

# AMBASSADOR TO THE STARS

Professor David Block is an astronomer, one of South Africa's best, in fact. But despite myriad academic accolades, he's really about making sure we all see the bigger picture.

WORDS CATHERINE DAVIS

Professor David Block showed me images that had the capacity to make me feel insignificant and empowered in equal measure: from startling close-ups of stellar maternity wards (literally, where stars are born), to the serene majesty of the aurora borealis (pictured left). The images were taken by the professor – the first through a telescope at the European Southern Observatory in Chile, and the second during one of his many trips to the Arctic.



undoubtedly one of the greatest minds of all time. His intellectual genius surpassed it all.'

Professor Block's collection of celestial photographs allowed me to peer into mysterious black holes, nebulae and faraway galaxies, including some of the most distant objects discerned in the universe. They teased out thoughts not only about our role on this earth, but also what's out there and how beautiful it is. With every image, my knee-jerk, and fairly unoriginal, response was 'Wow!'

But it's that response that gives Professor Block the greatest joy, and the reason why, when he's not lecturing or writing, he leads small groups of people to Northern Norway to share in the awe of the cosmos.

How wonderful to be taken to see the aurora borealis by a world-renowned astronomer, who knows where to go and when, and who can wax lyrical about the immensity and complexity of the universe. Unlike other tour operators and their guides (and there are many that offer this excursion), the charismatic professor can break down these complicated subjects, and explore the evidence for design in the astrophysical world with you.

'I've devoted more than 35 years to sharing the wonders of the cosmos, as well as encouraging audiences around the globe to always look up, but the most satisfying experiences is telling guests on my Arctic tours to look up at the Northern Lights in all their glory. The thrill on their faces tells me we as humans need to stay in touch with the universe.' ■

For more about Professor Block's arctic trips, visit [davidblock.co.za](http://davidblock.co.za)

Professor Block's CV is nearly as impressive as the night sky. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Astronomical Society of London at the age of 19, and a year later they published his first research paper on relativistic astrophysics. He holds a PhD specialising in the morphology of spiral galaxies, and serves as a professor at the School of Computer Science and Applied Mathematics at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. He has also been a guest at numerous international universities and observatories, including Harvard.

In 2013 Professor Block received the National Science and Technology Forum (NSTF) BHP Billiton Award recognising him as one of South Africa's greatest communicators in science to the public, and he has authored and co-authored several books, including *Shrouds of the Night* and *God and Galileo*.

But academic glories aside, one of his proudest moments, he says, was when he accompanied the world's most famous scientist of recent times, the late Stephen Hawking, to meet former President Nelson Mandela in Johannesburg. 'The legendary Stephen Hawking was

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