

PURSUITS

Summer Minus the Gridlock: Five Alternatives

Destinations off the beaten track can deliver as satisfying a holiday as the big draws.

By AMY TARA KOCH

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

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.



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