

TOWN

Root Bound:
A beautiful bouquet of veggies, courtesy of Margie Levine at Crescent Farm in Clinton, SC; for more, see page 86.

The Good Earth

CELEBRATING THE BOUNTY OF OUR LAND AND THE HANDS THAT FEED US

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THE **ZIMMERMAN** AGENCY
(continued)



Shimmering Sea

North Carolina's Crystal Coast brims with beach towns, up-and-coming cuisine, and outdoor opportunities / by *Abby Moore Keith*

Call me a beach bum, but when the dogwoods bloom I start itching for the coast. Come May, I get antsy, and if my feet haven't hit sand by Memorial Day, I'm downright displeased. Give me a few sunny days, a good book, and Atlantic views, and I'm content all summer long. But I recognize not everyone is of my sunny disposition. Some, like my husband, find an afternoon underneath an umbrella as tedious as sunscreen reapplication, preferring an excursion-filled itinerary. For wave-watchers such as myself, finding a beach that offers enough activity to appease productive party members can be challenging, but after a recent introduction to North Carolina's Crystal Coast, our summer vacations are saved. Its 85 miles of shoreline coupled with eclectic towns and nationally protected landscapes provide plenty of experiences to entertain a host of doers.



High Horse: (opposite) The wild mustangs on the Crystal Coast's Shackleford Banks have Spanish ancestry and are thought to have been marooned on the island in the sixteenth century; (below and below left) deep-sea fishing and net-casting are sure ways to catch local sea fare; (left) the Cape Lookout Lighthouse offers extended aquamarine views of the Outer Banks and national seashore.



After an easy flight into New Bern, North Carolina, it took about an hour to reach my destination on Emerald Isle. Along with Atlantic Beach, this southern strip of Crystal Coast lacks big resort properties, maintaining laid-back appeal. Just across the bridge and the Bogue Sound, Morehead City and Beaufort exude small-town charm accompanied by mom-and-pop shops, local food joints, and a pirate story or two (Black Beard's *Queen Anne's Revenge* was discovered just off of Beaufort's banks).

BIKE AROUND CHARMING BEAUFORT

For an alternative way to experience Beaufort (pronounced *BOH-fert*, unlike South Carolina's *BYEW-fert*), hop on a Hungry Town bike tour. Mounted on colorful vintage bikes named with spice flavors and fish varieties (I'm on "Ginger," a bright yellow bike), owners David and Betsy Cartier led us through the town's historic streets and into its best restaurants, many of which line the waterfront and face Carrot Island (watch for the wild horses) and offer excellent sunset views. I recommend the award-winning Painkiller cocktail at Front Street Grill, which pairs nicely with their shrimp tacos, and the Spouter Inn makes a mean key lime pie; but don't skip Beaufort Grocery, a town institution dishing out French bistro fare for 25 years.

KAYAK THROUGH THE CROATAN NATIONAL FOREST

While surfing season is August–December, those looking to actively enjoy the water can hit the waves in kayaks and SUPs. We picked our vessels up from Mike at Hot Wax Surf Shop, an Emerald Isle staple for more than 20 years, who then guided us through the Croatan National Forest. A tidal refuge with saltwater estuaries and gorgeous marsh views, the Croatan is home to a plethora of wildlife, including black bears, turkey, and plenty of fish. The early morning hours are ideal viewing and rowing times (the wind is down), and Mike also leads kayak fishing experiences.

EXPLORE SHACKLEFORD BANKS AND CAPE LOOKOUT

If your time on the Crystal Coast is limited, don't bypass a trip to Cape Lookout and Shackleford Banks. A ferry from Harkers Island Visitors Center will have




Ride Out: (left) Beaufort's Hungry Town Tours offer a variety of walking and bike excursions throughout the town's best eateries and historic sites; (above) the Crystal Coast's estuaries, like those in the Croatan National Forest, are excellent places to spot natural wildlife.



A trek out to Cedar Island grants a scenic drive through a national wildlife refuge, and a chance to preview the area's oyster farms. Jay Styron, of Carolina Mariculture Co., grows his Cedar Island Selects year-round. Raising oysters from seed in floating cages, Styron's mariculture techniques help keep the waters clean—oysters are filter feeders—and allow for harvesting throughout the year. His oysters are regularly available at local restaurants across the state (see his feature with Vivian Howard on PBS's A Chef's Life), teaching a thing or two to those religious R-month-rule followers. After a quick boat ride out to his beds, I can safely say I slurped down a fresh one with no negative side effects.

you island-side in no time, granting an up-close experience with Shackleford's renowned wild horses. These marooned Spanish mustangs have roamed the island for hundreds of years, and with a current population of more than 100, they are a magnificent sight. The southernmost part of the Cape Lookout National Seashore, the protected area is also a refuge for 250 bird species, loggerhead turtles, and various marine wildlife. Visitors can easily spend a day exploring Shackleford and Cape Lookout's numerous offerings (bring a picnic basket), including fishing, shelling, and climbing the Cape Lookout Lighthouse for stunning vistas of the coastal shoreline.

While most of our activities were outdoors, plenty of indoor recreation abounds, including the NC Maritime Museum and the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum, as well as Crystal Coast's array of fantastic restaurants. We ended each day with feasts at the likes of Chef Clarke Merrill's tapas and cocktaileria Circa 81 and Chef Creighton's coastal Italian gem Pescara—icing on the cake to our many diverse coastal experiences. The Crystal Coast brims with beach-based opportunities, including the most basic and arguably most important—a chance to listen to the waves, stick your toes in the sand, and settle into a sunny afternoon of ocean views. 

EAT
Pescara Wood Oven Kitchen, 208 West Dr, Atlantic Beach, NC. (252) 499-9300, pescararestaurant.com

Beaufort Grocery, 1117 Queen St, Beaufort, NC. (252) 728-3899, beaufortgrocery.com

The Island Grille, 401 Money Island Dr, Atlantic Beach, NC. (252) 240-0000, igrestaurant.net

Circa 81, 4650 Arendell St, Morehead City, NC. (252) 648-8300, circa-81.com

PLAY
North Carolina Maritime Museum, 15 Front Street, Beaufort, NC. (252) 504-7740, ncmaritimemuseums.com

Hot Wax Surf Shop, 200 Mallard Dr, Emerald Isle, NC. (252) 354-6466, hotwaxsurf.com/index.htm

STAY
Emerald Island Realty, (877) 686-5183, emeraldislandrealty.com