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Named a *Good Housekeeping* 2026 Travel Awards winner, **Wilmington, NC, and Island Beaches** is a must-see Southern destination that constantly draws in new people, building on an authentic heritage and adding unexpected offerings. From the Historic Downtown River District – featuring the Wilmington Riverwalk, ranked among the nation’s best riverwalks in *USA Today’s* 10Best Readers’ Choice Awards – to the modern facilities remaking the riverfront skyline, coastal culture and quintessential Carolina charm intersect in a refreshing, irresistible way. Wilmington is the portal to three island beaches – Carolina Beach, Kure Beach and Wrightsville Beach – each with its own distinct vibe. Not all oceanside vacations are created equal, so experience the best of the Carolina coast all in one place.

#### WHAT’S NEW IN WILMINGTON

##### **America250: Explore Colonial History, Scottish Heritage & “Outlander” Ties**

As America celebrates its 250th anniversary in 2026, visitors to Wilmington can step back in time at historical sites and special events. Founded in 1739 along the Cape Fear River, Wilmington played a pivotal role during the colonial and Revolutionary eras, from early acts of resistance like the Wilmington Ladies Tea Walk to the Patriot victory at the 1776 Battle of Moores Creek Bridge – an event that helped earn the state its “First in Freedom” distinction. Today, visitors can explore this legacy at sites including the Burgwin-Wright House Museum, and nearby Moores Creek National Battlefield and Brunswick Town/Fort Anderson State Historic Site, among others. Programming will bring history to life through festivals, living-history experiences and guided tours highlighting the region’s Revolutionary past, Scottish heritage and connections that inspired themes featured in the “Outlander” book and television series.

##### **Downtown Stays and Riverfront Accommodations**

Wilmington’s downtown lodging options continue to expand with distinctive new stays. Luxe 220 opened in summer 2025, introducing four penthouse-style vacation rental suites in the heart of historic downtown, complete with exposed brick, elevated finishes and spa-like bathrooms. Along the Riverwalk, The Cove Riverwalk Villas is beginning a phased expansion in early 2026, adding new floating houseboats with one- and three-bedroom layouts while preserving the unique waterfront experience that has made the property a standout. C.W. Worth House Bed and Breakfast was also voted as the

No. 1 “Bed and Breakfasts that Offer an Unforgettable Stay” by *USA Today*.

##### **Districts, Placemaking and Walkability**

The Brooklyn Arts District is ushering in a new era of walkable experiences as New Hanover County’s first approved social district. On the first and third Saturdays of each month from noon to 5 p.m., visitors can purchase beverages from participating businesses and enjoy them while exploring the creative neighborhood. Nearby, the Wilmington Riverwalk continues to earn national acclaim, ranking No. 3 on *USA Today’s* 10BEST Readers’ Choice list of the best riverwalks in the U.S. for 2025, with more than 200 shops, restaurants, attractions and an amphitheater. This summer, the Cape Fear Museum of History & Science – the state’s oldest history museum – will relocate to a new, state-of-the-art building on Grace Street, in the heart of Wilmington’s downtown historic district.

##### **Food Districts, Restaurants and Culinary Recognition**

Wilmington’s dining scene continues to gain national attention through new openings, expansions and accolades. In the Cargo District, the Cargo West Food Court opened in 2025, bringing together chef-driven micro kitchens – including Shepard Barbecue and Taco Papi from pitmaster Brandon Shepard, featured on *The Food Network’s* “Diners, Drive-ins, and Dives” – alongside eclectic eateries, an arcade, bar and communal seating. Downtown, award-winning chef Keith Rhodes opened VOYCE Bistro, serving casual coastal cuisine with Caribbean influences, while plans remain underway to relocate his flagship restaurant, Catch. Chef Dean Neff of Seabird, recognized as a semifinalist for the 2026 James Beard Foundation Outstanding Chef Award, recently renovated the kitchen and refreshed the menu at Zora’s Market & Kitchen, a community-focused seafood market. Neff also plans to open a new downtown restaurant later this year. In the Castle Street District, the Black-owned On Thyme recently expanded its indoor dining space. Coming to the Soda Pop District later this year, Canary Yellow Coffee plans to open a color-themed boutique inn.

##### **Shopping, Tours and Immersive Experiences**

Downtown Wilmington will welcome Floodplain Books in fall 2026, an independent bookstore founded by *New York Times* bestselling author Wiley Cash and his wife, Mallory, with plans to host nationally touring authors and literary



events. Experiential tourism continues to grow with new offerings from Wilmington True History Tours, which added an American Revolution-focused walking tour in early 2026 led by historian and author Dr. Chris Fonvielle. Wilmington Walking Tours has expanded its lineup with a Speakeasy & Prohibition Tour and upcoming district-focused history, pub crawl and scavenger hunt experiences, while Wilmington Water Tours recently added film-themed cruises led by historian and writer Hunter Ingram.

