

Photography Destination: The Outer Banks of North Carolina

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North Carolina's Outer Banks is a land both infinitely brutal and beautiful. For 125 miles, this thin band of barrier islands stretches from the Virginia state line south to Ocracoke Island, protecting the tranquil Pamlico, Albemarle, and Currituck Sounds from the raging Atlantic Ocean. In return for this amenity, the Federal government has protected the Outer Banks and Cape Hatteras by setting aside these natural buffers as the country's first National Seashore.

When viewed on a map, the Outer Banks appears as a stunning piece of coastal geography, boldly protruding into the Atlantic Ocean like an arm-resting akimbo. Attached near the shoulder are the Currituck Banks and the secluded town of Corolla. At the elbow bend is Cape Hatteras, which is over 25 miles from the North Carolina mainland - the easternmost point on the Outer Banks. Where the hand rests at the hip is Ocracoke, an isolated island refuge once used as a hideout for the infamous pirate, Blackbeard. Throughout its length, four working lighthouses serve as reminders of the area's rich maritime history and provide sensational views for photographers.

The majority of the Outer Banks coastline is a wild and untamed verge of waves and migrating sand. The most extensive stretch of undeveloped beach on the East Coast, this slender ribbon of passive sand is at the mercy of nature's primal forces - wind and water. Sustained gales subtly alter and sculpt the complex system of dunes while powerful ocean currents, nor'easters, and frequent hurricanes reshape the islands in more dramatic fashion. It seems that each new visit to the Outer Banks reveals a new wrinkle or cosmetic change to the landscape.

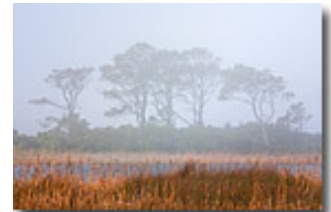
Nowhere is this change more evident than at the immense sand dunes at Jockey Ridge State Park near the town of Nags Head. Here stand the tallest sand dunes on the East Coast, many approaching 150-feet high. Wind whips the sand into slithering granular waves that reshape the massive dunes right before your very eyes. A climb to the top offers 360-degree views of the Atlantic Ocean to the east, oak forests to the north and south, and the Pamlico Sound to the west. This is a classic sunset location where compositions with foreground dunes and the setting sun over the sound are possible.

Water is never very far away when you are on these narrow islands. The Atlantic Ocean dominates the Outer Banks, influencing the weather, land, its flora, and fauna. The Pamlico Sound and its fertile salt marshes are within sight even from the ocean side of the islands. Landscapes images with water as a primary element are possible almost anywhere and are only limited by your imagination and vision.

Sunrises and sunsets over glistening water are legendary and can often be captured from the same vantage point. Even Orville Wright stepped away from his plane engine from time to time at his workshop in Kitty Hawk to observe, "The sunsets here are the prettiest I have ever seen. The clouds light up with all the colors, in the background, with various shapes fringed with gold."

Cape Point on Hatteras Island is the physical confluence of several opposing ocean currents: the Deep Western Boundary Current, the Gulf Stream, and Shelf Current. This creates a nutrient-rich habitat for sea life, resulting in a haven for pelagic birds and mammals. This collision of currents also incites dangerous seas at the Cape and creates the infamous Diamond Shoals, also called the "Graveyard of the Atlantic" for the dozens of shipwrecks in this area. Dramatic seascapes, particularly at sunrise, are well worth the mile-long drive over the beach to photograph. This drive, however, should only be attempting with a 4WD vehicle.

Standing guard over the cape is the iconic Cape Hatteras Lighthouse with its distinctive "barber pole" design. Compositions with both the lighthouse and the Atlantic Ocean are no longer possible



since it was moved 3000 feet inland in 1999, but dramatic landscapes with the wild dunes are still possible at both sunrise and sunset.

A short free ferry ride from southern Hatteras Island will take you to the remote island of Ocracoke. There are no roads that lead to Ocracoke, only three different ferries operated by the North Carolina Department of Transportation. Ninety percent of the island is part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and is protected from any development. Of interest to landscape photographers is the dune system at South Point, a two-mile drive over the beach to reach with a 4WD car or truck. The dunes here are not as large as those at Jockey Ridge, but their delicate, windswept shapes and form create fascinating interplays of light and shadow, even during mid-day.

The Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge is 5,000 acres of luxurious wildlife habitat on the north end of Hatteras Island. Nearly 400 species of resident and migratory birds inhabit Pea Island including snow geese, Canada geese, tundra swans, herons, egrets, terns, gulls, brown pelicans, and a varied assortment of ducks. During the autumn and winter seasons, large flocks of the migratory snow geese take up a temporary home at the refuge, making it a can't-miss location for wildlife photographers. A bird-watching platform off Highway 12 and the North Pond Trail offer photographers ample opportunities for shots at these waterfowl. Lenses 400mm or longer are recommended.

Just north of the town of Corolla is the Currituck National Wildlife Refuge, established in 1984. This refuge consists of 3,213 acres and is open to the public during daylight hours only. Wild horses roam the gnarled oak forest and pristine beaches and are the primary attraction of visitors. These animals are believed to be descendants of horses left behind by Spanish explorers during the 16th century. They are quite accustomed to people and can be approached fairly easily.

It should be noted that the raw elements of the Outer Banks can wreak havoc on your camera equipment and tripod. Wind, water, sand, and salt spray are ever-present realities of outdoor life on these islands and great care should be taken to protect your equipment. Clean your camera and lenses after each day of shooting and wipe down your tripod with fresh water. Fortunately, these same destructive elements make the Outer Banks brutally beautiful and a must-visit location for all nature photographers.

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Richard Bernabe has been a full time, professional outdoor photographer and writer since 2003. He is a team member of [Mountain Trail Photo](#) and leads photography workshops through [Mountain Trail Photography Workshops](#). Richard's photography website is www.richardbernabe.com.



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