



Ferry-Go-Round

Traversing coastal North Carolina by boat and by car

BY JAMES F. LEE ♦ PHOTOGRAPHS BY JUSTIN CHESNEY

Our car rumbled over the metal ramp as we drove onto the ferry. The crew guided us into a tightly packed space, making room for the cars behind us. Once aboard and parked, we exited the car and watched the panorama unfold.

My wife, Carol, and I were on a road trip in North Carolina, which claims to have the second-largest state-owned ferry system in the U.S. (after Washington). Over a long weekend, we set out to explore the coast by car and by ferry. During our journey, we would cross an ocean inlet, broad sounds, tidal estuaries, and a narrow river. Our fellow passengers included tourists, commuters, and schoolkids.

Ferry rides are a relaxing, picturesque way to travel and discover more about the land around you. And what's more, most of the ferry crossings are free of charge. Here are the 6 ferry crossings we took over 3 days, plus a few suggestions for things to do along the way.

This ferry crossing from Hatteras Island to Ocracoke Island is part of the Outer Banks National Scenic Byway.



Day 1

Ferry 1: Hatteras Island to Ocracoke Island

(1 HOUR; FREE)

Shortly before 2 p.m., the *W. Stanford White* pulled into the dock near the landing off State Route 12. While waiting for the ferry to take us south to Ocracoke Island, we saw license plates from Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, New York, and of course, North Carolina. A bus carrying a middle school baseball team was boarding the ferry, too.

Like most of the ferries in the North Carolina system, the *W. Stanford White* is double-ended—you drive onto one end of the boat and then drive off the other end once docked. This crossing is part of the Outer Banks National Scenic Byway, offering majestic views of the desolate sand dunes and scrubby vegetation of the thin barrier islands and the Atlantic Ocean beyond. On our right was the open water of the vast Pamlico Sound.

When we arrived at Ocracoke Village, we took a short walk from the harbor to the British Cemetery. Four tombstones mark the graves of the 37 sailors who were killed when their armed trawler was sunk by a German submarine in 1942 off Ocracoke Island. A nearby plaque names the crewmembers, and the British Naval ensign flies on a flagpole above this solemn spot sheltered by live oaks and cedars.

Day 2



Ferry 2: Ocracoke to Cedar Island

(2 HOURS AND 15 MINUTES; \$15 PER VEHICLE)

The next morning we boarded *Sea Level*, one of the largest vessels in the ferry system at about 900 tons. There was plenty of sheltered seating on the upper deck, lots of deck space for observation, and even an elevator.

We set out from the landing at Ocracoke Harbor as the sun was rising over the town in shades of pink and gray. We sailed across Pamlico Sound, a huge expanse of water that separates the Outer Banks from the mainland of North Carolina. Hungry seagulls followed in our wake.

Sea Level's captain, Walter Goodwin, has piloted boats across every ferry run in the state. He told us that this route—a “budget cruise”—is his favorite. “I can’t imagine not being on the water every day,” he said. *Reservations are recommended for the Pamlico Sound ferries; you can travel standby, but even during high season there are only 4 trips a day.*



Top left: The British Cemetery in Ocracoke Village. Above: *Sea Level* arrives at Cedar Island. Top right: A seagull greets passengers at Minnesott Beach. Right: A ferry passenger walks on the beach at Cedar Island.

Ferry 3: Cherry Branch to Minnesott Beach

(20 MINUTES; FREE)

From Cedar Island, we drove about 53 miles to Cherry Branch in Carteret County, where we caught the ferry boat *Neuse* for a quick trip across the lower Neuse River, a broad tidal estuary that empties into Pamlico Sound. This busy route not only connects State Route 306 on either side of the river but is also an important link for workers at the Marine Corps Air Station at Cherry Point who commute to their homes across the river in Pamlico County. Boats depart every 30 minutes between 5 a.m. and 10 p.m.

