

AS SEEN IN

SportDiver

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE PADI DIVING SOCIETY

*JUST 200 MILES EAST OF PUERTO RICO,
THIS TINY VOLCANIC PARADISE HAS
SOME OF THE BEST CARIBBEAN DIVING
YOU'VE NEVER HEARD OF*

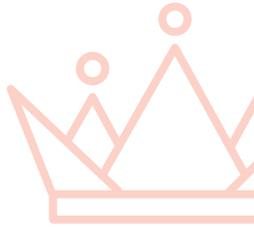


SABA

◆ ◆ ◆ THE UNDISCOVERED QUEEN ◆ ◆ ◆

BY MARY FRANCES EMMONS

At 180 feet tall but only 25 feet in diameter, Saba's spectacular Eye of the Needle pinnacle is easy to circumnavigate. Photo: Maruricio Handler



TYPE “SABA” INTO A SEARCH ENGINE AND A THAI RESTAURANT IN THE MIDWEST MIGHT POP UP.

FUN FACT ABOUT SABA:

Columbus sighted Saba in 1493 but didn't make landfall. He recorded that it was "smoking," but many believe the explorer really was witnessing the namesake mist — and a more or less constant feature — of Mount Scenery's cloud forest.

RIGHT: Saba's capital, the Bottom, is its largest town and home to a medical school. The Bottom shares its red-roofed, whitewashed look with Windwardside, farther up the volcano.

Try again and Wiki might suggest “Sabah,” on Malaysian Borneo. Few Americans have heard of the island — *SAY-buh* to locals, *SAH-bah* to the Dutch — once part of the Dutch Antilles and now a municipality of the Netherlands. It's a 5-square-mile volcano created by forces that left it little to no fresh water. That lack of runoff has blessed the seas around Saba — known as the Caribbean's “Unspoiled Queen” — with often-extraordinary visibility.

Turns out, unlimited viz can be a disappointment.

Among divers, Saba is known for deep pinnacles, knolls and seamounts. Its most famous pinnacle is spooky Eye of the Needle, which sometimes can't be reached due to currents that can see divers flying like flags on the mooring line.

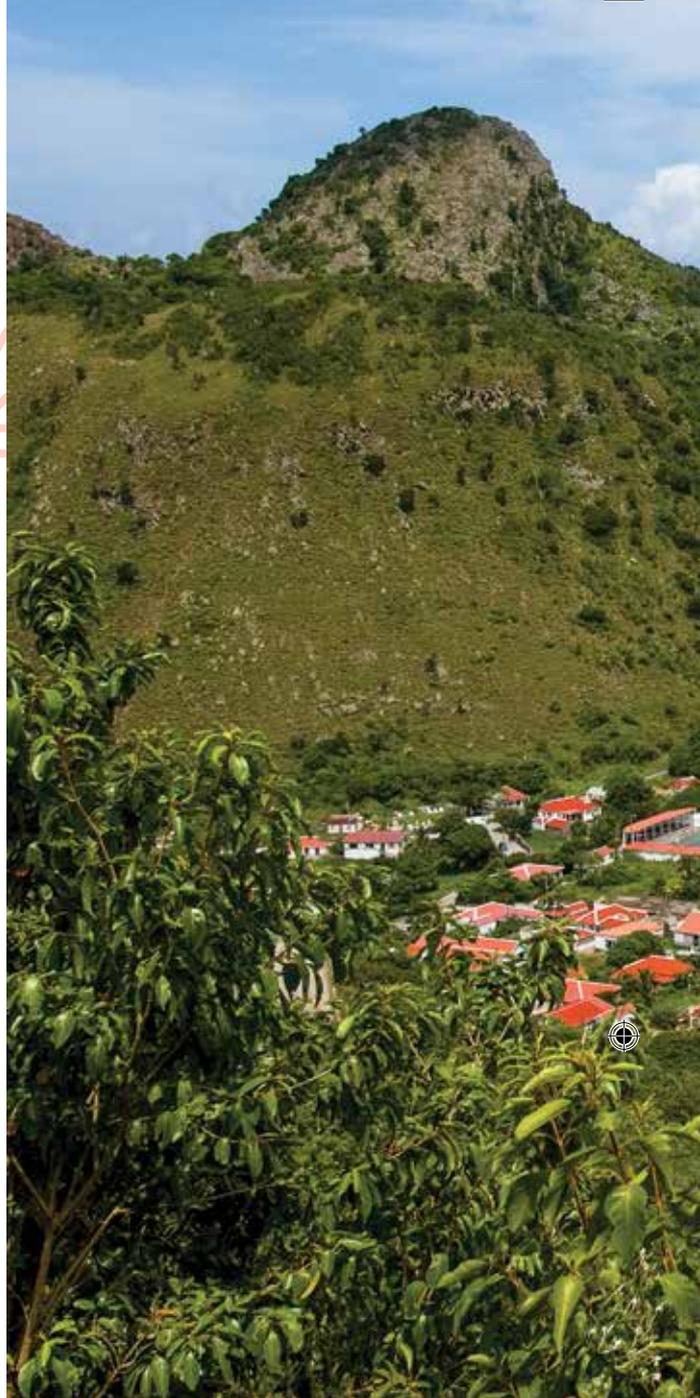
Accessing the Eye requires dropping 90 feet down on nearby Third Encounter, a moored site that's a 15-minute boat ride west of the island, and then finning 100 yards into the blue. If you're lucky, the Needle will loom into view, looking like a slumbering humpback.

