



# Autumn Scenic Drives

The Northwest Shows its Colors

*by Allen Lee*

A perfect way to appreciate the beauty of fall is to hit the highway.

A slight chill in the air, shadows lengthening earlier each day, the rustle of leaves underfoot all signal fall.

One week it's summer, and the next, it seems, the world is bathed in hues of red and yellow, a sight that's even more striking with the sun dancing on the autumn landscape. A perfect way to appreciate the beauty of fall is to hit the highway on a route that's earned a reputation for color. Here are six Northwest drives where lush greens settle into a rainbow of fall foliage for one of Mother Nature's most colorful spectacles.

## Chuckanut Drive Scenic Byway, Northwest Washington

Chuckanut Drive Scenic Byway (aka SR 11) is 21 miles of winding coastal asphalt high above the Salish Sea, connecting Skagit Valley with Bellingham's Historic Fairhaven District. While this narrow two-lane route is known year-round for its vistas of the San Juan Islands and



Rosario Strait, in autumn brilliant foliage upstages the view with golden maples set against the deep greens of giant conifers. Sunsets that can bring tears to your eyes round out the natural beauty as you cruise down this 1920s vintage highway on a late autumn afternoon. Chuckanut Drive makes an easy day trip from Seattle or Vancouver, one you'll do again and again.

**Where to stop:** Chuckanut Drive is a Northwest seafood destination, so be sure to take a break for some sustenance from the sea. You can't go wrong with The Oyster Bar (2578 Chuckanut Drive, 360-766-6185, [theoysterbar.net](http://theoysterbar.net)), Oyster Creek Inn (2190 Chuckanut Drive, 360-766-6179, [oystercreekinn.net](http://oystercreekinn.net)), or a fresh shellfish picnic on the

beach at Taylor Shellfish Farms (2182 Chuckanut Drive, 360-766-6002, [taylorshellfishfarms.com](http://taylorshellfishfarms.com)). To stretch your legs, stop at Larrabee State Park to explore the tide pools at low tide or hear the leaves crunching beneath your boots on one of the park's many forest trails. For more information visit [bellingham.org](http://bellingham.org) or [chuckanutdrive.com](http://chuckanutdrive.com).

## Stevens Pass Greenway Scenic Byway, North-Central Washington

This cross-Cascades route promises a show of yellow and amber in thick west-side forests heavy with big leaf maples. At higher elevations near Stevens Pass, vine



maples climb the mountainsides in a blazing show of crimson. In the eastern valleys around Leavenworth, the golden and red leaves of white

birch and other species enliven the landscape.

This scenic byway (US Highway 2) officially stretches

from Monroe in the west to Peshastin in the east and climbs to 4,060 feet at Stevens Pass. This popular drive can be done in a day from the greater Seattle area, but dedicating a fall weekend to it is much better. To turn the drive into a loop, continue south over Blewett Pass (US 97) where red huckleberry, yellow aspens and cottonwoods paint the landscape and groves of golden larch light up the countryside. Complete the loop west across Snoqualmie Pass on Interstate 90 to return to Seattle.

**Where to stop:** Leavenworth, a festive Bavarian-themed village on the eastern side of the Cascades, hosts the Washington State Autumn Leaf Festival the last weekend of September. The festival includes a Grand Parade, continuous entertainment, food booths, family-friendly activities and, of course, the town's legendary hospitality; [autumnleaffestival.com](http://autumnleaffestival.com), [leavenworth.org](http://leavenworth.org). For more information about the Stevens Pass Greenway Scenic Byway, visit [wsdot.wa.gov](http://wsdot.wa.gov).

## North Cascades Highway, Washington

Washington's North Cascades Range remains one of the most remote and unforgiving mountain

**"...a canvas of natural beauty unmatched anywhere else."**

landscapes on the planet. The corridor that crosses the mountains served as a native trade route for thousands of years, then as a crude

wagon trail. Finally, a paved highway opened in 1972.

This highway is only accessible for half the year, fall

being one of the highlights—a season of colorful displays in the forests and meadows, ranging from golden-amber to crimson. Highway closure for winter typically begins sometime in October or November, so you have plenty of time to hit this extraordinary highway for the fall show. The North Cascades

Highway is a small portion of the roughly 400-mile Cascade Loop, a scenic drive that covers much of northern Washington.

