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VERMONT IN AUTUMN'S DAZZLE

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Photos and map

Summer is already blurring into memory and winter is still just an apprehension of windy street corners. But autumn is more than an interval, a time for getting the sweaters out of mothballs; in much of the Northeast, it is the time of the greatest beauty, when the trees turn to torches of gold and wine and flame.

Nowhere is this more true than in Vermont, perhaps because this state is, at just about any time of year except the brief but depressing mud season of early spring, pleasing to the eye, a state of contours and curves, of hills and hollows. It is, as the political commentator Neil Peirce has said, "perhaps the only place in America a stranger can feel homesick for before he has even left it."

In part because it is so small, only 180 miles from top to bottom, with a population of about 500,000, Vermont is also well organized in such matters as making life easier for the millions of flatlanders - the Vermont word for everyone else - who come to the state to see New England the way they have imagined it. During the foliage season, of which Columbus Day is probably the height, the state's population doubles, but Vermont is well prepared. A weekend or a few days there at this time of year can include a variety of pleasures - hikes in the crisp, clear weather; church suppers, a zigzag railroad ride, concerts, bazaars - as well as richly colored hills and valleys punctuated by the dark green of conifers, mountains that are flaming mosaics of color against the clear autumn sky. And there are 251 small towns in the state, many of which look the way they used to, although not all of them do.

Of course, the leaves turn in other parts of the country, and of the world, but it is the (admittedly prejudiced) opinion of many Northeasterners that it is nowhere so spectacular - and that it is well deserved as a parting joy to provide at least spiritual insulation against the coming bleak winter. The reasons for the particular brilliance of the fall foliage in the Northeast, according to the meteorologist Ray Falconer, have to do with the preponderance of hardwood trees such as maples, birches, oaks and ash.

It also "may have something to do with warm days and cold nights," said Dr. Falconer, a recently retired research fellow at the Atmospheric Sciences Research Center at the State University of New York at Albany. The reason the leaves change from shades of green to copper, bronze, gold, scarlet, yellow and all the many gradations is the fact that, come the end of summer, the system that transports chlorophyll to the leaves becomes clogged, and the chlorophyll responsible for the green is replaced by other substances such as carotin and tannin. The amount of moisture in the ground will affect the timing of the change, but usually the dazzling time occurs during the later half of September and the first half of October. Temperature has some effect, but just how much is not entirely understood. The color will reach its peak sooner in the north and move south at, according to a Vermont travel official's estimate, about 100 miles a week. But both before and after the peak - a moment that is definitely in the eye of the beholder - the color is exciting.

Visitors seeking almost total immersion in scenery for which the word spectacular is pallid should take the privately owned 5.2-mile Sky Line Drive in Manchester, in southeastern Vermont, not far from Bennington. The road zigzags to the summit of 3,835-foot Mount Equinox, passing parking areas and picnic areas. A few other people are likely to be there, too; last autumn, 518 cars made the trip on a single day. The panoramas are extraordinary: mountain folded into mountain, the Battenkill River winding its silvery way through the hills. On a clear day, and fall is the clearest time of year, one can see as far as Mount Royal in Montreal and into New York and Massachusetts.

If you don't like roads that wind uphill (and then down), this is probably not for you. At the tollhouse, where you pay a fee of \$3.99 a car, drivers are given a brochure detailing both the wonders and difficulties of the drive. There are notes about places to turn off and what you can see from various turnoffs, as well as notes on suggested driving techniques, including the use of brakes, how not to overheat your car and which gear to use around hairpin turns. The drive is open from 8 A.M. to 10 P.M. until Nov. 1.

So much for the (very) big and glorious picture. If you want to leave the driving to the St. J. & L. C. Railroad, take the 57-mile, three-hour round trip between St. Johnsbury in the area known as the Northeast Kingdom and the small town of Greensboro Bend. On Sept. 23 and 29 and Oct. 6, 7 and 14, there will be two fall foliage excursions a day, leaving St. Johnsbury at 9 A.M. and at 1 P.M. It is a climbing, twisty ride (the tracks are state owned and recently refurbished and the train stops at appropriate points for taking photographs or just gawking. The fare is \$15, \$5 for students; children small enough to ride contentedly on laps for three hours ride free. Reservations may be made by calling the St. Johnsbury Chamber of Commerce (802-748-3678). Be warned: This is a very popular excursion.

