

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.

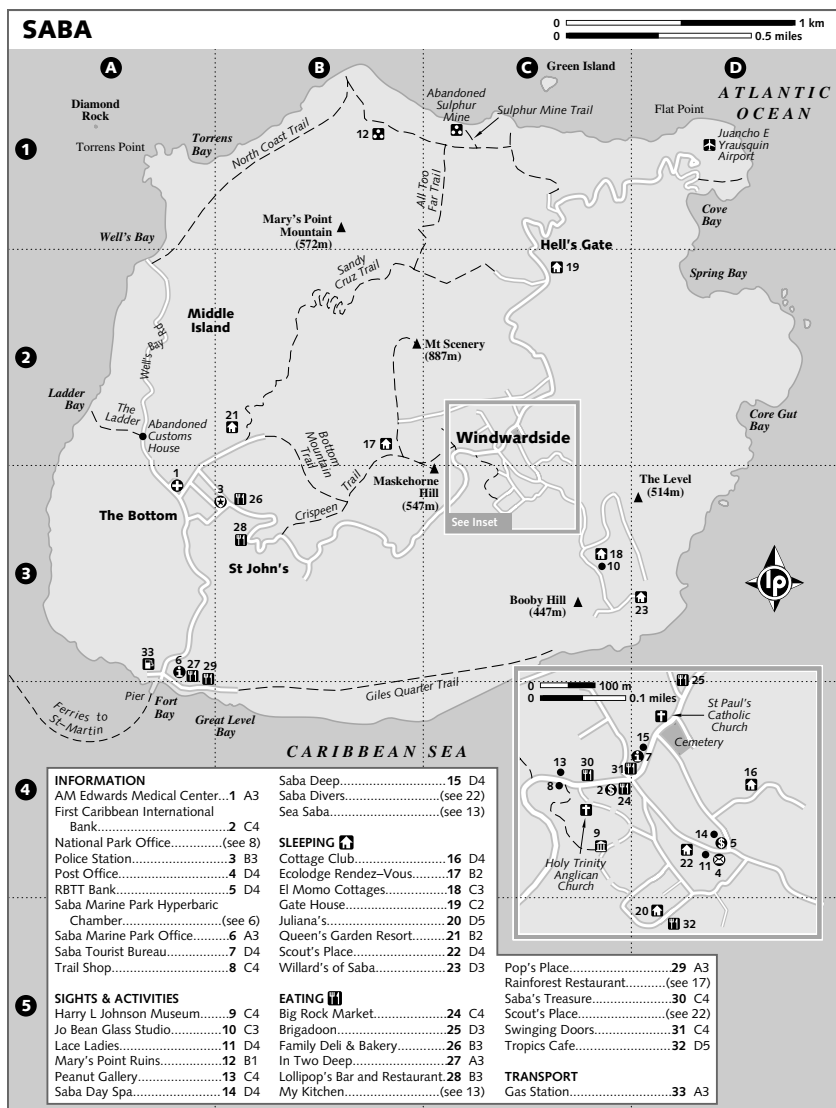
HISTORY

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.



Saba was a part of the Netherlands Antilles until 2005, when the five islands (Saba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Sint Eustatius and Dutch Sint Maarten) met on the Jesurun Referendum to decide the fate of the Netherlands Antilles. Saba, along with Bonaire, voted overwhelmingly to become administered directly by the Netherlands. At the end of 2008, Saba was

once again reshuffled when the Netherlands Antilles officially dissolved, with Curaçao and Sint Maarten gaining greater independence, while the governmental reins tightened on Saba, Sint Eustatius and Bonaire, bringing them closer to the Netherlands. For more on the fate of the Netherlands Antilles, see p779.

THE CULTURE

Saba was settled by a smattering of British, Irish, Dutch and Scandinavian settlers and their African slaves. Most of the current residents are descended from these families.

Coming to Saba feels more like visiting an 18th-century Celtic village than a Caribbean island. White houses with clay-colored roofs and green-trimmed shutters abound in a *Truman Show* kinda way, but it's all very charming and extremely photogenic. Locals drive leisurely along streets, honking their horns to greet neighbors and friends. After a week of vacationing on the island, you'll be waving at all of the locals as well.

Sabans enjoy a relatively high standard of living. The island is extremely tolerant of differences, an attitude that started hundreds of years ago when slave and master had to work side by side to allow the island to thrive. Today, gay dive and tour companies are welcomed and even courted by the island.

Most Sabans attend one of six churches on the island: three Roman Catholic, two Anglican and one Seventh Day Adventist.

ARTS

Saba has a small handicraft scene, and locals produce and sell beautiful items such as hand-blown glass, Saban lace and island paintings. In Windwardside you'll have the opportunity to a glass-blowing class at Jo Bean Art Glass Studio (p474).

Saba's most famous craft is lace making, a skill that was brought to Saba in the 1870s by a woman who'd been sent to live in a Venezuelan convent. Older women in the community still weave the lace in their spare time; see p474 for more information.

