

Victoria West to Calvinia

If you want a route that offers riverine rabbits, spiritual skies, corbelled houses, the presence of space-listening telescopes, windmill landscapes and small towns that know little of stress, traffic and deadlines, then hit this 'upper Karoo route', which winds through the Northern Cape from Victoria West to Calvinia.

DID YOU KNOW?



The Calvinia-Williston area is home to the lively and newly revived Nama Riel folk dance.

Our journey in the upper Karoo begins in a tiny Anglican church in Victoria West, as we gaze up at the stained-glass windows.

Some of the images displayed portray scenes from a devastating flood that hit the small Northern Cape town in 1871. More than 60 people were killed when a wall of water, following a typical Karoo cloudburst, rushed down the gorge where Victoria West stands. Of the victims, 21 were revellers dancing at Quirk's Hotel that night.

We check in at Die Pophuis Hoekie ('the doll's house corner')

self-catering cottages along the main street. If it is springtime the daisies will be out in full profusion, lining the sidewalks and adding even more flair to the Victorian-era buildings.

The next morning we leave for Loxton, which is about 80km away. This little sheep-farming centre has a special charm, and comes complete with water furrows and donkey carts meandering in the streets. Apart from being a favoured Karoo hideaway for Capetonians, Loxton is also the official headquarters of the Riverine Rabbit Working Group, which is trying to manage and save the highly endangered and last few hundred riverine rabbits still living in the region.

We take a long lunch at Die Rooi Granaat ('the red pomegranate') and, goodness, look at the time! We were going to drive up to Carnarvon this afternoon, but best we stay over in Loxton and leave in the morning. So we check in at one of the many self-catering cottages in the town and enjoy a braai (barbecue) under the Karoo stars.

The next day we're in Carnarvon before lunch, even though we took our sweet time getting up. There are some special places in Carnarvon, including the local museum with its reconstructed corbelled house. There's also the Blikkies (Tins) Bar in the local hotel, where we'll have a drink completely surrounded by wall-to-wall beer tins. There's a jukebox in the corner and we'll play a couple of classics before moving on.

Carnarvon's main attraction, although access is restricted at present, is the Square Kilometre Array radio telescope field about 80km away. Once built, it will be the world's biggest telescope complex – a very exciting coup for South Africa and its space scientists. You can book a tour there and it's well worth it, but be sure to go in advance as they don't run every day.

After an interesting night on a nearby farm, where we sleep in an original corbelled house built sometime in the mid-1800s, we head for Williston, nearly 120 km to the west.

Lunchtime finds us at the humorously named Williston Mall, wandering about the junk-art displays, the little bookshop and curio stalls. We have lunch here, and the pudding consists of the very special Williston Milkshake.

Williston is the site of the annual Williston Winter Festival, where people of all cultures come together to feast and dance.

After a night spent in Williston, we continue to our last point on this route: Calvinia. This is another of those attractive, energetic little Karoo towns where many residents are tourism-savvy.

We stay in one of the Hantam Huis cottages and spend the afternoon behind cameras at the local flower reserve, getting up close and personal with daisies. It just doesn't get any better than this...