Diving in Saba

Visitor Information

Saba National Marine Park
PO Box 18, The Bottom
Saba, Netherlands Antilles

www.sabapark.org

The Saba National Marine Park (SMP) was established in 1987 with the objective to preserve and manage Saba's marine resources. The SMP was not developed to repair a damaged environment but rather to ensure the continued quality of an extraordinary resource for the benefit and enjoyment of everyone.

The SMP circles the entire island from the high-water mark to a depth of 60 m (200 feet), including the seabed and overlying waters. A zoning plan divides the park for various recreational and commercial uses. A system of permanent mooring buoys facilitates diving and prevents damage to corals. One of the few self-sustaining marine parks anywhere in the world, the SMP raises revenue through visitor fees, souvenir sales, and donations.

The SMP is administered by the Saba Conservation Foundation, a not-for-profit organization with a mission to contribute to the development and preservation of Saba's natural and cultural heritage.

The island's commercial diving business which started in the early 1980s introduced scuba enthousiasts to the wealth of Saba's underwater world. The establishment of the Saba National Marine Park several years later assured the health of the undersea environment and thus the sustainability of dive tourism, today a major contribution to the island economy.

Saba plunges below the sea as steeply as it rises above it. From shallow patch reefs to deep underwater seamounts, Saba offers dive sites suitable for every diver's level of experience.

Past volcanic activity has created spectacular formations and structures. Underwater lava flows and hot springs are the most obvious evidence of Saba's volcanic origins.

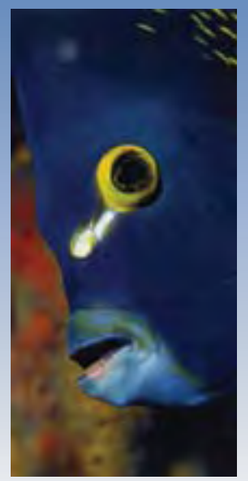
The reefs are populated with schools of tropical fish and healthy coral. Sheer close-to-shore walls are covered with sponges of all sizes, and the heavily encrusted deep-water seamounts attract pelagic creatures that are not normally seen by divers. Unusual and exciting sightings are always possible in Saba's waters including frequent shark encounters.

Saba offers year-round diving with seasonal differences in water temperature and surface conditions. The approximate water temperature varies between 26˚C and 28˚C (77˚F-84˚F). Visibility ranges from a minimum of 20m (60ft) but can be virtually unlimited. Poor weather conditions and heavy rainfall may influence visibility, but it typically improves again very quickly in Saba.

Due to the steep coastal zone, shore diving is virtually impossible. Therefore, all diving is done safely from a boat with one of Saba's licensed dive centres.

Their expertise contributes to a safe, convenient, and informative diving experience. Fortunately, Saba's dramatic coastline naturally limits coastal development. Pressure on marine resources has always been modest even as the island population has increased without runoff or sewer problems. The quality of the marine environment, strong coral communities, and rich and varied fish life continue to lure divers to Saba's unspoiled waters.

"In the end we will conserve what we love and respect.
"We will love and respect only what we understand.
"We will understand only what we are taught or allowed to experience."



Saba Marine Life

Tiger grouper

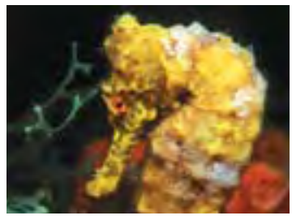
The grouper is an excellent indicator species for fishing impact; the larger they are, the less pressure from fishing exists. In Saba, groupers are often found in the deep waters around The Pinnacles. Nassau grouper and Tiger grouper are the most common species sighted.

Grey reef shark

Sharks have been feared and exploited for centuries, but as leader of the food chain it is important that we understand their role in marine ecosystems. Shark encounters occur frequently in Saba, especially around The Pinnacles. Nurse sharks and Black-tip reef sharks are the most common species, but Grey reef sharks, Bull sharks, and Hammerhead sharks can also be seen.

Hawksbill turtle

Sea turtle populations are declining throughout the Caribbean. Domestic and international laws have been established to protect these endangered species. In Saba, Hawksbill and Green turtles are the most common. The turtles find good feeding grounds around the island. The SMP minimizes impact on sea grass beds, the Green turtles' favourite food, by requesting yachts to utilize moorings or anchor in deeper waters only.