ENVIRONMENT

Six completely separate temperate zones exist on Saba. Starting with steep cliffs that seem to shoot out of the ocean, the land progresses to grassy meadows, slopes with little vegetation, and up to hilltops, rainforests and finally the cloud forest covering the top of Mt Scenery.

For a place this small, there is an enormous amount of mammal, fish, bird and plant life on and surrounding the island, both native and introduced. Rare wild orchids peek out along the road or in the rainforest, and oleander and hibiscus flowers are endemic. The elephant ear plant has shade-bearing leaves as big as...well, elephant ears.

HOW MUCH?

- **Taxi from the airport to El Momo Cottages** US\$12
- **Two-tank dive** US\$80
- **Souvenir from Jo Bean Glass Art Studio** US\$16
- **Burger at Tropics Cafe** US\$10
- **Guided nature hike per person** US\$15

Bird-watchers will enjoy spotting the plethora of avian life overhead as much as they'll enjoy saying their names: sooty terns, brown boobies, brown noddies, banana quits and pearly eyed thrashers are a handful of the 60 species of birds that call Saba home. Keep an eye out at higher elevations for hummingbirds, and at lower elevations for red-tailed hawks. Saba has its own unique reptile – the skittish little brown anoles lizard – seen scurrying around everywhere.

But perhaps the best thing about Saban wildlife is the obvious lack of a certain pest: mosquitoes are, by and large, absent.

Sabans are extremely environmentally aware. The island's water supply mostly comes from rain gathered on rooftop cisterns, or a small desalination plant. Visitors should be mindful about not taking long showers and not running the water longer than absolutely necessary. Latrines on the island are referred to a 'ship toilets' because (gee, how can we put this daintily?) only natural refuse may be flushed away; all paper and other materials are to be placed in the garbage. In the continuous effort to stay 'green' locals are still grappling with how to reduce the amount of imports to the island (namely food). The Ecolodge Rendez-Vous (p475) is pioneering the creation of gardens.

FOOD & DRINK

For an island that imports almost all of its food, Saba has a dizzying array of restaurant choices, from tiny bakery shacks to fine dining. You'll find a mix of interesting fruits growing on the island, including soursop and Saba lemon. Don't leave the island without trying homemade soursop ice cream, or grabbing a Saba lemon off of a drooping tree, scratching the peel, and taking a deep, satisfying whiff of the zest. Be sure to try

one of the many homemade rums, which are often flavored with locally grown banana, mango, vanilla or 'Saba spice.' Many establishments – such as El Momo Cottages (p474) and Ecologie Rendez-Vous (p475) – make and sell their own blends.

In Saba's continuous effort to 'go green,' there is a concerted attempt to reduce the amount of imported produce, and several establishments reap their crops straight from an onsite garden.

SABA

Saba has four towns straddling the rugged cliffs between the teeny runaway and hidden seaport: Hell's Gate, Windwardside, St John's and the Bottom. They are all connected by one serpentine route known simply as 'the Road'.

FLAT POINT

The aptly named Flat Point is precisely that: a flat point (Saba's only flat point, in fact), and the perfect place to plunk down an airport. The **Juancho E Yrausquin Airport** has the tiniest runway in the entire world, measuring a mere 400m, and by the time you figure out how to pronounce the airport's name, you'll have already landed on St-Martin/Sint Maarten. There's a small bar called Flight Deck inside the airport should you need a couple of frosty ones to ease your jitters before taking off; it's open one hour before and after each flight. Planes departing Saba don't actually lift off the ground; rather, the runway suddenly stops and the aircraft drives over a sheer cliff and glides away.

If you have a little time to kill before leaving, or after you arrive, leave your luggage in the waiting area ('theft' is barely word in Saba's lexicon) and quickly hike down to the **tide pools** beside the airport. You'll find dramatic waves crashing against the thick beads of volcanic rock.

HELL'S GATE

If you are arriving by plane, Hell's Gate is the first 'town' you will pass through while making your way across the island. But back in the day, when visitors arrived by boat, Hell's Gate was the furthest settlement from the docks. The village earned its infernal name due to the fact that it was absolutely hellish to lug parcels

all the way here after they arrived by boat; it would often take an entire day for the residents of Hell's Gate to schlep their shipments across the volcano. Today, this teeny village is mostly residential, with one fine place to stay and eat, and a couple private cottages available for holiday rental (see www.sabatourism.com/cottages.html for more information about prices and bookings).

A quaint spot to rest your head, the **Gate House** (☎ 416-2416; www.sabagatehouse.com; s/d incl breakfast US\$105/135, cottage US\$155; 🍷) sits on a quiet stretch of land punctuated by orange and cashew trees. Warm Caribbean colors cheer the rooms, which also feature beautiful views of Saba's rugged cliffs and choppy sea. Fun French cuisine classes are on offer in the house kitchen and can be tailored to suit your cooking interests. Courses are US\$120 and a maximum of six students are allowed to participate (so that's US\$20 per person).

