

AXIOS Charlotte

A weekend guide to North Carolina's Crystal Coast



Atlantic Beach, seen here, is one of several beaches along The Crystal Coast. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

North Carolina's Crystal Coast is well within road trip range for most North Carolinians, sitting just under three hours from Raleigh and five from Charlotte.

Why it matters: [Beach season is upon us](#). Use this guide to the Crystal Coast to plan your next getaway.

Context: The Crystal Coast is an [85-mile stretch of coastline](#), also known as the Southern Outer Banks.

- It's home to laid-back, serene beaches like Atlantic Beach and Emerald Isle, and seaside towns like Beaufort and Morehead City.

I recently took a trip there and put together this guide to help you plan where to stay, what to eat and which excursions to take.

- **Pro tip:** If you're looking for a more tailored guide, scroll to the bottom of this story. I've created itineraries for different types of trips: girls' trips, family vacation, foodie-focused and wellness reset.

Of note: I visited the Crystal Coast as part of a press trip on behalf of Axios Charlotte. While most activities and meals were pre-arranged, all opinions in this guide are entirely my own.

Where to eat

The obvious choice is seafood, but you may be surprised by how much range the Crystal Coast food scene has.



Oysters Oaxafeller baked with poblano pepper, chorizo and manchego from Bahia Beach Bar in Atlantic Beach. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Coffee + Breakfast/Brunch

The Banks Grill: Find gooey cinnamon rolls, hearty breakfast plates, and a "local's menu" filled with go-to orders from regulars in this Morehead City breakfast staple tucked in a shopping center.

- Stop by: [2900 Arendell St., Morehead City](#)



Yes, that's how much cream cheese frosting you can expect with just one cinnamon roll. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Noontide Coffee + Kitchen: Choose from a menu of fruit smoothies, giant iced coffees and made-to-order breakfast sandwiches in a chic, coastal space. Order at the counter and sit inside or take it to go for pre-beach fuel.

- Stop by: [4068C Arendell St., Morehead City](#)



The spirulina powder is what gives this smoothie its vibrant blue hue. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

The Trading Post: A classic Southern eatery in Emerald Isle with a menu full of comfort foods — think chocolate chip pancakes, shrimp and grits and big mugs of hot coffee the staff keeps filled to the brim.

- **Stop by:** [8302 Emerald Dr., Emerald Isle](#) (If the weather allows, request outdoor seating).



Bacon, grits, pancakes, sunshine. Yes, please. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Sugarloaf Island Deli and Yellowfin Pub: A lively indoor/outdoor restaurant on the Morehead City waterfront that's an easy choice for a filling lunch or a round of cold beers after a day on the water.

- **Stop by:** [501 Evans St., Morehead City](#)



Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Dinner

Amos Mosquito's: Seafood is the name of the game at this eclectic, family-friendly Atlantic Beach spot, with starters like warm, cheesy lobster-crab dip, fried fish platters, a sushi menu and boat drinks for days.

- Stop by: [703 E Fort Macon Road, Atlantic Beach](#)



Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Bahia Beach House & Surf Bar: With a modern coastal aesthetic, Bahia in Atlantic Beach feels like something you'd see in Malibu, California. Expect a menu of Baja-inspired small plates and cocktails — think ahi tuna nachos, spicy shrimp tacos, blood orange margs and frosé.

- Stop by: [208 West Dr., Atlantic Beach](#)



Bahia Beach House and Surf Bar. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

City Kitchen: If you're after an unforgettable steak dinner, City Kitchen, located above Town Creek Marina in Beaufort, will deliver. Don't leave without ordering the sticky toffee pudding. If desserts aren't your thing, stop by their outdoor tiki bar instead.

- **Stop by:** [114 A Town Crk Dr., Beaufort](#)



Steak and scallops served with duck fat potatoes from City Kitchen. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Pro tip: Find more of my favorite Crystal Coast eats at the bottom of this guide.

Things to do

Sure, a beach trip can be a chance to unplug, and the Crystal Coast offers plenty of opportunities to do just that. But if you'd rather stay booked and busy, these six experiences, hosted by local businesses, are a must-add to your itinerary.



