

BY MEGAN WILLIAMS | PHOTOS COURTESY OF WILMINGTON AND BEACHES CVB



Known as the gateway to the Cape Fear Coast, Wilmington proudly guards the foreboding shoals of the Cape Fear River and the strong surf of the nearby Atlantic Ocean. Once the battle grounds of famed "Gentleman Pirate" Stede Bonnet, Wilmington's story is one steeped in folklore and history—and its present story is equally spellbinding. >>



TASTE



Clockwise from top left: Informative boat tours available right downtown, WWII Battleship NORTH CAROLINA, the downtown Wilmington food scene, inventive cuisine from PinPoint Restaurant, historic downtown Wilmington's Riverwalk

The River District

Downtown Wilmington, more aptly referred to as The River District, is a vibrant, walkable area that's teeming with life and history. An area almost entirely surrounded by water—the Cape Fear River to its South and West and a trio of beaches marking the entrance to the Atlantic Ocean to its East—the unfamiliar may expect a typical beach town when planning a trip to Wilmington.

What they will find, however, is anything but. Downtown Wilmington is, first and foremost, an area steeped in its history. From the pre-colonial era when naval stores were transported down-river to Wilmington's occupation during the Revolutionary War through to North Carolina's involvement in WWII, Wilmington's walkways and shorelines paint a complex story. In fact, the 230 blocks of the National Register Historic District make it one of the largest historic districts in the South—rivaling that of larger and more well-known Charleston and Savannah.

As you walk the shoreline of the riverwalk and glance toward the Cape Fear River, you'll see the WWII Battleship NORTH CAROLINA looming amongst the shoals. Completely refurbished and available for self-guided tours, the battleship serves as a memorial for the 11,000 North Carolinians who fought and died during the war. And, as the most highly decorated American battleship from the war for its participation in every major naval offense in the Pacific Theater of Operations, it also stands as a testament to the area's grit and pride.

Never a town to rest on its laurels, Wilmington knows it's more than just its history. With its past as its bedrock, Wilmington has emerged into the 21st century full of fervor. The downtown architecture a mix of French colonial and classical revival influences, modern breweries, bars, and restaurants interplay between past and present. Breweries like New Anthem Brewery occupy industrial spaces while Front Street Brewery—Wilmington's oldest brewery—occupies an 1800's-era building that was once a dry goods store. Each business in the downtown footprint artfully maneuvers the narrow, historic spaces while servicing the unending foot traffic. There's no better example of that than The Basics, a Front Street institution that weaves from open air to indoor to second floor dining with ease. Known for its brunch, but an expert in every meal, The Basics exudes Wilmington charm with its exposed brick walls, restored wood floors, and cozy Southern fare.

The blend of past and present extends beyond the riverfront and into the residential areas of Wilmington. The historic vestige still present, French colonial homes and their Spanish Moss-draped trees part ways for tiny glimmers of commerce to shine through. One such shining beacon is Savorez, a Latin restaurant run by chef, owner, and Wilmington native Sam Cahoon. Their inventive salsas and flaky empanadas are a bright spot on a historic street corner.

Island Beaches

Just across the eastern watershed are Wilmington's three island beaches—Carolina Beach, Kure Beach, and Wrightsville Beach—each with their own distinct personalities and amenities.

Carolina Beach, a quintessential beach town with a scenic beachside boardwalk and miles of pristine beach, is known for its year-round incredible weather and down-to-earth atmosphere. The boardwalk is teeming with amusement, from classic arcade games to a nostalgia-inducing carousel and ferris wheel. Families and friends hop from game to game while the warm, doughy smells of Britt's Donuts—a Carolina Beach institution since 1939—mix with the salty ocean brine in an intoxicating scent medley.

On Kure Beach, nature has its way. The Fort Fisher State Recreation Area gives beachgoers miles of unspoiled beaches, offering ample opportunity to look for shells, sea urchins, and starfish, or simply pause for a moment or two and appreciate the natural beauty. The Basin Trail, a 2.2 out and back through pristine marshland, brims with wildlife, making for an idyllic afternoon stroll. And the North Carolina Aquarium offers abundant options to explore native wildlife no matter the weather.

And Wrightsville Beach, named one of the world's best surf towns, offers world-class watersports and incredible beach experiences. Tucked along Wrightsville Beach's shoreline are quaint beachside resorts and shops that exude the local charm. The Blockade Runner, a 60-year-old icon, emerges from the sand in calming colors of teal and pink to give guests uninterrupted coastal views, lush beachside gardens, and canopied dining. And The Workshop—a passion project owned by local SCUBA divers and coffee lovers—blends artisan craft and specialty coffee in an experience as unique as Wrightsville Beach itself.

The polarities of Wilmington and its island beaches only make its charm all the more irresistible. Its historic district and unique coastlines tell a story of ease, summer fun, and an unforgettable experience exploring all that this distinctive town has to offer. 



TRAVEL

