

## TRAVEL

4.9.2006

Section F

## ALASKA

One route  
by land,  
one by sea

► F5



## YOSEMITE

Lodge adds to  
Hetch Hetchy's  
quiet allure

► F7



## GHANA

Month  
visit op  
volunt

## Savoring Yosemite Valley's quieter sibling

Renovations at nearby lodge  
add to lure of Hetch Hetchy

By John Flinn

CHRONICLE STAFF WRITER

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK Forgive me, John Muir, for I am about to utter an environmental blasphemy: Hetch Hetchy is actually a pretty nice place.

It is gospel among card-carrying Sierra Clubbers that the sheer-walled granite valley was forever desecrated in 1923 when it was dammed to supply drinking water for a rapidly growing San Francisco. Muir, who spent his last years battling desperately to stop it, is said to have died of a broken heart.

Thanks to Muir and many others, Hetch Hetchy's fraternal twin, Yosemite Valley, was preserved. But if you've ever ventured there between Memorial Day and Labor Day you know what you're in for: traffic gridlock, tent-city campgrounds and air so smoggy it violates federal standards for cities. Every year more than 3 million people squeeze themselves into its 7 square miles.

Hetch Hetchy, by contrast, is filled only with water. And silence.

I drove there last fall to do a little solitary hiking and also to check out Evergreen Lodge, a recently refurbished resort just outside the park boundary.

Built in 1921 to house workers erecting Hetch Hetchy's O'Shaughnessy Dam, the collection of rustic cabins has served



SHELLEY EADES / Special to The Chronicle

**Crossroads:** Trail signs reveal the wealth of hiking options at Hetch Hetchy.

over the years as, among other things, a moonshine distillery and brothel. In 2001 a trio of San Francisco entrepreneurs bought it and spent \$7 million on renovations, adding 50 new cedar cabins, a recreation center, meeting hall and general store. Working with Juma Partners, a San Francisco nonprofit agency, they provide a training venue for what they call "high-potential young adults from urban backgrounds," who come to the mountains to work as seasonal interns.

The original cabins are cheap-



Courtesy Evergreen Lodge

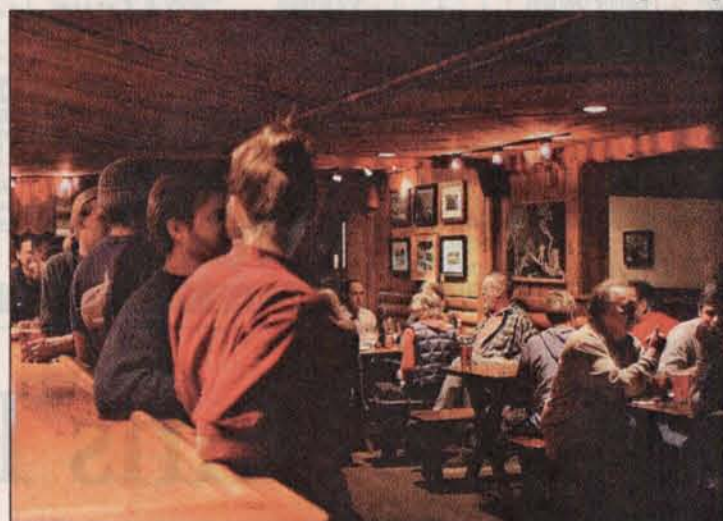
est, but they looked dark and uninviting. My wife, Jeri, and I upgraded to a "new traditional cabin." Built in 2004, it had a queen bed, a small refrigerator, a sitting area with a sofa bed, a gas-operated cast-iron stove and a private deck facing west, toward the sunset. It was unfussy, quiet and comfortable.

None of the rooms have televisions or phones, and cell phone reception is spotty at best. For those who can't bear the silence, there is satellite TV in the main lodge, and phones and free Internet terminals in the recreation hall.

The bar, which has been there since the moonshine days, was friendly and boisterous, filled with both lodge guests and locals. In the adjoining dining room, the menu was rather ambitious considering the location. I had the grilled flat iron steak with Bourbon reduction, and Jeri the broiled elk tenderloin with shiitake butter. Neither quite reached the level of to-die-for, but both were perfectly enjoyable. Exhausted from a long day, we went to bed before the campfire got roaring and the s'mores came out.

The lodge offers an array of guided programs, including fly fishing and a bike-hike-and-swim excursion that looked like a lot of fun. But the next morning I opted for a solitary hike at Hetch Hetchy.

