

## Surf Party/Luau Suggestions from the Snake

Bruce "Snake" Gabrielson

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So you really want to put on a serious luau or surf party for your friends in the tradition of Surfing's "Golden Years? Well, I didn't get the nickname "Snake" for nothing. I've been putting on surf parties, luaus, surf event socials and related activities regularly, big and small, since the 1960s and here are some of the things I've found most successful. In putting a surf party my motto has always been "Don't leave any stones unturned."

Many who will read this probably attended some of my early day Huntington Beach bashes. Well, you will likely never see a real party similar to the 60s anymore. There are just too many changes in our world now and surfers have grown more conservative.



*Surf Band K-39 Performing Using a Small Amp and Drummer Set-up Members Matt Kuhn & George Vermillion on Guitars With Scott Wetteran on Drums*



**Me With Luau Costume Winners - Jason, Jill, Me, Diane and Steve**

Additionally, as I've gotten older, my parties have toned down a little and at least I don't have a trashed house or get arrested for inciting to riot anymore.

If you ever watched the film *Big Wednesday*, you've had a chance to see a real surf party in action. Yes, this film accurately describes many of the surf parties I attended in the 60s and 70s. I sometimes wonder if the script's writer wasn't at some of those early surfing parties in the Huntington Beach area, or at least at some of the parties I used to attend up and down the California coastline back then. While those early parties were more

spontaneous, the modern version usually requires a little better planning.

### Pre-Party Coordination

Never decide to host a party without a little consideration of what you can really put on. If you haven't held a theme type surf get together before, you might want to attend someone else's first. Surfers are a little different than most other folks, particularly those generally referred to as the "core" surfers. These folks for the most part won't attend a function unless you offer something special that they can relate to. Many just want to hang out awhile, talk about surf, and then go home early so they can get up early and get in a session. The "special" is what draws the diehard crew, particularly if you want your party in the summer when the surf is good.



Some themes require a long lead for setting up. For instance, if you want to have a surf art show and surf photo show, unless you have a huge personal library, you need to get artist and photographers to contribute to the event. I'm fortunate that I've acquired many items over the years. Even so, a single painting or photo from a particular artist is never as impressive as a full display. Also, if you have an indoor library for the show it works much better than holding it outside under a tent. Before I

learned my lesson, one year I didn't weight the tent down well and a strong gust blew several framed pictures over and damaged a few.

Another theme that takes time to organize is the antique board show. Unless you have a large personal board collection, you will need to arrange for various board donations, plus figure out how to display the boards. I have both a nice hill that I can display the boards against, and I have several display stands in my surf shop that I can use.



Selecting themes of course depends on the age group of the party attendees. If you are in the 25 and under crowd, you need to have three things to host a good surf party, a date and time when there isn't a big surfing event going on someplace else, a small group of close friends who can help you maintain control, and of course, a place to hold the party. If you are in the older crowd, all you really need is to coordinate a date among your friends for the event. Also, it helps for noise or crowd control if you live in the country with no neighbors close by.



*62nd Street Longboard Club Band Playing in Front of K-Coast Surf Shop in Ocean City, Maryland - Front Three Members Include John Robbins, Ed Decourse, and ButchDye*

Back in the mid- 60s I started holding surf club meetings with the idea that after the meeting we would have an informal social. We held our meetings in an outside covered patio behind my parent's house. Those meeting/parties soon got out of control. When the party exceeded the several-hundred attendance mark, the City of Huntington Beach decided to bust the party and charge me with inciting to riot. There is a good write-up about this "classic" surf party on Tubesteak's web site.

My suggestion now if you are younger and still live at home is to not hold anything there unless you have a basement that you can keep a very small group contained in. Then, only invite a limited number of friends that you can easily keep track of. I also suggest you make sure your parents are around just to keep things

under control. The last time my kids had a party without me when they were younger, I was cleaning and repairing my home for several days.

