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World Cup comes to South Africa's smallest host city

By Gideon Long

NELSPRUIT, South Africa, June 18 (Reuters) - Drive to Nelspruit from Johannesburg, across the grasslands of the high veld and then down through the lush vegetation of the low veld, and the first thing you see as you approach the city is the football stadium.

With its green roof and bright orange roof supports, it looks from a distance like a giant spider with florescent legs, half-hidden in the undergrowth.

But get closer and the orange legs reveal themselves to be 18 steel giraffes, each 48 metres high. Step inside the Mbombela Stadium, and you find the 45,000 seats are painted in bold black and white zebra stripes.

In case you had any doubt, this is Africa.

Nelspruit, the smallest of the 10 World Cup host cities, is marketing itself on this quintessentially African imagery.

If you want a safari with your soccer, this is your place: the world famous Kruger National Park is an hour's drive away and South Africa's only chimpanzee sanctuary is just down the road.

Head north and you soon find yourself in a breathtaking landscape of deep gorges and craggy peaks. "God's Window", "Pilgrim's Rest", "Robbers' Pass" - the names on the signposts are evocative.

But behind the images of natural splendour that Nelspruit is presenting to the world during the World Cup, there lies a murkier reality. The construction of the \$140 million stadium was plagued by delays and controversy.

As one of Nelspruit's local newspapers, The Bush Telegraph, reminded its readers this week "there was some nasty goings-on to get the land for the venue".

Two schools had to be relocated and people in the nearby township of Mataffin complain they have yet to be fairly compensated.

"What good is this thing to us?" asked one resident of Mataffin, who identified herself only as Gwenda, as she pointed to the stadium from her garden, just a few hundreds metres away but separated from her by metal barriers.

"This football is no use to me."

Whether the stadium will be of use to anyone in this rural corner of South Africa will only become apparent once the World Cup is over.

While one can imagine the stadiums in Johannesburg, Durban and Cape Town being used for big sporting events and concerts, that is harder to picture in Nelspruit, an agricultural hub of 220,000 people.

Even at the opening World Cup match here, Chile's 1-0 defeat of Honduras, nearly a third of the seats were empty. Soccer's world governing body FIFA will be hoping for an improvement in the three remaining matches.

The next clash promises to be a sell-out, with world champions Italy in town to face New Zealand on Sunday.

After that, Nelspruit hosts two more matches -- Australia against Serbia on June 23 and North Korea against the Ivory Coast on June 25.

Only one team, Chile, have chosen to base themselves here, and it is perhaps in appreciation of that that the locals have warmed to the South Americans.

Plenty of South Africans in this city are sporting the red, white and blue of Chile as well as the green and gold of South Africa.

There are definitely advantages to following football in Nelspruit rather than in South Africa's bigger cities. It is much easier to get around and it feels safer, a major concern for travelling fans.

It is warmer too. While fans in Cape Town and Rustenburg have been huddling together for warmth at recent matches, it is still relatively balmy in this sub-tropical corner of the country.

"Of the three cities I've been to so far, including Cape Town, the atmosphere here is definitely the best," said Willem Schol, a Chilean fan. "We were in the FIFA Fanfest last night and the atmosphere was amazing."

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