

Wild Mustangs at Sunrise, Lighthouse Beams at Dusk

A 4-Day Outer Banks Road Trip

DURATION

4 Days

BEST TIME TO GO

May–June & September–October
Mild 70–80°F days, calmer ferry lines,
and thinner crowds than the July peak

FROM

\$650 USD / person
for 2 people, incl. 3 nights'
lodging, wild horse tour, park
fees & the Ocracoke ferry

Day 1

Kitty Hawk to Corolla — First Flight & Wild Horses

Pick up the rental car and point it north: the birthplace of flight in Kitty Hawk, then the two-lane Beach Road up through Duck to the 4x4-only sand of Corolla, where wild Spanish mustangs still roam free.

Self-Drive: Kitty Hawk to Corolla via NC-12 'Beach Road'

~45 minutes · no tolls, two-lane coastal road

NC Highway 12 — locally just “the Beach Road” — hugs the dune line north from Kitty Hawk through Southern Shores and Duck's boutiques and fish markets before dead-ending at the sand in Corolla. Roll the windows down for glimpses of the Atlantic between beach houses, and fuel up before Duck — gas stations thin out fast north of the village.

Wright Brothers National Memorial

~1.5 hours · \$10/person (16+), 15 & under free

Stand on the exact spot where Orville and Wilbur Wright made the first powered flight on December 17, 1903. Granite boulders mark each of the four flights across the flat, wind-scoured field, and a short trail climbs 90-foot Big Kill Devil Hill to the 60-foot granite Wright Brothers Monument. The visitor center's flyer replica and original 1903 Flyer engine are worth the extra 20 minutes.

Wright Brothers National Memorial · +12524732111 · nps.gov/wrbr

Wild Horse 4x4 Tour with Wild Horse Adventure Tours

~2 hours · from \$69/person

Colonial Spanish Mustangs — descendants of horses shipwrecked here in the 1500s — still roam the unpaved sand roads of Carova Beach north of Corolla, reachable only by 4x4. Wild Horse Adventure Tours runs open-air off-road trucks up the beach and through the maritime forest, with guides who know exactly where the herds have been grazing that week. Book a morning slot for the best odds of a sighting and cooler temperatures.

Wild Horse Adventure Tours · +12524892020 · wildhorsetour.com

Overnight: The Sanderling Resort, Duck

Oceanfront resort · from ~\$300+/night (seasonal)

A quiet, dune-front resort just south of Duck's shops, with a spa, an indoor pool, and the Lifesaving Station restaurant housed in a restored 1899 U.S. Life-Saving Service building. Ask for an oceanfront room for sunrise views over the Atlantic before day two's drive south.

The Sanderling Resort · +18554127866 · thesanderling.com

Day 2

Duck to Nags Head — Dunes at Sunset

A short, easy driving day built around one big view: grab warm donuts in Duck, then head south to climb the East Coast's tallest sand dune just in time for sunset over the sound.

Duck Donuts — Original Location

~20-minute stop · made-to-order dozen from ~\$13

The Outer Banks donut shop that became a national chain started right here in Duck. Donuts are made to order in about 90 seconds — pick your glaze, topping and drizzle at the counter and watch them come off the line hot. Go early; the original location gets a line by mid-morning in season.

Duck Donuts · duckdonuts.com

Jockey's Ridge State Park — Dune Climb & Sunset

Free entry · sunset ~7:15–7:45pm (Sept)

The East Coast's tallest living sand dune system rises up to 100 feet over Nags Head, shifting shape year to year with the wind. Climb barefoot up the main access dune in the late afternoon, watch hang gliders launch during on-dune lessons, and stay for one of the Outer Banks' best sunsets over Roanoke Sound on the west side of the dune field.

Jockey's Ridge State Park · +12525736108 · ncparks.gov/jockeys-ridge-state-park

Dinner: Basnight's Lone Cedar Cafe

Dinner Tue–Sun from 4:30pm · entrees ~\$22–\$38

A Nags Head institution overlooking Roanoke Sound, run by the Basnight family whose fishing boats supply much of the menu. Crab cakes, soft-shell crab in season, and a raw bar are the draws — reservations are strongly recommended in summer.

