

SOUTH CHARLOTTE

CITY LIFESTYLE

Art Makes The Room



inside the issue

The Home Issue



24



10



18



16

FEATURED

10 *Decorating Your Home With Art*

Art Sets The Mood

16 *It's March, So Let's Dine At Home and Celebrate St. Patrick's Day!*

Enjoy This Irish Feast

18 *Pea Organizing Services:*

Helping Clients Get and Remain 'Organized for Life'

24 *It's Time to Head to the Coast: The Crystal Coast is a Hidden Gem*

One of North Carolina's Finest

DEPARTMENTS

4 *Lifestyle Letter*

8 *City Scene*

10 *Decor Trends* HOME + DESIGN

16 *Culinary Creations* FOOD + BEVERAGE

18 *How To* HOME + DESIGN

22 *Giving Back* HOME SERVICES

24 *Must See* TRAVEL

28 *Open House* HOME + DESIGN

30 *Events*

31 *Realty Report* REAL ESTATE

34 *Eat Right* LIFE + CULTURE



THE CRYSTAL COAST: NORTH CAROLINA'S HIDDEN GEM

ONE OF NORTH CAROLINA'S FINEST

ARTICLE BY VALORIE MCALPIN | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ZIMMERMAN AGENCY

CRYSTAL COAST

Most people raise an eyebrow or two when you mention The Crystal Coast. “Exactly where is that?”...they usually ask. I recently had an opportunity to spend a weekend exploring this beautiful, unspoiled, diverse region of North Carolina’s southern outer banks. The Crystal Coast includes six distinct communities....Atlantic Beach, Beaufort, Pine Knoll Shores, Emerald Isle, Morehead City and Cape Lookout, all bordering the Atlantic Ocean or the beautiful inter-coastal waterway.

What makes The Crystal Coast a hidden gem? Eighty five miles of sparkling shoreline; unspoiled pristine beaches, each with its own cultural vibe; charming small towns with art galleries and boutiques; year-round fishing; fresh from the docks seafood served at waterfront bistros; diving for sunken treasures; kayaking and paddle boarding; exploring wild Spanish mustangs, and the list goes on.

My first stop while visiting the Crystal Coast was the renowned fishing town of Morehead City. After checking into the famed Bask Hotel with a lovely balcony suite facing the ocean, I decided to take a stroll to get a feel for the surrounding location. I was immediately charmed by the little grassy park in front of the hotel, complete with old fashioned swings facing the boats docked along the front of the hotel. As my husband and I walked for another block or so along the waterfront, we were amazed at the size of the fish being carried from one of the chartered fishing boats. We later discovered that Morehead City is home to the annual Big Rock Blue Marlin Fishing Tournament, where fishermen from all over the world compete.

Our next stop was dinner at Atlantic Beach, just a 10 minute drive from our Morehead City hotel.

We enjoyed cocktails and local beer from Idle Hour Biergarten as we sat outside by the fireplace and watched the sunset. Just across the street is the Bahia Beach House and Surf Bar, where we enjoyed fresh seafood in a quaint charming environment with small town friendly hospitality. Surprisingly, you won’t find many franchise restaurants along the Crystal Coast....most are eclectic family owned restaurants with fresh from the docks seafood.

Next stop....Beaufort, named “America’s Favorite Town” by *Travel+*

Leisure magazine. Beaufort, (pronounced *Bo-fert*), is a lovely, delightful town with boutiques, art galleries, and antiques all along Front Street. We enjoyed afternoon cocktails while watching the yachts and smaller boats cruise by. Kayaking and paddle boarding are favorite pastimes while exploring Carrot Island and the marshes of Rachel Carson Reserve in Beaufort. Guided tours are available for those interested in bird watching, wreck diving, and catching a glimpse of the wild Spanish mustangs. Animal lovers can book a wild horse vehicle tour to witness the untamed beauty of wild Spanish Mustangs who have made the beaches of The Crystal Coast their home for more than 500 hundred years.

It’s here in Beaufort that the famed pirate Blackbeard ran aground on the French slave ship, *The Queen Anne’s Revenge*. Just a short stroll off Front Street, you can learn more about Blackbeard at the NC Maritime Museum which houses many of the artifacts from his shipwreck.

A trip to the Crystal Coast would not be complete without visiting Cape Lookout National Seashore. Accessible only by boat, this 56-mile strand of unspoiled beaches represents one of the few



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remaining natural barrier island chains in the world. Here among the sand dunes and sea oats, you'll find campers enjoying fishing, hiking, and wildlife among this peaceful shoreline.

Don't miss the Cape Lookout Lighthouse and Keeper's Quarters. This majestic "Diamond Lady", built in the mid-1800's, stands at 163 feet tall with 207 steps to the top.

One final tip, explore North Carolina's Crystal Coast during the spring or fall when it's peaceful, the weather is slightly cooler and you can smell the ocean breezes. The Crystal Coast has something for everyone.... history buffs, marine scientists, wildlife enthusiasts, family beach vacationers, and all who enjoy sailing, swimming, and fishing....you name it.... it's all here on The Crystal Coast.

