



Fans looking for an authentic experience of Africa during the upcoming World Cup may be disappointed. Ellen Knickmeyer on how multinationals have a lock on the soccer business.

LAGOS, Nigeria—The red-and-white Coca-Cola billboards outside the airports of Africa’s largest cities trumpet the launch of the 2010 World Cup in South Africa in just three weeks, inviting arriving travelers from around the world to “Join the Celebration!”

But Africans and African businesses haven’t felt welcome at the 2010 World Cup.

Much of the immediate profits from what will be Africa’s largest-ever sporting event will go to the world’s largest multinational companies and the international soccer association, FIFA, rather than to the world’s poorest continent. FIFA alone is due to take in more than \$3 billion, up from the 2006 World Cup in Germany. Sponsors, almost all of them Western corporations, expect billions of dollars more.

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Budweiser will be the brew on offer in the fan parks, rather than the beers of South African Breweries, one of the world’s largest beer-makers. Hungry fans will find McDonald’s and other globalized grub in the fan parks and stadiums, but not one vendor of South African food, South African government officials and African tourism leaders said this week. A Middle Eastern airline, Emirates, serves as the World Cup’s official carrier, rather than the internationally respected South Africa Airways.

“When you look at the companies getting the most exposure, the bulk of them, many of them, are multinational companies that don’t work in Africa,” Edward Bergman, executive director of the Africa Travel Association, said this week at the organization’s annual meeting in West Africa.

Moreover, as ticket sales stand now, only two percent of the fans filling the 10 stadiums that South Africa has built or refurbished will be from African countries. Of the more than 2.5 million tickets sold ahead of the June 11 start, only 11,000 have been bought by Africans.

A FIFA ticket-system that shut out most potential customers among Africa’s more than one billion people was one of a host of issues that South Africa initially overlooked in its eagerness to get the World Cup for Africa, Sindiswa Nhlumayo, deputy director-general of South Africa’s tourism department said.

Like all competing countries, “We were desperate to get it!” Nhlumayo said. “We didn’t bargain as hard as we should have.”

“That’s one of the lessons we learned,” she added. “Don’t over-compromise” because of emotion. “Just look at the cost benefits.”

FIFA cut the price of tickets for South Africans to less than \$20, but offered only online ticket sales until last month. Both internet sales and credit cards are comparatively little-used and little-trusted in Africa, so offering tickets online only hurt sales on the continent. In Africa, it’s: “I want to go. This is the money. Give me my ticket,” Nhlumayo said.

Disappointing ticket sales have forced South Africa to cut its projection this week for international ticket-buyers, from 450,000 to 350,000. Unusually for a World Cup, American fans, rather than Europeans, are making up the biggest bloc of ticket-purchasers.

While much of the immediate cash will bypass Africa and land in the accounts of multinationals, South Africa could benefit in the longer term, according to western and local analysts and tourism officials.

Already, the country’s building boom for the World Cup has helped it weather the global recession much better did most Western nations. South Africa has spent more than \$4 billion on readying the country for the World Cup. Meeting World Cup standards forced the country to upgrade its airports, highways, and public transportation, speeding up projects that were only on the drawing board before. Now, the infrastructure is “world-class—not third-world,” Nhlumayo said.

The key issue will be how South Africa handles the aftermath of the World Cup. The country is already the wealthiest, most business-savvy country in sub-Saharan Africa, with a per capita income of more than \$10,000. If South Africa’s leaders act shrewdly, the country can leverage its infrastructure upgrades to boost development after the soccer fans have left. A comparatively problem-free World Cup—should that occur—could help persuade dubious tourists that Africa is a safe and viable destination, Bergman said.

“Everyone always focuses on the event, but what’s important is post-event,” said Hannah Messerli, a specialist in Africa tourism at the World Bank. Combined with any extra job-training for the event, any “benefits cascade,” she said.

Having signed the original deal with the international soccer association without much bargaining, South Africa since has been able to win some concessions. FIFA has agreed to open ticket centers to allow Africans to buy the tickets with cash. And breaking its normal rule of steering business to giant hotel chains, FIFA has authorized some South African bed-and-breakfasts as lodging for fans, Nhlumayo said.

Fans in the stadiums and official FIFA fan parks won’t experience much of what makes South Africa unique. But the host country has secured approval to open “public viewing areas” adjacent to the fan parks, which will be open to all and free.

There, soccer fans from Africa and abroad will be able to dance to the music of Ladysmith Black Mambazo, hear the Soweto Gospel Choir and eat brae barbecue and boerewor sausage rolls. "They will see what South Africa has to offer," Nhlumayo said.

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