WINDWARDSIDE

Although the Bottom is technically the capital of Saba, Windwardside is where most of the action takes place. One could say that Windwardside is to Sydney as the Bottom is to Canberra – on a much, much smaller scale, of course. Chances are, if you're sleeping on Saba, you'll be staying in this quaint hamlet of red roofs. The main area of town features all of the traveler necessities: banks, convenience stores, a post office, dive shops, a tourist office and many restaurants.

Booby Hill, a small subsection of Windwardside, sits just up the hill from the heart of town and is worth the short trek to check out the stellar views – particularly from Willard's of Saba Hotel – and snoop around a nifty little art studio.

Information

First Caribbean International Bank (☎ 416-2216; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) Does not have an ATM, although it offers a cash advance (in guilders or dollars) from your ATM card.

Post office (📧 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, to noon Sat)

RBTT Bank (☎ 416-2454; 🕒 8:30am-3:30pm Mon-Fri) Has a 24-hour ATM.

Saba Tourist Bureau (☎ 416-2231; www.sabatourism.com; 🕒 8am-5pm Mon-Fri)

Trail Shop (☎ 416-2630; 🕒 10am-4pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) Located at the west end of Windwardside, this helpful outpost stocks a large selection of maps, books

and souvenirs. It's a nonprofit organization set up by the Saba Conservation Foundation.

Sights

Though light on sights, Windwardside has a couple of gems that are worth checking out when you're in the mood to take a break from reading your book on your balcony. If you are interested in traditional handicrafts, there is a small legion of older women on the island who spend their leisure hours creating Saban lace, which uses a special stitching technique that has been passed down for a couple of generations. These women, known locally at the **Lace Ladies**, gather at the Eugenius Centre, across the street from the RBTT bank, on Thursdays at 4pm for their weekly stitching bee and visitors are more than welcome to stop by.

Another local artist, Jo Bean, works out of her colorful studio up on Booby Hill. A visit to the **Jo Bean Glass Art Studio** (☎ 416-2490; www.jobeanglass.com; Booby Hill) is a must for every type of traveler. Discover how she works her magic during a half-day glass-blowing course (US\$85), in which you'll be set up with a torch and an unlimited supply of thin glass shafts, which you melt down into swirling balls or cylinders. After you graduate the tutorial, you can start making beads of all shapes and sizes while incorporating gold foil and other quirky objects from around the shop. When the class is done, you'll proudly wear your creations home on a string of leather around your neck. The best part about the entire experience is hanging out with Jo Bean, a magnetic character who'll cheer you on as you fumble over your first beads, and dish out an inordinate amount of praise when you finally make a glass pearl that doesn't look a booger. If you don't have enough time to devote to a course, be sure to pick up a little glass frog, which sits on a rounded bead perfect for a necklace.

If you still have a craving for more local art, stop by Lambee's Place plaza, at the west end of Windwardside, and check out the **Peanut Gallery** (☎ 416-2509; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat), which features a color wash of local paintings, carvings and framed Saban lace.

In a gardenlike setting, the **Harry L Johnson Museum** (admission US\$2; ☎ 10am-noon & 1-4pm Mon-Fri) sits just down the hill behind Scout's Place, surrounded by wildflowers, including black-eyed susans, the island's official flower. The small museum sits in a 160-year-old Saban home, which has the typical pearly

white façade, green-shuttered windows and earthy, clay-colored roof. The collection features a smattering of vintage black-and-white photographs, an 'authentic' Saban kitchen, an old piano and scores of antiques from Victorian times.

Activities

All three diving outfits listed here have a good reputation for safety. Each offers several packages, as well as individual dives.

Saba Deep (☎ 416-3347; www.sabadep.com; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Recently taken over by new owners. Boats depart from Fort Bay.

Saba Divers (☎ 416-2741; www.sabadivers.com; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) Based at Scout's Place, this is a popular choice and has outgoing staff. The website has detailed listings of dive sites.

Sea Saba (☎ 416-2246; www.seasaba.com; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) This pick of the litter gets our endorsement for its unwavering dedication to its clientele. In addition, it is passionate about marine education and keeping Saba a pristine place to visit.

After a long day of diving or hiking, relax with a massage, body scrub or foot treatment at the **Saba Day Spa** (☎ 416-3488; www.sabadayspa.com; 80-min massage US\$100). The owner is a registered nurse and massage therapist, and spent many years working at the Ritz-Carlton spa on St Thomas.

Sleeping

There are six places to stay in Windwardside, all of which have their own unique flavor, ranging from the charming-yet-rustic El Momo Cottages all the way up to the expensive Willard's of Saba, which commands sweeping views of the sea and one ridiculously hefty price tag. If you're looking for a bit more privacy, there are several holiday cottage rentals scattered throughout town, all of which have the archetypal Saban gingerbread architecture. Check out www.sabatourism.com/cottages/html for more information.

