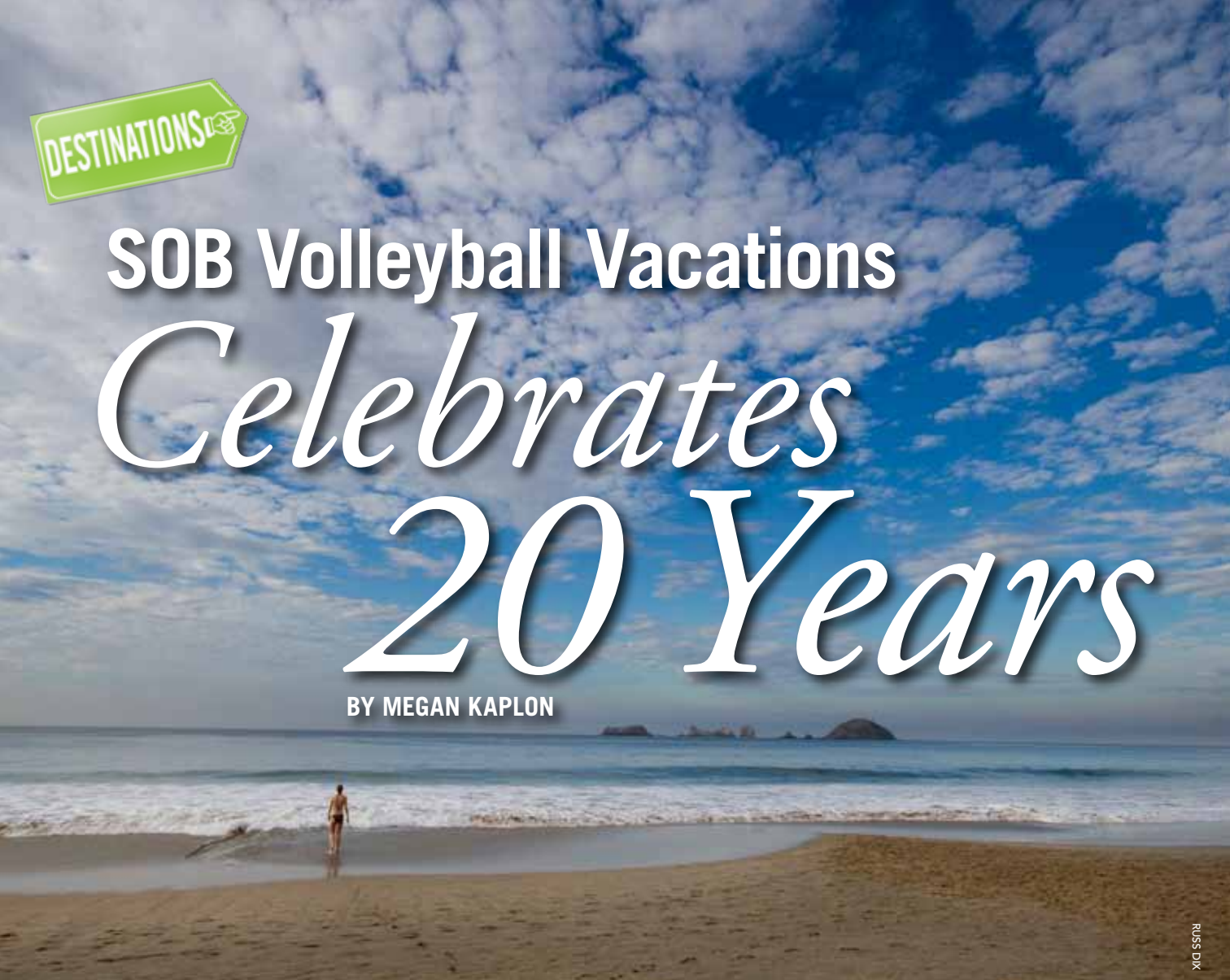


DESTINATIONS

# SOB Volleyball Vacations Celebrates 20 Years

BY MEGAN KAPLON



**Imagine** spending a week at an all-inclusive tropical Mexican resort, playing in an expertly organized volleyball tournament, with a group of pros available to answer your nerdy volleyball questions and teach you the finer points of the game. Do I even need to continue?

South of the Border (SOB) Volleyball Vacations has been organizing these unbelievable weeks in paradise since 1994. This year around 200 guests, a staff of six, and seven pros settled into the Park Royal Ixtapa hotel on January 19, and prepared themselves for the 20<sup>th</sup>-annual best week of their lives.