Two tiki boats for a sunset cruise or stages for a dance battle on the water? In our case, both. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Take a paddleboard yoga class with [Emerald Isle Paddle Tours](#)

- **What to expect:** A 45-minute, all-levels yoga flow taught on a stand-up paddleboard on the marshes of Bogue Sound. Go all out with the poses, and don't be afraid to fall in the water — it's part of the fun.
- **If you go:** Lessons are \$50 per person and meet by the dock at [6800 Emerald Dr., Emerald Isle.](#)

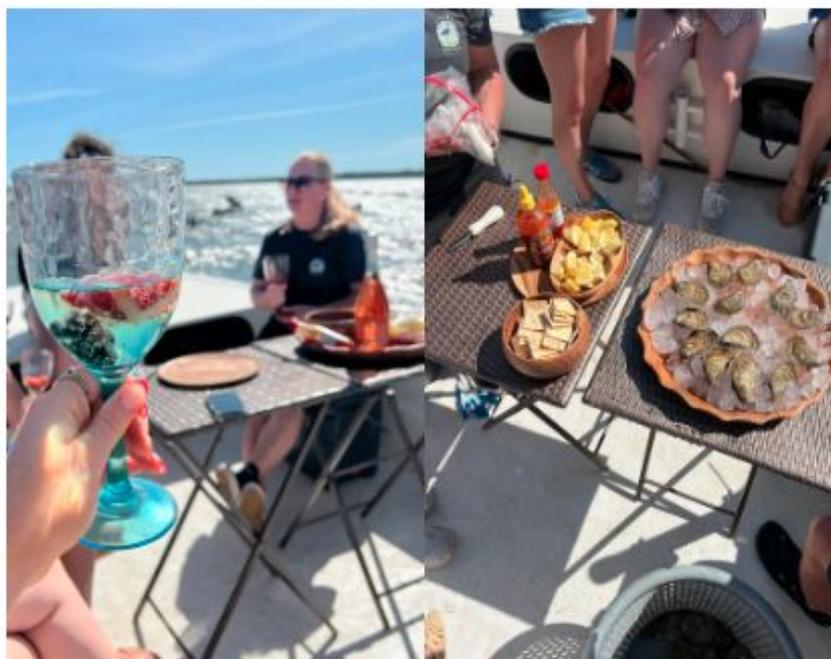


Trying to master warrior two on a paddle board sent me straight into the water shortly after this photo was taken.

Photo: Courtesy of Emerald Isle Paddle Tours.

Shuck oysters and pop champagne on a boating excursion to [Seashore Oyster Company's](#) shellfish farm

- **What to expect:** You'll reach the family-run shellfish farm by boat, where the farm's owners will pull oysters straight from the water and teach you how to shuck them. Then, enjoy your bounty paired with lemon, hot sauce, crackers and champagne.
- **If you go:** Tours depart from [229 Willet Drive in Beaufort](#). Email Seashoreoyster@gmail.com to inquire about booking.



Nancy Dupuis, to the right of the wine glass, is the owner of Seashore Oyster Company. She and her son Max took us out to their shellfish farm in Beaufort, where we got a master class in how to shuck oysters. (They're pros, but it's harder than it looks!). Photos: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Take in golden hour aboard a Tiki Boat with [Cruisin' Tikis Beaufort](#)

- **What to expect:** A two-hour, BYOB sunset cruise for up to six passengers. You can book individual seats or reserve the whole boat for your group.
- **If you go:** It makes for a convenient post-dinner outing after City Kitchen, since it departs steps away on the Town Creek Water Marina. Tickets are \$85 per person.



Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Spot dolphins and wild horses on a boat tour with [Crystal Coast Eco Tours](#)

- **What to expect:** Led by a marine biologist, you'll embark on a tour of the Crystal Coast's barrier islands, including a view of the Cape Lookout Lighthouse. If you're lucky, you might spot bottlenose dolphins and the wild horses of Shackleford Banks.
- **If you go:** Half-day tours [start at \\$450](#). Debrief over lunch at Sugarloaf Deli and Yellowfin Pub afterwards, located just a short walk from where the boat picks up and drops off at the [Morehead City Gulf Docks](#).



