

The Vegan 15 Peaks Challenge

or Why Vegans Seriously Need to Eat Cake

BY ANDREW KNIGHT

In the chilly pre-dawn mountain air of Snowdonia, Wales, on Saturday 5th June, 2010, our ragged, sleep-deprived band of two girls and six guys gathered for some serious self-punishment. For reasons that seemed less sound with every passing minute, we'd all signed onto the 'Vegan 15 Peaks Challenge'.

This attempt to climb all fifteen of Wales' 3,000-foot (900 metre) peaks in the same day was not for the faint-hearted. The official route covers 21.5 miles (35 km) and requires 9,800 feet (3,000 m) of ascent in total. However, this does not include the Crib Goch climb – Wales's most feared knife-edged ridge – which we would attempt first (in semi-darkness) *en route* to the official start point on Mount Snowdon, Wales's highest peak. To make matters worse, Chloe had recently run the London Marathon, while I had broken my arm, which was not quite healed.

Fortunately, however, we did have certain aces up our sleeves. For starters, it has to be admitted that we're not entirely rational – an essential criterion! Additionally we're all committed vegans, and hence possessed of lower average body weights, but higher fitness levels and bodily antioxidant stores than average. Also, we'd all been training for months (except John, who considers himself too macho to train). Finally, we'd been conscientiously stuffing ourselves with as many carbohydrates as possible (cake being my preferred form), and we had a sizeable stash of vegan sausage rolls,

flapjacks, poloni, vegan cheese and vitamin supplements – including stimulants – supplied by our kindly sponsors. Most of us also had the added motivation of fund-raising for one of several very worthy animal charities.

Some of us had been weakened by team-mates' snoring or 'heavy metal' drifting from their Walkmans in the Pen y Pass youth hostel, and others by John's driving and trance music. At least the latter made Crib Goch seem a bit less scary!

The Snowdon Massif

After meeting with our fearless mountain guides from the veg-friendly Lupine Adventure Cooperative (who had wisely arranged their own transport and slept elsewhere), we headed off into the pre-dawn gloom.

Far too soon, the edge of Crib Goch loomed sinisterly in the mist. Fortunately, the improving daylight and fear of humiliation in front of other team-mates gave everyone the courage to climb higher and higher. In time our efforts were rewarded by the rising sun lifting through the sea of mist below us, bathing the ridge in beautiful dawn light. Crib Goch was clearly saving its notoriously vicious winds for the majority of climbers later in the day. For once we didn't have to cling precariously to the ridge, but could relax a little and enjoy the views – which were truly stunning.

Glittering far below in the Horseshoe formed by Mount Snowdon and its neighbours was the legendary Lake Llydaw, home to the feared *Afanc* – a kind of demigod of the rains. Legend has it that, somewhere in its depths, lies Excalibur – King Arthur's sword – which he threw into the lake before his body was carried away by the ladies who reside in its haunted depths. The story says that in one of the surrounding caves his knights still lie sleeping, awaiting the call to rise once more to the defence of the realm. On the other side of the ridge you can see towns in the far distance, stretching all the way to the coast.

After reaching Crib Goch's narrow summit, we continued along the ridge where we had the odd experience of encountering a traffic jam at about 5.15am when we ran into another team. They had slept the night on Mount Snowdon and were proceeding in the opposite direction. A little tricky negotiation was required given that the ridge narrows to boot-width in certain spots.

After reaching, and navigating, Crib Goch's pinnacles, we reached the summit of Carnedd Ugain from which the summit of Mount Snowdon was easily reached. Shortly after, we stood on the top of Wales, at 3,560 feet (1,085 metres). It was wonderful to find it virtually deserted, for only a few hours later it would become a teaming anthill of humanity!

We descended towards the valley hamlet of Nant Peris, passing a cyclist pushing his mountain bike all the way up Mount Snowdon (it was refreshing to briefly feel quite sane).





The Glyderrau Range

After a long descent, Nant Peris was reached, followed rapidly by a brutal ascent of around 3,100 feet (945 metres) onto the Glyderrau mountain range which took nearly nine hours to cross. *En route* we admired the awesome Castle of the Winds, a spiny mass of rock rising some 200 feet (60 metres) into the sky. Here we posed for photos upon the Cantilever – a slab of rock that appears precariously balanced but has withstood the elements for thousands of years.

