

Tourism Action Plan 2016 – 2018

Saba

August 26, 2016



Photo Credit Kai Wulf

Introduction

The Tourism Action Plan 2016 - 2018 outlines the steps the Public Entity Saba will be taking to enhance tourism on the island. The program is based on input from different stakeholders in the tourism industry on Saba, such as restaurants, dive shops, real estate agents and ferry operators. Stakeholders and experts on St. Maarten were also consulted. The goal of this program is to enhance tourism on Saba, working in cooperation with the various stakeholders.

It is difficult to determine the performance of the tourism industry because reliable figures are presently lacking. But it is safe to state that tourism has been declining in past years. This can be determined from the following developments:

- Two of the three dive shops on Saba are for sale and are barely operational; where we used to have 7 operational dive boats, we now only have two that operate full time.
- In the past 5 years the average number of flights per day has been reduced from five flights to four, and trips by The Edge ferry have decreased from five times a week to three.
- One of the hotels has closed and only a few extra hotel rooms have been created, in terms of short-term rental cottages.
- According to information received from the Saba Marine Park, the amount of dives per year has decreased in recent years.

Based on the above points, it can be concluded that steps need to be taken to revive tourism on Saba with or without accurate statistical information. In the meantime, statistics will be gathered via our Economic Affairs department, and the importance of reliable statistical information will continue to be stressed with CBS.

This Tourism Action Plan starts with a short and pragmatic strategy, followed by the actions to be taken to target yachters, day-trippers and stay over tourists. It also has a chapter containing the implications for different departments of government, mainly the Tourism Department and Harbor Department. In the appendix there is a list of stakeholders who were interviewed on Saba and St. Maarten, as well as a map of the Fort Bay with the projected changes and a map with the existing and new moorings. Meetings with tourism stakeholders in St. Barths will be planned as soon as all the necessary appointments are made and those points can be added accordingly to this plan.

Strategy

The Tourism Action Plan can be considered a working document. Actions may be added or might change depending on how the tourism sector develops and funding opportunities evolve. There are a few principles and guidelines which were used while compiling this program:

- Saba is famous for its diving and hiking. However, there are also other attractions that can be marketed or developed, which will appeal to market segments beyond divers or hikers. Factors such as Saba being a safe destination, which is family friendly, tranquil and offers great dining opportunities, should be a part of the "Saban Identity".
- The Public Entity will actively support other avenues to further promote private initiatives that establish Saba as a destination that offers possibilities for retreats, conferences, sport fishing, zip lining, rock climbing or bird watching.

- The plan focuses on three target groups: yachters, day-trippers and overnight guests. The emphasis of this initial plan is mainly on attracting yachters and day-trippers. This was decided as we have learned from various stakeholders that many day-trippers return for a longer trip if they enjoy their first visit.
- On the short term the program aims to achieve improvements on Saba itself, and to target St. Maarten and St. Barths, our two closest destinations who have successful tourism industries.
- The Public Entity and its Tourist Bureau cannot do it alone. The stakeholders on Saba as well as the relevant ministries will be involved in executing the program as much as possible and also in adjusting the course if needed.

Target groups

Yachters

St. Maarten is one of the biggest hubs for yachts and mega yachts in the Eastern Caribbean. We need to attract more of these yachts and mega yachts to Saba. Based on meetings with stakeholders in St. Maarten, we came to the conclusion that more effort is needed on two factors to attract more yachts: facilities and marketing.

Facilities

The Fort Bay Harbor is known by many on St. Maarten as an industrial harbor with limited facilities for tourists and recreational visitors. Now that the road to the landfill is paved, the power plant is moved, and the road to the harbor is being repaved, there are many opportunities to develop the Fort Bay into a more tourist friendly destination. The following actions will be taken to make this happen:

- Harbor management must be professionalized and commercialized with the help of an external expert, as well as with an exchange program with the Port of St. Maarten. The Harbor Office needs to start working with a log and an agenda so that visiting yachts can reserve a spot at the dock if there is available space. Many yachts prefer not to sleep at a mooring on Saba because of the risk of drifting towards the rocks if a mooring line breaks and because the sea can often be rough which doesn't make for a pleasant night. When the Harbor Office maintains an agenda for the docks and local boats owners make use of their moorings, yachts can then reserve a spot in the harbor at night when there is no planned traffic.
- The Public Entity will look into improving security at night through an enhanced surveillance system or 24 hour security presence.
- The Harbor also needs a website, where visitors can find relevant information about the facilities in the Fort Bay, clearing procedures, and can possibly make a reservation for dock space.
- External funds will be sought from the Nature Funds to strengthen the existing moorings, and acquire 12 extra moorings, which would include two super-yacht moorings for mega yachts up to 40-50 meters.

