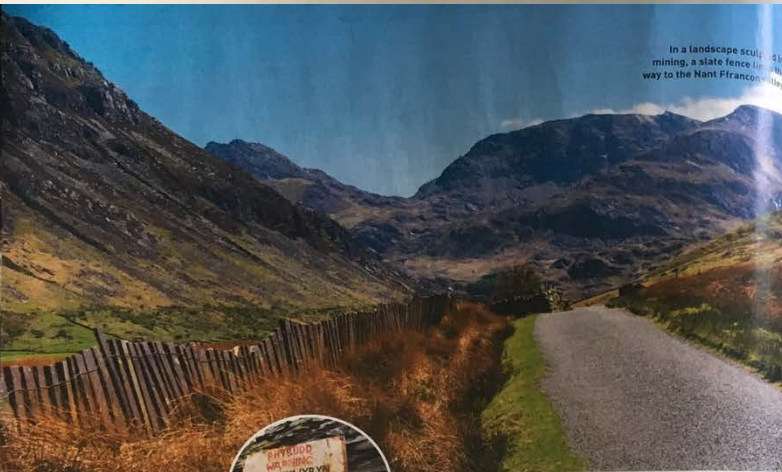


Snowdonia Slate Trail

Middle Earth, Mordor, The Shire, Dorothea, Ffestiniog, Rhosydd. Welcome to your next big walk. It's a trip like nothing else...

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ILLUSTRATION DAN BELL



In a landscape sculpted by mining, a slate fence in the way to the Nant Ffrancois valley



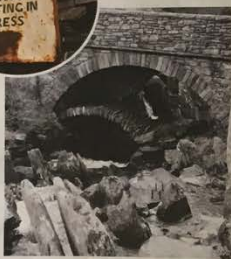
SNOWDONIA SLATE TRAIL

Appreciating Tryfan and Llyn Ogwen from new perspectives on day 1.

Where here are we? A quick glance out of the taxi's window hints at somewhere between a Tolkienesque fantasy and industrial North Walian reality. Between the lost worlds of mountain, moor, valley and village. This is still north Snowdonia, but from a very different angle...

Ross and I are en route to Llwybr Llechi Eryri, aka the Snowdonia Slate Trail. Technically we'll be doing the slate trail the 'wrong' way round, and we only have three days to do the six-to-eight-day route, but it's just too early to natter about any of that in the cab from Nant Peris to our starting point at Bethesda. The solitary and slightly over-ripe banana clearly isn't hiring the mark, and good coffee is most definitely required. As we're dropped off on a sleepy Bethesda High Street, with an over-excitable collie dog, Nonny, for extra company, I can't help but ponder where the trail actually starts? This is last minute planning at its best.

The Snowdonia Slate Trail is a seductive concept – an 83-mile multi-day journey in north Snowdonia, through many familiar places and some not so. Conceived by Aled Owen, who was born and raised near Bethesda,



The old packhorse bridge, Pont Pen-y-benglog.

the 13 route sections that make up the trail can be followed comfortably in a week or so back-to-back, or over a period of time returning again and again. But time is really of no relevance on the Snowdonia Slate Trail – it's a journey to savour. Its artful concept is the weaving together of existing paths and tracks through woodland, valley, upland, heath, abandoned quarries and diverse, north Snowdonia villages. There is an ever-present reference to this area's unquestionable relationship with the full bellies of the surrounding mountains. Their rich resource and abundant slate quarrying opportunities,

created the communities that thrived amongst this developing hustle of slate wagons, railways, cabans and the gapping, engineering anomalies where young and old workers chipped away at huge slate walls with no more than a hemp rope harness and a pick axe. Such a scene depicts the rapid growth of the slate industry in the 18th century, but what about before that? Back to the 1400s even? We're often inspired to journey through areas we feel friendly with but would like to know more about.

