

Equality in survival and the sharing of stories in Knysna

By Letter  Jun 8, 2017



Knysna, the prettiest town in South Africa, awoke yesterday morning to a different world, one of loss and ash on tongues. It is certain that this will be known as the Great Fire, or something else of great importance.

On Wednesday night, the old and young, wealthy retirees and the unemployed, found equality in survival and the sharing of stories. From Pezula to Karatara, from world-renowned golf estates to farmlands, they gathered on Thesen Island.

The shocked and brave became refugees in the Turbine Boutique Hotel. Rules burnt like houses before them.

Dogs barked in five-star splendour while those with no money ate for free from the menu. Smokers stood on the pool deck, watching a new fire grow from township to town.

Chris, the manager, kept getting calls.

"I can't take 60 people, we're already full... there's people sleeping in the foyer and in the bar. Yes, I know there's nowhere to go... I don't know where they'll sleep, but I'll take 20."

The exhausted would fall asleep everywhere from upright in chairs to the floors of the conference room, or in the spa, and, if they were lucky, in crowded bedrooms.

For each exhausted dreamer there was an insomniac, defiant with coffee and wine and shared thoughts: "My house is gone... Mine too... no one told us, escaped with fire both sides of the road... Yeah, me too... Don't know how it happened but I left with only one shoe... I'm in slops... Got my wife and the dog... Got my laptop... Yeah, me too..."

It was later that the more general concern became: "What do we do tomorrow?" Diana the receptionist said: "We're trying to cancel a tour group that was going to fill the hotel."

Chris shrugged in resignation: "There's nowhere to go, we're not going to let you down, you'll all stay here." A cynic said: "There's nothing left for tourists, anyway."

While staff worried if their loved ones were safe, they served those who had lost, but were safe.

While dogs peed in the wind outside, rain splattered with nasty hope – cold and short and gone in minutes. Dog owners noticed many more cars in the parking lot; more than 100 of them, rear seats filled with badly packed belongings with front seats home to husbands and wives, retired mothers and daughters.

The oldest church died with their prayers and three schools.

And the wind howled and howled.

Today, the survivors will find out who they really are.

It is now a town for the lucky and unfortunate, the brave and the helped.

Love Knysna, save Knysna!

Mike Hampton