

TRAVEL+ LEISURE

North Carolina's Crystal Coast Is an 85-mile Stretch of Quaint Small Towns, White-sand Beaches, and Plenty of Southern Charm

Here's what you need to know about planning a trip to the Crystal Coast in North Carolina.



Aerial view of Cape Lookout.
Credit: jared lloyd/Getty Images

TOP 5 CAN'T MISS

- Stay at the Atlantis, a vintage 1960s lodge in Pine Knoll Shores with ocean-view rooms and complimentary beach chairs.
- See the wild horses on Cape Lookout National Seashore.
- Rent a kayak or paddleboard, and get out on the local paddle trails.
- Fill up on shrimp burgers from Big Oak Drive-In & BBQ or Captain's Kitchen food truck in Indian Beach.
- Plan your trip for the spring or fall to enjoy pleasant weather without the summer crowds.

You've probably heard of the [Outer Banks](#)—maybe you've even visited them. But the Southern Outer Banks, also known as the Crystal Coast, is its own distinct region of [North Carolina](#). The 85-mile stretch of coastline and barrier islands reaches from Cape Lookout to the mouth of the New River. Within those boundaries are a number of gorgeous island strips and quaint waterfront communities—the most prominent of which are located on Bogue Banks, a barrier island that encompasses Atlantic Beach, [Emerald Isle](#), Pine Knoll Shores, and Indian Beach and Salter Path. Other popular destinations along the Crystal Coast include Beaufort, Harkers Island, Morehead City, and Swansboro. No matter which part of the region you visit, though, you can expect to find plenty of relaxation and natural beauty.

“The Crystal Coast is a quiet stretch of [small towns](#) and pristine white-sand beaches. We have ample boating, fishing, and scuba diving, and there's a rich history and abundant wildlife,” says Hallock Cooper Howard, co-owner and chef of [Amos Mosquito's](#) restaurant in Atlantic Beach. Mark Holbrook, manager at [Paddle NC](#), says the area's “biggest asset” is its Southern charm—a mix of slower-paced living and a welcoming atmosphere.

To create our official guide to North Carolina's Crystal Coast, we tapped a few locals throughout the region to share their picks on how to plan the perfect trip.

Hotels & Resorts



Exterior of Pecan Tree Inn.
Credit: Courtesy of Visit NC

The Atlantis

"The [Atlantis](#) ... is a 1960s beachfront lodge that you would have grown up going to, but modernized to current standards," says John and Beth Blackwelder, owner of [The Aerie](#), a bed-and-breakfast in [New Bern](#). You may come for the dog-friendly suites with fully equipped kitchens, but you'll stay for the amazing views from your ocean-facing porch.

Oceanana Family Motel

"The [Oceanana](#) has an assortment of suites and standard motel rooms. The property offers a free continental breakfast in the summer and watermelon parties on the oceanfront lawn," says Howard. Plus, she notes it's right next door to the only fishing pier in Atlantic Beach. "Be sure to stroll out to the end of the pier and grab a frozen painkiller at [The Barnacle](#)," she says.

Pecan Tree Inn

"[Pecan Tree Inn](#) is a short walk to downtown shopping, dining, and museums in historic Beaufort," says Blackwelder. Though the house itself was built in 1866, it's been remodeled several times over the years to ensure the rooms and common areas blend modern comforts with historic charm. When guests aren't out exploring Beaufort, they can relax on the porches or garden patio, preferably with a sweet tea (or wine) in hand.

Islander Hotel & Resort

If you're basing yourself in Emerald Isle, Ricky Farrington, owner of [Emerald Isle Paddle Tours](#), recommends [Islander Hotel & Resort](#). The oceanfront hotel is your classic summertime getaway, with beach access, a pool with loungers and cabanas, and areas where you can grill or picnic when the weather cooperates.

The William & Garland Motel

"[The William & Garland Motel](#) in Salter Path is a beachfront motel featured on HGTV's *100 Day Hotel Challenge*," says Blackwelder, who describes it as a "retro-hip motor lodge." Not only can guests take advantage of the property's private beach access, but they can also enjoy the motel's sauna, outdoor grill, fire pit, and lounge deck.

Best Things to Do



Wild horses in Cape Lookout National Seashore.
Credit: Courtesy of Visit NC

Venture to the Cape Lookout National Seashore.

There are 56 miles of undeveloped beaches, dunes, and marshes on the Cape Lookout National Seashore, a protected chain of three barrier islands: Shackleford Banks, North Core Banks, and South Core Banks. Here, says Blackwelder, you can “experience the Outer Banks as it was before it was developed.”

“These barrier islands, referred to by locals as ‘Shack’ and ‘The Cape,’ are only accessible by boat,” says Howard. You don’t need a private boat, though. The [Island Express Ferry Service](#) runs passenger ferries from Beaufort and Harkers Island. “On the way there, you may see dolphins playing or rays jumping. As you walk along the shoreline, look for hermit crabs, horseshoe crabs, and a dizzying array of shore birds,” she says. Plus, keep an eye out for the famous wild horses. “In addition to just being beautiful and fun to explore, our barrier islands are home to herds of wild horses. How they got there is a bit of a mystery, but it’s fun to see them strolling along and frolicking on the beach,” Howard adds.

