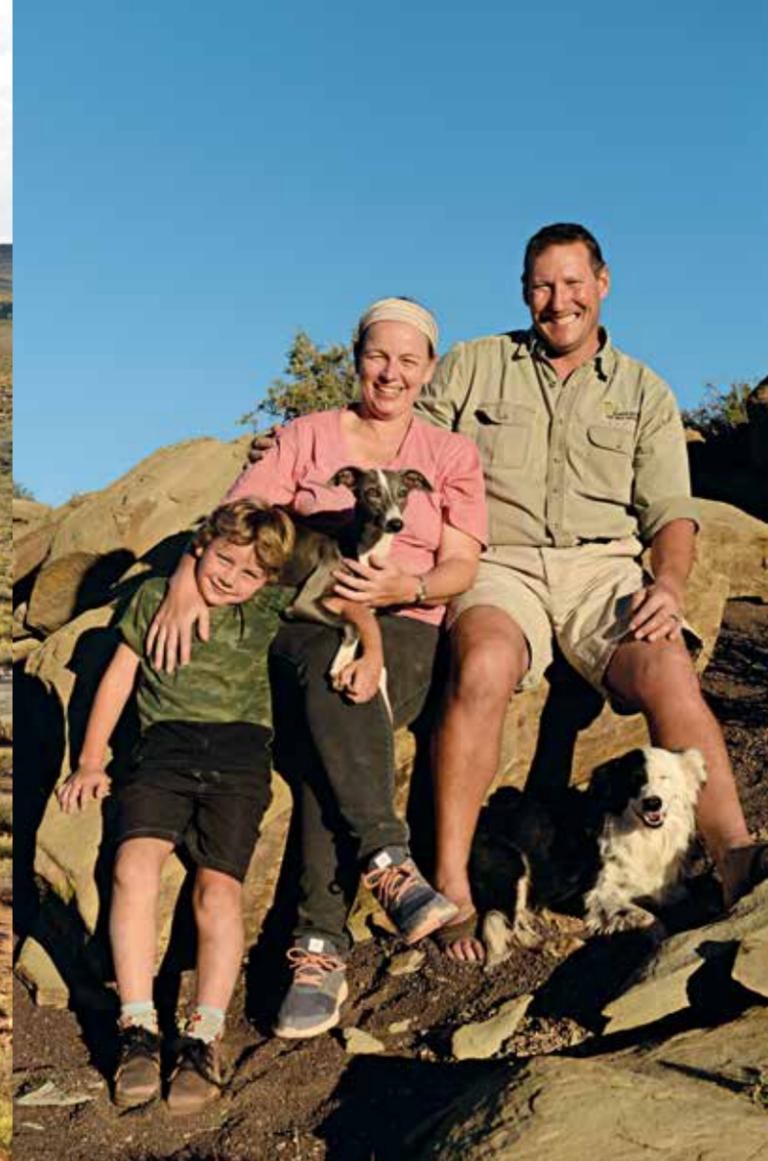


A wide-angle landscape photograph of the Great Karoo. In the foreground, a hiker is walking on a wide, sandy dirt trail that curves through a valley. The valley floor is covered with sparse, dry vegetation and patches of tall, golden grasses. In the background, there are large, flat-topped mountains with layered rock formations under a clear blue sky with some light clouds. The overall scene is bright and open, capturing the vastness of the Karoo environment.

Find freedom in the Great Karoo

Remember Sylvester – the lion that escaped twice from the Karoo National Park? On the four-day Heuningland Slackpacking Trail near Beaufort West, you can retrace Sylvester's steps and catch a whiff of freedom yourself.

WORDS & PICTURES **ERNS GRUNDLING**



The silence sings in my ears. Sssh. I'm on a plateau in the Nuweveld Mountains on day three of the Heuningland Slackpacking Trail. So far, I've walked more than 60km. That's a lot of time on your feet! My calf muscles are sore and I have aches and pains all over. I haven't had cellphone reception for ages and I'm not even sure what day of the week it is. Is it Monday?

