



Kay Mouradian

# A dream postponed

Five days in the lap of a wonderland called Yosemite

by Kay Mouradian

For years I'd heard how the backcountry of Yosemite affects one's soul, as if one could reach out and touch the hand of God. That thought never left my consciousness and I longed to make the trip, but family responsibilities and not winning the Yosemite lottery kept the dream on hold.

The Yosemite lottery determines who wins the coveted beds and gourmet meals at the five High Sierra Camps in Yosemite's backcountry. Thousands enter the lottery each year, but I was never one of the lucky few winners. Then destiny extended her hand in July of 2004, when I called to ask whether there had been any cancellations. "Nothing available," the reservation agent said and put me on hold. "I can't believe it," she said when she was back. "I just received a call canceling two spaces for the trip you requested."

Kismet! Are treasures waiting? But then my joy fell muted. Was I too old for such a strenuous trek? After all, I hadn't hiked the Sierras in more than 20 years.

"Is there an age limit?" I asked, my voice resonating with trepidation.

"Yes," was her response. "No children under seven."

Hesitating, I said "Fine." I decided not to tell her I had turned 70 on my last birthday.

My tennis friend Eiko, younger by some 15 years and a seasoned hiker who at one time ventured



The helicopter. Photo: Eiko Amano.

into Asia and wended her way to base camp at Mt. Everest, suggested we start training immediately. I was fit on the tennis court, but Eiko warned me that hiking in high altitude required a different kind of fitness. She suggested our first hike together should be in the heat of the day and that we needed to carry a full pack. Yikes!

Once upon a time many years ago, I had taken a trek in the Indian Himalayas. Porters carried all my gear and at the end of the trek I gave my slipper-comfortable hiking boots to a porter who had been especially considerate with regard to my safety and comfort. Now, with less than three weeks before our departure to Tuolumne Meadows, the starting point of our five-day guided hike, I did not have a pair of hiking boots.

I needed to break in a new pair quickly, knowing that new boots and blisters have an uncanny way of joining together. I didn't even own a backpack and the thought of a pack weighing me down was another cross I had to accept. The only other guided overnight hik-

ing trip I had ever taken was in Oregon, when not-so-friendly llamas carried our gear and the guides prepared gourmet meals on two hibachis. Not a particularly strenuous affair.

**One look at the testosterone-charged youngsters, and I began to wonder if I had made a decision I would later regret. Would I be able to keep up?**

For the High Sierra loop we didn't need to carry sleeping gear or food or bear-protective cans, but we did need rain gear, a minimum of clothes, toiletries, and lots of water. Eiko estimated the weight, including that of the backpack, would be between 15 and 20 pounds. I hoped such a heavy load on my back would allow me to lift my head occasionally to gaze at the marvels of Yosemite.

At once I had to find hiking boots that wouldn't wreck my feet.

story

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Above: The first trailhead. Right: Yosemite hotel.  
Photos: Eiko Amano.



I canvassed every sporting-goods store in the San Gabriel Valley but couldn't find a comfortable pair. Finally, someone suggested I consider running shoes. So off I went to a specialty store in Pasadena, hoping to find sturdy shoes that were friendly to my tender feet. The first pair I tried on fit nicely, and when I put on a second pair, I said, "Ahh." The salesman assured me that hikers said wonderful things about this particular running shoe, and I promptly gave him my credit card. But the shoe's low-cut style provided absolutely no ankle support. I went to REI, another sports-specialty store, to purchase a pair of hiking poles, hoping they would provide the balance I needed to protect my ankles. An experienced salesman helped me pick a pair and then spent an hour showing me an array of backpacks, eventually finding the right one for my weight and size.

I was ready for my first afternoon workout. Eiko and I started at the base of the Mt. Wilson trail out of Sierra Madre, intending to hike a modest three miles. Within the first uphill mile, a very fit older woman, an obviously seasoned hiker, was about to overtake us. Curious about our full packs, she stopped to chat. I mentioned we were training for the High Sierra loop. She said she had hiked it some years ago. She looked at my feet. "Your shoes will never make it up to Vogelsang Camp. That's a killer hike. You'll need ankle support," she said, her voice trailing off as she sprinted ahead.

This fit old woman had the stature and physique of a marathon runner. Did I need to heed her message? I told myself I'd have to pay close attention to every step to prevent twisting my ankle. The only other option was to purchase a new pair of hiking boots that surely would blister my feet and create a miserable me during the entire trek. So be it! Optimist that I am, I decided this could be an

opportunity to sharpen my focus. Mind over matter, I told myself.