**Where to stop:** On the west side of the Cascades, the North Cascades Institute hugs the north shore of Diablo Lake; stop by this environmental learning center to learn about the North Cascades ecosystem, take a hike or paddle Diablo Lake's jade waters. At Washington Pass, pull off the highway and walk to the overlook for an alpine panorama of Liberty Bell Mountain and her jagged neighbors. [cascadeloop.com](http://cascadeloop.com).

## International Selkirk Loop, Washington-Idaho-British Columbia

The granddaddy of western scenic drives, the International Selkirk Loop, encircles the spectacular Selkirk Mountains of eastern Washington, the Idaho panhandle and southeastern British Columbia. This 280-mile route is not meant to be accomplished in a single day; instead, three to seven days offer ample time to appreciate the scenery and interesting stops. Several towns offer plenty of lodging and dining choices along the way. As a major scenic destination that includes five scenic byways, this loop



© Tim Bentz/Leavenworth.org

attracts travelers in every season, but fall brings leaf watchers in search of brilliant golds and reds against the backdrop of dark green pine and spruce. Besides the autumn show, nature treats Selkirk Loop travelers to a variety of terrain from narrow river canyons and broad fertile valleys to lowland meadows and grand mountain vistas. If you have the luxury of time, six optional side

# AUTUMN SCENIC DRIVES

trips surround the loop broadening the probability of even more fall foliage.

**Where to stop:** The big question on the Selkirk Loop is where not to stop. The largest towns with the most services are Sandpoint, Idaho and Nelson, B.C., but be on the lookout for stops along the route that offer the greatest scenery, bits of history, fascinating arts communities, and, of course, the best autumn displays. Find all the details you need to plan a fall Selkirk Loop vacation at [selkirkloop.org](http://selkirkloop.org).

## McKenzie Pass-Santiam Pass National Scenic Byway, Central Oregon

State Routes 126 and 242 and US Highway 20 form an 82-mile scenic mountain loop—the McKenzie Pass-Santiam Pass National Scenic Byway—that traverses the Deschutes and Willamette National Forests. This route offers photo-perfect views of Three Sisters and Mt. Washington. On the McKenzie River portion of the route, you can stretch your legs and enjoy the fresh fall air and turning leaves at one of the many access points to the McKenzie River National Recreation Trail, which follows the banks of the river and parallels the highway. As the byway reaches the high desert near Sisters, autumn travelers earn a reward of golden aspens.

**Where to stop:** Sisters is located at the easternmost point on the loop, and is a great town for a rest break and a meal; visit [sisterscountry.com](http://sisterscountry.com). For more information about the McKenzie Pass-Santiam Pass National Scenic Byway, visit [byways.org/explore/byways/2148](http://byways.org/explore/byways/2148) or [traveloregon.com](http://traveloregon.com).

## Teton Scenic Byway, Southeast Idaho

Southeast Idaho's Teton Scenic Byway serves up 69 miles of Grand Teton views and spectacular fall foliage as it stretches from the small community of Swan Valley north to Ashton. This is known as the quiet side of the Tetons by people who live in this region. You'll pass through lush farmland and sprawling ranch country with the ever-present Tetons towering in the east. Brilliant blue sky, the stark gray and white of the giant peaks, the yellow grasses of the rolling hills and the gold and reds of the aspens create a canvas of natural beauty unmatched anywhere else.

**Where to stop:** Pull off the highway at any of the Teton Scenic Overlooks to drink in the view of the jagged peaks rising above forests of evergreens mixed with showy autumn color. Break at any of the towns along the route, such as Driggs or Teton, to enjoy the region's relaxed pace, warm hospitality and a good meal; visit [tetonvalleychamber.com](http://tetonvalleychamber.com). For more information about the Teton Scenic Byway, visit [idahobyways.gov/byways/teton.aspx](http://idahobyways.gov/byways/teton.aspx) or [visitidah.org](http://visitidah.org).

## When to Go

Mid-September to mid-October is typically the best window for fall foliage drives in the Northwest, depending on variable factors, such as altitude, tree species and weather. For the latest on when and where to catch the best fall color displays, call the U.S. Forest Service Fall Colors Hotline at 800-354-4595 or visit [www.fs.fed.us/fallcolors](http://www.fs.fed.us/fallcolors). Oregon has its own fall foliage hotline, 800-547-5445; and blog, [oregonfallfoliage.wordpress.com](http://oregonfallfoliage.wordpress.com). Another useful resource for these and other scenic drives is [myscenicdrives.com](http://myscenicdrives.com). 



Washington's scenic U.S. Highway 2 across the Skykomish River