

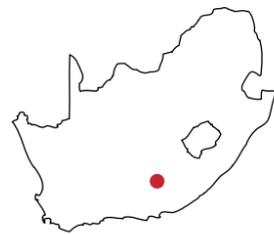
Where the land loves you back

Stay on a farm in the Sneeuberg and discover one of the most spectacular regions in the Karoo, if not the entire country.

WORDS **JULIENNE DU TOIT** PICTURES **CHRIS MARAIS**

Farmer James Brodie and his dog Emma, on a plateau overlooking the magnificent Sneeuberg range.





We're on a high plateau west of Graaff-Reinet in the Eastern Cape Karoo. The late-summer sun glows on sandstone rock faces. In the foreground are 2000 sheep, 18 irritable alpacas, one lean man in a cowboy hat, and a three-legged Kelpie dog called Emma.

The man is farmer James Brodie, and he offers to move his carpet of sheep to a spot where the light will be better for photographs. My husband Chris and I find a comfortable rock to sit on while we wait.

Before our eyes, the flock moves from left to right. The alpacas are swept along, towering above the sheep like indignant woolly giraffes.

"Haai, haai, haai," James calls with his arms outspread. Emma tacks back and forth, bunching the sheep and bringing them closer, as if moving thousands of bleating beasts is the easiest thing in the world.

This one camp on James's farm Doornplaats is 20 hectares in size – 40 rugby fields. In a day or so, he'll move all the animals to the next paddock, leaving the fertilised veld to recover for a year. By using this method of holistic veld management, James has dramatically increased his farm's carrying capacity.

In a few weeks' time, the first frost will be the signal to bring the sheep down to lower altitudes, just as generations of Sneeu Berg farmers have done when winter bites. Up here there are few diseases – no mosquitoes to spread Rift Valley fever and no midges to spread horse sickness. But in the snowy season, the cold can kill.

Here's a quick geography lesson for those who think that the Karoo is flat. Between Cradock (now called Nxuba) and Graaff-Reinet, stretching to points as far as Nieu-Bethesda, Middelburg and Pearston, is an enormous arc of mountains. This is the Sneeu Berg – the second highest mountain range in the country after the Drakensberg, measuring about 200 km at its widest girth, between Cradock and Murraysburg

There is no better place for road trippers who love the Karoo. Smooth tar roads link the major towns, which are mostly a two-hour drive apart. The towns themselves are full of history, and there are lots of interesting places to stay. And you're always within sight of mountains.

Crumple up a piece of paper, throw it to the floor and you'll have a rough idea what the geography looks like from above. There are high peaks, sure, but many are half hidden in the middle, only visible from certain angles.

All along their east-west axis, these broad-shouldered crags intercept high clouds and wring out their moisture in rain, snow, frost and mist. In a wet summer, the land can look like the Scottish Highlands. In winter, its bones lie bare. Ironstone crowns rise above the snowfall that settles on the long contour lines of ancient riverbeds.

Jutting head and shoulders above these great interlinked massifs is the distinctive peak of Compassberg (2 502 m), South Africa's own Matterhorn and the Karoo's greatest free-standing mountain.

Nardousberg, at 2 429 m, is the next highest, but it doesn't have as distinctive a peak, and it's deep within the mountain range so you'll only see it from some positions. In winter, it also wears a telltale skullcap of snow.

