

Hotels Are Hoping For a Last-Minute World Cup Surge. Will It Come?



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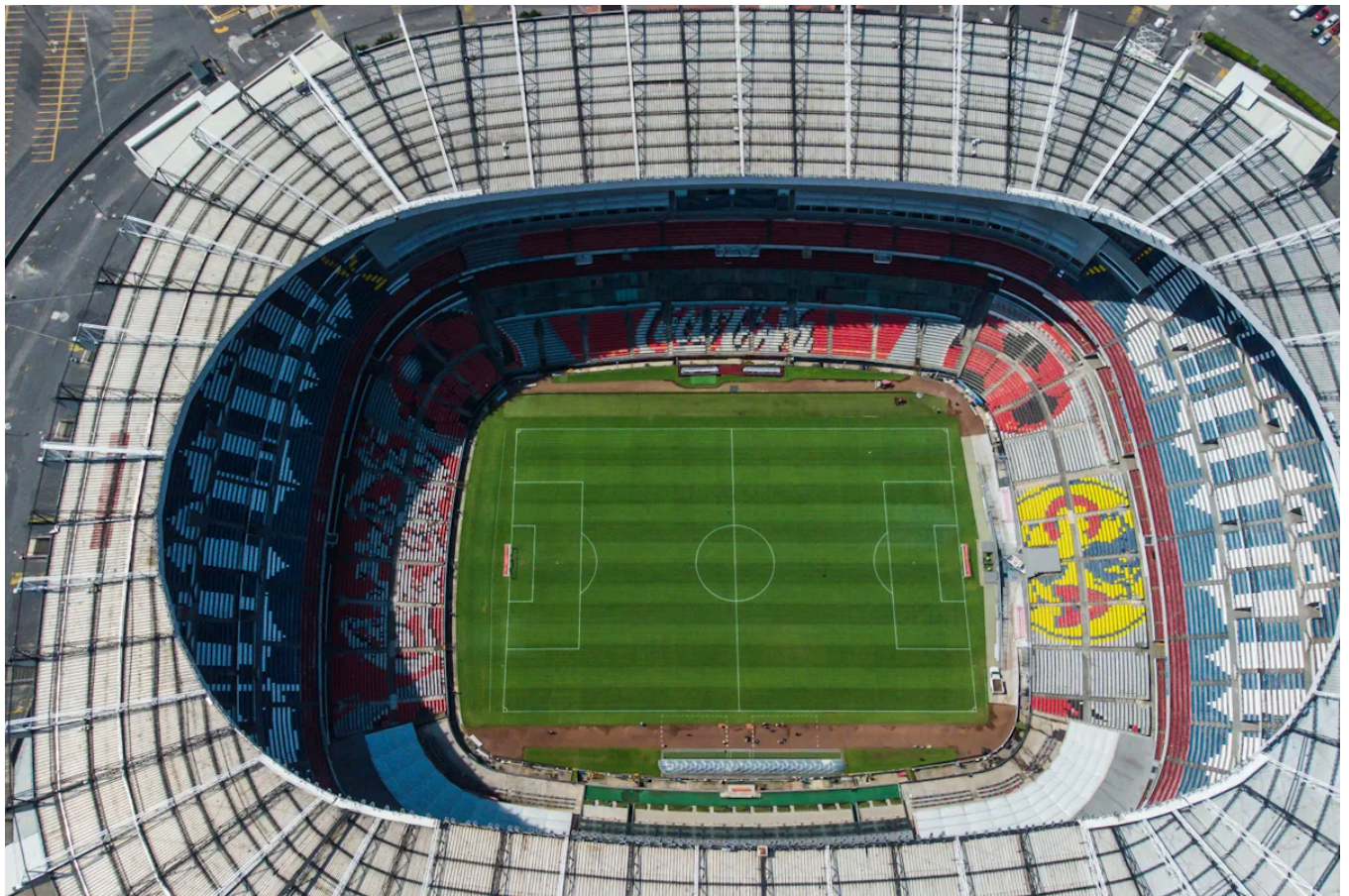


PHOTO CREDIT: AERIAL VIEW OF ESTADIO AZTECA MEXICO CITY, A VENUE FOR THE 2026 WORLD CUP. [ADOBE STOCK / RNL FOTOGRAFIA](#)

SKIFT TAKE

Operators are banking spur-of-the-moment travel from soccer fans who want to see their favorite teams play in the World Cup. Data suggests there are reasons to be optimistic, but it's still not clear how big of a surge last-minute bookings will bring.

