

**LANDING** the Curiosity rover accurately on Mars was akin to a champion golfer scoring a 10 000km hole-in-one, a South African scientist working at Nasa's Jet Propulsion Laboratory said yesterday.

Speaking at his alma mater — Stellenbosch University — JPL associate director for project formulation and strategy Jakob van Zyl said touching down on a precise spot on the Red Planet was a very difficult procedure.

"To put it in context, it would be a little bit like asking Ernie Els to tee

# SA Mars boffin on search for rabbits

off here in Cape Town and hit a golf ball into the cup at St Andrew's in Scotland. And to make life more difficult, he doesn't know what the weather is like in Scotland. And if that isn't enough ... the cup is moving at 100 000km/h," he said.

The three-ton craft carrying the robot Curiosity rover entered the thin Martian atmosphere last month at a speed of 41 000km/h.

"And we were supposed to stop in seven minutes," Van Zyl said.

Curiosity touched down in Gale Crater on the surface of Mars on August 6. The last stage of its landing saw the rover lowered 7m on cables by means of a revolutionary "sky crane".

Van Zyl said some of the photographs of the Martian surface the rover sent back "reminds me of

Namibia, where I grew up".

Curiosity's mission was to climb a 6km-high mountain. Photographs of the mountain show it is made up of layer upon layer of apparently stratified rock.

"It represents millions of years of Martian history and we will be driving up the mountain ... to analyse the rocks. The lowest rocks are the oldest, and the top rocks the

youngest. We'll be able to see if life ever existed there and, if so, for how long."

Van Zyl said among the aims of the mission was to find signs of past life, which he stressed would be "an enormous discovery".

"Some people think we're looking for rabbits and stuff like that. But we're looking for signs such as carbon compounds that will show life might have existed at one time. Of course, we'll be delighted if we get a picture of the rabbit," he joked. — *Sapa*