

Fall's Most Colorful Hikes

When the trees turn, the crowds come out — but that doesn't mean you need to walk with them. Here are the best hikes to have the mountains to yourself. **by JAYME MOYE**

DAY HIKES



Vermont's Long Trail: one of easiest — and most spectacular — hikes for fall color

CONTINENTAL DIVIDE TRAIL Montana

Highline Trail to the Loop; 11.6 miles, point to point

The Highline Trail, part of the 3,100-mile Continental Divide Trail, starts at Logan Pass, the highest point you can drive to in Glacier National Park. From there it follows the mountain just above tree line, offering unobstructed views of the massive glacier-carved valley below. "We're not known for our fall foliage," says park guide Corrie Holloway, "but it's still beautiful — the fireweed and huckleberry plants are turning red, and the mountain ash is a bright orange." To see mountain goats and grizzlies, start early — like 8 AM. At the hike's end, at Going-to-the-Sun Road, you can hitch a ride back up to the top.

APRÈS HIKE Stop at Glacier Distilling's tasting room, in Coram, seven miles outside the park's west entrance, for one of their dozen house-made spirits, such as Fireweed Whiskey.

ART LOEB TRAIL North Carolina

Black Balsam trailhead to Shining Rock Wilderness; 8.6 miles, loop

The Blue Ridge Mountains have the East's highest peaks, at over 6,000 feet, and this trail, starting from the Black Balsam parking lot, takes you straight to a 360-degree vantage point of the most dramatic ones, including Cold Mountain. In late fall, the hillsides are awash in reds and oranges. "Most people do this as an out-and-back, but it's better to make it a loop by using the Ivestor Gap Trail," says Jennifer Pharr Davis, owner of Blue Ridge Hiking Company. The trail will put you beneath the forest canopy rather than above it, and if the timing's right, the leaves will rain down on you.

APRÈS HIKE It's an hour's drive to Asheville along the ridiculously scenic Blue Ridge Parkway, a worthy pursuit even without the legendary baby back ribs awaiting you at 12 Bones Smokehouse.

THE LONG TRAIL Vermont

Sherburne Pass Loop, 8.5 miles, loop

Arguably the best place in all of America to explore the early fall colors is atop Pico Peak, halfway along Vermont's iconic 273-mile Long Trail. And it's easy to do: You can reach the peak in a few hours by heading out on the Sherburne Pass Loop trail, which begins at the Inn at Long Trail, in Killington. "We call that section the Green Tunnel because you've got waist-high ferns along a forested pathway," says Murray McGrath, who's family has owned the inn for 38 years. After Pico Peak, the trail dives back into the woods on its way to Deer Leap, a rock outcropping and popular climbing area with a clear vista all the way to the Adirondacks. "It's a phenomenal view, and you don't really need anything special to reach it," says McGrath. "Just a pair of sneakers."

APRÈS HIKE The easiest place to crash is also the best: the Inn at Long Trail, a 1930s ski lodge with a giant stone fireplace and redwood hot tub. And with breakfast specials like soda bread French toast with local maple syrup, there's no reason not to spend the night.



COLORADO TRAIL Colorado

Camp Hale to Kokomo Pass; 11.5 miles, out and back

The Rocky Mountains are never better than in fall, when their foothills light up with aspen trees turning red and gold — and there's no better place to see them than on the Camp Hale trail, a half-hour south of Vail. "Mid to late September is the best time for aspens in Colorado," says Liz Thomas, of the Continental Divide Trail Coalition. "The leaves shimmer like glitter in the breeze." The trail begins at Upper Camp Hale trailhead and tops out on Kokomo Pass, at 12,023 feet. The reward is impossibly sheer views of the jagged Gore Range.

APRÈS HIKE Bring your swimsuit: About 45 minutes south of the trailhead is one of Colorado's best hot springs, Mt. Princeton, with 105-degree water bubbling through the cool waters of Chalk Creek.

OVERNIGHT HIKES



ARIZONA TRAIL Arizona
Kaibab National Forest Boundary to Telephone Hill; 21.4 miles, point to point

This segment of the 800-mile-long Arizona Trail traverses the Kaibab Plateau's aspen and spruce forests, with impossibly scenic views of the Grand Canyon. "Part of the trail passes by the East Rim viewpoint," says Matt Nelson of the Arizona Trail Association. "You're hiking in this dense forest, and then without any warning, you're at the edge of one of the most dramatic landscapes on Earth." Despite being next to the 6,000-foot-deep canyon, the trail is relatively level, making it an easy hike. And on a clear day, you can see 40 miles to the Utah border, with its red-hued Vermillion Cliffs.

