

John Muir proclaimed this valley grander than Yosemite, but the masses have yet to flock to its deep pocket in the Sierra Nevada. **By Ann Marie Brown**

Best **Alpine Retreat**

KINGS CANYON

There's an undeniable allure to a place called Roads End. That literal designation refers to the eastern terminus of Highway 180, which climbs east out of Fresno, over the Sierra foothills, and into Kings Canyon National Park. The pavement ends six miles past Cedar Grove Village, where a few campgrounds, one lodge, and a burger-flipping café put a period on "civilization." To continue through the Sierra from here, you have to walk.

Luckily, traveling to Roads End along the scenic byway is half the fun. Fill up your tank before you go (gas is scarce in the park), then follow Highway 180 to Kings Canyon's Big Stump entrance. Pay homage to the giant sequoia trees at Grant Grove, then drive the zigzagging road to Cedar Grove over 31 of California's most awe-inspiring miles. The route carves through the steep and rugged Kings River Canyon, its granite walls plunging 8,000 feet at its deepest point. This makes Kings Canyon deeper than any other in North America, including the Grand Canyon. Its jaw-dropping grandeur inspired John Muir to pen a long, rhapsodic article in which he compared it favorably to the Yosemite Valley.

Today Kings Canyon might be called Yosemite without



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: LARRY LURICH; LONDE FANELSKY; LARRY LURICH

the masses. See for yourself. Start in Cedar Grove with the easy Zumwalt Meadow Trail, a 1.5-mile self-guided loop that offers views of imposing 8,518-foot Grand Sentinel and 8,717-foot North Dome, Cedar Grove's most impressive chunks of rock. Fern-filled Zumwalt Meadow is bordered by clear river pools and a fragrant forest of incense cedar and pines.

More ambitious hikers leave from Roads End for the billowing Mist Falls on the South Fork Kings River. Start this eight-mile round-trip early in the day to beat the heat. The path tunnels through riverside forest, then rises on granite slopes to gain grand views of 10,007-foot Avalanche Peak and

a granite pinnacle that distinctly resembles its name, the Sphinx. Four miles from the trailhead, the Kings River fans out over a wide, polished ledge and plummets 45 feet, forming aptly named Mist Falls.

A less visited but no less worthy footpath is the Hotel Creek Trail, which climbs 2.5 steep miles to Cedar Grove Overlook. There you'll be rewarded with a broad vista of Kings Canyon and surrounding peaks.

If hiking isn't your bag, rent a horse for a day and let Trigger do the walking, or drive or mountain bike the three-mile River Road Motor Nature Trail, a one-way dirt road. Pay a visit to Boyden Cavern and take a guided tour of its stalactites and stalagmites. Toss a line in the Kings River and pull out dinner—brown and rainbow trout.

Even the aerobically challenged will enjoy the five-minute stroll to Roaring River Falls, a boisterous cascade that funnels through a narrow gorge. Another easily visited cataract, 80-foot Grizzly Falls, can be found alongside Highway 180 five miles west of Cedar Grove.

Then again, you could just spend your time indulging in Cedar Grove's most rewarding pastime: Pick a spot near Roads End, spread out a picnic, and watch the Kings River roll by. ✨

Ann Marie Brown is the author of 10 books on the California outdoors, including Day-Hiking California's National Parks and California Waterfalls.

