

HOME & AWAY

Small Island Treasures

Often overlooked, laid-back Saba and St. Eustatius in the Dutch West Indies lure hikers and divers.

By Richard Varr

Trees rustled in the gentle Caribbean breeze, hovering over red-roofed cottages dotting a rolling landscape as it ascends cloud-shrouded Mount Scenery. The vegetation is lush—leafy palm trees, ferns, hanging orchids and giant, green elephant-ear leaves skirt hiking trails and winding roads. Roosters were already crowing as the sun rose, when the rustic town of Windwardside got its wakeup call.



Saba's largest town, The Bottom, sits at the foot of Zion Hill.
RICHARD VARR

What sounded like a horn—breathy and bellowing—trumpeted from a hillside house surrounded by pineapple and breadfruit trees overlooking the town below. It blew once, twice, then three times and again. And again. The horn was a conch shell; the blower, Percy ten Holt, sounds off every morning at 6 a.m. sharp, except Sundays, on the small Dutch island of Saba.

“I do it because it’s a tradition on Saba,” he said. “When I was a boy, there was a man named Peter, and he used to blow when a ship was coming. Everybody would get excited.” He acknowledged he first got in trouble with the neighbors, but now it’s just something everyone in Windwardside expects to hear at dawn’s first light. “I’ve been doing it for 34 years, and I feel proud doing it.”

He called his view of Windwardside the “million-dollar view,” yet many vantage points from hilltops and hiking trails showcase ocean panoramas and the rugged shorelines of this 5-square-mile island with a population of about 2,000. Saba and neighboring St. Eustatius, also known as Statia, are two of the Caribbean’s small island treasures off the shores of St. Maarten, all three included within the Dutch West Indies.

But unlike the white-sand beaches and mega resorts of bustling St. Maarten, Saba and St.

Eustatius have few small beaches and instead offer some of the Caribbean’s best diving spots, each island surrounded by a national marine park. Crime is rare. Both have volcanic peaks, hiking trails, detailed histories and, perhaps most notably, friendly residents who seemingly know all of their fellow islanders by first name.

Saba: The Unspoiled Queen

“If you’re a partier, this is not the spot,” quipped taxi driver and tour guide Donna Cain during a drive along Saba’s main road, passing purple jacaranda trees and yucca plants. “It’s beautiful, quiet and peaceful. For just total relaxation and unwinding, Saba is the best spot in the world.”

Nicknamed “the unspoiled queen,” Saba remains mostly lush and undeveloped with no hotel or restaurant chains and not one traffic light. Yet, many of the small hotels in the towns and villages are housed in whitewashed, gingerbread-like cottages with green shutters and sloping red roofs, indicative of typical Saban and West Indies architecture. Since villages are at a higher altitude on this mountainous island, temperatures can be up to 10 degrees Fahrenheit cooler than at sea level. And restaurants’ menu choices range from seafood dishes and typical Dutch fare to fine French cuisine, adding international flair to the island’s Caribbean lifestyle.



Guide James Franklin makes his way toward Saba’s rocky tide pools.
Richard Varr

For most visitors, their first experience on Saba is unforgettable—landing on one of the world’s smallest commercial airport runways, only 400 meters or 1,300 feet long. “It’s the same length as an aircraft carrier,” Cain said. From the airport on the island’s northeastern-most rocky outcrop, the island’s main road wiggles along the mountainsides—up green Zion Hill, through quaint Windwardside and to Saba’s biggest town and seat of government, The Bottom, also home to the Saba

University School of Medicine.

Before the convenience of the main road and airport built in the mid-20th century, residents hauled everything up to The Bottom via a steep stairwell from the island’s first port at Ladder Bay—every bit of food and medicine, wooden planks to build homes and furniture, and every stitch of clothing either on a porter’s head or donkey’s back. Now called The Ladder, hikers skip down the 400 steps to expansive ocean views to the shoreline below but

are then faced with a strenuous climb back up.

“People often wonder why The Bottom got that name. When people used to come by boat, they’d have to go up to get to The Bottom,” said Cain. The name actually stems from the original Dutch words *de botte* (the bowl) because of its geographical setting, located at the foot of the surrounding mountains.

A dozen or more hiking trails carve through the countryside and up 2,910-foot Mount Scenery, a dormant volcano and the highest elevation in The Netherlands. In fact, those that reach the top are awarded a certificate. “You can get them from the Tourism Office by showing us a picture or the mud on your shoes,” said Director of Tourism Glenn Holm. Tree ferns form dense canopies over trails traversing forests with giant elephant ears, with some connecting Windwardside to The Bottom. The Sulphur Mine Track trail stretches to the island’s northern shores and old sulfur mines.

“All the hiking trails were from the first settlers, some of them 300 to 400 years old,” said hiking guide James Franklin Johnson. Locally known as “Crocodile James,” Johnson wears a machete and is proud of his pirate ancestry dating back eight generations. “They survived day to day on the land and the sea for more than 300 years,” he said.

Johnson also leads tours sidestepping along the jagged rocks of the tide pools just below the airport, where pounding surf has carved through igneous rock creating a moonscape. Small boulders protrude from the rocky floor formed when the erupting volcano shot the stones up only to eventually plop in the molten lava. “When you hike the tide pools, watch out for wet rocks,” Johnson warned. “Just don’t get too close. If there’s a sudden wave, you can get swept out. Dry rocks are OK, because the waves are not reaching them.”

