

GOURMET TRAVELS

# SEA CHANGE

On the Outer Banks, a long chain of barrier islands off the coast of North Carolina, you'll find sand dunes and salty air, a culture steeped in risk and resilience, and food that will surprise you. It all exerts a strong tidal pull. By Jane Daniels Lear Photographs by Toby Glanville

At the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, you are standing on the edge of the continent. Your footprints might be the only ones of the day.





From top, left to right: Solar power on Ocracoke; Café Atlantic's stellar crab cakes; the Hatteras Light sweeps 20 miles out to sea; Thai Moon's interior is as welcoming as chef "Moon" Dennis; watermen Nicholas Pilaud and Craig Mercer; cottage comfort at Edwards of Ocracoke; the ocean keeps coming; artist-chef Debbie Wells and "vegetable man" Braxton Cahoon; beach retreats; time to fish or cut bait. Opposite: Neither out far nor in deep.



was coasting down N.C. 12, bound for an Ocracoke beach on a balloon-tired rental bike, when the smell hit me like a two-by-four. Garlic. Cilantro. Chiles sizzling in hot oil. Stunned, I skidded to a halt and landed on crushed oyster shells, hard, in front of O’Neal’s tackle shop. Having spent many childhood summers on the Outer Banks, I know the food has always been from the sea. Impeccably fresh and uncomplicated (“You want that fried or broiled, hon?”), it’s also typically very mild. Ignoring the large graze on my knee, I peered around and inhaled deeply. This time, though, I got nothing more than bait (mullet, I thought) from the fish-cleaning table around back.

There was a figure seated on the top step. “You lookin’ like a bird dog,” an amused voice drawled. I grinned, taking in the faded Ocracoke Volunteer Fire Department T-shirt and the pack of smokes in his hand. “It was the garlic,” I said, feeling sheepish and like the worst kind of tourist. “Wind just shifted,” he replied, cocking an ear to the squawk of the VHF radio inside the screen door. “Boats are comin’ in with Spanish mackerel. But it sounds like what you’re after is Thai Moon.” He flapped a hand across the road.

The beach could wait. I ended up instead at the unlikely restaurant on Ocracoke, a shipshape takeout place (“If Catching Ferry, please call your order ahead!” reads the menu) in the sort of shopping enclave—everything from sunglasses to stained glass—common from Nantucket to Key West. After finding a bench in the shade, I dug into my lunch, quickly realizing I’d never tasted a better version of *larb*, a spicy salad of flash-fried finely ground pork seasoned with lime juice, chiles, onion, cilantro, and nutty toasted rice. Hot-and-sour shrimp soup was heady with lemongrass, citrus, and the fermented tang of fish sauce; an intense, chunky curry made with red drum, a popular sport fish, had a deep chile sweetness.

Proprietor Pramuan “Moon” Dennis is as shy as her food is confident. “We met in Saipan,” explained Rob Dennis, Moon’s husband and a former merchant mariner. “She worked in a garment factory.” After the two married and moved to the upper Banks, Moon got a job at the Walmart in Kitty Hawk. “My wife didn’t know anything about restaurants,” said Dennis. “But she knew food, and she would bring her lunch every day. Soon she started cooking for her coworkers at Walmart. Every Wednesday, she’d pin a little menu on the bulletin board and folks would sign up for lunch. That’s how this whole thing got started.”

People have been carving a toehold for themselves on the Outer Banks for more than 400 years, and the Banks, like those who have settled there, are anything but fragile. Even though barrier islands may look delicate, they are, in fact, extremely hardy and adaptable. The long, slender bodies of sand, separated from the coast by broad sounds and from each other by tricky, fast-moving inlets, are in constant motion, changing shape in order to absorb the storm surges—thousands of metric tons of water being pushed into shallower depths—that would otherwise have an impact on the mainland.

I’d started my journey a week earlier and about 150 miles to the north, in Duck, on Bodie Island, where a fishing hamlet first appeared on maps in the 1790s, and where the cedar-shingled, low-key Sanderling Resort & Spa holds pride of place today. The swamp forests and estuaries there and on the mainland side

of Currituck Sound are home to more than 250 species of waterfowl at various times of year, and grabbing binoculars and field guide before I left my room soon became a habit.

