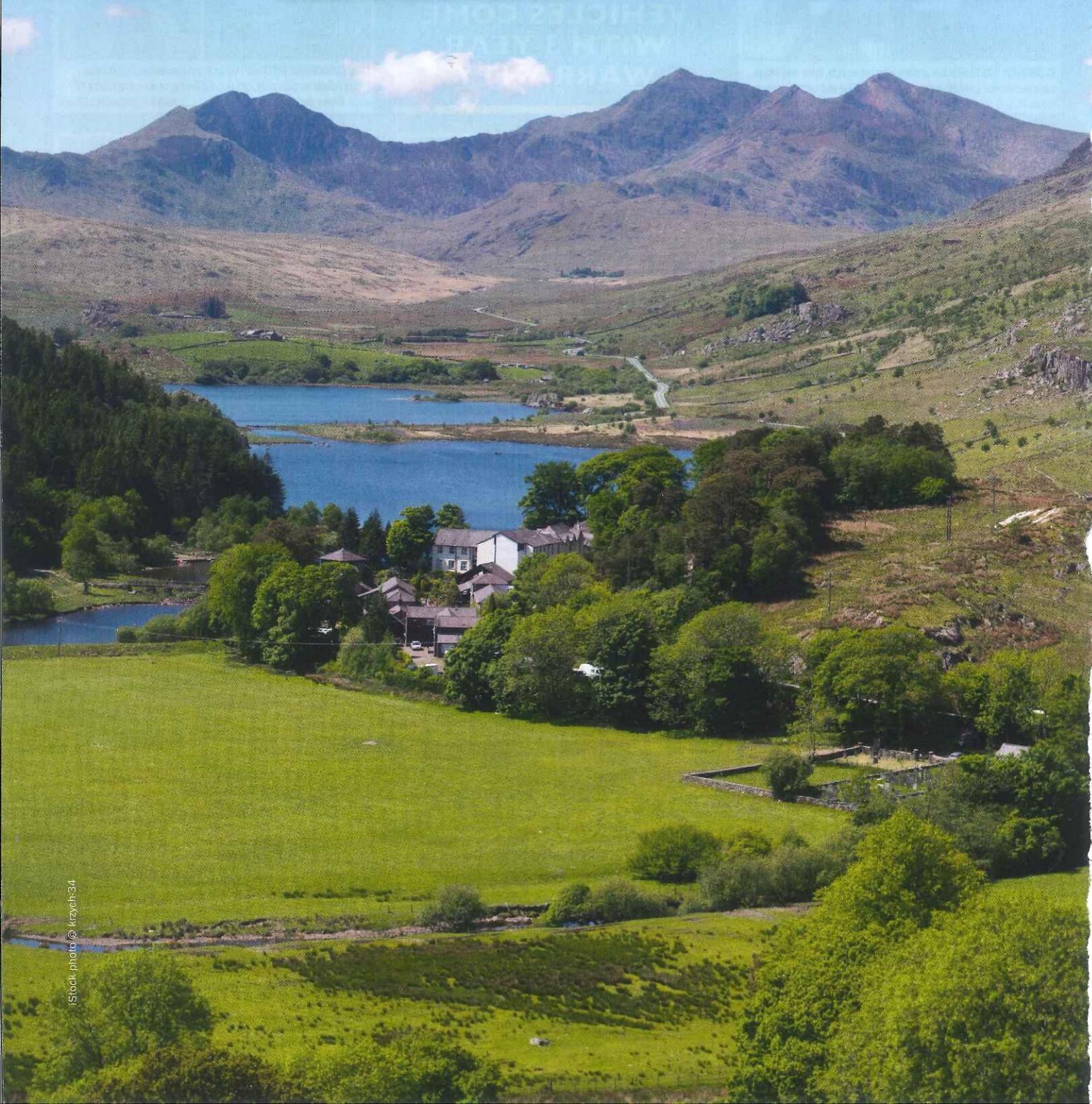




Amazing north Wales **TRAINS & TRACKS**

Get on the right track for majestic scenery with a trip to the dramatic region of Snowdonia

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki





Carol Kubicki...

