


Carolina country

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Carolina Country **Adventures**

Starting on page 14

Published by  **NC** Electric Cooperatives

**Power from
poultry waste**
page 6

**Should you replace
drafty windows?**
page 29

PERIODICAL

Your Touchstone Energy Cooperative

Be counted in the 2020 Census—page 10

Port City Diversions

Soak up the sun over a weekend in Wilmington

By Craig Distl | Photos courtesy of Wilmington and Beaches CVB unless otherwise indicated

NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher



NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher

Carolina Beach Boardwalk



Jungle Rapids Family Fun Park

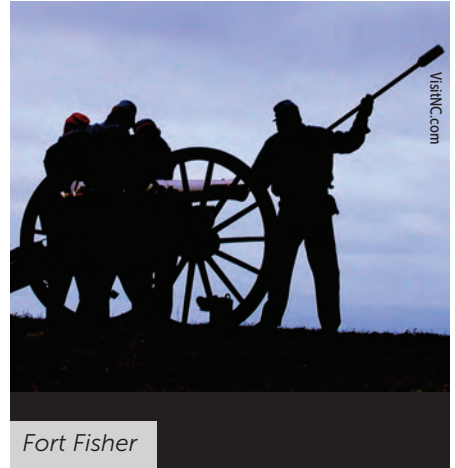




Marsh paddleboarding



Surfer's Special from Celtic Creamery



Fort Fisher

The port city of Wilmington beckons North Carolina travelers with the rare combination of historical significance and contemporary relevance. Throughout this city of 120,000 residents—and extending to adjoining surf communities of Carolina Beach, Kure Beach and Wrightsville Beach—vacationers discover an abundance of activities, many of them budget-friendly.

Museums and historic districts tell the tales of swashbuckling pirates, colonial pioneers, Revolutionary patriots, the largest land-sea battle of the Civil War and a shipbuilding industry that propelled our nation to victory in World War II.

Modern attractions include the acclaimed Wilmington Riverwalk, a million-gallon wave pool, a nationally recognized aquarium, an emerging culinary scene and sunset cruises along the Intracoastal Waterway.

It's hard to fully experience the Wilmington area in three days, but here's an itinerary that hits many of the high notes (without costing your family too many C-notes).

Day 1: Quintessential beach town

Get those toes in the sand at Carolina Beach, a friendly town known for the **Carolina Beach Boardwalk**, named one of America's Most Awesome Boardwalks by Budget Travel.

The oceanside boardwalk, renovated and extended a few years ago, has stations to wash your feet as you enter from the beach. It's the perfect place to take a break from the surf and sand. Test your skeeball skills at the arcade, enjoy the thrill of classic amusement rides or just sway in

the coastal breeze in bench swings stationed along the way.

Foodies rave about two sweet treats in Carolina Beach, one more than 80 years old and another that opened two years ago.

Since 1939, **Britt's Donut Shop** on the boardwalk has been producing delectable doughnuts that sell out as fast as they can make 'em. **Celtic Creamery**, a few blocks away in the downtown district, serves extra-velvety Irish ice cream and sundaes sprinkled with warm mini doughnuts. The owner imported the recipe from McCarthy's Ice Cream in Ballybunion, Ireland, and even had Joanna McCarthy fly over to oversee the early days in 2018.

A couple miles west of the boardwalk lies **Carolina Beach State Park**. This fee-free park has several hiking trails. One of the most popular is the wheelchair-accessible Flytrap Trail, a half-mile loop where folks can spot the Venus Flytrap in its native habitat. This carnivorous plant is notable because it catches and eats small insects.

Just south of Carolina Beach is Kure Beach, home to the **North Carolina Aquarium at Fort Fisher** and the **Fort Fisher State Historic Site and Museum**.

The aquarium is a jewel of the NC

Department of Natural and Cultural Resources. It has been named a top aquarium in the U.S. multiple times by Trip Advisor and has more than 2,500 animal residents, including Luna, a beloved albino alligator.

Fort Fisher played a prominent role in the Civil War. The Confederate fort protected trading routes to the port of Wilmington, the last Atlantic Coast port to fall to Federal troops. An epic land-sea battle for Fort Fisher included the largest Naval bombardment of the 19th century. Historical reenactments take place on site and a new exhibit this year focuses on the life and experiences of African American soldiers at the fort during the Civil War.

Day 2: Back in the port city

Wilmington's transformation over the last two decades is impressive. It has simultaneously preserved its 230-plus block historic district and naval shipbuilding past, while developing a vibrant city with things like the 1.75-mile Riverwalk hugging the city's edge along the Cape Fear River.

The **Wilmington Riverwalk** has increased daytime and evening activity with shops, artist galleries, visitor activities and top-notch restaurants.



Johnnie Mercer's Pier

A great starting point is the Bob Jenkins Riverfront Visitor Information booth at Market and Water streets. Helpful staffers can direct you to Segway tours, horse-drawn carriage rides, guided walking tours, live music and craft breweries.

Just across the Cape Fear from the riverwalk, take the family on a history adventure at the **Battleship North Carolina**. The legendary warship, which fought in every major naval offensive in the Pacific Theater of World War II, takes visitors into the daily life of the crew in 1942 by exploring several areas of the ship, including the galley and engine room. The battleship frequently offers kid-friendly programs and events, so check its website for the latest schedule.

A few minutes inland from the battleship is **Jungle Rapids**, a million-gallon wave pool that offers nearly every water park feature imaginable. Take on as much, or as little, water excitement as you wish at this Taj Mahal of a play

park. Water features operate from June to September, while Jungle Rapids' indoor portion, with activities like bumper cars, mini bowling, laser tag and a climbing wall, operates year round.

Across the road from Jungle Rapids, don't miss the weekly **Wilmington Farmers Market** at Tidal Creek Co-op. Every Saturday from 8 a.m. to 2 p.m., the market offers fresh seasonal produce, meat, eggs and more from local producers.

A great way to cap off any day in the city is via a scenic **sunset cruise** on the Cape Fear River or Intracoastal Waterway. Check out options at wilmingtonandbeaches.com.

Day 3: Surf's up at Wrightsville Beach

Sooner or later, you have to succumb to "pier pressure," and there's no better place to do it than Wrightsville Beach. This laid-back beach town, once a hangout for Jimmy Buffet, is awash in ocean adventure.

Experienced surfers know Wrightsville as the birthplace of NC surfing and one of the best surf towns on the East Coast. Other fun for thrill seekers includes kite boarding, scuba diving and sailing.

For those seeking softer adventure, **Epic Excursions** provides stand-up paddleboarding tours through serene marshes. Epic also offers evening cruises, as does **La Dee Dah Sunset Cruises**.

Kids get the chance to be a swash-buckling pirate for a day with a treasure hunt aboard **Wrightsville Beach Scenic Tours**.

A great free attraction is **The Loop**, a 2.45-mile paved trail around the core of the island. Easily accessed from the Loop is the **Wrightsville Beach Museum of History**, an old-school beach cottage that tells the story of beach vacations through the years.

Of course, the beach itself beckons. Enjoy the last day of your getaway soaking up rays, fishing from **Johnnie Mercer's Pier** and dining outdoors at the **Oceanic Restaurant** on the Crystal Pier. 📍

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Check out the online version of this article for links to more information about all of the mentioned sites and locations.



Battleship North Carolina



Wilmington Riverwalk



Sunset river cruise