

The Concierge

TIPS FOR TOURING HERE AND ABROAD

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
DIANE BAIR
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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.sabatourism.com.

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HERE

HISTORIC CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION

Need a nudge to get in the holiday spirit? Why not journey to Old Sturbridge Village for Christmas by Candlelight, an enchanted winter holiday experience that even Scrooge would enjoy. (Dec. 2-3; 8-10; 15-17; 21-23; 3 to 8 p.m.) Now in its 15th year, the living history museum's celebration offers fun for the entire family. Highlights include live musical performances, festive foods, storytelling, sleigh rides (weather permitting), roaring bonfire, gingerbread house contest, and Victorian carolers who stroll through the village that is decorated with hundreds of candles, evergreen garlands and wreaths. An area of the museum will be transformed into a “North Pole Village” with Santa and whimsical elves, Mrs. Claus's Bake Shop, and a magical talking Christmas tree named Tinsel. An all-new Santa experience features a walk through a super-sized “The Night Before Christmas” storybook. Last but not least, enjoy the nightly tree lighting. Adult \$28; ages 4-17 \$14; under 3 free. 800-733-1830, www.osv.org.

WINE AND ENTERTAINMENT VENUE DEBUTS

Enjoy wine, music, and the culinary arts at the newly-opened City Winery Boston. The 30,000-plus square foot urban winery, with 100-seat restaurant and private event space, features a 300-seat performance venue that will host an eclectic mix of classic and emerging artists — in pop, rock, jazz, indie, hip-hop, blues, Latin, and world music — and events such food and wine classes,



and hands-on wine blending. Upcoming concerts include Rufus Wainwright, Aztec Two-Step, Erin Harpe and the Delta Swingers, and Kindred the Family Soul. Annual VinoFile memberships (\$85) provide perks such as buying tickets with 48-hour advance notice before public sales; no ticket fees; invitations to members-only events; and more. 617-933-8047, www.citywinery.com/boston.

THERE

NEO-GOTHIC MANOR REOPENS IN IRELAND

Experience 19th-century grandeur at the newly reopened Adare Manor. After extensive renovations, restorations and expansion, the Neo-Gothic hotel and golf resort is receiving visitors in the lush rolling landscape of County Limerick, Ireland. In addition to the property's 18-hole, par 72 golf course, re-designed by award-winning Tom Fazio, guests can enjoy 842 acres of parkland with manicured trails, walled gardens and medieval ruins that offer opportunities for falconry, archery, clay pigeon shooting and fishing along River Maigue. Honoring the

original creations of Lady Caroline, Countess of Dunraven, the manor boasts 104 uniquely redesigned guest rooms and exclusive stateroom suites; a varied gastronomy program; and La Mer Spa, one of only eleven in the world and the first in the UK and Ireland. Rates from \$350. www.adaremanor.com.

RELAXED ADVENTURE TRAVEL

You say you like adventure vacations but aren't a super athlete? REI Adventures has you covered with its new series of Level 2 trips. Created to meet the demand of diverse ability levels, travelers will still experience the active itineraries for which the company is known, but at a more relaxed pace. Perfect for those who are inspired by hard-core climbs, summits and excursions, but are looking for something



less strenuous. For example, the Southern California Ocean & Desert Multisport — a new four day excursion — combines hiking, cycling and sea kayaking in the desert, mountain and coastal region from Palm Springs to La Jolla. Rates from \$2,199. Other Level 2 itineraries include Japan Hiking Kumano Kodo & Nakasendo; Great Smoky Mountains Winter Hiking; and Italy Hiking Amalfi Coast & Capri. 800-622-2236, www.rei.com/adventures/trips/weekend/southern-california-active-vacation.html.

EVERYWHERE

ZIKA MOSQUITO RISK INDEX FOR US

Travelers worried about contracting the Zika virus transmitted by the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito may want to consider consulting AccuWeather's newly launched Zika Mosquito Risk Index, a tool designed to provide a quick way to view the likelihood of mosquito infestations in the contiguous United States. Developed in concert with leading mosquito and epidemiology experts, the index level is generated by evaluating the historical habitat for the species most linked with Zika and the latest scientific research on how weather affects Zika transmission, and combines those results with the AccuWeather Day-by-Day 90-Day Forecasts. Available now online, and with the AccuWeather iOS app. (An app for Android to follow soon.) From the Personalized Forecasts Menu on the

Web homepage, select Mosquito (under Home & Garden) and then click the button labeled “Check Your Zika Risk.” On the iOS app, click on Radar, then choose Zika Risk from the dropdown menu. www.accuweather.com.



RUGGED BACKPACK

Adventure travelers can pack light and smart with Cotopaxi's latest backpack, the Allpa 35L Travel Pack. Weighing in less than four pounds, the Allpa is perfectly sized for in-flight carry-on convenience, and is loaded with well-designed features including a weight distributing, low-profile harness system, suitcase-style full wrap zipper, padded laptop and tablet sleeve, carabiner lash loops, four reinforced grab handles, and multiple zippered mesh compartments. Made of rugged TPU-coated 1000D polyester and durable 1680D ballistic nylon paneling. \$199.95; free shipping and free returns with United States. www.cotopaxi.com.

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