...and her partner, Anthony, use their Devon Sundowner to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring historical and natural environments

TOP TIP

The large car park by the railway station in Beddgelert is suitable for motorhomes

LEFT Mount Snowdon from Caernarfon

RIGHT The Welsh Highland Railway

Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

2007 two-berth Devon Sundowner on VW T5 2.5TDI. It's known as the Blue Bus and the great design makes good use of the small space which suits an active couple



2007 Devon Sundowner

THE JOURNEY We travelled from our home in Salford along the M56 and A55 to Caernarfon, then the A4085 to Betws Garmon. We spent three nights on sites

THE COSTS

| | | | |
|---|--------|---------------------------|---------|
| Fuel average 32mpg | £40 | Site fees | £52.50 |
| Attractions Sygun Copper Mine: two adults | £17.90 | Transport railway and bus | £30 |
| | | Total | £140.40 |

218 miles

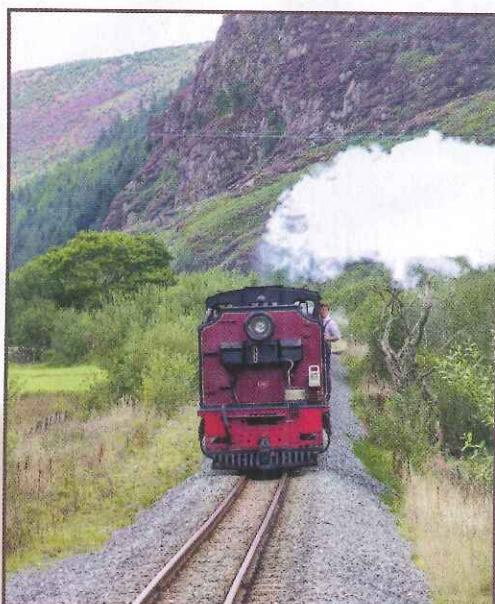
have very effectively taken root in the area and, for the past 30 years, the National Park Authority, along with the National Trust and other landowners, has worked hard to eradicate the invasive species from the hills.

A well-timed heavy shower encouraged us in to the relative shelter of the copper mine to learn more about the life of a Welsh miner in the nineteenth century. We made fun of having to wear hard hats but, as we crouched through the low roof of the entrance tunnel, we appreciated the protection they gave us.

The mine tour is self-guided, with audio presentations at interesting points that give a voice to the miners and a reminder of the dangers they faced. That said, the tour is great fun as well as informative. After ducking through tunnels and climbing the steep metal ladders, I felt in step with these hardy Welshmen.

Low-intensity mining went on at Sygun for centuries but increased with the Industrial Revolution and a greater demand for copper in the eighteenth century. The mine ceased working in 1903 when it was no longer viable and was undisturbed until 1986, when it was reopened as a visitor attraction. This was only possible after considerable and quite costly renovation work to dig out the tunnels.

During the closure, iron-rich water ▶



INFORMATION

 festtrail.co.uk

 beddgelerttourism.com

 visitcaernarfon.com

 For walks in Snowdonia
eryri-npa.gov.uk/visiting/walking

percolated through the rocks and, where this has dripped through the mine roof, long brown stalactites have formed.

From the mine you can continue along the river for a short distance to Llyn Dinas, an attractive lake set among the mountains, then take the well-graded path up the hillside. Alternatively, you can walk up the hillside route behind the mine.

Either way takes you to the top of Bwlch-y-Sygyn, a pleasant bumpy hilltop with a small pool, remains of quarries and a view out to the Irish Sea. As we walked we were enveloped in the sweet and heady smell of purple heather.

The route down through Cwm Bychan is wonderful. We followed the grassy path by the bubbling stream, surrounded by wild flowers. The signs of previous industrialisation are still all around – a ruined mine building in the ferns and old spoil heaps.

You can't miss the pylons from the aerial cableway that stand out starkly in the natural landscape. This cableway once transported ore in buckets to a processing plant near Nantmor and the railway line.

I stopped at a bench, erected as a tribute to someone's son who had died tragically

young. A local runner joined me for a rest and we watched the view together and talked about the weather.

"The Beddgelert valley has its own climate – usually rain," he explained, before adding, "but it's a small price to pay for living in such a beautiful area."

When we were here 20 years ago it was possible to trek along the old railway track and have the thrill of walking through the dark tunnels, a popular activity with our young son. The reopening of the Welsh Highland Railway means that this is obviously no longer an option. Instead, a route by the Glaslyn river is the best way to get back to Beddgelert, or you can catch the train from Nantmor.