High summer in the mountains

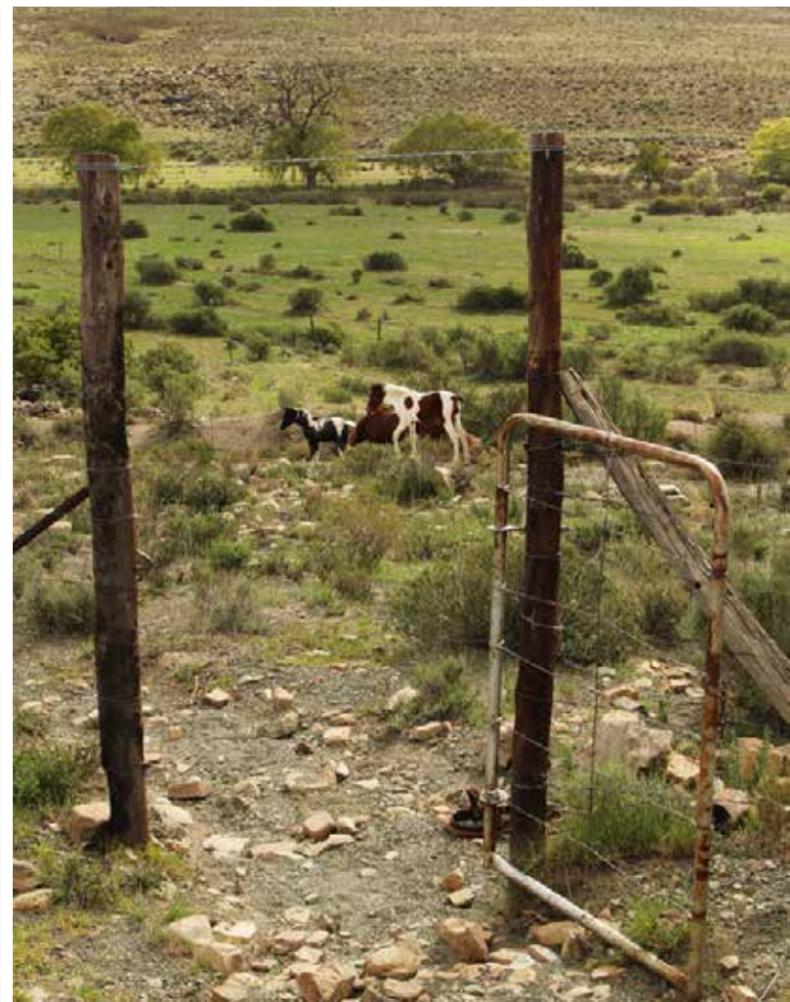
We're headed for the core of the Sneeu Berg with our friend, Gavin Holmes. He wants to check on the cattle grazing land he rents on a farm called Petrusdal.

From Cradock, where Chris and I live, we drive west on the R61, towards Wapadsberg Pass. This road, which links Cradock with Nieu-Bethesda and Graaff-Reinet, traverses a landscape full of sheep farms, craggy hills and the odd abandoned farmhouse.

Locals know the R61 as one of the cheapest game-drive routes in the country. It passes the entrance to Mountain Zebra National Park, and further on there are several private game farms where you might see anything from springbok to gemsbok and even the odd exotic like waterbuck and lechwe.

We pass the turn-off to Samenkomst and turn left onto the Kwaggashoek gravel road, which takes us deep into the heart of the Sneeu Berg.

At first it doesn't feel like we're gaining any serious altitude, but we're climbing all the time, from one green valley to the next. Each seems to have its own spring – water bubbling straight from the earth. Whatever the temperature is in Cradock,



Opposite page, clockwise from the top: Two thousand sheep, 18 irked alpacas, a man and his dog, with the sunbaked krantzies of the Sneeu Berg behind them. Farming in these mountains and hills is impossible without horses, who can go where vehicles can't. Julienne with Gavin and Lesley Holmes. From this high up, you can see forever and the grasses are always waving in the wind. Here and there you'll find an abandoned old wagon slowly becoming one with the earth.

Opposite page, clockwise from the top: At Ganora Guest Farm outside Nieu-Bethesda, Compassberg dominates the views. A jackal tries to hide in the long grass. Lions have been introduced to the Mountain Zebra National Park and they're thriving. Rolie Kroon is one of the farmers in this area who is restoring the land using regenerative farming methods.

it's at least 6 °C cooler up here.

Now and then, we see an old wagon left to slump into the earth. There are abandoned farmhouses and beautiful old kraals made from packed stone. Some pear trees have grown into giants, while the peach trees have become wizened.

It even smells different up here. We started in Karoo shrubland, with its fresh fragrance of wild rosemary. Now we're moving into grassland and even fynbos, with its scents of lavender and citrus.