I hear a distant droning noise: Probably an aeroplane tracking north over Sutherland, full of people on their way to boardrooms in Joburg where time is measured in money.

Not here. I have one task for the day: to hike 18km to a farm called Kareebos. Along the way, I ponder the words of American author and illustrator Maira Kalman: "Go out and walk. That is the glory of life."

Three days ago, a yellow Kellogg's box with a red arrow on it pointed me to the farm Rietfontein, where I met my fellow hikers, among others an IT expert, a pharmacy assistant, a farmer, an entrepreneur, a retired scientist, a former elevator technician and a digital marketer. Rietfontein is 72 km from Beaufort West, bordering the Karoo National Park. Douwe Vlok grew up here and he and his wife Liezl manage the four-day Heuningland Slackpacking Trail.

"Welcome to the foyer of Heaven," said Liezl that first afternoon.

Later, around the campfire, Douwe explained how things would work over the next few days. We would walk 100 km in total, but we'd only need to carry a daypack. The rest of our stuff would be transported to each overnight stop. We'd be walking along gravel roads and jeep tracks in a deserted

landscape, far from the N1. The trail wouldn't be marked, but we'd each get a set of flash cards with directions to water points, farmsteads and the like. Each person would set his or her own pace.

"If you want to hike on your own, you can do that. If you hit it off with someone and want to hike with them, it's up to you," Douwe said.

Then he told us more about Sylvester, surely the most famous lion in South Africa. Sylvester escaped from the Karoo National Park twice – in 2015 and 2016. The first time he escaped, he spent 24 days wandering around the area where we'd be hiking and killed as many as 30 animals. Thankfully, the problem lion has since been moved to Addo.

Back on the plateau, I take a deep breath of fresh Karoo air. In the distance, a sheep

bleats. My girlfriend Catharien and I are walking at the back, but it feels as if we're alone. The other 12 hikers are so far ahead we can't even see them.

I think of Sylvester again, and the sense of freedom he must have felt when he crawled through the park fence...

DAY 1 **Rietfontein to Oukloof** **(30 km)**

It's Saturday. The kettle is already bubbling on the fire when we get up. We help ourselves to fruit, muesli, cereal and rusks. Lunch, which we'll carry with us, is spread out on a table: bread, tomatoes, jam, leftover chicken, juice, muffins and date balls.

Catharien and I are the last to leave. The

COUNTING SHEEP (opposite page). Up on the plateau in the Nuweveld Mountains, the scenery is quintessential Karoo: grazing sheep and lots and lots of *bossies*.

FAMILY AFFAIR (above left). The Vlok family – Douwe and Liezl and their son Douwe-Tempel – will take good care of you on the Heuningland hike. Anan the whippet and Jasper the sheep dog are also part of the team.

SOAK IT UP. Cool your feet in a farm dam after a long hike – it's more refreshing than a visit to an exclusive spa.

HIKE KAROO

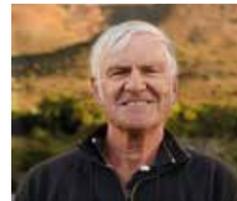
Opposite page, clockwise from top:

UBER, KAROO-STYLE. You won't see much traffic on the roads, besides the odd farmer's bakkie and donkey cart.

FINISHING TOUCH. At the end of each day, you can relax in your camping chair, catch up around the fire and look forward to a delicious meal.

HOT PROPERTY. This hardworking kettle provided hot water for coffee, for doing the dishes and for wiping grimy faces.

IN OTHER WORDS



Ernst Brunke, retired scientist, Bellville

"I'll always remember Liezl and Douwe's parting words: 'You're not just hikers who visited the farm – you're our friends now and you'll always be welcome here.'"



