

Hollywood East

Who says you have to go to California to follow the cinema trail? Wilmington, North Carolina, is crawling with film history — and history in the making.

WHEN THE PRODUCTION lights dim and the director shouts “That’s a wrap!,” moviemakers leave the studio for some R&R. They might sit dockside sipping sweet tea and munching on fried green tomatoes, or maybe they head back to their digs at a Southern mansion-turned-bed-and-breakfast to enjoy the warm breeze on a wraparound porch. Though Wilmington, North Carolina, is known as “Hollywood East” and “Wilmywood” to the locals, this port city has a spirit that’s entirely its own. It all started in earnest in 1983, when Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis came to Wilmington to scout his film *Firestarter*. The hospitality, quality of life and lack of bumper-to-bumper traffic appealed to him so much he decided to stay and build his own studio. More than 400 films later, Wilmington has maintained much of the charm that initially attracted De Laurentiis and the many other filmmakers who followed his lead.

1 TAKE A WALK OF FAME CAPE FEAR RIVERWALK

Looking out across the Cape Fear River in downtown Wilmington, it’s hard to tell which way the current flows as the water cuts diamonds across the surface. This serene, mile-long riverwalk features an array of shops and restaurants that are familiar from TV and films. Of the more notable is Blue Post Billiards. Tucked into an alley just off the riverwalk, this local bar has pool tables, a jukebox, arcade games, colored lights and lots of beer. The bar and alley have been used in films such as *We’re the Millers* and *Tammy* and on the TV show *Eastbound & Down*. Across the river is the Battleship *North Carolina*, a popular movie backdrop where the 1999 Jamie Lee Curtis film *Virus* was filmed. Further downriver is the N.C. State Port of Wilmington, where the final fight scene in *Iron Man 3* was shot. Or, play the part of a star by ducking into A. Scott Rhodes Jeweler for high-end pieces on demand.

2 STAY COMFORTABLY THE WILMINGTONIAN HOTEL

Just two blocks from the Cape Fear River is The Wilmingtonian, a cozy inn surrounded by tree-lined neighborhoods chock-full of gorgeous 19th-century homes. The inn is comprised of three restored buildings featuring apartment-style rooms, each with hardwood floors and balconies fitted with rocking chairs overlooking the courtyard below. Hundreds of stars and filmmakers have stayed here, including Matthew Broderick, James Earl Jones, Donald Sutherland and George Lucas. Ask to stay in the Cinema House, where each room is designed in the theme of a classic movie or star. Thewilmingtonian.com

3 ADMIRE MOVIE MAGIC EUE/SCREEN GEMS STUDIOS

The largest filming facility in the U.S. outside of California, Wilmington’s EUE/Screen

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Gems Studios spans 50 acres with 150,000 square feet of shooting space. Built in 1984 by Dino De Laurentiis, the studio boasts 10 stages and a special-effects water tank (parts of *Journey 2: The Mysterious Island*, starring Dwayne Johnson and Josh Hutcherson, were filmed here). Studio tours are available only when production is going on, so it's best to call ahead. Studios.euescreengems.com/nc

4 BASK IN THE BEAUTY **AIRLIE GARDENS**

Opened in 1886, this 67-acre oasis has had plenty of airtime. With a towering 470-year-old live oak tree and a romantic pergola overlooking the lake, it's no wonder this was a popular filming spot for teen drama *One Tree Hill* and Nicholas Sparks flicks like *Safe Haven* and *The Choice*. Venture into the canopy of trees to check out the eerie Mount Lebanon Chapel, where TV's *Sleepy Hollow* has filmed. Visitnc.com/listing/airlie-gardens-3

5 IDLE WITH YOUR IDOLS **WRIGHTSVILLE BEACH**

Twenty minutes from downtown Wilmington, Wrightsville Beach welcomes visitors to its Atlantic waters year-round. Despite its proximity to town and a steady flow of anglers and surfers, the beach still manages to feel distant and quiet. The facade of the seaside mansion that confined Julia Roberts' character in *Sleeping with the Enemy* was set up here, and when two dim-witted employees took their deceased boss' boat for a spin in *Weekend at Bernie's*, they were cruising Wrightsville Beach. Perhaps the most recognizable part of the beach is Crystal Pier, used for — cue Paula Cole's "I Don't Want to Wait" — the opening credits of *Dawson's Creek*. Townofwrightsvillebeach.com —AMANDA OGLE

 American offers 13 peak-day flights to **Wilmington (ILM)** from **Charlotte (CLT)**, **New York (LGA)** and **Philadelphia (PHL)**, and once-daily weekend service from **Washington, D.C. (DCA)**.

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