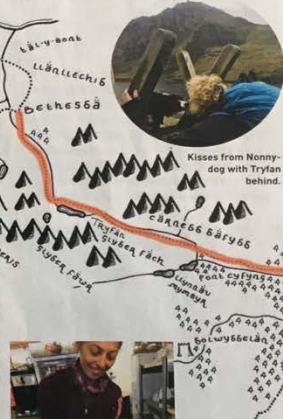
Day 1: A different view

We're feeling all maverick as we ascend out of Bethesda, along the curvaceous banks of Afon Ogwen, under a beautiful, broadleaf woodland canopy. Did we pack enough plasters? And this is only the first day... It's well-known that J.R.R. Tolkien, master of Hobbit and Mordor, was deeply inspired by Wales and the Welsh language. He visited during the 1940s, when he was writing his Lord of the Rings volumes. And while journeying through specific areas on the slate trail, it's not uncommon for the mind to wander back to the fantastical, fearsome and imposing backdrops to his stories of magic, battle, challenge and nature. "You shall not pass!" echoes silently as you peer into gaping, abandoned quarry holes, dripping with moss and alive with trees again but no longer rumbling with

the noise of past activity. There's just the wind and maybe the call of a peregrine: "Fly, you fools," says Gandalf. We do.

As we sail into Idwal Cottage, under the watchful stare of Tryfan rising solid above Llyn Ogwen, the skies are leaden and rain is forecast. And we know a good breakfast is still 90 minutes away in Capel Curig. I'm wondering if we'll receive the obligatory poke of fun from Nick as he serves us at the Moel Siabod Café? I'm daydreaming of their big-as-your-head scones as we pass under our mountain friends Foel Goch, Y Garn and Pen yr Ole Wen. It does feel a little strange to weave our way under these mountain giants, instead of over them, but they're familiar enough to let us pass without guilt. And we have to press on, there's another 78 miles to go!

With minimal food for day one, we finally handle our way into the steamy café, feeling all smug as we've walked a not-insubstantial 11 miles for breakfast. Nick supplies us with coffee, breakfast baps and those huge scones. He knows we're in for getting wet too, giving the game away with that wrinkle that says "You fools!" We're the first Snowdonia Slate Trail walkers to visit the café that morning, and receive a stamp for our



Kisses from Nonny-dog with Tryfan behind.



The most important part of the day! A stamp in the Slate Trail Passport at Moel Siabod Café.

Slate Trail Passport. I'm proud, like a wiggly child receiving a well-done sticker for good homework. Forever the professional, Ross secretes the precious passport back into its dry-bag. Good job too, 'cause it's properly raining now. Very wet, slate rain. It continues to rain for the remainder of the day. Even the familiar pavements of Berws y Coed are looking forlorn, increasing the determination to reach our destination. We're well kitted out to cope with a kind of precipitation, though a wet Nonny-dog is looking rather less enthusiastic at this point.

Catching a glimpse of an ancient bridge across a lively Afon Machno, dripping with mosses and ferns, reminds us where we are and the journeys people must have taken to and from past communities. We're next to the old Penmachno Woollen Mill, amidst a dripping world of trees. I hear you, J.R.R. Tolkien. Next up, a goblin will pop out from under the old 'Roma Bridge' as it's called. Streams are rising and cloud bases are lowering to valley-level in Cwm Penmachno. Coming in to land at the head of a distant valley, our first day is complete. We pants

"THIS WORLD IS RICH IN MOSSES, FERNS, LIVERWORTS AND LICHENS - A MINI RAINFOREST IN SNOWDONIA"



Full waterfalls and ancient woodland at Ceunant Cynfal Nature Reserve.



and past hungry, it's been a long time since we've had so many hours to talk complete nonsense to each other and we're excited to see tomorrow (and dry boots). Food would be good, a beer would be awesome, so we make our way to Conwy Falls Café. Nonny is totally pooped at the end of a very full day, and ready only for her bed, so we have her picked up and taken home for some much needed R&R. We'll meet her again once she's recuperated. The (long) day's not over for us yet though, as we just about make it in time for a free evening talk back at Plas y Brenin. Sore feet? No. Well... maybe.

Day 2: Hidden secrets

Mists lurk as we break our early on the second day, re-supplied and now canny to the need for extra food and snacks. We're



Ross leaving the remains of Rhoysydd Quarry at Cwmorthin.

SNOWDONIA SLATE TRAIL

impressive views of the enticing Nantlle Ridge, Snowdon's imposing massif, and a softness of fields falling away to the western coast. The gaping quarry holes of Dorothea are immense: a cool breeze rises back at me from tree-filled air as I try to peer further in. We take a detour from the path towards the abandoned buildings and all seasons are witnessed from these empty cabin windows. Timeless. By the time we reach Waunfawr, the sun is out and it's hot in the valley. Our planned cafe stop at Antur Waunfawr is thwarted by a volunteer staff training day, but a helpful lady delivers ad hoc orange squash and water refills. That hits the spot. We dry our boot insoles in the sun and take on some early lunch. What time is it? No idea. Ross is more concerned we've not been able to stamp our Slate Trail Passport. Now who's the kid?