Louise Smit, farmer, Wellington

"The simplicity of the hike will stay with me. Maybe this is what life is supposed to be like?"

first 6 km of the day traces Sylvester's route and it doesn't take long to be reminded how good walking is for body and soul. At Layton Primary School, the kids from the hostel clap their hands and chant: "Vasbyt! Vasbyt! Vasbyt!"

We spend a big chunk of the day on winding trails next to the upper reaches of the Koekemoers River. At one stage we walk through a forest of sweet thorn trees – yes a forest, in the Karoo!

About 21 km later, Catharien and I reach a farm dam and a windmill near Oukloof Pass between Beaufort West and Fraserburg. We soak our tired feet in the cool water.

Three other hikers arrive. "The silence is something you have to get used to," says Bardo Snyman from Vredenburg. "It sucks you in."

The final 9 km section of the day – to the pass itself – is long and tough. The gravel road stretches out to the base of the Nuweveld Mountains, which seem to hover in the distance, never coming closer.

What's this? It's the first vehicle I've seen all day. "Are you guys okay?" someone in the bakkie asks. I nod with a big smile on my face.

The last slog is halfway up the pass to our overnight camp, where fellow hiker Arnold Steenkamp from Brackenfell surprises me with a cold beer. Cheers to 30 km!

Liezl serves a delicious mutton stew and fresh bread for dinner, and we chat around the campfire until late. Arnold's friend Ighsaan Miller from Elsies River tells us about Arnold's nickname – "Duiwel" – that he earned on previous hikes because of his fondness for fires.

Arnold nods and adds another log to the growing inferno. "If there is no fire, there is no love," he says.

DAY 2

Oukloof to Tweefontein (26 km)

We start the day by hiking up the rest of Oukloof Pass. On the plateau the landscape changes dramatically: The plains of the Great Karoo roll away without a single tree in sight.

What's that yellow creature in the distance? For a second I think it might be Sylvester, but it's just a cement mixer.

After about 8 km it's time for lunch near the farm Steenkampspoort. A donkey cart passes us, on its way to the farm De Hoek,

carrying Denzel Riekert, Hennie Vrieslaar and their families.

"This is our only mode of transport," says Denzel, gesturing towards his donkeys, Ruben and Breker. Why Breker? "He breaks everything; he's too strong."

Denzel is 24 and part of a new generation of farm workers who have embraced the old way of travelling by donkey cart. "I don't ride a bicycle," he says. "These donkeys take me where I want to go. I didn't think that I would grow to love them, but I have."

We hike on through nothingness, eventually crossing a cement bridge that Sylvester also used on his ramblings. I'm sure the front runners are already relaxing in their camping chairs, but Catharien and I take our time.

Eventually we reach Tweefontein, our home for the night. Everyone is in a good mood: We've walked 56 km in two days!

Ernst Brunke from Bellville is the only person suffering from blisters. He's hiking in boots while the rest of us are wearing trail running shoes. But we're all in this adventure together: Lynette Bothma, a pharmacy assistant from Vredendal, tends to Ernst's feet.

Later, I chat to Liezl about the Karoo. "There's a healing power in the stillness and in the vastness," she says. "If you sit on a boulder and look out over the plains long enough, you'll reconnect with the earth."

DAY 3

Tweefontein to Kareebos (22,5 km)

After about 8 km of classic Karoo scenery – poplar trees reflected in a farm dam; a windmill creaking in the breeze – we reach the farm Koppieskraal, where farmer Nigel Peddie invites us in for a cup of coffee with goat's milk. Nigel previously worked for the navy in Gordon's Bay. He retired to Koppieskraal, where he farms with sheep and Nguni cattle.

"It's the best place in the world," he says. "It's clean, there's no traffic and very little crime. I get to work with animals and with the veld. And I have to look after myself, which is a good thing."

From Koppieskraal, we descend to the upper course of the Leeu River. The landscape becomes more mountainous. Thunderclouds start billowing in the sky and the rain catches



HIKE KAROO

IN OTHER WORDS



Ighsaan Miller, retired elevator technician, Elsie's River

"Being on foot in the Karoo is an experience that's hard to describe. I fell in love with the place. I'm even considering moving here!"