Except on this day, as we step off *Giant Stride* — one of two 40-foot Deltas at Sea Saba Advanced Dive Center, a PADI Five Star Dive Resort — the viz really is limitless. Barely to the top of Third Encounter, I think, “*Is that it?*” Our sheepish divemaster nods when I point to the Needle. We giggle and head for the clearly visible “mystery” pinnacle.

Disappointment fades immediately. Rising to within 90 feet of the surface, the slender tower is covered with sponges, corals, fans and swarming reef fish. Clouds of creole wrasse flit about like flocks of tiny birds. The depth means we aren't here long; as soon as we turn back toward the tableau-like seamount, we find a patrol of three Caribbean reef sharks waiting on the ridge — a thrill we'll experience on almost every Saba dive. Black jacks, wahoo and big, free-swimming nurse sharks round out a perfect day under the waves.



Look in the dictionary between “quaint” and “quirky”



and you might find a picture of Windwardside, Saba's most charming hamlet. The clutch of red-roofed, green-shuttered cottages sits halfway up the volcano, described as “potentially active.” Its last eruption was between 500 and 5,000 years ago — stick your hands in the yellowish sands of Ladder Bay's dive sites and you'll feel the still-emanating warmth.

Although there's no crime here, there are bodies everywhere; on Saba, you can be buried in your yard. Whoever buys your property inherits your ancestors.

It's an industrious place: That chirping you hear 24/7 isn't birds, it's frogs — local roosters work around the clock too.

There is one main road, which didn't exist until the 1940s, when a persistent islander defied the Dutch

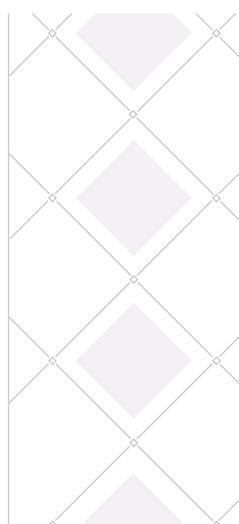


opinion that none could be built and taught himself construction from a correspondence course. There are few bugs and no litter, but also no beach, which Sabans are quick to point out — that is, if you can understand the brogue, somewhere between Irish chantey and New England sea captain, a living link to the British influence on Saba’s past (Dutch rule dates only to the 19th century).

