

WALTER

Raleigh's Life & Soul



Family Vacation

COASTAL FUN AT RIVER DUNES

by: CC Parker

Do you dream of time “off the grid”? Yearn for that special place to share a laugh, grill a steak, and have no worries beyond what to grill tomorrow? A place with spotty cell service; a place that supplies nicer sheets than you have at home? My family has found just the spot, not too far down the road, called River Dunes. River Dunes is a boating community nestled along a harbor off Broad Creek where the Neuse River meets the Pamlico Sound. This place takes you by surprise, in the best of ways. Here’s what you can expect.

Getting There:

For those accustomed to travelling the well-worn trail *Highway 70 East to Morehead City-Atlantic Beach*, you’ll find veering *left* at New Bern onto US-17 is a completely different experience. This trek has sweeping views of New Bern and the Neuse River. After winding through many cornfields, a white pasture fence, and behind it friendly noshing horses, marks the River Dunes entrance. A quick stop at the registration cottage and you’re on your way.

My husband jokes that I’m partial to “pretty,” and this place really is spectacular. A rambling drive meanders to the village and your first view is of River Dunes’ stunning marina and adjoining Harbor House. Built of reclaimed brick, the Harbor House is a stately two-story building smelling of beeswax and old wood, oozing first-class leisure. It houses the restaurant, a bar, pool tables, the Harbormaster’s office, and multiple screened-in porches with outdoor fireplaces. It serves as the heart of the community.

The Atlanta-based architectural firm Historical Concepts spared no expense in creating an authentic coastal village in the tradition of nearby communities like New Bern. The place is imbued with a genteel grace and casual elegance. The adjoining pool area has everything you (or at least for my family and me) could want: a pool, covered bar, cabanas, a hot tub, two outdoor fireplaces, and a workout area. The view out to the marina reveals some impressive boats – some boats are there for the night, some are kept there year round. There are kayaks and paddleboards for guests to use, as well.



Personal Experience:

Last Labor Day, my family joined two other families to celebrate at River Dunes. One family rented a large house on Main Street, but we opted instead to rent four “tiny houses” in the Grace Bay cottage enclave. Grace Bay, enclosed by a picket fence, is a charming area with a communal fire pit encircled by Adirondack chairs, a gas grill, and an oyster table. Each cottage is tiny but exactly what you need for a weekend stay. Equipped with a bedroom, a small kitchen – coffee provisions, plates, and a corkscrew – and a comfortable bathroom. Each front porch has a rocking chair and reading lamp, perfect for whiling away the evening. The porch is big enough, too, for morning coffee and evening cocktails (I recommend pulling up beer coolers to use as extra chairs).



Everyone was happy during the Labor Day weekend. The group’s two 10-year-olds were constantly moving, returning home only to change clothes for the pool, report a bicycle mishap, sneak out a bag of chips, or for a quick game on the PS4 while the teens slept. They ignored the discreet *No fishing off the docks* signs, and insisted that the Harbormaster didn’t mind. (I think this might be true, as River Dunes offers loaner rods for the little folk.)

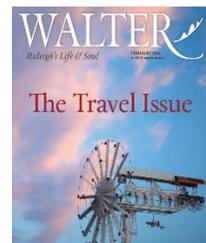
The fathers fished and napped. World-class red drum fishing makes this area a favorite destination at the end of summer. There is also excellent flounder and speckled trout fishing. The Marina sells the important stuff: gas, beer, ice, wine, and snacks. The Harbormaster is happy to connect guests to local captains, and boat slips are available for rent by the night, month, or annually. We enjoyed several beautiful sunsets on our nightly booze cruise. The teens, I’m happy to report, were also content. Glad for extra space and our parental laid-back mentality, they really had a great time. The boys imported a PS4, and nothing fosters friendship like four big boys huddled around a 30-inch TV screen. The girls practiced their driving skills and requisitioned a pool cabana.

Predictably, the big boys became restless on the second day and set out for nearby Oriental, their car stereo thumping. Only 15 minutes away, folks go to Oriental to grocery shop, eat lunch, or to look for “dragon eggs” (folklore fun for visitors: dozens of rocks painted to look like eggs and scattered around town).



Holiday weekends make for good observation, and River Dunes’ audience is well-rounded. We saw folks on a long cruise with no set return date; very young recent retirees; long-retired vacationers; River Dunes homeowners; and of course a few pirates.

You’re likely to fit right in. If you’re craving time away from it all, this is the place: excellent fishing, lovely accommodations, spotty cell service. River Dunes is quiet and beautiful and relaxed – enough to keep every member of the family satisfied. If your priorities are like mine, River Dunes creates the perfect retreat. Rocking chairs, reading lamps, and the wine cork await you.



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