

Colorful houses dot the shore in the Sea Dreams development in Atlantic Beach.



# Sand Castles

Affordability and a variety of choices attract second-home buyers, vacationers, and retirees to the area.

by **Liz Biro**

**A**s North Carolina's director of coastal management, Charles Jones scrutinized development all along the state's shoreline. But when he retired last year, he didn't have to travel far from his native Crystal Coast.

"I do not know of any better place in North Carolina than Carteret County," Jones says from his home in the tiny fishing village of Smyrna, where he spends warm days digging clams and walking his dog.

With 85 miles of coastline, not counting bays, creeks, and rivers that reach far inland, "water, water, water," Jones says, is the main attraction. But vast natural areas and an enduring small-town feel set Carteret County apart from other coastal communities. Those qualities remain even as diverse housing, some of the Atlantic seaboard's most affordable, grows to accommodate the population.

Locals and newcomers alike guard these natural resources. The 8,000-member North Carolina Coastal Federation, the state's largest coastal conservation organization, stations itself here, along with smaller groups that monitor environmental and cultural preservation.

State and local governments limit development and establish parks, nature trails, bike paths, and places that keep traditions alive, even in flourishing beach towns on Bogue Banks. Mid-Banks, the state's Theodore Roosevelt Natural Area claims 300 acres of maritime forest. The west-Banks town of Emerald Isle is working to build an ocean fishing pier like those Emerald Isle Realty owner Julia Wax and her family enjoyed when they started coming to these beaches 50 years ago.

"What I like about Emerald Isle is we've kept such a nice residential fla-

vor," says Wax. The town is a landscape of snug houses, old and new, nestled between scrubby pines, cedars, and live oaks. Even with its many new "sand castles," large homes that fit big families, the village atmosphere is maintained thanks to building-height limits and natural vegetation protections.

Each Crystal Coast town has a different flavor: Beaufort's Colonial houses, Morehead City's vintage 20th century homes, Indian Beach's luxury condominiums. Right next door, Craven County and its historic county seat, New Bern, offers a similar housing and

natural-resource mix along the rivers.

In Indian Beach, Grande Villas is an oceanfront, eight-story building where 86 residences ranging from 1,400 to 3,000 square feet feature spacious balconies, elegant interiors, and amenities such as a pool, pet park, and fitness center. Housekeeping, maintenance and linen services, and a rental program free owners from worrying about home upkeep.

"We have many different types of home buyers that the Grande Villas provides the answers for," says Mark Tipton, chairman and CEO of the

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Whistler Investment Group, a partner with Greystone Property Development for Grande Villas.

Crystal Coast buyers seek retirement, vacation, and second-home options. The Carteret County tax office mails nearly half its bills to zip codes out of county. Shoppers relish the reasonable prices compared to other coastlines, Carteret County Association of Realtors president Johnny Cameron says. Carteret's average home cost of \$219,000 is \$350,000 less than along the Outer Banks to the north.

To help offset costs or until they are ready to move in permanently, some owners rent out residences. Another trend is shared ownership — joining with a handful of buyers to purchase units each owner will use at different times.

Much of the area's real estate keys in on needs for low-maintenance living near recreational facilities. An 18-hole championship course anchors North River Club near Beaufort, where homes incorporate modern materials to eliminate upkeep headaches.

## Where to Stay

### The Aerie Bed & Breakfast

This historic 1882 Victorian home offers modern touches like wireless Internet and a conference room. Its downtown location is within walking distance to New Bern's attractions. 509 Pollock St., New Bern, 252-636-5553, [aeriebedandbreakfast.com](http://aeriebedandbreakfast.com)

### Atlantis Lodge

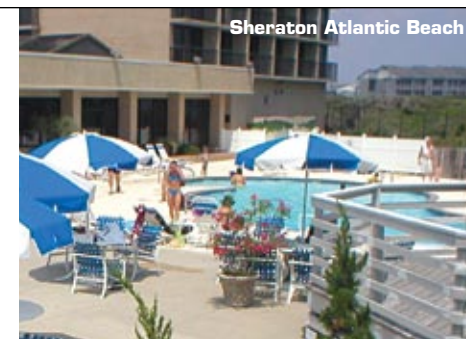
Since 1963, this family-owned motel has been welcoming guests to its wooded property right on the beach. Lush maritime woods, a quiet pool, and rooms with ocean views are a few reasons why visitors keep coming back year-round. 123 Salter Path Rd., Atlantic Beach, 252-726-5168, [atlantislodge.com](http://atlantislodge.com)

### The Ocean Club

This resort on Indian Beach offers one-to-three-bedroom villas with equipped kitchens. At the recently opened spa, splurge on one of the signature retreats, a package of treatments designed for total body rejuvenation. 1700 Salter Path Rd., Indian Beach, 252-247-2035, [theoceanclubnc.com](http://theoceanclubnc.com)

### The Pecan Tree Inn

Nestled in the heart of Beaufort and steps away from the waterfront, all seven rooms feature unique decor and pri-



Sheraton Atlantic Beach

COURTESY OF SHERATON ATLANTIC BEACH

vate baths. Explore the 5,000-square-foot English flower and herb garden or claim a spot on one of three porches. 116 Queen St., Beaufort, 252-728-6733, [pecantree.com](http://pecantree.com)

### Sheraton Atlantic Beach

A large full-service hotel right on the beach, the Sheraton recently underwent a multi-million dollar renovation. A good night's rest is guaranteed on the Sheraton Sweet Sleeper bed, with plush mattress, feather pillows, and down comforter. 2717 W. Fort Macon Rd., Atlantic Beach, 800-624-8875, [sheratonatlanticbeach.com](http://sheratonatlanticbeach.com)

### Sheraton New Bern Hotel & Marina

Overlooking the Trent River, the Sheraton is within walking distance of the Riverfront Convention Center. Or, bring the meeting to you with the hotel's 12,000 square feet of meeting space. Unwind at the poolside Gazebo Bar and enjoy Sunday brunch at Latitude 35. 100 Middle St., New Bern, 252-638-3585, [starwoodhotels.com](http://starwoodhotels.com)