

HEAVENLY RETREAT



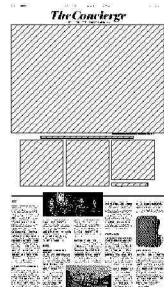
Plush bedding and a furry throw? The nuns who lived at Convent Cottage never had it so good. Six sleeping quarters were converted to two bedroom suites during the recent renovation. Off one of the suites (pictured) is a private deck with views of Mount Scenery.

PHOTOS BY
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FOR THE
BOSTON
GLOBE

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When you think “island digs,” you likely conjure a colorful sun-splashed resort or thatched-roof bungalow. Convent Cottage, on the Dutch Caribbean island of Saba, is different. It is a 150-year-old cottage that served as an actual convent in a former life. (Saba, blessedly, escaped major damage during recent hurricanes.)

Don’t expect a monastic vibe here. Old-meets-opulent in this unique cottage, located near shopping and restaurants in Saba’s Windwardside Village, one of the island’s four towns. Would the six Dominican sisters who once shared this space recognize it now, post-renovation, with its rain forest showers, fur throws, pillow-top mattresses, and Versace dishware? The original leaded glass windows remain, adding a colorful pop to the exterior of this white cottage, as do the gleaming mahogany floors. Settle in here, admiring views of Mount Scenery from the porch, and you’ll feel like you’re one of Saba’s 2,000 residents. “It’s a different take on the Caribbean,” says proprietor Mark Johnson. “I wanted to preserve what is unique and historic about this island.”



Johnson is an eighth-generation Saban whose family once owned the cottage. Decades later, the family sold it to the Dominican order as housing for the missionary nuns. In the 1980s, the 1,615-square-foot cottage changed hands again. Recently, Johnson bought the property back and lovingly restored it, opening it for guests in February. He transformed the plain bunkrooms into two lavish bedrooms with separate marble baths, ideal for two couples. Fine antiques and artwork are displayed throughout. Some of the furnishings are family heirlooms; Johnson purchased other pieces, and the home's stunning artwork, at auction. Global elements — a nod to the nun's missionary travel — include African bronzes, antique Chinese figurines, and Persian porcelain. There's a full kitchen, sitting room, and modern amenities like TV, Wi-Fi, and air conditioning. Surrounded by lush gardens of cascading angel tears (but of course), this is one elegant abode.

The entire cottage typically rents out for \$300 per night — not a bad rate for the island, especially when you're splitting with another couple. (Don't bring the kids; too many antiques.) "I think Saba is a perfect romantic getaway for couples," Johnson says, especially active types who don't mind the fact that there's no real beach here for about six months of the year. One of the main attractions on this green, volcano-borne island (which hasn't erupted for 5,000 years) is great hiking on ancient tracks through the rain forest. The most popular hike on this 5-square-mile island is the Mount Scenery Stairway — at nearly 3,000 feet, this peak is the highest point on Saba and the highest point in the Kingdom of the Netherlands. Underwater, pinnacles and seamounts create some of the best snorkeling and diving in the Caribbean.

Located 28 miles southwest of St. Martin/Sint Maarten, Saba is delightfully un-touristy. Residents of St. Martin and St. Barth's come here to escape the bustle, that's how mellow it is. If that sounds heavenly to you, put this one on your list.

E A Johnson St. #1, Windwardside, Saba Dutch Caribbean , 599-416-6150; www.sabaislandpremierproperties.com. From \$300 per night. Reachable via (short) flights from St. Maarten's Princess Juliana International Airport (now open). For information on Saba, www.saba-tourism.com.

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