

An aerial photograph of a winding road through a dense, green forested valley. The road curves through the trees, leading towards a valley floor. In the background, there are rolling hills and mountains under a clear sky. The overall scene is serene and scenic.

Is this the road to Heaven or Hell?

Carrie Hampton

In the heart of the Swartberg Mountains of the Western Cape is a lonely winding road. Roaming travel writer Carrie Hampton descended to find whether it went to heaven or hell!



The road to Hell may be rocky, but its twists and turns, looping creamy white like a fancy ribbon, led me to something more akin to my idea of Heaven.

I had waited a long time to descend into Die Hel and my procrastination only served to augment my ghostly expectations of this once inaccessible valley. Now, many visitors satiate their curiosity and take the plunge into the beckoning abyss between the towering Swartberg Mountains of South Africa's Western Cape. Flame-coloured rocks guide you into the narrow valley, while distant quartzite crags glint icily over the scene. This kloof (valley), holds so many secrets that people come in search of its lost existence. Bushmen paintings suggest that these hills and valleys once teemed with game animals, yet few were left when the white man ventured into this remote place in 1830.



Those Bureaucratic Brits Again

The British forcibly occupied the Cape in 1806 and within twenty years the Afrikaner community loaded up their wagons and left British rules and regulations behind.

They often searched for the most inaccessible locations and a most unlikely legend explains how some Afrikaner Boers (farmers) found Gamkaskloof valley, later known as Die Hel (The Hell). A young white boy Danie Hartman, was supposedly kidnapped by the Khoikhoi bushmen and hidden away in this remote valley. Upon his escape he told stories about a remarkable secret place, so inaccessible that even a horse could not reach it. The sound of such peace and isolation away from the Brits so appealing that Afrikaner families moved into this remote area and cultivated the land. A more likely explanation is that Boer cattle strayed off and were tracked into a narrow river valley just 20 km long and 600 m wide. The farmers realised that by moving here they could easily shut out the world and more especially the English, and this they did for more than one hundred years.

Full of Refined Folk

Petrus Swanepoel was the first to settle in 1830 and six more families followed. At its height there were 120 residents. A teacher who came to the valley for a couple of years described the people as 'refined folk' with a good standard of living. Never shy of hard work, this little community became self-sufficient with wheat and rye, nuts, peas, beans and vegetables. Their cattle and goats provided meat, milk and butter. Oranges, figs, apricots and grapes grew readily and wild honey was collected and made into beer and honeybush leaves made a fragrant tea. Life was sweet.

Income Tax In Hell

For more than 130 years the community had little contact with the outside world, except for trading excess produce with merchants in the Karoo town of Prince Albert, involving a lengthy donkey trek. Lenie Marais became doctor and midwife using herbal remedies to cure most ills but in 1946 a man with lockjaw (tetanus) needed more help than she could offer. A Doctor was summoned from town, but the treacherously steep footpath known as 'die leer' - 'the ladder' put him off coming again.



The stock inspector was quite used to this path as he was obliged to visit every two months, but in town he was heard to remark that getting there "was hell". This spawned the nick-name 'Die Hel', which the locals objected to most vehemently. When Mr Mostert, received a tax return addressed to him in 'The Hell', he promptly sent it back, angrily scrawling on the front, Do people in Hell pay income tax?

Before a road was constructed into the valley there was only a wide track on the valley floor linking the farms. A philanthropic or misguided donor gave a Gamkaskloof farmer a motor vehicle but as there was no road into Die Hel, it had to be carried down bit by bit. Its remains sit by the road as a reminder of older and stranger times.



The Valley Emptied Out



It was not until 1962 that a road was forged into the valley, but access to this once hidden enclave brought destruction to this community. Curious children left and did not return, and their parents gradually followed. The valley emptied out and in 1991 the last active farmer sold his land to Cape Nature Conservation. The old cottages remain and some have been renovated for visitors. There is still no electricity or heating and adornment is little more than it ever was - a crochet bedspread. Guests are offered no more or less than those who used to live here, and you soon realise that this is all you need.

It is ironic that the bumpy road used by the community to leave this place, is now being worn smooth by townies coming in search of the peace and solitude cherished by its earlier residents. This road now only leads to Heaven, not Hell.



Road to Hell