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Extend summer into fall: Outer Banks of North Carolina

By Necee Regis | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 06, 2014



NECEE REGIS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

At the Currituck Banks in North Carolina, you can choose from an abundance of water sports, fresh seafood and sights, including the Currituck Beach Light Station, circa 1875. Or you can just relax on the deck or under the signature orange beach umbrellas at the Sanderling Resort.

DUCK, N.C. — Summer in New England is too damn short. When September arrives, I imagine the earth turning away from all the things I love — warm and humid days, light-filled evenings, water warm enough for outdoor swimming — and begin dreaming about the windswept barrier islands of North Carolina.

The Outer Banks, or OBX, is a narrow strip of barrier islands and peninsulas. Beginning in the southeastern corner of Virginia Beach and extending more than 175 miles along much of the North Carolina coastline, it separates the Atlantic Ocean from the mainland.

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The beaches rival those of the Outer Cape — minus the towering dunes. For those who want to extend summer into the fall, the Outer Banks water and air temperatures are much higher than in New England meaning one can squeeze in extra days of swimming, shorts, and flip-flops.

I recently spent three days exploring the northernmost peninsula, Currituck Banks (also known as Bodie Island), and found it remarkably similar to my favorite New England vacation spots. Beachy-casual with an abundance of water sports, fresh seafood, historic sites, and places to be pampered, there was more than enough for my beau and me to see, do, and enjoy.

We checked into the family-friendly Sanderling Resort in Duck, an unpretentious 16-acre property situated on both sides of Route 12 — also known as Duck Road — a two-lane strip that is the main north-south thoroughfare through this fragile spit of land. Sanderling's sand-colored, shingled buildings (none higher than three-stories) blend into the landscape of small dunes, tangles of green vegetation, sea grasses, and the sparkling-blue ocean and sound on either side. The resort's bright-orange signature color — found on beach umbrellas, poolside lounges, and beach cruiser bicycles — added a zesty complement to the low-key relaxed atmosphere.



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If you go to the Outer Banks

What to eat, where to stay, what to do in the Outer Banks.

With newly renovated luxury accommodations, three dining options, a full-service spa, two

outdoor pools (one adults-only), a fitness center, a roster of on-site water activities (standup paddleboarding, kayaking, jetskiing, surfing), and evening s'mores by the firepit, one could never leave the resort and be happy as a clam — or, more appropriately, a blue crab. However, after a day of lolling, we did venture forth, and headed north to Corolla.



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Guests relax under signature orange beach umbrellas, and kayak off shore on the ocean beach at the Sanderling Resort, Duck, North Carolina.

At the Currituck Heritage Park we climbed 220 steps to the top of the Currituck Beach Light Station, the last lighthouse erected on the North Carolina coast, circa 1875. The circular viewing deck accommodates a limited number of visitors, and so admission is staggered. (The line to enter seemed long but it moved quickly.) Once on top, spectacular vistas of sea and sound and the land in between, from the Virginia state line to the central Outer Banks were a hot spot for photo-ops. Lighthouse geeks: The lens is a first-order Fresnel, original to the lighthouse, the largest of seven sizes and one of the few still in use in the United States.

In addition to dropping by the lighthouse, visitors to the 39-acre park can stop in at the 1880s lighthouse keeper's house, now a gift shop, moved to the site in 1920; tour the opulent Whalehead Club, a 21,000-square-foot Art Nouveau manor formerly owned by a couple from Rhode Island; explore the Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education's aquarium, nature

exhibits, and programs for kids; or stroll down the road to Historic Corolla Village, where nationally recognized historic buildings house restaurants and shops.

Kitty Hawk Kites offers bucket-list worthy activities for adventure enthusiasts. Not afraid of heights? Get a bird's-eye view of the coastline above the Currituck Sound while tandem hang gliding in an ultralight plane. Or learn the fundamentals of kiteboarding with a “fly and ride” class. At Jockey's Ridge State Park in Nags Head, home of what are said to be the highest sand dunes on the East Coast with peaks at more than 90 feet, enjoy paragliding lessons using a glider wing with no rigid frame. Perhaps the ultimate activity for flight enthusiasts — especially recommended in the spring and fall — is to fly a museum-quality reproduction of Orville and Wilbur Wright's 1902 glider. (Average flights are 5 to 15 feet off the ground for approximately 50 yards.) For a thrilling but more passive activity, go parasailing above Roanoke Sound and Currituck Sound.

At the Wright Brothers National Memorial at Kitty Hawk, a National Park Service property, you can see full-scale reproductions of the famous brothers' 1902 glider and 1903 flying machine, and stand on the same spot where they made their first flights.

Since I'm afraid of heights (climbing the lighthouse tested my limits), my adventure of choice was to climb aboard a four-wheel drive vehicle and head to the northernmost reaches of the beach in hopes of seeing wild horses, descendants of Spanish mustangs brought over by explorers in the 1500s. Through a variety of nonprofits, the horses have protected status and live freely along an 11-mile-long habitat between the Atlantic Ocean and Currituck Sound, 7,500 acres of maritime forests, dunes, marshes, and small estuaries.

The day was blustery as we scrambled into the back of the open-sided truck, joining eight other passengers for the two-hour round-trip journey to Carova Beach and False Cape State Park at the Virginia state line. Our Corolla Outback Adventures guide and driver, Brad Downs, 23, chatted about the barrier island's natural environment as we bounced along the sands of Route 12, an official state road along the ocean beach. (Posted speed limit: 15 miles per hour.)

“One thousand years ago, this was an ancient maritime forest of cypress and live oak,” said Downs, explaining that the Outer Banks sandbars are migrating to the southwest.

Turning inland, Downs drove through the dunes on twisting paths with names like Sand Fiddler, Ocean Pearl, and Wild Horse, past remote summer homes reachable only by four-wheel-drive vehicles. We first spotted the honey-brown and almost-black horses, who tend to congregate in small herds, munching grass in the yards of cottages, and then again in a secluded sanctuary far from any civilization. (All vehicles stay a distance from the herd.)

“It is truly wild and beautiful and free out here,” said Downs.

Indeed.



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Currituck Beach Lighthouse Station, circa 1875, is located at the Currituck Heritage Park in Corolla, North Carolina.

On rainy days, coastal shopping plazas and villages in Duck and Corolla have art galleries, clothing boutiques, surf shops, and independently owned stores selling jewelry, books, gifts, and one-of-a-kind treasures. Not-to-miss shopping stops include Kitty Hawk Kites and Nags Head Hammocks.

As for food, the Outer Banks are rich with locally sourced seafood, shellfish, poultry, and produce. I sampled everything from crab cakes and crab chowder, to chicken and waffles, grilled Carolina grouper, and — because I simply had to — indulged in made-to-order maple and bacon doughnuts. (Don't knock them till you've tried one.)

At the end of each day, we retreated to our Outer Banks resort hideaway for a late-afternoon swim before sipping cocktails and slurping down Virginia oysters at Kimball's Kitchen overlooking Currituck Sound. As the sun dipped toward the watery horizon, I tried to imagine the chilly New England weather, but I simply couldn't. And that was fine with me.

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