

The 11 Best Things to Do on North Carolina's Crystal Coast



The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

Spanning 85 miles of coastline, North Carolina's Crystal Coast is situated in the state's Southern Outer Banks. It consists of six communities—Atlantic Beach, Beaufort, Pine Knoll, Shores, Emerald Isle, Morehead City, and Cape Lookout National Seashore—where you'll find pristine beaches, legendary tales of pirates and Civil War figureheads, and the freshest seafood imaginable. With activities for young families and outdoor adventurers alike, the region is an idyllic destination any time of year. From spotting wild ponies to camping in an International Dark Sky Park, read on for the top things to do on the Crystal Coast.

Look For Wild Ponies at Shackleford Banks



The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

VIEW MAP 

ADDRESS:

Shackleford Banks, North Carolina, USA

The southernmost part of Cape Lookout National Seashore, Shackleford Banks, is an 8.5-mile-long barrier island bordered by the Back Sound to the north and the Atlantic Ocean to the south. It's a popular shelling destination thanks to its prime location near the Gulf Stream and Labrador Currents, and beachcombers will find everything from sand dollars and whelks to olive shells and moon snails. Fishing and birdwatching, too, are go-to activities; anglers can try their luck at catching croaker, trout, and king mackerel, while birders may spot waterfowl such as pelicans and egrets.

During your visit, keep your eyes peeled for the island's most iconic sight: wild horses. There are many theories about how the horses got here, though it's widely believed that the island's "Banker Ponies" are the descendants of Spanish Mustangs that survived a shipwreck hundreds of years ago.^[1] Today, roughly 110 Banker Ponies call the island home; while you may be tempted to pet them, be sure to keep a 50-foot distance—they are wild.

To get here, you can kayak, take a private boat, or hop on the NPS-authorized [Island Express Ferry Service](#), which departs from Harkers Island, Beaufort, and Morehead City.

Kayak or Paddleboard to Rachel Carson Estuarine Reserve



The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

[VIEW MAP](#)

ADDRESS:

*Front St,
Beaufort, NC 28516,
USA*

PHONE: +1 252-838-0886

WEB: [Visit website](#)

Across Taylor's Creek from downtown Beaufort is Rachel Carson Estuarine Reserve, named after the American marine biologist and conservationist behind "Silent Spring." Spread across 2,315 acres, the reserve comprises several islands, including Carrot Island and Bird Shoal, and is considered a Dedicated Nature Preserve.^[2]

Sitting at the mouths of the Newport and North Rivers, Rachel Carson Reserve's estuarine setting features a diversity of coastal habitats—including dunes, salt marshes, and maritime forests—that welcome an array of wildlife, from marsh rabbits and fiddler crabs to more than 200 different types of birds. In addition to birdwatching, visitors to the reserve can hike two (mostly flat) primitive nature trails and seek out roughly 30 wild horses, whose domesticated ancestors were brought to the islands in the 1940s, back when the reserve was a privately owned farm.

While you can reach Rachel Carson Reserve via boat or [ferry](#), we recommend signing up for a guided kayak or SUP tour with [Beaufort Paddle](#). Not only will you learn more about the reserve's history and wildlife, but you'll also have a chance to paddle around the reserve's surrounding marshes. On your way, see if you can spot Atlantic bottlenose dolphins and sea turtles.

[Hop on a Historic Double-Decker Bus Tour of Beaufort](#)



The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

[VIEW MAP](#) 

ADDRESS:

*130 Turner St,
Beaufort, NC 28516-2139,
USA*

PHONE: +1 252-728-5225

WEB: [Visit website](#) 

North Carolina's third-oldest town, Beaufort was founded in 1709, though the quaint fishing village served as a port of safety dating back to the late 1600s.^[3] Listed on the National Register of Historic Places, the Plan of Beaufort Towne—originally laid out in 1713—spans a 12-block district and features 150 restored homes.^[4] Learn about the architecture of these 18th- and 19th-century coastal Carolina houses and the stories about the historical figures who lived in them, including a Union sympathizer spy and Blackbeard—by signing up for one of [Beaufort Historic Site's double-decker bus tours](#). In addition to ghost stories, myths, and legends, your local guide will also share insight into the town's history.

Double-decker bus tours run from April through October and are available at 1:30 pm on Monday through Thursday and 11 a.m. and 1:30 p.m. on Friday and Saturday. Tickets are \$12 for adults, \$6 for children ages 6–12, and free for children 5 and under. Before or after your tour, visit the Old Burying Ground, North Carolina's oldest cemetery; self-guided tour maps can be picked up inside the gates, while guided tours can be booked by calling (252) 728-5225.

