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A LONG DAY IN THE LIFE

Next time you go to Club Med, definitely try their white-chocolate bread. But whatever you do, don't try shadowing a GO, because you won't survive. *By Kevin Raub. Photographs by Chad Windham.*

It's been two days, and things have only gotten worse. My thighs feel as if they were jackknifed full force by a Pro Bowl-bound linebacker with rage in his eyes. My right shin is engulfed in a case of debilitating shin splints, inflicting a throbbing pain I haven't felt since my 80-mile-a-week running days in high school cross-country. And my abs feel like they took an unprovoked jab from a rabid heavyweight. There is something terribly wrong about the source of all this pain, though, since I participated in none of the above activities. What I did was spend what I had thought was going to be a lazy day in paradise working as a Club Med GO in the Turks and Caicos Islands. I stand corrected.

GO stands for Gracious Organizer, a signature staff position at every Club Med since the French all-inclusive vacation concept was founded by a Belgian water polo champion in 1950. Though what their work responsibilities entail depends on the labor laws of any given country, at Club Med Turquoise, most front-of-the-house employees are GOs, with gigs like bartender, front-desk clerk, sports instructor, manager of leisure activities, the usual — and in addition to performing the tasks associated with these jobs, they also socialize with the guests (so the girl who checked you in last night may be sharing a Bahama Mama with you the next night). During the day, most have secondary duties like organizing the water polo matches and teaching guests how to sail. On average, a Club Med employs about 120 GOs per property (or one GO for every five to seven guests).

In years past, GOs had a reputation for being hosts of hedonism, too, but when an article in *Jane* earlier this decade actually exposed a few as such, it proved too much for this vacation giant once accused of exploiting the "poor and the weak" in a song by Camper Van Beethoven. It was time for change.

There are new rules for the GOs (put in place in 2000) — like no shots and no more Red Bull discounts — and Club Med has spent the past few years slowly changing its tune, converting its bare-bones villages in the Bahamas, in the Caribbean, and in Mexico from middle-of-the-road destination hotels to a more upscale lifestyle concept fit for families. The \$60 million renovation of its Buccaneer's Creek property in Martinique and the new \$24 million Cancun property are the company's new face. Total cost of reputation makeover to its 80 resorts worldwide: an estimated \$125 million per year between 2005 and 2008.

Given that my body currently feels somewhere between having been run over by a freight train and having been drawn and quartered, I would have preferred spending 24 hours as a GO in a Club Med of yore — I mean, who couldn't handle losing a day drowning in umbrella drinks, beautiful people, and bikinis (or Speedos, as the case may be)? Instead, the new Club Med has done far more damage to me than a few cocktails ever have, thanks to a GO named Brian Tranbarger.

TRANBARGER IS THE consummate poster boy for the new Club Med. Handsome and as sweet as guava, he's an easy-on-the-eyes guy from Red Bluff, California, with five years on the Club Med time clock. It is impossible not to immediately like him, and he is referred to as Mr. GO by some of his coworkers. Who better to give me a taste of what a day in the life of a Club Med GO is really like?

Our day begins as it does for many Americans trying to shed a few pounds and keep the cholesterol at bay: with a little nine a.m. power walk, which could easily be rebranded as simply a walk, as there is virtually no power involved at all. Only Tranbarger, a Kenyan businessman of Indian descent from Vancouver, and I turn up. We begin our morning stroll at a chitchat pace that leads us out of the resort and down Grace Bay Road, the main drag through Providenciales, the primary island of the six main Caicos Islands (which, for those who are wondering, are geographically part of the Bahamas but are a separate political entity).

Talk is centered on my multiethnic companion and on which clubs around the world he has frequented — a common thread of conversation at any Club Med. You see, the company prides itself on repeat business, and the GOs are a very big draw. Guests sometimes follow them from club to club, and there are websites dedicated to their whereabouts



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We head down the road a half mile or so before turning toward the beach, part of Princess Alexandra National Park, for the final leg of the stroll back to Club Med. The water is ridiculous, a calm and pristine blue rolling slowly over cornmeal-soft sands. So far, this is cake.