If you are one of the older surfing crew, my suggestion is to invite anyone and everyone who wants to attend, provided they are adults, but still limit the number of those from work or friends who will attend just because you're putting on a party. If you want a nice luau, insist on the full course of entertainment, food, shirts, shorts, and sandals if possible. Of course, make sure you have room to host the party.

## Invitations

In the early days, party invitations consisted almost entirely of telling everyone out in the water. Those days are gone now, particularly in a world of cell phones and the Internet. While I've tried mailing out invitations in the past, now I just put together a flyer and either email it or give it to those who I think will attend.

I don't suggest anything elaborate, but still prefer something both creative and informative. I make my flyer on the computer using pictures and text and then print and copy in black and white. My wife likes to print in color for some of her "select" friends. On your flyer let everyone know the actual theme; luau, surf party, or regular party for surfers, plus the expected dress, and if attendees should bring food or drinks. Luau's tend to be more formal and traditional with Hawaiian shirts and shorts then regular surf parties. The picture is from one of my annual Labor Day Luau flyers.



*Another K-39 Performance During a Recent Luau  
- Additional Members Include Rob Forsee on  
Drums and Jim Cerone on Guitar*

## Gabrielson's Labor Day Weekend Hawaiian Luau

Sat, August 30 2003  
6 PM to ???



### Hawaiian or Beach Attire Expected

The K-39 Surf Band will Perform + Other Jammers

*BYOB & a Hawaiian Pot Luck Snack*



\*\*\*PHONE # \*\*\* - Adults Only

5005 Bayside Road  
Chesapeake Beach, MD  
(about 20 miles south of Annapolis)  
Take Rt 260 south from Rt 2 or Rt 4 to the Bay.  
Turn right on 261 and go about 13 miles.  
Turn right at the black 5005 mailbox and passed ditueway.



*Special price for beer & wine & drinks & beverages & a female bartender  
Dartboard & Billiards to Jam. Welcome - Come early for fresh caught fish from the grill.*

Make sure to include an RSVP by either email or calling. This is really the only way you can get a feel for how many will attend beforehand. Also, even though I hold a luau and at least one or two well-established surf parties each year, as a rule of thumb, plan on having only about 60% of those invited actually attend.

## Events and Entertainment

I've found that most of my surfer friends generally like the idea of having at least one special draw for surf theme parties. Some of those we've been to of late featured a bonfire on the beach, live surf music, hula contests,

cooking food on an open fire, pig roasts, bull roasts, board sacrifices to bring up the surf, Hula lessons, a surf art and photography show, antique surfboard show, surf oriented door prizes for various things, and so on. Including the 19ive entertainment

For my own surf parties, I always try to provide more then one draw or special event of some kind. This has covered the range from attendance by out of the area surfing legends and professional surfers, a jump rope performance by superstar entertainer and ex-Olympian Buddy Lee, a professional hula dancer, and a 6-hour surf music jam session by various musicians.

The last few years just getting an experienced surf band to put on couple of sets seems to go “above and beyond” the surf parties most people attend. We’ve been lucky that an old surf buddy George Vermillion and his Crofton, Maryland surf band K-39 have been able to perform the past few years and this really has made the party. Members of my Ocean City Surf Club, the 62<sup>nd</sup> Street Longboarders, started playing surf music at club parties several years back and now they perform at every party plus also put on performances at surf shops in the area.



*Simple Luau Costumes Add Spice - My Sons  
Jason and Kevin With Diane Rowe*

Probably the most impressive surf band that regularly plays here are the surf band Reverb Galaxy.

Even if you can get a band, it’s fun if you can find someone to solo jam during the party or when the band takes a break. We have a several surfers like that locally, one that plays a mean 12-string, one that both plays and composes, and one that plays and sings lead in a Beach Boys type surf band. When we do have a band, they like to sing and play for fun when the band breaks, and also sometimes go on well after the band is through for the evening. I’ve found that the band members really enjoy this and have started bringing their wives to the party just to have a good time. One year the composer really got into the party and actually can up with a song, complete with music, that included naming everyone who showed up, plus many who didn’t. We filmed the production and it has become a real icon I sometimes pull out and play on the TV during more recent luaus.



