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Yosemite of the Spirit [Place Debate: Yosemite National Park - Perceptions]

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Yosemite's grip on our hearts and our minds is profound. Perhaps the most consistent reaction it evokes is a desire to attach some meaning to such a place and to come to an understanding of our connection to it.

Several of the following essays attempt to rationalize Yosemite, to dissect it into a framework of components and processes that help us understand the sway the Park holds over us. Others search for Yosemite's significance in the meanings human cultures ascribe to it; several report on how Yosemite serves as an inspiration for human creation. One argues we should shift focus, that our attention to places of extraordinary beauty blinds us to the beauty of everyday places.

There is a despondence emerging, a suggestion that the actual experience of Yosemite leaves much to be desired. Several authors note that a visit to

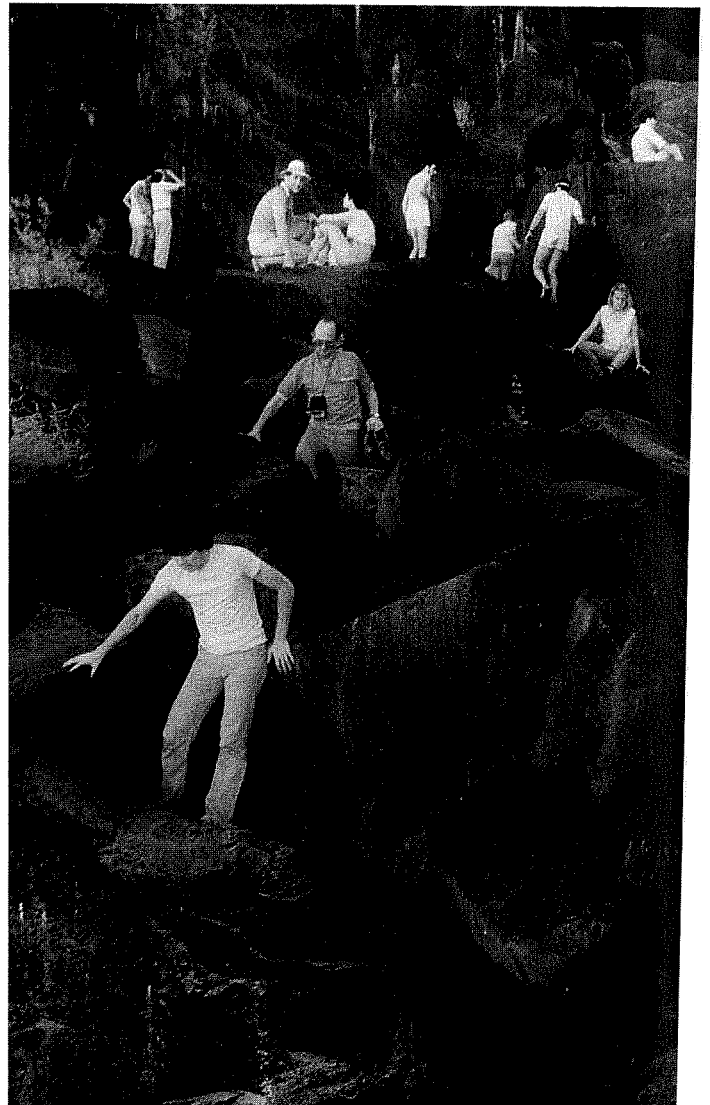
PERCEPTIONS... Yosemite increasingly resembles a visit to a theme park, and they counsel that we would be better off approaching the Park as a pilgrimage.

One need not visit the Park to be touched by it, two of the essays argue; the issues that touch the Park touch parks and wilderness everywhere. Yosemite's reputation has been communicated worldwide via verbal and pictorial images; an environmental preservation ethic spurred by John Muir's passion for Yosemite has resulted in the creation of national parks and wilderness areas throughout the world.

Each of the essays reveals a facet of the challenges Yosemite poses to the human spirit, which ordinarily refuses to be dominated and more often than not triumphs against its adversaries. One author argues the deck is stacked against Yosemite. Nevertheless, because neither Yosemite nor humans are given to humility, it is likely that Yosemite will continue to be a source of powerful, raw inspiration.

Research assistance for the
Yosemite Place Debate
provided by Lori Pottinger.

Photo by David Robertson.