WHERE TO CAMP Upper Tater Canyon is 10 miles in, with a wide-open meadow. Just make sure to fill up on water at the cistern two miles prior; it's the only water source before camp.



EXPERT ADVICE
WHITNEY LARUFFA
President of the
American Long Distance
Hiking Association

Fall is a great time to harvest huckleberries, blueberries, and mushrooms. Consider taking a mushroom-harvesting course or pick up *Mushrooms Demystified*. In the Northwest, there's nothing that can kill you, but you can get sick. Unless you're going into the backcountry with a big pack, avoid traditional hiking boots. Wear nice light hiking sneakers or trail-running shoes. One pound on your feet is equivalent to 10 on your back.



Washington's Goat Rocks Wilderness has dozens of small alpine lakes to pitch a tent along.

PACIFIC CREST TRAIL Washington
Old Snowy Mountain; 14.2 miles, out and back

This two-day hike takes in all of the best of the Northwest, from towering, moss-covered pine trees to subalpine wildflower meadows. The route up Old Snowy Mountain is full of loose rocks, making it feel more challenging than it is, but the reward is a bird's-eye view of the Goat Rocks Wilderness and the Cascade Mountains to the north. "You can see all the way to Mount Rainier," says Portland, Oregon's Whitney LaRuffa, of the American Long Distance Hiking Association. Fall conditions tend to be dry, but a rainstorm is never out of

the question — which means snow at high elevations. "Anytime you're going above tree line at this time of year, bring a sturdy, waterproof jacket and pants, and an insulation layer," says LaRuffa.

WHERE TO CAMP Snowgrass Flats, about four miles, is one of the few flat spots along the trail, so it's an ideal base camp. Hike in from the Snowgrass Flats trailhead and set up your tent there, then leave the heavier camp gear behind for the ascent up Old Snowy.

APPALACHIAN TRAIL Virginia
Elk Garden to Grayson Highlands State Park; 20 miles, out and back

There's no more iconic trail in the U.S. than the 2,200-mile Appalachian Trail, and this section, which begins at the high-mountain gap known as Elk Garden, offers some of the best late-fall color in the country. It's also one of the few places in the southern Appalachian Mountains that affords sweeping views of the surrounding hillsides, thanks to mountaintop balds — crests that are covered in grass and low wildflowers instead of trees. "It's the only place on the

Appalachian Trail that reminds me of out West," says Warren Doyle, director of the Appalachian Trail Institute. "Rocky outcrops, wide-open spaces, people on horseback — it almost feels like Montana."

WHERE TO CAMP Overnight in Grayson Highlands State Park at the Wilson Creek/Wise Shelter, which is a popular spot for AT thru-hikers — who'll be long gone by this time of year.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JUSTIN BAILEY/TANDEM STOCK; ETHAN WELTY/TANDEM STOCK; GETTY IMAGES; WHITNEY LARUFFA



EXPERT ADVICE

SCOTT JUREK

Ultrarunner who set the fastest time on the Appalachian Trail, in July

Fall foliage is beautiful, but leaves on the trail hide rocks and other debris. Ankle strength and proprioception (your body's ability to sense where it is in space) can be the difference between rolling your ankle and having it bounce back or being grounded by a sprain. To prepare, add one-legged balance exercises on a wobble board to your routine. When it gets easy, try it with your eyes closed. Also, I'd do step-ups on boxes or high platforms — you can also use resistance bands — to mimic walking in mud.



PINHOTI TRAIL Alabama

Porters Gap to Cheaha State Park; 26.3 miles, point to point

"Think of the Pinhoti Trail as a mini Appalachian Trail," says Jennifer Pharr Davis, owner of Blue Ridge Hiking Company. "The path is shorter and the mountains aren't as high, but the biodiversity and geological features are all there. Plus, the trees turn later in Alabama, which means you can chase fall colors further into the season." At this time of the year, you'll also see more wild turkeys and white-tailed deer — and migrating red-tailed hawks and peregrine falcons — than hikers. At 26.3 miles long, the Pinhoti Trail lends itself to a perfect three-day weekend, hiking a half-day Friday, a full day Saturday, and Sunday morning, then revitalizing your legs at the end with a soak in the cold mountain water at Cheaha Lake.

