

Little Statia- Big Time History and Diving

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Unless you are an in-the-know diver or a history buff, you probably never heard of St. Eustatius. The 12-square-mile Netherlands Antillean Island, positioned 38 miles south of [St. Maarten](#), is a quiet place. In fact, the scuttlebutt is that a St. Maarten police officer sent to serve on the island thinks he is being punished because there is nothing for him to do.

In the 18th century, Statia, as it is affectionately called, was the big time-very big time. So many ships carrying slaves, sugar, cotton and ammunition crowded its harbor that it was tagged the Emporium of the Western World and the Golden Rock. That abruptly changed. On November 16, 1776, the American Brig-of-War, the "Andrew Doria", rolled into port. By giving it an 11-gun salute, Statia became the first country to recognize U.S. independence. Not a popular gesture with Great Britain. British Admiral Rodney retaliated. In 1781, he looted and economically destroyed the island. Even though 200-plus years have past, it has never really recovered.

Those famous shots originated from Ft. Oranje, a Statia bastion since 1636. Located in Oranjestad, the island's only village, its courtyard is the site of the original Dutch Reformed Church, built in 1776. The outside of another religious structure, Holen Dalim, is located on Synagogepad (Synagogue Path). It is one of the oldest synagogues in the [Caribbean](#) (1738). The Jews once managed the island's commerce, but Admiral Rodney stripped them of their riches and deported them to other islands.

Today divers marvel at the isle's dive sites. Dutch warehouses that have sunk into the sea over the past several hundred years are now underwater ruins. They serve as day-care centers for abundant schools of juvenile fish. Stingrays, eels, turtles, and barracudas live in the undersea Caribbean neighborhood where giant pillar coral, huge yellow sea fans, and reef fingers abound. There are no shortage of wrecks, old cannons and modern ships-- like the cable-laying Charles L. Brown -- to explore either.

Combing the Atlantic shoreline in search of blue beads is a favorite pastime. Legend has it that 30 of these 17th-century blue baubles, found only on Statia, were used to purchase Manhattan. They were also currency for rum, slaves, tobacco, and cotton. The chance of finding one of these blue balls is slim -- unless you visit the St. Eustatius Historical Foundation Museum.

Another popular terra firma activity is the long and windy climb to the Quill's perfectly formed crater. The trail to the top of the 1,968-foot extinct volcano is bordered by wild orchids, ferns, elephant ears and various other kinds of flowers. One might even spot an iguana delicatissima, a long, greenish-gray spiny lizard. Contact the Statia Marine Park for a permit or a private guide.

Statia makes a fine day trip from St. Maarten. No matter how much time you spend on the island, locals will wave or beep at you in recognition. You never feel like a stranger.

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For more information, contact Statia Tourist Office: www.statiatourism.com.