

Lighthouse Tour

of North Carolina Lighthouses

by Cheryl Shelton-Roberts

Cheryl Shelton-Roberts is a cofounder and former president of the Outer Banks Lighthouse Society. She is newsletter editor of the award-winning *Lighthouse News*, now in its thirteenth year and author of *Lighthouse Families*; *Moving Hatteras: Relocating the Cape Hatteras Light Station to Safety*; *North Carolina Lighthouses: A Tribute of History and Hope*; and coauthor of *Cape Hatteras: America's Lighthouse*. Photography is copyrighted and was provided courtesy of Bruce Roberts and the Outer Banks Lighthouse Society.

The Outer Banks Lighthouse Society, an all-volunteer nonprofit organization, offers the following information on North Carolina lighthouses. There is perhaps more here than you plan to do, but you can select the information that suits your individual needs. More specific driving directions can be seen at <http://www.outer-banks.com/lighthouse-society/driving.asp>. Thank you for your interest in our state's fine lighthouses and let us know if we may help you further. Email lbsociety2@outer-banks.com

Most people visiting the Outer Banks of North Carolina want to visit at least one of the lighthouses. And we have lighthouses! The following is a driving tour from north to south along coastal North Carolina. Of the existing towers, you have a choice of seven lighthouses to visit, and you can see the ruins of an eighth. These light stations are so interesting that days can be spent in the surrounding area of each one, but you can adjust the length of your stay according to the amount of time you have, whether it is to make a quick stop or to linger. Visit a lighthouse soon! North Carolina has gained two "new" lighthouses. A reproduction of the Roanoke River Lighthouse can be visited on the lovely waterfront in Plymouth. Another reconstruction is located on the beautiful Manteo waterfront. Both were built according to the original plans of these "sound" lights that once dotted more than two dozen places all through the state's sounds and rivers and are reminders of our close connection to the sea.

▶ **Currituck Beach Light Station**

You can start early to get to **Currituck Beach Light Station**, the northernmost light on Hwy 12 North (north from 158). You will pass through Duck and Corolla. You should allow 1 - 2 hours to visit here. The lighthouse and all buildings at the light station have been meticulously restored by the nonprofit stewards, Outer Banks Conservationists, Inc. A modest fee is charged for climbing when the tower is open to the public during daylight hours, generally from March through Thanksgiving. If you are in a large group, call ahead for special instructions: (252) 453-8152 or email info@currituckbeachlight.com. You can walk to the adjoining Whalehead Club property that has undergone restoration and is a lovely 1930s hunt club reminiscent of the days when the island was host to hundreds of thousands of waterfowl.

▶ **Bodie Island Light Station**

The length of the drive from Currituck south to Bodie Island depends on the time of year--averaging about 1 ¼ hours. From the lighthouse and the village of Corolla on Hwy 12, travel to Hwy 158 South where the mileposts (MP) begin at # 1 at Kitty Hawk. Continue on Hwy 158 South to approximately MP 17 to rejoin Hwy 12. (In Kitty Hawk, you can also take old Hwy 12 South called the "Beach Road" if you would like to travel along the ocean at a slower pace.) Turn left into the Cape Hatteras National Seashore and continue approximately 10 miles to the Bodie Island Visitor Center sign. Turn right into the **Bodie Island Light Station**. Allow yourself at least an hour to explore the lighthouse grounds, open year 'round. There is a bookstore with exhibits in the keepers' quarters. You'll want more time if you'd like to explore the nearby sound area, or take advantage of the bird observation decks. Coquina Beach is located directly across Hwy 12 from the light station and offers wide, beautiful beaches with showers and changing facilities.

***Always be prepared for mosquitoes unless it is very cool weather! Keep in mind that as long as you stay on boardwalks mosquitoes are less likely to bother you.

