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The Perfect Beach House

Which beaches are least crowded? Most family-friendly? Best for nightlife? There's a good beach for everyone—here's our guide, plus how to still find a nice house to rent.

By Christine Koubek

Looking to sink your toes in at a new beach rental this summer, but still haven't rented a house? Although many prime rentals are taken, you can still find good choices.

Here's an overview of Mid-Atlantic beach towns—and how to find rentals.

OUTER BANKS, NORTH CAROLINA (north beaches)

Best for: Families or groups looking for a castle near the sand.

In Carova, Corolla, Duck, and Southern Shores, you'll find unspoiled and uncrowded beaches, opulent homes, and little commercial development. Rental homes are big, offering an average of five bedrooms plus amenities like home theaters, pool tables, putting greens, and swimming pools.

Where to rent: For remoteness—and proximity to the shore's fabled wild horses—head to Carova, accessible via four-wheel drive. Slightly south is Corolla, where the community of Corolla Light offers oceanfront pools, an indoor lap pool, a putting green, and entertainment from live bands to beach Olympics. Corolla's Pine Island community, across from the Pine Island Audubon Sanctuary, has tennis, basketball, and an oceanfront pool.

If you golf, check out the gated Currituck Club neighborhood, with its Rees Jones course. The Hamptonesque town of Duck offers fine dining, soundfront water sports, and winding paths that take you by foot or bike to boutiques and restaurants.

Weekly rentals on a five-bedroom range from \$3,495 to more than \$7,000.



For big houses, big waves, and lots of sand between you and the next person, head to the Outer Banks.



Best bets for rentals: Carolina Designs Realty (800-368-3825; carolinadesigns.com) has an easy-to-navigate Web site that lets you view floor plans and photos for rentals from Corolla to Nags Head. Twiddy & Company (866-457-1190; twiddy.com) represents more than 700 vacation homes in Duck, Corolla, and Carova. Both provide linens and starter supplies.

Shore things: Climb the Currituck Lighthouse for panoramic views. Pedal the Wright Brothers Bikeway, which stretches from Sanderling to South Nags Head; the path is a mix of wide paved shoulders, bike path, and quiet streets.

Eating out: For sunset views, head to longtime favorite the Blue Point in Duck, scheduled to reopen with more soundside seating on Memorial Day weekend. Me-

ridian 42, in Kitty Hawk, is the place for coastal Mediterranean fare. Celebrate a special occasion with French-inspired food and a great view at the Left Bank, in the Sanderling Resort and Spa in Duck.

For more information: Outer Banks of North Carolina Visitors Bureau, 877-629-4386 or outerbanks.org.

OUTER BANKS

(middle beaches and Hatteras)

Best for: Those who want more commercial entertainment along with those nice beaches and homes.

Kitty Hawk, Kill Devil Hills, and Nags Head offer rental prices typically 10 percent lower than a comparable home in Duck. Hatteras Island is a nature lover's paradise—most of the land is owned by the National Park Service. Visitors can surf, fish, kayak, and go on guided bird walks.

Where to rent: Kitty Hawk, Kill Devil Hills, and northern Nags Head have shops, restaurants, mini golf, and go-cart raceways, whereas south Nags Head is mostly residential and backs up to parkland. Accommodations range from cottages to luxury homes with pools and hot tubs. The Village at Nags Head offers an oceanfront pool and golf. The Estates at Hatteras Island Resort is a new community of luxury



Ride Ocean City's Ferris wheel at night to see the boardwalk lights.



From funnel cakes to arcades, the boardwalk is packed with fun.



Ocean City has lots of rentals, so you can find good prices and half-weeks.

homes in the fishing village of Rodanthe.

Five-bedroom homes rent for \$3,295 to more than \$4,000 a week.

Best bets for rentals: Sun Realty (800-334-4745; sunrealtync.com) is the only company that covers the entire Outer Banks; a large selection of condos and homes includes mini weeks. Its Web site provides a great overview of each town. Midgett Realty (800-527-2903; midgettrealty.com) is one of Hatteras Island's oldest family-owned businesses. Joe Lamb Jr. & Associates (800-552-6257; joelambjr.com) rents two-bedroom condos up to ten-bedroom oceanfront homes, most in Nags Head and Southern Shores.

Shore things: Tour the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse, the tallest brick lighthouse in the nation. Look for more than 350 species of birds at Nags Head Woods Ecological Preserve. See the highest sand dune on the East Coast at Jockey's Ridge State Park, with peaks more than 90 feet tall.

Eating out: For casual fare and seafood, head to Sam & Omie's in Nags Head, a favorite of local fishermen. In the mood for steak? Try JK's in Kill Devil Hills. Colington Café is a romantic spot off the beaten path in Kill Devil Hills.

For more information: Outer Banks of North Carolina Visitors Bureau, 877-629-4386 or outerbanks.org.

OCEAN CITY, MARYLAND

Best for: Vacationers who like Americana and boardwalks—and who don't mind crowds. This skinny ten-mile stretch of beach packs in the people as well as the fun. High-rises hovering over the beach offer affordable oceanfront views for all.

Where to rent: Newly built Sunset Island is a private 37-acre island with bayside beaches, indoor and outdoor pool, marina, and walking trails. Heron Harbour Isle offers a quiet retreat in high-end condos and townhouses plus easy access to shops and restaurants. Caine Woods has single-family homes on quiet bayside streets. Northside Park has walking and biking trails, playgrounds, fishing piers, and bay views.

Weekly rentals range from \$1,200 to \$3,900 for two to three bedrooms.

