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OUTDOORS & ADVENTURE

Hetch Hetchy Valley's hush

A Yosemite-adjacent parkland of abundant beauty is a little-known find for hikers and campers. The serenity nevertheless permits a wet and wild white-water experience.

By Dan Blackburn
 Reporting from Hetch Hetchy, Calif.
 August 28, 2009

You might say it was a family challenge. My daughter Courtney was graduating from high school, so I asked what she wanted to do to celebrate. She replied, "Go camping somewhere we never have been that is less than a day's drive from Los Angeles."

Not a simple request. We've done a lot of California camping. Out came the road map, familiar Yosemite in the middle. But what was that spot northwest of the park? Two words. Hetch Hetchy. Challenge met.

If Southern Californians know anything about Hetch Hetchy, it's probably that the reservoir there provides drinking water to San Francisco and that the damming of the Tuolumne River stirred controversy that continues to this day. The O'Shaughnessy Dam took 20 years to build and was completed in 1934, creating a lake eight miles long and more than 300 feet deep. The dam and reservoir sit just inside the Yosemite National Park boundary. The rest of the Hetch Hetchy area is contained within the Stanislaus National Forest.

For would-be visitors, however, the most impressive statistic is the comparison between the number of people who visit Yosemite Valley and those who visit Hetch Hetchy. Yosemite: 3 million a year, most in the summer. Hetch Hetchy: 50,600 a year. Most come from the Bay Area. In fact, Hetch Hetchy may be San Francisco's best-kept secret.

After some research, we piled into our car and headed off for the six-hour drive to the Dimond O Campground, where we would spend the week. Joining us was my daughter's good friend Celine, who had signed on for her first real camping trip. She could not have asked for a better location. Stately sequoias towered above our campsite while whispered sounds of the Tuolumne River, just a few yards away, lulled us to sleep at night. There was even a natural swimming hole by the riverbank.

The campground was well maintained, with plenty of room between campsites, and, as the girls quickly noted, restrooms were nearby.

We promptly popped up our tents -- one for the girls and one for me. Next came a couple of camp chairs and storing food and other cooking items in the metal bear box at the campsite. (Since campgrounds in national forests and parks started installing the bear-proof boxes, potentially dangerous encounters between hungry black bears and campers have dropped to near zero.)

Once we had settled in, we took time to explore the immediate area and then started making our plans for the rest of our stay.

First up was the almost mandatory visit to the controversial reservoir. That meant stopping at the National Park Service ranger station, where we chatted with Clarisa Flores, a 12-year veteran of Hetch Hetchy and our candidate for helpful and informative park service ranger of the year.

I asked what it was about Hetch Hetchy that appealed so strongly to her. "The quiet," she said. "When people come out here, it actually feels like a national park should. You can hear the birds sing. You have to get out of your car and walk and explore it. It's for people who are looking for something different. It is a place to hike and backpack. We actually get more backpackers than we do cars. And people always seem to want to tell us what a nice time they had."

In 1870, John Muir said the Hetch Hetchy Valley was "a wonderfully exact counterpart of the great Yosemite." As I stood on O'Shaughnessy Dam, I could see what Muir was talking about. As I gazed along the reservoir, a granite cliff that strongly resembled the upper half of Yosemite's famed El Capitan rose to my left. Next to it tumbled Wapama Falls, and across the way sat a familiar-looking granite dome.

Miles of scenic trails

Flores was right: This is a place for people who like to hike. From the dam to the base of Wapama Falls is an easy five-mile round trip. The trail meanders through some shady areas and over sunbaked rock and was lined with wildflowers in shades of white, purple, lavender and pink. A fine mist spread over the trail at the base of Wapama Falls, providing a refreshing spray.

Four miles farther on, backpackers and hearty hikers can stop at Rancheria Falls and, from there, trek into the wilderness of the Yosemite high country. We, however, had other stops on our agenda.

As we headed from the reservoir, we passed through Camp Mather -- a summer camp owned and operated by the city of San Francisco for use by its residents. The camp may be best known for its Strawberry Music Festivals featuring bluegrass music on Memorial Day and Labor Day weekends. The camp has several cabins, a small lake for swimming, a general store and a stable that offers horseback rides.

One of our friends who had recently visited Hetch Hetchy -- mountaineering guide Doug Robinson -- had insisted that we check out Evergreen Lodge. Doug's advice usually is worth following, and this was no exception.

Evergreen Lodge was built in 1921 for men working on O'Shaughnessy Dam. Legend has it that moonshine was distilled in the lodge basement and that a couple of the cabins were operated as a brothel. By the '50s and '60s, however, it had become a mainstream tourist spot with outdoor dining and dancing and a live orchestra.

More recently, it has undergone major renovations, including the addition of 75 well-equipped cabins and other modern buildings wrapped in forest-flavored wooden exteriors. The dining-room menu includes venison, fresh trout and wild boar.

Because there is no cellphone access in the area, the lodge has regular telephone lines available to guests as well as Internet service. Both Courtney and Celine seized the opportunity to check their accumulated e-mails. A range of activities also is available for both kids and adults.

Recreation manager Lesli Brown, who recently hiked the entire Pacific Crest Trail with her husband, showed me the lodge's latest addition -- camping. Away from the main lodge, 15 tents of varying sizes have been set up. It's called Custom Camping.

Each tent includes foam mattresses, sleeping bags, towels and lanterns. There is a communal bathhouse nearby.

"It's a way to immerse people into the woods and provide a different feel from staying in a lodge room," Brown said. "Some people really love to camp but can't always bring their gear, especially if they are coming from abroad. So this works for them, and it's cheaper too." If we had known about this sooner. . . . But no, we really liked our campsite.

The river wild

Day 3 was about to become the highlight of the trip for the girls. We had signed up for a day of white-water rafting on the Tuolumne River, one of the best rafting rivers in North America. Few roads offer river access to the river, so rafting is a true wilderness experience.

The river's rapids range up to Class 5, which can be daunting. It also would be just the thing to take Celine's mind off of the 27 bug bites she had accumulated despite significant application of insect repellent.

Of course, everyone needed a little reassurance. Nick Nyquist of Zephyr Whitewater Expeditions gathered the participants and addressed the safety issues, spelling out the rules and rehearsing what to do if the raft decides to dump you in the water.

"White-water rafting is not as dangerous as you might think," he said. "The technology has advanced with both the boats and the life jackets, and everyone wears helmets too. Lots of bright clothing. So much has been done to make it safer than in the past. In addition, all of the guides are white-water safety certified." They also were young and very fit.

Once people were in the river, the goal was to maintain some control over the headlong rush of the raft downstream. Forget about staying dry. Wet was the normal condition of the trip. At the end of the day, Courtney summed up the girls' reaction with one enthusiastic word: awesome.

Flores' words about the need to get out and walk in Hetch Hetchy stayed with us all week. We took a three-mile round-trip hike to beautiful Carlon Falls. The trail wound through sun-filtered forest that made us feel as though we were the only souls there. And, indeed, when we arrived at the falls, we were. The only voices were those of birds, muffled somewhat by the sound of falling water.

We also trudged up dirt roads that rambled beside and sometimes through flower-covered meadows. Gorgeous fields of purple lupine appeared almost everywhere, often accompanied by the brilliant yellow of Common Madia, a type of small sunflower. Here and there, old wooden barns spoke to the ranching and mining history of the region.

Funny, we thought, at the end of our trip. We came here because we had never been here, lured by the thought of something different and new. It is no longer new, but it was so different that, I'm sure, we'll be back again.

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