When you wish upon a star

HARSHA GORDHAN’S TRIP TO SEE THE STARRY SKIES OF SUTHERLAND EXCEEDED ALL HER EXPECTATIONS. SHE SAW MORE LIGHTS IN THE SKY IN ONE NIGHT THAN SHE COULD COUNT IN A LIFETIME.

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Before I knew anything about the town of Sutherland, I had been begging my friends for about two years to go there for a stargazing New Year’s Eve party I had read about on the internet. After some research, I found out about SALT (Southern African Large Telescope), the single largest optical telescope in the southern hemisphere. I wasn’t even really sure what that was and didn’t know what I hoped to see through it, but I was positive it would be something worth my while. At the very least, I would see a shooting star and make a wish that could change my world forever. Little did I know that the telescope is not one with which the public can view the night sky. It is, in fact, a highly sophisticated tool astronomers from all around the world use for research.

When I started investigating what other fun stuff the town had to offer, I came upon the name of Jurgens Wagener. Jurg, as we would later call him, owns a local guesthouse in Sutherland called Kambrokind. He offers stargazing sessions almost every night of the year. If my friends thought I was eager for the stargazing, Jurg said, “The peace and quiet, and to live out my dreams to look at the incredible stars each night.”

The first glimpse of the sky was something with which we were all familiar: the moon. As much as I have looked up some nights to try to see the man the band R.E.M. made me believe was on the moon, that night I saw the moon as I had never seen it before. Through Jurg’s powerful telescopes I got a magnified view of the moon, that night I saw the moon as I had never seen it before. It looked beaten – like a marble that had been chipped after playing too many games.

In Sutherland fuel is not available, so we refueled in Touws River on our way up from anywhere. The Sutherland accommodation and local tours.

We had informed Jurg of our late check-in, but when we got to the guesthouse, Jurg called to say we must look for an old bicycle. Next to that bicycle would be a brown mat and under that mat would be our room key. It was like something out of a small-town movie, because under the mat, just like Jurg said, was the key to our blast-from-the-past room. Kitted with wooden tops and a solid ceiling with sparkly stars for lights. How incredible to have experienced such a different view of the world we call home.

We were full up in Touws River on our way up to the stargazing session. Jurg and his wife, who organised the excursion, have lived in Sutherland for many years. When I asked him what he loves most about the town, he said, “The peace and quiet, and to live out my dreams to look at the incredible stars each night.”

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That night, once the tour was over and we got back to our room, we wanted to go outside and gaze up at the magnificent Milky Way one last time. My friend and I went out to the front lawn, lay flat on our backs and just looked up in awe. It made us feel small, yet experienced such a different view of the world we call home.