



Hills On Fire

Pennsylvania's Pine Creek Gorge

Text by ERICA LEE NELSON Photographs by SEBASTIAN JOHN

The promise of a flaming fall and technicolor hillsides may be what brought us to Pennsylvania's Pine Creek Gorge, but it's the pure, rural American charm of the people in the area that will bring us back.

Pine Creek Gorge—in a part of the country far from any shopping mall or four-lane freeway—is a 64-kilometer passage through the northeastern wilderness that drops nearly 442 meters at its deepest point. It's known as Pennsylvania's Grand Canyon, and though it may not be nearly as large as Arizona's it is certainly grand.

Driving there in early October, every turn of the road brings a new, awe-inspiring sight. "This is crazy!" my husband kept saying as we zoomed down the bumpy two-lane road, seeing hillside after hillside speckled with a confetti of trees—purple, red, yellow, pink, orange, brown and green.

The entire area surrounding the gorge is sparsely populated and largely undeveloped, with nearly 400,000 hectares of park and forest land. The gorge itself began forming 350 million years ago, and the layers of rock put on their own color show, as the sandstone, siltstone, mudstone and shale take on hues of green, gray, brown and red. Waterfalls can be found throughout the park, as well.



Top left: A view of Pine Creek Gorge from Overlook Trail.
Top: Motel and old style phone booth at Ansonia near Pine Creek Gorge.
Above left: Tourist Donna Daniels of Getzville, New York, pets goats at Carter Camp Lodge.



Above right: Barbara Andrews, who runs a bed-and-breakfast at Carter Camp, walks across the road from the Carter Camp Lodge.



*Fall foliage
at Denton Hill
State Park.*

Time to visit: For foliage, the peak time for northern Pennsylvania is usually the first week of October (www.fallinpa.com). Cold weather is the key to the turning of the leaves, so check the local conditions. Summer is great for swimming and whitewater rafting, while in winter there are snowmobile trails, downhill and cross-country skiing.

Accommodation: You can find the roughest wilderness campsite here (\$17.50 a night from April to October) and high-end bed-and-breakfasts with jacuzzi and spa services (about \$150 a night with breakfast). Carter Camp is \$85 a night in the peak foliage season.

Getting there: You'll need a car to get around, and prepare to do a lot of driving on back roads to see the sights. The gorge is about a three-hour drive from three nearby cities: Harrisburg, Pennsylvania; Buffalo, New York and Scranton, Pennsylvania.

Happy trails

Our first stop was Little Pine State Park, where we saw life from the bottom of the canyon. Walking on the banks of the blue creek that helped carve out the area, we see families boating, hiking and picnicking. Despite the activity, the place is incredibly quiet. Absent the sounds of civilization, all you can hear is an occasional engine rumble, clank of paddles and cry of hawks overhead. America's national bird, the bald eagle, is also spotted frequently.

Running through the entire length of the gorge is a wonderful walking and biking path, the 92-kilometer Pine Creek Rail Trail, built along an old railway route. You don't have to be super fit to enjoy it, as the trail is flat throughout, and never has more than a 2 percent grade—the maximum incline the old railway engines could handle. For the fall colors, seniors were out in force on their bikes. "We make a three-day weekend of it every year," one older cyclist tells me. Best of all, you don't have to pack anything with you as there are stores and hotels near different points all along the trail.

We kept seeing the dark-winged hawks circle the rim of the canyon as we walked. Hankering for a view like theirs, we searched the nearby roads for some route to the top that was easier than the steep trails up the slopes. Luckily, the roads at the top of the gorge led to well-maintained, shorter trails that rewarded you with long views down the twisting canyon.

Another unique way to experience the fall foliage is from a ski lift. The area offers a challenging collection of ski slopes in Denton Hill State Park that are used for dirt biking in the fall and summer, and the ski lifts are put to good use by leaf-seekers and young bikers alike. The slow ride up is relaxing, and it provides an amazing view near the top. Once you're there, you can hike, take the lift down, or hold on for dear life and zoom your bike down the mountainside. (They offer rentals, too).

The entire canyon area was once home to a booming logging industry at the turn of the 20th century. Timber used to float down Pine Creek to the nearby town of Williamsport and its saw mills. There's a lumber museum with authentic buildings that recreate the old times, right across the street from the ski slopes.

Trails in the region can even take you to sites of logging ghost towns deep in the forest.

Starry, starry night

Besides the gorge, the area offers another natural wonder—one which you can only experience at night. One evening, we drove to Cherry Springs State Park and arrived at 8 p.m., just in time for the last star-gazing program of the season.

Cherry Springs is one of the best places in the United States to do it. Located in such a remote area, the park has almost no "light pollution" from human civilization. All the lighting in the park is covered, and the astronomy field is cleared of trees, affording a 360-degree view of over 3,000 stars and five to six meteors on a good night. Astronomers or amateurs can camp on the field during the summer, or enjoy the stars from special observatories with rotating domes.