In summer, this is heaven for livestock. Winter is another story, Gavin tells us, echoing James Brodie. When the first frost comes, you move your animals down to milder temperatures, or you risk losing them.

Tales of the Sneeu Berg

There's no easy or direct access through the middle of these mountains. The only way through from east to west is literally by foot, hoof or mountain bike.

Spending a few nights on a farm is one of the best ways to experience the Sneeu Berg. One such farm is Petrusdal.

Owner Anton Olivier is a natural storyteller and has gleaned many tales from other farmers, living and dead.

"Some of the passes are so narrow that when the first trekboers came through, they had to dismantle the wagons, then cut the horns of the cattle and lead them through the kloofs one by one, with their heads turned sideways," he says.

He knows where the Boers hid a remount station so their horses were always fresh and rested before raids and skirmishes against the British during the Anglo-Boer War; and he can tell you about the umpteen times when he and his farmworkers had to go out and find their sheep, which were hidden under thick snowdrifts. The only way they could find them was by looking for steam rising from breathing holes.

Anton and James are among 200 landowners who have signed up to be part of an ambitious conservation effort in the Sneeu Berg: the Great Karoo Wilderness. In 2012, the Wilderness Foundation, working on behalf of SANParks, kicked off an effort to link the Mountain Zebra and Camdeboo national parks by creating a biodiversity corridor. Between the two parks is a mosaic of working

farms and private game reserves. The idea was to protect the river catchments and the area's endemic plant life. Over time, the concept grew and today the Great Karoo Wilderness spans a million hectares – or 10 000 km² – about half the size of the Kruger Park.

Project manager Ulrich Schutte has huge admiration for the landowners. "They're great custodians," he says. "Some of the farmland is in a better condition than many nature reserves. There are farming families that have been here for seven or even eight generations."

Well-managed grassland can sequester millions of tonnes of carbon in the soil. Ulrich explains: "By being good custodians and adopting regenerative farming principles, many of the Great Karoo Wilderness landowners now have the opportunity to be paid for carbon credits, through an international organisation called TASC. It's a great reward for farming with nature."

For the love of the land

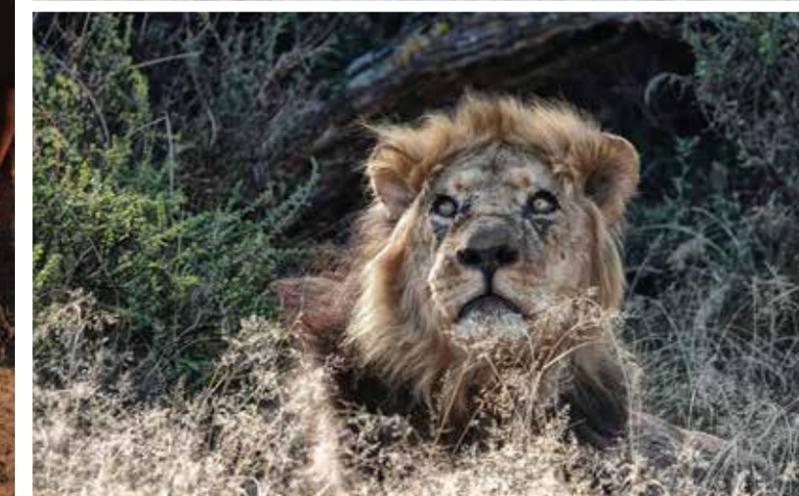
Rolie Kroon, another signatory, farms on Excelsior in the shadow of Nardousberg. Like James Brodie, Rolie uses a method of intensive grazing interspersed with long periods of recovery. In fact, the Kroon family were the pioneers of this method in the region.

Rolie takes us to a valley that was once bare and exposed, the soil hard as rock. Now, a herd of cows grazes, surrounded by thick grass, near a small dam of gin-clear water.

"About ten years ago, if we had as little as 10 or 20 mm of rain, it would run off and form washaways and floods. If you leave veld bare, more than 87% of the water runs off. You have to stop a raindrop where it falls. If it moves, it takes soil with it.

