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Escape to NORTH CAROLINA'S CRYSTAL COAST

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CRYSTAL COAST TOURISM
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LIKE A SHIMMERING MIRAGE, the wild horses of Shackleford Banks seemed to float on the waters of Bogue Sound, their heads bent as they grazed on salty sea grass. Behind them, Cape Lookout Lighthouse stood like a sentinel, its distinctive pattern of black and white diamonds visible for miles. I admired these iconic images from a small skiff skimming over the sound along North Carolina's Crystal Coast.

About 90 minutes north of Wilmington, miles of gorgeous sandy beaches welcome tourists attracted by the area's serene beauty, natural landscape and affordably priced accommodations. Here, you won't find crowds of people converging in one spot. In fact, the Crystal Coast features 85 miles of coastline 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 had come to do just that and to 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.

MANE ATTRACTION

Aboard the skiff, Carolyn Mason, a local expert, shared her knowledge about the thriving band of wild horses, whose ancestors likely came across the Atlantic on Spanish galleons 300 years ago. We watched as a pair of horses swam 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.

"They're one of the biggest tourist attractions,"

Mason said later as we enjoyed 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 makes the climb worthwhile.

TREASURED FINDS

Outdoor lovers will want to take a tour with Barrier Island Kayaks. For two hours, our group paddled languidly around the sound, ending up at Fossil Beach, known for its abundance of fossilized shark's teeth. Like excited school children, the other kayakers and I began our treasure hunt. Soon I found one, then another, then another. Those shiny black teeth, barely a centimeter across and purportedly six million years old, are 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. 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.

In the Maritime Museum in Beaufort, not far away, you'll find an exhibit with artifacts recovered from when Blackbeard pirated these waters, and his ship, Queen Anne's Revenge, ran aground in Beaufort Inlet. Plan to spend some time in the historic village, recently named "America's Coolest Small Town" by *Budget Travel*.





First, take a trolley tour and learn about the city's storied past. Then drop in to Front Street Grill, 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.

THE LOCAL ALLURE

If local culture is what you're after, don't miss the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center. Celebrating the "down-east spirit," the center stands as a tribute to the people who make a living along North Carolina's coast.

More local flavor abounds in awesome restaurants like Amos Mosquito's, which features the freshest catch and makes everything from scratch. If you've been out and about exploring all day, consider having private Chef Shawn Pratt prepare a meal for you. He created a decadent, multi-course dinner for us, featuring sweet freshwater prawns, local collards and rabbit ravioli, all in the comfort and privacy of Breezy Cottage.

A gorgeous, five-bedroom oceanfront beach house on Emerald Isle, Breezy Cottage is perfect for a large family. Of course, Crystal Coast accommodations range from hotels and condos to camping and rental homes. Regardless of where you stay, after a few days, like me, you too will understand why folks come here year after year. There's no other place like it. **PN**



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FOR MORE INFORMATION
crystalcoastnc.org