



FALL FOLIAGE IN THE *American West*

By William Sawalich Photography By James Kay

To photograph colorful fall foliage, the conventional wisdom says go to New England, but for photographer James Kay, no place is better in autumn than the American West. Kay, who makes his home in Salt Lake City, has photographed the mountain west for almost 25 years, and he still relishes its grand vistas of vivid autumn color.

“I grew up back east,” Kay says. “I certainly remember the falls back there, and they are spectacular. If I were to shoot back east, I would probably focus on close-up shots of the trees themselves, but out west I always look for the dramatic backdrop, the huge peaks, and then in the foreground, the aspen. Out west it’s more of that sweeping,

grand landscape.”

Kay’s favorite part of the western fall is a single tree, the aspen. The bright yellow glow of an aspen grove high in the San Juan Mountains of Colorado provides for his favorite fall landscape. The consistently vivid groves offer huge swaths of color that Kay weaves into his photographs to provide a dramatic counterpoint to deep blue skies and towering mountain peaks. Every year he works quickly to capture their fleeting beauty.

“The aspen trees are just so brilliant and monochromatic,” Kay explains. “They’re almost like an electric yellow. Aspen groves are clones; basically, it’s like one big organism. So when they go, a whole mountainside will peak at once—and with 14,000-foot peaks rising out of

the background and new snow dusting them, it’s like the hallelujah chorus.

“Up high in the mountains,” Kay says, “you’ve pretty much got aspen and that’s it. But of all the trees that change, the yellow of the aspen are as bright as any. In the high mountains, 8,000 feet and above, the aspen usually go from the twentieth or twenty-fifth of September until around the fifth of October. That’s usually the peak. You’re pretty high up, so they go pretty early. It’s kind of like crunch time, because it goes pretty quick. If it’s windy, the leaves can blow off within a couple of days. But even if you’ve got a calm fall without a lot of storms and wind, at the most they’ll stay on the trees for maybe a week, and then they’re gone. You’ve got to really time

it. I have friends in different places; sometimes I’ll just call them and ask how the leaves are looking.”

There are many prime western locations where aspen thrive, but after years of shooting in many of them, Kay has found a few favorites. The trick is picking just a single location to concentrate on each year.

“Out west you’ve got pockets,” he says. “The Tetons are really good. They don’t have a lot of aspen trees, but they’re brilliant when they go and they have a dramatic backdrop. Mt. Timpanogos is probably the best place to shoot fall colors in northern Utah. Just big groves of aspen and huge glaciated mountains that look like the Canadian Rockies. The San Juan Mountains in Colorado is another

glorious place. Places around Telluride, the San Juan Skyway between Ouray and Durango. If you had to pick one place to go, that would probably be it. You could spend the whole two weeks right there shooting with incredible variations and spectacular mountain backdrops—and they’re 14,000-foot peaks, so there’s a good chance you’re going to get snow on them. If I had to choose one place, my favorite, that would probably have to be it—that whole loop within about a 20-mile radius from Telluride. It’s just glorious.”

As much as the majesty of autumn aspen get Kay’s heart pounding, it’s the possibility of an early snow that makes the mountains his favorite fall destination.

“The thing that really sets me out the

Working in the fall in the west allows you to stretch your shooting time to as much as two months. If you’re up for the travel, you can start by photographing aspen in the Rockies in September and then head to locales in Utah and Arizona and shoot well into October.

JAMES KAY HAS A PASSION FOR THE GRAND VISTAS OF AUTUMN IN THE WIDE OPEN SPACES OF NORTH AMERICA

door more than anything else,” he says, “is a fresh storm and six inches of snow on the peaks. That time of year, you’ll start to get the first snow on the peaks. If you get snow in addition to the peak of color, then that’s what you dream of. But it’s always kind of a crapshoot, probably fifty-fifty. Fresh snow on the high peaks and fall colors—that’s really the magic combination. The bright white against that deep blue sky with the yellow leaves below—it just makes it pop.”

No matter what light he encounters in the mountains, Kay says the aspen are accommodating. When he’s faced with a hazy sky, he looks for details to make successful photographs out of less than ideal conditions, training his eyes downward to find the details of fallen leaves

still holding their color. When the sun is cooperating, Kay often uses the bright yellow leaves to his advantage by back-lighting them for added pop.

“The yellow is lighter than red leaves,” he says, “so when they’re backlit they just flame. The color goes off the scale. You’re shooting into the sun, and if you’ve got a big peak in the background that provides a nice dark background to the backlit aspen in front of it, then it works pretty well. If it’s a flat-light day and we just had a storm, I’d probably look for pools of water and leaves and rocks in streams. I’m always looking for the detail shots because they’re some of the most fun. They’re usually at your feet and most people don’t even see them.”

Not only is Kay able to make beautiful fall photos no matter what the light, he’s able to do it without any special equipment. With a tripod, a polarizer and full night’s sleep, Kay says it’s relatively easy to find success.

“The polarizer really comes in handy,” he explains. “That’s the one filter I’d have to take with me—all the others I could leave home. It reduces the reflections and makes the colors more saturated. The perfect situation would be to have a few Salvador Dali clouds floating by, and then the polarizer would make them pop against the bluer sky. There’s really not any other special equipment that I use.”



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