

Coastal Chic

In Duck, North Carolina, The Sanderling Resort and Spa is a civilized alternative to the big cottage scene

BY RICHARD ERNSBERGER JR.
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Duck, North Carolina, on the northern end of the Outer Banks, is renowned for being a civilized beach enclave. That's what I'd heard about the place, for years, and a recent visit validated its reputation. It's a fairly quiet place—especially in May. There are a few shops in the town of Duck, and a few restaurants scattered along Route 12, the coastal stretch also known as Duck Road, but the area does not have much commercial development. What Duck does have, of course, is beach cottages—thousands of them, in a near-uniform (and aesthetically pleasing) shade of gray. A large number of the summer homes are enormous, five- to 10-bedroom shingled palaces built specifically to be rented to small armies of people. No wonder Duck Road is jammed with traffic in the peak summer months.



The Sanderling Resort

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The Duck cottage scene is sweet, to be sure, but if you prefer a more intimate and refined beach holiday, there is an alternative—the Sanderling Resort and Spa, which this year is celebrating its 25th anniversary. Tucked on a narrow strip of land between the Atlantic Ocean and Currituck Sound, the Sanderling is an inviting place for a two- to four-day respite. With 88 rooms spread over three low-slung cedar shake buildings with generous porches (an attractive main inn plus north and south wings), it is just the right size—big enough to offer an array of amenities (two restaurants, an indoor pool and full-service spa, tennis, fitness and walking/biking) yet small enough to be both charming and relaxed. With a spacious deck behind the main

inn, a semi-permanent tented area on the sound and a sizeable gazebo, the Sanderling is a popular place for largish private gatherings, especially weddings, about 50 of which have been booked for this spring, summer and fall.

Wendy Coulson Murray, sales and marketing director for the Sanderling, describes the resort as “coastal chic.” If by that she means upscale in a quiet, understated way, Murray is spot-on. The main inn's first- and second-floor common areas have fireplaces and plenty of polished pine, along with comfortable sitting areas around which, in bookcases, can be found an impressive selection of books. In the morning, guests will find coffee, tea and newspapers in the second-floor sitting area; in the afternoon, tea and cookies.

The Sanderling, as one might expect, has an outdoor-themed décor—think shore birds and ducks, in keeping with the area's history. The marshland north of the resort, toward the Virginia border, was once a top waterfowl hunting area. In particular, the Sanderling has one of the rare and original copies of the naturalist and painter John James Audubon's *Birds of America*, arguably the best picture book ever produced. (It is under glass.) In addition, there are many bird sculptures—by such notables as Grainger McKoy and Gunther Granget, among others; ceramic bird figurines; and birding prints, including at least one by Bob Havell Jr. (the principal engraver of Audubon's classic book).



Earl Slick built the Sanderling, named for the brown, long-peaked coastal bird, in 1985. A Texan by birth and son of a wealthy oilman, Slick became a World War II pilot and then, with his brother, Tom, started an air freight business in the 1940s. They made it a success. Tom Slick, a Yale graduate, was an oilman, inventor, rancher and philanthropist. He was once described as a “millionaire adventurer and Yeti hunter of the 1950s and 1960s.” He founded the Southwest Foundation for Medical Research in San Antonio, the brothers’ hometown, and today it is a leading center for blood-borne disease research.

Earl Slick, also a Yale grad, moved with his wife to Winston-Salem, North Carolina, in 1952. There, while still running his air freight business, he became a real-estate developer, opening the city’s first shopping center in 1955. In 1973, he bought 636 acres of coastal property on the Outer Banks from Walter B. Davis, another Texas oil tycoon. According to Murray, Slick was an avid hunter and fisherman, and the northern stretch of the Outer Banks “became his playground.” She adds, “He was passionate about it. He developed this place for friends and family, and then it became more of a business.” Today, the Sanderling, which comprises 14 acres, is owned by Turnpike Properties. One of Slick’s daughters is on the board.

