

Mega-telescope breathes new life into South African outback

July 24 2012, by Justine Gerardy

The sleepy South African town of Carnarvon has more churches than ATMs, but science is breathing new life into the far-flung farming centre.

The former 19th-century mission station is the closest town to a science and astronomy hub that is forming in the arid central Karoo region where the [Square Kilometre Array](#) (SKA) mega-telescope will be built.

"When we came here 20 years ago, Carnarvon was almost a ghost town," said Gerrit Louw, who was the town's first realtor and runs a website on the town.

Scientists now fly in on a weekly chartered flight. Property prices have shot up, the number of guesthouses has grown, and the pretty town of fewer than 6,000 people has made it onto television news weather maps.

Residents say it is too early to judge how much change the SKA will bring to Carnarvon, which last saw a boom in the 1950s on the back of a strong wool price.

"We must just give it another couple of months and then you will have the full impact," said Nimrod Vass, owner of the Emzini Wakuti restaurant, whose name means "where we feel at home" in Zulu.

But his eatery has already seen a 70 percent increase in business as contractors, working on the remote site 80 kilometres (50 miles) away,

flock in for hearty African fare.

"It is quite an injection. Business is just good all over, all over, for the whole town I can say," he said.

Astronomy has even influenced local branding with a guesthouse and a restaurant named after the SKA's precursor MeerKAT telescope.

"You can feel there is a different feel to the town," said Breda van Niekerk, farmer and owner of De Meerkat restaurant and pizzeria.

"You can definitely feel that there is movement in town. It's still very early days, so it's very difficult to say now, to project the exact size of the impact, but most definitely you can feel it."

Six years ago, a house could be bought for under 100,000 rands (\$12,000, 9,800 euros), but today some properties are priced at over a million rands.

"The need for accommodation is increasing. At this stage, I'm showing people to some other places," Lord Carnarvon Guesthouse owner Pieter Hoffman said about his decision to renovate a property on the main road into a boutique hotel.

But one in two locals are unemployed, and the SKA team cautions that most of the jobs will be in the construction phase on the site, which will host the lion's share of the SKA alongside Australia.

"The people have got high expectations. The expectation is this is going to alleviate the poverty in this region, and you know it's a science project, it's not a job creation project," said Pieter Snydam, stakeholder relations manager.

Louw said he set up his brick-making business three months ago and now employs 40 people.

"Some of them will tell you that the people of Carnarvon haven't really benefitted from it, but we all benefitted from it. They must just open their eyes," he said.

"There's a lot of people that complain nothing is coming to them. But it's because they want something to happen by itself. There's a lot of opportunities and there's still a lot of opportunities that people haven't thought about. They must just do something themselves."

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