

THE WONDERS OF

WAWONA



Photo by ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN

Built in 1876, "Long White" is the oldest building at the Wawona Hotel.

For a frazzled family, a storied old hotel and the great pines of the Wawona Valley offer respite from the crowds in other parts of Yosemite National Park.

By ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN • Special to the Star Tribune

Less than 15 minutes after arriving in Yosemite National Park, my husband, Walter, and I had our first wildlife lesson. We were standing at the receptionist desk of the Wawona Hotel, a Victorian-era resort that presides over the park's southern edge. A college-age clerk asked us for our signatures.

"It just says that you are 'bear aware' and stuff," she said, pointing to a block of tiny text and a line at the bottom of the guest contract.

The problem was that I had no idea what she was talking about. Was I supposed to drive 5 miles per hour so I didn't take out a cub padding across the road? Attach bells to my belt to avoid being mauled? When I expressed my confusion, the receptionist puffed out her cheeks and looked at the ceiling. Clearly, she wasn't in the mood for a nitpicker.

"It means you know not to leave food or smelly items like shampoo in your car because bears can get into them," she said.

Unfortunately, our room, despite the hotel's promises, wouldn't be ready for a few hours and there wasn't a place to stash our bags. When I asked her what we should do, she gazed past me to some undetermined middle distance. It was clear she was stumped.

"You'll be fine," she said, waving us away.

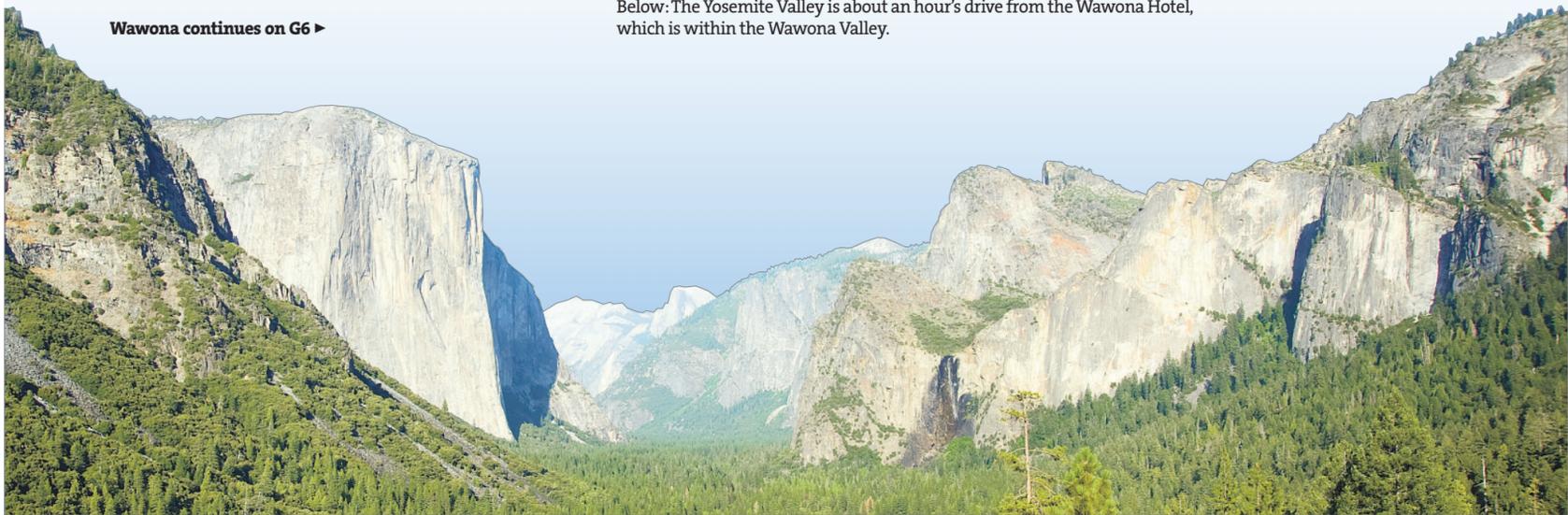
I'm normally fairly laid-back when it comes to traveling, but this slacker attitude didn't sit well with me. American national parks are unapologetic about the lack of phones and TVs in many of their lodgings. But I wasn't asking for a bellhop or a pillow menu. I was simply an exhausted and recession-weary Minnesotan who had endured a seemingly endless winter. I wanted every minute and every dollar of this late May vacation to count.

Wawona continues on G6 ►



Photos by MARK A. DUNCAN • Associated Press

Above: Giant sequoias dwarf a cabin in the upper Mariposa Grove, 4 miles from the Wawona Hotel.
Below: The Yosemite Valley is about an hour's drive from the Wawona Hotel, which is within the Wawona Valley.



