

Outer Banks Soul
an essay
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When my parents took me to the Outer Banks in the summer of 1996, I was only twelve years old. I didn't know that this vacation would be unlike any other. I had no idea such a thin strip of land could hold such history and beauty. I didn't think that I'd make a return journey a dozen more times over the next twenty years. And I had no idea that the place would capture my soul.

That first summer was when I learned to swim in the ocean – to respect Mother Nature's ferocity but to delight in the rolling, crashing waves. I learned to ignore the sting of salt in my eyes and the feel of brush burned skin from wiping out in the rough sand. I learned to fall asleep to the sway of the beach house as it moved ever so slightly on its stilts in the strong coastal breezes.

Over the years, I toured attractions and historical places with my family, picking up tidbits of information that would become ingrained in my memory as each year passed. On every trip, I retained a little more, braved different adventures, and fell further and further in love. I've come to memorize the geography of this tiny, narrow strip of land hanging precariously in the Atlantic Ocean.

When I'm in the Outer Banks, I can almost *feel* the history swirling in the wind, hiding beneath the sand, and washing up on shore.

I've become familiar with the ubiquitous "Graveyard of the Atlantic" posters hung in seemingly every beach house, restaurant, and souvenir shop, and am still in awe over the thousands of ships that have faltered off the coast. One of my most treasured memories from the Outer Banks is peering out the tiny window of a biplane into the deep blue ocean below, astounded at the ghostly outlines of centuries old shipwrecks.

Fascinated, I've read about the victims of the dangerous and unpredictable seas that are the result of the warm Gulf Stream and cold Arctic Current clashing. In my reading, I've learned that other ships faltered from something much more sinister – pirates that lured ships into the shallows by hanging lanterns on the neck of a nag and pacing the animal up and down the dunes in the dark. Because the land of the Outer Banks is so impossibly thin, sailors had no idea how close they were to shore and would run aground on the constantly shifting sandbars. The pirates would seize their loot, which many times included barrels of rum being brought north from the Caribbean. They would bury the contraband in the dunes of the beach, and the rum was rumored to be so strong it was said to have the ability to "kill the devil." I remember almost hearing the "click" in my brain realizing how Nags Head and Kill Devil Hills got their names.

I've stood on these stormy shores, watching as the churning water washed up remnants of those wrecks, some of which made their way to the Graveyard of the Atlantic Museum in Hatteras. I've listened to locals talk about diving the wrecks with black tip sharks and watched specials on TV about treasures that have been discovered, including the remains of Blackbeard's ship, The Queen Anne's Revenge.

I soon learned that Blackbeard wasn't the only famous historical figure with ties to the place that I loved. Plenty of famous names throughout history have been lured to the Outer Banks. While browsing the

Elizabethan Gardens in Roanoke and learning about the Lost Colony, I stood in the shadow of a giant statue of Elizabeth the I, who dispatched Sir Walter Raleigh and a team of colonists to this precarious land centuries ago.

But perhaps the most stunning historical relic on the Outer Banks is something that is still living and breathing today. On the northern beaches of Corolla, a pack of wild horses roam freely, galloping through the sand and even frolicking in the water. These stunning creatures are the ancestors of the Spanish Mustangs brought over by Conquistadors in the 1520's. Though the herd is small and considered threatened, much work is being done to save and preserve their lives and their history that embodies the spirit of this island town.

That spirit, combined with the resiliency of living in such a perilous place, is represented again in the four lighthouses that dot the coastline from Corolla to Ocracoke. The first time I stood in the shadow of the iconic Hatteras Lighthouse, it was being painstakingly moved, inch by inch to save it from the eroding coastline. The enormous effort and meticulous planning used to save this beacon of hope is a prime example of how proud the people of the Outer Banks are of their history. They adapt readily to their constantly changing and regularly threatened land and culture because they realize how extraordinary this aptly named "ribbon of sand" is for so many reasons.

The resilient lifestyle of native Outer Bankers is contagious to visitors from the day they arrive on this strip of land. Even at a young age, it didn't take me long to realize that those lucky enough to live in this place are of a certain breed. They are calm, easy going, welcoming, and helpful. They talk about hurricanes, flooding, and rebuilding homes as though they were discussing a quiet spring rainfall. They don't hesitate to help any home or business owner who's been effected by Mother Nature. And although many of them have lost homes or restaurants or been without electricity for days and even weeks at a time, they tackle each natural disaster with astounding perseverance and unrivaled positivity. They all seem to know that they live in a special place, and these events that have the ability to devastate a coastline seem to be only mild inconveniences for a place that gives new meaning to the word resilient.

It is that spirit that draws me to this place and keeps me coming back year after year. Yes, the beaches are beautiful and yes, the history is fascinating, and yes, it is a vacation that offers variety in the rat race that is everyday life. But the more I visit, the older I get, the more I realize just how much I have grown with this place and how much I've learned from it – about myself, about life.

