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Topsail Island

What's in a name? Good question when you're talking about Topsail Island. Well, legend has it that many moons ago, pirates used to hang out in the sound between the island and the mainland. When they spied a likely prospect to plunder, they'd race out and do their pirate thing to the hapless merchant ship. Eventually the merchantmen figured this out, so when they saw the top sails of a ship behind the island, they figured it was a pirate. Whether that helped them to avoid the pirates or not, who knows? But it's a cool legend.

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These days, very few pirates are lurking behind the island, which makes for considerably less piracy. On the other hand, the island itself has become a much more jolly place, what with civilization and development having made the island a far more pleasant place to live and visit. In fact, Topsail Island, at 26 miles long and 500 to 1,500 feet wide, offers some of the most delightfully uncrowded beaches along coastal North Carolina. With its maritime forests and wide beaches with cooling ocean breezes, the island has a charm not often encountered in other areas.

Geographically, Topsail is the next barrier island of any size north of Wrightsville Beach. It lies off the shore of both Pender and Onslow counties south of Jacksonville. The island is split between the two counties, with the northern half, which includes the town of North Topsail Beach, in Onslow County, and the southern half, which includes the towns of Surf City and Topsail Beach, in Pender County.

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Found In The 1500s [back to top](#)

Island history dates back to prehistoric times, but the first written records of the island are from the 1500s when early explorers described the abundant seafood beds. Not much was written about the island for some time after that, but according to legend, two prominent pirates, Blackbeard and Stede Bonnet, buried treasure hereabouts, and visitors with metal detectors keep looking for it.

Topsail Island remained relatively uninhabited over the years. The only human contact with the island came from picnickers, fish camps and the occasional mainland farmer driving his cattle over the sand bars at low tide to feed on the grass. There were no bridges to the island.

Navy Takes Over [back to top](#)

That all changed during World War II and the years after when the U.S. Navy took over the island, and in conjunction with Johns Hopkins University Physics Laboratory, began "Operation Bumblebee," which was the beginning of the space program in the United States. Roads, a fresh water supply, a bridge and other improvements were made as the military directed research operations from nearby Camp Davis in Holly Ridge on the mainland.

Topsail's Oldest Town [back to top](#)

Largest of the three towns on the island, Surf City was chartered in 1949 and has a permanent population of about 1,400. The town proudly possesses the island's only traffic light and is linked to the mainland by an old-fashioned swing bridge. With more than 30 beach accesses, boat ramps, park, playground, picnic area and an oceanfront pier, the town is the business center for the island and is experiencing rapid growth both residentially and commercially.

Topsail Beach, located near the southern tip of the island, has 494 residents and is home to a roller rink, miniature golf and bike path plus fishing, sailing, diving, surfing and other water activities.

Sea Turtle Hospital [back to top](#)

The town is also home to the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center, one of only two in the U.S. The Center cares for and rehabilitates injured loggerhead and other species of turtles and releases them back into the sea or finds other homes for them. Staffed by volunteers, the Center has been invaluable in the help and protection it has provided for sea turtles.

Volunteers protect and watch the many nests that sea turtles build on the island each year. They have attached tracking devices to some of their patients who have returned to the ocean so that their movements can be monitored and more can be learned about their habits. We can't do justice in this book to activities of this wonderful group, but you can learn more at www.seaturtlehospital.org.

Missiles and More Museum [back to top](#)

Also located in Topsail Beach is the Missiles and More Museum, which houses a large seashell collection, World War II artifacts from Camp Davis and exhibits related to local pirate lore, flora and fauna and, of



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course, lots of displays and information about Operation Bumblebee.

Speaking of Operation Bumblebee, this secret project is the reason for the somewhat strange looking buildings on the island; they were concrete observation towers for the monitoring of rocket launches. There was an arsenal on the sound side of the island for the assembly and storage of rockets and there were launching pads on the oceanfront.

More than 200 rocket launchings took place between 1946 and 1948, proving the feasibility of ramjet engines that could propel aircraft beyond the speed of sound. The Missiles and More Museum is located in the original arsenal building where models of the rockets are on display and videos of launchings during that time are shown. A recent addition to the museum is an exhibit on WASP (Women Airforce Service Pilots) who served at Camp Davis during World War II.