Visit nearby state parks and nature preserves.

“If land is more in your comfort zone, then the historical sights and state parks are plentiful, with trails, beaches, and historical reenactments,” says Holbrook. Howard says [Fort Macon State Park](#) is particularly great for “swimming, beaching, fishing, and picnicking,” but, she adds, the “real gem” of the fort is its nature trail. “The [Elliot Coues Trail](#) winds through soundside salt marshes and oceanside sand dunes that offer sweeping views of the Atlantic Ocean. On both sides, there are shady passages through the maritime forest. Keep your eyes peeled for rabbits, an occasional snake, and hundreds of types of birds,” she says.

The [Rachel Carson Reserve](#) is another destination where you can immerse yourself in the region’s marshes, dunes, maritime forests, and beaches. South of Beaufort, the area consists of Carrot Island, Town Marsh, Bird Shoal, and Horse Island. James Frey, the owner of [Crystal Coast Oysters](#) in Morehead City, recommends “getting out and going on a ferry to visit Carrot Island and getting to see the horses.” While there, you can also go bird-watching and walk along the nature trails.

Spend a day in historic Beaufort.

Visitors with an affinity for history and local culture will find endless entertainment in downtown Beaufort, not to be confused with the [South Carolina destination](#) of the same name. The Crystal Coast town has a waterfront with all sorts of shops, art galleries, and restaurants. “There are beautiful yachts and sailboats moored in the inlet, and the Beaufort Historical Association has grounds with an old jail, restored homes, and even an old apothecary,” says Howard. She also suggests stopping by the [North Carolina Maritime Museum](#) to “learn about boatbuilding and the history of Blackbeard the pirate,” who was known to frequent the Crystal Coast. (Note: The North Carolina Maritime Museum is temporarily closed for construction; the 2025 opening date has yet to be announced.) For an extra dose of history, hop aboard the [Beaufort historic double-decker bus tour](#).

Get out on the water.

Ferries aren't the only method of traversing the waterways along the Crystal Coast. “Kayaking the waters where Blackbeard sailed in is my highest recommendation,” says Holbrook. Farrington also suggests “renting a paddleboard and exploring the marshes.” If you opt to go alone (versus a guided trip), you can rent boats from [Island Water Sports](#) in Emerald Isle/Indian Beach or [Beaufort Paddle](#).

Enjoy a classic beach day.

You may be tempted to fill your days with activities, but don't forget to leave time to enjoy what Blackwelder calls the region's “off-the-beaten-path vibe.” For some, that might mean fishing or sailing, but for others, it's simply grabbing a lounge chair or two and spending all day on the beaches of Emerald Isle or Atlantic Beach.

Best Restaurants



Customers ordering at Big Oak Drive In.
Credit: Courtesy of Visit NC

Indian Beach and Salter Path

If you're visiting the Crystal Coast for the first time, Farrington suggests driving "down to Indian Beach to the Captain's Kitchen food truck to get a super shrimp burger." Just be sure to check the food truck's [Facebook page](#) beforehand to check its exact location. Blackwelder's pick for a shrimp burger—or a hot dog or barbecue sandwich—is [Big Oak Drive-In & BBQ](#) down the street in Salter Path.

Emerald Isle

"[Fish Hut Grill](#) in Emerald Isle is my favorite restaurant to get seafood," says Farrington. The menu features all kinds of North Carolina favorites, like peel-and-eat shrimp, dry rub wings, and fried fish. Holbrook also suggests [RuckerJohns](#), a waterfront eatery serving up burgers, sandwiches, seafood, and ribs.

Beaufort

“One of the best restaurants I found in North Carolina is located right in Beaufort. It’s called [Blue Moon Bistro](#). The chef, Josh, does a wonderful job sourcing local products and making sure everything is tasty,” says Frey. For what Howard calls an “unparalleled lunch or brunch experience,” head to [Beaufort Grocery Co.](#) They have an excellent wine list and fabulous salads and sandwiches. On weekends, their brunch includes bottomless mimosas, eggs Benedict, freshly baked pastries, and fluffy pancakes.

And if you want the best pizza in town? Order from [Black Sheep](#). “It’s a lively spot with fun decor. In addition to pizza, they have a variety of charcuterie, salads, and sandwiches. Don’t miss the delicious beet salad or the decadent macaroni and cheese,” Howard adds. “[Moonrakers](#) is also a wonderful spot to get appetizers, sit on the rooftop bar, and enjoy maybe a dolphin [spotting] or a sunset,” says Frey.

Morehead City

[Parrott's on Eleventh](#) in Morehead City is another one of Farrington’s picks, and Howard is partial to [Full Circle](#). “The menu ranges from burgers to pizza to fresh local fish preparations. The dining room is tiny and cozy and has a great vibe. Be sure to try the curry fried oysters,” she says.

Best Shopping



Beaufort's busy boardwalk.
Credit: Courtesy of Visit NC

Atlantic Beach

Howard recommends a selection of independently owned shops in Atlantic Beach, including [The Posh Pelican](#), [Atlantic Beach Surf Shop](#), and [Marsh's Surf Shop](#). Between the three, you'll find everything you need for a laid-back vacation at the beach—bathing suits, sandals, surfboards, souvenir T-shirts, and more.

