

Cruising Southeastern North Carolina Waterways

Basically stretching from the Beaufort and Morehead City area and running in a generally southwestern direction about 140 standard miles down to the Cape Fear River and the South Carolina state line, the southeastern part of coastal North Carolina features perfect boating conditions. With an abundance of public and private ramps, plus lots of boater services at marinas and more, it's easy to see why boating in the southeastern part of the state is so popular.

Like the rest of the state's coastal area, southeastern North Carolina features hundreds of miles of Atlantic and inland waterway boating, outlying islands that protect the coastline (many deserted and awaiting boater-only visits), varied Intracoastal Waterway (ICW) passages, world-class inshore and offshore fishing, several small towns that are incredibly boater-friendly, and lots to do when not on the water.

The twin towns of **Beaufort** and **Morehead City** are a great place to start. Lots of ramps, marinas, services, outlying islands, history, and seafood make this area a great boating destination.

Next, the Intracoastal Waterway runs southwest along the coast past Surf City, Topsail Beach, Wrightsville Beach, and Carolina Beach to the famed Cape Fear River. Here, Bald Head Island, Southport, and even Wilmington are all convenient destinations for boaters.

Finally, four outlying islands between the Intracoastal Waterway and the Atlantic welcome boaters before they hit South Carolina. These include, from east to west, Oak Island, Holden Beach, Ocean Isle Beach, and Sunset Beach. All four have definitely arrived on the GPSs of boaters. A seafood bash in Calabash completes the run before heading back to Beaufort.



7-Day Itinerary | Southeastern North Carolina

Day 1

Head to Morehead City and Beaufort and dock in historic downtown Beaufort

Day 2

Explore more of Beaufort and Morehead City in the morning before heading southwest along the coast to Jacksonville or Swan Point.

Day 3

Continue heading southwest for an overnight in either Wrightsville Beach or Wilmington.

Day 4

A myriad of exploration possibilities includes Southport and Oak Island (both great for an overnight).

Days 5-7

After visiting other outlying islands west of Oak Island and enjoying a Calabash-style seafood lunch, start the return trip to Beaufort – returning to favorite marinas or stopping in places missed on the initial run.

With so much to see and do in the area, we recommend the following seven-day round-trip itinerary. Enjoy all the area has to offer by mixing and matching the varied boating possibilities to your particular interests. Be sure to check days and hours of operation for each venue.

Day One

Visiting boaters could spend days on and off the boat in and around **Beaufort** and **Morehead City**. These twin cities team up to tantalize visiting boaters with an array of on-water experiences, marinas, restaurants, shopping, and sightseeing. The following recommendations can be pursued the day of arrival and the next morning, before continuing along the coastline on Day Two.

Basically, Beaufort is the more historic and established of the two, while Morehead City is a bit more utilitarian (it's the state's second largest commercial port behind Wilmington). Both should be visited on any trip to the area, which is considered by many to be the hub of the North Carolina boating scene.

Located along Taylor Creek, Beaufort's delights include: several bustling marinas (**Beaufort Municipal Docks** is the most convenient); a charming historic district great for walking; the excellent **North Carolina Maritime Museum**, which will interest any boater (the museum's fascinating **Harvey W. Smith Watercraft Center** across the street focuses on traditional North Carolina designs); an eclectically upscale dining scene (locals and transients swear by **Spouter Inn**, **Front Street Grill**, and **Beaufort Grocery Company**); and equally eclectic shopping (don't miss **Scuttlebutt Books & Bounty**).

To the west, Morehead City's waterfront includes: a large charter fishing fleet; several marinas (**Morehead Gulf Docks** is most convenient); **The History Place** (great local history exhibits); and a waterfront boardwalk with several restaurants (**Sanitary Fish Market** has been there since 1938). Just outside downtown, the helpful **Carteret County Tourism Development Bureau's office** offers lots of great information on the area, plus a bustling four-ramp North Carolina Wildlife Access point for boaters (which might just be the only visitor center/boat ramp combo along the Atlantic coastline).

Though Morehead City and Beaufort are ideal bases for boaters, the uninhabited outlying **Shackleford Banks** and **Cape Lookout Bight** offer two of the top boating experiences to be found in the Southeast U.S. Part of protected **Cape Lookout National Seashore**, Shackleford Banks is famous as the location of wild ponies – but there's also great primitive camping (no special permits needed) and wild dunes and valleys that have remained completely undeveloped. Cape Lookout features the distinctive black-and-white diamond pattern of **Cape Lookout Lighthouse**, and more than a dozen miles of undeveloped beachfront and dunes. Those who don't want to take their own boat to either destination can take advantage of ferry services out of Beaufort and Harkers Island.

Day Two

After spending more time in the Beaufort and Morehead City area (maybe staying through lunch), it's time put some serious time on the water. Heading west out of Morehead City along the ICW, beach communities like **Atlantic Beach** and **Emerald Isle** are mostly for sun-worshipping landlubbers. **Bogue Inlet** is the next navigational issue, with the charming waterfront town of **Swansboro** a popular stop for boaters. Though not nearly as developed as Beaufort, downtown Swansboro has more than adequate marina facilities, dining, shopping, and history.

Further along the ICW, the 17-mile stretch from Swansboro to the New River is among the quietest longer sections in the state. It's pretty much

a straight and well-marked channel, though tidal currents can be quite heavy at times.