Longsnout seahorse

Seahorse sightings are considered to be an incredible find among divers. The presence of this unique sea creature is not only a great tourist attraction, but it also signals the healthiness of the ecosystem, coral reef, and supporting seabed. The two species found in Saba are the Long snout seahorse and Lined seahorse.

Endangered Coral Reefs

Coral reefs are among the most important marine ecosystems in the world. Aside from their magnificent beauty, coral reefs provide a dwelling place for thousands of animals and plants that have high economic value. In turn, these provide food to millions of people. Reefs act as a natural barrier against wave action and coastal erosion.

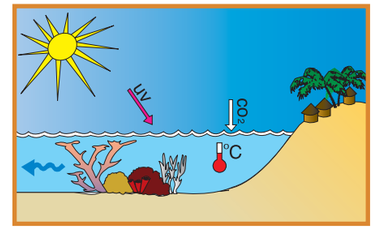
Although they may appear to be sturdy, coral reefs are in fact very fragile. Fast population growth, dense coastal settlements, and destructive fishing techniques threaten coral reefs and their associated resources. Coastal and marine pollution also discourage the well being of coral reefs and cause them to experience chronic stress.

A potentially greater threat has emerged in the last two decades. Coral bleaching, a phenomenon associated with a variety of stresses both natural and human-induced, has affected coral reefs with increasing incidence and severity. Coral bleaching is most often caused by high water temperatures and high levels of UV light that influence the physiology of the coral and cause a bleaching effect. This loss of color is due to the loss of symbiotic algae, which the coral polyp depends on for food. Prolonged bleaching can lead to widespread coral mortality. In Saba, coral diseases are uncommon and widespread coral bleaching has not occurred. However, bleaching events have occurred and may impact the health of the Saba reefs in the near future.

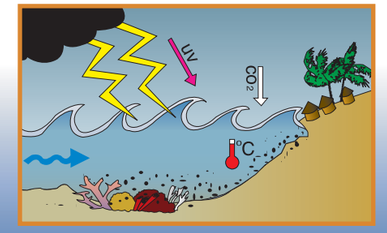
In recent years, coral reefs have suffered a dramatic decline around the world. About 10% may already have been degraded beyond recovery. Unless an effective conservation plan is implemented, it has been predicted that more than two-thirds of the world's coral reefs may collapse ecologically within this century.

Careful management and maintenance of the environment are crucial to safeguard this valuable marine ecosystem.

Coral reefs have thrived under past climatic conditions, temperature, UV and current patterns.



Now, coral reefs are threatened by increased sea temperatures, storminess, carbon dioxide and UV levels, as well as changing current patterns, resulting from global warming.



