

WE MADE THE MOVE

This is where the Vloks live – in a former corrugated-iron shed that became their home, one with a long stoep in front and another at the back. There's an outside shower on the nearest corner of the house (behind the bakkie), and a plunge pool and dry toilet out front. You can also see the vegetable garden under shade cloth and the chicken coop. And then there's the view of the landscape that they love. Behind the flat-topped mountain lies Beaufort West, and to the right... well, there lies the end of the rainbow.

Where you hear the earth's *heartbeat*

In the folds of the Nuweveld Mountains, about 70 km southwest of Beaufort West, Douwe and Liezl Vlok have realised their dream: to live simply and to tread the earth as lightly as they can. Let's go for a walk in their footsteps.

TEXT AND PHOTOS PETER VAN NOORD





Father and son spent both nights of Platteland's visit sleeping outdoors. Douwe got up early, but the first rays of the morning sun caught Douwe-Tempel and Liebe the dachshund still in bed.



Imagine living in a place where jackals howl in the kloofs behind your house. In front of it, a plain strewn with ancient stones extends to the horizon, and in the heavens above it you can see the skyglow at night where Beaufort West lies to the northeast. And through binoculars you may see a black rhino against a koppie in the distance.

You built this house with your own hands, your water comes out of the cool belly of the mountain, and your vegetables come from the patch of earth you faithfully tend and water and protect against the elements. On hot nights you take your bedding outdoors and sleep under the arc of the Milky Way, far brighter here than in most other places.

This is the life of Douwe and Liezl Vlok, two colourful characters who've each travelled long, winding roads to

get to where they are now – some of them gravel roads, Liezl says, laughing. "Where do you think these wrinkles come from?"

HERE, ON THE FARM HEUNINGLAND, the Vloks live with their youngest child, 11-year-old Douwe-Tempel, two dogs, four cats, four horses and a clutch of chickens. The nearest sign of "civilisation" to be seen is the occasional dust cloud rising above the Oukloof road between Beaufort West and Fraserburg. Beyond this road lies the Karoo National Park, former home of Sylvester the lion, the Houdini that rose to fame when he escaped the park twice, first in 2015 and then in 2016, and had the whole of South Africa following his adventures as he evaded trackers. He now lives in Addo Elephant National Park. They're on

the fringes of cellphone coverage, and Eskom lines and municipal services haven't reached them.

The Vloks' house doesn't have a bathroom, but there is an outside shower that delivers sun-heated water from tanks in the mountain. Waste-water is diverted to the trees – lemon, fig, carob, white stinkwood, thorn, banana – so only *boerseep* is allowed. Even to wash your hair. Or you can jump into the plunge pool next to the front stoep. Its water is clean and crystal clear, thanks to the use of copper sulphate, an effective algicide.

On cold winter days it's a different story. That's when you hurry a wash out of an enamel bowl in front of the coal stove. Tooth brushing means going outside in the morning and evening with your toothbrush and cup of water – and each time rinsing out the water over a different grateful Karoo bossie.

The toilet is a dry-composting affair where you have to keep your wits about you, since a number-two is acceptable but a number-one isn't – that's also for watering Karoo bossies.

There's very little garbage: waste is reused, recycled, repurposed or broken down into compost for the garden.

During the day the sun generates electricity, and the excess is stored in batteries so that fridges, chargers, Wi-Fi and lights can be powered after dark. But when it's locust time, lights are kept off. Best that the pests land in the fire or candlewax rather than in your dinner plate.

But even if they did, it wouldn't be the worst thing because, above all, you're assured that here on the farm you're far removed from the madness and despair of most of the modern world... light years away from the spectacle and the rush of the city.

LIEZL WAS BORN in the Swartland; she's the daughter of a Moorreesburg wheat farmer. She laughs easily and tells it like it is. "I have always been contrary and question what everybody else takes as gospel," she says as laugh lines appear at the corners of her blue eyes. "My parents sent me to Girls' High in Paarl, but they had their hands full with me. My dad says I was so wild that only when I turned 16 he knew for certain there was a God."

