



Italian fans celebrate their team's victory over the Czechs as they drive through the streets of Baden-Baden on Thursday night.

Casa Azzurri



INTERNET, undated

Wondering were most of the Italian entourage is while the team prepares to meet Australia? Try Duisburg, and zoom to the MSV Arena, the local side's gem of a stadium. In the back of the entire main stand, the dark blue of MSV has been mellowed into a slightly different colour, Italy's azzurro.

Meet Casa Azzurri, then.

I'd heard of an 'England Camp' set up near the team's base in south-western Germany, and of course almost every national federation tries to bring a bit of its country's flavour to the World Cup, with the indirect result of sometimes reinforcing clichés - sunny Spain, technologically advanced Japan and so on - but nothing probably comes close to Casa Azzurri.

The 'home of the Azzurri', like its clone Casa Italia which pops up at the Olympics, is meant to be a celebration of all things Italian, and the fact the Federation plays an heavy a part in its set-up means it also hosts a lot of press conferences.

Thus, a convergence of different conveniences: Italian broadcasters RAI and Sky Sport - the latter making a huge effort to cover the World Cup, having acquired the rights to

all 64 matches - set up a studio within the friendly confines of Casa Azzurri and thus receive a double benefit in that once they take their microphones off the broadcasters only have to walk a few yards for the next espresso, which, like the panini on the other side of the corridor, is free.

Casa Azzurri was not squeezed inside a prefab structure outside a stadium and its location reflects an aspiration to grandeur - ok, it's a French word - that falls in line with everything a certain sector of Italian life stands for. The colours of the stadium, after all, nearly match, although no self-respecting Italian 'fighetto' (the permanently tanned, smart-car driving, ostentatious type you'll find in most bars by 7pm) would be seen dead in MSV's blue-and-white hoops.

But this has the obvious advantage of providing both a first class environment - there is truly not much wrong with Casa Azzurri's design and purpose - and a football scene: go past the double doors each side of the main bar and you'll find yourself in the Main Stand, another excellent backdrop for a live shot while pretending to be far away from the studio which is in fact just a few yards away.

It also provides a scenario for intriguing stuff, as visitors have been spotted sitting in the stands at the right time of the day to work on their fans or to talk business discreetly, while another, less appealing sight

was that of a well-known Italian TV broadcaster fallen asleep in the stand with his shirt off, showing his grotesquely overweight body and providing some unknown amateur photographer with the chance to take a picture - with a mobile phone - that must have been the single most emailed item in Italy in the past week.

Casa Azzurri is, in a way, a microcosm and a shop-window for the kind of stuff and style Italians can be proud of. And while cynicism suggests a closet, rather than half a stadium, would be more than enough, once you get into shoes, salami, coffee, clothing and most regions of the country promoting themselves to visitors, you get the picture.

And no, on the subject of typical Italian products and lore, there was no mannequin dressed as a referee and hunched over at an angle (i.e. 'bent') or devices to improve your wire-tapping capabilities so you know who's going to win the next match. But there must have been a sign somewhere urging visitors to smoke, as everyone was lighting up like crazy, something which you're not allowed to do inside anymore, in Italy, and God forever bless who passed that law.

But wait a minute, were they visitors? No regular visitors are allowed, though. Only VIPs and journalists and special guests, who may also take in one of a series of concerts by leading Italian bands that are staged in the fully-equipped area at the top of the stairs. Must be

one of those B2B fraternities then, businessmen talking to each other, making each other bedroom eyes in the quest for a better deal or another plane load of tourists landing in one or two regions of Italy.

You want tourism? Check the literature Veneto and Salento are giving away. Want style? Er, you'll have it, but that's if sofas with pictures of former greats printed on the fabric are, of course, your idea of it.

One of the sofas sports the image of Paolo Rossi, the hero of the 1982 World Cup, heading his first of three goals against Brazil back in those days, and since Rossi himself, now a businessman and a Sky pundit, seems to be spending all of this time between matches at the Casa Azzurri, you wonder if he ever had the temptation to lean back and rest his word-wearied body on his own image.

It's slightly sad that one of the characteristics of Italians (and others), trying to build a number of Little Italys around the world so they feel they haven't really left the country behind after all, is replicated at the World Cup in such a way that a reporter could spend a whole month in Germany without once having to eat a local dish, leaving the place only to cover matches and practices then returning to the Italian-speaking, chain-smoking cocoon at the back of MSV's main stand.