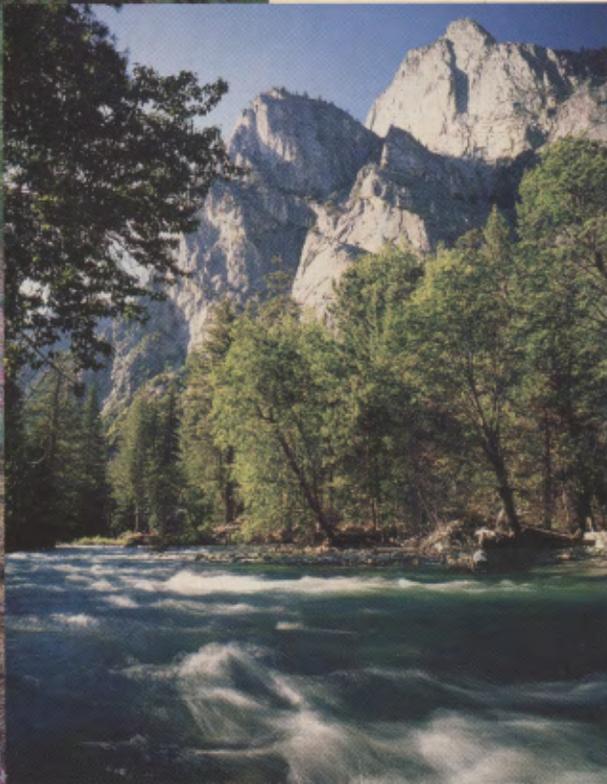
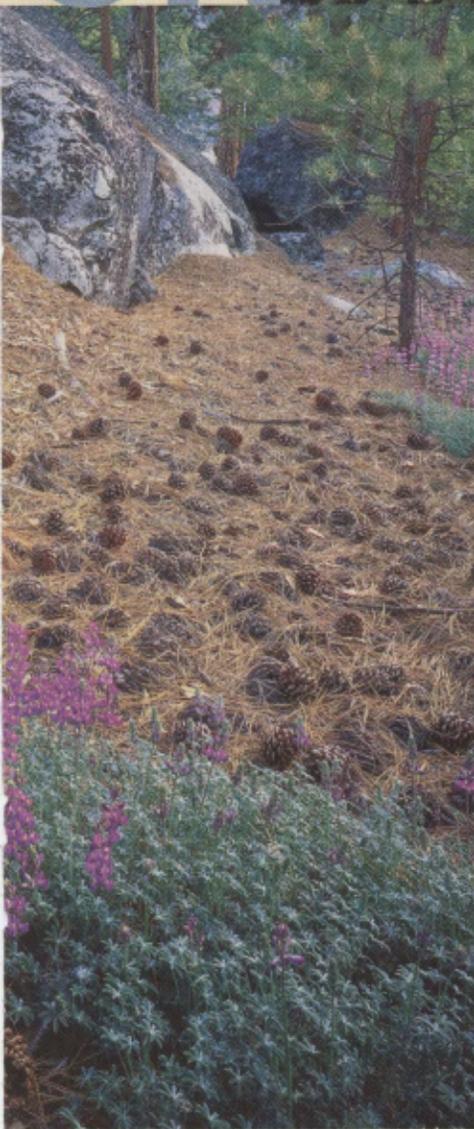
IF YOU'RE GOING . . .

Sleeps: Cedar Grove has the motel-style **Cedar Grove Lodge**. **John Muir Lodge** and **Grant Grove Cabins** are in Grant Grove (one hour from Cedar Grove). For all lodging reservations, call (559) 335-5500. Cedar Grove's four campgrounds are first come, first served, with a small market, and coin-operated laundry and showers available.

Eats: **Cedar Grove Snack Bar** offers counter service with hot meals and snacks. **Grant Grove Restaurant** is a restaurant-café serving breakfast, lunch, and dinner.

What to See and Do: Be sure to take the easy hikes in the valley—to Roaring River Falls and Zumwalt Meadow. At **Cedar Grove Visitor Center**, (559) 565-3793, ask about daily ranger walks and programs. **Boyden Cavern**, (559) 736-2708, offers tours on the hour, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. \$9 adults, \$4.50 children 13 and under. **Cedar Grove Pack Station**, (559) 565-3464, offers hourly and all-day horseback rides.

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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT, lupine claims Zumwalt Meadow; mariposa lilies are one of the many wildflowers that pierce the duff; the South Fork Kings River offers you a moving experience.