

America's Best Fall Color Drives

By Margie Goldsmith

Want to be dazzled by Mother Nature's fall foliage display? Just hop in the car.

Crisp air, panoramic views, brilliantly colored ash and poplar trees: the exhilarating route to [North Carolina's Mount Mitchell State Park](#)—the highest peak in the Eastern United States—is a destination in itself. The scenic 75-year-old Blue Ridge Parkway is just one of the country's great autumn drives.

The fall foliage season, when the changing palette of deciduous trees is in blazing bloom, is now starting. And the way to maximize your intake of color is to map out a driving route. In September, October, and—in some spots—even November, color seekers can visit 31 states and drive more than 3,000 miles of national scenic byways, plus thousands of other scenic roads.

Some nature lovers, like former [Shenandoah National Park](#) guide Hazel Mills, can't wait to buckle up and get up close and personal with the purple dogwoods and deep burgundy leaves of the [Virginia](#) creepers. "It's like a basketful of fall chrysanthemums in every color," she says. "Red and yellow, purple, and deep burgundy. When the afternoon sun hits the hickory, it looks exactly like gold, absolutely breathtaking."

Others, like Mike Boutin, owner of [Maine](#)-based [Northwoods Outfitters](#), like to take country drives surrounded by mountains bursting with yellow beeches, scarlet maples, and purple witch hazel around Moosehead Lake. He also loves one of the season's biggest local adventures—back-road moose safaris. "It doesn't get better than pulling over to see a huge brown male moose crash through a riot of bright red and yellow leaves," says Boutin.

Certain areas of the country—the Northeast corridor, the Southeast, along the Appalachian Mountains, and much of the Midwest—produce the most striking and vibrant colors because of mild autumn days and cool (but not freezing) evenings. If daytime temperatures are too warm for an extended period of time, colors are less intense.

If you're planning a fall foliage trip, choose your route based not only on the timing of nature's fiery color display, but also around available activities. Horseback ride through the orange hickory trees in Shenandoah National Park. Or stand beneath a quivering golden aspen at Mammoth Lakes in the Eastern Sierra while peering through a dusty window in Bodie, the best-preserved ghost town in [California](#).

But no matter where you are, the way to cover the most ground—and take in the biggest eyeful of color—is behind the wheel. Here are some of our favorite fall color drives.



www.dwoodphotography.com

Moosehead Lake Region, ME

The Route: 75.2 miles.

Foliage Update: <http://www.maine.gov/doc/foilage>

Visit the spectacular foliage of **Maine's** largest lake, Moosehead. Start at The Forks, Maine's white-water-rafting hub, then to Jackman, deep in the North Woods. Stop at the Attean Overlook for an extraordinary view of the Moose River Valley all the way to the Canadian border. Head to Rockwood on the shores of Moosehead Lake and spend the night in Greenville. In the morning, drive beneath spectacular tree canopies on unpaved logging roads.

Where to Stop: Overnight at the luxurious **Blair Hill Inn**; book a moose safari, white-water raft or hike to Moxie Falls, and take a scenic floatplane tour for a bird's-eye view of Moosehead Lake.



Priya Srinivasan

The Green Mountain and Mad River Byways, VT

The Route: 23.9 miles.

Foliage Update: <http://www.foliage-vermont.com>

Vermont is known as the mecca for serious leaf viewers in the Eastern United States. Drive on one-lane highways meandering through valleys and mountains painted glorious shades with yellow alder leaves, purplish-red pin cheery, and brilliant orange and red maple trees. Begin in Waitsfield where the Mad River runs, continue through Waterbury, and end in Stowe to see Vermont's highest colorful peak, Mount Mansfield.



Courtesy of the Stowe Area Association

Where to Stop: Visit Cold Hollow Cider Mill for a tour and cider tasting; dine at Michael's on the Hill with panoramic views of Green Mountain; and shop for local products at Cabot Annex, home of eight specialty shops including Cabot Cheese, Danforth Pewter, and Lake Champlain Chocolates.

Lake Placid, NY

The Route: 45 miles.

Foliage Update: <http://www.iloveny.com>

The Adirondacks, the largest natural wilderness region in the Eastern United States, offers a dazzling palette of autumnal colors in the six-million-acre Adirondack Park, designated “forever wild.” Start in Lake Placid and go northeast on Route 86 along the high cliffs of the Au Sable River to view the sugar maples, American beech, and yellow birch trees’ dazzling color display. Pass Jay and Keene, continue up the mountain along Cascades Lake, then head back into Lake Placid.



Leena Shekhar Bagawde

Where to Stop: Don't miss Lake Placid's

Flaming Leaf Festival, October 9th; overnight at the Lake Placid Lodge; take the Whiteface Mountain gondola ride; and go to Santa's Workshop in Wilmington.

The Driftless Region, WI

The Route: 158 miles.

Foliage Update:

http://tourism.state.wi.us/fallcolor_report.aspx

Wisconsin offers some of the most spectacular Midwest foliage driving routes, including The Driftless Region, a loop starting and ending at Mineral Point. Head north on Highway 23 to Baraboo, where sumac and maple trees streak the hillsides, and twisted oak and wild hickory blaze orange and yellow along the river valleys.

Where to Stop: Visit the historic Pendarvis miners' homes in Mineral Point, Cave of the Mounds at Blue Mounds, and Taliesin, Frank Lloyd Wright's home in Spring Green. Sample artisan Black Sheep Truffle and Goat Cheddar at Carr Valley Cheese in Prairie du Sac; ride the free *Colsac III* ferry across the Wisconsin River.



