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ISLANDS & BEACHES

The 11 Best Beaches in North Carolina

From easy-to-reach family spots to remote islands.

It's not easy to proclaim which are the best beaches in North Carolina—there are so many sandy stretches to choose from, and all are ripe for a summer vacation. From the Brunswick Islands all the way up to the Albemarle Sound, **North Carolina** has over 300 miles of coastline along the Atlantic Ocean—301 miles, to be precise—and lucky for all of us, almost 100% of it is accessible beachfront. But just like the many styles of **barbecue** you'll find in the state, the Carolina beach range is a vast one.

No matter where you go for a seaside respite, you won't be far from the many charming towns and holiday communities that line the Carolinian shore. Go beyond the usual suspects like the Outer Banks and Emerald Isle (though the classics are classics for a reason) to spend some time broadening your horizons on Masonboro Island, just a boat ride away from Wilmington's Wrightsville Beach; in Surf City on Topsail Island (pronounced "top-sull"); and even a town simply called Duck, just an hour and a half away from nearby Norfolk, Virginia.



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Emerald Isle

Pick the time of your visit right—read: beware of college spring break season—and stick to the western half of **Emerald Isle**'s narrow strip for a more chill vibe, where you'll find a scene that blends serious boating (on the sound side) and serious beach-going. Be sure to head down to the Point, where a vast plain of sand plumes into Bogue Inlet, offering virtually limitless space for frisbee tournaments and kite contests. Also of note, Emerald Isle is home to the Salty Pirate water park—get ready for a summer of fun.



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Shackleford Banks

Early European settlers arriving on Shackleford Banks found mounds of oyster shells left by members of the Coree tribe who originally inhabited the area—and today those rich shell deposits remain on this windblown strip at the base of the Cape Lookout National Seashore. But what you'll remember most about Shackleford is the horses—a whole herd of them, roaming wild over the island's shrub-dappled northern fringe. It's said they've lived there for 400 years, and that local residents once rounded up their yearly offspring to supply the mainland. (Fun fact, a congressional act to protect the horses and provide an annual report was enacted in 1998.) Shackleford makes a great day trip from [Emerald Isle](#) or Atlantic Beach; just grab the Harkers Island ferry or take a two-mile kayak ride.