



SABA: FIT FOR A KING

WE CAME A LONG WAY TO conquer Skull Island.

All the way to the Netherlands, in fact — but only sort of, to the Dutch Caribbean. Tiny Saba, only 5 square miles in size, is a vision of the sea idyll: a mountainous, rugged, windswept volcanic rock whose indomitable silhouette was the inspiration for the original movie depicting King Kong's kingdom in 1933.

This Dutch island's marine park is the envy of the scuba universe, the diving is some of the best in the Caribbean, the climbing is divine and the hiking, especially along Mount Scenery's volcanic spine (the highest point in the whole of the Netherlands at 2,877 feet), is breathtaking.

Adventure lust drew me south, but it was Saba's quixotic charm, luxury »

STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY
BY FLASH PARKER
with Chelsea O'Marra



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THE CONNECTION
POINT TO GET TO
SABA, EITHER BY
AIR OR BY SEA

trappings and tranquil magnetism that conquered my imagination.

Travel partner Chelsea O'Marra came for the culinary wizardry, the spectacular hotels and guest houses, the jewels fit for a queen and the remarkable castaway vibe, and she was swept off her feet by Saba's swashbuckling soul.

So two people with two vastly different island experiences in mind decided to carve up the mountain in order to understand something of Saba's spectacular split personality.

The tiny plane broke the clouds and brought Saba into view, Mount Scenery towering above the sea. Skirting the Cave of Rum Bay and the Pirate Cliffs as the plane came in for a landing, rubber hit the road, and quickly we were spirited in different directions.

In 20 minutes, Chelsea was on the grand pool deck at the Queen's Gardens Resort & Spa, a signature Saban Sunrise cocktail (vodka, peach schnapps, grenadine and fruit juices) in hand and the sun on her face.

Ten minutes after that, the good people of the Sea Saba Dive Center had me on the sea floor in Saba's National Marine Park, one of the Caribbean's crown

jewels. I was face to face with nurse sharks, sea turtles and titanic grouper at the bubbling hot springs; the 10-foot tall coral ridges at the labyrinth known as The Ladder; and the towering volcanic peaks of Man O' War Shoals. The park, established in 1987 as a way to safeguard the underwater environment, is a testament to forward-thinking conservation.

Back at the Queen's Garden Resort, Chelsea passed through a white arbor accented with fuchsia bougainvillea, and felt a blanket of Old World charm



envelope her as the panoramic view of The Bottom, Saba's capital, came into view. The resort is a 12-suite boutique charmer, an exercise in island escapism that features Saba's premiere spa and comes complete with a cocktail impresario. Local bartender Duco knew no fewer than 11 gin-and-tonic recipes (try the cranberry-thyme marvel), and there are 25 kinds of gin on hand.

Tucked into the jungle the way it is, Queen's Garden becomes the island's best place to begin and end wilder adventures. Satisfied by its romance and serenity, Chelsea was ready to explore further afield, and step off the beaten track to join me on the Sandy Cruz Trail.

But not before fueling up.

Chez Bubba Bistro, part of the Queen's Garden complex, has such an open, welcoming community vibe — that it's impossible to sit down and not spot Saba's who's-who on a given night. For instance, you could see the island's director of tourism, and the uber-peacocked dancing legend of Saba's Summer Festival. Sure, these are the same person — 14th-generation Saban Glenn Holm — but this is a small island.

Brought in to helm the namesake Queen's Gardens Restaurant, Chef Johan de Jager's culinary wizardry is on full display in creations including Saba lobster sliders and grilled red snapper in Creole sauce; fresh, delectable fare that fuses Caribbean ingredients with

European technical precision. The setting is all rustic island charm and casual elegance, and showcases Saba's gastro vibe.

Once we were properly fed, it was time to conquer a mountain.

Sandy Cruz, along with nearly 20 other trails that crisscross the island, is the result of decades of work by eighth-generation Saban James "Crocodile" Johnson and the Saba Conservation Foundation, which is "committed to the belief that a stronger island economy will result from the sustainable use of Saba's rich and virtually unspoiled resources," according to its website.

