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GET INSPIRED, GET HIKING

PLAY WITH FIRE.

ADIRONDACK MOUNTAINS, NY

Watch fall's fiery hues color the forest all around you from the Rondaxe Fire Tower atop Bald Mountain (also called Rondaxe Mountain). Gaining 500 feet in just under a mile, the climb to the 2,350-foot summit offers midway rewards in views over the Fulton Chain of Lakes. From the top, soak in the vibrant hues of sugar maples, American beech, and yellow birch trees (peak foliage tends to occur in early- to mid-October). Look northeast for vistas of the High Peaks Wilderness, including 5,344-foot Mt. Marcy, the state's tallest. Return the way you came for a 1.9-mile out-and-back. Plan a sunrise hike to beat the crowds that flock to this peak in autumn, and to see a different sort of flame over the morning fog.
CONTACT adk.org

JOHNATHAN AMPERSAND ESPER / WILDERNESSCAPES PHOTOGRAPHY

FALL HEAD OVER HEELS.

COLUMBIA RIVER GORGE NATIONAL SCENIC AREA, WA

Don't let the .8-mile distance fool you—the hike to Spirit Falls is no cakewalk. To access this cerulean cascade, you'll have to scramble down a steep, often muddy, and rocky slope (trekking poles are highly recommended, especially for the descent). From the Spirit Falls trailhead, descend through dense forest until the moss-covered volcanic rock rises before you. Look out for kayakers making daredevil drops over the falls, then ascend (carefully) the way you came. **CONTACT** fs.usda.gov/crgnsa

AUSTIN JACKSON

SOAK IN STILLNESS.

BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK, TX

Of all the things that river canyons collect, silence is the most fleeting. But at the bottom of Santa Elena Canyon, where the Rio Grande slows almost to a standstill, you'll find that elusive prize. Take the Santa Elena Canyon Trail, following a few switchbacks before dropping gradually to the floor, where riparian flora fringes the waterway. Savor the shade below the canyon's 1,500-foot limestone walls, which were formed 135 million years ago when a rising sea brought floods to the area. Rest by the river's edge before returning the way you came to complete the 1.7-mile day. **CONTACT** nps.gov/bibe

MATTHEW HAHNEL

THINK DEEP THOUGHTS.

HOCKING HILLS STATE PARK, OH

Ash Cave once served as a shelter for indigenous inhabitants of what is now Ohio. You can find refuge of your own in the state's largest recess cave, which spans 700 feet across and is 100 feet from rim to back. Hike a quarter mile from the Ash Cave parking area on the handicap-accessible Ash Cave Gorge Trail for a brief out-and-back, or take the .5-mile Ash Cave Rim Loop to see the cavern from above. In October, hemlock and beech trees turn out their fall colors, and in spring and after heavy rains, spot a thin cascade tumbling gently over the cave's rim. Want to go longer? A 10-minute drive will take you to the Old Man's Cave trailhead and a 5.1-mile loop through sandstone tunnels to another historic grotto. **CONTACT** hockinghills.com

JASON HATFIELD / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

WALK THROUGH TIME.

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK, CA

This isn't the Yosemite meadow you've heard about. It's better. Unlike Tuolumne and the park's other famous greens, Dana Meadows remains virtually empty even in summer. The reason? It's tucked away near the park's east entrance, far from the busy zones. Go at daybreak like photographer Robb Hirsch did for ultimate solitude: Hop on the Mono Pass Trail and hike east through Dana Meadows, where kettles formed from the last of the Tuolumne glaciers 10,000 years ago fill with today's runoff. Keep going 4 miles up 10,600-foot Mono Pass, where views stretch to rust-colored Bloody Canyon and the otherworldly spires that protrude from Mono Lake. Turn around at infinity pool-like Upper Sardine Lake for a 9-mile out-and-back dayhike. **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** nps.gov/yose

ROBB HIRSCH / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

TRIPLE YOUR FUN.

BLACKWATER FALLS STATE PARK, WV

This park's namesake cascade is reason enough to visit, but after checking out the 57-foot plume on a quick, .4-mile out-and-back, go high. Take the Dobbin House and Pase Point Trails roughly 1.5 miles west through dense hardwood forest on the north edge of Blackwater Canyon to the Pase Point Overlook, an outcropping that juts above the canopy and over the gorge. There, stand high above the North Fork confluence with a view that stretches down the canyon like a gunsight. Like what you see? On your drive out, peel off at Lindy Point for a .8-mile out-and-back to this view, where photographer Martin Radigan lucked into low-hanging fog (best chances in morning). There's no wrong way to do Blackwater Canyon, but seeing it three ways seems the most right. PERMIT None **CONTACT** bit.do/blackwater-falls-sp

MARTIN RADIGAN

GO ON AN EPIC.