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North Topsail Beach located, strangely enough, at the north end of Topsail Island, is the youngest of the three island communities, having been incorporated in 1990. With a permanent population of 843, the community has a fishing pier, beach accesses and a town park with a variety of amenities. The town is also active in loggerhead turtle nesting observation and protection. A high-rise bridge connects the town with the mainland.

Fishing Is Popular [back to top](#)

There are plenty of places on Topsail Island to fish, and visitors come from far and near to take advantage of all the opportunities to catch the big one, from surf casting to using the piers to going out on the charter boats that call Topsail home. There is a major fishing pier in each of the island's towns; SeaView Pier is in North Topsail Beach, the Jolly Roger Pier is in Topsail Beach and the Surf City Pier is located where you'd expect to find it. Numerous fishing tournaments take place throughout the year on Topsail Island, reflecting the popularity of this sport.

Fish are celebrated in the area too: the Shrimp Festival is held annually the second weekend of August in Sneads Ferry (across the bridge from North Topsail Beach); the Spot Festival, celebrating a fish prized locally, takes place the second weekend of September in Hampstead, 15 minutes from the swing bridge at Surf City.

Other Beach Activities [back to top](#)

Topsail Island has a dedicated group of surfers who come out any time the surf's up. Kite flying is popular too since the relatively uncrowded beaches offer plenty of room to spread out and stroll along. Topsail has plenty of room for late afternoon games of beach volleyball and bocce and visitors are happy to take advantage of the expanses there.

Annual Festivals [back to top](#)

Topsail Island has two festivals each year. On the last weekend of April, the Spring Fling is held in Surf City and features continuous live music, lots of food and beverage stations and plenty of vendors offering hand-crafted items. In October, Autumn at Topsail takes place around the Assembly Building in Topsail Beach. This festival features a juried Artists' Court, live entertainment, food vendors and games and rides for the

kids. The proceeds are used to maintain the Assembly Building, where rockets were assembled from 1946-1948 during Operation Bumblebee.

A Christmas Flotilla is held on Topsail Island the first weekend in December when boats are decorated and prizes are awarded for the best design.

Food For Fuel [back to top](#)

Taking advantage of all the activities and attractions on Topsail Island requires energy, and for that you need food. We've found that reliably good food at a fair price is served at **Mainsail Restaurant**, located on Highway 50 in Surf City.

Whether you're looking for very fresh fish topped with a wonderful chipotle sauce or mango salsa, pasta dishes served properly al dente or steaks cooked precisely as they've been ordered, Mainsail is sure to please. Fresh vegetables are cooked properly crisp tender too. Mainsail has a children's menu and a large room upstairs that can be reserved for weddings, anniversary parties or other private occasions. The restaurant opens daily for dinner at 5 p.m. year-round and has a full bar, an interesting and moderately-priced wine list and several excellent special occasion wines at higher prices. The main dining room is non-smoking but smokers are welcome in the separate bar.



When you crave a good pastrami sandwich, run to the **New York Corner Deli**. You'll need to run to build up an appetite for the huge sandwiches that are served on real New York rye bread that really comes from New York. A large selection of delicious deli meats and all the salads you'd expect, including excellent egg salad, macaroni salad, potato salad, etc., all homemade, are served. Be sure to go upstairs to see the New York memorabilia, ranging from a wonderful poster of Grand Central Terminal to a huge shot of Yankee Stadium to drawings of Mickey Mantle, there is much to see. Don't leave the Deli without trying the rice pudding; it is the best you'll find south of the Carnegie Deli in Manhattan. The New York Corner Deli is open daily for breakfast, lunch and dinner year-round.



When you crave pizza, and who doesn't periodically, order from Long Island Pizza, the best on the island. Another alternative for more casual meals is Mollie's Casual Dining in Surf City, serving breakfast, lunch and dinner. Try their fried green tomatoes appetizer if you've never had this southern staple.

A place to try off the Island is Dr. Rootbeer's Hall of Foam in Sneads Ferry. Here you'll find delicious Root Beer Floats and a museum celebrating all things root beer, from candies, to ice cream to vintage signs of late, lamented root beer brands.

Whether you just want to relax and enjoys the beautiful views, visit the attractions, keep busy with all the available activities or bust a gut eating - or all of the above - you can do it with style and pleasure on Topsail Island.