

Ho, ho, ho, Yosemite: A magical winter destination

By **DON BABWIN**
Associated Press

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, Calif. — Yosemite National Park might not seem like an ideal winter destination, particularly if you're from a part of the country where you'd like to trade in road salt for rim salt on your margarita and leave the words "wind chill" behind.

But Yosemite in winter is magical, as I discovered last year on a trip there with my family just after Christmas. There's snowboarding and skiing, both downhill and cross-country, as well as sledding (pick up a plastic saucer at a sporting goods store on the way). You can also ice skate at a rink in the shadow of the famed granite formation known as Half Dome. Park rangers also lead snowshoe walks (free with \$3 suggested donation).

Many of Yosemite Valley's shops and restaurants remain open. And at the Majestic Hotel, one of the country's most storied national park lodges, there are holiday decorations and a seven-course dinner with costumed performers called the Bracebridge Dinner. The wood-and-stone hotel, formerly known as the Ahwahnee, opened in 1927 and has hosted everyone from Presidents John F. Kennedy and Barack Obama to Queen Elizabeth and Walt Disney.

Winter can also be a time to enjoy the park's scenery without summer's crowds. But the weather can pose challenges as well. Here are some details.

The scenery

Naturalist John Muir once wrote that Yosemite was "full of God's thoughts."

Driving in, thick forests of snow-dusted pine and fir trees block your view at first of the park's famous granite monoliths towering over Yosemite Valley. But there's nothing like that first glimpse. El Capitan rises 3,600 feet from the valley floor, more than twice the height of the



This undated photo shows the Majestic Hotel in Yosemite National Park in California in winter. The park in winter is less crowded, offering solitude, scenery and activities like skiing and snowshoeing.



This undated image provided by the National Park Service shows the famous Half Dome granite formation in Yosemite National Park in California in winter.

Empire State Building. On the other side of the valley is Half Dome, rising 4,700 feet off the valley floor.

In winter, the options for

seeing these landmarks from anywhere other than the valley are limited, as some roads in the park are closed until the snow thaws. The

cables that climbers use to ascend Half Dome are also removed for the season.

But there are walking tours led by National Park

Service rangers that explain how these huge chunks of granite came to be. They're not just the result of erosion, but were also formed by

melting glaciers and forces under the ground that over the millions of years pushed them higher and higher. It's a way to understand the massive forces that formed the earth itself.

Visitors can also follow the footsteps of famed photographer Ansel Adams, who made his home here for a quarter century. You can even snap your own pictures from where Adams stood when he took some of his most iconic photographs. Classes cost about \$100 but the Ansel Adams Gallery also offers free camera walks on certain days (tours fill up; reserve ahead).

Getting there

Getting there can be a challenge on roads that are potentially snowy and icy. Car rental places may tell you — as they told me — that snow chains aren't necessary. They are, to be blunt, lying.

"California law says if you are entering a chain control area, you have to carry chains," said Scott Gediman, a park ranger and a public affairs officer in Yosemite. "Everybody needs to have chains, even if you have four-wheel drive."

Rangers don't enjoy checking car trunks for chains and cables but they do it and they will send you out of the park if you don't have them.

The good news is that chains are not that expensive, costing as little as about \$40, and can be purchased at any auto supply store nearby. Snow chain technology has improved dramatically, making it far easier to put the chains on than it used to be. But if you still feel like you can't do it, there are services along the road that will put the chains on for you for \$30 or so.

Yosemite Valley is about 210 miles from San Francisco. But if the winter drive sounds intimidating, use the YARTS bus service which runs year-round between Yosemite and Merced, a city located about 130 miles from San Francisco.



This undated photo provided by Yosemite Hospitality shows a scene from the annual holiday-themed Bracebridge Dinner at the Majestic Hotel in Yosemite National Park in California.

Smoky lentil soup gets depth and flavor without meat

By **MELISSA D'ARABIAN**
Associated Press

Rich bean soups are classic winter comfort food. They are filling, healthy, and inexpensive, making them a worthy addition to the menu rotation. The downside to dried bean cookery is the time it takes to soak and then cook beans. Canned beans are a reasonable substitute, although they cost more than three times the price of their dried, bagged counterparts.

An easy, money-saving solution is lentils, which you can find easily at any grocery store, next to the dried beans. Brown lentils — the type you'll most likely find in inexpensive bags next to the rice — don't require any soaking (although a good rinse is recommended), and are cooked to tender perfection in about a half hour. Green lentils are a little thicker and firmer than brown lentils (and often a little pricier), so they take a few minutes more to cook. Red lentils are softer, holding their shape less, so are best used for sauces or stews where you are seeking a thicker, creamier texture — for instance, when you are making an Indian dal.

Don't let the cheap price fool you: the everyday brown lentil is a nutrition powerhouse. One serving has over 8 grams of filling fiber, 9 grams of protein and a nice array of vitamins and minerals, including over half the daily requirement of folate and nearly 20 percent of our daily iron.

