

# SABA: UNSPOILED QUEEN OF THE CARIBBEAN

by Brad Bowins, December 2016

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Living on a volcano-  
Windwardside

## TIP OF AN UNDERWATER VOLCANO

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Truly special destinations are those that touch the heart, and one that achieves this with most visitors is a unique find. Saba, pronounced "Say-bah" is just such a location to virtually all that venture to this volcanic island in the central Caribbean. Over six visits, three on a live-aboard scuba boat and three land-based, the charm of this island has grown. But what makes it so unique? For starters, the simple fact that you are visiting the tip of a massive underwater volcano rising dramatically from sea level to the

3,000 ft. summit of Mount Scenery. Approaching from air or sea its impressive physical dimensions are very apparent.

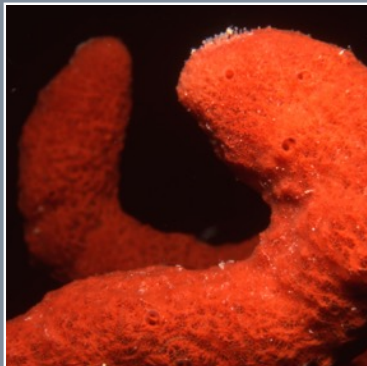
Given the striking dimensions it is amazing that an airport was even considered, but consistent with Saba's special nature a 1,300 ft. airstrip was constructed on a plateau, qualifying as the smallest international airport in the world. The runway, similar to the flight deck of an aircraft carrier, ends with a massive 200 ft. drop to the sea. The only planes capable of



**STOL for Short Take Off and Landing**

**The airstrip of the smallest international airport in the world perches on a plateau.**

# SCUBA DIVING



## Saba is known for its pinnacles

Saba marine life includes turtles, fish, small unique creatures, and spectacular topography. From top to bottom: Two finger sponges front to back. Peterson cleaning shrimp in tentacles of an anemone. Bushy soft coral in a current at sunset.

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reliably landing and taking off are the De Havilland Otters, also known as STOL (Short Take Off and Landing) aircraft. The approach from nearby St. Maarten, a local hub for international flights, is well breathtaking to say the least. The pilot skims the rock wall and then quickly angles in to touchdown. On takeoff, the plane clears the runway using the vertical drop to the sea as an aid.

As improbable as the airport is given the striking geography of Saba, the road system is even more amazing. In the early 1900's engineers determined that a road could not be built on Saba owing to

the steepness of the terrain. A Saban by the name of Josephus Lambert Hassell proved them wrong by designing the road himself after completing a correspondence course in civil engineering. This section of the road "That Could Not Be Built " took five painful years to complete and in 1947 the first car arrived. Later sections connect the four towns of The Bottom, St. John's, Windwardside, and Hell's Gate.

## SABAN CHARM:

This tiny and truly unique island underwent no less than twelve changes in sovereignty throughout its colorful history with the English, Dutch, French and Spanish all claiming possession. Finally, in 1816 Saba became definitively



Hawksbill turtle gliding over sand



**Determined to have the trappings of Europe one early resident had a piano delivered requiring the efforts of twelve strong men.**

Dutch. With highly limited agriculture population numbers remained very small, and even today there are only approximately 1,500 permanent residents derived from many of the original families, adding a special historical charm. For the early settlers everything was hauled up from the shore of ladder Bay, the only site with what might be considered a beach, although a very rocky volcanic one. Determined to have the trappings of Europe one early resident had a piano delivered requiring the efforts of twelve strong men.

The friendliness of the people whether of long-standing or

recent origin, contributes greatly to the charm of Saba. There is virtually no crime, and everyone is helpful. Consistent with the rugged terrain the people tend to be hardy taking things in stride. Enquiring why the only remaining produce in the grocery store consisted of two onions we were told, "Oh, the boat doesn't arrive for another couple of days." I doubt that many North Americans or Europeans would accept "The truck didn't arrive" upon discovering no produce. This rugged Saban attitude helps visitors take such things in stride.

Excelling in quaint charm are the towns of Saba. The Bottom is the seat of government on Saba. It is not at "the bottom" of the island, the name derived from "de botte", meaning "the bowl." It is an



## RED & WHITE



### Quaint Saba towns

Architecture is distinct with red roofs and white walls.

