



Get away for... **THE WEEKEND!**

A winter break in beautiful Keswick
is worth the effort

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki

Use any pitch, but please stay off the grass,' the campsite owner asked as we pulled up. We both looked across the snow-covered ground; it was impossible to tell grass from gravel! Pitching as best we could, we climbed out of our Blue Bus onto the frozen earth as two almost nose-to-tail jets raced up the valley, so low I wondered how they missed the chimney pots. The friendly owner told us this was the Caravan and Motorhome Club's oldest Certificated Location and gave us a potted history of the farm as another hardy camper rolled up.

January can seem like the longest month and three weeks of rain had made this one feel eternal. At last, a sun symbol appeared on the weather forecast for the following week and I excitedly set about booking a few days around Keswick in the Lake District.

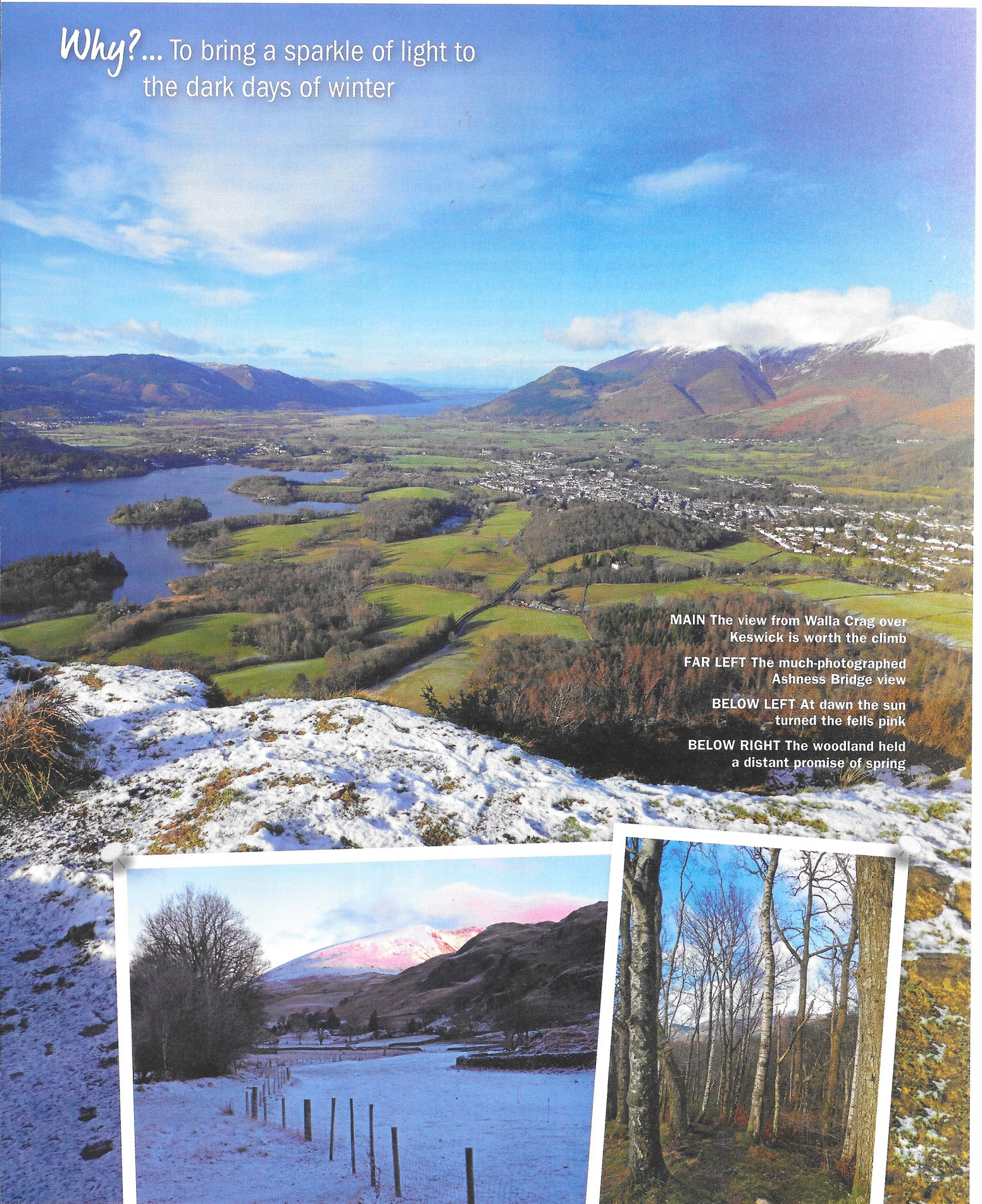
Finding a campsite in January can be

challenging. The one I was confident would be able to accommodate us had roadworks outside its gate and was inaccessible all week! Checking websites, campsites were cleaning up after flooding, full or temporarily closed for refurbishment. In winter we prefer a campsite with showers, as we drain our water and use a 10-litre container for washing and cooking. When this proved impossible, we booked into Shoulthwaite Farm, which has no sanitary block. I reasoned that we were hardly likely to get sweaty in sub-freezing temperatures and could get away with a couple of nights of spit and lick washes.

Driving into the Lake District, we left the green fields of Lancashire for the white fells but didn't see snow covering the roads until we climbed over Dunmail Raise north of Grasmere. Fortunately, the campsite is ►



