

North Carolina's Outer Banks

Offers Respite For All

By Nancy Dorman-Hickson



The debate usually begins as soon as the word “vacation” enters the conversation. Kids demand adrenaline-pumping action. Dad prefers a place packed with history. Mom requests a chance to rejuvenate in a serene setting, maybe something close to nature. How to satisfy all these divergent wishes? Choose North Carolina’s Outer Banks.

The Outer Banks is a dynamic chain of barrier islands that stretches from Corolla to the north, all the way down to Ocracoke at the southern extent, says Aaron Tuell with the Outer Banks Visitor Bureau (www.outerbanks.org). In this 130-mile stretch of territory jutting out into the Atlantic Ocean, six towns and seven villages offer something for virtually every vacationer.

Visitors find attractions ranging from the historical site of the Wright Brothers’ first flight to America’s longest-running outdoor drama, “The Lost Colony.” The area also features dozens of art galleries, great food, wind and water activities, golfing and horseback riding. Hotels, motels, bed and breakfast inns and rental cottages are available in a variety of price ranges.

Four major islands make up the Outer Banks — Bodie, Roanoke, Hatteras and Ocracoke. In the local vernacular, residents refer to the northern part as “up the

beach” and the southern as “down the beach.”

Bodie Island includes the colorfully named towns of Corolla, Duck, Southern Shores, Kitty Hawk, Kill Devil Hills and Nags Head, while the adjacent Roanoke Island is home to Manteo and Wanchese. This upper portion of the Outer Banks is considered more tourist-oriented, with comparatively easy access and every amenity, including shopping and night life. It’s also rich in history and local culture.

The lower Outer Banks includes Hatteras Island and Ocracoke Island, which also enjoy a unique history and culture. Here, the villages of Rodanthe, Waves, Salvo, Avon, Buxton, Frisco, Hatteras and Ocracoke Village offer a laid back, more natural experience than “up the beach.” Ocracoke is accessible only by a 40-minute ferry ride from Hatteras. As one resident says, “It’s harder to get here, but once you do, it’s worth every minute.”

“It’s not a place to live if you feel you’ve got to have certain amenities,” agrees Irene Nolan, a Hatteras Island resident for 17 years. She edits an online area





Whenever you go, count on returning. "People who come here can't wait to come back," says artist Stephanie Kiker, a long-time Outer Banks resident. "They meet people here, and they feel like they're part of the community."

An estimated 7 million visitors make the trek to the Outer Banks each year. Here are a few reasons why.

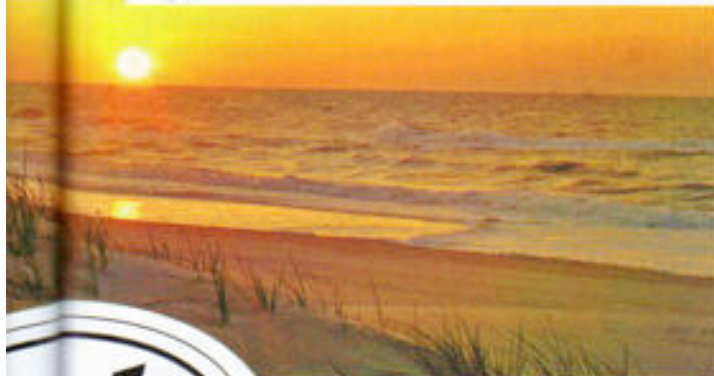
The Beaches

Nags Head was named by TripAdvisor as the No. 1 Family-Friendly Beach for 2007, while beach authority Stephen Leatherman, also known as "Dr. Beach," credited Ocracoke Lifeguarded Beach as the best beach in America that same year.

Scott Geib first vacationed at the Outer Banks as a teenager. "The first time I walked over the dune and saw the ocean," says the Ohio native, "I knew this was where I wanted to be." The Buxton resident is now a photographer in the area. (To see his work and the art of Stephanie Kiker, see www.lightkeepergallery.com).

Many of the Outer Banks' beaches retain a natural look with easy public access on wooden walkways. But the 28,000-acre Cape Hatteras National Seashore along the islands of Hatteras and Ocracoke — protected by law from development — are especially pristine. "You can drive for 15 or 20 minutes at some points and never see a house," Tuell says.

Another Outer Banks' bonus: "You can take your vehicle out on the beach," he says. While some areas are off limits due to bird or turtle nesting or tidal erosion, other areas, including the towns of Kill Devil Hills, Nags Head and along the National Seashore, allow



newspaper, the Island Free Press www.islandfreepress.org. "For instance," she adds with a laugh, "I don't believe you can buy underwear on this island." While Victoria's Secret — or even a Wal-Mart — is not available, this unspoiled territory provides a kind of solitude not often found these days. That's especially true along the protected, pristine Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

No matter where you stay on the Outer Banks, you'll be treated well. Tourism drives the economy and locals welcome visitors. The peak tourism season is June through August. After that, some rental accommodations, restaurants and attractions shut down during the off-season, which runs approximately from Labor Day until Memorial Day. Nonetheless, if your schedule permits, consider timing your trip for the less crowded, off-season times of winter, spring, or, best of all, fall. Residents swear the windy yet still warm autumn is perhaps the ultimate time to visit.

"The water is 'swimmable' through October usually, and the weather is very mild," Nolan says. Even in colder months, she says, "Most of the time, my geraniums on my front porch bloom all winter." If you go during the off-season, be sure to verify the availability of attractions and accommodations beforehand.



vehicles during certain times of the year. Permits are required.

