



Hetch Hetchy Valley



Hetch Hetchy Valley on August 11, 1911. Photo by Matt Ashby Wolfskill, courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Introduction

Hidden in Yosemite National Park's peaceful northwest corner, Hetch Hetchy Valley is a treasure worth visiting in all seasons. In spring, two of North America's tallest waterfalls plummet spectacularly over thousand-foot granite cliffs. The dramatic cliffs surrounding these waterfalls add to the grandeur that John Muir compared to the more well known Yosemite Valley. In 1870, Muir called Hetch Hetchy Valley "a wonderfully exact counterpart of the great Yosemite." In the early spring through late fall, visitors have easy access to a vast wilderness filled with high-country lakes, streams, and wildlife. A rare snowy winter day gives adventuresome visitors a chance to explore on skis or snowshoes.

Early History

People have lived in Hetch Hetchy Valley for more than 6,000 years. American Indian cultures were prominent before the 1850s when the first Euro-Americans came looking for gold and a place to graze livestock. The valley name probably derived from the Miwok word, hatchhatchie, which means "edible grasses." Miwok names are still used for features, including Tueeulala Fall, Wapama Fall, and Kolana Rock.

The lifestyle of first inhabitants depended on the natural resources of the land. They would gather seeds and plants, hunt, and trade. Meadow plants were particularly valuable resources to these tribes. Today, descendants of these people still use milkweed, deergrass, bracken fern, willow, and other plants for a variety of uses including baskets, medicines, and string.

Modern History

As early as 1882, Hetch Hetchy Valley had been considered a potential site for a new reservoir.

Preservationists, led by John Muir, wanted the valley to remain untouched. They maintained that a dam could be secured outside "our wild mountain parks." Muir and his followers launched a campaign to praise the virtues of Hetch Hetchy. For the first time in the American experience, a national audience considered the competing claims of wilderness versus

development. Until the early 1900s, Americans viewed wilderness as something to conquer and natural resources as infinite.

Dam supporters were convinced that a reservoir could offer tremendous social and economic benefits. The fastest growing city in the West, San Francisco was facing a chronic water and power shortage. In 1906, an earthquake and fire devastated San Francisco, adding urgency and public sympathy to the search for an adequate water supply. Congress passed the Raker Act in 1913, authorizing the construction of a dam in Hetch Hetchy Valley as well as another dam at Lake Eleanor.



The eight mile long Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and O'Shaughnessy Dam as seen today (photo by Greg Lawler)

The first phase of construction on the O'Shaughnessy Dam (named for the chief engineer) was completed in 1923 and the final phase, raising the height of the dam, was completed in 1938. Today the 117-billion-gallon reservoir supplies pristine drinking water to 2.4 million Bay Area residents and industrial users. It also supplies hydro-electric power generated by two plants downstream. The reservoir is eight miles long and the largest single body of water in Yosemite.

Flora and Fauna

Hetch Hetchy is home to a diverse array of plants and animals. Gray pine, incense-cedar, and California black oak grow in abundance. The distinctive manzanita bush is common, and many beautiful examples of this red-barked shrub are seen along the road. Spring and early summer bring brightly colored wildflowers including

lupine, wallflower, monkey flower, and buttercup. Seventeen species of bats inhabit this area of the park, including the largest North American bat, the western mastiff. This large bat is only one of two bats in Yosemite whose echolocation can be heard by the human ear. Also, be alert to sightings of rattlesnakes and black bears.

