

# Hike under a full Karoo moon

Experienced hikers will tell you that every hike is unique. That's true, but Heuningland's full-moon hike is even more so. It will have you looking at the Karoo through new eyes.

WORDS & PICTURES **ZIGI EKRON**

A golden sunrise over the Karoo.



It's just after 1 am on a Sunday, deep in the Karoo. The moon is almost full but it's playing hide-and-seek. It draws silver linings around the clouds that hang like shredded flags against the dark grey sky.

Seven people walk in silence on a deserted jeep track, rarely used even by day. Their boots crunch on the gravel. Then a disembodied voice with an American accent says: "You have walked two kilometres." It's coming from the side pocket of Estelle van Dyk's backpack, where her Samsung is emitting a blue glow. In reality, Estelle has already walked 10 km because yesterday, upon her arrival at Bergvallei farm, she walked 8 km in the early evening.

It's hard to find Bergvallei on Google Maps – what you need is the 3222AA "Reiersvlei" map by the Chief Directorate: National Geo-spatial Information. You'll see that the farm is in the nook of the Nuweveld Mountains, on the border between the Western Cape and Northern Cape, next to the Karoo National Park, in an area called Brandewyns Ghat.

If that sounds like too much effort, draw a straight line from Beaufort West to Fraserburg – Bergvallei is just north of the halfway mark. The important thing is that it's very far away from any traffic, noise and cellphone signal.

Tonight's leg is about 18 km long and makes a wide arc across the provincial border before returning to the Bergvallei farmstead. Each of the five legs of this 65 km hike start and end at the farmstead, which is the base camp.

This full-moon hike is the

brainchild of Douwe Vlok and his wife Liezl. They run Heuningland Tours and have welcomed tourists and hikers into the heart of the Great Karoo since 2017. Estelle has done the full, 103 km Heuningland Trail twice to raise funds for drought relief, but you can only do this mega hike at certain months of the year when it's not too hot or too cold. So, the Vloks made a plan to accommodate hikers in the early autumn and late spring, on a unique trail that makes the most of the full moon.

**Crunch, crunch, crunch** go our footsteps on the jeep track, while the moon bounces along on the ridges. The landscape is monochromatic, like a black-and-white photo. Every now and again, someone turns on their headlamp to make sure they're on the right track. When the moon peeks out behind the clouds, I instinctively reach to pull my hat lower over my eyes to prevent the bright light from affecting my night vision.

There's a great sense of camaraderie in the group, but you're also welcome to break away and walk on your own, with only your shadow and thoughts for company. "Moonshadow" by Cat Stevens is stuck in my head. I hum along as I walk. "I'm bein' followed by a moonshadow, moonshadow, moonshadow. Leapin' and hoppin' on a moonshadow, moonshadow, moonshadow..."

It's a slackpacking trail, so no one is staggering beneath the weight of a backpack. You only need to carry a water bottle or two, snacks, a camera and a jacket if there's

You'll discover on this hike that the Karoo is not as flat as it may look from the N1.







The water in the streams is clean and fresh.



On some days you start hiking before sunrise, on others you set off in the late afternoon.

a nip in the air; maybe a tippie to warm you from the inside if needed. The rest of my luggage is in my tent at the farmstead.

**We stop to rest** and drink coffee at a dry tributary of the Leeu River. Nicolette Simonis lays down on her back to look for shooting stars and satellites. It's easy to spot them here because there are no city lights to pollute the night sky. Fellow hiker Ria Grobler sums it up well: "You feel close to the earth *and* the heavens," she says.

A while later, when the voice from Estelle's backpack informs us that we have done 12 Karoo kilometres, the black-and-white landscape turns golden, yellow and

ochre. A light drizzle sifts down and before long a rainbow curves across the horizon. GPS technology is great, but it can't capture the smell of the soil, the sweep of grass against your legs, or the openness of the Karoo plains.

*Crunch, crunch, crunch.* Five kilometres to go to the Bergvallei farmstead. A hare leaps through the grass; a mouse darts across the path. Yesterday, two kudus disappeared over a ridge when they spotted us. There are other antelope on the farm, but they give us humans a wide berth.

A cat-like pawprint in the soil stops us in our tracks. It's too big to belong to a caracal... Leopard, maybe, or something else? The big river isn't

known as the Leeu for nothing...

This area is – or rather was – lion country. It's where Sylvester, the Houdini lion that escaped from the Karoo National Park, roamed for about a month in 2015 before he was caught. I've spotted the odd bleached sheep skull and bones in the veld – possibly killed by predators or maybe just a casualty of the hostile environment and long drought.

The riverbeds are mostly dry now, but there was some much-needed rain recently and there's some washed-up debris here and there. The earth's gratitude is visible in the veld all around: It's green, much greener than you'd expect of the Karoo.

**The Karoo holds** many surprises. The landscape is not the one you see at 120 km/h as you drive between Leeu-Gamka and Beaufort West. You give a satisfied sigh as you walk across a plain, only to find yourself in a kloof the next moment, where the branches of dense stands of trees form a dome overhead. When the trail goes up one of the high koppies, the landscape unfolds like a life-sized relief map. You want to reach out to touch the contours of the furthest mountains and run your fingers through the valleys.

