

Pomfret, Vermont: The fall foliage town that banned influencers

To enter the town of Pomfret, located in the US state of Vermont, is to be instantly struck by its bucolic beauty. From the north, Howe Hill Road winds downhill in a series of gentle curves, each sweep revealing verdant farm fields dotted with sheep, or swaths of forest in which the red and orange autumn leaves cling to boughs. At one home, a tree heavy with apples bends over a meticulously maintained stone wall, its slate top filled with decaying fruit.

In early October, more than half of the cars driving through this 900-person town sported out-of-state licence plates. One, from Florida, came to an abrupt stop on a road with a 45-mile-per-hour speed limit, blocking one of two lanes. The reason? To take a picture of a farm's silo against a backdrop of autumn leaves.

With a mere handful of businesses [...] Pomfret is generally a quiet, unassuming place. But in autumn as 'leaf-peepers' from around the world descend on the region's rolling hills and fetching small towns to witness its kaleidoscopic foliage, that all changes.

Until recently, the number of leaf-peepers visiting Pomfret was more trickle than torrent. But ever since images of Sleepy Hollow Farm, a 115-acre private property set on a rustic road, began going viral on social media a few years ago, locals say things have gotten out of hand. A quick look on Instagram reveals thousands of images of the farm's winding earthen road lined by stately maple trees lit up in autumnal reds and jack-o-lantern oranges leading toward an elegant 1700s Cape Farmhouse on Cloudland Road. It's no wonder then, that this unlikely farm has become known as one of 'the most photographed places in the state'.

'It's a beautiful spot. It's too bad it's been ruined for everybody,' said Deborah Goodwin [...] 'For the past couple of years it's been out of control. Tour buses were just dumping ... people out here.'

During the 2022 leaf-peeping season, law enforcement temporarily turned the road past Sleepy Hollow into a one-way thoroughfare. It wasn't enough to deter tourists from behaving badly. This year, local residents tried a different approach: crowdsourced funding.

In a plea on GoFundMe, a team of organizers wrote 'We have experienced an unprecedented surge in Instagram and Tik-Tok fueled tourist 'influencers'... who have damaged roads, had accidents, required towing out of ditches, trampled gardens, defecated on private property... and verbally assaulted residents.' To date, the request has garnered 103 donations, and raised \$16,068.

As a result, town officials voted to close the roads leading to the farm during the peak fall foliage season (23 September to 15 October) to non-residents, spurring the ire of travelers who had driven to the area in hopes of capturing a perfectly curated autumn photo.

Most Pomfret residents stressed that they're not anti-tourist; they simply want people to treat their hometown with respect [...] At a time when cities like Venice are so inundated with travelers that officials are poised to impose a tourist tax to visitors, and when trendy restaurants are banning influencers and their phones from dining, Pomfret is just one of many places around the world trying to curb over tourism and fight back against the hashtaggers but it's come with a cost.