The Fishing

"In Wanchese, as well as Avon and Hatteras, you'll find charter boats that will take you out for a day on the water," Tuell says. "We've got some of the best tuna fishing and red drum fishing anywhere because of the way (the islands) bow out into the Atlantic. We get the benefits of warm and cool waters bringing different species of fish."

Even if you don't fish, you'll benefit from the islands' teeming waters. Fresh-caught fare makes its way to virtually every local restaurant.

The Wind and Water

Dubbed the "Windsurfing Capital of the East Coast," the Outer Banks offers not only windsurfing, but jet skiing, hang gliding, ocean and sound kayaking, diving, surfing, parasailing, sailing and boating. Kiteboarding — a form of recreation that involves using a power kite to pull a rider through the water on a small surfboard — is the latest in a long list of Outer Banks sports for adrenaline junkies.

"We're one of the best places in the country to kiteboard," Tuell says. "All you need is a good 10-knot breeze to launch into the air with hang times of five seconds or more."

Kiker acknowledges she has become obsessed with kiteboarding. The artist sometimes works at night to keep her days free for kiteboarding. "I keep my (kiteboarding) stuff in my car all the

time, and I look at the wind report," she says. "If it looks like it's going to be a good day and I can get out and kite for an hour or two, I'll go kite." Kiteboarding lessons are recommended and readily available (www.outerbanks.org).

Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nags Head provides a perfect starting point for hang gliding. Described as "a giant natural sand box," the 426-acre park features the tallest natural sand dune — 90 feet — on the East Coast. "And we have the East Coast's only hang gliding school at the top of that dune," Tuell says. "Whether you're a teenager or a child or a physically fit adult, Kitty Hawk Kites makes it a mantra to get you up and flying."

Kayaking and canoeing on both the ocean and sound also are popular pastimes. "We've got sand dunes on the front side of most of our islands and on the back you have salt grasses," Tuell says. At Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, he says, you can actually see the bottom from your vessel, making it the perfect experience for novices. More experienced adventurers may prefer the challenging surf of the Atlantic.

The Wildlife

"Our environment, our marine life and our vegetation are what bring people here," Tuell says. "As an Outer Banks community, everyone is aware that we need to take care of these things because that is essentially what separates us from a lot of other beach destinations." Sea turtles, for instance, nest on the Outer Banks' beaches but are



not part of tourism promotion. Visitors and locals are discouraged from approaching the fragile creatures. In fact, the park service ropes off big pieces of land for turtle nesting areas.

Outside of Manteo on Roanoke Island, the North Carolina Aquarium offers a chance to see marine life, possibly even a rehabilitating sea turtle. Visitors are invited to dig for fossilized shark's teeth on the premises.

The Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge at the north end of Hatteras Island provides great birding, with more than 400 species of birds identified in the area.

"It's kind of like the big I-95 rest stop for birds that migrate thousands of miles from the Northern hemisphere to the Southern hemisphere," Tuell says.

The Unique: Only in the Outer Banks

Following is a mere sampling of world-renowned places and events that make these barrier islands special:

The Wright Brothers National Memorial — Kitty Hawk is synonymous with the Wright Brothers' Dec. 17, 1903, flight near a sand dune called Kill Devil Hills.

The Wright Brothers National Memorial can be found at the town of Kill Devil Hills.

Coastal Lighthouses — The Outer Banks boasts five coastal lighthouses including Cape Hatteras (the tallest in the United States at 208 feet), Bodie Island, Ocracoke (the oldest continuously operated), Currituck Beach and Roanoke Island Marshes Light.

The Graveyard of the Atlantic — The coast of Cape Hatteras gained this nickname after ever-shifting sandbars caused an estimated 2,000 wrecks in the vicinity. A museum with artifacts is in the village of Hatteras.

The Chicamontague Lifesaving Station — In 1874, the U.S. Lifesaving Service was begun when seven lifesaving stations were built along the Outer Banks. The stations' personnel saved and rescued many ves-



Hollywood and the Outer Banks

Fans of North Carolina author Nicholas Sparks will recognize the title of his book, "Nights in Rodanthe." This year, the movie of the same name, based on the book, comes out. It stars Richard Gere and Diane Lane and features familiar sites filmed in the Outer Banks' city of Rodanthe.

sels as they passed through "the graveyard of the Atlantic." At Rodanthe, a historic site is dedicated to this forerunner of today's U.S. Coast Guard.

"The Lost Colony" — The Fort Raleigh National Historic Site outside of Manteo is the location of America's longest-running outdoor drama, shown Sunday through Friday in the summer at the Waterside Theater. The symphonic drama has been performed since 1937 and is based on the mysterious disappearance of the Roanoke colony of English settlers.

The Roanoke Island Festival Park — In Manteo, the park celebrates the first English settlement in America and includes a replica of the Elizabeth II, one of the seven English ships from the Roanoke Voyage of 1585.

One Final Note

Not only can a visit to the Outer Banks prove habit forming, it might even change your life. When Nolan married an islander, her friends back in Louisville, Ky., thought the big-city journalist would have a difficult time adjusting to the decidedly laid-back environment of Hatteras. She laughs at that misguided notion.

"Once I put my toes in the sand," she says, "I never thought about leaving." In fact, she says somewhat proudly, "I only go over the bridge onto the mainland two or three times a year. I'd just as soon never leave."