04 Eat Your Fill of Seafood

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It should come as no surprise that seafood meets Southern cuisine around the Crystal Coast. In Beaufort, head to [Clawson's](#), the city's oldest restaurant, for hearty pub fare like fried seafood platters (shrimp, flounder, and oysters),

pan-seared crab cakes, and—in case you don't like fish—smokehouse ribs. At [Front Street Grill & Rhubarb at Stillwater](#), order the house-made pimento cheese for the table before diving into blackened ahi tuna tacos—served with a side of fried plantains—or sautéed day boat flounder.

On the Emerald Isle, treat yourself to dinner at [Caribsea](#), with a seasonal menu that reflects steak that will melt in your mouth and locally sourced and 100 percent sustainable seafood. Be sure to try the crab dip—made with Old Bay, red pepper soufflé, and bacon lardons—and maki roll of the day with a glass of wine. In Atlantic Beach, check out local favorite [The Island Grille](#), whose signature filet is a staple dish despite having a seasonally changing menu. For something lighter, settle in at [Bahia Beach House](#) for craft cocktails and small plates like local yellowfin tuna ceviche tostada and crab croquettes.

For breakfast on your way to Cape Lookout, fuel up at [The Banks Grill](#) in Morehead City. The Jumbo Breakfast Sandwich—whose two fried eggs and melted cheddar cheese come on an ultra buttery, flaky XXL biscuit—is a must-have, as is the "Soon-to-be-Famous" Jumbo Cinnamon Roll; topped with a pecan praline sauce, the pastry is very deserving of its name.

05 [Learn About Blackbeard at the North Carolina Maritime Museum](#)

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The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

[VIEW MAP](#)

ADDRESS:

*315 Front St,
Beaufort, NC 28516-2124,
USA*

PHONE: +1 252-504-7740

WEB: [Visit website](#)

Open since 1985, downtown Beaufort's North Carolina Maritime Museum is small, but it is an excellent starting place to metaphorically dive into the town's maritime history. Several permanent and temporary exhibits are on display, covering topics ranging from North Carolina's coastal habitats to surfing and commercial fishing in the state. Kids will particularly love learning about the infamous pirate Edward Teach (a.k.a. Blackbeard), who operated off the coast of North Carolina in 1718.^[5] Marvel at the museum's treasure trove of artifacts recovered from the pirate's wrecked "Queen Anne's Revenge" (including cannons and grenades) before gazing up at another wow-worthy display: the skeleton of a nearly 34-foot-long sperm whale skeleton, strung up from the ceiling.

For a more hands-on experience, the affiliated Harvey W. Smith Watercraft Center is across the street. You can watch traditional wooden boats take shape at this working boatbuilding facility or learn how to craft one yourself by signing up for [a boatbuilding course](#). Both sites are open from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Monday through Saturday and from noon to 5 p.m. on Sunday; entry is free.



Crystal Coast Stargazers / Alex Gu

[VIEW MAP](#)

ADDRESS:

*Cape Lookout, Cape
Lookout Rd,
Harkers Island, NC
28531,
USA*

PHONE: +1 252-728-2250

WEB: [Visit website](#)

This 56-mile stretch of coastline was officially [designated an IDA International Dark Sky Park](#) (IDSP) in December 2021, making Cape Lookout Atlantic Coast's first national park to double as a Dark Sky Place. Plan your trip around Astronomy Night, held monthly at the Harkers Island Visitor Center, where the Crystal Coast Stargazers set up telescopes for armchair astronomers and active observers alike to peer into and identify planets, nebula, and other galaxies. Throughout the summer, meanwhile, NASA Solar System Ambassador hosts programs in the Harkers Island Visitor Center Theater, where you can learn about the latest happenings in space exploration.

If you can't make one of the events, have no fear. Cape Lookout is open 24/7 and welcomes celestial enthusiasts for primitive camping on the beach for a truly incredible night under the night sky. (Check [the park's official website](#) for more information on rules and regulations.) During the day, take advantage of all the other spectacular outdoor activities the national seashore offers, including shelling, hiking, fishing, birding, and of course, spotting wild horses.

07 Sail Around Beaufort Inlet

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Silver and Chalk Images / Getty Images

Arguably there's no better way to get into the spirit of the Crystal Coast's maritime ties than embarking on a sailing expedition, and there are several tour operators that will take you out on the water. [Lookout](#)

[Cruises](#) gives you your pick between four excursions aboard its 45-foot catamaran, including an AM dolphin watch and moonlight cruise. If you want a more personal experience, [Crystal Coast Sailing Excursions](#) offers two private charter sailing experiences—a sunset wine cruise and an all-day trip to Cape Lookout—and a three-day sailing course.

