

The Best Beach Towns in North Carolina

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Emerald Isle



PHOTO: BRAD STYRON/COURTESY OF CRYSTAL COAST TDA

This [westernmost community](#) on Bogue Banks is a treasured vacation getaway for families, with its 12 miles of clean shores, clear waters, and old-fashioned neighborhoods and vibe. [Driving on the beach](#) is allowed here (with a permit), and there is plenty of public water access and parks. You'll find both hotels and vacation rentals in which to enjoy a classic beach vacation.

EXPLORE EMERALD ISLE



PHOTO: GARY W. CARTER / GETTY IMAGES

Not to be confused with the South Carolina town [of the same name](#) (and pronounced differently), this small and charming harbor town at the southern end of the Outer Banks has a lively [downtown marina](#) and is dotted with historic buildings dating back to the 1700s. Beaufort is home to a wonderful [North Carolina Maritime Museum](#) and is a stone's throw from the natural riches of the [Rachel Carson Reserve](#). Look for wild horses and dolphins across the water while you stroll on boardwalks downtown. Rent kayaks to explore the islands or [take a ferry](#) for prime shelling on Shackleford Banks.

[EXPLORE BEAUFORT](#)



PHOTO: PHOTO: MICHAEL DEFREITAS/ROBERTHARDING/GETTY

With history running through its veins (including [pre-Civil War Fort Macon](#)), the [oldest town on Bogue](#) Banks—with its back to Bogue Sound and facing the Atlantic Ocean to the south—is also home to the nostalgic (and 1,000-foot-long) Oceanana Fishing Pier, plus a steady swell for surfing. This barrier island town has amenities to please the entire family, like a town park with splash pad, skatepark, and mini-golf, and the [nearby aquarium](#) in Pine Knoll Shores.



PHOTO: JUPITERIMAGES/GETTY IMAGES

Just south of Beaufort, this quiet fishing community known for retaining the Down East dialect has also become a popular spot for retirees. [Harkers island](#) is served by a post office, a few restaurants, and a grocery store, but is primarily known for slowing life down to a pace that's nice and easy. Stay in a home on the sound side for a great view of the Cape Lookout Lighthouse.