

IT'S IN THE STARS

A lifelong passion for the heavens turns into a unique astrotourism business

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Readers may recall that old song:

*When you wish upon a star
Makes no difference who you are
Anything your heart desires
Will come to you ...*



Tim Doucette uses a laser pointer to indicate specific objects such as individual stars, constellations and planets. What is seen through the headsets (augmented tour) is then viewed by the naked eye. Inset: Constellation Great Bear (Ursa Major) as seen through the headset.

Although it was originally sung by Jiminy Cricket (Cliff Edwards) in Disney's 1940 adaptation of *Pinocchio*, this beloved tune could well be Tim Doucette's theme song.

Tim hails from Quinan, approximately 30 km inland from the town of Yarmouth. He has only 10 per cent of his vision, a result of having cataracts when he was a baby.

"Seems the first six months of a baby's life is when the eyes develop," Tim says. "Missed the boat on that one!"

At age 16, a surgeon removed the lens from Tim's eyes as a way to deal with the scar tissue caused by the cataracts. It was night time when his parents drove home from the hospital. Stepping out of the car, he looked up, and his left eye filled with a billion spots of light. "At first, it scared me, as I thought I had a detached retina—a possible side effect of the operation." The teenager was told not to be afraid; he was merely seeing stars for the first time. "It was like a curtain had been lifted. Although I was still legally blind, I knew that the stars would play a major role in my life. I just wasn't sure when or how." Shortly after this, Tim decided to learn all he could about the night sky and its mysteries.

Fifteen years later, while living in Moncton with his wife, Amanda, and their son, Alex, the budding astronomer built an observatory in his backyard. He then started hosting an

open house once a month. "I fell in love with sharing the night sky with everyone."

Fast forward to the winter of 2014, when a group from Argyle, NS—aware of Tim's night sky knowledge—asked if he would help them acquire a special dark sky certification. "After a lot of hard work, the municipalities of Argyle, Clare and Yarmouth were designated the first Starlight Tourist Destination, named 'Acadian Skies & Mi'kmaq Lands Starlight Reserve.' It's the first destination in North America to have that certification."

As luck would have it, Quinan (the place where Tim was born) is also in Argyle, which is part of a region referred to as the Southwest Nova Biosphere Reserve—one of only 18 ecosystems in Canada with this special designation. Encompassing Annapolis, Digby, Yarmouth, Shelburne and Queens Counties, the biosphere has unique features related to nature, culture, environment, traditions and heritage—including access to dark skies, free of light pollution.

Knowing that the biosphere's mandate includes: "...balancing the conservation of nature and cultural heritage with sustainable resource development, to support prosperous local economies and healthy communities," the Doucettes moved back to Quinan in the fall of 2014 with a plan to build



Spending the night in a sky dome with a perfect view of the heavens gives new meaning to “sleeping under the stars.”



Above left: Self portrait of the photographer, Brenda Tate, taken in front of the observatory at Deep Sky Eye. Right: The star cluster Pleiades, or Seven Sisters, bears a resemblance to the Little Dipper.

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a observatory and encourage the public to get up close and personal with the stars.

Deep Sky Eye Observatory opened the following year; Tim rolled out night sky programs; word spread. The next logical step was to find a way for visitors to experience the majesty of the night sky in comfort—all night. Now, within walking distance of the observatory, the Doucettes have three Sky Bubbles (overnight accommodations with see-through tops) as well as a Sky Cabin.

Amanda manages this part of the business. “Her attention to detail and making the customer happy is top notch,” Tim says. Although he’s undoubtedly biased, accolades keep pouring in on TripAdvisor and their Facebook page, echoing similar sentiments.

Tim’s brother, Stephen, is also part owner of the business. He designed the grounds, is responsible for maintenance, and often spends time with visitors, as do Tim’s parents.

“Together we make a very effective family operation. It would not work without each one of them,” Tim says.