Exploring Hetch Hetchy



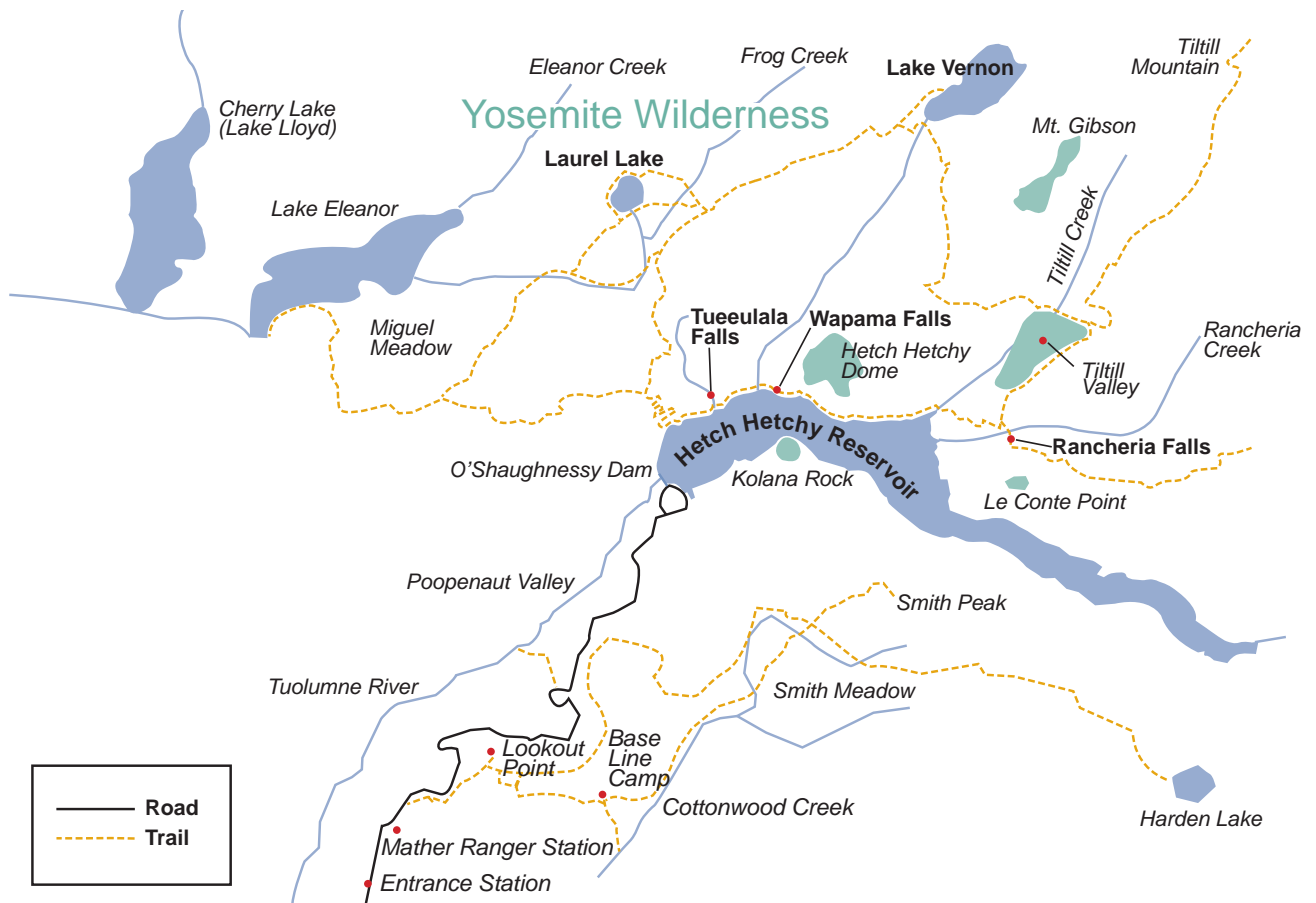
Wapama Falls (photo by Greg Lawler)



Kolana Rock (NPS photo)

Hetch Hetchy's relatively low elevation provides for one of the longest hiking seasons in Yosemite, and the varied trails include something for everyone. Carry plenty of water and sunscreen and watch for rattlesnakes and poison oak. Overnight backpackers need a wilderness permit, which can be obtained at the Hetch Hetchy Entrance Station at no cost. Bear canisters are required for backcountry food storage for overnight hikers.

- Wapama Fall is reached via a five-mile, round-trip hike that follows the shoreline of the reservoir with moderate up and downhill hiking. The trail includes spectacular views of Tueulala and Wapama Falls. To begin the trail, cross the dam and pass through the tunnel.
- The Lookout Point Trail begins at the entrance station. This two-mile hike involves moderate climbing and brings hikers to a rocky outcropping overlooking Hetch Hetchy.
- The trail to Rancheria Falls continues past Wapama Fall and may be done as either a long day hike (13 miles round trip) or a backpacking trip. Along the way, hikers will see beautiful views of the valley and waterfalls. Backpackers can access Tiltill or Rancheria mountains and the vast northwest wilderness of Yosemite from the Rancheria area.
- The Poopenaut Trail begins at a signed trailhead four miles past the entrance station. This strenuous 2.5-mile, round-trip hike to the Tuolumne River has 1,229 feet of elevation gain.
- Smith Peak (7,751 feet) is the highest point in the area and offers outstanding views. It has two trailhead options. One route begins six miles beyond the entrance station. This trail is 13 miles round-trip with 3,700 feet elevation gain. The other route begins at the entrance station and is 16 miles round-trip with 3,300 feet of elevation gain. The Smith Peak trails can be used to access the Yosemite high country.
- The Laurel/Vernon/Rancheria loop is a multi-day, 29-mile hike that includes spectacular views of Hetch Hetchy, beautiful high-Sierra lakes, and access to the park's northern wilderness. The first four miles of this loop follow the old Lake Eleanor Road as it climbs out of the valley. This portion may also be done as a more strenuous 8-mile day hike.



Specific Regulations

Water Quality: Swimming and boating are prohibited in Hetch Hetchy Reservoir in order to maintain a clean source of drinking water.

Pets: Dogs and other pets are prohibited on all trails and on the dam. Wild animals are threatened by domestic animals in their territory and may endanger your pets. Dogs are allowed in the parking area but must be leashed at all times.

Fishing: Fishing is allowed year-round in most lakes and the Hetch Hetchy Reservoir and part of the year in most rivers and streams. A valid California fishing license is required.

Hetch Hetchy Reservoir: Daily bag limit is five per day and ten in possession.
Tuolumne River and area streams: Fishing season is open from the last Saturday in April through November 15th. The daily bag and possession limit is two. Special fishing regulations in the Tuolumne River below the dam require the use of artificial lures with barbless hooks. Only fish 12 inches or larger may be kept.