

Inside The Outerbanks

BY VINCENT RHODES

The Outer Banks offers a lot to see off the beaten path

Outer Banks photos courtesy of NC Convention & Visitors Bureau

Part of the Outer Banks' charm is its seaside village feel. Heading north along Route 12, you'll find the stuff that dreams are made of—vacation getaways. Some are small bungalows. Some are palatial retreats. Sure, you'll find strings of specialty stores and restaurants, but the sand that softens the edges of the asphalt road is a sharp reminder that areas such as Duck and Corolla aren't your big-city beach towns. They grew up around a single need—the yearning for relaxation along beautiful coastal waters.

But there's something you might not know about this section of the Outer Banks—something that most locals don't want you to find out. There's a whole other world waiting close by. And the journey that

will seemingly transport you a thousand miles from civilization, like the old saying goes, "begins with a single step...off the paved road."

That's right. You need to go where there are no asphalt roads, only sand.

Larry Riggs, owner of Riggs Realty and son of Sam Riggs—one of the original developers in the area, explains, "We know [the northern beaches] are an active community and that people go there to vacation. Sales in that area have been incredibly good the last few years.

"But once new visitors leave the paved road, they find it's a different way of life and they like that. The idea of going where there are no paved roads is exciting. It's like new ground. They're discovering something new."

But there's no public land access from the north. Only residents who lived in their beach homes full-time prior to 1971 or members of commercial fishing crews have passes to drive through False Cape State Park and Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge which lie just north of the North Carolina line.

The only other access to these communities, besides the beach route, is to travel by boat across Back Bay from Knotts Island, N.C.

The five communities that make up this area—Ocean Beach, Sea Gull, Swan Beach, North Swan Beach and Carova (a blend of the Carolina and Virginia state names)—include a smattering of full-time residences and a variety of vacation homes.

But don't let the lack of a road fool you. While some vacation dwellings are little more than trailers jacked up on pilings, you can find some very nice homes. And the rental agencies can offer vacation accommodations that go toe-to-toe with the best properties the more-developed resort areas have to offer.

Michele Dyer, rental manager for Karichele Realty, explains that while the northern beaches offer no community pools or tennis courts, luxury isn't hard to find. "There are houses that have private pools and hot tubs," she says. "I have houses down there that have the same amenities as, if not more than, some of the houses on the hard-surfaced road.

"The houses down there are getting bigger. Originally, because so few people had four-wheel drive, the houses were small and meant for a single family—maybe two if they knew someone with a four-wheel drive. Now we have houses that can do three- or four-family rentals."

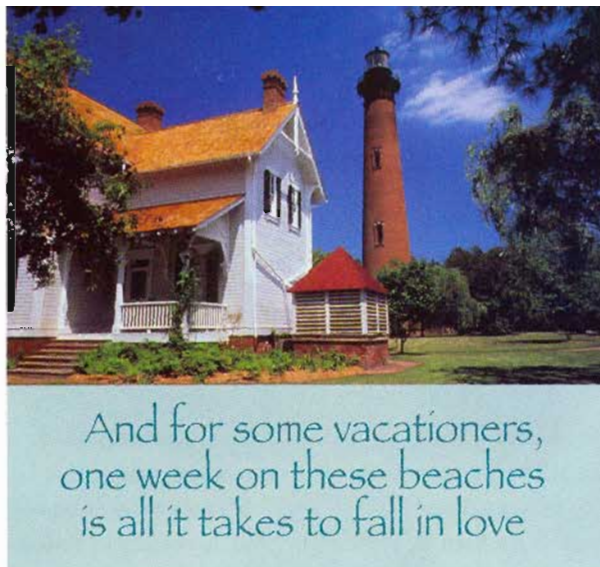
And for some vacationers, one week on these beaches is all it takes to fall in love. They are drawn to the seclusion and privacy of the four-wheel drive area.

A WILD TIME WATCHING WILDLIFE

John Mignogna, Director of Vacation Rentals at Coldwell-Banker Seaside Realty explains that vacationers often aren't prepared for what they find. "People are blown away," he says. "They love it. The wild horses in the area have been roped off there so it's become their special area to roam."

In fact, the horses that helped make Corolla famous are now confined to the northern beaches. It's not uncommon to see them trotting along the beach or to wake up in the morning and find a small group of them grazing in front of the house.

