

Saba

There once was a man and a woman who lived in a perfect garden. They were welcome in this idyllic thicket so long as they didn't eat the fruit of one particular tree. You probably know the rest of the story, but what you didn't know is that, although Adam and Eve ruined it for the rest of us, you can still have the chance to find your way back to Eden.

Paradise takes the form of a spiky volcano peak called Saba (pronounced *say-bah*) that pushes forth from the sea to pierce the lazy clouds above. It's hard to believe that this breathtaking retreat is but a 15-minute flight from garish casinos and condominiums, especially since the island's homogeneous white-green-brown architecture adds an extra sense of perfection to the naturally gifted enclave.

Just when you thought that nothing could be more beautiful than Saba's jagged volcanic landscape, a trip below the ocean's surface reveals a colorful kingdom of neon coral that teems with fat reef sharks, sea turtles and slippery fish. These dive sites rank amongst the top scuba spots in the world, and are fastidiously protected by the well-established national marine park.

While nearby islands have been snared by development conglomerates, Saba does its darndest to fly under the radar. Locals are steadfast in their efforts to preserve their close-to-nature lifestyle, which will undoubtedly prolong the island's status as the ultimate pristine getaway.

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 13 sq km
- **Capital** The Bottom
- **Country code** 📞 599
- **Departure tax** US\$5 within the Netherlands Antilles; US\$20 elsewhere
- **Famous for** Striking volcanic scenery, world-class diving
- **Language** Dutch is used in government; English is spoken in schools, homes and everywhere else
- **Money** Netherlands Antillean guilder (ANG); US dollars accepted everywhere; ANG1 = US\$0.56 = €0.36 = UK£0.29
- **Official name** Saba
- **People** Sabans
- **Population** 1500
- **Visas** Not necessary for most residents of North America, the EU and Australia; see p480



HIGHLIGHTS

- **Hiking** (p478) Explore the island's dramatic vertical peak and score killer views of the sea below
- **Diving** (p478) Hit the waves and explore stunning, submerged pinnacles that teem with nurse sharks and large colorful fish
- **Flying** (p473) Experience the thrill of landing on the world's smallest runway, and then hold your breath when you depart as your plane drives off the side of a cliff
- **Jo Bean Glass Art Studio** (p474) Head to this charming menagerie of colorful doodads and become a glass-blowing whiz under the tutelage of resident artist Jo Bean

ITINERARIES

- **One Day** First, shed a tear that you only have a day to explore this incredible island. Then meet up with one of the dive boats for a two-tank half-day trip out to some of the finest reefs and submerged pinnacles in the Caribbean, if not the world. Break for a leisurely lunch amid chatty locals in Windward-side and, if you have enough energy, take a stab at the Sandy Cruz Trail in the late afternoon.
- **Three Days** Pick a hotel in Windward-side and spend your first day walking around the small town (be sure to stop by Jo Bean's glass studio to say hello), then head out into the bush for a rugged hike up to the top of Mt Scenery (887m), the highest point on the island. Spend the mornings of the following two days scuba diving with numerous reef sharks around sunken pinnacles; afternoons are best spent curled up with a good novel under the warm Caribbean sun. In the evenings taste-test the menus at spots around the island, including the Rainforest Restaurant at the Ecolodge Rendez-Vous.
- **One Week** Prearrange a package diving trip and spend the greater part of the week blowing bubbles with sharks, rays, barracuda and sea turtles. Take a day off and organize a guided hike through Saba's rugged forests. In the evenings hit up Windwardside's restaurants: Swinging Doors for steak Sundays,

Tropics Cafe on Fridays for a burger and movie, and Brigadoon for sushi Saturdays. Then retreat to your cliffside cottage or colonial-style inn and click through your camera's postcard-worthy scenery shots, taken earlier in the day. After a week on Saba you'll know every local and all of their secrets.

CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Saba's temperature averages 27°C (80°F) in July, but winter weather can dip down to 17°C (63°F) during the evening. With stately Mt Scenery covered in cloud forest, the island gets substantially more rain – 1m per year – and cloud cover than the rest of the Caribbean. Trade winds keep the island cool, especially at night, and blankets are a necessity even on some summer nights. Saba is the rare island in this region where a visit during July to September is actually pleasant, if there's not a hurricane. The dry season is December to July.

HISTORY

Saba was intermittently inhabited by the Siboneys, Arawaks and Caribs before Columbus sailed past the island on his second voyage to the New World. Although English pirates and French adventurers briefly inhabited the island, it wasn't until 1640 that the Dutch set up a permanent settlement, the remains of which are still scattered around the island.

Saba changed hands a dozen times or so over the next 200 years, resulting in mostly Irish and English settlers, but Dutch ownership. Life on Saba for these pioneers was difficult at best. Many of the men made their living from the sea, leaving so many women on the island that it became known as 'The Island of Women.'

Because the steep topography of the island precluded large-scale plantations, colonial-era slavery was quite limited on Saba. Those colonists who did own slaves generally had only a few and often worked side by side with them in the fields, resulting in a more integrated society than on larger Dutch islands.

The close-knit community beat seemingly impossible conditions and thrived in this little outpost. Tourism found Saba when an airport was built in 1959, but it wasn't until 1970 that Saba got uninterrupted electricity.