"Despite the Calvinist streak we all have, marriage and procreation didn't feature in my plans. I loved animals. When I went to university in Stellenbosch, I took along a horse, Lurine, which was stabled at Lanzerac for three years."

But life didn't turn out the way Liezl had imagined, and by the time she met Douwe in 2004 she was a divorced mother of three: Ruan (now 25), >

ABOVE Time for a break... Douwe sits on the stoep and enjoys a beer and the view, with Anan the whippet and Liebe the dachshund at his side.

ABOVE LEFT Liezl has always had a close bond with animals. She had horses while studying at university, and these days they have four horses on the farm.

TOP Streepmuis's dad was an African wildcat, so she has a wild streak: she sometimes disappears for days. When Douwe goes walking in the kloofs behind the house, the two dogs and four cats accompany him. We saw for ourselves how Streepmuis ambled along at her own pace.

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Warnich (23) and Mieke Burger (21). “And then I married Beaufort West’s golden son, Douwe Vlok!” she says, laughing. He mumbles a protest, looking abashed, but she doesn’t let it go. “People always say, ‘You’re Douwe’s wife, aren’t you?’ To which I hit back, ‘No, I’m not Douwe Vlok’s wife; Douwe is Liezl Warnich’s husband!’”

Her attitude towards having children has changed completely. “My four children are my crown, and all of them are just as much Douwe’s children. I love them, *and* I love animals, because they keep you in the moment.”

Liezl saw Mieke through matric by way of home schooling, and now she home-schools Douwe-Tempel, a child who loves running around barefoot in the veld.

Not that her kids are tied to the proverbial apron strings. “I told them, ‘I’m your mother and your teacher until you’re 18... then I’m kicking you out. And after that I’m only available to you in an advisory capacity.’”

“I told them there are really only two things I could teach them: good manners... and, ‘Own your shit!’ There is really nothing more tragic than adults playing the blame game and not being willing to take responsibility for their own lives. No, wait – there are actually two more things: You need to know there’s always something new to be learned. And, very importantly, that a mistake is only a mistake; it’s a bruise, not a bloody tattoo!”

Douwe was still single when they met. He had travelled widely. After a few years in the army’s permanent



TOP Douwe wondered what his army pals would say about the fact that he uses *blouvitriool* (copper sulphate) in the dam to control algae growth. It keeps the water clear and blue.
ABOVE LEFT A collection of heart-shaped stones – and a rose quartz stone, the stone of universal love.
ABOVE RIGHT The fern-like markings on this stone are dendrites. They form as mineral-rich water – in this case manganese – leaches from the rock over a long period, flowing along tiny cracks, and manganese oxide crystallises in this pattern.



Liezl built not only their own house but also that of her father, Henri Warnich (right). She baked the clay bricks herself, and used a natural plaster consisting of finely sifted soil mixed with lime for better weather resistance. She also used recycled materials, such as the roof beams and the window and door frames, which she got for a steal. Henri moved here from Strand in July 2020. “I do miss my friends,” he says, “but I’d had enough of the hooters and sirens.”



force, he took jobs in Miami (1994 and 1995), cleaning stables, among other things; and in Paraguay (1996 to 2000), where he worked for a year at an ostrich quarantine station that bred chicks for the feather market – and ultimately managed a cattle ranch. It was during this time that he learnt to speak fluent Spanish.

Liezl was not an easy catch. “Douwe asked me to marry him nine times!” she says. After she finally consented, they were married in May 2008. And Douwe-Tempel was born exactly two years later.

The two of them are a perfect match. “Douwe doesn’t have an ego,” Liezl says, no longer jokingly. “What you see is what you get, and that’s a rare quality nowadays.”

HOW DO YOU SURVIVE out here, on your own, in the middle of nowhere? You’ll find the answer on their website: “We sell silence.” Douwe clarifies, “Yes, we farm with silence!”