Descending into Llanberis is like nearly completing our journey, for we're now a mere two miles from home, and yet 13.5 miles from the finish line of Porth Penrhyn in Bangor. As we descend from Bwlch-y-groes, the scale of previous quarry operations on the slopes of Elidir Fawr is awe-inspiring and the gaze returns to the Llanberis Pass and its rise towards Yr Wyddfa/Snowdon. Still standing proud she welcomes us, albeit fleetingly. We see the most people we've seen all day in Llanberis, unsurprisingly. Friends ask us what we're doing ("Why do you look so tired?") and are keen to hear more about the Trail. We move along with a friend, Jason, to find our walking pace only slightly less than his

WALK THE TRAIL...

Strenuousness, Navigation, Technicality, Distance 134km (83 miles), Total ascent 5237m, Time 5-8 days (or 3 like this!), Start/Finish The Snowdonia Slate Trail guidebook describes the journey in an anti-clockwise direction from Porth Penrhyn-Bethesda, but your start point could be SH892726 (Porth Penrhyn) or SH623444 (Bethesda High Street), depending on direction chosen. Nearest town/village Bangor, Bethesda, Llanberis, Bets-y-Coed - many!



Terrain Good tracks, forest and mountain paths, open moorland. Maps OS Explorer 1:25,000 OL17 and OL18, Harvey British Mountain Map 1:40,000 Snowdonia North, GPS route available from www.snowdoniaslatetrail.org Public transport See www.traveline.cymru/ for up-to-

date information. The Snowdon Sherpa bus serves a number of local villages, but times and days of operation can vary over the seasons. Check Dwyndd bus timetables for local village services. Guidebook Snowdonia Slate Trail by Aled Owen, pb/Rucksack Readers. Pubs & grub There are lots of options en route for refreshments, more so than a high mountain route - bonus! If you like coffee and cake! Check out Moel Siabod Café, Capel Curig or THE best scones in the area. Conwy Falls Café.

is our way? Moisture drips from my hair onto the map as I check our direction. Now this all feels very familiar, very Welsh. But we're blessed with a break in the weather as we descend from the moors towards Llan Ffestiniog, which has never felt so far away. And a most sublime detour through National Nature Reserve, Ceunant Cynfal - which impresses upon us a delight that stops us in our (relentlessly onwards) tracks with a protected area of ancient woodland and river gorge. Hidden and secretive, you'd be forgiven for thinking you'd just slipped through a time worm-hole back to a land of diplodocus. A world away from high summits, stripped bare by wind and ice, this area is rich in mosses, ferns, liverworts and lichens, like a mini rainforest in Snowdonia. It'll be well worth a return visit. And then Blaenau Ffestiniog beckons with the forboding horseshoe of Moelwyn Mawr, Moel-y-hyd and Foel Ddu, guarding the quietness of Cwmorthin with its abandoned Rhoysydd and Croesor quarries. There's a friendly chemist in Blaenau for extra plasters. Noted. Forty-two total miles in and the slate path above Cwmorthin needs some attention. Wine gums at the ready: let's climb another quarry track! We return to the feeling of the familiar playing tricks on you. Somehow, in the context of a multi-day journey we now feel further away than usual, in a historical, cultural and personal bubble, all to ourselves. I've been looking forward to our ascent over Cwmorthin, and it's here that we see the most people we've seen all day - a school group descending from an underground quarry tour, a lone walker below Llyn Clogwynn-brith, and a mountain leader assessment group looking for a place to wild camp. No one knows of the distance we've come since yesterday morning. Again we feel pleased with ourselves that we're making good time and the cloud base is lifting. And I know the descent to Croesor is an excellent, old double track which will allow us to freewheel all the way. An intake of food and addition of layers is much needed as we pass through Rhoysydd Quarry, huddling behind dismantled walls of slate. Hello mountain wind, we've missed you old friend. The delightful, emerging evening sun

Carving through the mountains around Croesor Quarry.



over Cwm Croesor, Cnicht and Moel Hebog knocks us over the head with the, 'isn't Snowdonia flipping awesome, everywhere you look?' bat. My head is spinning from too many wine gums, too little sleep and too many photos. What fresh take on a familiar view will we discover next? Did I say rain? After a morning of mist and moisture, humid sun in Llan Ffestiniog and upland winds, we're now greeted with the final attack of a sharp shower as we enter the Pass of Aberglawlyn. Just as we'd dried out and thought we could flop into Beddgelert, no drying room needed. How wrong were we? Luckily, the friendly staff at the Royal Goat Hotel are completely happy with our boots drying on the radiator in the dining room overnight. Adapt, improvise and overcome.