Wonder what those at Casa Azzurri must be thinking.

Haunted by Guus?

FROM PAGE 19

to stop a weakish Nico Kovac shot, would very often be the difference between success and defeat in the World Cup context. Similar mistakes against the Italians, and elimination will be the inevitable result.

The way I see it, Australia has already 'won' their World Cup just by getting out of the group. When he sat with me in Eindhoven for an ESPN interview back in December, Hiddink called that 'the important second step.'

Is a third step forward now really a possibility?

It would take a brave man to predict that Italy, with all their international know how, will be sent packing on Monday night. But who in their right mind would count out this spirited, all-action Australian collective, managed by the finest tactician in world football.

Battle

FROM PAGE 22

injury." Kuhn said. "He had two games with Rennes and then joined the national squad which gave him the opportunity to come back into form."

"I think he can score more goals in the competition. Whether or not he will be the best of the strikers, I don't know, but there is a chance."

Kuhn also singled out Pascal Zuberbuhler, the only goalkeeper of the first stage to keep three clean sheets.

"No goals against us in three matches - I am grateful to the defence and the goalie," said the silver-haired Kuhn.

One setback for the Swiss is the absence of Arsenal centre-back Philippe Senderos who scored the opening goal against South Korea but later fell and dislocated his shoulder.

If they reach the last eight, Switzerland would equal their best ever performance at a World Cup and Kuhn said a country not known for football fever was getting behind its best team for decades.

"Switzerland now has a way to express its national pride," he said.

"We are growing in confidence and now anything is possible. We can beat Ukraine and advance further - why not?"

Italy unfazed by critics

FROM PAGE 19

produced solid but unspectacular wins against Ghana and the Czech Republic and a draw with the USA.

"I really don't care how we play, the only important thing is to win," he said ahead of Monday's crunch second round match against Australia in Kaiserslautern.

"Everything else counts for little. The most talented team of all time was (Johan Cruyff's) Holland and they've never won anything."

They may be remembered for the way they played, but they ended up with nothing."

Perrotta jumped to the defence of out-of-sorts striker and Roma teammate Francesco Totti, who has only recently returned to action after breaking his ankle and looks off the pace.

"He's definitely not 100 per cent,

but players like Francesco, with the quality he has even if he's at 70 or 80 per cent, is a player who can make the difference in any moment of a match," Perrotta said.

Asked if Totti was a luxury to have in the team at the moment, Perrotta replied, "Absolutely not."

Perrotta made the surprise admission that he would have been happy to face tournament favourites Brazil in the last 16 rather than Australia.

"Australia may seem like the easier draw, but the game against the US proved that matches which seem easy on paper are often the most difficult ones," he said.

Paradoxically it might have been easier to face Brazil rather than Australia. Personally I would have preferred to meet Brazil, not because Australia is stronger, but because

would have been wonderful to play against them.

"It would have been a fascinating match and if you feel that you have the quality to win the World Cup, you have to beat everyone."

Perrotta used to be a fringe player for Italy but he has now become a key figure, starting all three of their group matches in his unfamiliar role on the right-hand side of midfield rather than in the centre.

"I used to be thinking that it would always be who would be sacrificed when the team was announced, but now I think differently," he said.

"I've had a good season and I've started every match here. I used to think that my role was only in central midfield, but now I've been given this new position, which I really enjoy."

"I'm playing well, but there's always room for improvement."

Wicky doubly

FROM PAGE 22

be 22-30,000 Swiss fans there and it would be like a home game for me."

Wicky says confidence is growing in a side which is the youngest in the tournament and also the one with the oldest coach - Kobi Kuhn.

"There is no problem with the age difference, everyone knows what to do. We have been playing for five years in the same system and we know what to do as a team, and the coach has got rid of little jealousies. I think the younger players will be even more ready."

Teams who have impressed Wicky in the tournament include Germany, Argentina, Spain and Côte D'Ivoire. "I'm also very proud that we are the only team not to have conceded a goal in the tournament," he added.

"It's an incredible feeling to see all the Swiss fans around and to be thinking what's happening back home, the fans know the fact we were top of our group shows that we have quality. Ukraine are a very good team, it will be difficult, but the World Cup euphoria in Switzerland makes me proud and it is something new for us."