Advice to fall fliers: Plan now and pay less

• With ticket sales down, holiday travelers can expect lower fares, but fewer choices.

By CAROL PUCCI • Seattle Times

When Seattle paralegal Laura Gold booked a trip in May to Maui for a friend's October wedding, she was happy to find an Expedia package that included nonstop flights for herself and a companion.

"We purposely booked early so we could get a better deal and a good flight," she said. Two months later, Expedia sent an e-mail asking her to call immediately. Delta Air Lines had canceled the flight.

Offered a new itinerary with a stop in Los Angeles on the way over and an overnight layover in Salt Lake City on the return, she applied for a refund, then spent several frantic hours searching for an alternative, finally rebooking on Hawaiian Airlines for \$125 more per ticket.

"I probably worked on it five or six hours, looking at various airlines," she said. "Delta said it was because they were canceling a lot of their flights."

With Labor Day signaling the end of the summer travel season, fliers between now and the Christmas holidays will notice changes as the airlines struggle to fill seats and boost revenues.

The good news is that fares, far cheaper than they were last year when fuel prices skyrocketed, are likely to

stay low, even for holiday travel.

Ticket sales down

Thanksgiving fares to domestic destinations are averaging 22 percent less than last year, and fares are 17 percent less for Christmas and New Year's, according to a forecast by Microsoft's Bing Travel.

"There's no sign that demand is picking up," says Joe Brancatelli, publisher of JoeSentMe.com, a newsletter for business travelers. "Airlines will have to keep prices down to fill

whatever seats they do fly."

As airlines continue to cut capacity — either by eliminating flights or using smaller planes — the result will be less convenient routes and fewer nonstop flights.

The Air Transport Association, a trade group, estimates that domestic departures at U.S. airports will drop 22 percent between October and December, compared to last year. Some cancellations will be temporary.

Fares continues on G3 ►



DARRELL WONG • McClatchy News Service

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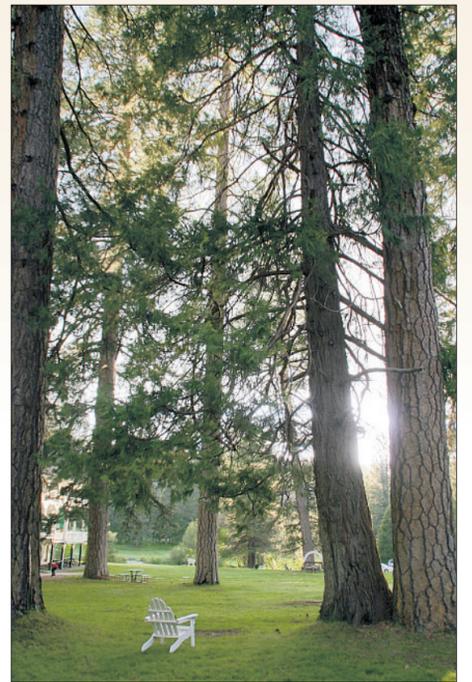


Photo by ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN

Top: Moore Cottage is one of six buildings at the Wawona Hotel. Above left: Lupines cover the fields along a roadside in the Wawona Valley. Right: Adirondack chairs dot the grounds surrounding the Wawona Hotel, which is a National Historic Landmark.

◀ WAWONA FROM G1

The 'grandest hotel'

Originally called Clark's Station, Wawona's roots extend as far back as 1855, when a New England miner named Galen Clark passed through the area on his way to Yosemite Valley to recover from miner's lung. Enchanted, he built a log cabin on the main trail to the valley the following year and sold provisions to travelers. When his white clapboard hotel was completed in 1879, it was heralded as "the grandest hotel in the mountains of California."

A subsequent owner's wife suggested the name of the hotel be changed to Wawona, which means "big tree" and is a reference to the valley's magnificent giant sequoia forests. When the area became part of Yosemite National Park in 1932, the park's lodging operators took over management of the National Historic Landmark.

Vintage charm

Today, the hotel trades on its time-capsule vibe. Pianist and singer Tom Bopp has indulged visitors with ragtime tunes since 1983. And even though the crowds sport polar-fleece chic, the lobby is gussied up with Victorian antiques and brocade wallpaper.

That doesn't mean the Wawona is fancy. In fact, the place exudes a dilapidated charm. The floors of the second floor veranda sag under threadbare indoor-outdoor carpet and most rooms are just big enough for a double bed and bureau.

When Walter and I visited, the hotel was crammed with European visitors making the most of the weak dollar, and the entire resort had the happy vibe of an international dormitory. Guests without private baths strolled the hallways in fluffy white robes. A British boy shouted "Oh, crumb!" when he realized he'd forgotten his book. Nearby, a young German substituted Cool Ranch Doritos and Sierra Nevada Pale Ale for dinner.