*Dancing is Big if You Have Room*

Probably the most impressive set-up we’ve had for a band to play on is the artificial beach. A pick-up load of fine sand runs about \$30 locally. It generally takes about two loads to cover my driveway. After the party, I used the sand to create a sand area around a fire ring. Now each year when the party is over I use the sand to refresh around the fire ring.

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*My Artificial Beach Driveway Just Up From My Shop*

Another thing those at my luaus like doing is a Hawaiian costume and a south sea dish contest. To get takers, you seriously need to offer something worthwhile as a prize. We've been giving model surfboards, small surfer models, ukuleles, and Puka or shell necklaces as prizes the past few years. In our case, the

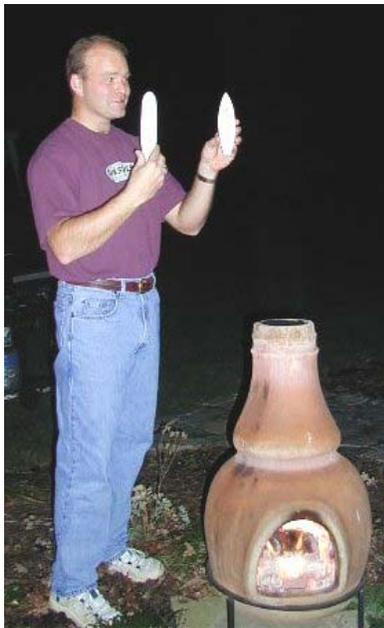
competition sometimes gets intense so I've learned one thing not to do during these contests, do not do the judging yourself. Best to have three independent judges give you their top two picks, and then give out a prize to the top two receiving the most votes for each contest category.

One costume I did need to stop is when one of my sons wanted to wear nothing under his grass skirt - that was a little too much. We also have had some pets get into the costume fever a few times.

The fun contest categories I suggest are:

Best main course dish, best dessert dish, best female costume, best male costume.

The surfboard sacrifice is often a highlight of many luaus and surf parties. Unfortunately, boards aren't readily available plus you need a fireplace, outdoor stove, or outdoor fire of some type to do it right. I attended a board sacrifice a couple



*Neal Carver at ASC Surf Partu Surfboard Sacrifice*

of years ago that showed me a better way of doing things. Previous board sacrifices had used either real boards or cardboard cutouts. Instead of a real board, make a couple of small boards out of surfboard foam. Also, don't discriminate between longboard and short; make two. I think someday I'm going to come up with a model kneeboard (or kneeboarder) to sacrifice. The boards shouldn't be longer than 6 to 8 inches each with a small glued on fin. This size can be burned in a small fireplace, patio burner, or any other controlled burning area. Also, if you have time, paint or hand-draw a design on your boards.



*Even Pets Can Have Fun*



*ASC Sacrificial Boards*

*"Oh God of Surfing Wind and Sea,  
accept this offering we give to thee.  
Give us large waves, give us small,  
any size - we'll take them all.  
Just to rise upon the face  
to see the crest, our hearts will race.  
To feel the sea within our veins  
but know its you who holds the reins.  
If we fall please drop us slow,  
as wipeout come and wipeouts go,  
we give our life without a fee,  
this we pray our God of Sea....."*

Treat the sacrifice as a very serious activity. Stop all the music and entertainment, announce the ceremony is starting, then offer the sacrifices to the surf gods by stating: "Please accept these offerings to bring us warm water, offshore winds, and great waves for the coming year." ASC member Doug Rhodes gave me another suggested prayer idea:

### **Dancing and Singing**

If you have any room at all, try to let party goers dance if they wish. Dancing at my luau parties has become a very popular activity. Some partiers will go for hours if they can. Sometimes it's a lot of fun to have a professional hula dancer give lessons. You should have the lessons in an outdoor area, preferably in the afternoon before dusk. Otherwise the bugs

get aggressive and those with costumes will suffer.



