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GUY HARVEY

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Leave it to writer and fishing freak Nick Honachefsky to slay fish wherever he travels. This time, he toured the Crystal Coast of North Carolina where he found inshore and offshore treasures.

BY **NICK HONACHEFSKY**

On the Cover:
Mako Dance
by Dr. Guy Harvey







Treasures of **THE CRYSTAL COAST**

NICK HONACHEFSKY

Down along the southern Outer Banks of North Carolina, the barrier islands stand apart in character and spirit, so much so that they go by a different name—the Crystal Coast. The sleepy, tourist beach town of Emerald Isle simply sounds like it belongs here. I checked into a sublime, aquamarine-sided beachfront home on Emerald Isle, quaintly nicknamed Susie's Hideaway, tossing my bags on a plump couch, and opened the sliding window doors to feel the rush of the Atlantic surf breeze tickle my face. A deep inhale, and I was already tying fishing rigs, set to explore the treasures of the Crystal Coast the next morning.

OFFSHORE GOLD – DAY ONE

A warming sunrise peeked over the Atlantic. I was greeted dockside by NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores Activity Director Wayne Justice, who promptly fashioned a Bojangles chicken and biscuit breakfast sandwich into my hand. "We pride ourselves on the chicken and biscuits here in North Carolina," said Wayne proudly with a big, down-home smile as we stepped aboard Captain Stewart Merritt's Salt Air Ventures on the Beaufort Inlet. The engines of the Privateer rumbled, and we pointed the bow 29 miles offshore. As we crossed the turbulent, white-watery shoals, Justice pointed out Shackleford Banks where, in 1995, adventurers found the actual shipwreck of Captain Edward Teach's, aka Blackbeard's, pillaging vessel—*Queen Anne's Revenge*. "They pulled up a couple of cannons and dinnerware and booze bottles, but no treasure of any kind," noted Justice as we passed the area. "Scholars now think the shipwreck wasn't an error of nautical misjudgment, but that Blackbeard took his treasured bounty and left his crew on board, then scuttled the ship to take it all for himself." Fair enough for a pirate.

Passing by the shoals, we blasted about 14 miles offshore to set up in 110 feet of water on some naturally occurring submarine rockpile ledges. Merritt busted out the bait consisting of Spanish mackerel heads, sardines, and frozen pogies. Justice dropped a bait down and in a split instant upon touching ground, was first to reel in a beauty—a 15-pound gag grouper. Merritt and I proceeded to battle three more gags up to 20 lbs. in the mix. "We are out here tagging sand tiger sharks for research all the time," said Justice, "but it's great to come out and fish for once." The bite was happening. Justice dropped down another mackerel chunk and his rod was buckled over again, this time a wrist-wrenching battle, and we all knew it was something with muscle and gusto. A deep bronze coloring appeared with a huge, 35-lb. almaco jack attached to the line.

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Wayne's glory for the pool winner didn't last long. I dropped down my chunk bait and doubled over immediately, sweating in the 95-degree heat, to haul in a bruiser 40-lb. amberjack. Justice and Merritt were both congratulatory, but the big one was yet to come. Another head chunk down, and another big hit. Merritt balanced the rod on the gunwale, wrenching in the beast crank after crank; after 25 minutes, we got a big, brown color that Justice thought was a sand tiger, but a long whiptail came into focus that was attached to a huge, 200-lb. southern stingray. Glorious enough for sure, but two shadows followed the beast upward. Quickly, I grabbed a Hyperlastics Dartspin lure and dropped it down beside the stingray, sporadically twitch-jigging it off the stingray's wingtips to convince a 10-lb. cobia to strike. Wreck fishing off the coast was nothing short of exemplary.

After fishing, on Wayne's recommendation, I met up with his brother Denny, who bartends at the Caribsea restaurant in Emerald Isle. Denny ordered me a meal fit for a king with succulent crab cake, maki rolls adorned with red pepper, and a sweet glass of Pinot Noir. Day one was a success.

INSHORE GEMS – DAY TWO

The next morning, Justice and I were joined by one of my childhood friends, now retired Lt. Colonel Steve Schultze, who lived in the area, to explore the shallow backwaters of Bear Creek in Swansboro. Looking for a scrap with some backwater redfish, we met up with Captain John Mauser of Tailing Tide Guide Service on his 18-ft. East Cape Fury skiff.

Mauser poled us over shallow waters encrusted with oyster beds way into the backcountry marshes, sometimes scraping the hull in six inches of water. Rigged with light tackle, Mauser fixed the push pole in the bay mud and spoke out loud, "Toss the plug next to that bank and pop it." Justice flung a Rapala Skitter Walk toward the spartina grass banks, pulling it off, blurping it on the surface, when Wham!—a 24-in. redfish exploded on the lure. Justice then proceeded to bag another sweet, 27-in. redfish that was released to fight another day. We worked the grass banks fastidiously to get some continuous blow-ups from reds.

Halfway through the trip, the silence of the backwater beauty was interrupted by blasts from 50-caliber guns on the nearby military gun range on the other side of Bear Island. I could see Schultze's thoughts go inward, reflecting on his time spent defending our country. As the sporadic booms from gunfire resounded between casts, Schultze softly said to me on the side, "Man, all the years I spent here, and I never knew this beauty existed behind the range." I saw him crack a reserved smile.

Though Justice had the hot hand on the reds, Schultze and I weren't done yet, casting gold spoons and DOA paddletails to score with three southern flounder to add to the tally. As the noon sun was high in the sky, I remembered something I read about fossil shark teeth hunting in the area.