Crocodile James sent us out into the mountains with Jelle van der Velde, a local hiking guide, shark wrangler, lionfish strangler (they're an invasive species), and beekeeper. Like most of Saba's residents, Jelle wears half a dozen hats on a given day, and serves as a tremendous ambassador for his island paradise.

Beginning at Upper Hell's Gate, Jelle toured us through primary and secondary rainforest, unveiled spectacular views of Wells Bay and the volcanic goblin fingers erupting from the sea far below, showcased wild jungle orchids and pink oleander and hummingbirds that would have been impossible to spot on our own and regaled us with the unprintable legend of the island's » lone tourist-loving monkey.

We crested one of Saba's towering ridges at Troy Hill, almost 2,000 feet above sea level, before we descended to Island Flavor, a breezy, busy little local



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outpost notable for brilliant blackened mahi mahi burgers and fresh conch stew. Kudos to the island's planning division for strategically installing restaurants at the bottom of nearly every great hiking trail.

We zipped out to quiet Booby Hill for a peek inside Jobean Glass Art, where Jo Bean Chambers, a bubbly, boisterous, whirling dervish of an artist, crafts stunning glass marvels, conducts peppy workshops and chats diving all day long. The shop's treasures are akin to pirate booty and make wonderful souvenirs.

Speaking of treasure, no visit to Saba is complete without a visit to the Jewel Cottage, Mark Johnson's love letter to Caribbean style. Johnson (not to be confused with guide extraordinaire Crocodile James), has Saban roots that run deep into the heart of the island. He is a storytelling savant, a pirate poet of the highest regard and a treasure dealer of legendary proportions; be forewarned that it can be tough to summit Saba's peaks under the weight of Johnson's shimmering jewelery.

It was Crocodile James who personally took us on a tour of the island's arid eastern hills, out along the incredible Spring Bay Trail, stomping brush at the ruins of sugar mills near Old Booby Hill as frigate birds swirled overhead, and through overrun sugar plantations as feral goats squealed all around us. Crocodile James kept me from chewing on deadly manchineel tree leaves I mistook for lemongrass, and we skipped over periwinkle and cactus before landing on the dark sand at Spring Bay.

We escaped the sun at cozy Seagrape Grill and fueled up on "Dutch

tea" — Sabans consume more Heineken per capita than any other people they say — before we scrambled over Cove Bay and into the tide pools at Flat Point, one of Saba's most beautiful, and treacherous, destinations.

- Queen's Gardens Resort & Spa**
queensaba.com
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- Sea Saba Dive Center**
seasaba.com
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- Saba National Marine Park**
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Here, ocean waves crash into ancient volcanic rock, while retreating tides have carved out picturesque pools that the sun superheats to the perfect temperature, creating an escape within an escape. From a rocky perch in the tide pools, Saba resembles a scene in a Dutch snow globe, the glass blown in Jo Bean's studio, all picturesque and perfect. Shaken by trade winds and volcanic gurgles a thousand feet beneath the surface, the globe reveals Saba's timeless fusion of luxury and intrepid adventure.

Saba's reputation as a thrillseeker's hideaway is well deserved, but it's during downtime that bliss reigns. Standing on the porch of a sprawling villa, one of Mark Johnson's stunning 18th-century sea captain's homes with Old World charm to spare, visitors soak in a bucolic view of Windwardside's beautiful homes, each dressed in white clapboard, green shutters, and red tiles — a postcard-perfect vision of Europe flung far out into the Caribbean. Saba's tiny villages conjure images of the Scottish Highlands; perhaps that's why the

17th-century pirates who landed on Saba decided to stay.

Today, instead of cruise ship ports and department store shopping, Saba's seas are dotted by sailboats and one-man skiffs, while the villages are home to unique jewelry shops and craft boutiques, where once there were rum runners and sugar plantations. Locals belonging to the eighth, 12th and even 14th generations are imbued with the lyrical vigor of Ireland — Crocodile James still spins myriad local legends while guiding hikes down to stunning Spring Bay — the culinary scene is infused with the gastro energy of Italy and the entire island flits on whimsy that could have been authored by Gabriel García Márquez.

A more thrilling version of the Caribbean may exist, but only in the imagination of an Irish pirate poet. ●

