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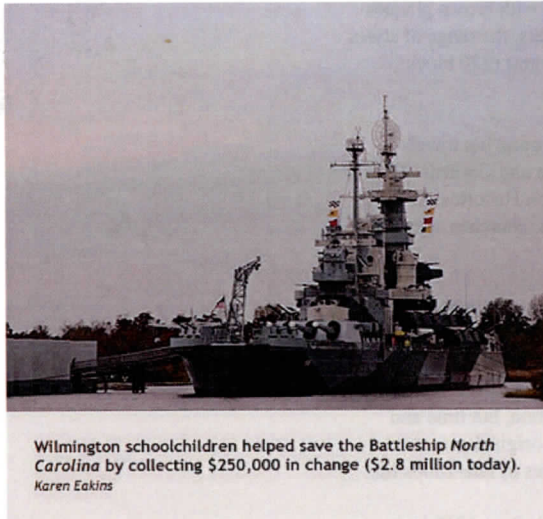
# HOME & AWAY

## North Carolina's Blackwater and Beaches

Wilmington, N.C., teases travelers with attractions from the Cape Fear River to the Atlantic coast.

By Karen Eakins

Sharing a savory al fresco repast with my husband at Le Catalan alongside Wilmington, N.C.'s, Cape Fear River was made to order. The bistro's Catalonian owner created the perfect light lunch for hitting the Riverwalk to join the flow of those enjoying the sun's warmth and the quiet slap of the river against the wooden pilings.



Wilmington schoolchildren helped save the Battleship *North Carolina* by collecting \$250,000 in change (\$2.8 million today).  
Karen Eakins

The Cape Fear River, which flows 202 miles and spills into the Atlantic a scant 20 miles east, has a long history. It's the star of Wilmington, featuring in many attractions, from boat tours to battleships to English ballast-stone streets in historical areas. It's also the site of one of the East Coast's longest riverwalks, which caps out at almost two full miles with the new north-end, \$40 million yacht marina. This blackwater river (created by surrounding cypress swamps) anchors a host of reasons for visiting.

### Permission to Come Aboard

The tours to get familiar with Wilmington run the gamut—boat and battleship tours, horse-drawn carriage rides, a scenic byway drive, walking excursions, even film-site tours. We began by hopping aboard Wilmington Water Tours' *The Wilmington* with Capt. Wendy for an educational, entertaining voyage where we learned lots more about the freshwater/seawater river.

Boats are understandably a highlight here. Visitors will see the *Cape Hatteras* research ship—crewed by students of one of the country's best marine-education programs, owned and operated by Cape Fear Community College. There's also the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter *Diligence VI*, moored here for six to eight weeks at a time; visitors can tour free if staff is available.

But the big dog in the bay, so to speak, is Battleship *North Carolina*, decommissioned in 1947. The 729-foot-long battleship saw action in World War II at Guadalcanal and Iwo Jima, earning 15 battle stars. Destined for the scrap heap in the late-1950s, the ship was saved when Wilmington schoolchildren collected \$250,000 in change (\$2.8 million today). It was brought to rest in its namesake state in 1961 by backing it up the river from the Atlantic.

It's open to the public today, and tours are offered, but individual exploration is easy by following the placards. Visitors should start with the 10-minute video that tells the ship's story then hit the decks (literally) to explore nine levels, from the gun turrets to the living quarters to the engine room. It's virtually all open and/or visible. The most compelling aspect is reading the snippets of ship life written by the sailors and posted in the living quarters.



**By Hoof and By Foot**  
Branching out from the riverfront is a must-do. Most downtown homes were built from 1825





The Bellamy Mansion Museum makes a regal backdrop for the Kenan Memorial Fountain.  
Karen Eakins

through 1885, and popular horse-drawn carriage rides give visitors a broad view on eight different routes. We caught an afternoon jaunt with Percheron horses Bob and Prince.