From top to bottom:  
Buildings in the town known as The Bottom, from Dutch de botte meaning the bowl.

Church in Windwardside.

Antique Inn at The Bottom.

apt description given that the town lies nestled between hills on a plateau with an opening leading to the small port of Fort Bay. At a significantly higher elevation, Windwardside is where most tourists stay since many of the accommodations and restaurants are located here. It is renowned for the "Ginger-bread" homes so named because of the red roofs and white exterior walls, with the end result looking like a stage set for Hansel and Gretel. Several traditional cottages are available for rent providing for an authentic Saba experience. Small hotels are a popular option such as Juliana's with its stunning views of both the ocean and island. Restaurants serve good food but do not expect too much in your salad just prior to the arrival of the delivery boat. When we asked for a vegetarian dish in one restaurant we were informed that this would be difficult because it would not leave enough vegetables for all the other diners. Costs are very reasonable for the hotels and meals, making Saba a very affordable destination.

## **AN ADVENTURE DESTINATION:**

Of the relatively few travellers who visit Saba, many do so initially for the scuba diving and hiking. Once there they discover the uniqueness and charm of this lofty island, ensuring a return visit. The volcanic nature of the island is evidenced underwater by

rocky formations, referred to as pinnacles, jutting upwards. These pinnacle dive sites include Eye Of The Needle, Man Of War Shoals, Ladder Labyrinth and Diamond Rock, the latter resembling a small volcanic cone extending above water. Turtles abound on these pinnacles and sharks are frequent visitors. There are two full service dive operations on Saba, plus the option of a live-aboard dive boat, the Caribbean Explorer, that also visits the nearby islands of St. Eustatius (Statia) and St. Kitts. I have been on this boat three times greatly appreciating the island tours offered. In 1987 a marine park was introduced to protect the local undersea environment. As with the entire Caribbean region, corals have unfortunately been largely replaced with algae due to factors effecting the entire region, such as global warming and the resultant acidification of oceans, depletion of algae eating fish from over-harvesting that often targets spawning grounds, and excess nitrogen and phosphorus favoring algae growth. One advantage of Saba compared to other locations is that the pinnacles do remain exciting to dive with intact marine life.

Although Saba tourism is highly dependent on divers, the hiking is safe, spectacular, and has not suffered from environmental stress. There are three hikes that I highly recommend. The shortest hike is Ladder Bay trail accessed from the Bottom with steps carved right out of the hillside. The trail brings you to the rocky beach where cargo used to be offloaded, still marked by the deteriorating customs shack located halfway up. This is a hike not to be missed as the views are dramatic and the vertical nature of Saba is clearly evident. Warning to the wise, going down is easier than going up unless you are prone to vertigo, and the hike should not be done at midday given limited shade. Do remember that in the past all goods had to be manually transported up this trail, an incredible test of endurance.

A trail that is rarely taken by visitors or locals but not to be missed by anyone who appreciates scenery, peace and quiet, and a great walk is Sandy Cruz trail. It takes about 2 hours to complete and starts in a residential area of Hell's gate requiring a cab ride to the access point. The trail winds around the base of Mt. Scenery ending at



**The slopes are so steep and densely covered by forest that no one has ever set foot or hand on most of what lies near to the summit.**

Troy's Hill above the Bottom. There are some steep but short sections as the trail meanders through untouched rainforest where orchids native only to Saba grow within plain sight. At various points, we emerged from a section of rainforest to be greeted with stunning views of the coast far below. There is shelter all along this trail and so a midday hike is feasible.

By far the most popular trail is to the top of Mt Scenery, many people coming for the day from St. Maarten to add this hike to their

list. Over a thousand hand-hewn steps help with the constant vertical ascent from the base in Windwardside, accessed from the Saba Trail Shop run by the Saba Conservation Foundation. For those wanting to lessen the strain taxis can take hikers to Rendezvous 20 minutes up the trail. If the day is sunny the views from the summit are unbeatable, with the Caribbean Sea and nearby islands in the distance and rainforest clad slopes extending to Windwardside directly below. The slopes are so steep and densely covered by forest that no one has ever set foot or hand on most of what lies near to the summit. On misty days the forest has a mystical aura with clouds swirling amongst trees covered in bromeliads, mosses and ferns. In this setting it is easy to envision



The Ladder  
trail to the  
seashore

## SABA NATURE



### Naturally Scenic

For such a small island, Saba is big on nature! From top to bottom: Diamond Rock one of the pinnacle dive sites. Saban orchid found on Sandy Cruz trail, winding around Mt. Scenery. A view from Mt. Scenery, the signature hike.



