

Discover Fall – Scenic Driving Tour



Planning For Your Trip:

- Check the Laurel Highlands Visitor Bureau website at: www.golaurelhighlands.com/ and the state parks and forests website at: www.dcnr.pa.gov for maps and updated information.
- Dress for the weather and activities. The Laurel Highlands can be eight to ten degrees cooler than other areas.
- Note there is limited cell service in some areas.
- Be aware that some GPS software programs do not display coordinates accurately in this region.
- Bring maps of the driving tour, the local towns, and the Laurel Highlands area.
- Bring a camera to capture the beauty of fall.

This approximately 70-mile loop offers meandering drives through the valleys between the ridges of the highlands. Highlights include stops within two state parks and views of the deepest gorge in Pennsylvania from both on top of the ridge and from the Youghiogheny River. Allow a minimum of two and one-half hours to complete the tour.

- Begin at Donegal (Exit 91 of the PA Turnpike) and drive 2.2 miles on PA 31 East
- Turn RIGHT onto PA 381/711 South (Laurel Highlands Scenic Byway) and drive 9.6 miles to Normalville

The Laurel Ridge

The Laurel Ridge seen on your right is known geologically as the Laurel Hill Anticline. It spans more than 70 miles and runs in a northeast to southwest direction extending from Cambria County in the northeast to beyond Ohiopyle in the south.

When the earth's continents collided 300-220 million years ago, the layers of rock folded into alternating ridges and troughs called anticlines and synclines. This folding produced the area we call the Laurel Highlands with its prominent anticline ridges – Laurel Ridge, Chestnut Ridge (to the west), and Allegheny Ridge (to the east) with rock layers at the top that are resistant to erosion.

Due to the steep slopes of the Laurel Ridge and the difficulty of reaching some areas, it is primarily heavily forested. Seven state parks and a state forest along this ridge ensure its continued conservation. **Laurel Ridge State Park** with its main feature of the 70-mile Laurel Highlands Hiking Trail runs the length of the ridge. The flat crest of the ridge provides backpackers and day hikers a wilderness experience with the reward of stunning views. The elevation and the ridges provide an ideal location for ski resorts that rely on the climate for winter recreation.

As you continue, you cross the ridge several times. Look for these views of the ridge, the abundance of trees, and the variety of fall color.

- Turn LEFT onto PA 381 South and drive 10.6 miles to Ohiopyle and Ohiopyle State Park
 - After crossing the railroad tracks, turn RIGHT into the parking area at the Ferncliff Peninsula, walk along the Great Allegheny Passage Trail towards the right to the high bridge (approximately a four-minute walk) for a view of the Youghiogheny River
- OR
- Continue on PA 381 South into the borough of Ohiopyle and turn RIGHT into the main parking area for a short walk to the overlook deck for a view of Ohiopyle Falls or to explore the visitor center.



Laurel Highlands Fall Events:

Mountain Craft Days
September 11-13

www.somersethistoricalcenter.org/

For additional event information,
please visit:

www.golaurelhighlands.com/

Gas, ATMs, and restrooms are available in Donegal, Normalville, Confluence, and New Centerville. **ATMs and restrooms** are available at Ohiopyle, but not gas.

Dining and lodging information for Donegal, Confluence, Ohiopyle, Trent, and Somerset can be found at:

www.golaurelhighlands.com/

www.visitconfluence.info/

www.mlchamber.com/

www.somersetcountychamber.com

State Park camping and cabin rental information can be found by searching:

[Stay the Night at Ohiopyle State Park](#)

[Stay the Night at Laurel Hill State Park](#)

For More Information:

Download a fact sheet about why [autumn leaves change color](#).

Transitional Forest - A Melting Pot of Two Forest Types

Most would agree; the sugar maple is the “King of Autumn.” Much of southern Pennsylvania is covered with oak-hickory dominated forests. However, the Laurel Highlands’ uniquely elevated terrain brings some of the northern hardwood forest species, like sugar maple, into southern Pennsylvania which creates a diverse splash of color in the fall.

