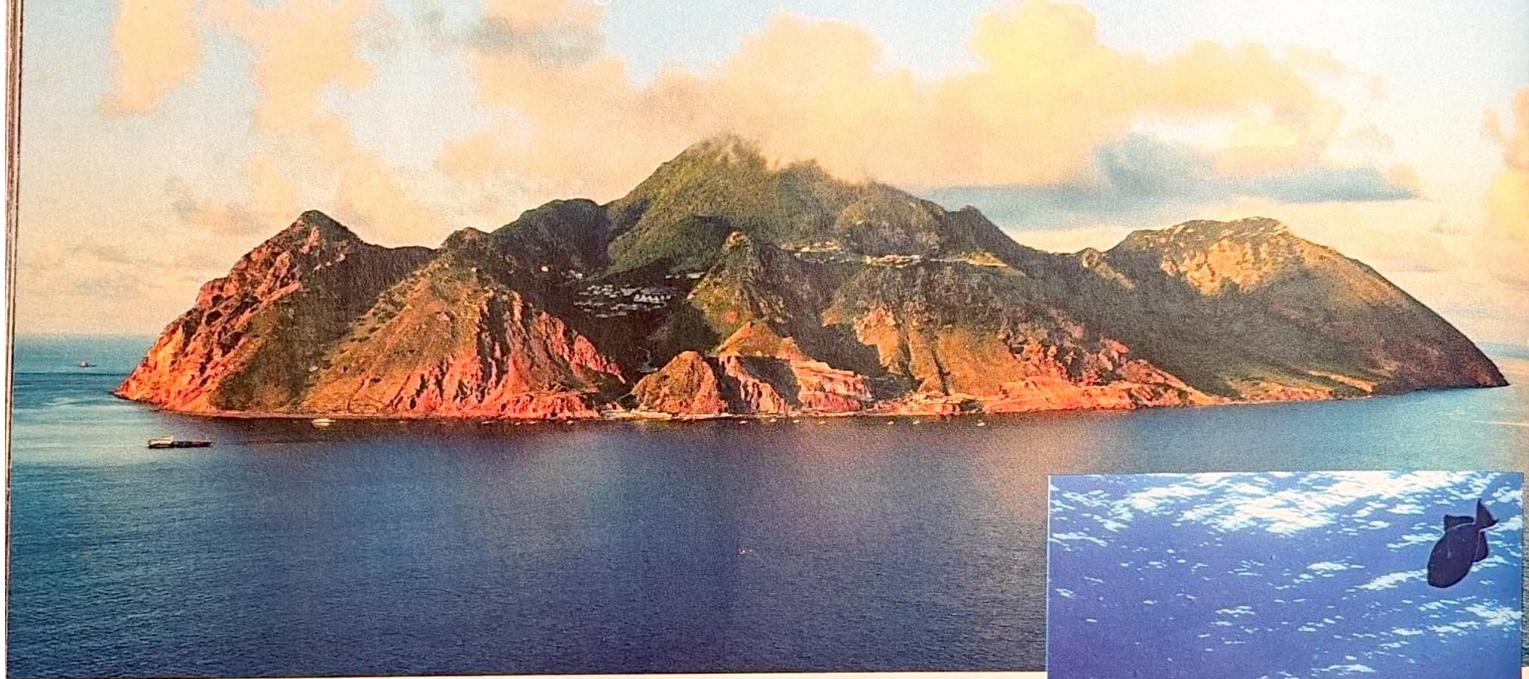


# A Deeper Dive

On lush and mountainous Saba, the smallest single-country island in the Caribbean, Betsy Andrews trades her towel and sandals for a scuba mask and hiking boots

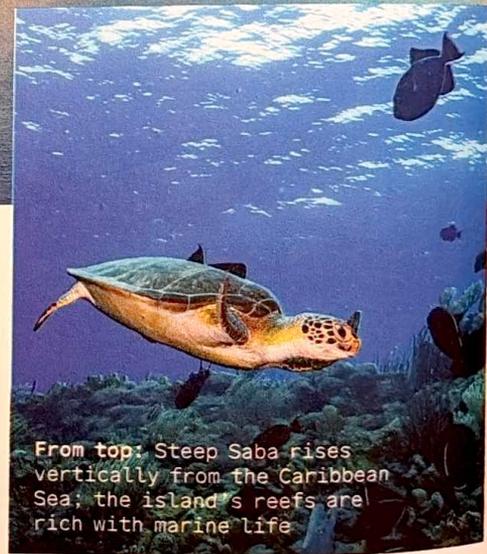


**OUR KNEES WERE BUCKLING**, and mud streaked our legs. It was the third day of a Caribbean honeymoon like no other, and we were exhilarated. My partner, Jeanne, and I, together for 20 years, had never before felt the urgency to tie the knot. But this past November, with a case challenging the federal right to gay marriage headed to the US Supreme Court, we decided to rush to City Hall. With matching gold-plated flower rings on our fingers, we booked a hasty, celebratory getaway to Saba, a place so undersung that, when we told people we were going there, they invariably responded, “Where? Never heard of it.”

