



Fall Magic IN SEVEN STATES

These autumn treks don't just offer great leaf-peeping—there are also unique flavors, fun to-do's, delightful places to sleep and a few ghostly presences.

Story and photos by Joe Tennis



Far left: Fall leaf color explodes on the lawn of the Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Arts Center in Christiansburg, Virginia.
Top left: Festivals are a big fall draw to Sinkland Farms of Riner, Virginia.
Bottom left: A new blacksmith shop has been added at the Historic Smithfield Plantation of Blacksburg, Virginia.
Above: Grandfather Mountain provides grand views in the High Country of North Carolina.

Nicole Winder is the tasting room manager of the Grandfather Vineyard & Winery at Foscoe, near Banner Elk, North Carolina.

VIRGINIA

It's a Friday afternoon in October, and I'm motoring across Montgomery County, Virginia.

Coming to Christiansburg, I marvel at the fluffy sugar maples staging a blaze-orange show on the lawn outside the Montgomery Museum and Lewis Miller Regional Arts Center (montgomerymuseum.org).

Or I can blast into Blacksburg to see the Hokies strut in burnt orange and Chicago maroon when the Virginia Tech football team takes the field on game days at Lane Stadium.

For the weekend, I set up a comfortable camp at the Homewood Suites by Hilton (540-381-1394), just off I-81 in Christiansburg. Then, for breakfast, I slip into Shawsville, following U.S. 460 east to Hale's Restaurant (540-268-9809).

Established in 1967, this easygoing eatery serves tasty tomato-and-onion omelets plus advice on where to see the color-changing of the leaves: Keep east on U.S. 460 and

enter the "Elliston Straightaway," says Hale's Restaurant manager Selena St. Clair. "You've got the mountains in front of you and to the side. It's a two-mile stretch."

While also in Shawsville, check out Camp Alta Mons, the site of an old spring resort off Crockett Springs Road (altamons.org). You can hike a couple of miles to see the 40-foot-high Stiles Falls. But, beware—you might also hear of Willie Jack, once a camp caretaker and now a ghost; some say he's good, and some say he's evil!

Following U.S. 460 west to Blacksburg, I head for the Historic Smithfield Plantation (540-382-4647), built in the 1770s. It was originally the home of pioneer settler William Preston and now "history heaven," says Smithfield's director, the affable April Danner.

And when is the best time to visit? Why, autumn, of course!

"There's something special, magical about fall. I don't know what it is," Danner says. "But, in

the fall, you just become absorbed with history."

Rolling to Riner, I lunch on a roasted beets and baby spinach salad plus grilled tuna tacos at the White Barrel Winery (540-382-7619) on Childress Road. Then I tour nearby Sinkland Farms (540-382-4647) on Riner Road, the site of a family-friendly Pumpkin Festival with a corn maze and hayride as leaves turn colorful and crisp.

"We have festivals every weekend in October," says owner Susan Sink. "I don't know a heck of a lot about commercial agriculture, but I know how to throw a good party."

Back in Christiansburg, I wrap up my weekend with a delightfully decadent feast of frog legs, gator bites, fried flounder and Rappahannock oysters at the Fatback Soul Shack (540-251-3182) on Roanoke Street. Outside, you can see neon-esque portraits of soul legends Sam Cooke and Otis Redding on the windows and, on the menu, read the motto, "It ain't easy, bein' greasy."

NORTH CAROLINA

Stealing away for a romantic weekend, my wife and I head for the High Country of North Carolina: our favorite go-to destination for a guaranteed good time. We love to see what's new but appreciate tradition—even our own in Blowing Rock, like dining on the delights of the Storie Street Grill (828-295-7075), serving pecan-crusted mountain trout and tempura-battered asparagus fries.

We check into the Green Park Inn (828-414-9230). Known as "The Legendary Grand Dame of the High Country," this Blowing Rock hotel was built in 1891 and retains an antique ambiance. We both loved the biscuits at breakfast; and I relished the vibe of hearing a piano playing in the lobby.

Still, the desk clerk brushed away my inquiry about whether something supernatural may linger from long-ago. Who knows? Famous figures have, indeed, slept inside the Green Park Inn's walls: Her-

bert Hoover, Annie Oakley, Calvin Coolidge. It's said that author Margaret Mitchell penned part of "Gone with the Wind" here.

