

WEEKENDER: The Crystal Coast

Clear waters, untamed beaches, and boatloads of fresh seafood in North Carolina's Southern Outer Banks



The Crystal Coast is an 85-mile stretch of beaches that encompasses Beaufort, Atlantic Beach, Pine Knoll Shores, Emerald Isle, Morehead City, and Cape Lookout. It's roughly five and a half hours from Charlotte by car depending on which town you visit, and each offers a mix of vacation rentals, boutique hotels, and bed-and-breakfasts. You won't find crowded boardwalks, theme parks, or high-rise hotels that block the ocean views. Don't expect flashy nightlife, either. Come for pristine beaches where wild horses have roamed for centuries, explore the quaint oceanfront towns at your leisure, and eat your weight in fresh seafood. If you end each day with salt in your hair and sand between your toes, you're doing it right.

STAY

If you have a big group or family reunion, book an oceanfront cottage in Emerald Isle. New builds like the [Poseidon](#) have multiple bedrooms with private baths, rec rooms, pools, outdoor showers, and large covered decks. [The Islander Hotel & Resort](#) puts you a few steps from the ocean, and the on-site pool and complimentary bike rentals are great if you're traveling with kids. For a romantic getaway, reserve a room at [Inn on Turner](#) in historic Beaufort. The 1860 home was renovated in 2022, and suites are stocked with plush bedding and towels, and toiletries made by local purveyors. Owners Kim Bell and Jon Haas are also chefs, so guests can enjoy daily breakfast, charcuterie boards, sweets, nightly wine service, and gourmet dinners.



EAT

For a hearty breakfast that keeps you full until dinner, head to [The Banks Grill](#) in Morehead City. This local favorite makes smothered breakfast burritos, XXL from-scratch biscuits, and cinnamon rolls as big as your face. Grab lunch at [Front Street Grill at Stillwater](#), a renovated boathouse in Beaufort's historic district that serves fish tacos, salads, and burgers. For a casual dinner, stop by [The Island Grille](#), Atlantic Beach's "gourmet hole-in-the-wall," and feast on crab cakes, lobster mac and cheese, and Key lime pie. For a date night or special occasion, book a table at [Caribsea](#) in Emerald Isle and dine on oysters, sushi, and filet mignon.



PLAY

The Crystal Coast has the longest fishing season on the Atlantic coast thanks to the Gulf Stream current, which makes the waters warm and translucent. Catch flounder and striped bass from the [Bogue Inlet Pier](#) or [Oceanana Pier](#), or charter a fishing boat through [Salt Air Ventures](#). Rent a kayak or stand-up paddleboard at [Beaufort Paddle](#) and explore Taylor's Creek, where dolphins often swim alongside you, and hop off at the [Rachel Carson Reserve](#), where wild horses play in the dunes. If you prefer dry land, stroll the tree-lined streets of historic Beaufort (pronounced "BO-fert") to see century-old cottages, visit the [North Carolina Maritime Museum](#) to view artifacts from Blackbeard's wrecked flagship, and shop the boutiques along Front Street.



BEACH YOU TO IT

[The Circle](#) is the most popular public beach in the summer months with its seasonal lifeguards, volleyball courts, and nearby restaurants. [Fort Macon State Park](#), on the eastern outskirts of Atlantic Beach, has large parking lots, snack vendors, and restrooms. [Station Street Park](#) in Emerald Isle is a great destination for fishing, shelling, and birdwatching; the shoreline is an easy quarter-mile walk from this public park and leads to the edge of the island. For a more secluded beach day, take a 15-minute water taxi from Harkers Island to the [Cape Lookout National Seashore](#), which is deserted except for a handful of rustic National Park Service cabins. Just be aware that the facilities are limited, so bring plenty of water, snacks, and sunscreen.

