

Sunset Beach's tiny barrier island is rimmed with miles of uncrowded strands; Boogieboarding and sandcastle building (below) are the main diversions in this laid-back town



sunset beach

NORTH CAROLINA

BY JODY MACE • PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT DINGMAN

Shore Bets

To learn about area wildlife, take a tour with the **Bird Island Preservation Society** (weekly in summer; 910-579-9754).

Ingram Planetarium on the mainland is a great diversion on a rainy day (910-575-0033; www.ingramplanetarium.org).

For an easy picnic, stop by the deli at

WE KNOW WE'RE "almost there" when we reach the old pontoon bridge that connects the town of Sunset

Beach to its island. On one side are the mainland and its many conveniences (supermarkets, gas stations, restaurants); on the other is pure tranquility: an unspoiled barrier island boasting pastel-colored cottages and miles of sand. We feel impatient waiting to cross the single-lane bridge, but it gives us a chance to slow down and take in the scene: sailboats gliding along the Intracoastal Waterway, fishermen casting lines from the shore, seagulls dive-bombing the reeds in search of prey. We start easing into vacation mode, knowing that once we cross the bridge, we'll be on island time.



PAGES 106 TO 107: LEFT TO RIGHT: SCOTT DINGMAN; STEVE NIEDORF; PETER N. FOX; STEVE NIEDORF



From top: Boogieboarding near the island's pier; Hanging out at the Calabash waterfront; Writing in the Kindred Spirit notebook on Bird Island

the **Sunset Beach Island Market** (910-579-0815).

Crabby Oddwaters on the mainland is our favorite spot for a first-night feast. We can't pass up the crab cakes, but crab legs are always the highlight (910-579-6372).

The **Calabash Seafood Hut** in nearby Calabash is known for its giant seafood platters (910-579-6723).

Accommodations on the island are pretty basic. A good bet for families: **Continental Condo**, which has modest two-bedroom apartments and a small pool (nightly rates start at \$104; 910-579-6772; www.continentalcondo.com).

For more luxurious digs on the main-

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Situated just off the North Carolina coast, the island of Sunset Beach is only three miles from end to end, which means we can park the car and spend our vacation walking or biking to the many beaches. My family's first stop is usually the east end for the large, crowd-free strand and tidal pools that 11-year-old Kyla used to call her "private swimming pools." Down the beach, the pier offers ample parking if needed and a few shops selling vacation essentials: beach toys, basic groceries, and ice cream. Our favorite place for a cone is **Julie's Rentals** (910-579-1211), which rents everything from boogieboards and kayaks to beach towels and cribs. When Kyla and eight-year-old Charlie tire of the water, we often walk out to the end of the pier and watch fishermen reeling in their catch.

A little further west is **Bird Island**, an uninhabited barrier island that's accessible by a sandbar. We bike there at least once a vacation to check out the animal population: herons, egrets, and the nesting sea turtles that lay their eggs there each summer. It's an untouched place and we always feel as if we're the first



humans to set foot there — until we see the Kindred Spirit mailbox in the sand. Kyla and Charlie pore over the messages contained in the notebook inside, then leave their own musings or drawings for the next explorers to find.

The beach can keep us entertained for days, but eventually the sea calls. Fortunately, there's no shortage of boat tours in the area. On this trip, we took a 2-hour ocean cruise aboard the **Sea Screamer** (843-249-0870) from nearby Little River, South Carolina. We got a hint of the captain's fun, easygoing manner as we listened to his drawled safety instructions: "If I start swimming toward shore, something is probably bad wrong, and y'all might want to put on your

life jackets and follow me." The highlight of the trip was watching leaping dolphins feasting on castoffs from a shrimp boat.

My kids can't resist the bright lights of bustling Myrtle Beach, South Carolina (about 30 miles south), so we always spend a day indulging in its many kid pleasures: the **Myrtle Beach Waves Waterpark**, the **Myrtle Beach Pavilion Amusement Park**, and the **Grand Prix Family Thrill Park**, among others. Following tradition, we end the day at

Original Benjamin's (843-449-0821; www.originalbenjamins.com), a huge all-you-can-eat seafood buffet that epitomizes Myrtle Beach's sensory overload. There's a snarling, gold-toothed pirate at the door and large-scale ship models inside. But most amazing are the 170 items on the buffet, including the ubiquitous crab legs, all manner of seafood, and vegetables prepared southern style: battered and deep fried.

No matter how much fun we've had in Myrtle Beach, we all look forward to crossing the drawbridge to get back "home." It was dark when we returned to the island this time. Still, we threw on our bathing suits and headed to the beach. The only things visible were the moon, its fractured reflection on the water, and the white foam of waves as they hit the sand. My husband and I couldn't quite see Kyla and Charlie, so we followed their laughter as they joked and ran along the shore. For us, that's the sound of a typical Sunset Beach vacation.

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