The World Cup is here. The booking surge many hotels were expecting isn't — at least not yet.

At the start of 2026, hotels hiked prices and set minimum-stay requirements in anticipation of the World Cup, according to Evan Saunders, senior vice president of travel at Azira, a consumer insights platform that works with tourism boards and hotels.

By the time March rolled around, properties faced a “reality check associated with the lack of demand.”

The hope from operators is that bookings within the 16 host cities in the United States, Mexico, and Canada will spike once soccer fans know which teams are playing in later-stage matches. Early group-stage matches kick off Thursday afternoon in Mexico, but it’s still not clear which teams will advance to the knockout rounds that run from June 28 through the July 19 final.

“It’s right to say that at this point in time the pickup has not been what we expected, period,” Jonathan Goldstein, CEO of investment management firm Cain, said at the NYU International Hospitality Investment Forum in early June. While group-stage demand is expected to be soft, he expects a “big” surge toward the end of the tournament.

Jon Bortz, CEO of real estate investment trust Pebblebrook, previously said 70% of business was booked within 30 days of the matches for the last World Cup in 2022.

This year could play out in a similar fashion:

- Daily searches for June 29-30 flight departures jumped 40% from May to June compared to an 18% increase the prior month, according to Amadeus Travel Intelligence. This signals a “major surge” of travel intent tied to knockout-stage travel, according to a June report.
- Azira tracked an uptick in last-minute bookings for group-stage games over the past two weeks, although trends are “wildly uneven” across match dates.
- AirDNA also tracked a sharp uptick in short-term rental bookings leading up to the tournament. Host market bookings during the group stage have more than doubled since April 18 from roughly 1 million to nearly 2.3 million.

“Pacing remains strong,” said AirDNA economist Bram Gallagher. But “there are risks as this is an unprecedented event in an uncertain time in global politics and economics, and that’s worth acknowledging.”

On-Field Results

Which teams advance will be a key factor.

Take the 2014 World Cup hosted in Brazil. The tournament brought in an estimated 1 million more international visitors, far ahead of the Brazilian Ministry of Sports’ forecast for 600,000. But roughly

one-quarter of that boost was because Argentina's national team advanced to the final, according to research co-authored by Victor Matheson, a professor and sports economist at the College of the Holy Cross in Massachusetts.

"You had this gigantic surge of people driving from Buenos Aires to Rio just to be in the town, even though they didn't have tickets," Matheson said. "Had Belgium made it instead of Argentina or Uruguay made it instead of Argentina, those numbers are likely to be much, much lower."

Star players' presence could also influence demand — especially knowing this could be the last World Cup to feature Cristiano Ronaldo.

"A potential Messi vs. Ronaldo matchup in Miami would instantly become one of the most sought-after sporting events of all time," said Gilad Zilberman, CEO and co-founder of SeatPick.

Ticket Costs Influence Demand

Fans who have so far held off on World Cup bookings within the 16 host markets could save money on lodging, according to Daniel Foreman, commercial strategist at Lighthouse.

"Hotel prices, with just a few exceptions, continue their decline right up to kickoff when compared to their all time observed pricing peaks," Foreman said. "We're seeing drops of at least 30% and in some cases even higher when you look at the group stage on average across all markets."

But other expenses like tickets and airfare could tick up for travelers waiting to book. With tickets already at record-high prices, the concern is some fans may be priced out.

