

On Saba, the Netherlands feels far away

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By [Marjolein van de Water](#)

Photography **Sanne De Wilde**

After eighteen years, Jonathan Johnson is stepping down as Island Governor of Saba. Under his rule, the island became a special municipality of the Netherlands, and a new, much closer relationship with The Hague was established. How is 'The Rock' doing now?



For eighteen years, Johnson was the rock of The Rock.

Less fast than most residents of Saba, but still at high speed, Jonathan Johnson drives his shiny Toyota Camry on the only road the island has. The Island Governor looks extremely relaxed, but when he passes a billboard, a frown appears in his forehead.



'Goats Lives Matter', says the sign placed under a large mango tree. The goats of the Caribbean-Dutch Saba have been a headache for the Island Governor (equivalent of a mayor) in recent years. 'There were about seven thousand of them,' he says. 'But in order to get money from The Hague, we had to kill them.'

The animals caused dangerous situations on the road and they ate the vegetable gardens empty. The Hague was particularly upset by their endless grazing, which caused erosion. So if Saba wanted to claim money for the much-needed erosion control, the goats had to go first.

That was a disadvantage for many Sabans who had sore legs. Because no matter how annoying they were, they were their goats. They hunted it and used the meat in stews. "By now, 90 percent of the animals are dead," says Johnson. Tempers have calmed down a bit. 'Also because people see that the vegetation is indeed returning.'

It is one of the many storms that Johnson (49) has weathered in his eighteen years as governor of Saba, an island with 2,200 inhabitants. When he took office, it still belonged to the Netherlands Antilles. In 2010, it became a 'special municipality' of the Netherlands, just like Bonaire and St. Eustatius.

This marks the beginning of a new, much closer relationship with The Hague. The Rijksdienst Caribisch Nederland was created, which represents the Dutch ministries from Bonaire. On paper, the European and Caribbean Netherlands are equal, but in practice this is not the case. And within the relationship, there is often a lack of understanding and trust. 'I tried to bridge the gap, which wasn't always easy.'

Tuesday was Johnson's last day of work; he became the longest-serving Island Governor ever. By comparison, Bonaire wore out six in those eighteen years. Island governors are appointed for six years, in a procedure similar to that of the appointment of a mayor. "I can handle egos well," according to Johnson's explanation for his success. And important: Johnson is not easily chased by politicians in The Hague.

Two weeks before Johnson left the country, *de Volkskrant* spent a few days on Saba, 7,000 kilometers from The Hague. What is life like on the smallest inhabited island in the Netherlands? How do Johnson and other Sabans see the relationship with the European Netherlands? Do they feel Dutch at all on Saba?

That last question is often followed by a somewhat glazed look. 'Dutch? I feel like Saban', says 21-year-old fisherman Jamaal Zaegers in liting Caribbean English. He fished for lobster all day and is now in Saba, about to ride his scooter home. 'We don't get any subsidy here; Dutch fishermen do.'



Jamaal Zaegers stunts for the photo with his scooter in Fort Bay Harbour.

Thorne Peterson (31) feels Caribbean in the first place. "I think this is true for most people here," says Peterson, who likes to fish at sea in his spare time and now has a drink in a café in the harbor. 'The Netherlands feels far away,' he explains. 'At the same time, everyone is happy with the passport. That offers opportunities, such as working and studying in Europe.'

History books state that Columbus personally discovered Saba in 1493; in reality it had been discovered by nomadic peoples more than four thousand years earlier. The Arawak, a seafaring people from Venezuela, called the island Amonhana, the rock. It is located 300 kilometers east of Puerto Rico and passed through various European hands in colonial times until it became permanent Dutch possession in 1816.

The Sabans still affectionately call their island, which fits almost three times in Vlieland, 'The Rock'. It consists largely of the Mount Scenery, with 870 meters the highest mountain in the Netherlands. Between the summit and the sea are steep slopes with four villages, connected by 'The Road'. There is one primary school, one secondary school and there are nine churches. It is luxuriantly overgrown with tropical plants and exuberant flowers,

banana plants are everywhere, and the ground is littered with mangoes that have fallen from the trees.

In the harbor there is an intense, reeking smell coming from pieces of cowhide. 'We use them to catch lobsters,' explains fisherman Zaegers. He points to the east, where a new port is being built. 'We are not allowed to store skins there because of the stench. But our boats will soon be better sheltered.'



The Sacred Heart School is the only primary school on the island.

The new port is perhaps the most important legacy that Johnson leaves behind. The project costs more than 50 million euros and is largely financed by the government. It will be a modern, hurricane-resistant port and should attract wealthy day trippers.

Because Saba is a two-hour boat ride from Saint-Barthélemy, an island known as a playground for the world's richest. From there, Amazon boss Jeff Bezos already came to Saba, in his hunt of almost half a billion euros. "We don't want mass tourism," says Johnson. 'But if they moor in the port and spend their money here, that's a great construction.'

