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IF YOU LIKE HATTERAS, TRY . . . Topsail Island

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Topsail Island's history is full of intrigue, including tales of pirates whose sails and masts gave away their hiding places -- hence the name of the island. (To not reveal your tourist status, pronounce it "TOP-sul.") Shortly after World War II, the Navy used the island for Operation Bumblebee, a missile program that had nothing to do with honey. Observation towers resembling massive lifeguard stations still stand today, a reminder of the 200-plus rockets that zoomed into the Atlantic from Topsail's shores. More than 2,500 people live on-island year-round, but the number can swell to nearly 15,000 during the summer. There are only a few high-rise condos marring the horizon, but new ones are blessedly banned.

The 26-mile-long island comprises three communities: North Topsail Beach, Surf City and Topsail Beach. Most of the activity swirls around Surf City, in the center of the island, and peters out at the calmer northern and southern ends. "There's no major shopping, no major attractions, no bowling alleys or movie theater," says Vinita Gass, manager of the Surf City Pier, which is often a knot of fishermen and rods. "The turtle hospital and the fishing pier are it." And, of course, the beach.

BEST FOR . . . Families who want to keep their kids within eyeshot and out of trouble; surfers and other big wave riders; nature lovers and turtle huggers.

BEACH SCENE: On Surf City's beach, you're just as likely to trip on a plastic pail as you are a surfboard, especially around the pier. The beach is wide and the dunes are low. Drinks and eats are within a Frisbee's throw of the shore. The crowds scatter as you move north and south: It could very well be you and a sandpiper, then the bird flies off and you're all alone. Nice.

SLEEPS AND EATS: The *Pink Palace* (1222 S. Shore Dr., Surf City, 910-328-5114; only weekly rentals in high season, nightly rates from \$99 September-May) has many modes of relaxation: a hammock, rocking chairs, a hot tub overlooking the beach, tropical-bright rooms. At the *Island Inn* (302 N. Shore Dr., Surf City, 800-573-2566, <http://www.topsailislandinn.com>; from \$90), near shopping and dining, hop between the pool and the ocean across the street. The *Loggerhead Inn* (622 N. New River Dr., 800-543-6079, <http://www.loggerheadinn.com>) is nothing fancy, but it does have a

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A patient recuperates at Topsail Island's Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center. (By Ben Chapman)

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pool, a good Surf City location and low rates (from \$60).

Buddy's Crab and Oyster House (101 Roland Ave., Surf City, 910-328-1515) has front-row views of the surf and sunsets and serves such beach-and-bar classics as steamed clams (from \$6.95) and fried corn nuggets (\$5.95). Imported beer is a lowly \$3.75. *Mollie's* (107 N. Shore Dr., Surf City, 910-328-0505) will hook and cook your meal (sandwich platters from \$8.95; dinner specials from \$15.25), or prepare your own catch and serve it with two sides (\$5.95). At the *Blue Gecko* (808 S. Anderson Blvd., Topsail Beach, 910-328-1022), fill up on such healthy eats as cranberry walnut chicken salad in a honey wheat wrap (\$6.59) or spinach salad (\$6.99). Go upscale at *Indigo Blue* (602-B Roland Ave., Surf City, 910-328-2580), a chophouse on the [Intracoastal Waterway](#) with entrees from \$20.

DIVERSIONS: *Patio Playground* (807 S. Anderson Blvd., Topsail Beach, 901-328-6491) offers mini-golf, video rentals, arcade games and ice cream for dessert. Hit the waves on a rented surfboard from *Bert's Surf Shop* (310 N. New River Dr., Surf City, 910-328-1010). Meet the hard-shelled patients at the *Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center* (822 Carolina Ave., Topsail Island, 910-328-1000, <http://www.seaturtlehospital.org>; free), a care-and-release operation for sick and injured reptiles. Learn about Indians, pirates and rockets at the *Topsail Island Museum* (720 Channel Blvd., Topsail Beach, 910-328-8663, <http://www.topsailmissilemuseum.org>; free).

INFO: *Greater Topsail Area Chamber of Commerce and Tourism*, 800-626-2780, <http://www.topsailcoc.com>.

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