Unfortunately, the night we arrived the moon was quite bright, obscuring much of the starlight. However, not being deterred, the park had prepared a special moon program, and the giant telescopes were focused right on the nearly-full moon. After a presentation by a park ranger, we all got a chance to see the craters up close—every divot and valley came into view. I wanted to stay there all night and just take in the sky, but it's cold on top of the mountain and eventually we had to tear ourselves away.

Below: Bikers at Denton Hill State Park. Bottom: The cafe at Carter Camp Lodge.



Country hospitality

Our accommodation was in the unofficial town of Carter Camp, population: 2. The bed-and-breakfast there is run by two natives of the area, John and Barbara Andrews, who live in the 150-year-old boarding house with their two dogs, two ducks and six goats.

"I don't have locks on the doors," John informs as we are taking our luggage up to the rooms. "Once, I tried to put them on there but the regulars complained," he says, laughing. He assures us that people are very honest in the area, and later on, I will find out just how right he is.

Though there are some more upscale hotels in the neighboring towns, Carter Camp Lodge is pure country. Eight rooms, a shared bathroom and a giant iron stove for heat. Breakfast starts every morning at 8 a.m. in the couple's kitchen and living room. They make almost everything themselves—from the spicy sausage to the crusty wheat bread.

Dinner, though, is a little bit harder to find, as most shops close early in these parts. So we headed to one of the larger towns in the area (Galeton, population 1,325) looking for some good food. Stopping at a restaurant, I accidentally left my wallet on top of my car roof and drove out of the parking lot. Half a mile down the road we realized the mistake and went back to the restaurant.

Then, the true hospitality of the American countryside sprang into action. One of the cooks ran to his house to get a flashlight. A customer who had a powerful torch in his pickup truck, and another woman diner volunteered to help me search. With all that help, we finally found it squashed by traffic but all in one piece. When we came back to the restaurant, the whole bar cheered.

Small world

Sunday morning breakfast at Carter Camp was busy. When the hungry crowd came in, everyone shared the three tables in the room and we got a chance to meet tourists and locals over coffee and buckwheat pancakes. Regular customers even picked up their own dishes and put them in the sink.

Local hunters Jim Spotts and Melvin Vanemon sat with us, decked out in full camouflage. They had come from a nearby town on the lookout for wild turkey. The hills are full of deer, grouse, squirrels, foxes, coyotes, bobcats and even bears, they tell us.

We eventually get talking about India, and Spotts tells us that the local doctor here is a Gujarati. "He taught me how to say some things," he says. "Majama!" My husband and I were totally shocked.

By the time we left, they advised us on all the best trails and extended an invitation to their houses for lunch sometime, making sure we got their phone number so we could call if we got lost.

Later, just before we left, we took one last look at the mountains. My husband admitted to me, "It looks like one of those Bollywood movies I saw when I was a child. I never believed trees could actually look like this."

I told him I wasn't sure that places with such warm, rural hospitality still existed in our urbanized world. Sometimes, it's good to know that you're wrong.

Erica Lee Nelson is a Washington, D.C.-based writer. She and her husband, Indian photographer Sebastian John, married in New Delhi.



Chasing Fall Colors

For those planning road trips to enjoy the leaf-changing season in the United States, here are some unconventional spots worth a visit.

<http://gorp.away.com/gorp/features/fall/fall.htm>
<http://www.fs.fed.us/news/fallcolors/>

The Green Mountains in Vermont might be one of the most popular locations but the **Delaware Water Gap National Recreation Area** in New Jersey, just an hour from New York City, has three scenic overlooks with breathtaking views of the lush autumn foliage covering the hillsides. The effect usually peaks around mid-October, with maple, oak, hickory and dogwood trees turning into vivid shades of purple, red, yellow, brown and orange.

<http://www.nps.gov/dewa/planyourvisit/fall-foliage.htm>

Sica Hollow State Park in South Dakota, just 24 kilometers outside Sisseton, presents a grand spectacle with maples, lindens, ash and oak trees blending for its famous fall foliage. The best way to enjoy the phenomenon is to hike or take a horseback ride along the Trail of the Spirits, through the Sica Hollow woodland where visitors can learn about the natural forces that created the hollow and the American Indian legends associated with the park.

<http://www.sdgfp.info/parks/Regions/GlacialLakes/SicaHollow.htm>

Oregon's fall foliage might not be as well known as New England's but **Aufderheide Memorial Drive** in northern Oregon offers a great option for a family picnic along with some amazing views of nature turning over a new leaf. Part of the Willamette National Forest, it is also a popular bicycling route and a National Scenic Byway. Most of the drive is through a forested corridor so you will see some of the best scenery along its numerous hiking trails.

http://gorp.away.com/gorp/activity/byway/or_aufde.htm

Give the more well-known Great Smoky Mountains National Park a miss and check out the **Nantahala National Forest** in North Carolina instead. The best way to enjoy its autumnal splendor is by taking the three-kilometer loop trail, an easy hike even for families with children. Cascading waterfalls and white-water rivers add to the forest's atmosphere, heightened by towering oaks, hemlocks, chestnuts and poplars.

<http://www.cs.unca.edu/nfsnc/press/fall.htm>

—Y.M.