According to the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, this group is the only true Spanish Mustang herd in the world still living in the wild. The horses are descendents of those brought to the barrier reef by Spanish expeditions in 1523. When colonization was unsuccessful, the horses were left behind. From 1584 to 1589 English settlers purchased more horses from the Spanish and brought them to Currituck



along with other livestock for Sir Walter Raleigh's colonization on Roanoke.

The Cherokees, Chickasaws and Choctaws took many of the horses during their forced migration west. And the herd was thinned again when some of the horses were sold during the Depression. But the remainder thrived until development of the resort areas became a threat. After increased night traffic on the roads led to accidents that killed six horses, the Corolla Wild

Horse Fund and concerned citizens drove the herd north, erected a fence sound to sea and installed cattle grates on the roads to prevent the horses from wandering back into danger.

Now it's hard to pinpoint how many horses wander the area. Scott Trabue, one of the owners of Corolla Outback Adventures who leads four-wheel-drive wild-horse safaris to see the herds, says, "We don't have an exact number. We suspect there are close to 70 horses. And then there are about eight to 10 new foals born every year."

Because the horses are accustomed to encountering people, they will usually remain still long enough for you to snap several images—if you don't approach too closely or spook them. Their chestnut brown coats and expressive faces make for memorable vacation photos. Just remember the horses are wild and unpredictable. Each stallion will try to protect his herd and the mares will try to protect their young.

But the horses aren't the only wildlife attraction along the four-wheel drive beaches. Deer roam freely in the twilight hours and a host of sea birds inhabit the shoreline. It's also quite common to see pods of dolphin and an occasional whale frolicking in the ocean.

The Atlantic waters along the Outer Banks offer a host of fish to challenge the skill of any angler. Depending on the season, puppy drum, striped bass (or rock fish), trout, flounder, roundhead and spot abound. And even if you don't catch anything, the gentle breezes, the warm sun and the soothing sound of the ocean are sure to make the effort worthwhile.

You may also have the opportunity to observe commercial fishermen first hand. While fishing boats are often plying the waters a mile or so from shore, local fishing crews set nets from the beach using small boats called dories. Watching a crew launch a dory through the pounding surf may be enough to stand your hair on end. As the dory crests the side of a steep wave, it sometimes stands up completely vertical and the crew maintains its place with expert balance. The net becomes a blur as it slips quickly over the side of the boat and disappears into the sea.

The net is set at low tide. And after the water rises, the only signs of its presence are a collection of colorful floats that hold it in proper position and the two lonely anchors that keep it rooted to the shore. When high tide has come and gone, it's time to collect the net—an exercise of human strength and engine horsepower.

Lines are attached to trucks that back slowly away from the

ocean, pulling the net closer and closer to shore. When the truck reaches the dune line, the rope must be released and held in place so that the vehicle can dart forward for another pull. That's where the muscles come in. While one person holds the line to keep the net from sliding back out to sea, another member of the crew forms a quick loop to attach to the front of the car.

After several pulls, the net is on the shore. If the crew has been lucky, the net will be littered with the silver, flapping bodies of fresh fish waiting to be extracted from their monofilament prison and taken to market. If it's been a good haul, it's hard not to be caught up in the excitement and the triumph of the catch.

SEEING THE SITE

But if fishing isn't your bag, the northern beaches have plenty of what makes the Outer Banks famous: sun, sand and water. Because it's less populated than other areas, a stroll along the waterline often turns up an unusual variety of shells. Low tide reveals a literal mosaic of collectible treasures. And although they're more difficult to find, the sun-bleached treasure known as the sand dollar lies in wait for the diligent shell seeker.

The other benefit of limited access to the four-wheel drive area is a lack of crowds. You can set up your beach chair near another group of people or find a more deserted stretch of sand and soak up rays in solitude. And don't forget to take a dip in the welcoming Atlantic waters. Just be alert for signs of strong currents.

When you need a break from tanning and swimming, the northern beaches offer their own brand of mystery. While you're in the area, you may want to visit a town buried under tons of sand. In Sea Gull, you'll find the largest dune on the Currituck's beaches—and the sandy tomb of a village buried approximately 100 years ago.

"It's called Penny's Hill now, but no one really knows why," says Trabue. Rumors circulate that the name came from a reputed witch whose house was overtaken by the sand. But Trabue says that's unsubstantiated.

