

OBX!

North Carolina's Outer Banks is a day's drive away

STORY AND PHOTOS BY CLAUDIA J. TALLER

Houses on stilts dot the flat landscape, wild horses are a whisper away, and red foxes roam through sea oats. At water's edge, seagulls screech and dive to the sand, pelicans skim the waves, dolphins dip and soar, and kingfishers skitter from the surf. Tiny sand-colored crabs scurry across bare feet.

This is North Carolina's Outer Banks, the series of barrier islands and peninsulas stretching 125 miles from Corolla to Ocracoke Island and south to Cape Lookout National Seashore.

The shoreline changes when hurricanes and nor'easters create new inlets through the shifting land that moves southeast toward the mainland, causing beach houses or wooden steps to disappear from one year to the next.

Our family became enchanted with the Outer Banks 25 years ago, and we return often to South Nags Head near Whalehead Junction, or the town of Duck, with its small-town feel and cottage industry businesses. Newer hamlets stretch north of Duck to Corolla, and

south of Duck, the towns of Southern Shores, Kill Devil Hills and Nags Head are strung along the busy four-lane bypass road. After the bypass turns west at Whalehead Junction in South Nags Head, the tranquil villages of Rodanthe, Avon and Buxton settle in further south on Highway 12. Historic Ocracoke Island, south of Hatteras Lighthouse, can only be reached by ferry, and is the most remote location. Local real estate agents assist with choosing rental property at the target rate with the requisite number of beds.

GETTING THERE

Travel time by car is about 12 hours, though it can be driven in less. We usually break the trip up with an overnight stay on the way down. If our reservation begins on Saturday, we leave Friday evening and stay overnight in Breezewood. If our vacation rental isn't available until 4 p.m. on Sunday, we drive most of the day on Saturday, driving across the Pennsylvania turnpike to the Breezewood exit. We take the scenic route into Berkley Springs, West Virginia,

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winding past yard sales, clapboard hillside homes and a vintage state park lodge. Entering Virginia, the route meanders through Winchester and Warrenton and past white-fenced horse farms into Fredericksburg, a colonial Virginia town with a quaint historic district where we relax for the evening with dinner and window shopping.

Leaving Fredericksburg, we take Interstate 95 to Richmond, then head south through the Chesapeake Bay area

to the backcountry, south of Virginia Beach. Route 168 in rural Currituck County passes bean fields, wetlands and corn stalks on the road parallel to Currituck Sound. We pull off the road at a fruit stand, gently squeeze crisp vegetables, savor the aroma of ripe peaches and stock up on fresh produce. Driving over water on the expansive Wright Brothers Memorial Bridge over Currituck and Albemarle Sounds, we feel the relief of arriving on the Outer Banks.

ABOUT TOWN

The village of Nags Head – named after the islanders' long-ago practice of tying lanterns to horses to lure ships to be grounded and marauded – is the largest town on the Outer Banks. The area is traversed north to south by the beach road, Highway 12, which runs from Corolla, just south of Virginia Beach, to the Ocracoke ferry line at the south end. While the picturesque beach road boasts 1950s motels and weather-worn Old Nags Head homes, the four-lane bypass road, strewn with commercial development, is the way to quickly reach places between the towns of Southern Shores and Manteo.

SETTLING IN

By arriving early, we avoid the lines of traffic that pour into the Outer Banks late in the afternoon, but we do not yet have access to our quarters. While waiting, we shop at one of the down-home haberdasheries or a meandering area of specialty shops or a local gallery. Although shopping is tempting, sometimes we simply find our house, park the car and head to the beach for the afternoon until it's time to pick up the key. After all, being able to soak up rays and cool off in the surf is the main attraction.

We stay away from the crowded grocery stores for our first day or two and eat food brought from home, or have world cuisine at the Rundown or gourmet at the Red Sky Cafe. If we have dinner at Hurricane Mo's in Manteo, we stroll dockside past the yachts under the lowering sun. Many days end by walking the beach in the dark with flashlights while the crabs quickly seek their holes. We sleep well.

