

Tiny Caribbean island of Saba offers big piece of paradise

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Saba as seen from the window of Winair flight to St. Maarten. Note the world's shortest commercial airstrip and the Road, the island's only road. (Mary Ann Anderson/TNS)

It's a hot and humid summer day in the Caribbean and the wind is up. Just moments after Winair's de Havilland Twin-Otter bumpily takes off from St. Maarten, the tiny island of Saba, just a 10-minute flight away, rises like a scepter from the floor of the crystal-blue Caribbean.

As the plane putters toward Saba's 1,300-foot airstrip, the shortest commercial runway in the world, I see waves lashing against the island's rocky, steep shores. Beneath the waterline, the volcanic island stretches to the sea bottom, its jagged ledges and coral reefs providing arguably the best diving spots in the Caribbean.

Before my journey to the tiny, practically unknown island, I had read that the producers of the original 1933 "King Kong" movie were enthralled with its craggy, volcanic silhouette and used its likeness as Skull Island. From the plane window, I think the five-square-mile island looks more like a massive emerald.

The plane glides in for a landing on the short runway wedged between cliff and super-clear water, and as I glance out of the window, I realize the precipitous mountainside is so close that the wing seems to almost brush it. Startled at its closeness, I draw in a deep breath but fully understand the pilots fly this route five times a day and know what they are doing.

When I read in an almost-century old National Geographic that described Saba (pronounced SAY-ba) as a “quaint little island,” I was attracted to it immediately and made plans to visit. Along with neighboring St. Eustatius and Bonaire, in 2010 the island, formally a part of the Netherlands Antilles, became a Special Municipality of the Kingdom of the Netherlands.

From the airstrip I'm picked up by my guide, the affable Glenn Holm, a Saba native who's agreed to show me around the island for a couple of days. Saba is pretty much a one-horse island, with one road, one car rental agency, and one gas station. On the road to Queens Garden Resort, where I'm staying, Glenn tells me that most visitors hire a taxi.

Here's why. The winding, twisting, serpentine road—simply called the Road—is narrow and lined with flamboyant trees filled with orange and red blossoms, bright pink oleander and wide-leafed sea grape. Connecting Saba's four small villages of Zion's Hill—also called Hell's Gate—St. John, Windwardside and the Bottom, the capital, it almost wasn't built because of the rugged topography of the island.

“This is the road that was said couldn't be built,” Glenn says as he expertly maneuvers a sharp switchback. “Dutch engineers said it was impossible to build. A local man, Joseph Hassell, took a correspondence course and proved to Holland that it could, and building began in 1938. Each stone of the road was made by hand, with picks and shovels, and finally finished in 1963.”

Before we make our way to Queen's Garden, I find yet another reason that Saba stands alone among its Caribbean sisters. Glenn explains that since Saba is volcanic, it has no beach. You read that right. A Caribbean island that has no beach, but that isn't a deterrent for visitors, who come here

for myriad reasons.

By then we're at Queens Garden, where I'm met by Hidde and Claire VerBeke. I'm no one special. It's just tradition on Saba for owners to greet their guests.

"The only rule on Saba is that there are no rules," Hidde says as he shows me around the lovely hillside resort. "Just be yourself. Everyone is friendly." Then he adds, "And there are no traffic lights, no crime."

Even with no beaches, Saba was beginning to sound more and more like paradise.

Confession time. I love seafood, whether it's fish, shrimp or lobster. Doesn't matter to me as long as it comes from the water. That night at dinner on the open air patio at Queen's Garden, Duco, my waiter, recommends a Caribbean spiny lobster. As he reaches into the tank, the lobster stabs him, gets him good. That lobster clearly doesn't want to end up on a plate, and I decide at that moment to forego the crusty crustacean and order the wahoo instead, a tasty local fish.

The next morning after being serenaded awake by boisterous roosters and bleating goats that freely roam the island, Claire serves a delicious omelet made with gouda. The restaurant overlooks the pool, where I watch a young couple take a dive class.

"You can learn in the morning and then dive that afternoon," says Claire. "You don't have to be certified, as they will teach you and then take you on a shallow dive. When you come here, you don't need to think about anything. We set up everything from dives to hiking to snorkeling."