El Momo Cottages (☎ 416-2265; www.elmomo.com; s/d cottage with shared bathroom US\$55/65, with private bathroom from US\$75/85; ☎ ☎) The small clusters of cottages at El Momo are hidden along a steep, rugged hill smothered in juicy tropical foliage. You'll need a sherpa to haul your luggage up the myriad stone steps to your cabin. Seriously. After cursing under your breath and grabbing your chest to make sure you're not having a heart attack, you'll be rewarded

with lovely views of the craggy island and churning sea. The highest cabin – the ‘Cottage in the Sky’ – is positively breathtaking and oozes rustic romantic charm. Solar-heated outdoor showers, hand built by the previous owners, ensure a clear, private view of the ocean while you suds up, but don’t leave your organic soap in the bathroom – it will be devoured by mysterious forest critters during the night. This Robinson Crusoe–like resort has wi-fi and is 100% smoking free.

Scout’s Place (☎ 416-2740; www.sabadivers.com; s/d incl breakfast from US\$76/96; 📶) This lively 14-room hotel is owned by the same German couple who runs Saba Divers. There are three categories of rooms: the cheapest have refrigerator, cable TV, wi-fi and ceiling fan, while the spacious private cottages have grand four-poster beds and balconies with ocean views. Diving packages are also on offer.

Ecolodge Rendez-Vous (☎ 416-3348; www.ecolodge-saba.com; Crispeen Trail; cottages US\$85-99; 📶) If staying deep in the forest at a place powered by solar panels sounds better than having a TV and phone in your room, then these green-conscious cabins might be the perfect place for you. Shower water is stored in bladderlike pouches and heated by the sun, so you won’t have warm water in the morning, or on cloudy days, or...ever. However, the colorful cottages are covered in beautiful bright murals and all feature individual nature-related themes; there’s also a lovely breeze and a sauna to keep you refreshed. One downside to staying at the ecolodge, though, is the lack of awesome ocean vistas available at most of the other accommodations. Dive packages can be arranged. If you decide that it’s a tad to rustic for your taste, be sure to swing by the on-site Rainforest Restaurant for an organic/-asmic meal.

Juliana’s (☎ 416-2269; www.julianas-hotel.com; s/d from US\$100/125; 📶 📺 📶) Juliana’s has a sociable vibe centered on the turquoise lap pool, which is also home to the resident giant inflatable swan. The comfortable rooms and prim, private cottages, all in the classic Saba gingerbread-house style, have colorful and airy decor. Each comes with a TV-DVD, wi-fi and terrace. Excellent dive package deals can be organized with friendly Sea Saba. Very gay friendly.

Cottage Club (☎ 416-2386; www.cottage-club.com; cottage US\$118; 📶 📺) This quaint collection

of Saba-style cottages sits on a quiet, palm-fringed spot accented by welcoming swimming pool. Cottage Club is the only hotel in Windwardside without a restaurant, although all of the cottages have kitchens and the town’s restaurants are only a short walk down the road.

Willard’s of Saba (☎ 416-2498, 800-504-9861; www.willardsofsaba.com; Booby Hill; s US\$300-600, d US\$400-700; 📶 📺) The highest hotel in the Kingdom of the Netherlands, Saba’s most expensive sleeping spot offers heart-pounding views of the sea, 750m below. The seven rooms feel slightly dated, but guests lounge around the cozy hot tub and large heated lap pool. Willard’s has the only tennis court in Windwardside, and you’ll often find the locals using to court in the mornings before the sun gets too strong. Skip the fitness center; you’ll get your daily dose of butt-robics just by climbing the dozens of stairs scattered around the property. Offers wi-fi.

Eating & Drinking

Windwardside has the largest conglomeration of dining and drinking options on the island.

It’s always best to book your dinner plans in advance: Saba’s food shipments are sometimes limited and most restaurants only cook enough food each evening for guests with reservations; restaurants also sometimes close unexpectedly for the evening due to a variety of reasons. The hosts at each hotel are always happy to book your dining plans for you.

There’s usually one restaurant each evening that offers a special dinner deal of some sort.

Tropics Cafe (☎ 416-2469; breakfast US\$3-10, mains US\$8-18; 📶) breakfast daily, lunch & dinner Tue-Sun) Edging Juliana’s lap pool, Tropics has some great eats for very reasonable prices. Friday nights are busy, with a US\$10 deal that gets you a delicious burger and drive-in-style movie projected onto a makeshift screen. If you chance upon a ‘Caribbean night’, you’ll be rewarded with scrumptious lobster pasta worthy of the finest seafood restaurants in the Caribbean.

Saba’s Treasure (☎ 416-2819; mains US\$6-15; 📶) 10am-10pm Mon-Sat) The interior of this little cheapie feels like the hull of a wooden frigate. Choose from the assortment of dishes such as pan pizzas or sandwiches, and wash it down with a beer.