If you have kids in tow, you may want to hop on [Beaufort Pirates Revenge's](#) Pirate Treasure Cruise, a 90-minute, buccaneering adventure where aspiring swashbucklers can learn to sword fight, shoot cannons, and recover stolen treasure from an evil pirate. For brave souls, opt instead for the tour operator's family-friendly, haunted historic pirate cruise, during which you'll hear tales and ghostly lore about Blackbeard as you sail past the remains of his 18th-century flagship, the "Queen Anne's Revenge."

[Take a Tour of Fort Macon State Park](#)



The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

[VIEW MAP](#) 

ADDRESS:

*2303 E Fort Macon Rd,
Atlantic Beach, NC 28512-
5633,
USA*

PHONE: +1 252-726-3775

WEB: [Visit website](#) 

If you're a self-described history buff, you'll want to plan a trip to North Carolina's most-visited state park.^[6] Located east of Atlantic Beach, the 424-acre park is home to the eponymous Fort Macon, a 19th-century fort that both Union and Confederate soldiers used during the Civil War. Later, it served as a federal prison in the late 1800s before being garrisoned during the Spanish American War.

Visitors to the park can take a guided or self-guided tour of the five-sided fort, with guided tours taking place three times a day (11 a.m., 1 p.m., and 3 p.m.) and lasting approximately 45 minutes. At the museum, you'll find restored soldier barracks, artifacts such as military uniforms and weaponry, and exhibits detailing life in the military.

In addition to exploring the fort, visitors are welcome to hike approximately 5 miles of easy-to-moderate trails; angle for flounder, bluefish, red drum, and other types of fish; picnic; and swim at the beach. Fort Macon is also a birder's paradise, as more than 300 species of birds have been identified here. Before your visit, check the park's calendar of (mostly free) [events](#), including small arms demonstrations and a summer concert series. The fort and museum are open from 9 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. every day except Christmas.

Go Diving in the 'Graveyard of the Atlantic'



The Crystal Coast Tourism Authority

Often called the "Graveyard of the Atlantic," the Atlantic waters off the Outer Banks have witnessed approximately 2,000 shipwrecks, including the infamous German submarine U-353. That, coupled with average water temps of 80 degrees F and more than 100 feet of visibility, makes the Crystal Coast an excellent place for scuba diving. Several tour operators will take you on full-day and half-day dive trips,

including [Discovery Diving](#) and [Olympus Dive Center](#).

[Visit the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores](#)

VIEW MAP 

ADDRESS:

*1 Roosevelt Blvd,
Pine Knoll Shores, NC 28512,
USA*

PHONE: +1 252-247-4003

WEB: [Visit website](#) 

Housing the state's largest artificial ocean habitat, the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores is one of the best places to learn about the aquatic creatures that live off the Crystal Coast. The 306,000-gallon saltwater tank is home to a replica of the sunken U-352 German submarine and animals, including sandbar sharks, Atlantic spadefish, crevalle jack, sheepshead, tarpon, a sand tiger shark, and a green sea turtle. Learn about how loggerhead sea turtle hatchlings travel to the ocean at the "Loggerhead Odyssey" exhibit, then check out a rotating collection of ocean-themed artwork in the Spadefish Gallery. Preschool-aged kids and toddlers will love Imagination Bay, where they can climb toys shaped like turtles and sharks and crawl around a glowing cave.

Special events occur at the aquarium throughout the year, including family paint nights and BYOB "Sip and Paint" sessions. General admission tickets for visitors between 13 and 61 cost \$12.95.

11 [Explore Croatan National Forest](#)

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Ryan McGurl / Getty Images

[VIEW MAP](#) 

ADDRESS:

*Croatan National Forest,
North Carolina 28570,
USA*

Located 45 miles northwest of Beaufort, this 160,000-acre national forest is considered the East Coast's "only true" coastal forest, with a unique ecosystem featuring landscapes ranging from pine forests and saltwater estuaries to bogs and pocosins. Wildlife lovers will be thrilled to discover the diversity of animals that reside here—black bears, deer, ospreys, alligators, and the Venus fly trap, to name a few—which can be spotted on day hikes and longer treks throughout several sections of the forest, including the Catfish Area, Cedar Point Recreation Area, and Neusiok Area. Other popular activities at Croatan National Forest include salt water, lake, pond, and river fishing; horseback riding; hunting; motorized and non-motorized boating, and OHV trail riding.

Dispersed camping is allowed in undeveloped sections of the park (with [some restrictions](#)), but Croatan National Forest also provides three established campgrounds for tent and RV camping: [Cedar Point Campground](#), [Flanners Beach/Neuse River Campground](#), and [Oyster Point Campground](#)). You can reserve your site at [Recreation.gov](#).