If you don’t like to dive, hike or eat, Sabans will cheerfully tell you, there’s not much going on here. If you do, you’ll find 30-plus dive sites, a dozen maintained trails and a dozen or more restaurants, several with talented, adventurous chefs, including Tropics Café at Juliana’s Hotel in Windwardside. Juliana’s compound of eclectic, historic buildings forms one of the most popular

accommodations for divers and hikers. Owners Johanna van’t Hof and her husband, Wim Schutten, have a close connection to Saba’s main attraction: Her father, Tom van’t Hof, helped found marine parks in Saba and Bonaire nearly 30 years ago, at the dawn of recreational diving here. Saba’s marine park is credited with preventing the reef degradation evident elsewhere in the region.

All but a few of Saba’s reefs are geological, not biological, having formed over volcanic rock. “Pinnacle,” “seamount” and “knoll” are used loosely in diving; Saba has all three. (True pinnacles are skinny — the Eye of the Needle is 180 feet tall but 25 feet in diameter — seamounts and knolls are taller but more mesa-like.) All provide feeding and cleaning stations and navigational waypoints for more than 150 species of underwater fauna.





“Reefs in the Caribbean have degraded very rapidly in recent years,” says Kai Wulf, director of the Saba Conservation Foundation. “Most of the marine parks in the Caribbean are paper parks,” he says as I savor a lobster and crab strudel at Tropics Café. “No enforcement whatsoever. But the Dutch take their responsibilities seriously.”

Local fishermen understand and largely cooperate — a recent study estimated the worth of Saba’s reefs at \$4.5 million a year. “These are exciting times,” Wulf says. “I’m optimistic.”

Dive a site like Diamond Rock and you can see why. “It’s one giant sponge and coral beneath the waterline,” says our captain, Michael Hood, who will lead the dive — every divemaster on the boat has volunteered for this one. Currents and surge can be tricky here. Hood

CLOCKWISE: Topped boulders give Tent Reef interesting topography as well as a home for every kind of reef fish, plus green sea and hawks-bill turtles; schools of horse-eye jacks abound.

carefully briefs us: Stay together; don’t get ahead of him. By Saba standards it isn’t deep — 80 feet, max. But it’s action packed: an adorable baby burrfish as soon as we hit the sand, angelfish by the scores, reef fish of every kind, Atlantic spadefish, reef sharks, queen triggerfish, juvenile drums and more, on a seamount crammed with life. The surge creates an “elevator” that gently swings us up and down by 10 feet or more with each swell. It’s great fun, and awe-inspiring too — the waves crashing not far overhead remind us that we are frolicking just over the boundary of an alien and spectacular world.



“Gimme one second, Lynn,” a voice calls from behind the bar at Brigadoon restaurant as a blender roars to life. It’s time for “the Monday night presentation,” a weekly slide show by Sea Saba. Dive shop owner Lynn

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: SOLOMON BAKSH; MAURICIO HANDLER; CARLOS VILLOCHO



SEA & LEARN ON SABA

The award-winning Sea & Learn on Saba – now in its 13th year – takes place throughout October, with a mission to enhance the environmental awareness of residents and visitors. Naturalists and scientists from around the globe make evening presentations; during the day, they work with local students – participants can join an expert on a dive or a hike, all events free of charge.

This year's speakers include experts on bats (Saba has five to seven species); humpback whale songs; Saba's "uniquely healthy" population of Saba Racer snakes; predicting wind and wave height; whale entanglement; CITES policy and how it affects divers and the planet; renowned shark scientists covering population biology, evolution and ecology; and more to be announced. seaandlearn.org

DIVERS GUIDE TO SABA

Average water temp 77 to 80°F in winter; 80 to 84°F in summer » **What to wear** Skin to 3 mm in summer; 3 to 5 mm in winter » **Average viz** 75 feet in summer; 100 feet in winter » **When to go** Year-round » **For more information**, go to sportdiver.com/saba

DON'T-MISS DIVES

Hot Springs

A night dive here includes the Caribbean's best "string-of-pearls" bioluminescent display by ostracods (minute crustaceans), plus nurse sharks, black jacks, carrier crabs, cryptic teardrop crabs and parrotfish.

Mooring Fields

Think muck diving is for the Pacific? Sand flats under Sea Saba's moorings host flying gurnards, batfish, nudis, sea horses, pipefish, pipehorses, pikeblennies and many kinds of baby reef fish.

