

Catching autumn leaves in Vermont

BY GARY LEE
THE WASHINGTON POST

It wasn't easy to spot on a mid-September morning as we took stock of the blanket of green stretching in either direction from Vermont to peaks in New Hampshire and New York. But it was there, halfway down the mountainside from our perch atop Mount Mansfield—a single shock of bright yellow foliage amid the emerald leaves.

"Aha, that's where it all starts," said Willy Leginowicz, the affable innkeeper who had chugged four miles up the mountain with me in his red minivan for this scene. "In a couple of weeks, this whole valley will be turned into a river of reds, oranges and yellows."

It's the very beginning of foliage season in Stowe, Vt. This north-central section of the state is best known for some of New England's grandest ski slopes. But a combination of expansive views, the unique blend of flora and a spectacular mix of trails gives it the kind of cachet among leaf-watchers that South Beach has for partiers or Paris for foodies. A steady flow of visitors, including Japanese, Australians, Brits and others, starts descending on Stowe at this time every year.

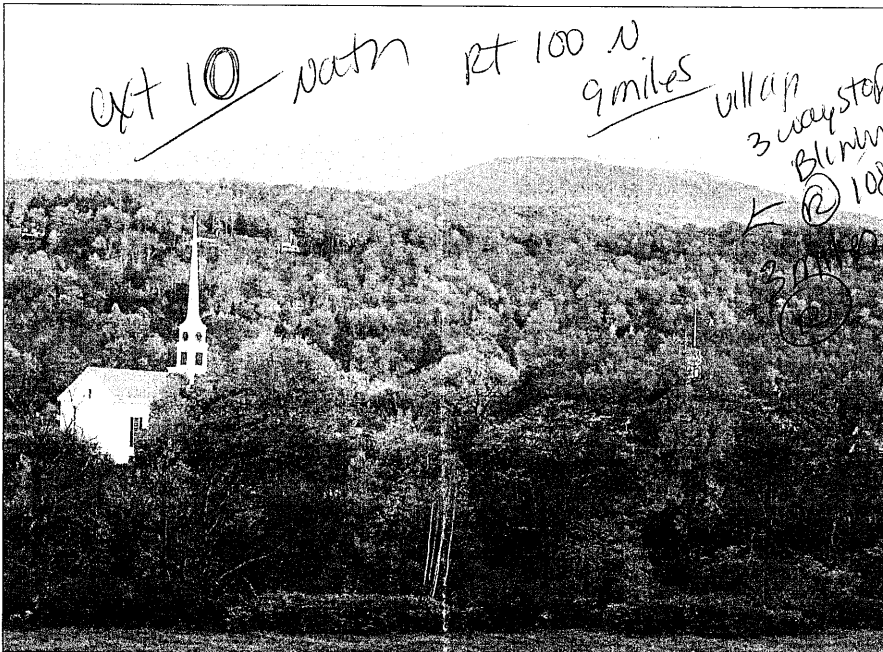
My friend Eddy and I timed our visit to beat the rush but still catch an early peek at the autumn glory.

The window to see Vermont covered in bright foliage is short. At press time, forestry agents were forecasting the first week of October as the peak of color, depending on weather. By the end of October, according to Brian Stone, Vermont's chief of forest management, all but the evergreens will be bare.

In Stone's view, what sets Stowe apart from other foliage destinations is the towering elevation of Mount Mansfield (at 4,393 feet, it's the highest point in the state) and other nearby peaks. The evergreens common at high altitudes ensure that big swatches of background green will be part of the color fusion. From mid-September to mid-October, the maples turn red, the beeches and birches take on yellow and orange and the ashes go burgundy.

From Burlington, we took a 45-minute drive to Stowe through rolling hills, neatly manicured villages and dairy farms.

The vista didn't end when we checked into the aptly



Stowe, Vt., is famed for brilliant foliage and a classic village.

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named Arbor Inn, three miles from Stowe Village; one of our windows framed a perfect picture of Mount Mansfield. Despite its old-fashioned decor—heavy on the flowered wallpaper—the hotel is just right for bargain hunters. The 12 rooms are spacious, and some include extra beds, Jacuzzis and kitchenettes. Breakfast, individually prepared by the owners, was more like a tasty brunch. It was easily worth the price of \$95 a night for two. More (or less) discerning tastes shouldn't fret, though. In this resort town, there are plenty of options, from the \$49-a-night Riverside Inn to the posh \$260-a-night StoweFlake resort.

We started our first morning with a walk along the Stowe Recreation Path, a 5 1/2-mile greenway that runs from the village toward the mountains. Here were classic New England covered wooden bridges, meadows of corn and other crops, and the occasional black squirrel.