I wasn't on Saba to dive, hike or snorkel, at least not this trip; I just wanted to explore the island known as Unspoiled Queen of the Caribbean.

Soon Glenn is there and we take off on the Road once more, slowing for several goats to meander out of the way.

“Goats have the right of way here,” he laughs.

The permanent population of Saba runs about 1,500 to 1,600, Glenn says, with those numbers swelling with students, many of them American, when Saba University School of Medicine in the Bottom is in session.

“Everyone knows everyone else and their dog,” he says, a reminder of just how small the island is. “And while everyone speaks English, Dutch is the official language.”

Glenn is driving slowly along, showing off spectacular scenery where dark volcanic rock blends with lush forest and then down to where it meets blue Caribbean. I'm listening to him and watching the tropical colors swirl by when some sort of movement on the side of the road catches my attention. Without warning, Glenn slams on the brakes when some huge creature that I thought at first was a crocodile or dragon of some type saunters in front of the car.

“Whoa!” Glenn practically shouts. “It's an iguana. Look at the size of that thing. I've never seen one that big before, and I've been here all my life.”

With Saba's 3,000-foot elevation most Sabans sleep with their windows open as nights are wind-cooled. When I vow to Glenn there was no way I would keep my windows open that night for fear of giant woman-eating iguanas, he laughs and assures me that iguanas, too, sleep at night, and that there were no critters on the islands that are dangerous. He adds that the only snake on Saba is a nonvenomous black racer.

We drive along under the bluest of skies that reflect off the surface of the sea, passing mango, banana and wild apple trees. When we stop in Windwardside to visit the Harry L. Johnson Museum with its vintage photographs of Dutch royalty, Saba's first telephone, an extraordinarily pretty writing box, and other tidbits of island history, I stop and listen to the natural music of palm fronds crackling against one another in the breeze. The fragrance of mint and bay leaves lingers in the air, lending a Garden of Eden-like atmosphere to the surroundings.

Driving back into the Bottom for a quick lunch and shopping, we stop for a traffic jam. Seems there are four cars backed up on the Road, and we must wait for a minute or two before moving forward. "Oh, this traffic," sighs Glenn seriously as I laugh at him.

Most visitors to Saba come for scuba diving the pristine waters or hiking the myriad trails of the cloud forest that crowns Mount Scenery, the highest point on the island. And it is there atop Mount Scenery that we meet Keith Murphy, who runs the Saba Ecolodge, a simple but comfortable lodge. Our conversation turns to diving.

"Two hundred feet around the island is protected," says Murphy. "It's all very colorful, too. That's why our diving is some of the best."

Murphy intones that among the sea creatures that inhabit Saba's waters are hawksbill, green and leatherback sea turtles, plus tiger, nurse and hammerhead sharks. Big eels, seahorses and Nassau grouper are also among the denizens of the sea.

Later Glenn and I make a stop at Jobean Glass Art Studio where I watch lively, super-friendly owner Jobean Chambers fashion such pieces as seahorses, starfish and mermaids from hot glass. She tells me that Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands has several pieces of her work, and I watch completely mesmerized as she melts the glass into beautiful pieces of art with just her hands and a blow torch of sorts.

From there we drive to a nondescript building that hosts the local Lions Club where every Thursday a group of ladies of all ages gathers to tat Saba Lace, one of the island's most coveted souvenirs. Inside Glenn introduces me to several ladies, including Imelda Peterson. She tells me that Saba Lace, once known as Spanish work, is threadwork that is completely handstitched into delicate, intricate patterns in tablecloths, napkins, collars and bookmarks.

"Anyone who wants a lesson can come in and just watch," she says. "I've been doing this since I was 6 years old, but now it's a dying art."

The camaraderie among the ladies is soft and sweet, just like all of Saba. With the welcome absence of glittering all-inclusive resorts, chain restaurants and flip flops-wearing tourists, this island of “only ones” and “uns”—uncrowded, unspoiled and completely unique—has a down-home, small-town feel and is mostly quiet, save the occasional bleats and cackles of goats and chickens.