"Everybody thinks the Green Park Inn is haunted, I guess, because it's so old," suggests Krystyl Harris, the music festival coordinator at The Blowing Rock (828-295-7111), an attraction with a grand view, lying within walking distance of the hotel.

At mid-day, we take a brewery tour with Micki Reed at the Blowing Rock Ale House (828-414-9600). And, in the brewery's restaurant, I savor a succulent duck breast sandwich, seasoned with peppered bacon and sliced Fuji apples.

"The duck is phenomenal," says our server, Lauren Olson. "We let it sit for a really long time in this old-style marinade, so it gets a really nice flavor from that."

From downtown Blowing Rock, we spin about a half-dozen miles south on U.S. 221 and find the folksy Grandfather Country Store (828-295-6100) at Blue Moon Gap.

How to describe: It's a stacked-and-packed structure, featuring a rambling collection of books, snacks, hats and toys inside a century-old layout of "strange additions," says the co-owner, Sharon Blair Tolbert.

And much of this store's business comes from travelers using U.S. 221—what Tolbert calls "an old-fashioned, two-lane road like they used to be."

Following a two-hour visit to the rock-capped peak of Grandfather Mountain (800-468-7325), we follow N.C. 105 to the terraced vineyard of the Grandfather Vineyard & Winery (828-963-2400), bordered by the bubbling Watauga River at Foscoe. Tasting room manager Nicole Winder shares samples of Pinot Noir while also pointing to Casey, her beloved border collie and winery mascot.

"Our busiest time here in the tasting room is in the fall," Winder says. "The vines are in full bloom. And you kind of get a little bit of that color change in the leaves of the vines."



Worth a Click!

For video and additional stories by Joe Tennis from some of these destinations, visit BlueRidgeCountry.com/FallMagic



Top left: Sam Mauzy is a co-owner of Big Timber Brewing Company. **Bottom left:** Ghost tours are popular at the Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum. **Center left:** Stonewall Jackson Lake laps the banks of the Stonewall Resort. **Center right:** Foster Falls is a popular destination at South Cumberland State Park. **Above:** A swinging bench awaits on the wide porch of Jim Oliver's Smokehouse at Monteagle Mountain, Tennessee.

WEST VIRGINIA

With sunset in sight, I board a cruise on Stonewall Jackson Lake, just off I-79 in Roanoke, West Virginia. And I'm laughing as the boat takes off, hearing the speakers blast The James Gang's "Funk #49"—a wild tune for what really is a mellow ride.

Nightly, up to 90 passengers at a time can ride on the 75-foot-long boat, dubbed Little Sorrel; the 50-minute cruise is free for lodge and cottage guests at Stonewall Resort. And it grows especially popular in the fall when you see "the reds, the oranges, yellows," says the Little Sorrel boat captain, Adam Petryszak.

Stonewall Resort is an upscale state park. It contains a golf course plus fine-but-fun dining and drinks at Lightburn's: I used a "West-Virginia-Politan" (moonshine, cranberry juice and pineapple juice) to wash down a "WV Ramp Dusted Rainbow Trout," served with fried potatoes and a 50-degree egg.

Near the resort, I also tour Lewis County's Trans-Allegheny Lunatic Asylum, claimed to be the largest hand-cut-stone building in North

America. Here, you can learn about decades of medical history in the treatment of the mentally ill. And you can hear of the many ghost tales that surround the structure (304-269-5070).

Just after dawn, I check out Lambert's Winery (304-269-4903), a popular site for weddings in Weston, then head east to Elkins along U.S. 33. There, I stop to see the Stirrup Gallery—with its Civil War artifacts—on the campus of Davis & Elkins College. And I taste the Drop Dead Trout Spread at the recently opened Smoke on the Water (304-636-9669), where the owners are, indeed, fans of Deep Purple's "Smoke on the Water" song.

Still in a rock'n'roll mood, I book a night at Graceland—not Elvis Presley's house but the overnight inn and dining hall operated by Davis & Elkins College (gracelandinn.com). This mansion was built in the 1890s and offers a grand view of Elkins. Here, too, I try yet another trout, served by Chef Melanie Campbell, who also teaches hospitality courses for the college.

Come morning, I make way

to meet the mayor of Elkins, Van Broughton, who shares a table at The Lunch Box (304-591-4575) for a breakfast of eggs and oatmeal.

