

Nothing beats a stormy sunset at Tunnel View.
Nikon D700, NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8 lens at
62mm. Exposure: 1/30th sec., f/11, ISO 200.



9 Best Places To Shoot At Yosemite National Park

From the valley to the high country, these spots offer great shots

Text & Photography By Josh Miller



Recently, I was asked by Dan Havlik, the editor-in-chief of Outdoor Photographer, what my favorite national park was and if I would be interested in writing about some of my favorite locations in that park. Talk about a dream assignment!

Truth be told, my favorite park is the reason I moved from Washington state to California the day I graduated college. After graduation, I drove my old minivan south and never looked back. In the beginning, I moved to California not for the photography but for the climbing. I lived in my minivan for much of the next two years, climbing and guiding and making my first visits to the famed climbing areas of California, including Yosemite.

At first, the draw to Yosemite was for its granite walls and dirtbag lifestyle. But as climbing became less a part of my life, my passion for wild places and photography grew. As a result, it was only natural that Yosemite continued to be a place of great significance in my creative and personal life. I even met my wife in the park.

While we don't currently live close enough to the valley to call it home, living a few hours north near Lake Tahoe gives us easy access to both sides of the Sierra Nevada year-round. By living near enough to Yosemite to teach workshops and even make a quick overnight dash down to the park for a winter storm, we still feel like Yosemite is our home park.

As with many popular national parks, the

While not officially in Cooks Meadow, this view of Half Dome can be found just upriver from the meadow. Often it is quicker to park at the edge of the large Yosemite Village parking lot just east of Cooks Meadow. From there, it is a quick walk down to the river bend for this reflection. Nikon D800E, NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8 lens at 50mm. Exposure: 3 exposures bracketed around 1/100th sec., *f/8*, ISO 100 for HDR.

key with Yosemite is knowing when and where to go to avoid the crowds. First, it is important to know that while most people think of Yosemite as only the valley, the park itself is much larger and offers many more subjects than just the classic valley shots. Second, Yosemite Valley during the summer is overcrowded and hazy from campfire smoke and should be avoided from about mid-May till October. During the summer, the higher elevations of the park along Tioga Pass or the backcountry are great locations to avoid the crowds and smoke. While I love shooting the classic valley views during the winter, many of my favorite Yosemite shots are from the high country both during the summer and winter.

There is no question Yosemite is a dream destination for many photographers and offers perhaps the highest concentration of landscape subject material of any location in the world. During my workshops, I sometimes call it "Disneyland for landscape photographers" because everywhere you turn, there is a waterfall, dramatic rock face or viewpoint. It can be hard to know where to start. In this article, I'll do my best to share a few of my favorite locations, some of them valley classics and a few that are a bit more off the beaten path.

VALLEY LOCATIONS

Tunnel View

If there was one classic view of Yosemite, this must be it. We have all seen Ansel Adams' classic "Clearing Winter Storm" photograph from Tunnel View. I was so inspired by his image that a bad photocopy of it hung beside my computer in college to inspire me to someday visit Yosemite. While perhaps the most cliché photo of any national park, it still captures a location we all love to shoot. There is always something interesting here, no matter

I shot this handheld image of Yosemite Falls while testing out a Sony A6500 as a possible lightweight backpacking camera. Sony A6500, Sony 10-18mm f/4 lens. Exposure: 1/80th sec., *f/8*, ISO 100. .

what the light and clouds are doing. My personal favorite time is during a clearing storm in March because the setting sun lights up both El Capitan and Bridalveil Falls. Add in fresh snow, and it is pure magic. This location is typically a late afternoon to sunset spot, but it can also be good at sunrise when clouds are present.

PRO TIP: While Tunnel View includes a great social scene and chance to meet photographers from around the world, most photographers never walk beyond the main parking lot. But for those looking for a slightly different angle and solitude, there is a great trail across the street in the smaller parking lot that leads up to some other great views. There are also interesting angles uphill a mile or so through the tunnel.

Cooks Meadow

Cooks Meadow is a great location because it offers amazing views of so many valley features. In the early morning, it provides backlit views of Half Dome (sometimes through fog), and after the sun is up, it is a great location to shoot Yosemite Falls (sometimes with a rainbow). On the south side of the meadow across the road is the photogenic Yosemite Chapel. But to me, the real winner of Cooks Meadow is the sunset view of Half Dome. While Half Dome makes a great photo in the right morning light, at sunset, Half Dome acts like a giant reflector glowing with the colors of sunset. The most popular view of Half Dome is from the northwestern end of the meadow, with the classic elm tree. But there are many other great angles, including from Sentinel Bridge with Half Dome reflected in the Merced River. You can also find some nice reflections of Half Dome from a bit farther up the river from the bridge. No matter which direction you point your camera, there is always something to shoot from Cooks Meadow. On a big water year, it is also a good spot for spring moonbow photos on Yosemite Falls.