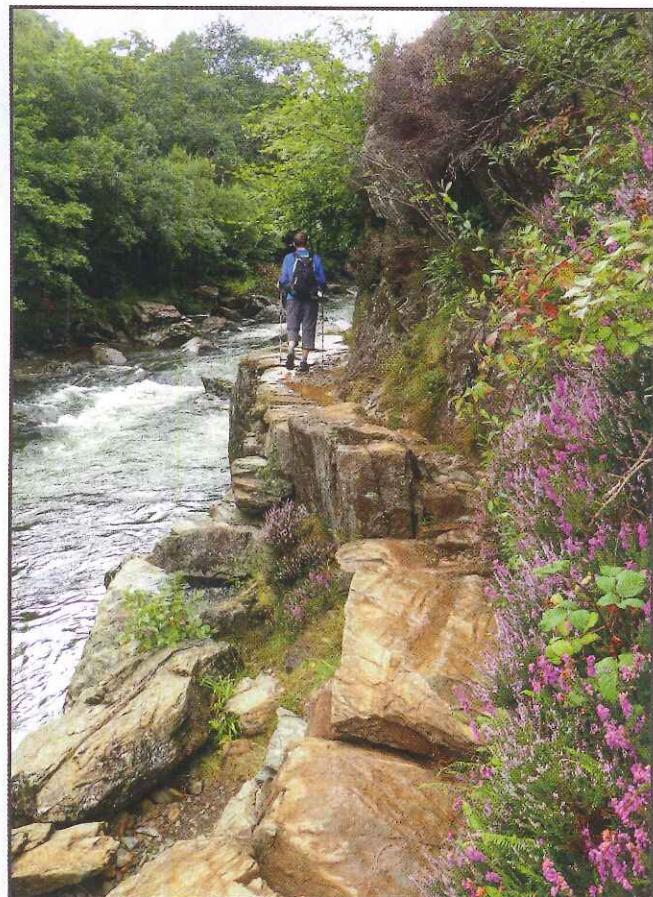
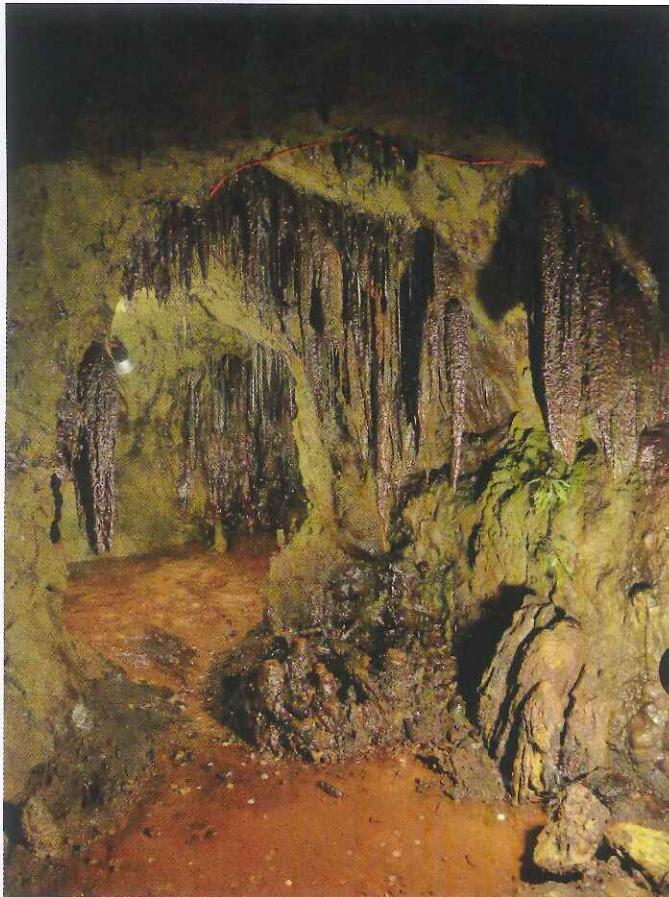
The paths got much busier in the valley and we joined the throng through the woodland to Pont Aberglaslyn, keeping the river on our left to make navigation easy. From the bridge, the riverside path brought us up close and personal to the river.

At no point was the path dangerous, despite the damp rock from the earlier rain, but it was exciting to be walking on a narrow stone walkway around a cliff with metal bars to keep us steady.

After this exhilaration it was easy going ▶

BELOW LEFT Inside Sygun Copper Mine

BELOW RIGHT River Glaslyn at the Pass of Aberglaslyn





back to Beddgelert.

We made the short and worthwhile diversion to see Gelert's grave and sculpture, which provides a salutary lesson in thinking before you act.

It is said that Prince Llywelyn killed his dog, Gelert, because he had jumped to the assumption that the dog had mauled his young son to death.

The prince was full of remorse when he realised that the blood stains on the dog's fur were actually those of the wolf Gelert had fought off and killed in an attempt to save Prince Llywelyn's son, rather than the boy's blood as the remorseful prince had assumed. Lesson learned!

But, after the visit, I had just a one-track mind and, back in Beddgelert, we headed for the Glaslyn Ices shop and café. I was in luck; they had my favourite pistachio flavour and I didn't have to think about lesser alternatives.

