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Take the scenic route • 13 reasons why traveling HWY 301 is better than I-95

DECEMBER 14, 2018 BY [KAREN DAWKINS](#) — [LEAVE A COMMENT](#)

If you've ever traveled I-95 through North Carolina, you've experienced the traffic jams as you pass mile after tedious mile of loblolly pines. You've seen the New Jersey snowbirds travel south in winter. And you've followed the Floridian headed north for summer. There has got to be a better way, right?



That's exactly what you get with HWY 301, an alternate route to I-95. We've long known the secret of skipping the interstate to avoid the traffic jams and choose scenic HWY 301 to get around the backups.

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But, HWY 301 is more than an alternate route. This road served as the historic byway connecting many small towns in eastern North Carolina that exist mostly because of cotton farming and the tobacco industry. While those industries have largely given way to subdivisions and sweet potato farms, the charm of these small towns has not changed.



Photo Credit Johnston County CVB, used with permission

Drive this scenic route, famous for the 301 Endless Yard Sale, to discover small town, southern Americana. And while you're at it, enjoy the break from highway gridlock!

Scenic travel on HWY 301



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Let's take this scenic road from north to south, starting in Rocky Mount, a town built on both cotton and tobacco. If you happen to be driving from South Carolina toward Virginia, just scroll to the bottom of this post and go in reverse! The post, not your car!



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1. Explore historic Rocky Mount

Today, Rocky Mount's cotton mill has been repurposed as [Rocky Mount Mills](#), a mixed use community with homes, restaurants, breweries, shopping and more. They have restored the "mill homes," where cotton mill families lived, to create a vibrant community with historic charm. Rocky Mount Mills is a mile east of HWY 301 and worth the stop. Enjoy a meal at one of the restaurants and stroll through the neighborhood, imagining what life might have been like for the mill workers who lived here.

In downtown Rocky Mount, right by HWY 301, you can explore the [Imperial Centre for the Arts and Sciences](#). Built in an old tobacco factory and historic library, the center houses a science museum, art museum and theater complex. My personal favorite is KEVA: A Permanent Interactive Exhibit that lets you be the creator, challenging you to think outside the box. Speaking of outside, check out the sculptures on the grounds while you're there.



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2. Watch whimsical whirligigs in Wilson

Drive south about 16 miles to the town of Wilson to marvel at the whirligigs of Vollis Simpson. A repairman by trade, Simpson spent his retirement tinkering with sculptures to create the whimsical whirligigs that are making Wilson famous. Locals have long enjoyed Simpson's metal whirligigs, but they are known far beyond this small city. They were even featured at the 1996 Olympic games!

[Wilson Whirligig Park & Museum](#), located a mile east of HWY 301 on Goldsboro Street, was created to preserve Vollis Simpson's creations. It is open daily and free to the public. It's a spectacular place to stretch your legs while the kids watch the wind spinners go. Who knows, maybe they'll inspire your family to create your own outdoor whirligigs!



Photo courtesy of the Vollis Simpson Whirligig Park and Museum

Closer to HWY 301, the Freeman Round House Museum honors another artist, Oliver Nestus Freeman. Born in 1882 to former slaves, Freeman was educated at Tuskegee and came back to Wilson to build affordable housing for World War II veterans. The Freeman Round House Museum shares African-American history, art and culture that is central to the history of this area.

3. Experience East Carolina Barbecue at a local favorite

Before leaving Wilson, grab a spot in line at [Parker's Barbecue](#) for authentic eastern Carolina barbecue, fried chicken and corn sticks. Parker's has been a Wilson staple since 1946, and with the rave reviews, they'll be here for a long time to come. Parker's is a cash-only restaurant, and while the lines can get long, service is quick, so don't be intimidated. The best things are worth it! Parker's is located at 2514 HWY 301 in Wilson.



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4. Discover the life of a tobacco farmer

The history of this region is best learned with a stop at the [Tobacco Farm Life Museum](#) at 709 Church Street in Kenly, NC. The museum was created by local families who wanted to preserve the way of life of their parents and grandparents for future generations to appreciate and has developed into an internationally recognized and accredited museum. The exhibits tell the story of everyday life on the farm, how the tobacco was grown, harvested and cured, early medicine and social life of tobacco farm families.



Photo Credit [Johnston County CVB](#), used with permission

5. Go treasure hunting in Selma

About 15 miles from Kenly, Selma is a popular destination for antique treasure hunters. The town's history is directly tied to the railroad coming to town, and Union Station is still an active AMTRAK station today. Stroll through the shops to find a treasure for yourself.