WHAT TO DO

The uncrowded beaches are long and wide. At 7 a.m., the windows drip with moisture, but the breeze off the ocean pushes past it and the hardened, wet sand is packed down. The dolphins dance the waves as fisherman cast into the breakers. We ride our bikes along the bike path and go swimming early to avoid the heat and humidity. Then



When Francine Evans sat down at Hospice to begin sewing her memory quilt, her own life seemed lost. After all, it was just a few days earlier that her daughter Jennie was laid to rest. At first, the sewing group was just something to take her mind off everything. But as Francine stitched the swatches of Jennie's clothes, her life started to come together, too. She found herself talking. And smiling. And healing a little more each day. At Hospice, we provide many services, like the *Fabrics & Feelings* group, to help survivors cope. Because we believe that death is no reason to stop living.



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we take a mid-day excursion.

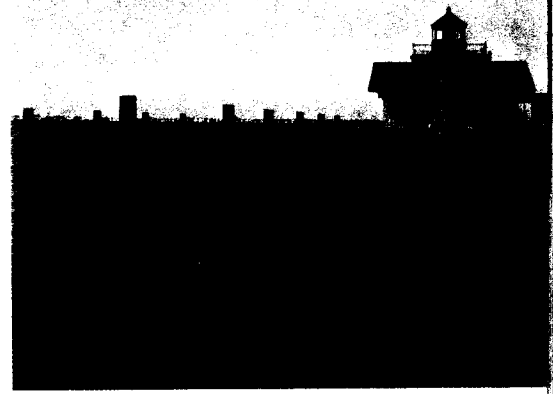
We have kayaked the primeval waterways through Maritime Forest and listened to stories of Blackbeard hiding amongst the reeds. We once shoaled the sound with nets at the Nature Conservatory at Nags Head Woods and pulled up tiny shrimp and crabs to view under microscopes. While touring the village at Currituck, we've seen people leaning over the docks to pull crabs from the water, caught with raw-chicken-laden strings. On Roanoke Island, where the Lost Colony was established in 1585, we've strolled through the Elizabethan Gardens and sampled Weeping Radish beer. We always pick one morning to pack up our boogie boards and snacks, and drive over Oregon Inlet and along the National Seashore to Buxton for the waves near Hatteras Lighthouse.

Another routine during each weeklong stay is to drive to Jockey's Ridge State Park near sunset and walk down wooden walkways through the loblolly pines and native rhododendron to the dunes. From the base of the 100-foot-high dune called Jockey's Ridge, the people playing on it look like ants. Hang gliding enthusiasts run awkwardly through the sand until the wind scoops them up from the ground in flight.

This past fall, we revisited the Wright Brothers Memorial and Museum in Kill Devil Hills – we walked the path of the first flights and viewed old photographs of hurricane-damaged shores and lifesaving stations. For the first time in 20 years, we went to the North Carolina Aquarium and delightedly stroked stingrays and sea anemones in an indoor pool. One morning we explored the new Education Center near the Whalehead Club and Currituck Lighthouse and watched a film about storms and the changing shoreline. Another morning, we drove to Pea Island on the National Seashore for a guided bird walk around a marshy pond, the air laden with mosquitoes, and saw 40 species of bird – osprey, heron, swan and bald

eagle among them. We discovered that the mid-Atlantic is as warm and inviting in the fall as it is in the high season of summer.

When we want to completely unwind for the week, we drive to the Outer Banks. Judging from the number of OBX stickers in car windows of northeast Ohio residents, we are not the only ones who return to OBX year after year. It is irresistible.

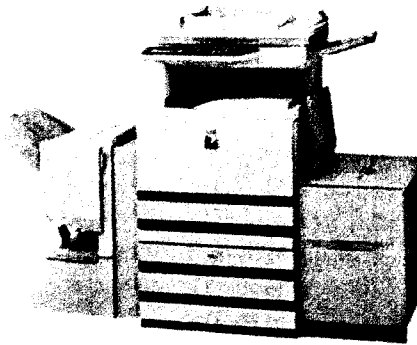


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