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THE TRAVELER



Small Towns, Big Charm

By Kathleen Mansfield

The Southeastern Coast is rife with destinations for travelers in search of a summer getaway or relaxing holiday. Myrtle Beach, the Golden Isles, the Gulf Coast, the Keys... these beautiful areas are certainly worthy of their reputation and have much to offer for any style vacation. The lesser-known tourist destinations are a little off the beaten path, sometimes not even on the coast; yet those travelers who take the road less traveled are rewarded with culinary treats, outdoor adventures, and breathtaking scenery.

Join us as we explore a few of these intriguing destinations, each with their own history and take on the atmosphere of a great vacation.

First, we visit the Crystal Coast, a North Carolina coastal jewel made up of several cities and communities with delectable seafood, a variety of water sports, and an abundance of wildlife along one of the prettiest shorelines on the Atlantic.

Within the Crystal Coast, we make our way to Beaufort, a waterfront town with hospitality and history like no other. Tourists can learn all about it while paddling through the streets on a bicycle tour, enjoying seafood fresh from the docks, or exploring the North Carolina Maritime Museum, where artifacts from the Pirate Blackbeard's ship Queen Anne's Revenge are on display.

A few hundred miles south and a little further from the coast, we find the exciting Capital City of Florida, home to the Florida State Seminoles. Tallahassee is an up-and-coming spot for vacationers who love history, beaches, and the adventurous outdoors. The geographic center of Florida is located in the heart of Tallahassee, along with museums, scenic trails and an interactive farm area.

What are you waiting for? Turn the page.



The Crystal Coast, NC

On the Southern end of the Outer Banks lies a place appropriately nicknamed the “Crystal Coast.” This pretty stretch of North Carolina yields some fascinating sights. Sand dollars and other sea shells abound along the pristine beaches. Dolphins leap and cruise the waves of the intracoastal waterways and Atlantic Ocean shoreline. In the distance, hardy wild horses graze the marshy islands of Shackleford Banks and the Rachel Carson Reserve. The wildlife is beautiful and timeless, but the cities or “Gems” of the Crystal Coast have a lot to offer besides nature: history, fine dining and outdoor adventures.

A community of engaging cities make up the Crystal Coast, each drawing visitors to explore and experience something unique. Festivals, fishing tournaments, and multiple watersports such as kayaking, surfing, and paddle boarding are standard extracurriculars for the adven-

turing nesting season. In the early summertime, disrupted sand along the Crystal Coast’s beaches shows the evidence of mother sea turtles having laid eggs the night before, and later in the summer, little baby turtle tracks heading back to the ocean. Lucky beachgoers can even see live hatchling turtles waddling furiously toward the water.

The quiet crystalline beaches of Pine Knoll Shores are great for relaxing and turtle watching. A little further down the coast, Atlantic Beach offers more excitement with ongoing festivals and concerts, and convenient dining near the beach. The Atlantic Beach pier is home to the Barnacle Bar, and just a short walk back along the beach sidewalk is a variety of restaurants for all tastes: the Crab’s Claw for a classic seafood menu and oceanfront view; Pescara Wood Oven Kitchen for an elegant evening of fine dining; and the Idle Biergarten, perfect for those



turous in cities like Emerald Beach, Indian Beach, and Salter Path. Miles of nature trails wind through the area to observe wildlife. All of the Crystal Coast’s gems favor conservation of their flora and fauna, and support multiple organizations and programs that support the cause and educate visitors.

Pine Knoll Shores, located at the center of Bogue Banks, has a strong community commitment to the environment and is home to the largest of North Carolina’s four aquariums. The aquarium celebrates a “journey from the mountains to the sea,” featuring the three major geographical regions of the state - Mountains, Piedmont, and Coastal Plain, along with Tidal Waters and an Ocean Gallery.

The NC Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores specializes in sea turtle conservation. Each year, its turtle program rehabilitates anywhere from 20 to 200 sea turtles from all over the coast, including loggerhead, leatherback, and green sea turtles. These turtles are stragglers from summer nests or “cold-stunned” victims of wintry ocean temperatures. They live in the aquarium, being used to educate visitors, until they are healthy enough to be released.

Not far from the aquarium, sea turtles can be observed in the wild

after hours of mingling under patio lights with a beer in hand.