Photo Credit [Johnston County CVB](#), used with permission

6. Savor a treat at the old-timey soda fountain

Of course, that treasure hunting might make you thirsty. Never fear! [Creech Drug Company](#), a family owned pharmacy serving the area since 1939, still serves hand-squeezed orange aids at the old timey soda fountain! They also serve lemonade, ice cream and milkshakes.



Photo Credit [Johnston County CVB](#), used with permission

7. Rediscover the magic of Old Hollywood

In Smithfield, take a quick detour to the [Ava Gardner Museum](#), just a half mile from HWY 301 on Market Street. If you're like me (or at least like I was), you might know very little about Ava Gardner. Trust me, her life story is amazing! Two hours here will allow enough time to learn how Ava went from tenant farmer's barefooted daughter to Hollywood "royalty."



Photo Credit [Johnston County CVB](#), used with permission

8. Skip the fast food and eat local

When you're in Smithfield, grab dinner at one of our favorite restaurants. For southern food with flair, try [SoDoSoPa](#), a block from the Ava Gardner Museum at 146 S. Third Street. I highly recommend the Southern Fried Rangoon, a southern twist on a popular Asian dish. For farm to table goodness, we really like [Simple Twist](#), a block from the Ava Gardner Museum at 227 Market Street. My favorite dish is the Food Truck Tacos!



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9. Shop for hand-crafted goods in Four Oaks

Four Oaks sure sounds like a crazy name for a small town! The name goes back to the 1800s when the town grew around the railroad. Four oak trees grew from an oak stump, and a name was born.

But there's more to Four Oaks than its name. The commercial district is listed on the National Register of Historic Places. Stroll along Main Street, imagine what life might have been like when the railroad came through bringing visitors and business every day, and enjoy a look back in time.

While you're in Four Oaks, pop in to three unique stores! The first, [Ogi](#) (pronounced O-gee), at 206 S. Main Street, creates custom wood furniture and restores old pieces as well. You're sure to find the perfect unique piece for your home here — or they can custom build it for you.



Photo Credit [Johnston County CVB](#), used with permission

The second, [Vine & Branch](#), at 303 N. Main Street, is a flower and gift shop. They're well-known locally as the place to go for floral arrangements, unique gift items and for turning shabby into

chic.

Third is [Stanfield's General Store](#) at 105 North Main Street. Here you can shop for unique treasures or just sit a spell and enjoy a cold soda served in a glass bottle!

Did you know that Four Oaks marks the halfway point between New York and Miami? So, snowbirds, whichever way you travel, you can celebrate the halfway mark every time you pass through this cute little town!

11. Enjoy a doughnut at Sherry's Bakery

In the town of Dunn, about 15 miles south of Four Oaks, you will find one of our favorite bakeries! [Sherry's Bakery](#), still owned by the original family, has been serving fresh baked doughnuts since 1967. You can eat in, they've got seating for 100, or get a box to go. Doughnuts are huge, so we understand if you choose to share!

12. Stroll through southern gardens

The [Cape Fear Botanical Garden](#) in Fayetteville is a wonderful place to stop on long road trips. The botanical garden spans 80 acres with walkways along the Cape Fear River, a children's garden, water features, and green space (to name just a few things). There's plenty to discover as you stroll under tall shade trees. Outside food (no glass) is allowed, so bring a picnic to enjoy while you relax. Seasonal displays mean you'll see something different every time you go. Admission is required.



13. Finish strong at Fowler's

Also in Fayetteville is [Fowler's Southern Gourmet](#), at 723 W. Rowan Street, just a mile from HWY 301. I got to enjoy their menu before they opened to the public, and it continues to be one of my favorites! This is a family-owned restaurant with an incredible understanding of flavor combinations. Their passion for food shows through in every plate they serve. Some of our favorites (Who am I kidding? We love it all, and my belly is growing as I type), are The Angry Hawaiian, The CBR and the Boss-rito. But really, I could list the whole menu. Eat inside or out, or get it to go. You'll be thankful you skipped the fast food with each juicy bite! And, you won't spend a whole lot more!







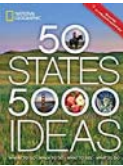



If you're reading this as you sit in traffic on I-95 in North Carolina, take the next exit and drive along HWY 301 instead. You'll discover some great places along the way — without the aggravation of stop and go traffic. If you're one of the lucky few who is driving through without 100,000 of your favorite snowbirds nearby, skip the fast food break at the exit and venture just a little further from the interstate to discover great food, unique finds and interesting places. There's some great history, shopping and food just waiting to be (re)discovered!

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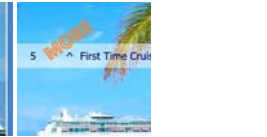
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