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SUMMER/FALL 2024

\$12.00



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Let's Get PICKLED!

“Getting pickled” in Los Cabos has taken on a whole new meaning.

*~by Ardith Stephanson | photos courtesy of Francisco Estrada,
Sally Meecham, Julie Shipman & EHV Sports~*

Hearing about someone who has been “pickled” in the beautiful resort area might conjure images of too many margaritas on the beach or tequila shooters at a late-night club.

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(ABOVE AND BELOW) | *Gran Sueño at Bay of Dreams, La Paz. JW Marriott Los Cabos. Chileno Bay Resort.*

Not so fast.

Now if you got “pickled,” it might mean you couldn’t score a point in a morning pickleball match. The explosion in popularity of the hybrid game of pickleball has hit Baja California Sur, and in Los Cabos, it has brought another activity for those who like to get outside and enjoy the warm sunshine of the area all year round.

It’s also brought its own language, where getting pickled is the same as getting “skunked” in other sports—or scoring zero

points in an entire 11-point game. You have to be careful not to volley in “The Kitchen,” and a soft shot is a “dink.” Sometimes players warn they are about to serve by yelling “Pickle!”; courts are often referred to as a Pickledome; and a Pickler or a Picklehead is a pickleball addict who can’t stop talking about the sport.

What On Earth is Pickleball?

If you haven’t yet heard about pickleball, it’s a racquet sport that combines elements of tennis, ping pong and badminton. It was invented in the 1960s when a couple of dads in Washington State threw together a game for the family one day, playing on a badminton court with ping-pong paddles and a perforated plastic ball.

The net was soon lowered from badminton height—since the wiffle ball bounced easily on the court surface—and rules were created that fulfilled their goal: a fun game for the whole family to enjoy.

What about that iconic name? It’s odd in that nothing about the game involves pickles—the balls aren’t even green! One myth is that it was named after the family dog of one of the inventors. The true origin is apparently that the wife of one inventor named it after the pickle boats in rowing. That type of boat would have a crew that was thrown together at random. *The Sporting News* declares this a fitting moniker since pickleball was “born out of using leftover equipment from other sports.”

After the creators built the first court in



1967, and the first tournament was played in Washington State in the 1970s, the rest, as they say, is history. By the 1980s, the United States Amateur Pickleball Association was organized, the first rule book was published, and the first composite paddle was made by a Boeing Industrial Engineer. By 1990, the sport was being played in all 50 states in the U.S.

In 2023, the Sports & Fitness Industry Association declared pickleball as America's fastest-growing sport for the third year in a row. The Association's participation report showed that pickleball participation had increased by an astonishing 158.6 percent over three years, with 8.9 million players in the U.S. over the age of six years old. Similar growth has been seen in Canada, with a jump of almost half a million players in just one year.

It's even attracted former tennis stars,

like in The Pickleball Slam, which pitted former legends Andre Agassi and Steffi Graf against John McEnroe and Maria Sharapova.

Pickleball Spreads South

In Los Cabos, the growth of the ex-pat community has resulted in the growth of pickleball too. Americans and Canadians are embracing the sport, and the communities in and around Los Cabos have responded.

"Ten years ago, nobody knew about pickleball, everybody played tennis," says Manuel Trigo, who is part of a group that is revitalizing the San Lazaro Club Privado in Cabo San Lucas and has added pickleball courts to the club's offerings. "Once pickleball came to Cabo, you saw a lot of activity in pickleball courts—even more than tennis. Pickleball became one of the priority activities for Canadians and Americans, which as you know is about half of Cabo. We

are happy to offer pickleball for tourists, and half-time and full-time residents. I see they enjoy it a lot."

San Lazaro first opened in the El Tezal community of Cabo San Lucas in 2007 when Trigo and two friends created a private sports club environment similar to where they grew up in Guadalajara. The economic downturn and hurricane damage caused the club to close, but it opened again in 2022 with tennis courts and new padel courts—another hybrid sport, this one invented in Mexico and combining elements of tennis and racquetball.

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(BELOW) | Tres Palapas Baja Pickleball Resort and Pickleball Club Cabo San Lucas.





