

## Golf Balls and Pickleballs Are Having a Love Affair

Golf communities around the world are looking for more ways to attract young people by offering a wider range of activities. Pickleball is only one.



Pickleball is played on the tennis courts at the Abaco Club in the Bahamas. There are also playgrounds — and not all of them are for children. Kyle Biedenbach/The Abaco Club

**Golf communities in vacation destinations are revamping their courses, their facilities and their recreational offerings to attract younger buyers and visitors.**

But what seems to unify their approach in warm weather destinations around the Caribbean, the Bahamas and the coastal areas of the southern United States can be summed up in one word: pickleball.

The racket sport with a silly name goes back to the mid-1960s and has boomed in the last decade. But it's more than that. It's something fun, relatively easy and appealing to all ages. And it represents for resorts an opportunity to attract new customers.

After all, even the very coolest of the international jet set play. "George plays pickleball. Rande plays pickleball. It's fun," said Mike Meldman, founder of Discovery Land Company, which develops luxury golf communities.

That would be George Clooney, the Hollywood leading man, and Rande Gerber, the hotelier and husband of super model Cindy Crawford. The three men founded Casamigos Tequila together.

"It's social. It's a good workout. But the way we play there's a lot of trash talking," Mr. Meldman said. "It's not your parents' pickleball."

Were there ever a motto for clubs seeking to separate themselves from a previous generation's recreational interests and lure a younger crowd, it could be that phrase: "It's not your parent's pickleball."



Pickleball is not new but it's been having a moment, in part because it's fun and relatively easy, and it appeals to a range of ages. Kyle Biedenbach/The Abaco Club

If each generation seeks out its own leisure activities to while away hours in the sun — shuffleboard anyone? — then pickleball fits firmly into this moment, thumbing its brightly colored racket and neon balls at the old forms of relaxation.

But it has a symbolic value beyond that: It's a sign that resort owners and property developers are working to attract younger visitors from around the world while not alienating their existing clients.

“Abaco Bay has always been pretty family friendly,” said Tommy Southworth, president and chief operating officer of Southworth Development, which owns Abaco Club in the Bahamas and four other golf communities. “The golf, tennis, and fitness were built with my parents in mind. We just built a huge new playground for kids that's been a crazy hit and an adult playground with corn hole and a huge Jenga set in a bar area.”



And, of course, pickleball. “It's a great equalizer,” he said. “You can play for fun or, somewhat, seriously.”

Outdoor is king right now. The swirl of Covid-19 protocols for social distancing, coupled with people sick of being inside, means resorts are working to meet guests, especially younger ones, where they want to be: outside.

“All of our outdoor activities have blown up,” said Scott Dawson, general manager of the Kiawah Island Club in South Carolina. “If I could snap my fingers and have a few more tennis courts and 27 more pickleball courts, I’d do that.”

In the past year at Kiawah, golf was up 50 percent, boat rentals up 51 percent and tennis lessons and clinics up 87 percent, according to South Street Partners, which owns Kiawah.

The club bought a giant outdoor television that is mounted on a trailer for outdoor movie nights. It also plans to use it again this summer when Kiawah hosts the P.G.A. Championship. Kids’ clubs that extend to the teen years have grown in importance, so parents can relax while away, Mr. Dawson said.

Ed Lehmann and Jennifer Nguyen, a married couple in their 40s who live in London, bought a home in Kiawah seven years ago. They saw it as a place to stay for weeks, not days, and were lured by the direct flights from London to Charleston, S.C.

“We put in an offer on a place in Barcelona at the same time as we put an offer in for our house in Kiawah,” Mr. Lehmann said.

“They’re very contrasting places, but the commonality was better weather and an escape from London.”

He said they were attracted by the high-end facilities at the club, the water sports and the beach, and the ownership’s commitment to limiting the community’s size. Being there also got him to take up golf.



