



What to See and Do in North Carolina's Crystal Coast

If you're a fan of Nicholas Sparks novels and find the coastal, small-town settings charming, you'll love the Crystal Coast region, the 85-mile stretch of North Carolina's Southern Outer Banks.



On a recent visit to the [Crystal Coast](#), I witnessed the quiet beaches, quaint small towns, historic homes, outdoor activities and picturesque lighthouses that the area has to offer. The Crystal Coast's beaches have sand dunes lined with wooden fences, hardly any crowds and sounds of crashing waves and singing seagulls – the perfect setting for relaxing in a beach chair and getting lost in a good book. You won't find high-rise hotel after high-rise hotel along the shoreline, beach-towel-to-beach-towel crowds or road traffic on a visit here.

While you could easily spend several days parked on the beach, there's no shortage of activities in the region.

Explore the quaint town of Beaufort, N.C. – not to be confused with Beaufort, S.C. They're spelled the same but pronounced differently. As one local told me, think "Bow, No. Byoo, South" as a way to remember the pronunciation for each state.



The best way to get a sense of the town and enjoy the scenery is by taking a bike tour. [Hungry Town Tours](#), the top rated tour in Beaufort, N.C. on [TripAdvisor](#), offers a variety of 14 walking, bike, culinary and history tours, led by co-owners David and Betsy Cartier. They offer A Ride to Remember, which takes visitors to several Beaufort locations as described in Nicholas Sparks' best-selling novels *The Choice* and *A Walk to Remember*. Some of their culinary tours include Beaufort Culinary Bike Tour and Bike, Brunch & Bubbles. Each of the cruiser bikes have names on a mini license plate, and most are named after herbs like Rosemary and Thyme.



The confusion between Beaufort, N.C. and Beaufort, S.C. actually made the owners of Hungry Town Tours stop taking online bookings because visitors would call the day of their tour and say, "Okay, we're on our way to the tour," but they would be in South Carolina. David Cartier says they only book tours over the phone now to make sure those mix-ups don't happen.

For another way to take in the scenery, go kayaking or test your balance stand-up paddle boarding in the Bogue Sound. It's a great way to fit in some exercise in a peaceful setting. You can rent kayaks and boards at [Beaufort Paddle](#), where they also have guides who will take you out on the water.



Witness majestic horses in the wild at [Shackleford Banks](#), an undeveloped island off the coast of Beaufort. About 115 wild horses live on the island. Low tide is the best time to see them out by the coast. The public is allowed to visit the island, and while the horses are accustomed to seeing visitors, park rangers suggest keeping at least a bus-length distance from the horses.



The [Cape Lookout Lighthouse](#) is another site worth visiting. Access the lighthouse via a ferry, explore the Light Station Visitor Center to learn about the lighthouse's history and climb the 270 steps to the top. Your legs might burn a little when you finally reach the top, but it's worth it for this view. Note: the lighthouse is only open to the public in the spring and summer months. Any other time requires calling ahead to set up a special tour with a park ranger.



What's a beach destination without great food? Two recommendations: [Pescara Wood Oven Kitchen](#), a coastal Italian spot in Atlantic Beach, and [Front Street Grill at Stillwater](#) in Beaufort. If you need a refreshing drink after climbing the steps of Cape Lookout or getting a kayaking workout, try the painkiller – a cocktail made with Pusser's Dark, orange juice, pineapple, cream of coconut and fresh nutmeg at Front Street Grille. It's delicious.

