

WATERFRONT PROPERTY

The Sunday Paper heads to North Carolina's Crystal Coast



Bring the children, borrow someone else's or leave them at home: The Crystal Coast appeals to all ages.

COURTESY OF THE CRYSTAL COAST TOURIST DEVELOPMENT AUTHORITY

BY HOPE S. PHILBRICK

Flexibility is a traveler's most important character trait. I am reminded of this on a recent trip to the southern Outer Banks (otherwise known as the North Carolina Crystal Coast) when, after arriving at the airport, I learn that my travel companions have brought their young children. I feign a smile, quickly forcing its corners a bit higher: Instead of installing ourselves in a block of hotel rooms, we'd be lodging in a rented beach house.

A rented house hasn't traditionally fit into my definition of a vacation because small conveniences like tiny shampoo bottles and wall-mounted hair dryers aren't necessarily de rigueur. Plus, I'm stuck making my own bed. But it's now clear to me that what you get in exchange is a unique blend of privacy and proximity—ideal for groups of close friends or family members. Our beach house has five bedrooms and four bathrooms, with ready access to shared living spaces boasting spectacular ocean views. Sipping coffee while facing this vista at sunrise,

I begin to fantasize that this is just part of my daily existence rather than a temporary respite from reality. Turns out that such a mind shift is actual-

ly easier to make in a home than in a hotel room.

On one foggy morning, a scheduled private plane tour of the coastal islands is canceled. But sailing aboard a 45-foot catamaran with Lookout Cruises proves to be an ideal alternative. Captain Steve Bishop's itinerary from the Beaufort waterfront includes a stop at the Cape Lookout National Seashore, with its distinctive lighthouse (which, according to legend, is painted in the wrong pattern); a pass by Shackelford Banks to see if wild horses are swimming in the ocean; and anchoring at a beach for swimming, collecting shells and investigating tidal pools. A delicious lunch is catered by Beaufort Grocery Company Restaurant. It's a truly relaxing experience—where soft waves lull even children toward calm.

Beaufort is the third-oldest town in North Carolina, and its beautiful historic homes (the oldest of which was built in 1709) are most easily appreciated on a double-decker bus tour. Some homes are supposedly haunted, and one once belonged to the pirate Blackbeard. "Look at the dates [on the plaques next to front doors of these homes]," says tour guide Martha Barnes, "and you can imagine the number of storms these homes have weath-

ered. Most of them lean or leak, but at least they're still standing."

The same cannot be said of the more than 2,000 vessels sunk along North Carolina's coast. The first recorded shipwreck here occurred in 1585. Blackbeard's Queen Anne's Revenge sunk in 1718. The coastline nicknamed "Graveyard of the Atlantic" now offers some of the world's best diving sites, water that averages 80 degrees Fahrenheit and more than 75 feet of visibility.

The North Carolina Maritime Museum provides landlubbers and divers alike with an opportunity to learn about the shipwrecks and the state's maritime heritage, along with a national perspective on coastal environment and barrier island ecology. Exhibits include artifacts from various wrecks, examples of different types of boats, whaling tools, fossils and much more.

The North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores, which recently completed a \$25 million renovation, features 38 exhibits in five galleries. Displays feature recreated shipwrecks and the myriad of aquatic life attracted to them, like river otters, seahorses, jellyfish, hermit crabs and much more. The sea turtle skeleton is especially fascinating.

No trip to the coast is complete without

IF YOU GO



HOPE S. PHILBRICK

GETTING THERE

Delta offers direct flights from Atlanta to New Bern, N.C.

GOOD TO KNOW

Renting a car to see the sites is highly recommended.

WHEN TO GO

- The Beaufort Old Homes and Gardens Tour takes place on June 22 and 23. Private residences and gardens, the Old Burying Ground and the buildings of the Beaufort Historic Site are open for touring. The event also includes a concert, an antique car show and living history demonstrations. For information, call 252-728-5225 or visit www.crystalcoastnc.org.
- The North Carolina Seafood Festival is one of the state's most popular events. The 21st Annual North Carolina Seafood Festival is scheduled for Oct. 5-7. For general information, visit www.ncseafoodfestival.org. For tickets call 252-726-6273.

MORE INFORMATION

Crystal Coast Tourist Development Authority
800-786-6962
www.crystalcoastnc.org



The bus driver alerts passengers on the top deck to duck when driving underneath tree limbs.

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a dive into its seafood offerings. With more than 100 restaurant options, from elegant to down-home, it's easy to find a good fit. Amos Mosquito's Swampside Café in Atlantic Beach offers an eclectic selection that appeals to adult and child palates. Kathryn's Bistro and Martini Bar in Emerald Isle specializes in preparations with a sophisticated flair. The Front Street Grill at Stillwater in Beaufort serves up hearty dishes showcasing fresh regional ingredients. Here, as at all of the restaurants that I try, dill makes unexpected appearances in dishes like potato salad and clam chowder. While dill is not my favorite herb, the food is tasty, so I relax at the waterfront bistro, enjoy the sun setting over the ocean and dig in for more. **SP**