- External funds will be sought from the Ministry of I&M to do small maintenance at the new pier, and to reorganize the customs office so that visitors can wait inside rather than in the sun or the rain.
- External funds will be sought to reinforce the roof of the new commercial building so that the parking area can be utilized.
- Better signage in the Fort Bay is needed, as visiting yachts do not always know where they can dock, and where they can tie up their dinghies. Improved communication is also necessary between visiting yachts and the Harbor Office, who will advise captains when they moor on private moorings.
- The Fort Bay will be beautified where possible. Benches will be placed in strategic locations. There will also be an outlet created where visitors can find information about the island. The overall cleanliness and organization of the harbor area must also be improved.
- External funds will be sought to place a VHF-repeater in the tower on Mount Scenery to make sure moored yachts in the Wells Bay and Ladder Bay are able to communicate with the Harbor Office.
- The Public Entity will explore options with interested stakeholders to establish a water taxi service.
- Efforts will be made to streamline and simplify the checking in and out procedures for yachts, by making sure the different organizations that are involved align their requirements. The Public Entity will continue to lobby with customs and immigration to simplify and speed up border controls.
- Other opportunities that will be looked into:
 - Discuss with SEC how the old power plant could be utilized and visually improved in the short term.
 - The possibility for entrepreneurs to offer services such as sport fishing, snorkeling tours, sunset cruises and around the island tours.
 - A fish market at the harbor where both tourists and locals can purchase fresh fish.

Marketing

Saba is a relatively unknown destination by the marinas, boat crew and boat owners/renters on St. Maarten, and based on feedback we have received the situation seems to be the same in St. Barths. As soon as we can achieve a number of the vital improvements mentioned above, more must be done to market Saba as a destination for yachts. The following actions will be taken to make this happen:

- The Public Entity will design and print promotional material specifically for marinas and boat crew. Marinas are interested to disperse flyers, and tell us there are a lot of potential yachts interested to visit Saba but there is limited information.
- Make use of press releases and newsletters (like Dockside Management) to inform boat crew and marinas about improvements in the Fort Bay, with moorings and improved services.
- Yachters' guidebooks will be contacted to make sure Saba is well covered in guides such as the Super Yacht Guidebook.
- Explore the possibility of setting up a billboard on St. Maarten to promote Saba.
- A familiarization trip will be organized for boat crew and marinas.

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- There will be more focus on digital marketing for the promotion of Saba. This plan will make funds available for campaigning with new and creative methods of promotion.
- The Saba Regatta will be revived.
- Plans will be made to make a new promotional video for Saba, including a plan on how to fully utilize the video when it's ready.

Day-Trippers

It is very important to accommodate day-trippers as much as possible with an excellent and seamless experience on the island. Many returning visitors to Saba first came to the island on a day trip. The following actions will be taken to ensure that day-trippers will visit Saba, and when they do, that they will have a great experience on our island:

- The Public Entity will ensure day-trippers have a warm welcome on arrival, by establishing a welcoming agent or 'friendly face' who will greet visitors upon arrival, and also answer questions, organize booked tours and arrange excursions. The welcoming agent will also be present upon departure, to ask visitors about their experience, and to ask them to leave a recommendation or fill in a short survey.
- An inviting outlet for information will be created in the form of a model of a Saban cottage, where visiting tourists can find brochures and other relevant information.
- A day-trippers' brochure will be designed and printed for the activity desks on St. Maarten and St. Barths. The activity desks will be actively targeted by the Tourist Bureau to make sure they are well informed about Saba, and that they have Saba on top of their list when making recommendations on trips to their clients.
- In order to ensure that the various activity desks are knowledgeable about Saba and its many attractions, familiarization trips will be organized for the people who work at the activity desks and also for other stakeholders in the tourism industry on the neighboring islands.
- The Public Entity will actively seek ways to establish a ferry service between St. Barths and Saba. Once this has been established, it will be more feasible for visitors from St. Barths to make a day trip to Saba or spend a long weekend.
- The Public Entity will continue to lobby for faster clearance procedures for day-trippers, as well as reorganizing the customs office to ensure that visitors can wait inside instead of outside in the sun or rain.
- Efforts will be made to improve the taxi experience.

Overnight guests

All the actions above, which focused on day-trippers and yachts, are expected to have a long term effect on the amount of overnight guests. The following actions will be taken specifically to attract more overnight guests:

- The Public Entity will lobby with Winair to include flights from St. Barths to Saba during the high season twice weekly, as well as more flights to St. Maarten in general, and lower fares.
- The Public Entity will encourage stakeholders in setting up package trips from St. Maarten and St. Barths. For these to be successful it is important to set up a good promotion, and to make it possible for hotel rooms to be booked online.

