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## Free For All

### Jill and the microorganisms from Mars

By Jill McWhinnie

Renowned astrophysicist Professor Steven Hawking recently stated that extinction has claimed the majority of species to ever exist, and it is likely that the same fate awaits us, whether from nuclear war, climate change, a global pandemic or a meteor hit. Professor Hawking believes that our survival as a species depends upon our ability to find new homes elsewhere in the universe and predicts that a colony on Mars may be established within 40 years.

Judging from the degree of media interest in the Red Planet, including a major special on Discovery Channel this month, I wouldn't be surprised if we get there long before that. Who knows? Developers may already have placed a plan of subdivision on Mars' Valles Marineres canyon. Since the best lots always get snapped up quickly I checked out Discovery Channel's website to find out more about life on Mars in case I decided to move there.

After reviewing the Red Planet Travel Brochure, I'm not sure I'd like living on Mars. For one thing, the return trip is 900 million kilometres. A one-way trip to the planet takes 11 months. I could get to a colony on the Moon in three days – a much more convenient commuting distance. If I lived on Mars, I'd have to telecommute if I wanted to keep my job.

Getting to Mars would be kind of like going to the cottage – you'd have to bring everything you need with you on the first trip. NASA plans to send the "surface habitats" – the living accommodation – on ahead so they'll be there waiting for the landing parties.

The surface habitat looks a bit like a motor home except it has an airlock and a rear emergency exit with its own pressure port. It appears to be the Martian version of a starter home. Once builders figure out how to get foundations into the surface of the planet they should be able to send the colony some nice big two storey models with garages for the pressurized Land Rovers we'll be driving.

Gardening would be a major challenge on Mars since the surface of the planet is super cold, totally dry, and blasted by deadly radiation and dust storms. And it never rains. That would certainly eliminate most of the plants I enjoy in my garden here on Earth. I would miss the blooming of tulips, daffodils and hyacinths in early spring, the sweetly fragrant blossoms of flowering shrubs in May, the romance of my rose garden in June, and the burnished fall glory of my birch and service-berry trees.

I couldn't even have a lawn. There's no water. There may have been some surface water once but scientists think it all seeped underground and is now subsurface ice. Once they figure out how to access the ice and thaw it out, underground sprinkler systems for lawns could be installed. That

wouldn't be so bad. People usually have to wait for their grass in new subdivisions.

We'd have to bring all our food supplies with us. Eventually we could grow our food – but only hydroponically, until the constituents of the Martian soil were better understood. I think there's something to be said for growing food in soil – I can't help thinking of the seasonal abundance of a friend's garden plot – the tender shoots of asparagus in spring, sweet juicy strawberries in June, and tomato plants laden with sun-ripened tomatoes in high summer. I don't even want to think of what it would cost for a salad on Mars!

Since there's no breathable air on Mars it would not be possible to go outside without our NASA designed, sealed spacesuits, which have their own oxygen supply. They cost \$10 million each. Hopefully they'll go on sale before I have to make the trip and a Mars Mart will be established on the planet soon after colonization so that replacement suits can be obtained more reasonably.

Once we get there, we won't find any life forms on the planet's surface – nothing could withstand the harsh conditions. But scientists think there may be microorganisms – Martian bacteria – living deep underground. I don't think as a life form microorganisms would add much to the neighbourhood. I know I couldn't help comparing them to the cardinals, doves and goldfinches that visit the birdfeeders in my garden; the noisy bluejays who perch high in the big fir tree at my kitchen window, calling for their daily serving of peanuts in the shell; the squirrels and chipmunks and raccoons and skunks and butterflies and honeybees, and all the other living creatures that share my backyard here on Earth.

The Red Planet Brochure notes that on Mars a day is 39 minutes longer than a day on Earth. That would certainly be advantageous. Think of how much more we'd get done if we lived on Mars! But, all in all, I'm not sure that's reason enough to leave Earth and all its beauty and variety for the cold, dry desolation of Mars.

Professor Hawking says that while we are pushing ourselves to expand beyond planetary boundaries we should also be trying to mitigate the damage we are inflicting on our home planet. NASA estimates that the cost of human and robotic missions to the moon and Mars will total about \$120 billion by 2020. It seems to me that much money would go a long way to cleaning up the environmental messes we've made here on Earth.

The professor cautions that we may have to go to another star system before we find any place as nice as Earth to live. That being the case, I think I'll just file the Red Planet Brochure for now and work at trying to be a better environmental citizen here on the Blue Planet.



## Readers Write

### Don't mess with History

To the Editor:

When the Vandorf Community Centre and the Whitchurch Stouffville Museum boards met for the first time on Sept. 20, the purpose of the meeting was to get both boards together and discuss how they can work under one roof, if and when that happens.

The museum wants to expand, and needs more buildings, a situation which has been going on for two years. In order for that to happen, the mayor's office wants to sell the community centre and use the proceeds to pay for the museum expansion.

If the community centre is sold, a heritage building will be gone forever for all Whitchurch-Stouffville residents. Is that what we want? Instead of selling the centre and building across the road, why not create the new building for the museum and retain the community centre? We need both properties.

The community centre is a historic structure. Let us not bulldoze the past. People cannot forget the memories of their weddings, baptisms, banquets and funerals. The centre is meeting community needs and it can continue to function for another hundred years.

Let local residents enjoy their lifestyle; don't mess with their past and their heritage.  
Steve Pliakes • Whitchurch-Stouffville