PASAYTEN WILDERNESS, WA

Make at least one trip this summer a hike that you—and your quads—will remember. Go deep, deep, *deep* into the backcountry on the 43-mile Devils Dome Loop in the North Cascades. Done in four or five days, it racks up more than 10,000 feet of elevation gain as it bores through the high country on the Washington-Canada border. This view is near the halfway point (if you start at Canyon Creek), looking south toward the glacier-mantled Jack Mountain massif. Plenty of eye candy makes the miles fly by. **PERMIT** Required (free) for overnighting at Ross Lake in North Cascades National Park on the final night; obtain from the Marblemount Ranger Station. **CONTACTS** www.fs.usda.gov/okawen; nps.gov/noca

MICHAEL DEYOUNG

GO GREEN.

FISHEATING CREEK WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT AREA, FL

There are two types of wilderness beauty: the timeless kind, etched in stone, and the fleeting kind that comes and goes with the seasons. Here in south-central Florida, it's all about the latter. When the calendar year flips, summer's high waters have just subsided enough to reveal sandy freshwater beaches perfect for camping—but wait any longer and you'll be navigating tangles of reeds or, worse, portaging. Photographer Paul Marcellini recommends the 16-mile route from Ingrams Crossing downstream to Fisheating Creek Campground; it's easy paddling the whole way, and in January, the passage narrows, both creating a more intimate corridor beneath the cypresses and funneling the aquatic wildlife to a smaller area. Keep your eyes peeled for wading birds like ibises, herons, egrets, and roseate spoonbills. Camp anywhere you like along the way (practice gator safety), or go all the way to the campground (sites 11 to 16 are right on the water; reserve for $27/night at fisheatingcreekoutpost.com). Fisheating Creek Outpost also rents out boats and runs shuttles to Ingrams Crossing; prices vary. **CONTACT** bit.do/fisheating-creek-wma

PAUL MARCELLINI / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

GET A LOOK AT THIS.

ROAN HIGHLANDS, TN/NC

Whether pink and lavender clouds settle over the valleys or burn off to reveal long views over rhododendron-crowned slopes, the hike along Grassy Ridge promises a sensory overload of one kind or another in early summer. By June, the catwalk erupts with two types of rhododendrons: Catawbas (pictured) and rosebays. It's becoming a bit popular, so check it out mid-week or early in the morning (better chance of fog), and head east from Carvers Gap. Follow the Appalachian Trail 2 miles across Round and Jane Balds to reach Grassy Ridge Bald and this view. PERMIT None CONTACT www.fs.usda.gov/cherokee

J & W PHOTOGRAPHY / GUOHAI JIN & YI WANG

SEE THE NEW.

ROUND VALLEY REGIONAL PRESERVE, CA

Record rain and a friendly visit from the Pineapple Express have had profound effects on a state long accustomed to drought. Like here, in the East Bay, perhaps local hikers forgot what a good dose of water does to Round Valley, transforming its oak-studded slopes into something more resembling Ireland than California. But to see Bay Area wilds in all their green glory, you better head out now, before summer brings back the brown. From the trailhead on Marsh Creek Road, link the Miwok and Hardy Canyon Trails to create a 5-mile loop. **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** bit.do/ebparks-roundvalley

SUSAN HOLT

SEE THE OLD.

LASSEN VOLCANIC NATIONAL PARK, CA

If the Painted Dunes look like a watercolor, then the brush strokes were made 400 years ago. In the mid-1600s, a massive volcanic eruption spewed lava across northeast California, creating 6,907-foot Cinder Cone. Climb the rubble on a 4-mile out-and-back from Butte Lake, peeking out at the rim to see the Painted Dunes (and their sprinkling of Jeffrey pines) melt into the bronze-streaked Fantastic Lava Beds. (This hike is typically doable in June, but check snowpack.) Make it an overnight by taking the Nobles Emigrant Trail around Cinder Cone to camp at Rainbow Lake near mile 4.8. **PERMIT** Required for overnighting (free); apply online. **CONTACT** nps.gov/lavo

RACHID DAHNOUN / TANDEMSTOCK.COM



APPROACH THE ALTAR.

ACADIA NATIONAL PARK, ME

Pilgrims travel far to catch sunrise from 1,529-foot Cadillac Mountain, the highest point along the North Atlantic seaboard. It's a stunner, but no secret. More than three quarters of a million people visited Acadia last May and June, and most of them came for Mt. Desert Island's crown. But you can have first light without the crowds if you gun for the Schoodic Peninsula. When Acadia's boundaries spread eastward to encompass the 1,400-acre promontory in 2015, it opened up a swath of granite shoreline lined with thick forests much like the park's more popular areas, but far less congested. Visit in June when temperatures hang in the mid-70s and conditions are just about perfect. A handful of short trails spiderweb across the Schoodic Peninsula; link the Alder, Schoodic Head, and Anvil Trails for a 2.1-mile loop. Tack on a .8-mile (round-trip) spur on the East Trail to get up onto the coast. There's no backpacking in the national park, but the Schoodic Woods Campground has backcountry-feeling, tent-only sites ($22; reservation recommended)—if you want a head start on sunrise. **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** nps.gov/acad

MARTIN RADIGAN



TAKE THE SCENIC ROUTE.