Extra income is welcome; the government is now by far the most important employer. In the last century, a lot of money was still earned with driver's license tourists. At its peak, sixty Dutch people flew to Saba every week to get their pink paper in a week's time: the only challenge on 'The Road' was the slope test. But in 1993, The Hague put an end to this 'Saba route,' which would result in too many incompetent drivers.



Fort Bay Harbour is the old port of Saba, a second one is now being built.

The island is now aiming for ecotourism. It has no beaches and attracts mainly divers and hikers. The license plates bear the nickname with which it markets itself: 'Unspoiled Queen'. 'When the super-rich come, we will sell our lobsters more expensive,' Zaegers hopes. 'I'm also considering becoming a captain on a mega yacht.'

Johnson was born on Saba, studied educational science in the United States and then became a teacher at the primary school of Saba and director of the secondary school. As governor he had to learn Dutch. 'I watched *De Wereld Draait Door* every night,' he says.

Stereotypes

He has an office in a stately, wooden government building in 'capital' The Bottom. Like almost all other buildings on Saba, it is painted white, with a red roof and green shutters. "It's an unwritten rule that we use those colors," said Johnson, dressed in a tightly ironed shirt and a tie with sailboats.

The civil affairs department is located on the ground floor, and the council chamber on the first floor, which also serves as a wedding location and meeting room. "We have to see how it will all fit later," says Johnson. Because in June, the House of Representatives decided that the island councils of Bonaire, Saba and St. Eustatius will be expanded.



The scarce bus transport on 'Unspoiled Queen' Saba has colorfully decorated booths at carnival.

Saba will go from five to seven councillors, and a third deputy (equivalent to an alderman) will also be added. "It's necessary," says Johnson. 'There is too much work for too few people.' He does not want to waste any further words on PVV member Elmar Vlottes, who turned against the expansion during the committee debate and spoke of 'hammock deputies.'

Of course he is annoyed by the stereotypes that exist about the islands. But he finds the ignorance more problematic. After every election to the House of Representatives, there

are new parliamentarians in the Kingdom Relations Committee, and a new State Secretary takes office. Johnson patiently shows each delegation around. 'Almost all of them want to climb the highest mountain in the Netherlands but sometimes have very limited prior knowledge.'

Some are unaware that Saba's official language is English, unlike Papiamentu on Bonaire, Aruba, and Curaçao. That they pay here with dollars and not with Antillean Guilders; that a boat from Sint Maarten only comes once a week to supply the supermarkets, that Bonaire is not nearby but 810 kilometers away; and that Saba has rainforest and cloud forest, in contrast to the much drier Leeward Islands.

Colonizer

History is also not clear in everyone's mind. Until 1954, Saba was a colony of the Netherlands, after which it formed an autonomous country within the kingdom: the Netherlands Antilles, together with Aruba, Curaçao, Bonaire, Sint Maarten and Sint Eustatius. In practice, it came down to the fact that Curaçao, which had 14 of the 22 representatives, determined everything. It felt like a new colonizer for Saba.



Once a week, Big Rock Market receives new stock from a boat from Sint Maarten.

At the beginning of this century, there were referendums on the islands. The population could choose to maintain the Netherlands Antilles, become an autonomous country within the kingdom, or have more direct ties with the Netherlands. In 2010, Curaçao and Sint Maarten became independent, just as Aruba had done before. Bonaire, St. Eustatius and Saba became so-called public entities. Colloquially: special municipalities. Or the BES islands.

Since then, laws and social services on the BES islands must be the same as those of the European Netherlands. Unless there is a demonstrably good reason to deviate. But equality is still a long way off. Until recently, the Caribbean Netherlands has been overlooked in the development of climate policy, as well as in the preparation for emergencies. A third of the BES residents live in poverty, access to care and education lags behind and child benefit is much lower than in the European Netherlands.



You can watch football in the Hideaway Bar & Grill.

At the same time, research by Statistics Netherlands (CBS) shows that satisfaction with life is higher on all three islands than on the other side of the ocean. On Saba, there is a widely shared conviction that much has improved since the island became Dutch. Residents do

not so much make the comparison with the European Netherlands but with the situation before 2010. Or with other Caribbean islands.

Verna Robinson Simmons (56) is also satisfied. She lives a stone's throw from the government building, in a house that has been painted mint green and is, therefore, quite different from the rest. She has made a bar in her house, with which she earns some extra money in the evenings. During the day she is a security guard at the airport.

This morning she is in a hurry to eat her Kellogg's breakfast because she has an appointment at the clinic. 'I broke my thumb playing volleyball,' she says while holding up her plaster hand. 'They took me to Aruba by plane via St. Eustatius for the operation; two pins were put in it.'