*After Sacrifice Fireworks are Fun*



*Key West Party Goes Around an Interesting Centerpiece Used as the Costume Winner Award*

It's a little hard for traditional dancing to a band if you have a small house, but maybe you can get a smaller band with a drummer that has a small size drum set for such

occasions. Our local surf band, K-39, has been very good with this. Another idea you might want to consider is having a sing-along for a couple of popular surf songs. We have a printout of some popular surf songs that we've used a few times over the years. This is especially fun if you have a single guitar player or a surf music tape or CD for entertainment.



## Bar and Bar Decorations

A small bar will work wonders as a central socializing point and also as a place to mix and/or store drinks. This is just a preference I have in my old age I guess. If you do have a bar, a good conversation centerpiece adds a lot of interest.

Recently, I've also decided I really like having someone volunteer a shift to mix margaritas, daiquiris, and rum drinks at a bar. I went to Singapore last year and had the opportunity to visit the birthplace of the Singapore Sling. We have a small bar outside on our deck that I like to spend time during the party working at myself. It only has four bar chairs but always seems to draw a good crowd. Grass aprons are inexpensive and will immediately convert the front of a standard bar to one



*Serious Bar Volunteer Jeff Williams*



*Bar With Deck Lights and Decorations*

with a south sea flavor. Netting is also inexpensive and can be draped on the wall next to or behind the bar for added flavor.

Some other items on, under, or around the bar that look great are: a small rock filled waterfall that gurgles and trickles down a stair, surf oriented toy figures, fish figures or shells hanging from the netting, shell ashtrays, a surfing poster or two on the wall, a live palm tree, and a blender if you have room. We have a blender with a spout that we use for

## Lighting

missing margaritas and daiquiris. I also have a small CD player for surf music located under the bar. It's kept low so as not to interfere with the other entertainment, discussions or things going on, but really adds to the atmosphere.

One item you really need to consider near your bar or in your party area is lighting. I use four different light sources. The golden rule is never use a simple white light outside if possible. It will draw bugs, mosquitoes, and an occasional bat, at least if you live in this area. Some of my friends (and myself) use small Christmas tree like lights. These can be white, and are strung along the ceiling. We run them along the outside of our deck plus have a few draped on one of our shoulder high palm trees near the bar. I also replace the outside deck and porch lights with yellow bug lights. Around



*Waterfall*

the party area and also behind our bar we hang some strings of lighted figures of fish, starfish, crabs, seahorses and such. A great idea is to use kerosene torches that light your driveway and yard into your home. One final thing I like to do is put Chinese grass lantern covers over some of our hanging interior lights for the party.

### **Drinks**

This can run the gamut from a cooler full of beer and soft drinks or a keg, to a full service mixed bar. Here are a few things that I suggest if you can work it. I started avoiding kegs after four years ago when most of the older party goers stuck with the mixed drinks and punch, and the younger crew hauled the keg down on the driveway for a beer bash that didn't finish the keg off. It was just too much trouble to rent everything, set it up, and then finish the keg off before returning it. Plus my driveway was a mess with paper cups the next day.

On the more conservative side, frozen margaritas and strawberry daiquiris are very popular at luaus. You can buy a couple of small one-gallon tubs of margarita mix and simply add tequila and freeze before the party. We often run two blenders, one to mix margaritas at the bar, and one in the kitchen for daiquiris (which my wife and her friends love). ASC member Neal Carver usually gets a couple of these tubs for his Key West Party, and they are tremendously popular when the weather is hot.

If you've seen the commercial on TV about the surf luau with someone mixing a concoction of whatever in a washtub, yes we actually used to do that at our parties. However, in the modern world where you don't know what might be slipped into the mix, you might want to try a different approach. One of the most popular "punch" things we do is hollow out half a larger watermelon, and then mix small pieces of the watermelon, some smaller pieces of cantaloupe or a different melon, and then add rum with a touch of tequila in one half and fruit punch mixed with 7-up in the other half. You will have to watch and refill as the punch gets consumed, but after awhile we find that the fruit really gets popular in at least the spiked half of the punch bowl.

