

October 2023

# SOUTH PARK

THE ART & SOUL  
OF CHARLOTTE

INSIDE:  
WEDDINGS

by SOUTH PARK

Page 128

Out &  
about  
with Molly Grantham

Run clubs

A Fetchin Bones reunion

Charlotte's craft-beer scene

## FALL TRAVEL

3 driving-distance getaways

Art: From California to Blowing Rock

A Savannah Airbnb that's a design-lover's dream





Cape Lookout National Seashore

# Beach bound

THE CRYSTAL COAST BECKONS IN THE OFF-SEASON WITH STARGAZING, NATURE WALKS AND FRESH OFF-THE-DOCK SEAFOOD.

by **Cathy Martin** | photographs courtesy **The Crystal Coast**

**F**rom June to August, tourists flock to the North Carolina coast to play in the surf and sand, nosh on fresh-from-the-dock seafood, and escape the business of city life.

We North Carolina natives know a little secret — the shoulder seasons, fall and spring, at the coast are just as nice, with fewer crowds, a break from the insufferable heat and shorter waits for tables at local restaurants.

I grew up going to the Crystal Coast, though back then, we just called it “the beach.” The region just south of The Outer Banks and north of Wilmington spans 85 miles of coastline and is known for its laid-back, family-friendly atmosphere and boating lifestyle.

Decades since my last visit, I returned last spring to the

Crystal Coast. Driving along Bogue Banks, the 21-mile barrier island that’s home to the area’s beaches, passing through towns like Salter Path, Indian Beach and Pine Knoll Shores was like a trip down memory lane. Among my earliest memories: vacationing at Emerald Isle in a saltbox cottage with a houseful of cousins, eating fresh fish my father and uncle had caught earlier in the day. In high school, my friends and I would pile in the car for day trips or loosely chaperoned weekends at Atlantic Beach (it was the ‘80s, what can I say).

Crossing the causeway bridge to Atlantic Beach, I couldn’t wait to see what had changed — and what had thankfully stayed the same.

PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD STYRON



PHOTOGRAPH BY BRAD STYRON

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY PRIME BISTRO & WINE BAR

## EXPLORE

### Row your boat

The Crystal Coast is a boater's paradise, but chances are if you're visiting for just a few days, you may not have access to a motorboat. You can still get out on the water by renting a kayak or paddleboard at **Beaufort Paddle**. The friendly staff at this family-owned business on the causeway between Beaufort and Morehead City will hook you up with the right gear and show you where to paddle, from the crystal-clear shallows around Bird Shoals (ideal for shelling) to the waters around Rachel Carson Reserve, a complex of undeveloped islands just south of Beaufort where wild Banker horses roam.

### Stroll along the salt marsh

At the far eastern end of Bogue Banks lies **Fort Macon State Park**. While the fort itself, completed in 1834, is a draw for history buffs, there are 389 acres to explore here. The 3.2-mile Elliott Coates loop trail leads you over the rolling sand dunes with magnificent ocean views, through a maritime forest, and along the sand marsh on the sound side of the island. Red cedars, live oaks, yaupons and Carolina willows are just a few species found here. The trail is a good 1.5-hour hike, and a chance to spy wildlife like marsh rabbits, turtles and the various coastal birds that inhabit the area.

### Stargaze at Cape Lookout National Seashore

Somehow on my previous visits to the Crystal Coast, I'd never been to Cape Lookout. The unspoiled barrier island with 56 miles of beaches is home to one of the state's most iconic lighthouses. The island is accessed by a 20-minute ferry ride departing from a visitor's center atarkers Island, a quiet residential area where porches and mailboxes are adorned with handmade metal anchors, a symbol of the community's maritime heritage. Arriving at Cape Lookout, where prickly pear cacti and vibrant red blanket flowers dot the landscape, you can set out on foot or rent a UTV to explore the island, including the keeper's quarters and an abandoned Coast Guard station. In 2022, Cape Lookout was designated an International Dark Sky Park: Minimal light pollution makes the area

Prime Bistro  
& Wine Bar



Banker Horses



conducive to stargazing. Astronomy Nights organized by a local stargazers club, Starlight Cruises and a Star Party in spring are a few of the ways to experience the celestial sights.

### Explore underwater worlds

Tucked in a maritime forest, the **North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores** — one of four state-operated aquariums along the coast — is ideal for a rainy day and offers a chance to learn about aquatic life across the state, from river otters and longnose gar to sea turtles and sand tiger sharks.

