

Fall Foliage 3-Day Itinerary

You know it's fall when a) the dog isn't the only one who wants to ride in the car with the windows rolled down; b) warm apple pie tops your favorite dessert list; or c) you're feeling like a road trip.

Answer: All of the above.

Time to gather up the family and take to the mountains for that annual rite of autumn — leaf gawking. South Carolina's Upstate is getting ready to cut loose with color as fall's sunny days and cool nights transform the vibrant green forest foliage into a brilliant palette of oranges, reds, golds, and pinks.

Throw in a couple of fun side excursions, some fresh-from-the-farm cuisine, a cozy cabin in the woods and you have one bodacious autumn getaway.

Whether you're traveling with the kids, your parents or friends, we've got some great ideas for your itinerary. For other excursion options, check out www.southcarolinaparks.com, www.theupcountry.com and www.discoversouthcarolina.com.

Day 1: The Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway, whitewater rafting on the Chattooga River, apple orchard country, dinner at the Steakhouse Cafeteria in Walhalla.
Day 2: Devils Fork State Park, kayak or pontoon boat tour of Lake Jocassee, Twin Falls.
Day 3: Caesars Head State Park, Raven Cliff Falls, Poinsett Bridge, Campbell's Covered Bridge.

Details, Details...

No need to rush on this road trip. It's all about enjoying the sights, sounds and smells of fall in the mountains. Slow down, stop often and take plenty of pictures to show the folks back home.

Day 1: Start your adventure at the southernmost end of the 115-mile Cherokee Foothills National Scenic Highway off Interstate 85 at the Georgia-South Carolina border. As you travel through the low, soft hills of the Piedmont, you'll see the magnificent peaks of the Blue Ridge Mountains in the distance awash in fall color.

Take a turn off the highway to venture into the heart of Sumter National Forest, where you'll find Wildwater's Chattooga Rafting Center. Take your pick of several great excursions — a zip line canopy tour through nine acres of wooded wilderness, a leisurely seven-mile canoe trip on Section II of the Chattooga or, ratchet it up a notch and take a mini whitewater rafting trip on this National Wild and Scenic River. Just down the road from Wildwater's outpost is Chattooga Belle Farm, a 138-acre u-pick plantation featuring exquisitely maintained fields of peach and apple trees, grape and muscadine vines and berry patches. Apple season is over, but you can still sample the locally made chutney, relishes and apple butter sold in the store. Or order up a hot apple cider, take a seat in one of the rocking chairs under the barn's covered patio and enjoy the expansive vista of fall foliage as the sun sets behind the mountains.

Day 2: Make your way back to the Cherokee Foothills Highway and head north to Devils Fork State Park, a hidden jewel tucked deep in the foothills of the Blue Ridge Mountains. The centerpiece of this 622-acre retreat is Lake Jocassee, a crystal clear mountain reservoir surrounded by a lush landscape of pines and hardwoods.

Rent a canoe, kayak or motor boat from one of the local outfitters or take a guided pontoon boat tour of the lake and its many splendid waterfalls. The park also features an easy one-mile loop trail that follows a winding creek through the forest.

Finish the day with a pleasant hike to one of the prettiest waterfalls in the Upstate. It will take you just 15 minutes to walk the quarter-mile trail to Twin Falls. Reedy Cove Creek splits at the top of the falls, sending most of its water down a 75-foot granite wall and the rest cascading down a 45-degree slope of rocks and boulders.

Day 3: It wouldn't be the mountains without some seriously twisty roads. As you continue on the Cherokee Foothills Highway, you'll begin to ascend through a tunnel of trees ablaze in scarlet, yellow, orange and purple. Next stop is Caesars Head State Park in the Mountain Bridge Wilderness Area. Walk out to the 3,266-foot granite outcropping for a fantastic view of Table Rock, South Carolina's most photographed natural wonder. The annual raptor migration will be going on through December 1, so be sure to look for Broad-winged Hawks, Bald Eagles, Osprey, Mississippi Kites, Turkey Vultures and Peregrine Falcons being carried by the thermals and updrafts generated by wind currents on the south-facing escarpment.

If you're up for a moderately difficult but lovely trek through the woods, hike to Raven Creek Falls, a 420-foot mountain cascade boasting well-deserved postcard status. A suspension bridge offers one of the two publicly accessible overlooks to the falls as they splash deep into the mountain cove below.

Those of you seeking a less-strenuous end to your fall foliage tour might prefer to visit two landmark bridges farther along the Cherokee Foothills Highway. Poinsett Bridge, one of the most significant historic structures in South Carolina, is a graceful 14-foot Gothic arch stone bridge spanning Little Gap Creek. Campbell's Covered Bridge is the only remaining covered bridge in the state. Both are great spots for picnicking.

Where to stay, what to eat...

Before you leave Oconee County for Devils Fork State Park, stop at the Steakhouse Cafeteria in Walhalla for some of the best fried chicken this side of the Mason-Dixon Line. It doesn't have to make sense, it's delicious! Other great dining spots along the way include Aunt Sue's for ice cream, the Hare & Hound Pub, Twigs and the Persimmons Tea Room.

Your choice of accommodations is just as plentiful. Oconee, Table Rock and Devils Fork state parks all feature camping and cabins or villas. Among the many popular private offerings are Foxfire Mountain Cabins and Laurel Mountain Inn.