It'll be our last day of walking tomorrow, with just the 31 miles to cover. Did I mention it would be preferable to take a little more time over this route? We're discussing this over beer at dinner. We don't always agree on everything, myself and Ross. But on this occasion we do. Especially as I suggest an even earlier start the next morning to ensure our repatriation is before midnight Ross nearly spits out his wild mushroom risotto. He doesn't do early mornings...

Day 3: Mountain giants

It's alpine-start o'clock to reach Rhyd-Ddu (Ross thinks it's still the middle of the night), but the hour's walk wakes up the muscles and the feet. Sun breaks through the clouds in Rhyd-Ddu to promise an improving weather picture, and we're ahead of the showers forecast for later today. Battling over trees blown across the path above Rhyd-Ddu, we're on a mission to Dyffryn Nantlle and the way back to Llanberis. Descending into Drws y Coed, squeezing past Clogwynn-arreg, the morning shafts of sun pick out the ripples



Nonny-dog above Llanberis and posing with Yr Wyddfa/Snowdon beyond. Inset: Onwards through the gate at Rhyd-Ddu.

of a special journey. We're exposed to a north-east wind up here and all layers are on again. Please don't rain now, that would be brutal. Stomachs are rumbling in Bethesda and croissants, cheese and milk from the local Llandis fill a hole, and prove just enough to speed us on our way to Porth Penrhyn. This dock is where much slate was loaded onto ships, bound for distant destinations. Evening sun shines through a cloud slot in the western sky, bathing the fields above Bethesda and bringing contrast to the darkness of the working Penrhyn quarries behind. Looking to the brooding cliffs of Twell Du in Cwm Idwal, it's easy to see why this 'black hole' was named as such. And to think that only the day before yesterday we were winging our way towards this landmark, dreaming of mountain giants, hobbits and scones.



The moody Quarry of Dorothea, Nantlle. Inset: The Slate Trail Passport is filling up!

Journey of rediscovery

Do you visit familiar places again and again, or think you know an area so well that you move on to the next all rather too quickly? Snowdonia really is a Pandora's Box of enthralling adventures - as soon as you think you've mastered the art of this diverse National Park then more appears, lying dormant, waiting for re-discovery. The Snowdonia Slate Trail



Llanberis lies ahead of Bwlch-y-groes.

will fast-forward you along to quiet corners, with comforting views aplenty, but all the while retaining enough of a difference to the 'big hitters' to warrant your time and attention. And the walking is visually stimulating, physically challenging in many places, and through a mix of ever-changing terrains and natural and man-made environments. The feet are just as occupied as the mind, the body and the camera. There's a connection with yourself and the space around you made when you're travelling on foot: it's tactile, immersive... and 83 miles is a long way. That's a lot of time to walk, to talk, to look and look again. The conceptual beauty of this waymarked journey is that it can be broken into as many stages as needed, which means it's totally accessible for when winter storms hit the higher summits, for shorter autumnal days, for long summer evenings, or as a day's antidote to bank holiday swarms on Snowdon. I am going back, Gandalf. I am smitten. 📌



Kate & Ross are experienced Summer, Winter and International Mountain Leaders. They live in Snowdonia, from where they run their mountain activities business, RAW Adventures, and are always keen to explore their local areas in more detail. www.raw-adventures.co.uk

Slate Trail Tips

- Gaiters come in very useful over certain upland moor and valley bog sections. You'll be surprised by how often these little water proof friends save your trousers.
■ If you're using a mixture of traditional and online mapping to follow the route, make sure you have a charging pack or plug to recharge your device en route at café stops (the sure to ask first and definitely buy something!)
■ As with any walk in varying and upland terrain, check your skill level against your objective. Are you happy with your plans and fitness, length of days and your ability to mend them if necessary? Some high points will be affected by adverse weather, some areas need close attention on the map in poor visibility, as paths on the ground are vague.