"My children and I came out here recently and counted all the different plant species in an area we could span with our arms. Each of us identified around 18 species."

Around a campfire that night, with the stars shining bright above the ridges, James Brodie finds the perfect words for what's happening in the Great Karoo Wilderness: "With land, you must put in more than you take. But what you put in, you'll get back tenfold. It's an amazing thing, learning to love your land. And what's even more incredible is when your land starts loving you back."





7 great places to stay

The best way to experience the landscapes of Sneeu Berg is to stay on a working farm. You can walk in the veld, ride your mountain bike, breathe the wide-open spaces and settle into the quiet rhythm of Karoo life.

1 Ganora Guest Farm

Ganora is about 8 km from Nieu-Bethesda, with splendid views of Compassberg. There are 10 en suite rooms, all elegantly furnished, of varying sizes. Breakfast is included in the rate; you can order dinner in advance.

Then there's Khoisan Cottage, which overlooks the farmstead, sleeps six and is kitted out for self-catering; and a campsite where you can pitch your own tent.

Do a fossil tour (R80 per person), a Bushman artefact tour (R120) or a medicinal plant walk (R140). **Rates:** R700 per person in a standard room; R895 in a bigger room. Khoisan Cottage R2 600 per night. Camping R220 per person. Free Wi-Fi.

More info: Hester Steynberg ☎ 082 698 0029
📍 ganora.co.za

2 Wheatlands Farm

You can book the whole farmhouse at Wheatlands, between Graaff-Reinet and Jansenville. It sleeps 12 in total and you can either cater for yourself or request delicious meals made by Kirsten Short. The dining room and lounge have fireplaces for cosy winter evenings. There's Wi-Fi, too – you should definitely request the pin for their "Karoo Sundowner Spot".

If the local teams are playing a cricket match on the farm, don't miss it...

Rates: Base rate R3 000 per night for up to six people. For seven and more, it's an additional R400 per person (self-catering rates).

More info: Kirsten Short ☎ 072 251 9022
📍 wheatlands.co.za

3 Petrusdal Farmstay

Hosts Anton and Andalet Olivier have three en suite guest units. Two units sleep four people (for families); the last unit is better suited to a couple. There's a communal lounge with a fireplace, a dining room, a covered braai area and a garden for guests to enjoy. There are also rugged camping facilities (with a shower and toilet).

The farm is about an hour's drive west from Cradock, on the Kwaggashoek Road from the R61.

Rates: Camping R150 per person. Four-sleeper room R1 800 a night; R1 200 for the double room. Breakfast R80 per person; lunch R100 per person; dinner (or braai) R200 per person.

More info: Andalet Olivier ☎ 083 491 5770 (WhatsApp); 📍 andalet.olivier@gmail.com

4 Roode Bloem Farm House

This is an historic old house with six en suite bedrooms, about 10 km north of Graaff-Reinet off the N9. Your hosts are Tim and Liza Murray.

One of the rooms has four beds – good for a family. Guests share the fully equipped kitchen, lounge, dining room, spacious stoep and yard.

Rates: R430 per person sharing (R600 for a single person). Hire the entire house for R6 000 per night.

More info: Tim Murray ☎ 082 632 3103 (WhatsApp)
📍 rbd@intekom.co.za

5 Grootklip Getaway

This farm is 31 km from Nieu-Bethesda – it's great for a big family or a small group of friends yearning for peace and silence. It has three bedrooms and three bathrooms, sleeping eight in total. There's Wi-Fi and the kitchen is well equipped for self-catering, including a coffee machine and even a washing machine. There's a fireplace in the lounge. But the real treasure is outside: You can walk, hike or ride your mountain bike to your heart's content, and see only mountains and Nguni cattle.

Rate: R2 300 per night.

More info: Lisa Watermeyer ☎ 082 047 3220
📍 grootklip.co.za

6 Hillston Farmstay

From this farm, you can see the distinctive peaks of Teebus and Koffiebus – landmarks in this part of the Karoo.

