

Wednesday, Aug. 08, 2012

Kings Canyon a surprising outdoor alternative



KINGS CANYON -- Yosemite is by far the best-known national park in California. Close to home, but often overshadowed, Sequoia and Kings Canyon National Parks are the other national parks in the Sierra Nevada. Although technically two separate parks, they are adjacent to each other and managed as a single unit.

Annual visitation averages only 1.5 million visitors a year, while Yosemite sees 3.4 million. With half the number of visitors, 15 percent more land area to explore, and a nearly endless list of things to do, these parks are a great alternative with many surprises. Now connected to Highway 99 by the 180 freeway, the drive time is shorter than it used to be.

I started out trying to cover both parks this week but eventually realized there was just too much to say. So this week I'll feature Kings Canyon and next week Sequoia.

Kings Canyon, the northern park, has very few roads -- most visitors explore the backcountry on overnight backpacking trips. If that isn't your preferred way of experiencing the outdoors, you can access many of the most popular destinations within the park along Highway 180, the park's only major road.

A mile past the Big Stump Entrance station is a crucial road junction. A left turn keeps you on Highway 180 and to most of the Kings Canyon destinations that I am recommending. A right turn puts you on the Generals Highway south towards Sequoia. This week we will follow it to where it enters Sequoia. Next week we will follow it down to Sequoia's southern entrance at Ash Mountain.

Confused? It always helps to look at a map. You can find one at: www.nps.gov/seki/planyourvisit/.

Once you've found the junction, follow 180 northeast. At Grant Grove you can pick from a variety of easy trails to marvel at massive sequoias. The General Grant Tree -- the third largest in the world -- is accessible via a half-mile paved loop. Grant Grove Village offers lodging, campsites, food, supplies, showers, and a visitor center. A side road to Panoramic Point offers great views of Kings Canyon and the crest of the Sierra Nevada.

Just beyond Grant Grove, Highway 180 crosses into Giant Sequoia National Monument before reentering the park further east. Graded dirt roads on the west side of 180 access the Converse

Basin, a huge sequoia grove that was logged in the 1890s. Seeing this graveyard of big stumps is one way to appreciate the trees that have been preserved within the park.

The highway then drops into the spectacular canyon of the South Fork of the Kings River, one of the deepest canyons in the United States. You can find gas, food and lodging at Kings Canyon Lodge. Within the canyon, but outside the park, Boyden Cave offers glimpses of the insides of a mountain. Although over 200 caves exist in this area, Boyden is one of only two that are open to the public.

At the bottom of the canyon you will find lodging, food, supplies, campsites, and a visitor center at Cedar Grove. Located between Cedar Grove and the end of Highway 180, trails around Zumwalt Meadow (1.5 miles) and up to Roaring River Falls (half mile) are very popular. A longer 9-mile hike to Mist Falls is great for hikers who want a bigger challenge. As with all waterfalls, late spring is the best time to visit, especially in a dry year like this one.

The wilderness that makes up the northern part of Kings Canyon is one of the most beautiful places in the world. Entering it from the 5,000-foot trailhead at the end of Highway 180, however, makes for an extremely challenging trip. With average elevations in the high country in the 10,000-foot range, it is easier to begin your trip at Florence Lake in Sierra National Forest or at one of the many trailheads on the eastern slope of the Sierra. You can also arrange a horseback pack trip through Cedar Grove Pack Station and let the horses do some of the work. Horseback riding is also offered at Grant Grove and at the Horse Corral Pack Station on Big Meadows Road.

Highway 180 is a dead-end route, so eventually you have to turn around to see other areas of the park. As you return on 180, a left-hand turn on Hume Lake Road will take you to additional campgrounds and Hume Lake. Built to provide water for a flume that carried lumber down to the valley town of Sanger, this lake now offers fishing, picnicking, and camping. Hume Lake Christian Camp offers supplies and gas for visitors. Hume Lake Road connects with the Generals Highway south of the Big Stump Entrance, so you can use it as an alternate scenic route when you return from visiting the canyon.

Heading south on the Generals Highway from the 180 junction (or from where Hume Lake Road joins the Generals Highway), you can turn on Redwood Mountain Road hike among the massive trees of the Redwood Mountain Grove.

Big Meadows Road leads to a campground at Big Meadows and an historic fire lookout at Buck Rock. The lookout is often open but undergoing some repairs this summer. Contact buckrock@inreach.com for current conditions and hours. From Big Meadows you can take a moderate 6-mile hike to Weaver Lake in the tiny Jenny Lakes Wilderness. You can also find luxury tent camping at the Sequoia High Sierra Camp.

Further south along the Generals Highway, the Montecito-Sequoia Lodge offers lodging and meals and Stony Creek Village offers lodging, meals, gas, and supplies. Just beyond Stony Creek the highway enters Sequoia National Park, which is where we will pick up next week.

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