

StyleBlueprint

8 Reasons to Visit NC's Crystal Coast

From stargazing, wild horses, and white sand beaches to an outstanding culinary scene, here are just a few reasons to put North Carolina's Crystal Coast on your must-visit list.

by **GAYE SWAN**



With 85 miles of pristine beaches, stunning scenery, outstanding cuisine, and too many adventurous opportunities to count, [North Carolina's Crystal Coast](#) is a destination you don't want to miss. Also known as the Southern Outer Banks, this stretch of the Atlantic is home to several charming beach towns that are perfect home bases for exploring the area. You'll find water sports, stargazing, seafood, history, conservation — and perhaps a ghost or two.

While we're just skimming the surface here, we've rounded up a few of our favorite reasons to make a trip along North Carolina's Crystal Coast.



North Carolina's Crystal Coast is filled with Southern charm, a rich history, outdoor adventure – and absolutely stunning scenery! Image: [Crystal Coast N.C.](#)

Fresh Oysters

If you like fresh oysters — and we mean *just out of the water* fresh — this is the spot for you. [Crystal Coast Oysters](#) is a perfect example of what the area offers. Small and family-run, this farm-to-fridge operation is dedicated to providing fresh, traceable, quality oysters while protecting the environment and keeping their waterways clean and well-managed.

You'll find oysters on the menu in many restaurants; if you plan to stay in one of the location's lovely [rental homes](#), you can pick them up for a fun evening in.



When we say fresh oysters, we mean fresh oysters! Image: [Gaye Swan](#)

Stargazing

We love a good [stargazing](#) opportunity, and [Cape Lookout National Seashore](#) delivers. Boasting some of the darkest skies along the East Coast, the seashore is one of the few places to see the Milky Way with your natural eye — not to mention constellations, planets, and stars. With such an ideal location, it is no wonder that Cape Lookout was certified as an [International Dark Sky Park](#) in 2021.

Plus, the shore is home to the 163-foot-tall, 207-step “Diamond Lady” lighthouse. Do not miss out on the chance to explore the fascinating history behind the lighthouse and keeper’s quarters, which are open to the public during the summer.

Getting there is half the fun. [Harkers Island](#) offers a ferry service, a visitors center, and telescopes set up to view the sparkling night sky.



The “Diamond Lady” lighthouse was painted with a distinctive black-and-white diamond pattern to distinguish direction and differentiate it from other North Carolina lighthouses. This Crystal Coast must-see is open to visitors to climb during the summer, May through September. Image: Crystal Coast N.C.

Water, Water Everywhere

While spending a day or two on the beach is a must, you’ll find plenty of other ways to enjoy the ocean. A boat is a wonderful way to explore the nooks and crannies of the Southern Outer Banks. An excursion with [H2O Captain](#) gives you a taste of the Crystal Coast’s most iconic sights, including Shackleford Island, [Beaufort](#), Rachel Carson Reserve, and Morehead City, all along the beautiful Intracoastal Waterway. Owner Captain Mark offers private, sunset, adventure, and custom cruises.



*You'll find plenty of options for exploring the inlets, islands, and waterways of this 85-mile stretch of the Atlantic Ocean.
Image: Crystal Coast N.C.*

We also recommend kayaking or paddleboarding for a fun morning or afternoon activity. [Beaufort Paddle](#) is a family-owned-and-operated business with friendly, patient, and knowledgeable guides to show you the way. They offer guided kayaking tours to Bird Shoals and the historic Beaufort waterfront, but a trip to the [Rachel Carson Reserve](#) is something special. Keep reading to find out why!

Wild Horses

Located between the mouths of the Newport and North Rivers, directly across Taylor's Creek from the historic town of Beaufort, the 2,315 acres of the Rachel Carson Reserve are home to a diverse array of birds, fish, and mammals — including a herd of the Outer Banks's famed wild horses. Introduced to the site in the 1940s, the horses are pretty fearless, but close-up contact is prohibited. Luckily, they don't mind being photographed.

The majestic animals are also found on [Shackleford Banks](#), a barrier island southeast of Beaufort. Descendants of Spanish Mustangs, the Shackleford horses are a spectacular sight!



Words fail us at the beauty and freedom of North Carolina's wild horses. Image: Crystal Coast N.C.