CROCODILE JAMES

He approaches slowly, raising one eyebrow and wielding a large machete-like knife – he’s James Johnson, known as ‘Crocodile James,’ Saba’s official trail ranger. Clad head to toe in khaki (which, according to legend, he only washes twice a year), he quickly plunks down his blade, warmly shakes your hand and whisks you away into the wilds of the island’s jungle. A fifth-generation Saban, James knows the terrain oh-so intimately, and his unique tours are a quirky blend of history and biology – be ready for some off-trail trekking and prep your taste buds for sampling local vegetation.

The guided tours are US\$60 for a maximum of four people (additional trekkers cost US\$15 each), and last anywhere from one to four hours depending on your stamina (James could trek all the way through ‘til tomorrow – it’s in his Saban genes). Call ☎ 416-5428 to make arrangements.

Scout’s Place (☎ 416-2205; lunch mains US\$6-20, dinner mains US\$9-24; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner) The food isn’t anything to write home about, but Friday nights are not to be missed – locals pile in for an evening of karaoke (commonly called ‘scary-oke’). Wolfgang, the owner, commands the microphone and belts out classics such as ‘Splish Splash, I Was Takin’ a Bath’ with the utmost seriousness.

Swinging Doors (☎ 416-2506; mains US\$10-20; 🍷 10am-9pm) Enter through the saloon-style swinging doors and grab a picnic table in the side courtyard for a tasty assortment of dishes that are one step above the usual pub grub. Tuesdays and Fridays feature cheap chicken and ribs, while Sundays are a must – the owner, Eddy, helms the grill and churns out juicy slabs of steak.

My Kitchen (Mijn Keuken; ☎ 416-2539; mains from US\$11; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Located near the Trail Shop, My Kitchen is a good place to stop after working up an appetite on a long hike. Sample a variety of Caribbean and European favorites.

Rainforest Restaurant (☎ 416-3348; www.ecolodge-saba.com; Ecolodge Rendez-Vous, Crispeen Trail; mains US\$13-15; 🍷 breakfast, lunch & dinner, closed dinner Mon) A soul-cleansing meal at the Rainforest Restaurant is a must. Virtually all of the food is homegrown, and the ever-changing menu features an assortment of international dishes ranging from Asian curries to hearty English breakfasts. Try the tea made from herbs and spices that were plucked minutes earlier from the garden.

Brigadoon (☎ 416-2380; thebrig@unspoiledqueen.com; mains from US\$15; 🍷 6:30pm-11pm, closed Tue) Those who visit the Brig are looking for a quality meal and aren’t afraid to drop a couple of extra bucks on it. Chef Michael Chaamaa brings together an assortment of dishes from all over the world, ranging from fresh lobster

to garlicky falafel. Thursday nights feature succulent prime ribs, and Saturday night sushi hour is a force to be reckoned with.

For a picnic lunch, hit Windwardside’s largest grocery store, **Big Rock Market** (☎ 416-2280; 🍷 8am-7pm Mon-Sat), and browse the relatively impressive selection of international food and wine. There are a couple of stores on the street between Brigadoon and Big Rock Market that sell snacks and bulk items (not that you’re looking for a pound of nutmeg...).

MT SCENERY

The highest point on very-vertical Saba, Mt Scenery (887m) is officially the highest point in the entire Kingdom of the Netherlands. Views from the top are definitely worth the climb. The peak offers three distinct vistas: Windwardside, the Bottom and Hell’s Gate. For detailed information about hiking to the top, see p478.

ST JOHN’S

Little St John’s, straddling a crooked cliff between Windwardside and the Bottom, was created when the locals could not decide where to build the island’s school. Residents of each community squabbled over the matter for quite some time, and when no resolution was found, everyone compromised and constructed the school halfway between the villages. A simple cluster of gingerbread houses sits around the classroom buildings; besides that, there’s one joint, **Lollipop’s Bar and Restaurant** (☎ 416-3330; mains from US\$10; 🍷 lunch & dinner), where you can grab some chow on the way down to the Bottom. Hit the restaurant up for mouthwatering fish cakes and excellent ocean scenery, or stop by on a Sunday for the filling brunch. Thursday nights feature barbecued grub and reggae beats.

THE BOTTOM

The Bottom is Saba's official capital, and houses the island's administrative and governmental buildings. The police station is located here (not that island has any crime); the large bell in the front yard was rung every hour on the hour until the 1990s.

Today, the Bottom is largely the domain of students studying at Saba Medical College, an accredited university offering the first 2½ years of medical education in a course that on par with those offered at US or Canadian medical schools. The 300 students give the island some much appreciated revenue and make up a whopping 20% of Saba's population. Snoop around the village for cheap eats as prices are slashed for the thrifty wannabe doctors.

AM Edwards Medical Center (☎ 416-3239) offers medical services, while the region's only hyperbaric facility, **Saba Marine Park Hyperbaric Chamber** (☎ 416-3288; 🕒 24hr), is on the right side of the road as you enter the Bottom from Windwardside.