Best bets for rentals: Thanks to an abundance of rentals, you'll find affordable prices and a growing selection of mini weeks. Coldwell Banker (800-633-1000; cbvacations.com) offers thousands of rentals. Long & Foster (800-THE-BEACH; lfovacations.com) offers trip-cancellation insurance as well as a concierge service to help

with everything from tee times to deep-sea fishing charters. Family-owned Holiday Real Estate (800-638-2102; holidayoc.com) has a Web site with detailed descriptions of Ocean City developments.

Shore things: Walk the boardwalk to experience all that is beloved: sweet-smelling funnel cakes, impromptu musical performances, carnival games and rides, Victorian-style street lamps, and neon nightlife. Ride the vintage Ferris wheel around sunset to see the boardwalk's lights come to life and the sun set over Assawoman Bay. Check out wool bathing suits and learn the history of the boardwalk at the Ocean City Life-Saving Station Museum. Enjoy a drink at sunset at Fager's Island.

Eating out: For cozy dining amid shelves of fine wines, head to Liquid Assets Wine & Martini Bar. Galaxy Bar & Grille offers good food in a colorful setting.

For more information: Ocean City Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800-OC-OCEAN or ococean.com.

BETHANY BEACH AND FENWICK ISLAND, DELAWARE

Best for: Families looking for a slower pace. Touted as the "quiet resorts," these seaside towns offer a small village and

The quiet resort of Bethany appeals to families. New houses offer pools and golf.



boardwalk, family-friendly communities, and boating along the canals.

Where to rent: The massive Sea Colony development offers a half-mile private beach, 12 pools, tennis courts and instructors, and an aquatics center. New, inland Village at Bear Trap Dunes offers golf, pools, plays in the park, and a beach shuttle. To be walking distance to Bethany's boardwalk, stay between Fifth Street and Cedarwood.

A three-bedroom townhouse or single-family home ranges from \$1,000 to \$4,000 a week.

Best bets for rentals: Seacoast Realty (800-634-3400; bethanyrentals.com) is a local firm offering rentals within five blocks of the beach; it also represents Sea Colony and Bear Trap. ResortQuest (800-GO-RELAX; resortquest.com) has condos, townhouses, and villas in Sea Colony and Bear Trap. Its quality-rating system—by employees, not owners—scores properties from bronze through “EVP” based on furnishings and amenities. Coldwell Banker and Long & Foster (listed under Ocean City) also represent rentals in Bethany/Fenwick.

Shore things: Fenwick's Viking Golf Theme Park—with water slide, mini golf, and bumper boat rides—is a hit with kids. Fenwick Island State Park offers swimming, sunbathing, and a surfing area.

Eating out: Sedona is considered the best restaurant in Bethany. Bethany Blues smokes up ribs and barbecue. Nantucket's offers a New England-style setting in Fenwick. Across the street, Capt'N Pete's

Enjoy an early-morning ride on the Rehoboth boardwalk—after 10 AM, it's for walkers only.



Mediterranean Cove is fun. If what matters most is eating by water, there's Mango's in Bethany.

For more information: Bethany-Fenwick Area Chamber of Commerce, 800-962-SURF or bethany-fenwick.org.

DEWEY, DELAWARE

Best for: Anyone in search of Margartaville. Dewey is known for its laid-back lifestyle, bay sports, and nightlife. While you'll see families, Dewey is where twenty-and thirty-somethings bask on the beach by day and party in the bars at night.

Where to rent: Oceanfront rentals, the most expensive, are available by the week. Bayside houses tend to be seasonal rentals, where younger visitors head.

A three-bedroom house ranges from \$1,200 to \$3,400 a week.

Best bets for rentals: Long & Foster (800-THE-BEACH; lfvacations.com) and Crowley Associates (800-242-4213; crowleyrealestate.com) both offer weekly and seasonal rentals.

Shore things: The Bottle & Cork sometimes features national acts like Dave Matthews, Matchbox 20, and Vertical Horizon. Head to the Starboard the next morning to build your own bloody mary from 700 ingredients.

Eating out: Venus on the Half Shell, with its Middle Eastern motif, offers bay views and a raw bar. At roadside Ed's Chicken & Crabs, enjoy barbecue chicken and steamed crabs at a picnic table.

For more information: Rehoboth Beach-Dewey Beach Chamber of Commerce, 800-441-1329 or beach-fun.com.

REHOBOTH, DELAWARE

Best for: Just about anyone, but especially beachgoers who like good food and shopping. Rehoboth has nice restaurants and lots of stores—from souvenir shops to upscale furniture stores to outlet malls.

Where to rent: Tree-lined streets shade a mix of old and new houses, many within walking distance of the beach and shops. North Shores is a residential area with pool and tennis. For larger homes, consider the Pines neighborhood.

Three-bedroom rentals range from \$1,000 to \$4,400 a week.

Best bets for rentals: Coldwell Banker Resort Realty (800-800-4134; cbanker.com), Long & Foster (800-THE-BEACH; lfvacations.com), and Jack Lingo Realtor (800-345-3469; jacklingo.com) offer condos to single-family homes.

Shore things: Children love the rides and games at Funland, while parents love that the arcade is more affordable than its Ocean City counterparts. Rehoboth Summer Children's Theatre kicks off its 25th season with *Cinderella* and *Jack and the Beanstalk* plus theater camps for kids.

Eating out: For quintessential Rehoboth, head to Nicola Pizza for a popular Nic-o-Boli stromboli. (Or buy it uncooked and bake it back at the house for an easy dinner.) For something more romantic and ambitious, take a trip to Eden at Rehoboth