

Trails of Wales

North Wales is a tapestry of rich history, dramatic coastlines and rolling hills, offering endless opportunities for exploration and relaxation

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki



North Wales has it all. Beaches for those who yearn for sand between their toes; castles galore for history buffs; industrial heritage for cultural aficionados; mountains, delicious food and a tempting network of lowland long-distance footpaths, perfect for those of us looking for day walks from campsites.

Peering at our maps while planning our latest Welsh trip, we traced promising stretches of the North Wales Pilgrim's Way (Taith Pererin Gogledd Cymru), the Wales Coast Path and the Snowdonia Slate Trail (Llwybr Llechi Eryri) with our fingers.

The Pilgrim's Way crosses north Wales to Bardsey Island, off the Llyn Peninsula, an island pilgrims have been drawn to for centuries. In its 130 miles, the trail visits many significant sites and an unmissable highlight near Conwy is the climb to the remote and ruggedly simple Llangelynnin Old Church. The walled church, dedicated to Saint Celynnin, has a well whose waters were once thought to be healing, tucked in the corner of the churchyard. We approached the twelfth century church from Rowen in the heavy footsteps of many coffin bearers, following the old coffin route.

The panoramas from the church will be enough for many but we continued, leaving the Pilgrim's Way and crossing grassy hills that are home to a group of wild ponies, to find the remains of Caer Bach fort and the summit of Tal y Fan. Ravens kept us company over the hill, soaring overhead as we negotiated the boulder-strewn descent.

The seemingly empty southeast-facing slopes of Tal y Fan saw plenty of activity in the past and are dotted with chambered tombs, standing stones and hut circles. We stopped to admire Maen y Bardd (Poet Stone), a well-preserved Neolithic chambered tomb, placed to make the most of the view.

Picking up a delightful walled lane back to the campsite, thought to have been trampled by Roman Legions, the warm air ➤

ABOUT US...



US 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



OUR 'VAN A 2021 Devon Firefly on a Ford Custom Transit SWB 2.0-litre. This is our third Devon Conversions campervan and we love the layout that packs so much into a sub-five-metre van

LEFT Looking over Llanbedrog Beach

BELOW INSET The Iron Man on Llanbedrog headland

THE JOURNEY

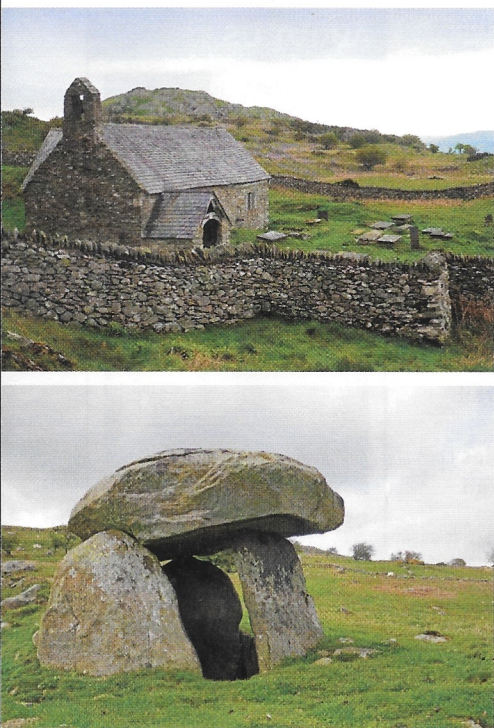
We travelled to north Wales on the M6 and the A55, returning the same way, making this a return distance of around 390 miles. We spent 12 days touring with 10 nights on sites in May

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 40mpg (Morecambe to north Wales return 390 miles)	£55
Site fees	£332.80
Parking Blaenau Ffestiniog	£2.20
Total costs	£390



390 miles



TOP TIPS

The road to the beach at Trefor is narrow and winding but thankfully short and most vehicles should manage it with care. There is a car park with toilets and parking by the harbour

If you can't manage the walk up to Llangelynin Old Church, you can drive on narrow winding roads above Conwy. The directions and information about the church and the walk from Rowen can be found on this website

www.rowenconwy.org.uk/activities/llangelynin-old-church

ABOVE CLOCKWISE The Llangelynin Old Church above Conwy; The Wales Coast Path near Trefor; Maen y Bardd (the Poet Stone)

released the sweet aromas from bluebells and gorse.

Having realised it was some years since we have been to north Wales, we had planned a 10-night tour that combined old favourites and new adventures. Cefn Cae campsite near Conwy is an old favourite and, enjoying the peace and sunshine of this rural campsite, we toasted that good-to-be-back feeling.

Driving to our next site, we parked up at Trefor on the coast for a dramatic stretch of the Wales Coast Path, as well as a brief reacquaintance with the Pilgrim's Way. The terraced houses of Trefor were built for the local granite quarry workers and we parked by the sheltered beach and harbour that was once a busy shipping hub for stone. It is now used for nothing more energetic than fishing and strolling.

