

RIDING HIGH

Autumn in the Berkshires provides the time for a recreational bicycle cruise

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IN A HIGH-SPEED, high-tech era, two-wheeling it in the not-so-fast lane is a welcome throwback, an athletic version of the Sunday drive that old folks rhapsodize about. It's not hard to find the time for a recreational bicycle ride: a warm day, cloudless cobalt skies, a magnificent landscape, and, of course, a veritable gold mine of scenic country lanes where cars are scarce and roads are smooth. But where to go? How about a web of lovely, lightly traveled byways offering the kind of up-close, out-of-car experience that beckons travelers to take it down a notch, savor the silence, and witness nature's glory at its cusp-of-autumn best. While Route 7 weathers an annual tide of leaf-peeping tourists, fall foliage paints a pretty picture along back roads, too, where flaming maple trees line riverbanks and russet-tinged hills rise out of quiet valleys. Here are three perfect detours guaranteed to satisfy any cyclist.

Northwest Connecticut

Sal Lilienthal, owner of the Bicycle Tour Company, a Kent, Connecticut-based outfit specializing in self-guided tours and custom trips, has traveled the globe as a tour leader, but there's still a home-field advantage as far as he's concerned in riding the roads he's most familiar with: "The landscape is beautiful, the people are friendly, and the roads are quiet."

Every curve of the northwest corner of Connecticut yields some bucolic expanse dotted with old barns and proud homesteads built in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Feast on apples and pears from a roadside stand. Wave to paddlers on the Housatonic River. Moo back at the cows. Idyllic spots often pay a price for their loveliness, but here, refreshingly, the back roads haven't become a tourist bauble. The towns of Sharon and West Cornwall are delightfully off the Connecticut grid, one with a vintage-covered bridge, the other surrounded by wooded hills, open meadows, and hand-tossed stone walls—the state's version of ancient ruins.

The journey begins where Litchfield County does—in Salisbury, a popular country address for working authors, painters, and well-heeled weekenders. The distance from here to Manhattan is about two hours and nearly as many centuries. From the village green, Route 41 heads south past pampered horse farms and manicured prep school lawns; in the distance, one can see the state's highest peaks, their outlines magically softened by autumn colors. Ten miles away, the town of Sharon sits just shy of the New York state line, a bastion of old New England gentility with whitewashed buildings lining a neat-as-a-pin green; beyond the sparsely traveled asphalt of Main Street, magnificent mansions compete with patchwork farmers' fields for cyclists' attention.

Outside of town, West Cornwall Road meanders high into the hills and, it seems, through a time warp, before winding down in a hurry to the Housatonic River and West Cornwall. A good place to enjoy a picnic or lunch is at the cozy Wandering Moose Café, just a stone's throw from the river. From the top of Main Street, mentally erasing the automobiles, the view down to the river is pretty much as it must have been a century ago. The old tollhouse on the right accommodates Ian Ingersoll's reproduction Shaker furniture showroom; straight ahead, the oft-photographed single-lane red bridge has spanned the river since 1864. An easy-to-miss junction in town marks the way to aptly-named River Road, truly the prettiest way to continue. The meandering dirt lane (cyclists who prefer pavement can follow Route 7 north) hugs the river that courses through thickets and forested areas that were open farmland a century ago.

When the roads meet some four miles later, the landscape turns suddenly wide open. A short ride from White Hollow Farm, whose late-season cornfields are carved into an intricate maze, is Route 112, which skirts the outfield of Lime Rock Park, home to NASCAR racing and vintage car shows. Just past the racetrack, turn right onto Salmon Kill Road, a rural gem lined with smartly restored nineteenth-century farmhouses. The road then loops through an old farming valley before reconnecting with the heart of Salisbury, where the White Hart Inn is a welcome sight for the road-weary, and a charming retreat for cyclists wishing to linger awhile.

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Southern Berkshires

Sometimes it's the journey rather than the destination that makes a trip worthwhile. In the case of the back-roads stretch between Great Barrington and Stockbridge, Massachusetts, it's both, and pretty much a tossup as far as the best Main Street to roll into and park your bike for a rest stop. And both are just a skip away from lesser-known hamlets hidden away from the fray (Massachusetts's Alford, West Stockbridge, and Housatonic, to name three). But here's the best part: these are the old roads—local favorites for viewing fall color that tourists never seem to find, and every cyclist's fairy-tale fantasy of a country corridor, particularly when the hills are flush with an electrifying palette of gold, crimson, and ochre.

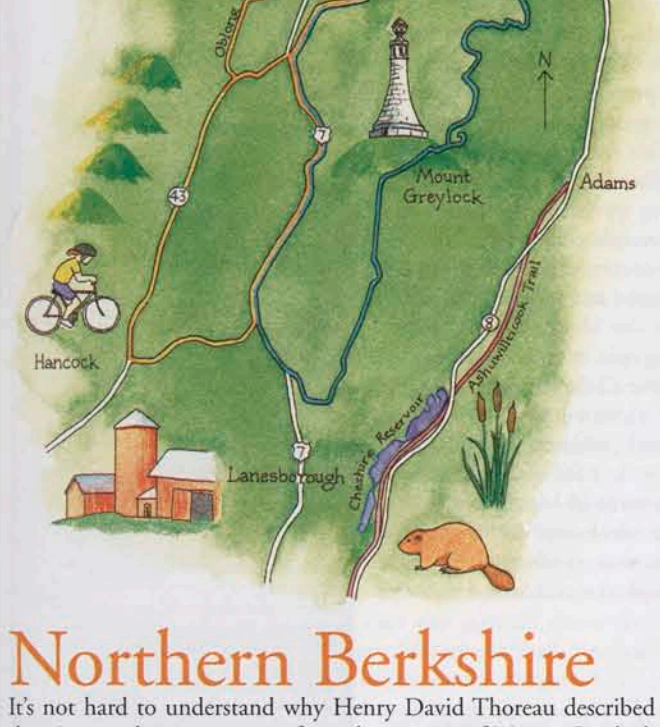
Pedaling west and then north from Great Barrington toward

