

COASTAL TRAVEL

DREAM * DISCOVER * ESCAPE

The ocean-view pool at Queen's Gardens Resort

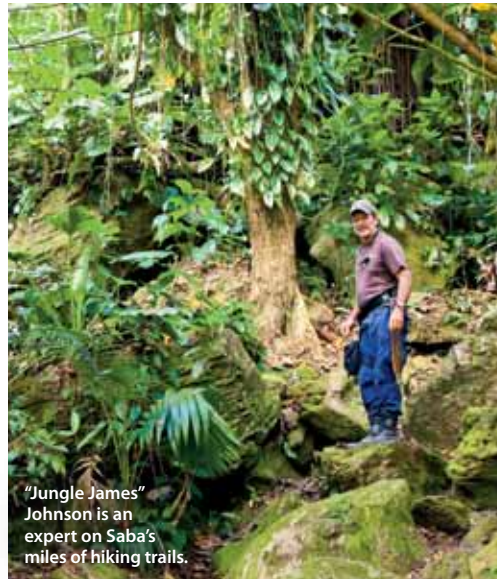
Caribbean Cool:
PLAN YOUR GETAWAY
relaxing resorts • lush hiking trails • gourmet fare • world-class snorkeling, scuba diving & more

Serene Saba

An island without beaches? Tiny, tropical Saba is an unspoiled sanctuary that feels worlds away from its popular Caribbean sisters—and you won't even miss the sand



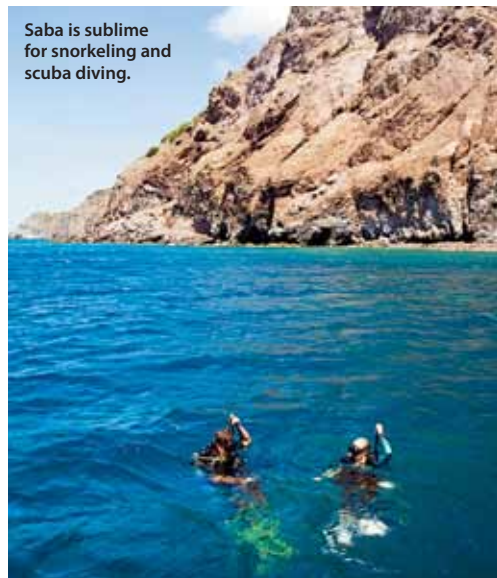
Red-roofed homes and businesses dot the landscape.



"Jungle James" Johnson is an expert on Saba's miles of hiking trails.



Shrimp Michael at Brigadoon Restaurant



Saba is sublime for snorkeling and scuba diving.

carved into the cliff. At 400 meters, roughly the size of a suburban driveway, it's the shortest commercial runway in the world and is navigated only by a handful of specially trained pilots. (Day-trippers or the otherwise inclined make use of ferry service.) As a reward for our courage, it's happy hour at the tiny airport—apparently a local hangout. Reggae music sets the mood, and a bartender (hopefully not also a pilot) mixes cocktails at the outdoor tiki bar.

Welcome to Saba (pronounced SAY-bah). A well-kept secret at a little over 5 square miles, this Dutch island is one of the smallest spots in the Caribbean. Named for the Arawak Indian word meaning "rock," Saba is actually a dormant volcano—its mountainous terrain means there's a stunning cliffside view at every turn, but remarkably, no beaches. Nicknamed "The Unspoiled Queen," it's home to fewer than 2,000 residents and a bounty of free-roaming goats. Most visitors come for the island's wealth of hiking trails and its reputation as one of the best diving sites in the world.

Despite the island's sporty pursuits by land and sea, I immediately adjust to its pleasantly slow pace. I could forever stay passively content at the idyllic Queen's Gardens Resort, the chicest spot on the island, nestled on scenic Troy Hill overlooking the crystal blue waters below. The charming managers, Claire Nuyens and Hidde Verbeke, took over the 12-suite property in 2007 and turned it into the island's first true luxury destination—in essence, they're helping to put Saba on the map. This Dutch couple runs the

the flight to Saba is not for the faint of heart. My first clue that this is not your typical tourist-filled Caribbean island: a handwritten boarding pass from Winair, currently the only airline to venture to the island. The plane leaving from nearby St. Martin—a 15-passenger puddle jumper so small you can practically reach out and touch both sides—is filled with divers, students from the local med school, destination-wedding guests, and island hoppers. The 15-minute flight has been the subject of many exhilarating YouTube videos, and past visitors issue ominous words of warning to us Saba virgins: "You'll see." Nervous giggles fill the air as our plane stays close to the water's surface until it approaches what looks like a giant rock in the middle of the sea. Suddenly, the captain makes a quick descent onto a miniscule airstrip

place like an old-fashioned hotel out of a romantic black-and-white film, greeting arriving guests with rum punch and chilled towels, bringing out freshly baked croissants at breakfast, and appearing at dinner to refill wineglasses or ask about the day's excursions.