STEPHENS GAP CALLAHAN CAVE PRESERVE, AL

One way to evade late-summer temps in the South? Go underground. It's not a big hike, but trust us: You won't mind cooling off in this 143-foot, open-air cave. Better than the natural AC is that Stephens Gap is beginner-friendly and nontechnical. Experienced cavers can, of course, rappel in through the top (pictured), while the rest of us can scramble in near mile .7 of an easy hike from the eponymous trailhead on AL 35. The side entry looks like a vast garage door, and hikers can clamber through it to get to the watery cave floor (wear sturdy shoes; the opening lets in enough natural light that you can forgo a headlamp). **PERMIT** Required (free); apply at permits.scci.org. **CONTACT** bit.do/stephens-gap

QUIN SCHROCK

OPEN SESAME.

SAMUEL H. BOARDMAN STATE SCENIC CORRIDOR, OR

You'd be forgiven for thinking this coastline was the product of some artist's fantasy. Here, near the California state line, erosion and uplift have joined forces to sculpt the seabed into seven arches and dozens of sea stacks. Visit in March when temps in the 50s and rain keep casual hikers in hibernation. First, tick off the Natural Bridges Trail, a .5-mile out-and-back to an overlook of Secret Beach, where you can spot two arches, including the narrow slot pictured here. After, tackle the 7-mile out-and-back to China Beach: From Indian Sands, take the Oregon Coast Trail north past dunes to Thomas Creek Canyon, a 350-foot-deep defile. Cross the ravine on a bridge, then reconnect with the Oregon Coast Trail as it wends through Sitka spruces en route to China Beach. You'll see more rocks and sea stacks poking out of the surf than you can count. Not fantasy, just geology. PERMIT None CONTACT bit.do/sam-boardman

GRANT ORDELHEIDE

TAKE THE BAD WITH THE GOOD.

BADLANDS NATIONAL PARK, SD

When French trappers first crossed the Dakotas, legend has it that they dubbed the twisted topography *mauvaises terres à traverser*, or "bad lands to cross." But beauty, as they say, is in the eye of the beholder. See where you land on a 6.2-mile lollipop-loop from the Door and Window Parking Area. Head 1.1 miles northwest on the Castle Trail (pictured) to a junction. Here, create a 4-mile loop on the Medicine Root and Castle Trails before retracing your steps. The route is mostly flat, traveling through prairie with views of badland formations. Ready to step up your game? Dive into Badlands' trailless interior for a DIY backpacking trip. Though temps creep up to 50°F in early spring, pack for winter. From the Sheep Mountain Overlook parking area, follow dirt doubletrack Sheep Mountain Road 1.1 miles south to Spring Draw Creek. Turn west into the drainage and follow the wash .9 mile, including a fun bit through a tight slot canyon. Set up a basecamp at mile 2 on a grassy shelf (BYO water). Find a more complete itinerary at backpacker.com/badlands-weekend. **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** nps.gov/badl

BE SELFISH.

SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK, CA

Wait until summer and you'll have a better shot at winning the lottery than getting the Giant Forest to yourself. But in February and March, this grove of sequoias sees one tenth of the visitors it will in July and August. Stage a trip and cross your fingers for snow—not only will it keep the last of the tourists away, it will add another layer of quiet and beauty. From the Giant Forest Museum, hike past 20-story-tall trees, circling Round Meadow on the .7-mile Big Trees Trail (pictured). Thirteen of Earth's 50 largest sequoias live in this grove, so plan on a slower pace than usual—and maybe a post-hike neck massage. **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** nps.gov/seki

MICHAEL O'KEEFFE

PLAY THE NUMBERS.

CANYONLANDS NATIONAL PARK, UT

Spring and fall are considered prime time in this desert park, but if solitude is what you're after, winter takes the prize. Just chew on the stats: Canyonlands draws fewer than 10,000 visitors in January. In May? More than 100,000. It snows here in winter, but not too often, and daytime highs hover around 40°F. And if you catch the morning sun as it seeps through Mesa Arch, illuminating the sandstone maze of the Island in the Sky District 1,300 feet below, we're confident it will give you a very, very warm feeling. See for yourself on the easy .5-mile loop this month. From Mesa Arch, pick out the spindles of the Washer Woman formation and let it whet your appetite for an extended trip in the Gooseberry-Lathrop Zone beyond Buck Canyon. Winter is calling. **PERMIT** Required for overnighting ($30); reserve online. **CONTACT** nps.gov/cany

DANIEL FLEISCHHACKER

SEE THE ICE CAPADES.

ALLAGASH WILDERNESS WATERWAY, ME

If you want to experience winter in its purest form—cold, lonely, and beautiful—bundle up and head to north-central Maine like photographer Chris Bennett. Here, subzero temps turn the 92-mile-long Allagash Wilderness Waterway into a frozen footpath of rivers and lakes. Bennett has tried to cross the whole thing twice, but impassable running rivers on the north end have turned him around both times. We recommend heading to the frozen lakes and ponds of the southern half, where he's never had an issue. Hauling your gear in a pulk sled (read more on page 34), trek north across Chamberlain Lake from the Chamberlain Bridge. If the surfaces are snow-covered, skis or snowshoes are best, but if they're not, opt for simple traction devices. It's about 10 miles to a short portage into sprawling Eagle Lake, where Bennett camped. Expert winter skills required. Check conditions before heading out on the ice (it must be at least 4 inches thick), and study up at backpacker.com/ice-travel-skills. **PERMIT** Special activity permit required in winter; inquire beforehand. **CONTACT** bit.do/allagash-waterway

CHRIS BENNETT PHOTO

TAKE A LOAD OFF.