History

Avast, ye mateys! Brush up on your pirate lore and other historical tales with a [Beaufort Ghost Walk](#). As darkness falls, stroll through the storied streets of Beaufort with a guide so knowledgeable, he might just have been there himself. You'll hear stories and see the sites of betrayal, tragedy, and treasure from the Golden Age of Piracy, Colonial and Civil War eras, and the early 1900s.



As you explore the Historic District of Beaufort, your pirate guide will bring history to life with spin-tingling stories of ghost ships, haunted houses, lost loves, and buried treasure. Image: Crystal Coast N.C.

For something a little less spooky but no less interesting, visit [Fort Macon State Park](#). As the centerpiece of the most visited park in North Carolina, Fort Macon itself is a carefully restored glimpse into the past. After you finish touring the site, you can hike, swim, or fish.

The Age of Aquarium

The [North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores](#) deserves a paragraph of its own; the aquarium opens a world of underwater wonder to visitors. Observe the aquatic animals that call [North Carolina](#) home, from playful otters to ethereal jellyfish. From habitats as varied as a peaceful mountain lake to a replica of Blackbeard's sunken ship *Queen Anne's Revenge*, you'll explore, discover, and connect with nature in carefully curated and maintained exhibits.



How cute is this little fellow? Image: [Facebook](#)

Nature also comes here to rehabilitate. The North Carolina Aquariums are dedicated to animals in their care and the wild. Recognizing the challenges threatening animals locally and globally, the team behind the aquarium strives to learn more and take action through research, fieldwork, and education. You can find out more about the animals they are helping [here](#).

Time to Relax

The Crystal Coast lives up to its name with beautifully clear, inviting water. Stroll along the white-sand beaches, hunt for seashells, and scan the horizon. You may just catch a glimpse of a playful dolphin! The family-friendly beaches are perfect for splashing in the waves, building sand castles, and letting your stress melt away.



No trip to the coast is complete without some beach time! Image: Crystal Coast N.C.

Speaking of de-stressing, what vacation is complete without a little retail therapy? The lovely little beachside towns that nestle along the coast are filled with boutique shops. From crafts to clothing, wine to olive oil, [shopping on the Crystal Coast](#) is a fun and exciting treasure hunt.

Dock-to-Dish Dining

With over 100 locally owned restaurants to choose from, you will never go hungry! As implied by the phrase “dock to dish,” seafood is the star of this show, but you’ll find plenty of other delicious options as well. Listing them all would take too long, so we’ve broken down a few suggestions for your day.



The nifty little towns that make up the Crystal Coast are filled with plenty of choices for every meal. [Beaufort Grocery Co.](#) is a local favorite that serves breakfast and lunch. Image: Crystal Coast N.C.

- **Breakfast:** If you'd like a craft cocktail with your caffeine (hey, you're on vacation!), try [Mug Shot Lounge](#) in Morehead City. While you're there, local fave [The Banks Grill](#) serves up delectable, extra-large homemade biscuits.
- **Lunch:** Take a break from the heat of the day to grab a delicious bite and brew at [Idle Hour Biergarten](#), get a taste of the French countryside at [Beaufort Grocery Co.](#), or sample local seafood at [Fish Hut Grill](#).
- **Dinner:** If you are ready to take a break from seafood, [Black Sheep](#) offers homemade, coal-fired pizzas, classic salads, and creative appetizers. If you're in the mood for relaxed yet upscale dining, [34° North](#) features locally inspired eastern North Carolina cuisine served on the waterfront. You'll also find plenty of chef-driven cuisine, such as Chef Clarke Merrell's [Circa 81](#), [Beaufort Olive Oil Company](#), [Dank Burrito](#), [Social Q Smokehouse](#), and [Prime Bistro and Wine Bar](#).
- **Cocktails and Nightcaps:** Family-owned [Crystal Coast Brewing Company](#) has won multiple awards for innovative brews. Local cocktail bar [Arendell Room](#) uses the freshest ingredients for a delicious menu of handcrafted drinks. Either is a delightful way to wind down after a day of adventure!



A fresh, delicious meal by the waterfront at 34° North — what a lovely way to spend the evening! Image: Crystal Coast N.C.

Happy travels!