Merwe Erasmus, food factory manager, Eversdal

"I didn't enjoy the long, flat sections on gravel roads, but other people might. Douwe and his team were very hospitable and the food was delicious."

up with us in the final few kilometres to our campsite on the farm Kareebos. Rain in the Karoo is always a big event. Everything smells new and fresh. We huddle in a small room, listening to the reassuring patter-patter on the corrugated-iron roof.

When the sky clears, we move to the campfire. Liezl serves spaghetti bolognese and another fresh loaf of bread. We eat like Karoo kings.

DAY 4 Kareebos to Rietfontein (23 km)

"This is the first long hike I'm doing solo," says Louise Smit from Wellington. It's early morning and we're walking together. Louise's husband passed away in January – they'd been married for 40 years. "I miss having a partner," she says. "I always held his hand on hikes. But I decided to give myself this time away. Every day I think about my four children and I pray for them."

After about 5 km, we follow signs to a corbelled house. Trek farmers built these igloo-like houses in the early 1800s as they moved through the Karoo. On the way

there, I chat to another hiker, Merwe Erasmus from Eversdal. "A corbelled house in the Karoo is like the Sacré-Coeur in Paris," he says. "If you're nearby, you should go have a look."

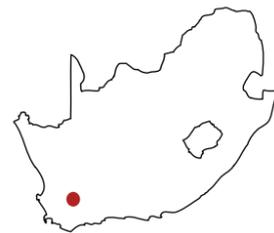
After a while we see the boundary fence and a gate into the Karoo National Park. We're approaching the place where Sylvester wriggled through twice. Douwe has scratched an "S" and an arrow into the gravel road to show us the exact spot.

There's something satisfying about passing a Sylvester landmark on the last day of the hike. How many of us feel trapped, like Sylvester did? On a hike like this, your thoughts can also crawl through the fence and escape. You feel free again, as if the world is filled with opportunity.

Late that afternoon I see the yellow Kellogg's box again. By now, Douwe and Liezl are like family and their farm is like home. I'm grateful for their passion and their willingness to share their piece of the Karoo with others.

"It's hard to put into words. You have to experience the Karoo for yourself to know why it's so special," says Liezl as we drink one last cup of coffee. "After spending time here, you're ready to face reality again."

KNOW BEFORE YOU GO



Opposite page, clockwise from top left:

MAKE FRIENDS. Louise Smit from Wellington and Anli Engelbrecht from Strand soon became hiking buddies.

AT HOME. Mary and Nigel Peddie moved from Gordon's Bay to the farm Koppieskraal in the Karoo. Pop in for a cup of coffee with them on the third day of the hike.

BLUE YONDER. The scenery on day four is spectacular. This view is towards the Karoo National Park, near Beaufort West.

How does it work? You hike for four days, carrying a daypack with snacks, lunch, water and a jacket. Douwe and Liezl will transport tents, camping chairs, sleeping gear and clothes to the overnight camps on private farms in the area. You have to pitch your tent

yourself and pack up the next day, but the team sets up the kitchen and outdoor toilet and prepares all the meals. There are no shower facilities – each hiker gets an ice-cream tub with hot water for your daily "bath".

What do I need to bring? Each hiker is allowed two medium-sized zipped bags (like the ones you get at PEP) to hold their spare clothes, tent, sleeping gear and mattress. Also bring a camping chair, a hat, a beanie, a water bottle, a headlamp, cutlery, Wet Wipes, Ziploc bags, a towel,

a toiletry bag, a camera, binoculars, snacks and drinks. (You're also allowed to bring a small cool box.) The terrain isn't rocky or technical, so rather wear trail running shoes instead of hiking boots.

Dates: 5 – 9 May 2018;
12 – 16 September 2018.

Cost: R3 250 per person, including four nights' accommodation and three meals per day.

Contact: 072 243 5251;
heuningland.com

