

## Pharaohs caught by surprise

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Egypt landed in South Africa on Thursday and were surprised to be greeted upon their arrival by a flawless rendition of their national anthem, sung fluently in Arabic by a group of local pupils who had travelled four hours by bus to meet them.

A group of pupils from the country's Mpumalanga province, who had 'adopted' Egypt as part of a marketing initiative by the tournament's South African Organising Committee - took to the road at 4.00 am this morning to make their way to Johannesburg to welcome the African champions to South Africa.

Some of the pupils gathered at the airport today had represented Egypt on the football pitch in a national schools Confederations Cup tournament, while others won a competition in which they learnt how to sing the Egyptian national anthem.

And the sound of their country's hymn being beautifully sung as they arrived on South African soil certainly evoked a reaction from the Egyptian team, who happily posed for pictures with the team and signed autographs for them.

For Pharaohs coach Hassan Shehata, the warm welcome was no less than he expected and a fitting start to a tournament he hopes will swell African pride from Cape Town to Cairo over the next fortnight.

"This is not the first time I've come to South Africa, but it will be the first time I am bringing a team to play football in the country," he said. "I have always known that South Africans are passionate about their football.



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Egypt coach Hassan Shehata.



"When we were here for the Confederations Cup draw in Johannesburg last year, we visited the stadiums that will be used, for the Confederations Cup and the World Cup, and we were satisfied with the facilities. It is a great honour for Africa to host the FIFA World Cup and to show the whole world what we're capable of."

For team captain Ahmed Hassan, being in South Africa was a chance for reminiscing and reflecting on what's been a stellar career for the veteran 34-year-old midfielder.

"For me personally, my beginnings in the Egyptian national team were here," he recalled. "I played here in the African Nations Cup in 1996, so it's really very special to me. I am sure South Africa will host a spectacular event. Together with South Africa, Egypt, as two-time African champions - and South Africa as hosts - we can display Africa's best football in this tournament."

While there was much to reflect on, the Egyptians also have their minds very much on the present and in their battle to qualify to return to South Africa for the 2010 FIFA World Cup next year.

After two matches in the final qualifying round, Egypt find themselves bottom of Group C, with just one point from two games, and trailing Algeria, Zambia and Rwanda.

"The tough qualification for the 2010 FIFA World Cup remains the biggest challenge for us," continued Hassan. "The 2010 World Cup is a major event, and this is an event we are looking forward to participate in. Although the World Cup qualifiers have been tough so far, we'll do our best so we can come back next year," said Hassan.