

Our State

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10 Family-Friendly Crystal Coast Activities Beyond the Beach

Kid-tested, kid-approved ways to play, eat, and explore history in these coastal communities.

by Robin Sutton Anders



Cape Lookout Lighthouse, affectionately known as our Diamond Lady, is accessible only by boat or passenger ferry, meaning that visiting it is an adventure in and of itself.

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With a magic carpet-sized, yellow rubber mat wrangled under their arms and pep in their steps, children scurry up the steps leading to the top of the waterslides at Emerald Isle's [Salty Pirate Water Park](#). At the top of their summit, they approach their descent — kid-style: Some flop face-forward on their mats; others take a burrito approach. Still, others sit straight up — arms catching the breeze as their waving hands and squeals of delight reach maximum heights.

Sunny mornings or afternoons playing at the beach anchor family vacations to the Crystal Coast. But ask any child who's recently returned from a beach vacation, and they'll likely report a few memorable moments beyond the sand and surf.

Along the 85 miles of coastline running from Emerald Isle all the way to Cape Lookout, a collection of communities house kid-approved destinations, like the Salty Pirate, [Lost Treasure Golf](#), and [Fort Macon](#). These family-friendly vacation staples welcome the littlest beachgoers year after year.

A MESSAGE FROM OUR SPONSOR:

Beeeeaaaacccchhh.

Kick off an unforgettable summer with 85 miles of picture-perfect beaches and 11 welcoming waterfront communities. Plan your trip now!

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Stroll through Emerald Woods

Take a right after you drive over the Emerald Isle Bridge onto Coast Guard Road, and about a half mile down, you'll see the entrance to Emerald Woods. Tucked into the trees on the sound side, the 41-acre [Emerald Isle Woods Park](#) stays shady and pleasant even in the dog days of summer. This is a perfect nature hike for kids of all ages: Young adults find the disc golf course irresistible, while little feet appreciate the short walk that ends at a floating pier.



Step into nautical history inside the North Carolina Maritime Museum.

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Find infamous artifacts at North Carolina Maritime Museum

Everybody's heard of Blackbeard. But at the [North Carolina Maritime Museum in Beaufort](#), you get the *full* story of Edward Teach, the privateer who captured a French slave ship in 1717 and renamed it *Queen Anne's Revenge*. After wreaking havoc along the East Coast, Blackbeard was killed along Ocracoke Inlet at the hands of an armed contingent led by Royal Navy Lieutenant Robert Maynard.

Throughout the Queen Anne's Revenge exhibit toward the back of the maritime museum, kids can see more than 300 restored artifacts — many unexpected, like the bones of livestock eaten on the ship.



The infamous Blackbeard was a feared presence throughout the southern coast of North Carolina.

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Hone your (mini) golf game

Only at [Lost Treasure Golf](#) in Salter Path can you and your crew board a mining train that takes you to the first holes of the two miniature golf courses. From there, your adventure continues through 18 holes adorned with water features, shady palm trees, and boulders.



At Fort Macon State Park, a restored Antebellum-era fort, you can explore the tunnels, watch for pirates, and even observe a cannon and musket demonstration.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE CRYSTAL COAST

Explore Fort Macon

At the easternmost tip of Atlantic Beach, this [restored Civil War fort](#) leaves just the right amount of guts and glory to the imagination. As they meander through 4.5-foot-thick brick vaulted rooms, children learn about the fort's past, including its time as a military prison after Reconstruction. As they step gingerly beside the tall moat wall to look out at the water, they might pretend Blackbeard's *Queen Anne's Revenge* is approaching from the Atlantic. After a tour of the fort, take time to hunt for seashells on the wide sound- and ocean-facing beaches.



Find a beach-eat to please everyone at Shark Shack.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE CRYSTAL COAST

Grab a bite

What if you could go to a central location on the island, find easy parking, and walk right up to the window of an unpretentious hut to order lunch that every member of your family will love? Grouper bites? Yes! Fish tacos? Yes! Blackened mahi? Yes! A selection of every imaginable dipping sauce? A thousand times, yes! [The Shark Shack](#) at Atlantic Beach has it all figured out. Take your seat at a picnic table, close your eyes for a moment, and enjoy the breeze as your kids entertain themselves with Hula Hoops and yard games in the grassy yard.



Treat the family to after-dinner ice cream scoops and some peaceful moments on the Bogue Inlet Fishing Pier.

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Ice cream at the pier

There's nothing better than getting to the bottom of an ice cream cone before it melts in the summer heat — unless, of course, you're matching licks for steps down [Bogue Inlet Fishing Pier](#). Park your car at the [Sweet Spot](#) on Emerald Drive, and let your children take their pick of more than 50 flavors on offer. The rocking chairs out front are tempting, but the short walk to the pier pays off with close-up views of today's catch, fresh from the ocean. When you reach the end of the 1,000-foot pier, walk up the short flight of stairs to the viewing platform, where the water extends as far as the eye can see.

Rev your engines ...

Watch — or join in the fun on a two-seater — as your children square off in a go-kart race at [Fun World Motorsports](#) in Emerald Isle. After their racetrack adrenaline rush, make their day with a visit to the on-site arcade.

... Or take a bike ride

Emerald Isle is known for its family-friendly, 26-mile bike path, which follows the main drag all the way from Indian Beach to The Point at the western tip of the island. You'll pass places to stop and grab a coffee or a bite to eat as you wind your way through neighborhoods, shaded by the branches of cedars shrub oaks, and along N.C. Highway 58, with shopping centers and souvenir-rich beach supply stores that are easy and safe to access. For rentals, try [Beach Wheels Bike Rentals](#) in Indian Beach, [Isle Cycle](#) in Emerald Isle, or [Beachside Bikes](#) in Atlantic Beach.



Explore the marsh islands within the Rachel Carson Reserve by standup paddleboard or, for those still mastering their balance, sightsee by kayak.

PHOTOGRAPHY COURTESY OF THE CRYSTAL COAST

Paddle through the water

From Beaufort's historic downtown, you're just a short paddle to the islands within [Rachel Carson Reserve](#), a sanctuary and home for animals such as river otters, marsh rabbits, and even a herd of wild horses.

On the sound side of the towns along the Crystal Coast, you'll find public boat launches, often in parks like [McNeil Park](#) in Pine Knoll Shores, where you can put in a kayak or paddleboard and explore the Bogue Sound. "When it's high tide, sometimes we'll see dolphins," Ricky Farrington says, who owns [Emerald Isle Paddle Tours](#). At age 13, Farrington began helping his father with the paddleboard rental and tour business. Thirteen years later, he owns the company and spends time sharing the waters he knows so well and the wonders they hold with visitors. "Some trips we'll stop and dig for clams," he says.

To rent a kayak or stand up paddleboard, options include [Beaufort Paddle](#), [AB WaterSport](#) in Atlantic Beach, or [Hot Wax Surf Shop](#) in Emerald Isle.

Slide into your dream playground

Beside the Emerald Isle public boat ramp, the playground at [Jean Preston Memorial Park](#) houses innovative and accessible equipment, like the AeroGlider, a gigantic swing that holds a gaggle of children as they sway back and forth. This is your destination for expending post-dinner energy bursts that happen to coincide with the sunset, and you can enjoy the glorious, unobstructed view over Bogue Sound. Truth be told, leaving won't be easy for anyone.

When your crew needs a break from building sandcastles and catching waves, slip on your flip-flops and strike out to explore more of these coastal towns beyond the beach. [Click here](#) to learn more about ways to level up your time relaxing and playing on the Crystal Coast ... sand between your toes *not* required.