

SPORT FISHING

North Carolina's Crystal Coast is a Gem

Located near the easternmost protrusion of the Outer Banks, the Crystal Coast offers inshore opportunities and a relatively easy run to the Gulf Stream.



No boat, no problem. Anglers can fish from piers that jut out 1,000 feet from the beach, such as the Oceanana Fishing Pier at Atlantic Beach. *Courtesy Adobe Stock/Eifel Kreutz*

Spend much time on the waters of North Carolina's Crystal Coast and the origins of that moniker should be pretty clear. The waters here are some of the clearest in the Mid-Atlantic. The Crystal Coast, what can be described as the Southern Outer Banks, is a designation for roughly 85 miles of beaches (56 of which are protected) and coastal towns from the New River north to Cape Lookout. This includes Beaufort, Morehead City and the Cape Lookout National Seashore.

There's no shortage of fishing opportunities on the Crystal Coast. Many are seasonal, but whatever the season, there are fish to be caught. While many destinations require bringing or hiring a boat, the coast of North Carolina boasts some of the world's best surf fishing. Among the many species taken on beaches here, the two high-status game fish are red drum and striped bass. Very large reds prowl along the beaches in the fall. How big? Consider the IGFA all-tackle world record that angler David Deuel landed on an Outer Banks beach in November, 1984 — a fish weighing an extraordinary 94 pounds, 2 ounces.

Those without a boat can also hit the piers that jut out 1,000 feet from the beach into the ocean — the Bogue Inlet Pier (at Emerald Isle) and the Oceanana Fishing Pier (at Atlantic Beach). In addition to the many species that surfcasters catch, pier anglers target red drum, cobia and kingfish spring through fall, as well as croaker, bluefish, flounder and more.

Yet another land-based fishery involves wading in inshore waters, but these waters are much more accessible to those with skiffs or kayaks. Kayakers can access Back Sound and Bogue Sound from Fort Macon State Park and several spots around Harkers Island.

Located near the easternmost protrusion of the Outer Banks, the Crystal Coast offers a relatively easy run to the Gulf Stream and blue water often teeming with prized game fish. The list of summer-time targets includes marlins (blues and whites), sailfish, mahi, wahoo, tunas (yellowfin and blackfin) and more coastal species such as cobia, snapper, amberjack and kingfish.



The Crystal Coast offers a relatively easy run to the Gulf Stream and blue water, often teeming with prized game fish such as wahoo. *Doug Olander*

One of the most exciting cold-weather fisheries here sees larger charter and seaworthy private boats running out to fish just a few miles off the Outer Banks for huge bluefin tuna. Bluefin approaching the grander mark have been taken on sport-fishing boats, and tuna larger than 1,000 pounds have been caught commercially. The past season, in fact, was one of the best ever, and included not only giant bluefin but those of a more modest size (relatively speaking). While not as coveted as bluefin, blackfin tuna can be caught in numbers here at times and in the winter will run 25 to 30 pounds — large for the species.

Tournament fishing is big on the Crystal Coast; you'll find offshore, inshore and surf events here. Notably this includes one of the fishing world's premier tournaments, the Big Rock Blue Marlin, as well as other billfish tournaments in the summer. The fall schedule includes plenty of events for king mackerel.

Planning a Trip



Among the many species taken in North Carolina, the two high-status game fish are red drum (pictured) and striped bass. Very large reds prowl along the beaches in the fall. *Sam Hudson*

When to Go: Everyone wants to be here in the summer. That translates into lots of visitors, higher rates, busier roads. But it is a wonderful time of year to enjoy the beaches and offshore variety, along with calmer seas. Just book far in advance, as much as a year ahead. On the other hand, fall and winter offer special fisheries — big drum in the surf and then giant bluefin just offshore — at a time when visitors find things considerably more laid-back and less crowded here. Certainly, things get windier in mid-fall and winter; those who want to fish beyond the inlets would be wise to plan to stay at least a week, looking for a calm day or two.

Where to Go and How to Get There: The closest major airport is in New Bern (EWN), just over 30 miles away, served by a number of major carriers. Raleigh-Durham International Airport is just under three hours by car. More distant air options include international airports in Norfolk, Virginia (NIA), or in Charlotte (CLT), about a 4- or 5-hour drive, respectively. Many choose to drive to the Southern Outer Banks. From Atlanta, figure nearly eight hours drive time; from Boston, about 13 hours.



Off the beaches and in the bays, flounder are a popular target when the short season is open. *Doug Olander*

What to Expect: For visiting anglers, the infrastructure is generous, with plenty of inshore guides, offshore charter, launch sites and marinas. Also, take advantage of local bait and tackle shops, often the best source of information, especially for surf and jetty anglers. Private boaters fishing offshore will need a boat large and seaworthy enough to negotiate Bogue and Beaufort inlets; like all inlets, they can be tricky. Check the shoaling alerts online for up-to-date information when planning routes.

Crystal Coast accommodations are many and varied from budget (hard to find in high season) to five-star. Check with various local real estate brokers since they handle vacation rentals for the many amazing ocean-front homes along this coast.

Families who join anglers here need not be bored. Besides enjoying the endless Cape Lookout National Seashore beaches, visitors can paddleboard and kayak inshore waterways and marshes; climb to the top of the iconic Cape Lookout Lighthouse (Wednesday through Sunday); make historical visits to Beaufort's North Carolina Maritime Museum and to Fort Macon; see the famed wild horses of Shackleford Banks Island; hike the Croatan National Forest; and plenty more.