Thaddeus and Tiffani Jones (with their daughter, Gavyn, and son, Greyson) live in Charlotte, N.C., but have a vacation home at Kiawah Island Club in South Carolina. Patrick O'Brien/Kiawah Island Club & Real Estate

Mr. Southworth said his company's properties in Scotland, the United States and the Bahamas have started to reimagine golf and tennis to make them easier and more social. "We thought, let's use our courses and do 15-inch cups [as opposed to the usual 4.25-inch version], or let's do fun mini golf courses, or have people bring music and drinks and make it a social hour," he said.

"Millennials want new things, but they still fundamentally love a meaningful connection to a community."

Last summer, at one of their properties on Cape Cod, in Massachusetts, the group repurposed its tennis stadium as a human foosball court.

"We strung pool noodles across the tennis court and you got taped into your noodle," Mr. Southworth said. "Then we played a 10-on-10 soccer game, but you could only shuffle left and right. It was a huge hit."

But not all of Southworth's efforts to skew younger have been successful. A drone race was a memorable failure. "It ruffled a lot of feathers," Mr. Southworth said.

Whatever the activity, a casual dress code is a key component to attracting younger guests. Mr. Meldman, who has created two dozen Discovery Land properties in North America and the Caribbean and has his first European property set to open in Portugal, said players can wear the kind of attire that would get them booted out of most country clubs.

"People on their way to the beach club stop in their bathing suit, go hit balls and start playing golf that way," he said of the club at Baker's Bay in the Bahamas. "A lot of the clubs have rules and traditions. I love them. But it's also nice to know that you're growing the game, getting people to stop at the driving range in their bathing suit and pick up a club. If we were a more traditional club that would never happen."

In other places, there's a move toward making the resort itself more cosmopolitan.

Reynolds Lake Oconee, which is 90 miles from Atlanta, has six golf courses, and 20 years ago it was all about golf. In the past three years, the number of international residents there has topped 300, up from just 20, and they are looking for more things to do.

The developers have decided to create an 80-acre downtown village, with restaurants and fitness centers on the water. It's meant to entice the 2,400 year-round residents of the sprawling community to stroll along the lake.

“Ten years ago, that 600 acres would have been another golf course,” said Dave Short, senior vice president for strategic planning for marketing and sales at Reynolds Lake Oconee.

“Today the greater need is more fitness, more space on the lake front and more space for concerts. Our shelves are not empty when it comes to great golf. We needed more opportunities to support fitness and an outdoor lifestyle.”



Many members of the Kiawah Island Club, like the Joneses, are taking to the water, with boat rentals up 51 percent in the last year. Patrick O'Brien/Kiawah Island Club & Real Estate

Kiawah is creating restaurants with an eye toward rivaling nearby Charleston and adding local and national celebrity chefs. Tom Colicchio of Craft in New York has been a consultant on two restaurants, and popular chefs from nearby Charleston have been hired.

“Our members can eat in any restaurant in the country or the world, so why should they compromise on what they eat here?” Mr. Dawson said. “We don’t look at our competition as the other clubs around us. It’s Charleston, New York, Chicago, San Francisco.”

The club is also responding to current events and to present a more progressive tone. Thaddeus V. Jones, head of global diversity in the talent acquisition group at Amazon Web Service, and his wife, Tiffani Jones, an obstetrician-gynecologist, bought a home in Kiawah in 2019 as a weekend and vacation retreat from Charlotte, N.C.

They were drawn by the golf and the beach, but Mr. Jones said he was also impressed by the developers' push for more diversity among the homeowners.

“Last summer when everything happened with George Floyd, they sent emails out to the owners saying, we want to be part of the change, we want to help out,” Mr. Jones said. “They’ve done amazing things.”

“They did a fund-raiser for the local schools around Kiawah. They’ve reached out to owners. They’ve looked at some of the things they’ve done with suppliers.”

During the pandemic, with his regular trips to Amazon’s Seattle headquarters postponed, he has spent more time with his family in Kiawah and come to appreciate the efforts more. “The pandemic,” he said, “took it to another level.”