It's worth stopping by the Bottom's **Catholic church** to check out what the locals refer to as 'Saba's Sistine Chapel.' Heleen Cornet, a respected local artist, spent two long years painting the church's altar with scenes that fuse images from the Saban jungle with biblical themes. Visit her website at www.heleencornet.com.

A 12-unit luxury resort set up a small hill overlooking the Bottom, the beautiful **Queen's Garden Resort** (☎ 416-3494; www.queensaba.com; deluxe/superior/royal ste US\$225/300/375; 📺 📶) is the choice retreat for royalty when it visits the island. Gorgeous views accompany rooms equipped with cable TV, wi-fi, a phone, four-poster beds and a separate living room. The pièce de résistance is the blue-tiled outdoor Jacuzzi in each suite. The hotel's restaurant (open for breakfast and lunch daily, and for dinner Wednesday to Monday) serves an elegant lineup of dishes – it's pricey, but worth the dough for a romantic soiree.

Family Deli & Bakery (☎ 416-3858; mains US\$6-15; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-4pm Sun) serves breakfast, lunch and dinner, plus light meals throughout the day, including cheese *pastechnis* (deep-fried turnovers). Follow the smell of freshly baked bread.

WELL'S BAY

As stunning as Saba is, the spike-shaped island doesn't have a beach to call its own. Well, there's Well's...sort of. After a large storm walloped the island in 1999, a small stretch of grainy sand began to appear and disappear with the tide. Commonly known amongst Sabans as 'Wandering Beach,' this cobbled stretch of beach-ish terrain is more of a tourist attraction than a place to recline with good book. If you plan to walk down to the 'beach' (locals often make the bunny ear quotation marks with their fingers when referring Well's Bay), make sure you arrange for someone to pick you up – climbing back up the steep-even-by-Saba-standards hill will be extremely arduous.

While you're visiting, check out **Diamond Rock**, a giant swirling pinnacle bursting skyward from below the waves just offshore. The torpedo-shaped mass is noticeably light in color, the result of years of guano bombardment by resident birds – don't let the locals trick you into thinking that they paint it white to warn watercraft not to crash into it.

A mere fifteen minutes' swim, at the northeast end of the bay, Torrens Point is a gathering spot for tropical fish (and snorkelers in the know).

LADDER BAY

Before Fort Bay became Saba's official port, everything – from a Steinway piano to Queen Beatrix herself – was hauled up to the Bottom via the **Ladder**, a vertical staircase of over 800 steps. The area is now a moderately difficult trail that heads past an abandoned customs house and affords hikers beautiful views.

MARY'S POINT RUINS

A generation ago Saba was even more isolated than it is now. One village, Mary's Point, was a 45-minute walk from even the next village. In 1934 the Dutch government decided to move every single villager and house to an area behind Windwardside known as 'the Promised Land,' thus lessening the isolation of being so far from any other signs of civilization. You can see the ruins of Mary's Point while hiking on the Sandy Cruz Trail.

FORT BAY

A mishmash of concrete structures, electrical parts and oil drums, Fort Bay is Saba's main port and probably the ugliest place on the entire island. Those arriving by ferry will pass through here first before being carted up the crag; divers will also pass through before heading out to sea.

The **Saba Marine Park office** (☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) has a few brochures to give away, and sells marine-park-logo T-shirts and books on diving.

Although Pop is long gone, **Pop's Place** (☎ 416-3327; ☎ 11am-9pm Wed-Mon), on the waterfront, is a welcoming joint and the perfect place to stop after a dive. Go for one of the famous lobster sandwiches. Try **In Two Deep** (☎ 416-3438; ☎ 9am-3pm), next to Pop's, for great harbor views and a tasty surf-and-turf platter.

DIRECTORY

ACCOMMODATIONS

Most of Saba's accommodations are reasonably priced considering the limited number of options: when compared to the other islands in the Caribbean, sleeping on Saba is a steal. For a bit of rustic fun, try El Momo Cottages (p474), the cheapest place to crash on the island. If you want to go green, try a night at the Ecolodge Rendez-Vous (p475). The top-end resorts are conspicuously overpriced.

Check out www.sabatourism.com/cottages.html for a list of private vacation rentals. Most cottages are located in Windwardside or Hell's Gate.

The Saba Tourist Bureau (p480) offers help with booking accommodations.

Hotels often add a 5% government room tax; the 10% to 15% service charge is usually at the discretion of the visitor.

ACTIVITIES

Diving & Snorkeling

Although it seems hardly possible when you first approach Saba by air or ferry, this stunning volcanic island might even be more scenic below the ocean's surface. Divers and also adventurous snorkelers can find a bit of everything at 26 varied dive sites: steep wall dives just offshore, amazing submerged pinnacles, and varied marine life ranging from sharks to stingrays to turtles.