This tiny Dutch protectorate in the Leeward Islands hosts no cruise ships. Its only real beach is an ephemeral strand that appears seasonally, if luck will have it. A quiet yet technically active volcano, the island totals five vertiginous square miles, and its roller-coaster-grade single road was hand-built by farmers nearly 90 years ago. It’s a wonder anyone manages to live there. Yet 2,000 souls call Saba home. They’re the descendants of pirates; of European settlers who tamed the jungle in order to farm plantations; of enslaved Africans forced to work those plantations. They’re expats from the Netherlands, the US, the Philippines, and Central America, with a few wealthy owners of mansion hideaways thrown in. For such a diverse population, it’s a close-knit place. “If you don’t know what your business is, somebody else will tell you,” said the taxi driver who dropped us at our hotel.

A third of Saba’s land is national park, and a marine reserve encircles the island. It’s dubbed the Unspoiled Queen for a reason. There’s little to do here but dive, hike, and eat spiny lobster. In other words, it’s our idea of paradise. So, with my scuba gear in tow, we flew from New York City to St. Maarten, where we caught a puddle jumper to Saba and landed, after a 12-minute flight, on the world’s shortest commercial runway.

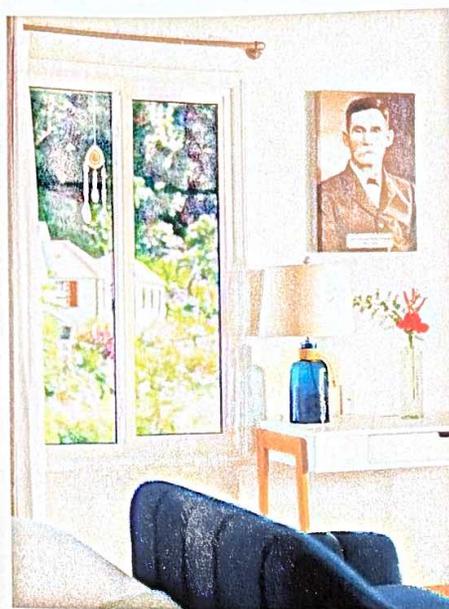
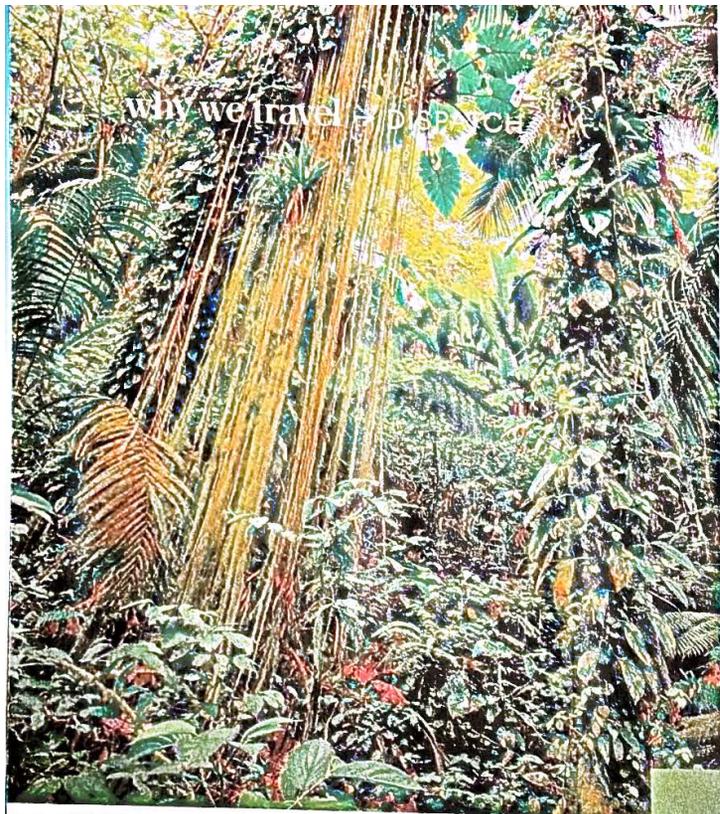
There aren’t many accommodations here, but ours was sweet. We stayed at Juliana’s Hotel in Windwardside, a town of white gingerbread-esque cottages with red roofs (typical Saban



From top: Steep Saba rises vertically from the Caribbean Sea; the island’s reefs are rich with marine life

architecture), and our suite had a vaulted ceiling and an expansive ocean view. At the poolside restaurant we feasted on crustaceans: lobster bisque, lobster “escargot,” and lobster salad. We made a valiant effort to finish our entrée, a grilled two-pounder.

