

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

15 Best Weekend Getaways in North Carolina, According to Locals

From quaint towns in the Blue Ridge Mountains to relaxed beaches and bustling cities, these are the best places to visit in North Carolina for a quick trip.



PHOTO: VISIT NC

Not all vacations need to be extended, expensive trips. Sometimes, a simple weekend getaway — in the form of a cozy mountain retreat, a couple of days at the beach, or a whirlwind city escape — is the perfect way to satisfy a travel itch. While there are numerous [East Coast destinations](#) to choose from, it's sometimes easier to first narrow down the search; in this case, to North Carolina, a state with a wide range of fun, fulfilling places to explore.

"North Carolina is a really interesting, diverse state with sub-locations that are almost entities in and of themselves," says Tiffany M. Griffin, co-owner and co-founder of [Bright Black](#), a Durham-based retail shop. "The mountain ranges are some of the best on the East Coast (and in the country), the [Outer Banks](#) have some of the best beaches in the country, the cities are walkable and all [have] their own vibe, and the food rivals some of the best in the country."

The state's [coastal towns](#) — Beaufort and Emerald Isle, to name a few — frequently appeal to those searching for relaxation mixed with adventure. Others, like Matthew Weinstein, the executive chef of [Oak Steakhouse](#) in Highlands, find themselves drawn to the mountains. “Whenever I think of a weekend getaway, the first place that comes to mind is Western North Carolina... I think about hiking and camping, but I also love getting a cabin rental and disappearing into the woods,” he explains. No matter where you choose to spend your weekend, though, Griffin suggests bringing an open mind: “When you visit, don’t come in with preconceived notions of ‘the South,’ because I guarantee North Carolina will not fit into any of them. It’s a state difficult to describe and best experienced in real life.”

Ready to plan a quick trip? Keep reading to discover some of the best weekend getaways in North Carolina, according to locals.

03 Emerald Isle

of 15



PHOTO: VISIT NC

Julia Wax, a North Carolina native and the owner of [Emerald Isle Realty](#), may call this beach town home, but she also thinks of Emerald Isle as a great weekend getaway. “Its naturally slower pace of life and...stunning crystal-clear ocean waters never cease to captivate me, even after many years of living here,” she says. If travelers are seeking peace and quiet, they’ll find it. “Our beaches are never crowded, and the serenity is complemented by the ocean’s glistening, vibrant emerald-green hues,” she explains. And, she adds, those who want adventure will find “world-class kitesurfing, deep-sea fishing, and surfing.”



PHOTO: VISIT NC

Don't confuse Beaufort for the [South Carolina town of the same name](#); they're pronounced differently — it's "bow-fert" in North Carolina — and have different personalities and reasons to visit. "Walking the historic streets of Beaufort is like stepping back in time," says Wax. "My day typically begins with a visit to the local coffee bar, [Cru](#), a cherished morning tradition among Beaufort residents; by night, it transforms into a lively wine bar. Down by the waterfront, admire the 100-foot yachts and sailboats lining the shore, all while enjoying a refreshing beverage at one of my favorite 'watering holes,' the [Rhumbar](#)," she shares.



PHOTO: VISIT NC

"I'd strongly advise dedicating some of your time to the enchanting Down East Carteret County, a well-kept secret nestled on the Crystal Coast," says Wax. Down East refers to several waterfront communities in the county — including Bettie, Straits, Harkers Island, Gloucester, and Smyrna — and each embraces a slower way of life. "Here, you'll immerse yourself in the enduring spirit of village life, a living legacy of generations sustained by the art of commercial fishing. For a deeper connection to our regional heritage, a visit to the [Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center](#) is a must; it's an authentic portal to our history."



PHOTO: VISIT NC

North Carolina has its fair share of coastal towns — making it hard to choose just one to visit for a few days — but Wax recommends adding Morehead City to your list. “Over in Morehead City, the waterfront offers a front-row seat to the arrival of deep-sea charter fishing boats,” says Wax. “You’ll see sun-kissed, contented fishermen displaying their day’s catch with pride as they pull up to the docks.” If that doesn’t convince you to come for the weekend, the food might. “Just a few steps away, you can savor the freshest oysters, shrimp, crabmeat, or grouper at nearby restaurants like [Full Circle Café](#), [Southern Salt](#), or [Jack’s Waterfront Bar](#). It’s not just a meal; it’s a culinary journey that’ll make your taste buds dance with pure delight.”