Also accompanying the change in color is the six-day Northeast Kingdom Foliage Festival, held on different days in six different towns within a few miles of each other. Scheduled in Walden on Oct. 1 are an afternoon hymn sing, among other diversions, a church bazaar and a beef barbecue. Taking place the next day in Cabot, home of the creamery and the well-known cheese, will be a tour of the creamery and a turkey supper. In Plainfield the day after that a bazaar, local foliage tours and a chicken barbecue will be offered. On Oct. 4 in Pretty Peacham, settled in 1776, events include a bazaar, a village tour, a country supper and a band concert, and visitors will also be able to buy cones of shaved ice covered with hot maple syrup. In Barnet on Oct. 5 there will be a pancake breakfast (with Vermont maple syrup) and a ham dinner. On Oct. 6 in Groton, breakfast, lunch and a chicken pie supper will be served. Groton is known for its chicken pies, which along with red flannel hash (so called because it contains mashed beets) are traditional at harvest-time suppers. There will also be a hymn sing and a lumberjack ball.

Josephine French is one of 30 women who baked 60 chicken pies to feed 800 people at this event last year. It's a simple recipe: Each pie contains the boned meat of two six-pound skinned and boiled chickens. The chicken, with a little gravy, goes into a big oblong pan and is topped with 15 or 20 homemade biscuits. The pies bake in a moderate oven for a couple of hours and are served with extra gravy, squash, cole slaw and mashed potatoes. Then come the homemade pies, apple or pumpkin, and coffee. This costs \$5, \$2.50 for children under 12, including second helpings. According to the state's travel experts, the charge is just about the same everywhere.

Two other Northeast towns, Granby and adjoining Victory, schedule a Holiday in the Hills weekend on Sept. 29 and 30. According to Mrs. Maude Lund, the Granby town clerk, events include "bountiful" meals at the cook shack of the nearby lumber camp, horse-pulling contests (in which draft horses compete to pull heavy weights) and an antique engine show. All this, of course, in addition to the scenery.

Mrs. Lund says that there are no commercial establishments offering overnight accommodations in Granby or its neighboring towns. During the foliage season, said Dorothy Collins of the St. Johnsbury Chamber of Commerce, there are often no rooms available north of Boston. Local travel information booths and chambers of commerce will help; many Vermonters open their homes for bed and breakfast. Also, state travel officials say, there may be condominiums available at ski areas. But don't wait too long to make plans. For accommodations in the Northeast, call the St. Johnsbury Chamber of Commerce (open from 9 A.M. to 5 P.M.) at 802-748-3678.

It's not only the Northeast Kingdom that is anticipating the so-called leafers but the entire state as well. There will be a chicken pie supper in Montpelier, a harvest supper in Chester, a leaf peepers supper in Manchester, an apple pie festival in Dummerston Center, a Vermont Symphony Orchestra concert in Bennington.

A kit containing a calendar of fall events, a Vermont attractons brochure, a Vermont travelers guide and maps can be obtained from the Vermont Travel Division, 134 State Street, Montpelier, Vt. 05602 (802-828-3236). It can also be obtained at the New England Vacation Center, 630 Fifth Avenue, Concourse Level, Shop No. 2, New York, N.Y. 10020 (212-307-5780).

Autumn is also cider season in Vermont, a good time to buy such apples as the Jonathan, the Milton and the Northern spy, which are fresh and crunchy and not too often available in supermarkets, and their juice. Cider, which can be frozen, can also be fermented slightly into a mild effervescence. Pour off an inch or so, replace the cap loosely and store it in the refrigerator. The resulting not quite hard cider is tangy, a bit bubbly and autumn crisp.

The weather is likely to be between 50 and 70 degrees in the daytime and between 30 and 50 at night. Clearly, a good, heavy sweater is a necessity. It is not a dressy state, but it is a commonsensical one, so flat or low-heeled shoes are a good idea.

