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HOME & AWAY

Channeling *Seinfeld* in the Outer Banks

A freelance writer is put to the test as she attempts to let her North Carolina vacation unfold without planning a thing.

By Shelly Steig



Sand dune grasses line the beach along the shores of North Carolina's Outer Banks.
Outer Banks Visitors Bureau

The assignment sounded simple enough: Go to North Carolina's Outer Banks and write a story about the *Seinfeld* Vacation—the trip where I do nothing but relax on the beach, where there is no theme or purpose, and little pre-planning.

However, what is often simple in theory turns out to be hard in practice.

The List Nazi

Let me explain. I have lists scattered all over my house—for groceries, things to do, people to call ... even a list of the lists. And I get a peculiar pleasure when I cross a neat line through what I've accomplished. So it took a tremendous amount of willpower to not spend 10 to 20 hours researching ... and making more lists.

I arrived on the Outer Banks with a hotel reservation—but still no list. The first morning, I woke up late and had a quiet breakfast at the Hilton Garden Inn. Then my husband, Jeff, and I wandered the beaches of Kitty

Hawk. Light clouds skittered across the endless blue sky. Dune grasses quietly rustled and the surf roiled along the shore. I gathered tumbled shells that had been polished nearly smooth and shards of opaque sea glass. We lounged in the sand and watched families play in the surf while dolphins frolicked farther out in the deep waters. I sighed happily and thought: *If there was ever a place to relax and do nothing, this is it.*

The next day, we took a leisurely drive along the narrow barrier islands. Gorgeous Victorian-style homes perched on the sands, some half hidden by hilly dunes. On the west side of the islands, kayakers, fishing boats and Jet Skis plied the waters, while on the east side, the beaches stretched as far as we could see. When the clouds that had been building all day erupted into rain, we stopped at the Aycock Brown Welcome Center while the storm passed.

That's when my resolutions vanished faster than footprints in the surf. I walked out with three pounds of information, stuffed into a plastic shopping bag.

Yada Yada Yada

From that mound of brochures I learned the Outer Banks are a 130-mile chain of islands that separate the Albemarle and Pamlico Sounds from the Atlantic Ocean. Because they are farther away from a coastline than any other barrier islands in the world, they feel secluded and remote.

They also have a history both mysterious and tempestuous.

Amerigo Vespucci first touched land on the Banks in the early 1500s. In 1584, Queen Elizabeth I established English colonies—which vanished without a trace. During both world wars, German submarines lurked in nearby waters, even sinking a British ship whose sailors are interred on Ocracoke Island—the most fascinating of the Outer Banks. Ocracoke was where Blackbeard lived and died, and where feral horses, or Banker Ponies, (rumored to have descended from Mustangs who swam ashore from a sunken Spanish galleon) are now corralled.

Despite five lighthouses on Bodie, Roanoke, Hatteras and Ocracoke Islands, ships frequently met with disaster, earning this area the nickname “the graveyard of the Atlantic.” And although the climate is often temperate, the Gulf Stream makes this the most hurricane-ridden area north of Florida, resulting in a constantly shifting topography.

The Show About Nothing?

Once I had those brochures in hand, my do-nothing vacation became an action-packed adventure where we hit the sand running in the morning, then came back to the hotel with sand in places it never should have been.

First, we headed to Kill Devil Hills, home of the Wright Brothers National Memorial. It was here on December 17, 1903, that two bicycle repairmen became the first to successfully pilot a power-driven airplane. The museum offers a fascinating look at how the self-taught engineers used scientific methods to accomplish what the most educated could not.



The Wright Brothers National Memorial at Kill Devil Hills is the perfect spot to launch a kite.
Outer Banks Visitors Bureau

The brothers did their research and knew that the blustery area provided the perfect opportunity for flying. And not just for powered flight. Jockey's Ridge State Park features prevailing winds year-round and the largest natural sand dune on the East Coast. The combination makes for some of the best hang-gliding in the nation—especially for beginners.

We checked into Kitty Hawk Kites one briskly windy morning. After an hour of training, we grabbed our gear and trekked up the dune to a high point where the triangular-shaped gliders awaited. Students ranged in age from 10 years to a 65-year-old woman who had been taking lessons every fall for four years. Each of us experienced the thrill of soaring toward the horizon while safely tethered to earth by our cheerful and athletic instructors.

Since aviation was on our minds, we jumped at the chance to take kiteboarding lessons at REAL Watersports. Once considered an extreme sport, this

fusion of kite flying, wind surfing and aeronautics is now enjoyed by men and women of all ages. After finishing our first half-day lesson, we drove south to Cape Hatteras, home to a 30,000-acre sand- and wind-swept park that was the first national seashore in the country. From America's tallest brick lighthouse, we had sweeping views of the islands and the waters the keepers once protected. We also stopped by the Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum, where I learned more about how and why the region earned the ominous nickname.



The black-and-white-striped Bodie Island lighthouse stands 156 feet tall.
Outer Banks Visitors Bureau

Because I kept discovering new adventures, my list never grew shorter even though I'd meticulously crossed off items. As we drove back across the bridge toward the mainland, I worried that I'd failed my mission to experience the *Seinfeld* vacation.

In the end, however, I concluded I'd fulfilled the assignment since the show about nothing, actually commented on just about everything.

The List: What We Missed

- **"The Lost Colony" and Fort Raleigh National**

Historic Site: The historic site is home to America's longest running outdoor drama that ponders what happened to the vanished British colonies.

- **The Nature Conservancy at Nags Head Woods:** A 1,400-acre forest with miles of hiking trails.

- **Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge:** Wood ducks, alligators, black bears and red wolves roam 150,000 acres of wetland habitat.

- **Roanoke Island's North Carolina Aquarium, and North Carolina Maritime Museum:** Exhibits at the aquarium at the north end of the island depict the aquatic environments of the region. The centrally located museum interprets the seafaring heritage.

- **Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge:** More than 360 species of birds nest here.

- **Chicamacomico Lifesaving Station Historic Site:** The site includes the original station built in 1874, as well as outbuildings, exhibits and programs.

- **Corolla Wild Horse Museum in the Historic Corolla Schoolhouse:** In northern Corolla, wild horses still roam freely.

- **Spas:** Aqua Essence Day Spa in Duck offers the ultimate relaxation as well as an adjoining restaurant, Aqua S.

- **Shopping at Galleries:** The beauty of the Banks has attracted artists and photographers.

Planning Your Trip

For more information, contact the Outer Banks Visitors Bureau at (877) 629-4386 or visit www.outerbanks.org. For help planning an Outer Banks vacation, contact your AAA Travel agent or AAA.com/travel.

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Enjoying the beach is the perfect way to spend a do-nothing vacation.

Jeff Steig

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