Travel Trends

SMARInsights

Prepared for Visit Williamsburg and the Williamsburg Tourism Council

September 2026

A Subculture of Experiential Travel

Modern traveler behavior has shifted to focus less on the destination than why they go where they go. Historically, travelers have leaned into visiting iconic landmarks and leisure sites; however, these experiences have lost much of their charm and novelty in the internet era, with the digital media landscape blurring perceived and lived experiences. Diverging from tradition, a growing trend has risen to the forefront of 2026 travel, influenced by the prevalence of recent World Cup tourism: “groundhopping.”

Though the trend isn’t new and has deep roots grounded in European football culture, "groundhopping"—visiting as many sports stadiums as possible on game-days, “collecting” stadium experiences—is firmly situated in its own corner of the 2026 experiential tourism trend. It sits at the crossroads of place-based narrative and destination exploration.

Groundhoppers plan their trips around specific attractions and venues—which, in turn, shapes their geographic movement and local discovery. This trend spotlights cities that are usually considered “secondary” destinations and are traditionally overlooked by travelers. This transforms the value of these places in the travel industry, expanding perceived desirability, familiarity, and economic vitality.

The Rules of Groundhopping

Tenets of groundhopping include the following:

The standard group tour does not meet criteria. Rather, a groundhopper must attend an athletic event through its entire duration. In the U.S., seasonal sports calendars are especially important to stadium experience “collectors,” enabling them to plan their trips accordingly so that they can participate in sports functions from start to finish.

“Citymaxxing” and “groundmaxxing” are key for groundhopping, as they spur these travelers to cover more ground during their trip. Citymaxxing is the practice of building a travel itinerary that utilizes continuous movement in a defined area, avoiding traditional practices that might be considered static, such as formulaic visits to iconic attractions that might be overcrowded. Groundmaxxing aligns with citymaxxing in that it focuses on efficient

travel within a geographic cluster in order to maximize time spent in a chosen destination.

Getting to the event is as appealing as the event itself. Associated with groundmaxxing, transportation to an event becomes part of the trip itself, transforming a typically monotonous task into a sort of choose-your-own-adventure.

Technology Behind the Trend

In a travel landscape where trip planning is increasingly digitized, groundhoppers have adopted real-time transit tracking applications to map and time their travel within a destination. These optimization tools provide a broad digital framework for users to optimize their arrival to and experience within their desired venue. Specifically, these tools can track venue goals, provide personalized venue maps, and emulate travel agents by identifying surrounding sports venues with upcoming events to attend. Example platforms include Futbology, Sports Venue Tracker, Sports Tracker, StadiumJourney, and Mappedin.

Economic Dynamics of Groundhopping

The K-shaped economy has divided groundhoppers into two distinct segments: high-end corporate venue travelers and independent local venue travelers.

Wealthier consumers more often find themselves in modern, tech-driven stadiums that were designed to be multipurpose entertainment venues—frequently seeing expensive tickets that fluctuate with dynamic pricing models and soaring, secondary ticket marketplace markups.

Travelers who prioritize independent local venues tend to be more budget-conscious and seek low-cost, community-oriented alternatives that promise local character. Rather than navigating the financial constraints of attending premier sporting events at high-end venues, these groundhoppers prefer non-league, minor league, and collegiate athletic venues with less marketing presence. These smaller, less-expensive locations allow visitors to sit closer to the action and experience the full perimeter of the stadium.

Regardless of where these travelers are positioned on the “K,” the contemporary stadium collector witnesses a type of genuine authenticity unseen at several iconic tourism hotspots. Storytelling is key for

sporting venues; often, built-in narratives and shared rituals among attendees help travelers find meaning in their journey. The decision to travel to stadium events reflects a desire for shared identity and camaraderie.

Distinguishing Sports Tourism and Groundhopping

While both trends exist under the umbrella of experiential tourism, there are distinct differences between the two. These differences lie in primary motivation, destination choice, frequency, and spend.

Conventional sports tourism centers fan loyalty to a team. These teams have fixed locations for sports tourists to visit, as well as official merchandise and elite tournament dates that drive up visitor spending. With that said, these trips have set travel dates and are accompanied by hopes that the team will be successful.

Groundhoppers have more of a neutral approach, making the stadium itself the priority over the hosted event. They are interested in the novelty and atmosphere of the stadiums they visit, and they are flexible with destination choice—what matters most is collecting the stadium experience and checking it off their bucket list. With less focus on merchandise and tournament spending, groundhoppers can afford to visit more stadiums at a higher frequency across multiple types of sports.

Groundhopping is ultimately an inquiry into the social contract of a sports community, immersing the visitor in the story of the stadium and related fans.

Sources:
BundesTrip, falstaff TRAVEL, Football Ground Guide, Futbology, Medium, Nottingham City Football Club, OurGameplan, Ovals, QUE.com, Spears, Travel Pulse, TravelAge West [1, 2]

In Summary

- “Groundhopping” has risen to the forefront of 2026 travel, influenced by the prevalence of recent World Cup travel.
- Groundhopping—visiting as many sports stadiums as possible on game-days, “collecting” stadium experiences—is firmly situated in its own corner of the 2026 experiential tourism trend. It sits at the crossroads of place-based narrative and destination exploration.
- The rules of groundhopping include attending an event at a stadium from start to finish, building a travel itinerary that utilizes continuous movement in a defined area, and efficient travel within a geographic cluster in order to maximize time in a destination.
- The decision to travel to stadium events reflects a desire for shared identity and camaraderie.
- While sports tourism and groundhopping exist under the umbrella of experiential tourism, there are distinct differences between the two. These differences lie in primary motivation, destination choice, frequency, and spend.
- Groundhopping is ultimately an inquiry into the social contract of a sports community, immersing the visitor in the story of the stadium and its related fans.