

With ITF support,  
participation  
figures rocketing  
and tournaments  
worldwide, beach  
tennis has never  
been so popular.  
Tennishead visited  
Aruba, home to  
the sport's biggest  
event, to see if the  
Caribbean island's  
national pastime  
is truly ready for  
the mainstream

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# LINE SAND THE





White sands, topaz water, palm trees dancing in the wind and inescapable, sweltering sun – it certainly didn't feel like a weekend in late November. Yet while Roger Federer and Stanislas Wawrinka were wrapping up Switzerland's first Davis Cup title in chilly Lille, nearly 8,000km away in the Caribbean town of Oranjestad the action at the Divi Aruba Beach Tennis Open was hotting up – in every sense.

There, amid the bronzed holidaymakers playing in the shallows and lazing on sun loungers, the paps, taps, yelps and cheers of a 30-court tournament in full flow filled the air – not of tennis balls against strings, but against carbon-fibre paddles. Time and again a group wandered by, stopped, stared and stayed. There's no denying it – beach tennis is quite the spectacle.

Aruba, one of the three Dutch Antilles islands off the north coast of Venezuela, is host to the richest beach tennis tournament in the world. The prize fund for the flagship doubles events hit \$30,000 in 2014, drawing 56 pairs for the men's draw and 46 for the women's draw from across the globe.

On the 2,000-seat centre court, the atmosphere rests somewhere between basketball match and beach party. House music and dance classics blare out from the subwoofers as two MCs play off one another while commentating on the action, one from the DJ booth, the other from the VIP balcony.

Beneath them, four players leap, lunge, stretch, dive and do whatever it takes to keep the ball from hitting the sand. At its best, as it was in Aruba, beach tennis is a cross-breed of much more than just tennis; there's the reactions and close net play of badminton, the positioning and spectacular last-ditch saves seen in beach volleyball, and basketball-style vertical leaps and slam dunk smashes.

"We call it 'sportertainment,'" explains Sjoerd de Vries, one of the founders of beach tennis in Aruba. The former tennis pro discovered the sport in his native Netherlands back in 2003. "First of all, it's very dynamic. You've got the sand, so there's a lot of diving and jumping, which is spectacular to watch. The ball is a little softer, so it levels the playing field – if somebody smashes the ball hard, there can still be a save. The pros are so good they will



**RIGHT**  
A SOFTER BALL THAN THAT USED FOR TENNIS MAKES FOR SOME SPECTACULAR POINTS

**LEFT**  
MARAIKE BIGLMAIER IS RANKED NO. 6 IN THE ITF BEACH TENNIS RANKINGS

## "THE PRIZE FUNDS FOR THE DOUBLES EVENTS HIT \$30,000, DRAWING 56 PAIRS IN THE MEN'S DRAW AND 46 IN THE WOMEN'S DRAW FROM ACROSS THE GLOBE"

make the save. They have such incredible reactions, which adds to the spectacle."

Combined with the postcard-perfect Caribbean backdrop and festival atmosphere, it is an intoxicating cocktail that has seen beach tennis become the biggest sport on the winterless island.

"I've seen tremendous growth in tourists asking for beach tennis as a new experience," says Aruba Tourism Authority's Karin Swiers. "Nine out of 10 tourists live in much colder countries. We have summer all year round, so the circumstances are ideal for trying out our sports. Kite surfing is huge, and SUP (stand-up paddleboard) yoga is growing rapidly. We also have golf courses, but it is beach tennis that stands apart. For one sport to attract players from over 20 different nations year on year is unparalleled."

The atmosphere is a big part of the draw. It is a far cry from traditional tennis – in fact, it is a far cry from traditional beach tennis: for those who have played or watched it in its motherland, the Italian region of Ravenna that has hosted the world championships for the past three years, the extra-sensory experience is part of the sport's new age.

"Our event is straight with a curve," explains Jochem Ros, another Dutchman and De Vries's fellow beach tennis co-founder.

"In Italy everything is pristine, very serious and conservative. Here, we are progressive. The stadium, web streaming, LED big screens, and DJs to entertain and inform – I think that's our strength."

Players from 25 nations descended on Oranjestad's Eagle Beach in November, with 1,100 entrants – up from 700 in 2013 –





## BEACH TENNIS BASICS

The origins of beach tennis date back to the early 20th century, when it was first played with tambourines in Ravenna, Italy. Paddles were first introduced following the Second World War, but the sport truly took off in the 1980s and by the early 2000s had spread to shorelines the world over.

