

# The New York Times

## How to Make Fast Friends While Traveling? Try Playing Pickleball.

One of the newest sports crazes is not only portable, but an opportunity to meet fellow travelers who can't get enough of this addictive game.

By Elaine Glusac

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In 2022, Tess Jacoby, 36, took 47 flights. She packed her pickleball paddle on each one.

"I joke that I'm an addict," said Ms. Jacoby, who works in commercial real estate in Chicago. "I will bring my paddle anywhere it's warm."

Pickleball websites, apps, Instagram and LinkedIn help her find competition — and new friends — away from home, opening doors in distant places. In January, she plans to honeymoon in Cape Town where she hopes to find a pickleball group.

"I won't Google where to eat," she said. "If I find a game down there, that's where I would ask."

For travelers who love it, [pickleball](#) — a racket sport played with a hollow plastic ball on a court about a fourth of the size of a standard tennis court pad — is not only portable, but an easy entree to new destinations through fast friends made on the courts.

"The beauty of pickleball is you can find drop-in times, show up and you don't have to know anybody," said Karen Hawkes, 58, a postsecondary education counselor and consultant, who serves as a co-ambassador at the public pickleball courts in Aspen, Colo., which organizes drop-in sessions. "We embrace people who drop in here. It's inclusive and we try to promote that."

A devoted tennis player, I started playing pickleball about a year before the pandemic and discovered how travel-friendly it is. On a trip to Scottsdale, Ariz., last year, I played at public courts packed with locals who directed me to their favorite breakfast spot ([Farm & Craft](#)) and where to catch the sunset (Pinnacle Peak Park). The game, I discovered, was the social equivalent of walking a dog in the park, a conversation starter that paid off in local insights.

To test my theory, I talked to dozens of adult pickleball players across a 60-year age spectrum to glean their insights into pickleball as a travel portal, and looked into hotels, resorts and cruise ships where travelers can find a game. Here's what I found.

### 'It's something everybody can do'

In case you haven't heard, [pickleball has exploded](#) in the last decade, becoming the fastest growing sport in 2021 and 2022, according to the [Sports & Fitness Industry Association](#). The global trade association counts roughly 4.8 million participants, up 39.3 percent over the past two years.

For many newcomers, pickleball was a pandemic [lifeline](#).

"It's something everybody can do," said Matt Manasse, 34, an instructor based in Los Angeles, who [Vanity Fair](#) called the "pickleball coach to the stars" for instructing celebrity clients like Matthew Perry and Larry David. "During the pandemic, it got people out and they could be socially distanced and competitive." Along the way, its reputation as a geriatric pastime began to fade as younger players discovered the thrill of fast volleys, the strategic art of drop-shooting (known as "dinking") and the inclusive culture where seniors can play with grandkids.

"One of the reasons I love pickleball is the community is so nice," said Martin Michelsen, 21, a senior at the University of Florida in Gainesville who plays on the college squad (pickleball is a club sport at many colleges and universities).

In high school, he learned pickleball at a park near his home in Westin, Fla., where local players lent him a paddle. Last spring his doubles team won an eight-school tournament held at North Carolina State University.

"Everyone starts somewhere," he said of playing with less skilled enthusiasts while on a recent family vacation in the Dominican Republic. "I would love to be a part of someone's pickleball journey."

### Portable and affordable

According to [USA Pickleball](#), the national governing body of the sport, there are nearly 10,000 pickleball locations nationwide. Its website, [Places2Play](#), offers a searchable database.

Travelers say they just need a paddle, as locals always have balls.

"For ease of portability, it's a no-brainer," Ms. Jacoby, of Chicago, said, referring to the solid yet lightweight paddle. "It's flat and fits in a carry-on, tote or backpack."

"You do need court shoes," cautioned Sue Baker, 75, a retired teacher and travel agent who travels seasonally from her home in Lewes, Del., to destinations such as Florida and Arizona where she brings her gear. "I did fall once and broke my wrist."

Most public courts and drop-in sessions are free or inexpensive.

"It's more accessible than other sports," said Laura Gainer, 40, a marketing consultant in Ponte Vedra, Fla., who discovered the sport three years ago and founded [Pickleball in the Sun](#), a travel and leisure brand that profiles pickleball resorts and sells apparel. "You're not paying to practice like golf."

Tournament entry fees, she added, can range from \$25 for a local contest to a little more than \$100 to participate in a professional event.

Apps including [Pickleball+](#), [Places2Play](#) and [PicklePlay](#) help traveling players find courts and other players. For some, a game can break out anywhere.

Katy Luxem of Sandy, Utah, 37, who owns the pickleball gear company [Big Dill Pickleball Co.](#), took her paddles on a family trip to Paris and volleyed in front of the Eiffel Tower.

The paddles are her go-to for alleviating travel boredom. On a trip back from Disneyland with her three children, she said, "Our flight was delayed, so we hit around the airport with the kids."



The JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort & Spa in Phoenix has opened multiple lighted courts, including a stadium court with seating for 400. Marriott International

### 'The latest must-have amenity'

The travel industry has enthusiastically piled on the pickleball bandwagon, installing new courts or programs at hotels and resorts and on cruise ships and tours. As one hotel publicist put it, "Pickleball is the latest must-have amenity."

Instead of rooftop bars, look for rooftop pickleball courts at the [Amway Grand Plaza](#), [Curio Collection by Hilton](#) in Grand Rapids, Mich. The [Plaza Hotel & Casino](#) in downtown Las Vegas maintains more than a dozen courts on its roof.

Pickleball has yet to proliferate globally — though [Kauri Cliffs Lodge & Golf Course](#) in New Zealand has two new courts — but in North America, travelers can play in the Caribbean (including at [Rosewood Little Dix Bay](#) in the British Virgin Islands), seasonally in Maine ([Samoset Resort](#) in Rockport), at tennis resorts (including [Topnotch Resort](#) in Stowe, Vt.) and, in early 2023, in the heart of Manhattan at a street-level, glass-walled court coming to the [Margaritaville Resort Times Square](#).

Novelty — including glow-in-the-dark pickleball at [the Watergate Hotel](#) in Washington, D.C. — abounds. For a wedding party at [High Hampton](#) resort in Cashiers, N.C., the staff organized a pickleball tournament with 16 teams on its four courts.

Often, as at [Hawks Cay Resort](#) in the Florida Keys, home to eight pickleball courts, play is complimentary for guests, with extra fees for clinics (\$25) and round-robin play (\$15).

Another set of resorts has gone all-in on pickleball with expansive facilities and lavish tournaments, including the [JW Marriott Desert Ridge Resort & Spa](#) in Phoenix which opened 16 lighted courts (two hours free for guests), in addition to a stadium court with seating for 400, in 2021.

Early pickleball adopters, cruise ships have added pickleball lines to their multisport courts that usually include basketball. [Princess Cruises](#) first added the game more than five years ago and now offers pickleball on all of its 15 ships.

[Carnival Cruise Line](#) just installed a permanent pickleball court aboard the [Carnival Conquest](#), and held a pickleball tournament for about 60 passengers when it launched the new [Carnival Celebration](#) in November. Recently named the official cruise line of the Professional Pickleball Association, [Holland America Line](#) plans to add complimentary beginner lessons on all of its 11 ships by April.

On a recent Royal Caribbean cruise in the Bahamas, Ms. Gainer, of Pickleball in the Sun, took a shore excursion to visit a resort, gaining access to its beach and pickleball courts for \$130.

Tour companies like [Pickleball Trips](#) will show you the world and its pickleball ways. Nine-day trips to Japan start at \$3,450.

Life coaches and pickleball players Yvette and Dave Ulloa of Vero Beach, Fla., recently began adding the activity to their retreats in [relationship-building](#).

"We started incorporating pickleball because there are so many parallels," said Ms. Ulloa, who identifies strong partners on and off the court as being able to communicate and refrain from criticism. "Those who bicker or blame the other person on court, that translates into the real world."

### Road-tripping for dinks

For all the opportunities to travel to plush resorts and faraway places to play, pickleball remains accessible on free public courts across the country, which are destinations for many paddle-porting road-trippers.

"The ability to connect with others in pickleball is phenomenal," said Clinton Young, 46, an inspirational speaker and pickleball coach based in San Diego, who, with his wife, spends most of his time on the road, working from their 36-foot Holiday Rambler Vacationer R.V. "As we drive around, we're going to as many places that have pickleball as possible, and we meet amazing people," he added, recounting a stop in Oklahoma City where a pair of opponents drove the couple to a local grocery store after the game, waited for them to shop and then dropped them at their R.V.

"A big motivator is the social aspect of the game," said Austin York, the general manager of [Sun Outdoors Sarasota](#), an R.V. resort in Sarasota, Fla., with 16 outdoor pickleball courts. "We don't have to schedule events for players because pickleball is so social."

When they can't find courts, many devotees create their own lines with chalk or tape on pavement and set up a portable net.

"You can be all in for \$250, including a net, paddle and balls," Mr. Young said.

Randy Coleman, 58, left what he described as a "cake job" managing the security at a private estate in Houston in 2018 to go on the road and play pickleball professionally. Living out of his pickup truck, he has played in nearly 40 states, mainly staying with other pickleballers he met along the way.

"For three years, I never had to buy a hotel room," he laughed.

Now a senior pro with various promotional deals, he travels the pickleball circuit as a commentator for a livestream service when he's not leading trips to Japan, Belize and Thailand for Pickleball Trips.

"That's what pickleball does, it builds relationships," Mr. Coleman said, "and does it organically."