

Enjoy Some Of The South's Best Stargazing Along The North Carolina Coast

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Photo:
CJ Honaker

Cape Lookout National Seashore, located off the North Carolina coast, is the only National Park with Dark Sky designation (awarded by International Dark Sky Association) on the Atlantic Coast and can only be reached by ferry. That means exceptional stargazing with little-to-no light pollution along this 56-mile stretch of natural barrier islands—it's one of the few places you can see the Milky Way without a telescope.

Wayne Justice, Activity Director at North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shore, loves this stretch of North Carolina coastline, which once was a collection of sleepy fishing villages. Long known for pristine beaches and small-town life, the southern Outer Banks offer a respite from the busyness of everyday life, and the perfect storm of fishing conditions for those looking to test out their rod and reel year-round. And now stargazing under a pristine dark sky can be added to the mix.

Local Expert

Wayne Justice, Activity Director at North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shore, NC

“If you love the water, it's different here than in other communities where you might find a boardwalk and lots of activity. The Park Service took over some of the barrier islands and left them undeveloped. Having land left in its natural state gives people who love the outdoors a place to escape the challenges we face in our everyday lives. Places like Fort Macon State Park, Hammocks Beach State Park, and Rachel Carson Estuarine Reserve are jewels that remind us what the North Carolina coast used to look like,” Justice said.



CJ Honaker

Reasons To Visit Camp Lookout National Seashore

Known for observing the herd of wild horses on Shackleford Banks (Justice says don't miss this), bountiful shelling, fishing, birding, and touring historic villages, Cape Lookout National Seashore has long been a destination for curious travelers who love the outdoors. With IDSA designation, a slew of stargazing activities now abound, including stellar astrophotography opportunities. Dark Sky gazers can board a ferry for starlit cruises, NASA Solar System Ambassadors provide laser-pointed tours, and primitive camping with a bring-your-own telescope policy offered for up to 14 days.

Cape Lookout also offers astronomy programs with Crystal Coast Stargazers allowing guests to view the night sky while learning about the effects of light pollution. Throughout the season, the local astronomy group gathers at the Harkers Island Visitor Center for astronomy movies, stargazing at the visitor center, and educational programming provided by NASA.

North Core Banks tops Justice's spots to view the night sky for its serenity and isolation, but he also appreciates Portsmouth Island, "[It] provides an idealistic background with the abandoned village serving as a reminder that much of this land used to be inhabited by small fishing and whaling communities."

Where To Stay

No hotels or vacation rental properties are available on the Cape Lookout National Seashore, however, if privacy and relaxation are on the itinerary, rustic National Park Service-managed cabins offer prime beachfront views. They can only be reached by boat, adding a layer of exclusivity.

- **The Great Island Cabins**, located in the South Core Banks, feature 25 cabins with 4 to 12 bunks per unit. They include a screened porch, hot water heater, private bathroom with shower, table and chairs, kitchen with propane oven/stove (propane included), and a charcoal grill. There's no air conditioning, and you must provide your own linens, bedding, cookware, and refrigerator/cooler. The cabins are wired for electricity, but you must bring your own generator.
- **The Long Point Cabins**, located on Portsmouth Island, are a collection of 20 cabins with 6 bunk beds per cabin. They are duplex-style, share a screened porch with their neighboring unit, and offer electricity, a private bathroom with shower, hot water heater, table and chairs, kitchen with oven/stove (with propane included), and a charcoal grill. Some even have air conditioning, but you still must bring your own linens, cookware, bedding, and refrigerator/cooler.
- **Beach camping** is also an option, if you want to get back to nature, and is available for up to 14 consecutive days. Camping is permitted on most of the barrier islands, but no established campgrounds exist in the park. You must bring everything you need and transport all trash back to the mainland for disposal. Be sure to check NPS Beach Camping guidance while planning your visit.