Goliath v David

FROM PAGE 19

"So they will be looking to get a goal whenever they can and we'll be looking to keep it as tight as possible for as long as possible because we feel stamina-wise and physically we can match any team."

Alessandro Nesta has been ruled out for Italy after failing to recover from a groin strain. Marco Materazzi, who scored against the Czech Republic after coming off the bench to replace Nesta, will retain his place at the heart of the defence.

Midfielder Daniele De Rossi will also be absent for Italy as he serves the second of a four-match ban for elbowing the USA's Brian McBride in the face.

Australia, whose World Cup campaign has captured the imagination of a country where rugby and cricket rule, will be without Brett Emerton.

The dynamic Blackburn Rovers midfielder was sent off in the 2-2 draw against Croatia on Thursday.

"They're going to have to do it without me, but I'm sure they can do it," Emerton said.

"I think it's more nerve-wracking just sitting and watching than play-

ing, so I'm not looking forward to that."

Mark Schwarzer will return in goal for Australia in place of Zeljko Kalac, who looked nervous against Croatia and gifted them a soft goal.

Three of the Australia squad play in Italy's Serie A: Kalac (AC Milan) and midfielders Marco Bresciano and Vincenzo Grella (both Parma).

Kewell in doubt

FROM PAGE 19

Hiddink has to find a replacement for athletic utility Brett Emerton, who is suspended from Monday's match.

"We don't have that many options to replace him, that's why I like to play a flexible system and also have players who have the ability to play in several positions," Hiddink said.

"We'll find our solution, but it's not easy because Brett Emerton has given a lot of energy to this team, he's a very athletic player and when you see him running all over the place, he's one of the fittest players in this World Cup."

Robinho pulls up in training

REUTERS, Bergisch Gladbach

Brazil striker Robinho ended training early on Saturday after suffering a twinge in his right thigh, team doctor given Luis Runco said.

Robinho, whose speed and trickery gave Brazil a new dimension in the 4-1 World Cup win over Japan on Thursday, was seen to clutch his thigh during shooting practice.

"Robinho felt a twinge in the front of his right thigh," said Runco. "He is undergoing ice treatment, we will wait and see."

"If necessary we will ask for tests and if he still has pain tomorrow (Sunday), we will hold him back."

Asked if Robinho would be fit to face Ghana in Tuesday's second round match in Dortmund, Runco replied: "There's no certainty about it."

Robinho started Brazil's first games against Croatia and Australia on the bench, coming on in the second half.

He then replaced Adriano in the starting line-up for the Japan match and Brazil looked much livelier throughout.

Coach Carlos Alberto Parreira has not yet decided whether Robinho will start against Ghana, if he is fit.

No Hiddink revenge: Cannavaro

INTERNET, undated

Fabio Cannavaro is not taking the Australia tie as a rematch against Italy's 2002 'villain' Guus Hiddink.

Hiddink was on the South Korea bench when they shocked the peninsula stars with a Golden Goal in the second round of the 2002 World Cup and now he has the opportunity to repeat the trick with Australia.

"It won't be a rematch for what happened in Korea," insists the Azzurri captain ahead of Monday's clash. "It's Hiddink and not the same team, so all we must do is play in order to win the match."

Topping Group E was imperative to avoid Brazil, but some of the Italy side have realised that taking on Australia is no easy task either.

"It'll be a very tough game. I'd already said before we knew who we'd be paired with that the Socceros had impressed me. They have great players and are very strong physically, plus a talented Coach that we know well."

Cannavaro, writing on his official website, also tried to reassure fans that the Azzurri had already done well to finish top of the most balanced group in the competition.

"I have always been confident, because I knew the potential and the moral strength of this squad. We knew it'd be difficult, but also that we would do it. Here's hoping we continue in the same way."

England fans were in the city for

Sven's mantra for success



INTERNET, undated

England's footballers have been given new orders by Sven-Goran Eriksson in their quest to win the World Cup: drink your way to victory.

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Roberto Carlos remembered that he also sat out Brazil's final group stage game at the 2002 World Cup, when they took on Costa Rica and won 5-2 having already made sure of a second round place.

He returned and was ever-present in the knockout stages as Brazil went on to win the title. He has been a regular in the national side for a decade.

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