

Topsail Island

Topsail Island, located in southeastern North Carolina, is one of the best-kept secrets among East Coast beaches. It's hard to discover such a place that's uncrowded, friendly, and casual. The Topsail area offers a wealth of attractions to match the interests of beachcombers and outdoor sports enthusiasts alike.

The name "Topsail" (pronounced Topsul) is said to have originated during the days of piracy. Pirates hid their ships in the channels behind the dunes and waited for passing merchant ships, which they would pursue and attack. As the freighters became wise to the pirates' ploy, they began watching for the tops of the pirates' sails showing over the dunes – hence the name "Topsail Island".

Topsail Island is located five miles east of US Highway 17 via NC's Route 210 and Route 50. Visitors can easily reach the island from access points along Interstate 40. Topsail Island is approximately 30 miles north of Wilmington. Travel across a landmark swing bridge on NC Route 50 to Surf City or by NC Route 210 over a high-rise bridge near the northern end of the island. You can visit the Topsail Area Chamber of Commerce website for more area information at www.topsailcoc.com.

Topsail Island Museum

The Topsail Island Museum - Missiles and More is located in the Town of Topsail Beach in the Assembly Building at 720 Channel Blvd. The museum features the history of the island, with artifacts and displays from prehistory to the present. One impressive display concerns "Operation Bumblebee" the US missile project that was conducted on the island after World War II by the US Navy and Johns-Hopkins University. This display includes a color video of actual rocket firings and prototypes of rockets that were tested here. The concrete towers you may see on the island were observation towers for the project. The nine sway-proof observation towers were each set on a 30 by 30 foot reinforced concrete platform, secured by pilings driven deep into the sand. Each 35-foot tower was to be topped with a 5-foot wall of concrete blocks, and was to contain four decks of instruments that would measure and record the rockets' flights. There is no admission charge to visit the museum, which is operated by volunteer members of the Historical Society of Topsail Island. Please visit the website for additional information and hours at www.topsailmissilemuseum.org.

Loggerhead Turtles

Topsail Island is a nesting ground for the endangered Loggerhead sea turtle. These giants of the sea, weighing between 250 and 400 pounds, nest from mid-May to mid-August. The female turtles come ashore between sundown and sunrise to build their carefully constructed nests and deposit an average of 120 eggs in each nest. The nesting females leave a distinctive pattern of flipper marks or tracks in the sand. Report sightings of turtle tracks or nesting turtles to the Topsail Turtle Project. The nest sites must be left undisturbed to incubate 55 to 65 days after which time hatchlings will emerge to begin their perilous journey to the sea.

Although thousands of eggs are laid each year, very few hatchlings survive to adulthood. Not only do they face the natural perils such as crabs and other predators, but also they must deal with the detrimental effects which man has had on their environment. All species of sea turtles are fighting for survival and are protected by the Endangered and Threatened Species Act. It is a violation of Federal Law to interfere in any way with nesting or hatching turtles.

The Topsail Turtle Project is a local group of dedicated volunteers who monitor and protect the turtles. They request the aid of residents and visitors in making sure the nest sites are not disturbed and that the new hatchlings are shown their way safely to the sea. There are stiff fines and penalties for infractions of the laws protecting sea turtles. There are some things everyone can do to help these ancient reptiles. Do not approach a nesting turtle. Doing so may cause her to abandon nesting efforts. Avoid shining flashlights or using flash cameras near turtles. It is best to enjoy the event by quietly sitting in the dark at a respectful distance. Outdoor lights, which shine on the beach, can confuse the turtles since they orient themselves by the light of the moon. Leave outside vacation home lights off and the turtles in the dark. Do not disturb the nest in any way. Turtle nests are usually marked with wood stakes and fluorescent tape. Avoid walking in these areas.

Be sure to visit the Karen Beasley Sea Turtle Rescue and Rehabilitation Center behind the Topsail Beach Town Hall at 822 Carolina Blvd., Topsail Beach. For additional information visit their website at www.seaturtlehospital.org.