They played cards and listened to their iPods and watched from their Adirondack chairs as the setting sun cast long shadows across a meadow tinted purple by wild lupines.

Which is to say that it was so delightful that my initial irritation went away the moment those bags finally left our trunk.

A peaceful valley

Unlike Yosemite Valley, whose granite panoramas and sky-high waterfalls draw so many tourists that it can feel a little like the Universal Studios of the natural world, the Wawona Valley is surprisingly peaceful.

On our first day, Walter and I walked 6 miles through dense groves of giant sequoias and ponderosa pines without seeing a single person. (Thankfully, no bears, either.) An 8-mile hike to and from Chilualna Falls was just slightly more crowded.

That's not to suggest there's nothing to do. The hotel offers golf, tennis, a swimming pool and horseback riding. But the real attraction is only 4 miles away at the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias. I'd read about these



Photo by ELIZABETH FOY LARSEN

The upturned roots of a giant tree are among the many attractions to young visitors in Yosemite National Park, which includes the Yosemite and Wawona valleys.

colossal conifers and expected to be impressed by their enormity alone. What I hadn't counted on was how emotionally moving it would be to stand among their living history.

Many are charred by fires, with black gashes streaking up their adobe red bark. Their resilience struck me as incredibly poetic. Who of nature's creatures, after all, hasn't been somehow burned? And yet, life goes on.

As we strolled through the grove, the trees started to take on different personalities. There were the sugar pines, whose pineapple-sized cones dangled like grand dames' earrings. Nearby, lanky mountain hemlocks posed in their lacy tutus. The Grizzly Giant — a famous sequoia that's 7 feet in diameter and estimated to be 1,800 years old — has so many carbuncles and wrinkles that it reminded me of a retired boxer. I was completely under its spell until I spotted a lodgepole pine that reminded me of a professor. I imagined him scolding me: "Lady, we're trees," he said. "Enough with the anthropomorphizing."

A storied existence

It was so dreamy we didn't want to leave. But dinner called, so we returned to the Wawona's dining room, which is staffed with its own share of old-timers who love to talk about the traditions of the room, including the enchanting lampshades that hang from strings of sequoia cones. Originally produced by a school for deaf students in San Francisco, the deer-skin shades showcased hand-painted scenes of different famous giant sequoias, including the now fallen Wawona Tunnel Tree and the Clothespin Tree. Paper reproductions replaced the originals in 1984.

Wawona is filled with those types of stories. My favorite is of a more recent vintage. Seventeen years ago an employee named Marvin was cleaning the pool when he spontaneously started whistling "The Star Spangled Banner." He made such an impression that it's now part of the resort's flag-raising ceremony — the serenade begins each morning "some time between 8 and 9" — and his performance is piped through a walkie-talkie into the hotel's lobby.

Watching Marvin, I realized that a great hotel doesn't have to function like a perfectly synchronized Rolex. Rather, like trees, it organically grows and changes over time. When we reluctantly checked out to head for the Yosemite Valley, I was so taken with Wawona's quirks that I even made a point of thanking the clerk who had irritated me when we arrived.



DARRELL WONG • McClatchy News Service

The Victorian-era Wawona Hotel is short on posh, but long on tradition. Pianist/singer Tom Bopp has been a fixture at the hotel since 1983.

IF YOU GO

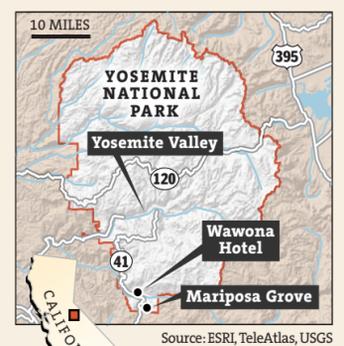
Getting there: Delta flies to Fresno Yosemite International Airport, with a stop either in Los Angeles or Salt Lake City.

Lodging: The Wawona Hotel is a 4-mile drive inside the park's South Entrance. The hotel is open from the end of March through early January, with rates for a double room with a private bath ranging from \$170 (off season) to \$225 per night, including a breakfast buffet. Campsites are located a mile north of the hotel (check www.nps.gov/yose/planyourvisit/wawonacamp.htm for more information).

To make reservations at the Wawona Hotel or any other Yosemite National Park Lodging, call 1-800-559-4884 or visit www.yosemitepark.com/Accommodations_WawonaHotel.aspx.

Attractions: Wawona is 4 miles from the Mariposa Grove of Giant Sequoias and 18 miles from the Badger Pass Ski Area. The Yosemite Valley is roughly an hour's drive away. Other activities at the hotel besides hiking include golf, swimming and tennis.

To learn more: Yosemite National Park was featured in the Ken Burns series on PBS called "The National Parks: America's Best Idea." For information about the program go to www.pbs.org/nationalparks.



Source: ESRI, TeleAtlas, USGS