We sat outside in the sunshine and licked our way through the excellent homemade ice cream.

Throughout the day we had heard the friendly toot-toot of the steam trains on the Welsh Highland Railway. We were keen to incorporate a train ride into one of our

future excursions.

So, the next morning, we were on the platform at the Plas-y-Nant stop, which was just five minutes from our pitch to go to Caernarfon. The route the train follows is very picturesque, passing through the wooded, steep-sided valley of Afon Gwyrfai and coastal farmland.

I find travelling under steam power very special; the gentle chug of the engine and the toot of the whistle delights me.

By the time we arrived at Waunfawr and passengers dismounted to watch the tender refilled with coal, I was whistling the theme tune to the 1960s children's TV programme *Casey Jones* 'a steamin and a rollin'...

The Welsh Highland Railway is the UK's longest heritage railway. It's 25 miles from Caernarfon to Porthmadog, where it joins the Ffestiniog Railway.

Once back on board and underway again, we were soon within sight of the intimidating castle of Caernarfon.

Cafés were spilling onto the paving of Castle Square and, as we wandered down to the seafront, we found a Welsh rock band playing at the Anglesey Arms, an ancient pub built into the town walls and which was originally a customs house. ▶

ABOVE LEFT Beddgelert flowers and cottages

ABOVE RIGHT One of the trains of the Welsh Highland Railway

BELOW Horses near Betws Garmon





ABOVE View to the coast from Cwm Bychan

ABOVE RIGHT At Caernarfon station for the Welsh Highland Railway

The Menai Straits' boat tour left the harbour and, like two small, eager children, we went to watch the swing bridge moving to let the boat out.

A young boy also stood watching the bridge swing to one side, his face rapt with attention as he re-evaluated the world and his knowledge of it. Clearly up until then bridges had been static things; now one was moving in front of his eyes.

Having travelled on the Iron Horse, we now needed to employ Shanks's Pony on the Lôn Gwyrfai, a 5.6-mile cycling and walking path from Caernarfon to Waunfawr. This is accessed from alongside the Welsh Highland Railway station at Caernarfon.

It's a lovely, straightforward walk on tarmac and some gravel and, better still for us, we had it all to ourselves for much of the route. We nibbled on wild blackberries and stood quietly watching a buzzard tearing at its bloody prey in a field.

Ahead of us was the view of Mynydd Mawr. Alongside us were drystone walls swamped with flowers and bushes. It was so peaceful that, in a woodland section, we were able to stop and laugh uninhibitedly as a tiny nuthatch scolded us from the boughs of a tree over the track.

We left the Lôn Gwyrfai route to cross the Welsh Highland Railway again at Tryfan Junction and then picked up the Slate Trail Footpath towards Rhostryfan.

We walked this old rail track as far as

WE STAYED AT

Silver Birches Camping, Cynefin, Betws Garmon LL54 7YR

01286 650707 silver-birches.org.uk

Easter – 30 September

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £14 (no children under 15)



the first road, where we scrambled onto the lane above.

The lane took us across the hillside and steeply down to the Snowdonia Park pub where we stopped for a rest and an enjoyable, very welcome pint of the local brew before covering the last few miles back to the campervan.

Next time we come to this area we will bring our bikes; there are plenty of off-road cycle routes to be explored.

Another 4.5-mile section of the Lôn Gwyrfai route is from Rhyd Ddu to Beddgelert. This multi-use route is suitable for wheelchairs on the section from Rhyd Ddu to Llyn y Gader.

The path lends itself to being used along with a Welsh Highland Railway ticket, as there is a station at Rhyd Ddu and Beddgelert and it passes the request stop at Meillionen if you want a shorter walk.

Our circular walk took in some of the hillside above Llyn y Gader, where we had a splendid view of the steam train as it wound its way along the valley. The section back down the hill to Beddgelert forest was on very boggy ground after the rain showers, but we found drier ground after we had crossed the main road onto the tracks in Beddgelert Forest and around Llyn y Gader.

After a relaxing lunch by the lake, all too soon it was the end of the line for us and we were leaving this beautiful Welsh valley for home. **mmm**

ALTERNATIVE SITES

Coed-Y-Liwyn, Gelliolydan, Ffestiniog, Gwynedd LL41 4EN

Tel: 01766 590254

Riverside, Old Church Road, Betws-Y-Coed, Conwy LL24 0AL

Tel: 01690 710310

Min Y Don, Beach Road, Harlech, Gwynedd LL46 2UG

Tel: 01766 780286

THE CARAVAN CLUB
www.caravanclub.co.uk