Why?... To bring a sparkle of light to
the dark days of winter

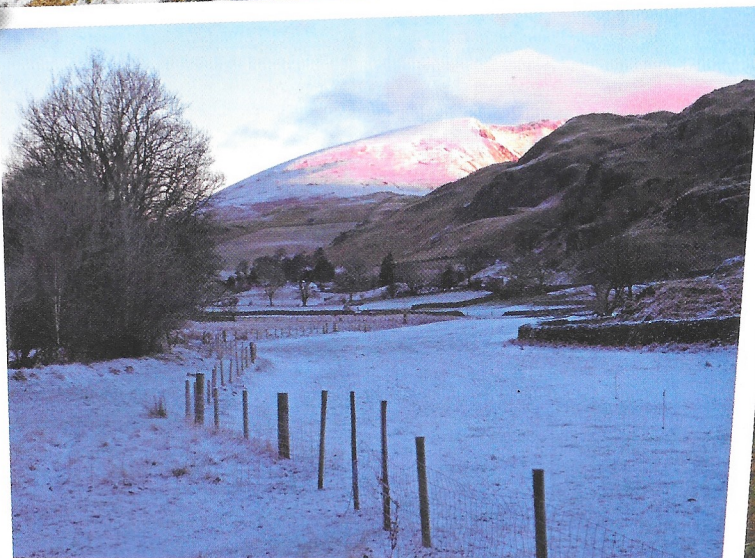


MAIN The view from Walla Crag over Keswick is worth the climb

FAR LEFT The much-photographed Ashness Bridge view

BELOW LEFT At dawn the sun turned the fells pink

BELOW RIGHT The woodland held a distant promise of spring



US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...
and her husband, Anthony,
explore beautiful places
in their Blue Bus whatever
the season. Carol is a keen
walker, fair-weather cyclist and
improving birdwatcher



2015 Devon Tempest on
a Renault Master MWB
2.3-litre. This is our third blue
campervan and we have called
them all the 'Blue Bus'

just off the main Ambleside to Keswick road and access was no problem.

Leaving the owner defrosting the outside tap with a kettle, we stretched our legs along the farm track, stopping to admire the flock of muscular Texel sheep. Their short ears pricked up with interest as we approached, hopeful for food. Eventually, after filling up our water container as dusk settled on the wintry Lake District landscape, we turned up the heating and settled in for the night.

Campervan life doesn't come simpler than a winter night on a no-frills campsite. There was no pub within striking distance, in the narrow steep-sided valley neither of us had any phone signal and outside it was pitch black. We had hook-up and everything we needed in our 'van and spent a cosy and relaxed evening reading, cooking, listening to the radio and watching a TV programme we had downloaded to the laptop.

I woke in the early morning dark and soon had the kettle boiling for tea. The rucksack was packed and I filled our flask with hot chocolate and slipped in extra rations and layers of clothing. We had checked the mountain weather forecast at home and were prepared for the conditions.