Swinging Bridge

Located along the south-side drive, the Swinging Bridge Picnic Area is a great location to photograph Yosemite Falls mid-morning. The bridge offers a sweet mid-river view of the falls in many seasons, with reflections and moving water. My personal favorite time to shoot in this location is during April and May, when Yosemite Falls typically has lots of water, and the trees have lush new green growth. In big water years, the surrounding meadows often flood in the spring, which creates great reflection pools and many unique compositions. If spring reflections are your goal, a good pair of rubber boots can be a life saver as they allow you to explore the edges of the meadow while keeping your feet dry.

Typically, this location is best a little

while after sunrise as it takes time for the sun to make its way into the valley and start lighting up the falls. I usually start my day shooting sunrise in a different location and then visit this spot after sunrise for the falls. There are also several other unique views of the falls and other valley cliffs if you follow the river beyond the bridge.

Vernal Fall

Vernal Fall is a great location that I am surprised more photographers don't photograph. Likely the most popular trail in the valley, it does require close to a 2-mile round-trip walk up a steep but paved trail. But there is no rush, and you won't be alone on this very popular hike. Take your time and look behind you on your way up, and you will see some great views looking back down into the valley.



While the classic shot is from the bridge when you first see the falls, my personal favorite location is a bit farther up the trail, where you can get down to river level and fill the foreground with flowing water. For photographers who want a longer day hike, you can follow the “mist trail” up to the top of Vernal Fall and past Nevada Fall as well. This is one of my favorite hikes to do in the spring, when the waterfalls are huge and rainbows surround hikers on the trail. If you hike the “mist trail” section along Vernal Fall in spring, protect your camera and be prepared to get very wet. In the winter, this section of trail is closed due to dangerous ice.

El Capitan Meadow

If you were to ask many local Yosemite photographers their favorite location in the valley, you might be surprised to find out that many would choose El Capitan

Meadow rather than more “classic” locations like Tunnel View or Cook’s Meadow.

I would 100% agree that El Capitan Meadow is my favorite location within the valley, not because it offers the big dramatic “classic” shots but rather because it’s exactly opposite of that. By forgoing the well-known subjects such as Half Dome or Yosemite Falls, it offers photographers a chance to be more creative and find unique shots that don’t look like everyone else’s. From El Capitan Meadow, you have great angles in every direction and as a result can take advantage of whatever conditions are happening in the valley.

I personally love shooting in the meadow with a telephoto lens on a winter morning as mists rise and fog plays in the trees. It is also a great location during a snowstorm, as it has great stands of oak trees that make wonderful black-and-white images with blowing snow. Of

Above: Nothing gets the climber in me more excited than seeing the top of El Capitan peeking through the clouds in early morning light. Nikon D800E, NIKKOR 80-400mm f/4.5-5.6 lens at 80mm. Exposure: 1/160th sec., f/11, ISO 100.

Left: While it does require a bit of a hike, Vernal Fall offers a wide range of compositions for photographers willing to take the time. Bring your neutral-density filters to slow your exposure and be very careful on the slick rocks; a swim would be deadly. Nikon Z 7, NIKKOR Z 24-70mm f/2.8 lens at 24mm, 10 stop neutral density filter. Exposure: 15 seconds, f/9, ISO 160.

Opposite: This location isn’t in Tuolumne Meadows proper, but if you go exploring, you will find several nice cascades with great mountain backgrounds. Nikon D800, NIKKOR 24-70mm f/2.8 lens at 45mm. Exposure: 3 shots bracketed around 1/8th sec., f/11, ISO 100 for HDR.





Left: This is perhaps my favorite winter Yosemite location; I have visited it many times over the years. During the summer when Glacier Point Road is open, it is a short hike from the car. But during the winter, it is nearly a 20-mile round-trip ski to shoot this location. Pack a tent or plan on spending half the night skiing back to your car. Nikon D300, NIKKOR 12-24mm f/4 lens at 12mm. Exposure: 3 exposures bracketed around 1/10th sec., *f*/16, ISO 200 for HDR.