While still living in Oudtshoorn, both Douwe and Liezl had careers in the travel industry. Douwe was synonymous with the travel companies Bhejane and Mpafa, renowned for their efficiently organised tours throughout South Africa, Namibia and Botswana – and for our sister magazines *go!* and *Weg!*. Among her other professional activities, Liezl was a booking agent for Mpafa.

They worked hard, suffered mild burn-out, and yearned for a different kind of life. In 2017 they decided to settle on the Vlok family farm, where they planned to offer hiking tours. After all, Douwe, knows the landscape like the back of his hand. During the holidays, when he was in high school, he and his friends would pack rucksacks and hike and camp in the veld. The only food they’d pack would be a few tins of bully beef and sweet black coffee.

“Neither of us has training in financial management,” Liezl says. “Some people would probably say I was crazy to give up my job without the prospect of another – but the universe rewards the headstrong. How did JM Storm put it? ‘Magic happens when you don’t give up, even when you >



LEFT Liezl, busy working on the framework for the old corrugated-iron shed that they'd bought at an auction, which is now their home. **BELOW** Before there was a building on the farm, Liezl, her eldest son and her youngest son lived in this caravan for seven months.



In this harsh climate, the Vloks have a vegetable garden that would put many in more fertile parts to shame. They've harvested strawberries, squashes, beetroots, brinjals, tomatoes, lettuce, spinach and more. It is fenced off to keep out the horses and wild creatures – porcupines in particular. The shade netting also protects the crops from the heat, the wind, and frost in winter.



want to. The universe always falls in love with a stubborn heart.”

Douwe and Liezl designed a five-day, 103km circular hike, following the route of Sylvester the lion's adventure – as well as a four-day, 65 km full-moon hike.

There are other options, too, among them tours that explore the Little and Great Karoo, and our neighbouring countries. During our visit to the farm, Douwe was on his way to Botswana to check out new routes.

Hikers who've done the trails can't stop praising them. Douwe and Liezl don't walk with the group; they transport the luggage, make sure there's boiling water for coffee and tea, prepare all meals, fire up the donkey boiler, and take care of any and all of their clients' needs – even the unforeseen ones.

Douwe and Liezl take turns making supper. Douwe is well known for his delicious meals, she says – while we can

attest to the excellence of Liezl's bread!

“We wanted to design safe trails for women hiking alone,” Douwe says. “We wanted to be accessible. We wanted to keep things simple. In the evenings, for example, every hiker gets a two-litre ice-cream container filled with hot water for washing. It's really enough, although you wouldn't think so if you haven't tried it. People need to know that water is scarce. It's precious. In the Karoo, water is holy. It's the lifeblood of everything here.

“We don't want our business to be part of a sausage factory,” he says firmly. “We don't want to compete with other operators. Our hikes are about a unique experience. It's a mental thing. And while they're challenging, they're certainly not extreme. We also don't do a lot of back-to-back tours or hikes – the Karoo hikes, for example, are limited to just two in the spring and

two in autumn.”

Douwe says he flourishes when he has people around him. “I like group dynamics, the interactions and the intrigues. Like a CEO, you always have to be in control and manage that one difficult client out of his comfort zone. For me, it's about the simplicity of the Karoo, to be comfortable in your skin... just to *be*. I'm not a teller of jokes or an entertainer. And you work *hard*, because people want their coffee at 05:00 in the morning!” he laughs

The new business was thriving... and then came Covid-19.

“The year 2020 tested our marriage,” Liezl says. “Overnight, we went from having a good, sustainable business to having zero income. We were used to being apart for long stretches of time when Douwe led tours – and suddenly, during lockdown, we were both at home and not earning an income.”

“Liezl is the one who deserves the credit for our surviving from month to month so far,” Douwe says. “We have one vehicle between us. We don't do excess, but we don't suffer any shortage either. We both love to travel – it's our business model – but for now we don't have the budget for it, and fuel has become incredibly expensive.”

