

Southern Living

This North Carolina Coastline Offers 85 Miles Of Historic Towns, Crystal Clear Waters, And Wild Horses



The South is known for its beaches, and whether it's during the heat of summer or the dead of winter, there's something about the crashing waves and sandy coastline that fosters relaxation. And while your mind may immediately go to the always sunny [beaches in Florida](#) or the upscale vibe of [Hilton Head Island](#), the often overlooked sleeper towns are well worth a visit.

When planning your next beach getaway, North Carolina's [Crystal Coast](#) should top your list. From quaint historic districts filled with shops and eateries—all of which are locally owned—to pristine stretches of sand ripe for taking a sunset walk, there's something new to discover in every corner. No matter what's on your agenda, a Crystal Coast vacation can suit, even if your itinerary includes planning to do nothing at all.



Credit: Peter Frank Edwards

Where Is North Carolina's Crystal Coast?

If you're familiar with the [Outer Banks](#)—a line of coastal North Carolina islands—the Crystal Coast is situated in the southern part and spans 85 miles. The region encompasses remote islands, urban areas, and a wide range of activities to suit almost any type of to-do list.

Whether you choose to relax in a vacation rental set against the blue-green waters of [Emerald Isle](#), peruse the quaint shops of [Beaufort](#), or rent a UTV to explore Cape Lookout, plenty of surprises—and things to do—await.



Paddle-boarding in Emerald Isle.

Best Things To Do

Spend Time on the Water

While you definitely want to make time to walk on the sand and stick your toes into the sea—the beaches at Emerald Isle and Atlantic Beach are ideal for doing so—there are other ways to experience the ocean. After a short lesson, you can explore Bogue Sound by slowly paddling through estuaries with [Emerald Isle Paddle Tours](#). If you prefer a more leisurely pace, book a cruise with [Lookout Cruises](#). Whether you select their six-hour tour to Cape Lookout or the 90-minute sunset voyage, you'll experience time on the water surrounded by stunning 360-degree views.

Get Close to Marine Life

A visit to the [NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores](#) offers the opportunity to get up close to aquatic species, such as river otters and loggerhead sea turtles. Their 306,000-gallon ocean habitat is complete with a replica shipwreck that houses sharks, tarpon, and several other fish species. One perk is that your entry fee helps support conservation efforts. You can also get a glimpse of the rehabilitation process for animals during one of the behind-the-scenes tours. Due to the aquarium's popularity, purchasing a timed ticket in advance is recommended.

Hike Around a Historic Spot

[Fort Macon State Park](#) is suitable for both history and nature lovers. A pre-Civil War fort is at its center, and the park also served to protect the coastal region during World War II. If you're looking for a spot to hike, select the 3.2-mile Elliott Coues Nature Trail, where you can explore the marsh, dunes, and maritime forest. For a shorter walk, consider the quarter-mile Yarrow's Loop, a nature trail that features informational placards about the area's flora and fauna. Guests can also swim, fish, and bike in specific areas within the park.



Credit: Courtesy Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

Take a Different Type of Farm Tour

Seafood lovers should definitely prioritize heading to one of the local farms—the water-centric kind. Not to be missed are the excursions led by [Oysters Carolina](#), where, depending on the weather, you can pick oysters, ride to a sandbar, and then casually consume oysters surrounded by your fellow-harvesting friends. Caviar-curious folks will enjoy spending time at [Marshallberg Farm](#), where you can take a tour of their facility and do a champagne-included caviar tasting. If you're planning to take some home, bring a cooler to keep the product chilled.

Explore a Remote Island

The truly adventurous will enjoy the excitement of traversing [Cape Lookout National Seashore](#) while driving a UTV. The bonus of the experience is that you need to take a ferry ride from Harkers Island to get there. You can upgrade your ferry ticket to include a stop at [Shackleford Banks](#), where you can usually spot some of the 100 free-roaming horses. Cape Lookout is very remote with spotty cell service (if any), but you can view the lighthouse, ride to see buildings of the historic district, and ride on the beach, where you'll find dedicated fishermen—and women—angling for the perfect catch.



The wild horses of Shackleford Banks.

Credit: Penny Britt/Getty Images

Learn Something New

If you enjoy learning new skills, consider taking a class during your stay. [BluSail Golitz Studios](#) in Morehead City is a creativity-inducing place to play with clay. A husband and wife team—she paints and he makes pottery—owns the studio and designs seasonal, but simple, pottery projects for those who want to get their hands dirty. Nearby is [Wine & Design](#), where you can take a paint and sip class or sign up for one of their seasonal offerings, such as making stained glass earrings or experiencing a cookie decorating lesson. [Sipspiration](#) in Beaufort also has a variety of courses for those who want to DIY.



Fish Hut Grill in Emerald Isle.
Credit: Photo: Jennifer Prince

Where To Eat and Drink

Rise and Shine at a Local Breakfast Spot

For a hearty Southern breakfast before a day on the water, fuel up at [The Trading Post](#) in Emerald Isle. Or wake up and head to [Oceana Pier House](#) for a well-thought-out menu and spectacular views from the pier in Atlantic Beach. For a relaxed, coffee shop vibe in an upscale setting, pop into [Mug Shot](#) in Morehead City, where you can sit and work remotely or chat as you sip their latest coffee creation. In Beaufort, you'll find [Historic Grounds Coffee](#), a coffee shop that offers a variety of gift items, including antiques and pottery.