Bottom: This is an older shot from when I first switched from film to digital (before HDR was a thing). It is a good test to show how well even old lower-resolution files hold up with a bit of work in today's modern software like Lightroom and Topaz. Nikon D300, NIKKOR 12-24mm f/4 lens at 14mm, Singh-Ray 3-stop neutral density filter. Exposure: 1/2 sec., *f*/11, ISO 200.

Right:For photographers who love to shoot flowing water, the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne River offers no end of compositions. Nikon D800, NIKKOR 16-35mm f/4 lens at 26mm, 6-stop neutral density filter. Exposure: 5 seconds, *f*/11, ISO 100.

course, there is also the top of El Capitan shrouded in clouds through the oaks. No trip to Yosemite Valley would be complete without taking a long walk around the meadow and exploring it with a telephoto.

HIGH-COUNTRY LOCATIONS

Tioga Pass

When the pass is open during the summer, photographers shouldn't miss the chance to drive and shoot along Tioga Pass, which crosses west to east through the park and over the Sierra Crest, with views of Half Dome, Tenaya Lake and Tuolumne Meadows along the way. The real trick is figuring out where to position yourself for sunset with so many great options getting late light. Two of my favorite spots are Olmsted Point, with its amazing views of Half Dome or Tenya Lake, and Tuolumne Meadows.

There are plenty of other great spots to stop and shoot, but both of these locations are easy to access and classics. While Olmsted Point is more popular for its views of Half Dome (bring your



telephoto), I prefer Tuolumne Meadows for its views of Lembert Dome and Unicorn Peak. If you take the time to follow the river through the meadows, there are many great compositions beyond the quick roadside shots.

Glacier Point

When open, Glacier Point should be on every photographer's list when planning a trip to Yosemite. Glacier Point overlooks the valley and gives an eye-level view toward Half Dome across the valley. This is one of the classic sunset locations for Half Dome, well worth braving the crowd for. Arrive early to get a spot and meet your fellow photographers. It can be a fun social event, with cheers going up from the crowd during a particularly great sunset. The road up from the valley takes about an hour without traffic and closes during the winter. On a big snow year, it can reopen quite late in the spring.

For truly adventurous photographers, the road is groomed for cross-country skiers and snowshoers during the winter. This is one of my favorite winter locations, and I try to make at least one trip each winter. Considering it is nearly 21 miles round trip to Glacier Point, it is safe to assume you will need to camp after sunset. But what better place to pitch a tent than looking out at Half Dome. For those photographers with advanced backcountry ski skills, there are also several

other great locations to shoot along the south rim in the winter. But these locations are off the groomed road, and all require advanced backcountry navigation skills and avalanche training and shouldn't be taken lightly.

Cathedral Peak

While there are many great locations in the Yosemite high country that are off trail and require difficult route finding, for photographers willing to hike, Cathedral Lakes is a great sunset location that is reached by an easy-to-follow trail about 8 miles round trip. If you plan on shooting sunset (when the light is best), you will need to assume that 4 of those miles will be in the dark on your way back to the road, so make sure you are comfortable hiking and navigating in the dark via headlamp, or you will spend an unplanned night out. There are a few backcountry permits to camp in this location, but good luck getting one. They are reserved months in advance via lottery, and we photographers need to be more spur of the moment based on building clouds for a potential sunset.

Grand Canyon Of The Tuolumne

There are many great day hikes and backpack trips based out of Tuolumne Meadows, but one of my personal favorites is following the Tuolumne River west out of the meadows into the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne. The trail follows the

river for miles as it tumbles and falls over several great waterfalls. The official Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne hike is a 30+ mile one-way backpack that starts in Tuolumne Meadows and ends to the west in White Wolf and is typically done as a three- to four-day trip.

But for photographers not wanting to carry all their gear for days in the backcountry, there is the option of day hiking the first part of the canyon to Glen Aulin Falls, which is about 11 miles round trip. There is also a High Sierra Camp at the falls where you stay in tent cabins while a cook prepares your meals and mules carry in your heavy camera gear.

Whether you are day hiking or staying at the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp as you work your way down the canyon below Glen Aulin, the Tuolumne River passes over a series of cascades that are a photographer's dream. Years ago, a friend and I spent several days camped a few miles below Glen Aulin deep in the canyon exploring and shooting waterfalls. For creative photographers willing to hike, there is no end to the number of unique compositions that are rarely photographed. If backpacking isn't your style, being based at the Glen Aulin camp gives you day-hiking access to many of the falls within the canyon. **OP**

See more of Josh Miller's work at josh-millerphotography.com.