Obviously, during a volleyball vacation, you spend a lot of time on the courts, and SOB's tournament director Doug Arritola runs a unique series of competitions. You

start the week playing coed fours, seeded based on where you ranked yourself on the registration form. As you win or lose, you move up and down on numbered courts, your final position determining your seeding for the men's or women's tournament.

Between the coed tournament and the first few rounds of the single-gender competition, there's plenty of opportunity to prove where you really belong, in case you believe you were misplaced to begin with. The men's and women's tournaments follow a king or queen of the beach format, where each court has a one, two, three, and four seed and each player has a chance to partner with the three other people on their court, point differentials determining the new ranking at the end of competition.

This tournament system requires quite a bit of finesse on Arritola's part. You never know when players will contract a little *montezuma*, or get injured, or sleep through their match. The staff also avoids putting players together who hail from the same city.

"You don't want to walk out to your court and see three of the four people are

from your city and you play them every week in league," explained Tom Davenport, founder and owner of SOB. "You didn't come to Mexico to play the same people you play all the time."

As another staff member put it, "We're willing to play God a little bit for a better product."

This tournament format isn't for everyone. In the first round of the single-gender competition, there is a wide disparity in the levels of players on the court, and that can be frustrating for players at the top and bottom of the spectrum. But Davenport does this on purpose. "It forces you to play ruthless and play nice with everyone," he said.

This unique tournament struc-

ture also allows for maximum socializing. "You end up knowing people, and it's really much harder to be a jerk to people who you've met and you know," said first-time guest Alicia Zaklan. "I think it's a good, soft introduction for people who are more introverted to have an avenue to get to know people without having to put themselves out there."

As people are eliminated from the tournament, they can enter the coed doubles draw, organize pick-up games, or attend daily clinics taught by the pros. On Friday, the four men and four women still standing in the top divisions of the tournament square off in the men's and women's finals, also a queen or king of the beach format, while the rest of the group watches and cheers them on. With one pro in the men's and one in the women's tournament, the fi-

## ➔ What is "hook"?

Hook is the ultimate way to play casual pick-up with a large group of people, and a favorite pastime of SOB regulars. It's 4v4, but at the end of each play, the person who let the ball hit the sand, or hit it out, or double contacted, or in whatever way screwed up, is heckled off the court by the rest of the people waiting in line to take their place. On SOB trips, pros participate along with guests but are required to have a drink, coconut, or some other object in one hand at all times (see above).

DESTINATIONS



2013-14 SOB Vacation Dates

PUERTO VALLARTA, MEXICO  
Nov. 30 – Dec. 7, 2013

The 5-star SOB treatment hosts 100 guests in the luxurious and all-inclusive Hard Rock Vallarta.

IXTAPA, MEXICO Jan. 18–25, 2014

The classic SOB experience: 200 guests at the Park Royal Ixtapa.

NASSAU, BAHAMAS March 1–8, 2014

The baby of the SOB family will host its second annual Bahamas trip in 2014: 52 guests and two pros attended the first Nassau trip this March.

nals are guaranteed to be exciting, and you might just have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to beat a pro. Alas, this year's pros Christal Engle and Austin Rester emerged as the official queen and king of the beach. Maybe next year.

**DAYS IN IXTAPA** are spent on the beach, with nights reserved for the group's favorite watering holes, the most popular being the hotel's poolside "Sexy Bar." All three theme nights (this year's were pink and powder blue, hero, and anything but clothes) are hosted here. The bar tab is included and unlimited, and best of all, you only have to crawl to the elevator and down the hall to your room when it's time to call it a night.

The party scene makes up a large portion of the trip. "When you're not going to the bar with somebody to get something, you hear people being like, 'Alright, game's over, let's get a cocktail. Let's grab a beer. You want some beer?'" said three-time Ixtapa pro Paige Davis Jensen. "It's very much a part of the trip...When people go to Mexico, that's what they think of: *cervezas* and margaritas on the beach."

But if that's not your thing, don't stress. I can promise you'll still have a good time. Zaklan admits she was having some health problems and didn't plan to get too wild on the trip. "Am I just going to be surrounded by, when not playing volleyball, a bunch of drunken revelry and feel outside the mix?" she wondered. "But I didn't. I certainly didn't."

