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## *Tourism in Eastern North Carolina: A Bastion of History and Good Beaches Too*

**T**he rich history and scenic landscape of North Carolina's coast contribute to the statewide growth of the tourism industry. According to the NC Department of Commerce's Division of Tourism, in 2004 more than 49 million visitors traveled to North Carolina, ranking it eighth in person-trip volume by state. Domestic travelers spent \$13.2 billion that year in North Carolina, showing a 4.9 percent increase from 2003, and continuing a trend of increasing revenue from the tourism sector. Tourists ranked visiting North Carolina's beaches their second most popular activity while traveling, along with outdoor activities, both at 15 percent and behind only shopping at 26 percent. Trips to historical places and museums made up 12 percent of travel activities.

While the counties of Eastern North Carolina contribute 25.8 percent of the state's total travel expenditures, the top five of those 41 counties alone contribute 13.5 percent of the statewide total of \$12.6 billion, according to estimates from the Travel Economic Impact Model developed by the U.S. Travel Data Center. With combined total expenditures of \$1.7 billion, Dare, New Hanover, Cumberland, Brunswick, and Carteret counties represent about 52 percent of the East's total travel expenditures of \$3.3 billion. Dare County, home to the 130 miles of coastline and 900 square miles of coastal sounds that are the Outer Banks, is the highest contributor in the East. The scenery as well as the history of this county—from the first flight in 1903 to the tallest lighthouse on the East Coast, Cape Hatteras—help Dare bring in the most state and local tax receipts from tourism; \$31 million and \$29 million, respectively. New Hanover County, with popular vacation spots such as historic Wilmington and Carolina, Kure, and Wrightsville Beaches, contributes the second highest amount. Fayetteville, located in third-ranked Cumberland County, hosts the state's first art museum as well as the Airborne and Special Operations Museum (displaying the history of the U.S. Army's airborne and special operations) located at Fort Bragg.

The collection of small, historic towns in the East also makes its collective impact on the

region's economy. Craven County hosts North Carolina's second oldest town, New Bern, and such tourist attractions as the Tryon Palace, the Pepsi-Cola Store (the birth place of Pepsi), and a 157,000-acre national forest. Edenton, the county seat of Chowan County, was named by the National Trust for Historic Preservation as one of the U.S.'s "Dozen Distinctive Destinations" in 2003, and was also selected to participate in the N.C. Main Street Program that year, which helps small towns focus on creating new jobs and investment by revitalizing downtown areas.

Yet another concept that developers hope to move off the drawing boards is a 700-acre entertainment complex off Interstate 95 in Roanoke Rapids that would feature a \$9 million, 1,500-seat music theater and a \$14 million nautical theme park with an aquarium. One of the developers is Randy Parton, the brother of country music queen Dolly Parton. The project is patterned after a successful complex in Branson, Missouri.

With an increasing number of visitors to the state, there is a growing need for workers in the tourism industry. Tourism is the third highest private sector employer in the state, and 25.6 percent of the state's 183,250 jobs directly supported by domestic tourism expenditures in 2004 are in the East. The payroll for this region, however, represents a lower percentage than the percentage of jobs in tourism, at 20.3 percent of the \$3.6 billion state payroll. Hotels, restaurants, travel agencies, and visitor centers all are impacted by tourists. North Carolina's nine welcome centers received about 8.8 million visits in 2004, according to the NC Division of Tourism.

Employment in the tourism industry can also include the marketing of the state, with marketing efforts currently being made by UNC-TV's program "North Carolina Weekend" as well as the NC Division of Tourism's "Visit NC" website. Visit NC gives visitors information on dining, accommodations, and local attractions in the three regions of North Carolina; for those wishing to visit the coast, it gives them a suggested itinerary for a week at the beach, ending with buying a piece of property on the coast. Visitors can

arrange their own itineraries, ranging from petting zoos in Jacksonville to horse-drawn historic carriage tours in Wilmington, to water parks scattered all over the coast.

But with all the enthusiasm, not everyone is enamored with tourism as an economic development engine. “[M]ost of the jobs supported by it are low-wage and seasonal,” says Alfred Stuart, professor emeritus of geography and earth science at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. “Its best role may be that it introduces people to the area, leading some retirees, often affluent, to relocate there, especially in Wilmington and along the Outer Banks.” Rapid growth in these coastal hot spots often brings issues of its own. Once isolated Currituck County, for example, now ranks among the 20 fastest growing counties in the nation.

However, efforts are also being made to steer tourists off the beaten path to parts of the region that could use a boost. The statewide “1,000/100 Project” to train community and industry leaders in growing the cultural and heritage tourism industry. The name stems from the project’s goal of creating a network of 1,000 trained leaders in

heritage and culture throughout North Carolina’s 100 counties. The Foundation of Renewal for Eastern North Carolina (FoR ENC) joined with the project to target 17 Eastern North Carolina counties in 2005, the project’s third year. With cultural tourism as the fastest growing segment of the tourism industry, the eastern counties will greatly benefit from the project, says Phillip Horne, president of FoR ENC. “We have a tremendous inventory of sites and opportunities from which to enhance our viability as both a destination and an incubator for entrepreneurs. More than any single region in the state, our potential is unlimited as we begin to realize the full value of our natural assets and our human capital.”<sup>1</sup>

—Katherine Dunn

#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> “FoR ENC-Venture East Partner with Statewide Effort to Expand and Enhance Cultural/Heritage Tourism,” Foundation of Renewal for Eastern North Carolina, June 13, 2005, [www.forenc.com](http://www.forenc.com).

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