

FIRST LIGHT

THE LATEST ON LIVING WELL

Find the Best Fall Color

When the weather turns cool, Americans hit the roads. We schedule a quarter of our vacation trips to take advantage of fall color, according to the Travel Industry Association. Make sure you see the forest—and the trees—by following these helpful travel tips.

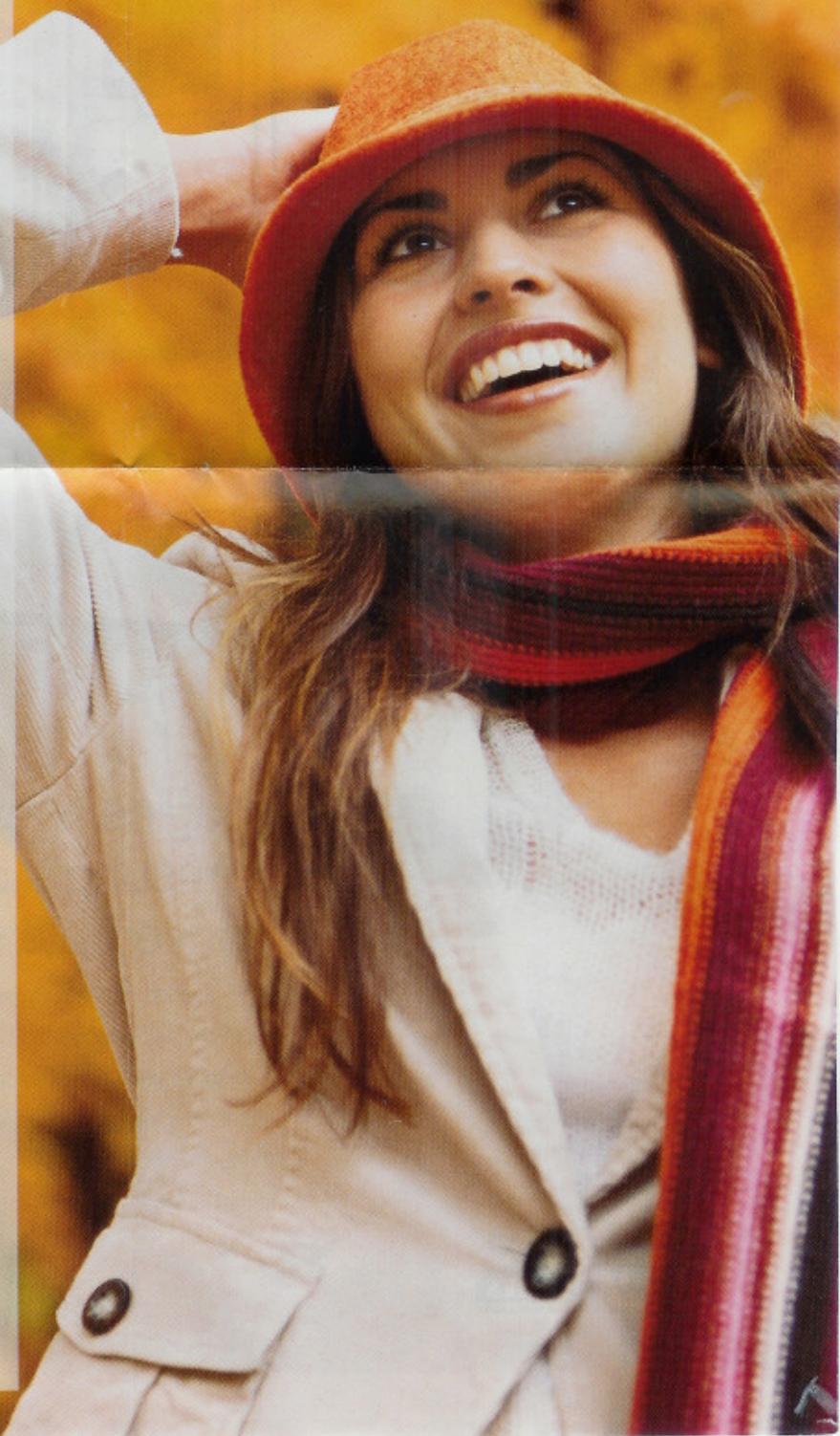
■ **Be flexible with travel dates.** "Foliage is a process, not an event," says Jason Aldous of Vermont Tourism. Changes in leaf color begin at higher elevations and in the North, then descend and progress southward. So while the number of leaf-peepers in Vermont spikes on Columbus Day weekend (the traditional time for peak color), early visitors can enjoy bright foliage high in the mountains, and late-comers will see intense colors at lower elevations. Visitors to southern states will find the richest color later in October or early November. See www.stormfax.com/foliage.htm for a list of hotlines and Web sites that track the leaves' progress.

■ **Know what to expect.** Leaves reveal yellow, orange, and red pigments when their green chlorophyll fades as the trees go dormant. But each year brings different conditions. "The most intense color comes after a good growing season with dry or even mild drought conditions at the end," says Marc Abrams, professor of forest ecology at Pennsylvania State University. "The temperatures need to turn cold—not freezing, but cold enough to stop the leaves from growing."

■ **Get out of the car.** Hiking on trails and back roads puts you into the heart of color—and away from the road salt that may keep pavements safe in the winter, but can rob fall foliage of its most vivid hues. You don't have to hike uphill to see the brightest displays. Many intensely colored trees and shrubs, like black gum, sumac, sassafras, and red maple, are more common in valleys than hills, Abrams says.

■ **Work with bad weather.** "Foggy or overcast days are especially good for photographing foliage," says Atlanta-based photographer Robb Helfrick, who's published nine books on the American South. Clouds help diffuse light, making leaves seem more colorful. "Go out right after a rain, and you'll be surprised at the vibrancy of the leaves," Helfrick says.

—Patricia Harris and David Lyon





Country roads and covered bridges in New Hampshire's Monadnock Region.

Plan Your Trip

Four spots far from the crowds

Popular areas like the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia or the White Mountains of New Hampshire are justifiably famous for fall color but don't hold a monopoly on good foliage. Seek roads less traveled, like these:

■ **Monadnock Region, New Hampshire.** Hike the gentle trails up Mount Monadnock for 100-mile views. Then bicycle through nearby Swanzey's covered bridges, which are framed by red maples and acid-yellow birches (603-355-8155, www.monadnocktravel.com).

■ **Mason Neck National Wildlife Refuge, Virginia.** This refuge, just 18 miles south of Washington, D.C., was established in 1969 to protect the then-endangered bald eagle. The oak and hickory forest

turns bronze and brown, in contrast to the golden marsh grasses, where dozens of species of ducks and geese gather (703-490-4979, www.fws.gov/refuges).

■ **Route 191, south from Bozeman, Montana.** Fly-fishing aficionados know this stretch of the Gallatin River well from its star-

ring role in the movie *A River Runs Through It*. Look for golden aspens splashed on the hillsides among the ever-green lodgepole pines (800-736-5276, www.yellowstonecountry.net).

■ **Oak Creek Canyon, Coconino National Forest, Arizona.** Most of the visitors to this little

cousin to the Grand Canyon aren't thinking about the foliage as they drive the canyon road to see the rock formations. But hikers on the West Fork Trail find a colorful bonus: Red and orange big tooth maples line the cliff walls (928-282-4119, www.fs.fed.us/r3/coconino). —PH and DL

