

RALEIGH, N.C. — North Carolina's [Welcome Centers](#), the state's friendly and helpful gateways for travelers and a key economic engine for the tourism industry, celebrate their 50th anniversary of service this month with a series of celebrations and a sweepstakes to enable visitors to take part in this important milestone.

Earlier today, the Welcome Center anniversary ceremony took place at the Interstate 95 South Welcome Center in Rowland. North Carolina First Lady Kristin Cooper greeted attendees and offered keynote remarks. North Carolina Commerce Chief of Staff George Sherrill recognized Welcome Center managers and staff from all nine locations. The ceremony included cultural performances by members of the Lumbee Tribe and remarks from Lumbee Tribe Chairman Harvey Godwin Jr. and N.C. Representative Charles Graham.

The event also launched the N.C. Welcome Center 50th Anniversary Sweepstakes. Travelers stopping into any of the state's Welcome Centers between now and October 31 will have the chance to win one of three prize packages, just by signing into the Welcome Center guest registration system during their visit. The North Carolina Department of Commerce is partnering with [Visit North Carolina](#) and the [Greenville-Pitt County Convention and Visitors Bureau](#), the [Heart of North Carolina Visitors Bureau](#) and the [Haywood County Tourism Development Authority](#) to offer the sweepstakes.

On August 1, 1968, the first of North Carolina's Welcome Centers opened two miles from the Virginia line on Interstate 85. A second facility, located along Interstate 95 North, opened to the public in September 1968. Today, a total of nine Welcome Centers are in operation.

At each Welcome Center, nationally certified travel counselors extend hospitality to visitors and offer personal customer service in modern facilities. Staff distribute the Official North Carolina Travel Guide, the Department of Transportation's state map as well as marketing publications for thousands of tourism-related businesses and attractions.

"The Welcome Centers play a crucial role in our state's tourism industry," said Commerce Secretary Anthony M. Copeland. "From the Great Smoky Mountains to the Outer Banks, North Carolina offers an abundance of attractions for visitors to explore. The Welcome Centers' seasoned travel counselors welcome guests into our state and help them make the most of their time here."

The state's Welcome Centers serve many people each year. A total of 9,418,982 people stopped by the Welcome Centers in 2017. Last year, the top five origin states for travelers, excluding North Carolina, were Florida, South Carolina, Virginia, Pennsylvania and Ohio. The nine facilities also served nearly 10,000 international travelers during 2017. The Welcome Centers' travel professionals assisted visitors from Palau, Zimbabwe, Luxembourg and other distant countries. The top five origin countries were Canada, Germany, the United Kingdom, China and Australia.

Since opening in 1968, an estimated total of more than 300 million visitors have stopped at one of the centers, nearly the population of the United States.

In addition to serving recreational travelers, the Welcome Centers support people in times of

distress, including displacements due to natural disasters. In 2017, thousands of evacuees entered North Carolina when Hurricane Irma forced one of the largest evacuations in national history. In response to the influx, Welcome Centers along the South Carolina border extended their hours of operation to answer questions about transportation and accommodations. North Carolina residents, businesses and churches volunteered to provide food and water outside the facilities.

“Hurricane Irma sent many evacuees northbound on Interstate 95 seeking shelter until the storm passed,” said Kat Littleturtle, manager of the Interstate 95 South Welcome Center. The Welcome Center remained open late to help travelers with reservations and directions.

Funding support for the Welcome Centers comes from the North Carolina General Assembly, which enables the state to provide this important service to both visitors and North Carolina’s tourism industry.

The program was originally operated by the Travel and Promotion Division of the N.C. Department of Conservation and Development and maintained by the State Highway Commission. Today, the North Carolina Department of Commerce, the North Carolina Department of Transportation and Visit North Carolina support the Welcome Centers.

North Carolina’s Welcome Centers are located at:

- Interstate 26 East: Mile Marker 68 in Columbus
- Interstate 26 West: Mile Marker 6 in Mars Hill
- Interstate 40 West: Mile Marker 10 in Waynesville
- Interstate 77 North: Mile Marker 105 in Dobson
- Interstate 77 South: Mile Marker 1 in Charlotte.
- Interstate 85 North: Mile Marker 231 in Norlina.
- Interstate 85 South: Mile Marker 2 in Kings Mountain.
- Interstate 95 North: 1 I-95 Southbound Highway in Pleasant Hill.
- Interstate 95 South: Mile Marker 5 in Rowland.

The Welcome Centers are open from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except for New Year’s Day, Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Eve and Christmas Day.

For more information about North Carolina’s Welcome Centers, visit nccommerce.com/tourism/programs-services/welcome-centers.

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<https://media.visitnc.com/Welcome-Centers-Celebrate-50th-Anniversary-and-Launch-Sweepstakes>