HOW TO DO IT You'll need to organize your own car shuttle to hike point to point, but there are plenty of camp spots; and September is the driest month, so you can ditch the heavy rain gear and extras layers and even sleep outside the tent.

OZARK TRAIL Missouri

Taum Sauk section; 36 miles, point to point

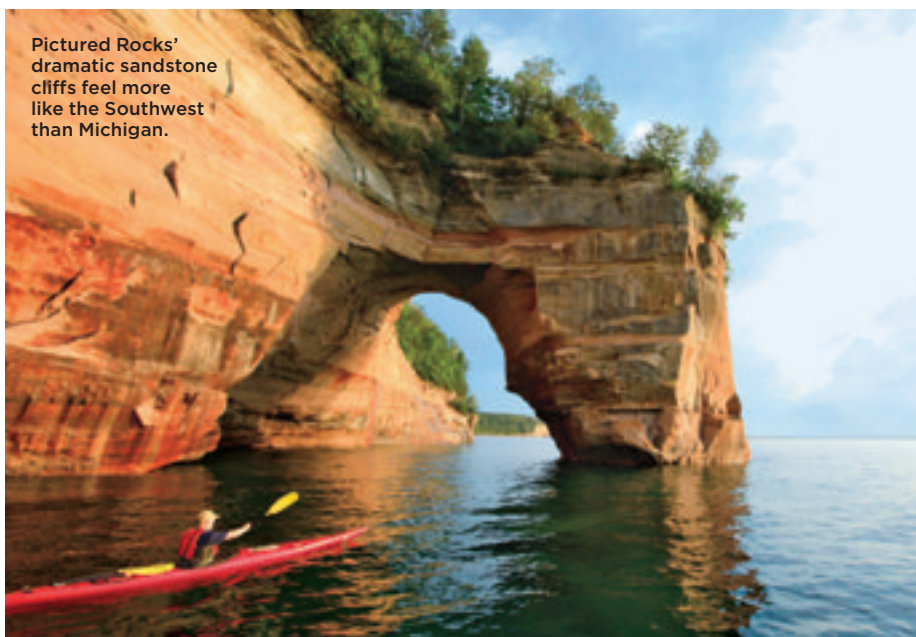
This section of the Ozark Trail, two hours south of St. Louis, crosses through the heart of the 1.4 billion-year-old St. Francois Mountains, covered in an oak and hickory forest that lights up come fall. The trail is impressively rugged, and you'll need at least four days to complete it. But the sites are worth the effort. "You'll pass Mina Sauk Falls, which is a series of cascades 132 feet high," says Matt Atnip, of the Ozark Trail Association, "and Devil's Tollgate, where the trail threads through 30-foot-high volcanic rock walls — it's like walking through to Middle-Earth."

HOW TO DO IT Backcountry camping is allowed most places along the route but, says Atnip, "there are long stretches on the hillsides with no water." Keep your bottles full by camping along Padfield Branch Creek (mile 6), then at Black River (mile 15.5), and at Taum Sauk Creek (mile 26.5).



MULTIDAY HIKES

Pictured Rocks' dramatic sandstone cliffs feel more like the Southwest than Michigan.



THE NORTH COUNTRY TRAIL Michigan

Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore; 42 miles, point to point

The North Country Trail stretches for 40-odd miles on the south shore of Lake Superior, in Michigan's Upper Peninsula, and you'll need four days to trek it. The payoff is Caribbean-blue water along Northwoods forests lit up by red and yellow maple trees. From the shore town of Grand Marais, the trail crosses 12 miles of white-sand beaches, then skirts the edge of Pictured Rocks National Lakeshore, with sandstone cliffs dropping 200 feet to the lake. Fourteen designated backcountry campsites line the route, so finding

a spot is easy. "Definitely camp at Mosquito Beach," says Bill Thompson, co-owner of Downwind Sports, in nearby Marquette. "It's incredibly pretty and faces west, so you can watch the sun drop into Lake Superior."

HOW TO DO IT To hike it point to point, use the Alger County Transit's backpacker shuttle, which will pick you up at the trail's end, at the Munising Falls Interpretive Center, and drop you off at the start (\$20; altranbus.com).