Alford (population 393) on Seekonk Cross Road can feel like heading to the edge of the known world: a Colonial village of tidy white clapboard buildings that exists quietly in an isolated valley and seems to have dodged the mainstream of twenty-first-century America. Not much has changed, it seems, since settlers arrived in 1750 and a built a gristmill. The road meanders north past an old-fashioned landscape of farmland and historic homesteads beneath the Taconic Range, itself none too hard on the eyes.

Coasting into town, it's easy to understand why everyone talks of West Stockbridge being one of the liveliest arts communities in the region. The Williams River is lined with a folksy jumble of studios and galleries that includes the Berkshire Center for Contemporary Glass, where visitors can watch apron-wearing sculptors mold soft molten glass into vases, bowls, and other works of art and function.

Five miles east on Route 102 is the busy center of Stockbridge, whose white clapboard Red Lion Inn has welcomed travelers since 1773, and whose customary rockers soldiered on the rambling front porch overlooking the village where Norman Rockwell lived and painted his iconic scenes of small-town American life preserved to this day. About equal distance between the two towns and up the road from the Norman Rockwell Museum is the Berkshire Botanical Garden, a plant-lover's treasure trove, where blazing foliage provides a dramatic backdrop for lush perennial gardens that seem to stretch forever. To the south, Glendale Middle Road passes through the emerald fairways of the Stockbridge Golf Club en route to Chesterwood, the tucked-away 1920s summer estate where Daniel Chester French lived and sculpted; in the Barn Gallery, visitors can see working models of his most famous works, including Washington, D.C.'s *Lincoln Memorial* and Concord's *Minute Man*.

Route 183 heads south through the blink-and-you'll-miss-it brick mill village of Housatonic, named for the river that rushes through it. From here, there are two options: continue south to pick up traffic-wracked Route 7 and ride the last mile into Great Barrington, or follow Van Deusenville Road to Route 41, a gently sloping straightaway through quiet neighborhoods that barely hint at the energetic vibe of nearby downtown Great Barrington. Buoyed by urban weekenders and a local arts scene, this Main Street offers plenty of cafés and bistros at which one can happily kick off his bike shoes and relax.



Northern Berkshires

It's not hard to understand why Henry David Thoreau described the nineteenth-century scene from the summit of Mount Greylock as "such a country as we might see in dreams, with all the delights of paradise."

Indeed, high hills and remote farming valleys fill a peaceful corner of New England that many tourists pass by in a rush to get someplace else. While tour buses rumble along Route 7 and the Mohawk Trail, in-rush-the-know cyclist beeline it to what seems the middle of nowhere—specifically, the rural borderland between Massachusetts, New York, and Vermont, and its something-for-everyone mix of terrain. Williamstown, Massachusetts, is small enough for visitors to feel at home, yet full of pre- or post-ride activities. It's also where locals rendezvous for weekly forays into the surrounding countryside, where cycling runs the gamut from a family-friendly rail trail jaunt to a leg-burning ascent of the state's aforementioned highest mountain.

"Riding here is a bit harder than South County, because the hills are more sustained, and mountains are hemmed in by valleys," notes Paul Rinehart, owner of The Spoke, a Williamstown bike shop for the past twenty-two years. "The valleys inform where we ride."

Like the gentle Hoosic River Valley, whose not-to-be-missed Ashuwillticook Rail Trail, an abandoned train corridor-turned-recreational path, is popular among beginners and families. "It's more gorgeous than most rail trails," Rinehart says of the delightful stretch of blacktop, whose Native American name translates roughly into "the pleasant river in between the hills." From its northernmost point in Adams, Massachusetts, the trail heads south past wildlife-filled swampland, woods, and the Cheshire Reservoir to its terminus at the Berkshire Mall in Lanesborough, Massachusetts, eleven miles total distance.

Cyclists looking to stretch their legs a bit more can spin out of Williamstown on Route 43, an old two-lane highway that assumes gentle contours as it heads south. Riders will enjoy views of the meandering Green River; the not-so-far-off green peaks of the Taconic range; and glimpses of New England as it's always been. The arresting stretch of country road winds its way through wide-open farmers' fields and vibrant meadows to South Williamstown, where the historic Store at Five Corners, a country store-cum-café-cum-local landmark, presides over the Route 7 junction. Just ahead, cyclists are faced with a choice: swing right onto Oblong Road, leading to a network of lovely back roads—some paved, others not—ambulating through meadows, woods, and gentle hills on the way back to town, or continue east on Route 43 as it skirts the rugged Taconics, and return on Route 7 via a climb up and over Brodie Mountain Road.

"And for those thinking epic, of course you've got the Greylock ride, one of the all-time great mountain rides," Rinehart adds, and it's no wonder. For those so inclined, a ten-mile huff-and-puff ascent of the north face (the southern route makes for a safer descent) leads to the 3,491-foot summit of Mount Greylock. The payoff: hundred-mile views into six states, the same glimpse of paradise that captivated Thoreau and countless others through the centuries fortunate enough to reach it. **B**

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