
World Cup fans camp by the beach to dodge Rio hotel prices

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Hundreds of cost-conscious soccer fans have found a cheaper way to attend the World Cup in one of Brazil's most expensive cities - camping by Rio de Janeiro's Copacabana beach.

Most of them drove thousands of miles from other South American countries to support their national teams, avoiding expensive flights as well as Rio's notoriously pricey hotels.

The largest contingent of supporters camping by the beach is Argentina, but Colombians, Chileans and Ecuadoreans could also be seen parking old cars, trailers and even small buses turned into rolling dormitories along Avenida Atlantica, one of Rio's most famous postcards.

Emmanuel Estrada, 29, and Damian Perez, 32, took four days to drive a 1984 Ford Falcon Ranchero from Buenos Aires to Sao Paulo for the World Cup's opening game on Thursday. Then they came to Rio for Argentina's first match on Sunday.

"We will stay here until Argentina wins the World Cup. And certainly a few extra days after that," Estrada, who works as a plumber in Buenos Aires, told Reuters as he sipped a cup of coffee he made himself, using a portable stove.

Both are part of a larger group of 50 to 60 Argentines who drove rickety buses and vans into Copacabana over the past weekend. Rio will host the World Cup final on July 13.

Planning for the trip started years ago but travelling on the cheap was the only option to deal with Brazil's sky-high prices and Argentina's weak currency, which has lost about 20 percent of its value so far this year.

"Our money is worth nothing here," Perez complained about Rio, where a room for two in a dingy hotel can cost as much as \$700 during the World Cup.

NO HASSLE

While their presence has annoyed some local residents, many Brazilians have welcomed them. Nor have they been hassled by police, several campers said.

Camping is usually not allowed on Rio's central beaches and cars must pay hourly parking fees in most of the city, but authorities have largely turned a blind eye to the presence of World Cup campers so far.

A military police officer stationed near the Argentine group said it was the responsibility of Rio's municipal guard to take action. A nearby municipal guard said he would only intervene if the campers caused trouble.

Meanwhile, foreign visitors were pleased to see an extensive police presence in Copacabana.

"We feel safe here," said Fabian Alvarez, a Chilean auto mechanic who drove over 5,000 km (3,107 miles) from Santiago to Cuiaba, where he watched Chile defeat Australia on Friday, and then to Rio on the following day.

Alvarez said he decided to sleep in his van after failing to find affordable hotels in Rio. He plans to spend about one million Chilean pesos (\$1,789) during the whole trip, including on gasoline, food and maybe even one more World Cup ticket.

Echoing most World Cup campers, Alvarez said the trip was exhausting but he would do it again.

"It's all worth it. It's such an emotion when we sing the national anthem in the stadium. It gives me goose bumps."