Nearby Morehead City continues the fine dining trend. Banks Grill boasts the “soon to be world-famous” pecan-filled cinnamon rolls and fluffy beignets for brunch. For dinner, Circa 81 pairs candlelight and enchanting background music with gourmet dishes and fine wines.

Fishing charter services operate out of Morehead City for those who want to work up an appetite or enjoy a sunset cruise before dinner; charters take guests up the waterway for a view of neighboring Beaufort and the historical Fort Macon, and even as far as Cape Lookout.

The Cape Lookout National Seashore is a preserved 56-mile stretch of Southern Outer Banks coastline that is protected by the National Park Service. One of its highlights is the Cape Lookout Lighthouse, a 163 feet tall structure with a 207-step climb to the top. Its diamond paint scheme, or “day mark,” is unique to Cape Lookout; this and also its light pattern allow sailors to recognize the lighthouse by sight and know their location on the coast.

The lighthouse museum showcases the history of the lighthouse and seashore, and also features an idyllic front porch with rocking chairs facing the beach and nearby Shackleford Banks, which is part of the National Seashore.

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"St. Simons Island"



The famed wild horses, or “Banker ponies,” of Shackleford Banks are descendants of Spanish Mustangs, left when the Spanish first settled here in the 1500s. The herd of around 120 horses wanders around the 9-mile long island, eating the salty grass that grows on top of marsh banks. The Island Express Ferry cruises by them several times daily on its way from Beaufort to the lighthouse, offering visitors an up-close look at this beautiful example of nature as they graze.

Back in Beaufort, more wild horses graze in the pastures of a farm managed by the Carolyn Mason Foundation for Shackleford Horses. The Foundation was created to preserve the existence of the Banker ponies and their role in Crystal Coast history. Visitors to the farm can get up close and personal with rescued wild horses who couldn’t survive on the island; like the aquarium’s sea turtles, these horses help educate about conservation efforts of the area.

The wild horses of Shackleford Banks, Cape Lookout’s lighthouse, and the numerous other attractions of the Crystal Coast are all within a short driving distance of each other – an ideal setup for visitors to the area looking for daytime activities. When it is time for a breather from all the adventures, the Crystal Coast also has a variety of condo and beach house rentals that provide great views of the water and amenities of their own.

Bluewater Vacation Rentals offers “sand castles” scattered throughout the coastal cities. These beach mansions have private pools and private access to the beach, as well as game rooms and in-home theatres for families or large groups enjoying a vacation together. Each sand castle was thoughtfully designed for comfort and relaxation away from home, much like the rest of the Crystal Coast.

North Carolina’s coastal gems are certainly one-of-a-kind in coastal living; there truly is something for everyone, regardless of what “vacation” means to them. Explore history and nature, or test the waters on an ocean kayak or paddle board. Taste the flavors of fresh seafood and imbibe local beverages. Relax in a spacious beach house or revel at an afternoon music festival. All of these experiences and more lead to an unforgettable vacation on the Crystal Coast.



Beaufort, NC

Driving into the quaint seaside town of Beaufort (pronounced Bo-fort), it feels a bit like you're driving into a scene from a movie. You see an older couple walking their Great Dane along the sidewalk of a street lined with friendly little boutiques, waterfront seafood restaurants, cozy inns, and enormous old houses that look preserved in time, as bicycles coast by and their riders give a friendly wave. Does it seem familiar?

In fact, you are driving into a scene from a movie. Beaufort was the enchanting setting for two books, and later movies based on them, written by romantic drama novelist Nicholas Sparks. "A Walk to Remember," and more recently, "The Choice," each give a warm glimpse into life on this stretch of the Crystal Coast of North Carolina.

There is much more to Beaufort than you see in the movies though. Just talk to Betsy and David Cartier of Hungry Town Tours.

"It's a small, tasteful town with year-round tourism," Betsy said of the town after which their bicycle and walking tour company is named. Hungry Town was Beaufort's original name, because it was "hungry for settlers" in the early 1700s when it was founded. A bicycle tour with Betsy and David provides a "local's perspective" of the little town and all it has to offer, from its maritime history to its charming present.