We traversed much of the riverfront area, past refurbished warehouses and Colonial-seaport-turned-shopping-area Chandler's Wharf, before clip-clopping

down Front and Second streets by dozens of historical homes. Tagged with brown plaques to indicate houses at least 75 years old and black ones for 100-plus years, the range of styles and social class made it easy to see why this is one of the country's largest (230 blocks) historical districts and a popular relocation spot.

The eight-mile Cape Fear Historic Byway covers much of the same ground but travels farther south, too, looping around the scenic, peaceful Greenfield Lake and Gardens. This history geek's favorite tour, though, was by foot, utilizing a Wilmington Historical Society mobile app that explores Market and Third streets, packed with homes, churches, and official buildings and monuments.

Must-stops are the Bellamy and Latimer mansions. The Classical Revival Bellamy was built for \$50,000 in 1861 by Dr. John and Eliza and features coal-gas lighting, slate-and-marble fireplaces, and oak and mahogany floors. Eliza loved gardens, and azaleas, camellias and 1870s magnolias still flourish. The restored slave quarters out back illustrate the vastly different living conditions. The home has undergone extensive restoration, but time and circumstances took their toll on the furnishings, too, leaving but three original pieces. Docents provide lively historical details that create vivid virtual pictures of late-1800s life.

A few blocks away is Latimer House, with a matching lively history. Built in 1852 by importer/exporter Zebulon and Elizabeth, the Italianate home sports a solid 2-foot brick foundation, four floors and 16 fireplaces. The home has been meticulously restored, down to the paint color. Thirty percent of the first-floor furnishings are original, and artifacts such as two Black Forest "throne" chairs and an 1875 wedding gown beg to be told about.

Plus, film buffs can catch a Hollywood Location Walk. Wilmington is the nation's third-most-active film capital after Hollywood and New York and boasts more than 400 film/TV credits.

### A Little Beach Time

Just a short drive from Wilmington is a breath of fresh sea air, via a string of beach communities—Kure Beach, Carolina Beach and Wrightsville Beach. Kure Beach is host to the NC Aquarium at Fort Fisher and just a short hop away, Fort Fisher State Historic Site—location of the Civil War's largest land-sea battle. The 1861

Confederate fort's footprint remains; visitors can learn about the site and the battle through interpretive plaques on the quarter-mile trail and the small museum's artifacts. Farther north lies 1923-built, 711-foot Kure Beach Pier, filled with anglers hoping for a haul, and nearby Ocean Front Park, filled with giggling children.



Carolina Beach State Park is home to the fascinating Venus flytrap.  
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At Carolina Beach State Park, visitors shouldn't miss a ranger-led tour of the Venus Flytrap Trail. The carnivorous plant grows only within a 60-to-100-mile radius of Wilmington. Our knowledgeable guide, Ellie, took our group of 12 on a half-mile loop where we also spotted longleaf pines, purple Dense Blazing Stars and beautiful Yellow Pitcher Plants. The flytraps are fascinating—they live 20 years and grow to a maximum of 6 inches. They don't eat flies but do spend a week eating every spider, ant and beetle unfortunate enough to spring at least one of its three trigger hairs twice or two of its trigger hairs simultaneously. The delicate

appearance is a ruse.

Also in Carolina Beach is the locals-favorite Shuckin' Shack, a dive bar perfect for a quick lobster roll and a beer. The laid-back atmosphere, friendly waitresses and decor that includes a fake shark over the bar set the tone. Great food made the casual-Sunday-lunch picture complete. Around the corner is the recently renovated boardwalk, peppered with benches with reversible backs for people watching the seaside and the sidewalk.

At the peninsula's north end lies Wrightsville Beach, the most upscale of the three. It's home to Johnnie Mercer's Pier, great water-sports options and the Oceanic Restaurant, a popular oceanfront spot to watch the water, even on the pouring-down-rain day we had. We had another terrific meal at upscale Bluewater Grill, overlooking the Intracoastal Waterway on the community's west side.

