



# GOING COASTAL

Explore 85 miles of beaches, historic charm and hidden treasures along the Southern shores of the Outer Banks

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Sailboats moored in the harbor channel waters by Sugarloaf Island in Morehead City.

A weekend beach getaway is always a good idea, no matter the month or season. Traveling to the coast in the fall or winter when the crowds are gone and more shells are left to discover along the shoreline makes for an easy, relaxing, off-peak season vacation. Discover the special allure of rural waterfront communities east of Beaufort down to Cape Lookout National Seashore and Cape Carteret. These barrier island towns hold treasures for history buffs, seafood lovers and those who revel in the great outdoors. So, if you're in desperate need of a break or just a slight change of pace, take our tips for a mini-holiday along North Carolina's Crystal Coast.

Set off on the slightly more than three-hour drive east on **Highway 70**, and check into the Bask Hotel in Morehead City. Be sure to ask for a high-level center suite for the best panoramic views overlooking Bogue Sound and Sugarloaf Island. The waterfront hotel is located a block from the historic Big Rock Landing weigh station and a short walk from restaurants, coffee shops and boutiques. The hotel also features a nightly cocktail reception from 5:30-7 p.m. Alternatively, you can book a rustic fishing cabin at Cape Lookout, or pitch a tent at Hammocks Beach State Park.

### IF FISHING IS YOUR THING ...

Morehead City and Atlantic Beach are widely known for their fishing opportunities, including the annual Big Rock Blue Marlin Tournament, which broke records in 2023 with a fleet of 271 registered boats and a \$5.8 million total purse. Mark your calendars now for other saltwater competitions beyond the summer months, like the Sixth Annual Emerald Isle Fall Fishing Tournament on Sept. 28 or the Atlantic Beach King Mackerel Fishing Tournament held Oct. 5-26.

But you don't have to enter a competition to enjoy the rewards of the sport. Just grab your fishing license (anyone 16 or older must have a license to fish in North Carolina; you can purchase a license online at [gooutdoorsnorthcarolina.com](http://gooutdoorsnorthcarolina.com)) and cast a line into the surf to hook bluefish, red drum, black drum, speckled trout or Spanish mackerel



Visitors can walk the ramparts of a pre-Civil War stronghold at Fort Macon.

near the Fort Macon rock jetty, or by the Bogue Inlet Pier in Emerald Isle, or the Oceanana Pier in Atlantic Beach. Or charter a boat with fisheries biologist David Berrane of Hawk Charters, who knows the deeper waters well beyond the breakers, or with Jason Frivance, U.S. Coast Guard vet and owner of Back Sound Fishing Charters.

### IF YOU LOVE SEARCHING FOR SEA GLASS AND SHELLS ...

Plan a visit during the off-peak season when frequent storms stir up buried treasure. Experienced shellers know the best time to look for intact specimens is at low tide before rising waters reclaim these marvels. We found more lettered olive shells than we could hold from Fort Macon State Park beach. We also collected a wide variety of Atlantic surf clams, sawtooth pens, banded tulips, whelks, augers, oyster drills, disk dosinia, shark's eye and baby's ear moon shells on this outing.

After shelling, we explored the bookstore, exhibits and restored quarters inside Fort Macon, which was originally designed by Brig. Gen. Simon Bernard after fighting alongside Napoleon in 1815 at the Battle of Waterloo. More than 1 million visitors each year hike and bike the nature loops at the 389-acre state park and climb the fort's ramparts overlooking the waters of Beaufort Inlet.

### IF YOU ARE LIKE AQUAMAN ...

You'll want to take a behind-the-scenes tour at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, where a guide leads visitors through a maze of holding tanks, water filtration systems and marine labs. Say hello to the green or loggerhead turtles swimming in the rehabilitation unit. In another part of the tour, you can watch jellyfish gracefully drift and propel themselves through their aquatic realm. The highlight was climbing to the top of the 115-foot Living Shipwreck exhibit, tossing portions of food into the 306,000-gallon ocean habitat and watching the frenzied feeding of fish and sharks. The saltwater exhibit features a replica of the U-352 German submarine sunk by the U.S. Coast Guard off of North Carolina's coast in 1942. Sport divers can visit actual submerged wrecks along the coast, including three U-boats, to see how large debris becomes unique habitats for aquatic wildlife. The aquarium provides visitors a dry opportunity to view how nature adapts itself to human-made structures. ►



Check out the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores and discover creatures like the mesmerizing sea nettle jellyfish, which can deliver a painful sting.

