



GOOD TO KNOW

START/FINISH

Happy Isles, Yosemite Valley

Out-and-back to the summit of Half Dome via a combination of the Mist and John Muir Trails.

TOTAL ELEVATION GAIN

1,466 m (4,809 ft)

SEASON

Late May to early October. Due to the steepness of the final 122 m (400 ft) ascent to the summit, the National Park Service installs metal cables and wooden slats on this section around Memorial Day (the last Monday in May) and takes them down again around Columbus Day (i.e., the second Monday in October). These dates can vary from year to year depending on conditions.

PERMITS

During hiking season, a permit is required for Half Dome (via the Yosemite National Park Service). As of 2019, a maximum of 300 permits are issued per day; 225 for day hikers and 75 for backpackers. The majority of permits are awarded through a pre-season lottery that takes place each March, though there are also a limited number of places available a couple of days in advance. To increase your odds of success, try to avoid applying for a permit on weekends or public holidays.

HELPFUL HINTS

CAMPING

Obtaining a day-hike permit for Half Dome can be difficult, but a back-packing permit is even harder to procure. For this reason, the majority of those who hike up Half Dome do so in one long day. If you are adamant about trying your luck at an overnighting permit, the main camping option along the trail is Little Yosemite Valley Campground, situated 7 km (4.2 mi) from the Happy Isles Trailhead.



GEAR

Trail running shoes; headlamp; gloves (for the cables); day pack; insulation garment for the often chilly summit; rain jacket; and sufficient food for a full day of hiking.

WATER

The only place to obtain potable water on the trail is at a drinking fountain at the Vernal Fall Footbridge, which is only a 20–30-minute walk from the Happy Isles Trailhead. After that, it is possible to get H₂O from the Merced River up until Little Yosemite Valley, but the water will need to be purified with either a filter or chemicals.

BACKGROUND

CLOUDS REST

For those looking for a less crowded but equally spectacular Yosemite hiking experience, consider heading to the summit of nearby Clouds Rest (3,025 m [9,926 ft]). You do not need a permit for this 22.5 km (14 mi) round-trip hike, which begins and ends at Sunrise Trailhead. The ascent involves 701 m (2,300 ft) of elevation gain, and it takes most ramblers 8–10 hours to complete the round trip. The 360-degree panorama from the summit is a jaw-dropper, with a bird’s-eye perspective of Tenaya Canyon, Sentinel Dome, Mount Hoffmann, and the cable side of Half Dome. Upon completing the hike, be sure to reward yourself with a cooling swim in the crystal-clear waters of Tenaya Lake.

BONUS TRACK

Hiking season in Yosemite National Park generally runs from late May to the start of October. Depending on the season’s snowfall and the altitude at which you are hiking (elevations in Yosemite range from 600 m [2,000 ft] to above 4,000 m [13,000 ft]), each month brings with it different pros and cons:

June: Conditions in the valley are usually ideal, but if you wish to venture into the higher parts of the park, expect to encounter a great deal of lingering snow. Nighttime temperatures are often still below freezing.

July: Snowmelt is at its peak, so those hiking at loftier elevations should expect to encounter raging rivers that may be difficult to ford. Temperatures are warming up, with an average range of between 13–32°C (55–90°F).

August: Generally the weather is ideal, but this is when Yosemite’s famed mosquitos are at their worst. A head net and bug repellant can be sanity-savers.

September: The pick of the bunch. The school holiday crowds have abated along with the bugs, and although the nights are becoming cooler again, the temperatures are usually mild. Plus, you may experience the beautiful hues of fall foliage. The nights are getting shorter, and by the end of the month, the chances of early snowfall become greater.

ACTIVITIES

Apart from being a hiker’s paradise, Yosemite has long been known as a haven for rock climbers. Each and every year mountaineers from around the world migrate to the valley, drawn by iconic granite behemoths such as El Capitan and Half Dome.

For less seasoned climbers looking to scale new heights, perhaps the best place to start is at the Yosemite Mountaineering School & Guide Service, which holds classes in Half Dome Village and Tuolumne Meadows. Founded in 1969, the school offers group classes (limited to six students per instructor)