

A Nags Head Getaway

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With summer only a few short months away, now is the ideal time to start making plans for that annual family getaway. If you're like most families, the whole planning process can be quite a challenge. The main problem lies in the fact that different family members like to do different things, so it's almost impossible to make vacation plans that please everyone.

Your daughter wants to work on her tan, your son wants to play video games, your brother-in-law wants to try out his new digital camera and your husband wants to fish. You just want to kick back and enjoy that new novel you've been meaning to read and maybe go out for dinner once or twice. Oh, and of course everything has to be wheelchair-accessible. How in the world can you make the whole family happy?

Well one solution is to rent a spacious beach cottage in Nags Head, North Carolina. It's the perfect place to unwind, enjoy a little natural beauty, and just relax. Most of the larger beach cottages have pools, spas, gourmet kitchens, beach access, barbecues and games. With up to nine bedrooms you can split the cost with another family or invite along some friends. There's lots of room to spread out, so everyone can do their own thing, yet still be under the same roof. It's the perfect family vacation.

And with over 14,000 units on the market, cottage rentals are big business in the Outer Banks. That's good news for wheelers and slow walkers, because with such a large inventory, there are accessible choices.

Cottages Galore

Finding a cottage that suits your needs is pretty easy. Granted, there are a large number of cottages; but even though most are owned by individuals, they are managed by a handful of real estate agencies. So, it's not as if you have to contact 14,000 individuals to find an accessible cottage. Local real estate agents are pretty knowledgeable about their inventories, and most can tell you can tell you immediately if they have any accessible choices.

For example, when I contacted Seaside Realty (252-261-5500, seasiderealty.com), Peggy Stoval was able to quickly direct me to two wheelchair-accessible cottages: The Carolinian (7710) and Feelin' Good Again (7905).

The seven bedroom Carolinian features wide doorways, good pathway access and elevator access to all floors. The ground floor is the recreation and kids floor and it comes complete with a pool table, computer and kids bedrooms; plus a spacious patio with a lift-equipped swimming pool, wet bar and a refrigerator. The whole patio area is fenced, so there's lots of privacy. It's a great place for a barbecue or a pool party.

The accessible bedroom is located on the second floor. It has a private bathroom with a roll-in shower, grab bars in the shower and around the toilet and a roll-under sink. There is sliding door access to the second-floor deck from the accessible bedroom, and a great view of the ocean from just about anywhere in the bedroom. The kitchen, living area and dining room are located on the third floor. There is



Cottage 5519 located in the Village at Nags Head

also an accessible over-dune boardwalk out to the beach, with stairway access down to the beach.

Feelin' Good Again also has good pathway access, elevator access to all floors and a lift-equipped swimming pool on the ground floor patio. This nine bedroom cottage features several bedrooms that are appropriate for slow walkers, but the most accessible choice is on the third floor. This bedroom has a private bathroom with a low-step shower (with a five-inch lip), a soaking tub and grab bars that are attached to the toilet. This home also has a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk out to the beach, with stairway access down to the beach.

Over at Village Realty (252-480-2224, villagerealtyobx.com) Cheryl Hoffarth was equally helpful in pointing me to a wheelchair-accessible property: Cottage 5519, located in the Village at Nags Head. This seven-bedroom cottage features elevator access to all floors, wide doorways and a roll-in sauna on the first floor. The accessible bedroom is located on the third floor and it features a hallway bathroom with a roll-in shower, a hand-held shower head and grab bars in the shower and around the toilet. It also has a beautiful wrap-around deck which connects to a private ocean view boardwalk. There is level access to the deck from the second floor, and it's a great place to enjoy the sunset.

As far as equipment goes, remember to bring your own shower chair or make arrangements to rent one locally, as none of the cottages come equipped with them. Additionally for a little beach fun, you can rent a beach wheelchair at Lifesaver Rentals (252-441-6048) or borrow one from the Nags Head Fire Department (252-441-5909).

A Coastal Drive

If you'd like to enjoy the scenic beauty of the Outer Banks, save a day for a coastal driving tour, complete with stops at a few of the historic lighthouses. If you'd also like to learn a bit about the local history, I highly recommend picking up the Our Tour Guide (ourtourguide.net) audio driving tour. Just pop in the CD while you drive and listen to the narrated tour along the way. Like most audio tours you can take it at your own pace, and just skip the areas that you don't want to visit. It's very well done and filled with lots of great local information. You can order it on line or pick it up at the K-Mart in Kill Devil Hills or any Food Lion in the Outer Banks.

