

Granite Giants by Day, Tufa Towers at Sunset — A 4-Day Yosemite & the Eastern Sierra Road Trip

A 4-day Yosemite and Eastern Sierra road trip: Mariposa Grove's giant sequoias, Glacier Point at sunset, a drive over Tioga Pass, and the glowing tufa towers of Mono Lake.

DURATION

4 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

Late May – October

Tioga Road, the only route across the Sierra crest inside the park, is seasonal and typically opens late May or June and closes with the first heavy snow in late October or November — check the NPS road status before you go, since this itinerary depends on it being open. Yosemite Valley itself is open year-round.

FROM

\$680 USD / person
for 2 people

Day 1

Fresno to Yosemite's South Gate

Fly into Fresno, pick up a rental car, and drive northeast toward Yosemite's South Entrance — a stop at the park's grove of giant sequoias is the natural first break before the first night at a resort just outside the gate.

Rental Car Pickup — Fresno Yosemite International Airport

Full day · ~\$55–70 USD/day

Highway 41 runs almost straight from Fresno to the South Entrance in about an hour and a half. A standard sedan handles every paved road on this route fine, so there's no need to size up unless you're planning extra detours on unpaved forest roads.

Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias

~2 hrs · included with \$35 USD/vehicle park entrance (7-day pass)

Home to more than 500 mature giant sequoias, including the 2,000-plus-year-old Grizzly Giant. A free shuttle runs from the Mariposa Grove Welcome Plaza in season (roughly April through November); outside shuttle hours it's a paved 2-mile round-trip walk to the grove itself.

Check-In — Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite

Check-in 4pm · from \$179 USD/night

A full-service resort two miles from the South Entrance in Fish Camp, with several on-site restaurants so there's no need to drive again after a long first day — Embers Grill for a sit-down dinner or Jackalope's Bar for something faster, both on property.

Tenaya Lodge at Yosemite · +1 559-683-6555 · visittenaya.com

Day 2

Yosemite Valley & Glacier Point

The park's signature day: the classic valley overlook, a waterfall hike, and a sunset view from one of the best overlooks in the entire National Park System.

Tunnel View & Bridalveil Fall

~1 hr stop · included with park entrance

The view that launched a thousand postcards: El Capitan, Half Dome, and Bridalveil Fall in a single frame from the east end of the Wawona Tunnel. Bridalveil Fall itself is a short, paved quarter-mile walk from its own parking area a few minutes further into the valley.

Mist Trail to Vernal Fall Footbridge

~1.5–2 hrs round trip, moderate · included with park entrance

A steep but short out-and-back to the footbridge view of 317-foot Vernal Fall — close enough in spring and early summer to feel the spray that gives the trail its name. Turn around at the bridge for a shorter visit, or continue up the granite steps for a closer view if you have another hour to spare.

Glacier Point at Sunset

~1 hr drive each way from the Valley · included with park entrance

A 30-mile round-trip detour off Wawona Road for a view that puts you at eye level with Half Dome and looking straight down 3,200 feet into the valley. Glacier Point Road is seasonal, generally open the same months as Tioga Road — arrive an hour before sunset to find parking.

Check-In — The Ahwahnee

Check-in 4pm · from \$399 USD/night

A 1927 National Historic Landmark in Yosemite Valley itself, with a floor-to-ceiling-windowed dining room worth the splurge even if you stay elsewhere on other nights. Booking through Yosemite's official lodging concessionaire is the only way to get a room here.

The Ahwahnee (Travel Yosemite) · +1 888-413-8869 · travelyosemite.com

Day 3

Tioga Road to the Eastern Sierra

The drive's wildest stretch: a high alpine meadow, a crossing of the Sierra crest at nearly 10,000 feet, and a lake on the other side unlike anything in the park you just left.

Tuolumne Meadows & Olmsted Point

~1.5 hrs of stops · included with park entrance

Tioga Road climbs out of the forest into Tuolumne Meadows, the largest subalpine meadow in the Sierra Nevada, with Lembert Dome and the Tuolumne River as a backdrop. A few miles on, Olmsted Point delivers a surprise side view of Half Dome from a direction almost nobody photographs it from.

Tioga Pass Crossing

~45 min drive · included with park entrance

At 9,943 feet, Tioga Pass is the highest highway pass in California and the only road across the Sierra Nevada inside Yosemite's boundaries. The road drops fast on the east side, losing nearly 3,000 feet of elevation in nine miles down to the Mono Basin.

Mono Lake South Tufa at Sunset

~1–1.5 hrs · \$3 USD/person day-use fee (16 and under free)

A lake twice as salty as the ocean and more than 700,000 years old, ringed with limestone tufa towers that formed underwater and were exposed when the lake's level dropped. The South Tufa boardwalk is the easiest place to see them up close, and they turn a deep orange in the last hour of light.

Check-In — Double Eagle Resort & Spa

Check-in 4pm · from \$285 USD/night

Log cabin-style rooms and suites on the June Lake Loop, about 20 minutes north of Mono Lake, with an on-site spa and restaurant (Eagle's Landing) looking out at Carson Peak — a quieter base than Mammoth Lakes for a one-night stay.

Double Eagle Resort & Spa · +1 760-648-7004 · doubleeagle.com

Day 4

June Lake Loop & the Drive Home

A short scenic loop drive before pointing the car back over the Sierra and down to Fresno for the flight home.

June Lake Loop Scenic Drive

~45 min self-drive loop · free

A 16-mile paved loop off Highway 395 past four alpine lakes — June, Gull, Silver, and Grant — backed by the jagged Sierra crest. It's a favorite fall color drive, but worth the detour from the main highway in any season for the Silver Lake and Gull Lake overlooks alone.

Lunch — Tiger Bar & Cafe, June Lake

Lunch · \$15–22/person

A small-town diner and bar on the June Lake Loop that's been serving burgers and milkshakes to climbers and anglers for decades — a straightforward, reliable stop before the long drive back over the mountains.

Return Drive to Fresno via Tioga Pass & Airport Drop-Off

~4 hrs drive

Retrace Tioga Road back over the pass and through the park to the South Entrance, then Highway 41 down to Fresno. Build in a buffer for a last stop at Tunnel View if the morning light is good, and confirm the rental return counter's hours before your flight.