Twenty miles up the road, I took stock of the 15,000 acres of unpaved outback known as Carova (it sits right below the North Carolina–Virginia state line) with Jim Shipley, a 69-year-old surfer, drag racer, and former NASA engineer who guides tours of the area. From his bucking, slewing, beat-to-hell Land Cruiser, Carova is a crazy quilt of dunes, maritime forest, and summer cottages plopped down every which way along wide, desolate tracks in the sand that shape-shift while you’re looking at them, causing many first-time visitors to mutter “We are never going to get out of here” like a mantra. There are no grocery stores, no traffic lights, no cars that don’t have four-wheel drive. What you will find, though, are about 130 shaggy descendants of Spanish mustangs that roam freely, grazing belly deep amid sea oats and spartina. There are wild boar, too; a gray fox slipping into the scrub; great blue herons standing like statues in the shallows; and double-crested cormorants on the wing.

Nature makes me hungry. The Sanderling’s snug, wainscoted Lifesaving Station Restaurant—located in one of the 29 such stations that were established along the coast of North Carolina between 1874 and 1911—is known for its shrimp, crab, and corn chowder, but what won my heart was something you don’t normally see on a resort menu: “Simple Seafood Simply Prepared.” The evening I was there, that meant sweet, tender local shrimp, and they couldn’t have been more expertly grilled or more satisfying.

There was a light sea breeze the morning I headed south to Hatteras, lured by the vivid names of the villages along the central Banks—Kitty Hawk, Kill Devil Hills, Nags Head. They’re overlaid today with beach condos, strip malls, and big-box stores (little did I know that, courtesy of Thai Moon, I’d soon look on the Walmart in a more kindly light), but the pylon memorializing the intuitive, endlessly tinkering Wright Brothers glints in the sun, and kites and hang gliders



At The Sanderling, hummocks of green-gold beach grass and shore plants roll out to the ocean like waves, making it a safe haven for wildlife.

float above Jockey’s Ridge State Park. Its steep, immense dunes are formed by northeasterly storm winds, which blow beach sand toward the sound; from the opposite direction, prevailing southwesterlies shove it back toward the ocean. The dunes, the tallest on the East Coast, nudge up against busy U.S. 158 with all the grandeur of a gentle yet determined Great Dane.

N.C. 12 (Beach Road), which runs parallel to 158 until you reach Nags Head, threads its narrow way south to Ocracoke, following the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Once you cross the breathtaking span of Bonner Bridge, over Oregon Inlet, you’ll find yourself in the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge, at the north end of Hatteras Island. It’s wind-scoured and beautiful, with dunes between highway and ocean; the lines on the road often disappear beneath sweeping crescents of sand and, during a bad storm, the Atlantic.

Near the refuge’s headquarters is the site of the Pea Island Life-Saving Station, active from 1878 until 1947. The keeper of the station, Richard Etheridge, was born a slave on Roanoke Island and commanded the only black lifesaving crew in the country. Their finest hour came in October 1896, when the schooner *E.S. Newman* foundered offshore in a hurricane. The conditions were so horrific that neither boats nor beach apparatus could be used; the surfmen swam out to the ship and rescued its crew—and the captain’s wife and child—one at a time. Six miles south, Chicamacomico (“chick-a-ma-COM-i-co”) station still survives in its original setting. After the British tanker *S.S. Mirlo* was torpedoed by a German U-boat in 1918, keeper John Allen Midgett Jr. and his men overcame the turbulent, blazing ocean (the flames were 500 feet high) to retrieve 42 crew members. Sometimes history and legend are one and the same.