Host cities are hoping fan festivals help draw in the more budget-conscious soccer fans without tickets, but Shafi Syed, global head of hotel development and acquisitions at Equinox Hotels, said in early June that demand trends in New York have been directly linked to ticket prices.

While the average price of the cheapest listed resale ticket for each group-stage match is down from its April peak, prices have picked up more than 10% over the past week, according to TicketData.

"If you're talking about all sports in general, more often than not, they [prices] go down," said Keith Pagello, TicketData's founder. "If you're looking at this World Cup, it doesn't necessarily look like that broad statement will hold."

He added that pricing trends will likely vary across matches, with certain games dropping ahead of kickoff.

Cheaper tickets could spur last-minute travel demand, according to Jan Freitag, national director of hospitality analytics for CoStar Group. But he said that's more likely to come from fans within

driving distance rather than the high-spending international crowds that need more lead time to plan their trip.

Concerns Over U.S. Entry

International tourists have grown more wary of travel to the U.S. in recent months, in part due to concerns over the Trump administration's immigration and entry policies.

International visitation dropped 5.5% in 2025, and Amadeus data shows international arrivals during the tournament are down about 4% from the same period last year.

Travel industry advocates have worked to paint the U.S. as a welcoming destination in the weeks leading up to the World Cup. But recent headlines on soccer fans, players, and staff facing difficulties entering the country have worked against that messaging.

"Many are expecting a spike in demand for the later rounds," said Erik Hansen, the U.S. Travel Association's senior vice president, head of government relations. But "negative headlines have the potential to send the wrong message and create the wrong perception about travel to the United States."

Some soccer fans from Scotland, for example, had their Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) form approvals withdrawn at the last minute, according to the BBC. Paul Goodwin, co-founder of the Scottish Football Supporters Association, said the number of affected fans appears to be approaching double figures, and the fan group has called on FIFA to intervene "to get this problem resolved as soon as possible."

Other reported entry challenges have piled up in recent days:

- Iraq's World Cup striker was held and questioned nearly seven hours at O'Hare in Chicago before he was allowed entry, according to Reuters. The team's photographer was ultimately denied entry "due to vetting concerns," according to a statement from U.S. Customs and Border Protection.
- A Somali referee was also denied entry after landing in Miami, with CBP again citing vetting concerns.
- Visas for more than a dozen members of the support staff for Iran's soccer team were rejected, according to the New York Times.
- The International Sports Press Association said there were "many cases" of accredited journalists from Iran and Africa who were given single entry visas that would prevent them from re-entering the U.S. if they follow a team to Canada or Mexico.

“It’s not helpful,” said Freitag. “They are anecdotes. And I’m not denying that they’re happening ... but the other side of it is that you have 104 games with tens of thousands of fans who will be entering the country on an ESTA visa without any problems. But that doesn’t make the news.”

Even if there is a last-minute wave of bookings from international travelers, Saunders said numbers may still fall short.

“This event is one of the largest opportunities ever to bring internationals overseas to America to be tourists,” Saunders said. “Will it bring back international visitation to levels we saw in 2023 and into 2024? No. In order to do that, we must drive further visitation from Canada, and the World Cup is not there to solve that current status.”

When reached for comment on fans’ ESTA applications that had been revoked, Lauren Bis, acting assistant secretary of public affairs for the Department of Homeland Security, said “an approved ESTA does not guarantee admission.”

“The Trump administration is enforcing immigration laws,” Bis said in an emailed statement. “Failure to disclose arrests or convictions constitutes misrepresentation and can lead to ESTA denial, revocation, or a permanent bar from entering the United States.”

The State Department said the agency adjudicates each visa application on a case-by-case basis, and the administration “will not waver in upholding U.S. law and the highest standards of national security and public safety in the conduct of our visa process.”



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Bailey is Skift’s global tourism reporter. Before joining Skift, she worked for USA TODAY’s money and travel sections and at the Las Vegas Review-Journal, where she covered the city’s casino industry and tourism. In her free time, she enjoys reading and traveling.

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