

THE ULTIMATE CALIFORNIA ROAD TRIP

9 Days. 5 National Parks. From 282 Feet Below Sea Level to 3,000-Foot Granite Walls.

Everything you need for Death Valley, Joshua Tree, Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite in one trip: real drive times, the 2026 Yosemite reservation change, detailed trail breakdowns for the most important hikes and viewpoints in all five parks, lodging and camping strategy, multiple itinerary options, desert and Sierra safety, and family logistics for a nine-day loop across the most dramatic elevation range in the National Park System.

5 NATIONAL PARKS * REAL DRIVE TIMES * NO YOSEMITE RESERVATION * 2026 CONDITIONS

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Table of Contents

01	About This Free Preview
02	Trip at a Glance
03	2026 Current Conditions & Before You Go
04	Critical 2026 Update: Yosemite Reservations -- What Actually Changed
05	Best Version of This Trip by Traveler Type
06	Spotlight: Badwater Basin
07	Day 1: Arrive + Death Valley South District
08	What to Skip If You Only Have 9 Days

About This Free Preview

A sample of The Ultimate California Road Trip Guide 2026

This free preview pulls seven sections straight from the full, 115-chapter premium guide -- the same research, the same 2026 accuracy, the same practical detail. The full guide covers all five parks in depth, real drive times, multiple itinerary options, and everything you need to plan this trip with confidence; this preview gives you a genuine taste of what's inside before you buy.

Trip at a Glance

The Five Parks	Death Valley, Joshua Tree, Sequoia, Kings Canyon, and Yosemite National Parks
Region	Southern and Central California, spanning low desert to the high Sierra Nevada
Standard Trip Length	9 days -- roughly 1.5-2 days per park plus dedicated travel days
Minimum Realistic Length	7 days, condensing time at Joshua Tree and Kings Canyon
Ideal Extended Length	11-12 days, adding a buffer day and more time in Yosemite
Total Core Driving Distance	Roughly 1,100-1,200 miles across the full route, plus in-park driving at each stop
Total Entrance Fees (paid individually)	\$130/vehicle for all 5 parks
Best Single Purchase	America the Beautiful Annual Pass, \$80 -- covers all 5 parks plus every other federal recreation site for a year
Biggest 2026 Change	Yosemite's entrance reservation system has been eliminated for the season
Best Season	Spring (April-May) or fall (late September-October) -- summer is workable only by reversing the park order
Best Home Base Airports	Las Vegas, NV (for the desert start) or Fresno, CA (for the Sierra end)

2026 Current Conditions & Before You Go

This route touches five parks across two very different climates, and several 2026-specific facts should shape your planning before you book anything. Confirm all current fees, road status, closures, permits, campground availability, and reservation requirements directly with each park before you leave home.

- **Yosemite does not require a general entrance reservation in 2026.** No day-use or peak-hours reservation is required to drive into Yosemite this year, including during the popular February 'Firefall' (Horsetail Fall) window. This does not mean the park is less crowded -- parking can still fill early, and Half Dome permits and wilderness permits are separate systems that still apply.
- **Non-US residents age 16 and older pay an additional \$100 per person at Yosemite and Sequoia & Kings Canyon,** unless admitted with a qualifying annual pass. Death Valley and Joshua Tree are not currently on the nonresident surcharge list.
- **Bring a credit/debit card or mobile payment for all entrance stations.** Several parks on this route have moved to cashless fee collection, and you should not rely on cash at park gates.
- **Fuel planning matters.** Death Valley has limited fuel at Furnace Creek, Stovepipe Wells, and Panamint Springs, but stations are far apart. Joshua Tree, Sequoia, and Kings Canyon do not have gas inside the park boundaries, so fill up in gateway towns before entering.
- **Death Valley and Yosemite want opposite seasons.** Death Valley can be dangerously hot from June through September, while Yosemite's high country roads, including Tioga Road and Glacier Point Road, are typically closed by snow for part of the year.
- **Avoid lower-elevation Death Valley hikes after 10 a.m. in summer.** Summer desert heat is a serious safety issue, not just an inconvenience.
- **Sequoia and Kings Canyon campground and road access can change.** Dorst Creek Campground is closed in 2026, Cedar Grove is seasonal, and vehicle length advisories apply on Generals Highway.

Book This First

1. Yosemite Valley lodging or Yosemite gateway lodging • 2. Sequoia/Kings Canyon lodging or campground • 3. Death Valley lodging, especially Furnace Creek • 4. Joshua Tree lodging • 5. Half Dome permit, if hiking • 6. Crystal Cave tickets, if tours are operating • 7. Rental car, especially for one-way routes • 8. Campgrounds and timed/seasonal activities.

