The 2026 FIFA Men’s World Cup Games: Implications for cross-border travel in Cascadia

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INTRODUCTION

In July 2023, Taylor Swift played a weekend of concerts in Seattle, drawing over 1 million visitors to the city. The stadium crowd was so enthusiastic, they produced a ‘Swiftquake’ equivalent to a 2.3 magnitude earthquake.1 That same weekend, the Toronto Blue Jays faced off against the Seattle Mariners just across the street. Both events sold out of tickets. The City of Seattle planned and prepared to be descended upon by Swifties and baseball fans alike. What was perhaps less anticipated was the impact these two events had on border crossers from British Columbia. Not only was there the typical traffic associated with Canadians attending a Jays game in Seattle. There were the Swifties, which were not only people with tickets to the show, but also people who wanted to partake in the overall festivities.2 Wait times at the Blaine crossings into the US peaked at over three hours.3 The result at the border led to significant disruptions for many travelers. Travelers arriving at the border at 2pm hoping to catch some tailgating or buy some merch prior to the Saturday show were lucky if they made it to the opening act. The Swiftie/Jays combo brought the largest number of visitors to Seattle since before the pandemic.

The attendance at those events is likely to be repeated, and perhaps surpassed, when the FIFA Men’s World Cup Games come to the region in 2026. This Border Policy Brief lays out several suggestions and key considerations related to regional cross-border travel between Canada and the US during the 2026 FIFA World Cup.

BACKGROUND

The games will be held in 16 cities throughout North America, with Seattle hosting 6 games and Vancouver hosting 7, and undoubtedly selling out their respective stadium capacities (69,000 in Seattle and 54,000 in Vancouver). Seattle estimates drawing between 400,000 to 750,000 4, and Vancouver expects to see up to 900,000 people during the games.5 The Games themselves will draw crowds of fans who attend off-site watching events and participate in the festivities, even if they don’t have tickets to the games (similar to the Swifties). In addition, many travelers from outside of the region will take advantage of a plethora of tourism activities in the broader Cascadia region.

With the games being held in both Seattle and Vancouver, a mere 145 miles away from each other, many fans will be crossing the border between B.C. and Washington to attend events in both places.Unlike the Swifties/Jays event, these travelers will be coming from all over the world. Some will need visas for the US but not for Canada, others will need electronic travel authorizations, and many will not be familiar with entry requirements, which not only vary between the US and Canada, but also vary by mode of travel. For example, an Enhanced Driver’s License is acceptable at a land border crossing but not for air travel. This combination of increased volumes, as well as more diverse travelers, could present considerable delays. With the games rapidly approaching, major planning efforts are underway, yet these largely remain state-centric and overlook the cross-border aspect of travel, particularly in both directions. This is especially an issue at land borders, where travelers can’t necessarily be informed ahead of time about entry requirements.
Border Management

Canada Border Services Agency and US Customs and Border Protection have several tools to facilitate the movement of travelers across the border. They can increase staffing levels, yet still face infrastructure constraints (there are only so many booths available). It is through the use of technology – primarily the submission of advanced traveler information through apps such as ArriveCAN and CBP One – that travelers can be processed more efficiently, reducing pressure both on staff and on wait-times. While both agencies are actively expanding their use of technology to collect traveler information prior to arrival at the border, they are using different apps, with different requirements, which inhibits their uptake. For the frequent traveler, these programs are still nascent. For the occasional, or uninformed, border crosser, these unaligned systems create confusion and inefficiency.

Educated Travelers

While technology can facilitate cross-border travel, such tools only work if travelers are aware of them and know how to use them. In the case of the World Cup games in Cascadia, there will be three main types of cross-border travelers: those living in the region who already cross the border regularly (summer is the peak season for cross-border travel); citizens or permanent residents of Canada or the US who may have little experience crossing the border but only need an acceptable form of ID; and third country nationals from both visa waiver countries and those needing visas. It is this last group that has more complex entry requirements, particularly if they plan to travel to both the US and Canada. There is a significant need, and opportunity, for the tourism industry to fill the existing gap in education and outreach of travelers across modes, particularly for travelers in both directions.

Cross-Border Travel Routes and the Games

The map on the left displays the 5 land border crossings and 3 marine routes connecting BC and Washington. Additionally, there are multiple air connections. The Amtrak passenger train follows the I-5 corridor.

Scheduled Cross-Border Service by Mode

- **Train**: Amtrak
- **Bus**: Greyhound, Flixbus, Quick Shuttle
- **Seaplane**: Kenmore Air, Harbour Air
- **Air**: Various commercial carriers
- **Ferry**: Blackball Ferry, Victoria Clipper, Washington State Ferry

The games will be held throughout North America, but Cascadia is the only region where they straddle either side the border. As shown in the table below, most game dates alternate between Seattle and Vancouver. Due to the proximity of the two cities, this will contribute to an increase of visitors travelling across the border in various modes to attend games in both locations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Game Dates</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>June 13</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 15</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 18</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 19</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 21</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
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<tr>
<td>June 24</td>
<td>Vancouver &amp; Seattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June 26</td>
<td>Vancouver &amp; Seattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 1</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 2</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
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<tr>
<td>July 6</td>
<td>Seattle</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>July 7</td>
<td>Vancouver</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Map: Cross-Border Travel Routes Between BC and WA in the Cascadia Region

*The Anacortes/Sidney ferry route is currently not in service.*
The following information is relevant:

- What documents are needed for different modes of travel and for different compositions of travelers (i.e., minors, mixed families)?