I’ve never had to steer a boat into an inferno, but I’ve sailed through enough heavy seas to regard lighthouses with a tremendous sense of relief. The one at Cape Hatteras, with its daymark of black-and-white candy-cane stripes (each lighthouse is painted differently, so seafarers can readily identify them), is a particular talisman. When I was a child, we always came here



## DETAILS

### STAYING THERE

The north and central Outer Banks from Corolla to Nags Head are within easy striking distance of **THE SANDERLING RESORT & SPA** (252-261-4111; thesanderling.com; from \$125), in Duck, on Bodie Island. Just a mile and a half from the Hatteras lighthouse is the **CAPE PINES MOTEL** (866-456-9983; capepinesmotel.com; from \$79). Owners Bill Rapant, formerly of the Hôtel Plaza Athénée, in New York City, and his wife, Angie, have lovingly and (rare in this age of hipster-meets-old-school) unironically restored the cottage court to its pine-paneled vintage glory. It is also one of the most immaculate places I have ever—and I mean ever—stayed. You’ll find eight simple cottages from the ’50s and ’60s (as well as 11 bungalow rooms) at **EDWARDS OF OCRACOKE** (800-254-1359; edwardsfoocracoke.com; from \$60).

### EATING THERE

Although The Sanderling’s formal restaurant has a dramatic view of Currituck Sound, my strategy was to have a drink at the handsome bar and then mosey along to the cozier **LIFESAVING STATION RESTAURANT** (1461 Duck Rd.; 252-449-6654). The toughest reservation in Duck, however, is at the ever-popular **BLUE POINT** (The Waterfront Shops, N.C. 12, Duck; 252-261-8090; thebluepoint.com). From its red leatherette banquettes to its savvy menu (iceberg wedge with buttermilk dressing and Allan Benton’s Tennessee smoked bacon; fried catfish with dirty rice and pickled tomatillos), the place exudes a jaunty dockside charm. Picnic under centuries-old live oaks at **COROLLA VILLAGE BAR-B-QUE** (takeout only; Historic Corolla Village, “behind Twiddy Real Estate”; 252-457-0076) before exploring Carova. Tucked among weatherbeaten cottages and ramshackle motels is the bright, shiny **KILL DEVIL GRILL** (2008 Beach Rd., at Milepost 9; 252-449-8181), a restored 1939 diner now in the sure hands of chef-owner Bill Tucker. Gingham-shirt-clad local businessmen flock there for crab cakes, a blackened mahimahi sandwich with a revelatory homemade tartar sauce, and the day’s blue-plate special. If you need a break from seafood, head for **JK’S** (U.S. 158, at Milepost 9; 252-441-9555) for a Caesar salad and a steak grilled over live wood. In Buxton, on Hatteras Island, dinner at **THE CAPTAIN’S TABLE** (47048 N.C. 12; 252-995-3117) couldn’t be more basic—brothy Hatteras clam chowder (it tastes of the sea, not of cream) followed by tender flounder caught by co-owner and charter captain Rick Scarborough. The hot, crunchy hush puppies that kept appearing on the table had true corn flavor. Fortify yourself in the morning with a yeasty apple “ugly” and coffee at the **ORANGE BLOSSOM BAKERY & CAFÉ** (N.C. 12, Buxton; 252-995-4109; orangeblossombakery.com). Spend enough time on Ocracoke so that you can enjoy meals at **BACK PORCH RESTAURANT & WINE BAR** (110 Back Road; 252-928-6401), **CAFÉ ATLANTIC** (1129 Irvin Garrish Hwy./N.C. 12; 252-928-4861), **FLYING MELON CAFE** (804 Irvin Garrish Hwy.; 252-928-2533), and **THAI MOON CARRY-OUT** (589C Irvin Garrish Hwy., at Spencer’s Market; 252-928-5100).

