

# Diving in Saba



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

The SNMP surrounds the entire island and extends from the high-water mark down to a depth of 60 meters (~200 feet), including the seabed and overlying waters. The SNMP 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 SNMP raises revenue through visitor fees, souvenir sales and donations.

The island's commercial diving business introduced scuba enthusiasts to the wealth of Saba's underwater world starting in the 1980s. The establishment of the SNMP soon afterward assured the health of the undersea environment and thus the sustainability of dive tourism, today a major contributor 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.

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 centers. Their expertise contributes to a safe, convenient, and informative diving experience.

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 sightings.

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 (79°F-82°F). Visibility ranges from a minimum of 18 meters (60 feet) but can be virtually unlimited. Poor weather conditions and heavy rainfall may influence visibility, but it typically improves again very quickly.

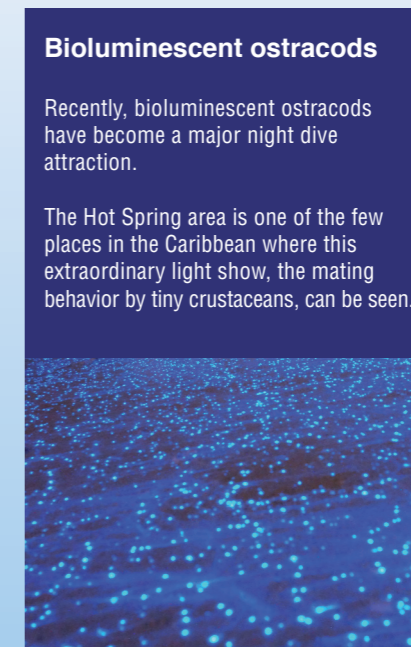
Fortunately, Saba's dramatic coastline naturally limits coastal development. Pressure on marine resources has always been modest even as the island population has increased without runoff or sewer problems. The quality of the marine environment, strong coral communities, and rich and varied fish life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

*"In the end we will conserve only what we love. We love only what we understand. We will understand only what we are taught."*

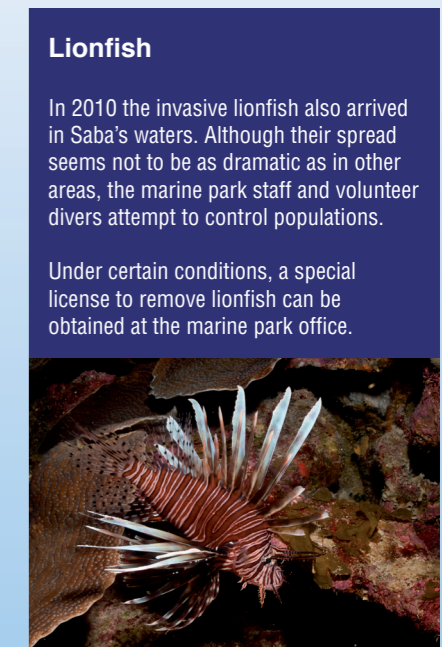
- Baba Dioum, Senegalese conservationist and poet



Nurse Shark



Ostracods



Lionfish

## Bioluminescent ostracods

Recently, bioluminescent ostracods have become a major night dive attraction.

The Hot Spring area is one of the few places in the Caribbean where this extraordinary light show, the mating behavior by tiny crustaceans, can be seen.

## Lionfish

In 2010 the invasive lionfish also arrived in Saba's waters. Although their spread seems not to be as dramatic as in other areas, the marine park staff and volunteer divers attempt to control populations.

Under certain conditions, a special license to remove lionfish can be obtained at the marine park office.

## Saba Marine Life



Groupers

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. Red Hinds and Yellow Fin Groupers are the most common species sighted, but Nassau Groupers can also be spotted quite often.



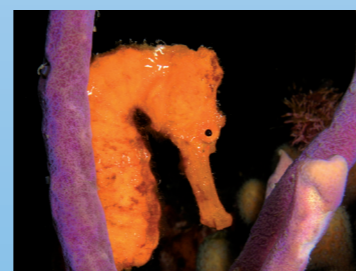
Sharks

Sharks have been feared and exploited for centuries, but as they inhabit the top of the food chain it is important that we understand their role in marine ecosystems. Shark sightings occur frequently in Saba, especially around The Pinnacles. Nurse Sharks and Caribbean Reef Sharks are the most common species, but Hammerhead Sharks, Bull Sharks and Tiger Sharks can also occasionally 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 SNMP minimizes impact on sea grass beds, the Green Turtles' favorite 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. Of the two species found in Saba, the Longsnout Seahorse is commonly found and the Lined Seahorse is very rare.