## SAMPLE STORYLINES

### Fit for a Foodie

Wilmington continues to gain recognition as a hotspot for standout chefs and innovative coastal cuisine. Holding a 10-year run as Wilmington's only AAA Four Diamond award-winning restaurant, manna ave. 123 is among the best restaurants in the U.S., as ranked in 2026 by *USA Today*. Chef Carson Jewell's elevated fare at manna changes daily based on available fresh, local ingredients. Seabird owner/chef Dean Neff was recognized as a 2026 JBF semifinalist for "Outstanding Chef" nationwide. Neff's signature Seasonal Seafood Tower showcases North Carolina seafood and shellfish, including locally harvested "Seabirdie" oysters. Also committed to fresh, local ingredients, chefs at Olivero, Rx Chicken & Oysters, VOYCE Bistro, Covey, Origins and Perla Raw Bar are creatively interpreting coastal fare. Discover foodie destinations throughout downtown Wilmington with Taste Carolina Gourmet Food Tours or during festivals such as Feast Wilmington (spring) and Taste of Wrightsville Beach (fall).

### Set-Jetting

Dubbed "Hollywood East" and "Wilmywood" over the years, Wilmington has become a hub for set-jetting, the travel trend of visiting locations from movies and TV shows. The destination - with over 400 credits to its name - serves as the backdrop for many popular shows, including "The Summer I Turned Pretty," "Outer Banks," "Dawson's Creek" and "One Tree Hill," along with feature films like "A Walk to Remember" and "The Choice" based on novels by Nicholas Sparks. The locally filmed ABC series "RJ Decker" will debut this spring. From a seaside state park to picturesque Southern gardens, local landmarks have been transformed into the settings of classic productions. The Wilmywood Movie & TV Location Walk features downtown filming locations.

### Active Adventures and Wellness

Wilmington and its beaches are overflowing with ways to get active. Jog along the scenic Riverwalk, then rent a kayak to paddle around Greenfield Lake or book a guided excursion to search for fossils on Shark Tooth Island. Bike along the Gary Shell Cross City Trail, a 15-mile, off-road multi-use trail from Wilmington to the Intracoastal Waterway, or set out on the River to Sea Bikeway, an 11-mile on and off-road route. Challenge yourself to a surfing, sailing or standup paddleboarding (SUP) lesson on crystal blue waters. The area hosts world tour-qualifying watersport competitions, as well as 5k, 10k, marathon and triathlon races.

## African American Experiences

Engage with Wilmington's African American heritage to discover the resilience, contributions and achievements of the community. The Cape Fear Museum of History's "Cape Fear Stories" exhibit traces the region's African American history from the 1700s to the 20th century. The Cameron Art Museum honors the U.S. Colored Troops (USCT) who fought in the final stages of the Civil War with the nation's first USCT Park. Within the park, "Boundless" is a life-size sculpture that honors troops on the grounds where they fought during the Battle of Forks Road. Several self-guided tours highlight significant religious, educational, social and cultural sites, while guided tours include WilmingtonNColor Heritage Tours and Journeys Wilmington - with both companies recently adding new tour routes.

## Lookalike Classic Southern Getaway

If you love the Southern charm of Charleston or Savannah but want a fresh experience, Wilmington is the perfect alternative. Its historic district spans over 230 blocks, featuring cobblestone streets, grand homes and haunted tales rivaling its more famous counterparts. The scenic Riverwalk along the Cape Fear River offers waterfront dining, boutiques and boat tours, while lush parks and historic cemeteries add to its Lowcountry appeal - all at a likely more affordable rate. Wilmington's thriving culinary scene showcases award-winning chefs and standout seafood, and its boutique hotels and B&Bs deliver signature Southern hospitality to rival that of other well-known coastal destinations. Every April, the North Carolina Azalea Festival (celebrating 80 years in 2027) ushers in spring with Southern flair and fanfare.

## One Destination: Four Waterfront Towns

Discover three island beaches located just a short drive from the riverfront and the heart of Wilmington, offering endless vacation experiences. Carolina Beach, Kure Beach and Wrightsville Beach each boast unique personalities and attractions, all while being USLA Lifeguard-protected Memorial Day through Labor Day and committed to ocean safety programs. Just 8.5 miles east of Wilmington, Wrightsville Beach is a vibrant community where quality and wellness converge. Experience world-class watersports, crystal blue waters and miles of pristine beach. Carolina Beach and Kure Beach are classic seaside towns with landmark attractions, including the Carolina Beach Boardwalk and Fort Fisher State Historic Site, along with the North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher, currently closed for a multi-year expansion and renovation. During construction, the aquarium will continue engaging visitors through a satellite location at Independence Mall in nearby Wilmington.

