

tidewater family

Waiting for Baby
Birth & Baby Guide
Discover NC's Crystal Coast

(let's go)

The Pride of Crystal Coast

escape to a windswept destination by Peggy Sijswerda



Watching horses run free is a memorable sight and one your children will never forget.

(Photos courtesy www.crystalcoastnc.org)

Like a shimmering mirage, the wild horses of Shackleford Banks seem to float on the waters of Bogue Sound, their heads bent over as they graze on salty sea grass. Behind them Cape Lookout Lighthouse rises up like a sentinel, guarding this peaceful kingdom, its distinctive pattern of black and white diamonds visible for miles.

I'm on North Carolina's Crystal Coast in a small skiff skimming over the sound, wind whipping my hair as I admire these iconic images—symbols of this proud region. About ninety minutes north of Wilmington, miles of gorgeous sandy beaches welcome tourists from up and down the East Coast, attracted by the area's serene beauty, natural landscape, and affordably priced accommodations.

But you won't find crowds of people here converging in one spot. In fact, the Crystal Coast stretches for 70 miles from Swansboro in the west to Cedar Island in the east and includes idyllic beach havens like Emerald Isle, Indian Beach, and Atlantic Beach, as well as cozy towns like Morehead City and Beaufort. Its vibe is low key, perfect for those who want to experience small-town charm

and a restful escape from the hectic pace of life.

I'm here to do just that: savor the simpler pleasures—a walk on the beach, a bike ride through coastal woods, a tasty meal—plus learn about the proud culture of this place, where watermen have raised their families for generations and still fish the waters of the Atlantic for prized seafood. After a few days of immersing myself in this region, I understand why folks come here year after year. There's no other place like it.

Wild Horses

Back on Bogue Sound, I'm headed to view the wild horses up close as they roam around their uninhabited island, wading and sometimes swimming to tiny spits of land for tasty grasses. On board the skiff with me, Carolyn Mason, a local expert, shares her knowledge about this thriving band of horses, whose ancestors likely came across the Atlantic on Spanish galleons three hundred years ago.

Carolyn holds a list of the horses with names ranging from the literary—Homer, Zelda, Shakespeare, and Penelope—to the playful—Aftermath, Tuna, and Texas. A group of Princeton students maintains a database of the horses, which number well over 100. We watch

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The Pride of Crystal Coast (cont.)

as a pair of horses swim from a narrow spit of land back to Shackleford Island, their heads held high, nostrils snorting. It's a sight you're unlikely to see anywhere else. On another small island, a new foal hides behind her mother, and Carolyn adds the youngster to her list.

"They're one of the biggest tourist attractions," Carolyn says later as we enjoy a picnic near the lighthouse. Boats ferry folks over from the mainland to view the horses en route to Cape Lookout National Seashore, where you can spend an afternoon hiking, swimming, and bird watching. The National Park Service gives tours of the stunning lighthouse, its 207 steps not for the faint of heart. But the view from the top—the sparkling Atlantic, the horses of Shackleford Banks, and the remote windswept beaches—makes the climb worthwhile.

Cooler Small Town

The Crystal Coast offers lots of options for outdoor lovers. One day I take a bike ride along a paved trail on Emerald Isle, startling a killdeer whose piercing cry startles me in return.

Another afternoon I sign up for a tour with Barrier Island Kayaks. For two hours, our group paddles languidly around the sound, finally ending up at Fossil Beach, known for its abundance of fossilized shark's teeth. Like excited schoolchildren, the other kayakers and I begin our treasure hunt. Soon I find one, then another, then another—shiny black teeth, barely a centimeter across, purportedly six million years old, according to our guide—amazing souvenirs I will treasure always.

Families will love the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, which takes visitors on a journey from the mountains to the sea. Exhibits focus on fish and mammals indigenous to both the fresh and saltwater ecosystems of North Carolina—including river otters, alligators, and even tropical fish.

My favorite exhibit, the Living Shipwreck, features a three-quarters

size replica of a German U-Boat sunk off the North Carolina coast by a Coast Guard Cutter in 1942. Three viewing windows provide plenty of opportunities for watching the variety of species that swim around the shipwreck in this 306,000-gallon exhibit. Piped-in New Age music lends a very peaceful vibe to this meditative spot.

As you might expect, the Crystal Coast's strategic location also invited attacks over the years. Blackbeard pirated these waters, and his ship, Queen Anne's Revenge, ran aground in Beaufort Inlet. You'll find an exhibit featuring artifacts recovered from the shipwreck in the Maritime Museum in Beaufort.

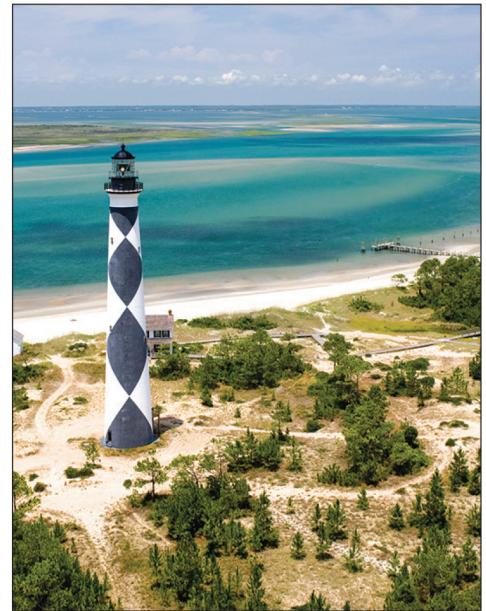
Plan to spend some time in this historic village, named America's Coolest Small Town by Travel + Leisure. First take a trolley tour and learn about the city's storied past. Then drop in Front Street Grill at Stillwater, where you can sip a cocktail on their waterfront patio and enjoy their signature Baked Oysters. Civil War buffs can explore nearby Fort Macon State Park, a pentagonal fort that offers historic exhibits, as well as swimming and fishing.

But I want to know more about the local culture, and the perfect place is the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center. "This is where the people tell their story," says Karen Ampacher, director of the center, as we wander past exhibits featuring quilt making, boat building, and decoy carving. Celebrating the "down-east spirit," the center stands as a tribute to the people who make a living along North Carolina's coast. "It's a rich, changing culture," Karen says. "We can't forget what connects us."

A passion for their coastal heritage unites this proud people—the wild horses, the stately lighthouse, the hard work required when you live on the water's edge. After my visit to the Crystal Coast, I am beginning to share their passion for this small corner of the continent, a place that's truly unlike anywhere else. ●

For more information:

- Accommodation options range from hotels and condos to camping and rental homes. I stayed in a gorgeous, five-bedroom oceanfront beach house on Emerald Isle called Breezy Cottage—perfect for a large family. <http://reservations.emeraldslerealty.com/properties/Breezy-Cottage>
- Awesome restaurants abound on the Crystal Coast. Amos Mosquito's features the freshest catch and makes everything from scratch. I recommend the coconut shrimp, the wahoo ("caught yesterday"), and their signature S'Mores. amosmosquitos.com
- I recommend Island Express Ferry Services for your Cape Lookout excursion. www.islandexpressferryservices.com



Cape Lookout Lighthouse rises up like a sentinel, watching over Shackleford Banks.

- For tourist information, visit www.crystalcoastnc.org.

