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## Japanese national football team at the World Cup camp in Saas-Fee

# They're off to South Africa

**It seems as though the Japanese national football team only just arrived in Saas-Fee, but already they're off with high hopes to South Africa. Whether or not their training camp at 1,800 m in Saas-Fee brings them the success they desire will become clear in the coming World Cup matches.**

Somehow it feels like the Japanese national football team only just arrived for their training camp in the glacier village. The two weeks the Japanese team spent in Saas-Fee have flown by with one day after another of intensive training and exciting events.

Last Saturday fans and local residents gathered on the square in front of the post office to wish the team a warm goodbye and the best of luck for the upcoming tournament. It was the same spot where they had welcomed the team with speeches and music on the day of their arrival.

Eventually, the team's bus pulled off and the Japanese delegation left the small glacier village with their ambitions of making it to the semi-finals in South Africa. It remains to be seen if the team's high-altitude training camp in Saas-Fee will bring them the success they hope for. One thing is for sure, the players and officials were delighted with their stay among the highest peaks of the Swiss Alps, and according to a number of players the team felt extremely comfortable in the village right from day one. What was it they liked most? The clear answer was the clean air and the calm and impressive natural setting. Some have even started planning their next winter holiday in Saas-Fee!

### **From the day they arrived to the day they left**

The Japanese team's programme was packed from their very first day in the village. Shortly after they arrived on 26 May, the team were out on the pitch for their first open training session. On 27 May they showed off their skills in two more open training sessions, one in the morning and one in the afternoon. On 28 May, they honed their technique away from the eyes of the public and media in two closed training sessions. However, even during these closed sessions the media were allowed in to watch for a few minutes at the end. Up to 100 journalists were also given an opportunity to interview the players at the end of one of the training sessions each day.

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On 29 May the team travelled to Graz in neighbouring Austria, where an open training session took place in the afternoon. A friendly match against England followed on 30 May. The Japanese scored three goals, although unfortunately two were for England.

As the England team had little to do with their 2:1 win, the Japanese team were able to return to the calm setting of Saas-Fee in good spirits.

The following day the players were scheduled to travel to new heights. Everything was in place for the team and the horde of journalists to travel to the highest revolving restaurant in the world at the popular destination of Mittelallalin, which is usually closed before the high season.

However, the weather did not cooperate and over 100 km/h winds meant it was no longer possible to make the ascent in the gondolas. Due to the long delay and the players still being tired from the England match, the Japanese Football Association (JFA) had to call off the trip.

The same afternoon the team travelled to St. Niklaus to play against Sion in a training match, which the Japanese won 6:0.

On 1 June the team pressed on with their training programme. As before, a training session took place in the morning and in the afternoon, and the head coach was happy to open up both sessions to the public. The afternoon training session and subsequent interview session lasted until almost 8 p.m.

Called off does not always mean cancelled. After a semi-open training session in the morning on 2 June, the team and Japanese media representatives set out again for Mittelallalin in the afternoon. This time the cableways were ready for action and carried 70 journalists up to 3,500 m. Ten players and several JFA officials followed shortly afterwards. They all met up on the snow-covered terrace of the revolving restaurant under the summit of the Allalinhorn to enjoy the bright sunshine and the breathtaking panoramic views. Before the team arrived, the journalists took the opportunity to play around in the snow and take pictures of one another in amusing poses.

The players also appeared to thoroughly enjoy the snow and the awe-inspiring setting of the Swiss Alps.

The team's last training session in Saas-Fee took place on 3 June. Afterwards, the Japanese team's head coach held a short press conference to field questions regarding the friendly match against the Ivory Coast. Then the team headed back to the Hotel Schweizerhof Gourmet & Spa, where the JFA had their base camp during their stay in Saas-Fee.

Before the team departed for South Africa on Saturday, everyone in the Valais had one more chance to see the

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Japanese team in action. At 12:20 the whistle blew in Sion for the team's friendly match against the Ivory Coast. The players were accompanied by a group of loyal fans from Saas-Fee, which included over 100 local schoolchildren who cheered on the team with loud cries of "Ganbare Nippon!"

Despite their enthusiasm, the Japanese couldn't seem to get up to speed and had trouble getting into the game. Again and again their opponents gained the ball or passes missed their mark. In the end, Japan lost 2:0 against the Ivory Coast with the feeling that they had been capable of a lot more. A clever tactic? That remains to be seen in South Africa. The game was also marred by a collision between Tulio (JAP) and Drogba (CI), which ended in the Chelsea star being taken off to hospital with a broken elbow.

### **The training camp in Saas-Fee**

All in all the team's stay in Saas-Fee was a varied and exciting experience – for both the players and the local inhabitants. A lot of effort went into planning, building, organising and managing the training camp for the Japanese national football team. The event was a success thanks to the hard work, cooperation and flexibility of all those involved, including the town of Saas-Fee, the Saas-Fee/Saastal Tourism, Switzerland Tourism Tokyo, the JFA, Matchworld and the countless other service providers and volunteers.

"This exciting but demanding project, which was a valuable learning experience, is now over. After the success of the camp in the Japanese media, we are planning to stay on the ball and make use of the marketing opportunities this event has opened up," said Simon Bumann, Director of Saas-Fee/Saastal Tourism, confidently.

And who knows? If the Japanese liked it in the Saas Valley as much as they say, perhaps we'll see a few of the team whizzing down the slopes here next winter.

Saas-Fee has proved it is well up to the challenge of accommodating superstars. Hosting the Japanese training camp was a great challenge and a fantastic experience – let the next team come!

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