Dive Sites

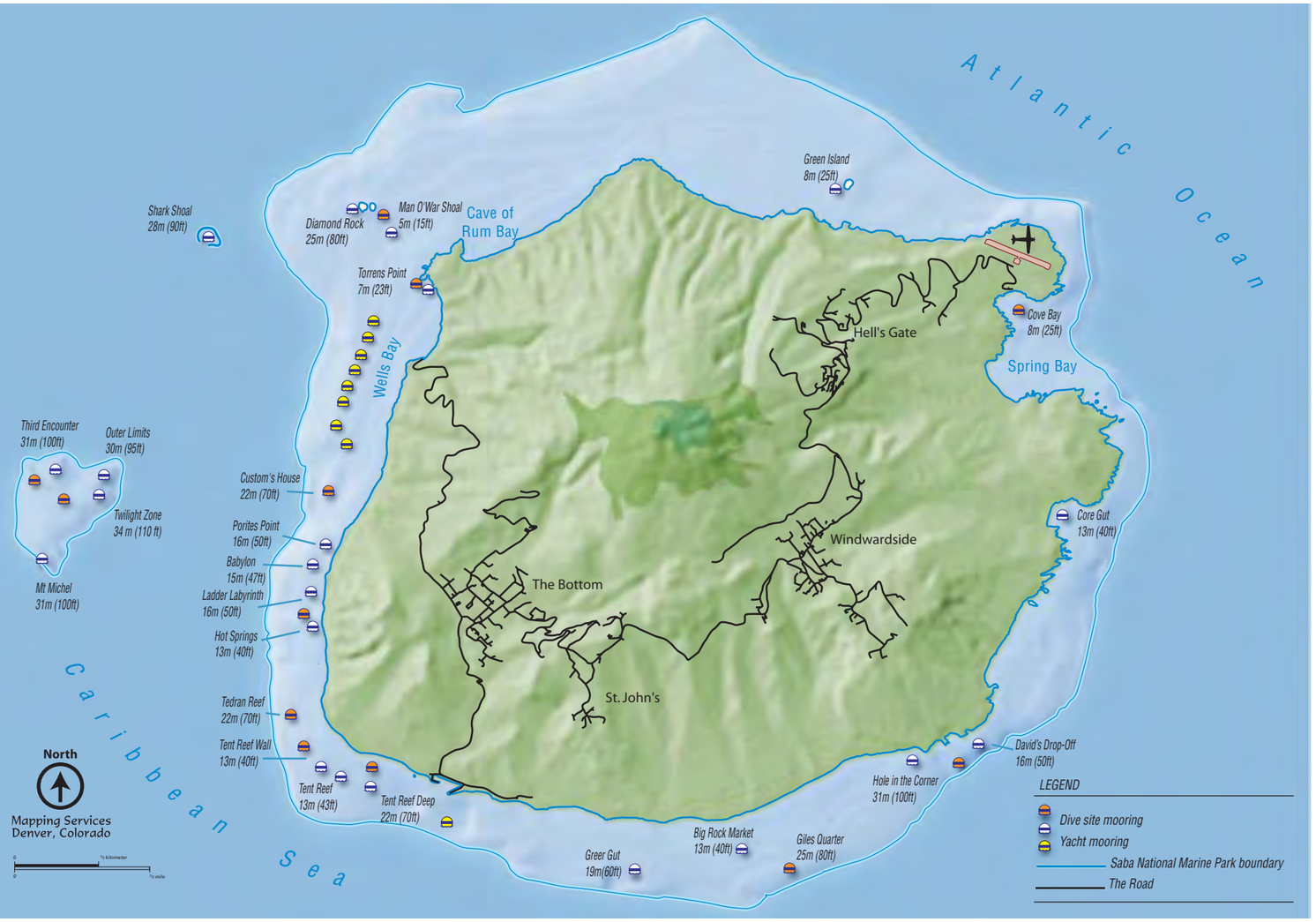
For Your Safety

To ensure your personal safety as well as the safety of our valuable marine resources, the Saba National Marine Park has developed the following diving regulations:

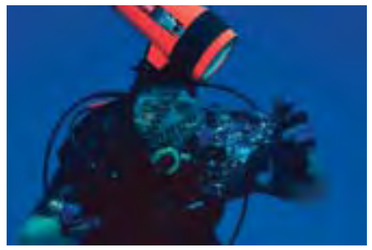
! To eliminate the temptation of touching; gloves are not permitted while diving. One glove can be used while ascending the mooring line if the diver wishes.

! Good buoyancy control will help avoid contact with corals, gorgonians or sponges. They are living invertebrates that can be easily damaged. Practice buoyancy skills before diving on the reef.

! Introducing foreign food substances into the reef environment is harmful; it may cause behavioural changes that could cause fish to be more vulnerable to disease and predation. Therefore, do not feed the fish.



Underwater Photography and Video



The abundance of marine life makes Saba a perfect place for underwater photography and video although these activities require advanced diving skills. Taking a camera in the water will change both buoyancy and balance, therefore, you should practice these skills with your camera before attempting a reef dive. It is also essential that you avoid all contact with the reef and your subject so that no damage is caused. To get the most out of this fascinating activity, it is important to follow certain guidelines that will allow you to shoot your best photos and videos:

- Position yourself and your equipment before attempting your shot!

- Get buoyancy correct before trying to get close to your subject!

- Stay at least 1 metre (3 feet) away from your desired subject; you may be considerably closer than your viewfinder suggests!

- Make all camera and strobe adjustments before moving in to take the shot!

- Once you have taken your shot and are ready to move on, inhale to lift you clear of the bottom; do not push off from the reef and do not fin until you are clear of the reef!

- Your shots should show your underwater friends at home in their natural habitat. Repeatedly flashing a strobe, touching or moving your subject may cause stress on the creatures!

The Pinnacles (sites 1-5)

The fascinating Pinnacles that rise from the ocean floor up to depths of 30m (100ft) were formed by past volcanic activity and are nourished by deep ocean currents. The Pinnacles are covered with corals, sponges and other invertebrates. Abundant fish life including large groupers, jacks and turtles are attracted
to this area and provide a spectacular diving experience.

