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Sunset

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Top 18 spots for fall color

Go on a foliage tour of the West at our favorite places to soak up the season's golds, crimsons, and more



Photo by Getty Images; written by Aislyn Greene

San Juan Mountains, CO

In October, the aspens and oaks of Colorado's San Juan Mountains gild the slopes so brilliantly it's like *Project Runway* for trees. Choose from two great scenic drives to take it all in: the San Juan Skyway or the Silver Thread Scenic & Historic Byway.

More: [Best fall getaways in the West](#)



Photo by Thomas J. Story; written by Aislyn Greene

Bridgeport, CA

Use the town as a base to explore the vivid fall color of the Eastern Sierra and the wealth of hot springs stretching between it and Mammoth Lakes, 60 miles south. Try this therapeutic formula for a long weekend: Drive, hike, see fall color, and do some soaking on the way to Mammoth Lakes. Don't miss the Travertine Hot Springs, where the waters average 105° and views of the Sawtooths are yours to savor, or Conway summit (south of Bridgeport on U.S. 395) for a sweeping, tree-dotted vista of where the Great Basin meets the High Sierra.

More: [Soak up fall in California's Eastern Sierra](#)



Flagstaff, AZ

Sunshine, great dining, and golden leaves: "Flag" is Arizona's capital of autumn. In fall, the air in Flagstaff is crisp as a Winesap, the skies are the dictionary definition of blue, and the return of 18,000 NAU students gives "Flag" a Red Bull–swigging, outdoorsy zing. Explore the historic downtown or head to the hills for some seasonal hiking. Also, don't miss Coconino National Forest, located north of town, for the state's most spectacular aspens set against the backdrop of dormant volcano Humphreys Peak.

More: [Experience Flagstaff's fall](#)

Photo courtesy of Logan Brumm; written by Aislyn Greene



Photo by Thomas J. Story; written by Aislyn Greene

Ukiah, CA

Autumn in this throwback burg explodes with foliage that rivals Vermont's. The city—population 16,000—may be the largest city in Mendocino County, but the place is as small-town as it gets. It's got 19th-century architecture, charming tree-lined neighborhoods, and a laid-back vibe without the bustling feel of its wine country neighbors. Make sure you save time for the indoor and outdoor mineral baths at Vichy Springs Resort (pictured).

More: [Unwind in Ukiah](#)



Photo by Andrea M. Gómez; written by Aislyn Green

Vernonia, OR

Fall color is off the charts in this low-key riverside town that's less than an hour from Portland. Biking and yoga are big, as are the views on the 21-mile Banks-Vernonia State Trail, a paved former railroad grade, where you can pedal, walk, or ride horses through forests of yellow ash and red maple, past burbling creeks, across 80-foot-high Buxton Trestle, and right into Vernonia.

More: [A fall spin through Vernonia](#)



Maroon Bells, Aspen, CO

Colorado's most photographed landscape is even better in living color, when the distinctive symmetry of snow-dusted Maroon and North Maroon Peaks are framed by a ribbon of aspens, all reflecting on shimmering Maroon Lake.

More: [Top 5 fall hikes](#)

Photo by Tyler Stableford Photography; written by Aislyn Greene



Photo by Brown Cannon III; written by Aislyn Greene

Alaska

Where else but Alaska could you get both a dose of fall color and soak in the cosmic color of the aurora borealis? Choose your adventure: local art and culture in Anchorage, the cream of Alaska's natural world in Kenai Fjords National Park, glacier-gazing in Juneau, or taking in the heart-stopping geography of Haines.

More: [Fall adventures in Alaska](#)



Photo by Jen Judge; written by Aislyn Greene

Arroyo Seco, NM

Fall's golds and reds are at their height in this tiny, eclectic village 9 miles north of Taos. Right at the foot of towering Taos Mountain, Arroyo Seco is perfect for an outdoor adventure on horseback through a landscape of streams, rocky cliffs, and changing leaves. In town, country meets bohemian with tons of eco-friendly finds. America's favorite boho sweetheart, Julia Roberts, even lives on a secluded ranch nearby. Take a drive outside town along the Enchanted Circle Scenic Byway (State 522) to see quartz and feldspar rock formations as well as aspens.

