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OF NOSTALGIA**

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**Remaking
the 90s**

**The Crystal
COAST CHRONICLES**

Starring
**JAMES
MASLOW**

BY SAM ZACHRICH **+**

PATRICK FABIAN (Better call Saul)
PETER PORTE (Baby Daddy)

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NOSTALGIA ISSUE

THE CRYSTAL COAST CHRONICLES:

4 Days of Bliss in North Carolina

BY **HIKO MITSUZUKA** (@TheFirstEcho)

FIRST, A CONFESSION: IN THE PAST, THE STATE OF NORTH CAROLINA WAS ONLY A BLIP ON MY RADAR BECAUSE OF A CERTAIN TEEN SOAP THAT DOMINATED THE ZEITGEIST BACK IN THE LATE 90S.

Dawson's Creek, the seminal WB serial that introduced the world to Katie Holmes, Michelle Williams, James Van Der Beek and Joshua Jackson was famously shot in the Tar Heel State, inspiring countless fans to visit the locations where young love was once lost and found on the small screen. But earlier this summer, I got up-close and personal with the rest of NC's scenic destinations.

The Crystal Coast refers to the 85-milelong coastline that runs along the southern tip of the state. Isolated beaches, untamed wildlife, hospitable harbor towns, and breathtaking oceanscapes make up this magical region. If those New York snowbirds aren't escaping to their second homes in Florida, they're most likely taking up residence in one of the strip's many coastal havens. And in addition to the natural beauty of the land, there's plenty of opportunities to experience

Southern hospitality at its finest. Here's what happened when I made -- and mostly ate -- my way along the Coast...

SATURDAY

11:30am – I arrive at "Seaside Seclusion," the beach house where I will stay for the next three days in an eco-friendly residential community known as Pine Knoll Shores. I feel like the first roommate showing up on the first episode of *The Real World*. ("Seven strangers picked to live in a house...") I drop my luggage, check out all of the rooms, and squeal with delight when I stumble upon the pool, the hot tub, and the epic ocean view from our third-floor patio. Thank you, **Bluewater Vacation Rentals**.

6:30pm – We're taken to our first notable spot in Atlantic Beach, **The Barnacle** on Oceanna Pier, a local restaurant and watering hole located

over...the water. We're given glasses of champagne and toast to a wonderful trip ahead of us. The champagne also comes with some nibblers: shrimp nachos and crabcakes. I inhale four or five pieces each before heading out to the pier to take in the gorgeous sunset.

8:00pm – For dinner, we have the honor of being the first to preview the menu at a new Italian seafood restaurant called **Pescara**. A charcuterie plate comes out first, and we all gush over the Buratta and prosciutto. (Think of Buratta as mozzarella's hunkier, tastier, and more satisfying older brother.) The next appetizer consists of calamari that has been fried in rice flour and diced olives sitting in a pool of some kind of roasted pepper and almond puree that I want to bathe in. We then move on to a tasty kale salad with toasted almonds and roasted tomatoes. (Did I mention that each course also comes with its own wine pairing?) The main course is grilled veal chops covered in marinated mushrooms with a side of creamy truffle polenta that elicits an audible moan from my mouth. Everyone around me has a good laugh at my foodgasm, and I briefly take pride in being the comic relief at the table.

9:30pm – Dessert is two scoops of homemade pistachio and strawberry gelato. Once we're done, Chef Andy Hopper comes out to a round of applause. We each shake hands with him and learn more about his days working at Chicago's famous Spiaggia before he returned to his native state. One of my fellow travel writers, who shall remain nameless, pulls me aside to say she wouldn't mind having the youthfully handsome Hopper for dessert.



SUNDAY

8:30am – I pack my tote bag with a granola bar and apple in case I need the sustenance after our next activity: kayaking along the **Croatan National Forest** with some guides from **Hot Wax Surf** in Emerald Isle.

10:15am – Kayaking isn't so easy as it looks. Especially if you don't have the proper back support. I learn this the hard way.

12:00pm – We drive by a local fast food chain called **Bojangles**, and I am determined to try some of their fried offerings before I leave North Carolina. I've heard good things about their biscuits, and I might as well do as these Southerners do.

2:00pm – We board a 16-person **Island Express Ferry** and soar across **Shackleford Banks**. The only permanent residents on this 9-mile long island are Spanish Mustangs, locally known as "Banker ponies." The majestic horses, survivors of Spanish galleon shipwrecks, have roamed freely across the miles of pristine beaches for more than 300 years. Needless to say, do not attempt to saddle them.

2:45pm – I have just climbed more than 200 steps to get to the top of the 163-foot tall **Cape Lookout Lighthouse** on Hawkers Island which is a part of the Southern Outer Banks. It's the most cardio I have done in the past two



months, but the view up here is worth the breathlessness. When we make our way down, our private tour guide, a deep-voiced park ranger named Steve, walks us through an adjacent site known as **Keeper's Quarters**, built in the mid-1800's to warn passing ships of the dangerous coastal waters. Some of us stop, get caught in his crystal blue eyes, and listen to him go on and on about historic dates and the island's storied past.