### **Tropical and Hawaiian Type Food**

There are a couple of things you can do for food depending on your budget. Living in Maryland I've tried crab feeds, but the trouble of clearing away shells and then getting to the dump during



*Jammer and Song Composer Kevin Buff at the Bar*



*Skip Savage on the Beach Sampling a Roasted Pig*

the summer before the trash starts to stink the place up convinced me to give up on that endeavor.

A tremendous idea if you have the chance to hold a party on the beach is a pig roast or simply a bring your own meat barbeque over the open fire. The 62<sup>nd</sup> Street Longboarders hold an evening end of summer beach barbeque that has become very successful.



*My Entry Way Tiki*

Since my parties have grown so large that I can't feed everyone, I've started to ask for those attending to each bring a theme dish. I mentioned above my incentive for everyone to do their best for the dish. Some of the best food in the main dish category have been beef on shish kabob, Hawaiian herb seasoned fish, shrimp with a tropical sauce, and Hawaiian chicken. I really think it's the sauce used that makes the food superb. As for desserts, the pineapple or tropical fruit based offerings seem to go over the best. My wife has a recipe for a pineapple and coconut flavored pudding that she likes to make. Two years ago one of our friends won the main dish prize with Pigs in a Blanket cooked in a pineapple flavored sauce that was tremendous. Basically, anything goes on the dishes.

### **Other Neat Little Things That Can**

### **Add Color**

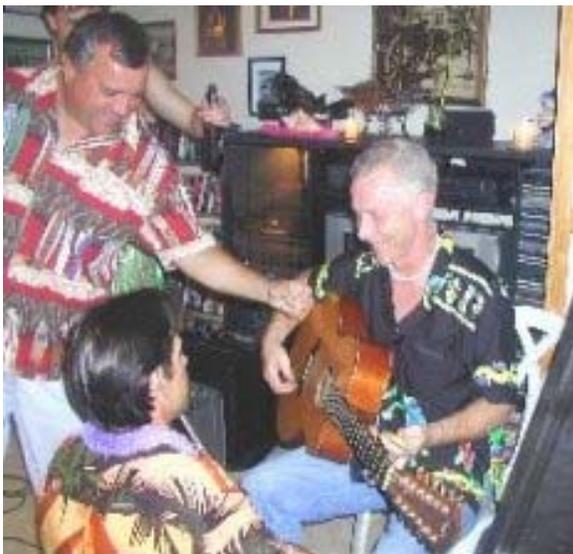
While regular parties are usually focused on the most current tunes available, I suggest



*Indoor Art Show*



that you try to play some surf music or Hawaiian music in the background and put a surf video or CD on the TV. Not many will really watch the surf flick, but it will generally get a comment or two as the evening goes on, particularly when a great ride shows up.



*Darrell on His 12-String Jamming with Kevin During a Luau Band Break*

I have a carved Tiki at the entry to my house. Visitors walk up the driveway and stairs to the porch through a canyon of torches, then pass by the Tiki statue into the party. I carved my Tiki in about 4 hours out of a section of tree from my yard, but I've found a number readily available through various surf shops. I suggest you use a small chain saw only for the rough cut, then use a Dremmel tool and chisels for the rest. In the 60's I had a Tiki at my parties carved from a palm tree

trunk using a chain saw. If you can't get soft wood, make sure the wood is cured before carving. I had one split badly when carved before the wood dried out.

Grass mats add a little color but I advise you to use them for table covers rather than floor mats. They are slippery and can cause a real problem on vinyl or wood floors. One place I like them is around trashcans. Make sure you have a few larger trashcans around that can be emptied and the liner quickly replaced as needed.

We started using plastic glasses with luau type handles for mixed drinks a couple of years back. Only have a few dozen but these really add color. I also like to get paper cups and plates with bright colors for food and those who don't get one of the luau glasses.

Hang a large cutout surfboard on the doors into the bathrooms. I was able to find one through Oriental Traders. I've also seen plastic surfboard decorations and rugs that will add to the board background. I have both a heavy grass entryway rug and a surfboard rug that I put out in front of my doors into the house.

