Nature, History and Development Blend

By Alex Johansen
Photos by Liz Mitchell

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South of Wilmington and east of the main route leading to Myrtle Beach, SC and the well traveled coastal towns are the Brunswick Islands including Oak Island, Bald Head Island and the coastal town of Southport. Known as the Southern Cape Fear Coast of North Carolina, the lifestyle is slow and takes advantage of water vistas and natural beauty.

Oak Island is across a high bridge spanning the Intracoastal Waterway. It has more than 60 public beach access points along its 10-mile Atlantic beach, and one of the fishing piers is the tallest pier in North Carolina. The state record catch was landed here in 1966 when Walter Maxwell reeled in an 1150-pound tiger shark.

The Oak Island Lighthouse is one of the newest lighthouses in the country. Differing from old light houses, its 134 steps are steel ship's ladders rather than the traditional spiral.

Fort Caswell is tucked away at the tip of Oak Island. The site of a Civil War fort is owned by the North Carolina Baptist Assembly which offers a peaceful setting for inspirational retreats and leadership training. Meetings which include kayaking, swimming and watching the sunset in a secure protected setting are sure to entice guests who love the beach lifestyle.

Southport is a charming small town filled with antique shops and historic homes facing Waterfront Park along the Cape Fear River at its mouth to the Atlantic Ocean. An ordinary day here finds residents and visitors strolling along the River Walk or relaxing with an ice cream cone while watching the leisurely waterway traffic.

Southport visitors will enjoy a waterfront bed and breakfast such as Brunswick Inn Bed and Breakfast or Lois Jane's Riverview Inn.
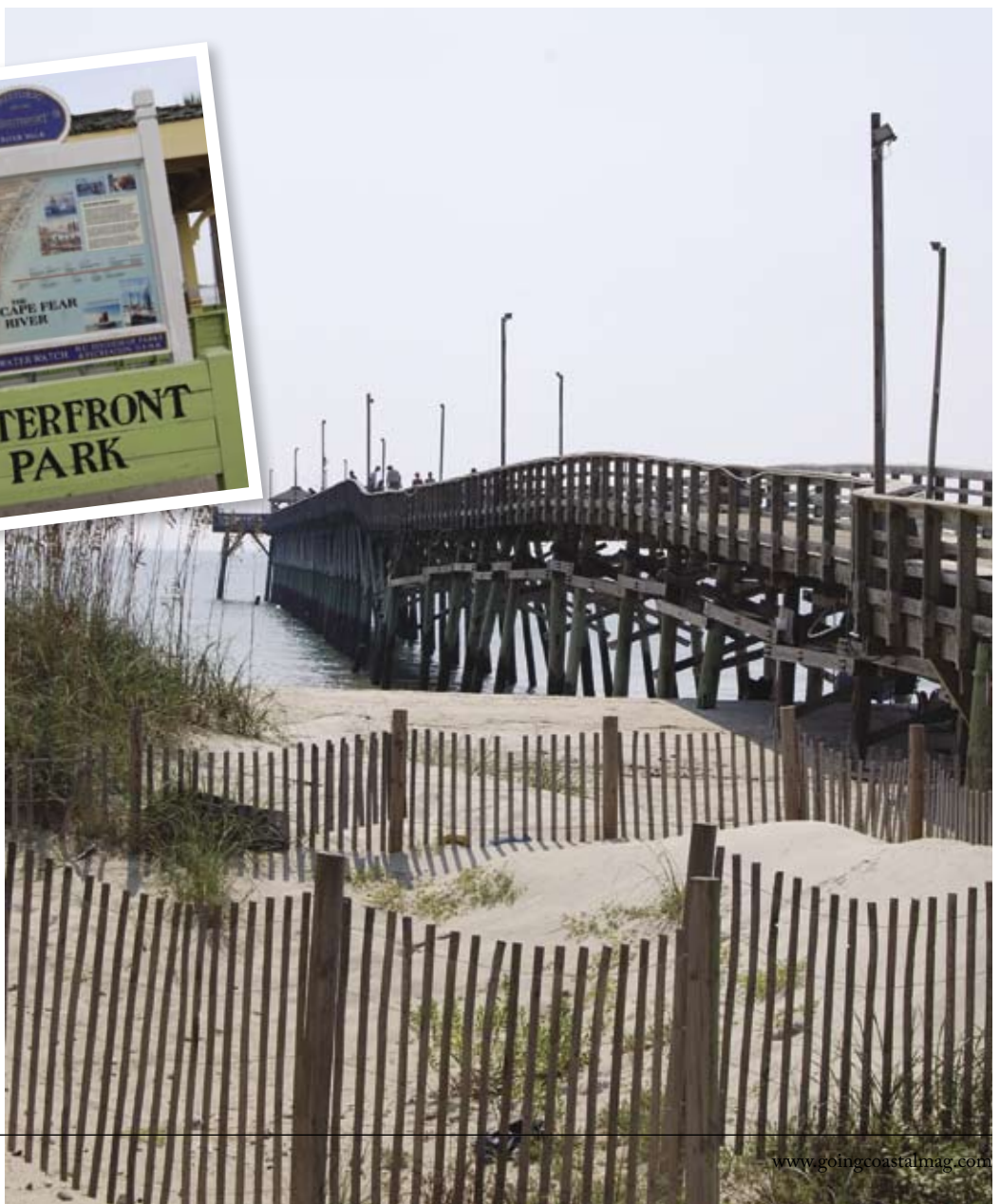
Bald Head Island is accessible only by boat, and the primary mode of transportation on the island is electric golf cart. Walking and biking are popular here, and there's really no rush to go anywhere. It is an upscale resort community featuring golf, beach and water activities.

The island was purchased in 1983 by Bald Head Island Limited, owned by the George P Mitchell family which is known for development of The Woodlands near Houston, TX and has also developed Indigo Plantation and Marina in Southport. This is the departure point for the passenger ferry regularly traveling the two miles to Bald Head. Developers are careful to preserve the history and nature which make the island desirable to vacationers and about 200 residents who choose to really get away from the world. Ten thousand of the island's 12,000 acres are protected and will not be developed.

While shopping, dining, church and modern conveniences are available, it's the type of place to go for unwinding in quiet seclusion or with a special family gathering.

Bald Head Island got its name from early river pilots' reference to its "bald" headland that is devoid of vegetation. Pilots would look for this high dune headland on the island's southwest point as a landmark leading to the mouth of the Cape

WATERFRONT PARK

Fear River. Its large maritime forest dense with live oaks, dogwoods, sabal palms, cedars, wax myrtles, yaupons and junipers is one of the largest examples of its kind on the East Coast.

Old Baldy Lighthouse, built in 1817, was commissioned by Thomas Jefferson. It is the oldest in the state and is open daily for the public to climb its 108 steps to view the panorama of the island.

A stay on Bald Head can be a real treat at a rental home, cottage or condo available from Bald Head Island Limited. Guests are offered temporary club memberships and can take advantage of packages featuring golf, holiday or weekend specials or couples' retreats.

Contact the Southport-Oak Island Chamber of Commerce at 1-800-457-6964 or 910-457-6964 or www.southport-oakisland.com.

Why take notice of this North Carolina coastal area? Life's a beach, and every possible beach should be enjoyed. ∎