LITTLE BIG ECON STATE FOREST, FL

You've earned it. With the holidays behind you, get your year off the ground on the Econlockhatchee River outside of Orlando. There's no wrong way to stage a trip in this flatwater paradise, but we recommend paddlers put in at the launch on CR 419 and float up to 20 miles east to the St. Johns River. Stop over in the East Camp Area, about 10 to 11 miles from the starting point, to sling a hammock among the waterside oaks and palms or find a patch of dry land for tenting. Not the seafaring sort? That's OK: Take off on foot from the Barr Street trailhead, following the Florida Trail east along the blackwater river. You'll pass through the West Camp Area in the first 2 miles—your best bet is to claim a campsite or hammock-friendly pair of trees beside the tannic water, then keep going on the 1.5-mile Kolokee Loop. It follows the Econlockhatchee before doglegging north through pine woods and circling back to the West Camp Area. With January highs in the 70s and few bugs, this is the perfect spot to get your year started on the right foot—or paddle. PERMIT Required for overnighting ($10); call the state forest (407-971-3500) to reserve. CONTACT bit.do/little-big-econ-sf

MAC STONE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

GO FAR, FAR AWAY.

MONO LAKE, CA

Or at least *feel* like you are when you venture out to this corner of the Eastern Sierra, where a massive soda lake looks like a scene from an alien planet. Mono Lake has absurdly high pH levels and salt concentration—and no outlet—which have given rise to the knobby, castle-like formations and towers that dot the water. Pay a visit this month, when highs in the 50s keep casual visitors away and the aspens and cottonwoods in the Sierra's foothills turn vibrant yellow. Hop on the 1-mile South Tufa Trail to get the best vantage of the limestone Shipwreck formation (pictured) in Mono Lake's shallow waters. Like what you see? Set up your tent for a view that never ends: Dispersed camping is allowed anywhere above the 1941 shoreline (where the brush begins). **PERMIT** Required for overnighting (free); obtain at the Mono Basin Scenic Area Visitor Center. **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/inyo

SUSANNA PATRAS / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

WATERCOLOR.

ATCHAFALAYA BASIN, LA

To see one of the season's last color shows, you need a paddle. Tucked away in southern Louisiana, a 1.4-million-acre swamp serves up some of the South's most electric fall foliage when the thick-crowned tupelos and cypresses blaze red and copper come mid-November. There's no wrong way to stage a trip into Atchafalaya Basin, and with the constantly changing currents, nothing is a given, anyway, but you can do as photographer Chris Moore did. He overnighted at one of the five canoe-friendly campgrounds at Lake Fausse Pointe ($25; reserveamerica.com), then explored the blackwater bayous by boat. If you're looking for a more remote (and challenging) adventure, find the Morgan City levee break off Levee Road (near 29.7953, -91.1719) and launch your boat where Little Bayou Sorrel spills into the Intracoastal Waterway. Paddle roughly 4 miles west through the cypress-lined channel, keeping an eye open for dry land. There should be a site large enough for your tent near the confluence of Little Bayou Sorrel, Bayou Chevreuil, and Bayou Gunnie. (Pack drinking water.) Retrace your strokes on the return.
PERMIT None **CONTACT** atchafalaya.org

CHRIS MOORE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

HIT A HOLE IN ONE.

POISON SPIDER MESA, MOAB, UT

Everyone knows Moab is best in fall—that's why the crowd at Corona Arch looks like a tailgate party. So here's how to do one better in the October-perfect desert: Jeep Arch, less than 2 miles from Corona as the crow flies, yet still off the radar. The 45-foot-tall window sits undisturbed at the end of a slickrock canyon that's a fun, 1.8-mile hike in its own right.

Find the trailhead about a quarter-mile past the parking lot for Corona (near 38.5785, -109.6363). There, head north through the culvert to cross beneath the railbed, then find the trail splitting the redrock walls to the north. The cairn-marked route snakes up and over dry pouroffs and across the scrubby slickrock to a wide wall at the head of an amphitheater—with a jeep-shaped cutout in the middle. (Note: It's called Gold Bar Arch on some topos.) From the window, see the serpentine Colorado behind you and the snow-capped La Sal Mountains 20 miles southeast. Cross through the window and loop clockwise across the slickrock to create a 4-mile lollipop. **PERMIT** None **CONTACT** blm.gov/visit/jeep-arch-trailhead

LOUISA ALBANESE

TOUCH THE VOID.

