

Fall Foliage Tours

If you live in the Lake Region, Evans Notch is no secret. It is one of the North Country's briefest – but most spectacular – notches. It is my favorite, and has always been, though Grafton Notch, further north, also competes for my affections.

It is easy to get to Evans Notch, though. And so rewarding – particularly if you want to combine the favorite Maine fall sport of leaf-peeking with the favorite summertime sport of eating ice cream. You'll see lots of leaves. And, believe me, you'll eat lots of ice cream. Come along.

Starting from Bridgton, motor west on 302 to Fryeburg, keeping an eye out for foliage and moose, and then take Route 5 north past the Fairgrounds to the crossing street to 113. Rt. 113 takes you to North Fryeburg and Stow (You can also get to Stow via Route 93 through Sweden and Lovell on 5, crossing, again, to 113)

Here, near the channel of Little Cold River, is where the ice cream is featured. The Stow Store is a funky, friendly place and a Nirvana for anyone not counting calories. When I went there last week, I sat open-mouthed as a happy customer was handed her "small" cone. I have never seen any cone as large as this "small" one: it had to tower five scoops high, anyway. Maybe there were only four; I was too dumbfounded to count. These were big scoops. The manager winked at my amazement and told me "Wait until you see a large." Some courageous – and hopefully starving – soul actually ordered a large cone a few minutes later. This one appeared to be only somewhat less massive than Mount Katahdin; a fellow would need a skidder to get a pair of large cones out of the Stow Store are ridiculous; they are phenomenal.

Stow is out in the country. The town rubs shoulders with the wilderness and people are awfully friendly there. We got smiles and howdy-dos wherever we turned. Cone-fed, we entered our car again (endangering its suspension system) and headed north to Chatham.

Past Chatham, the valley opens up to a bowl under the mountains, and the brown fields stretch away, bordered by hardwood trees. In fall, the mountains all around show yellows and golds and reds, contrasted with the deeper shades of the evergreens. A little farming is done here, and a lot of gardening.

Just before this tiny outbreak of civilization, a pull off beckons from the left. There's a circle loop trail, and up the trail about a mile past a turnoff at a small cairn of stones, bubbles Emerald Pool. This is a wonderful brook, sprinting from one side of its miniature valley to the other, turning this way and that, bouncing over miniature falls and cataracts and cascades. Emerald Pool is very green. Though it didn't look particularly emerald to me, it is manifestly more precious than jewels.

After that comes the ride through the notch. Go on a sunny day, when the trees arch overhead in a canopy of yellow and red wonder, and the narrow, sun dappled road climbs and twists through banks of trunks and branches and glorious leaves. Several wayside pullouts offer spectacular views back south through the notch, and of the notch itself, its gray ledges rising majestically in counterpoint to the evergreens and the hardy birches, which stand white and skeletal in their yellow autumn dresses.

Down the other side, through aisles of evergreens, you'll come to Wild River and its campgrounds. The fishing is good here all the way to Route 2. On 2 West, the foliage continues unbroken past Shelburne to St. Johnsbury, if you have only gasoline enough, and time. If you had a cone at Stow Store you won't be needing anything to eat for awhile.

