

Review: Firefall Ranch Near Yosemite National Park



For many explorers, a day spent in California's [Yosemite National Park](#) is a moving one. From Half Dome and the formidable El Capitan to Cathedral Peak and Mirror Lake, Yosemite is a wild remnant of ancient glaciation and a marvel to behold at every angle.

Here's the rub: The park is massive at 700,000 acres, so determining how to tackle it and where to overnight is a vital part of any park plan. I've stayed at the no-frills [Yosemite Valley Lodge](#), and know plenty of folks who have roughed it a bit by camping in the cot-furnished canvas tents of [Curry Village](#) and [Housekeeping Camp](#). But in 2024, an attractive and brand-new option came on the market: [Firefall Ranch](#) in Groveland.

Regional History

Before the dawn of the automobile, visitors to Yosemite usually came from the west via stagecoach. If their starting point was San Francisco, they likely rode a steamboat up the San Joaquin River to the delta town of Stockton, then boarded a horse-drawn coach to traverse miles of trails (and climb thousands of feet in elevation) to Yosemite. Today, Firefall Ranch rests along one of the old stagecoach routes, which is now Highway 120. Staying here places guests about 40 (slow) miles from the park's valley floor.

Staying at Firefall Ranch

The ranch is set on 300 acres of meadowland in the Sierra foothills; these hills roll right into the Sierra Nevada Mountains, of which Yosemite is a part.

There are 55 [standalone cottages and villas](#) at the ranch, available in one-, two- and three-bedroom configurations, though I would argue that the word "cottage" doesn't really do these structures justice. Our two-bedroom accommodation was essentially a contemporary cabin, complete with a double-sided indoor/outdoor fireplace, custom-built wood furnishings, park-inspired prints on the walls, a luxurious double shower and heated bathroom floors.



My daughters made themselves comfortable in their double- twin-bed room, and my husband and I relished our separate space. We gathered for fireside reading and Scattergories in the latter room, which also had a sofa bed, a coffee table and sliding doors to a private covered deck.



The deck overlooked the ranch's natural pond; beyond it, we could see the giant pool deck (the pool is heated year-round) and the main lodge, which is home to on-site dining options, a great general store and a vaulted ceiling guest lounge with a massive fireplace as its focal point. There are also myriad fire pits, which ranch staffers get roaring come nightfall. And during our December visit, guests zoomed about on a small seasonal ice rink.



Games Galore

The ranch is incredibly kid-friendly — as a mother of children with a large age gap (my girls are now 13 and 6), I can attest that young people of any age will be highly entertained here, and at no additional cost.

It was too chilly for us to brave the pool (which I'm sure is a huge draw in the summer months), and it was no longer the season for [horseback riding](#), but we did test out plenty of the ranch's other offerings. There's a fleet of bikes ready for use on various parts of the property; my oldest loved walking out of our cabin, grabbing a bike off the closest rack and pedaling to the main lodge, where she could leave the bike and grab it (or another one) later.

Adjacent to the pool, there's a massive game pavilion with shuffleboard, corn hole, ping pong and yet another giant double-sided fireplace. We hung out here several times, including in the evening, when many guests brought their complimentary s'mores kits (procured from the front desk) to roast marshmallows in between table games. Another cool option for kids is the ranch's clue-driven scavenger hunt, which had us traversing the property in search of two well-hidden wolf statues — my kids loved earning complimentary scoops of gelato as their final prize upon finding the wolves.

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Another diversion? A nostalgia-inducing 18-hole mini- golf course, which we played from start to finish one afternoon. There are straightforward holes and then silly ones with ramps and tunnels and dangling objects to nudge your ball off track. Complimentary putters and balls are waiting in the main lodge for anyone interested in playing the course, and guests can even play in the evening, as twinkle lights are strung above the holes.



Had we arrived at the ranch with another family, I imagine that the tweens and teens would have played mini golf repeatedly in attempts to best each other, or pedaled around the property all on their own on borrowed bikes. The stand-alone cabin arrangement and innumerable games make the ranch ideal for multi-family stays and independent roaming — which is a gift for parents and kids alike.

Dining at Firefall Ranch

We loved our cabin so much that we ordered pick-up meals off the on-site dining menu two evenings and had fireside picnics around our coffee table. While my youngest daughter rarely strayed from penne pasta with red sauce, the rest of us loved options such as house-made tomato soup, elk chili, roasted chicken, foraged mushrooms, salmon and a classic burger. Described as “elevated mountain cuisine,” these dishes hit the spot after active days on and off the ranch.

For those who are willing to leave their cabin, two adjacent dining spaces serve that same menu at the ranch. [The Tavern](#) has booths, high-top tables and a central bar, plus televisions showing sports games; breakfast and lunch are served here daily. Just a few steps away is the comfortable (but more upscale) Yova dining space, which is open only for dinner. It’s a popular choice with non-guests, too, so making reservations in advance is wise.

Excursions

We left our cabin one morning at sunrise, drove to the Yosemite Valley floor (one hour away by car) and spent hours exploring. Parking in Yosemite is very limited, so an early arrival is the best way to avoid stressing over finding a spot.

I highly recommend booking clients on the guided two-hour [Valley Floor tour](#), which takes riders to some great viewpoints, including the base of El Capitan (I’ve stood here mesmerized by the climbers above, identifiable by their bright-colored portaledges) and Tunnel View, an awe-inspiring vista famously photographed by [Ansel Adams](#) that showcases Half Dome, Bridal Veil Falls and the valley itself. Once the tour is over (it starts and ends at Yosemite Valley Lodge), clients should take the short walk to sights such as Yosemite Falls and Cook’s Meadow.

The Firefall Ranch team is also more than happy to book [guided excursions](#) into the park. The sky is the limit: There are flightseeing tours, rafting adventures, guided hikes and more, depending on the season. The park is spectacular no matter how you explore it — but I do argue that having a cabin at Firefall Ranch to go back to sweetens the experience.

Sister Properties

Firefall Ranch is part of [First Light Resorts](#), which also operates the nearby [Rush Creek Lodge](#) and [Evergreen Lodge](#). Both are as family-friendly as Firefall, with pools and myriad activities and games for all ages. The [spa at Rush Creek](#) is accessible to Firefall and Evergreen guests (it's just 15 miles down the road from Firefall) and offers everything from an aromatherapy steam room to a massage designed for sore hikers. Day-use passes are available.