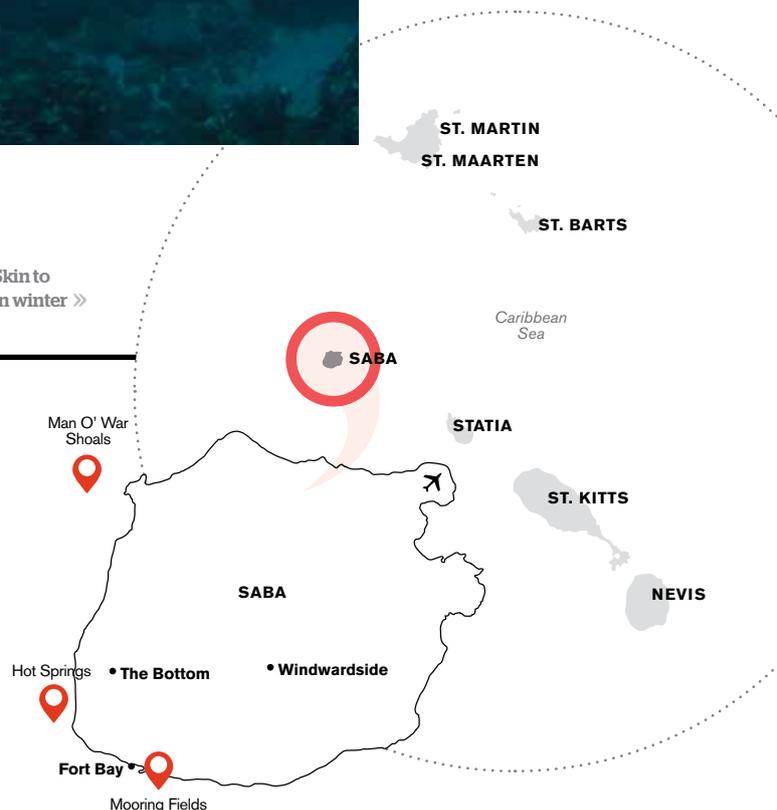
Man O' War Shoals

A "minnacle" – mini pinnacle – with two life-encrusted peaks where you can make figure eights looking for jawfish, eels, filefish, sharks, nudis, huge stingrays, pipefish, octopuses, scorpionfish, black durgon and sergeant majors.