GUIDE TO THE MAP

#2 Village Antiques, Harrison

#3 Naples Gallery

Watercolors, Antiques

#5 Country Sleigh

Gift & Christmas shop

#10 Jones Museum of Glass

& Ceramics

#11 Douglas Hill Orchard

#12 Five Fields Farm

#15 Oxford House Inn

fine dining

#16 Sherman Farm Stand

#20 McSherry's Orchard

#22 Kedar Craft

quilt & fabric store

#23 Fillebrown Orchard

Several Suggested Tours

1. Travel west on Route 302, toward Fryeburg. At East Fryeburg, a left-hand turn on Denmark Road yields a gorgeous view over fields to the back of Pleasant Mountain; this scene is gorgeous in any season. Turn around after taking in the view, just a few yards from 302. A right-hand turn at the same Four Corners takes you down Hemlock Bridge Road to one of Maine's few remaining covered bridges. (I believe there are only six or seven left in the state.) The Paddleford truss structure traverses a branch of the Saco. Continue along the dirt road through the bridge until you reach Route 5 through Lovell and Stoneham. You'll pass Keywadin Lake. At North Waterford, turn south on Route 35, passing the white-painted houses of Waterford, where you'll see some of the most beautiful in-town foliage scenes in the world, with the palette dominated by oranges and yellows. Keoka Lake and Bear Pond offer nice vistas. You can even climb most of the way up the back of Bear Mountain on a road, if you wish. Bridgton is just south. The pleasure of this trip peaks in early to mid-October.
2. Another longer, more northern route is sometimes pretty even before the calendar turns to October. Travel north on Route 117 through Harrison and past the head of Long Lake, where the trees will be a week or so from peak. You'll see more colors around Little Pond on the Otisfield stretch than any other place until you get farther north. In Norway, many beautiful side roads may tempt you. These soul-satisfying side trips include jaunts along Crockett Ridge Road, accessed just past Norway Lake, and another up King Hill Road, off 117 (Buckfield Road), under Streaked Mountain. For the first week of October, go to Market Square, turn right and take the Buckfield Road, then jog a little left only a half-mile or so from the turnoff onto Hooper Ledge Road. This route will take you up steep Paris Hill (altitude, remember!). Paris Hill is another place that is simply gorgeous anytime of year, a village out of time, with beautiful Nineteenth Century homes and some fine craft shops. Continue down the other side of the hill to Route 26 and drive on through West Paris (stop at Perham's Minerals if you like) to Bryant Pond. Take Route 232 through Woodstock to Route 2. (This is more quickly said than done.) Travel east on 2 to Rumford and then take Route 17 north to Rangely. Your route will parallel the beautiful Swift River. Your final reward will be the wonderful vistas of the Rangeley Lakes from Routes 16 & 17. The road humps up and down here and the winds in amongst the several lakes. The views are spectacular in fall. The best option for a return journey is to follow Route 16 to Errol, N.H., turning south to pass through the Thirteen Mile Woods (where you are almost assured of seeing a moose) to Berlin, Gorham, Bethel, and back to Bridgton. This trip will take up most of the day.
3. Since you can see more foliage on elevations, and more trees from elevations, a trip west to the White Mountains will probably yield better views of foliage than can be seen in this area as the calendar turns to October. The famous Kancamagus Highway trip, which runs west out of Conway and up into the mountains, is always a treat.

Closer to home, get on Route 107 South. Before you even leave Bridgton, you will find an attraction of sorts, for this time of year and during cross-country ski season, both: Gyger's Orchards, in South Bridgton, just before the Sebago town line. Go several miles farther on 107, and just before you reach Sebago Center, take Convene Road on your right, and travel up past more orchards. A left onto Orchard Road brings you shortly to Dyke Mountain Road. You can visit the Jones Museum of Glass & Ceramics, one of the country's best known specialty museums. A town lot nearby takes cars for hikers who want to venture up the short but relatively steep trail to the top of Douglas Hill. There is a fascinating old stone tower, complete with an interior staircase to the top, and the views are wonderful. To the southeast, Sebago Lake does its best impression of the Atlantic Ocean. There are several routes off the hill. If you go down Dyke Mountain to Douglas Hill Road, you'll end up in West Baldwin, where the old dance hall still hosts dances and public suppers and meetings. The halls in this area have the world's best names: in North Bridgton, there used to be a place called Freelove's Pavilion. In West Baldwin still stands the Dancemore! Can't beat that. Turn north on 5/113/117 to Hiram, then take 117, the old Bull Ring Road, to Denmark, where the Civil War statue guards the intersection. A right turn takes you the 10 miles or so to Bridgton. If you want to smaller routes home, turn left at the four-way intersection about three miles from Denmark Village. Take Hio Ridge Road back to 302, just west of Bridgton.