Clint Farlinger / Alamy

Skyline Drive, Shenandoah National Park, VA

The Route: 105 miles.

Foliage Update: <http://www.virginia.org/fall>

This park in the Blue Ridge Mountains is the quintessential fall foliage destination for Southeast travelers, and Skyline Drive has been called one of the top 10 scenic mountain drives in the U.S. Cruise along the crest of the Blue Ridge Mountains from Front Royal, VA, to the Waynesboro-Charlottesville area, and ogle at the bright red Virginia creeper vines, yellow and orange hickories, and deep purple dogwoods.

Where to Stop: Visit The Apple House in Linden, and Skyland Resort Gift Shop for local Virginia wines, and stay at the historic Skyland Resort, 3,680 feet above sea level. Ride horseback through the park's scenic wooded trails, and don't miss Luray Caverns.



Cades Cove, The Smoky Mountains, Gatlinburg, TN

The Route: 49 miles.

Foliage Update:

<http://www.eventsgatlinburg.com>

Straddling the **Tennessee–North Carolina** border, **Great Smoky Mountains National Park** is the most visited national park in America. For optimal leaf viewing, start at the “top of Ole Smoky” at Newfound Gap, and drive down the mountainside to Cades Cove. You’ll experience the fiery yellows of American beech and birch and vibrant reds of mountain ash, pin cherry, and mountain maple. Take the 11-mile loop around Cades Cove, winding past foliage surrounded by waterfalls, streams, and panoramic views.

Where to Stop: Shop for handmade baskets, scrimshaw, and leather goods at Gatlinburg’s Great Smoky Arts & Crafts Community; bite into a stack of flapjacks at the Pancake Pantry; hike, bike, or horseback ride Cades Cove to view the 19th-century homesteads.



Courtesy Gatlinburg Department of Tourism

Blue Ridge Mountains, Asheville, NC

The Route: 110 miles.

Foliage Update:

www.VisitNC.com/fallcolor

This year marks the 75th anniversary of the Blue Ridge Parkway, an ideal time to drive its winding scenic roads with panoramic views. Start on the Blue Ridge Parkway at milepost 469.1 from Cherokee through Mount Pisgah, Asheville, and head to **Mount Mitchell State Park**, the highest peak in the Eastern United States. Feast your eyes on the eye-popping colors of ash, beech, red spruce, poplar, and maple trees.



NC Division of Tourism

Where to Stop: Enjoy panoramic forest views and excellent wildlife spotting from the 5,000-foot-high Pisgah Inn restaurant's observation deck, and visit the Southern Highland Folk Art Center for locally made rocking chairs, pottery, and quilts.

West Elk Loop Scenic & Historic Byway, Gunnison-Crested Butte, CO

The Route: 205 miles.

Foliage Update:

<http://www.gunnisoncrestedbutte.com>

The country's largest and most spectacular aspen grove delivers endless vistas of gold, orange, and crimson. From Gunnison, head to Crested Butte on Highway 135 and on the Kebler Pass Road (gravel, but fine) that connects to Highway 133 near Paonia Dam. Loop back around on the West Elk Loop Byway, along the Blue Mesa Reservoir and the north rim of the **Black Canyon of Gunnison National Park**.



Gunnison-Crested Butte Tourism Association

Where to Stop: Tour the galleries on Crested Butte's September 30th ArtWalk; take a trail ride through the forest with Fantasy Ranch Horseback Adventures; try the Fried Green Tomato Po' Boy at Sugah's Café in Gunnison; and bunk at the Inn at Crested Butte with daily wine tasting.

The Enchanted Circle Scenic Byway, **Taos, NM**

The Route: 84 miles.

Foliage Update:

<http://taosvacationguide.com>

You'll find some of the best southwestern fall foliage along the Enchanted Circle Scenic Byway loop from **Taos** to Eagle Nest (where you'll see 13,161-foot high Wheeler Peak), on to Angel Fire, and back to Taos. Here, the aspens range in color from brilliant gold to dark orange. Feast on purple cinquefoil and golden and red cottonwoods while on the lookout for elk, black bear, and eagles.

Where to Stop: Swing by the **Taos Fall Arts Fest**, September 24th–October 11th, and the old gold-mining town of Elizabethtown; dine at The Old Blinking Light Restaurant, known for its Tex-Mex Red Chile; and stay at the **Historic Taos Inn** (in business since 1936) in the town's charming old section.



NM Tourism Dept

Eastern Sierras, CA

The Route: 125 miles.

Foliage Update:

<http://www.monocounty.org/docs/FallColorGuide.pdf>

Head to **California** for blinding displays of yellow and orange aspens, golden willows, and crimson cottonwoods amid sapphire alpine lakes, gushing waterfalls, and snow-frosted 12,000-foot-high mountain peaks. Start in Coleville to Lundy Lake, and then continue on to the June Lake Loop and Mono Lake. Go through Mammoth Lakes where orange streaks the mountainside, and finally to Rock Creek Canyon.



Oleksandr Buzko / Alamy

Where to Stop: Take a short hike for a view of Lundy Canyon Falls plunging down hundreds of feet; visit the West's largest unrestored ghost town, Bodie, in the Basin Range; and don't miss the he-man Cowboy Steak Sandwich at the unusual Whoa Nellie Deli located inside the Tioga Gas Mart in Lee Vining.