(ABOVE AND BELOW) | *Tres Palapas Baja Pickleball Resort, Los Barriles, Puerto Los Cabos, San Jose Del Cabo and Rancho Elena, San Jose.*

It wasn't long before picklers had taped lines and adjusted nets to play pickleball, so Trigo converted two tennis courts into eight pickleball courts.

"Pickleball brings energy and more attention to this place, to make it as good as it used to be," says Trigo, whose club also offers horseback riding lessons, an in-house dance and fitness company, and will soon be adding a gym and restaurant. "It's a very interesting sport and I can see that it allows not just younger people to keep being active. At a certain age, people may not be able to play tennis, so this is a supplement or an extension that people can keep doing."

San Lazaro soon had a thriving pickleball club, after volunteer Angela Connor and a few helpers offered to organize the open play

leagues for Trigo. Numbers grew within the first few weeks, and like the other clubs in the area, the pickleball courts are busy every day. Open play is available six mornings a week, and courts can be booked at other times too. Courts are being renovated and lights are being added, so the base of players is bound to expand.

"The ex-pat community is always looking for activities," says Connor, who brings her operations expertise from her summer job at the Whistler Racquet Club to her volunteer work organizing San Lazaro's pickleball schedule. "This is an activity any age can do, and one the retired ex-pat community can do, and anybody can play even if coming from a hotel on vacation. Once we have lights, we will be so happy to have locals who can come out after work to play too."

Pickleball Destination Vacations

The growth in popularity means that pickleball enthusiasts in Los Cabos now

have options. There's Club San Lazaro and the Cabo Pickleball Club in Cabo San Lucas, and Club La Huerta in San Jose del Cabo, another multi-sport club. La Paz has the Pedregal Club and the San Juan Social Club, Pescadero has a pickleball club, and the Buena Vista Resort has now opened its courts to public play.

Many local clubs are considered public, with open play available, lessons and all levels of players encouraged to join. That means a holiday-goer can drop in at a session, or those who spend a longer time in Los Cabos can make it a regular activity.

This is a snapshot of the known facilities, but pickleball clubs and courts in communities, at resorts and in new developments seem to be popping up so fast that it's impossible to name them all—and we are sure to miss one or two when listing them.

More and more resorts are adding pickleball to their amenities, too. Some create new courts, while others have moveable nets and both sets of lines painted, which





allows guests to play tennis or pickleball. Pickleball programs can be found in many top communities and resorts, including The Pedregal Club Cabo San Lucas; Esperanza, an Auberge Resort; Chileno Bay, an Auberge Resort; Querencia; Quivira Los Cabos; Nobu Hotel Los Cabos; Marquis Los Cabos; and more.

The same is true of community developments. Many are adding pickleball courts to their amenities, along with other features like pools or gyms, to attract buyers to the area.

“We see pickleball being a focal point in almost every new community,” says Wally Halicki, Consultant and Real Estate Advisor with Oceanside Real Estate Group. “Courts are appearing in communities and tennis courts are being adapted to be made into multiple pickleball courts as the popularity of this sport continues to grow. Both

residential communities are adding or building these facilities as well as hospitality resorts and hotels as pickleball fever is real and there is a strong demand.”

So if you’re looking to dink the ball into The Kitchen while in Baja California Sur, you can choose a destination that has pickleball courts, or look for a community with courts as part of the amenities.

But for real pickleheads, how about planning an entire vacation around pickleball?

The Center of Pickleball in Baja

The pickleball frenzy in Los Cabos, in Baja California Sur, and perhaps in the entire country of Mexico is thanks to the groundbreaking vision of the owners of Tres Palapas Baja Pickleball Resort. This facility in Los Barriles, north of San Jose del Cabo, has put pickleball on the map here. You can’t talk

| (ABOVE) | Tres Palapas Baja Pickleball Resort, Los Barriles. |

pickleball without talking about this oasis of courts that truly was a first in the area.

Opened in 2015, the husband-wife team of Paul Bland and Sally Meecham did not have previous “paddle experience,” but they have business savvy and a passion for creating a community gathering place. They wanted to live on the beach, and they felt Los Barriles was a “cool, physically active town” for a pickleball resort.