- **Net height: 1.7m**
- **Court dimensions:**  
16m x 8m (doubles)  
16m x 4.5m (singles)
- **One shot per side**
- **The ball cannot hit the sand**
- **Either player may return serve in doubles**
- **No second serve, no service let**
- **Regulation paddles, low-pressure orange balls**
- **Standard sets with no-ad scoring**





#### LEFT

HOUSE MUSIC AND DANCE CLASSICS PLAYED BY DJs NEXT TO THE COURT ADDS TO THE SPECTACLE



registered across the week-long schedule of tournaments catering for players of all ages and abilities. For the first time in the event's history foreign participants outnumbered Aruban entrants, 600 to 500, including representatives from the likes of Chile, United States, Netherlands, Slovenia, Portugal, Switzerland and Japan.

The sport's powerhouses were also well represented. Italy, whose players dominate the rankings, had 50 players in the various draws, while Brazil sent a contingent of 250 – and that was just the competitors. Throw in friends and family and the number swells to around 500.

These are exciting times for the sport. Since the International Tennis Federation assumed responsibility for the growth and development of beach tennis in 2008 – establishing a single set of rules, compiling world rankings and taking charge of officiating – the tournament roster has increased almost six-fold.

For now, the ITF deals solely with the doubles events that, like beach volleyball, dominate the competition's appeal. It's a fast-paced spectacle, and tactical too. "The most important thing is the serve and the return – pap-pap, and that's the point," says Italy's Alex Mingozzi, a top-five stalwart in the ITF standings. "Reactions are important, for sure. But more-so tactics, because the game is very quick and you don't have a lot of time to think. We serve very fast!"

The ITF's involvement hasn't affected the soul of the sport according to Mingozzi, a powerful athlete who has been playing beach tennis since 1995. "They organised the rankings in a better way, they put together a nice calendar, introduced some new rules. And now many tennis players and very important people are interested in the sport, investing money and time in the game. But the sport remains the same. The game is ours."

But is beach tennis ready to make the jump from niche resort novelty to fully-fledged mainstream sport? The signs are certainly promising. Growth in both size and global reach continues apace with 207 tournaments played worldwide in 2014, a 24% increase on the previous year boosted by maiden events in Belgium, Latvia, Estonia, Lithuania and Puerto Rico. Combined prize money rose 12% to



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\$473,900 with \$150,000 up for grabs in the Americas, once a new frontier for the sport.

And it's not confined to beach towns. Russia's National Tennis Centre in Moscow plays host to the World Team Championship, the tour's flagship event, where a record 24 nations competed in 2014 including debutants China, Israel, Greece and Thailand. There are around 4,000 tour-level pros, with top-ranked players representing 57 nations.

"It needs to be an Olympic sport," insists Jim Lorenzo, president of Beach Tennis USA and a key figure in the deal struck with the ITF. "I've met members of the Olympic Committee, which also handles the Pan American Games – in 2015, in Toronto, Beach Tennis will be part of the Pan American Games. That's a big step.

"The next major step is to get a world sponsor, and we need to be on television. It's just incredible to watch."

"Compare the investment needed for a beach tennis court to a golf course, or a tennis court," De Vries adds. "It's nothing. You don't need much, just a paddle, a net and a ball. You don't even need expensive lessons, because it's relatively easy. Everybody can play beach tennis."

A tipping point is on the sun-drenched horizon – the moment when the beach tennis elite can join the ranks of true professional athletes. As it stands, most are semi-pro – competing for prize money while living off modest sponsorships or part-time jobs with the various brands and investors that allow them to compete. Take the experience of Maraike Biglmaier, winner of the women's doubles event with Camilla Ponti. Unlike Mingozi, a dyed-in-the-wool beach tennis player, the German made the switch to sand after a promising career on court.

"I used to play tennis on the tour but I got a bad back injury when I was 20," Biglmaier said. "I had to stop for two years. I still have problems when I play on hard court surfaces with my hip and groin, and back again. One day a friend said, 'Come try beach tennis – I think it's your sport because you love to play with touch'. I tried it and I loved it, and I don't have any back problems."

The travel and beach life are part of the appeal, but Biglmaier admits the money is not yet there for a top-10 player to make a steady living off the tour, even after winning her seventh of eight titles in 2014.

"I still play a little bit of tennis to earn money for travelling. In tennis there is much more money, but I hope that beach tennis will increase their events, the prize money. It's a pity there are not more tournaments like this."

They are coming. Spain is set to host its first Grade 1 event in Las Palmas, while 2015 will also see the debut of a junior ITF tournament at the World Team Championship. The sport has momentum and a destination; now to pass those milestones.

The only thing stopping the Divi Aruba Beach Tennis Open expanding is the beach itself. "But how big do you want to grow?" De Vries counters. "You don't want to lose your charm, your ambience – your straight-with-a-curve atmosphere."

"Nobody knows where beach tennis will be in five years' time," he admits. "If beach tennis becomes an Olympic sport, we will have the main event, right here in Aruba. That's our vision, and that's what we're working towards." ■

Tennishead visited the Divi Aruba Beach Tennis Open courtesy of the Aruba Tourism Authority. For more information on the One Happy Island, visit [Aruba.com](http://Aruba.com)