

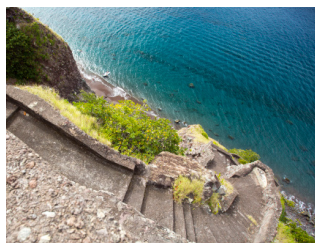
The Unspoiled Queen

Welcome to the tiny Caribbean island of Saba.

BY FRANK ROFFERS

The flight from St. Maarten lasted just 12 minutes when our 16-seat Twin Otter started its approach to the Caribbean island of Saba. The cockpit door was wide open, and the pilots calmly executed a hairpin turn next to a rocky cliff, followed by a sharp nosedive. Seconds later, they slammed on the brakes and the plane landed with a jolt 100 feet from the end of the runway.

I later learned that Saba's Juancho E. Yrausquin Airport has the shortest commercial runway in the world at 1,312 feet. It's like landing on an aircraft carrier; the sides of the tarmac end with steep cliffs 400 feet above the ocean. My first impression of the island came a few minutes later inside the two-room airport with a ticket office that felt like a grownup lemonade stand. I knew I was in for a unique travel experience.



Saba is a tiny Dutch island that soars out of the Caribbean Sea with an area of just five square miles. Steep with rocky shores, it's a paradise for ecotourism, scuba diving and hiking. Beaches are few and far between, with just two truly sandy spots: Cove Bay and Well's Bay. Settled more than 300 years ago, the island has a community of some 1,600 close-knit, English-speaking residents. It remains largely untouched by the 21st century, and the people of Saba proudly refer to their isle as "The Unspoiled Queen." Islanders are self-sufficient people related through centuries of intermarriage. They know each other by name, including most dogs and cats.

The local joke is that you can only go up or down in Saba. Authorities back in the Netherlands did not believe it was possible to build a road in the rugged terrain. Undeterred, the Sabans, led by a man who had only a mail-order engineering degree, built it carefully by hand. Construction took 20 years and was completed in 1958. Cutting through dense forest with dramatic peaks and valleys, this single road (known, quite fittingly, as "the road") services four distinct villages: Hell's Gate, Windwardside, St. John's and the Bottom. Windwardside, with its banks, restaurants and shops, serves as Saba's commercial heart.

Natives genuinely embrace tourism and make visitors feel welcome. Oddly enough, there is a medical school on the island with 400 students, giving it an almost college-town vibe. There is no crime,

If You Go

Getting There

Winair offers five daily flights from St. Maarten. Ferry service, offered twice daily, takes 90 minutes.

What to Expect

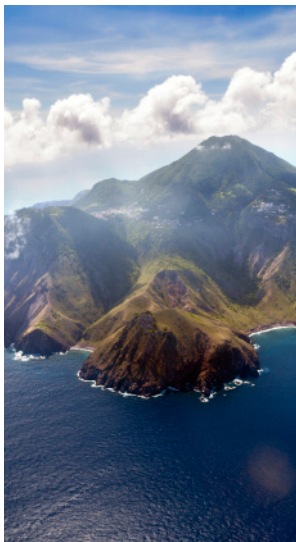
Year round, days on the island average 75 to 85 degrees with little or no humidity. Cooled by mountain breezes, night temperatures drop to 65 and 68 degrees.

Where to Stay

Eight small inns offer a total of 150 rooms. Saba Island Premier Properties (sabalandpremierproperties.com) can arrange private villa rental.

Where to Dine

Saba's dozen restaurants are quite small and informal. Reservations are recommended. Fare ranges from fresh seafood to Creole and Caribbean specialties. Brigadoon in Windwardside is a mainstay situated in an 1800s house.




and the main modes of transportation are walking, bicycling or flagging down one of the 20 or so cabs that roam the island. Goats and roosters seem to own the roadsides.

The architecture is remarkably consistent, with white wooden facades, green shutters and bright red roofs. Gingerbread woodcutting features prominent on shutters, pergolas and fences. The two main activities on the island are scuba diving and hiking. Below the water line lies a colorful kingdom of coral teeming with sharks, turtles and schools of fish. More than 30 dive sites dot the sea surrounding the island, offering reefs, pinnacles and peaks. Premier sites include Man O' War Shoals, Diamond

Rock and Eye-of-the-Needle. Sea Saba Dive Center runs daily trips into the Saba Marine Park.

The island features a network of more than 15 carefully marked and maintained trails ranging from moderate to strenuous, making for a hiker's paradise. Settings range from rainforests to tide pools to historic ruins in this rich natural wonderland. James "Crocodile" Johnson, trail manager at the Saba Conservation Foundation, is a lifelong expert and leads guided hikes.

Little Saba is a departure from the ordinary and remains a best-kept secret. The island looms large and represents the old Caribbean: charming, friendly and unusual. 





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