Buckle Up!

YOUR ULTIMATE 324-MILE 3-DAY 2-NIGHT FALL FOLIAGE TOUR

By Virginia M. Wright

Photographed by Mark Fleming
THE CARS RACE EAST AND WEST ON Routes 25 and 302 in western Maine, their drivers hell-bent on getting to the coast or New Hampshire’s Presidential Range. Not you. You’re taking the Pequawket Trail Scenic Byway into the foothills of the White Mountains. You dip through the tiny towns of Baldwin, Hiram, and Brownfield and skirt placid ponds that are every bit as beautiful (some might argue more so) as that big, famous lake just down the road. The lazy Saco River twists itself into so many knots you lose track of the number of times you cross it. In Fryeburg, Route 113 drops the state Scenic Byway designation, but there is nothing ordinary about the next 40 miles. You dip into the fertile Saco River intervale, a vast, flat lowland dotted with antique barns and recently harvested fields and offering unparalleled views of the White Mountains. Weaving back and forth over the Maine–New Hampshire border four times, you are soon climbing Evans Notch, a mountain pass in the White Mountain National Forest. The road here is so narrow that it is canopied by the branches of maples, birches, and beeches – it’s a glorious tunnel of red, orange, and gold.
“We have moose. We have bear. We have these bright-blue lakes surrounded by big mountains. I call this place ‘my little Alaska.’”

Keith Deschambeault, pilot and owner of Acadian Seaplanes, Rangeley
Mountains and Waterfalls

ROUTE 2 follows the Androscoggin River northeast from Bethel, a mix of woods and farm fields. You see farm stands selling pumpkins and other fall crops, plus lawn displays, which, with their jumble of peeling shutters, wooden chairs, wheelbarrows, and birdbaths, fall somewhere between an antiques shop and a junkyard. After you pass through the mill towns of Rumford and Mexico, you venture into a dramatically different landscape. The woods, dense with spruce, close in, and the terrain is rugged. Even the rivers have a harder edge. In Byron, the Swift River has carved Coos Canyon, a long, deep gorge with pools that make for great swimming if the temperature allows. A few miles north, one of the Swift’s tributaries plunges over 90-foot-high Angel Falls. The Rangley Lakes National Scenic Byway begins near here, climbing to Height of Land, a spectacular overlook with views of Moosehead Lake and the surrounding mountains. Looping around Rangeley Lake, the route is dotted with ponds, lakes, and viewpoints all the way to Smalls Falls, a series of cascades on the Sandy River in Township E.

Detours

● Stroll around the maple-edged Bethel Hill Common, a classic New England town green with a gazebo, then pop into the Bethel Historical Society’s 1821 O’Neil Robinson House and learn about “the Athens of Oxford County.” Broad Street on the Common. 207-824-2908. bethelhistorical.org

● Ride the Sunday River Chondola and see the Mahoosuc Mountains in all their golden glory. Sunday River Rd., Newry. 800-543-2754. sundayriver.com

● Go higher: Acadian Seaplanes offers both seaplane and helicopter tours of the Rangeley Lakes Region. 2640 Main St., Rangeley. 207-864-5307. acadianseaplanes.com

● Brush up on Maine’s sporting camp history at the Rangeley Outdoor Sporting Heritage Museum. Exhibits include a display of vintage, handcrafted equipment like fishing rods, paddles, creels, and canoes, as well as memorabilia from President Dwight Eisenhower’s 1955 Rangeley vacation. Rtes. 4 and 12, Oquossoc. 207-864-3464. rangeleyoutdoormuseum.org

Air Tours are sometimes the easiest way to access the beauty of remote places like Cupsuptic Lake, near Rangeley.

WHERE TO SLEEP

A wide range of lodging, from B&Bs and hotels to sporting camps, cabins, and campgrounds can be found in the Rangeley area. The Rangeley Lakes Chamber of Commerce maintains a comprehensive list. 207-864-5571. rangeleymaine.com
FILL UP YOUR GAS TANK AND STOCK YOUR COOLER: THE ROAD from Solon to Jackman is so wild and isolated that it can make the Rangeley Lakes seem settled and tame. For more than 25 miles, the Old Canada Road Scenic Byway hugs the Kennebec River, at times so wide it looks more like a lake (and, in fact, it is just above Moscow, where the river has been dammed to form Wyman Lake). The riverbanks are heavily forested, and the towns — what few there are — are mere whispers. You are on what the locals call Moose Alley, so named for the number of moose spotted along this road (countless moose-crossing road signs, some with flashing lights, warn drivers to be alert). In Jackman, you turn east on the Moosehead Lake Scenic Byway, following a chain of lakes — Long Pond, Brassua, and Moosehead, all the way to the rustic resort village of Greenville.

“The Moosehead Lake region is so wild, the scenery so spectacular. We’re in the heart of two great whitewater rivers, so you can go rafting in either direction, and there are beautiful waterfalls you can reach on a nice leisurely hike.”

Jessica Hargreaves, Northeast Whitewater