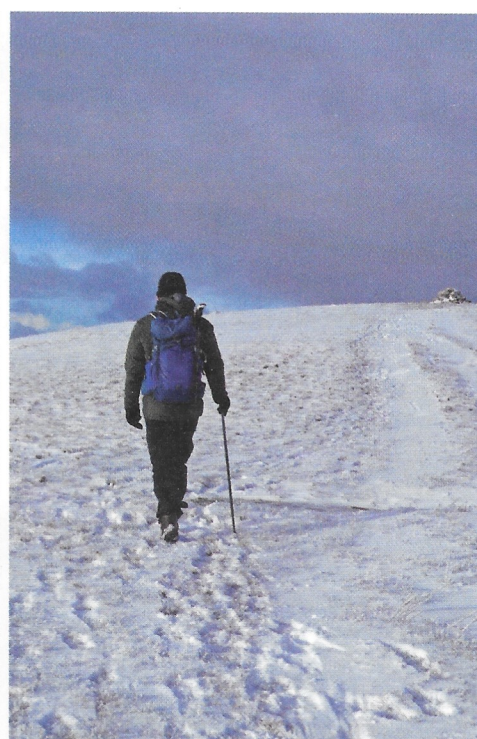
After a filling breakfast we crunched out into the snow as the sun began to lighten the sky. The farmer was up with the light,

too, and as we made our way down the track, the sheep watched us expectantly.

It was a magical morning. The rising sun reached the mountaintops, painting the white slopes of Blencathra, a distinctive nearby mountain, a blushing pink, while we waited for the bus in blue shadows. The 555 is an hourly service that stops by the site and we rode the short distance to the head of Thirlmere and hiked steeply uphill.

Despite the dawn chill, we soon warmed up as we climbed above waterfalls, the snow becoming deeper. Views of fells, blanketed in white, unfolded and we picked out some favourites. The ridges above Derwentwater were clearly defined, the snow settling on northern slopes while the orange bracken glowed on south-facing hillsides where the sun had warmed the ground. We stopped to admire ice crystals clustered on grasses like delicate frosty seeds and as we approached the top of Sticks Pass the sun reached us and our world sparkled.

We were climbing the Dodds, a series of rounded hills that are all the better for a covering of snow. The panoramic views encompassed Ullswater, Thirlmere and the ski runs above Glenridding. Later we spotted two skiers and envied their apparently effortless descent. The crossroads of paths was busy with walkers,



Must do... Fill a flask with your favourite hot drink; you'll be glad you made the effort on a cold day

almost all men on their own. Johnny Cash's 'Solitary Man' came into my head as I trudged uphill and the mournful song stayed as an earworm the rest of the day! Along the ridge we picked up the strong tailwind the forecast had promised, but the powdery snow was deep and soft and the going was easy enough.

Our hot chocolate was welcome when we stopped for lunch on Stybarrow Dodd. By now the clouds had thickened and I was wearing five layers! Only a survival bag and emergency thermal blanket lay between me and hypothermia. Even so, the winter wonderland was awesome as walked over Watson's Dodd and Great Dodd before heading back.

Even with walking poles, descending Sticks Pass was tiring as I diligently dug the sides of my boots into the snow, creating steps on the steepest sections. Stopping for a drink from our water bottle we were amazed to see lumps of ice floating inside, the water was glacial and I tucked it inside my layers to warm it. Looking up we watched a hang glider launch themselves off the slopes and soar overhead. Below us the jets noisily and briefly returned to the valley.

Missing the return bus by just a few minutes was a mixed blessing. We had an hour to wait and so really had no choice but

to walk the short distance to the King's Head Inn for drinks. In this snug refuge, Anthony had his cold-weather favourite, rum and coke, and I had beer (Jennings). Back at the 'van we had tea and home-made cake and another comfy evening.

At the deepest point of the night, I woke with a migraine. These throbbing headaches and accompanying nausea don't affect me often but cold weather can be a trigger. I knew I needed to take medication but didn't want to disturb Anthony. Eventually, I climbed out of my warm bed and quietly flicked on a light at the back of our small 'van, opened the cupboard and found the right tablets. Pouring a glass of water, Anthony snuffled in his sleep and I readjusted his blankets before snuggling back into bed. I needn't have worried, Anthony sleeps like a log!

The next morning the headache was only a faint memory and the nausea manageable. Even so (and despite another sunny and frosty day), we decided to ditch the plan for a second mountain hike and took a leisurely approach to breakfast as the farm woke up nearby.