Christopher Columbus bypassed Saba in 1493 because of its rocky shores, and despite brief periods of French and British rule, the island became part of The Netherlands in 1816. More recent history is on display at Windwardside’s Harry L. Johnson Museum in a white-washed cottage built in 1854, once the home of a Saban sea captain. Items include 19th-century traditional Saba lacework, period furniture and a pump organ. “It took 10 Sabans to carry the pump organ all the way up from Ladder Bay to The Bottom,”

said museum curator Jennifer Thielman.

Other historical highlights include the nearby Dutch Museum with 18th-century paintings, blue Delft tiles and an extensive collection of books and bibles from 1640 to 1777. Artifacts from 1800 B.C. through the colonial plantation era, including Amerindian flint tools and Dutch coins, can be seen at the Saba Archaeological Center.



Goats graze on the grass at the entrance of Fort Oranje in Oranjestad, St. Eustatius.

Richard Varr

The Saba Artisan Foundation in The Bottom sells Saba lacework still hand-stitched by local women, hand-

screened linens including tablecloths and curtains, and potent Saba liquors made with rum, fennel seeds, cinnamon cloves and other spices. T-shirts and souvenirs sport favorite island slogans, including “Keep calm, just visit Saba” and “I survived the Saba landing.”

St. Eustatius: The Golden Rock

Fort de Windt towers over the sea with ocean views worthy of the drive along a bumpy road to get there. “What a view of St. Kitts,” observed local historian Roland Lopes on an extraordinarily clear day on St. Eustatius. From this vantage point, St. Kitts is only seven miles away across calm waters, its mountainous peaks dominating the panoramic view. “You could walk on the water to get there,” he said.

Actually, Fort de Windt is only a small battery where two cannons remain. Now perched over the southernmost shoreline, it’s one of 19 fortifications that

once ringed Statia—a reminder that despite its size of only eight square miles and a population of more than 3,000, the island’s colonial legacy is immense. “Statia was the international trade center of the Western Hemisphere,” Lopes said. “What really put it on the map was the Dutch West India Co.” Island rule switched 22 times between the Dutch, Spanish, English and French, ending with Dutch control since 1816.

During the 17th and 18th centuries, thousands of ships dropped anchor at Statia, unloading and loading cargos—tobacco, sugar, cotton, weapons, ammunition and slaves—from other Caribbean islands and from throughout the world. More than 3,000 ships docked each year during the latter half of the 18th century, making Statia, declared a free port in 1756, one of the busiest harbors in the world and thus nicknamed The Golden Rock.

Busy maritime traffic has resulted in about 200 shipwrecks around the island, some used as diving sites today. Divers leave from the shores of the capital Oranjestad’s Lower Town, its restaurants and cafes popular with visitors. Lower Town is also where the dilapidated walls of old harbor warehouses once stood along dark sand beaches and where artifacts like a barnacled cannon or Dutch 17th-century pentagonal glass “blue beads” lie in shallow waters along the shoreline. Made from bottle residue, the beads were once used as currency or for bartering. Lucky snorkelers might find one to pluck from the water’s edge.



Clouds hang above the Quill, an extinct volcano atop Signal Hill on St. Eustatius.
Richard Varr

A short walk up the adjacent cliff leads to the Upper Town, where history again comes alive with some of the Americas’ oldest preserved colonial buildings. The Honen Dalim Synagogue built in 1739 is the second oldest in the Western Hemisphere, its brick walls remaining intact. Restored Fort Oranje, built by the French in 1629, has a cobbled courtyard lined with cannons and is now home to the island’s tourism office. The roofless, restored walls of the Dutch Reformed

Church and tower date to the mid-18th century. Despite its grassy floor, it’s often used for weddings and other events.

Copies of documents and paintings help detail the island’s colonial history in the St. Eustatius Historical Foundation Museum, housed in an 18th-century merchant’s home. The museum highlights when on Nov. 16, 1776, the American warship *Andrew Doria*, while offshore, fired a 13-gun salute commemorating the U.S.’ claim of independence from

England. Fort Oranje returned an 11-gun salute, making it the first foreign government to recognize the new self-declared nation.

But retaliation soon followed. “Four years later, England declared war on Holland,” said Lopes, adding the British soon after took control of the island. In 1939, President Franklin D. Roosevelt arrived offshore and presented a plaque to the island commemorating America’s gratitude for Statia’s support back then. Islanders soon renamed the airport after him. Statia-America Day is celebrated every Nov. 16.

Hiking the Quill

The most popular adventure on Statia is hiking up the rim of the 1,968-foot-high extinct volcano known as the Quill, stemming from the Dutch word *kuil*, meaning pit. “When English settlers came here, they couldn’t pronounce the Dutch name, so they called it the Quill,” said Lopes.

Several mostly moderate to difficult trails in Quill National Park circle the mountain or ascend to the rim, while one descends into the crater. The Crater Trail cuts through a rainforest, home to species including the red-necked pigeon and purple-throated carib. Begonias and bromeliads skirt the trails alongside towering silk cotton and yellow plum trees. Other hikes ascend different hills in Boven National Park on the north side of the island. Signal Hill National Park has a steep climb with excellent views of F.D. Roosevelt Airport and the Quill dominating the island view.

What’s next for Statia tourism? “It’s about diving so we want to incorporate weddings,” said Dihiara Pierre-Arnaud, managing director of the travel agency Island Essence. Underwater weddings, that is. “The thrill would be having a background of the Caribbean and nature—all types of beautiful coral reefs and clear blue water.”

Planning Your Trip

For more information, visit sabatourism.com, statia-tourism.com and island-experience.com. Contact your AAA Travel agent or visit AAA.com/travel for help planning your island vacation.

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Published: Oct 30, 2017