Topic Page: Outer Banks

Definition: Outer Banks from Merriam-Webster's Geographical Dictionary

Chain of narrow islands and peninsulas off the North Carolina mainland stretching from the Virginia border to Cape Lookout; ab. 175 mi. (280 km.) long; most are connected by road; contains beaches, recreational areas, several lighthouses.

Summary Article: Outer Banks from The Hutchinson Unabridged Encyclopedia with Atlas and Weather Guide

Narrow, sandy barrier reef stretching almost the entire length of the coastline of North Carolina, and broken by inlets into a channel of islands. There are many sites of historical interest here, including Roanoke Island, location of an early, unsuccessful colony established by Sir Walter Raleigh in the 1580s, and Kitty Hawk, home of the aviation pioneers Orville and Wilbur Wright.

From north to south, the main islands on the North Banks are Bodie, Hatteras, Ocracoke, Portsmouth, and Core Banks. Three prominent capes dominate the Banks: Cape Hatteras on Hatteras Island, Cape Lookout on Core Banks, and Cape Fear on Smith Island, all infamous for their many shipwrecks. (However, Cape Lookout is often considered the southern boundary of the Banks, and Cape Henry, in Virginia, their northern limit.) The main industries here are commercial and sport fishing and tourism.

Lying between the islands of the Banks and the irregular mainland shoreline are, north to south, Currituck, Albemarle, Pamlico, Core, and Bogue sounds. Roanoke Island lies in a channel between Albemarle and Pamlico sounds, and is connected by bridges with the mainland on the west and Bodie Island on the east. Another link to the islands is the Wright Memorial Bridge from the mainland, farther north on Bodie Island. Ferries provide access to Ocracoke Island. The main settlements on the Banks are Southern Shores, Kitty Hawk, Kill Devil Hills (site of the Wright Brothers National Memorial), and Nags Head, on Bodie Island; Rodanthe, Salvo, Avon, Buxton, and Hatteras, on Hatteras Island; and Ocracoke, on Ocracoke Island, once a shipping centre and the haunt of Blackbeard and other pirates in the 18th century. Manteo, on Roanoke Island, is the location of the Fort Raleigh National Historic Site. Cape Hatteras National Seashore encompasses Bodie Island south of Nags Head, and all of Hatteras and Ocracoke islands. Vegetation consists primarily of dune and marsh grasses, live oaks, red cedars, and yaupons. Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge covers over 23.9 sq km/9.2 sq mi on the northern end (also called Pea Island) of Hatteras Island. The Banks are frequently battered by northeasters in the winter and hurricanes in the summer and autumn. Erosion has moved much of the shoreline westward, continually creating new inlets, islands, shoals, and sandbars. Since the 18th century, isolation has produced distinctive cultural – particularly linguistic – patterns among the permanent inhabitants, who are known as ‘Bankers’.

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