

## The Tourist

# Travels with The Ball link thousands through sport

A special football has had an amazing journey from London to Soccer City in Johannesburg

JEREMY SHEPHERD SMITH

**B**ATTERSEA Park, London, is a special place for football. January 9 is equally special. They make up the place and day in 1864 that the first game of football was played under Football Association rules. Before that the number of players was not regulated and there were no rules about the size of the pitch or the goals.

Now, in memory of that day and to raise money and awareness for worthy causes, a special ball makes the trip every four years from Battersea Park to the opening game of the World Cup. This year it took 138 days — from January 9 — to travel down Africa to Johannesburg. In 2006 a different ball made the trip to Munich, as with Seoul in 2002.

The men behind The Ball are Englishmen Christian Wach and Phil Wake, and a New Zealander who lives in Germany, Andrew Aris. Their organisation is Spirit of Football CIC, an independent, fan-led, community-interest company registered in the UK.

The Ball 2010 was made in Kenya under the auspices of the Alive & Kicking organisation that distributes footballs to poor communities. The dying wish of Alive & Kicking's founder was to have one of his footballs travel the length of Africa. The Ball 2010 did that — and also literally met its maker when during the trip the travellers visited the factory where it was made.

Other partners in the adventure were logistics company DHL, which transported the men and The Ball, the Special Olympics (for intellectually disabled athletes) and the Goethe Institute.

"On every journey to the World Cup, many thousands of ordinary people make direct contact with The Ball, whether by chance in the street or by attending events, playing with it, signing it and helping it along its way. The Ball brings the World Cup closer to people who wouldn't otherwise experience it and introduces its audience to the great work that its partners are doing," say the adventurers.

All this helped The Ball 2010 extend the impact of the World Cup from the host country to the wider region and the continent.

Donations were made via the website to help Alive & Kicking donate 100 000 balls to children across sub-Saharan Africa. The footballs are transported by DHL to Special Olympics programmes in the African countries that the ball travelled through. Modes of transport included cargo planes, trains, buses and taxis, with a police escort through Togo and Benin and full-time guards for the ball

in Nigeria and Côte de Ivoire.

The adventurers had few scary moments in their quest to travel overland as far as possible. In fact, their biggest scare was when they stopped at a toll gate near Rustenburg and discovered that the ball was missing. It had rolled out of the vehicle during a previous break. Luckily, their driver knew the terrain and they found the ball, in the dark, in about 15 minutes.

Wach said one of the important aspects of such trips was to counter stereotypes such as those about Africa and the disabled.

"There was a real feeling among people that this was Africa's World Cup, and we had virtually no delays at border posts or hassles from officials."

The men were also pleasantly surprised at the ease with which they could communicate via cellphone and the internet.

The ball has been kicked or headed and then signed by more than 17 500 people, including presidents and prime ministers, disabled people, urchins, border guards, bus drivers and pilots. It was used for games of football along the way, was kicked over border posts and had to be repaired four times.

A typical event was a "unified" game with a mix of intellectually disabled and able-bodied players in a Nairobi slum. In Tanzania, an Albino team pitted themselves against a team made up of ambassadors, and they often played curtain raisers to premiership games. In collaboration with the Goethe Institute, the travellers held workshops with two youth camps in Johannesburg for about 100 children from sub-Saharan Africa.

The trip was by no means planned down to the smallest detail. Aris said he was constantly concerned that they would not have enough money and they often had no idea where they would sleep, often relying on last-minute arrangements through people they had met or paying commercial rates.

The trip took its toll in terms of time and money, as well as strained relationships, as all three of the men have families back home and they mainly funded themselves. They hope to recoup some of the costs from a film and book.

Nonetheless, The Ball 2014 will kick off from England and visit every nation between London and Brazil as it heads for the opening ceremony in June 2014.

January 9 2014 marks the 150th anniversary of the very first match played under Football Association rules, and the plan is to kick off from Battersea Park on that day. [www.spiritoffootball.com](http://www.spiritoffootball.com)



HAVING A BALL: Christian Wach and Andrew Aris flank Pascale Sandrine, Mariene Jenifer and Laetitia Konan from Côte de Ivoire, part of a group of 100 children visiting SA during the World Cup. The football they are holding was signed by more than 17 500 people on its 138-day journey from Battersea Park to Soccer City. Picture: JEREMY SHEPHERD SMITH



## WINE TASTING

### Something to wine about

THIS year's Vaal River Wine Route takes place at hotels, lodges and other venues along the Vaal River every Saturday and Sunday from noon to 6pm until July 25.

The route wends its way through charming river and country estates where visitors can taste wine from the country's top wine makers, including Nederburg, Zonnebloem, Glen Carlou, Boland Kelder, Spier, Fleur du Cap and Robertson Winery. Breakfast, lunch and dinner are served at 24 river

and country estates.

The establishments taking part include a five-star hotel, an intimate riverside pub, a garden restaurant on the banks of the Vaal and a country inn. For only R20 for eight wine tastings it's a good excuse for anyone wanting to focus on nothing more pressing than the next glass of wine.

There are historical and cultural sites to explore, art and craft studios and the 56km of navigable water along the Vaal River makes for great water sports.

## EDUCATION

### Young conservationists sign up

THE Diamond Route, represented by Strilli Oppenheimer, and the Endangered Wildlife Trust, represented by its CEO, Yolán Friedmann, have signed an agreement to develop young aspiring conservationists on Telperion, a Diamond Route conservation site.

A section of the reserve, with a Montessori School, boarding and staff house has been made available to the Conservation Leadership Programme, a part of the EWT dedicated to experiential learning for students enrolled at tertiary educational facilities offering diplomas in nature conservation. It thus provides the required practical experience.

Through this initiative, the

programme aims to inspire environmental awareness and responsibility in South African communities; to capacitate aspiring conservationists through innovative, high impact mentorship, training and education programmes; and to effectively mobilise and empower these future leaders in conservation through exposure to experiential training and employment opportunities.

Telperion is a private nature reserve straddling Mpumalanga and Gauteng.

The initiative will train and mentor a minimum of 20 selected students enrolled for a national diploma in nature conservation. [www.diamondroute.co.za](http://www.diamondroute.co.za)

The keys to open the first four star BEE boutique hotel on the Vaal Dam.



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