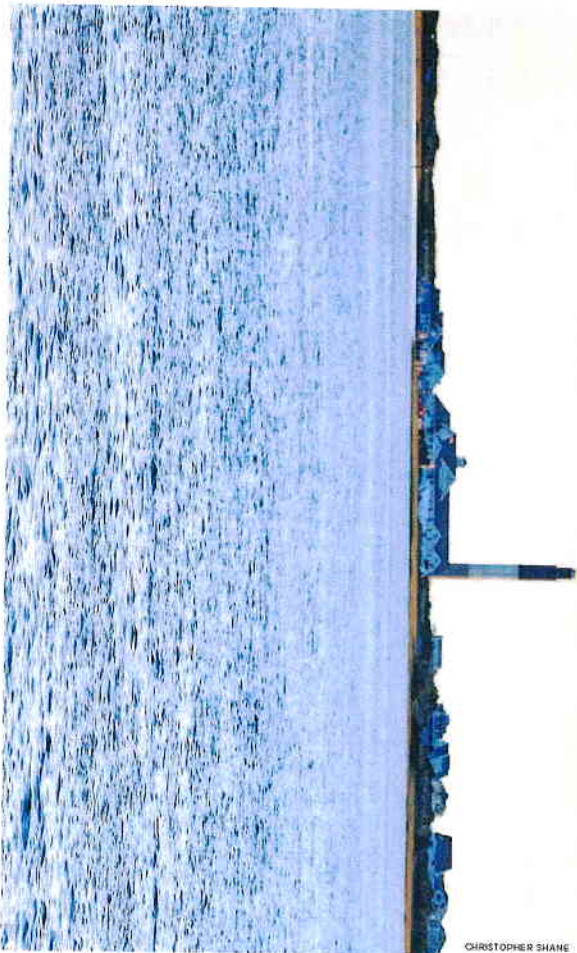


# AMERICA'S HAPPIEST SEASIDE TOWNS

Meet the winners of our annual search for the best coastal places to call home—for a weekend or a lifetime

By Tracey Minkin



CHRISTOPHER SHANE

## 1 SOUTHPORT

North Carolina

Putting proof to the adage that "small is beautiful," this tiny (2.2-square-mile) harbor town at the outlet of the Cape Fear River with only 3,060 residents wins big on Southern beauty and charm. Everyone's your neighbor here, and most of the town's residents walk, bike, or drive golf carts down Southport's oak tree-lined streets to enjoy a morning coffee at Port City Java, browse antique shops and galleries, and head to the waterfront for a table—and delicious fish tacos—on the pier of Fishy Fishy Café.

One stroll through town (and perhaps a stop at Bull Frog Corner, with its barrels of peppy candy) makes it easy to see why Southport has long been sought after as a film location. Bright white cottages with red roofs, stately sea captains' homes, two



Southport, North Carolina

light houses, and water in seemingly every direction (what with the confluence of the river and the Intracoastal Waterway) create vistas at every bend in the road. It's a vintage postcard sent from aholeyon past.

In addition to the town's harborfront pleasures—the jaw-dropping views of massive container ships navigating toward the ocean from inland Wilmington, plus a narrow strand of sand along the water—Southport is also a quick ferryboat ride out to Bald Head Island, housing one of North Carolina's most stunning beaches. Finally, there's nothing small about the Independence Day party here: Southport swells with revelers who come to celebrate at the North Carolina 4th of July Festival—a truly all-American weekend.

**WHERE TO STAY:** The buttercup-yellow circa-1890 Robert Ruak Inn offers a historic retreat, not to mention a welcoming line of rockers on its ample front porch. Rates start at \$145. 910/263-4189 or robertruakinn.com. **Lot's Jam's RiverView Inn** has cozy, pretty rooms near the water. Rates start at \$120. 910/457-6701 or lotsjams.com

## 2 VENICE

Florida

What does it say about this town of 22,000 people on Florida's Gulf Coast that it has a designated beach for dogs? Two things: Venice is a town with a big heart, and it has plenty of gorgeous, peppy-white beaches to spare (14 miles, in fact). Locals love Casperen Beach, a 2-mile-long sandy playground with a short drop-off that draws ocean swimmers. Beachcombers flock to Venice Beach to seek shark teeth, for which the town is known.

On shore, the pleasures of Venice are equally beautiful. The lushly landscaped avenues of the historic district, designed in the 1920s as an homage to the town's Italian namesake, are lined with Italian Renaissance-style buildings sporting elegant arches and red tile roofs that are home to more than 100 boutiques, restaurants, and small businesses.

The onetime winter-encampment for The Ringling Bros and Barnum & Bailey Circus, Venice still enjoys its playtime. The Venetian Waterway Park runs for 10 miles on both sides of the Intracoastal Waterway, allowing everyone access to running and walking trails, not to mention constant water views. Dogs, meanwhile, just lead their masters to Broward Paw Park Beach, where they can run free.

**WHERE TO STAY:** Across a slender street from the ocean, the Inn at the Beach has a charmingly old-fashioned courtyard pool, and its beach-view suites are perfect sunset-watching perches. Rates start at \$165. 941/544-8471 or innatthebeach.com



Venice, Florida