Morehead City

"In downtown Morehead, you shouldn't miss [Dee Gee's Gifts & Books](#). This landmark gift shop has a selection of home goods, books by local authors, and baby gifts," says Howard, who also adds [Z & Z Designs](#), [Dorsea](#), [Deepwater Boutique](#), and [Backshore Living](#) to her list of best stores in the area. While there, be sure to stop by [Core Sound Store](#), which Blackwelder recommends for local handmade goods, sold to support the [Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center](#).

Beaufort

You'll find a variety of local shops down on the Beaufort waterfront. Howard suggests popping into [Island Proper](#) and [Beaufort Linen Co.](#) The [Beaufort General Store](#) is also a good pick for fudge, ice cream, and souvenir T-shirts — plus a healthy dose of summertime nostalgia.

Best Time to Visit

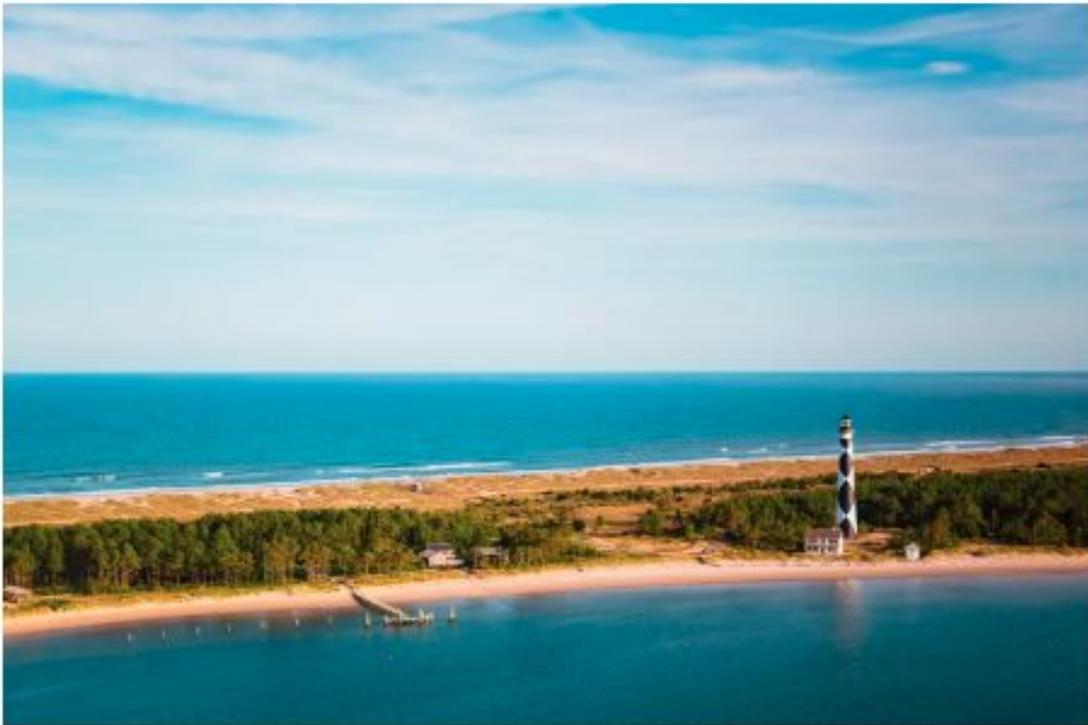


A crowd fishing on the Oceanana Fishing Pier in Atlantic Beach.
Credit: Courtesy of Visit NC

Summer may be the season most travelers make their way to the Crystal Coast, but the consensus among locals is that the spring and the fall are the best times to visit this part of the state. "My favorite time of year is early fall," says Howard. "After the busy summer season, the beaches and waterways become less populated. The water is still warm, the sunsets are spectacular, and it feels like you have it all to yourself."

Spring is just as magical. "With everything starting to come back to life, you get to see the seagrass change from brown to a nice green," says Frey, adding that the water also "starts to get more active with critters."

How to Get There



Aerial view of the Cape Lookout National Seashore.
Credit: Courtesy of Visit NC

Coastal Carolina Regional Airport (EWN) in New Bern is the closest airport to the towns and beaches that make up the Crystal Coast—about 45 minutes away—but flights are limited. If you're flying to the region, other options include the Albert J. Ellis Airport (OAJ) in Jacksonville, North Carolina (a little over an hour away), and Wilmington International Airport (ILM) in Wilmington (about two hours away). Raleigh-Durham International Airport (RDU) is the largest airport in the area, although it's about three hours from your final destination. No matter which airport you fly into, you'll need to rent a car to get to and around the Crystal Coast.

How to Get Around

Most travel along the Crystal Coast is done by car. If you're planning to explore a few of the towns, you'll take the main connection within the area, U.S. 70; it passes through Morehead City and down to Atlantic Beach. All of the coastal communities are relatively flat, so you can also rent bikes (or a golf cart) to get around your immediate area.