7:30pm – Dinner is at **Front Street Grill at Stillwater** and includes more fried calamari, garlic shrimp drowning in a pool of garlic butter, roasted pepper cheese curds with pita chips, and a parmesan-crusted filet of flounder with some green beans. For dessert we sample every sweet treat on the menu so that we get a well-balanced taste of everything. The flourless chocolate brownie topped with caramel ice cream is an immediate favorite.

MONDAY

10:00am – I get up-close and personal with a few lizards and sea creatures at **North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores**. I make eye contact with a 4-foot-long alligator. For some reason, I call him Ralph and make a joke about his loneliness ever since his tankmate was turned into a Prada handbag.

11:45am – Bike tour time! Courtesy of the friendly (and knowledgeable)

folks at **Hungry Town Tours**, Betsy and David Cartier. We head into the cozy, picturesque town of **Beaufort** where Mandy Moore's *A Walk To Remember* was filmed. However, yours truly is looking for *A Meal to Remember*. The first stop on our culinary bike ride: **The Fudge Factory** for a little sample before we get our legs pumping. I watch a man handle a massive dark brown blob of fudge on a cold marble slab. He then takes what looks like a giant spatula and shapes it into a rectangular block while it hardens. "This guy has the best job in the world," I mutter to myself.

12:00pm – **Finz Grill** is our next stop, a mere block away. We try a crab fritter appetizer with a Dijon remoulade while learning about the town's historic maritime past. I finally give in to the ways of The South and order a sweet tea to wash it down. This sparks my appetite. I want more.

12:30pm – The main course waits for us at a cute and cozy bistro called **Beaufort Grocery Company**, owned by Charles Park, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America, and his wife Wendy. We are seated at a large table, and the plates never stop coming: Broccoli and bacon salad. Potato salad. Black eyed pea salad. Fried squash blossoms stuffed with ricotta cheese. Ahi tuna wraps. A giant meat lovers panini. Cobb salad. And a plate of Buratta soaking in a brandy that is set aflame. My stomach becomes too full to try the remaining



platters that are served to us by Kyle, our tall, dark and handsome waiter who, in all seriousness, looks like he could be an underwear model. In other words, he would fit right in with the highly photogenic population of model-actors in L.A.

1:15pm – Feeling blimpier than an actual blimp, I pedal my way through more picturesque residential streets (*American flags! Old ladies sitting in rocking chairs on porches!*), receive a history lesson on **Blackbeard’s House**, and end up at **The Spouter Inn** for dessert. Everyone in the group orders something different so that we can all sample each other’s dishes. I order an apple cobbler topped with vanilla ice cream. I also order a coffee because I feel myself slipping into a food coma. Caffeine, STAT!

6:30pm – A sunset cruise on a Carolina-style sport-fisher called Bill Collector, steered by Captain Stephen Draughon, takes us along the coast and past yachts and massive sailboats. We toast our last night in North Carolina with some champagne and a cheese platter. The golden and pink sky adds a nice touch to the occasion.

8:00pm – Our last dinner is at a local establishment called **Tight Lines Pub and Brewing Company**. (*Earlier, I kept referring to this place as Tight Ends, which would be an entirely different kind of bar.*) Once again, the appetizers are my downfall: bacon chili cheese fries, a cheesy artichoke dip with pita chips, and shrimp rolls. Luckily for us, what makes this meal most memorable is the appearance of Ranger Steve from



Hawkers Island and Waiter Kyle from Beaufort Grocer Company. It’s like a small reunion of warm faces, coming together to bid us adieu at the end of our culinary journey. I feel pressured to order one of the restaurant’s famous brews, but since I’m not much of a beer drinker, I get a hard cider instead. Kyle sits across from me, and I learn about his brief dalliance in modeling when he lived in Huntington Beach, just outside of L.A. – just as I had imagined. Once my dinner arrives, a crab and shrimp gumbo loaded with *sausage*, I am too full to go any further. I must put a stop to this feeding frenzy...for now. By the end of the night, I ask for a doggy bag.

TUESDAY

9:00am – I wake up just in time to say farewell to some of my new friends before they take a shuttle to the airport. I head down to the beach to catch a few

rays so that this beached-whale of a body can become a *tanned* beached-whale of a body. I want to soak up as much as I can before I’m whisked away to my real life.

12:30pm – I have an hour to kill at Charlotte International Airport, and – *praise the fast food gods!* – I discover a Bojangles in the terminal, not too far from my gate. I take this as a sign from the Universe and fill my time with a classic meal: Two fried chicken breasts, mashed potatoes with gravy, and naturally, a biscuit on which I drizzle some honey. It is expectedly delicious.

7:15pm (PST) – I’m back in L.A. I promise myself to hit the gym immediately.

THE CRYSTAL COAST CHEAT SHEET

Bluewater Vacation Rentals
bluewaternc.com

Pescara
facebook.com/PescaraAB

Hungry Town Tours
hungrytowntours.com

Hot Wax Surf
hotwaxsurf.com

North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores
ncaquariums.com

Beaufort Grocery Co.
beaufortgrocery.com

Tight Lines Pub & Brewing Co.
tightlinesbrewing.com

Front Street Grill at Stillwater
frontstreetgrillatstillwater.com

