

# A FIVE-STAR HOTEL WITH 12X POINTS

*12x points on Hotels booked on cititravel.com*

LEARN MORE

INTRODUCING



CITI STRATA ELITE<sup>SM</sup>

North America > United States > North Carolina > Wilmington



Hal Goodtree/Getty Images

STYLE & CULTURE

The beloved beach enclave stands in for a nebulous Northeast location.

BY

September 9, 2025

 SAVE THIS STORY

All products and listings featured on Condé Nast Traveler are independently selected by our editors. However, we may receive compensation from retailers and/or from purchases of products through these links.

Listen to this story



It may have started as an innocuous TV show seemingly aimed at teens and tweens, but *The Summer I Turned Pretty* has been a stratospheric hit, hypnotizing audiences of all ages. With viewers flitting between camp Conrad or team Jeremiah, hooked on the love triangle between two brothers and the show's pivotal character, Belly, it has kept many of us (even in our late 40s) glued. So, it's with deep sadness for many that the final episode of season three airs this month.



Belly (Lola Tung), Jeremiah (Gavin Casalegno), Conrad (Christopher Briney), Steven (Sean Kaufman), and Taylor (Rain Spencer) on fictional Cousins Beach in *The Summer I Turned Pretty*. Erika Doss/Prime

For me, it hits a deeply nostalgic chord on multiple levels. Not only does it ooze with the teenage angst many of us experienced at the age of 16, at a time when romance ruled and hormones soared—the time when many of us, in our own way, turned pretty—it is filmed in a part of the world I love as my own—Wilmington, [North Carolina](#). The

show gives it a fictional name of Cousins Beach and I first dipped my toes in its waters back in 1994, making it home several years later, when I embarked on a degree at UNC Wilmington. It was love at first sight and I still get back as often as I possibly can.



A pocket of the world on the south-eastern seaboard of America, it probably seems a million miles away for most, but it is a place you'll be far more familiar with than you realize, even if you've never been. For those of us who came of age during the other famous TV “will-they-won't they” romance—*Dawson's Creek*—the sea oats, clapboard cottages and jutting wooden boat docks are all real-life sets from this idyllic, coastal Carolinian town. The creepy river waters of *Cape Fear* (both the original 1962 Gregory Peck classic and the 1991 Robert DeNiro remake) were set there; lovers of *Outer Banks* and the high school hit, *One Tree Hill*, will also recognize the eye-catching, quintessentially southern backdrop. It's relatively small but mighty film studios have led to the area being lovingly renamed “Wilmywood” by locals.

ADVERTISEMENT



Belly (Lola Tung) and Jeremiah (Gavin Casalegno) in *The Summer I Turned Pretty* Erika Doss/Prime

My own **summers** started back when Pearl Jam played on every radio station and no one had mobile phones; we spent hours in rickety beach chairs, wedged into the sand of Wrightsville Beach, a barrier island which runs just four miles long along the edge of town. Separated from Wilmington by a thin sliver of the East Coast Intracoastal Waterway and connected by a tiny drawbridge, it's a haven for **surfers** and boaters, peppered as it is with original 1930s cottages and contemporary, glass-fronted beach homes. With newfound friends, I'd migrate at dusk to the slightly shabby but seriously buzzing beach bars in little more than flip-flops and a bikini. Coming from the vast urban sprawl of **London** I was in awe of it all, from the small 1950s grocery store to the dripping live oaks that framed the picture-perfect streets. And I was simultaneously seduced by the unbelievable yet utterly authentic small-town charm of this sumptuous southern community.



Taylor (Rain Spencer), Belly (Lola Tung), Jeremiah (Gavin Casalegno), and Conrad (Christopher Briney) in *The Summer I Turned Pretty* Erika Doss/Prime

ADVERTISEMENT

Wilmington is often ranked as one of the fastest-growing places in America and I've seen inevitable changes, but the very soul of the place is, thankfully, still the same. Even now, at the age of 47, I can't listen to the soundtrack of *Dawson's Creek* without shedding a tear. It takes me right back to my own summers spent there just like Belly, (minus the love triangle, thankfully). Having been back this summer with my own girls in tow, I was struck by how many hidden gems are now newly recognizable thanks to hours spent inhaling the aforementioned small-screen favorites. If you're keen to see those sets up close and personal, there is nowhere I can recommend more highly. Seeing my own girls learning to surf, making friends for life, using the Southern plural pronoun "y'all" and jumping freely from the wooden posts that jut out into the waterway, I am reminded of how I first fell in love with Wilmington during the very summer that, I guess, I also turned pretty. Or, at the very least, came of age.