The Wrightsville Beach History Museum—a tiny, locally loved and curated museum detailing the community's 100-plus-year story—is great fun. Our 86-year-old docent, Phyllis, made the memorabilia come to life. On the way back to Wilmington proper, visitors can learn much more at the 1898-founded Cape Fear Museum of History & Science, where the entry's giant ground sloth welcomes visitors to exhibits featuring 52,000 artifacts. Now showing (through February) is the exhibition "Starring Cape Fear!"

### Sleep, Shop, Eat

For accommodations, we enjoyed the hospitality of both The Wilmingtonian and Front Street Inn. The Wilmingtonian traces its history from the early 1900s. Today, the Southern-style hotel features three buildings with rooms devoted to Hollywood genres and films—we stayed in the full-efficiency showcasing Charlie Chaplin. My favorite spot was in one of the rocking chairs overlooking the courtyard gazebo.



All sorts of treasures can be found in the 1880-established City Market.  
Karen Eakins

The elegant Front Street Inn is on the historical-homes main drag. Once a Salvation Army building, its rooms are upscale, comfortable and complemented by sumptuous breakfasts created by the inn's gracious co-owner, Polly Salinetti. Our Bistro Room and the glass-enclosed sun porch made lingering particularly attractive. Both hotels offer quick walks to the riverfront.

Those given to shopping pursuits will find myriad enticing offerings along

Front Street. The 1880-established City Market is a huge building with an open courtyard now filled with 21 shops to poke around in, and the 1850s Cotton Exchange is a series of eight repurposed warehouses sure to entertain explorers and shoppers both with its 30 shops, brick walkways, creaky wooden planking and massive heart-pine beams.

All this activity requires sustenance. And from sophisticated to pure Southern, food options are plentiful. Visitors can't go wrong for breakfast at The Basics, whose wooden floors, brick walls and tin ceiling lend a warm atmosphere that welcomes diners, and the outstanding, fresh food—such as *migas* (Mexican-style eggs in tortillas) with a bountiful side of fresh fruit—brings them back. A popular lunch stop is Southern-to-the-core Dixie Grill. Decor at the downtown fixture is 1950s diner; the menu is fried green tomatoes, grits and gravy served on pretty much anything the customer wants. It's a gut-busting, soul-satisfying meal.

Dinner along the waterfront is popular and pricey, and the most crowded spot was The George on the Riverwalk. We had a 40-minute wait for a table on the deck but quick service for perfectly prepared butternut squash soup and bacon-encrusted scallops. More to our liking was the Pilot House Restaurant at Chandler's Wharf. Also riverside *al fresco*, our meal here was accompanied by quiet music by a guitarist and far less foot traffic alongside. Plus, the Sweet Potato Grouper was sublime.

While it's not waterfront but strip-mall located, the region's standout is a sleek little hole-in-the-wall called Catch. Owned by chef Keith Rhodes—James Beard finalist and a Bravo TV *Top Chef* contestant—Catch promises an indulgent meal diners won't soon forget. One bite of Chinese Firecracker Shrimp and I knew why it had won awards. And the dark-chocolate

ganache on a pecan crust topped with chocolate mousse, whipped cream and raspberry coulis was simply decadent.

Those looking for a lighter dessert will find it by the riverfront. Slip into Kilwin's for a scoop of Mexican chocolate with cinnamon ice cream. Or take a short walk to The Peppered Cupcake for something quite different. This "gourmet cupcakery" delights with a creative menu, such as a Bourbon Black Cherry and Vanilla Cobbler Cupcake. When the warm cherry sauce is poured into the center, it melts the buttercream frosting. Great taste, sweet little dessert for the perfect riverfront getaway.

#### **Planning Your Trip**

To learn more about Wilmington, visit [wilmingtonandbeaches.com](http://wilmingtonandbeaches.com). For trip-planning assistance, visit your local AAA Travel agent or [AAA.com/travel](http://AAA.com/travel).

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