

# Sutherland Inspires Writers and Artists

Sutherland is a town with about 2,841 inhabitants in the Northern Cape province of South Africa. It lies in the western Roggeveld Mountains in the Karoo. The town was established in 1855 with everything focused around the Dutch Reformed Church. In 1872 there were 19 houses, with a community of 138.



Sutherland

Sutherland is a small Karoo town, famous for its warm hospitality, snowy winters, starlit nights and dramatic landscapes. Fascinating history, unique natural assets and numerous outdoor activities make Sutherland a popular destination. See links below for more.

## Look Up

Over 25 000 years ago, the KhoiSan or Bushmen people who inhabited this region knew that time is in the stars. They had

a remarkably extensive knowledge of the stars and wove this wisdom into the rhythm of their lives. The 19th-century scholar Dr Wilhelm Bleek, who studied their languages and analysed their legends, found evidence that the Bushmen had observed the movements of the planet Jupiter and its four main moons with the naked eye. These Bushman legends date back to before Galileo made his observations with his first telescope.

Like the earliest people, we are still awed by the mystery of the stars, planets and distant galaxies. Today, the extraordinary clarity of Sutherland's cloudless, pollution-free night skies and its high elevation above sea level makes it a prime star-gazing destination and the perfect site for the South African Astronomical Observatory.

The observatory houses the largest single optical telescope in the Southern Hemisphere. Based on the design of the Hobby-Eberly Telescope in Texas, it consists of a primary, hexagonal mirror 11 metres wide made up of 91 individual hexagonal mirrors, each one metre wide and weighing about 100kg.

This great eye probing the universe is sensitive enough to pick up the light of a single candle on the moon – but its main job is to scan deep space, witnessing the birth and death of planets, gazing into distant galaxies and recording the scale and age of the universe, stars, galaxies and quasars billions of light years away.

The telescope cost about US\$30 million, of which South Africa contributed a third and international partners the balance.

## **Architecture**

Sutherland's pioneers quarried the area's distinctive grey stone for many of their buildings and architectural features, such as walls, gateposts and reservoirs. Building methods varied from dry packed stone to large dressed blocks, set in pointed mortar.

Together with the use of corrugated iron roofs, the stone walls give the town a textural, earthy appeal while the later addition of stoeps (verandas) in timber or steel adds a delicate touch to the otherwise sturdy houses.

Early photos of the town show that most buildings were gabled in the Cape Dutch fashion. As the Victorians swept in, gables and thatch or clay roofs went out of fashion, to be replaced by verandas and corrugated iron roofs. The remains of stone walls and other stone buildings are dotted around town, giving Sutherland its warm, rustic character.

A walking tour of the town will take you past most of the architecturally prominent buildings

Many of the more notable houses are now used as guesthouses serving the town's thriving tourism industry. A stroll will take visitors past The White House, originally a boarding house named Dagbreek (Daybreak) and later a garage and a museum; Sutherland Inn, which was the first pastoral residence and later a doctor's office; Primrose Cottage, built in 1905, one of the only houses with an intact gable; Cluster d'Hote, now a restaurant, was once an overnight station for farmers staying in town for Communion; and Sutherlandia. All these are examples of local architecture over 60 years old.

**Brrrr...**

By South African standards, Sutherland is bitterly cold in winter. It lays claim to the coldest winters in the country. The mercury plunges well below zero at night, sometimes as low as -16 degrees Celsius, and the area gets heavy snow several times each winter.

In their characteristically enterprising way, Sutherland locals have turned their town's extreme winters into an attraction. Tourists are drawn back time and again to their warm-hearted Karoo hospitality in guesthouses with roaring log fires. They experience jaunts in the snow and see the normally

harsh Karoo landscape transformed and softened by snowfall.

Maybe it's the serenity. Or the remoteness. Or the stark beauty of the place. Whatever it is, the Karoo inspires writers and artists.

Two Sutherland families, the Von Moltke Louws and the Esterhuyses, produced three of South Africa's best-known Afrikaans poets, DC Esterhuyse, NP van Wyk Louw and his brother WEG Louw.

Possibly Sutherland's most recognised literary son is Nicolaas Petrus van Wyk Louw. He was born at Sutherland on 11 June 1906, the second of four boys, of whom the youngest, William Ewart Gladstone Louw, also became a poet.

After what he described as an idyllic childhood in Sutherland, NP later found himself separated from it and was moved to verse, stark with haiku-like words of longing for his beloved Karoo. This excerpt was written in Amsterdam, where he was studying at the time:

**Ek staan weer by 'n wit poel  
Waar die wintermiddag sneeu  
En ek is klein en hoor verskrik  
'n jakkals uit die rante skreeu**

In 1920, the family moved to Cape Town, where the young NP van Wyk Louw later earned an MA in German at the University of Cape Town before going on to become a lecturer there. In 1948 he received an honours degree from Utrecht University for his critiques and creative works. In 1949 he took up a post as professor of Afrikaans at the University of Amsterdam, where he remained until 1958. He returned to South Africa to become Head of Department of Afrikaans-Dutch at the University of the Witwatersrand. Some of his best-known works are *Raka*, *Gestaltes en Diere*, and *Germanicus*. He died a week after his 64th birthday on 18 June 1979.

WEG Louw became a poet and renowned academic. Awarded the Murray's Gift and Queen Victoria Memorial Scholarship, he studied in Holland and returned to South Africa to be appointed professor of Dutch and Afrikaans at Rhodes University College in 1944. He later became the editor of Die Burger, a large Afrikaans daily newspaper, and was a professor of Dutch literature at Stellenbosch University.