

"Dr. Beach" Chooses NC's Ocracoke Island As His Top Beach in 2007

Move over Florida and Hawaii. Your beaches are no longer the best.

The nation's best place to get a tan and enjoy the ocean's waves in 2007 is North Carolina's Ocracoke Island, a place so remote that even people in the offices of "Dr. Beach" - Florida International University professor Stephen Leatherman - didn't know where to find it on the map.

"It's not the end of the world, but you can see it from here," Leatherman said from Ocracoke, the first beach not in Florida or Hawaii to earn the top spot in his annual ranking of the nation's top 10 spots on the shore.

Technically, it's Ocracoke Lifeguarded Beach that is the nation's best. But Leatherman said there's little that separates those 300 yards of postcard-perfect sand from the rest of the island, almost all of which is protected from development as part of the Cape Hatteras National Seashore.

"Here, you have 14 miles of unspoiled, undisturbed barrier beach," said Leatherman, director of Florida International's laboratory for coastal research. "Where do you find that in the world?"

Ocracoke is at the southern end of the Outer Banks, the fragile chain of barrier islands along North Carolina's coast known as the "graveyard of the Atlantic." Accessible only by boat or private plane, there are only about 800 full-time residents of the island where the pirate Blackbeard met his untimely death at the hands of the Royal Navy in 1718.

"People shouldn't come here to play golf, and don't come here for the Hilton spa or something like that," Leatherman said. "They're not going to find those things here. What you will find here - it's like going back in time with very quaint, small inns. It's my favorite getaway island beach. And it's definitely that."

Ocracoke has been a favorite of "Dr. Beach" for years - he ranked it No. 3 in 2006 and No. 2 in 2005. By winning this year, it will be retired from consideration along with other past champions.

"Obviously, it's a great honor to be put up at the top of the heap," said Julia Howard, the administrator for the Ocracoke Island Museum and Preservation Society, who has lived on the island for 35 years.

Leatherman ranks beaches on 50 different criteria, using a 1 to 5 scale. No beach has ever gotten all 250 points, and Ocracoke ranked somewhere in the 230s, he said. The sand, for example, isn't lily white, so it lost points there.

He only considers swimming beaches, which leaves out those along the Maine and Oregon coastlines where the water is just too cold. Beaches with lifeguards get high points, as do those that balance the natural environment and the built environment.

"I'm just a stickler for detail," he said. "There's no perfect beach by the rating criteria, but there are so many great ones."

Earning the No. 1 ranking on the "Dr. Beach" list is usually a tourism booster. When the north beach at Florida's Fort De Soto was named the best in 2005, Leatherman said, the number of hits on a related

Web site jumped in one day from 1,000 to 10,000.

But the remote nature of Ocracoke and its place as part of a national seashore should spare the island's 25-foot sand dunes, topped by sea oats, from an onslaught of beachcombers.

"When things are inundated with people, it isn't quite the same place any more," Howard said. "We hope people who do come here would honor our beauty and keep it looking the way it does for a long time."

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