



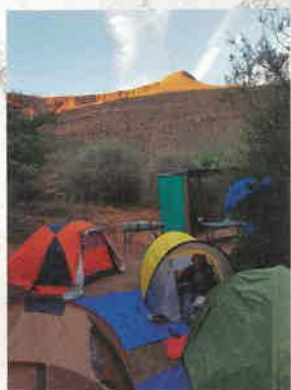
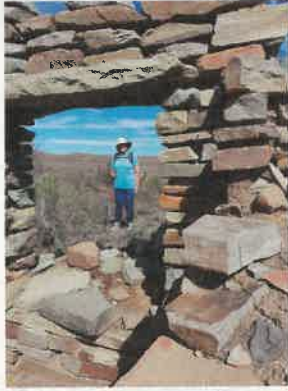
Slow and steady: The route varies from farm dirt roads to near-derelict criss-cross country tracks.



The organisers:
Douwe en Liezl Vlok.



Taking a breather: To relax in the shade of a tropical grove is one of the Heartland hiker's unexpected highlights.



Talking points: Great conversation makes the road feel shorter.



A unique Karoo experience:
You never tire of looking at the clear blue and pure white clouds.



Fellow hiker: Lientje Zieggers





The four musketeers: The writer (second from left), with Jeanne Bestbier, Arina Botes and Lientjie Zwiegers.



Refreshing: Despite the drought, a few dams along the way help you cool off.

Searching for the perfect combination of silence and companionship? Then lace up your trail shoes and hike the Heuningland route. **BY MARENET JORDAAN**

Surely this must be the last bend in the road, I think to myself as the bright pink shirt of the hiker in front of me disappears around the corner. After a steep incline, I reach the bend, only to see the same bright pink shirt off in the distance, still walking and not reclining in a camp chair as I had hoped. Ahead I see the Oukloof Pass has another turn waiting for us.

Now I know: the Karoo is anything but flat.

But it's exactly this – these unexpected discoveries – that makes the Heuningland hiking trail between Beaufort West and Fraserburg so alluring. You walk kilometres along a two-track trail with only Karoo shrubs for company, then suddenly the landscape changes, and you find yourself in a poplar grove. Or after a careful descent down a rocky riverbank, you're in a dry riverbed where bright red succulents sprout.

Hiking 103 km over four days is no joke. But I will do it again tomorrow.

HOW IT STARTED

Why did I decide to do this specific route? I'm still not sure. Maybe I read about it, or maybe I clicked on an interesting link. However, I recall the banner on the Heuningland website. It read: "We sell silence." Heavenly bliss! And I can attest – silence follows you on this route.

But to experience this blissfulness,

you need to put in the work. Be sure to properly read the first e-mail you receive from Liezl Vlok, who, with her husband Douwe, organises the Heuningland Karoo hike. Even if it's classified as a nontechnical hike, exercise you must. At the end of each day, your gear and a delicious dinner awaits you, but if you want to enjoy some of Douwe's pot bread, you need to reach the campsite in one piece. So, add a few (hundred) kilometres to your trail shoes before you attempt this route.

Luckily, you'll have some time to calm your nerves a bit. The afternoon before the first day of the hike, your group will meet at the remote Welgemoed camping site. It's situated approximately 70 km on the other side of Beaufort West (on the Fraserburg road). Here you'll meet Liezl and Douwe, who will inform you about the dos and don'ts for the next few days. You'll quickly come to realise that the Vloks are the type of people who genuinely mean it when they invite you to visit them on their farm.

You'll never know what thoughts raced through the minds of the 20 or so hikers the night before you start. Yet, you'll remember clearly how everyone set out at the crack of dawn, with their lunch – sandwiches, yoghurt and fruit – safely tucked away in their day backpacks. There's no turning back now. Ahead of you lies the 27,5 km you need to hike on day one into the Oukloof Pass. →

Hiking

GOOD CONVERSATION MAKES THE ROAD SHORTER

Sometimes you walk on your own, but you're never lonely. Your mind calms as you increasingly focus solely on the sound of your shoes hitting the gravel. There's no cellphone signal. The only vehicle you'll see on the road is Liezl and Douwe, who drive by with a trailer on their way to set up camp for the evening. One day, as they drove past, Liezl handed out lollipops. Another day, it was chocolate. These treats will give you a much-needed boost after a few hours on the road.

But you're human, and somewhere between kilometre 10 and 20, you're thankful for the company of another hiker.

Heuningland was a type of solo pilgrimage for me. An early 40th birthday present to myself. However, I thank my lucky stars for the people I met along the way.

Due to a serendipitous set of events, I became part of a group of four women, each with her own motivation for embarking on this hike.

During the day, we would stop together to take off our shoes and have lunch. In the evenings, our four small tents formed a colourful laager. For dinner, we'd pull up our camping chairs next to other hikers around the fire. In the mornings, we would set out together.

My closest hiking partner was Jeanne Bestbier, a music teacher from Somerset West. We walked while talking for long stretches. Other times we covered kilometres without saying a word. For most of the day our fellow hikers would be way ahead of us. Lientjie Zwiegiers from Beaufort West and Arina Botes from Worcester, both nursing sisters, were clearly used to hiking far and fast. Jeanne and I didn't even try to keep up with them. It wasn't necessary. Here you walk at your own pace.

MEMORIES OF THE LONG ROAD

Despite having hiking companions and the valuable guidance of the Vloks, the road is long. You cover more than

Heuningland 101

Listen to Liezl and Douwe's advice. They know what they're talking about.

Exercise! The distances you'll have to cover are:

- **DAY 1** Oukloof 27,5 km
- **DAY 2** Tweefontein 26 km
- **DAY 3** Kareebos 22,5 km
- **DAY 4** Welgemoed 27 km

Walk with trail running shoes, not hiking boots.

One of the hikers in our group started off with boots and got blisters all over his feet. He completed the route, but it was painful.

Don't overpack. You need less than you think.

Remember your first aid kit. Liezl provides specific guidelines.

Stay hydrated. Even in the cooler weather, the Karoo sun can still be harsh.

Make frequent stops. Take off your shoes and socks to allow your feet to dry.

Take a tent that's easy to set up. The last thing you want after a long day of walking is to struggle to set up camp.

GOOD TO KNOW

- Each person is only allowed two medium-sized zipper PEP plastic bags to hold all their clothes and gear.
- You hike with a day backpack with enough water, your own snacks and lunch. Lunch is provided, but you must pack it yourself in your own small dish with a lid. Dinner is also provided.
- The Vloks will transport your luggage, including your tent and camp chair, to the overnight camps. There will be an outdoor toilet, and you "shower" with an ice-cream tub of warm water.
- Hikes only take place in spring and autumn. The 2020 price is R3 950 pp (including meals), but it's unclear if any hikes will take place this year due to Covid-19.
- For more info, visit heuningland.com.



Geared to go: The four hiking companions' backpacks, decorated with handmade owls which Jeanne brought for good luck.



20 km each day. The first day, when you're hiking Oukloof Pass, you'll start to doubt the wisdom of your life decisions. But it gets easier as the days go by, or maybe you just get more used to the routine of the road and the unavoidable aches and pains that sneak up on you. On day three, I was surprised when we only had 10 km left before we reached the camp. It felt as if a kilometre had become shorter. I think it's the quiet and fresh air that pumps new energy into your limbs.

The immense plains, rocky hills and zinc dams that peek out behind thorn trees. At night, you'll stare in wonder at the vast expanse of stars above. These memories will stay with you long after you've dusted the Karoo sand off your shoes. You'll feel an indescribable sense of gratitude for an experience that money can't buy. ■