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- Investments will be made into dive packages with St. Maarten and St. Barths. The Public Entity will organize a familiarization trip for dive shops from St. Maarten and St. Barths to see if package deals can be made.
- The decompression chamber needs to be operational as this is a big selling point for diving on Saba.
- The Public Entity will actively support and promote new initiatives taken by stakeholders in tourism, such as the Saba Restaurant Week, Taste of Saba, potentially the Saba Regatta, as well as existing initiatives such as Sea and Learn, Saba Day, Carnival and Saba Triathlon. More can be done by government to promote these initiatives.
- The Public Entity will monitor the performance of D&DPR for Saba on the US market, and will explore the possibility of contracting a marketing firm in Europe.

Implications

In order to make this Action Plan a success, a number of changes will be implemented in the operation of the Tourist Bureau, the Harbor Office, the Tourism Committee and the taxi's.

Tourist Bureau

The Tourist Bureau will take a more prominent and pro-active role in marketing Saba and making the tourists' stay on Saba a pleasant one. The following actions will be taken to improve the image of the tourist office locally and to improve the services offered:

- The tasks and responsibilities of the Tourist Bureau will be clearly outlined and communicated with the stakeholders. The staff of the Tourist Bureau will be provided with a representative uniform.
- The Tourist Bureau will be open all day during office hours on weekdays (also during lunch) and between 10.00 am and 2.00 pm on Saturdays and Sundays. The structure of this new working schedule will be formulated with the input from the staff of the Tourist Bureau. In the event that visitors show up outside of office hours, there will be an outlet which will have local brochures and other relevant information booklets
- Investments will be made to improve the marketing of Saba via digital media. A policy needs to be established which will detail how the Tourist Bureau will ensure that all businesses on the island are able to get exposure on the Tourist Bureau's various media outlets.
- Marketing via traditional channels such as printed media and trade shows will be evaluated based on effectiveness. When trade shows are being visited by the Tourist Bureau, targets will be set in order to determine the success of the show. Trade shows within other countries in Europe, Canada and the US will also be explored, to determine which shows would make for a good investment.
- A policy will be created to ensure that The Tourist Bureau will maintain an annual calendar, and actively promote Saban events in St. Maarten, St Barths, and other islands in the region, such as with activity desks and marinas. These updates will also be included on the Saba Tourism website.
- The activity desks in St. Maarten and St. Barths will be contacted regularly to make sure that Saba as a destination is actively being promoted.
- The contract with TVC will be terminated at the end of the year. The image bank will be managed by the Tourist Bureau, which is more cost effective. The Tourist Bureau will also

organize photo competitions/projects to ensure that there are always recent and fresh pictures, which can be used.

Harbor Office

The Harbor Office is instrumental in making sure visiting yachts and day-trippers have an excellent experience on Saba. The service offered at this point needs to be improved. The following improvements will be implemented in the functioning of the Harbor Office:

- An external expert will be contracted for a short period to assist with professionalizing the operation of the harbor. The available dock space must be used more efficiently, and to do this an agenda and log will be kept by the Harbor Office. By having a log yachts and other visitors can inquire in advance to determine if there is space for them to dock on the day and time that they are considering. It will also be made possible for visiting yachts to sleep at the pier, when possible.
- Harbor Officers and security officers must be available to assist when visiting vessels are docking, when possible. Harbor Officers must also be more visible in the harbor, using their provided uniforms. The Officers should monitor the boat traffic to ensure that local boats use their private moorings and that visiting vessels are given correct information to guarantee that they do not use local moorings.
- The harbor facilities need to be better organized and kept clean. While there is no additional money to dedicate to maintenance, the lack of cleanliness can no longer be ignored and will not be accepted.
- The Harbor needs a website where visitors can download and submit forms for clearing in, make a reservation for dock space and find information on the facilities in the Fort Bay area.
- The office hours will be evaluated for both the Harbor Officers and the Security Team to better facilitate the proposed actions.
- Public Wi-Fi will be installed in the Fort Bay as a service for visitors. This service will also be explored as an option for obtaining statistics.

Airport

- Public Wi-Fi will also be installed at the airport as a service for visitors.
- The Public Entity will continue to lobby to open up the airport for more traffic.
- The Public Entity will look into creating a second helicopter platform. Owners of mega yachts could use this to visit Saba in their helicopter, if they prefer not to come here with their boat. It would also create an opportunity for high-end tours to Saba with a helicopter.
- Execution of the Airport Master Plan will continue. This enhances the safety of the airport and can be a selling point for tourism. The Master Plan also includes the relocation of the fire department, and the remodeling of the terminal.
- An outlet will be created for printed information material for visitors, and more seating will be created, once there is space in the terminal after the relocation of the fire department.

