

# YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK

By Michael Shapiro

**C**lose your eyes and you'll see what I mean," said my friend Walt. We had stopped a moment as we skied 10 miles from Badger Pass to Glacier Point in Yosemite National Park.

Following his instruction, I could hear the whooshing wind, clattering the spare branches of the pines, punctuated by occasional chirps of winter birds. Tiny shards of ice stung my cheeks. And I could smell that distinctive metallic scent of impending snowfall.

Thanks to Walt, I had activated my other senses and begun to "see" the park in greater dimension. Then I opened my eyes and described the view of Yosemite Valley to Walt, who is blind.



From this spot we could see so many of the park's famous sights: the imposing mass of Half Dome; Yosemite Falls' crystalline waters; the tree-lined river at the valley bottom that the falls feed; the sturdy peaks of the Sierra in the background. This is the landscape that inspired John Muir and Theodore



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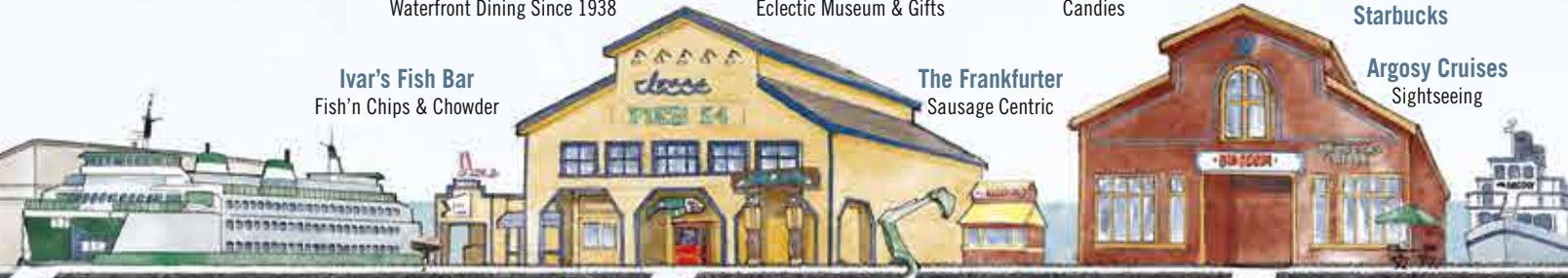
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Roosevelt to push for a system of national parks. It's the place that Ansel Adams used as a canvas for his path-breaking photography. Its granite highlands, pristine wilderness, towering sequoias and historic lodges exemplify what makes our parks so valuable. I volunteer for an organization, Environmental

Traveling Companions, that takes disabled people on outdoor adventures. We had a diverse group with a range of physical challenges that weekend, including a couple of women who were unable to use their legs. They propelled themselves with custom poles, and when fatigue set in they let others pull them

Half Dome is the most conspicuous sight in Yosemite Valley from the vantage of the trail to Glacier Point.

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uphill on sleds (or slow them on downhills).

It's easy to get to Glacier Point in summer—all you have to do is drive. But in winter the road, deep in snow, is closed to motor vehicles. The park carves parallel tracks for cross-country skiers; some ski out and back in a day, 21 miles roundtrip.

The day I skied to Glacier Point with the disabled participants carried the tang of incoming weather. After hours of skiing and pulling others up hills, I was deeply tired, but rarely have I felt so alive. When the cabin appeared on the dusky horizon our group cheered with joy, knowing we'd have shelter, warmth and deep platters of lasagne.

This wasn't my first trip to Yosemite. The summer after moving from New York to California, I came here with a junior high school group—I was in the park on Independence Day in 1976, when the U.S. celebrated its 200th birthday. I returned in high school for a program at Yosemite Institute.

In Yosemite, among towering granite formations and skyscraping sequoias, I found majestic consolation for the challenges of adolescence. One summer

day I sat by the Merced River and simply listened to its music, mesmerized and transported by the sound. At night my high school friends, the naturalists and I sang songs and told stories around a campfire, forming a community under the stars.

People often talk about getting away to the great outdoors, but for me going to wild places, especially Yosemite, has long felt like coming home. From the day I first saw Half Dome through a school bus window, to my most recent trip there last summer, my reaction to Yosemite remains awe; my lasting feeling is gratitude.

After the trip with the group of disabled skiers, Walt thanked me for letting him “borrow my eyes.” But it was I who overflowed with appreciation: for Walt who had enabled me to see the park anew; and for the visionaries who preserved these pristine lands where all of us can see better, in every sense.

*San Francisco-based Michael Shapiro is author of A Sense of Place. He has worked as a rafting and kayaking guide, as well as a bicycle tour leader.*



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