

Come Away to the Crystal Coast

Discover North Carolina's Southern Outer Banks

by Libby Carly McNamee

I'll admit it. Before traveling to North Carolina's Crystal Coast, I really hadn't, um, heard of it. All I can say now is "Shhhhhhhhhhh!" Let's keep this fabulous destination to ourselves, shall we? There are so many reasons to love the Crystal Coast that I hardly know where to start. It accomplishes the impossible—a gorgeous place geared to tourists without being downright "touristy." As a result, it is a great destination for any kind of group—a girls' weekend, family vacation, or romantic getaway.

Also known as the "Southern Outer Banks," the Crystal Coast in Carteret County is only a five-hour drive from Richmond. The best part of traveling there is taking Route 95 rather than taking heavily congested Route 64, the usual route to Virginia beaches and the Outer Banks. The trip is also easier on the pocketbook because the area is not as well known, another big advantage, especially in this economy.

The Crystal Coast is the southern portion of the Outer Banks, and includes Morehead City, Beaufort, Cape Lookout, and the Down East area. Its crown jewel is the 21-mile barrier island known as Bogue Banks, easily accessible by two bridges. The narrow island offers five unspoiled beachfront towns, including Emerald Isle and Atlantic Beach.

Once you cross over the bridge onto Emerald Isle, you can't help but breathe a sigh of relief as you leave the worries of the mainland behind. Your vacation has now begun! If the many seafood restaurants along the road are not too much of a distraction, you can practically see water on both sides of the island. Once settled, you have the wonderful choice of the long, wide beach facing the Atlantic with its crashing waves or the

more serene waters of the Intracoastal Waterway.

And before you know it, it's time to eat! Trust me when I say there is nowhere better for those who love seafood with a Southern flair. It's a good thing I arrived with a hearty appetite, because there were plenty of fabulous restaurants to try. We started off with a delicious meal at the Sanitary Fish Market in Morehead City, also accessible by boat. Known for its famous hushpuppies and top-notch fresh fish, this restaurant is a local icon for good reason.

Another high recommendation goes to Chef's 105, a casual eatery situated in a gorgeously renovated old Gulf Oil warehouse in Morehead City. Don't be fooled by the laidback atmosphere or the patio's wonderful view of the water—the main attraction is the food because it is divine, especially the Ahi tuna and lobster salad. If you want your food to come to you, Carlton's Fine Dining will come cook a magnificent gourmet dinner where you are, perhaps in a waterfront beach house.

If you are not a "foodie," do not despair, because there is a wealth of other things to do and see. For the outdoorsy type, there are nature hikes through a maritime forest, cruises to see Cape Lookout National Seashore and the wild ponies on Shackleford Banks, world-class fishing right from the beach, scuba diving, bike trails, and even parasailing. For kids there is mini-putt, lots of pirate lore, and the recently renovated North Carolina Aquarium. And did I neglect to mention taking long leisurely walks on the beach, swimming and surfing?

History buffs will love learning about Fort Macon. Soldiers constructed it during the Civil War on the eastern end of Bogue Banks to defend the area. Water surrounds this five-sided structure dramatically on three sides, adding beauty to its colorful past. In addition to once serving as a

Confederate stronghold and later a federal prison, the fort is now part of Fort Macon State Park, the most popular state park in North Carolina.

A visit to Beaufort is a highlight of any trip to the Crystal Coast. This charming colonial town, pronounced "Bow-fort" unlike its counterpart "Byew-fort" in South Carolina, is steeped in history. Taking a tour on Beaufort's English double-decker bus is a fun and informative way to learn about this quaint locale's rich past while taking in the beautifully restored old homes of the historic site.

As the third oldest town in the state, this picturesque seaside village was once one of the few ports of entry along the East Coast. While Beaufort prospered as a result, it also became a prime target for pirates and foreign rogues. At the local Maritime Museum you can see many pirate artifacts, including those believed to be from the shipwreck of Blackbeard, the legendary pirate who once terrorized the coast.

Shoppers can get their fix and then some in Beaufort's fabulous shops along the seafont. These individually owned boutiques offer unique clothing, decorations, and souvenirs with not a tacky item to be found. The Beaufort Grocery Co. offers gourmet lunch, dinner, and Sunday brunch in the charming ambiance of a French country bistro. The menu is so appealing that narrowing it down to one entrée is



downright painful. You can't go wrong, though, because everything is scrumptious, especially their "crabby" cakes. Beaufort is also home to Sharpies Grill & Bar, a spectacular spot for fine dining on coastal Carolina cuisine. We sampled just about everything on the menu, and there was not a morsel left. The oysters there were quite simply the freshest—and best—I've ever had.

At the end of the trip, I had only one fleeting regret. My shorts were rather snug, but I quickly decided it was worth every overly indulgent bite. I have the right incentive to take it back off. The sooner I lose it, the sooner I can go back. ▼

For more information about vacations on the Crystal Coast, visit www.CrystalCoastNC.org or call 877-206-0929. And please bring me.

▼ Libby Cary McNamee is a local freelance writer and mother, already plotting to go back to the Crystal Coast at her first opportunity. No need to wait for summer! Check out her web site at www.libbymcNamee.com.



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