Fortunately, things are starting to pick up and some of the hikes for 2021 are fully booked. You'll notice the people of Heuningland walking with a renewed spring in their step.

THE MOVE FROM OUDTSHOORN to Heuningland was not at all straightforward. Douwe's father bought the 3000ha Rietfontein farm many years ago. He passed away when Douwe was nine years old. Although the farm remained in the family's possession,

SANParks claimed some of the land. Extensive negotiations led to a barter deal – and Douwe came away with this piece of land next to the Karoo National Park's boundary fence.

So there wasn't a house on Heuningland. No buildings whatsoever.

Liezl and Douwe lived in Beaufort West for two years and regularly visited the farm to familiarise themselves with it, to discuss the possibilities and to make plans. In 2017 Liezl came to live on the farm – in a caravan – together with Ruan, her eldest, and Douwe-Tempel. She could now thoroughly assess the lay of the land and its flow. Ruan, however, occupied much of her time. He was born with Prader-Willi syndrome, a genetic abnormality that causes an insatiable appetite and requires strict routines and constant supervision. (Read more about it on page 45.) >



Hiking at Heuningland

The purpose of their tours, say the Vloks, is to introduce people, who wish they could stop the clock, to the Great Karoo – in all its simplicity – and to discover its stories and secrets. “When one is silent for long enough in this land of space, you can once again hear the earth's heartbeat. It is a place where time does not exist.”

There are two trails, a Karoo hike and a full-moon hike. You take your own tent, bedding and camp chair, as well as drinks and snacks. Your luggage is transported daily to the next overnight stop, and you walk with a daypack. The Vloks supply three meals a day, and evenings around the fire are known to be memorable occasions.

Heuningland Karoo Hike

This is a four-day hike that largely follows Sylvester the lion's adventure trail across terrain that cannot be seen from main roads. Hikers walk at their own pace.

Distance 103 km

Cost R4 245 per person

Dates 30 August – 3 September 2021 and 6–10 September 2021

Heuningland Full-moon Hike

This is a five-day, four-night hike during the full moon. The shortest distance is 8 km and the longest is 16 km. There is one optional late-afternoon hike, two early-morning hikes before sunrise, and two night-time hikes.

Distance 65 km

Cost R4 455 per person

Dates 17–21 November 2021 and 16–20 January 2022

Contact heuningland.com

info@heuningland.com

072 243 5251 (WhatsApp only)

Since there were no existing structures, not even a kraal or a road to consider, they had a clean slate to work with. "Douwe just said, 'Don't mess with my view!' So we decided that this was the best spot to build our house – it had the best view. It does get quite windy here, flush with the koppie, but we can live with that. Nothing beats this view."

They also had to decide on the best position for the farm's entrance, and a road to the house had to be created. Again, it couldn't spoil the view... "I told the guy with the grader that I didn't want an ugly straight road in my face – it had to meander its way up to the house," Douwe jokes.


In need of a shed, they bought a corrugated-iron structure which they'd heard, from an Oudtshoorn acquaintance, was up for auction at a school in Dysselsdorp. Together with a team of workers, Liezl erected the

building on the farm. Little did they know then that in the end it would become their home. A while later, between September 2019 and July 2020, Liezl also built a cob house for her father, Henri Warnich, just down the road from them – a house that blends in with the veld and looks as though it's always been here. "On this farm," says Liezl matter-of-factly, "a woman does *everything*."

They're in their element here on Heuningland, where they work and play, and find complete happiness despite the occasional setback. In the evenings, Liezl listens to Tom Jones and Frank Sinatra while making a salad, and Douwe lights the fire to braai chicken over the coals. Douwe-Tempel, their "free-range child", keeps himself busy – picking tomatoes, feeding the horses and chickens, playing with the dogs and playing his home-made didgeridoo. Or he lies on his bed

and uses some of his precious three hours per day phone time.