Hillston offers two different farmhouses for guests. Northmead Country House is off-grid, sleeps eight, has beautiful wooden floors and high ceilings, with a lovely kitchen with a wood-burning stove.

A smaller ironstone cottage – Hillston Cottage – sleeps six, is fully equipped for self-catering and offers a great stoep for dreamy sundowners.

Rates: R450 per person (self-catering). Minimum stay two nights.

More info: Riana Southey ☎ 082 322 4403
📍 hillstonfarm.co.za

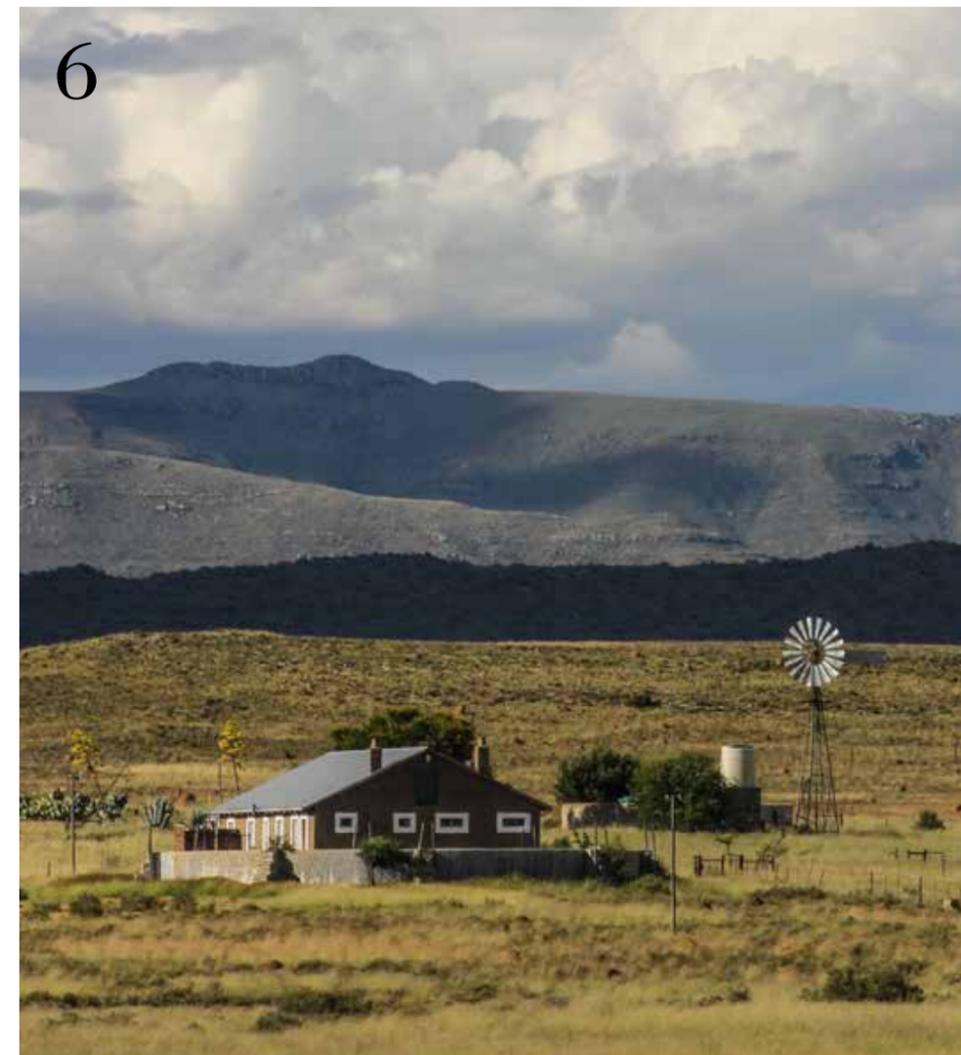
7 Allendale Farm Cottage

Allendale is between Graaff-Reinet and Nieu-Bethesda, on a dirt road off the N9. Their spacious self-catering cottage is near the farmhouse – the main bedroom is en suite and there's enough space in the lounge to comfortably sleep two or even three more people.