The Saba Marine Park has protected the area since 1987. It's the only self-supporting marine park in the world, maintained by a US\$4 fee charged for each and every dive, a small price to pay for the pristine conditions. There is a hyperbaric chamber (p477), staffed by trained volunteers from the medical university and Saba Marine Park. There is no individual diving on Saba; all divers must register with the **Saba Marine Park office** (Fort Bay; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) and go through a dive operator. See p56 for more on diving here.

For snorkelers, Well's Bay (p477) and the adjacent Torrens Point (p477) are popular spots, and there's even a marked underwater trail. Ladder Bay is also popular, but it's a good 30-minute hike down to the shore from the road and double that back up.

Dive operators are located in Windwardside; see p474 for details. Friendly **Dive Saba** (☎ in the US & Canada 800-883-7222; www.divesaba.com) offers fantastic deals on airfares, dive packages and hotels in Saba. It's based in the US, but can arrange trips for anyone.

Hiking

Saba is a hiker's paradise. Many of the trails have been around for centuries, and were used by the earliest settlers to get from village to village.

When you're hiking, dress in layers, wear sturdy walking shoes and bring water. Some hikers might appreciate a walking stick. Stay on the trails as they traverse private land.

The island's premier hike is to the top of Mt Scenery, a three-part climb that ends at the highest point in the entire Kingdom of the Netherlands. The trail starts in the Bottom; the first part is called the Bottom Mountain Trail, while the second leg is the Crispeen Trail. The third and final part of the trail (which is the leg that most people do) starts behind the Trail Shop in Windwardside, and goes straight up and up until you reach the ethereal cloud forest. The best time to head out is about 9am or 10am, so you can reach the peak at around noon, the least cloudy part of the day, for a view that will make the pain in your calves well worth it.

The Sulphur Mine Track is a moderately strenuous hike past hot springs to an abandoned sulfur mine (exploration of the mine highly inadvisable). The relatively easy

PRACTICALITIES

- **Newspaper** *St Martin Herald* has one Saban correspondent.
- **Radio & TV** Voice of Saba is at 93.9FM and 1140AM. Radio Transat (broadcast from St-Martin/Sint Maarten and playing reggae and dance tunes) is at 95.5FM. The island has cable TV.
- **Electricity** Electric current is 110V (60 cycles). North American plugs are used.
- **Weights & Measures** The metric system is used here.

Sandy Cruz Trail is the local favorite and leads past the deserted old village of Mary's Point (p477).

Before setting out on a hike, head to the Trail Shop (p473) for endless information and maps on Saba's hiking trails.

It's not illegal to hike on Saba without hiring 'Crocodile James' Johnson, but it might as well be. This fifth-generation Saban knows the island better than anyone else. For more information on James, check out page p476.

The only trail you shouldn't attempt without a guide is the North Coast Trail. All of the other trails are accessible to experienced hikers.

Rock Climbing

Although it's still too early to pack your carabiner, Saba has a plethora of sheer rock faces that will make climbing enthusiasts drool. The **national park office** (Trail Shop, Windwardside) is in the process of tagging viable areas for single pitch climbs, so check in with them before your arrival to get the latest scoop on the project's status and completed paths.

BUSINESS HOURS

Businesses on Saba are generally open 9am to 5pm Monday to Saturday. Restaurants serve breakfast from 7am to 10am, lunch from 11:30am to 2:30pm, and dinner from 6pm to 9pm; exceptions are noted in specific listings.

COURSES

Local artist Jo Bean offers excellent half-day glass-blowing courses (US\$85) at her charmingly cluttered studio in Windwardside. See p474 for detailed information.

Try your hand at gourmet French cooking in the kitchen at the Gate House in Hell's Gate. It's US\$120 per class, with a maximum of six attendees, making it US\$20 per head. See p473 for more information.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The only thing that could possibly be annoying is the steep topography of the island. Short walks are often arduous, but few complain since everyone returns from their holiday with a nice firm bottom.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

There are no embassies on Saba.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Saba Summer Festival The island's Carnival is a week-long event in late July that includes a Carnival queen contest, a calypso king competition, a costumed parade around the Bottom and a grand-finale fireworks display.

Sea & Learn (www.seaandlearn.org) In October the entire island becomes a learning center for naturalists, scientists and laypeople, who discover share the richness of Saban flora and fauna in a range of activities, from helping out on a shark research project to learning how to use tropical plants to make medicinal teas.

Saba Days Held in the first week in December, this features sporting events, steel bands, dance competitions, donkey races and barbecues.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELERS

Although it's a complete coincidence that Saba's nickname is the 'Unspoiled Queen,' and the capital city is called the Bottom, Saba is one of the most gay-friendly spots in all of the Caribbean. It doesn't have the nightlife of St-Barthélemy, but it's a good spot for gays and lesbians looking for a relaxed outdoor vacation where appropriate displays of affection do not have to be limited the privacy of their room.