Tropical plants, particularly palms, look great when scattered around inside the party area. We have a couple of paper pineapples we place around the party area that seem to add a little color as well.

For the past few years we've had a very small exhibit of some new boards to show off. One year, local distributor (and band guru) George Vermillion brought a few Nezzzy Surfboards to show those attending.



*New Snake Board on Display at a Luau*

The boards weren't out for long, but do add spice to the party. If you have more room and can talk to local board shop, you can have a paddle board display as well. My surf shop has a large sign on the side where pictures are taken. Things like these are always fun party/luau things. The only problem with a board display though is that someone has to be around to watch the boards and put them away if and when the party really gets started.



A couple of other luau fun things, particularly if you have younger kids, is getting someone to paint water based tattoos, having a swing set available, and putting up a wading pool. We've had them all and they worked out well.

One thing I like to do is give a tour of my surf room. My wife finally gave me

a room where I can exhibit some of my surfing things of interest and hang all my pictures. There is a story that goes behind each and every item and picture there and



telling the story seem to get a lot of interest every time someone wants the tour. I've also been to a surf party in Virginia Beach that had a room set-up similar to mine.

We sometimes like to barbecue a fresh fish on our grill for those who show up early. It's sort of like another level of finger food. Take a good size fish, fill it with seasoning, onions and a cut up lemon, then wrap it in tinfoil and put it on the grill. Provide small plates and forks or toothpicks and wow, what a treat. By the way, we found some neat oriental type two prong colored plastic toothpicks in an oriental trader catalog that are themselves a keepsake.



*Lei Wearing Luau Goers Neal, Myself, Rod and KC Getting a Surf Room Tour*

Lei's are a must. I've got a great one that I wear at my parties. I also like to buy a couple of

dozen to give out whenever someone shows up without one. We always tell them that this will be the first party they've been to where we can guarantee everyone gets lei'd.



*You Never Know What Will Happen When The Luau Gets Going - Mike, Walt & Kevin in Costume*

dozen to give out whenever someone shows up without one. We always tell them that this will be the first party they've been to where we can guarantee everyone gets lei'd. One other suggestion I have if you are strapped for space. I attend one party every year that's held in a very large rented tent behind the host's house next to their pool. A tent can be decorated a number of ways inside, isn't impacted by rain, your floor doesn't need a serious cleaning after if something spills, and you can invite as many folks as the tent will hold.

you are a die-hard, be ready to get up early and hit the surf. Also, be ready for unexpected surprises both during and after the party is over.

### **Finally**

Party seriously and have some rules. If

Several years ago, one of those at the party ran their car just off my driveway across the creek. She didn't tell us until late when the party was winding down and everyone wanted to leave. It took about 20 of us to physically pull/push her car back onto the road. One year, my surf partner Jeff Marlow decided he would show up early for my luau and park down in the yard so there would be more room for others to park. It rained and he got stuck. After getting muddy we gave up trying to push him out and waited until the next day when he could get a tractor in to pull him. All I can say is the fist golden rule for hosting a surf party is "BE READY FOR THE UNEXPECTED BOTH BEFORE AND AFTER."



Surf parties themselves can get wild as well. At a surf party I attended several years ago, a female partier in costume decided to get up on a table and dance for everyone. When she started to take her top off, someone's wife got upset and tried to pull her off the table. The table broke and she broke her wrist. In the meantime, both husband and boyfriend decided to get into an argument that just about ended the party. Another time some kids in front staged a fight so their friends could heist the keg out the back door. Just remember who you invited, who showed up and what should be considered appropriate behavior for those present. It's not bad when you are a little older and have a smaller group of friends, but the younger crew today does tend to do the same kinds of things we did years ago. Therefore, my second golden rule for hosting a surf party is to "KEEP IT UNDER CONTROL"

Authors Note: The majority, but not all of pictures herein were taken at local surf club parties, luaus or at my home during my annual luau.



*The Shop Sign at the Driveway Was Easy to Spot*