## Endangered Coral Reefs

Coral reefs are among the most important marine ecosystems in the world. Aside from their magnificent beauty, coral reefs provide dwelling places for thousands of animals and plants, which have high economic value and provide food to millions of people.

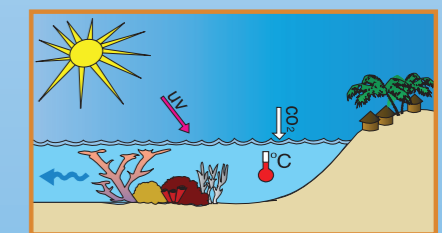
Although they act as a natural barrier against wave action and coastal erosion, and appear to be sturdy, coral reefs are in fact very fragile. Fast population growth, dense coastal settlements, and destructive fishing techniques threaten coral reefs and their associated resources. Coastal and marine pollution also threaten 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

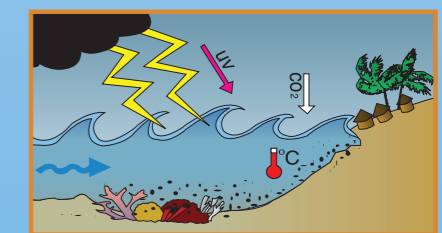
physiology of the coral and can cause a bleaching effect. This loss of color is due to the loss of symbiotic algae, which the coral polyp depends on for up to 90% of its food. Prolonged bleaching can lead to widespread coral mortality as the weakened corals are more vulnerable to disease and starvation. In Saba, bleaching events and coral diseases are still uncommon, although there was a Caribbean-wide bleaching event in 2005. Nonetheless, global climate change may also impact the health of the Saba reefs in the future.

In recent years, coral reefs have suffered a dramatic decline around the world. About 20% 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 lived under a wide variety of past climatic conditions, temperature, UV and ocean current patterns.



Today coral reefs are threatened by increased sea temperatures, storminess, UV levels, as well as changing current patterns, resulting from our current climate change.

# Dive Sites

## The Pinnacles (sites 1-5)



of Torrens Point headland. They do not exceed depths of 25 meters (82 feet), 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 Reef Sharks merge into the blue. Stingrays hover over the gray sandy bottom. Walls and rocks are covered with colorful 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 fascinating Pinnacles that rise from the ocean floor up to depths of 30 meters (100 feet) were formed by past volcanic activity and are nourished by deep ocean currents. The Pinnacles are covered with corals, sponges and other invertebrates. Abundant sea life, including large groupers, jacks and turtles, is attracted to this area and provides a spectacular diving experience.

Shark sightings also occur frequently around these waters. Black-tip Reef Sharks, Gray Reef Sharks and Nurse Sharks are the most common species seen.

The most unique structure not to be missed is the Eye-of-the-Needle, a pinnacle that rises up to 17 meters (56 feet) just off in the deep blue waters from Third Encounter.

## From Torrens Point to Diamond Rock (sites 6-9)



The large spires at Wells Bay and Torrens Point form a protected cove, an ideal location for snorkeling 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 Parrotfish are characteristic in this area.

Man O' War Shoal and Diamond Rock appear to be submerged and semi-submerged extensions

## The Ladder Bay Area (sites 10-16)



The original steps that Sabans used to access the island are known as The Ladder. Prior to the building of the Fort Bay Harbor, 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 flows. If you bury your hand in the sand where it is yellow/brown colored, the geothermal temperature differences of the sea floor become quite evident.

Large boulders and gray 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 17-19)

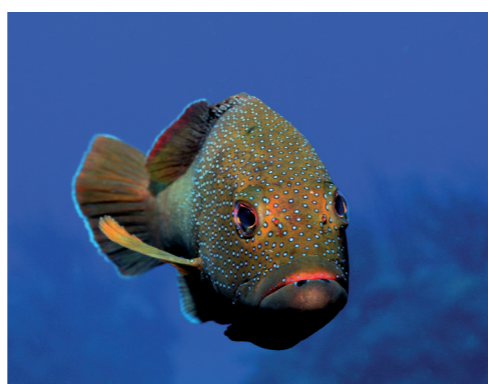
Just west of the Fort Bay Harbor is another unusual geological structure known as Tent Reef. It is an extended rock ledge that starts at only four meters (13 feet) deep but becomes progressively deeper as you head northwest. The ledge is deeply undercut at some points, providing shelter to large snappers. 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 Sponges and Black Coral dominate the wall.

Tent Reef is also a favorite site for night dives with frequent Octopus, sleeping turtle and Spiny Lobster sightings.

