

Bay of Plenty woman to honour late friend with 250km Namib Desert challenge

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Multimedia journalist · Bay of Plenty Times ·



Karen Neubrandt will participate in Racing the Planet Namibia, a self-supported 250km ultramarathon in the Namib Desert.

A Bay of Plenty woman will trek 250km across the Namib Desert next month in a challenge inspired by a late friend who helped her believe she could achieve the impossible.

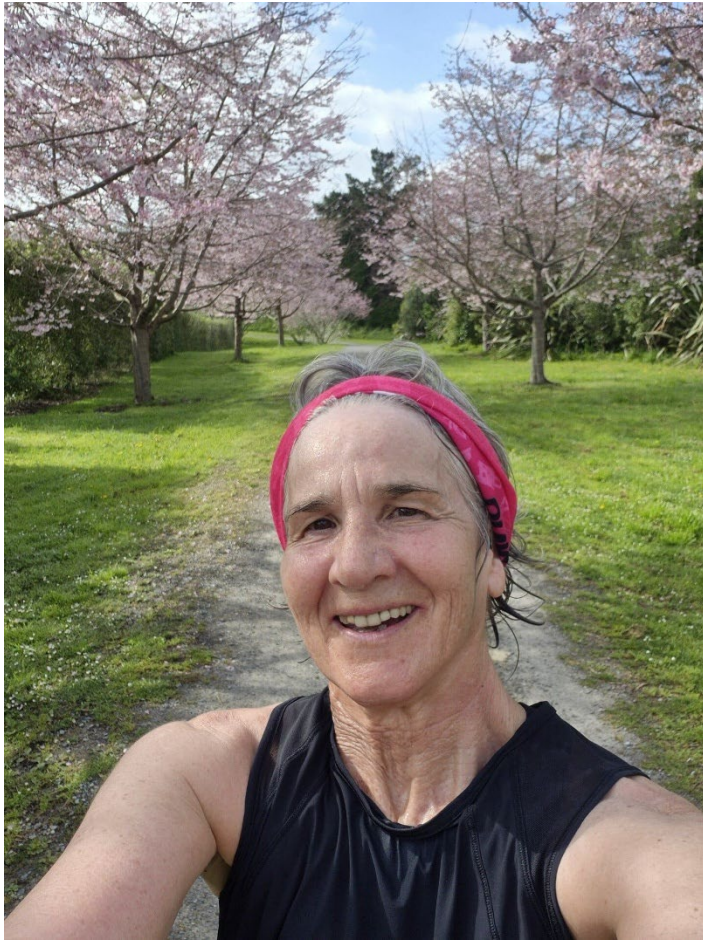
Karen Neubrandt, 62, said she was also using the journey to “square things with the Namib” and “honour the second chance” given her when she and her sister survived a plane crash there three years ago.

Neubrandt is preparing for Racing the Planet Namibia, a self-supported ultramarathon where competitors spend up to a week crossing the desert.

“This has been a long time in the making,” Neubrandt told the Bay of Plenty Times.

While researching the event in 2020, Neubrandt said she came across the profile of American runner Zach, who had also started [running](#) later in life at age 57.

The pair began corresponding through the Racing the Planet platform and developed a close friendship over the following year.



“As our friendship grew, he wanted me to experience what he had - the kindness and generosity of those who race.”

She said he became one of her strongest supporters, helping her overcome concerns about the cost of competing, and eventually offering to sponsor the US\$4000 entry fee.

“He helped me understand that by looking at an obstacle through a different lens, an array of possibilities comes into view,” Neubrandt said.

“His was the voice of reason, convincing me that I am stronger than I can imagine.”

Zach died suddenly from a glioblastoma, an aggressive brain tumour, last year.

Determined to honour both her commitment and his belief in her, Neubrandt decided to still pursue the challenge.

“He opened my mind and eyes to the fact that there are so many possibilities, but I was so heavily invested that I either had to commit or give it all up - and I didn’t want to back out.”

While she had the option of competing in the Gobi Desert, Neubrandt said Namibia was her preferred choice because of the strong personal connection she had to the country.

“Namibia holds a truly special place in my heart.”

Having grown up in South Africa, before moving to New Zealand 20 years ago, Neubrandt said she had memories of annual family road trips to the desert.

“It would be about 2000 kilometres from Johannesburg to Windhoek where we’d go tiki touring in the desert going on little adventures.

Karen Neubrandt has spent months under the guidance of a coach, following a strict training programme.

“I’m just so grateful that I can get there to do it, and let’s just see what happens.”

On May 5, 2023, Neubrandt experienced a “spectacular misadventure that very nearly cost me my life” while crossing the Namib in a small plane piloted by her sister.

“She was coming in for landing on a gravel airstrip and a strong side wind blew her Cessna off course and over the game fence.

“The plane hit about three short, stumpy trees in succession. We were incredibly lucky to climb out alive. I fractured my sternum though.”

On August 16, she will be back in Namibia for her “second chance”, starting the week-long 250km powerhike/jog across the desert.

Before the race begins, athletes must pass mandatory gear checks and prove they are carrying all the required equipment.

They are then transported into the desert, where they spend a night camping before the race officially starts.

Each day covers roughly 40km, the equivalent of “almost a marathon a day”, Neubrandt said, with runners and walkers navigating between checkpoints spaced about 10km apart.

At each checkpoint, competitors can refill their water supplies, but they must leave carrying a minimum amount of water in addition to the food, clothing and camping gear already packed into their backpacks.

The self-supported [ultramarathon](#) requires Neubrandt to carry all of her own supplies, including clothing, sleeping gear, food and electrolytes, for the duration of the race.

“You have to pack really carefully and thoughtfully, making sure everything’s the lightest thing you can find. It becomes a bit of a geek fest,” she said.

“You’ll chop your toothbrush in half if you think it could save you a few grams.”

Neubrandt has spent months training under the guidance of a coach, following a strict training programme tailored to fit around her work commitments and daily life.

“Having a programme has kept me accountable and I know how much I want to do this race in honour of Zach.”

Before setting off in the Namib Desert, Neubrandt said she would be thinking of the support from her family, friends, and Zach, whose encouragement helped lead her to the race.

“I don’t know exactly what I’ll be thinking on that start line, but I do know I’ll constantly be thinking of what my story will be when I finish.

“I think my main message is that we should never let age define us. And if we face obstacles, just chip away at them methodically.”

Neubrandt is seeking donations at [her Givealittle page](#) to help cover the event costs, and says she will give any extra funds to a charity which supports glioblastoma patients.

[Kaitlyn Morrell](#) is a journalist for the Bay of Plenty Times and Rotorua Daily Post. She has lived in the region for several years and studied journalism at Massey University.