Vermont has set up a "foliage hot line," a 24-hour recorded report on foliage conditions. The number, in service through Oct. 21, is 802-828-3239.

FOLIAGE-TIME EVENTS THROUGHOUT THE STATE

Here is a selective list of events planned by various Vermont communities during the fall foliage season. Oct. 1 Annual bazaar in Bennington, crafts boutique in Springfield and the Northeast Kingdom Fall Foliage Festival in Walden, Cabot, Plainfield, Peacham, Barnet and Groton (to Oct. 6). Oct. 3 Chicken pie supper in Richmond. Oct. 4 Antiques show and sale in Bennington and arts and crafts exhibit and sale in Woodbury (to Oct. 7). Oct. 5 Chicken pie supper in Chelsea, Fall Foliage Festival in Montpelier (also Oct. 6), antiques show in Weston (to Oct. 7), Discovery Festival in Vergennes (to Oct. 8), rummage sale, bazaar and auction in Bennington (to Oct. 8), foliage supper in Brandon (to Oct. 8), crafts fair in Bristol (to Oct. 8), art sale and harvest supper in Chester (to Oct. 8) and chicken pie supper in East Montpelier (to Oct. 8). Oct. 6 Crafts fair and roast beef supper in Hartland. Oktoberfest in Jay, chicken pie supper in Jericho, crafts fair in Lincoln, leaf peepers' supper in Manchester, turkey dinner in Pomfret, apple festival in Shaftsbury, ham and red flannel hash supper and auction in South Stratford, fall foliage supper in Stowe, chicken pie supper in Vernon, bazaar and food sale in Weston, turkey supper in West Newbury, bazaar in Woodstock, Heritage Festival and crafts fair in Newfane (also Oct. 7), Fall Festival of Arts and Crafts in North Tunbridge (also Oct. 7), Art in the Park in Rutland (also Oct. 7), antiques show and sale in Stowe (also Oct. 7), Green and Gold Weekend in Waitsfield (also Oct. 7), Apple and Crafts Fair in Woodstock (also Oct. 7), Apple Festival in Sprongfield (also Oct. 7), Folk Dance Fest in Stowe (to Oct. 8) and the Mount Snow Craft Fair in West Dover (to Oct. 8). Oct. 7 Apple Pie Festival in Dummerston Center, Autumn Pie Festival in Pownal Center, the Vermont Symphony Orchestra's 50th anniversary concert in Stratton, barbecue in Westminster and watercolor exhibit in Danby (to Oct. 19). Oct. 8 Lunch and bazaar in Westbridge, autumn fair in Woodstock and antiques show and sale in Winooski (also Oct. 9). Oct. 10 Demonstrations of pastels in Saxtons River and Vermont artists' exhibit in Northfield (to Oct. 18). Oct. 11 Chicken pie supper in Williamstown and performances of "The Boyfriend" in Barre (to Oct. 20). Oct. 12 Winter sports exposition in Rutland (to Oct. 14) and artists' studios open to the public in Burlington (to Oct. 18). Oct. 13 Flea market in Brandon, turkey dinner in Georgia, bazaar in Northfield, harvest dinner in Wells, festival in Windsor, crafts exhibit in Bennington (also Oct. 14), Vermont Crafts Festival in Montpelier (also Oct. 14), crafts show in Weston (also Oct. 14) and antiques show and sale in Springfield (also Oct. 14). Oct. 15 Oktoberfest in Quechee. Oct. 16 Concert in Castleton. Oct. 19 Concert in Montpelier and rummage sale in East Arlington (also Oct. 20). Oct. 20 Vermont Symphony Orchestra's 50th anniversary concert in Burlington, harvest supper in Marshfield, Bread and Puppet Theater presentation in Montpelier and penny sale in Springfield. Oct. 21 Brunch with Bach in Montpelier. Oct. 25 Bazaar in Montpelier. Oct. 28 Oktoberfest in Castleton (to Oct. 28). Oct. 27 Vermont Symphony Orchestra's 50th anniversary concert in Bennington, bazaar and flower show in Rutland and crafts show in Essex Junction (also Oct. 28).

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