"It was originally called Lewark's Hill because Mr. Lewark's house is underneath it. In it's heyday, Seagull was the largest town on the Outer Banks with about 35 houses. Shifting sands clogged up the inlet between the sound and the ocean and the settlement died out. Eventually the sand came in and covered the town."

From the top of the hill, hikers can see both the ocean and a string of marsh islands. One of the bodies of land, Monkey Island is a waterfowl rookery and the site of a run-down hunting lodge. As the sand blows and shifts, the secrets of the hill are revealed. The rusted remnants of



cars that became stuck on the sand dune appear and disappear with the whims of the wind.

Locals and visitors alike used to drive to the top of the hill — up and down the steep side. An exhilarating drive, but one that sometimes led to accidents. Vehicular access is now prohibited, but you can still walk to the top. It's a great place to fly a kite or sight-see. And a run down the steep side as you depart will get the

adrenaline pumping.

It's easy to find a bit of history on the four-wheel drive beaches as well. According to Trabue, there's a 125-year-old Lifesaving Station in the area that was originally built in the town of Corolla and then moved up the beach. You can also see the old Washwood Coast Guard Station and its lookout tower. Originally, Washwood was a community just over the Virginia line. At that time, lifesaving stations were located every seven miles along the coast. But the Washwood outpost was swept away in a flood.

By the time it was rebuilt further south in North Carolina, Washwood had become a Coast Guard station. And because the village existed solely to support the lifesaving station, the original settlement in Virginia died out. But if you hike or bike three miles into the False Cape State Park, you can still see the steeple of the old church sitting in the middle of the woods. It's a unique, and somewhat surreal, sight.

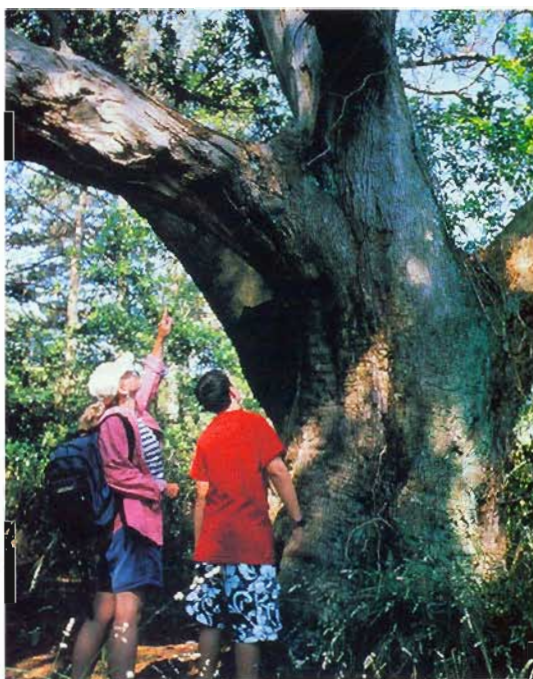
The Coast Guard station was eventually closed and purchased by private owners. And now it's actually a rental property with Twiddy & Company Realtors. While access to the lookout tower is prohibited for safety reasons, you can spend your vacation in historic surroundings if you choose.

Although Mignogna reports that interest in Seaside's four-wheel drive area properties is less than interest in those located long the paved road, Dyer says Karichele's properties are equally in demand. In fact, she says that during the off-season she actually has more rentals in the four-wheel drive area.

Karichele's properties vary in price from \$895 to \$4,900 per week

depending on the season, the size of the house and the amenities offered — a range in line with the other companies serving this area. Both Dyer and Mignogna agree that these prices are somewhat lower than those for rentals along the paved road.

"The houses in the off-road area tend to be a little less expensive, although that is starting to even out," Dyer says. "When I started renting houses with another company in '92, people didn't have four-wheel drives. Now you're not a yuppie without one." And the increased popularity of these vehicles is allowing owners to earn more on their rental properties.



DECISIONS, DECISIONS...

So how do you know if the northern beaches are for you? Dyer says the answer is simple. It's the first thing Karichele rental agents ask prospective renters. Do you have a high-clearance four-wheel drive?

Although the question seems obvious, Dyer says it's an important factor to consider. "You'd be surprised how many people think they can take their cars out onto the beach because of what they've seen of Daytona," she says. "On Saturdays, people will take their Mercedes or BMW out there."

