

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY / SUSAN KRAUS



A week at the beach

It's OK. You can be a true Kansan and still long for the beach. In fact, why not plan for a trip now based on your memories of salty air?

Take off your shoes.

Ditch the watch.

Lose the cell.

Forget e-mail. Eat when hungry. Sleep when sleepy. Watch waves, not TV.

Walk along the edge of the sea, on hard-packed sand at low tide, as white frothy wave-bubbles tickle your toes.

You are now officially at the beach.

True confession: My biggest disappointment with Kansas life has

been the lack of an ocean. Kansas would be almost perfect if it had one.

I have a theory that a person's concept of "ocean" is imprinted at a young age ... or at first glimpse. So for some it is the gentle roll of the Gulf of Mexico that makes their hearts ping. For others, it's the pounding surf of the Pacific. For me, it was the Atlantic, the "Jersey shore" that has been so grossly misrepresented of late on reality TV.

My summer memories are of cousins crammed into the back seat

AROUND THE BEACH

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Diversions around Emerald Beach keep things simple. Save the North Carolina Aquarium at Pine Knoll Shores for a rainy day, and time your visit around the daily programs that feature feeding the creatures and experiencing other up-close encounters. An annual family pass is \$50 and provides multiple visits at no additional charge, which is often cheaper than paying for regular admission. There are also kid-specific programs where you can leave the children for half a day.

Free to visitors, Fort Macon is an impressive historic site connected to events from the Civil War to World War II (again, schedule visits for program times). In Beaufort, a historic seaport just across the bridge from Atlantic Beach, you'll find the North Carolina Maritime Museum that also offers free admission. Stroll the historic district of restored homes, then take a ferry ride to Shackleford Banks to look for wild ponies.

Morehead City, adjacent to Beaufort, is where you'll find the big-box stores, as well as the History Place Museum (again, free!). It contains The Tea Clipper tearoom, with 165 kinds of tea and more tea history than you can digest, featuring ladies' lunches and British "high tea." I liked the decoy carvings at the Core Sound Waterfowl Museum and Heritage Center, another free site at the end of Harkers Island (go through Beaufort and follow the signs).

In season, Morehead City features Wednesday night outdoor movies and a Friday night farmer's market, plus, along with Beaufort, outdoor concerts. Swansboro, a quaint historic village of shops and cafes, is perfect for a late-afternoon stroll and an ice cream float. At Hammocks Beach State Park, take a ferry to explore an uninhabited island or try a marsh cruise with a park ranger.

HOW MUCH?

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Oceanfront weekly rentals in Emerald Isle vary from about \$2,000 during high season to under \$950 in early June for a two-bedroom, two-bath house with amenities. But go to the second or third "row" of homes from the ocean and prices drop: A three-bedroom, two-bath home rents for around \$1,250 during high season.

But for a real treat, look at the grandiose "Sand Castles" that rent for \$8,000-\$10,000 a week during high season but as low as \$4,500-\$5,500 in early June. One of these oceanfront homes boasts eight bedrooms, 10-plus bathrooms, a private pool, four master suites, a theater room, pool table, eight TVs and multiple laundry rooms.

That may seem extreme, but the house is big enough for four to five families and can actually be economical. Plus you get to live like a millionaire for a week.

Look up Emerald Isle rental agencies and order multiple agency catalogs. They make for fun winter bathroom reading.

of a Buick, inching our way down the New Jersey Turnpike, heads hanging, like thirsty puppies, out the windows. At last, we would come upon the exit, hit the two-lane roads and collectively inhale as we caught our first taste of the sharp salt air. Then a final wait as we scootched down in the back seat while our aunt and mom picked up keys at a rental agency to whatever linoleum-floored tiny cottage they'd booked for the week. (We were always over the allowed occupancy limits with kids sleeping on whatever piece of bed or couch we could find.) We'd find the pastel cottage, usually down some alley-of-a-street, and pile out, begging for our bathing suits. And then we'd run, towels around our necks, holding a plastic dipper or bucket, toward the sound of the waves. That moment became one of the best times of the year.

I haven't been to the Jersey shore in years. My choice of beach now is Emerald Isle, North Carolina. It is far less crowded and commercial, more relaxed. And my mother lives there. (OK, that would be the number one reason.) But Emerald Isle warrants a look even if you have no relatives living nearby.

Emerald Isle is a place where you drop your sandals on the bottom step of the wooden boardwalk that goes over the dunes ... and they're still there six hours later. It sits on Bogue Banks, a strip of east-west land about 21 miles long but just blocks wide in parts with five towns: Emerald Isle, Salter Path, Indian Beach, Pine Knoll



Shores and Atlantic Beach. The latter is the most commercial, with high-rise condos and (gasp!) some fast-food spots. Emerald Isle is almost all houses or duplexes, with more year-round residents and house/duplex rentals and no fast-food chains.

There are several diversions and restaurants everywhere, from oyster shacks to upscale. A personal pick is The Icehouse Waterfront in Swansboro, with the biggest and best fish sandwich I've ever tasted. The pesto and pecan-encrusted grouper is also a treat.

But some of the best eating can be found at any town, along any road, where there are farm stands piled with fresh corn, peaches, tomatoes and the famous Bogue Inlet watermelons. "Sweetest in the world," the lady at one stand boasted. Two hours

later, juice dribbling down my face, I had to agree.

If I had to compose a "must experience" list for Emerald Isle, tasting the fresh produce would be on it. But what I like best about the region is the seductive lure of doing almost nothing and having time, space and quiet enough to, with some luck, wake up not composing a "must do" list in my head.

Any beach vacation is best experienced doing as little as possible. Sea and sand. Books and board games. A few outings spread over a week if children demand distraction, but otherwise the beach is the entertainment. Walk without a destination, collect shells, build sand castles, sit in a beach chair and pretend to read. But, really, behind the sunglasses, just doze and watch the waves roll in. *TM*

GETTING THERE

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Emerald Isle is just more than 1,200 miles or 19 hours of driving from Lawrence. Or fly from Kansas City to Jacksonville, N.C., (via U.S. Airways or Delta) and rent a car. Emerald Isle is less than hour from the airport. For more information, go to www.crystalcoastnc.org.