I continued to train throughout the next three weeks. My springy running shoes felt more comfortable with each climb, my ankles stayed strong, and I gave thanks to my shoes for leaving my feet blister-free.

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The magic day finally arrived. Eiko and I drove to Tuolumne Meadows, an elevation of 7,600 feet, and registered at the camp's headquarters. We were each given a towel and a wash cloth and directed to a four-bed canvas tent. Trying to find our tent among the many scattered around tall trees, we noticed five ladies, towel and washcloth in hands, standing and waiting one behind the other on the stairs of a building that was obviously the ladies' shower and rest room.

Thank goodness our tent sat in the midst of a cluster of tents some distance from the restrooms. Persons wending their way to the restrooms at all hours of the night wouldn't bother us. As I opened the tent's door, my eyes fell on a pot-bellied stove sitting on the floor at the far end. Eiko immediately started a fire. That was the first of many talents which I didn't know my friend possessed. Her understanding of how to build a fire that would last until morning kept us snugly warm in tents that provided little protection on cold nights, especially in camps perched at 10,000 feet.

After a so-so meal at the camp's dining hall, we attended the evening campfire, where we met Eric, our middle-aged ranger and guide.



Snow at  
Volgelsang. Photo:  
Eiko Amano.

He asked for our names. When I said "Kay," he looked into my eyes and replied, "Oh, I remember that name."

I could feel my stomach tighten. Did he think I was too old for such a strenuous trip? I had intentionally delayed sending the requested information sheet asking about our hiking experience and our ages until I knew it would be too late for the powers that be to invent an excuse to cancel me out.

He asked how Eiko, my Japanese-American friend, and I knew each other. When we simultaneously said "Tennis," he smiled and shifted his attention to others who would be leaving with us the next morning. If he knew how old I was, he never let on then or at

any other time during the five-day hike. For that I was grateful.

The next morning our designated group met Eric outside the dining hall. We were not an especially homogenous group. Our gang of 13, as I called us, included, in addition to Eiko and me, a psychiatrist, a trial lawyer, a judge, their wives, a couple of ladies in their 50s from Arizona, a 35-year-old Pilates instructor, and two teenage boys, all of 15 years. One look at the testosterone-charged youngsters, and I began to wonder if I had made a decision I would later regret. Would I be able to keep up?

I wrapped a scarf around my neck, pulled my backpack up, slid my arms through the straps, and tightened them. With my com-



Our gang of thirteen. Photo: Eiko Amano.

fortable pack resting on my back, a friendly woman standing on the porch of the dining hall asked me where we were headed.

“Vogelsang,” I said.

“That’s a beautiful spot. It’s my favorite camp,” she said. “I’ve been there many times.” Her eyes fell on my backpack. “You’re carrying too much stuff.”

*Too much stuff?* No way was I going to unpack a single item. I needed everything I had neatly stashed into my pack. Then my eyes fell on the teenagers who were directly behind Eric as he headed to the Vogelsang trailhead. The pace was already fast and we hadn’t even left the meadow.

I was determined not to be the last in our group. The trail was not yet strenuous and, fresh from a good night’s sleep, I kept up with the pace. Confidence began to dissolve my misgivings, and I decided this was going to be a wonderful adventure. My spirit high, I kept up with our fast-moving group. Our guide suggested we stop for lunch before the already rocky terrain got even rockier. And there it happened. I slipped on one of

those rocks, twisted my ankle, and fell. Would you believe that a certain face flashed in front of my eyes at that very moment... that of the very seasoned lady hiker who said my shoes would never make it to Vogelsang? Every curse word I knew shot through my mind – so forcefully that I hoped none of my fellow hikers heard those crude, unladylike thoughts.

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Both Eric and Eiko rushed to help. I put on a brave act and said, “Oh, it’s nothing!” Luckily, Eric had medical tape and Eiko, who had worked as a therapist at UCLA, taped my ankle with such deft, I was able to continue the hike as if my ankle did not have a sprain. I was lucky. The sprain

was slight and the tape provided all the support I needed for the rest of the trek.

Nearing Vogelsang Camp, our pace increased. The heavy dark clouds above were threatening. Then the rain thundered down as Vogelsang, nestled at the foot of snow-covered peaks, came into view. Eiko and I and the two ladies from Arizona rushed into our assigned four-bed tent. Eiko kindled a fire in the pot-bellied stove, we changed into dry clothes, and, as the rain eased to a stop, we found our way to the dining room. The Yosemite High Sierra camps are known for their wonderful meals, and I must admit I was awed by the gourmet fare that we were served. The chef even created a special East Indian meal for me, as I was the only vegetarian in our group.

