

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

This North Carolina Beach Town Has Clear, Caribbean-like Waters—No Passport Required

Emerald Isle, North Carolina, is perfect for both families and couples, with tasty seafood, oceanfront homes, and beautiful beaches.



The Bogue Inlet Pier at Emerald Isle, North Carolina.
Credit: Kenneth Keifer/Getty Images

TOP 5 CAN'T MISS

- For beachfront access, stay at Islander Hotel & Resort or rent a spacious home through Emerald Isle Realty.
- Take in the gorgeous water views while spending the day on one of the wide beaches.
- Fill up on tacos and all manner of local seafood at Fish Hut Grill.
- Pick up the newest bestseller from Emerald Isle Books & Toys.
- Visit in the fall and winter for fewer crowds, comfortable weather, and fresh oysters.

You don't have to travel to the Caribbean for a glimpse of clear blue-green waters. In fact, you don't even need a passport. All you need to do is book a trip to Emerald Isle, a laid-back [beach town](#) and popular vacation spot on North Carolina's Crystal Coast.

The water off the coast of Emerald Isle doesn't have the murky, brownish hues you might expect at other beaches along the coast. Depending on the weather conditions (storms and strong winds reduce clarity), the water can appear nearly transparent and almost turquoise — hence the town's name.

“Since we are oriented east to west, we are tucked into the North Carolina coastline,” Julia Batten Wax, the second-generation owner of her family business, Emerald Isle Realty, tells *Travel + Leisure*. “Sheltered this way, our ocean is gentler than the Northern Outer Banks, and ocean waters are warmer, also thanks to the Gulf Stream passing by offshore.” She also says this position provides a “seasonal arc of amazing sunsets and sunrises over the Atlantic Ocean and Bogue Sound.”

Along with its natural beauty, Emerald Isle boasts all the essentials for a [classic beach vacation](#) — from oceanfront homes and local seafood spots to a lengthy paved bike path and all sorts of water-based activities. So, if you're searching for a relaxing couples getaway or a family-friendly coastal destination, look no further. Here's everything to know to plan a trip to Emerald Isle, according to two local experts.

Where to Stay



Aerial view of beach houses along the coast.
Credit: Crystal Coast N.C.

The Islander Hotel & Resort

“The [Islander Hotel & Resort](#) is a great oceanfront option for a traditional resort experience with private beach access,” says Clarke Merrell, chef and owner of [81 Hospitality Group](#). Wax agrees, adding that it’s “walking distance to a fun new shopping and dining area also located on Islander Drive.” She recommends requesting one of their newly renovated rooms if available.

Lighthouse Inn & Suites

“There’s [Lighthouse Inn & Suites](#), located right next to the Salty Pirate Water Park and within walking distance to several good restaurants,” says Merrell. Part of the Best Western Signature Collection, the 25-key hotel offers complimentary breakfast and an outdoor seasonal pool. There are also ADA rooms, elevators, and accessible parking.

Emerald Isle Realty

“For large family gatherings, [Emerald Isle Realty](#) has many great rental options,” says Merrell. With more than 600 vacation homes in the area, you can narrow down your search based on location, building type (single-family, duplex, or condo), and number of bedrooms. You can even choose a property with easy beach access and incredible views from a private deck. “There’s a special blessing to being able to run down your boardwalk anytime of the day or night and be toes in the sand whenever you wish,” says Wax. “Watching the light change from rosy dawn to sparkling diamonds of sunlight at noon, then to the deepening lavender- and peach-hued sunset— all from your oceanfront deck— never gets old.”

Best Things to Do



Aerial view of young boys running on the beach.
Credit: Crystal Coast N.C.

Have a beach day.

If you're coming to Emerald Isle, you're likely looking forward to a few blissful days on the beach—and the 12-mile stretch of island delivers. "The beaches are clean, easily accessible, and, being south-facing, the water is warm much of the year," says Merrell.

"Wide beaches and calm seas make this the perfect salty playground or restful retreat for those spending the day in the shade of a Shibumi tent," adds Wax, who also notes that Emerald Isle is a sea turtle sanctuary; nesting season starts in May and ends in September. "We deeply care about preserving our coastal environment, so much of our island has been thoughtfully and carefully protected. Our sea oats and other native plants and wildflowers add their touch of beauty to the dunes," she explains.

Go fishing.

"We have the Bogue Inlet Pier for in-shore fishing, and the Gulf Stream is just a boat ride away for some world-class offshore fishing," says Merrell. If you don't have your own boat, you can charter one from [Emerald Isle Adventures](#). You can also try your hand at either surf fishing or fishing in the marshes along the sound side. "Grab your fishing pole or crab nets and head for Emerald Isle's public soundfront dock at Cedar Street, especially wonderful at sunset on a summer evening," says Wax. Just don't forget to get your [North Carolina fishing license](#) beforehand.

Explore the Bogue Sound.

Emerald Isle may be known as a beach destination, but much of its appeal is found on the other side of the island, in the Bogue Sound. "Rent some kayaks or paddleboards and enjoy the quieter side of Emerald Isle," says Wax.

