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Spring travel: 8 primo places for a beach getaway

TRAVEL

By H.M. Cauley

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Just in case you need a persuasive argument for carving out some serious beach time, here are several that will send you packing. Georgia's convenient geographic location means seaside lovers have a nearby array of options, from the rugged coast of North Carolina's Outer Banks to the serene emerald waters of Florida's Gulf of Mexico shoreline. And don't let the drive time detract from beach time. One of the joys of being an Atlanta-based traveler is that you can get just about anywhere in the world from the busiest airport, Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International.



Credit: Alex Gu

Cape Lookout National Seashore, N.C.

While this Atlantic coastal area offers multiple locations for soaking up the sun, it's also a popular destination for nature lovers and sky watchers. The 56 miles of beach along the Outer Banks provide stellar spots for camping, swimming and fishing. Observe nature close-up among the dunes, grasslands, thickets and salt marshes where the wildlife ranges from beach-nesting species to sea turtles.

Stargazers of all ages head to Cape Lookout to study the sky far removed from artificial light. In December, the seashore was certified as an International Dark Sky Park, recognizing the extraordinary views it provides. The voluntary program encourages the preservation and protection of dark sites with environmentally responsible outdoor lighting and public education.

The local Crystal Coast Stargazers (ccgazers.com) offer monthly astronomy programs to point out the particulars of what's starrng overhead. "The dark skies are good for our resources, but they're great for nighttime ecotourism, too," says B.G. Horvat, interpretation and education chief. Check their [Facebook page](#) for upcoming free events including a Telescope and Astrophotography Workshop at Fort Macon State Park on March 18.

Cape Lookout National Seashore, 131 Charles St., Harkers Island, North Carolina. 252-728-2250, www.nps.gov/caloc

Wilmington, N.C.

This city on the Cape Fear River boasts easy access to three beaches. Pick from the sandy stretches of Wrightsville, Kure and Carolina beaches to spread out a blanket and pop up an umbrella. Each has its own attractions, including Carolina's beachside boardwalk, Kure's Civil War-era Fort Fisher State Historic site and the North Carolina Aquarium, and Wrightsville's water sports that include surfing and swimming as well as paddleboarding and kayaking along the intracoastal waterway.

A short drive from the water's edge, Wilmington's historic downtown is dotted with historic sites including the antebellum Bellamy Mansion and the World War II Battleship North Carolina. Both the beaches and town boast eateries where fresh seafood is the star. Stop by one of the newest dining destinations, Seabird (entrees \$27-\$32, 1 S. Front St., 910-769-5996, seabirdnc.com), located along the city's famed Riverwalk. Husband-and-wife team Dean Neff and Lydia Clopton oversee an oyster bar and a menu of small plates and updated catches such as Eastern cioppino and mahi-mahi schnitzel.

Wilmington and Beaches Convention & Visitors Bureau, 1 Estell Lee Place, Wilmington, North Carolina. 910-341-4040, www.wilmingtonandbeaches.com