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# Gettin' Coastal

Cutting away from CoVa for a food- and fun-filled weekend along North Carolina's Crystal Coast

By Kelsey Thomas



## Hot Spots and Local Bites

CRAVING A QUICK, RELAXING WEEKEND getaway from our region? What better place than the Crystal Coast of North Carolina? This 85-mile stretch of coastline, also known as the Southern Outer Banks, is dotted with charming towns, beautiful beaches and attractions.

I recently decided to cut away from Coastal Virginia for a few days and explore its perks—natural beauty, fascinating history and even a few great ghost stories—and, of course, a lengthy list of liquid libations and local eateries to entertain the palate.

The weekend started out with my check-in at the **Bask Hotel**, a newly renovated hotel in Morehead City that welcomes you with warm hospitality. In addition to exploring Morehead City, my adventures took me to nearby Beaufort, Emerald Isle, Cape Lookout and more. Here are a few highlights—edible and otherwise—to hit if you're planning a trip.

**Bahia Beach House + Surf Bar** in Morehead City offers fresh seafood sensations and appetizers that's don't disappoint. The deliciously fried, fresh calamari paired perfectly with a sweet chili sauce that had just the right amount of heat. On special during my visit was a beautifully plated dish that featured parmesan risotto topped with plump sea scallops, fresh roasted vegetables and a spicy red sauce that resembled a Caribbean pepper sauce, which paired excellently with the Bahia Cosmo, my post-dinner drink of Leblon Cachaça, St. Germain Elderflower Aperol and fresh lime.

At Beaufort's **Black Sheep**, a casual waterfront dining spot with views of **Carrot Island** and **Taylor's Creek**, my lunch was served al fresco. While they offer a variety of handhelds and salads, their uniquely crafted brick oven pizzas really hit the spot—from a classic pepperoni to a charcuterie pie topped with fennel sausage, bacon, Ovalini and caramelized onions, mozzarella, parmesan, Pecorino and basil finished with shaved Serrano ham.

From brunch to breakfast classics, **Banks Grill** is a local's spot in Morehead City with a cozy diner-like feel and family-friendly aura. My personal favorite was the biscuits and gravy—a savory country dish featuring extra-large, soft buttermilk biscuits topped with homemade brown sausage gravy. You also shouldn't leave without tasting their "Soon to be World Famous" cinnamon rolls, served warm and dressed with pecans and icing oozing down the sides of the giant delight.

I saddled up for another local's lunch at **Ruddy Duck Tavern**, also in Morehead City. This laid-back seafood joint is located right on the water just a few blocks from the **Bask Hotel**, serving up specials like octopus tacos and stone crab claws. Their nachos were the kind you dream about, loaded with all "the stuff," and their build-your-own shrimp tacos were both crafty and delicious, piled with as much black beans, sour cream, rice, pico de gallo and shrimp as your belly desires.



### SCENES AND CUISINE:

The natural beauty and wildlife of the Rachel Carson Reserve and Cape Lookout National Seashore, along with elegant dishes plated by Parrott's on Eleventh and CaribSea Restaurant.



## Fine Dining for Foodies

If you are looking for a fine dining experience, I recommend heading over to Emerald Isle where **CaribSea Restaurant** is a hidden gem celebrating the rich coastal history of the area. The freshness of their locally sourced seafood was apparent in my sushi roll appetizer, and the filet mignon was seasoned with a “cocoa & chili” rub and paired with fingerling potatoes doused in chateau butter, bacon fat braised Brussels sprouts and a blackberry steak sauce. A Ukraine Mule offered a refreshing take on a Moscow Mule, featuring mint, Absolut vodka, ginger beer, jalapeño and freshly squeezed lime juice.

**Parrott's on Eleventh** in Morehead City is another upscale eatery serving modern coastal cuisine with a storied past—located in an old, abandoned house that once was a place for wounded soldiers. Their risotto du jour for the evening boasted flavorful goat cheese, roasted pepper and asparagus. Other delicate bites included their mouthwatering Scallop BLTs with fresh tomato, basil and bacon sandwiched between large sea scallops and drizzled with a balsamic glaze. The evening ended on a sweet note with a slice of chocolate cheesecake topped with whipped cream and chocolate shavings.



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## Libations and Nightlife

**Idle Hour Biergarten** is a cozy little spot nestled into the sands of Atlantic Beach and decked out with picnic tables, string lights and a sleek outdoor fireplace. Their variety of rotating beers on tap, including quite the selection of German brews, are perfect for pairing with to-die-for fried pickles. These thinly sliced and lightly breaded dill medallions are a classic pub-style delicacy.

There was one place that I found myself visiting repeatedly throughout my trip: **The Arendell Room**. This modern cocktail bar in Morehead City is within walking distance of the Bask Hotel and features an endless selection of whiskies while still serving everything from dirty martinis to margaritas. Their unique menu includes the “Bartender’s Choice,” which is a surprise beverage curated just for you based off your personal flavor preferences.

If you’re looking for a party, Jack’s is where it’s at. **Jack’s Waterfront Bar** is a three-story building right on the water in Morehead City that serves as a restaurant, bar and music venue. I came through on ‘80s night, which featured a rocking band, a pumped-up crowd dancing to all the old school jams and two full-service bars on the main floor. It was totally tubular to say the least.



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## Outings and Excursions

I decided to tap into my adventurous side for a kayaking excursion with **Beaufort Paddle**. During this two-hour guided tour, we trekked across the waters and explored the barren islands of the NC Rachel Carson Reserve. Along the way, we spotted the wild horses of **Carrot Island**. The DNA of these horses exhibits Spanish ancestry and dates to the shipwrecks that took place there between 1528 and 1564.

Also in Beaufort, I stopped to check out the **North Carolina Maritime Museum**, which serves as the official repository for artifacts from Blackbeard’s flagship. The English pirate who terrorized the Atlantic coast was well-known for his famous ship, *Queen Anne’s Revenge*, among others. I learned about the Graveyard of the Atlantic and had the opportunity to get closeup views of artifacts and marine life—and even got to touch a real-life whale heart.

A next-level adventure was waiting for me at the **Cape Lookout National Seashore**, where I was greeted by Captain George Aswad, owner of **Island Express Ferry**, and two six-seater UTVs. We toured the entire island, which is famous for seashell hunting, camping and fishing. We ventured deep into the abandoned historical villages and onto beaches lined with campers and fishermen, who seemed to be yanking up fish left and right. The most enticing part of the island, however, was the **Cape Lookout Lighthouse**. Built in 1857 and standing 171 feet tall, this landmark can be spotted from any point on the island.

Finally, you can’t venture around the Crystal Coast without a taste of its unique history and legendary ghost stories. From the islands to the historical neighborhoods, a paranormal presence awaits. Captain Jon led my **Beaufort Ghost Walk** by **Port City Tours**, explaining 300 years of haunted history and pointing out specific residences where haunting stories took place. The ghost walk finished out with a visit to the **Old Burial Ground** on Ann Street, dating back to the 1700s and including mass graves, victims of the Plague and soldiers from the pre-American Civil War era and beyond. If you visit, be sure to bring a toy for the Little Rum Girl, whose story is both chilling and beautiful.



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It is an approximately four-hour drive from Virginia Beach to North Carolina’s Crystal Coast/Morehead City. Learn more about the area at [CrystalCoastNC.org](http://CrystalCoastNC.org). 