Brenda Murray offers delicious homemade dinners for R200 per person (typically lamb or chicken with rice and two veg, with something sweet for dessert), or a braai pack for two with salad and roosterkoek at the same price.

Rates: R900 for the first two people; plus R300 per additional person (max five people).

More info: Brenda Murray ☎ 084 682 9235 (WhatsApp); 📍 allendalefarm.wordpress.com



Four must-do activities

Sip Karoo spirits

Tim Murray from Roode Bloem Farm just north of Graaff-Reinet is probably the most knowledgeable man in the entire Karoo when it comes to tequila, mezcal and the other strong spirits that can be made from agave plants. Set aside an intoxicating hour or two to find out more.

Cost: There's a minimum set-up fee of R500 for two people. After that, it costs R100 per head, for a maximum of 12 people.

More info: Tim Murray ☎ 082 632 3103 (WhatsApp) 📧 rbd@intekom.co.za

Fish for trout

Some of the rivers and streams that rise in the Sneeuberg are home to enormous trout and yellowfish. Alan Hobson from Somerset East knows how and where to find them. He can take you out for a full- or half-day trip. If you left your gear at home, you can hire everything from Alan.

Cost: From R2 500, plus R1 000 per fisherman, for a half-day mission.

More info: Alan Hobson ☎ 082 442 2884; Annabelle Hobson ☎ 082 375 4720; 📧 wildflyfishinginthekaroo.co.za

Climb Compassberg

If you're reasonably fit and can scramble up a few rough sections, you'll probably be able to reach the peak of the spectacular Compassberg. It takes about two hours to get to the top and another two hours down. The wind tends to pick up during the heat of the day, so rather start early.

The trailhead is on Compassberg Farm, which is about an hour's drive from Nieu-Bethesda or Middelburg. Permit fee: R70 per climber.

More info: Brenda James ☎ 082 596 6475 (WhatsApp) 📧 brendajames@icon.co.za

Go with a guide: If the idea of going alone is too daunting, contact Graaff-Reinet local Dawid de Wet, who runs a tourism business called Karoo360. He'll give you advice on how best to arrange a guided climb. 📧 karoo360.co.za

Ride a rapid

Just south of Middelburg, the Brak and Fish rivers merge and form some exciting rapids. At Karoo River Rafting, James and Delina Jordaan offer rafting, abseiling and other team-building activities. There's accommodation in tents and wooden cabins.

Cost: A three- to four-hour guided rafting trip in inflatable canoes, travelling about 16 km downstream, costs R1 000 per person. See the website for other rates.

More info: James Jordaan ☎ 084 429 9944; 📧 karoo-river-rafting.co.za



COMPASSBERG



ALAN HOBSON



TIM MURRAY, ROODE BLOEM FARM

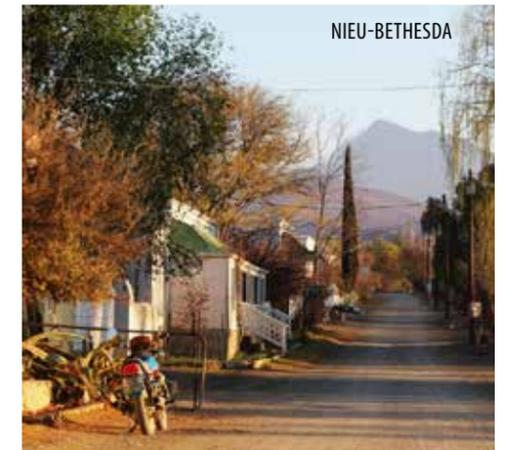


In winter, the Sneeuberg lives up to its name.



The towns around Sneeuberg include Graaff-Reinet, Nieu-Bethesda, Middelburg, Cradock, Hofmeyr, Somerset East, Pearston and Aberdeen. This area is also called the Karoo Heartland. Visit 📧 karooheartland.com for information about activities and accommodation.

For more information about the Great Karoo Wilderness, visit: 📧 mzcpe.co.za



NIEU-BETHESDA

