

DESTINATION

THE COAST IS CLEAR

VIRGINIA BEACH IS READY WHEN YOUR GROUP IS

BY ROBIN ROENKER

Home to multiple beaches and a famous three-mile-long boardwalk, Virginia Beach, Virginia, boasts plenty of opportunities to safely enjoy surfside sun and fun.

“Our beaches are three football fields wide, so there’s plenty of room to spread out,” said Jim Coggin, tourism sales manager for VisitVirginiaBeach.

But the lively and inviting city, which sits at the meeting point of the Chesapeake Bay and the Atlantic Ocean, is no run-of-the-mill beach town. In Virginia Beach, groups can experience science, history, arts and outdoor adventure, plus bucket list food experiences that showcase the richness of Atlantic Coast life.



Virginia Beach boasts 28 miles of public coastline, much of it on Chesapeake Bay.

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SEASIDE SCIENCE

No visit to Virginia Beach would be complete without a stop at the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center. Visitors can explore coastal habitats from around the world, through hands-on exhibits and up-close views of the aquarium’s harbor seals, sharks, rays, Komodo dragons and more.

Groups looking for a unique team-building experience may want to try the Adventure Park at Virginia Aquarium, where 17 treetop challenge courses and 27 zip lines offer a recipe for outdoor fun. For nature lovers, the aquarium also offers whale watching excursions from November through March and dolphin-watching cruises throughout the spring and summer.

The 2.5-hour whale watching cruise in search of juvenile humpback whales in the Atlantic is “magnificent,” Coggin said. “While you’re out there, the captain will talk about other winter wildlife visible in the area as well.”



Virginia Aquarium



Whale watching in Virginia Beach

NOTABLE NATURE

Natural beauty abounds in Virginia Beach, where guests can enjoy more than 200 miles of hiking and biking trails throughout the city. At the city’s False Cape State Park, one of the last remaining undeveloped areas along the Atlantic coast and a favorite of birdwatchers, visitors can enjoy guided kayak trips and interpretive wildlife-viewing programs. Not open to public vehicular traffic, the park is accessible only by foot, bicycle, tram or boat via the nearby Back Bay National Wildlife Refuge.

The city’s Rudee Inlet is a water lover’s paradise that is teeming with options from fishing charters to jet skiing and parasailing. Several boat companies launch sightseeing tours from the inlet. Thrill-seeking groups might find the Rudee Rocket to be their speed: Zooming through the waves with 2,000 horsepower, the 70-foot yellow speed-boats offer a memorable way to view the Virginia Beach shoreline and, if luck holds, even a pod of dolphins at play.

HISTORIC HAPPENINGS

Rectangular Snip

Virginia Beach is also a haven for history. The city’s First Landing State Park — home to 20 miles of interpretive hiking trails through unique natural habitats, including bald cypress swamps, lagoons and maritime forests — also marks the spot where English colonists first landed in America in 1607, before moving inland and settling Jamestown.

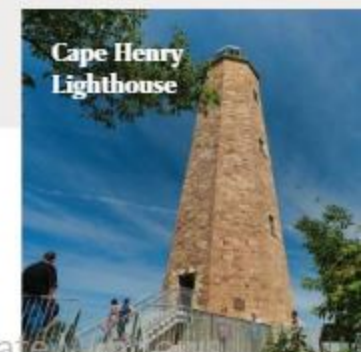
The city’s famed Cape Henry Lighthouse, the fourth oldest in America, dates from 1792. Its construction was commissioned by George Washington and overseen by Alexander Hamilton. “There are 191 steps to the top for a great view of both the Atlantic Ocean and the Chesapeake Bay,” Coggin said. The original lighthouse stands alongside a “newer” one built in 1881, which is still in use today.

Fans of either military or aviation history will want to make time to visit the Military Aviation Museum in Virginia Beach, home to one of the largest collections of World War I and World War II military aircraft in the world. “All of the planes in the museum are airworthy,” said Coggin. “In this museum, you can actually walk through and see where the oil is dripped.” The museum is suitable for groups and is able to host catered functions and even arrange guest speakers, such as former fighter pilots or Rosie the Riveter-type historic interpreters.