The **New River** is a highlight for many locals and visiting boaters, thanks to 15+ miles of largely undeveloped shoreline that runs pretty much right up to **Jacksonville**. It's undeveloped because it's part of the **Camp Lejeune Marine Corps Base**, so landing is generally not allowed. **Old Ferry Marina**, located just past the Sneads Ferry bridge, is a great stop for services and upriver information.

Jacksonville is well worth the run up the New River, thanks to the friendly husband-wife operation at **Tideline Marine** and lots of dining, shopping, and more within walking distance. Docking for diners is also allowed at tasty **Fisherman's Wharf Restaurant**.

Swan Point is the next stop past the New River, with **South Point Marina** offering a perfect place to stop for complete services and information about the run to Wrightsville Beach. Jacksonville or Swan Point both make for great overnight docking before Day Three.

Day Three

About 19 miles further from Swan Point along the ICW, **Harbour Village Marina** is another popular stop. Access to outlying islands like Surf City and Topsail Beach is available, but these are mainly beach destinations.

However, further along, **Wrightsville Beach** is well worth visiting. The Wrightsville Beach area offers a number of marinas, lots of restaurants within walking distance (don't miss Causeway Cafe), shopping, and some interesting cruising all along the ICW (with many convenient ramps).

After Masonboro Inlet's busy **Masonboro Boatyard and Marina**, bustling **Carolina Beach** is the next stop along the ICW. Because of lots of development, marina facilities and boat ramps are limited. However, if possible, both **Carolina Beach State Park** and Civil War-era **Fort Fisher** are well worth exploring by boat and ashore.

Like the New River, the **Cape Fear River** is definitely a cruising highlight in this region. Whether simply using one of many ramps to explore a part of the river, to heading all the way up to the charming riverfront city of **Wilmington** (about 10 miles), there's little to fear about boating the Cape Fear.

Highlights of this area include: lots of local history; Bald Head Island; cruising the river; and Wilmington. The history of the Cape Fear includes the pirate Stede Bonnet, the 1725 town of Brunswick, and stunning Orton

Plantation. Reached only by private boat or a frequent public ferry, **Bald Head Island** is a great place for boaters to visit – where visitors and residents use golf carts for transportation (no cars allowed) and **Old Baldy** stands as a landmark lighthouse.

The shoreline up to **Wilmington** is largely undeveloped, making for a generally quiet trip. However, it's the state's largest port and commercial traffic (including huge container ships) can sometimes be daunting to smaller vessels. Once there, however, downtown docking and some of the region's best dining (Pilot House is a waterfront favorite), shopping, and history await. Across the river from downtown, visiting boaters shouldn't miss a tour of the huge **Battleship North Carolina**.

Either Wrightsville Beach or Wilmington are ideal overnight stops.

Day Four

Back at the mouth of the Cape Fear, the town of **Southport** is surely one of the top boating hotspots in the region. Highlights in Southport have to include a meal (and the general vibe) at famed **Yacht Basin Provision Co.**, a visit to the **North Carolina Maritime Museum of Southport**, and a warm welcome at **Southport Marina**, where there's also a convenient ramp (for a fee).

Further along the ICW, **South Harbor Marina** has developed into a popular boater stop, with a busy ramp about a mile down Dutchman's Creek – which also offers quiet cruising and anchorage. One particular highlight of South Harbor Marina is **Joseph's**, thanks to creative Italian cuisine and lots of friendly locals who know their area boating.

Just across the ICW, 14-mile-long **Oak Island** has grown into a popular vacation spot. Boaters can take advantage of the beach and more by heading to **Blue Water Point Marina**, where full services, a ramp, and **The Fish House Restaurant** await (plus, the beach is just a short two-block walk from the marina).

Days Five to Seven

After passing by the ICW community of **St. James Plantation** and through the mouth of **Lockwoods Folly River** (where there's great upstream cruising for smaller craft), the next few outlying islands offer a busy passage along the ICW. **Holden Beach**, **Ocean Isle Beach**, and **Sunset Beach** are all worthy of exploration, but the town of Calabash should definitely be on the menu of every boater in the area.

Quite simply, **Calabash** is a North Carolina seafood classic and a great boater destination for the day. After passing briefly into South Carolina on

the ICW, Calabash Creek leads boaters back north and northeast into North Carolina and the sleepy village of Calabash and its inordinate number of restaurants.

With restaurants dating back to the 1940s (there are now more than a half-dozen), Calabash-style seafood is now known all along the coast and inland. At these casual restaurants, the generally made-to-order seafood is lightly battered, deep-fried, and typically served with coleslaw and hush puppies. Several of the restaurants offer water views, with **Capt. Nance's** and **Coleman's** among current favorites.

A seafood lunch washed down with some sweet iced tea seems like an ideal way to "end" the first half of the trip – before starting back to Beaufort and a speedier two-night run to keep the trip to seven days.

For more information:

For much detail about boating southeastern North Carolina and the rest of the coast, "**North Carolina's Coastal Boating Guide**" is a great place to start. This fold-out map (and more) features: a detailed map (which should never replace proper charts); around a dozen public boat ramps (there are also countless fee-based ones at marinas); contact agencies for boating, tourism, fishing, and more; information on more than 140 marinas and boatyards, and super summaries of more than 50 points of interest. The website www.ncwaterways.com is also quite detailed and helpful. You can also order the "Boating Guide" on the website or by calling (877) DOT-4YOU.

Beaufort and Morehead City
www.crystalcoastnc.org

Jacksonville and Swansboro
www.onslowcountytourism.com

Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach
www.cape-fear.nc.us

Oak Island and Southport
www.ncbrunswick.com

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