Of course, increased popularity means more customers. In 2018, when it became evident that Tim needed an assistant, photographer and night skies aficionado, Brenda Tate, stepped into the picture. “He knew me online through Astrophotography Nova Scotia, a Facebook group, and had seen my photos, so he invited me to come out sometime,” says Tate. “I did, and we clicked.”

Now, when Tim has large groups booked, he takes one group in the observatory, and Tate takes the other group outside for a

visual tour of the night sky. “I point out various constellations, explain what they are, and sometimes tell stories of the myths associated with them,” she says. If there’s anything unusual—a meteor shower or a pass by of the International Space Station (ISS)—she directs their attention to these items of interest. At some point, the groups switch.

Tate also writes a blog for the Deep Sky Eye website, and takes photos to go with it. “I sense an affinity with the stars and the universe in general,” says the retired school teacher. “I believe we’re all beings of wondrous, indwelling light. Some people have raised the idea that the universe is sentient—albeit not in the way humans are. To quote Carl Sagan, ‘The cosmos is within us. We are made of star-stuff. We are a way for the universe to know itself.’ ”

Tate adds, “I’ve always loved the night sky. My dad was in the navy and when I was very small, he used to talk to me about what he saw up there. But (of course), sailors were among the very first celestial navigators.”

Astronomy is the study and science of celestial objects and related phenomena. It dates back to our earliest civilizations when Babylonians, Greeks, Iranians, Chinese, Egyptians, Maya, Indian, Nubian, and indigenous peoples of the Americas observed and recorded data from the night skies.

This information was used to figure out the seasons, create calendars, and determine the best time to grow and harvest crops. As far back as 150-80 BC, astronomers used an early analog computer called the Antikythera mechanism, which

was designed to calculate the location of the Sun, Moon and planets for a given date. Advances in the realm of astronomy (not to be confused with astrology!) continued.

Zooming into the 18th and 19th centuries, new technologies such as the spectroscope and photography came into being. But it wasn’t until the 20th century when the Milky Way was determined to be the Earth’s galaxy, with its own group of stars. As well, observation of “external” galaxies, and their recessive habits, provided insights into an expanded view of the Universe.

Today, some of the terms associated with astronomy include black holes, quasars, pulsars, blazars and radio galaxies. But let us return to more familiar lingo, like “stars”—and how they lined up in Tim’s favour yet one more time.

In November 2018, Tim received a phone call from Quebec. Jon Marcotte cut to the quick; would he be interested in hosting the Night Sky Odyssey program, in partnership with National Geographic? You bet!

*Like a bolt out of the blue
Fate steps in and sees you through
When you wish upon a star
Your dreams come true*

Marcotte explained that his company had been looking for innovative ways to get people to look up at the skies. They were especially interested in exploration, education, and preservation. To that end, his company worked with

innovators in the Netherlands and the United Kingdom and, voila! Night Sky Odyssey was born.

In a nutshell, it’s a software program that involves people inserting a smart phone into a headset, which, in turn, shows night sky patterns (constellations and major elements). But here’s the thing: it superimposes night sky illustrations wherever the person is facing, creating a visual impression of what’s out there—whether the skies are clear or not.

When considering an organization to champion this program, the National Geographic Society was the obvious choice, “They loved it,” Marcotte says, and gave Night Sky Odyssey the rights to use their logo and branding, and to select service providers to deliver the program. A bonus to participants is that they get to keep the headsets which means they can use them anytime, anywhere.

Tim says, “We feel privileged to be one of the first in North America to offer this exciting technology.” Asked if the stars have other things in store for them, the 45-year-old says, “I can only see this continuing to grow. And we hope that other businesses will follow suit so that we can offer more astrotourism products here in Southwest Nova. The possibilities are endless.”

After pausing for a moment, he continues, “The heavens have taught me so many things...We have to take care of each other and our home, the Earth, which is in great danger from pollution and climate change. We have the technology to shape our planet, get rid of fossil fuels, protect the environment, and save the world. Let’s use it!” 🐼