

# 8 Amazing Alternatives to Iceland's Most Touristed Spots

Take your family off the beaten path to incredible, lesser-known spots



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PHOTO: Kirkjufell is just one of many natural wonders that draw millions to Iceland every year. Photo credit: Wikimedia

## Skip the crowds

Like many of the world's most beautiful places, Iceland is suffering from its own popularity. It makes sense why the country is so popular. Not only is Iceland jaw-droppingly beautiful, it's easy to get to (particularly from our upper left corner of the U.S.) and [there's plenty to do](#) for tourists, including families with kids.

Still, popularity means crowds. In 2016, [over 1.7 million people visited the country of 330,000](#). But most of them crammed themselves into a handful of popular destinations. You don't have to go far off the beaten path to open up the view. Click through for ideas on where to go and what to see.



PHOTO: Thingvellir National Park is one of three iconic spots in the famed Golden Circle. Photo credit: Wikimedia

## Instead of the Golden Circle...

While [the Golden Circle](#) (Thingvellir National Park, the Strokkur Geysir and the Gullfoss Falls) is a good day trip, its popularity is partly due to convenience. Don't be afraid to skip the Golden Circle and see something else just as amazing. A few ideas: [Southern Iceland's black sand](#); the diverse landscapes of [Snaefellsnes peninsula](#); [Jökulsárlón glacier lagoon](#); an [ice cave](#); ["Game of Thrones" filming sites](#); or [try scuba diving](#) inside the continental rift.



PHOTO: Try Secret Lagoon for a less crowded dip. Photo credit: Shaherald Chia on flickr

## Instead of Blue Lagoon...

The artificial [Blue Lagoon](#) is on everyone's Iceland bucket list partly because it's conveniently located between the airport and the city. But it's also expensive, and so crowded that tickets are timed. Meanwhile, [Secret Lagoon](#) is a natural hot spring in a geothermal area close to the Golden Circle route. Admission is a fraction the cost of the Blue Lagoon, and kids under age 15 get in free. Explore the area to find the tiny geyser, but stay on the boardwalks to avoid burning yourself. The ground is literally boiling hot.



PHOTO: Hotel Viking in Viking village offers campy fun for the whole family. Photo credit: Wikimedia

## Instead of 101...

The city district of Reykjavík 101 is home to many sights, but hotel construction and tacky souvenir shops are taking over. Locals avoid it except for the raucous Saturday night pub crawl that will keep your kids awake until the wee hours. Consider making quiet [Hafnarfjordur](#) your home base instead.

Roughly the same distance from 101 as Northgate is from Pike Place Market, this “suburb” is connected to downtown by bus. It’s home to the destination café [Pallett](#), and its shops still have local character. Plus, the themed waterfront [Hotel Viking](#) is the sort of campy fun you can only justify when you have kids. While still expensive, their “houses” that sleep up to six people are a good value for larger families.



PHOTO: The golden shores of Skarðsvík may still be chilly. Photo credit: Jennifer Boyer on flickr

## Instead of Reynisfjara...

The black sand beach Reynisfjara looks great in music videos, but rogue waves and a vicious undertow make standing near the water dangerous – [three tourists](#) have died there in recent years. Why not try these alternatives?

On the Snaefellsnes peninsula, [Djúpalónssandur \(Black Lava Pearl Beach\)](#) offers a rock-framed glacier view and a series of “lifting stones” said to have been used to measure the strength of fishermen in the past. Good luck lifting them yourself.

Less than an hour north is [Skarðsvík](#), a lovely golden beach and one of the few in Iceland where it's safe to swim (but still very cold). It's a great spot for a picnic and for kids to run around. The Viking skeleton and grave goods on display in the [National Museum](#) in Reykjavík were found at this beach.



PHOTO: Stop by Gljúfrabúi for a breath-taking (and lesser-known) waterfall. Photo credit: Gemma Alexander

## Instead of Seljalandsfoss...

In 2017, a rockfall at [Seljalandsfoss](#) closed Iceland's only path behind a waterfall, but it's still impossible to take a picture there without strangers in the background. Instead enjoy the view of Seljalandsfoss from the road on the way to nearby [Gljúfrabúi](#). To fully experience this waterfall, wade upstream through a crack in the hillside to an otherworldly rainbow-filled cavern hidden inside.



PHOTO: Some of the greenhouse eats at Friðheimar Farm. Photo credit: Friðheimar Farm

## Instead of Dill...

Though stories of Icelandic bananas are mostly apocryphal, the greenhouses of [Friðheimar Farm](#) do supply their tomato-themed restaurant. Eating in a warm, brightly lit greenhouse filled with the scent of tomato plants while snow blows outside is an unmatched experience for a fraction the cost of the famous New Nordic darling, [Dill](#). Bonus: Friðheimar also hosts horse shows.





PHOTO: Consider Akureyri for your home base rather than the busier Reykjavík. Photo credit: Wikimedia

## Instead of Reykjavík...

Consider making the hub of north Iceland your home base. A 45-minute flight from Reykjavík, [Akureyri](#) has its own charming waterfront, breathtaking waterfall ([Goðafoss](#)) and geothermal swimming hole ([Myvatn Nature Baths](#)). Surprisingly well-outfitted with quirky, well-curated museums and galleries, the town also boasts skiing 15 minutes away and numerous nearby filming locations. If you opt to drive, it's about five hours from Reykjavík.



PHOTO: Dive into the center of the earth at Vatnshellir. Photo credit: dconvertini on flickr

## Bonus stop: Vatnshellir

Take your own journey to the center of the earth. A tour of the lava tube created by [Jules Verne's favorite volcano](#) reaches 115 feet below the surface. It's cold and requires sturdy shoes, but fascinating and perfectly safe for children.