"They're driving down near the water getting seawater all over their cars. They think it's cute. Then in a month, their car starts rusting and they don't know why."

She adds it's important to have a four-wheel drive so that you don't have to travel near the surf. And while cars can sometimes make it out onto the beach at low tide, four-wheel drive helps you avoid getting stuck.

"We tell them, 'You are driving on the beach. Sometimes it's harder than others.' We recommend that they go to the house for the first time with a low tide so it's easier," she says. "There are no roads, no street signs. We prefer that they not come at night because it's harder to see the landmarks in the dark."

"We can't tell them to go to Mackerel Street and turn right. They have to get on the beach, **drive** eight miles, look for a certain type of house and then turn."

"It takes a certain willingness to go out there," she concludes.

When making a decision to rent on the northern beaches, Mignogna adds that visitors should consider the remoteness of the location. He encourages renters to stay in the area, but also cautions them to be aware of the tides and the potential for being stuck there. Mignogna also reminds them to keep health issues that might require quick medical attention in mind when making a rental decision.

Although the specialty shops, restaurants and grocery store in Corolla are accessible, they aren't necessarily convenient if you decide to make a soda-and-munchies run late at night. Accordingly, vacationers should plan grocery lists and pack necessities carefully. Your rental agency can make suggestions regarding what items to bring.

Despite the inconveniences, Mignogna says renters return year after year. "They like the beauty of it—the peacefulness, the back-to-nature aspect."

Dyer agrees. "Since '92, only two people I've rented to have absolutely hated it. We've converted a lot of hard-surface renters. Now they only rent in the four-wheel drive area."

Because the rental market in the Outer Banks is aggressive, plan your vacation early. Most companies recommend having reservations by January although oceanfront homes may be booked by as early as September and October of the previous year. Prices for properties vary by season.

For sales information on the four-wheel drive area, contact a local realty company.

Once you arrive, you'll undoubtedly want to hit the beach. Just keep a few common-sense tips in mind. Remember that while the beach is a vacation spot for you, it's still the only means of access

Getting There

By car: From the Eastern Shore and points north, take Route 13 South from the Chesapeake Bay Bridge-Tunnel to Interstate 64. Take 64 East to exit 291B (Elizabeth City/Dominion Blvd.) in Chesapeake. You will pick up 168 South (Nags Head/Manteo). Follow 168 for about 75 miles. Note that Route 168 will eventually become Route 158 at Barco, N.C. Cross the Wright Memorial Bridge and turn left onto Route 12 at the fifth traffic light. The signs for Route 12 will say "To Duck and Corolla." Follow Route 12 all the way into Corolla.

From Richmond and Washington D.C., take Interstate 64 East to Hampton. In Hampton, go south on Interstate 664 through the Monitor-Merrimac Memorial Bridge-Tunnel. Take 168 South to 158 South. When you cross the Wright Memorial Bridge, follow the directions above.

From the south or the west you have two choices—Route 17 or the causeway. To follow the causeway route, from Interstate 95 take Interstate 64 to Williamston, N.C. Follow 64/264 through Manteo, N.C. Follow the signs for Route 158 that will take you across the bridge/causeway to the Outer Banks. Follow Business 158 North for approximately 17 miles until it intersects with Route 12 at the Aycock Brown Welcome Center. Turn right on Route 12 North and follow this road through Duck to Corolla.

Instead of taking the causeway, you may also follow Route 17 North from Interstate 64. At Elizabeth City, N.C. you will pick up Route 158 South. Cross the Wright Memorial Bridge and turn left onto Route 12 at the fifth traffic light. Follow Route 12 all the way to Corolla.

Important notes: Be sure to monitor your speed carefully as you drive through the Outer Banks, especially on Route 12. Speed limits are strictly enforced on the Outer Banks and the roads can be crowded and take unexpected turns. You wouldn't want to start your vacation off with a speeding ticket or an accident. Also, even though it's only 12 miles to Corolla, allot plenty of time to arrive for check-in. Due to the high volume of traffic along Route 12 as vacationers leave and enter the area, the trip can take as long as an hour to complete. Be patient and enjoy the sights.

By air: The closest major airport is Norfolk International. Most major airlines offer flights into Norfolk. From there, you can rent a car and follow the driving directions above.

for permanent residents to their homes.