Tourism Committee

The Tourism Committee has been involved in promoting Saba during the past 2 years. Promotion of Saban tourism has seen a boost, in particular because of the endeavors of D&DPR to attract travel writers to Saba from the USA. Reviews from the stakeholders on the functioning of this committee

were mixed, even by some of the current members. Most of the non-members are of the opinion that the businesses of the actual members are favored during the visits of the travel writers and subsequently in the articles, which follow. Although the goal of this committee was to advise on providing neutral promotions for the island, it can be concluded that in some articles the committee members are favored. This plan does not conclude that this is being done willfully but does promote the idea that all stakeholders in the tourism industry should receive a fair amount of opportunities and exposure. Based on this information, the following is proposed for a new structure:

- All tourism related stakeholders can have an opportunity to be on the committee.
- The committee will be restructured with the aim of creating a more effective advisory board. This restructuring may include a method, which would encourage more businesses to contribute to the neutral advertising of Saba. It is known that some businesses on the island invest more in marketing than others and The Public Entity would like to encourage individual businesses to contribute more to the marketing of Saba. The final structure of the committee will be created with the help of input from the stakeholders.
- The members of the committee vote for the tourism advisory board. The tourism board will plan quarterly meetings and will be chaired by the Commissioner of Tourism, who will be representing the Public Entity. The secretary will also be provided by government. The head of the Tourist Bureau will also be present in these meetings as an advisor to the Commissioner.
- The board will be responsible for advising the Public Entity on marketing strategies and will monitor the results and effectiveness of the ongoing activities. The advisory role of the board will not change from the current structure.

Taxis

Almost all tourists visiting Saba will use a taxi at least once during their stay. The taxi drivers can therefore have an impact on the experience of any tourist visiting Saba. Therefore it is important that this impact is positive. The following actions will be taken to improve the taxi service:

- All taxi drivers will be given a representative uniform, to ensure that they are recognizable as a reliable taxi driver when picking up passengers at Fort Bay or Airport.
- Standards will be set for the appearance of all taxi vehicles on the island in terms of cleanliness and safety. The current taxi rates will be evaluated and simplified where needed. A grace period for this will also be implemented.
- The island tour will be more clearly defined, as currently many taxis do different tours, some which are shorter than others. A standardized tour ensures that all tourists booking an island tour will have a similar exciting experience. While the main structure of the tour will be standardized, there will be room for personalization of the tours by the individual taxi drivers, which can include favorite lookout points, locations for finding local fruit and much more.
- The welcoming agent at the Fort Bay will ensure tourists that have booked a tour during their day trip to Saba will be directed to a taxi in order to prevent any confusion as to where they have to go after completing the immigration and customs procedures.

Financial Plan

To accomplish the goals, which are described in this document, the Public Entity will actively seek financial assistance from the Dutch Government through the relevant ministries. Although there is a local tourism budget and funding has been reserved for Economic Development from BZK, there is not sufficient budget available. The activities, which are not listed below but are mentioned in this document, will be financed through the available local funds. The following requests will be made to the relevant ministries:

Ministry of I&M

There is 3 million Euros available for the backlog of maintenance for the harbor. Already some of this money has been spent to dredge the harbor basin late last year. A request for some “quick win” projects has been submitted which includes the following:

- Reorganizing the customs office
- New dock repairs
- Promotional outlet (Saban cottage)
- Reinforcing roof parking

Ministry of Economic Affairs

Through the nature funds, a request will be made for the investment in the moorings. In addition to this, funding will be requested to finance an extended contract with D&DPR (a New York based marketing firm) and for a similar firm in Europe.

If funding from the relevant ministries does not materialize the priorities will be adjusted accordingly based on what financial means are available.

Conclusion

Tourism is one of Saba’s main economic drivers, second only to the medical school. Over the years it is clear that the number of arrivals have declined. The Island Government intends to promote and stimulate economic development. This opinion has also been expressed by the National Government. An improved tourism sector would provide many opportunities for employment and economic development.

This tourism action plan provides a clear vision of the way forward in the short term. Based on the interviews conducted, we have incorporated the achievable opinions of the stakeholders into one document as a starting point for improvements. This will continue to be a working document and will, as much as possible, include the input of the stakeholders, to make it a well informed and efficient process.