Driving the short distance into Keswick we firstly treated ourselves to coffee and cake in a cheerful café; it was, after all, an hour since breakfast! The charming >

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG

Three nights

WHEN

January

HOW MUCH

Fuel Average 35mpg (From Morecambe to Keswick return 117 miles).....£27

Site fees.....£75

Parking Keswick.....£8.20

Bus fares.....£12

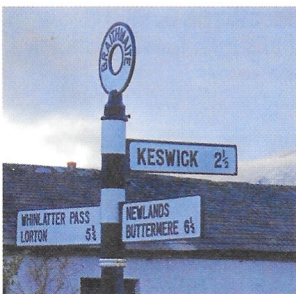
TOTAL.....£122.20



BELOW FAR LEFT The author with rosy cheeks enjoying the weather; The Dodds are rounded hills and Improved by snow

BELOW LEFT A Cumbrian fingerpost near Keswick

BELOW RIGHT Snow picks out the walls, gullies and crags on the fells



TOP TIPS

Keswick is a busy hub for various bus routes so check out the bus times at [stagecoachbus.com](https://www.stagecoachbus.com)

Put a mountain weather forecast app on your phone but don't rely on a signal!

INFORMATION

Tourist Information

[keswick.org](https://www.keswick.org)
[visitlakedistrict.com](https://www.visitlakedistrict.com)

The Met Office has a mountain weather section

[metoffice.gov.uk](https://www.metoffice.gov.uk)

Lake District Ski Club

[lidsnowski.co.uk](https://www.lidsnowski.co.uk)





Must see... The spectacular views over Keswick from Walla Crag

market town of Keswick has plenty of shops and places to eat and we could have potted around the town but being out in the sun and snow was too much of a draw and we caught the Borrowdale bus along Derwentwater, hopping off for a walk.

A single-track road climbs steeply through woodland to the attractive hamlet of Watendlath that is owned by the National Trust and sits high in the fells between Borrowdale and Thirlmere. Today we were only going as far as Ashness Bridge, which might be the most photographed packhorse bridge in the Lake District! The stone arch and tumbling beck make the perfect foreground for the view over Derwentwater, Bassenthwaite Lake and the steep slopes of Skiddaw above Keswick.

From Ashness Bridge we picked up airy footpaths above the trees towards Walla Crag. The views opened out across Derwentwater with a backdrop of snow-covered fells and a meadow pipit joined us on the path, bobbing from rock to rock. At these lower altitudes the paths were icy and, where the previous three weeks of rain had poured down the hillside, we found rows of thick icicles like organ pipes. Walla Crag is a big-hearted walk that rewards you with an exceptional viewpoint for little effort. We had lunch perched on its icy rocks with the

houses of Keswick scattered below us in the green valley and the blue sky reflected in the lakes. Every last vestige of January blues had been blown away, this was surely the Lake District at its best.

Walking through the wood down to Keswick, the dry stone walls were attractively dusted with snow, vibrant green mosses covered the tree trunks and some orange beech leaves hung onto lower branches. I knew the woodland was somehow storing a distant promise of spring. In Keswick we browsed some charity shops for new reading material before heading to our campsite for the night.

Threlkeld Hall near Keswick is a tidy campsite with an open aspect, views to Blencathra and Clough Head and hot showers! There was no snow on the ground in this exposed spot but a penetrating wind howled around the 'van. The sky was clear and after dark we wrapped up and stepped onto our pitch, leaning back to pick out the constellations we knew. With a mobile signal we felt connected again and steaming, indulgent showers cleaned off the grime of the last couple of days.

As we drove home the next day the snow was melting and I knew we were lucky to have been able to grab the chance for a short, dazzling winter wonderland trip. **MMMM**

ABOVE The snow lay on the northern slopes longer

BELOW It was hard to tell grass from hardstanding in the snow



THE CAMPSITES

Shoulthwaite Farm CL,
Naddle, Keswick, Cumbria
CA12 4TF

caravanclub.co.uk

01768 772678

All year

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £20

Threlkeld Hall Touring Site,
Threlkeld, Keswick, CA12 4SX

threlkeldhalltouringsite.co.uk

01768 779211

All year

Two adults, pitch and electric: From £35