

Island Treasures

Just across from the Manteo waterfront, Roanoke Island Festival Park is home to two very special venues of North Carolina heritage: the Adventure Museum and the Outer Banks History Center.

By Bryan A. Oesterreich

The bi-fold doors on the bright yellow school bus open with a hiss, and fourth-grade students come spilling out, eager to stretch their legs after the ride from Beaufort County to Manteo. Chaperones direct the children through a set of glass doors where they'll be transported back in time — more than 400 years' worth.

North Carolina's Outer Banks are awash in the rich history of the colonization of America by cultures from around the world. The Adventure Museum's mission is to preserve the histories of those who braved the treacherous Atlantic Ocean to settle in a New World. And it does so by using a concept not usually associated with museums: fun.

Scott M. Stroh III, executive director of Roanoke Island Festival Park, tells visitors to leave behind any expectations about typical museums. "Most museums encourage visitors to look and read to their heart's content, but that's where it stops," he says. "Our facility was designed from the ground up to provide a hands-on experience for those who visit." And hands-on it is. Every display area in the 8,500-square-foot museum brings Outer Banks history to life in a way that books cannot.

For example, when visitors enter the Rogues Gallery, they learn more than who was instrumental in the colonization of North Carolina; they can actually dress up in the costumes worn by those who lived in the Elizabethan period. Delicate bonnets, softly woven shawls in earth-toned colors, and belts of all sizes hang on hooks. "Students who visit us really enjoy wearing these clothes," says Lynda Midgett, a site educator. "It makes for wonderful photo-ops. And some say it makes them feel like they lived back then."

Next on the historical path through the museum, visitors not only read about how the explorers navigated without GPS, but they're actually shown how to use some of the instruments of the 16th century, navigational tools that seem very rudimentary by today's standards.

The museum is set up in a chronological time line, so as visitors move from area to area they're also moving along through history — from the Rogues Gallery to Native American settlements to Civil War displays to duck hunting on the Outer Banks, where visitors get the chance to prove their skill with an infrared rifle while sitting in a virtual duck blind.

Focus on children

According to Stroh, the hands-on design of the museum was targeted toward students. "We work directly with North Carolina educators so the areas in the museum correspond to the curriculums being taught in fourth- and eighth-grade history classes — both North Carolina

and world history,” he says. Since explorers and settlers came from many parts of the world, the museum has tailored its displays and interactive opportunities accordingly. Students read about the beginnings of America in the classroom; then they take field trips to Roanoke Island to supplement their reading with a virtual reality experience in the museum. The students say they think the experience is “very cool.”

Manteo Mayor John Wilson agrees that the Adventure Museum’s focus from the beginning was children. “We continue to get very positive feedback from educators who bring their classes to visit,” he says. “The museum proves that learning really can be fun.”

Just ask Catherine Revels, who teaches at Snowden Elementary School in Beaufort County. “Before we visit the museum, students are given a list of questions that can be answered if they pay attention as they move through the museum,” she says. “What’s really interesting is most students today are exposed to a lot of technology to entertain them. But when they go through the museum, the hands-on experience engages them in ways that computer games can’t.” Revels also says after they finish their tour of the museum, students gravitate toward the outdoor experiences provided by the museum.

Visitors can walk down a wooded path from the museum and immerse themselves in a re-created Civil War campground replete with items needed by soldiers to survive during battle. One look at a typical tent used by those in uniform will give a whole new meaning to the term “camping out.”

Just down the path from the Civil War campground is yet another hands-on experience for those who visit the facility: the Elizabeth II sailing vessel. Pictures may be worth 1,000 words, but a replica of a 16th-century sailing vessel is worth more than any picture. Aboard the vessel, people are entertained by knowledgeable and friendly “sailors.” Visitors can begin to imagine what it was like to spend 30 to 90 days aboard the tiny ship, crossing the cold Atlantic Ocean without the benefit of electricity or abundant fresh water and food.

One of the things most noticeable during a visit to the Adventure Museum is the passion for history shown by all who work and volunteer here. “Our people love the Outer Banks and love sharing the history with those who visit,” says Stroh. “People have interest in preserving history and memories. We all want to know more about who came before us.”

Outer Banks History Center

Just a short stroll down from the Adventure Museum is the Outer Banks History Center (OBHC). The 6,700-square-foot facility is operated by the North Carolina Office of Archives & History. While the Adventure Museum is a hands-on experience for visitors, the OBHC is a more traditional reference facility that complements the museum, focusing on an intimate look at life long past. And, thanks to the Internet, people from all over the world are accessing its treasures.

Various media provide access to information: books, magazines, journals, microfilms, photographs, oral history tapes, and more — all dedicated to preserving the geographical and environmental histories and cultures of the Outer Banks.

One of the reasons the center is queried from all parts of the world is the rarity of many of its holdings, according to KaeLi Spiers, OBHC curator. “Most of our photos, maps, artworks, and oral histories are one of a kind,” she says. “So naturally, we get inquires from many people doing research — journalists, universities, authors, and historians — in addition to people who have interest in tracing their family lineage.”

Outer Banks resident, historian, and author David Stick is the man behind the creation of the OBHC. In 1986, Stick donated his extensive personal library to the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources. According to Stick, who, by the way, says his first published piece was in *The State* (now *Our State*) in 1939, he wanted to be sure his materials would be available for others to use in the years to come. “I had been fortunate enough to acquire the second-largest collection of Outer Banks historical materials” in the world, he says. “Now, the materials are where they belong, in a place for all to use and enjoy.”

Stick still maintains a relationship with the OBHC. “I’m still actively doing research,” he says. Materials donated by Stick — and many others from around the country — are classified in a variety of genres. “Discovery and Early Exploration” holds many watercolors, archeological reports, and map collections ranging from the 16th century to current navigational charts. Anyone wishing to learn more about the lifestyles of both colonists and Native Americans will find such information in this area. Especially interesting are the drawings of how the two groups interacted.

If you think you may have family roots dating back to early colonists, the “Genealogy and Family History” area is where you need to begin your research. In this area are many published documents that may hold that missing piece to your family’s puzzle. Available are newspapers, published family histories, copies of public records, deeds, and marriage records from four eastern counties: Dare, Currituck, Hyde, and Tyrrell.

Other research genres include “Coastal Military Operations,” including American Indian conflicts, the Revolutionary War, piracy, the Civil War, and both world wars; “Works of Local Photographers,” with thousands of photos that focus on the Outer Banks and how it has changed over the years; “Shipwrecks, Lighthouses and Aids to Navigation,” providing information on how mariners dealt with the ever-changing inlets and sounds; and “Natural History and Environmental Sciences,” dealing with the entire scope of man and nature in and around the Outer Banks.

So whether you want to absorb some of the history by exploring in the Adventure Museum or do some research at the Outer Banks History Center, both are valuable treasures for Tar Heel residents and those who’d like to learn more about our rich coastal heritage.

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