WHITE SANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT, NM

Less is more here, where a 275-square-mile swath of white outruns the sight line in every direction. The largest gypsum dunefield on the planet, White Sands registers as a smudge on satellite images, as if a massive storm was overtaking south-central New Mexico. Visitors this month know that's not the case, as pleasant temps in the mid-70s and calm days make for the perfect recipe for ticking off the 5-mile Alkali Flat Trail. Less a "trail" than a general route, it circles long-gone Lake Otero with far-off views to the San Andres and Sacramento Mountains. The park closes to day trippers around sunset, but that's the best time to see dusk paint the gypsum pink and orange, so gun for one of the 10 first-come, first-serve backcountry permits and post up along the 2.2-mile Backcountry Camping Loop. PERMIT Required for camping ($3/person); obtain from the visitor center. CONTACT nps.gov/whsa

MITCH WARNICK

START A NEW SEASON.

BIG BEND NATIONAL PARK, TX

Elsewhere around the country, people are flocking to the backcountry in a last-ditch effort to hang onto hiking season. Not here. In Texas, October means the best hiking of the year is just beginning. But "best" doesn't mean easy. Backpackers have to brave long, *long* stretches without water to reap the rewards: empty trails, canyon views that melt into the horizon, and some of the best campsites in the entire park system. Start easy, with the 4.8-mile out-and-back along the Lost Mine Trail to this outcropping facing Big Bend's South Rim. Let it whet your appetite for a bigger adventure across the way. There, you can kick off the Lone Star State's backpacking season with a 14.5-mile variation of the South Rim Loop. Link the Pinnacles, Boot Canyon, East Rim, South Rim, Laguna Meadows, and Basin Loop Trails to do it, camping midway on the South Rim, a fortress of crumbly rock that lords 2,000 feet above the canyonlands of the Chisos Mountains. **PERMIT** Required for camping ($10); obtain from any visitor center. **CONTACT** nps.gov/bibe

IMAGESFROMTEXAS.COM

TAKE YOUR TIME.

CATERPILLAR HILL, ME

Find North Woods quiet in the Down East at this forested paradise. The Blue Hill Heritage Trust bought Caterpillar Hill in 2001, built some trails, and turned it into a positively idyllic weekend destination that's so new to the scene, not even Google Maps knows about it. Thankfully, photographer Martin Radigan does—and he's willing to share his spots. The best way to explore the white pine and red spruce forest is by linking the area's three loop trails into a 1.5-miler: From Caterpillar Hill Road, follow a path lined with blueberry thickets (fruiting in August) through a meadow that pops with goldenrods in early summer. Descend into coastal woods, where neon-green moss carpets every surface and a boardwalk keeps your boots dry. On the return, spy the Camden Hills and East Penobscot Bay. **CONTACT** bit.do/caterpillar-hill

MARTIN RADIGAN

COME INTO SEASON.

PEMIGEWASSET WILDERNESS, NH

September is undisputedly the best month when it comes to peakbagging in the White Mountains. Gone are the days of ice, mud, humidity, and bugs. Instead, good tread and predictable weather patterns reign. And here, in the southern corner of the Pemigewasset, you get an added bonus: a first look at fall. From 4,682-foot Mt. Carrigain, scan north to see the taller Presidential Range, which will light up in reds and yellows beginning the third week of September.

The best way to get here is on a 13.5-mile lollipop-loop from the Signal Ridge trailhead. Follow the Signal Ridge Trail 1.7 miles northwest to a junction and the start of the loop. From there, it's best to go counterclockwise (climbing the steepest section, which is easier on the knees). Split off onto the Carrigain Notch Trail and take it a little more than 5 miles across the 2,639-foot pass and into the Pemigewasset Wilderness to an intersection near Carrigain Branch. (If overnighting, find a flat spot in this area.) Veer south to begin the lung-busting climb up Mt. Carrigain via the Desolation Trail, which gains nearly 2,500 feet in less than 2 miles. The view from the summit fire tower is worth it, though: It outruns the horizon in every direction, encompassing three wilderness areas, including the craggy Sandwich Range to the south. Best part, according to photographer Harry Lichtman? "Not a road in sight." To return, drop off the summit on the Signal Ridge Trail. PERMIT None CONTACT www.fs.usda.gov/whitemountain

HARRY LICHTMAN

APPROACH THE ALTAR.

BRIDGER WILDERNESS, WY

There's a reason hikers tend to talk about the Wind River Range in hushed tones. Between its pinnacled peaks, high-rise cirques, and turquoise lakes, you just won't find that many people. That doesn't mean they don't know about it, though. Isolation, long approaches, and lack of national park status are the area's best protectors, keeping it solidly on most backpackers' life lists—rather than in their photo albums. Change that this September by staging a multiday epic into the granite wonderland when the weather is relatively mild and the wilderness's notorious 'skeeters have abated.

The best way in is via Island Lake (pictured), itself a rough, 12-mile haul from Elkhart Park. From there, you're right at the fanged mouth of Titcomb Basin, in the heart of the Winds. Link the Pole Creek, Seneca Lake, and Indian Pass Trails to get to the 140-acre tarn, then pitch your tent on an established spot on the southwestern shore of the pool, where tent-door views frame 13,745-foot Fremont Peak (background) and the crest of the Winds. Next day, you could turn around after a perfectly acceptable introduction to the range, but we recommend exploring the Titcomb Basin Trail, which leads some 4 miles from camp into a glacier-bulldozed cirque of granite massifs that's sure to leave you speechless. PERMIT None **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/btnf

EMILY POLAR / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

FIND YOUR PEACE.