Stop for a Midday Bite

[Moonrakers](#) in Beaufort offers delicious food and drinks, served in both indoor and outdoor spaces, including a rooftop with a water view. Although [Fish Hut Grill](#) typically has a line out its door, don't let that scare you away. Customers order at a counter (hence the line) and then seat themselves as they wait for food to be delivered to the table. When the day calls for a relaxed, quick meal, don't sleep on [Tower 7](#), which is right on the water and serves fresh, tasty Mexican food with a Baja flair. When you need an on-the-go meal for the ferry, order a salad or sandwich from [Turner Street Market](#) to eat on the way.



34 Degrees North in Beaufort.
Credit: Photo: Jennifer Prince

Plan a Nice Dinner

The abundance of quality seafood, coupled with the remarkable creativity of the local chefs, almost makes it impossible to cull down the list of dinner restaurants. In Beaufort, have dinner with a view at [34 Degrees North](#), then stop by [City Kitchen](#) for dessert. It serves locally sourced fare with water views, but the capstone is the house-made Sticky Toffee Pudding. Beaufort's namesake, [Beaufort Grocery](#), and [Bahia Beach House & Surf Bar](#) in Atlantic Beach both offer full menus catering to a wide range of tastes. To concentrate on steak and seafood, drive to Morehead City to dine at [Catch 109](#), [Prime Bistro](#), or [Circa 81](#).

End the Day with a Sip

As with many other areas, the Crystal Coast has jumped onto the craft beer scene with local breweries, such as Beaufort's [Fishtowne Brew House](#) and [Shortway Brewing Co.](#) in Newport.

In addition to vodka and gin, [Bogue Sound Distillery](#) is renowned for unique whiskey flavors, such as peanut butter and salted caramel. Wine lovers should visit the tasting room of [Mountain Brook Vineyards](#) in Emerald Isle. If craft cocktails are more your speed, sip for a while at [Blue Mountain Bistro](#) to savor their twist on classic drinks.



BLUSAIL golitz studios in Morehead City.

Credit: Photo: Jennifer Prince

Where To Shop

Pop into a Farmers' Market

One of the best ways to spend a Saturday morning while getting a pulse on the community is to stop by a local farmers' market. There you'll find local producers selling tasty goods and artisans selling handcrafted wares. Both [The Market at Cedar Point](#) and [Olde Beaufort Farmers' Market](#) fit the bill perfectly. Whether you're making dinner at your rental home or restocking your gift closet, you'll find what you need while mingling with locals who call the Crystal Coast home.

Patronize Locally-Owned Boutiques

One highlight of heading to smaller towns is the presence of locally owned businesses, often with the owners themselves working in the shop. Front Street in Beaufort draws visitors due to the large number of quality stores. [Beaufort Linen Co.](#) is a Southerner's dream with its lovely selection of clothing and home goods, or stop by [Mattie King Davis Art Gallery](#) for a handmade piece. Morehead City also has a nice selection of shops. Buy handcrafted jewelry at [DP Jewelry Designs](#), browse a curated collection of home goods at [Dorsea](#), or stock your kitchen at [Ginny Gordon's](#).

Find Preloved Goods

Whether you [enjoy thrifting](#) for wall decor or picking up treasures at an antique mall, get ready to empty your trunk before going coastal. Morehead City is a haven for these types of keepsakes. Antique lovers will enjoy stepping into [Seaport Antiques](#), which is open daily, and you never know what you'll find at the well-stocked [Hope Mission Thrift Store](#). Cedar Point also has a healthy selection of vintage shops. You'll find an eclectic mix of hand-selected goods at [Red House Antiques](#), [A Muse Me Antiques & Treasures](#), and [CAPT Cardigan Vintage Heap](#).



Beaufort Hotel.

Credit: Photo: Jennifer Prince

Where To Stay

Book a Local Hotel

Staying along a strip of barrier islands definitely calls for a unique stay, and even the hotels are on board with the idea. The [Beaufort Hotel](#) overlooks Taylor Creek, making it the perfect spot for a relaxing getaway. With an [on-site restaurant](#) that overlooks the water—make reservations during sunset for a stunning vantage point of the colorful sky—and cozy, modern rooms, you won't feel like leaving at all. Another waterfront option is [Bask Hotel](#) in Morehead City, where restaurants and shops are just a few steps away. Whether you need an accessible studio room or a two-bedroom suite with a full kitchen, there are multiple options available to suit your travel needs.



Spinnaker's Reach Realty Rental on Emerald Isle.
Credit: Photo: Jennifer Prince

Have a House to Yourselves

The Crystal Coast is the ideal destination for a family getaway, and everyone from grandma to the newest grandbaby can enjoy time at one of the many spaces available through [Spinnaker's Reach Realty](#) or [Emerald Isle Realty](#).

From oceanside villas for four to stately homes for 20+ guests, you can book a rental for a romantic getaway or your next family vacation. Many of the rentals also feature pools, adding an extra element of interest, and pet-friendly accommodations welcome the furriest guests.

Get Cozy at a Bed-and-Breakfast

For a true home away from home vibe, while feeling attended to, choose one of the local bed and breakfasts along the Crystal Coast. In the heart of Beaufort, you'll find several B&Bs so you can have a cozy stay within walking distance of waterfront shops and restaurants.

Stay at [Inn on Turner](#), where their breakfasts feature local cuisine and even their toiletries are handmade. Or you could choose one of the thoughtfully decorated rooms at [Ann Street Inn](#) or watch the world go by from the large front porch of [Pecan Tree Inn](#).