Basnight's Lone Cedar Cafe · +12524415405 · lonecedarcafe.com

Overnight: First Colony Inn, Nags Head

Historic inn · from ~\$180/night (seasonal)

A wraparound-porch, 1932 beach inn moved intact to its current soundside lot, with a small pool and a full breakfast included. It's a short drive from both Jockey's Ridge and the Beach Road restaurants — an easy, walkable reset before the long drive to Hatteras Island.

First Colony Inn · +12524412343 · firstcolonyinn.com

Day 3

Nags Head to Ocracoke — Lighthouse & the Ferry

The longest driving day of the trip, but the most rewarding: NC-12 threads south through Pea Island's wildlife refuge and the villages of Hatteras Island to the candy-striped Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, then hands off to a free vehicle ferry across Pamlico Sound to car-free Ocracoke.

Self-Drive: Nags Head to Buxton via NC-12

~1.5–2 hours · one road, no shortcuts

NC-12 is the only road down Hatteras Island, running the length of Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge (watch for egrets and the odd wild pony pasture near Rodanthe) before threading through Rodanthe, Waves, Salvo, Avon and into Buxton. Fill the tank before you leave Nags Head — stations are sparse and pricier the further south you go.

Cape Hatteras Lighthouse — Grounds & Museum

Grounds free · museum ~30–45 min

At 198 feet, the black-and-white spiral “barber pole” lighthouse is the tallest brick lighthouse in the United States, moved 2,900 feet inland in 1999 to escape the eroding shoreline. Climbing is closed through 2026 for a major restoration, but the keepers' quarters museum and grounds are open, and the base makes one of the most photographed stops on the whole Outer Banks.

Cape Hatteras National Seashore · +12529952500 · nps.gov/caha

Hatteras–Ocracoke Vehicle Ferry

Free · ~60-minute crossing, no reservation needed

NCDOT's Hatteras–Ocracoke run is a free, first-come first-served vehicle ferry across Pamlico Sound, departing roughly every 30–40 minutes in season. Arrive early on summer weekends — the line for the first few sailings can run an hour or more — and stay on deck for dolphins, which trail the ferry more often than not.

NCDOT Ferry Division · +18002935982 · ncdot.gov/ferry

Overnight: Blackbeard's Lodge, Ocracoke Village

Historic inn · from ~\$140/night (seasonal)

A 1930s lodge two blocks from Silver Lake Harbor, walkable to every restaurant and shop in Ocracoke Village. Rooms are simple and motel-style, but the location — and the porch rocking chairs — make it the easiest base for a short island stay.

Blackbeard's Lodge · +12529283421 · blackbeardslodge.com

Day 4

Ocracoke Village & the Ferry Home

One unhurried morning on car-free Ocracoke before retracing the ferry and NC-12 back north — bikes, a British cemetery, and a last plate of fried seafood before the drive home.

Ocracoke Village on Two Wheels

~2–3 hours · bike rental from ~\$25/day

Ocracoke Village is small enough to see entirely by bike or on foot: the 1823 Ocracoke Lighthouse (the oldest operating lighthouse in North Carolina, grounds open, no climbing), the British Cemetery where four WWII sailors are buried, and Springer's Point's ancient live oaks, said to have been Blackbeard's favorite anchorage before his final battle offshore in 1718.

Lunch: Howard's Pub & Raw Bar

Open daily, 11am–late · entrees ~\$15–\$28

An Ocracoke fixture since 1989, with a screened porch, 100+ bottled beers, and a menu that ranges from a raw oyster bar to a genuinely good crab cake sandwich. It's the village's default answer to “where should we eat” — casual, reliable, and open every day of the year.

Howard's Pub & Raw Bar · +12529284441

Return Ferry & Self-Drive North

~60 min ferry + ~2.5–3 hr drive

Catch the same free Hatteras–Ocracoke ferry back north, then retrace NC-12 up through Buxton, Avon and Pea Island to Nags Head and beyond. Build in slack for the ferry line and for one more stop at whichever Beach Road overlook you missed on day two — the return drive is every bit as scenic as the way down.