

## The Berkshires minus the museums



STEVE HEAP/SHUTTERSTOCK

By **Diane Bair and Pamela Wright** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENTS SEPTEMBER 26, 2015

Yes, the cultural scene is fabulous. But what brings us back to the Berkshires again and again is the landscape. This is a place where you can easily spend a weekend playing outside — bouncing from activity to activity like a frolicsome 10-year-old — with minimal driving time between adventures if you plan it right. Perfect-for-fall pursuits include bicycling along a lakeside trail, hiking some of the best terrain in Massachusetts, and paddling a glassy lake, surrounded by color-drenched hillsides. You can even hike to a waterfall that offers separate parking lots for New Yorkers and Bay Staters! No lie. So if you think Berkshires equals summertime, know this: There's plenty to do when artsy draws like Jacob's Pillow and Tanglewood have closed for the season. Here's where to get your outdoorsy on, Berkshires-style.

## BASE CAMP

“You’re going to the Berkshires? Oh, I’m dying to check out that new hotel, the one that used to be a department store,” a stylish Bostonian commented, when he learned we were heading west. How fun to reply, “Yep, that’s where we’re staying!” Open since June, the 45-room **Hotel on North** in downtown Pittsfield has a Brooklyn, N.Y.-meets-Berkshires vibe, thanks to design elements like retro starburst chandeliers and subway tiles that play off the building’s tin ceilings and exposed brick. Decor includes haberdashery pieces culled from the hotel’s past life as a menswear-sporting goods emporium called Besse-Clarke. Even folks who aren’t staying here are showing up at Eat on North to sample the locally sourced food from James Beard-featured chef Brian Alberg. But the best part of Hotel on North may be its location: Pittsfield sits in the center of the Berkshires, so it’s a great base for exploring. *Rooms from \$139, [www.hotelonnorth.com](http://www.hotelonnorth.com)*

## WALK THIS WAY

When it comes to the Berkshire Hills, **Mount Greylock** is a rock star. Carloads of visitors drive up this mountain, the tallest peak in the state, but it’s truly amazing on foot. You can make a loop of it, beginning and ending at **Sperry Campground**, traversing eight miles of trail and ascending five mountaintops, including parts of the Appalachian Trail. (There’s a big If: if you’re an experienced hiker in decent shape.) Our favorite Greylock Moment: Standing amid a field of late-season wildflowers, as monarch and viceroy butterflies swirled overhead.

As a fall color hike, Mount Greylock is tough to top. But if you aren’t up for a seven-hour trek, and want to take a route less traveled, here’s a tip: **Alander Mountain**.

Local hiking enthusiasts rave that Alander offers some of the most sublime views in New England. Off the beaten track, this 2,239-foot mountain lies in the extreme southwest corner of Massachusetts, in Mount Washington State Forest. (Yes, Massachusetts has its own Mount Washington.) Although the Connecticut and New York borders are nearby, this hike is remarkably undiscovered.

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The blue-blazed Alander Mountain Trail traverses open meadows and deeply shaded woodlands of sugar maple, gray birches, towering hemlock, red maple, and quaking aspen. Brooks and streams lace the landscape, spanned by wooden bridges. All of this makes Alander Mountain a wonderful hike even before you reach the top. There are plenty of ups-and-downs on this one, with a vertical rise of 840 feet, so you'll get a decent workout without having to suffer through long stretches of straight-up incline.

"These views are ridiculous," our hiking buddy said, as we sprawled out at the summit of Alander, unwrapping sandwiches from **Mom's Country Cafe** in South Egremont. Amazing vistas extend in every direction, including Mount Greylock to the north, Mount Everett to the east, the Catskills to the west, and the Adirondacks to the far northwest. As we lounged on a sun-warmed slab of granite, a hang-glider soared overhead like a scarlet pterodactyl. We'd suggest leaving home early and doing this first (it's easily accessible from the Mass Pike), and allowing three hours or so to hike it, plus some time to enjoy the summit.

### ... OR THIS WAY

Want to make a day of it, and take in a waterfall? A hiking trail connects Alander Mountain to Bash Bish Falls, a fun option if you've got energy (and time) to spare. Bash Bish Falls State Park is located at the northern tip of Mount Washington State Forest; you can also drive to the parking lot and skip the hike. A short walk gets you to one of the state's most stunning waterfalls, a vision of cascading water tumbling over boulders before plummeting 60 feet into a sparkling pool. On sunny weekends, visitors perch on slabs of rock, dangling their feet into the cool crystalline water. The crowd is a mix of local folks and New Yorkers — and yes, each side has its own, labeled parking lot.



OGDEN GIGLI

Hills in the Berkshires are known for taking on the palette of brilliant fall colors.

### ... OR MAYBE HERE

If you've worked crazy hard all week, and aren't up for planning hiking routes, or simply want a hike with something extra, consider a guided trek. An organization called **Housatonic Heritage** offers a range of free, themed tours — mostly hiking, but some paddling and biking options — focusing on the region's archeology, industry, nature, architecture, landmarks, and history. These expert-led events are offered on the weekends of Sept. 26-27 and Oct. 3-4.

[www.heritage-hikes.org](http://www.heritage-hikes.org)

### A RAIL-Y GOOD TIME

The former Boston & Maine Railroad line now known as the **Ashuwillticook** (ash-oo-WILL-ti-cook) **Rail Trail** offers a scenic tour of the Massachusetts countryside, peopled with families biking and fishing, pushing baby strollers, and simply meandering. So Norman Rockwell! (Those madly racing, Spandex-clad cyclists? All New Yorkers, no doubt.)

The trail passes through the Hoosic River Valley between Mount Greylock and the Hoosac Mountains, lovely in any season but absolutely stunning in fall. "What's the prettiest part of the trail?" we were asked by an out-of-towner with a loaded bike rack. Hmm. We have pedaled it all, and are partial to starting at the southern end, where we're instantly rewarded with wetland and water views as the rail trail skirts Berkshire Pond and the Cheshire lakes. But it's worth doing the whole thing — nearly 22 miles of flat trail isn't too taxing, especially if you pop out of the saddle en route, and plop onto one of the benches along the trail, or make a snack stop in Adams. We rewarded ourselves with a pizza at **Baba Louie's** in Pittsfield. *For trail conditions and map:* [www.berkshirebikepath.com](http://www.berkshirebikepath.com)

### PADDLE THIS

If you're lucky enough to own a kayak or two, it's worth strapping them onto your vehicle for your trip to the Berkshires. The region is dotted with lakes and ponds, and a couple of them are right in Pittsfield. We discovered **Pontoosuc Lake** by surprise, driving right past it on the way to Ashuwillticook Rail Trail. Turns out, this little lake is a perfect place to slip in for a paddle, with a public landing and a backdrop of rolling hills. Also nearby: **Onota Lake**, where an outfit called **Onota Boat Livery** ([www.onotaboat.com](http://www.onotaboat.com)) will be happy to rent you a kayak, canoe, or pedal boat. The season runs from early May through mid-October.

Is it possible to hike, bike, and paddle the Berkshires in one weekend? Yep. In the interest of reporterly research, we did it. Did we feel one bit guilty about skipping the museums? Nope. And we'll do it again in a few months, swapping our hiking boots for snowshoes.