### BEING THERE

The Sanderling is an ideal base for one of the ecotours run by **COASTAL KAYAK TOURING COMPANY** (North Beach Outfitters, Duck Waterfront Shops; 252-261-6262; coastalkayak.org) or a drive through Carova with **COROLLA OUTBACK ADVENTURES** (1150 Ocean Trail, Corolla; 252-453-4484; corollaoutback.com). Channel your inner Wilbur or Orville by learning to hang glide at **KITTY HAWK KITES** (252-441-4124; kittyhawkkites.com), which has an outpost at **JOCKEY’S RIDGE STATE PARK** (U.S. 158, at Milepost 12, Nags Head; 252-441-7132; jockeysridgestatepark.com), or by paying tribute at the **WRIGHT BROTHERS NATIONAL MEMORIAL** (U.S. 158, at Milepost 7.5; 252-473-2111; nps.gov/wrbr). Architecture buffs shouldn’t miss the spectacular Art Nouveau **WHALEHEAD CLUB**, especially the gleaming pink kitchen (Currituck Heritage Park, Corolla; 252-453-9040; whaleheadclub.org); architect Frank Stick’s vernacular **SOUTHERN SHORES FLAT TOP HOUSES** (along N.C. 12 in Duck), built from the late ’40s until the mid-’60s; and the “unpainted aristocracy,” **OLD NAGS HEAD BEACH COTTAGE ROW** historic district (Beach Rd., from Milepost 12 to Milepost 13.5). Nearby Roanoke Island is the site of Paul Green’s long-running (since 1937) outdoor play **THE LOST COLONY** (Waterside Theatre; 800-488-5012; thelostcolony.org), about the New World’s first English colonists, whose fate remains a mystery to this day. If you know how to windsurf, up the ante by taking kiteboarding lessons at Jay Crawford’s **OUTER BANKS KITING** (Avon Village; 252-305-6839; outerbankskiting.com). At the **CAPE HATTERAS LIGHTHOUSE** (off N.C. 12, Buxton; 252-995-4474), swing into the National Park Service bookshop to pick up *Taffy of Torpedo Junction* for your favorite nine-year-old; published in 1957, the instant classic tells the story of a young girl who helped capture a ring of Nazi spies hiding out in Buxton Woods. Stop just down the road at the Outer Banks Motel to get your purchase autographed by owner Carol White Dillon—the real “Taffy.” —J.D.L.

MAP: HOLLIS YUNGBLUIT

first, my father speeding past our summer cottage no matter what time it was (often past midnight) and despite my mother’s objections. He would lift my brother and me out of the car and brace us, his arm around Mom, in the wind until we caught the deep, rhythmic roar of the waves foaming in, something we felt as much as heard. “It’s like a heartbeat,” he would say.

A retreating shoreline and an unusually rapid rise in sea level (what better place to monitor the effects of global warming than the Outer Banks?) put the lighthouse, built in 1870 and, at 198 feet, the tallest in the United States, in danger of toppling into the water. About ten years ago, in a literal case of “Move it or lose it”—and a civil-engineering feat that made the *Guinness Book of Records*—it was jacked up and moved 2,900 feet to safety. I climbed the steps spiraling up to the top and stood on the circular iron catwalk with Bob Long, a volunteer park ranger. There were whitecaps about 15 miles offshore on Diamond Shoals, the bank of ever-shifting sand ridges just below the surface of the water, which glittered blue-green in the sun. For centuries, ships have risked foundering in this Graveyard of the Atlantic to take advantage of the swift-flowing Labrador Current, coming down from the north, or the Gulf Stream, rolling up from the Caribbean. The treacherous stretch is also known as Torpedo Junction, for in just six months in 1942, U-boats sank more than 60 American ships here. About two miles to the southwest lies Cape Point, where the coast sharply angles westward. “Look, there are breakers on both sides of the point,” said Long. “They come together like a zipper. Sometimes there will be two hundred surfers down along the south end.”

**B**y ferry, Ocracoke is only 40 minutes away from the tip of Hatteras, but you’ll find a real sense of isolation there. The northern half of the island is spacious, sandy, and uninhabited, like the Pea Island refuge. Civilization—for me, epitomized by a cozy, white-clapboarded bungalow at Edwards of Ocracoke—is clustered at the south end, in Ocracoke Village. And, best of all, it turned out that Thai Moon was just the beginning to the most delicious food of my trip.