The challenge of climbing Jockey's Ridge taught me about overcoming obstacles – persevering in the heat as my muscles strained to tackle the east coast's largest sand dune, feeling the sugary soft sand fall away beneath my bare feet. Watching the scorching orange sun disappear into the Roanoke Sound is my reward for making it to the top.

I've learned to love certain aspects of "roughing it" by doing simple things like enjoying outdoor showers. I grew to enjoy rinsing sticky salt and gritty sand from my hair and skin, then basking in the knowledge that my locks would lighten and soften in this foreign environment.

Standing on the pier and feeling the weathered wood sway beneath me taught me to be flexible yet strong. Watching dedicated fisherman cast their lines into frothy waves that pounded the barnacle encrusted pylons taught me patience.

I learned that there is still a place in this world for dreamers and small businesses when I visited a grass roots rum distillery started by four friends. I listened, intrigued and inspired, as the owner told about their blood, sweat, and tears, and how they wove the history of Kill Devil Hills into their passion.

I've managed to endure the arduous ten hour drive from Pennsylvania, knowing that my eyes would well up as soon as I spotted the crest of that first wave over the dunes. And I've realized that no matter how hard I try, I can never hold back the tears of disappointment during our last sandy walk at the end of the vacation.

My creativity has always flourished when I'm in the Outer Banks, and it even unleashed a tidal wave of ideas after years of not writing a word. I've read books and written poems in the cradle of a hammock, watching as day faded into night and listening to the loud buzz of cicadas.

Several of my fears have also been conquered in this amazing place - I rode a horse for the first time in Frisco, gripping the reins in terror as we made our way through the narrow wooded trail, only to laugh with joy when I felt the rush of my stallion's canter once we reached the open beach. I took my maiden voyage on a kayak in the calm waters of the sound, and let my husband convince me to ride a jet ski, clinging to the back of his life jacket as he sped forward, spraying water and turning on a dime. There are even times when I banish my fear of sharks and venture deep into the ocean where I can barely touch the bottom. Here, I float on my back, squint up at the sun, and let the ocean's waves roll gently beneath me. I rise and fall with the water, relaxing in its salty arms and smiling, until the inevitable rogue wave comes rolling in unexpectedly and crashes over my head, stinging my eyes and burning my throat so that my smile becomes a laugh, and reminds me that the unpredictability of the sea is one of the reasons I love it so much.

And when night has enveloped the land completely, I've wandered to the deck of the beach house to lie on my back and stare up at the brilliant stars, listening to the waves crash violently, yet peacefully over the dunes.

This last time, while planning this most recent excursion, I thought I'd done it all, seen it all, felt it all. But the Outer Banks had more secrets, more lessons for me to learn.

While our track record for weather had been glorious for the last twenty years and dozens of visits, this time our vacation, a trip to the place where my soul felt most at peace, was threatened by the Outer Banks' biggest foe – a hurricane.

Irma was poised to be a record breaker, and until the last minute, no one knew where she would hit. The last few days before our vacation were stressful, anxiety-riddled hours spent thinking about evacuation routes and emergency supplies instead of sunscreen and bathing suits.

Her path was so uncertain that I didn't feel relaxed until we had officially arrived in the familiar beach town. By then we knew that Irma was going to hit Florida, and while the storm's most devastating winds were hundreds of miles away, we certainly felt the residual effects in the violent waves that pounded the coast for the first two days of our visit.

So I didn't know that a hurricane would threaten us or my favorite place. I didn't realize how scared I'd be, how uncertain I'd feel about returning to a place I thought about year after year. In my anxious state I

almost forgot about the irrepressible spirit that was part of the reason I loved this island so much in the first place.

Despite the fear and the worries, despite the fact that our vacation had two cloudy days with red “no swimming” signs posted along the beach, I realized that the Outer Banks still had something to teach me.

I learned that it was still beautiful, even with the menacing clouds and roaring waves. The imperfect weather made me realize how bold the first settlers of this place had to be, and I saw firsthand the resiliency I had heard about for so many years. The people and their land could handle anything, and that perhaps the simultaneous danger and delicacy of this place is the very essence of its allure.

And I learned that I will always return. Despite the Outer Banks being a physical and logistical enigma, I still gravitate to its shores. Because it shouldn't have survived all these centuries of hurricanes, tropical storms, shifting sandbars, and climate change. It should have been swallowed up by the Atlantic Ocean, but instead it is thriving and impossibly stunning. The fact that all these hazards threaten the area on a daily basis are actually part of its appeal.

So give me the hurricanes, the Nor'easters, and floods. Give me high insurance costs, crowds of tourists in the summer, and isolation in the winter. The newest thing the Outer Banks has taught me is that it is not in spite of these things that I love this place so much, but because of them.

This is where my heart is at peace and where my soul is at ease. This is where I feel empowered, as though I can tackle anything life throws at me. When I'm on the beaches of the Outer Banks, I feel as though I am one of the original beach cottages from the 1920's – weathered, plain, and often overshadowed by newer, more luxurious homes. But I am still standing, just as they are, watching as the waves roll and turn, day after day, night after night, as they have for centuries, luring visitors and locals alike to the shores of this whimsical, mystical place.