



Windsurfing is just one of the popular watersports along the Outer Banks.

Bank on the Outer Banks for off-season beachcombing

BY NORMA AND WENDY SCHONWETTER
CORRESPONDENTS

If you thought you had to go to Florida to enjoy 70-degree days at the beach in February, or endure the mugginess and crowds of Boston in summer to get a good dose of early American history, think again! The Outer Banks of North Carolina offers 130 miles of unspoiled coastline and 30,000 acres of surf and sand to enjoy every thinkable beach-related activity, and is the site of some of America's most fascinating events. The Outer Banks are a chain of barrier islands on the Atlantic Seaboard, 90 miles south of Norfolk, Virginia (a one and a half-hour drive from the airport).

The best times to visit are May through June or September through November, when the temperatures are in the 70s and the crowds are gone.

There are plentiful options for lodging, from chain motels and hotels, to zillions of beach houses available for rent. We stayed in an air-conditioned seven-bedroom beach house, each with its own bathroom and housekeeping service. The enormous kitchen had all the usual appliances, dishes, and cookware. From the verandah we enjoyed a school of dolphins playfully swimming close to shore. This is quite a common phenomenon when the ocean is fairly calm. Conversely, the sandy beach is best for collecting shells after a storm or rough seas.

For outdoor lovers, there's kayaking (on the sound and salt marshes), windsurfing, kite-flying, hang gliding, parasailing, wildlife refuges, nature trails, bird watching, fishing galore from a boat or pier, surfing,



The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse is the tallest brick lighthouse on the American Coast, standing at 299 feet high and is painted in black and white spiral stripes.

swimming, snorkeling, and just building sandcastles.

If you are up for a trek through soft, fine sand, check out the tallest sand dune on the East Coast at Jockey Ridge. If you make it to the top you'll be treated to spectacular views of the Roanoke Sound and the Atlantic Ocean on opposite sides of the narrow stretch of land. Or take it easy and watch hang gliders, kite flying and the spectacular sunsets at this 414-acre park.

If you have a love of lighthouses, there are four in close proximity. The Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, at 208 feet, is the tallest in the United States with its black and white spirals and red base. Its light can be seen for 20 miles. In 1999 the lighthouse was moved a half-mile away to protect it from the pounding waves of the Atlantic. Weather permitting, visitors

can climb the 286 steps to the top. The other three lighthouses along the Outer Banks are at Bodie Island, Ocracoke and Currituck Beach.

Searching for shipwrecks? More than 2000 ships sank off the coast as they attempted passage through the treacherous waters, giving rise to the nickname, "Graveyard of the Atlantic." When the tide is low the remains of submerged sailing ships can be seen.

If you like a little history with your sand, you'll discover Orville and Wilbur Wright made man's first successful powered air flight from the dunes at Kitty Hawk on December 17, 1903. The historic flights of that day are detailed at the Wright Brothers National Memorial. A 60-foot monument stands atop Kill Devil Hill as a tribute to the first flight. Don't miss the replica of an original plane in the engaging visitor's center.

If you like a little mystery with your history, visit Roanoke Island. More than 400 years ago England sent a group of men, women and children across the sea, to establish the first English settlement at Fort Raleigh in the "New World." The first English child, Virginia Dare, was born shortly after they arrived. No one knows what became of those settlers, who disappeared without a trace three years after their arrival.

Virginia Dare and the other colonists would become known as "The Lost Colony." The oldest outdoor drama in the nation, aptly titled "The Lost Colony," debuted in 1937, and tells the tale of Sir Walter Raleigh and his colonists. It is retold each summer in the theater at the Fort Raleigh

Historic Site.

Would you like to live some of Outer Banks' history? The Roanoke Adventure Museum, located in Roanoke Island Festival Park, is chock-full of interactive exhibits that make learning fun. All ages can try on Elizabethan clothing, enter a Civil War encampment, and much more. The Park is the homeport of Elizabeth II, a sailing ship representative of the ships that brought the colonists to America. Sailors dressed in authentic garb spin tales of the experiences of the three-month trip to this country.

Also on Roanoke Island is the North Carolina Aquarium with displays of marine animal and plant life unique to the area.

Children love to touch the skatefish, rays, crabs, sea stars, and other invertebrates. The main attraction is the 285,000-gallon ocean tank, which houses the remains of the recreated USS Monitor shipwreck.

If you're lip-smacking has been making the fish in the exhibits nervous, it's time to head out for fresh seafood... crab, lobster, clams, tuna, mahi-mahi, grouper, oysters, shrimp, flounder, scallops are easy to find at local restaurants. Get adventurous and try a southern style breakfast, with grits or the raw and steam bar for half-shell delight, or enjoy a local favorite of crabcakes, steamed crabs or soft-shell crabs at this "crab capital."

Now that you've stimulated your mind and satiated your taste buds, go back to your beach house, snuggle up and listen to the waves.

Check the Outer Banks Web site (www.outerbanks.org) for loads of information about the area or call 877-298-4373.

TRAVEL BRIEFS

A LOOK AT CHINA

American Youth Hostels, Michigan Council, looks at travel in China during a panel discussion, *New Perspectives on China*, at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, Feb. 12, in the Michigan Youth Hostel Council Office, 302 1/2 Coolidge, south of 12 Mile, Berkley.

Cost is free for members and \$2 for non-members. The panel members will share experiences from their recent travels to China, including the Three Gorges, Beijing, Shanghai, the Yellow Mountains and Dali. They'll also give travel tips.

To reserve a spot or for more information, call (248) 545-0511.

ON THE LIST

The Townsend Hotel, located in downtown Birmingham, earned its highest ranking ever, on *Condé Nast Traveler's* Gold List. It's the only Michigan hotel listed on the magazine's ninth annual Gold List, which is derived from the votes of more than 28,000 subscribers. Reader comments on the Townsend included "lovely, intimate" and staffers that "know what a person on the road needs."

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