My spacious one-bedroom suite is simply done in beige, white, and red tones, with tiled floors and dark wood furniture. But the decor doesn't try to compete with the breathtaking views of the majestic mountains and sapphire sea, visible from every window. By afternoon it's time for a dip in the resort's pool, the largest on the island, perched in a prime position to gaze through twin mountain peaks down to the sea. A potent grapefruit martini is the perfect choice while lounging on a cushy white chaise as soft music wafts down from the sleek >

The best views of Saba's lush and rocky landscape are from the water.



alfresco lounge above. Dinner under the mango trees in the restaurant's candlelit outdoor garden features a feast of the chefs' delectable twists on vitello tonnato, crab cakes with smoked cucumber, fruits de mer, and beef Wellington with Saban lobster. At twilight, as the island slips deeper into a peaceful lull, I can't resist a soak in my suite's blue-tiled open-air Jacuzzi with views stretching out to the sea.

But Saba is known for adventure, so the next morning is my time to get a lay of the land. While there are a limited number of cars on the island available to rent, I decide the tight, sharply winding roads are best left to the professionals. My guide, Eddie Peterson, is a Saba native who, along with several other drivers on the speed dial of every hotel and inn, helps visitors make their way around. Eddie's family goes back generations on the tiny island—apropos of his ancestors, his accent is a vague blend of English and Dutch, with a hint of Caribbean spice. "I am what you call a believer—someone who belongs here," he proudly proclaims. We start across the island's one road (aptly named The Road), which winds up, down, and around Saba, making hairpin turns past lush patches of mahogany trees,

ferns, elephant's ears, and black-eyed Susans, the national flower. Saba's sister island, St. Eustatius, beckons in the background, and the neighboring islands of St. Martin, St. Barts, Anguilla, and St. Kitts and Nevis appear to be a stone's throw away. Though at times the drive feels death-defying—the narrow road is bordered on one side by a seemingly endless drop to the bottom—Saba is one of the most peaceful islands in the world; residents routinely leave their doors unlocked and hitch-hike between towns.

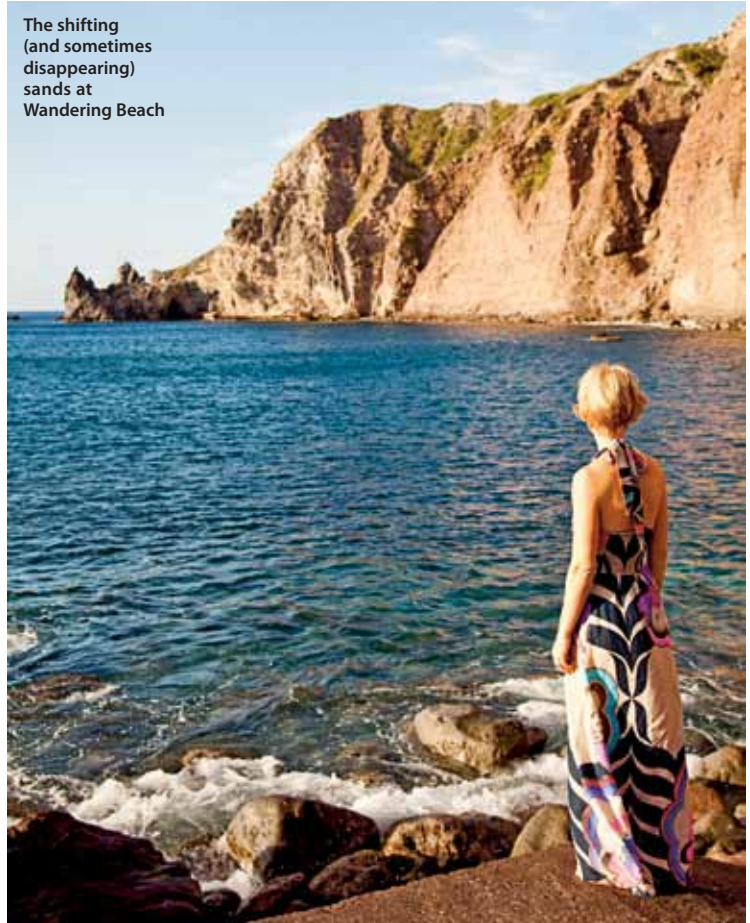
We stop at Wandering Beach, the island's only one, where the black sand is fairly unreliable—the name derives from its tendency to disappear, depending on the tides and the whims of the sea gods. After an early morning downpour, there's no sand to be seen, so we continue past red-roofed homes resembling storybook gingerbread cottages and what's nicknamed "the great wall of Saba," a grand, hand-built stone barrier completed in the 1960s to run alongside the paved road that was previously a trail for donkeys and horses.

