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8 great and unusual fall foliage destinations

Travel editor Peter Greenberg on taking in the season's beautiful hues

By Peter Greenberg

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Mention the words "fall foliage" and New England immediately comes to mind. Indeed, the traditional leaf peeping in the United States has always been focused on Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. For those traditionalists wanting that New England fall foliage experience, the peak starts just about now in the

more northerly regions of Vermont, New Hampshire and Maine. Then it moves in three directions — south, down slope and down east.

But my suggestion: You should move a lot further south, west, and yes, even north for some unexpected, and brilliant fall colors. Here are recommendations for great fall foliage in some surprising locations:

Michigan, Upper Peninsula

Michigan has more than 100 different species of trees, such as oak, ash, birch, maple and sycamore. Leaves turn from mid- to late-September into October.

You can find many scenic trails — for biking or hiking — in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan on state and national forest and parklands, along former railroad beds, and also in cities. Taking one of the many hikes in the UP is a great way to see fall foliage. If you prefer rugged trails, you can try tackling the trails in Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park. Located in Copper Harbor, Brockway offers breathtaking views and a 9½-mile drive with views of Lake Superior and the thousands of acres of the Keweenaw. The peak is about 735 feet above Lake Superior, and here you can see the beautiful colorings of fall, when the hardwoods display red, yellow and orange hues. Porcupine Mountains Wilderness State Park was built in 1945 on Lake Superior, and the park

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If you're a mountain biker, you can reach some of the most remote areas of the park. Located in the park, the Kaug Wudjoo Lodge (pronounced *kahg-WAD'-jiw*) sleeps 12 and is available for weekly rentals. You also can rent one of their 19 rustic cabins or modern and rustic campsites. There are more than 11,000 inland lakes and 3,200 miles of Great Lakes shoreline in the state of Michigan. Wherever you stand in the Michigan, you're within 85 miles of one of the Great Lakes. You are also no further than six miles away from an inland lake or stream. You should definitely take advantage of this waterway access, grab a canoe or kayak and enjoy some great — and uncrowded — fall foliage views.

Montana

Dominant golden hues begin peaking in early October in Glacier National Park. The colorful trees include maples, larch and aspen. Maple trees usually dot hiking trails, and they turn to hues of yellow, orange and red. The larch and aspen trees turn to bright yellows and gold. These trees are normally near evergreens, so the foliage displays contrasting colors. The appearance of fall color varies, due to elevation. Late-September to mid-October is typically the best time to view fall foliage in Northwest Montana. If you want great views of Glacier National Park or Flathead Valley and Lake, head to the summit of Big Mountain at Whitefish Mountain Resort. The Summit Trail is eight miles long and 7,000 feet high. Here, you will see golden hues of larch and aspen along with red hues from Montana's huckleberry bushes. And don't forget Missoula — an almost forgotten fall foliage destination. Not only is it the cultural and outdoor mecca of Montana, there are numerous biking and hiking trails by the river.

South Carolina

The fall color in South Carolina occurs in mid- to late-October in the mountains, and it occurs through mid-November in the Midlands. Head for the Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway (S.C. 11) — it's about 115 miles long — and much of the highway runs along the escarpment and through South Carolina peach orchard country. Views include steep drops, deep mountain coves, waterfalls cascading hundreds of feet and broad vistas.

Caesars Head State Park is part of South Carolina's Mountain Bridge

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Wilderness Area, and it also includes Jones Gap State Park. You can enter the park off the Cherokee Foothills highway, and it includes a five-mile drive through mountain valleys and coves where you can view small, pastoral farms and steep mountains. The park has a small river through a mountain cove where you can have great views of fall and enjoy trails that lead up the mountain to Caesars Head.

Tennessee

This is a true fall foliage state, but if you want guaranteed great fall colors, go to the Great Smoky Mountains National Park. This national park is the most visited in the entire country, and it receives 9 million annual visitors. In addition, Tennessee has nearly 400 festivals that celebrate fall, and it has 54 state parks and more than 1,800 miles of hiking and biking trails, so you have many opportunities to experience fall foliage. In East Tennessee, you will see the first sighting of autumn color. Trees above 3,500 feet change color first, usually during the first week in October. To see the best foliage, stay in East Tennessee for the second and third week of October, then go to middle Tennessee for later foliage sightings. The foliage in west Tennessee usually begins to change nearing the end of October to the first week in November. Tennessee has more than 400 species of deciduous trees.

By road, you can drive along the Cherohala Skyway and the Ocoee Scenic Byway. This is an especially popular time for motorcycles to drive along the skyway or byway. By rail, you can ride the Tennessee Valley Railroad on restored vintage trains in Chattanooga. In Knoxville, you can take the Three Rivers Rambler Train and explore east Tennessee. By boat, you can ride the Southern Belle Riverboat and enjoy lunch or dinner while viewing the fall foliage.

Colorado

Aspen, of course, is the dominant tree here. The leaves turn golden in mid-September. And, speaking of Aspen ...

- Hotel rates drop as much as 50 percent and restaurants offer discounted menus. Fall rates start at \$100 per room per night. For example, a hiking/biking package at Hotel Jerome starts at \$340.
- Aspen Expeditions' tandem guides take you to the top of Aspen Mountain. Once on top, take flight and see the foliage with a major adrenaline rush.
- Trek through forest and spend the night in one of 29 backcountry huts through the Colorado Rocky Mountains. Huts are equipped with fireplaces, cooking materials and water.
- Visit the Aspen Center for Environmental Studies (ACES) on the Hallam Lake Reserve. Take in the autumn hues with the family while learning about the native trees, birds and animals that thrive in the high-alpine environment.

Utah

There are those who think that Colorado has a monopoly on the beautiful yellow leaves of the aspen trees each fall. But Southern Utah should not be overlooked. Places like Cedar City offer one of the most dramatic fall foliage backdrops in the country.

Cedar Breaks National Monument contains cliff faces eroded into the west side of the Markagunt Plateau. The rock layers a brightly colored rock strata and interesting formations. There are two main trails: Spectra Point/Ramparts Overlook is an easy two-mile hike that offers grand vistas along the cliff's edge. Alpine Ponds Trail takes you through trees, meadows, flowers and wildlife for spectacular foliage viewing.

You can also drive along the access road, UT 148, which circles the cliff's edge. Leaves should start turning within the week. Kolob Canyon is located in Zion National Park. It offers breathtaking canyon views (some say it rivals the Grand Canyon in terms of the gorgeous colors and layers).

Washington

Another surprise fall foliage choice is the state of Washington, especially places like Yakima and Leavenworth. There are state fairs and wine festivals, all scheduled around fall foliage, in addition to fly fishing, white-water rafting and hiking among the foliage.

In Leavenworth, if you move fast, you can catch the Washington State Autumn Leaf Festival, September 28-30, the longest-running Leavenworth festival, celebrating the area's spectacular fall foliage with a grand parade, entertainment, food booths and activities. And if you miss that, it's followed by Oktoberfest — yes, there's German beer, but the fall colors are still there as well.

California, Sonoma County

Last but definitely not least — the changing colors of Sonoma County. The leaves start turning early - to mid-October and going into late November, when the countryside (and the vineyards) are awash in reds, golds and yellows. And here's a less than subtle hint: It's also wine harvest season now. So your timing couldn't be better.

Sonoma Valley is currently in full-blown color. If you drive along Highway 101, the hillsides are red and orange. The vineyards along the 101 are just starting to change and the colors will head toward the coast in the next 10-15 days.

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