

# North Carolina's Outer Banks



Outer Banks Wetlands

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**N**orth Carolina's famous Outer Banks don't disappoint. The 210-km coastline stretch is an RVing dream route, with windswept dunes and beaches, dotted with protected parklands, striped lighthouses and special little towns. There are no high speed lanes filled with transport trucks – and so no white knuckle driving – but there are countless spots to stop and indulge in the rich history of pirates and the age of powered flight, dive into platters of fresh seafood and camp next to dunes, listening to the sound of the waves below an inky dark sky peppered with pinpricks of starlight.

## Lighthouses

During the hurricane season (June through November), wind and waves can play havoc with the long chain of barrier islands; the strip of sand is constantly shifting and evolving. This movement of soft ground is one of the reasons the Outer Banks coastline is nicknamed "Graveyard of the Atlantic." Ever since early recordkeeping in the 16th century, thousands of ships have sunk in the treacherous currents – often thanks to the unstable underwater sand bars, known as the Diamond Shoals.



Cape Hatteras  
Light Station

It was this miserable statistic that eventually led to the building of lighthouses along the shoreline as navigational aids. As a teenager, ships mate Alexander Hamilton made a frightening trip around the pitch-black Cape Hatteras in stormy seas. Years later, after working his way up the job ladder to become the first Secretary of the Treasury, Hamilton made sure a lighthouse was built





on that very spot. At 63 metres, the black and white, spiral-striped Cape Hatteras Light Station is the tallest brick lighthouse in North America. Beach erosion and the ever-shifting coastline have threatened the stability of the lighthouse and in 1999 it underwent “the move of the century” – over 23 days it was lifted and relocated 884 metres inland to safer ground.

A climb to the top of the Cape Hatteras Light Station meant a breath-busting 257 steps of cast-iron stairway (think: 12 storeys). At the top, we were treated to a bird’s eye view over the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, the nation’s very first National Seashore. The long, skinny stretches of sand of the Outer Banks make up some of the narrowest landmasses inhabited by humans. If you are looking for quiet, clean beaches filled with shells rather than sunbathers, this place has your name on it. The easy coastline drive is perfect for RVs – scenic and flat. The Cape Hatteras Light Station is just one of several lighthouses along the Outer Banks. We also visited the very pretty Bodie Island Light Station near Nags Head and the rejuvenated Currituck Beach Light Station in Corolla. Before the lighthouse was built at Bodie, the locals realized that shipwrecks could be very lucrative affairs. They tied lanterns to the necks of nags and walked them up and down the beach. Ships at sea would see the moving lights and think the way was clear before being run aground on the dangerous shoals.

### **The Age of Powered Flight**

The small town of Kill Devil Hills is known for ushering in the age of powered flight through the tinkering of those bicycle-building Wright brothers. The Wright Brothers National Memorial marks the spot where man first experienced motorized flight.

Why did Orville and Wilbur Wright choose this spot as the Birthplace of Aviation? Park Ranger Josh Boles had an answer for us. “In 1900, the brothers wrote the weather bureau asking for the windiest spot in the country. They were looking for wind but they were also looking for privacy – they were developing proprietary material.”

Inside the national memorial’s visitor centre is a full-scale reproduction of the Wright 1903 Powered Flyer, the wind tunnel used to measure lift, and grainy archival video and photos. As bicycle builders, the Wright brothers understood the mechanics of moving parts and forces like propulsion. “Everyone was studying birds but the Wright Brothers were studying the right birds,” explained Boles. “They realized it was soaring birds and they knew they could figure out the propulsion.”

And on December 17, 1903, their calculations struck aviation gold. The world’s first successful heavier-than-air powered flight along a remote, sandy beach changed world history.





### A Wildlife Paradise

Located right smack in the middle of the Atlantic Flyway, the Outer Banks is a bird lover's paradise. At the northern tip of the region, are the marshlands of Currituck Sound (the name is an Algonquin word for "land of the wild geese") but most visitors come to see the herd of wild horses, all direct descendants of Spanish Colonial mustangs that were shipwrecked centuries ago. The stocky horses roam in a protected wild space; a 20-km stretch behind the dunes just north of the seaside village of Corolla.

Nowhere is better for checking birds off a spotting list than the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge just north of Rodanthe. Volunteers point visitors from around the world in the direction of the more than 400 species of birds that land at the ponds, fields and saltwater marshes of Pea Island. Some of the volunteer guides are retired, travelling from one National Wildlife Refuge to another in their motorhomes, following the path of good weather.

### Birthplace of English America

It's not just the shifting sand that mesmerizes in this part of the continent – it's also the history of the colourful people, the so-called Outer Bankers. In its rather enviable run of 80 years, the play *The Lost Colony* tells the story of the first permanent settlers from Plymouth, England, who arrived four centuries ago, claiming the title of Birthplace of English America. Three years after they landed on Roanoke Island, all 117 settlers mysteriously disappeared. Virginia Dare was the first English child born in the New World – she vanished

along with all of the other men, women and children of the settlement. Historians and archaeologists have never been able to solve the mystery.

Although the play was launched in 1937 and meant to run for just one season, *The Lost Colony* now holds the title as the nation's longest running outdoor symphonic drama. The enormous production has run continuously each summer, with the exception of several years during the Second World War when the coastline was blacked out.

The Roanoke Island Festival Park Historic Site is a popular stop with snowbirds looking for a little history and culture. Costumed interpreters enliven the park's 16th-century settlement life. Roanoke Island is bordered by two sounds, between the mainland and the barrier island. We were fascinated by the displays of the voyages of Columbus that opened the floodgates of exploration, the Spanish conquests in search of gold and the influence of the colonial expeditions of Spain, France and England.

### Plates Full of Seafood


The Outer Banks is seafood paradise. At local institutions like Pier House Restaurant (where the waves of high tide crash below the wooden floorboards) several hundred regulars show up for breakfast each morning. Arrive after a day of fishing and the Pier House kitchen will grill, broil or bake your catch.

The famed Sam & Omie's, one of the oldest family restaurants on the barrier islands, began as a place for early morning fisherman. Founded by father and son team Sam and Omie Tillett back in 1937, the walls



of this casual eatery are lined with photographs of the fish that didn't get away. This is the old Nags Head – a place where “liquor by the drink” has only been served since 1980. Their Shrimp Burger is a Carolina favourite – over a dozen lightly breaded and fried shrimp, piled on a bun and topped with melted cheddar cheese, coleslaw and tartar sauce.

One of our best meals along the coastline was at the Breakwater Restaurant in the village of Hatteras. For the main dish of Shrimp & Grits, stone ground grits made a perfect background for sautéed North Carolina shrimp, spicy Andouille sausage, roasted tomatoes, mushrooms and garlic.

It was the perfect meal before we settled into the dark, quiet National Park Service Frisco Campground just outside Hatteras. Like all four NPS campgrounds along the coast, the services are rustic (cold showers, no hook-ups) but the views over the coastline and the sound of the waves... priceless. 

*Writer Josephine Matyas and writer/musician Craig Jones travel with their dog, Eleanor Rigby, in a Class B Roadtrek 210 Popular. Learn more at [www.travelswithrigby.com](http://www.travelswithrigby.com).*



Spring and fall are the best times to visit the Outer Banks – although September and October are at the tail end of hurricane season. Summertime has the largest crowds.

For more information: [www.outerbanks.org](http://www.outerbanks.org) and [www.visittheusa.ca](http://www.visittheusa.ca)

NPS campground information: [www.nps.gov/caha](http://www.nps.gov/caha)

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