Critical 2026 Update: Yosemite Reservations -- What Actually Changed

For years, Yosemite required a separate timed-entry reservation during peak hours and peak season, on top of the standard entrance fee. That system has been eliminated for the 2026 season: there is no day-use or peak-hours reservation required to drive into Yosemite at any time in 2026, including during the popular February 'Firefall' (Horsetail Fall) event.

No Reservation Needed, But Don't Expect Empty Parking Lots

Removing the reservation system does NOT mean Yosemite is less crowded. Parking can still fill by mid-morning on popular days, and illegally parked vehicles may be cited or towed. Arrive early even without an entrance reservation -- before 8-9 a.m. on any popular day.

Separate from the general entry reservation, which is gone, Half Dome permits and wilderness backcountry permits are still required and entirely unaffected by this change. If Half Dome is on your list, that lottery system still applies and should be entered months in advance at recreation.gov.

Best Version of This Trip by Traveler Type

Traveler Type	Best Version of This Trip
Families with younger kids	The 11-12 day version, with more downtime
First-time California national park visitors	The standard 9-day route
Summer travelers	Reverse the route and keep desert stops before 9-10 a.m.
Serious hikers	Extend Yosemite and add permit-based hikes only if secured
Photographers	Prioritize sunrise/sunset in Death Valley, Joshua Tree, Moro Rock, and Yosemite
RV travelers	Use the CA-180 Big Stump entrance and avoid tight mountain-road sections when possible
Short-on-time travelers	The 7-day route, with Joshua Tree shortened and Kings Canyon limited to Grant Grove

Spotlight: Badwater Basin

The Lowest Point in North America

Badwater Basin sits 282 feet below sea level, a vast salt flat stretching toward distant mountains on every side. A flat, easy boardwalk and salt-flat walk lets most visitors experience it in 45-60 minutes, and a small sign on the cliff face above marks sea level for scale. The basin is spectacular at sunrise, when temperatures are tolerable and the light picks out the hexagonal salt patterns underfoot -- visit before 8 a.m. even in spring or fall.

Day 1: Arrive + Death Valley South District

Morning	Fly into Las Vegas, pick up rental car. Las Vegas is the closest major airport to Death Valley (about 2 hours to Furnace Creek). Grab any last-minute supplies; this is your final easy big-box shopping stop before the desert legs begin.
Afternoon	Drive to Death Valley, check into Furnace Creek area. Enter via CA-190. Stop at the Furnace Creek Visitor Center for current conditions and to pick up your park pass if you have not bought one online. Settle into lodging in the Furnace Creek area.
Late Afternoon	Badwater Basin. Drive 17 miles south of Furnace Creek to Badwater Basin -- 282 feet below sea level, the lowest point in North America. The boardwalk and salt flat walk is flat and easy; allow 45-60 minutes.
Sunset	Zabriskie Point. One of Death Valley's most photographed viewpoints. The eroded badlands glow gold-orange at sunset. A short walk from the parking area to the main overlook.

Today's insider tip: Furnace Creek's small grocery store and gas station are your last easy resupply point before the more remote stretches of this trip -- top off your tank and grab any forgotten items now. **Tonight's stay:** Furnace Creek offers lodging from simple to upscale, all within walking distance of the visitor center and a real restaurant; Stovepipe Wells, about 25 minutes further west, is a quieter, more budget-friendly alternative if

Furnace Creek is sold out.

What to Skip If You Only Have 9 Days

- **Skip Racetrack Playa** unless you have a high-clearance vehicle and a lot of extra time.
- **Skip Telescope Peak** unless you are building a hiking-focused Death Valley trip.
- **Skip 49 Palms Oasis in summer** due to its seasonal closure and the heat.
- **Skip Crystal Cave** unless tours are operating and you already have tickets.
- **Skip Half Dome** unless you already have permits and are prepared for a serious full-day hike.
- **Skip Tioga Road** unless it is open and you have an extra Yosemite day.
- **Skip trying to visit both Cedar Grove and a full Sequoia day** if you are already running behind schedule.

This Free Preview Ends Here

Get the Complete Guide

The full Ultimate California Road Trip Guide 2026 includes all 115 chapters: complete mini-guides for all five parks (history, geology, getting there, visitor centers, trail tables, spotlights, lodging, camping, wildlife, and safety), the full 9-day day-by-day itinerary plus 7-day condensed, 11-12 day extended, summer-reversed, and bonus two-week Eastern Sierra itineraries, a gateway-town guide, month-by-month seasonal deep-dive, family reality check, airport strategy, accessibility, pets, stargazing, dining, budget planning, packing lists, a full FAQ, and a quick-reference checklist -- all built around current 2026 conditions. Get the complete guide at AdventureFamilyVlog.com.