Lagos uses beach polo to hook investors to 'Dubai of Africa'

LAGOS, NIGERIA: Porsches and Jaguars are parked in the sand while businessmen and their partners, in high heels and hats, sit in the sheltered grandstands, glass of champagne in hand.

Polo, the sport of the monied set. (Image: Public Domain)

The scene could be Dubai or Miami but this is Lagos - Nigeria's biggest city and financial hub - and the first beach polo tournament in Africa.

Hundreds of kilometres from fighting between the Islamist group Boko Haram and the Nigerian Army and a week before closely fought elections, entertainment is the name of the game.

Teams of three and their mounts, instead of four as in traditional polo, compete on a sandy polo ground slightly smaller than the classic grass version.

"Beach polo is similar to arena polo," said Habeeb Fasinro, president of the Lagos Polo Club, which was set up in 1904 under British colonial rule.

"It is usually played off season, when you're not playing on grass, just to keep the horses in shape," he told AFP, still dressed in his white trousers and leather riding boots after one game.

"But now it's turned into something very big. You have the world beach polo tournament as well in Miami, you have it in Dubai, in Ibiza."

The competition, which finishes on Sunday, has been organised on the vast stretch of sand known as Eko Atlantic, which is

currently the biggest real estate building site in Africa.

Work began in 2008 to drag millions of tons of sand from the bottom of the Atlantic Ocean to create a 10km² city within a city.

Developers predict that when it is complete in the next 15 to 20 years it will be "the Dubai of Africa" and accommodate some 250,000 people.

The first two buildings are currently being built. Roads, bridges, street lights and even small palm trees have also emerged on the sand, which is annexed to the upmarket area of Victoria Island.

"The idea was to start to create a bit of activity in this new city," said Ronald Chagoury Junior, vice-president of Eko Atlantic, who admits to liking the parallels with Dubai.

His father, Ronald senior, and uncle Gilbert - both of Lebanese origin and well-established in Nigerian business - founded the multi-billion dollar project through a subsidiary of their company, South Energyx.

A beach football tournament, "Copa Lagos", has been held on the sand of Eko Atlantic for four years.

But with polo - a sport traditionally associated with the elite - the development's promoters sensed an investment opportunity.

"We want to associate Eko Atlantic, the new city for Lagos, with... the sport of kings," said Brent Sadler, the project's spokesman.

"We want to show that we're producing a professional quality, prestigious city that people will enjoy living in and people will understand what we're doing here by coming to watch polo."

The new city aims to become a hub for business across Africa and the promoters are hoping to bring in international entrepreneurs as well as the moneyed, local elite.

In a dark designer suit with round, horn-rimmed spectacles, Chima Anyaso, admits that he knows nothing about polo - and even less about the beach version.

"I got an invite... that was sent to my office and I also got three extra cards, so I brought along my friends," said Anyaso, who heads a company in the oil and gas sector.

"I have been (to Eko Atlantic) two times, just to look at the project and prospect, as a prospective buyer."

Polo isn't a recent sport in Nigeria and has remained popular among the wealthy even after the country gained independence from Britain in 1960.

"We have at least 30 polo clubs in Nigeria, and then then there are private clubs as well. At Lagos Polo Club we have between 80 to 100 players," said Fasinro.

"There's a very long tradition of polo in Lagos. We've attracted the best players who've come here and played with us. And we've had Nigerian players also playing abroad quite frequently.

"A good number of us played in Europe this season, in England mostly."

Source: AFP