I've never seen water in so many shades of blue anywhere else in NC. Even more important, do you see the wild horses behind me?! Shout-out to Capt. Jess, who got us as close as possible without disturbing them. Photos: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Go hiking, swimming or biking at [Fort Macon State Park](#)

- **What to expect:** This historic state park, located on a [restored pre-Civil War fort](#) on the Bogue Banks, is a nature lover's dream, with hiking trails, a picnic area and a lifeguard-protected swimming section.
- **Stop by:** [2303 E Fort Macon Road, Atlantic Beach.](#)



This had to be one of the best views of the entire trip (second to the dolphins and wild horses). Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Shop and stroll along [downtown Beaufort](#)

- **What to expect:** Beaufort feels like it's straight out of a [Nicholas Sparks novel](#) because it is. "A Walk to Remember" takes place in this charming seaside town.
- **Yes, and:** Beaufort's full of maritime history. Blackbeard's ship, "Queen Anne's Revenge," sank just off the coast, and you can see artifacts from the wreck at the North Carolina Maritime Museum in downtown.



Downtown Beaufort. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Where to stay

From massive beach houses near the water to cozy inns, here are a couple of lodging ideas to consider.

[Pointe of View, Atlantic Beach](#)



Pointe of View is one of Emerald Isle Realty's 700+ vacation properties along the Crystal Coast. Photo by Coastal HomePix, courtesy of Emerald Isle Realty.

If you're looking for: Ocean access and lots of space, consider a rental home with Emerald Isle Realty, like [Pointe of View](#) in Atlantic Beach.

My thought bubble: I stayed here along with six others during my trip. Each person had their own room, bathroom and balcony. With so much space, it almost felt like having the house to yourself, unless you make use of the kitchen for a dinner party or get together in the theatre room for a movie night.



The kitchen even had its own wet bar. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Specs: 8 bedrooms, 10 bathrooms, four floors.

Notable features: Swimming pool and hot tub, game room, theatre room, gourmet kitchen, outdoor shower, walkway to the beach with a covered gazebo.

[Inn on Turner, downtown Beaufort](#)



Photo: McKenzie Rankin

The vibe: A coastal boutique hotel meets contemporary bed and breakfast along Beaufort's historic waterfront district. Expect quintessential Southern hospitality, curated meals and the opportunity to socialize with other guests.

My thought bubble: While I didn't stay at The Inn on Turner, I was able to meet co-owner Kim Bell, who hosted us for brunch. She and co-owner Jonathan Haas make all of the meals in-house using locally-sourced ingredients. And every night, the two host a happy hour for guests in the garden.



Brunch in the garden at Inn on Turner. Photo: McKenzie Rankin/Axios

Specs: Four suites total (two with king beds; two with queen).

Notable features/amenities: "Field to fork" breakfasts, evening social hour, king and queen suites and a chef's table experience.

Stop by: [217 Turner St.](#)

Choose your own adventure

Whether you're seeking a wellness-centric retreat or a fun family getaway, here are must-do recommendations based on your trip's focus.

For a wellness reset:

- Start your day with a peaceful beach walk and watch the sunrise.
- Grab an iced latte or smoothie from Noontide Coffee + Kitchen.
- Sign up for a paddleboard yoga class with Emerald Isle Paddle Tours.
- If dry land is more your thing, opt for a hike and picnic at Fort Macon State Park.

For a girls' trip:

- Order all the small plates and sip on margs at Bahia.
- Cruise into golden hour with Cruisin' Tikis Beaufort. Got a go-to playlist? You can play it over the speaker.
- Enjoy oysters and champagne on a boat with Seashore Oyster Company.
- Staying at Pointe of View? Have a cozy movie night in the theatre room.

For the foodie: Here are four of the best things I ate there.

- "Mad Dar's Sandwich" at The Banks Grill. This fried hot honey chicken sandwich with pimento cheese and pickles is found on the locals' menu.
- Ahi tuna nachos from Bahia. They're served with crunchy wonton chips instead of tortilla chips.
- The "Smooth Sailing" smoothie from Noontide, made with mango, banana, pineapple and blue spirulina. Add protein powder for extra satiety.
- Steak and scallops from City Kitchen. I ordered that evening's special, but you can't go wrong trying any of the surf and turf options.

For the family vacation:

- Grab breakfast at The Trading Post.
- Have dinner at Amos' Mosquitos.
- Enjoy a beach day on Atlantic Beach (be sure to collect seashells — they're unreal).
- Go dolphin spotting with Crystal Coast Eco Tours.

What's next: We've rounded up lots more inspiration on where to go and what to expect in our guide to [North Carolina's Best Beaches](#).