"Watch in wonder as great blue herons stalk through the tall marsh grasses. Charter an eco-tour boat ride, and delight in dolphins swimming alongside [you] and appearing to smile for your photographs." If you prefer to go with a guide, sign up for a tour with [Emerald Isle Paddle Tours](#).

Best Restaurants



Seafood dishes from Caribsea.
Credit: Ashley Brooks/Caribsea

Cap'n Willis Seafood Market

It wouldn't be a beach vacation without some fresh seafood. "[Cap'n Willis Seafood Market](#) tops my list for incredible local shrimp, crabmeat, grouper, flounder, and triggerfish. They will steam your shrimp or crabs and also make delicious coleslaw and Key lime pie," says Wax. "That's a wonderful seafood meal right there that you can take home and eat in the comfort of your beach cottage."

RuckerJohns

"I enjoy [RuckerJohns](#) for a classic family meal experience," says Merrell. The Emerald Isle location has a menu that basically guarantees you won't leave hungry. Load up on the lightly battered shrimp, shrimp and grits, or the nachos, the latter of which is covered in homemade chili and grated cheddar and Monterey Jack cheeses.

Caribsea

“For great atmosphere and gracious service, we love [Caribsea](#). Chef Patrick is creative with his use of seasonal produce and the freshest catch of the day,” says Wax. She also notes you’ll get amazing views of the Emerald Isle bridge, Bogue Sound, and the Atlantic Ocean, “all while sipping on craft cocktails, beers from our famous North Carolina breweries, and one of the area’s best wine lists.”

Fish Hut Grill

Both Wax and Merrell recommend [Fish Hut Grill](#) for seafood. Saddle up to one of the outdoor tables and get ready to feast on fish tacos, peel-and-eat shrimp, or a hearty crab cake sandwich. Wash it all down with a blueberry jalapeño margarita or the house sangria.

Thirsty Surfer

Wax says [Thirsty Surfer](#) is a new addition to the island that has “quickly become a favorite hangout for locals.” The classic beach bar serves up burgers, wings, and local seafood tacos from its outdoor food truck. There’s also live entertainment on select days during the week.

Best Shopping



Interior shelves at Emerald Isle Wine Market.
Credit: Emerald Isle Wine Market

Winberry Farm Market

Wax calls [Winberry Farm Market](#) in Cedar Point, just off the island, her “favorite farm stand.” “The Winberry family grows the prized Bogue Sound watermelons—so flavorful and kissed by those salty breezes. We love their locally grown cantaloupes, corn, tomatoes, butter beans, strawberries, and blueberries,” she adds.

Emerald Isle Wine Market

“A fun stop on everyone’s list should be the locally owned [Emerald Isle Wine Market](#) on Coast Guard Road,” says Wax. “Nancee Allen has a connoisseur’s eye for great wines at superb prices, an outstanding craft beer selection, and some tasty gourmet treats, including superstar TV chef Vivian Howard’s [Viv’s Fridg](#) of appetizers, entrees, and desserts.”

Emerald Isle Books & Toys

Forgot your book at home? No problem. “[Emerald Isle Books & Toys](#) is one of my favorites for an exceptional collection of books for readers of all ages and also a delightful collection of toys, puzzles, crafts, and games,” says Wax. You’ll find it in the Emerald Plantation Shopping Center—a hub of stores that also includes [Wind Tide](#), [Beaufort Olive Oil Company](#), and [Carteret Country Store](#).

Best Time to Visit



Aerial view of people walking on an Emerald Isle beach.
Credit: Crystal Coast N.C.

While you might expect summer to be the best time to visit Emerald Isle, both Wax and Merrell explain the off-season and shoulder seasons have their own appeal. “My personal favorite time of year is the fall. The weather is perfect, the water is still warm, but the beaches are less crowded with school being back in session,” says Merrell, adding there’s also beach-driving access in the off-season.

“Winter—our quietest season—is also when the turn of the earth has the sun setting over the ocean in the southwest sky from winter solstice to early March,” says Wax. This gives way to sunsets that turn the sky “a deep cardinal red.” Fall and winter, from October through March, bring oyster season. “[You’ll get] the chance to discover our mariculture and feast on some salty, briny selects pulled from the rivers and sounds nearby,” she adds.

How to Get There



Aerial view of colorful beach homes.
Credit: Crystal Coast N.C.

Emerald Isle is located on Bogue Banks, one of the Crystal Coast’s barrier islands. The closest airports are Albert J. Ellis Airport (OAJ) in Jacksonville, North Carolina, and the Coastal Carolina Regional Airport (EWN) in [New Bern](#). From either airport, you’ll need to rent a car and drive the remaining hour to Emerald Isle.

How to Get Around



Pier shot with beach and ocean in the background at Emerald Isle.

Credit: Visit NC

There are many sidewalks, nature trails, and bike paths throughout Emerald Isle. Like many beach towns, it can also be traversed by golf cart (which can be rented from [Emerald Isle Golf Cart Rentals & Sales](#)); you just can't drive on Highway 58 or Coast Guard Road.