

Southern Living

This Hidden Crystal Coast State Park Offers Beach Days, Fishing, And A Rare Look Inside A Restored Fort

Your guide to this underrated spot.



[The Crystal Coast](#) is an 85-mile stretch along North Carolina's shore, known for its white-sand beaches, charming vacation homes, standout seafood spots, and excellent fishing. It's also a place I once called home, and one I return to year after year.

While the coastline itself is unforgettable, what many visitors overlook is the gem tucked between its beaches: [Fort Macon State Park](#). Here, travelers can explore scenic trails, unwind by the water, and step into a rich slice of coastal history all in one visit.

Where Is Fort Macon State Park?

Fort Macon State Park sits in Carteret County at the eastern edge of Atlantic Beach, roughly 40 miles southeast of [New Bern](#). Spanning 424 acres, the park offers a mix of lush natural landscapes and unspoiled shoreline to explore.

What Makes The Park Unique

The defining feature of Fort Macon State Park is its beautifully restored pre-Civil War fort. Built between 1826 and 1834, Fort Macon played roles in multiple conflicts, including the Spanish-American War and World War II, and even served as a military prison before the state acquired it and transformed the area into a public park.



What makes the site especially remarkable is how much of the original structure remains intact; many forts from this era were destroyed, but Fort Macon has been carefully preserved and restored, offering a rare glimpse into the past.

Visitors can wander the fort's exterior grounds and step inside to explore reconstructed living quarters. Today, the park enhances that experience with guided tours, live cannon and musket demonstrations, and exhibit rooms that bring the region's history to life.



What To Do While You're There

Beyond exploring the fort's history, joining a guided tour, or wandering its grounds, Fort Macon State Park offers plenty of other ways to enjoy your time in the park.

Appreciate The Hiking And Biking Trails

Fort Macon State Park features nearly five miles of trails to explore, more than enough to get outside and stretch your legs along North Carolina's scenic coastline. Along the way, visitors are treated to views of marshlands, rolling dunes, and the open ocean.

One standout is the [Elliot Coues Trail](#), a roughly 3.3-mile loop that offers a little bit of everything. It's an ideal route for those looking to experience both greenery and ocean views, and it typically takes about an hour to complete.

Relax By The Water

Having lived in the area, I can say one of the best ways to experience Fort Macon State Park is simply by slowing down and enjoying the water. With beach access along both the ocean and the inlet, it's an easy choice for a relaxed, no-frills beach day.



Of course, a spot this good doesn't stay secret for long. It's especially popular in the summer, and parking can fill up quickly on weekends. I'd suggest visiting during the shoulder seasons if you can, but if you're heading to Fort Macon State Park in peak summer, plan to arrive early to secure both parking and a good spot on the beach.

Cast A Line

The [Crystal Coast](#) is one of North Carolina's premier fishing destinations, and Fort Macon State Park is one of the best places along the shoreline to cast a line. Anglers can enjoy surf fishing right from the beach or fish from one of the rock jetties, narrow structures that stretch from the shore into the ocean. Depending on the season, catches can include bluefish, pompano, and even flounder.

Know Before You Go

Fort Macon State Park is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., except on Christmas Day when the park is closed. One of its standout features is that admission is free, making it an easy, budget-friendly option for a family day along the coast.