Then it's right to a quick breakfast, as we're due for water aerobics at 11:15 a.m. Tranbarger is leading the charge. But first, as his main gig is land-sports manager, he must fetch water for the volleyball courts, see to it that the fitness center and weight rooms are presentable, track down the billiard balls (which end up in the pool, on the beach, in the bathrooms, and sometimes in the buffet — goodness only knows), and otherwise make sure all available sports equipment is accounted for and ready to face another day. Thus far, the work isn't too physical, but it's sweltering outside. We're both dripping sweat by 10:45 a.m. — so much for the SPF 30 — and I'm only shadowing him while he does all the work. It's going to be a long day.

TRANBARGER, A GRADUATE of California State University, Chico, started his professional life as a PE teacher and football/track coach at Red Bluff High School in Northern California. He loved it but knew he wanted to see more of the world and get out of the daily grind. He had never heard of Club Med, but a friend encouraged him to apply. Of course, he was an instant hit and served time at clubs in Cancún and in Crested Butte, Colorado, before landing at Club Med Turkoise in Turks and Caicos.

Given his athletic background, Tranbarger's gig as land-sports manager was a no-brainer, but in addition to their primary positions, GOs are also almost always required to perform onstage in front of a live audience. An entertainer he was not. "I had never really danced at all," he tells me of his life before Club Med. "The first few times they grabbed me and threw me on the dance floor, I was lost beyond belief. The first week, I really considered ending my GO career just because of the embarrassment." Times change.

TRANBARGER HITS THE mike to announce water aerobics with all the enthusiasm of a Las Vegas game-show host. Women around the pool — just reopened today after two weeks of renovation — flock to the water. Of course, a few guys join, as well, including me. I have never had a remote interest in water aerobics, but at this point, any excuse to cool off in the pool need not be offered twice. Before I know it, I'm running in place in the shallow end of the pool to the tune of bad '70s dance music and praying that my girlfriend (who's checking her e-mail nearby) doesn't happen to witness this less-than-masculine moment in my life. We swoosh waves in, we swoosh waves out, and we shake them all about. We pump our fists in the air and turn ourselves around. That's what it's all about.

Yes, it was embarrassing. Yes, it was harder than I thought it would be. Yes, I'm desperately hoping nobody captured it on video. But, truth be told, as silly as it was, I kind of liked it. And I'm starting to feel the love that so many Club Med addicts feel for this place. It takes you out of your comfort zone. "One of the reasons I stay with Club Med is that I get to do things I would never get to do anywhere else," Tranbarger tells me later. Like dance? "Yeah, especially the stage stuff."

Water aerobics sufficiently gets my blood flowing, but it doesn't really tire me out too much. So it's no problem segueing straight into coed water polo (the only break we take is to divide up the silly skullcaps that we have to wear to differentiate between teams). Water polo is also something that's absent from my normal routine, but I'm quite familiar with the soccer/hockey/lacrosse origin of the rules: Catch. Turn. Shoot. Got it.

What I wasn't banking on was the Club Med rule that states that the men cannot touch the women at all, while the men are completely fair game. So every time I catch the ball, a female guest — likely from Montreal, which seems to be where the majority of the visitors here are from — nearly drowns me in a valiant effort to prevent me from scoring. I quickly wise up, switch to the other side of the pool, and proceed to surprise even myself with my superb skills. I score about six of our 12 goals, and the GO in charge of water polo — a fellow Californian — tells me I should quit my day job and become a water polo GO (I'm mulling it over).

We're out of the water by 12:20 p.m., and it's at this point that I'm starting to need a break — as in the kind of siesta where I lie on the beach for a few hours sipping some drink called a Rainbow Rum Punch Ecstasy or something. Instead, I get lunch, which, I suppose, is a sort of break but which requires a bit more effort than I'm looking to exert at this moment. It would be remiss at this point to not mention the food, most notably the white-chocolate bread. It's the most addictive culinary creation I have ever eaten — and worth a trip to Club Med completely in and of itself. I'm trying to convince the magazine to run the recipe as a sidebar to this story, thereby relieving me of any future debts to mankind.

After lunch, it's right to the volleyball courts, where Tranbarger and a few of the more volleyball-savvy GOs (employees tend to become quite adept at a variety of sports) play for an hour, just for fun. At three p.m., it's open volleyball for the rest of us. Now volleyball doesn't involve a lot of movement, and the court is relatively small, but it quickly begins to take its toll on me. I'm out of breath, and, judging by my pathetic returns, clearly out of my element. It should be noted here that I have never smoked and that I run four to five days a week. I'm in excellent shape for a 33-year-old guy. Still, I'm dying. Of course, Tranbarger is trucking along, smiling and spiking balls left and right. Unbelievable.

