

CARDINAL & PINE

Discovering North Carolina's Crystal Coast, from A to Z



PHOTO COURTESY OF CRYSTAL COAST.

From Atlantic Beach to zinc oxide, here are 26 ways for you to enjoy the hidden gem of the southern Outer Banks.

What comes to mind when you think about the Outer Banks? Names like Nags Head, Kitty Hawk, and Kill Devil Hills? The wild horses of Corolla or the iconic Cape Hatteras lighthouse? Might we suggest you look southward?

North Carolina's Crystal Coast is an oft-overlooked gem that comprises 11 communities that are home to a total of 85 miles of shoreline along the southern Outer Banks.

Named for its crystal clear waters, the Crystal Coast offers something interesting for every type of traveler, and just to prove it, we've created an alphabetical list of 26 quintessential locations and activities across the destination, making it as easy as the ABCs to discover the adventure awaiting travelers along the coast.

We recommend you put this list to use when planning your summer vacation in 2024.

The ABC's of the Crystal Coast

A for Atlantic Beach

Experience true tranquility at one of the destination's premier beaches or indulge in watersports amidst postcard-worthy turquoise waters. Atlantic Beach is a great starting point for this list, as many of the following activities and locations are within walking distance from what Coastal Living Magazine called one of NC's Best Beaches.

B for Beaufort

Watch the 100-foot yachts and sailboats drift by while walking on the waterfront or step back in time on the [Historic Double Decker Bus Tour](#) and learn the town's intriguing history, which includes tales of star-crossed lovers, Confederate spies, and swashbuckling pirates.

C for Cape Lookout National Seashore

One of the only certified International Dark Sky Parks on the East Coast, where astro-tourists and stargazers can see the Milky Way with their own two eyes. More of a landlubber? Roam the solitary seashore to discover endangered animals in their natural habitats or search for one of the many large unbroken conch shells. Camping is allowed at Cape Lookout.

D for Dock-to-Dish Dining

Over 100 locally-owned restaurants adopt this sustainable food philosophy along the Crystal Coast, serving fresh seafood straight from local waters to your plate, from creative tapas at [Circa 81](#) to the upscale Southern menu at [Amos Mosquito's Restaurant and Bar](#).



Photo courtesy of Crystal Coast

E for Emerald Isle

For the more adventurous travelers, Emerald Isle offers lots to do, including world-class kite surfing, deep-sea fishing, and surfing. This true coastal gem promises a perpetual summer experience year-round.

F for Fort Macon State Park

Explore one of North Carolina's most visited state parks, which features a restored pre-Civil War military fort along Beaufort Inlet and the diverse Elliott Coues Nature Trail winding through dunes, marshes, beaches, and scenic views.



Photo courtesy of Crystal Coast

H for Harkers Island

The [Island Express Ferry Service](#) offers a quick portal to the other nearby islands, offering ideal vistas and refreshing breezes on their catamarans.

I for Indian Beach

Located between Atlantic Beach and Emerald Isle, this public beach provides white sands, easy Bogue Sound access, and a chance to effortlessly savor the freshest catches at the nearby [Billfish Grill & Bar](#).

J for Jet Ski

Embark on an exhilarating guided tour with [AB Watersport Adventures](#), perfect for the family as you explore the stunning scenery and stop for rare seashells along the way on your personal watercraft.

K for Kiteboarding

Test your wind-surfing skills with [Kitty Hawk Kites](#) (with two locations in Beaufort and one in Atlantic Beach) or [Teach's Kiteboarding](#), with ideal conditions along the 85 miles of coastline from March through November.

L for Lookout Cruises' Unique Sailings

Get on the water with Lookout Cruises and enjoy the views from a 45-foot catamaran with waterfront sunset sailings, romantic moonlight cruises, dolphin-watching adventures, and more.