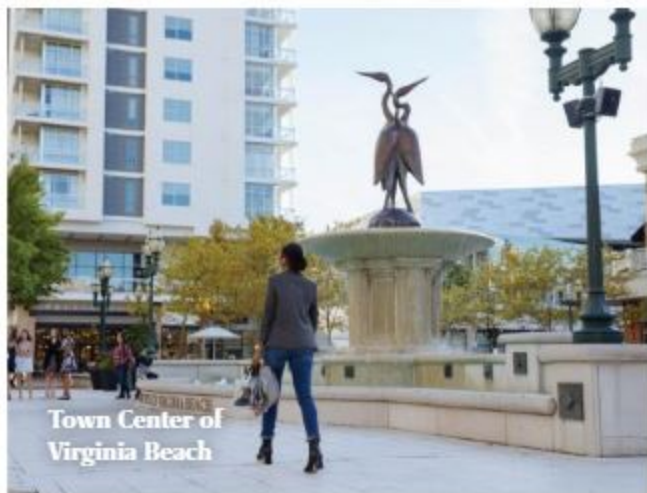
For something altogether unique, groups could consider a stop at the international headquarters of Edgar Cayce’s Association for Research and Enlightenment (ARE), which is open to tours seven days a week. Considered the Father of Holistic Medicine, Cayce is credited with giving more than 14,000 psychic readings covering some 10,000 topics, including holistic health and wellness, reincarnation and ESP. Cayce opened his Virginia Beach facility in 1928 as the Cayce Hospital of Enlightenment. Now home to the ARE Health Center and Spa, the building is listed on the Virginia Beach Historic Register. The ARE complex also includes one of the largest metaphysical libraries in the world, as well as a bookshop, a cafe and a meditation garden.



Military Aviation Museum



Cape Henry Lighthouse



ABOUNDING ARTS

For groups looking for a night of culture, the Sandler Center for the Performing Arts typically hosts a rich, rotating repertoire of performing artists, from classical music and ballet to family-friendly Broadway musicals. When the pandemic ends, the venue will again be able to host group events in its 1,308-seat performance hall, as well as its lobbies and smaller meeting rooms.

The Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art in Virginia Beach presents rotating exhibitions of works by artists that, in the museum's own words, "were either radical in their day or are finding new approaches to depicting objects and ideas now."

Virginia Beach also features a wide array of outdoor, public art, including bright murals that fill the city's oceanfront and ViBE creative districts, home to a rich community of local artisans. Visitors can enjoy a one-mile, self-guided walking tour to enjoy each of the ViBE murals up close and take a break here and there at one of the many coffee shops, bakeries, artist shops and restaurants.

Live music is easy to find along the city's oceanfront, particularly on Atlantic Avenue, where the city's Live! On Atlantic street entertainment program includes live, free concerts throughout the summer.

Parks and public area throughout the city are dotted with three-dimensional art as well, including the Instagram-friendly bronze sculpture *The Kiss*, found in Virginia Beach's Central Park, and *The Canoes*, a stainless-steel piece that features 10 canoes in honor of the region's rich waterway history, found near Lesner Bridge.

BEVERAGES AND BITES

When hunger sets in, there's no shortage of fine-dining options in Virginia Beach. But for a bucket-list experience, stop at one of the city's many oyster bars for a taste of the area's famed Lynnhaven oysters, known for their large size and saltiness.

"Groups can also do a Chesapeake Bay blue crab feast at one of several area restaurants," said Coggin. "They actually do it the authentic way. They throw a newspaper down on the table, and the crabs are in bushel baskets, and they dump the crabs on the table. It's really kind of fun to watch people enjoy the experience who maybe have never had crab before."

And when it comes to social hour, Virginia Beach delivers thanks its bustling array of bars and distilleries. Best bets include the Tarnished Truth Distilling Company — a bourbon distillery inside the 1920s-era Cavalier Hotel — and the Mermaid Winery, an urban winery, wine bar and restaurant. For craft beer lovers, the Virginia Beach Beer Trail offers a "microbrewed adventure" that spotlights the city's many local breweries, including Back Bay Brewing Company, the Home Republic Brewing Company and the Wasserhund Brewing Company.

Groups looking to add a game night to their itinerary can plan a stop at the city's brand-new Apex Entertainment complex, home to laser tag, axe throwing, bowling, mini golf, an escape room, an arcade and more. "They also have a full-service restaurant, so groups can go there for a meal and then have some fun," Coggin said.

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