

Bottom's Up in Saba

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn



"The Bottom" seen from the top

Approaching Saba (that's SAY-ba), shrouded in a thick mist, you wonder if you haven't taken a wrong turn somewhere and you're heading into the middle of a Grimm's fairy tale. This would certainly be an excellent place to hide a princess. Rising abruptly out of the sea to nearly three thousand feet, this tiny Dutch Antilles' island appears to be all "up". Steep-to on all sides, there's really no comfortable place to anchor, so picking up one of their Marine Park moorings is beneficial to the environment as well as the visiting cruiser.



Saba switchbacks – Heading "up" to The Bottom

Less than 25,000 tourists a year visit Saba and few of that number are cruisers. It's out of the

way and doesn't seem to have as much appeal as some of the more popular islands like St. Bart's. So what could possibly be the attraction in stopping at a 5 square mile volcanic mountaintop? The people and the sheer delight of height. On arrival at the dinghy dock, a most exhilarating trip from the mooring field, all you can see is "up". There are steep, rugged peaks and domes surrounding the tiny port of Fort Bay. Saba is entirely surrounded by a protected Marine Park and exceptional diving is available through the dive shops here. A switchbacked road, so seemingly vertical it nearly takes your breath away, is lined with rock walls and leads you up to The Bottom. Yup, The Bottom is at the top. Well, not really the top. Actually, the highest point in Saba is Mount Scenery at 2,877 feet (877m), but that's a different topic. The Bottom is the "capital" of Saba and its administrative center. It's a pleasant, quiet little town where the houses are neat and tidy; most are painted green and white and blend harmoniously with the remnants of the island's 300 year old history.



Zetty (Miss Saba) and Marcie (Miss Nine of Cups)

Sabans are an interesting lot and unlike any other folks we've met in the Caribbean. The population of about 1200 claims Dutch as its official language, but everyone speaks English with a distinctive accent that's not quite Dutch. The people are friendly, outgoing and very tenacious. Garvin Hessel, our local guide, was quick to point out that Sabans are independent, industrious

Bottom's Up in Saba

By Marcie Connelly-Lynn

and innovative and based on what we saw, he wasn't exaggerating. Just consider that whenever they've been told something was impossible, they just did it. An unbelievably steep road constructed over a 20 year period by the locals runs from the sea to the towns above; and their airport, opened in 1963, barely has a runway...in fact, it's the shortest officially used runway in the world!

The older women hand-make a fine, distinctive thread work called Saban lace. They also make a rum-based concoction known as Saban Spice, bound to knock your socks off. Saban houses sit precariously on the hillsides at impossible angles. They make the most of their land and steeply-terraced farms dot the rugged terrain. Vibrant orange flamboyant trees abound and black-eyed Susans, the island's official flower, sway colorfully in the gentle breeze.

Windwardside is the island's social center with several boutiques, artists' shops and restaurants. It's also the location of the small, but informative Saba Museum. Lunch at a local restaurant was served by a stunning young lady with a captivating smile. Upon chatting with her, we learned she was none other than "Miss Saba" and represented the island in regional beauty pageants. Looking at the picture of the two of us taken by David, I was left with only one redeeming thought: She'll be "Miss Saba" for a year or two, but me? I'll be "Miss Nine of Cups" forever!

Just outside of town, we picked up the access trail to the 1,067 hand-carved, mossy, slippery stone steps that lead to the summit of Mt. Scenery. (It may have been 1,068 steps, I lost count at around 752.) Realizing the labor-intensive effort involved in creating and maintaining the steps, we asked why they did it. "We thought tourists might like it." They were right.

The step-up ascent leads you through an elfin rain

forest and is lush with elephant ears, ferns and climbing vines. We climbed leisurely and snacked on wild Surinam cherries on the way, our faces and hands red with evidence. Small anoles (*Anolis sabanus*) unique to Saba scurried across our path and two harmless red racer snakes, luxuriantly sunning themselves, never moved as we passed by (we figured out later they were probably mating). At the very summit, there's a rope handhold to assist hikers in their final 20 foot scramble to a commemorative monument and, fog permitting, an incomparable view of the Caribbean.

We give the island and this hike particularly high marks since there's an added bonus: not only can you claim you've climbed to the highest point in Saba, but you can also boast you've reached the highest point in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Now that's an upper!



A rope handhold at the summit of Mt. Scenery comes in handy for the final 20' scramble