

What to expect when the Rugby Sevens comes to Vancouver

Matt O'Grady | SEP 21, 2015



The Rugby Sevens—coming to Vancouver, and Canada, for the first time next year—are a raucous good time, as the flagship Hong Kong tournament proves

It's late Saturday afternoon on day two of the Hong Kong Sevens—an iconic global rugby tournament celebrating its 40th anniversary—and I'm watching my hometown team, Canada, face off against the powerhouse squad from Fiji (winners of 14 of the past 39 tournament cups). Canada has managed to squeak into Pool A of the tourney, but this game is a blowout: after 14 minutes, it's 45-to-nil.

Rugby Sevens is the fun and fast version of rugby union, with only seven players lining up for each team (compared to 15 for the full version) and matches lasting just 14 minutes (20 minutes for the final). Still, here in the 52-year-old Hong Kong Stadium, steps from tony Causeway Bay, most of the estimated 40,000 fans are not watching the action on the field, whatever their allegiances, and whichever rotating cast of 28 countries are pairing off in competition. No, all eyes are trained on the action in the stands, and particularly the sun-drenched and alcohol-soaked 18-plus South Stands, where nationals from Australia, Canada, the U.S., Mexico, Portugal and beyond—dressed as cavemen and cavewomen, hula girls and naughty nuns, cans of soy sauce and '80s rockers ZZ Top—sing, dance and, with some regularity, fall flat on their faces.

The Hong Kong Sevens is stop number six on the 10-city World Rugby Sevens tour and takes place annually on a weekend in late March. It's become a major tourist draw for the city, with an estimated 120,000 people coming to Hong Kong for the weekend, generating \$40 million from international visitors and bringing in big-time sponsors like HSBC and Cathay Pacific (more on Cathay's involvement on the opposite page). And now, Canada—specifically, Vancouver—is going to get a beer-soaked taste of the Sevens when BC Place hosts a two-day tourney stop for the first time ever in March 2016. Exact dates were expected to be announced over the summer, with tournament passes going on sale in early September, but already corporate suites have sold out.

"Vancouver is a world-renowned event location and a city with a tremendous track record of hosting incredible events," said World Rugby chair Bernard Lapasset when the four-year contract was awarded to Vancouver in February. "Its inclusion within a stellar Series hosting line-up is great for players, great for fans and great for the ongoing prosperity and development of rugby in Canada and around the globe." Rugby Canada officials hope that Vancouver's "Canada Sevens" will help bolster the sport's domestic popularity—on the rise thanks to Canada ranking as one of World Rugby's Top 15 teams—while local tourism officials hope that a little bit of the Hong Kong Sevens magic will rub off on Vancouver and help draw more international visitors. (Initially, however, Canada Sevens organizers appear to have more modest expectations, with only BC Place's 20,000-seat lower bowl configuration being put into use for the tournament.)

As the sun starts to set on Hong Kong Stadium, and with Canada officially out of the running (Fiji goes on to beat New Zealand in the final match on Sunday, winning their 15th Hong Kong cup), I start to wind my way through the swaying crowd, hoping to find an exit from the South Stands. I run into Pascal Nadaud, a handsome player from the Mexican team who is sharing drinks, and several selfies, with a pair of 20-something women. "So you're done?" I ask in Spanish. Apparently, Mexico is ranked lower than Canada—only cracking the Sevens' qualifier tournament—and Pascal's last game finished at 10 a.m. "Not done," he replies with a smile on his face. "The party is just beginning."

Cathay is not your father's business class

Cathay Pacific has been one of the title sponsors and the official airline of the Hong Kong Sevens for over 30 years. As part of its partnership with the tournament, Cathay, in conjunction with Rugby Canada and the BC Rugby Union, offers special "Fly 'n' See" packages to help local rugby enthusiasts get in on the Hong Kong action (wherever it may be). A package for the weekend festivities, which runs again in late March 2016 (after the Vancouver "Canada Sevens"), includes airfare plus a three-day event ticket. Prices and dates haven't been released for 2016 yet, but this year's packages were available for as little as \$1,575 for economy class and \$4,664 for business class.



And if you're going to travel the distance (13 hours-plus from YVR) and can stomach the step-up in price, business class is definitely the way to go. Global passengers regularly vote Cathay the world's best airline at the SkyTrax World Airline Awards, and travelling business class one can see why. From fully flat beds that measure two metres in length and entertainment centres with well-stocked libraries of movies, music and games to extensive menus offering everything from beef tenderloin to dim sum and vintage port to domestic beer (should you want to pre-drink for that first game), you'll arrive well rested and ready to rumble.