Travel and Adventure: The Outer Banks - North Carolina's playground by the sea

by Fred J. Eckert

Visitors have been exclaiming about the area where northeastern North Carolina meets the Atlantic Ocean for a long time. In fact, what we today call the Outer Banks received its first rave reviews in 1584.

CAPE HATTERAS - The Cape Hatteras lighthouse, at 208 feet, is the tallest lighthouse in the United States. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert.

ROANOKE ISLAND - The Roanoke Island Festival Park is a living history museum. 'Settles' are decked out in costumes of the 1500s. CNS Photo Fred J. Eckert. JOCKEY'S RIDGE - Jockey's Ridge is the highest natural sand dune on the Atlantic coast. It's a popular spot for hang gliding and dune surfing. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. SURF FISHING - Surf fishing is a popular recreation along the Outer banks of North Carolina. Few areas offer such an opportunity for freshwater and saltwater sport fishing. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. WRIGHT STUFF - The Wright Brothers National Memorial at the Outer Banks includes a sculpture of Orville Wright at the controls of the heavier-than-air machine he flew on Dec. 17, 1903. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. That's when Sir Walter Raleigh sent two explorers to check out the sounds and estuaries alongside what is today North Carolina's playground by the sea. The reports they brought back to England about the wonders of the New World caused Queen Elizabeth I to commission Raleigh to establish the first English settlement in America in this area in 1587, two decades before Jamestown and three decades before Plymouth.

It was a disaster that to this day remains a mystery. Every one of the roughly 120 men, women and children whom Raleigh sent - he never set foot in North America - vanished without a trace. Their deserted settlement site showed no signs of any trouble. Conflicting theories about what had happened still abound.

Today, one pastime during a visit to the Outer Banks area is to take in a stage production about this four-centuries-old unsolved mystery. Written by Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Paul Green, "The Lost Colony," America's first and longest-running historical drama performed under the stars, has drawn large crowds and high praise for the past 60 years.

What we call the Outer Banks is a string of sandy barrier islands that stretch for more than 130 miles along the Atlantic coastline of North Carolina. Barrier islands - generally long and of low elevation with beaches on the ocean-facing side and sand dunes and/or tidal flats or marshes on the mainland-facing side - are thus called because they serve as a sort of protective barrier between the ocean and the mainland they parallel. Tidal inlets usually are interspersed among them.

It's an area of great natural beauty with mile after mile of pristine white sandy beaches and shifting sand dunes, inlet water hideaways and wildlife refuge areas, all of which make for great recreational opportunities. The water frontage surrounding the Outer Banks exceeds 900 miles. Its estuary system - a mixing place of seawater and freshwater - is the largest in the world.

In Nags Head, at 400-acre Jockey's Ridge State Park, site of the highest natural sand dune on the Atlantic coast, visitors can go hang-gliding and sand-boarding, fly kites, hike through nature trails and picnic in an area that in some places looks like a big desert. It was precisely this combination of tall dunes, good winds and soft sand that led two Dayton, Ohio, bicycle shop owners, the Wilbur and Orville Wright, to come here to try out their invention. They selected a spot just south of Kitty Hawk called Big Kill Devil Hill, from which they made more than a thousand glides.

Here, on Dec. 17, 1903, the two, each dressed in suit and tie, flipped a coin, shook hands over the noise of the engine they had built, and with younger brother Orville at the controls and Wilbur running alongside, their machine lifted off the ground at 10:35 a.m. For the first time a heavier-than-air machine with a person onboard rose into the air on its own power.

That first flight lasted only 12 seconds and traveled only 120 feet, not much more than half the length of a Boeing 747. But that day on the Outer Banks the two brothers made history, and you can learn all about it at the place where it occurred, now the site of the Wright Brothers National Memorial.

There are 85 public access beaches in this area, some of which are among the best on the Atlantic Coast. Relax on a beach, take a dip in the ocean, walk on the soft sand, search for shells or go surfing, windsurfing or surf-fishing. This is one of the best areas along the entire East Coast for any of these activities. It's also a great area for such other outdoor activities as golf, kayaking, canoeing and camping.

Fishing, both saltwater and freshwater, is truly outstanding, and you can fish from along the ocean shore, from piers, in the many sounds and aboard charter boats. This is also one of the best places in the country for bird-watching. It's the home of the 5,834-acre Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, great during the warm

months but even better during the cold season, when more than 400 species of waterfowl winter here. You can go on either guided or independent nature trail tours and even sit in a blind to observe birds up-close.

Along the coast you will see some of America's best known lighthouses, including Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, the tallest one in America and a symbol of North Carolina.

At least 1,500 known shipwrecks lie off the coast, a delight for divers. A few shipwrecks are visible from shore at low tide. It was Founding Father Alexander Hamilton who dubbed the area offshore "The Graveyard of the Atlantic." A museum by that name is open to visitors, and there are other maritime-related sites that include Chicamacomico on Pea Island, where you can learn about the U.S. Life-Saving Service, forerunner of the U.S. Coast Guard, and the North Carolina Maritime Museum in the town of Manteo.

Manteo, on Roanoke Island (population 6,000), is the main gathering point of the Outer Banks. A pleasant place with nice shops and good restaurants, the town includes such attractions as a newly expanded aquarium that focuses on Outer Banks waters and Fort Raleigh National Historic Site, a re-creation of the fort the first settlers built here. The fort includes a classic English garden called Elizabethan Gardens and stands adjacent to the amphitheater in which "The Lost Colony" performances take place.

You can stroll from "downtown" Manteo across a bridge to Roanoke Island Festival Park, a living history museum with an interactive museum and a film theater. Visitors can climb aboard the Elizabeth II, a sailing ship reflecting the type of vessel on which those first settlers crossed the Atlantic. "Settlers" decked out in the costumes of the late 1500s perform woodworking and blacksmithing chores and show you the sort of accommodations settlers inhabited.

It was at this living history museum that I learned from a "settler" about something that certainly must have amazed and delighted those first Englishmen to settle in the New World here in North Carolina's Outer Banks area. The natives, I learned, were very happy to acquire low-value items from the settlers in exchange for something they called a "Roanoke." It was their word for a pearl.

IF YOU GO:

Information: Contact the Outer Banks Visitors bureau by calling toll-free 877-629-4386, e-mailing information@outerbanks.org or clicking on www.outerbanks.org.

Dining: There are plenty of fine restaurants in the Outer Banks and, naturally, seafood is unusually good here. A restaurant in Kitty Hawk that is well worth going out of the way to experience is The Rundown Cafe and Tsunami Surf Bar for great burgers, seafood and salads plus an eclectic selection of Caribbean and Asian tastes created by its world-traveling owner, all offered up in a casual fun atmosphere with exceptionally friendly service.

Travel guides: For sound judgments and reliability, it's always hard to beat Fodor's (www.fodors.com) travel guides. When touring North Carolina, also be sure to check out the travel publications of the John F. Blair Co. (www.blairpub.com).

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