

From first-time festivals to annual favorites, lively events fill the fall calendar in North Carolina. Show-stopping foliage, spirited music and irresistible fare await at celebrations from the mountains to the sea.

'First' things first
Wide Open Bluegrass Sept. 27-28, Raleigh: The biggest names in bluegrass converge on Raleigh for the International Bluegrass Music Association's World of Bluegrass, a five-day affair that peaks with Wide Open Bluegrass. The inaugural weekend festival features a street fair, indoor and outdoor concerts, jam sessions and the North Carolina Whole Hog Barbecue State Championship. And the headliners will blow you away: Steve Martin & The Steep Canyon Rangers featuring Edie Brickell on Saturday and an epic collaboration featuring Alison Krauss, Del McCoury, Béla Fleck and others on Friday.

ICF Canoe Freestyle World Championships Sept. 2-8, Bryson City: The acrobats of the kayak world show off their cartwheels, blunts and airscrews on the Nantahala River at the ICF Canoe Freestyle World Championships, being held in the United States for the first time. During breaks in the action, visitors can enjoy the festive atmosphere in the Great Smoky Mountains and also compete in SUP, team rodeo, rubber duckie and canoe ball races.

Brunswick Waterfest Sept. 20-22, Leland: Leland, a fast-growing town near Wilmington, asserts its riverside identity with the first Brunswick WaterFest. A full moon will illuminate a kayak/SUP/owl-calling trip on Town Creek, while birding on Eagle Island, SUP racing on the river, a kayak fishing tournament and land activities add to the weekend's fun.

Artistry on a grand scale
Willis Whirligig Festival Nov. 2-3, Wilson: Volls Simpson turned metal scraps into towering delight with his wind-powered whirligigs, which can be seen at museums in New York, Atlanta, Baltimore and Raleigh. For the full effect, head to the Willis Whirligig Festival for the opening of the Willis Simpson Whirligig Park, where 29 of the kinetic collector's items are being installed (a third of them should be in place by November). Simpson died May 31 at his home in Lucama, about 10 miles from the park, at age 94.

Porsche by Design: Seducing Speed Oct. 12-Jan. 20, Raleigh: Autoweek, Art News and Luxury Daily are all spreading the word about the North Carolina Museum of Art's first-ever design exhibition. Showcasing the brand's style, innovation and artistry are 22 Porsches that combine horsepower and star power. Steve McQueen's 356A Speedster, Janis Joplin's 356C Cabriolet and Ralph Lauren's Porsche Type 959 are among the models going on view.

Colorfest: Art and Taste of Appalachia Oct. 5, Dillsboro: Visitors see more than art on display at this street festival — they see art being made as painters capture scenes in the picturesque Great Smoky Mountains town. Add music, regional wine and craft beer, North Carolina fare and brilliant foliage to complete the picture.

Specialties of the house

Barbecue Festival Oct. 26, Lexington: Even without the music, craft vendors and other activities, people would flock to the 30th annual Barbecue Festival, which unfolds in a town whose name is synonymous with pit-cooked pork. Organizers are planning for 160,000 visitors, who can pig out, take part in a month's worth of events, and buy Childress Vineyards' Fine Swine Wine, which like the barbecue sauce is red.

NC Seafood Festival Oct. 4-6, Morehead City: None of the 185,000 festival-goers is likely to leave hungry: Seafood sampling along the port city waterfront covers everything from fried favorites to inspired chef creations — and that includes Charcoal Mullet and Sea Urchin on a Stick. You can aim to win an "I flung a flounder" T-shirt, watch the sailing regatta and attend Sunday morning's Blessing of the Fleet, which pays tribute to the watermen who make it all possible.

North Carolina Apple Festival Aug. 30-Sept. 2, Hendersonville: Henderson County, one of the nation's top apple producers, adds a new twist to its apple-laced street festival with the Tour d'Apple, offering 25- to 100-mile cycle routes that take in orchards, mountains, waterfalls and other beautiful views. The downtown festivities come with sights of their own, from the spectrum of apples to the painted fiberglass bears in the 2013 Bearfootin' art display.

Woolly Worm Festival Oct. 19-20, Banner Elk: Here's our prediction: Fall foliage will be near its peak in Banner Elk when Isabella tiger moths race up 42-inch strings to forecast the severity of the coming winter. We further predict that the 20,000 festival-goers will delight in the fun, food and mountain setting — regardless of whether their woolly worm wins the race.

Wings Over Water Wildlife Festival Oct. 22-27, various coastal locations: Take a walk — or a paddle — on the wild side along North Carolina's Outer Banks and inner coastline. Serious birders flock to Wings Over Water for one of the East Coast's largest concentrations of wintering waterfowl. Photography and painting sessions, moonlight paddles, red wolf howlings, astronomy programs and a daylong Southern Backyard Boot Camp for gardeners broaden the appeal.

Mountains to Coast Bicycle Ride Sept. 28-Oct. 5: See the state in all its fall glory on this scenic ride from Spruce Pine to Atlantic Beach. Riders can go the full 490-mile distance or join in at the host towns of Morganton, Troutman, Asheboro, Holly Springs, Goldsboro and New Bern. More than

1,100 cyclists from 38 states and five countries made the 2012 journey.

Carolina Balloon Fest Oct. 18-20, Statesville: Celebrating its 40th consecutive year, the festival attracts more than 30,000 spectators. Between the spectacular lightoffs and landings, visitors can sample local wine, craft beer and food as well as entertainment and children's activities.

Mayberry Days Sept. 26-29, Mount Airy: To be honest, every day is a Mayberry day in Mount Airy, Andy Griffith's hometown and inspiration for the "The Andy Griffith Show" setting. But this September celebration is when you can see Thelma Lou (Betty Lynn) and others associated with the show and channel the era with a checkers tournament, pork chop-eating and apple-peeling contests, trivia competitions and horseshoes plus entertainment and a parade.

Ava Gardner Festival Oct. 4-6, Smithfield: A visit to the Ava Gardner Museum in Smithfield is itself an occasion, a chance to see costumes, movie posters, awards and 40 Bert Pfeiffer portraits of this radiant actress. The festival makes it even more special with heritage tour to sites from Gardner's early life, special events and free screenings of "The Night of the Iguana," 2013's festival focus.

Hollerin' Heritage Festival Sept. 14, Spiveys Corner: Nobody hollers or celebrates the age-old communication form like the folks around Spiveys Corner, where a hearty holler might be heard three miles away. And they've proved it every year since 1969 with the National Hollerin' Contest. This year's festivities move from June to September and add a barbecue cook-off to the schedule, which also features music, antique cars and tractors, and a demonstration by the North Carolina Work Horse and Mule Association.

Find dozens more fall festivals plus trip-planning information at VisitNC.com.

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