The fall season is perfect for setting off on one of the state's many bicycle trails.

Experience Awesome

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Pedaling a bicycle along a path in autumn excites the senses.

For starters, autumn's clean, crisp air invigorates the lungs. The grand palette of changing colors intensifies the views, and the ride transmits the trail's terrain through the bicycle to the body—and mind.

Whether the trail is flat, climbs or descends, your soul can soar as you glide through the season's soft light filtering down on the path. In this far-ranging Land of Lincoln, bicyclists can ride through forests, beside prairies, along historic canals or old railroad beds, and atop bluffs with spectacular panoramas.

Bicycling in autumn lets bicyclists experience Illinois during an ideal season—after the hot, muggy days of summer and before the frozen, snow-swept days of winter. For many a serious cyclist, autumn affords a special window of opportunity for an epic bike trip or two before the thermometer plummets, snow clogs the trails and the bike gets retired until spring.

Autumn

Pere Marquette State Park provides a beautiful landscape for bike riding, especially during the fall months.

Before taking to the trail for an awesome autumnal excursion, bicyclists should make sure they and their bicycles are ready for the experience. Depending on the distance of the ride, be sure to pack some snacks, water, a spare inner tube or patch kit, tire pump and tire levers for changing a flat.

Check the air in the tires, the bite of your brakes and the quick release levers securing the front and rear wheels to the frame to make sure things are shipshape. Have a map, know where you're headed and how long it will take and, just in case, take a cell phone. And before pushing off on the trail, make sure a helmet fits snug on the noggin.

To ensure all bicyclists will enjoy their trip, they should select trails that match their fitness and skills. Illinois has trails to suit everyone from children to experienced trail riders. Some trails may be paved with asphalt for an easier glide, while some, especially in more rural or natural settings, will be covered with crushed limestone.

Mountain bike trails may have even tougher terrain with gravel, rocks and sand along with swales, ruts, fallen tree limbs, sharp turns, steep climbs and fast descents that present exhilarating challenges to riders with the technical skills to ride over and around obstacles in their way. With fallen leaves covering some trails, a cyclist can't always be sure what lies beneath so use caution.

Where to go? With scores of choices, here is a sample of great Illinois trail rides.

Riders emerge from the 543-foot tunnel, one of the many highlights along southern Illinois' Tunnel Hill State Trail.

Rock Cut State Park—Near Rockford, this park gives visitors the choice of riding paved park roads or a 23-mile rolling network of trails around Pierce Lake. The mountain bike trails are marked with blue signs and are open only from April 1 to November 30. The park's hardwood trees offer a colorful show in the fall.

Tunnel Hill State Trail—From bottomlands and farm lands to hills and bluffs, this 47-mile trail from Harrisburg to Karnak provides a variety of views and riding experiences through a 543-foot tunnel and over 23 trestles. The trail follows a deserted rail bed through the Shawnee National Forest and the Cache River State Natural Area, which offer great vistas, especially in the fall.

Moraine Hills State Park—The 11-mile, mostly flat trail near McHenry is a great destination for a family ride with the children because of its four trail segments of 1.7-3.7-miles each. The trail also gives riders a glimpse of what glaciers did to the local terrain. Also, Pike Marsh, a 115-acre area in the southeast corner of the park, is home to many rare plants, including the state's largest known colonies of pitcher plants.

Rock Island Trail—The 28-mile greenway follows the former path of the Rock Island Railroad from Alta near Peoria to Toulon and passes through a vast plain once dominated by tall-grass prairies. Trail features include an arched culvert made of massive limestone, a steel trestle bridge spanning the Spoon River, and in Wyoming, a rehabilitated 1871 railroad station.

Illinois & Michigan Canal State Trail—Riding the trail takes you back in time when commerce moved slowly on boats harnessed to mules and horses on towpaths. The I&M Canal helped connect Lake Michigan to the Gulf of Mexico. The trail goes from Channahon, southwest of Joliet, 60 miles to LaSalle. Eight miles from Channahon is Aux Sable where trail riders can see an aqueduct, lock and the lock tender's residence. The trail is part of northern Illinois' 500-mile Grand Illinois Trail and the 6,800-mile, coast-to-coast American Discovery Trail.