At four p.m., I finally get a break, but Tranbarger must now rehearse for the following night's show. Time it takes to transition from volleyball court to stage: two minutes. The show, named Utopia, is heavy on acrobatic circus moves, and Tranbarger and three fellow GOs are practicing a sort of body tower that falls somewhere between a game of Twister and the National Cheerleading Championships. Still unleashing sweat from volleyball, I watch as Tranbarger and the head circus GO, Mac, support the weight of two female GOs in this convoluted acrobatic contortion and think to myself, He does everything.

A half hour later, we have to rush over to the sailing area to greet the return of the day's sailing armada — Tranbarger is in charge of sailing too. He has a brief spat with the sound guy over the choice of music (Tranbarger wants reggae, not Joan Jett and the Blackhearts) and sends him off to round up some Bob Marley. Once the catamarans arrive, we break down the amp and roll its 100 or so pounds back to the storage area and sprint off to soccer, which we are now late for. Since I happen to be wearing a Brazilian soccer jersey, the guys are expecting big things from me. That could be a problem.

We join the game midway through and make an immediate impact. Without getting into international politics, let's just say that I split two defenders from countries where soccer is much more loved than in the United States and put the ball in the goal. For a brief moment, I feel like Ronaldinho (must be the jersey). Then, I crash. My feet fall flat. My shin splints start acting up. My labored breathing sounds like that of a smoker in a deprivation chamber. My body is simply done. Tranbarger? Yeah, he's still going ... and going ... and going, just like the Energizer battery.

By 6:20 p.m., we get a brief respite for a shower. As far as the day goes, I have played more sports today than I have ever played in a single day, and that includes field day in elementary school. I hit the shower, but what I really need is a rehabilitation center. We have about 50 minutes before we're due for cocktails to celebrate the grand reopening of the pool. I'm so spent, the thought of even lifting a fruity cocktail sounds like moving mountains.

From there, it's all a blur. We go straight to dinner, which is followed by the week's sports medal award ceremony and

then by the evening's show, the International Revue. Tranbarger plays an African tribal dancer, an Egyptian pharaoh, a Swedish dancing queen, and some sort of Frankie Goes to Hollywood male revue dancer, and he excels at each of them. My only comment by this point is unprintable here.

The show ends at 11 p.m., and we're now going on 14 hours. I'm deep into the reserves of my personal power supply. But it's not time for bed; it's time for even more rehearsal. And, no, I'm not kidding. Tranbarger spends the next two hours rehearsing, while a raging party is going on 50 yards away at the main bar. I struggle to hold my eyes open.

At 1:30 a.m., he finally finishes. Time to call it a day? Of course not; it's time for shots. Apparently, some rules were made to be broken — as, I discovered, were (nearly) my bones.

KEVIN RAUB is a Los Angeles-based travel and entertainment journalist. His work has appeared in *Travel + Leisure*, the *New York Post*, *FHM*, and *Stuff*, among other publications. He now realizes all-inclusive includes pain and suffering.



A Sweet Reward

To appease our writer, we finally agreed to print the recipe for Club Med's White-Chocolate Bread — but we couldn't promise him that it would relieve his debt to mankind. Then we tasted it for ourselves and realized that Kevin is now a free man.

Club Med White-Chocolate Bread

(makes five loaves)

8 cups flour

1 teaspoon yeast

1 tablespoon gluten, wheat

3 1/2 cups water

2 teaspoons salt

2 3/4 cups white-chocolate chips

Place the flour, yeast, and gluten in a small bowl of an electric mixer. Mix on medium-low or first speed for 1 minute with the hook attachment. Add the water and mix for another 2 minutes. Add the salt and continue to mix for another 8 to 10 minutes on medium or second speed. Add the chips and mix for an additional 1 to 2 minutes or until the chips are well distributed throughout the dough. Take the dough out of the bowl and lightly knead into a ball. Let rest for 15 to 20 minutes. Preheat the oven to 450F. Cut the dough into portions of about 1 1/2 cups and knead into the desired form. Let the loaves proof for about 30 to 45 minutes, depending on the heat and humidity of the area they are proofing in. Place the uncooked loaves on a baking pan lined with either parchment paper or Silpat and bake for approximately 20 minutes.

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