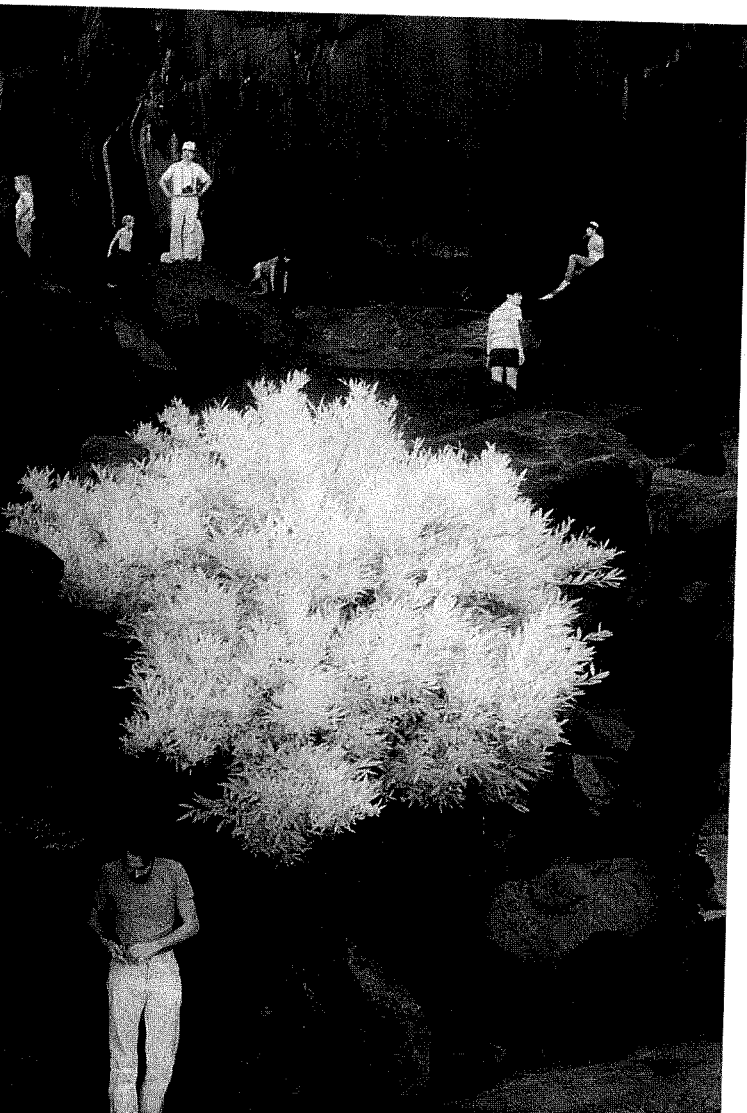


Yosemite of the Spirit

I backed my Nissan King-Cab pickup, full of gear and groceries for a week, out of the driveway of my home in the Sacramento suburbs at 11:30 a.m. I arrived at Bridalveil Fall in Yosemite National Park at 3:15 sharp, ready to photograph the sublime, although I had never been able to define it. Maybe that very inability was part of my mission: to picture what I could not say.

I gathered my equipment: a 35mm camera with three lenses and a tripod for long exposures; a (Techni-kardan) 4x5 camera, another tripod and three lenses for it; two kinds of film, infrared for the 35mm as well as infrared and Polaroid for the 4x5. I will not mention all the accessories.

David, I said to myself as I walked up the asphalt path leading



to the bottom of the fall, you are off on a great artistic (and spiritual) adventure.

At the end of the paved path I hopped out on to the rocks slicked by years of roaring current. It was late August and water over the Fall was low enough for me to venture a near approach. No more than three rocks later the tripod I carried on my pack fell out and crashed around. I slipped and slid.

Maybe I had better get off slippery rock, I thought, and I headed into a narrow stream bed, only to have the tripod, which I now had attached more securely to the pack, cling to the grape vines that hung from the limbs above me. Able neither to go forward or backward, I took the pack off and carried the equipment up piece by piece to the staging area, a large flat rock from which the majestic Fall was clearly visible.

Now for the photograph. I wanted to use the 4x5 first to get a large negative, which would permit a even bigger enlargement without much evidence of grain. Out came the Polaroid film. The sun was just right and the wind blew the water into a gentle curve. I snapped the shutter only to discover that I had failed to pull the dark slide.

I tried again, but this time when I pulled the exposed film, it came apart and developer squirted out all over. I breathed deeply and cleaned up the mess with the only thing I could find, a nice white handkerchief. Meanwhile the sun was sinking, emblematic of my spirits. I tried again, with exactly the same results.

Now I was mad. I fumed and fussed. I cursed myself. Why hadn't I learned how to use this apparatus before I got out in the field, in the midst of this incomparably beautiful scenery? More than two hours had gone by since I left the truck; the sun was all too quickly dropping behind the cliffs to the west. I would have to hurry to get the picture I wanted.

At that point a shutter inside me clicked. Through the opening I saw that hurry had characterized my every move since I left home: driving, parking, loading, climbing, getting set. I put the film aside and sat myself down on the rock. I rested my head on my arms and my arms on my knees. Like a flash it came to me: You fool, Moses, as he tended the flocks of his father in law, did not look up at Mt. Sinai and say, "There is a sublime mountain, I think I will go up it and have a profound religious experience."

I went to Yosemite, the nation's outdoor cathedral, in the same spirit of conquest that took Americans across the continent more than a century ago. I came to grab a spiritual insight. I came with a fast film to capture quickly the spirit of a place.

But I learned that landscape does not reveal itself to those in a hurry. It is patient and discloses itself, if at all, to those who are like minded. I had thought, as do so many visitors to national parks, that beauty guarantees instant revelation.

Now I can offer some practical advice: Go slow, carry slow film, use long exposures.