**IF YOU ENJOY HISTORY AND LEARNING SOMETHING NEW ...**

Take your time exploring the educational exhibits at the NC Maritime Museum in Beaufort to discover the ecological past of the coast and learn about Black maritime history – one local story describes menhaden chanteymen, Black fishermen who sang rhythmic songs to aid their efforts in netting and hauling tons of shad from the ocean. Another unique museum feature is the working archaeological conservation lab inside, where artifacts recovered from the shipwreck of Queen Anne’s Revenge are treated and restored. You can see many items displayed on-site, like coins, pearl buttons, utensils and tableware.

At the Beaufort Historic Site, guides dress in period clothing to interpret the town’s history during its formation before the Revolutionary War and life through the Civil War era. Or embark on an adventure into the past with Port City Tours’ ghost walk, where daring history enthusiasts can delve into the architectural features of old homes while listening to tales – like the story about the heartbroken girl in the blue dress at Beaufort’s Langdon Bed & Breakfast – that still haunt residents to this day.

**IF YOU ARE A FOODIE ...**

Reserve a table at the lively Circa 81 in Morehead City for tapas. Start with the biscuit crackers with pimento cheese or the charred Brussels sprouts before sampling the scallops special and the best Key lime pie you’ll taste in this lifetime. Enjoy the intimate ambience at Beaufort’s Blue Moon Bistro (formerly the historic Dill House, which was built in 1827), and order from a full menu of modern French cuisine made from locally sourced ingredients. The lobster bisque was delicious paired with courgette fries before diving into a bowl of wild-caught shrimp atop a fried grit cake covered in Cajun tasso sauce.

After working up an appetite trekking through Morehead City and Beaufort, we found ourselves at the Front Street Grill, where the strawberry goat cheese salad was a refreshing accompaniment to so many seafood options at the waterfront restaurant. We had spectacular views of yachts, kayaks and sailboats right outside our window.

For breakfast or brunch, visit the friendly staff at The Banks Grill to sample grit fritters – cooked grits rolled in cheddar and Jack cheese, coated in breading and then fried to golden perfection. A fun option for coffee and a light breakfast of bagels or scrambled eggs is the Mug Shot, where the walls are covered with framed photos of notorious celebrities.



**ABOVE** Be sure to give yourself enough time to browse the collections at all the local shops along Front Street in downtown Beaufort.



**LEFT** Dive into decadence with Blue Moon Bistro’s lobster bisque, featuring poached lobster tail and a grilled baguette - the perfect blend of luxury and Crystal Coast flavor.



**BELOW LEFT** Learn all about the many dozens of fish species featured in the tanks at the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores.

**NEXT TIME ...**

A single weekend is not enough time to fully discover all the gems of the Crystal Coast. The next visit will include a visit to Bonehenge Whale Center to learn how to help in cases of mammal stranding on the beach. We might book a tour to watch dolphins or go on a photo safari in search of wild horses and estuarine wildlife at the Rachel Carson Reserve, which is only accessible by boat. Birdwatchers will enjoy the more than 200 species of birds found at the reserve, as it is along the Atlantic Migratory Flyway.

Back in Beaufort, there are some delightful little boutiques and antique stores ... I want to browse Christina Cuninghams shop, Beaufort Linen Co., to find the perfect summer coverlet or a blue and white ginger jar to add to my collection. And I want to look for jadeware amid all the goods inside The Marketplace Antiques and Collectibles. I’ll be back, and recommend you extend your own trip by a few days to fit in all the sights, meals and shopping you can, too. 🐾