

## IN BRIEF

# As Falls Yosemite Falls

by Erica Gies

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For many of the three million people a year who visit Yosemite National Park, its eponymous falls are the most dramatic—and most accessible—site. Not only is this the highest waterfall in North America (and the fifth-highest in the world), it's visible from the main road.

Before this spring, visitors hopped out of their vehicles in a cloud of exhaust smoke and gazed up at the gossamer falls from the cracked asphalt, the smell of sequoias and the sound of cascading water barely discernible.

That visitor experience has been relegated to park lore with the completion this spring of a new transit plan that includes reforestation of the old parking lot, a shuttle stop and a fleet of 18 hybrid buses. The new plan encourages visitors to use the free shuttle, walk or ride bikes and leave their vehicles in day parking. The transit plan is part of a Lower Yosemite Falls restoration project that also includes upgraded trails, educational wayside exhibits, bike racks and a larger bathroom.

The transit system promises to improve Yosemite Valley's long-derided traffic jams and pollution issues. Park ranger Adrienne Freeman was leading a walk when she encountered one of the new hybrid buses. "Our walks usually leave from the Visitors' Center, and I usually have to stop talking when a bus comes by. But this one was totally silent."

The 18 new buses are diesel-electric hybrids, and they get 60 percent better fuel economy and provide up to a 90 percent reduction of certain emissions than the previous diesel buses. Yosemite is the only park in the country with an all-hybrid bus fleet. Each bus cost \$500,000 and was paid for by the Department of the Interior. There are bike racks on the front and wheelchair accommodations.

The Yosemite Fund, a nonprofit, raised \$11 million of the \$13.5 million total (minus the buses) for the Falls project. In the last 10 years, the Fund has raised money, worked with the National Park Service, hatched plans, held contentious public comment periods, and hired landscape architect Lawrence Halprin as a key developer. All construction was done during the last two years while retaining public access to the falls.

However, not everyone is pleased. "We're very disappointed in the Lower Yosemite Falls project because it's a development project, not a restoration project," says Joyce Eden, co-director of Friends of Yosemite Valley, a grassroots advocacy organization. "There were repairs needed," she says, "but the separation wall, the obtrusive bathroom on top of Native American archeological sites, the overdone bus stop, the increase in paved area, and the interference with the wildlife corridor all increase ecological degradation of the area and interfere with the opportunity for a connected experience with the natural world."

Denise Brooks of Friends of Yosemite Park Association disagrees, pointing out that paved trails "prevent erosion and accommodate disabled visitors." She adds, "It is a great thing that we preserve our nation's treasure for all to see and use."

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Hybrid buses stop here: Yosemite now hosts hybrids, replacing belching diesels.

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