Begin your drive by heading south towards the Cape Hatteras National Seashore. Highlights of the drive include Bodie Island Lighthouse, Coquina Beach and the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse.

Bodie Island Lighthouse (252-441-5711, nps.gov/caha/bodieli.htm) is not open to the public, but there is ramped access to the Visitors Center, which features a number of interpretive exhibits. The big treat here is the Bodie Island Pond Trail, located behind the lighthouse. This boardwalk trail features level access and a ramped viewing platform at the edge of the marsh. Be sure and take your binoculars, as you never know what you'll see.

If you'd like to explore the beach (and get a look at a shipwreck) head over to Coquina Beach, just across the street from the lighthouse. A beach wheelchair is available for loan at the lifeguard station.

Further down the road you'll find the Cape Hatteras Lighthouse (252-995-4474, nps.gov/caha/capelight.htm), perhaps the most famous lighthouse in the area. This beloved structure made national news in 1999 when it was moved 2,900 feet in order to save it from the eroding shoreline. There is ramped access to the Visitors Center and level access to the first floor of the Museum of the Sea (where you will find a free loaner beach wheelchair). The grounds around the lighthouse are level, and with a little effort you can take the beach wheelchair down to the former site of the lighthouse. It's a very scenic spot, and a great place to get a good view of both the lighthouse and the ocean.

Nature Walks

If you'd like to get an up-close-and-personal look at the local flora and fauna, or perhaps enjoy a short hike on an off-the-beaten-path nature trail, you're in luck as there are many accessible outdoor areas in the Outer Banks. At the top of the list is Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge (252-987-2394, peaisland.fws.gov), located just 10 miles south of Nags Head, on Hatteras Island.

Pea Island is a shore bird nesting haven and a prime habitat for wading birds. Swans are also a common sight in the refuge, and if you're lucky you might even catch a glimpse of the endangered peregrine falcon or a piping plover. There is level access to the Visitors Center, which has a number of interpretive exhibits and a very knowledgeable ranger on duty.

Viewing platform at the Pea Island National Wildlife Refuge



Photos by Charles Pannell



Boardwalk at the Creef Cut Wildlife Trail at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge

Outside, the half mile North Pond Trail winds halfway around the pond, out to a viewing platform over the marsh. Half of the trail is paved, while the other half features a boardwalk; but it's all wide, level and very accessible. The viewing platform has ramped access to the lower level and a wheelchair-height spotting scope at the end. There are also a number of benches and resting places along the trail. It's a great birding trail, but also an excellent choice for a leisurely nature walk.

Up north in Nags Head, Jockey's Ridge State Park (252-441-7132) offers an intimate look at the ecosystem of a medana; a huge hill of shifting sand that lacks vegetation. The entrance to the park is located on Carolista Drive, near milepost 12 on the Highway 158 Bypass. There is level access to the Visitors Center, which features interpretive exhibits and a small gift shop. Behind the Visitors Center there is a wheelchair-accessible boardwalk which leads out over the sand.

There is also an interpretive trail across the sand, but because it is not accessible to anybody with a mobility disability, alternate arrangements are available. With advance notice, visitors who have a physical disability can make arrangements for a free ride to the top of the dune in an all-terrain vehicle. Contact the park office at least 24 hours in advance to make a reservation for this private tour.

And don't miss the newest accessible trail in the area: the Creef Cut Wildlife Trail at Alligator River National Wildlife Refuge (252-473-1131, alligatorriver.fws.gov). Technically, Alligator River is located on the mainland, but it's just a short drive on US 64, so it's shame to miss it. The trailhead to the Creef Cut Trail is just off Highway 64 at Militia Road.

Near the trailhead you'll find an accessible pit toilet and a new accessible fishing pier. The half-mile paved Creef Cut Trail runs alongside the river and connects to a short boardwalk over the marsh. It's a great place for wildlife sightings, especially birds, black bears and red wolves. In fact it's a very accessible way to experience an otherwise remote wildlife area.

If You Go

Outer Banks Visitors Bureau
(252) 473-2138
outerbanks.org