The forest species that grow within a certain region are dictated by topography, elevation, available sunlight, slope position, rainfall, and soil characteristics. The many elevation changes in the Laurel Highlands create a melting pot of Pennsylvania’s northern and southern tree species. The highest plateaus are covered with northern hardwood species, such as sugar maple, American beech, red maple, black cherry, sweet birch, northern red oak, and white ash. The valleys, lower elevations, and side slopes are covered with the oak-hickory forest type which consists of northern red oak, red maple, black oak, white oak, chestnut oak, hickory, sweet birch, white ash, American beech, and yellow poplar.

In the Laurel Highlands, the highest ridge tops peak about a week before the valleys and side slopes. In general, fall color in the Laurel Highlands peaks around October 15-20. Black gums and some red maples peak around October 1-10. Most red maples, sugar maples, black cherries, and sweet birches peak around October 10-20. Red oaks, white oaks, chestnut oaks, yellow poplars, and beeches peak around October 20-30.

With this widely diverse mix of tree species, especially the abundance of sugar maples and red maples, some say the peak of fall color in the Laurel Highlands rivals some of the New England states in the Northeast.

- Turn **RIGHT** out of the parking area to continue on PA 381 South. Make an immediate **LEFT** on Sugarloaf Road. Drive two miles to Baughman Rock overlook on **LEFT**

Baughman Rock

The drive to the overlook takes you from river level to the steep slopes overlooking the Youghiogheny River Gorge. The path to the overlook crosses a flat tilted outcrop known as Baughman Rock. Although the access to the overlook is steep, the view is worth the walk.

The Youghiogheny River originates in West Virginia and flows 130 miles north to join the Monongahela River at McKeesport. This river, which is older than the surrounding mountains, has cut through the Laurel Ridge; leaving the erosion resistant sandstone where you stand. It also lies along the top of the ridges you see in front of you.

At 1,700 feet deep, the Youghiogheny River Gorge is the deepest gorge in Pennsylvania. Look to the right to see the Laurel Ridge and below to see what was originally the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad; built in 1870. This active rail line is currently operated by CSX Railroad. The section of river, known as the “Middle Yough,” is barely noticeable from here as it meanders around Victoria Flats.

As you leave this site, you cross over the ridge and follow the river south to where it joins the Casselman River and Laurel Hill Creek.

- Turn LEFT to continue on Sugarloaf Road for 5.6 miles. Turn LEFT at PA 281 North.
- Drive 2.5 miles then turn LEFT to continue on PA 281 North (Oden Street). Drive 0.3 miles to Confluence
- Turn Right at the stop sign in Confluence and drive 15.5 miles on PA 281N to a blinking light in New Centerville.
- Turn LEFT onto Copper Kettle Highway

Fall Foliage – Why and How Leaves Change Color

Did you ever wonder how and why leaves change color? Why a maple leaf turns bright red? Where do the yellows and oranges come from?

Leaves are nature's food factories. Through photosynthesis, plants take water and carbon dioxide and use sunlight to make oxygen and glucose. A chemical called chlorophyll makes photosynthesis happen and is what gives plants their green color. As summer ends and autumn comes, the days get shorter. Trees shut down their food-making factories. The green chlorophyll disappears from the leaves. As the bright green fades, we see yellow and orange colors. The orange colors come from carotene pigments and the yellows from xanthophyll pigments. Small amounts of these colors are always in the leaves but we can't see them in the summer because they are covered up by the green chlorophyll. The yellow and gold colors remain fairly constant from year to year since they are always present in the leaves.

The bright reds and purples are derived from anthocyanin pigments that develop in leaf cells in late summer. Sugars in the leaf begin to breakdown in bright sunlight as phosphate and other chemicals decrease in the leaf. The brighter the light during this period, the greater the production of anthocyanins and the more brilliant the resulting colors of reds and purples.