A good hour of daylight remained after dinner. We surveyed the camp with its rain-soaked meadow and wended our way to an enchanting area by a tiny waterfall surrounded by boulders. Vogelsang is stunning. I wanted to stay for at least one more day to explore a trail or two along the mountain lakes, but that was not to be. We were scheduled to leave early in the morning to spend the next two nights at Merced Camp.

The next morning, as the sun’s rays fell on our canvas tent, we were awakened by the whirring of what sounded like a helicopter. Rushing out, we watched a chopper land in the nearby meadow. As the whirling blades stopped, several young men jumped out of the copter. “A woman is lost,” one of them said. “She should have been back at Tuolumne three days ago.” After asking our group if we had seen her along the trail and learning that we had not, he and the rest of the men gathered their belongings and spread out onto the various trails.

I found it comforting that Yosemite would send a rescue squad to find a lost soul. I recalled my

conversation with the reservation clerk. She suggested that I buy insurance because, she said, if I needed to be flown out, it would cost \$10,000! Needless to say, given my trepidation about the trip, I did indeed buy the insurance. Then I thought about the lone hiker and hoped she'd be found well and with deep pockets. The next day we learned that the woman had been found and was in good health.

The trail to Merced was downhill, steep, and rocky. Planting my hiking poles in specific grooves gave me the stability I needed to proceed with confidence. But halfway down the trail one of the ladies from Arizona slipped and fell. I gave her one of my poles, for which she was most grateful. She made it to Merced Camp long before I did.

We spent two nights at Merced, did some gentle hiking during our day of "rest", and the next morning we started for the longest trek of the five-day hiking tour. Our destination was Sunrise Camp, ten miles from Merced... all uphill. Until that morning my pack had rested comfortably on my back. But that changed on the trail to Sunrise. The steepness of the trail and the increasing altitude were taking their toll. By mile seven, my backpack began to feel as if it were filled with bricks. In addition, I was so far behind, I could not see anyone in our group. It should have been a wonderful opportunity to have drunk in the quiet of nature and become intoxicated with its beauty, but I was so tired that I just wanted to get to camp and plop on a bed.

Sometime later I saw Eric at the top of the trail, waiting for me. We were still a mile from Sunrise Camp, but fortunately that last mile descended into a lovely meadow, and I began to feel stronger in the lower altitude. That is, until I found myself at the entrance of the camp, where I had to lean forward and push up against my



Relaxing our tired feet. Photo: Eiko Amano.

poles to lift my weary body over two huge rocks. After registering with the camp director, I clumsily tried to find my tent cabin among those spread among the scattered trees. Tired as I was, I was still taken by the beauty surrounding Sunrise Camp. Then a good soul from our group came to my rescue and led me to my tent, where I did indeed crash on a bed.

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**I found a quiet spot by the enormous boulders framing the camp. Resting my body in a relaxed position, I breathed in the solitude of twilight.**

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After a well-deserved respite and another gourmet vegetarian meal at dinner, I opted not to attend the gathering by the campfire. Instead I found a quiet spot by the enormous boulders framing the camp. Resting my body in a relaxed position, I breathed in the solitude of twilight. As darkness fell, the night sky became vivid and clear. I felt wonderfully alone and after a time the brilliant stars became my companions. I

was not ready to leave this awe-inspiring place, but all things come to an end. We were scheduled to return to Tuolumne Meadows the next morning.

The downhill trail toward Tuolumne was another strenuous hike, and with so many people scrambling up, I began to think the trail was becoming as crowded as a Los Angeles freeway. Approaching a mountain lake halfway down, our group took a short break. Relishing the cool water brushing up against our bared feet, Eiko and I decided to linger in the lake's pristine beauty and said goodbye to our trekking friends.

When Eiko and I finally reached the road at the end of the trail, I saw the approaching Yosemite bus that was to take us back to Tuolumne Meadows. Now that the trek was over, I was anxious to find the nearest motel, where I could once again plop my drained body on a comfortable bed. The five-day trek had been an arduous but wonderful adventure. Would I do it again if the opportunity presented itself? You bet! Sunrise and Vogelsang camps are surrounded with such beauty that I'd love to spend several days to take in the wonder of their essence. But I'd prefer being taken there by helicopter! ☸