

POLAND ON CHARM OFFENSIVE

Locals are going out of their way to make every foreign fan welcome

By SANJAY NAIR

WARSAW – “Feel like at home”.

It is a phrase that greets every visitor to Poland’s capital, from advertisements at the airport, to giant billboards that line the Warszawa city centre.

The phrase may not be grammatically correct, but visitors get the point – the Poles are going out of their way to make new friends.

At the airport, instead of glum looks and incoherent mumbles, an immigration official asked me about my thoughts on the country’s hosting of the European Championship.

“This is the biggest and greatest thing to happen to Poland since the Germans left,” the official added chirpily, in reference to the Nazis’ occupation of the country during the second World War.

Many buildings in the historic city are covered in Euro-related posters, and not just of Polish stars like Robert Lewandowski and Lukasz Piszczek.

One government office has a huge portrait of Spanish maestro Xavi Hernandez juggling a ball, while bus stops and bars carry posters of the who’s who of football – Portugal’s Cristiano Ronal-

do, Germany’s Lukas Podolski and Italy’s Andrea Pirlo, just to name a few.

The Poles may be out of the tournament – but Warsaw is still very much on a charm offensive.

Problems of racism – which was the subject of much hype ahead of the tournament following a BBC documentary claiming that anti-semitism is at the heart of Polish football – has largely been confined to a few isolated incidents.

Jozef Mielech, 33, a restaurant owner, said: “We don’t care what colour you are or which country you’re from.

“If you’re a true football fan or just want to see our country, you’re most welcome here.”

Singaporean student Ashwin Tiwari, who has been on an exchange programme in Warsaw since February, believes the negative media portrayal has been exaggerated.

The 24-year-old Singapore Management University student said: “You would think from the reports that there are clashes at every corner and every minority race is in danger of being attacked.

“That could not be further



Singaporean student Ashwin Tiwari (left) with other football fans in Warsaw. The 24-year-old says the negative media portrayal about racism in Poland is exaggerated. PHOTO COURTESY OF ASHWIN TIWARI

from the truth. I’ve been here for a few months and have yet to personally encounter a single incident of racism.

“Of course, there are some idiots around, but they’re in the minority and the police deal with them very quickly.”

Nonetheless, security has been stepped up in Warsaw for tonight’s semi-final between Germany and Italy.

The organisers are pulling out all the stops to avoid a repeat of the chaotic scenes when Russian and Polish fans clashed before

their teams met in the group stage.

Dozens of riot police vans and water cannons have been stationed outside the National Stadium and the Uefa Fans Zone in the heart of the capital.

Several hundred thousand Germans are expected to descend upon the city, bringing with them the potential for clashes off the field.

Uefa fined the German federation €25,000 (S\$40,000) after a neo-Nazi banner was displayed by German fans during a group

match against Denmark.

It is believed that Polish “Ultras” – fans who had earlier clashed with their Russian counterparts – are planning revenge attacks for that incident.

Hotel manager Maciej Kuciak hopes cool heads will prevail and football will grab the limelight.

He said: “We worked so hard to bring the European Championship to our country.

“Poland must be remembered long after this tournament is over – but only for the right reasons.”

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