

Summer Vacation, Minus the Traffic: 5 Alternatives to Popular Trips

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6/22/2017

Positano. Vail. St.-Tropez. Yellowstone. There's one big problem with these vacation hot spots. Everyone knows about them. So don't be shocked when you turn up at your hard-won summer holiday, sun-screened and ready to de-stress, only to encounter fellow vacationers jostling for your place in the sun.

Crowds kill my vacation mellow. I go to great lengths to preserve the fantasy that I'm less tourist than fly on the wall, a traveler quietly savoring the charms of a spot versus part of a herd trampling it. Luckily, the world is a big place. And a pivot from popular destinations to others off the beaten track can deliver an equally satisfying experience. Even in the throes of peak season. Here, trendy summer getaways are paired with five less-trafficked spots that echo the allure and offer similar recreation.

Swap [San Juan Islands](#) for Vail

Vail's swank and easy accessibility (Eagle County Regional Airport is 20 minutes from downtown) position it as a primo alpine getaway for well-heeled outdoor enthusiasts drawn to pristine hiking trails, river rafting and top-notch Colorado cuisine.

Though its geography is altogether different, the [San Juan Islands](#) in Washington offer naturalist perks with a more attractive price tag. Base camp is [Friday Harbor](#), a town whose timeworn bakeries, bookshops and vistas of the Salish Sea, a network of waterways that runs from Puget Sound in Washington to the Strait of Georgia in Canada, induce a laid-back island reverie.

Though you won't be summiting 14,000-footers off the coast of Seattle, you will be enveloped in nature. As you bike or hike through craggy shorelines and woodlands, you'll glimpse wild turkeys, red foxes, bald eagles, peregrine falcons, seals, otters and porpoises.

The most thrilling sighting, of course, is an orca. From [Lime Kiln Point State Park](#), you can spot killer whales (and hear their "blows") in the Haro Strait as they hunt for king salmon in the deep, nutrient-rich kelp forests. For a more intense whale-watching experience, a tour with [San Juan Outfitters](#) will have you crisscrossing the waters from Washington to Canada with biologists who can identify individual whales as they breach and frolic with their pods. Adventurous types can sea kayak alongside the orcas.

[Sea Quest Expeditions](#) offers trips from half-day outings to three-day excursions (you'll camp in state marine parks) led by environmental scientists. On any island, I anticipate first-rate seafood. But the ebullient flavors served up at [Friday Harbor House](#) were unexpected. The chef, Jason Aldous, forages and then finesses hyper-fresh ingredients — fiddlehead ferns, ramps, organic duck eggs, local oysters — into dishes that highlight the crisp brine of the waters and earthiness of the terroir.

Another island expectation: hotels in need of a refresh. Happily, [Island Inn at 123 West](#) veers contemporary, with firm mattresses, organic high-thread-count sheets, flat-screen televisions, heated towel bars and radiant bathroom flooring.

Swap [Ascona](#) for Positano

Positano, the charming, sun-soaked vertical Italian town on the Amalfi Coast, is on everyone's bucket list. Which is

reason enough, unless you enjoy hearing English spoken at every trattoria (not to mention sitting bumper-to-bumper at the beach), to avoid it during the high season.

Consider [Ascona](#), Switzerland's secret slice of Mediterranean on upper Lake Maggiore. Like Amalfi's Positano, this tiny town in the Italian-speaking canton of Ticino (just 20 minutes from Italy) is ritzy and very much about enjoying the balmy climes by the water. After a few days of living like an Italian on Swiss soil, I noticed that Ascona has an attractive dual nature: snow-capped mountains fraternizing with palm trees and vineyards, bougainvillea-rimmed hotels with snappy service, mild-mannered (at least the ones I encountered) Vespa drivers who stop for (and often greet) pedestrians.

It's la dolce vita, Swiss-ified. You can swim, water ski or paddle board. There are wildflower-filled alpine trails for hiking and mountain biking. And, of course, boating. Take a hop-on, hop-off-style day [cruise](#). Rent a motorboat. Better yet, book a skipper to ferry you to lunch at the glamorous [Ristorante Milano](#) in Pallanza and then on for sightseeing in the [Borromean Islands](#). This way, you can relax with a few bottles of the region's acclaimed white merlot.



Colorful buildings line the waterfront of Lake Maggiore in Ascona, Switzerland, a short hop from the Italian border. Getty images

From Ascona, you can day-trip to the [Cardada Cimetta](#) cable car or the lost-in-time village of the [Valle Verzasca](#), known for its glacially chilled emerald-green river, a star summer attraction.

