

10 MUST-SEES AT NEW VMFA

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BEACH GUIDE

36 Destinations in Three States
From kid-friendly spots to romantic retreats

PLUS: WHAT TO DO IF IT RAINS

3.95

MAY 2010



**VOTE
ONLINE FOR
THIS YEAR'S
BEST
& WORST**
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NORTH CAROLINA

OCRACOKE

You'll need to take a ferry, boat or small plane to get to Ocracoke. The 16-mile beach gives you the chance to simply relax with a good book or spend the day surf fishing or casting your line from a charter. If you're feeling adventurous, sleep near the ocean at the Ocracoke Campground (*reservations at 877-444-6777 or recreation.gov*), rent a surfboard and learn to surf, or take a kayak tour of the island, which is home to more than 400 species of birds. Be sure to visit the paddock of the Ocracoke ponies, a unique herd that was once cared for by the island's Boy Scouts. **ALSO TRY:** Buxton is probably best known as the home of the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, but it's also a spot for superb surf fishing. Anglers might also think about bunking in Avon, where you can learn to game-fish for red drum.



NAGS HEAD



Hundreds of cottages and homes are situated among the dunes and sea grasses that give Nags Head its visual charm. You'll find 11 miles of oceanfront here, as well as Jockey's Ridge State Park (*jockeysridgestatepark.com*), a sand-dune-filled landscape that's a great place to fly a kite or get a birds'-eye view of your surroundings. Fishing is also on tap, thanks to a pair of public fishing piers, the Nags Head Fishing Pier and the Outer Banks Fishing Pier, as well as a number of charters and guide services. **ALSO TRY:** Quiet and secluded from the masses, Manteo is a quaint village with an antique mall, fun shops and tasty restaurants. Or consider Corolla, where you'll find wild horses and a shining example of Art Nouveau architecture, the 21,000-square-foot Whalehead Club (*whaleheadclub.org*).

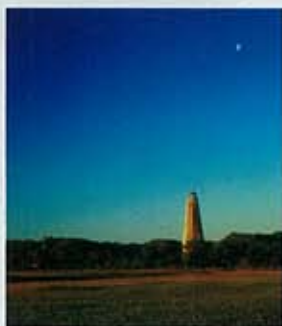
EMERALD ISLE

Located on the tranquil Crystal Coast of North Carolina, Emerald Isle features an uncrowded coastline with a boatload of activities, including guided nature-photography tours and private chartered fishing excursions. The Crystal Coast has one of the longest fishing seasons on the Atlantic, giving you the freedom to cast all year long. The coastline is also known as a "wreck diver's dream," with the average temperature hovering around 80 degrees and more than 75 feet of visibility.

More than 2,000 vessels have made their watery graves along the North Carolina coast. **ALSO TRY:** Atlantic Beach is a haven for sun worshippers because of its wide pearlescent beaches. In Beaufort, you'll find historic treasures like the Beaufort Historic Site (*beauforthistoricsite.org*), which has costumed docents.



BALD HEAD ISLAND



Located just off the coast of Southport, N.C., where the Atlantic Ocean, Intracoastal Waterway and Cape Fear River meet, Bald Head Island is an ideal spot for couples to unwind and reconnect. The island is only accessible via a 20-minute ferry ride, and since cars are not permitted — commuting by golf cart or bicycle is the norm — it's easy to leave the hustle and bustle of the "real world" behind. Named one of America's Top 100 Golf Communities by *Travel & Leisure Golf Magazine* for 2009, Bald Head Island has an 18-hole course that winds its way along the ocean and through a maritime forest. **ALSO TRY:** Oak Island, on the southeastern coast of the Brunswick Islands, has wide, uncrowded beaches. Another relaxed option is Topsail Beach. It wasn't always so quiet: The concrete observation towers you'll see here are remnants of Operation Bumblebee, a top-secret effort by the Navy that involved developing and testing experimental rockets.

Other attractions

Austin Boat Tours (portsmouthnc.com) runs a trip to the ghost village on Portsmouth Island, where you can go birding, surf-fishing or clamming. The boat will leave you on the island and pick you up later in the day. Back on Ocracoke, the North Carolina Land Trust's more-than-120-acre Springer's Point Preserve has been open to the public since 2006.

If it rains

Check out Village Craftsmen (villagecraftsmen.com), which offers an eclectic mix of crafts, everything from kaleidoscopes to wrought-iron wine racks, or relieve your cabin fever at Deepwater Theater (deepwatertheater.com), where you can hear traditional bluegrass and folk tunes.

