

World Cup Fans Can Go Far, Yekaterinburg Says

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A construction crew working on Yekaterinburg's Central Stadium, which will have 27,000 seats and open in July. **Gennady Fyodorov**

YEKATERINBURG — Free travel on new high-speed trains should allay fans' fears about the long journey to the most far-flung city on Russia's list of proposed sites for the 2018 World Cup, officials say.

Jet lag, though, could be a consideration for players going to Yekaterinburg, located at the foot of the Ural mountains near the Europe-Asia border some 1,800 kilometers from Moscow.

When Russia won the right to host the World Cup, some critics said that long-distance travel within the world's largest country could be tiring for the players and costly for the fans.

Yekaterinburg is one of 13 proposed host cities. If it is included in the final plan, which must be approved by FIFA, football's world governing body, fans could be traveling distances of more than 3,000 kilometers from the Baltic exclave of Kaliningrad to this most easterly location.

Sverdlovsk Governor Alexander Misharin, however, was quick to dispel concerns about the distance to Yekaterinburg, the biggest city in his region.

"For the fans, we can offer something special. They can take an overnight train and enjoy sightseeing the country in addition to football," he said in an interview. "And the best thing for them, it would be free of charge."

The government has guaranteed free rail travel for all fans with valid tickets during the 2018 tournament.

It takes about 26 hours to travel by train from Moscow to Yekaterinburg, but the government plans to build high-speed rail lines by 2018 that would significantly reduce travel time.

"With high-speed trains, it would take about seven to eight hours instead of 26," said Misharin, a former railroad engineer appointed by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin last month to serve on the supervisory board of the World Cup.

Experts say jet lag and the time difference could affect players' performances. Yekaterinburg is two time zones east of Moscow, four ahead of Central Europe and six ahead of Greenwich Mean Time.

"We've always prepared ourselves if we had to travel to places like Vladivostok," said Vyacheslav Beresnev, a doctor for local side Ural, which plays in Russia's Division One (second tier).

"Jet lag could be a negative factor in the team's play unless you prepare yourself well in advance," he said. "Normally, players need at least five days to acclimatize themselves in a new environment."

Misharin pointed to the 1994 World Cup held in the United States, where fans also had to travel up to 3,000 kilometers, flying from New York to Los Angeles.

"Brazil is not a small country either," he said, referring to the host of the 2014 World Cup. "So to say that in Russia fans and players would suffer from long travels like never before is not true."

"In 2018, the teams would be traveling by plane anyway, so it should take them no more than just a couple of hours at most to fly here," he said.

Misharin called it a false perception that Yekaterinburg is far from Moscow.

"We need to try to change such a perception," he said. "A flight to Moscow or St. Petersburg takes just over two hours, about the same time it takes to fly from London to Lisbon or Rome for example."

The Russians originally picked a total of 16 venues in four geographical clusters for the 2018 edition, but that number will likely be cut to 12, eliminating at least three smaller cities because Moscow alone will have three separate stadiums.

The decision on the World Cup venues will be made in 2013.

Yekaterinburg, the only prospective 2018 venue located outside Russia's European zone, is considered to have a good chance of being selected in the final list for political reasons.

When Russia bid to host the World Cup, the plan was for the whole country to be involved. Excluding Yekaterinburg would mean leaving the largest part of the country — the whole of Siberia and the Far East — out in the cold.

Asked whether he was optimistic that Yekaterinburg would make the final cut, a confident Misharin said: "Do I hope? No, I'm practically sure we will be in the final list."

Yekaterinburg, named after Empress Catherine I, the second wife of Peter the Great, hopes to attract foreign tourists to the Urals, and hosting World Cup matches would greatly enhance its reputation abroad, Misharin said.

The city changed its name to Sverdlovsk, after Bolshevik leader Yakov Sverdlov, in 1924 before going back to the original after the Soviet breakup.

Until now, the country's third-biggest city behind Moscow and St. Petersburg has been mainly known to foreigners for two reasons: being the birthplace of President Boris Yeltsin and the place where the Bolsheviks killed Tsar Nicholas II and his family in 1918.

Like other prospective World Cup venues, Yekaterinburg is building a new stadium with the hope of being included in the 2018 plans.

"The old arena was built more than half a century ago, and it really looked decayed," Vadim Vorobyev, director of the Central Stadium, said as he pointed to the stadium's facade, which will be preserved as a historical monument.

"It had to be rebuilt regardless of whether we're selected as one of the World Cup venues," he said. "The capacity of the new arena will be 27,000 [seats], just like the old one, but it could be expanded to 40,000 for the 2018 tournament.

He said the stadium was scheduled to be completed by July.

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