For this Tourism Action Plan to be successful it does not only need the support of the local government and its departments; it also needs the support of the National Government, the local stakeholders who provide services and the stakeholders who carry out controls such as customs and immigration. With the support of all parties involved considerable improvements can be made in the short-term, which will result in an improved tourism industry.

Annex 1: List of interviews

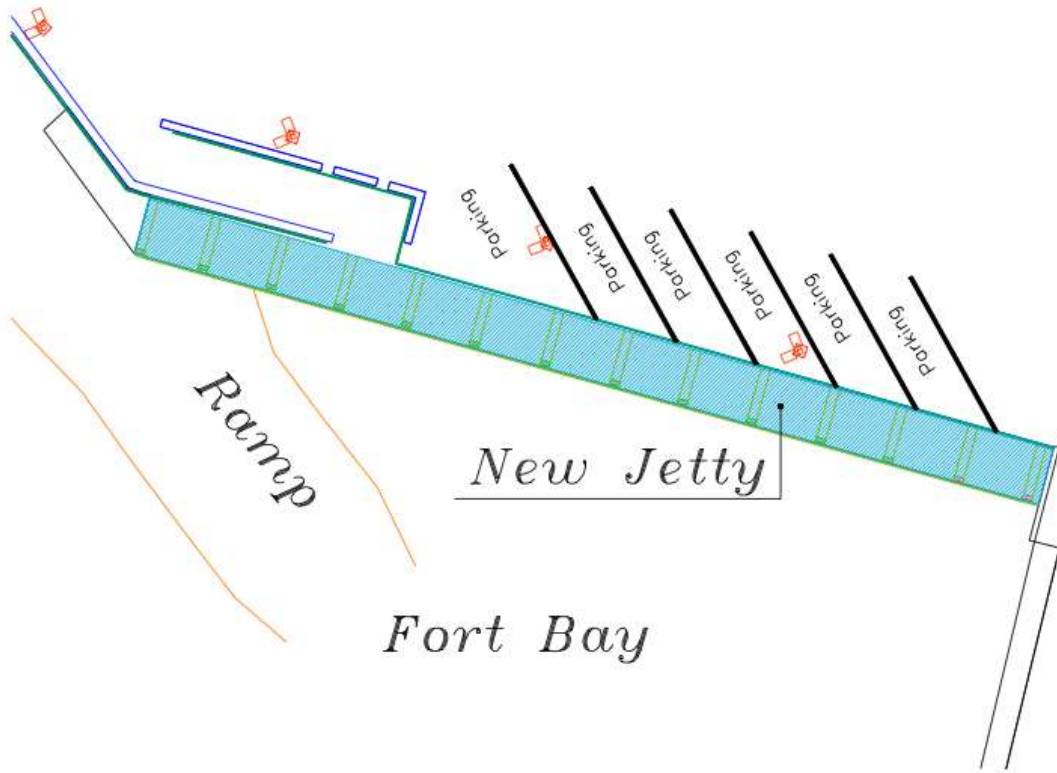
Saba:

- Claire Verbeke and Hidde Verbeke, Queens Garden Resort and Bistro Chez Bubba
- Mark Johnson, Cottage Club and Jewel Cottage
- Wolfgang and Barbara Tooten, Scout's Place
- Johanna Schutten and Wim Schutten, Juliana's Hotel and Tropics restaurant
- Andries Bonnema, El Momo Cottages
- Keith Murphy, Ecolodge Rendezvous and Long Haul Grill restaurant
- Cheri Waterfield, Saba Deep
- Lynn Costenaro, Sea Saba
- Caroline Johnson, Johnson Travel Services
- Eddie Peterson and Stanley Peterson, Breadline Plaza
- Kai Wulf, Saba Conservation Foundation
- Jaime Buchanan, Saba C-Transport
- Albert Pensis and Michael Feeley, Saba Island Properties
- Monique Wilson, Island Council Member
- Carl Buncamper, Island Council Member
- Wayne Peterson, Taxi driver
- Paul Cizek, Bottom Bean Cafe

St. Maarten:

- Debby Lind-Steyn, Aqua Mania Adventures
- Keith Franca and Zaida Vlaun, Priority Resource Management and Travel Planners
- Michael Cleaver and Claudio Buncamper, Winair
- Kass Johnson, Dockside Management
- Edmond Johnson, Port St. Maarten
- Ariel S. Jamil, St. Maarten Yacht Club
- Michelle van der Werff, Heineken Regatta
- Corrado Losi, TUI Marine
- Chris Johnson, Dutch Representation in Philipsburg
- Activity desks on Dutch and French side St. Maarten

Map Fort Bay indicating taxi parking area



Map of Moorings

