



Sandpiper Bay Club Med



I've heard the name 'Club Med' for years, but never had the opportunity to go to any of their eighty resorts. I didn't even realize there was only one in this country—and it's here in Florida.

No, it's not in Miami, Orlando or any of our major cities. In fact, even though Florida has over a thousand miles of coastline, "Club Med Sandpiper" isn't even on the ocean or gulf.

No joke—I thought my GPS lady was lying when she instructed me to go down a suburban street in Port St. Lucie. "This can't be where it is," I kept muttering as I drove deeper into the bowels of a middle-class neighborhood.

"Your destination is on the right."

Really?

Welcome to an all-you-can eat, all-you-can drink oasis way off the beaten path. Then again, once you check in, there's no reason to leave again until you check-out.

The front-desk clerk greeted us with a glass of fresh orange juice and a moist towel. Good start. Then he snapped a plastic bracelet around our wrists that made us officially eligible to eat and drink all we wanted over the next few days. "Club Med Sandpiper Bay" bills itself as "the only all-inclusive family resort in the U.S."

Oh, and workers there are not called servers or even staff members. They call themselves "G.O.s," for Gracious Organizers. Most of them are very gracious and friendly. It's not a job for them, it's a life-



Mastro, Director of Operations for the tennis department. He's a likable 40-something guy from Colorado, who's taught tennis around the world. His background in sports psychology came in handy during the

second hour of our lesson.

After hitting balls for an hour and getting some good pointers and reminders, something happened in our lesson that I've never experienced before. We just HIT for awhile, without talking. Eventually, my form inevitably began to break down and I began to play like I would when I'm back on my home courts. THAT'S what I wanted him to see; not me on my best behavior.

- He told me I was going to the open-stance forehand too often, and that I should only use that when I have to.

- We played mini-tennis at the net, and he told me to practice just using my left-hand on the two-handed backhand. Good idea.

- I told him that I sometimes mentally clench when my opponent rushes the net, so we dug deep to find out my thought process: I explained to Scott that after I initially tense up, I then over-compensate and almost become complacent to not let the on-coming opponent distract me.

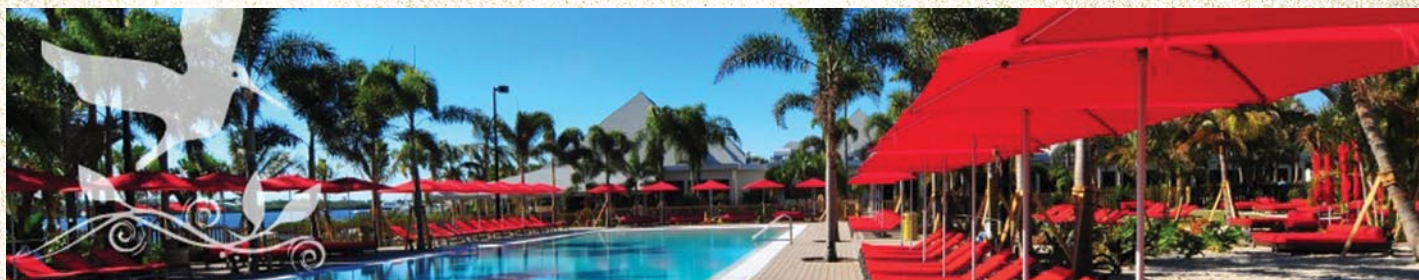
style. Most of the workers actually live at the resort and when they're not doing their respective jobs, they're socializing with you—at the pool, in the restaurants or in the nightclub. During our first night, the staff outnumbered the guests on the dance floor!

Oh yeah, tennis. That's why I'm here.

Club Med is building a junior tennis academy that may someday rival IMG in Bradenton. They've assembled an experienced staff—many of whom came from IMG—and up-and-coming juniors are flocking to Port St. Lucie. While guests play on the soft courts, the academy players work-out on adjacent hard courts where dance music is blaring.

The emphasis on the junior academy is giving a boost to tennis at Club Med Sandpiper. There are 21 courts and clinics every morning for advanced, intermediate and beginner levels. Yes, that's also included—but if you want a private lesson, that's an extra charge.

My private lesson was with Scott Del





Either way, I'm not in my ideal state. So we played out points and he rushed net on me until I eventually settled down and didn't become frazzled.

Wiping the sweat off my face, I said—and he laughed at this—"I've concluded, you're rushing the net—and it's going to be okay."

It's good to go through the fundamentals in a private lesson, but it's great to get a little deeper into why we do the things we do. It's the difference between whacking at the leaves, or getting to the root of the problem.

The tennis instruction is quite advanced for a resort, thanks to the fact Club Med is growing tennis, golf and fitness academies on-campus.

After tennis, there were three pools

from which to choose—including a well-named 'Calm Pool' right on the bay. Kids aren't allowed, hence the name. There are two other pools for families and also a kids program that parents seem to love. (We met a couple from Atlanta who were able to have their three children taken care of during the day while they relaxed and had a vacation within their vacation.)

Club Med Sandpiper Bay also has sailboats and sailboards at your disposal. I've always wanted to try sailing, but never really had the opportunity. Being over six feet tall makes it a challenge on these smaller sailboats where the sail suddenly can shift back and forth without much advance warning. Unfortunately, there wasn't much wind on this particular afternoon and we had to use an oar to get back toward land.

Meals are available all day at one of two different restaurants. Beer and wine are also available at dinner—but if you want higher-quality wine, that comes with an extra cost.

The resort was recently renovated and has a beautiful central area with striking red umbrellas around the pool. We were there at a slower time during the week and it seemed at times we had

the place to ourselves. But by the time the weekend and hundreds of other guests arrived, we longed for that peace and quiet.

Having come back to Sarasota and talked about Club Med Sandpiper Bay, I'm amazed at how few others are aware of it. It's a straight shot directly across the state on State Road 70, about three and a half hours from downtown Sarasota. (The hardest part was believing it was tucked in that suburban neighborhood in Port St. Lucie!)

If you want to get away for a long weekend or more, you can get all the sun and fun and food and drink for one price at Club Med Sandpiper Bay! Bring your dancing shoes, your swim suit, and, of course, your tennis racquet!

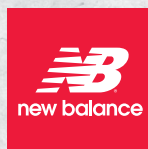
<http://sandpiperbay.clubmed.us/resort>



Ray Collins is a former TV newscaster and country club tennis pro. He now owns a Sarasota-based media company. Details at www.RayCollinsMedia.com.

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