There are many gastronomic restaurants in Ascona. But the best meals are the simple ones, grilled meats and fish served with crisp local wine. At [La Cassetta](#), a historic stone lake house, classic Mediterranean fare is made more delightful by the al fresco setting. The rooftop restaurant at the stylish [Art Hotel Riposo](#) serves pastas and proteins whimsically dressed with terrace-grown daisies and herbs.

Grottos are a Ticinese signature. These rustic outdoor restaurants are all about hearty local flavors: boards of

cheese and air-dried salami, vitello tonnato, polenta infused with savory mushrooms and pork shank. [Bed-and-breakfast](#)-style lodging is plentiful in Ascona. But as a stand-in for Positano, an ideal choice is the five-star [Hotel Eden Roc](#). You'll have spacious rooms, a serious spa (hydropools, sanarium, Kneipp path, Finnish sauna), a private beach (the hotel has its own Riva Aquarama boat), use of hotel Vespas and sommelier-led wine tastings under the vine-covered pergola.

Through July 1, [JazzAscona](#) will have 200 free concerts along the lakefront, a European homage to New Orleans-style music.

Swap [Santa Barbara](#) for [St.-Tropez](#)

St.-Tropez, the jewel of the Côte d'Azur in France, is glamorous, sure. But an equally idyllic coastal getaway is tucked between the Pacific and the Santa Ynez Mountains. For decades, [Santa Barbara](#) has wooed jetsetters with its Mediterranean climate, rugged coastline and Moorish architecture. So much so that this pocket of Southern California is often referred to as the "American Riviera."

That the Santa Ynez Valley is surrounded by vineyards begs another comparison to Provence. Here, it's a great pleasure to not only drink some of the country's best wine, but also to breathe the region's orange blossom-scented air. There is an abundance of outdoor recreation, something you won't find as much of on the French Riviera: beaches (surfing, swimming, snorkeling, kayaking and sailing), just minutes from most lodgings; and mountainous terrain for hiking and biking.

Standout activity: a day trip to [Channel Islands National Park](#). Go on your own (take [Island Packers Cruises](#) ferry from Ventura, about 40 minutes from Santa Barbara) or with an organized outfitter ([Santa Barbara Adventure Company](#) and [Truth Aquatics](#) do kayaking, diving and snorkeling day trips) to explore windswept peaks and ocean grottos.

Back to the vineyards. On top of being home to 170 tasting rooms, the rolling hills of the [Santa Ynez Valley](#) are ideal for bike riding, horseback riding (all available to rent/book) or just kicking back with a farmstand picnic. You can also test-drive the local vino without leaving town. The newly established [urban wine trail](#) offers two dozen tasting rooms, all within blocks of downtown and the beach.

Santa Barbara's microclimate makes eating well effortless. [Lucky's](#), [Barbareño](#), [Trattoria Mollie](#) and the Stonehouse at San Ysidro Ranch nail the region's rustic yet elegant cuisine. Two new boutique hotels, [the Kimpton Goodland](#) and [the Wayfarer](#) (this property also has shared hostel rooms), are well situated and casually chic. But for classic glamour, splurge at the five-star [San Ysidro Ranch](#), where you can stay in a private bungalow and stroll along the lavender-studded foot paths once trod upon by the newlyweds John and Jackie Kennedy.

Swap [Stockholm](#) for [Paris](#)

It's hard to be disappointed in the City of Light. That is, until your outing to Paris's hallowed food hall, [La Grande Epicerie de Paris](#) at Le Bon Marché department store, is marred by selfie stick-wielding tourists clamoring for a photo with a baguette. On my last summer trip to Paris, these selfie-stick-obsessed tourists were everywhere; at the farmers' market, clogging the Tuileries, blocking my family's view on a sightseeing Bateaux Mouches boat ride down the Seine.

For culture and let's-get-lost urban appeal, try Stockholm. Meander through its cool neighborhoods. Ostermalm is fancy, Sodermalm is hip, Gamla Stan, or Old Town, is filled with preserved homes from the 17th century.



Three stand-up paddlers off the beach at Santa Barbara, Calif. Getty images

Museums? There are dozens. Contemporary photography, often controversial, is on display at [Fotografiska](#). [Moderna Museet](#) exhibits 20th- and 21st-century artwork; think of Rauschenberg and Warhol mixed with provocative choreographed performances by Marina Abramovic. Of specific interest is [the Nobel Museum](#), which spotlights the more than 900 laureates and tells the story of the Swedish inventor Alfred Nobel (1833–1896) who left his fortune to be distributed among fellow pioneers who have had an impact on the world through science, diplomacy and the arts. The [Abba Museum](#), more of an attraction than cultural institution, is a hoot. It is difficult not to enjoy the karaoke stalls and the kitschy 1980s disco room whose flashing dance floor invites moves to the strains of “Dancing Queen.”