## East Side Diving (sites 20-26)

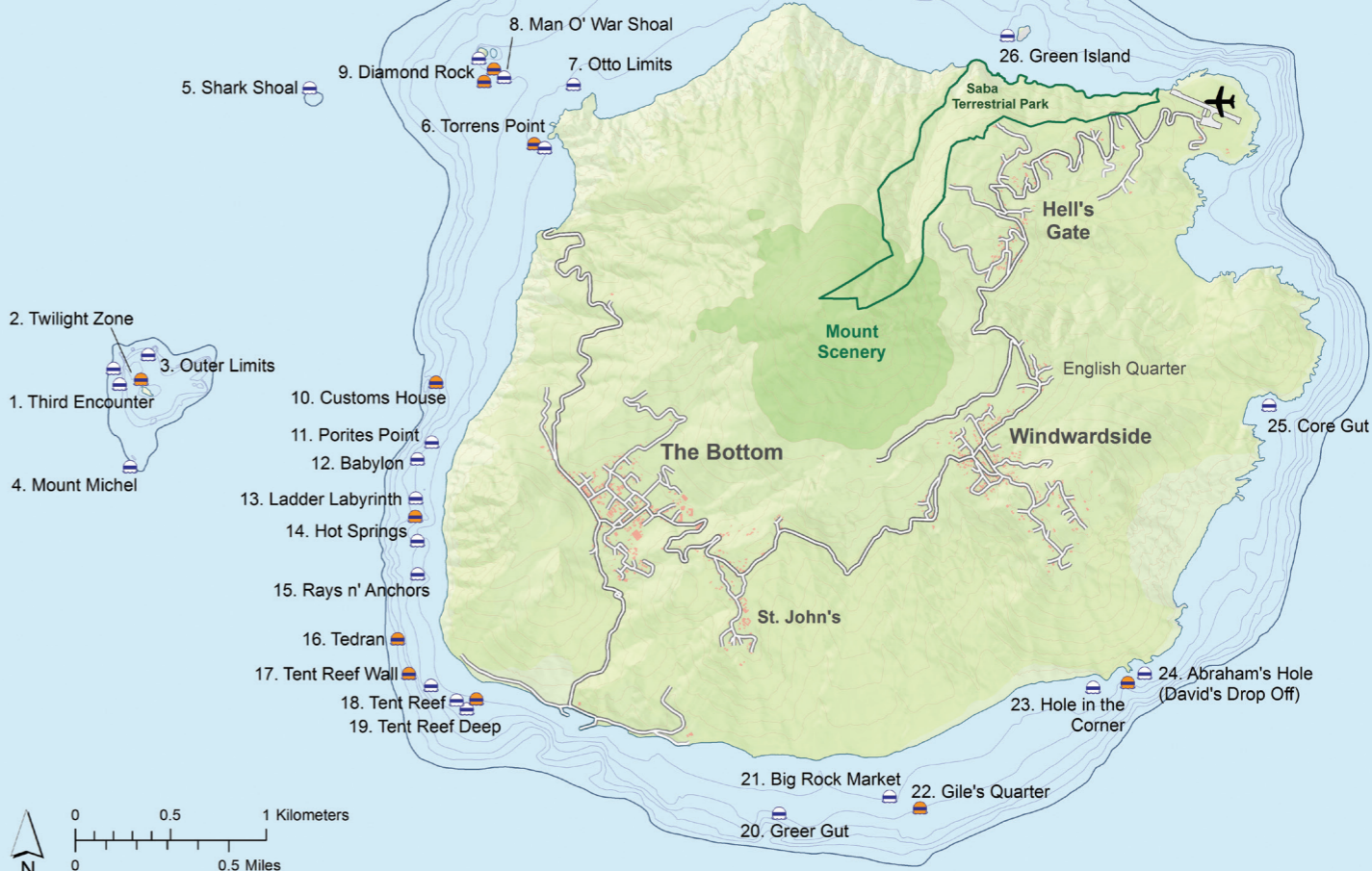


Diving on this side of the island depends on suitable weather. However, visibility tends to be exceptional when the weather is calm. Most of Saba's diving offers views of coral encrusted boulders of volcanic origin, but only Greer Gut and Giles Quarter are true coral reefs (i.e. made out of limestone). 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 fosters 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. These coral branches are fragile, but they tend to recover quickly due to high growth rates.

## Dive Site Map

- Dive mooring (50-100 tons). Licensed tour operators only.
- Dive mooring (up to 50 tons). Licensed tour operators only.
- Saba National Marine Park
- Bathymetric contours up to a depth of 60 meters
- Saba Terrestrial Park
- > 550m Protected Zone (no structures)
- Road



## 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 one meter (3 feet) away from your desired subject. Remember that 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 ascend and to keep you off 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.

## 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:

- ❗ Gloves are not permitted while diving. This is to eliminate the temptation of touching the coral. 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 behavioral changes that could cause fish to be more vulnerable to disease and predation. Therefore, do not feed the fish.