Eight twisting miles from the lodge, I parked my car and walked across the top of 430-foot-high O'Shaughnessy Dam, passed through a dark, dripping, 500-foot-long tunnel and came to a National Park Service sign that stopped me in my tracks. I had to read it three times to make sure I wasn't hallucinating. Next to grainy old photos of the Miwuk and Paiute Indians who once lived here was a message that read in part: "Disturbing these resources



Courtesy Evergreen Lodge

**Cabin fever:** Evergreen Lodge has added 50 new cabins, top. The bar, above, is friendly and boisterous, filled with guests and locals.

is disrespectful to American Indian cultures."

I'm trying to picture the park official who thought it a good idea to post the sign next to the dam that turned the Indians' erstwhile home into a giant Doughboy pool.

The trail followed a big granite bench a couple of hundred feet above the reservoir. Last autumn the water level was down a little, leaving a conspicuous white band above the waterline like a bathtub ring. (With the recent rainfall, you're unlikely to see it this year.)

I had the place practically to myself. As I sauntered along the undulating trail, catching glimpses of Hetch Hetchy Dome and the El Capitan-like Wapama Rock through the pines, I heard nothing but the wind.

Passing the base of ribbon, 800-foot-high Tueeulala Falls, which was merely a trickle at the time (but should be flowing exuberantly this spring), I arrived at the base of thunderous Wapama Falls. Plunging 1,300 feet from the valley rim, it is, according to

the World Waterfall Database, "probably the most powerful waterfall in Yosemite National Park." Some years — and this is likely to be one of them — it flows so mightily in springtime that it washes over the bridge at its base, blocking the trail.

Among the boulders I found a perfect little pool, went for a brisk swim and sprawled out on a sun-warmed granite slab to dry off. There was no one else around. On my way back I encountered three other hikers, which made a total of eight for the day.

The Sierra Club and other environmental organizations are lobbying to tear down O'Shaughnessy Dam and restore Hetch Hetchy to its original condition — Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has asked his aides to look into it — and I hope some day they succeed. But for now I love being able to savor its silence. I hope John Muir would understand.

To comment, e-mail Executive Travel Editor John Flinn at [travel@sfchronicle.com](mailto:travel@sfchronicle.com).

## If you go

## WHEN TO GO

Evergreen Lodge, at an elevation of 4,600 feet, is open year-round. Late-season storms have left a lot of snow on the ground.

## GETTING THERE

From San Francisco, make your way to Manteca and then follow Highway 120 east. Twenty-two miles past Groveland, and a half-mile before the national park entrance, turn left on Evergreen Road. In 7 miles you'll come to Evergreen Lodge. Continue 8 more miles to get to Hetch Hetchy.

## WHERE TO STAY

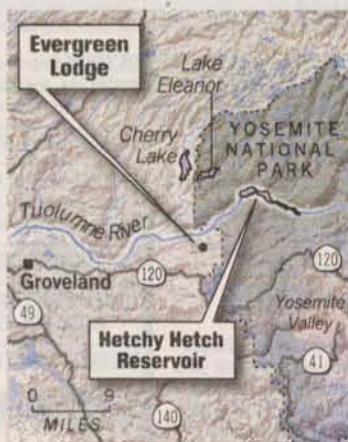
**Evergreen Lodge.** (209) 379-2606, [www.evergreenlodge.com](http://www.evergreenlodge.com). Cabins from \$89 (older cabins) to \$179 ("new traditional" cabins); one-bedroom cottages sleeping two to four, \$129-\$199; family cabins sleeping up to six, \$149-\$249.

## WHERE TO EAT

At the lodge's restaurant (virtually your only nearby option) dinner entrees range from \$14 to \$25.

## WHAT TO DO

**Wapama Falls:** The hike, about 5



JOHN BIANCHARD / The Chronicle

miles round trip from Evergreen Lodge, is quite easy.

**Evergreen Lodge:** Massages, \$75 an hour; bike rentals, \$30 a day. Guided programs include fly-fishing excursions (from \$30 for an hour-long casting class to \$395 for a full-day "high country fly fishing adventure") and various biking, hiking and swimming combinations (\$60-\$70).

**Camp Mather:** Evergreen Lodge guests can purchase a day pass to use the nearby facilities at San Francisco's popular family camp. Adults \$12, children \$6.