▶ **Cape Hatteras Light Station**

From Bodie Island Light Station, it is about a 1 ½ hour drive to the village of Buxton and the **Cape Hatteras Light Station**. This famous lighthouse that was rescued from the edge of the sea in 1999 is open for climbing to the public approximately from Good Friday through Columbus Day (around October 12th each year). A modest fee is charged for climbing. The lighthouse double keepers' quarters, open year-round, is a visitor center and holds the Museum of the Sea. Also near the lighthouse is a new book/gift store and visitor contact station. For Cape Hatteras National Seashore information, or if you need assistance with a large group such as students, call (252) 473-2111 at the Cape Hatteras National Seashore Headquarters in Manteo, NC, and ask the operator to direct you to someone who can help you. For specific information on the lighthouse, call the Buxton Visitors Center located at the lighthouse (252) 995-4474. Note that any lighthouse that is open for climbing must close during high winds or rainy or stormy weather for visitors' safety. From Buxton it is about 45 minutes to the Ocracoke ferry at the southern tip of Hatteras Island in Hatteras Village. Near the ferry docks at the southern end of Hatteras Island is the Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum that is

open to visitors when volunteers are present. You may check the state-run (no charge) car ferry schedule on <http://www.outer-banks.com/ferry> and get an idea when you can cross between Ocracoke and Hatteras Islands. The ferry ride is about 45 minutes and you will land at the north end of Ocracoke. Another twenty-minute drive will get you into the village, a great place to park your car and walk or bike.

► **Ocracoke Lighthouse**

The beaches on Ocracoke are representative of the peaceful beaches along the northern Outer Banks. There are many places to stop and walk/explore on the way to or from the **Ocracoke Lighthouse**. Owned by the National Park Service along with Bodie Island and Cape Hatteras Lighthouses, the Ocracoke Lighthouse is located in the village of Ocracoke, sequestered on the east side. As you enter the village, take a left at the main intersection and find the lighthouse down on your right. There are several places to stay on Ocracoke and reservations are recommended.

► **Cape Lookout Lighthouse**

Reaching **Cape Lookout** is a lighthouse too far for just 2 days' time if you are traveling from the north beginning at the Currituck Beach Lighthouse. However, if you have 3 or 4 days to travel, it will afford you time to enjoy Core Sound Banks where the lighthouse is situated, virtually an untouched island. To get there, take the Cedar Island Ferry from the south end of Ocracoke Island. You should consider making reservations for the 2-1/4 hour ferry ride. Check fees and schedules by contacting NCDOT-Ferry Division at 1-800-BY-FERRY. The ferry crosses 22 miles of Pamlico Sound between Ocracoke Island and Cedar Island--it is well over 200 miles if you drive by land! The ferry ride is an experience itself and very relaxing. Enclosed ferry cabins are heated/air conditioned for your comfort or you may simply remain in your vehicle and/or walk the decks.

From Cedar Island there is another 30-minute drive to the end of Harkers Island. You will disembark the Cedar Island ferry and travel an extension of Hwy 12 (towards Beaufort) where you will rejoin Hwy 70 West. Watch for the sign past Smyrna and just east of Otway where you will turn left onto a paved, unnumbered road towards Harkers Island called "Harker's Island Road." To get close to the lighthouse you must take a fee-charge passenger ferry to Core Banks and the Cape Lookout Lighthouse, about a 20-minute boat ride, since there are no bridges that connect the mainland with Core Banks Island. You can stay on the island one hour or all day, just tell your captain how long you plan to be there and when to pick you up. It's a great day trip; take water and food, depending on how long you want to stay. The light tower and keepers' quarters are near the sound and you can take a short jaunt over to the ocean and beach--guaranteed to be one of the most pleasant island experiences. A new visitors' center complete with bookstore and bathroom facilities is now open. The keepers' quarters has been restored and holds exhibits about the U.S. Lighthouse Service and island history. It is open from roughly Easter until the end of October. Reaching the island and lighthouse is weather-dependent.

For more information, call Cape Lookout National Seashore headquarters (252) 728-2250.

Be sure to also visit the National Park Service (NPS) visitor center at the end of Harkers Island and the new Core Sound Waterfowl Museum & Heritage Center in its beautiful facility next door. The NPS visitor center has been redesigned and offers new exhibits and a film about the seashore that is narrated by Meryl Streep.

