

Life on the red planet

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A trip to the beach is as far as most Wellingtonians go on their summer break, but one local woman went a little further – the mountains of Mars.

A simulated Mars, that is, among the red rock mesas of the Utah desert in the United States.

Thorndon-based astronomer Haritina Mogosanu spent her two-week summer holiday at the Mars Desert Research Station, a project run by non-profit, space advocacy group the Mars Society.

She was part of Crew 98, a Romanian team selected by the Romanian space agency to conduct experiments that will help explorers of the red planet.

"This was the most amazing experience of my life," said Ms Mogosanu, who moved to New Zealand from Romania in 2007. "It's just you, the Hab and nothing else."

Life in the Hab – a two-storey, 10-metre round habitat complete with lab, living quarters and a greenhouse – included using "space suits" to go outside and eating food provided by the National Aeronautics and Space Administration.

Ms Mogosanu, the astronomer and engineer on board, said the experience was as "real as you made it".

"This was my chance in life to feel like I was a real astronaut," she said. "I won't get to Mars, but I'll train people who will."

A passion for the stars brought Ms Mogosanu, who studied astro-photography, to New Zealand.

"I came to see Canopus [a star best seen from New Zealand], and stayed."

She initially worked for Carter Observatory as an education co-ordinator and now works in bio-security for the Ministry of Agriculture.

Ms Mogosanu is president of the New Zealand Mars Society and is putting together a New Zealand crew, with uniquely New Zealand sensibilities, to return to the Mars station next year.

"New Zealanders are the best at bio-security in the world," she said.

"This is the question for Mars – what are we going to take there? What plants, what diseases? Is there life on Mars and, if there is, what can we do to preserve that?"

She is talking about bacterial and microbial life, not little green men, but said the preservation of that life was a real issue.

"That's why they crashed the probe [Galileo, on September 21, 2003] on to Jupiter – so it wouldn't go down on [Jupiter's moon] Europa, because Europa is another one that might have life."

She said she hoped New Zealand bio-security expertise could play a part in a real mission to Mars. "This country is such an inspiration for me. [The first] people who arrived in New Zealand are the greatest explorers ever because they had come so far – and they came by boat.

"[New Zealanders] have the DNA for getting to Mars, out of all the people in the world."

Ms Mogosanu said going Martian was not as far off as people thought, since US president Barack Obama announced last year Nasa plans to mount a human mission to Mars by 2030.

The Mars Society has a plan to send people on the 109.2 million kilometre round trip within 10 years.

"This is do-able," says Ms Mogosanu. "We just need to show people it can be done."For information on the Mars Society and proposed Kiwi Mars simulation crew, see sites.google.com/site/marssocietynz/home.

- The Wellingtonian

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