Then I wrap up my West Virginia journey with some beer. And delicious dark beer, at that—perhaps the best dark beer I have ever tasted. It was so smooth and so refreshing that I broke a no-beer pledge to sneak just a few more sips.

"That's the nitro sluice dry stout," says Sam Mauzy, co-owner of the Big Timber Brewing Company (304-637-5008) in Elkins. "It's really light, really thin, easy to drink. And, instead of carbonating it, we nitro-genate it. And it makes a really creamy and smooth and silky head on it."

Like a melted malt milkshake.

TENNESSEE

It's a smokin' Friday night at Jim Oliver's Smoke House, a Tennessee landmark with a beer bar and a family atmosphere. Here for the weekend, my 10-year-old son, John, and I check out Greg Hall, billed as "The Best Guitar Player in Comedy, or the

Best Comedian Guitar Player."

Hall waxes poetic on Gordon Lightfoot and "Gilligan's Island" and how the same chords have been recycled in rock, song after song. Hall's humor is a hit on top of Monteagle Mountain. And he loves to improvise, telling one couple, "It's urban legend that if you spend \$100 at the Smoke House on your first trip, on stuff, that good luck will follow you for at least 30 days after that."

Established in 1960, the Smoke House ranks among the best-known landmarks of the Cumberland Plateau in Southeast Tennessee. The Marion County site sprawls with a trading post, restaurant, conference center, lodge and cabins. You can browse endless rows of barbecue sauce, made in house, and even sample some of those smoky flavors on the pulled pork served on the dinner buffet.

We love the salad at dinner and the sausage at breakfast. But we also venture beyond the Smoke House to Pearl's Fine Dining (931-463-2222) in Sewanee to taste fried calamari and a salad of Boston Bibb lettuce topped

with asparagus and carrot strips.

On a daytrip to Tracy City, we gaze at the collectibles stacked high against the ceiling of Henry Flury & Sons Grocery (931-592-5661), a Main Street landmark since 1905. We pick up deli-sliced meats at this general store for a picnic lunch and snap shots of the railroad-themed Tracy City Mini-Park.

Then, for dessert, we walk a few doors to the Dutch Maid Bakery (931-592-3171), where the owner, Cindy Day, serves strawberries and cream while maintaining a fresh-made tradition that began with the bakery's opening in 1902.

"All of our breads are made from starters and sponges," Day says. "Nothing is fast, instant or quick."

The bakery building boasts a legend: Day says its founder, John Baggenstoss died from making a bad batch of beer, and now perhaps his spirit lingers. And yet she questions, "What baker makes a bad batch of beer?"

Day's answer? "None. Somebody poisoned him."

So is there a ghost here?

"I don't know," Day says.

"Ghost hunters said there was. They found that little [ghost] meter thing in a couple of different places."

John and I didn't investigate the Dutch Maid Bakery ghost. But, upon Day's advice, we did head seven miles to Foster Falls—what became the highlight of our day.

By trail at Foster Falls (931-924-2980), it's only a few dozen yards from the parking lot to reach a platform lookout. But, if you really want the best view, hike another half-mile down the ridge, step over rocks and cross the suspension bridge to find a swimming hole at the waterfall's base.

"This waterfall is special because it's the tallest one we have in South Cumberland State Park. It's a little over 60 feet," says park ranger John Ball.

"In the fall, when all these trees are leafed out, and you've got a lot of really brilliant oranges and reds, the waterfall will have a little bit less flow on it, but it will make this whole area a little bit quieter, because there's not a lot of people down here," Ball says.

"So it's very serene."



SOUTH CAROLINA

Be ready to roar when you come to Clemson, South Carolina. This college town is the home of the Clemson Tigers, the football team that won the national championship game in Tampa, Florida, on Jan. 9, 2017, beating the Alabama Crimson Tide.

So now, during late summer and fall, all rightfully roar in Tigertown, where I settle into a spacious, suite-style room at The Abernathy (864-654-5299) on Old Greenville Highway. Then I stroll along the sidewalk until I reach TDs (864-654-3656), a popular watering hole and eatery on College Avenue.

"It is the most exciting thing," says longtime TDs waitress and Clemson student Fern Johnson, 23. "For football season, it's the exciting adrenalin of just everyone being here and loving, like, the same team. It's really cool."