The hike on the third day takes you to the beacon on top of one of the highest peaks in the area in the late afternoon. As you eat your sandwiches while a cold

breeze pulls on your sleeves, it feels like you can see all the way to tomorrow. You want to imagine that if you were to turn around, you might also see your yesterdays trailing behind you like a string of pearls.

It's tempting to wax lyrical when you watch the sun setting in the west and then, minutes later, the moon rising like a big yellow ball on the other side of the koppie. But that's only on the third day. There are still some kilometres to go before then.

We crunch along the farm road, past the windmill and the cement dam, to the Bergvallei farmstead, where Liezl and Douwe are waiting with coffee and breakfast. In the

dining room, the table is laid with fresh bread that Douwe baked in a big cast iron pot over the coals, plus jams, rusks, fruit, breakfast cereal, juice, bacon and eggs, and leftovers from last night's braai. You'll never go hungry on a Heuningland hike.

We sink into our camping chairs and kick off our shoes on the stoep. Gert van Dyk soaks his tired feet in a basin of water. After breakfast and a hot bath, most people head off for a nap. But we have a lot of free time before the next shift tomorrow morning at dawn. Will the rest of us linger on the stoep to listen to bird chatter? Maybe read a book, talk, swim, have a beer?

I think so – we've earned it!



Mother Nature welcomes the hikers with this beautiful display.



**KNOW BEFORE YOU GO**

**How does it work?** On the day you arrive, there's an optional late-afternoon hike. On the second and third day, you start your hike around 2 am. The third day has a second leg at 5 pm and you start at the same time on the fourth day. All the routes follow jeep tracks.

**Where?** On the farm Bergvallei, about 60 km north-west of Beaufort West. Douwe and Liezl will send you directions when you book. You need a vehicle with high ground clearance to get to the farm.

**When?** The next full-moon hikes will take place from 17 – 21 November 2021, 16 – 20 January 2022 and 14 – 18 February 2022.

**Accommodation?** Hikers bring their own tents and bedding. They may use the bathrooms and kitchen in the farmhouse and swim in the farm dam.

**Cost:** R4 435 per person (2021); R4 735 per person (2022). The rate includes three meals per day, plus dinner on the first night and breakfast on the last morning before you go home.

**Contact:** 072 243 5251; heuningland.com

**IN OTHER WORDS**

**Estelle van Dyk, farmer**

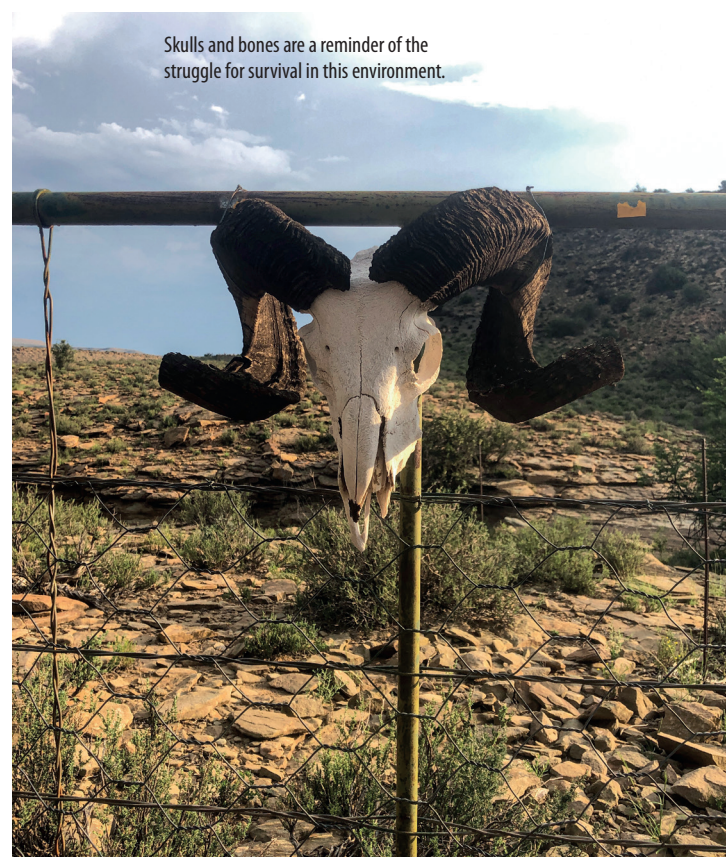
*"When the full moon rises behind you and you can see your own shadow. ... It's brighter than any torch; an unbelievable experience. You have to be in nature to realise how small you are in the greater scheme of things."*

**Daleen van Zyl, cattle farmer**

*"It was wonderful to get away for four days where no one can reach you. It was also good to see how little you really need."*

**Dirk van Zyl, accountant**

*"I feel well rested and content. The fact that there's no cellphone reception here is a bonus. There are no other people; the farm is hidden away from the world. I'll remember the landscape, the peace, the beauty."*



Skulls and bones are a reminder of the struggle for survival in this environment.



Night hike under a full moon.



Wynand Vievier was only 23 years old when he was laid to rest in the veld.



Douwe Vlok