Sea Saba Advanced Dive Center
seasaba.com

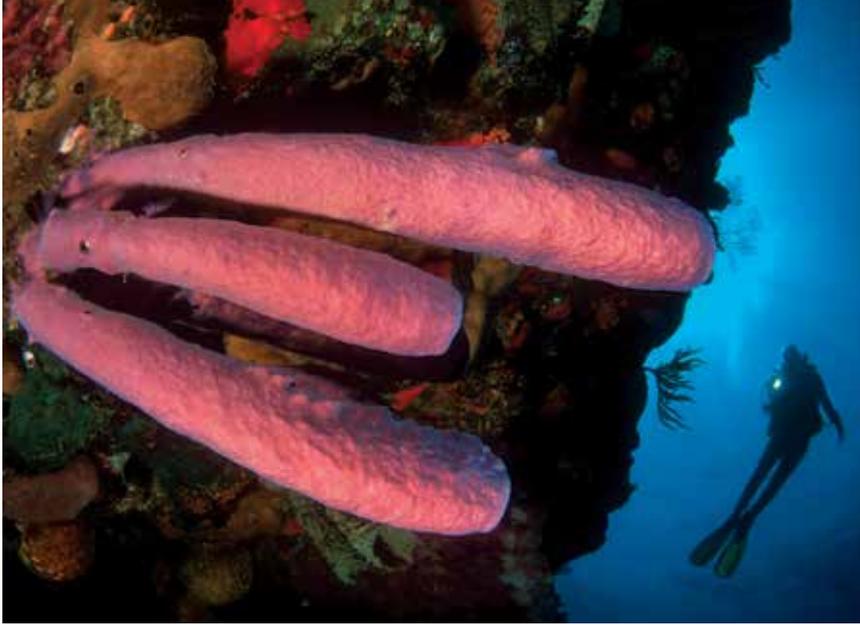
Juliana's Hotel
julianas-hotel.com

Queen's Gardens Resort
queenssaba.com



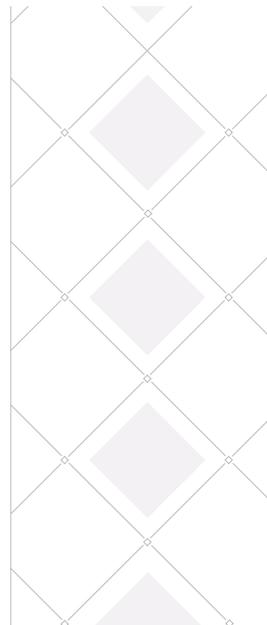
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CLOCKWISE: Its healthy marine environment — where everything seems just a little bit bigger, like these stove-pipe sponges — is one of Saba's top draws; Eye of the Needle pinnacle is covered in life; queen angels are common.



MAKE YOUR OWN GLASS ART

Want a hot tip for your dry day? Spend a few hours learning to create glass art at Jobean Glass Art Studio on the slopes above Windwardside. Artist Jobean Chambers trained with Venetian masters and imports her raw materials from Italy; she offers classes that can have you producing beautiful creations almost instantly. From what looks like a squirt of toothpaste, dangling from a melting glass rod turning slowly before your torch, a little rainforest frog or unique glass bead soon is born. jobean-glass.com



Costenaro shows a shot of a fish-shaped artifact used to ingest hallucinogens, evidence that Carib Indians camped on Saba as long as 2,000 years ago. “People have been partying on this island for a long time,” Costenaro says to laughs. Columbus sighted Saba but didn’t stop; the first Europeans arrived in the 1630s. Today, it’s tourists and expats who seek out what locals call the “Unspoiled Queen.”

“It’s the only place I know that’s the same as 20 years ago,” Bob Guile tells me at the Brigadoon bar over a plate of sustainably caught, local grilled kingfish in an inventive Thai marinade. The underwater photographer, an American, is here so often he’s practically a local. Struggling with health problems, he realized that “if I wanted to get lost and get in shape, Saba was a way to do it — fresh fish, hiking, fresh air.”

The next day, Wulf takes me out on the Sandy Cruz trail — an easy one — to get a dose of that fresh air and

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: ESPEN REKDAL/SEAPICS.COM; SOLOMON BAKSH; JOSE ALEJANDRO ALVAREZ; JON WHITTLE



a closer look at Saba's manicured trails. The violence of Saba's origins is evident in jagged formations and the checkerboard surface of its cliffs — and the occasional waterfront landslide. But all is softened by greenery: oleander, heliconia, bleeding heart vine, bougainvillea, breadfruit, croton, mango, mahogany and too many palms to list.

We look down — *waaaay* down — on Diamond Rock and Ladder Bay, but I forget all about diving when our hike ends at luxurious Queen's Gardens Resort. Nine of its 12 suites have tiled hot tubs so large they're more like in-room pools, but even the Queen's new open-air spa and a chef that exemplifies the culinary talent on this tiny island can't keep thoughts from returning to the sea below.

On our last day, we're heading for Green Island, near Saba's infamous landing strip — at 400 meters, it's the world's shortest commercial runway — where

blasé pilots make the 12-minute run from St. Maarten up to five times a day. It's typically too rough to get out here, and once again the divemasters are excited — some have been here only a few times. Turtles, drums, clouds of yellowtail damselfish, angelfish and queen triggers are all present, along with beautiful elkhorn coral, increasingly rare in the Caribbean. But what catches our attention is hundreds of jacks forming a monster baitball. It's amazing to watch, but the jacks have something more in mind. A squadron peels off and heads straight for us, forming a mini-baitball around excited divers who madly pop off flashes and swing GoPros inside the living circle.

As quickly as they arrived, the jacks are gone. Reluctantly, we also return to our own domain, thinking of the day we can return to Saba's underwater realm and renew our acquaintance with the fascinating subjects of our now-discovered queen.



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