### Soak in the history

Much is written about the charming waterfront community of Beaufort (see our June 2022 issue), but a trip to the Crystal Coast isn't complete without spending an afternoon or evening in this historic hamlet. Learn about North Carolina's seafaring history at the quaint **Maritime Museum**, where you can view artifacts uncovered from the wreck of Blackbeard's *Queen Anne's Revenge*. The



## travel | fall getaways

wreck was discovered in 1996 a mere mile from the eastern end of Bogue Banks. Stroll along the docks and have lunch by the water at **Black Sheep** (woodfired pizzas, sandwiches, salads) or **Front Street Grill**. At cocktail hour, share a crispy calamari with chili-lime glaze and sip a mojito or painkiller — the fruity rum cocktail seems to be the drink of choice around here — at the restaurant's dockside Rhubarb. A short drive from the historic downtown, **The Beaufort Hotel** is one of the few boutique properties in the area, with modern accommodations and soothing water views.

### EAT + DRINK

#### Get your fill of fresh seafood

Finding truly fresh fish, shrimp and oysters in the Piedmont can be a challenge, so while I'm near the beach, I tend to overcompensate. While you might not find Michelin-starred chefs in this quiet coastal community, you will find an abundance of fresh seafood and menus designed to showcase the local fare. Restaurants here run the gamut, from paper-bag meals at old-school drive-ins to upscale steak and seafood spots. Wherever you go, when in doubt, get the fresh catch — no matter what's biting, it's hard to beat that fresh off-the-boat flavor.

**Amos Mosquito's**, a casual waterfront dining spot at Atlantic Beach, has become a local mainstay. Hallock Cooper Howard, a UNC Chapel Hill and Culinary Institute of America grad, opened the restaurant in 1999. Today, she and her husband, Sandy Howard, run the restaurant, where festive multicolor string lights highlight whimsical mosquito artwork by Charlotte artist Trip Park. Start with the sweet-and-spicy Buzz-Buzz shrimp and the cheesy lobster crab dip, then work your way into the entrees: sesame-seared tuna, shrimp and grits, lump crab cakes with roasted corn and scallions, to name a few. The vibe is lively and fun, the menu is approachable, and the portions are generous.

At **Aqua** in Beaufort, the portions are daintier but you'll find some of the area's most creative and artful cuisine. Request a table on the cozy screened patio surrounded by lush landscaping and twinkly lights, and enjoy tapas like ceviche and PEI mussels and shareable small plates that reflect what's local and in-season.

For oysters, small plates, and more fresh-from-the-dock seafood, head to **Catch 109** in Morehead City. The dining room is vibrant but cozy with wood beams, crystal chandeliers, a U-shaped bar with live music, and an extensive bourbon selection.

For a splurge, reserve a table at **Prime Bistro & Wine Bar**. Don't let the location fool you — you'll find unexpected elegance and top-notch service in this blink-and-you'll-miss-it spot with a high-end steakhouse feel off U.S. 70 in Morehead City. Here, you can



Cape Lookout National Seashore

PHOTOGRAPH BY ALEX GU



indulge in one of the area's local delicacies, Marshallberg Farm's Osetra caviar served with Pringles, crème fraîche, chives and dill. The family-owned sturgeon farm was started in 2010 to bring caviar production — much of which is done in China — back to the U.S. Wood-fired steaks, local seafood dishes, housemade pasta and raw-bar selections round out the extensive menu.

#### Settle the shrimpburger debate

In various beach towns, I've ordered shrimpburgers only to be disappointed by bland pressed patties of shrimp meat topped with ordinary mayonnaise, lettuce and tomato. A good Carolina shrimpburger, for the uninitiated, consists of a few simple key components: a soft bun, hot fried shrimp, ketchup and slaw. **El's Drive-In** in Morehead City, which opened in 1959, was a must-visit for shrimpburgers back in the day. Later, I discovered

**The Big Oak Drive-In** in Salter Path — its version also includes tartar sauce. Which is better? Depends on who you ask. Thankfully, both establishments are still going strong for new generations to enjoy.

#### Pack a cooler for the drive home

If you haven't gotten your fill of fresh seafood, there are plenty of local markets where you can stop on your way out of town to bring home a taste of the coast. They include **Blue Ocean Market** in Morehead City, **Willis Seafood Market** in Salter Path, and **Jerry Pittman's Shrimp**, a cash-only mom-and-pop operation in Salter Path. **SP**

The Crystal Coast is about a five-hour drive from Charlotte. Learn more about the area, including vacation rentals, seasonal events and a myriad of festivals, at [crystalcoastnc.org](http://crystalcoastnc.org).