

# Roaming the Ocean Highway

By Tom Poland

## We Love Highway 17 For Many Reasons

Like a sea breeze, Highway 17 blows through a Lowcountry land of plenty. Trailing Calabash fragrances, it leaves North Carolina to plunge through rice country, court the sea, cross a modern marvel, and teach us something about nature.

Like the land it journeys, it is changed. Old plantations became historic sites. Seventeen leads to pretty places aplenty, and that's good enough for me. Hitch a ride, then, and let's travel the Ocean Highway.

As the seagull flies, Highway 17 spans about 220 miles. This sea-level artery throbs through a legendary beach named for genus *Myrtus*, and its Pavilion, theme parks, and golf courses before heading to Murrells Inlet, known for seafood and Mike Hammer's creator. Then comes Huntington Beach State Park, one of the East Coast's top birding areas. Nearby, Brookgreen Gardens' marble and bronze statuary glisten in one of the Southeast's most beautiful public gardens. Feathers and stone--all pretty.

Signpost ahead: Pawleys Island, land of hammocks and the ghostly Gray Man who warns beachcombers of hurricanes. Then comes *South Carolina Smiles 2005*

McClellanville where a rare firetower overlooks oyster-strewn estuaries. Farther south, the Seewee Environmental Center--gateway to the Francis Marion National Forest--serves up its Nebo nature trail and red wolves, survivors of a lost era. Offshore lies Cape Romain Wildlife Refuge, haven for shorebirds and seaturtles. Here, near Nebo, forest confronts the sea and Swallowtail butterflies and Swallow-tailed kites gracefully co-exist.

Hungry? Try Awendaw's Sewee Restaurant, a general store of the early 1920s turned restaurant. "We want to keep it as original as we can," says owner Mary Rancourt. Good. Appreciate its old shelving, well-worn floors, and tongue-and-groove paneling--protected by a red tin roof upon which a weathered sign says "Simply Good Food." True. Original family recipes work here. Try the crab cakes, hushpuppies, shrimp and oysters. Enjoy fried green tomatoes, collard greens, steamed squash and fresh, homemade desserts. What? That's not on the menu. "We'll fix it for you," says Mary.

Charleston bound now, we see women hawking

sweetgrass baskets upon 17's green shoulders. Just north of Shem Creek (restaurants galore) sets a village, Mount Pleasant. A friendly passerby calls out, "It's very old, very Victorian." Indeed. It's saturated with live oaks, elegant homes, and schizophrenic hydrangeas that can't decide if they're pink, blue or purple. Picket fences, manicured lawns and roses greet the ever-near estuary. Ye old apothecary, the Pitt Street Pharmacy, dispenses island cures. At Pitt Street's marshy end, the old, cast-aside Sullivan's Island bridge finds solace as a great place to crab, fish, bike and see the Holy City across a marshy vista.

And when the rain descends on St. Paul's Lutheran Cemetery, images of spirits flitting Druid-like among ancient oaks surface. An old home squats in the rain among massive oaks in this hamlet of green lawns, white columns and everywhere the smell of the sea. No, not even the soft spatter of summer rain dampens the spirit of this village that shimmers with history.

Tighten your seatbelt. North America's longest cable-stay span bridge spirits us up, over the Cooper into the magic of cobblestone streets, horse-drawn carriages, She Crab Soup, steeples and Rainbow Row. We linger at the Old Market, then cross the Ashley and turn south to Angel Oak, a 1,400-year-old monarch. We wind inland toward Port Royal Sound, where Frogmore Stew sweetens the salty air. Sated, we see Sheldon Ruins' Tuscan columns, towering walls and massive arches. Burned by the British. Rebuilt and torched by Sherman. Ruined for good.

And then 17 shoots across the Savannah.

Here is the thing about 17. Nature delineated its route upon the Lowcountry as modern man discovered irresistible, ancient rituals. Need an example? A seaturtle lumbers ashore on Pawleys at 3 AM to drop eggs in dune sands she herself hatched in. Need another? The American alligator stays south of 17. It just knows. Of course nature can be capricious. A massive, tropical log floats ashore, its journey across the Atlantic complete. Pale green light like the aurora borealis shimmers across its length. The stars answer back as does luminous surf. Angel Oak will tell you. Ancient wonders live here... Always have. All along Highway 17.



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Georgetown County Visitor's Bureau

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Myrtle Beach Area Chamber of Commerce & Visitor Center

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