PICTURED ROCKS NATIONAL LAKESHORE, MI

Take 13 miles of Lake Superior's pristine coastline dotted with bluffs, beaches, caves, and islands, add in 70°F temps, then subtract the crowds, and you get the Beaver Basin Wilderness in midsummer. This small piece of Pictured Rocks doesn't get the recognition it deserves, but that suits hikers—and paddlers—just fine.

There are a few ways to do it. Option A: Strong paddlers can kayak 20 miles northeast from Munising Bay, passing Pictured Rocks highlights Miners Beach and Chapel Rock en route, to Beaver Basin. Grab a permit for one of the four lakeshore campsites. Option B: Get there on foot. From the Little Beaver Lake Campground, follow the backcountry trail north to the shore before doglegging east to camp at Pine Bluff, the most remote site in Beaver Basin, near mile 4.4. Next day, circle back around 762-acre Beaver Lake (bald eagles and river otters here) and through old-growth cedar and mixed hardwood forests to close a 10-mile loop. (Bonus for walkers: In August, yellow-orange jewelweed and pink turtlehead hit full bloom on the forest floor.) **PERMIT** Required for overnighting ($15 reservation fee + $5/person per night); obtain at recreation.gov. **CONTACT** nps.gov/piro

JOHN McCORMICK

FOLLOW THE RAINBOW.

SOUTH CUMBERLAND STATE PARK, TN

OK, we can't promise you a rainbow, but shockingly green foliage, a reprieve from the summer sun, and surging waterfalls are all on the docket when you visit Savage Gulf in midsummer. Link the Stone Door, Big Creek Gulf, and Big Creek Rim Trails to create an 8.6-mile lollipop-loop that touches it all. Don't miss short spurs to 50-foot Ranger Falls and 65-foot, two-tiered Greeter Falls (great swimming here) on the gorge floor before looping back along the view-packed rim. And, if it's a rainbow you're after, do the hike as an overnight so you're in prime position when the morning fog lifts. Camp at Alum Gap (mile 4.9), where sites 4 to 8 sit right on the gorge's rim ($8; recreation.gov). CONTACT bit.do/south-cumberland

JON BUFFINGTON

TAKE THE PLUNGE.

MT. RAINIER NATIONAL PARK, WA

Celebrate summer by cooling off in a backcountry lake or stream. Any will do, but some stand out—like this spot along the Ohanapecosh River. Photographer Scott Kranz found this launching pad a short walk from the Ohanapecosh Campground ($20; recreation.gov). There, bluffs rise up to 30 feet above strikingly blue, deep holes (check water depth and safety before jumping; see right). Better yet? From this basecamp, you're in position to venture farther into Mt. Rainier's backcountry: The Silver Falls Trail leaves from camp, where it tours an island of thousand-year-old, 300-foot-tall Douglas firs and western red cedars, and connects with the Eastside and Owyhigh Lakes Trails to reach the high country. **CONTACT** nps.gov/mora

SCOTT KRANZ

GET A NEW PERSPECTIVE.

GREAT SMOKY MOUNTAINS NATIONAL PARK, TN/NC

The Smokies have their wealth of balds, but precipitous cliffs are hard to come by. That's what makes this find so special. When the ancient glaciers retreated, leaving behind a range of rolling peaks, they must have missed 5,565-foot Charlies Bunion—the rocky knob has thousand-foot drop-offs on three sides. Get to the airy peninsula on the Appalachian Trail from Newfound Gap. It's 4 miles one way to the short spur, which toes the state line between Tennessee and North Carolina. Charlies Bunion is underappreciated when it comes to AT highlights, but you'll still have to share, unless you time it for midweek or twilight. **CONTACT** nps.gov/grsm

STEVEN YOCOM

AIR IT OUT.

FLAT TOPS WILDERNESS, CO

The upside to the Rockies' pitiful snowpack this year? Hikers can weasel into the alpine a lot sooner. So get to work and fill your bucket list with summer summits, like Devils Causeway, a crumbly plateau that narrows to 3 feet wide in places. From the 12,000-foot-tall tabletop, enjoy a spin-around view of the Flat Tops gumdrops popping out of June-green slopes studded with the season's first purple columbines and yellow mule's ears.

The best route there is from the Stillwater trailhead; follow the East Fork Trail (#1119) 3 miles north to the obvious saddle. Hikers cozy with heights can follow the catwalk west all the way to the north-south Chinese Wall before looping back on the Bear River Trail (#1120) for a 10.6-mile trek. CONTACT www.fs.usda.gov/whiteriver

NOAH WETZEL

FLOAT ON.

EAGLE CAP WILDERNESS, OR

Summer in the Wallowa Mountains is a glorious thing. Early bloomers like white and purple monkshood dot the slopes. Snow-capped, 9,000-foot peaks punctuate the horizon. Temperatures creep into the 70s. And, yet, somehow the sum is even greater than the parts.