## YOUR STAY



### Saba is unique and scenic from every angle

Compared to nearby destinations Saba is very affordable while offering more for adventure seekers.

From top to bottom: Juliana's in Windwardside. Queen's Gardens Resort Troy's Hill. Directions in case you get lost.

### By far the most popular trail is to the top of Mt Scenery.

Jurassic era dinosaurs or magical forest creatures. If you are doing the hike on a cloudy day proceed slowly at the very summit of the trail, as you definitely do not want the honor of being the first to set foot on the steep slopes below. I have completed the hike twice, once on a very cloudy day and the other time on a clear day, and although I prefer the later there is something very magical to the cloud-shrouded summit of Mt Scenery that is absent on a sunny day.

### PLACES TO REST & RELAX:

On our way down from the summit of Mt Scenery we had a very

refreshing drink at the Ecolodge near Rendezvous. Hikers and the very environmentally conscious travelers with limited luggage might want to consider staying at this unique resort tucked into the rainforest. The restaurant serves up great meals using locally grown ingredients when feasible. They have theme nights with the Indonesian one being very popular. From Ecolodge the Mt. Scenery trail returns you to Rendezvous or Windwardside, but for the more adventurous there is the trail to Troy Hill. This trail passes through a drier vegetation zone than is found on Mt Scenery or the Sandy Cruz trail, but the steep section at the end can be very slippery when wet. Fortunately, cables are provided for support and do come in very handy.



# UNSPOILED QUEEN

## Saba strikes the ideal balance of preserving nature and comfort for visitors

Emerging from the rainforest after this final very steep section we discovered Queen's Gardens Resort, named after the Dutch Queen. This oasis provides breathtaking views of The Bottom and Caribbean Sea. The bar area situated above the inviting swimming pool is the perfect place to wind down after a hike or dive. We were so impressed that we returned for dinner, patio tables set amongst light-adorned trees providing the ideal romantic setting. To ensure that there are no food shortages Queens Gardens fly their produce in. The prices at this resort are more upscale but there is definite value for the money and similar accommodation at nearby St. Maarten would be out of reach except for the elite. The following year we stayed at this resort for 4 nights appreciating the very spacious suite with traditional Caribbean decor. One unique feature of these suites are hot tubs with very relaxing views. A

comparable luxury resort also with reasonable prices compared to many other Caribbean settings, is Shearwater Resort located near Windwardside. A variety of room types are offered and the ocean view suites truly live up to the name, providing a panoramic scene of the Caribbean and surrounding islands.

Divers will find that 5-7 days combining hiking and diving makes for a great vacation. For those who do not dive I suggest 4-5 nights giving enough time to complete the best hikes and experience the island. The remaining time might be spent on St. Maarten or one of the other nearby less crowded islands (Statia, Anguilla, or St. Bart's). Regardless of whether you stay at the more upscale Queens Gardens or Shearwater, or a very basic small



Looking up on Sandy Cruz trail

inn, the hypnotic sound of tree frogs echoing through the hills at night and peaceful nature of the island adds a special charm to your stay. The early morning call of roosters and local activity in Windwardside is admittedly less charming, and might be taken into consideration when selecting your particular accommodation. However, in the fashion of the rugged Saban terrain and people able to construct the "Road That Could Not Be Built " and seemingly impossible airport, distractions such as these do not take away from the charm of Saba, Unspoiled Queen of the Caribbean.

### Where to stay:

Many options are feasible.  
Cost effective:  
Juliana's in Windwardside.  
Luxury:  
Queen's Gardens Resort  
Shearwater Resort

### Hikes

- Mt Scenery
- Sandy Cruz trail
- The Ladder

### Scuba diving

Pinnacle dives such as Diamond Rock, Eye Of The Needle, Man Of War Shoals, and Ladder Labyrinth

[www.sabatourism.com](http://www.sabatourism.com)

for all aspects of your Saba vacation.

For information about the author Dr. Brad Bowins and additional travel articles see:

<https://www.docbowins.com/photos/>