If you build it, they will come. The response has been astounding. The beach community on the East Cape was known for kiteboarding and other windy ocean sports,

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(ABOVE) | Tres Palapas Baja Pickleball Resort, Los Barriles.
Paul Bland and Sally Meecham.

but pickleball might have surpassed those on the list.

“We focused on making this place an extension of community,” Sally says. “What makes us unique is that we are a community destination. Pickleball is at its best when it mirrors the community. Pickleball loves community. When they come here, everyone has an equal opportunity to have a good day on the court.”

The facility that was built by Paul and Sally offers 10 courts in an enclosed resort-like setting that also has a restaurant, bar and cafe, and a pro shop with gear like paddles, hats and shirts. There are also three condo units on-site, so guests can choose to stay and play too. There are plenty of seating options all around the facility, which is clean and

bright, creating more than a place to stop and play a game. It’s a community gathering center.

“We have become a spot where people can immerse themselves in pickleball,” Paul says. “It’s like a golf camp. We are different from staying at a hotel with courts. We are all about pickleball.”

When a new pickler comes to town, they can enjoy a combination of experiences that will help them learn pickleball, or improve their game, and “find their tribe” as Paul calls it—be matched with players of similar skill levels.

A combination of private lessons, skills and drills clinics, round-robin play and open play, as well as regular tournaments, make Tres Palapas a winter training destination for the serious picklehead, or a fun place to learn and advance for those new to the game. Courts are managed so that teams are evenly matched, and play remains fair and fun.

The courts were full when we arrived in

the morning, but one of the most popular times is during “Be Happy Pickleball,” a variation on traditional happy hour gatherings, which runs from 3-6 p.m. Friday nights are a “pickle of it all,” with live music, dancing, a buffet and happy hour specials, and the chance to watch some competitive games on the Championship Centre Court.

That environment where spectators can come to watch also makes it a community gathering spot, with some tournaments attracting up to 600 fans in the casual seating areas spread around the complex. It’s like an all-inclusive resort for pickleball, with an open and welcoming vibe.

“We’ve given Mexico a type of tourism that wasn’t there before,” Sally says. “Through word of mouth the following we have created is incredible.”

It doesn’t hurt that they were featured in the United Airlines in-flight magazine, which was purported to reach 11 million travelers. With success has come accolades: Tres

Palapas has been recognized as “Mexico’s Number One Pickleball Destination” and a “Top Global Pickleball Destination.” Vacations are planned around time spent at Tres Palapas.

The couple from Western Canada created as they built and continue to adapt to remain relevant and successful. They also play when they’re able to fit in games. Courts are open every day from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., adding evening play last fall, and close for two months, typically in August and September, when they spend time planning for the next season. That planning includes re-considering tournament play as the pickle crowd gets younger.

“What pickleball was when we opened to today is a thousand times different,” Paul says. “When we opened, our clients were

primarily in the 50+ crowd. Now we have brought in more 20-, 30-, 40-year-olds and a lot more 60- and 70-year-olds.”

The stereotype of pickleball being for a gray-haired crowd may still be a fact, as it is an accessible sport for those who can’t manage running the much larger tennis court. Like other outdoor sports, Paul and Sally saw a boom in popularity for all ages during the Covid pandemic, as people looked for outdoor activities that provided natural social distancing.

So, while there still are plenty of older players—making it a great fit for the ex-pat community in Los Cabos looking for an activity to enjoy in the sunshine—there are more and more younger players too.

It also helps when courts are managed like Tres Palapas, San Lazaro and the other

clubs, with open play allowing for all skill levels to find a court. More advanced players are typically divided from newer players, and teams are constantly switching up so it’s also a great way to meet new people. All you really need is a paddle, which is lightweight and not too big—typically 16 inches by 8 inches—making it easy to throw in your luggage and bring on vacation, and the rules are simple enough to learn.

“My whole intent was to meet new people,” concludes Angela Connor, an avid player herself. “What better way than through pickleball. It just took off like I knew it would. There were so many people that wanted to play.

“If you’re interested in learning a sport and being social, meeting new people, I couldn’t recommend it more.”

El Fin!