Experience it for yourself on a 15-mile loop, heading south from the Two Pan trailhead on Trail #1670. Parallel the Lostine River south to its headwaters at Minam Lake, where mule deer often graze and peregrine falcons float overhead. Cross 8,500-foot Carper Pass (scan for Rocky Mountain bighorn sheep) to drop down to Mirror Lake before closing the circuit's final 6.2 miles on Trail #1662. Find a campsite near the lazy East Lostine River, which any water park would be glad to have (BYO inflatable sleeping pad). **CONTACT** www.fs.usda.gov/wallowa-whitman

BEN HERNDON

SPRING TO LIFE.

OZARK-ST. FRANCIS NATIONAL FORESTS, AR

Dust off your boots because, like a juicy red serviceberry, the hike to Sams Throne ripens early. Come April, the Ozarks are made anew by spring's rain and mild temps, and the dogwoods and redbuds are blossoming. Get an eyeful on the 2-mile out-and-back to 1,888-foot Sams Throne (pictured, middle), where the catwalk-like approach offers near-constant views over the Boston Mountains. From the trailhead off AR 123, head south on the easy-to-follow (though unmarked) user path, tracing the ridge past a collection of exposed, 50- to 75-foot-tall bluffs to Sams Throne. Turn around here and snag a dispersed campsite on top of the sandstone escarpment on the way back (free; first-come, first-serve; BYO water) so you're sure to be in the best spot for sunrise. CONTACT www.fs.usda.gov/osfnf

PAUL CALDWELL



FIND PARADISE.

PRESIDENTIAL RANGE-DRY RIVER WILDERNESS, NH

Photographer John Welch cracked the code to landing solitude in the Presis: Avoid the Appalachian Trail, go out in May, and spend the night. Follow his formula on the 9-mile out-and-back to the clifftop campsite on 3,468-foot Stairs Mountain, which overlooks a sea of peaks, including Iron Mountain (front), Thorn Mountain (middle), and Kearsarge North (back). This month, you may even luck into low-hanging fog in the valleys, like Welch did; May's still-cool nights are a good recipe for the inversion effect. "Even on Memorial Day weekend, there was only one other party at the campsite," he says of his favorite spot, which is some 5 miles south of the hordes on the AT's Presidential Traverse. "By mid- to late May, the valleys are leafing out in vibrant greenery, and the redbuds rival New England's fall foliage."

To get there, follow the Davis Path from US 302. Cross 3,119-foot Mt. Crawford near mile 2.2, then keep going to find the summit spur near mile 4.4. Peel off to the east to find one of three dispersed tent sites (they're dry; BYO water). CONTACT www.fs.usda.gov/whitemountain

JOHN WELCH

FLY SOUTH FOR THE WINTER.

ORGAN PIPE CACTUS NATIONAL MONUMENT, AZ

Organ pipes provide little shade when the desert sun pummels this preserve, but with January highs in the 70s, who cares? Cash in on this national monument's best season by setting up a basecamp at the tent-only Alamo Canyon Campground among the arms-aloft cactuses ($10 self-issue permit required). Now you're in prime position for dayhikes: Photographer Ian Shive recommends the short-but-rough, 2-mile Alamo Canyon Trail, which leads east into the crumbly, reddish Ajo Range. (Set an alarm for sunrise; you won't want to miss first light bleeding into the sky above the 3,000-foot mountains.) Note: Organ Pipe, right on the border, sometimes has immigration issues. Check the park website for alerts and expect law enforcement patrols. CONTACT nps.gov/orpi

IAN SHIVE / TANDEMSTOCK.COM

DOUBLE YOUR FUN.

RED RIVER GORGE GEOLOGICAL AREA, KY

This double-window never makes the lists of the country's best arches—but that just means you can get rock-sculpture glory all to yourself. Hopewell Arch hides from crowds, Instagram, and Google (seriously, it returns only 700 hits) beside a small cascade along Copperas Creek, roughly a mile north of the unofficial trailhead on Sky Bridge Road (37.821124, -83.575595). There's a user trail to the arch that continues 2 miles deeper into the Copperas Canyon and its west branch to bigger-name arches, Snow and Double Deer, but this vantage is the real treat, says photographer Bob Brown. "In winter, you'll get a great view like this without the dense forest canopy, but the white pines and rhododendrons still provide some greenery," he says. Air temperatures may crest 40°F, but cross your fingers for subfreezing: Copperas Creek Falls, at the trail's terminus, freezes over into "an ice volcano," Brown says. CONTACT bit.do/red-river-gorge

BOB BROWN

CASH IN.

PEDERNALES FALLS STATE PARK, TX

Patience is a virtue in this Austin-area park, where the cypresses don't typically turn until mid- to late November. But once the mercury starts to drop this far south, the trees look like sunbursts, says photographer Rob Greebon. The best place to see them is clustered along the river, about a mile downstream from the Pedernales Falls trailhead. Follow the easy path to the shore of the small, tiered cascade, then keep going: Alternate between following a social trail and picking your way over limestone embankments and sandy patches to this quiet area where the tangle of cypress roots spiderweb into the river. Turn around for an easy, 2-mile out-and-back, or continue tracing the water as far as you like. **CONTACT** bit.do/pedernales-falls-sp

DIAL IN YOUR COLOR SETTINGS.

