

## ***Explore the Wild Wonders of Yosemite from a Family-Friendly Basecamp***



Much to the delight of junior hikers, climbable boulders dot the path to Lower Yosemite Falls.

Sheltered in the Stanislaus National Forest just outside the northwest corner of Yosemite National Park is a getaway within a getaway. A three-hour drive due east of San Francisco (the 170-mile trip that **John Muir** famously first walked in 1868), Evergreen Lodge in Groveland has been welcoming families for over a century, since the construction of the nearby Hetch Hetchy Reservoir's O'Shaughnessy Dam, initially completed in 1923, inspired a need for material transport and lodging.

Through generations of owners, including San Francisco's **Dan and Angie Rovero**, who operated Evergreen in the 1930s, **John and Kay Bargmann**, who revitalized it over 25 years, and today's proprietors under First Light Resorts, **Brian Anderluh** and **Lee Zimmerman**, the 20-acre property that was saved from the Sierra Nevada's 2013 Rim Fire has grown to house 88 one-bedroom, two-bedroom or vintage cabins. For a large or multifamily stay, the 2,500-square-foot John Muir House on a private edge of the property sleeps up to 10 and is where my family was among three who recently discovered a bevy of onsite activities for the whole gang, as well as proximity to awe-inspiring adventure at this doorstep to Yosemite National Park's nearly 1,200 square miles.



Families have been making memories at Evergreen Lodge, founded in 1921, for generations.

KIM CARROLL

Screens can be left confidently behind at Evergreen when a stroll along the property's footpath passes by bocce ball courts, ping pong tables, epic zip lines, a new forest disc golf course and Scientific Art Studio–designed play areas. The Recreation Center behind the General Store and Restaurant and Tavern hosts daily activities, like a scavenger hunt and bracelet making in the morning to evening s'mores around the outdoor fireplace and historical slideshows that can help teach young naturalists about the indigenous people, including the Southern Sierra Miwuk and Ahwahneechee, who first lived in the region as long as 8,000 years ago. (For a new perspective on Muir's legacy, the East Bay's **Robert Aquinas McNally** published *Cast Out of Eden* in May.)

***“... arriving at the glorious Yosemite, we found it full of summer and spring. Thus, as colors blend in a rainbow, and as mountains curve to a plain, so meet and blend the plants and seasons of this delightful land.”***

— John Muir, from *Anywhere That Is Wild: John Muir's First Walk to Yosemite*, edited by Peter and Donna Thomas

The large pool and hot tub drew families from England, Germany and France during just one afternoon of our stay, a reminder of the attraction of an area that welcomes some 4 million visitors each year, with peak season from May, when waterfalls are at their most spectacular, through September. A private hot tub and

firepit are also among the amenities at the John Muir House, along with a loft that comfortably slept four kids in our party.

As **Willa**, age 10, puts it, “The thing I like most about Evergreen Lodge is they have a lot of kids' climbing areas and places to have fun.” A range of bikes, mountain strollers, day packs, kid carriers, and trekking poles are also all available for rental, ensuring littles of all ages can comfortably explore the grounds.

While guardians can rest assured that the kids are creating core memories, they can also actually *rest*, which can be a rare achievement on a fun-filled family vacation. But moments to pause are built in for the basking, such as views from wicker rocking chairs on the Sunset Deck (perhaps after California craft beer tasting in the evening), morning yoga, or a treatment in one of two onsite massage cabanas.

If that's not enough, day passes are available for Rush Creek Lodge & Spa, Evergreen's sister property 7 miles away. Under the same ownership, Rush Creek provides another 20 acres of accommodations and amenities right off Highway 120, notably a Poppy Award–winning spa with both family and adult-only hours of operation available for a



Jennifer Casey unwinds in the magnesium-enriched hot tub at Rush Creek Spa, the indoor/outdoor facility at Evergreen Lodge's nearby sister property.  
JENNIFER MASSONI PARDINI

reasonable day rate. In addition to a menu of treatment options, the indoor/outdoor spa boasts a Himalayan salt sauna, cool mist room, aromatherapy steam room, and a sensory room replete with sounds from Yosemite and lighting that mimics a sunrise and sunset. My favorite was the magnesium-enriched hot tub, with a waterfall all its own, for unbeatable pressure on sore muscles. And in May, First Light Resorts opened Firefall Ranch, with fine dining and elevated villas on 300 acres, 15 minutes west on Highway 120.



The Evergreen Lodge Recreation Center is a one-stop shop for a host of activities, from scavenger hunts and crafts to Yosemite trivia and stargazing.

KIM CARROLL

When adventure calls back at Evergreen, its Guided Recreation Program offers fly-fishing, stargazing through a Unistellar telescope, Class III–V whitewater rafting on the Merced and Tuolumne rivers, as well as full- and half-day tours of Yosemite Valley (in the winter, snowshoeing is also available).

The surrounding region is easy enough to explore on one's own by car, however, given Evergreen's close

proximity to Carlon Falls and its watering hole (10 minutes); Hetch Hetchy Reservoir — the gravity-fed water source for 2.4 million residents of the San Francisco Bay Area — as well as views of Wapama Falls (20 minutes); Yosemite Valley and its endless wonders through the park's Big Oak Flat entrance (60 minutes); and the sweeping silhouettes of Half Dome and El Capitan afforded by Glacier Point, followed by the sweet reward of Snack Stand ice cream (120 minutes). And just next door to Evergreen is Camp Mather, the 350-acre, City of San Francisco–owned destination that is celebrating its centennial this year. In the summer, its swimming pool, tennis courts and hiking and biking trails are also open to Evergreen guests for a day-use fee.

If you're visiting Yosemite National Park soon, make time to stop at its new Yosemite Valley Welcome Center and Bridalveil Fall's rehabilitated grounds, which, like Mirror Lake and Lower Yosemite Falls, offer accessible, paved paths for viewing some of the most magnificent vistas our state has to offer. With a combined drop of 2,425 feet, the three tiers of Yosemite Falls put it amongst the highest in the world, a natural wonder that will leave anyone of any age in awe, marveling in its mist.



The author and her family take in an epic view at Yosemite National Park.

JENNIFER CASEY

## Know Before You Go

*In June, reservations are required on weekends and holidays to enter Yosemite National Park; they are also required every day in July and through August 16. Weekend and holiday reservations resume August 17 through October 27. For more information, visit [nps.gov/yose](https://nps.gov/yose) and [evergreenlodge.com](https://evergreenlodge.com).*