She chalked it up to the atmosphere and the outlook of the staff and the participants. "There's a lot of time and care put into setting the tone for everybody's attitudes, and the people who have been doing it for so long have gotten that down to a science, so they represent and model that behavior so well that it's really easy to follow. In that kind of positive, supportive environment it really is kind of easy to get over yourself."

Jensen admits just eating dinner with a good group of people is sometimes the highlight of her trip. "I always feel like,

that was awesome. That was a cool dinner. Just something easy and simple, it wasn't centered around any crazy theme or dress up or going out or anything."

The staff also schedules a sailing and snorkeling trip, and will help you find surfing, scuba, or parasailing instructors. "There's a lot of different activities provided for lots of different personalities where everybody leaves having a good memory of something," said Jensen.

**IN A STAFF MEETING** early on in the week, Davenport told his pros what he expected from them. "Every moment is a chance to connect with the guests," he said. "Give a little sugar to as many people as possible throughout the week."

He reminded them, "This is not your vacation." "You're there as an employee. You're there as a volleyball professional," agreed Jensen. But she also added that, "you're there to have a blast."

The unique status of volleyball as a professional sport makes this possible. Imagine a "play and party with NBA pros" trip. It would never happen. But professional volleyball players aren't millionaires. They're generally pretty down to earth, and, especially right now with the domestic tours in such a state of flux, many of them hold other full-time jobs. The guests still worship them, but no one quivers in their boots before asking a pro to play a game of pick-up or even shies away from dancing with one of them at a bar.

You might be tempted to question the pros' intentions when they sit down with you at breakfast or agree to help you correct your serving form, wondering if they're just doing it because they're being paid, but the pros adamantly deny this assessment. "Absolutely not," said Dane Jensen, Paige's husband and three-time Ixtapa pro. "I would do this if there was no money involved."

His wife echoed this sentiment. "I don't think that's ever [been] anybody's perspective in the twenty years Tom has done

2013 IXTAPA PROS

Christal Engle • Dane Jensen • Paige Davis Jensen • Kevin McColloch • Mike Placek • Austin Rester • Megan Wallin



**Anything But Clothes**  
For those more than a few years out of college, you may be unfamiliar with an ABC party. Really it's very simple: **YOU ARE FORBIDDEN FROM WEARING ANYTHING THAT CONSTITUTES NORMAL CLOTHING.** Everything else is fair game. In Ixtapa, guests wore anything from the blankets off their hotel bed, to shredded volleyballs made into bikinis, to ace bandages wrapped strategically into tighty whities.



Clockwise from top left: Pro Austin Rester and men's finalist Matt Stoffa in the final; Guests climb out of water taxis on their way to the La Perla restaurant after the sailing trip; Guests went all out for the anything but clothes party; TD Doug Arritola (far right) and the rest of the SOB staff pack up the nets at the end of the week; Pros Christal Engle and Megan Wallin lead a clinic; Guest Geraldine Poon; The excited crowd settles in for the finals.

this. On top of that, I think that's an attribute to Tom and who he chooses to hire. Because I do think there are other volleyball players, that I know in the world, that if he were to hire them, that probably would be their perspective. [They would be nice to the guests] on the outside and then when they were around [the other pros] they would complain about it."

Geraldine Poon, a four-time guest from San Francisco, doesn't think her experience with the pros on the SOB trips could be any better. "I know that sounds totally hokey,

but I just love asking them really geeky volleyball questions, like what their weaknesses are, and what their training programs are, how much time they spend in the gym versus on the beach – just having dinner with them and them drawing diagrams."

Through the connections she's made with the pros on Davenport's trips, Poon has played in pro-am tournaments, once with Paige and another time in a fours tournament in Florida where she was the only person on her team who had never played on the AVP main draw. "It was totally random! And that's all from Tom, you know?"

**IF THERE'S ONE THING** you're left with after this vacation, it's the feeling of being accepted into a very close community, with new friends all over the country (and Canada!) you'll keep in touch with.

"If I'm in Seattle for business, I can find a pick-up game," said Poon, "and I can meet up with somebody else that I met on these trips and play in a tournament in West Virginia and Chicago and I've played at [Davenport's] Denver facilities."

Zaklan, despite feeling a bit intimidated coming into the trip only knowing one person, had a great experience. "By the end of the first two days, I had made so many new friends it was just like I was on vacation with a hundred of my friends for the rest of the week."

Even the pros can't escape the trip without making close attachments. "We've probably made friends for life," said Jensen.

"I would almost come back as a guest because it's so fun . . . It's a great trip. Dane and I could come, maybe even bring our family down the road."