

First bookmaker opens in gambling-mad Spain  
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By Ben Harding

MADRID (Reuters) - Spain's first sports betting shop opened for business on Wednesday, one of thousands that foreign bookmakers hope to launch in the football-crazy nation which already bets more than any other European country.

British bookie William Hill and Spanish gambling firm Codere plan to set up 70 sports betting shops across the Madrid area -- the first of Spain's 17 regions to grant licenses -- under the joint venture's Victoria brand.

Spanish gambling market is expected to grow to 39 billion euros (\$57.8 billion) by 2010, with the sports betting market set to hit 4.5 billion euros, according to MECN consultants.

"There is a huge demand everywhere," said Victoria's Operations Manager John Hallahan. "It's an old cliché but the sky is the limit," he added.

Spaniards already spend an average of 670 euros each a year on betting, according to industry and government figures. Spain's state-run Christmas lottery, known as 'El Gordo' or 'The Fat One' is the world's biggest prize draw, dishing out 2.2 billion euros last December.

However, apart from a workplace sweepstake or an informal wager between friends, up to now Spaniards have had to go online to bet on sporting events, although the state-run lottery does offer a twice-weekly football pools game.

Although Madrid's residents will be able to bet on social events and TV competitions like Pop Idol or Big Brother, authorities have banned wagers on religion or politics.

Madrid has granted a license to a joint venture between Britain's Ladbrokes and Spain's Cirsa, while Greece's Intralot were awarded one last week. Austrian firms bwin and Betbull also plan to launch a joint franchise and private-equity owned Gala Coral has been in talks with potential Spanish partners for the last six months.

Victoria's new shop, located above a Codere casino, gleams with chrome and glass and has comfortable sofas and a bar -- a far cry from the stereotypical British bookie, offering plastic seats and a bank of screens showing the 3.45 from Kempton Park.

Hallahan said Spain was "virgin territory" which offered bookies the chance to redefine betting shops as a more attractive destination for women.

"We are starting with a blank sheet... I would expect a healthy interest from women, who won't be deterred by a historical perception in the UK that betting is a male-only activity," he said.