At Café Atlantic, most of the customers were fresh from deep-sea fishing expeditions or surfcasting; the trucks parked

out front had up to 20 rods loaded, like lances, into sockets on the front bumper, and had extensions on the back for tackle boxes and coolers. Like many Banks restaurants, the café will cook a fisherman’s catch to order, and so, in addition to the finest crab cakes I’ve eaten in a very long time, I ended up sharing plates of broiled drum and grilled tuna with the sunburned, blissfully happy crowd at the next table. A woman named Patty had surfcast alongside her husband for almost 50 years. “She fishes like a man,” her husband said admiringly. “But I treat ’er like the woman she is.” Patty, who has, presumably, heard this more times than she can count, blushed.

One thing that was special about the café were the framed gouaches on the walls. I’d seen plenty of bad art over the past week, but what I was looking at here was the real thing. The artist was Debbie Wells, I discovered, who cooks at the café a few nights a week. Wells, as it turned out, had opened the renowned Back Porch restaurant (crab beignets, fig cake, great ambience) before selling it to become a full-time painter. “Eventually, though, I missed the energy of a kitchen and the confidence and competence I felt there,” she explained. So she started cooking again occasionally, just to keep her hand in. Wells was delighted I’d found Thai Moon (she, in fact, had helped Moon get her start on Ocracoke), but “You can’t leave before you try Flying Melon,” she said firmly. “It’s wonderful.”

No kidding. Flying Melon had me with the sweet-potato pancakes I’d ordered for breakfast. Dinner that night proceeded from tiny corn muffins and fried green tomatoes with rémoulade to sweet, flaky sheephead, a fish that feeds almost entirely on small crabs and other crustaceans. Chef and co-owner Michael Schramel, a native of New Orleans, is an absolute master of the classic lemon-butter sauce, which is all too often overly acidic or broken. His is seamless, perfectly balanced, a work of art in its own right.

After dinner, I walked the beach one last time. During the day, the wind had picked up, swinging more to the east, and sculpted clouds loomed on the horizon, over the Gulf Stream. The waves—big ones—curled and broke. I realized my legs were almost completely coated with grains of fine white sand. The island was on the move.

## FRANCES O’NEAL’S FIG CAKE

Back Porch Restaurant & Wine Bar, Ocracoke Island, North Carolina

SERVES 10 TO 12

ACTIVE TIME: 20 MIN START TO FINISH: 4½ HR (INCLUDES COOLING)

*Most of the old houses on Ocracoke have a fig tree in the yard, so it’s no surprise that many cooks there have a recipe for fig cake and its primary ingredient, preserved figs. This prizewinner—rich, moist, and chunky with fruit—from the late Frances O’Neal is a staple at Back Porch. The restaurant serves it as a layer cake with cream cheese icing, but we like the traditional version, made in a bundt pan and dusted with confectioners sugar. Preserved figs can be ordered from Ocracoke’s Community Store (252-928-9956; thecommunitystore@yahoo.com) or The Lee Bros. Boiled Peanuts Catalogue (843-720-8890; boiledpeanuts.com).*

- 2 cups all-purpose flour
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 tsp cinnamon
- ½ tsp ground cloves
- ½ tsp ground nutmeg
- 3 large eggs
- 1½ cups granulated sugar
- 1 cup vegetable oil

- ½ cup well-shaken buttermilk
- 1 tsp baking soda
- 1 Tbsp warm water
- 1 tsp pure vanilla extract
- 1 cup preserved figs in syrup, drained and chopped
- 1 cup walnuts or pecans, chopped

EQUIPMENT: a 10-cup bundt pan

GARNISH: confectioners sugar

- Preheat oven to 350°F with rack in middle. Generously butter pan. ► Sift together flour, salt, and spices.
- Beat eggs in a large bowl with an electric mixer at high speed until light and foamy, about 2 minutes. Add sugar and beat until pale and thick, about 2 minutes. Add oil and beat 1 minute. At low speed, mix in flour mixture in 3 batches, alternating with buttermilk, beginning and ending with flour.
- Stir together baking soda and water until dissolved, then stir into batter along with vanilla, figs, and nuts.
- Pour batter into pan and bake until golden-brown and a wooden pick inserted into center of cake comes out clean, 50 minutes to 1 hour. Cool completely in pan, about 2 hours.

COOKS’ NOTE: Cake keeps, tightly wrapped, at room temperature 3 days. 🍴