Beaufort's enchanting story began with its role as a port to Spanish and French ships colonizing the East Coast. Nearby lies the final resting place of Queen Anne's Revenge, the famed ship of the Pirate Blackbeard. Many interesting artifacts from the ship's wreckage can be viewed in the Beaufort Maritime Museum across from the waterfront near Hungry Town Tours, and the ship has been added to the National Registry of Historic Places, along with several area homes

and the Old Burying Ground.

The Old Burying Ground, as its name suggests, is the burial site of more than 200 graves dating from 1724 to the early 1900s. Just a short bike ride from Front Street, the quiet, scenic cemetery is home to Orway Burns, a North Carolina war hero and long-time politician whose tomb is marked with a cannon from one of his ships.

Another resident of the cemetery has become well-known posthumously within the iron gates of Old Burying Ground. The wooden

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grave marker reads, "Little Girl Buried in Barrel of Rum," and her story is a sad one. A daughter of the Sloo family in the 1700s, "Rum Girl" begged to join her father on a trading voyage across the Atlantic. Reluctantly her mother allowed it, on the condition that her father bring her home to Beaufort. Sadly, she

died at sea. Her father, intent on bringing his daughter home to her mother, purchased a cask of rum from the ship's captain and placed the body inside for the rest of the journey. The Sloo family home still stands on Front Street today, just blocks from the grave of its young former inhabitant, and visitors to her grave leave small gifts in her memory: sunbleached seashells and tiny dolls, children's drawings and shiny pennies. Rum Girl's story is heartbreaking, but it is also another piece of history that makes Beaufort stand out among the "gems" of the Crystal Coast.

Back in the present, Beaufort boasts a picturesque home for its living residents and an alluring destination for its guests. Betsy and David Cartier moved there not long ago, and fell in love with the town and its history. They purchased their bicycle tour company in 2011 to share what they love about "Hungry Town" with those who want an active tourist experience.

The active tourist experience doesn't stop at tourists, however.



Many residents, Betsy said, are heavily involved in the Garden Club, which maintains landscaping and flora along the historic streets. The Club's master gardeners and gardening enthusiasts put on home and garden tours throughout the year for anyone who wants to enjoy the scenery. Some of these tours are walking or driving, but bicycling is also popular. You can thank Hungry Town Tours for that.

Betsy and David's tours offers a variety of experiences for inquisitive visitors. Depending on the chosen tour, participants can check out waterfront restaurants and the boutiques of Front Street, which include an olive oil shop, wine boutique and kitchen store, as well as businesses and sites off the main road, such as historical homes, the Old Burying Ground, and a tiny craft brewery. On a sunny day, riding along the waterfront, wild horses from Carrot Island can be seen grazing in the sandbars along the banks.

The Carrot Island horses are unique to the Crystal Coast and are part of the Rachel Carson Reserve, which is made up of several small islands. Their heritage is anyone's best guess, but the small herd of around 30 horses is a beloved part of the Beaufort community.

"We count them after every storm," Betsy said. "Our residents care about them and their safety." Thankfully, the islands of the Southern Outer Banks protect Beaufort and Carrot Island from most major hurricanes.

Another way to see the horses is with the help of Beaufort Paddle, which provides kayaking and paddle boarding experiences around the Reserve to see horses, dolphins, and other wildlife as well as a fresh view of Beaufort from the water. Owner Rod Hoell is an avid outdoorsman and started Beaufort Paddle to introduce novice and experienced paddlers to Beaufort's coastal surroundings.

For those who work up an appetite paddling with Rod, the water-

front restaurants of Beaufort have a lot to offer in the way of quality dining with local seafood and a vacation view of dolphins, boats, and sunsets. Many of the area's restaurants and businesses participate in the Carteret Catch program, designed by the county to sustain the area's fishing industry by highlight seasonal fish and seafood in restaurants and at market.

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"Everyone is into farm-to-table, or as we like to call it, dock-to-dish. We love sharing this on our culinary tours," Hungry Town's David Cartier said.

Carteret Catch is just one more way that the residents of Beaufort work to maintain everything that is special to their little stretch of the Crystal Coast, from the preservation of history and wildlife to the active culture of hospitality, outdoor activities and delicious fresh seafood. Whether you experience Hungry Town through a bicycle tour or create your own tourist experience, take note of how much your vacation will feel like home in the inviting coastal town of Beaufort, North Carolina.

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