

Southern Living

The Best Beach Towns In North Carolina



Because North Carolina has [3,000 miles of coastline](#) (including more than 300 miles of barrier beaches alone), there are many wonderful beach towns and harbors that are just a short boat ride away from the sand. Some of these towns are quiet getaways focused on surf and sand, while others offer shopping and strolling along old-timey boardwalks and adventures on the water. They have plenty of sites to explore, whether you're a pirate fanatic, intrigued by early colonial history, excited by [sea turtles](#), or anxious to see herds of wild horses.

Visit from Memorial Day to Labor Day for prime beach weather, or make a trip in winter, spring, or fall for lighter crowds. No matter which of our favorites you choose, you'll feel restored by an escape to small-town life at the beach in North Carolina. Ahead, the best beach towns in North Carolina.



This [westernmost community](#) on Bogue Banks is a treasured vacation getaway for families, with its 12 miles of clean shores, clear waters, and old-fashioned neighborhoods. [Driving on the beach](#) is allowed here during shoulder season (with a permit from September 15 through April 30), and there is plenty of public water access and parks. You'll find both hotels and vacation rentals where you can enjoy a classic beach vacation.

EXPLORE EMERALD ISLE



Not to be confused with the South Carolina town [of the same name](#) (and pronounced differently), this small and charming harbor town at the southern end of the Outer Banks has a lively [downtown marina](#) and is dotted with historic buildings dating back to the 1700s. Beaufort is home to the wonderful [North Carolina Maritime Museum](#) and is a stone's throw from the natural riches of the [Rachel Carson Reserve](#). Look for wild horses and dolphins across the water while you stroll on boardwalks downtown. Rent kayaks to explore the islands or [take a ferry](#) for prime shelling on Shackleford Banks.

TIP

The North Carolina Maritime Museum is open Tuesday to Saturday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.



With history running through its veins (including [pre-Civil War Fort Macon](#)), the oldest town on Bogue Banks—with its back to Bogue Sound and facing the Atlantic Ocean to the south—is also home to the nostalgic (and 1,000-foot-long) Oceanana Fishing Pier, plus a steady swell for surfing. This barrier island town has amenities to please the entire family, like a town park with a splash pad, skatepark, and mini-golf, and the nearby [North Carolina Aquarium](#) in Pine Knoll Shores.



Just south of Beaufort, this quiet fishing community known for retaining the Down East dialect has also become a popular spot for retirees. [Harkers Island](#) is served by a post office, a few restaurants, and a grocery store, and is primarily appreciated for its small-town feel and slowing life down to a pace that's nice and easy. Stay in a home on the sound side for a great view of the [Cape Lookout Lighthouse](#).