- What options exist for cross-border routes (i.e., the ‘truck crossing’ is open to all travelers)? How can travelers utilize the wait-time system to navigate to the best crossing?

- What information can be submitted in advance? How can ArriveCAN and CBP One be used at the land border?

**Differences in visa requirements and travel authorizations**

The US and Canada both maintain a list of countries whose visitors are visa exempt. While most of these countries are the same, there are some exceptions. Between the two, there are at least 9 countries whose travelers do not need a visa to enter Canada but do need one to enter the US.

Canada requires visa exempt travelers to have an Electronic Travel Authorization (ETA) only for air travel, but not to enter Canada by land or sea. The US, however, requires travelers under their Visa Waiver Program to have an Electronic Secure Travel Authorization (ESTA) regardless of mode. It is apparent how travelers wanting to visit both countries may get easily confused. One very likely scenario is that a visa exempt foreign national arrives in Canada with an ETA. When they attempt to cross the US land border to attend a game in Seattle, they are sent to secondary inspection because they don’t have an ESTA, which is required for travelers from visa waiver countries to the US (regardless of mode). This causes them to miss half of the game they traveled so far to see.

To complicate matters even more, Canada also allows travelers who meet specific requirements from a handful of visa-required countries to enter with only an ETA. However, this only applies to air arrivals. A visa is still required from these same travelers at land and marine borders. The countries that fall in this category that are of most relevance to the 2026 Games include Argentina, Brazil, Costa Rica, Panama, and Uruguay.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

Streamlining cross-border travel in anticipation of the games should also create long lasting benefits to the region. The recommendations below could be pursued prior to the games:

- Develop a “know before you go” public outreach campaign with local and regional stakeholders to educate travelers about cross-border requirements.

- Conduct NEXUS ‘blitzes’ via mobile enrollment events to get as many people enrolled as possible. Increasing participation reduces pressure and wait times on the overall system, enabling more people to be processed more quickly. This will facilitate cross-border travel both during the games and after.

- With the implementation of the REAL ID Act in the US in 2025, there is also an opportunity to expand the use of Enhanced Drivers Licenses (EDLs), which can be used to cross the land border more quickly.

- Pilot the ‘READY Lane’ concept using ArriveCAN and CBP One at one of the land crossings. Analyze lessons learned to better inform how dynamic lane management, and expanded advanced passenger information, can best be utilized.

**CONCLUSION**

The 2026 FIFA Men’s World Cup is being billed as the ‘biggest tournament of all time.” In addition to the stadium attendance, an estimated 4 billion people will be watching the games. It is truly a time that Vancouver, Seattle, and the Cascadia region will be on the global stage. It’s an opportunity for our region to show the world that strong cross-border relations and cooperation can facilitate a great tourism experience. Organizations such as the Future Borders Coalition and the Pacific Northwest Economic Region are actively engaged in bringing together stakeholders throughout Cascadia to facilitate dialogue to address some of the issues raised in this Brief. Their comprehensive focus on the challenges related to cross-border travel between the US and Canada in both directions and across modes of travel is critical to our success.

The Games present a rare opportunity to innovate and advance the cross-border travel experience in our region and build on past successes such as the creation of EDLs introduced prior to the 2010 Vancouver Olympics. If people wait at the border for 3 hours, if they miss their bus, train, or flight because they got stuck at the border, or didn’t have the right documents, that opportunity will be missed. Instead, we will encounter a longer and bigger repeat of the Swiftie/Jays event, with social media posts reflecting the unpredictability of cross-border travel that was expressed that weekend: “Wish me luck today. I need to cross the border.”
ENDNOTES


3. Some travelers reported wait times as high as five hours, but recorded data only reached 3 hours, available here: https://www.cascadegatewaydata.com/Dashboard?cookieCheck=true NEXUS wait time were much lower, however many travelers reported being unable to access the NEXUS lane due to the long back-up of cars.


6. Passport, passport card, enhanced drivers license, Tribal ID, NEXUS, etc.

7. https://digitalhub.fifa.com/m/1be9ce37eb98fccc5/original/FWC26-Match-Schedule_English.pdf

8. For Canadian list, see https://www.canada.ca/en/immigration-refugees-citizenship/services/visit-canada/entry-requirements-country.html#visaExempt. For US, see https://www.dhs.gov/visa-waiver-program

9. Bulgaria, Cyprus, Hong Kong, Mexico, Papua New Guinea, Romania, Samoa, Solomon Islands, United Arab Emirates, plus a number of British overseas territories.


12. See, Future Borders Coalition: https://www.futureborderscoalition.org

13. See, Pacific Northwest Economic Region: PNWER.org