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### **North Carolina's 85-Mile Crystal Coast Is the Perfect Destination for Wildlife Viewing, Birdwatching, and Exploring Pristine Beaches**

**T**he Crystal Coast, a beautiful 85-mile stretch of beaches on the southern Outer Banks of North Carolina, is a treasure trove of attractions and activities. This region includes several distinct communities such as Atlantic Beach, Beaufort, Pine Knoll Shores, Emerald Isle, Morehead City, and Cape Lookout, each offering its own charm and appeal. A trip to North Carolina's central stretch of coastline gives you easy access to pristine beaches, top diving destinations, wildlife (including wild horses, sea turtles, dolphins, and more), and plenty of areas perfect for when you want to do nothing more than kick back and relax with a drink and a good meal.

Plan your visit at the right time and you'll come across a music festival or two, though there's truly never a bad time to visit in the warmer months.



## Getting outdoors along North Carolina's Crystal Coast



Photo: Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

The best way to experience Crystal Coast is to immerse yourself in the outdoors. Whether you want a chill day laying out on the beach or would rather crank up the adventure with jet skis or a UTV ride, you'll find exactly what you're looking for here.

### Hike Fort Macon State Park

Based around a restored fort from before the Civil War, you can spend some time learning about the fort's history and the surrounding nature before heading out to explore the nearly five miles of trails here. Like elsewhere along the Crystal Coast, wildlife is abundant. Dolphins can be spotted from the swimmable beach, and hikes run through a salt marsh and dunes where more than 300 species of bird reside. Needless to say, you'll want to bring your binoculars with you if you're a birdwatcher.

**Fort Macon State Park:** 2303 E Fort Macon Rd, Atlantic Beach, NC 28512

## Take a ferry ride to Cape Lookout National Seashore



Photo: Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

Taking a boat to Cape Lookout is one of the best ways to experience the magnitude of the coast and enjoy some wildlife spotting along the way and when you arrive. Cape Lookout National Seashore consists of the barrier islands about three miles from the mainland. This is where the horses reside on Shackleford Banks and they tend to get much of the attention from visitors, but there's also a notable lighthouse to check out (though it's undergoing renovations until 2025), historic villages, and plenty of opportunities for fishing, birding, seeing protected wildlife, and shelling. For an extra special experience, you can camp out right on the beach and stargaze your way through the night (Cape Lookout is an International Dark Sky Park) knowing more adventures lie ahead the next day. Just note that beach camping is a barebones experience here with no running water or amenities, so you'll need to bring everything in with you and take everything back out when you leave.

**Cape Lookout National Seashore:** Ferries leave from various locations depending on destination



## Explore Cape Lookout by UTV

There's no better way to get around the Cape than a UTV tour. Sit in the driver's seat of a UTV and explore miles of beaches, amazing fishing, and some of the best shell finding on the coast. Or just enjoy the ride as you learn about the lighthouse and enjoy the peacefulness of your surroundings. Rentals start at Cape Lookout, where snacks, drinks, and beach gear are available to purchase, and there are rentals for UTVs that hold up to six, four, or three people. Leaving from the Harkers Island location offers more opportunities to fill up at a food truck with seafood, hotdogs, and burgers.

**Island Express Rentals:** 1800 Island Road Harkers Island, NC 28531 as well as 600 Front Street Beaufort, NC 28516

## Go kayaking through the Shoals



Photo: Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

Slow things down a notch with non-motorized exploration on the water. At Beaufort Paddle, which is based in Beaufort as the name suggests, you don't have to go far to find some of the clearest water off the shore. Take a break to bird watch, spot wild horses in the distance, or take a swim. If you're lucky, dolphins may even swim alongside you.

**Beaufort Paddle:** 424 Old Causeway Road, Beaufort, NC 28516

## Cruise the channels on a floating tiki bar

You're probably familiar with tiki bars and you know what a leisurely cruise is like, but here you can combine the two in an innovative way. Cruisin' Tiki Beaufort has powered floating boats with a tiki bar built on top — thatch roof, bamboo railings, and all — that are guided by a captain. This experience is BYOB, so bring your favorite drinks, connect your music to the Bluetooth, and dance, laugh and swim through the channel in style.

**Cruisin' Tiki Beaufort:** 103 Cedar St, Beaufort, NC 28516

## Where to eat and drink along the Crystal Coast

### Black Sheep

If you're looking for a break from seafood, you can find locally loved brick oven pizzas here made with fresh, seasonal ingredients (the roasted vegetable pizza is a must-try). Enjoy your slices while sitting on the back patio watching boats go by.

**Black Sheep:** 510 Front St STE 3, Beaufort, NC 28516

### Aqua

Local seafood, meats, and produce highlight the menu at this upscale casual dining spot that's extremely popular in the summertime (make sure to make a reservation to ensure a spot). Many ingredients that are used can be traced back to the producers, including Blue Ocean Seafood, Jaimies's Mushroom Farm, Early Girl Gardens, and more. A tapas menu lets guests explore bites for the table, while small bites offer a bit more and shareable large plates highlight each dining experience. Don't forget the lengthy drinks menu of cocktails, beer, and wine. You don't want to miss out on an order of muscles and a martini.

**Aqua:** 114 Middle Ln, Beaufort, NC 28516

### Prime Bistro & Wine Bar

If you're looking for fine dining, look no further. By creating a contemporary twist on classic favorites, this restaurant elevates every sip and bite. A lengthy wine menu complements the house-made pasta, seafood, and wood-fired steaks on the food menu, as well as cocktails and caviar options to start.

**Prime Bistro & Wine Bar:** 4031 Arendell St, Morehead City, NC 28557



## Big Oak Drive In & Bar-B-Q

You haven't visited Crystal Coast until you've gone to the home of the best shrimpburger on North Carolina's Crystal Coast. The menu is extensive — with seafood sandwiches highlighting oysters, clams, flounder, and softshell crab alongside barbecue and seafood plates — but you definitely don't want to miss the shrimpburger.

**Big Oak Drive In & Bar-B-Q**: 1167 Salter Path Rd, Salter Path, NC 28575

## Where to stay along North Carolina's Crystal Coast



Photo: Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

A full vacation home is the best place to stay on the Crystal Coast. [Bluewater Vacation Rentals](#) has more than 800 rental properties throughout the destination, from Atlantic Beach to Emerald Isle, and you're sure to find an option that offers both relaxation and easy access to the beach and other activities that you're most interested in enjoying.

## How to get to the Crystal Coast

The easiest way to arrive is flying into Raleigh-Durham International Airport. From there, it's about a three hour drive to the Crystal Coast. A car is needed to get around the expansive area, and rentals are available at the airport. 😊