M for Marshallberg Caviar Farm

Explore the largest sustainable sturgeon caviar farm in the US on an exclusive farm tour featuring state-of-the-art recirculating aquaculture systems (RAS) technology and sustainable practices, concluding with a caviar tasting experience.

N for “the Napa Valley of Oysters”

Learn the destination’s reputation as the “Napa Valley of Oysters” thanks to the variety of oyster farms and their sustainable practices, making the destination’s award-winning oysters delicious and fresh year-round. [Learn more about how Kyle Frey and Phillip Lannon of Crystal Coast Oysters](#) are helping to cultivate the area’s reputation for these mollusks, farming along the Newport River.

O for Oceanana Fishing Pier

Head to Atlantic Beach’s sole fishing pier, stretching nearly 1,000 feet into the ocean, to cast your rod for the afternoon before unwinding with a drink at [Oceanana Fishing Pier House](#), with unmissable views of the Atlantic Ocean.



Photo courtesy of Crystal Coast

P for Pine Knoll Shores

This coastal gem between Atlantic Beach and Bogue Sound is known for world-class golfing at the [Crystal Coast Country Club](#) and family-friendly attractions like the [North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores](#).

Q for Quaint Communities

We’ve named a few already, but you can’t go wrong in experiencing the essence of Southern charm throughout any of the 11 quintessential small coastal towns throughout the Crystal Coast, all complete with stunning beaches, fresh seafood, outdoor adventures, and rich history.

R for Reel in a Catch

Fishing charter services and rentals like [Cape Lookout Charters](#) or [Yellowfin Charters](#) in Morehead City help even the most inexperienced fishermen catch a striped bass onshore or even a sailfish out on the deep sea.

S for Shackleford Banks

Witness more than 100 wild Spanish horses, whose lineage dates back to the 16th century, roaming freely on the beaches of Shackleford Banks.

T for Tour by Boat

Tour the Crystal Coast by boat with Captain H2O's "Round We Go! A Private Excursion," showcasing the area's waterways, wildlife, and notable destinations like Shackleford Banks, Beaufort, Rachel Carson Reserve, and Morehead City.

U for Underwater Exploration

Plunge into the depths of the "Graveyard of the Atlantic" with Olympus Diving, exploring more than 5,000 shipwrecks from pirate ships to a WWII German U-boat, all amidst crystal-clear waters teeming with tropical fish.



Photo courtesy of Crystal Coast

V for Vacation Rentals

Now's the time to start booking for the summer. Embrace the local lifestyle with a range of vacation homes across the Crystal Coast, including Emerald Isle Realty's colorful luxury "Sanc Castle" homes and Spinnakers Reach Realty's Pet-Friendly Rentals, boasting stunning views and luxurious amenities like game rooms, private pools, and direct beach access.

W for Waterfowl Crafting

Admire the collection of intricately crafted waterfowl decoy carvings at Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center and delve into the rich community history of this art and other topics through thought-provoking environmental exhibits like "Living on the Edge," which explores the effects of Hurricane Florence and other storms while looking forward to address very serious questions about the Crystal Coast's future.

X for X Marks the Spot!

Explore one of America's oldest towns' rich pirate history in Beaufort by visiting the [Hammock House](#), once the dwelling of the notorious pirate Blackbeard, or head to [NC Maritime Museum](#) and see artifacts from his famed ship, Queen Anne's Revenge.

Y for Yoga on the Beach

Join [Cruising Tiki's Tiki Beach Yoga](#) for a scenic cruise along Taylor Creek, passing by Carrot Island and marshes to observe wild ponies and dolphins, followed by a tranquil yoga session led by a local instructor against the backdrop of stunning beach views.

Z for Zen

Sure, there are enough activities listed above to keep you busy for weeks, but remember among all the zooming around that you should zero in on what vacation is all about: time to yourself. Put some zinc oxide on your face and zip down to the nearest Crystal Coast beach to put yourself in a zone of comfort like you've never experienced.



Photo courtesy of Crystal Coast