

9 Reasons North Carolina's Crystal Coast Is an Active Family's Paradise

If you're looking for a beach getaway that's equal parts relaxing and exciting, the Crystal Coast of North Carolina offers the best of both worlds. With 86 miles of beautiful beaches, unique land and water activities, plus a history of pirates, the Crystal Coast is sure to keep your family busy.

A three hour drive from Raleigh, North Carolina, the Crystal Coast is a natural barrier island system that includes the communities of Emerald Isle, Pine Knoll Shores and Beaufort, among many others. Enjoy the easy going vibes of a beach community, while having a natural playground at your fingertips in this coastal wonderland.

1/9 SEE WILD HORSES ON SHACKLEFORD BANKS



If you only do one thing during your visit to the Crystal Coast, go see the wild horses! A group of about [100 horses roam free on the shores of Shackleford Banks](#), living entirely off the small island. This area is only accessible by boat or ferry and the land is protected to let the wild horse population thrive.

Pro tip: Be sure to bring shoes that you don't mind getting wet. You'll get off the boat in very shallow water, then take an easy hike to get a peek at the horses. The ground is a little muddy and the shrubs are a little prickly, so flip flops are a no-go. The banks themselves are very flat and easy to navigate, so even little ones will be able to see the horses.

2/9 CLIMB THE “DIAMOND LADY” FOR THE BEST VIEWS



Right next to Shackleford Banks sits Cape Lookout. A national seashore with 56 miles of protected shoreline, Cape Lookout is a beautiful, nearly untouched beach perfect for swimming, shell collecting and getting the best view of the coast from the top of the Cape Lookout Lighthouse.

Called the “Diamond Lady” for the black and white diamond pattern painted on the side, the [Cape Lookout Lighthouse](#) has 207 steps and an unbeatable view. It *is* a climb, so it’s not suitable for very young children or people not up for climbing the equivalent of 12 stories. But, the steps are not as foreboding as they seem and if you’re up for a little adventure, it’s well worth the trip. Be sure to buy tickets in advance, where you’ll be given a specific time to ascend the steps (and complimentary history lesson).

The easiest way to get to both Shackleford Banks and Cape Lookout is through the [Island Express Ferry Service](#). The ferry takes you to both destinations and has easy pickup times and locations.

3/9 KAYAK TO THE RACHEL CARSON RESERVE



There's nothing like cruising the beautiful waterways of the Crystal Coast by kayak. At [Beaufort Paddle](#), they include a safety briefing and quick lesson before you hit the water, so the whole family will feel comfortable navigating in their kayaks. A guide will also help you paddle to the [Rachel Carson Reserve](#), where you'll encounter a variety of birds, plant life, and maybe even a wild horse or two.

Be sure to bring sunscreen! The cool breeze off the water feels great (and you can swim on the beaches of Carrot Island if it gets toasty), but you'll get quite a burn without a little extra SPF.

4/9 BIKE THROUGH CHARMING BEAUFORT



The town of Beaufort is adorable and ripe for exploring by bike. From the Victorian style homes to rows of delightful shops to [the Maritime Museum](#) that explores their seafaring history, you'll be immediately charmed by the community.

[Bike rentals are available](#) all throughout the area and the flat landscape makes it an easy ride for all ages.

5/9 HOOK A BIG ONE



Due to the warm currents of the Gulf Stream, you can fish year-round along the Crystal Coast. It's easy to charter a boat to try your luck catching a big bluefin tuna, or you can opt for a more relaxed fishing adventure off the [Oceanna Fishing Pier](#) in Atlantic Beach. The 1,000-foot long pier juts out into the Atlantic, making it an ideal place for dropping your line.

The Oceanna Pier House has all your fishing equipment needs, so you won't have to haul rods and tackles all across the beach. Even if your family doesn't fish, the pier is a great spot to enjoy the ocean views and take in a spectacular sunset.

6/9 DO YOUR SUN SALUTATIONS ON THE BEACH



After all the fishing, boating, hiking, and wild horse adventures, it can be great to stretch your body and relax with some beachside yoga. [NC Coastal Life](#) offers private and group classes right on the beach. If you have a large family gathering, or just want some private yoga coaching, NC Coastal Life can cater the class to the needs of the group. Plus, one of the perks of beachside yoga is if kids decide they'd rather run around than find their zen, it's no problem.

7/9 SPOT SEA TURTLES AT THE NORTH CAROLINA AQUARIUM AT PINE KNOLL SHORES



Perfect for a rainy day, or for the otter lover in your family, the [North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores](#) is a lovely afternoon activity. The aquarium has a living shipwreck exhibit, a loggerhead sea turtle viewing area, and the adorable North American River Otters are always on display.

The aquarium is small and can easily be viewed in 1-2 hours. There's a talking sea turtle puppet show and other activities to keep the littlest kiddos in your crew entertained.

8/9 SEARCH FOR TREASURE ON A PIRATE CRUISE



Courtesy of Beaufort Pirates Revenge

Though Beaufort is an idyllic small town, it's also home to a real-life history of piracy! Black Beard's infamous ship, the Queen Anne's Revenge, wrecked right on their shores. Incorporating the actual pirate history with playtime pirate fun, [the Pirate Treasure Cruise](#) is perfect for all the little plunderers in your family.

During the 90-minute cruise, kids get a bandana, a sword fighting lesson and witness a water cannon battle while on the hunt for great treasure. Parents can join in on the fun or relax and enjoy the beautiful scenery.

9/9 COOL OFF WITH SWEET TREATS



After all that activity, you've earned a scoop of ice cream...or two! [The General Store](#) in Beaufort is a cute shop that features homemade fudge, local gifts and perfectly Instagram-able ice cream cones. With 32 flavors to choose from, there'll definitely be something for every sweet tooth.