BLUE RIDGE PARKWAY, NC

Sorry, summer, the best hiking season is now, during fall's prime-time foliage. But don't sleep through the alarm—the color is fleeting. Here, in the Blue Ridge Mountains, the hardwoods go off between the first and second weeks of October, but the true leaf-peeping connoisseur knows there's more to it than that. Because you want to go when ground shrubs like sumac turn fiery red (second week of October) and when the sun is setting (6:45 p.m. or so). If you can luck into low-hanging fog (roll of the dice), then it's just about perfect. The show will be especially good on a thru-hike of the 1,200-mile Mountains-to-Sea Trail, but if you only have a day, try the 4-mile loop that circles Rough Butt Bald. From Bear Pen Gap (milepost 427.6 on the Parkway), near where this photo was snapped, follow a user trail to the MST, which descends into the Blue Ridge's valleys along fall's red carpet. That deserves a permanent place on your calendar.
CONTACT nps.gov/blri

YI WANG & GUOHAI JIN

GET LOST.

ANSEL ADAMS WILDERNESS, CA

Come October, the Golden State really earns the nickname. Head out to the eastern Sierra this month to see why. Here, the sweep of aspens is just beginning. Our recommendation: the 5-mile, unnamed fisherman's trail that links June, Gull, Silver, and Grant Lakes. The social path parallels Silver Creek downstream through aspen corridors and meadows with peekaboo glances south to the granite face of 10,909-foot Carson Peak. If you do plan to cast a line, Silver Lake (near the midway point) offers the best shore fishing (rainbow and brookies). Park off June Lake Loop (CA 158) near its namesake, then pick your way down to the creek; the path follows it the whole way. Expect colorful aspens (bright yellow or even rosy) through the third week of October. **CONTACT** bit.do/ansel-adams-wild

BILL STEVENSON / AURORA PHOTOS

GET FOUND.

CATSKILL PARK, NY

Some popular hikes deserve the attention, and you just have to decide when to join the crowd. October may be the perfect time to visit 260-foot Kaaterskill Falls. Not only is it when the birches turn, but this year, the revamped trail system means options to extend. So join the tourists on the .6-mile hike to the two-tiered cascade (go midweek to avoid the rush), but don't turn around there. Find the newly installed staircase and climb to the top of the falls where, around mile .8, you can link up with any number of footpaths, including the renowned 23.9-mile Escarpment Trail. But for a bite-size trip, we recommend picking up the Blue Trail. Follow it 1.2 miles counterclockwise around the flank of South Mountain to a sandstone outcropping called Inspiration Point for a view of hardwoods fanning out in every direction. **CONTACT** bit.do/kaaterskill-wild-forest

ANTHONY G. TASSAROTTI

HIT THE HIGH COUNTRY.

TRINITY ALPS WILDERNESS, CA

Every season has its virtues when you're a backpacker, but it's hard to beat late summer in the mountains. The wildlife is active. The berries are fruiting. The daytime temps invite mid-hike dips (but it's cold enough at night to warrant cocooning). And, perhaps best of all, this year's record snowpack will have melted out enough to reveal alpine prizes like Lake Anna, nestled in a redrock cirque below appropriately named Mt. Temple.

It's only 4.5 miles to this pool, but the going is steep and, toward the end, off-trail, so only savvy navigators should try. From the Long Canyon trailhead, climb roughly 4 miles on trail (gaining more than 3,000 feet) until you're due north of Lake Anna, at the base of a steep gully. Ascend the off-trail chute about .5 mile to the saddle above the lake. Make camp on the rocky shelf, then drop down to the 4-acre tarn for a swim. Since its outlet spills over a steep drop to Bowerman Meadows, it may be the closest you come to an infinity pool in the backcountry. Retrace your steps on the return, or pick a path of least resistance to Bowerman Meadows and take the trail by the same name to the Long Canyon Trail for a 9.3-mile lollipop-loop. **CONTACT** bit.do/trinity-alps-wild

HARRY LICHTMAN

COME IN FOR A LANDING.

BISTI/DE-NA-ZIN WILDERNESS, NM

There's no water in the Bisti Badlands—there aren't even trails. Both factors keep visitation low year-round, but come September, when Four Corners hikers depart seeking yellow aspen foliage, you can bet you'll have this funky moonscape—really an ancient sea—to yourself. Plan for daytime temps in the mid-70s, and set out from the southern parking area (36.259123, -108.251665; about 40 miles south of Farmington on Rd. 7290) with a gallon of water per person per day. Head east through the eerie terrain, passing arches, fins, mushrooms, and other rock formations, as well as petrified trees. About 1.8 miles in, reach the "cracked eggs" (near 36.267214, -108.223926), photographer Kennan Harvey's pick for the best spot to throw down. "The badlands are totally gray and barren, but when the landscape reflects the sun's last rays, it shines brighter than any stand of aspens," he says. **CONTACT** bit.do/bisti-wild

KENNAN HARVEY