Shark encounters also occur frequently around these waters. Black-tip reef sharks, Grey reef sharks and Nurse sharks are the most common species sighted.

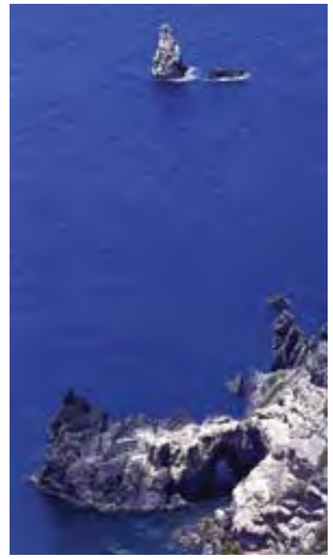
The most unique structure not to be missed is the Eye-of-the-Needle, a pinnacle that rises up to 17m (90ft) just off in the deep blue waters from Third encounter.

From Torrens Point to Diamond Rock (sites 6, 7 & 9)

The large spires at Wells Bay and Torrens Point form a protected cove, an ideal location for snorkelling or shallow diving. Underwater caves and tunnels are interesting structures to explore and the diver can encounter many aquatic life forms. Schools of Blue tangs, Goatfish, and Parrot fish are characteristic in this area.

Man 'O War Shoals and Diamond Rock appear to be submerged and semi-submerged extensions of Torrens Point headland. They do not exceed depths of 25m (80ft), allowing for more bottom time to explore the rich waters and enjoy the magnificent fish life that abounds. Schools of Black-durgons and Barracudas swarm around the mooring lines while Black-tip sharks merge into the blue. Sting rays hover over the grey sandy bottom. Walls and rocks are covered with colourful sponges, smaller corals and Sea fans.

Be cautious while diving around Diamond Rock because of strong currents. While this site may present challenging diving conditions, it also attracts abundant fish life.



The Ladder Bay Area (sites 11-15)

The original steps that Sabans used to access the island is known as The Ladder. Prior to the building of the Fort Bay harbour, goods were brought by boat to the rocky shore of the leeward coast. Sabans carried the cargo by foot up the nearly vertical stairway to the village. Diving in this area unveils Saba's volcanic origins. A natural labyrinth of groove formations and protrusions developed as a result of lava flow. If you bury your hand in the sand where it is yellow/brown colour, the temperature differences of the sea floor become quite evident.

Large boulders and grey sand dominate the area and the most common species of coral are Star coral, Brain coral and Gorgonian. Curious Barracudas may approach divers very closely.

Tent Reef Area (sites 16-19)

Just west of the Fort Bay harbour is another unusual geological structure known as Tent Reef. It is an extended rock ledge that starts at only 4 m (13ft) deep but becomes progressively deeper as you head northwest. The ledge is deeply undercut at some points, providing shelter to large snappers. It turns into a sheer wall that gradually becomes fragmented and appears as a series of steep coral outcroppings separated by deep sand channels. Tubular sponges, Elephant ear sponge and Black coral dominate the steep wall.

Tent Reef is also a favourite site for night dives with frequent octopus, sleeping turtles and Spiny lobster sightings.

East side diving (sites 20-28)

Diving on this side of the island depends on suitable weather. However, visibility tends to be exceptional when the weather is calm. Most of Saba's diving offers views of coral encrusted boulders of volcanic origin, but only Greer Gut and Giles Quarter are true coral reefs (i.e. made out of limestone). Diverse species of reef fish and other marine life along with the white sand covering the sea floor provide a very different diving experience compared to Saba's other sites. Exposure to the Atlantic side yields the development of hard coral structures more often than soft coral.

Close to shore, well-developed Elkhorn coral formations occur although the risk exists of periodic destruction by wave action and storms. The coral branches are fragile, but they tend to recover quickly due to high growth rates.

Hyperbaric Facility

In 1990, the Saba National Marine Park became the only marine park in the world to manage its own hyperbaric facility. It was donated to the island by the Royal Dutch Navy and it is the official hyperbaric facility in the region to treat diving related injuries. The four person chamber features a double lock system and full monitoring and is located at Fort Bay.

A hyperbaric team consists of a supervisor, driver, administrator and series of tenders, under the direction of a hyperbaric physician. Saba Hyperbaric teams are on a 24 hour call schedule to handle diving emergencies. Any revenue generated from the treatment is put into a separate fund dedicated to the improvement and maintenance of the facility.