More: [Autumn in Arroyo Seco](#)



Wine Trail, near Monterey, CA

In California's Salinas Valley, near Monterey, fall color can be found in more places than just the leaves. Sample all hues of great, under-the-radar wines along River Road, aka the Wine Trail, at the 20 or so wineries (most of them in the Santa Lucia Highlands appellation). In addition, make time to stock up excellent local produce along the way—there's a good reason it's called the "salad bowl of the country" (80 percent of U.S.-grown lettuce comes from here).

More: [Wine tasting and more along Monterey's River Road](#)

Photo by Thomas J. Story; written by Aislyn Greene



Photo by Carmel Zucker; written by Aislyn Greene

Denver, CO

Who says you have to leave the city to get your fill of fall? Head to our favorite Denver hilltop, LoHi, aka Lower Highlands, for rooftop bars and alfresco restaurants with views of the downtown skyline and the city's golden elms.

More: [One perfect fall day in LoHi](#)

More places to soak up fall color

COLORADO: Sections of the 22-mile **Guanella Pass Scenic Byway** are unpaved (check conditions), but the aspens will make you happy to be driving slowly. *From Grant to Georgetown;* bit.ly/boWecw

IDAHO: The 69-mile **Teton Scenic Byway** is a drive of subtle yellows--here cottonwoods and there aspens. What's not subtle: the view of the Tetons. *From Swan Valley to Ashton;* 208/354-2312.

MONTANA: On the **Seeley-Swan Scenic Drive**, you'll spy the bright yellow fall needles of the larch, a deciduous conifer. *Start 1 hour north of Missoula on State 83; Lolo National Forest;* bit.ly/SdfmNA

NEVADA: On the 5-mile (one way) **Marlette Lake Trail**, you'll emerge from the aspens to see them reflected on the lake. *East of Lake Tahoe; access at Spooner Lake, 1 hour south of Reno;* bit.ly/RbQhTA

OREGON: You want bold russets and reds? Try a hike in William L. Finley National Wildlife Refuge's **Upland Forest** for oaks and maples. *Near Corvallis, off Finley Refuge Rd.;* fwd.gov/willamettevalley/finley

UTAH: In Fishlake National Forest, **Pando**, the largest aspen clone in the world, creates a gigantic blanket of shimmering color. *3 1/2 hours south of Salt Lake City; 435/896-1070.*



Photo courtesy of U.S. National Arboretum; written by Kathryn Cannady

WASHINGTON: On **Skyline Trail**, in Mount Rainier National Park, don't just look up--focus downward to see the deep reds of vine maples and huckleberry bushes. *About 2 1/2 hours south of Seattle; nps.gov/mora*

WYOMING: You'll pass logging, but don't fear: **Aspen Alley** leads through a stand so dense, it's like swimming in a sea of gold. *2 hours west of Laramie; Medicine Bow National Forest; 307/326-5258.*



Get ready for the fireworks

Scott Aker, head of horticulture for the U.S. National Arboretum, explains when fall leaves peak and why Western color is the most spectacular in the country.

Q: How is fall color different in the West?

A: In the East, fall is like a really long parade from north to south. In the West, it's like fireworks: a spectacular burst of beautiful colors over a short time. Here, the distribution of trees is based on altitude—different types of trees grow at different altitudes, with those at higher elevations developing color first.

Q: Why does altitude matter?

A: The timing of fall color is mostly controlled by the length of night—when that magical duration of darkness is reached, leaves begin to turn. How long the night must be

depends on the tree species; trees that grow at high elevations must prepare for cold weather earlier, so they are programmed to develop fall color long before species that grow at lower elevations.

Q: How will this year's drought affect the fall show?

A: The quality of the seasonal color is more complicated than people think—it depends on weather, and the plant's health going into fall. With heat and drought, trees are often forced to give up some of their leaves to survive. So by the time autumn comes, there are simply fewer leaves to look at. Leaves of drought-stressed trees may turn brown instead of yellow or red, and drop off early to reduce water loss in the branches. You're still going to see fall color, but it might not be as brilliant, or it may be more fleeting. Interior areas of the West that had decent monsoon rains may have better fall color than drier areas.

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