With about 17 hours of sunlight during the summer months, you’ll be motivated to be active. You can bike, kayak or go by boat to explore Stockholm’s 30,000 islands, uninhabited islets, rocks and coves. Or swim. Sandy beaches like Langholmens and Smedsuddsbadet are smack in the city center. And don’t forget the coffee break, fika, as it is known. The Swedes break up the day with this great ritual that always includes pastry.

For a room with a view, try the stately harborfront [Grand Hotel](#) or sleek [Radisson Blu Strand Hotel](#). Tucked into a residential area of Ostermalm, the 12-room [Ett Hem](#) is more townhouse than hotel, high-concept Scandi-chic design made cozy with plenty of flickering candles and communal spaces. You’ll have breakfast on the pelt-covered sitting-room couch and wind down the day in the basement spa, stretched out upon a massive hot stone slab.

Swap One National Park for Another

The majesty of Yellowstone is indisputable. Glacier and Acadia, too. But your repose may be fractured when throngs of hikers bulldoze their way toward your perch on a scenic canyon rim. Newsflash: You don’t need to visit the most popular national parks for an outstanding experience with nature.

The National Park Service manages 417 “units,” and many of the less trodden sites are decidedly bare bones, but

offer similar recreation and sublime scenery.

In Montana (straddling Wyoming), 120,000 acres of high desert punctuated by weathered prehistoric canyons make [Big Horn Canyon National Recreation Area](#) an excellent substitute for [Yellowstone National Park](#) (4.25 million visitors in 2016). Much of the desolate terrain resembles the uncharted wilderness of the film “The Revenant.” Especially the [Bad Pass Trail](#). Once traversed by the Crow people to reach buffalo plains and by trappers, the trail is craggy and arduous with vistas of expansive parkland flecked with bighorn sheep and wild horses.

Bighorn Lake is a fisherman’s paradise as well as a watery highway that allows you to float through gorges in the shadow of 1,000-foot walls of sedimentary rock.

[Theodore Roosevelt National Park](#) in North Dakota’s Badlands is another Yellowstone alternative. Visitors can hike grassy buttes and wind-carved gullies or sightsee by canoe, where they may encounter bison, coyotes and elk on the shores of the Little Missouri River as you drift past the site where Theodore Roosevelt built a log cabin in 1884.

[Glacier National Park](#)? It’s stunning; a million acres of some of Montana’s most breathtaking scenery. But, for D.I.Y. travelers like me, the setup can be frustrating. The park has limited parking, so guests often travel by shuttle bus to the best-known hiking areas. And, once you arrive, you’ll have to ascend past the crowds to find any semblance of solitude.

In place of Glacier, tackle [North Cascades National Park](#) in Washington, which has similar topography, landscape and bodies of water, yet every trail feels off the beaten track. (While Glacier had 2.9 million visitors in 2016, North Cascades had just 28,646.) The setting — rugged mountain peaks, dense evergreen forests, alpine lakes, wildflower-filled valleys and extensive glacial coverage — is ideal for hiking, canoeing and rock climbing. On a switchback-filled hike canonized by Jack Kerouac, daredevils can channel their inner beatnik on Desolation Peak Trail. The writer spent the summer of 1956 working for the Forest Service as a fire lookout atop this 6,102-foot peak and recounted the experience in “Desolation Angels” and “The Dharma Bums.”

On the East Coast, [Acadia National Park](#) in Maine attracted over 3 million visitors in 2016. About 130 miles north is a spanking-new national monument in Maine’s remote North Woods, [Katahdin Woods and Waters](#). This park was donated to the federal government by Roxanne Quimby, a founder of Burt’s Bees body care products, and opened by President Barack Obama in August 2016. This 87,500-acre parcel, almost double the size of Acadia — with limited primitive campgrounds, dirt roads, pit toilets, no potable water — is catnip for travelers in search of the pristine wilderness traversed by [Roosevelt](#) in the 1870s.

You can hike and bike the rugged terrain (still sprinkled with wooden lean-tos) with your solitude interrupted only by the rustle of wildlife. Anglers will delight in the trout-filled Wassataquoik Stream and the Penobscot River. After sunset, you’ll get the show of a lifetime — planets, meteor showers, stars — illuminated against northern Maine’s inky black skies.