Vadalabene Bike Trail—This 22-mile trail between Alton and Grafton, including 9 miles along the Great River Road, affords wondrous views of Old Man River and its bluffs. To sample the flavor of 19th century Mississippi River life along the way, be sure to visit Elsah, the town that time forgot. Nearby is Pere Marquette State Park, known for its spectacular fall foliage and home to wintering bald eagles. The trail is part of the 3,000-mile, 10-state Mississippi River Trail.

Fox River Trail—Thirty-five miles of trail run through open spaces and small communities along the Fox River Valley from Algonquin to Aurora. To the north, the Fox River Trail connects with McHenry County's Prairie Trail, going 25.9 miles to the Wisconsin border near Genoa City. To the south, the Fox River Trail connects with the Great Western Trail and the Illinois Prairie Path, making a continuous trail of more than 100 miles. This also is part of the Grand Illinois Trail.

For those wanting to explore autumnal Illinois on paved roads rather than trails, try these popular organized bicycle rides:

Oct. 6 – Leaf Peepers, Elizabeth, routes of 21, 31, 46 and 60 miles. Contact joyce_mccready@gmail.com.

Oct. 7 – Pumpkin Pedal, Maple Park, road routes of 7, 25, 45 and 62 miles; trail routes 10 and 20 miles. Contact shutchins@soill.org.

Oct. 7 – Pumpkin Pie Ride, Ottawa, routes of 31, 62 and 100 miles. Contact bikegod@ivnet.com.

Ride alongside the former railroad on the Peoria-area Rock Island Trail from Alta to Toulon.

Illinois Great Rivers Ride

The Sept. 9-15 Illinois Great Rivers Ride is a non-competitive, week-long ride that offers a range of one-of-a-kind experiences as it winds through Chicago, Joliet, Starved Rock State Park, Kewanee, Peoria, Lincoln's New Salem and Springfield. This approximately 350 mile ride makes many stops along the way for bikers to discover Illinois' rich treasures. For information, visit www.illinoisgreatriversride.com/index.htm, call (309) 837-7460 or e-mail info@illinoisgreatriversride.com.

Bicyclists who want a more intense riding experience can sign up for the three-day Shawnee Weekend Forest Ride, Sept. 29 - Oct. 1. During the weekend, participants can do 30, 62 or 100 miles through the Shawnee in Jackson, Williamson and Union counties and camp in lodges or tents at the Touch of Nature Environmental Center just north of Giant City State Park. The League of Illinois Bicyclists sponsors the weekend tour with the Carbondale Bike Club assisting. To learn more about the event and to register, go to www.bikelib.org/swfr/index.htm.

While pumping those pedals along these and other trails, don't forget to keep your eyes and ears alert to the nature all about you—a harmless black snake basking on a sunny trail, a pheasant's distinctive call, a soaring eagle, deer grazing in a field, a fox loping furtively through the woods, squirrels and chipmunks rattling dry leaves as they scamper about looking for food for winter storage. It's all there and more.

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Some state sites allow mountain biking, but riders are advised to call ahead to verify site-specific regulations.

Helpful tips

Remember, most trails are not just for cyclists. Be alert to joggers, hikers, horseback riders and dog walkers. Show them courtesy when passing by announcing yourself in advance. Mountain biking is allowed in some parks, but riders are advised to call ahead to verify regulations, stay on trails designated for that use and yield to hikers and equestrians.

To check out the Illinois state parks bicycling guide to favorite bicycling spots and for more tips for your trip, go to www.dnr.state.il.us. To view searchable, on-line bicycle trail maps, or order a paper copy of any of the nine regional maps, visit www.dot.il.govbikemap/STATE.HTML. For more information on other trails and rides, go to www.bikelib.org and click on maps/trails.

Southwest Illinois' Vadalabene Bike Trail is part of the 3,000-mile, 10-state Mississippi River Trail.