The Sanderling is right on the beach, which slopes a bit to the ocean and is notable for its texture, a mix of sand and the finely ground remains of clams, oysters, starfish and mollusks. It’s therapy for feet. The Outer Banks is not a great place for swimming—the surf can be rough, and the water is said to be cold even through July—but I’m guessing that few guests are open-water swimming types to begin with. At the Sanderling, the idea is to amble out the wooden walkway in the back, grab your own lounge chair and umbrella, plop down with a good book, and relax, sun and breeze on your face.

Those who are more athletic will find plenty to do. The indoor pool, adjacent to the full service spa, is directly across Duck Road, a one-minute walk. It is small (two lap lanes plus a kids’ area) but heated and airy, with comfortable chaise lounges and window views. There are two outdoor tennis courts next to the spa, and guests are also welcome to use the Pine Island Racquet and Fitness Club, located three miles up the road toward Corolla. If you are fit and so inclined, you can rent a bike and ride through the Pine Island Audubon Sanctuary, adjacent to the Sanderling and alongside Currituck Sound, to get to the racquet club. Or just walk along the mostly grassy path and watch birds. The sanctuary is said to be a favorite resting spot of double-breasted cormorants, the northern harrier and sharp-shinned hawks, Virginia rails and black-bellied plover. In the late fall months, geese and ducks descend on the sound. The Sanderling can arrange kayak tours of the preserve, which is open year-round. And don’t forget that most traditional of Outer Banks diversions: flying a kite.



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The resort has two restaurants. The casual option, for breakfast, lunch and dinner, is the Lifesaving Station, which has a maritime theme and genuine nautical artifacts inside. The restaurant is built around the restored remains of an actual U.S. lifesaving station—one of seven built along North Carolina's treacherous coast in 1877. It was destroyed by fire, rebuilt in 1899, decommissioned in the 1950s, renovated in 1977 and opened with the Sanderling in 1985. According to a marker outside the restaurant, "the mission of the U.S. Lifesaving Service was the systematic saving of shipwrecked victims, their cargo and the ships, in that order." In 1915, the service was joined with the Cutter Revenue Service to form the U.S. Coast Guard. The food and service are good, and there is a bar on the second floor.

The Sanderling's more formal restaurant, located across the street and next to the spa, is the Left Bank. It's been an AAA four-diamond restaurant since it opened six years ago—the only one on the Outer Banks. The 60-seat restaurant is a stunning, crescent-shaped room with caramel leather chairs, cherry millwork, an exhibition kitchen and floor-to-ceiling windows that overlook the sound. At dusk, with cocktail in hand (a pomegranate martini, say, or a Harry's Bar Sidecar) at the blonde onyx bar and with the fading rays of the sun glistening on the water, it is quite the place to be. "I'm officially in the restaurant business, but I'm really in the sunset business," says general manager Michael Murray, who looks jaunty in sport coat and bow tie. The restaurant serves contemporary American cuisine with an emphasis on Southern fare, and takes a "sustainable, organic, artisanal and local" approach to its food. Among the offerings on a five-course tasting menu (\$85 or \$125 when paired with wine): smoked Carolina trout, a salad of organic herbs, spiced heritage pork belly, Maine halibut with English pea puree, and artisanal cheeses from Vermont. To accompany our drinks, Chef de Cuisine Christopher Gerster made for us a grilled flatbread pizza with pureed cauliflower, truffle oil and Portuguese-style chorizo sausage. It was gone in 30 seconds.

According to Murray, the Sanderling was completely renovated in 2005. The best rooms, whether in the North, South or main Inn, feature either dune or ocean views (depending on whether you are on the first or second floor). Other rooms face the sound or landscaped areas on the perimeter. The resort has just opened a new outside bar on the back deck—and did I mention it? Those who want resort amenities and lots of living space can find that at the Sanderling, too. The resort owns five cottages next to the South Inn, which larger groups can rent. After all, this is Duck!

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