Where to eat

Settle down for a meal on the spacious screened-in dining area at Back Porch Restaurant (252-928-6401) or stop by Howard's Pub (howardspub.com) for some fresh local shrimp and oysters. Wash down your grub at Howard's with one (or more) of the nearly 200 bottled beers and 24 beers on tap that are available.

WHERE TO STAY

RENTALS myocracoke.com; blueheronvacations.com; midgettrealty.com

HOTELS blackbeardslodge.com; thecaptainslanding.com; thecovebb.com

Other attractions

Learn about the first settlers at Roanoke Island Festival Park (roanokeisland.com), where you'll find the Elizabeth II, a replica of one of seven English ships from the 1585 voyage that founded the Roanoke Colony.

If it rains

Visit the Wright Brothers National Memorial (nps.gov/wrbr), with reproductions of the 1903 Powered Flyer, or check the sales at the Tanger Outlet Center (tangeroutlet.com/nagshead).

Where to eat

Head to Sam & Omie's (samandomies.net), for large breakfasts and great homemade sandwiches, then hit up Owens' Restaurant (owensrestaurant.com) to partake of local seafood.

WHERE TO STAY

RENTALS carolinadesigns.com; vacationsobx.com; joelambjr.com; sunrealtync.com; kittydunes.com; atlanticrealty-nc.com

HOTELS firstcolonyinn.com; whitedoeinn.com; nagsheadbeachinn.com

Other attractions

Explore the barrier islands with Crystal Coast Ecotours (crystalcoastecotours.com) and Capt. Jess Hawkins, who has 30 years of experience as a professional marine biologist.

If it rains

At the North Carolina Maritime Museum (ncmaritimemuseum.org), you can see artifacts recovered from Blackbeard's pirate ship, the Queen Anne's Revenge.

Where to eat

Enjoy the sumptuous seafood at Kathryn's Bistro and Martini Bar (kathrynsbistro.com), but don't forget your cocktail. May we suggest the "Chocolate Kiss" martini?

WHERE TO STAY

RENTALS emeraldslrealty.com; bluewatergmac.com; spinnakersreach.com

HOTELS islandernc.com; clamdiggerinn.com

Other attractions

Take a kayak tour led by a naturalist from the Bald Head Island Conservancy (bhic.org) — the Kayak Shack (riversideadventure.com) also has tours — or go on a night turtle walk with a naturalist to see loggerheads nesting or hatching.

If it rains

Try a heated-stone massage at Island Retreat Spa and Salon (www.baldheadisland.com/explore/spa), or visit the circa-1817 Old Baldy Lighthouse (oldbaldy.org) and the accompanying Smith Island Museum.

Where to eat

Keep an eye on the ferries coming into the island at the casual Eb & Flo's Steam Bar (910-457-7217), or opt for a night of fine dining and ocean views at the Shoals Club (shoalsclub.com) on the beach.

WHERE TO STAY

RENTALS baldheadisland.com

The Best and Worst of Times

Our family beach adventures started in a 1978 Starcraft pop-up camper at state-park beaches up and down the East Coast — a run that happily ended at North Carolina's Outer Banks after one too many soggy weeks of rain and sleepless nights filled with my dad's raucous snoring.

For the past 17 years, we've found respite in the sister towns of Duck and Corolla, usually joined by longtime family friends.

I've had the same room in the same house for 13 years, and these trips represent for me some of the sweetest — and the hardest — memories of my life.



They include a kaleidoscope of senses — the fresh taste of fried bluefish that was pulled out of the surf just hours before; laughing as the waves knocked me onto my backside in a game we kids dubbed "rompassed"; and the soft noses of the wild mustangs who stuck their heads into our car windows one sunny afternoon. I still remember one of my last games of rummy with Granddad, dealt at our kitchen table overlooking the Atlantic. Playing cards was a favorite pastime with his 12 grandchildren, and whenever I drew a diamond, he'd always say with a wink, "That's a girl's best friend."

The salty air also reminds me of the year my mom was diagnosed with breast cancer. Our trip got delayed several days because of complications with her initial round of chemotherapy, and it was at the beach that she discovered she was losing her hair. This year, we celebrate 14 years since she's been cancer-free, twice the length doctors claim as the threshold for no recurrence.

With my first nephew on the way, we've outgrown our old house, making a new rental necessary this summer. Though I'm a bit mournful about leaving our "home away from home" for more than a decade, I'm optimistic that another jaunt up Route 12 will yield days filled with sunshine and new memories to be made. —*Bethany Emerson*