Heading towards the steep-sided hills that plunge into the sea here, we walked through blue spring squill and clumps of pink thrift. We spotted seabirds on the water and inland sheep kept an eye on their chunky lambs.

The beautiful Llyn Peninsula and sunny weather was a heady combination! We were staying above Abersoch and once again the coast path helped us explore.

First, we climbed the hillock by the campsite to get our bearings as this was new territory to us. The hill, topped by a disused windmill, has views that sweep over countryside and coast.

A stretch of sand led the eye to Pwllheli

and on the horizon the mountains of Snowdonia shimmered blue in the evening light. Around Abersoch were a cluster of manicured hedged fields and white houses.

The next morning we walked around the harbour to Abersoch's centre and had coffee in a lively café. This leg of the coast path took us along the curving beach with breakwaters and disparate beach huts to Machroes.

Carrying our shoes, we pushed our toes into the warm sand, the waves barely murmuring. We had lunch watching the watery comings and goings of paddleboarders, kayakers and a myriad of small motorboats.

Climbing from the beach, our route wound its way above the cliffs to the headland on grassland full of wild flowers. We were enjoying the beauty of the landscape, looking across to the two islands just offshore, when we spotted dolphins. One of the boats had seen them, too, and switched off the engine, giving space to the group of about six bottlenose dolphins.

We sat on the short grass with binoculars, bowled over by the dolphins' graceful frolicking, eventually following their progress back towards Abersoch. It was a magical experience and deserved celebrating with rich Welsh ice creams before we climbed the hill to our campsite.

The following day we walked to Llanbedrog, getting a little confused in the spider's web of paths and lanes that became surreal when we found ourselves lost in a copse full of gnomes! Eventually reaching ►



"A fabulous view of Llanbedrog Beach with its row of colourful beach huts and the turquoise still water of Cardigan Bay"

ABOVE LEFT Plas Glyn y Weddw art and heritage centre in Llanbedrog has a unique café

ABOVE RIGHT The railway station in Betws-y-Coed

BELOW The distinctive outcrop called Clogwyn y Garreg in the Nantlle Valley

Llanbedrog, we headed for Plas Glyn y Weddw for much-needed coffee. This art and heritage centre in a nineteenth century mansion has a lush woodland garden, outdoor sculptures and a unique café inspired by sea urchin shells.

After browsing the galleries, we explored the woodland garden, rejoining the coast path to the headland. The *Iron Man*, a statue that looks over Llanbedrog and the bay, stands tall on a high crag.

This is the third statue to stand here; it

was designed and created locally and they say on a windy day it sings.

On a still day we didn't get to experience this eerie sound but we did have a fabulous view of Llanbedrog Beach with its row of colourful beach huts and the turquoise still water of Cardigan Bay. Walking over the headland, the rough heath was alive with insects while jet skis roared below. Back in Llanbedrog we sank a cool beer in a pub garden before heading back.

We enjoy watching the Hairy Bikers TV programmes and a old episode about north Wales had inspired us to visit a couple of places. The fascinating story of Kurmang Rashid, a former rocket scientist from Kurdistan, and the Model Bakery he ran in Blaenau Ffestiniog tempted us, along with the mouthwatering description of the spicy pasties he made.

Blaenau Ffestiniog was once the slate capital of Wales and so, after our delicious takeaway lunch from the bakery, we followed the signs for the Snowdonia Slate Trail. This 83-mile trail around Eryri (Snowdonia) takes walkers on a remarkable journey through the slate heritage of north Wales.

After leaning on the bridge watching the steam trains on the Ffestiniog Railway, we walked through oak woods and among moss-covered boulders and bluebells. While cuckoos called, our views encompassed the contrasting fissured slate-grey workings, May-fresh trees and walled meadows of sheep with lambs.

We had never visited the Nantlle Valley before, although the Nantlle Ridge is a well-known and challenging hill walk. We were drawn here by the Snowdonia Slate Trail and the Hairy Bikers (more of this later), but what made us fall in love with this remote valley was the well-run and



THE TRAILS

Snowdonia Slate Trail is 83 miles long, starting and ending in Bangor

W snowdoniaslatetrail.org

Wales Coast Path – 870 miles around the coast

W walescoastpath.gov.uk

North Wales Pilgrim's Way is a 135-mile-long marked walking route, between Basingwerk Abbey near Holywell and Bardsey Island

W pilgrims-way-north-wales.org

BELOW Abersoch's sheltered harbour

peaceful campsite.

The Slate Trail runs the length of the Nantlle Valley and on our first afternoon we followed it along the narrow road and across fields to a distinctive outcrop called Clogwyn y Garreg. The views opened up beyond the crag and were dominated by Yr Wyddfa (Snowdon). Walking back, the sun was setting and the light was so soft, I felt cocooned in sheep's wool.