Silence. That's what it's about at Heuningland. And you get very used to it, says Liezl. "Sometimes we're both so reluctant to go to town that we resort to drawing lots!"

Douwe and Liezl look out over the plains, smiling. "Silence and simplicity," she says; that's the magic... the charm of the Karoo." 



In the heat of the Karoo summers there is no better way to cool off than in the cool plunge pool. Here, Douwe and his son Douwe-Tempel are playing in the water. **INSET** It can be quite a spectacle when the sun sets behind the house.



What is Prader-Willi syndrome?

This rare chromosomal abnormality affects the functioning of the hypothalamus and pituitary gland, the parts of the brain that control functions such as appetite. Liezl's eldest son, 25-year-old Ruan Burger, was diagnosed with Prader-Willi syndrome at the age of three. As a baby he had no muscle tone and was unable to suck. "Doctors diagnosed him as a 'floppy baby', but I also knew from the start that something was wrong, because he didn't cry and didn't move. Instinctively I knew this was something else.

"Then one day I saw a pamphlet about the syndrome at a doctor's consulting room. The doctor sent away a blood sample and it was confirmed: a deletion on chromosome 15 as a defect."

Those were difficult times. "He has the mental capacity of a 10-year-old. There were regular outbursts and drama in public, like swearing in Pick n Pay. At home we had to lock everything, because he *never* stopped eating."

Because it is such a rare disorder – in South Africa there are only 78 families with children living with Prader-Willi syndrome, Liezl says – there are no facilities for these people.

"We tried various institutions. He was

always accepted, because he is so amiable and loving, but then the tantrums would start when he couldn't have food... Then they'd phone and ask me to come and fetch him."

Eventually, in May 2017, Ruan came to live with her on the farm. She laughs. "I don't give myself enough credit for having made it through life thus far without medication! There've been so many incidents in public that nothing embarrasses me any more. I've learnt the hard way that, ultimately, balance and consistency are crucial to deal with the crap in your life."

And then came Huis Henri

But there was another concern: "We were worried about what would become of our child one day, because caring for Boeta is really a 24-hour job – there is nothing glam about it."



So, in collaboration with Liezl's father and her two brothers, Hennie and Botha, the Vloks established the Henri Warnich Foundation, a non-profit organisation. Since February 2019, the foundation has rented a house, known as Huis Henri, in Beaufort West: a home for adults living with Prader-Willi. It is the first and only home in South Africa established exclusively for

adults with the syndrome. There are three full-time staff members, and Ruan currently lives there with three other people.

"We are deeply grateful to friends and family and everyone in the community, as well as complete strangers, who believe in our dream and help us keep the doors open. It is just amazing how the whole of Beaufort West helps – for instance, the residents of Huis Henri get two free swimming lessons per week at Swim Steps swim school; Indaba butchery donates meat to the home on a monthly basis; and every six weeks Charlene Botha cuts the residents' hair at no cost.

And Ruan? "He lost more than half his weight, because his food intake is strictly managed, snacks are limited and the pantry is always locked. He will still always be hungry, but he can bear it as long as he knows exactly when he will get his regular meals."

Ruan is a happy young man. With happy parents.

Readers who would like to make a contribution towards Huis Henri can send an email to huis Henri@023.co.za  henriwarnichfoundation.co.za  072 243 5251



ABOVE It was a joyous day in February 2019 when Huis Henri opened its doors. At the back, from left, are Liezl's younger brother, Botha Warnich; Liezl; Ruan; Liezl's older brother, Hennie; and their dad, Henri. In front, from left, are Li Deegan, a resident; Douwe-Tempel; and Hennie's daughters, Mila and Jodi. **ABOVE RIGHT** The three residents of Huis Henri in May, shortly before the arrival of a fourth housemate: Li, Kele Moatshe and Ruan (whose weight loss from 113 kg to 55 kg, since moving into Huis Henri, is clearly visible). **RIGHT** The staff of Huis Henri: housemother Annette Mocke, Catherine Frieslaar and Eunice Menze.