For lunch, I head to the island's most happening little town of Windwardside to grab a bite at Scout's Place, a small divers' inn with a rustic wood restaurant >

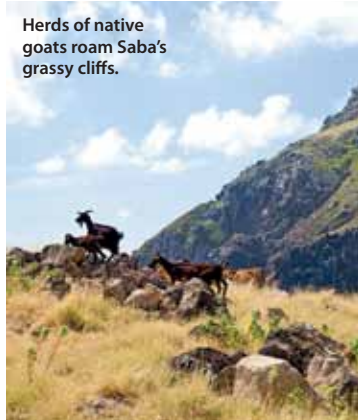
Dining at Queen's Gardens Resort means the freshest seafood prepared with delicious simplicity.



The shifting
(and sometimes
disappearing)
sands at
Wandering Beach



Herds of native
goats roam Saba's
grassy cliffs.



and bar with picture-perfect views of the aqua water. After lunch, I pop in to a few shops proffering souvenirs and locally made Saba Spice rum. Just up the road from town is The Cottage Club Hotel, the only Saban-owned hotel on the island. Its 10 crisp, white cottages overlook majestic Cove Bay on one side; iguanas and roosters wander out from the surrounding rain forest. To see Windwardside by night, I head to Brigadoon, a fine-dining restaurant housed in a century-old colonial building. Inside, the dining room is elegantly rustic,

with dim candlelight and weathered wood tables and floors. The gregarious hostess, Trish, knows everyone's name (including mine). She seats me at a cozy corner table with a great view of fellow diners. I tuck into a dish of linguine and fresh seafood in a light cream sauce named Shrimp Michael (after Trish's husband, the chef/owner).

I've been told it's possible to hike most of Saba's 16 trails solo, but the following day I enlist the expertise of James Johnson, a.k.a. "Jungle James"—part guide, part conservationist, part unofficial historian. Like Eddie, James is a Saban who can trace his ancestry on the island back eight generations, to the European settlers, >



A private Jacuzzi room at Queen's Gardens Resort



Scout's Place Hotel's airy accommodations

and today he preserves the splendor of the island's trails. The trek to the top of Mt. Scenery is the longest and most strenuous hike, so instead we opt to gently wind through the trails from just outside Windwardside back to Troy Hill. "Everywhere you hike, you see the ocean," James reminds me, pointing out glimpses of the sea among aromatic patches of orchids, ginger plants, wild cilantro, and almond trees. "I always say about Saba, it's one of the quietest and safest places in the world." Having seen the flora and fauna, I'm ready for a glimpse of Saba's world-famous underwater life.

At Fort Bay Harbor at the island's base, in a village cleverly named The Bottom, I meet Cheri and Tony Waterfield, an American couple who gave up their

corporate jobs in Virginia to run their own dive center, Saba Deep. Saba's healthy marine life, and more than 25 dive sites around the island, means common shark, stingray, and octopus sightings. "People come on day trips from St. Martin and say they don't want to go back," Cheri tells me. Divers

"I ALWAYS SAY ABOUT SABA, IT'S ONE OF THE QUIETEST AND SAFEST PLACES IN THE WORLD"

STAY
Queen's Gardens Resort rates start at \$250; queensaba.com.
Scout's Place Hotel rates start at \$91; scoutsplace.com.
The Cottage Club Hotel rates start at \$130; cottage-club.com.

are drawn to sites such as the Saba Pinnacles, seamounts that were formed by volcanic activity and remain a nesting ground for colorful coral, manta rays, lobsters, and grouper. While the island draws a die-hard diving crowd (Saba Deep offers certification levels up to dive master), the waters also entice beginners to the Discover Scuba program.

But Saba puts on just as thrilling an underwater show for snorkelers,

too, and we head out on Cheri and Tony's boat, *Jolly Mon*, to an area called "Hole in the Corner." The main mission: "Don't get back on the boat until you see turtles," Cheri says of the sea creature commonly spotted in Saban waters. I jump in and snorkel around the warm water, spotting rainbow-hued schools of blue tang, parrotfish, and angel-fish, and watch the waves crash against the coral formations close to shore. As I swim back to the boat, I realize I haven't missed the beach at all. Later that night, still feeling the gentle rocking of the sea, I sleep soundly in my villa's comfy four-poster, king-size bed, serenaded by a symphony of tree frogs. I feel like a believer, too. 🌿



The Ocean Bar at Queen's Gardens