On our first morning I saw plenty of those 10-limbed creatures while diving with Sea Saba Dive Center, the island’s only scuba shop, as Jeanne explored Windwardside’s handful of art studios. With dive master Lenroy “Lenny” Sutherland, a native of St. Vincent who now lives on Saba, I visited Man O’ War Shoals, one of the most beloved of the island’s 30 or so dive sites. Sea turtles snoozed, manta rays glided, and reef fish darted by the thousands over →



Clockwise from far left: The high-altitude Elfin Forest on the way up Mount Scenery; one of the Captains Suites at Juliana's Hotel; a purple-throated carib, a species of hummingbird found throughout the Lesser Antilles

lava pinnacles covered in corals and basket sponges. Though the reef looked healthy, Sea Saba and the Saba Conservation Foundation, which manages the island's parks, are raising baby corals in an offshore nursery to replace reefs lost to hurricanes and climate change.

Later we met up with Mount Scenery National Park officer Robin van der Bij, who grew up in the Netherlands but was on his second stint living on Saba. He led us along some of the historic footpaths that settlers blazed centuries ago. "The older people still call these trails 'roads,'" he said. His work includes the maintenance of all 20 trails, data collection, search and rescue of lost hikers, and the culling of animals that threaten Saba's ecosystem, including rats.

We started our hike on a sea cliff trail that led to a defunct sulfur mine lined in sparkling minerals. The mine is a hideout for Saba's only endemic mammal: bats. As we made our way up through dry forest punctuated by fruit trees—mango and avocado—and cinnamon trees whose aromatic leaves infuse Saba Spice, the local hooch, we ran into more island creatures: spotted lizards, red-bellied racer snakes, and an army of soldier crabs scuttling along in borrowed shells and audibly whining when we got too close.

Halfway up an endless series of switchbacks along a trail called All Too Far, we entered the rainforest. Massive elephant ears with their distinct heart-shaped leaves wrapped around bottle palms. Big, waxy flowers called lobster claws protruded from thick stalks. Tree ferns, survivors from the age of the dinosaurs, towered above. Bananaquits, yellow-bellied birds with curved beaks for siphoning nectar, squeaked from the canopy. We oohed and aahed. "I'm renaming this trail All Too Fab," I joked.

Then we hit a trail called Sandy Cruz, which dipped down into the ravines that Sabans call guts, and Jeanne cried out, "We forgot our walking sticks!" We had lugged them from home only to leave them behind in our suite. Cursing, I clung to whatever branch, stalk, or solid object I could grab while my boots slipped on slick rocks and mud. It was then that van der Bij chose to tell us that a couple of locals, training for Saba's triathlon, had raced over all 20 of the island's trails in a little over 10 hours.

Finally, in about half that time, we dumped out onto the road above Saba's capital, The



Bottom. We had completed only three trails, but van der Bij was impressed, and we were chuffed. We paid a visit to Saba's "Sistine Chapel," a church with an altar area painted by island artist Heleen Cornet, who depicted locals as cherubs and saints amid rainforest vegetation. Then we caught a lift back to Windwardside, where, famished, we polished off fresh-caught tuna and rib-eye steaks at a cozy restaurant called Brigadoon.

The next morning, our remembered sticks in hand, Jeanne and I headed up the Elfin Forest Trail to the top of Mount Scenery. At 2,877 feet, it's the highest point in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. We had hoped to have a view of the entire island from the top, but we were foiled by a dense mist that shrouded the summit. The scenery on the way up, nonetheless, was ravishing, the plant life thick and exuberant. As we trekked through the cloud forest, we passed countless spiky-leaved bromeliads and orchids clinging to the trunks of mountain mahogany and trumpetwood trees. Jeanne, the gardener in our household, wondered whether these air plants were parasitic. So after our hike, drinking beer at a jungle bar called Colibri Café, I pulled out my phone and looked at the internet for the first time in days.

"Air plants are actually commensalistic," I reported. "They benefit from the tree, but they don't harm it." Then I checked the headlines: The Supreme Court had declined to hear the challenge to gay marriage after all. Jeanne took my hand, our flower rings touching. "Oh well!" she said, laughing. Exhausted, filthy, and tipsy, we were needlessly, yet blissfully, wed.