

## The Untamed Northern Outer Banks of North Carolina Retain Their Wild Charm, Along With Their Wild Horses.

By Suzanne Wright

OBX seems like something a skate boi would plaster on his board. But it turns out that OBX is shorthand for North Carolina's Outer Banks.

I understand the need for a bit of sly insider jargon. Despite—or perhaps because of its relative seclusion—the region is a major tourist destination, a 200-mile long string of narrow barrier islands off the coast of North Carolina. I got schooled on just how remote OBX is when I visited from my home in Atlanta. The closest airport is Norfolk (about a two-hour flight); from Norfolk, it's about a two-hour drive (depending on traffic). Established in 1668, Currituck County, at the northern tip, is Algonquin for “land of the wild goose,” boasting 954 acres of beaches, maritime forests, sand dunes, marshes and grasslands. Until 1985, the area was protected by a guard gate and accessible only to property owners.

The major attraction here is the undoubtedly the wild horses. Corolla's horses are descended from a herd of Spanish Mustangs established by settlers in the 1500s. A small, calm, sturdy breed, they have been roaming the beaches for more than 500 years. Today, there are about 115 horses in a 7,550-acre stretch between the end of the paved road and the Virginia state line. The herd is protected and monitored by the Corolla Wild Horse Fund, which says that while the animals have survived No'easters and hurricanes, residential development poses a greater threat.

Only by driving on the wide beaches of Corolla can you catch a glimpse of the horses. I join the Wild Horse Tour from Back Country Outfitters & Guides for a two-hour excursion. Gulls circle overhead, frequently and noisily diving for fish. Ghost crabs skitter across the sand. Our guide Jim waves at the mailman, and Larry the tow truck driver, who makes a tidy living pulling those foolish enough to attempt the drive without four-wheelers out of the wet sand. Jim shows us a fulgurite, a lightweight, black, pocked rock formed when lightning strikes the sand. It's akin to molten lava.

We take a hard left and head for the undulating dune line: that's where the horses are today. There are family groups—alpha males and a harem of mares—and bachelor bands of teens, their shaggy coats bringing to mind 'tween heartthrob Justin Bieber and his glorious chestnut mane. We even spot a few foals. They seem blithely unaware of us gawking and snapping pictures, continuing to chomp on the grasses in the yards of million dollar homes.

Back in the sleepy town of Corolla I visit the one-room schoolhouse that is now home to the Corolla Wild Horse Fund. Along with a few others, I pet a “gentled” horse that has been rescued and adopted out to a local horse lover. Sadly, there have been some sinister and senseless killings of the horses over the years, possibly a clash between nature lovers and developers. The

Corolla Wild Horse Fun educates visitors and accepts donations, while offering rare opportunities for interaction with these beautiful creatures.

I also tour the majestic Corolla Lighthouse which sits in the heart of historic Corolla Village. The treacherous waters of the Atlantic Ocean are known as the “Graveyard of the Atlantic” for the high number of shipwrecks—more than 1,000 since 1526—that have occurred. Built in 1875, the Corolla Lighthouse, the only natural red brick lighthouse on the East Coast, illuminates the darkness between Cape Henry to the north and Bodie Island to the south. Climbing the 214 spiraling steps of the 163-foot lighthouse affords you a sweeping view of the Currituck Sound, the Atlantic Ocean, and the village.

Corolla has a long, rich history of fishing and hunting, particularly for duck, as OBX is on the Northern American Migration Flyway. Located in Currituck Heritage Park is the most famous hunt club in the region, The Whalehead Club, built in 1922 by Pennsylvania industrialist Edward Collin Knight. Knight was married to French-Canadian Marie Louis LeBel, who liked to hunt, but as a woman in that era wasn’t admitted to hunt clubs. The fully restored, butter-colored 23,000 square-foot Art Nouveau mansion is on the National Historic Register, and features Tiffany light fixtures, a “grandmother” clock with hourglass lines, and an eye-popping Pepto-Bismol pink tiled kitchen. The home was the first in the Outer Banks to have an elevator, indoor plumbing, hot and cold running water, and a swimming pool (since covered over).

Also in Park is the Outer Banks Center for Wildlife Education, marked by the impressive whitewashed skull of a young male humpback whale. The educational facility explores its theme of “Life by the Water’s Rhythms,” through a video, a diorama of marsh wildlife, a small aquarium and an exhibit of 250 antique waterfowl decoys. On the day I visited, a free class of surf fishing was offered.

I’m staying at the oceanfront Hampton Inn, where nearly every room has a balcony. I can’t resist a pre-dinner stroll on the beach at sunset, looking for shells under a baby blue and pink streaked sky, waves crashing at my bare feet.

I’ve worked up an appetite for some of the area’s famed seafood. October’s off-season, but the locals fill the North Banks Restaurant & Raw Bar. This is where the South meets the North, and I hear some sinuous drawls along with more staccato accents. While sipping a bracing gin and tonic, I tuck into two kinds of raw oysters (it’s an “R” month!), plump broiled lump crabcakes, sweet and saline, and a just-tart-enough key lime pie.

Before heading back to the Norfolk airport, I stop at the Native Vine Cellars & Tasting Room. The oldest living grapevine in North America is muscadine, in Manteo, further south. Muscadine wine tastes like kerosene to me, but fortunately there are a number of other North Carolina wines to choose from. It surprises me to learn that North Carolina is ranked seventh in U.S. wine production with 98 vineyards. Owner Ken Hyman explains that Currituck has a climate similar to that of Long Island, New York.

Though it means I'll have to check my suitcase, I buy a bottle of Sanctuary Vineyards Whalehead White a perfumed, rosewater nose that would pair well with mussels or spicy Thai curry, RayLen Vineyards Category 5 (a witty hurricane reference) which Hyman describes as a "pretty" cabernet sauvignon with soft tannins, and the easy-drinking Pale Red, a rose for "southerners raised on Pepsi and sweet tea."

Here's my assessment: OBX may be remote, but it's worth the journey. It may be untamed but it's far from unrefined.

To learn more about Corolla, visit [www.cometoourbeach.com](http://www.cometoourbeach.com) or [www.visitcurrituck.com](http://www.visitcurrituck.com). To view a gallery of wild horse photography log onto <http://visitcurrituck.spitfirephoto.com/albums.php?albumId=116566>.