HOLIDAYS

New Year's Day January 1

Good Friday Friday before Easter

Easter Sunday Late March/early April

Easter Monday Late March/early April

Queen's Day April 30

Labor Day May 1

Ascension Thursday Fortieth day after Easter

Christmas Day December 25

Boxing Day December 26

INTERNET ACCESS

Most of the hotels on Saba have computer terminals and wi-fi, including El Momo – although sitting in your rustic cabin in the jungle watching videos on YouTube can sometimes feel a little funny.

INTERNET RESOURCES

Saba Tourism (www.sabatourism.com) is the official tourism website for Saba. It features excellent information about lodgings on the island, including private cottage rentals, plus information about ecotourism, wellness and special events.

MAPS

The Trail Shop (p473) in Windwardside sells maps.

MEDICAL SERVICES

Medical services are available in the Bottom (p477), including the region's only hyperbaric facility.

MONEY

The official currency on Saba is the Netherlands Antillean guilder, also known as the florin. US dollars are accepted everywhere, though, and most prices at hotels and restaurants are listed in US dollars.

There are banks in Windwardside (p473).

POST

There are no addresses or postal codes on Saba. Simply address correspondence to: Ms Johnson, Saba, Dutch West Indies.

There's a **post office** (✉) 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-noon Sat) in Windwardside.

TELEPHONE

Saba's country code is ☎ 599 and is followed by a seven-digit local number. If you are calling locally, just dial the seven-digit number. To call the island from overseas, dial your

country's international access code + ☎ 599 + the local number. We have included only the seven-digit local number in Saba listings in this chapter.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Information can be found at the **Saba Tourist Bureau** (☎ 416-2231; www.sabatourism.com; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri).

TRAVELERS WITH DISABILITIES

Wheelchair-bound travelers may have a difficult time on Saba as the island is extremely steep and riddled with thousands upon thousands of stairs.

VISAS

Citizens of North America and most European countries do not need a visa to visit Saba. Other nationalities should check with the Dutch representation in their home country.

TRANSPORTATION

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Entering Saba

Valid passports are required by all visitors.

Air

Landing at Saba's **Juancho E Yrausquin Airport** (SAB; ☎ 416-2255; Flat Point) is the second-most thrilling activity undertaken on Saba. The first is taking off – the runway doesn't end with a comfy grassy meadow or even a fence, but at a sheer cliff. Don't worry, though: your pilot must pass a test every month to be able to fly into Saba.

Currently, the only airline flying into Saba is **Winair** (☎ 416-2255; www.fly-winair.com). It has five 15-minute flights a day to/from St-Martin/Sint Maarten, as well as a daily flight to/from Sint Eustatius.

Sea FERRY

There are two ferries that run visitors between Sint Maarten and Saba. The **Dawn II** (☎ 416-3671; info@sabactransport.com; adult/child one way US\$35/18, round-trip US\$60/30) travels on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, leaving Saba at 6:30am and from Dock Maarten in Philipsburg at 5pm. The **Edge** (☎ 545-2640; adult/child one way US\$45/23, round-trip US\$65/33) leaves Pelican Marina in Simpson Bay at 9am Wednesday to Sunday,

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- **Ambulance** ☎ 111
- **Fire** ☎ 111
- **Police** ☎ 111, 416-3237

arriving in Saba at about 10:30am. It departs Saba at 3:30pm, arriving at Pelican Marina at 5pm. It's worth double-checking the schedule as times may change.

GETTING AROUND

There is no bus service on Saba. Most travelers hitchhike, walk or use taxis. Those who prefer walking should get well acquainted with the dirt trails, as they are significantly faster at getting you from point A to point B than following the road.

Car & Motorcycle

Renting a vehicle on relaxing Saba will only give you grief. Lifelong residents won't even attempt some driveways (Willard's of Saba is especially notorious). The only two roads are narrow, steep and winding, with tight corners, and driving is difficult in just about every way. The island's sole **gas station** (☎ 416-3272; 🕒 8am-2:45pm Mon-Sat) is located in Fort Bay.

DRIVER'S LICENSE

A driver's license from your home country is valid in Saba.

RENTAL

OK, don't say we didn't warn you! **Caja's Car Rental** (☎ 416-2388; takijah77@hotmail.com; the Bottom) rents cars for about US\$50 a day.

ROAD RULES

Driving is on the right-hand side of the road. Drivers tend to drive slowly as there are many sharp turns and two-way streets that only fit one car at a time.

Hitchhiking

Hitchhiking is so common and necessary that it's virtually illegal *not* to pick up a hitchhiker. This is the most common method for tourists to get around, although you are highly encouraged to take a taxi to and from the airport so that the cabbies don't go out of business.

Taxi

There is no central taxi dispatch number on Saba, but prices have been set in stone to prevent overcharging (although some drivers will still try to sneak a couple extra bucks out of you). There is an additional US\$1 for transporting luggage. Your hotel or restaurant can arrange a cab; ask for Peddy.

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