Verna Robinson Simmons and her daughter Vernisha.

The clinic is there for simple procedures or check-ups like today at Robinson Simmons. For everything else, Sabans have to fly to one of the larger islands or Colombia. There is a helicopter for emergencies, and everyone has health insurance. 'Since we became part of the Netherlands, healthcare has improved enormously,' says Robinson Simmons.

However, it remains significantly below the level of the European Netherlands. BES residents are unable to obtain additional insurance, necessitating significant out-of-pocket expenses for certain treatments. Preventive care is in its infancy, and there is a high turnover of healthcare professionals, many of whom come over temporarily from the Netherlands.

Serious work

The coalition agreement of this cabinet states that the government wants to work seriously on equality. It remains to be seen how this will be put into practice. In any case, Johnson is very happy with the unifying tone of this cabinet, a big change compared to the Schoof

cabinet. At the time, Zsolt Szabó was state secretary, whose party PVV wants to 'put the islands on Marktplaats'.



Boys wear orange on the day that the Dutch national team is in action at the World Cup.

Johnson also appreciates that Prime Minister Rob Jetten visited the islands soon after taking office. He insists to all delegations in The Hague that 'equality is not the same as conformity.' Usually a municipality of 2,200 inhabitants does not have its own airport, port and court. The classes here are smaller, and there is no house of detention. So people who have to be remanded in custody are flown all the way to Bonaire.

"Everything here has a completely different scale, and that often means higher costs," says Johnson. 'Some Dutch politicians and policymakers find that difficult to accept. They think that the islands cost too much money by definition.'

That tiny scale also means that everyone knows each other. This becomes apparent, for example, when the bank manager suddenly dies, a woman from Sint Maarten who had lived on Saba for years. In no time, the whole island is informed, and residents gather at the airport. Her body will soon be flown to Sint Maarten to be buried there.

Last Greeting

Verna Robinson Simmons, the woman with the plaster arm, has also rushed from the clinic to the airport. 'She was very popular,' she says. "This is our only chance to say goodbye." The coffin with the body arrives in a car with deafening music, those present crowd around it for a final salute. When the coffin is carried into the plane, there is a reverent silence filled with tears.



Sabans pay their last respects

Robinson Simmons chats for a while with her daughter Vernisha (22), who works at the airport. 'I did the training of the Royal Netherlands Marechaussee in Apeldoorn,' says Vernisha. 'I was only 18, it was exciting to live all alone in such a big city!' She looks at her mother. 'She raised me independently, that's why I made it.'

Many Saban young people choose to study in the United States. Although this is more expensive than the Netherlands, there is no language barrier and less independence is required. 'In the Netherlands you have to find a room yourself,' says 18-year-old Bea Durand, who does the teacher training college in the US, lives on a campus there and is now on summer vacation on Saba. 'And there is alcohol and drugs everywhere.'



Bea Durand (right) in 'The Spot', an after-school hang-out for young people.

Those who successfully complete their studies usually do not come back. The island is aging; migrants from Colombia and the Philippines are filling the gaps in construction and catering. "We have a huge brain drain," says Johnson. Locally, job opportunities for the highly educated are scarce. He shrugs. Young people simply desire to explore their potential. I was recently at a mayors' conference in Lochem; there is also a brain drain there.'

Johnson's phone is at full volume and rings often. 'Many people on the island have my number,' he says. Until 2020, Johnson was also on Facebook, the only place where the population shares and discusses news due to a lack of local media. 'I stopped doing that. As a director, you have to think about solutions and not constantly get involved in discussions.'

He already has enough discussions with The Hague. One of the sore points is accessibility. There is a ferry to St. Eustatius and St. Maarten, notorious for the many passengers who get seasick on the two-hour trip. There are also daily flights to and from Sint Maarten, a twelve-

minute journey. The runway is the shortest in the world and runs close to a deep cliff. Only tiny planes land there; a return ticket costs 400 euros.

Ideally, Johnson would like to have fixed low rates for residents. 'But that kind of construction makes them nervous in The Hague,' he says. 'Too susceptible to fraud.' The ferry service keeps its head above water with a government subsidy of half a million euros per year, but it is unclear whether that subsidy will be maintained after this year. The government does spend 7.5 million euros annually to keep the shipping channels in the Wadden Sea open. 'The importance of the accessibility of the Wadden Islands is never in question.'

On clogs

Although quite a bit has improved in eighteen years, Johnson concludes that confidence is still lacking. 'Saba has its accounts in order better than many municipalities in the European Netherlands,' he says. 'Yet we are being monitored more strictly.' He shakes his head: 'I tried to close the gap. But sometimes it feels like salsa dancing on clogs.'

What he will do next, he does not yet know. 'I'm taking a sabbatical and leaving the island with my family for a while,' he says. 'I don't want to get in the way of my successor. And that happens rather quickly on this rock.'