Photographing Stunning Autumn Color

Essential Fall Photography Tips

by Richard Bernabe
Autumn color season is one of the most eagerly anticipated times of the year for restless nature photographers. The brilliant red, orange, and yellow foliage is like a jarring wake up call for all the creative energy atrophied by the listless and drab dog days of late summer (August through mid-September has always been my least favorite time of year). And since these photos aren’t going to just take themselves, here are 5 essential tips to help you make the most of the autumn color season.

**Use Backlight**
The leaves of autumn foliage are translucent, which means sunlight is allowed to partially pass through them when viewed or photographed from the opposite side. The foliage seems to glow and radiate the boldest colors when this happens. Seek out as many of these lighting opportunities as possible for stunning, luminous color. You’ll want a screw-in polarizing filter for your lens with the largest front element size, and step-up rings for your smaller lenses (step-up rings are much more cost-effective than a polarizer for each lens). We use and recommend filters from Breakthrough Photography.

This will work anytime there is direct sunlight. Even when most photographers retire during the “idle light” of midday, you can always aim the lens skyward as the canopy of yellows and reds glow against the complementary crisp blue sky.

**Keys to Using Backlighting**
- Aim the camera toward the sun.
- Be aware of ghosting or flare when shooting into the sun. Your lens hood might help, although probably not if shooting directly into the sun, so consider using your hand, a hat, a book, anything that can block the sun’s rays from striking the front element of the lens.
- Avoid underexposure. Your camera’s meter will probably want to underexpose the scene under most backlighting conditions. Consider adding a stop or two of exposure to keep the image from being too dark. Better yet, consult the histogram and “exposure to the right.”
- Look to add a sunstar for additional interest and a strong focal point of the image—if it needs one. A sunstar is created by using lens diffraction when a small aperture is used. A small aperture is associated with large f-stop numbers so a setting of f/22 usually does the trick. Best results are when you partially obscure the sun behind a tree branch or mountain, leaving only some of the sun’s rays peeking through. Let diffraction do the rest.
- Try to employ complementary colors by shooting skyward on a sunny, blue-sky day. The warm tones in the backlit foliage fully complement the blues in the sky.
Use Telephoto Lenses to Isolate Your Subject

A forest of trees can appear as visual chaos, but by isolating smaller vignettes with a telephoto lens, you can help bring some order to that chaos.

Telephoto isolation in landscape photography is the fine art of exclusion, stripping away any extraneous visual elements to reveal only the most essential parts of the scene. This is particularly true when shooting autumn color. In the example at left, I used a focal length of 85mm to reveal only a small section of a larger waterfall scene and split the image into three equal sections: the autumn color, the falling water, and the glacial blue of the river.

Look Down

When exploring autumn scenes among trees and hillsides, don’t forget to look down at the “leaf litter” scattered across the forest floor, on river rocks, along trails, etc. This is particularly true in late autumn, my favorite part of the season—a lot of the leaves have already fallen, some of the trees are completely bare or still holding on to a few leaves, and vibrant greens have given way to autumn’s reds, yellows and oranges.

There are often many tiny scenes within the autumn leaves themselves. Look for patterns of veins and variations in color found in a single fallen autumn leaf. A versatile macro lens of about 100mm is a useful tool for these types of images (right).
Look For Reflections in Water

On any sunny autumn day, find a body of water that is in the shade but also near some brightly illuminated autumn color, such as a grove of colorful trees or hillside. Here is where you will find a great opportunity to photograph fall reflections. If the water is still enough, you can capture some literal reflections that create a mirror image of the primary subject. If the water is choppy from the wind or is moving, like you would find in a river or stream, you can make abstract reflections with longer exposures. The above image is an example of the latter, with a 10-second exposure being used to smooth out the water’s surface.

This type of reflection images usually needs some help in the form of one or more visual anchors in addition to the reflection. A rock or rocks, a log, or a duck are just some examples to look for when making reflection images. In order to get exposures of 10 seconds or longer during the middle of the day, you will need a strong neutral density filter of 6 to 10 stops in filter strength. At Muench Workshops, our recommended neutral density Filters are from Breakthrough Photography.
Additional Resources

U.S. Fall Color Map by Weather.com
https://weather.com/maps/fall-foliage

Fall Foliage Prediction Map for the U.S
https://smokymountains.com/fall-foliage-map/

Peak Fall Foliage Map by Stormfax
http://www.stormfax.com/foliagemap.htm

Peak Fall Foliage Map for New England
https://newengland.com/seasons/fall/foliage/peak-fall-foliage-map/

Your Ultimate Guide to the Smoky Mountains Fall Colors

15 National Parks for Fall Color (Wilderness.org)
http://wilderness.org/15-national-parks-fall-color

The 10 Best Places to See Fall Foliage in Canada
https://www.tripsavvy.com/places-to-see-fall-foliage-in-canada-1481743

Best Times To See fall Foliage Across Canada with Interactive Map
http://www.winnipegsun.com/2013/10/02/best-times-to-see-fall-foliage-across-canada