Close to campus, Clemson University operates the South Carolina Botanical Garden (clemson.edu/scbg), where you can see the state tree, Palmetto, uniquely growing in a sandy, coastal habitat. Or beware the prickly cactus facing the walk outside the Bob Campbell Geology

Museum (864-656-4600).

For Sunday brunch, I stop in the SunnySide Cafe (864-653-9532) on College Avenue. And I order what looks like a football: Lines of cheddar cheese on the "Miami Breakfast Sub" resemble the lace on a pigskin.

This Cuban-influenced breakfast sandwich is both hearty and hulky, packing pulled pork, Applewood-smoked bacon and Boar's Head tavern ham into a French roll with local over-easy eggs, tomatillo salsa, chipotle sour cream and an avocado aioli.

"It's easily the most popular dish on the menu," says restaurant manager Randy King.

Fortified like a football player, I take off for Table Rock State Park, driving about a half-hour into rural Pickens County. Then I paddle the soft waters of Pinnacle Lake on a kayak, enjoying the best views of Table Rock's shiny slope and listening to the laughter of the sunbathers on the beach.

Two miles east, I crunch on crispy catfish and juicy green beans plus ice tea and ice cream at the folksy Aunt Sue's Country Corner (864-878-4366), a longtime landmark facing the Cherokee Foothills Scenic Highway/S.C. 11.

I also take a tour of the Victoria

Valley Vineyards (864-878-5307), about a mile off S.C. 11.

The winery's managing director, Brittany Jayne, tells me peak fall color in Pickens County comes during the last week of October or the first week of November. "And the view is just incredible when the colors turn. It's honestly just so gorgeous. The foothills are breathtaking."

GEORGIA

Edie Rich built up the anticipation, oh, so cleverly.

Rich guided our tour of the historic Union County Courthouse, showing off spaces dedicated to veterans, athletes, churches, schools and the county's claims to fame.

And then?

We arrived at the old courtroom in this 1899 structure, standing at the center of Blairsville, Georgia.

"We have a ghost here," Rich says with a deadpan tone. "His name is Hector."

Saying that, Rich also presents a picture—a sketch by a woman who said she saw "Hector" here, inside the courtroom. And that's when my 10-year-old son John's jaw dropped, and his eyeballs opened like an owl's.

Turns out, says Rich, that ghost-

spotting woman wasn't the only one. About two years later, a man stopped in the courthouse and said, "You know you have a ghost upstairs?"

And then he drew a picture, which resembled that woman's sketch of the shaggy-haired "Hector," sporting a beard and wearing a long coat!

Still in Blairsville, we take a drive beyond the courthouse, following U.S. 19 to Granddaddy Mimm's Moonshine Distillery and Museum (706-781-1829), which plans its "Second Annual Grand Opening" at 5 p.m. on Oct. 7.

Also, just steps from the old courthouse, we feast on a scrumptious salad plus pizza and pasta pillows stuffed with spinach inside the recently-relocated Michael Lee's (italianlifecaffe.com), a renowned restaurant and coffee bar, once operating in nearby Towns County.

For two nights, too, we make waves in Towns County, the home of Lake Chatuge.

For one night, we settle into a ground-floor room of The Ridges of Young Harris (706-896-2262) and enjoy father-son talks on the dock, the sidewalks and in the salt-water swimming pool. We make s'mores

Top left: Pinnacle Lake at Table Rock State Park is a popular place for canoeing, fishing and sunbathing.

Center left: Be ready to root for the Tigers when you visit Clemson, South Carolina.

Center right: The Union County Courthouse stands at the middle of Blairsville, Georgia.

Far right: Jerry Hamilton leads a tour at The Stables of Brasstown Valley Resort in Young Harris, Georgia.

Above: Hiking is popular in Kentucky's Red River Gorge.



IF YOU GO

Virginia

Montgomery County:
gotomontva.com,
540-394-4470

North Carolina

Blowing Rock:
blowingrock.com
877-750-4636

West Virginia

Lewis County:
stonewallcountry.com,
304-269-7328

Randolph County:
randolphcountywv.com
800-422-3304

Tennessee

Southeast Tennessee
Tourism Association:
southeasttennessee.com

South Carolina

Clemson:
visitclemson.com
Pickens County:
visitpickenscounty.com

Georgia

Blairsville:
visitblairvillega.com,
877-745-5789

Towns County:
golakechatuge.com,
706-896-4966

Kentucky

Powell County:
gopoco.org,
606-663-1161



Kentucky's Natural Bridge State Resort Park in Slade is a popular site during late summer and fall.

around a campfire. And we cruise Lake Chatuge with Michael Kennedy, the general manager of The Ridges Marina.