The most spectacular fall foliage results when late summer is dry and autumn has bright sunny days and cool (low 40-degree) nights. A fall with cloudy days and warm nights brings drab colors. Early frosts or a wind storm will quickly end any fall color display.

- Drive 2.8 miles and turn LEFT onto Ream Road
- Drive 0.4 miles and turn RIGHT onto Lyons Road
- Drive 0.2 miles and turn right at the Scenic Overlook sign and follow the road to the gate. Park in the lot at the gate and enjoy a short walk to the overlook pavilion.

Scenic View at Laurel Hill State Park

Enjoy the panoramic view of the Laurel Highlands from this 180-acre property. The only evidence of development that can be seen is the top of Seven Springs Mountain Resort to your left and the old farmhouse in front of you. The farmhouse is the visitor center at Laurel Hill State Park.

- Return to Copper Kettle Highway and drive 1.5 miles through Trent to Laurel Hill Park Road (Copper Kettle Highway becomes County Line Road). Turn RIGHT into **Laurel Hill State Park** (visitor center on left).

Laurel Hill State Park

As you enter the park, notice the large bronze statue to your right. The CCC Boy statue represents the hard work and tremendous pride of the boys that served in the Civilian Conservation Corps.

The Laurel Hill Visitor Center contains exhibits about the Civilian Conservation Corps and its influence on the development of the park. Learn about the challenges of early logging and lumbering practices on the ridge.

The park, named for its location at the foothills of the Laurel Hill Anticline (Laurel Ridge), offers numerous views of forested slopes that make up the ridge. From the visitor center, follow the main park road to the left for approximately one-third mile to reach Laurel Hill Lake.

Park in one of the parking lots on the right. Walk to the causeway that crosses the dam and admire the reflection of the fall foliage in the calm waters of Laurel Hill Lake.

As you leave the park towards your next destination, you will begin your climb up and over the Laurel Ridge.

- Turn LEFT as you leave the parking area to return to County Line Road. Turn RIGHT on to County Line Road toward Seven Springs Mountain Resort
- Drive 10.2 miles to the stop sign at PA 381/711

The Highlands

After passing Seven Springs Mountain Resort, the ridge ahead of you is the Chestnut Ridge. It is one of three ridges that define this area.

This area, geologically known as the Allegheny Plateau, consists of high ridges with flat tops separated by valleys with steep sides as a result of the folding that occurred when the continents collided. This entire region was then lifted into mountains as tall as today's Andes Mountains in South America, forming the highlands. Over the millennia, the ridges have eroded down to their present elevation.

Elevation and the ridges play a key role in the climate of the Laurel Highlands. It is often cooler and wetter than climates in the surrounding areas. On average, temperatures can be eight to ten degrees cooler. The ridges create barriers that dramatically affect the weather. As a result, one side of the ridge may receive abundant rain or snow while the other side is dry. The average temperature for October is a high of 62 degrees and a low of 41 degrees. Snowfall in October can be one to three inches.

As you travel to your next destination, notice the characteristic terrain of the highlands as you drive over high ridges and into the valleys between.

- Turn RIGHT onto 381/711 North and drive 1.2 miles
- Turn LEFT onto 711 North/31 West and drive 2.2 miles to return to Donegal

Need a snack and want to try a local favorite? Stop for a gob at the **Old General Store and Country Pie Shoppe** (on the left as you return to Donegal).

Gobs

A gob is a mining term that refers to a coal refuse pile but is also a name given to a regional dessert. These little cakes with the cream filling can be traced back to Germany and this local favorite is an adaptation of whoopee pies of the Pennsylvania Dutch. In the 1920s, the Harris and Boyer Bakery of Johnstown named these desserts gobs which proved to be the perfect lunchbox snack for the coalminers of the time. The original consists of two small devils food chocolate cakes with white cream filling but there are many variations.

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