The onset of global warming appears to be leading us to one of the hottest years on record, and we were experiencing one of the hottest days of the year. The sun beat down on us mercilessly as we climbed the rocky, dusty slopes of the Glyderrau. Soon we were all running low on water and discussions ensued about the relative risks of resupplying from the mountain streams. I dispensed some of the water purification pills brought for just this eventuality. Unfortunately, one of our team had flown in from a country close to the North Pole and was not acclimatised to the heat. After bravely battling nausea for a prolonged period, he nobly decided to withdraw to avoid slowing the team. He had completed nearly two-thirds of the route and was keen to try again another (hopefully cooler) day.

For the rest of us, the notorious sheer summit of Tryfan loomed ahead. After scrambling high up its jagged, rocky slopes, we finally reached the summit where we encountered 'Adam and Eve', two rocky pillars standing tall on the narrow summit. Two of us climbed Eve, and Andrew Taylor jumped the gap to Adam. Fortunately, he is as agile as a gazelle, and completely fearless. Any fall could last for a very long time.

After descending what seemed to be a mile to those of us with aching knees and legs (that is, all of us!), we finally reached the car park at Lake Ogwen, where our supply car waited with wonderful supplies of water and food. Night was approaching, so we didn't linger. For those with enough time, it was an opportunity for some foot care, but most of us dared not examine our feet by that stage.



The Carneddau Range

At 6.00pm we crossed the valley and started our ascent of the Carneddau range. Our new guides were fresh and keen, but we heavily outnumbered them and were able to force them to slow down. The first ascent of nearly 2,300 feet (700 metres) was brutal, but we clung to the knowledge that it was our last major ascent. Once on top, the going would be nearly flat – or so we thought!

After reaching the summit of Pen yr Ole Wen, we proceeded smoothly across the Carneddau until the summit of Carnedd Llewelyn loomed before us. Recalling the guide book, I advised that we should contour around to first climb the side summit, Yr Elen. However, I was outvoted and we proceeded to the top of Carnedd Llewelyn where we dumped our packs before heading to the side summit. To our horror we discovered that it was much further than it had looked and was separated by a steep valley. Lacking torches or warm gear, we raced the setting sun to the side summit and all the way back, thereby managing to climb 16 summits within our 15 peak course. No-one other than our grinning guides appeared to enjoy this exercise or the fear of being caught in darkness on the mountainside.

The final peak, Foel Fras, was now visible in the far distance and we moved quickly to get as close as possible before complete darkness set in. We got within an hour of the summit before being forced to don our head torches. Our calculations revealed that we were close to completing the official course in 17 hours and 30 minutes – the time previously achieved by Pete, one of our super-fit guides. Once we realised this, Iain and I ran for the final few minutes to make sure that we beat Pete's time. We achieved this by 50 seconds, which we've been trying (and are still trying) to communicate to the absent Pete by all available means!

On the 90-minute slog back to the car (over yet another summit) we were joined by another team. We chatted pleasantly for ages, admiring the twinkling lights of the stars above and the towns below. Due to my delirium, the only things I can recall about this team are that they had slept the previous night on Mount Snowdon and that some of them were Irish!

At the end of a Roman road the cars were waiting to pick us up. In total, we had covered around 27 miles (43 kilometres) and had ascended some 13,000 feet (4,000 metres) in 20 hours and 15 minutes. I kissed the car that I crawled into, but the lengthy drive to the far end of the mountain ranges along winding mountain roads made me violently car-sick by the time we finally returned to Pen y Pass in our weakened states.

After a hot shower, we crawled into our bunks at around 2.00am and most of us slept like corpses. At 9.00am as I staggered out weary-eyed to breakfast, I met Kirsch who had apparently been up for hours and had already hiked half way up Mount Snowdon and skipped back down! She was the only one of our team to live locally and her mountain training had resulted in a supernaturally fast recovery. After our first disorderly breakfast, we headed down to Betws y Coed for another load of carbohydrates.

Days later, the team had largely recovered and wild plans were already being hatched for future vegan adventures. In time you may see some of them appear at www.ExtremeVeganSports.org.

Even though I don't know what our next challenge will be, I believe in always being prepared – I've already started eating as much vegan cake as I can! ♦