"What's this I hear of Shark Tooth Island?" I asked Mauser. "Oh yeah, that's the spot where Pleistocene and Miocene era shark teeth wash out from the inland deposits and lay along the beach. I love taking kids there."





The dropping tide cleaned up the muddy waters where we decided to make a stop by Shark Tooth Island. Wishing to find a jet black Megalodon tooth sticking out of the banks, we all kept our eyes focused downward and amassed a cool collection of millions-year-old goblin shark teeth and stingray barbs, digging through the shell piles, and scanning the water line as it lapped up along the beach. I filled my pockets like a kid in a candy store with all sorts of shark teeth. Mauser then offered me fly-casting lessons for fun, a most relaxing way to end the day. Departing Mauser at the dock, Schultze and Justice both went home to eat dinner with their families and I, once again, met up with Denny at Caribsea, this time to gorge on blackened shrimp and scallops with gorgonzola sauce and tuna meat with ginger celery and poke-style sesame oil, celebrating the day's events.

THE HUMAN TREASURE – DAY THREE

Day three, winds were gusty at 30 knots, way too high to get out and fish effectively. I met with Jess Hawkins, a retired marine scientist with the NC Dept. of Marine Fisheries who now runs back bay ecotourism charters, engaging in various activities like shelling, snorkeling, wild horse searching, and bird watching. Hawkins and I were both kind of discouraged not to be able to get out for an ecotour to explore the Crystal Coast Sound, so in a comforting, down-home southern drawl, Hawkins belted, "You ever have a shrimp burger?"

I replied, "I mean, yeah, I've had shrimp sandwiches before in my travels."

"But you ain't never had one like this," said Hawkins as we pulled into a ramshackle BBQ joint that looked like it was someone's backyard food stand—the famous Big Oak Drive-In Bar-B-Que. He was right. Stacked between two soft buns, loaded with fried shrimp, special hot sauce, and slaw, we grabbed our goodies and sat on a beach bench, eagerly chomping on a world-class shrimp burger, and just shot the breeze about fishing and the ocean—two new friends hanging out, simply enjoying the day. After gorging upon the shrimp sandwich, I dropped by the NC Aquarium, where Justice proudly showed me the aquarium inhabitants and all the conservation-minded initiatives the NC Aquarium embarks upon to preserve, protect, and promote the marine ecosystems. "We want to the public to know they can drop by and experience the marine life if they can't get out on the water," said Justice. "It's all about building the relationship between the environment and people and closing that gap to keep people informed and interested in our world."

Reluctantly, I had to leave the Crystal Coast behind the next morning. The days on the boat were done, but I hadn't finished up fishing just yet. I called Schultze to meet me at the beach, picking up some frozen shrimp at Reel Outdoors tackle shop, and casting out bottom hi-lo rigs into the surf in front of Susie's Hideaway. As the evening set in, Schultze and I were transported back in time, fishing shoulder to shoulder together just as we did as kids growing up, pulling a medley of small bluefish, stingrays, blacktip sharks, and whiting out of the rolling surf. We were in our glory, laughing and carrying on like old times. As we packed up for the night, Schultze turned to me and said, "Brother, I've lived around here a long time and this is one of the best days I've ever spent here, fishin' with you." Likewise, Steve. The Crystal Coast always offers up new, golden finds, but more importantly, helps you rediscover those treasures you always knew were there. 🐟



Travel Info for **THE CRYSTAL COAST**

NC AQUARIUM AT PINE KNOLL SHORES

A vast marine playground exists at the NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores. Stunning marine habitats filled with freshwater and saltwater fish species abound, along with amphibians, reptiles, and even bald eagles to exhilarate and delight visitors. But the Aquarium is also heavily involved in scientific research. "We have a citizen science project called the Spot-A-Shark Program that encourages divers and anglers to contribute to the growing database of sand tiger sharks," states aquarist Ara McClanahan. "Divers and anglers take photos of sand tiger sharks and upload them. Each sand tiger has a unique spotting and pattern to identify and track specific sharks, and we've found they engage in site fidelity, sticking around the same shipwrecks year after year. The shipwrecks are very important habitat for breeding females." Visitors can take guided tours to explore the splendor of the Aquarium as well as host educational programs for both children and adults alike. "The Aquarium is much more than just a place to gaze at marine life," states Danielle Bolton, PR coordinator of the Aquarium. "We are in the field contributing to the scientific community. We are here to create a family tradition to make memories learn and grow. It's a very real experience."

www.ncaquariums.com/pine-knoll-shores

WHERE TO STAY

The Crystal Coast encompasses 18 miles of beach including the towns of Emerald Isle, Atlantic Beach, Cape Lookout, Beaufort, Pine Knoll Shores, Morehead City, Harker's Island, Salter Path, and Indian Beach. Beach home rentals are outfitted to the max—quaintly-themed houses saturated with nautical flare overlooking the Atlantic. Check out Emerald Isle Realty for your stay in paradise.

www.emeraldislerealty.com

HIDDEN GEMS

Crystal Coast EcoTours

Capt. Jess Hawkins, 252-241-6909

www.crystalcoastecotours.com

NC Maritime Museum

www.ncmaritimemuseumbeaufort.com

Caribsea, Emerald Isle

www.caribsearestaurant.com

Any and all adventures can be found through

www.crystalcoastnc.org

FISHING CAPTAINS

Capt. John Mauser

www.tailingtideguideservice.com

Capt. Stewart Merritt,

www.saltairventures.com,

252-725-1725