Kennedy cranks up country music on his pontoon. Then he beaches his boat on Brown Island to show off a sandy shoreline near the North Carolina-Georgia line.

"We do a fall lake cruise at The Ridges every year," Kennedy says. "It's a 13-footer pontoon, and it holds 25 people. It's usually around the first to the middle of September to the end of November."

Back on land, I begin craving fish. So I order mountain trout for lunch at Mary's Southern Grill (706-896-1048) in Young Harris then crab-stuffed flounder for dinner at the newly-opened Sundance Grill (706-896-4745) in Hiawassee.

Spending another night at Young Harris, we splash in the indoor-outdoor pool of the plush Brasstown Valley Resort (706-379-9900), a casual-yet-upscale retreat that offers luxurious rooms with private porches plus made-to-order omelets on the breakfast bar.

You can also ride horses with the must-meet Jerry Hamilton, the friendly manager at The Stables.

Leaf-looking is popular at Brasstown, says general manager Charles Burton. "You get the cooler temps early, like in September, so the evening cools and people like that. But our main draw is that fall leaf color changing. October is our busiest month."

KENTUCKY

Aurilla Lesley runs rings around the Red River Gorge on her bicycle, netting 20-some miles at a time. She follows a road-biking loop here each spring in Kentucky "for the flowers" and later "for the fall leaves."

The fall is especially pretty, says a friend and fellow cyclist, Joe Bowen. "The thing that brings the people here, and I love it, too, is the fall colors."

Bowen, in his 70s, and Lesley, in her 80s, may rank among the most avid athletes going through the gorge—a wonderful wonderland of arches, stone bridges and canyon views.

"When you're on a bike, you can see everything because you're close to it. You stop and take pictures," Lesley says. "It's a tough ride, but the whole time it's pretty."

Red River Gorge Geological Area (606-663-8100) contains a mile-long loop trail to see the Sky Bridge, an arch spanning 76 feet. The gorge is also part of the Daniel Boone National Forest. And it's close to Natural Bridge State Resort Park (606-663-2214), where I spend a night at the Hemlock Lodge and then most of a day hiking the park's trail system in Slade.

I feast on the all-you-can-eat breakfast buffet in the Sandstone Arches Restaurant. Then I head straight-up on the Original Trail, gaining about 420 feet in elevation,

to stand below the sandstone structure of the Natural Bridge.

"It looks too good to be true," fellow hiker Jack Perlette tells me while scanning the bottom of the 78-foot-long bridge. "You would think it was constructed this way."

Perlette laughs, and so does his wife, Arlene. Both take pause at the 65-foot-tall bridge: a vacation destination for this couple from Gainesville, Florida. The Perlette pair celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary with a cross-country RV trip that pinpointed this stop for a Monday morning in October.

"And it's just so relaxing and rejuvenating to be out here in nature, and so beautiful," Arlene Perlette says. "And I love the leaves starting to change colors."

Hiking is the biggest draw to the Natural Bridge State Resort Park, says park naturalist Brian Gasdorf. But even on the half-mile-up Original Trail, it's not exactly easy to see its namesake arch.

So take the Skylift, which provides almost-universal accessibility, dropping off passengers only 600 feet from the bridge. Since 1967, the Skylift has shuttled passengers on a half-mile-long ride.

What's more, it starts at a parking area where you may see "The Purple Lady"—reportedly a ghostly vision with "a purple hue," says the Skylift's owner, Judy Shaw.

"My understanding is that she was killed in one of the campgrounds, and her ghost is apparently still here," says Shaw. "Quite a few people see her. I haven't seen her. I've watched for her. I feel spirits, but I have never seen her."

Operating the Skylift is a family affair for Shaw. These days, she is assisted by her granddaughter, 27-year-old Bree Curtsinger.

"The fall is our busiest time of year because of the leaves turning," Curtsinger says. "And this is a great vacation for anybody. In the fall time, it's very pretty." 🍂