Don't set up your beach blanket, chairs and coolers right in the middle of well-traveled tracks. Don't park your vehicle there either. And keep in mind that as the tides change, you may need to move your "camp" so you aren't in a high-traffic zone. When the sand is exceptionally soft or when it's high tide, it's easy to get a vehicle stuck. That's why drivers stick to those well-worn paths near the dunes or use the hard packed sand near the water's edge.

It pays to be courteous. If you get stuck, one of those locals probably has a tow rope and can help get your vehicle free. And without those permanent residents, the area would never have been developed enough to become a rental destination.

Finally, keep track of your pets and children. And be aware of your environment. Nothing is more frightening than having a friend, relative or pet head down to the water and step directly into the path of an oncoming vehicle. Accidents are unlikely, but no one's heart needs that kind of shock while on vacation or on their way home from work. Just remember that those beautiful stretches of sand are also the only road. **HR**

Staying There

The northern beaches are accessible with a four-wheel drive vehicle making it possible for anyone vacationing on the Outer Banks to visit these pristine areas. If you'd like to stay in the four-wheel drive area, however, contact one of the following rental agencies for more information. Homes are available in a variety of locations including lots at the oceanfront, lots in the interior of the community and lots along the freshwater canals of Back Bay. Please note that the number of houses available in each rental program varies from year to year.

B&B on the Beach/Brindley & Brindley Realty

(approximately 6 rental properties in 4WD area)
(800) 962-0201 or (252) 453-3033
1023 Ocean Trail, Corolla, NC 27927
web: www.bonthebeach.com

Karichele Realty

(approximately 35 rental properties in 4WD area)
(800) 453-2377 or (252) 453-4400
P.O. Box 100, Corolla, NC 27927
web: www.karichele.com
e-mail: info@karichele.com

Coldwell-Banker Seaside Realty

(approximately 9 rental properties in 4WD area)
(800) 395-2525 or (252) 261-5500
4900 N. Croatan Hwy, Kitty Hawk, NC 27949
web: www.seasiderealty.com
e-mail: info@seasiderealty.com

Twiddy & Co. Realtors

(approximately 33 rental properties in 4WD area)
(800) 489-4339 or (252) 261-8311
1181 Duck Road, Duck, NC 27949
web: www.twiddy.com
e-mail: rent@twiddy.com

Just visiting

If you aren't sure that you're ready for the off-road vacation experience, check the area out first. Corolla Outback Adventures offers all-terrain vehicle (ATV) tours and four-wheel-drive wild horse/ecological tours to the northern beaches. Their tours are offered during the peak vacation months and during Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays. Call (252) 453-4484 for information on the ATV tours and (252) 453-0877 for information on the ecological tours. Pricing and other details are also available on the internet at www.corollaoutback.com or by e-mailing info@corollaoutback.com.

If you have a four-wheel drive vehicle, you may want to explore on your own. Just remember a few simple guidelines:

Plan your excursion to coincide with low tide. This is generally when the beach is easiest to travel. Be aware, however, that storms and other factors can make beach travel difficult even during low tides. You should also be aware that the tides occasionally form "washouts" where the level of the sand can drop suddenly anywhere from a few inches to a foot or more.

Don't worry too much about getting lost. If you're headed north up the beach away from Corolla, just keep the Atlantic on your right side. As you return, keep the ocean on your left and you can't head in the wrong direction. If you venture onto the sand roads behind the primary dune line, you need to pay more careful attention. If you become absolutely lost, just check the sun. Head east on the interior trails and eventually you'll find yourself back on the beach.

Despite what you see on the commercials, remember that driving through the salt water can damage your car. And be courteous to others. Driving "doughnuts" in the sand forms ruts that make beach travel difficult for everyone. Also, watch carefully for obstructions and debris that can damage your vehicle. One stretch of beach in this area is home to the stumps of an 800-year-old maritime forest. They're interesting to look at, but can be devastating to your car if you aren't paying attention.

Local sheriffs patrol the northern beaches so observe all posted regulations. Driving on the dunes with an ATV or a car is illegal and in restricted wildlife areas can seriously damage vital habitat. Stick to established paths if you venture into the interior. Remember that speed limits are 35 mph unless you are passing a group of beach-goers. Then you must slow to 15 mph.

