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# FINDING STATIA

## Saint Eustatius Beckons with a Smile

Steve Gillick

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01 DEC 2014: When I considered a speaking engagement at the 3rd Annual Sustainability Conference in St. Eustatius, my first question was, 'where is it?' And boy was I in for a surprise.



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After flying on Westjet to St. Maartin, I caught the Winair puddle-jumper: a 19 seat, 18-minute flight that saw the crystal blue waters of the Caribbean give way to the looming greenery of the volcano known as the Quill, and then on to F.D. Roosevelt airport just outside the city of Oranjestad.

Roland Lopes from the Tourism Development Foundation was there to greet us with a welcoming smile. And you know, despite the amazing history, ruins, picturesque old houses, renowned scuba diving, hiking and wildlife that the island offers, it was the people we met who instilled a sense of comfort, ease and ‘family’, that is the hallmark of the Island.

Fellow Canadian speaker Nicole Vaugeois and I were accommodated at The Old Gin House, a reconstructed 18th Century building that once housed a cotton gin, located on the lower town coast not far from dive centers and restaurants. And almost immediately we were ready to explore.



A hand-painted sign pointed 'up' to the Tourist Information Office so we followed the short but steep cobblestoned 'Old Slave Road' to Upper Town. Near the top it started to rain so we ducked under a tree along with two municipal workers, and started chatting. A car drove by, honked and waved, and then another. When I remarked that our two new friends were very popular, one of them explained, "they're waving at you. It's just how we are on St. Eustatius". And I will say that during my five days on the island, truer words could not have been spoken.

One of the slogans being considered for Saint Eustatius Tourism is "Unhurried, Unspoiled" and many compare the island to the way that many Caribbean islands looked 40 years ago. There are no major hotel chains, beach resorts, slick shopping malls or fast food restaurants.

Ruins, in the form of old brick walls and archways near the shore, date back to the 1820's and recall the past history of the island when it earned its nickname, 'The Golden Rock'.



Under Dutch rule, St. Eustatius became one of the centres for the slave trade, but also served as a tax-free haven, open to people of all countries and religions. As the island was not suited to a plantation economy like its neighbours, the Dutch focussed on trade, and it's said that two hundred ships could lay anchor in Oranje (Oron-ya) Bay at the same time. The arrival of Jewish merchants in the 1680's contributed to the economy. The ruins of the Honen Dalim synagogue, (meaning, She who is charitable to the poor), built in 1739, are still visible today. The old Jewish cemetery can be found in Upper Town, not far from the resting place of some of the early Dutch settlers, and only minutes from The Quill.

For those seeking adventure, there's nothing like climbing a volcano.

The Quill National Park surrounds a dormant volcano that rises 600 meters above sea level. The name, 'Quill', is derived from the Dutch "kuil" meaning "pit" and refers to the crater on top. With assurance that the last eruption took place in the year 400, three of us signed up to climb, accompanied by Charlie Lopes, the local expert.

While Charlie pointed out trees and vegetation, Lisa Sorenson, one of the speakers and the Executive Director of BirdsCaribbean, enthusiastically spotted Antillean Crested Hummingbirds, Yellow Warblers, Banana Quits, Grey King Birds and Pearly Eyed Thrashers, most of which evaded my straining eyes.

As we climbed higher, Red Headed Lizards scampered in the brush and at times the trail came alive as sea shells, inhabited by colourful hermit crabs, crawled along; they as curious to gawk at us as we were to pick them up and stare back.

After about 45 minutes we reached the Panoramic Viewpoint on the edge of the crater, where we could see the town, the airport and the island of Saba off in the distance. (On clear days, St Maarten and St. Barth's can also be seen). After a ton of photos, we headed down a different path and had the chance to taste sweet, juicy guava fruit, straight from the tree.



In between conference sessions, a few of us discovered that just wandering around Upper Town was equally rewarding. We visited the Historical Foundation that featured an exhibit on Slavery included local artifacts and a reconstructed slave dwelling. The museum is in the 18th Century home of a wealthy merchant but also served as the residence of Governor Johannis de Graaf. His fame lies in the fact that on November 16, 1776, after receiving a salute from the USS Andrew Doria, he acknowledged the

gesture with an 11-gun salute. This has gone down in history as the first time the newly formed United States of America was recognized by another country.

Fort Oranje still stands guard over the Caribbean and if you enter it quietly, you won't scare away the goats! There are about a dozen that munch the grass on the hill just under the battlements, and clamour on the stone walls, at least until visitors arrive.

And just outside the Fort and along the narrow streets are historic houses, some very good restaurants, a few shopping opportunities (crafts, groceries, souvenirs), several dilapidated homes (but visual treasures from a photographer's point of view), more smiling people and just a nice relaxed atmosphere.

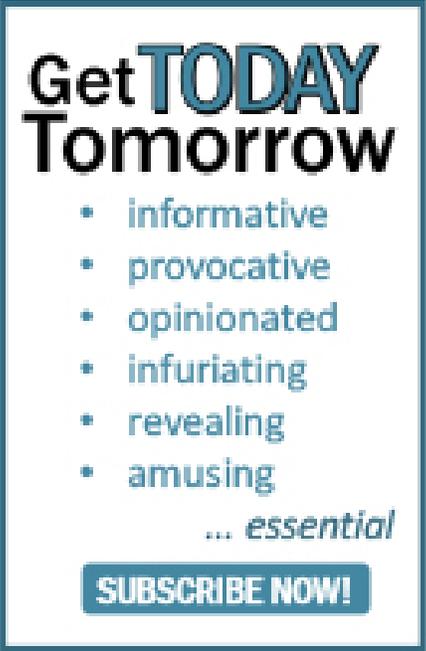


Without doubt one of the strong draws of Statia is the high quality of the dive experience.

While I didn't participate on this trip, some of the conference delegates pointed to the marine park that includes drop-off canyons, sunken ships, artificial reefs, coral reefs and sea grass beds, as well as Reef Sharks, Nurse Sharks, Hawksbill Turtles, Green Turtles, Conches, Lobsters, colourful fish and underwater photography.

And what is a vacation without food? Suffice it to say that we ate lobster almost on a daily basis, as

well as fresh fish and salads, usually washed down with an ice-cold Carib Beer.



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With the emphasis on satisfying the niche market interests of travellers and their quest to see and experience something different while on holiday, St. Eustatius has great bucket-list potential. It's the Caribbean as your clients may have never seen it. Pick up a CD of the Rebels Band, listen to the reggae/soca/dance music rhythms and get into the spirit. Combine this with nature, adventure, history, scuba and those welcome smiles, and you've got a sure fire recipe for enjoyment and indulging the senses. Finding Statia can be pretty rewarding.

## St. Eustatius



Steve Gillick

A tireless promoter of "infectious enthusiasm about travel", Steve delivers his wisdom once a month in his column *The Travel Coach*.