Later, during a drive from Stowe to the nearby town of Cambridge, we passed roads lined with gargantuan blocks of

granite and lush forests.

Stowe, with 4,500 people, is the kind of place where a visitor knows many faces after a day and many names by the end of a weekend. The town is anchored by Stowe Village, a settlement of well-preserved Colonial-era wooden houses and shops. But it stretches for three to four miles along Mountain Road, a busy thoroughfare flanked by small guesthouses and restaurants.

At this time of year, Stowe's tourism infrastructure is geared to seeing, not skiing. They've come up with all manner of leaf-peeping excursions, including biking, gondolas, driving tours, glider trips and "dog carts" (think mushing on wheels). Most can be booked in the tourism office in the middle of Stowe Village.

We chose an afternoon kayak trip followed by a visit to the Boyden Valley Winery offered by Umiak Outdoor Outfitters. After gathering with the six other kayakers and getting a brief lesson on paddling

and steering, we shoved off into the Lamolle River. Despite occasional low water, the narrow river made for a pleasant ride.

Nowhere was the seasonal allure more evident than along the river. The sky was clear, and a mild wind kept the temperature at a pleasant mid-70s. But it was the coloring deciduous trees that grabbed my attention.

Maybe I should have paid more attention to the river. Halfway into the two-hour trip, I looked up and realized that we were about to crash into a stump. Eddy, steering our tandem boat from the back, tried frantically to put us back on course. But in a matter of seconds the boat was filling with water. Never mind. We jumped out into the shallows and pulled it ashore, emptied it out and carried on.

The winery tour, at the end of the boat ride, sweetened the afternoon. David Boyden, the co-owner, explained the history and the functions of the

vats and machines. Originally a dairy farm that had been in the Boyden family for five generations, it was transformed into a winery eight years ago. Despite the challenges of producing wine in a northern climate, he said, production has gradually increased every year.

The wines are mostly made from cassis, cranberries, blackberries and a special grape designed to withstand harsh climates. After sampling a few glasses, I forgot all about my damp clothes.

Breakfast the next day found us dry and hungry. After serving a wholesome breakfast of omelets, toast, coffee, juice and banana bread, Willy and Jolanta, owners of the Arbor Inn, joined us for a chat. Originally from the Tatra Mountains region of southern Poland, they were naturally drawn to this area. They were planning to drive up Mansfield later that morning and insisted we come along. That's how we came to be standing atop the mountain, looking down at the

IF YOU GO

STAYING THERE: At the Arbor Inn (3214 Mountain Rd., 800-543-1293, www.arborinnstowe.com), doubles go for \$95 a night (\$149 during Columbus Day weekend). Bountiful breakfast is included.

The decor is a bit grandmotherly, but the rooms are clean and have stellar mountain views. Some include kitchenettes and extra beds, perfect for families. The Riverside Inn (1955 Rivermountain Rd., 800-966-4217, www.rivinn.com) goes even lower; doubles, including a modest continental breakfast, start at \$49 a night. Its Stowe Village location is excellent, but the rooms are tiny. For deluxe lodging, the StoweFlake (1746 Mountain Rd., 800-253-2232, www.stoweflake.com) has lovely rooms, a full service spa and a health club. Doubles start at \$260 a night. Stowe tourism offers hotel/rental car/golf/spa packages through October.

EATING THERE: The gamut of local eateries runs from posh Michael's on the Hill (4182 Route 100, North Waterbury Center, 802-244-7476) and its gourmet veal chops to Harvest Market's turkey sandwiches (Route 108, Stowe, 802-253-3800). Pie in the Sky (49 Mountain Rd.) makes exceptional pizza and pasta. A lunch for two of pesto pizza, including soft drinks, cost \$20. With red-and-white checkered tablecloths and home-style Italian fare, the Trattoria La Festa (4080 Mountain Rd., 802-253-9776) is a fine mid-price dinner option. Minestrone, chicken parmesan, pasta and wine for two came to \$50.

BEING THERE: Hiking or biking the 5 1/2-mile Stowe Recreation Path or taking gondola rides across the peaks are superb ways to take in the fall glory. The Stowe tourism office in the center of Stowe Village offers bookings on several ways to view fall color, from gliders to mountain bikes. Soft adventurers should try the kayaking and winery tour offered by Umiak Outfitters (849 S. Main St., 802-253-2317, www.umiak.com) until Oct. 16 for \$40-\$45 a person. For leaf color updates and a list of recommended drives, see Vermont's foliage report at www.vermontvacation.com/seasons/report.asp.

INFORMATION: Stowe Area Association, 877-317-6693, www.gustowe.com.

very beginning of Vermont's annual autumnal pageant.

"You'll be able to see the first leaves change," Willy said. "Nobody should come to Stowe without getting a sight of that.

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