

AFTER THE FLOODING

Remnants of the Miwok people's ancestral land are highlighted by frothy falls, breathtaking views

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Maybe it was the exotic, sexy sound of "Hetch Hetchy" that cast a spell on me. Year after year, every new book and map fed my fascination for the Miwok Indians' ancestral land, tucked in the northwest corner of Yosemite National Park. Hetch Hetchy had become some mystical, legendary place in my mind.

I was intrigued by the controversy surrounding the flooding of Hetch Hetchy Valley and John Muir's fight to save a place he thought as uniquely beautiful as the "great Yosemite." According to historical accounts, it was San Francisco's fast paced growth and increasing thirst that drowned Hetch Hetchy Valley. As long as the debate raged on, it still stood a chance. But the earthquake of 1906 sealed the fate of this pristine valley, home to American Indian cultures for more than 6,000 years before the arrival of gold rushers and their livestock.

After several failed attempts to schedule a getaway to the Hetch Hetchy region of Yosemite National Park, we finally made and kept a reservation at the Evergreen Lodge, a lesser known stitch in California's tapestry of historic landmarks and a cozy base camp for exploring Hetch Hetchy's hiking trails.

We savored the leisurely drive across the Central Valley and climbed into the foothills through the old mining town of Mariposa, along the scenic Merced River to El Portal and up Big Oak Flat Road to the Evergreen road junction just outside the northern

entrance of the park.

I never expected the drive along Evergreen Road to be such a visual treat with bucolic pockets of meadows and vales rolling out to the forested foothills interrupted by meandering forks of the Tuolumne River.

The restored Evergreen Lodge and its compound of rustic to classic cabins, custom camping facility, recreational activity center including bicycle rentals, dining room with outdoor patio and fireside terrace beneath a canopy of pines exuded yesteryear Yosemite Valley, minus the world famous gem's hustle-bustle of human and vehicular traffic.

By 7 the next morning, David and I were first in line at Yosemite's Hetch Hetchy entrance, just 1 mile down the road past Camp Mather. The next 10 miles of paved serpentine roadway descended to a small parking lot and day use area at the face of the O'Shaughnessy Dam and Hetch Hetchy reservoir. I was so wowed by the granite ramparts bracing this bulging body of water on both shores narrowing up the Grand Canyon of the Tuolumne River that in my exultation I committed eco blasphemy, exclaiming, "This is awesome! What's so bad about this dam?"

From my vantage point, staring at the granite cliffs highlighted by frothy falls and silhouette of domes in the distance, it was difficult to imagine a more dramatic, breathtaking, surreal setting without the fierce flow contained behind the colossal concrete barricade.

It was later, at Evergreen Lodge and in a Groveland antique shop, that I saw early photographs of the Tuolumne River snaking along Hetch Hetchy's verdant valley mirroring Yosemite Valley and the Merced River, and felt the loss mourned by Muir and other visionaries of his time. But at the risk of damming myself further (or maybe it's a way of

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making the best of what is unlikely to be restored) I continue to ponder on whether the flooding sacrifice of Hetch Hetchy Valley may have preserved some of the serenity and romantic wildness of a jewel that would have undoubtedly been obliterated by the excess of tourist amenities currently plaguing Yosemite Valley and threatening the exquisite realm John Muir so worshipped?

By 8 a.m., summer's robust, warm air current at barely 4,000 feet already rippled across the water, warning of a hot day ahead, so we set out on our 6-mile hike, crossing the dam and following a path through a tunnel to the trailhead.

The trail undulated along the shore for the first 3 miles, exposing a grandiose, dazzling panorama. We walked below Wapama Falls along raised walkways and bridges cooled by the veil of mist. The terrain transitioned to a zigzag through shaded pine groves and across granite plateaus bordered by yellow and purple wild flowers and sprinkles of poison oak.

Two hours into the hike, as face flies and mosquitoes were bouncing off my swatting hand, I was ready to curse the heat when I heard the promising rumble of tumbling water. Rancheria Creek's cascade soon came into view, spilling into the gorge. A few steps more and the prize was in sight — a granite terrace of idyllic pools for soaking and basking in the afternoon sun. The solitude, stunning picnic setting and rejuvenating plunge was sheer heaven and worth every annoying buzzing bug and sticky trickle of sweat.

As the sun slipped lower on the horizon, still cool and euphoric, we gathered our packs and retraced our 6-mile steps to the car, focused on our next mission — ice cream bars at the Evergreen Lodge store and scheduling a return visit to Hetch Hetchy, perhaps under the white veil of winter next time.

Linda Mullally is a freelance writer and author. She and her husband David travel and adventure as a writer/photographer team from their Carmel Valley home.

If you go -Lodging: Evergreen Lodge is a historic hotel in the woods on the western border of Yosemite, off Highway 120. The lodge includes a restaurant serving breakfast, lunch and dinner, as well as a tavern and general store. Rates range from \$99 to \$299 per night. -Information: www.evergreenlodge.com -Nearby highlight: Less than 30 miles from Yosemite's northern entrance from highway 120, take in a little Gold rush history along Groveland's main street. This spit of a town has enough charm for a leg stretching stroll or an overnight at one of its historic inns, including the dog-friendly Groveland Hotel. Don't miss lunch in the museum atmosphere of the Iron Door Saloon, the oldest continually operating saloon in the state of California.

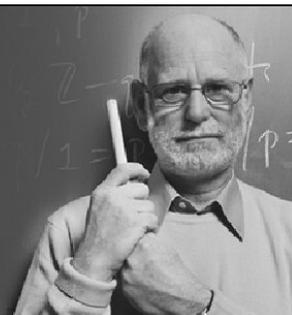
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