Wilmington, North Carolina Hal Goodtree/Getty Images

## Where to play

Wrightsville Beach is a haven of activity, but boat days are often the most memorable. Fringed either side by untouched islands—many of which disappear at high tide—small vessels dock up on neighboring islands such as Masonboro, where families gather, drinks’ coolers and beach chairs at the ready. Alternatively, you can hop on the small ferry from nearby Southport to the stunning shores of Bald Head Island where only golf carts and boats roam.

In stark but wonderful contrast, the historic downtown area of Wilmington is made up of beautiful colonial, *Gone with the Wind* style homes. Bulging with indigo blue hydrangeas and boasting wrap-around porches complete with rocking chairs, they scream out for a Long Island Iced Tea and gossip with old friends. The World War II North Carolina Battleship sits proudly on the adjacent Cape Fear River and a hip stretch of cobbled streets, bars, boutiques, and restaurants. All offer up a hit of culture, fabulous food and live music that plays late into the night. And, if you stay in North Carolina a while, take a few days out to drive to the [Blueridge Parkway](#) and the Appalachian Trail crossings. In the height of a humid summer, the temperature drops at least 20 degrees (you'll be glad of that) and the views across to Tennessee from the Great Smoky Mountains are almost ethereal.

Sundowners on the beach are a great option at Trailborn Surf & Sound, even if you're not staying there. Christian Harder/Courtesy of Trailborn

## Where to stay

Wrightsville Beach has two obvious choices, both of which have views of both the sound (for sunset) or the ocean (for sunrise). [Shell Island Resort](#) is a local institution and sits on the white sand of the island's north end, which is relatively peaceful.

Trailborn Surf & Sound was recently bought and renovated. Christian Harder/Courtesy of Trailborn

Closer to the beach bars of downtown Wrightsville (which is tiny despite its name) sits [Trailborn Surf & Sound](#). Recently bought and newly renovated, the rooms are stunning, the outdoor swimming pool a hip hangout in its own right and it's an ideal place for sundowners on the beach, even if you don't stay there. In the downtown area, the [Front Street Inn](#) is the obvious choice for a boutique hotel, colonial-style rooms, and a quaint espresso bar that transforms into a live music venue once the sun goes down.

Ceviche's is the author's favorite for its Panamanian seafood offerings. Courtesy Ceviche's

## Where to eat

Beach offerings are perfectly suited to the environment, with a little 1970s hot dog shop called **Trolley Stop**, Tex-Mex delights at **Tower 7** and frozen custard galore. My favorite is **Ceviche's**, which offers up ceviche and seafood offerings in a gorgeous little yellow building alongside the drawbridge. Warm, inviting and run by locals, it's all about fresh and sustainable Panamanian cuisine served with perfect margaritas.

YoSake has sushi and pan-Asian dishes on the second floor of a historic corner building. Courtesy YoSake

Downtown, there are endless great options but I've two personal top spots. **YoSaki**—a sensational offering of sushi and pan-Asian dishes sits on the second floor of a historic corner building in the heart of the downtown area

—South Front Street. The eclectic décor and exceptional cuisine draw crowds so you'll need to book ahead. And head upstairs to Tempo Lounge if you're there on a weekend evening for live music after dinner.

Another wonderful culinary spot is **Manna** on nearby Princess Street. With its exposed brick interior, sweeping bar and refined American cuisine, everything is local, sustainable, and delicious to boot. It's also a gorgeous place for early evening drinks that all come from a seriously considered list made up of wines and liquors from family-operated and local businesses where possible. This spot is achingly cool, totally one-off, and, just like all of Wilmington, an experience unto itself.

*A version of this story originally appeared on **Condé Nast Traveller UK**.*

RECOMMENDED

### AC Hotel Ballantyne

A consistent space to eat, drink, and make merry away from the bustle of Uptown.

[READ FULL REVIEW](#)

### Kasa Edison House

A contactless hotel that invites you to stay a while in the Queen City.

[READ FULL REVIEW](#)

[VIEW ALL NORTH AMERICA](#)