Lentils themselves have an earthy, mild flavor, so they easily take on the flavors of other ingredients. Today's recipe for Smoky Lentil Soup is all plant-based, which means it's truly jam-packed with health-boosting foods but it's also full of flavor. It gets its smokiness from smoked paprika instead of the traditional ham bone, and little bit of cumin.



Lentil soup.

Melissa d'Arabian via AP

SMOKY (VEGAN) LENTIL SOUP

Servings: 8

Start to finish: 45 minutes, including cook time

- 1 tablespoon olive oil
- 1 large onion, chopped (about 2 cups chopped)
- 1 stalk celery, chopped (about ½ cup chopped)
- 4 ounces white mushrooms, finely chopped (about 1 cup chopped)
- 1 ¼ cup cubed butternut squash (1/2-inch cube) (or substitute chopped carrot)
- 5 cloves garlic, minced
- 1 teaspoon ground cumin
- 2 teaspoons smoked paprika
- 1 teaspoon chili powder
- 2 teaspoons dried Italian herb seasoning (or dried oregano)
- 3 cups vegetable stock
- 2-3 cups water
- ½ pound dried brown lentils, rinsed and picked through (about 1 1/4 cup)
- 1 bay leaf
- 2 teaspoons apple cider vinegar (or wine vinegar)
- ½ teaspoon kosher salt, if needed

Finely chopped mushrooms add meaty depth of flavor, and I use small cubes of butternut squash instead of classic carrots for just a touch of sweetness. A bonus:

the entire dish cost about \$10 to make, and you'll probably have leftovers. Meatless Monday fans, this may be your new favorite dish.

In a large heavy-bottomed soup pot or Dutch oven, soften the onion, celery and mushrooms in the olive oil over medium heat, and cook for 5 minutes, stirring frequently. Add the squash, garlic, cumin, smoked paprika, chili powder and Italian herbs and cook for another five minutes, stirring frequently. Onion should be quite soft now.

Add the stock, 2 cups of the water, the lentils, and bay leaf and bring to a simmer over medium high heat. Reduce heat, cover partially with a lid and let simmer until lentils and squash are tender, about 25-30 minutes. If the mixture gets too thick, add up to another cup of water.

Once soup is cooked, remove 1-2 cups of the soup to a blender and very carefully blend on low until somewhat smooth. Pour the thickened, blended soup back into the pot and stir. Stir in vinegar and taste for salt. Add the salt only if needed.

Chef's Note: green lentils may also be used, but add about 10 minutes of cooking time.

Nutrition information per serving: 155 calories; 22 calories from fat; 3 g fat (0 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 0 mg cholesterol; 328 mg sodium; 27 g carbohydrate; 7 g fiber; 4 g sugar; 8 g protein.

Food Network star Melissa d'Arabian is an expert on healthy eating on a budget. She is the author of the cookbook, "Supermarket Healthy."



Courtesy of Laura Agra via AP

LEMON CURD

Makes about 2 cups, or about 16 servings

Start to finish: 3 hours (30 minutes hands-on time; includes 2 hours 30 minutes of chilling time)

- 1 large egg
- 4 large egg yolks
- 1 cup sugar
- ½ cup fresh lemon juice
- 6 tablespoons cold unsalted butter, in 6 pieces
- Pinch kosher salt

In a large, heavy pot, whisk together the egg, yolks, sugar and lemon juice until smooth.

Place the pot over medium heat and whisk frequently until the mixture is warm. Continue whisking frequently until the mixture thickens and turns buttery yellow, about 7 to 10 minutes. Adjust the heat as needed to make sure the mixture does not simmer, but stays hot. When the mixture coats the back of a mixing spoon, it is done. You can also use a candy thermometer to measure the temperature, which should be between 170 and 175 degrees F.

Remove the pot from the heat and whisk in the butter one tablespoon at a time, until each addition of butter is melted and incorporated. Whisk in the salt.

Transfer the lemon curd to a glass container.

Place a piece of plastic wrap over the top (this prevents a skin from forming) and allow to cool. Seal the container and refrigerate for up to 10 days.

Nutrition information per serving: 107 calories; 51 calories from fat; 6 g fat (3 g saturated; 0 g trans fats); 71 mg cholesterol; 22 mg sodium; 13 g carbohydrate; 0 g fiber; 13 g sugar; 1 g protein.

AAA predicts record travel over Christmas and New Year's

(AP) — Comforted by a strong economy, more Americans than ever are expected to travel over the Christmas and New Year's holidays.

Auto club AAA said Thursday that 107 million people will travel between Dec. 23 and Jan. 1, a 3.1 percent increase over last year.

It's the ninth straight increase in Christmas travel,

according to AAA.

Most will travel by car — about 97 million — despite higher gasoline prices. More than 6 million are expected to fly, and AAA says nearly 4 million will take trains, buses or cruise ships.

While the national average gas price of \$2.47 is 28 cents higher than last December, airfares and mid-range hotels are cheaper, according to AAA.