With rain forecast for the afternoon of the next day, we set off early in the opposite direction on the Slate Trail. We were heading for Nantlle village and Poblado Coffi, a coffee roaster and café and another Hairy Bikers recommendation. A track took us around the lake to the village and we enjoyed excellent coffee in a cosy courtyard, accompanied by tasty ginger flapjack.

Having lived and worked in Colombia, the owners of Poblado Coffi now collaborate

with growers to provide sustainable coffee, paying a fair price to everyone along the supply chain. This is coffee that is more than fairly traded and we stuffed a couple of bags of its freshly roasted coffee into the rucksack before setting off back along the road, still hoping to beat the rain.

The single-track road through the Nantlle Valley doesn't get much traffic, so, hearing the familiar thrum of motorbikes, we stepped to the verge and turned around.

A funeral cortège of bikes and cars was approaching, led by a magnificent shiny Honda Gold Wing. We stood, heads bowed, paying our respects to someone who must have been a much-loved biker, as the line of vehicles slowly passed.

The last biker gave us a nod of thanks as he solemnly cruised by.

We successfully dodged the rain but, as we reached our Silver Machine, the wind was ►





ABOVE The summit of Mynydd Tal-y-Mignedd

BELOW Riverside Touring Park – the Afon Llugwy

FAR RIGHT Tal-y-Mignedd campsite

whipping up a storm. Noticing a sheep had managed to sneak its way into the camping field, we re-enacted an episode of *One Man and his Dog*, without the dog, shepherding the errant sheep back to the fields. As the rain bounced off our metal roof and the wind tried to tip us over, we relaxed in the comfort of our campervan, drinking tea and eating delicious Welsh cakes.

The storm had blown over the next day and we set off up the sheer valley sides from the campsite to Mynydd Tal-y-Mignedd, just one of the summits on the Nantlle Ridge.

At first the track snaked through sweet-smelling bluebells, slowly opening up views along the valley. But, once we reached the open hillside, the path settled on a relentless uphill slog to the summit of grey rocks.

Fortunately, the immense views across the Nantlle Ridge to Yr Wyddfa and its surrounding mountains were worthwhile. We were grateful for the stone obelisk that gave us shelter from the stiff breeze and we had our lunch admiring the serrated edge of Craig Cwm Silyn, the highest point on the ridge. There wasn't another hiker in sight and, if you're looking for a solitary ridge walk, then this is the one.

Later we descended to a narrow grassy col and peered down the precipitous slopes into the cwm, a curved mountain basin. Descending among the cotton grass and skylarks, we kept stopping to watch fluctuating sunlight dancing across the

almost vertical crags of Craig y Bera on the opposite side of the valley.

The bustle of Betws-y-Coed was a bit of a shock after the tranquillity of the Nantlle Valley. The railways brought the first tourists here in the nineteenth century and its scenery has drawn visitors ever since, including us for the last 40 years. Betws-y-Coed also has a mining heritage and we picked up the Slate Trail once again on a shady woodland route by the Afon Llugwy to the unusual Miners' Bridge that the quarrymen used to cross the river to work.

Following their footsteps, we navigated



the bridge and ascended steadily to the shore of Llyn Elsi, a natural lake extended by a dam in the early twentieth century. Our lunch was spent watching the antics of Canada geese and their fluffy goslings and quieter herring gulls nesting on one of the islands.

In the evening we ate at Hangin' Pizzeria, a short walk from the campsite. This was on the recommendation of our son rather than any TV celebrities. He is a pizza connoisseur and was right to ensure we didn't miss this restaurant. With communal tables and bright colours, the pizzeria has a relaxed style and a social conscience, giving money to charities that protect orangutans, gorillas and chimpanzees. Most importantly, the pizzas were excellent!

The long-distance footpaths of north Wales had served up some fantastic walking, along with glimpses of the area's rich history. These paths are so numerous and cover such varied walking, I am sure there will be a section to suit everyone.

An evening of good food was the perfect way to end our tour around north Wales. We left with a cupboard full of coffee, more places to add to our favourites in this part of the UK and a promise to return. **Wales**



WE STAYED AT

Cefn Cae Camping Site, Rowen, Conwy LL32 8YU

20 March - 10 October

W campinginnorthwales.co.uk

Yr Helyg (The Willows), Mynytho, Abersoch,

Gwynedd LL53 7RW

22 March - 31 October

W the-willows-abersoch.co.uk

Talymignedd Campsite, Nantlle, Caernarfon

LL54 6BT

1 March - 31 October

W talymignedd.co.uk

Riverside Touring Park, Old Church Road,

Betws-y-Coed, Gwynedd LL24 0AL

17 February - 3 January

W morris-leisure.co.uk

ALTERNATIVE SITE



Tyddyn Llwyn Holiday Park is located near Porthmadog

W tyddynllwyn.com

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