We missed the commuter rush during our 10:30 a.m. crossing and spent our time looking out over the boat’s rails at the scene before us on this sunny, windy day. We passed a sailboat headed toward Pamlico Sound and waved to the *Kinnakeet*, cruising in the opposite direction. As we approached the coastline, sandy beaches and homes peeked out between the trees.



Ferry 4: Aurora to Bayview (30 MINUTES; FREE)

From Minnesott Beach, it’s about 27 miles up Highway 306 to the town of Aurora, home to Aurora Mine, a massive industrial complex that includes a phosphate strip mine, refinery buildings, pipelines, and production facilities. Scott Randalls, a crew member on our ferry, the *Gov. Daniel Russell*, told us that many mine employees living on the Bayview side commute to work on the ferry.

A fun place to visit in Aurora is the Aurora Fossil Museum on Main Street. This small museum showcases vertebrate and invertebrate fossils, Native American artifacts, and a variety of rocks and minerals. Visitors can find their own fossils in dig pits.

As the *Gov. Daniel Russell* headed out across the Pamlico River, we stood on the deck, enjoying the brisk wind. Behind us, the industrial cranes and smokestacks of the Aurora plant stretched along the riverbank. Ahead, a pelican skimmed the surface of the water, while cormorants stood guard atop the posts as we neared the Bayview dock.

From the Bayview landing, we took State Route 92 for 6 miles heading northwest toward our next ferry crossing, passing through the village of Bath, North Carolina’s first town and port. This tree-lined community on the Pamlico River boasts several historic buildings worth touring, including St. Thomas Church (1734), the oldest in the state; and the Palmer-Marsh House (1751), the town’s oldest house and a national historic landmark.

Day 3



Ferry 5: Cashie River (5 MINUTES; FREE)

The next day, we drove from Bath about 46 miles north toward rural Bertie County, which grows cotton and peanuts. Prior to reaching the county seat of Windsor, we turned on to County Road 1500 to approach the Cashie River from the south. There we boarded the *Sans Souci*, one of 3 cable ferries in North Carolina that are guided along by steel ropes.

Pilot Darrell Bond emerged from the small pilot station and greeted us. He lifted the barrier arm at

the water's edge, and we drove onto the bargelike vessel capable of carrying 2 vehicles. Bond operated the diesel engine from the small pilothouse on the side of the boat. He told us the majority of passengers are locals, although he gets some tourists, too.

After the boat docked, Bond jumped out and lifted the barrier arm that was blocking the dirt road leading to Route 308. A hand-painted sign at the end of the road read, COME BACK, Y'ALL.



Ferry 6: Currituck to Knotts Island

(45 MINUTES; FREE)

After crossing the Cashie River, we drove about 67 miles northeast to arrive at our last ferry stop—the Currituck terminal—where we boarded the *Gov. James B. Hunt*. “The biggest reason we’re here is for the children,” said crew member Richard H. Lee Jr.

The *Gov. James B. Hunt* is like a school bus on water, ferrying students between their homes on Knotts Island about 2 miles across Currituck Sound to the mainland, where the middle school and high school are located. Without the ferry, students would have an almost 40-mile commute that would require a circuitous route through Virginia.

Lee has been looking after the kids for 10 years. “I have a great rapport with them,” he said.

I asked one of the high school girls aboard if she liked riding a ferry to school rather than taking a bus. She thought it over and said the view was better on the ferry.

Looking out on the sound's broad expanse with cormorants skimming the water, seagulls swooping by, and the tree-lined shore of Mackay Island National Wildlife Refuge in the distance, I'd say she was right.

Driving off, I looked in the rearview mirror and saw the girls wave goodbye to crew member Lee as they walked ashore.



JAMES F. LEE is a freelance writer and blogger focusing on history and travel. He is the author of *Safe Passage: The Civilian Evacuation From Hawai'i After Pearl Harbor* and *The Lady Footballers: Struggling to Play in Victorian Britain*.

Clockwise from far left: Willie Lee, captain of the *Sans Souci* ferry; *Gov. James B. Hunt* passengers in their vehicles at the Currituck dock; cormorants perch on navigational signage. Below: Arriving at Knotts Island from Currituck.

