Travel Trends

SMARInsights

Prepared for Visit Williamsburg and the Williamsburg Tourism Council

June 2026

Summer 2026 Itineraries

This summer, travel planning for American destinations has been largely shaped by major events, including the World Cup, America's 250th anniversary, as well as the 100th anniversary of the "Mother Road," Route 66.

Per Expedia's *Unpack '26: The Trends in Travel* report, event travelers want more than tickets to the big event—they are also seeking authentic local experiences and cultural connections to enrich their vacation. They want to experience more out of the destination on their trip, rather than make their itinerary all about the event they are traveling for.

For a majority of travelers, these intentional travel decisions partially reflect growing inflation and consumer efforts to get the most "bang" for their buck. Per Airbnb data, the "bang" this summer might look like lodging under $500 per night and local experiences under $100 per person.

At the same time, luxury travel has continued to see strong demand from more affluent consumers—indicative of a growing K-shaped economy.

Despite different budgets, recent trends indicate that all event travelers have changed the way they plan their vacations—namely, they are building their itineraries around *where* and *how*.

Where: Food, culture, nightlife, and local exploration are increasingly popular trip attributes for travelers. As such, they seek destinations known for these experiences—including secondary destinations that feel like a meaningful extension of the primary destination.

How: Per Hotels.com, 54% of travelers now want to book multiple hotels within a single destination, with 50% citing a desire to explore different neighborhoods and 35% looking to maximize deals and discounts. The remaining 15% are drawn to the flexibility, value, and opportunities for discovery that hotel hopping offers.

"Moving between neighborhoods lets you see the many sides of a destination, how locals live beyond the tourist zones, how culture changes block to block. Staying in multiple places gives you a richer, more nuanced sense of place…It's a way of travel that keeps you curious."
-Meagan Drillinger for Yahoo! Creators

These trends among event travelers align with general trends the tourism industry has seen so far in 2026—across the board, travelers are prioritizing emotional resonance and intentional experiences on their trips.

Secondary Destinations to See Visitor Spikes

Secondary destinations outside of major metro areas are seeing big gains. Visitors are increasingly traveling outside of host cities (whether they are hotel hopping or day tripping). There is also a rising trend of travelers extending vacations into surrounding areas. By extending their trips beyond major cities, travelers are creating a wider set of benefits for smaller destinations.

Large events can re-shape how consumers move throughout a region—a point underscored by recent World Cup travel.

Forbes reports that base camp communities for the event attracted an influx of supporters this spring, creating a "parallel economy" with host cities. Additionally, with matches spread across several destinations, these travelers are more open to road trips and exploring the locales in between.

Secondary destinations that have seen an uptick in visitation because of the World Cup include Niagara Falls, Jersey Shore, Fort Worth, Olympic Peninsula, and Fort Lauderdale, among several other cities.

Another key factor pushing travelers to secondary destinations is high lodging prices. Per *The Economic Times*, travelers would rather be flexible on affordable destinations than cancel a trip due to costs. Because lodging is typically responsible for the bulk of vacation expenses, consumers try to narrow down those expenses first.

Iconic Events Influencing Travel

As mentioned previously, Summer 2026 is poised to be a successful travel season in America because of the World Cup, America 250, and the Route 66 centenary—iconic events with international and domestic draw.

The World Cup has overcome inflation, immigration concerns. Per FIFA data, total attendance topped 2.85 million across 44 matches, and stadiums were

99.6% full. Nicholas P. Brown, a writer for Reuters, explains that it is "…less of a reflection of American fondness for soccer, and more a measure of its love for spectacle."

He adds that, despite resentment towards dynamic pricing models for match tickets, consumers seem to be making the ticket purchases "more intentional" by offsetting costs with cheaper accommodations and food.

Brown also addresses previous immigration concerns for international travelers attending the World Cup. Though projections for inbound travel for the event wavered earlier in the year, a strong turnout nevertheless developed.

Spectacular celebrations and commemorative events will mark America's 250th birthday. History buffs can get their fill of American spirit by attending a variety of historic re-enactments and nationwide festivals celebrating 250 years of independence. Celebrations will hit their peak around July 4th and will continue through the rest of the year.

Per AAA, 72.2 million Americans have planned Fourth of July travel so they can partake in America 250 festivities (this travel will occur at least 50 miles from home between June 27–July 5). This number is up from 71.8 million travelers last year.

Travelers will get their kicks on Route 66. Spanning 2,500 miles and passing through eight states, the cross-country road will see a wealth of centenary celebrations—and a wealth of corresponding road trips. Future Partners reports that 51.9% of Americans are interested in traveling for Route 66 centennial celebrations.

Sources:
The Economic Times, Expedia (1, 2), Airbnb, CT Insider, Reuters (1, 2), MarketWatch, Visit USA, Future Partners, Forbes, Trove, Hotels.com, Yahoo! Creators

In Summary:

- This summer, travel planning for American destinations has been (and will continue to be) largely shaped by major events. Event travelers want more than tickets to the big event—they are also seeking authentic local experiences and cultural connections to enrich their vacation. These trends among event travelers align with general trends the tourism industry has seen so far in 2026.
- Large events (such as the World Cup) can re-shape how consumers move throughout a region. Visitors are increasingly traveling outside of host cities (whether they are hotel hopping or day tripping). Travelers are extending vacations into surrounding areas. By extending their trips beyond major cities, travelers are creating a wider set of benefits for smaller destinations. Another key factor pushing travelers to secondary destinations is high lodging prices.
- Summer 2026 is poised to be a successful travel season in America because of iconic events with international and domestic draw.