While in the Harkers Island area, you have the quaint town of historic Beaufort nearby and its waterfront to explore filled with specialty shops and restaurants. Be sure to visit the North Carolina Maritime Museum, an agency of the Office of Archives and History, Department of Cultural Resources and boat exhibit building. And just over the bridge on Hwy 70 West is the waterfront of Morehead City with art galleries and other interesting shops. From Beaufort and Morehead City waterfronts, you can arrange all sorts of water-borne trips to Cape Lookout and neighboring islands including sailing, kayaking, and viewing wild horses on Shackleford Banks.

► **Bald Head Lighthouse**

To reach **Bald Head Lighthouse**, a.k.a. "Old Baldy," take to US 70 West to NC 24 in Morehead City and head west towards Jacksonville. Pick up 17 South to Wilmington, a river port town rich in history. Stay on US 17 and after crossing the Cape Fear River, take N.C. 133 southeast to Southport (NC 133 merges with NC 87 and 211 just before you get to Southport). Southport has layers of history. See the Southport Maritime Museum there, for instance. In town, turn west off NC 211 onto West 9th Street and follow signs to the passenger-only ferry dock on Indigo Plantation grounds to reach the island and lighthouse because there is no bridge. There is a fee for each passenger. For ferry information call (910) 457-5003. Bald Head Island is a memorable place to explore. You can stay for just hours, or overnight at one of the quaint B&Bs, or rent a house for a longer visit. Old Baldy Foundation, a nonprofit organization, takes care of this lighthouse and has built a reproduction of the 1850s keeper's cottage that serves as the Smith Island Museum. The lighthouse is open for climbing on a self-guided tour and the small fee goes entirely for the maintenance of the historic lighthouse. For information on the lighthouse and museum call (910) 457-7481. Visitors can take a different route to Bald Head by taking an extra ferry ride from Ft. Fisher to reach Southport. If you go this way, be sure to see Ft. Fisher, a Civil War fort and state historic site, as well as the North Carolina Aquarium. On the Ft. Fisher-Southport ferry, you will see the truncated **Price's Creek Lighthouse** on the south bank, the only river/sound light still in its original location. It sits quietly on corporate property and is not accessible to the public, but you can get a good view and take pictures from the ferry (a short telephoto helps). This small lighthouse was part of a series of range lights on the Cape Fear River and served as a Confederate signal station during the Civil War for blockade runners. Because the channel through the river changed significantly, many of these lights, including Price's Creek, were not continued after the war.

▶ **Oak Island Lighthouse**

While on the ferry to Bald Head Island, you can see the strong flash of the **Oak Island Lighthouse**. You can reach Oak Island by returning to the mainland at Southport and driving on NC 211 for approximately two miles. Turn left towards Yaupon Beach on 133 South. Where 133 ends at the ocean, turn left on a paved road to Caswell Beach, also marked for the Oak Island Coast Guard Station. The lighthouse is on the left side of the road. Located on the Coast Guard station, the lighthouse has been turned over to the Town of Caswell Beach. A Friends of Oak Island Lighthouse has officially been formed and is planning the future of this lighthouse for coming generations. A walkway/overlook has been built across the road from the lighthouse in a lovely oceanside spot.

▶ **Sound Lighthouses**

There are two reproductions of North Carolina sound lighthouses in Manteo on Roanoke Island in the "northern" Outer Banks area. Located off Hwy 64, west of the entrance to the Cape Hatteras National Seashore, it is a reproduction of the original Roanoke Marshes Lighthouse. A second reproduction is located in historic Plymouth, NC (located on 64, about 100 miles west of Manteo). They interpret a nearly forgotten part of American lighthouse history. The original Roanoke River Lighthouse, as it appeared in the late 1800s, recently has been relocated to historic Edenton's waterfront and is awaiting restoration.

The **Outer Banks Lighthouse Society** hopes you enjoy visiting North Carolina lighthouses. Our non-profit group operates on modest membership dues and small donations. We distribute newsletters at the lighthouses, give out full-color brochures on all the NC Lighthouses, sponsor interpretive exhibits at the lighthouses, help students and teachers with school projects on lighthouses, hold commemorative events at various NC lighthouses, and much more. To help us keep these activities going, please consider becoming a member. Information is at <http://www.outer-banks.com/lighthouse-society/>. We'd like to have you aboard!