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From Best Friends to Elbows UP: Tourism Leaders Call Time Out on the U.S.– Canada Travel Meltdown

Remember when Canadians and Americans mostly argued about who invented basketball and who should have won the Stanley Cup or World Series? The Beyond Borders Tourism Coalition (BBTC) is now staring at a border relationship so strained that empty hotel rooms, quiet main streets and \$100 park surcharges are doing the talking – and none of it is good for tourism.

For generations, hopping the border for a weekend was as normal as debating how to pronounce “about,” but 2025 has delivered a plot twist worthy of a Louise Penny novel that nobody wants to read. Canadian trips to the U.S. by car have dropped close to 20 per cent, with some states reporting campground reservations from Canadians plunging by over 70 per cent. In places like Montana and New Hampshire, businesses that once counted on Canadians for up to 80 per cent of international visitors are now counting empty parking spots and reduced direct flights from Canada to the U.S. Even U.S. ski resorts are praying for more than just snow- but a shift in attitude that brings Canadians back to their slopes.

Meanwhile, U.S. tourism operators are watching long-standing cross-border itineraries unravel as travelers decide that surprise fees, tariffs and tense headlines are not their idea of vacation planning. Border towns that used to measure success in sold-out weekends are now measuring it in deeply discounted shoulder seasons.

And nothing says “we value this relationship” quite like a brand-new \$100 per-person surcharge just for foreign visitors at some of the most iconic U.S. national parks, layered neatly on top of existing entrance fees. At the same time, international visitors will soon pay more than triple for an annual pass, while U.S. residents keep paying the old rate – because nothing builds goodwill like a two-tier price tag at the front gate.

Tour operators, who sold 2026 trips 12–18 months ago, are now being told to magically make these costs disappear or pass them on mid-contract. Group travel via motorcoach generated nearly \$70 billion in direct traveler spending and more than 890,000 U.S. jobs in 2024, but international group bookings are already reported to be down 30 per cent, a number that makes rural gateway communities feel like abandoned cottage country.

In case surprise park fees were not enough, a steady drumbeat of tariffs, “pay your fair share” soundbites and even casual chatter about annexation has turned what used to be a friendly border into a running joke on late-night TV, which is a lot less funny for people whose livelihoods depend on tourism. Canadians, who once made more than 20 million trips a year to the U.S., are now quietly voting with their passports and staying home or exploring abroad. And U.S. travelers are wondering just how welcome they are in the Great White North these days, with Canadian marketers trying hard to convince them that [there will forever be a welcoming seat at the table.](#)

On the Canadian side, destinations that have spent decades building cross-border relationships – including Indigenous and rural communities – are now watching carefully laid plans wobble every time a new tariff, fee or rhetorical grenade gets lobbed across the 49th. For an industry built on long lead times and trust, this kind of policy whiplash feels less like economic strategy and more like an expensive game of twister.

Finally, for everyday Canadians and international visitors, the idea that a border officer might scroll through holiday posts, political memes or decade-old concert photos is not exactly the welcome mat they had in mind – and industry groups warn it risks a serious “chilling effect” on tourism as travelers quietly choose destinations where their newsfeeds are not part of the customs experience.

The Beyond Borders Tourism Coalition is a united front of major associations who would rather be promoting increased visitation than explaining new surcharges:

- **United States Tour Operators Association (USTOA)** and **Canadian Association of Tour Operators (CATO)**, whose members move millions of travelers across and between both countries every year.
- **American Bus Association (ABA)**, **United Motorcoach Association (UMA)** and group-travel partners who literally drive visitors – and their spending – into small towns, parks and attractions.
- **Adventure Travel Trade Association (ATTA)**, **National Tour Association (NTA)**, **International Inbound Travel Association (IITA)** and **Student & Youth Travel Association (SYTA)**, representing everyone from first-time student travelers to high-value international visitors deciding whether getting around North America still feels welcoming.
- **Indigenous Tourism Association of Canada (ITAC)**, **America Indigenous Tourism Association (AITA)**, and **Destination Original Indigenous Tourism (DOIT)**, for whom cross-border visitation supports cultural exchange as much as it does local jobs often in rural and remote communities.
- **Destinations International**, the global association for destination organizations, brings the voice of hundreds of U.S. and Canadian tourism boards and convention and visitors bureaus that see the fallout of border uncertainty play out in real time on their main streets, meeting calendars and hotel tax receipts.

Collectively, these organizations represent thousands of businesses and hundreds of thousands of workers who are all asking the same question: **How did we go from “world’s longest peaceful border” to “world’s least predictable vacation destinations”?**

The Coalition is simply asking for better policies. Recommendations include:

- **Stop the surprise-fee era:** No more dropping major price changes – like per-person international park surcharges or new CUA fee structures – into a season that was sold a year and a half ago. Give operators clear timelines, real consultation and enough runway to adjust without blowing up contracts and customer trust.

- **Dial down the tariff theatrics:** Reassess travel-related tariffs and cross-border costs that may play well in a soundbite but quietly drain billions from border economies and small businesses.
- **Retire the tough-talk tourism strategy:** Replace annexation jokes and “foreigners must pay up” messages with pro-tourism, pro-trade language that reflects how many jobs, tax dollars and community projects rely on visitors from our neighbouring countries.
- **Invest in the relationship, not just the rhetoric:** Back joint marketing, recovery programs and support for gateway and Indigenous communities so they are not left holding the bill for policies they did not design.

The Beyond Borders Tourism Coalition is asking leaders in Washington, Ottawa and every border state and province to do something radical: treat the U.S.–Canada tourism relationship like the valuable asset it is.

“Every \$100 surprise at a park gate, every new tariff, every off-the-cuff negative comment about our closest neighbour sends a signal,” says Shannon Stowell, President of the ATTA and initial founder of the BBTC “Right now, that signal is: ‘Maybe don’t come or maybe you won’t be welcome.’ Our ask is simple: stop making it harder and more expensive for Canadians and Americans to visit each other and start acting like the longest undefended border in the world, and our subsequent longstanding relationships, are still something worth exploring and protecting— together.”

To learn more or join the call for a saner, more sustainable approach to cross-border tourism, visit www.beyondborderstourismcoalition.com.

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