

Vegan

15 Peaks Challenge

Local Contact Kirsch Bowker is undertaking mountain leadership training and plans to start a vegan walking group in North Wales. In early June, she joined three fellow Vegan Society members and four other vegans on the Welsh 15 Peaks challenge. Also known as the Welsh 3,000s, it involves climbing all 15 peaks over 3,000 ft in 24 hours - no mean achievement. Kirsch takes up the story.



Our adventure began before dawn at Pen y Pass, on the side of Snowdon. The air was warm and still and it was very dark - quite different from the daytime hustle and bustle. By 4.30 we were on the move up the steep, irregular steps of the Pyg track to the start of our challenge: the infamous Crib Goch.

The scene of a number of fatalities, Crib Goch is not for those with a fear of heights. The main ridge has a knife-edge arête with an almost vertical drop on one side and a steep slope on the other. However, with expert guides from Lupine Adventure, the glimmers of daylight breaking and some spectacular cloud inversion creeping up below, we quickly ascended our first peak. There were very few people about and the light made this awe-inspiring place even more magical.

Next was Garnedd Ugain, the second highest mountain in Wales, followed by Snowdon itself, the highest mountain in England and Wales. Anyone who has been there when the little train is running will know how busy it can get, but in the early morning sunshine we shared the summit with just a handful of wild campers, a couple of fell runners and a solitary mountain biker. We stopped for a quick picnic - the first of many - and feasted on a variety of yummy vegan treats.

From Snowdon we headed down into Nantperis. The next peak, Elidir Fawr, though only 924 m, was the worst one for me. The day was heating up and the summit seemed to keep slipping further away while my rucksack grew heavier with every step. Fawr means "big" in Welsh and Elidir Fawr is well named. At the summit we had yet another picnic. Looking down at the valley below, I suddenly felt certain I would complete the challenge.

After more quick picnics on Yr Garn and Glyder Fawr, we got all the way to Glyder Fach (fach means "small") before stopping again. The Glyderau are amazing rocky mountains with huge boulders strewn all over their tops. At the famous cantilever stone we paused for a quick photocall before the next picnic. From Glyder Fach we could see most of the way we had come, and most of the way left to do. This was peak No. 7 - only 8 more to go!

At the summit of Tryfan we didn't even stop to picnic before heading down into Ogwen Valley and a last chance to replenish water and other supplies. Feeling quite human again, we set off with renewed optimism towards Pen Yr Ole Wen and the Carneddau range.

The Carneddau are my favourite range, but it felt like a real slog and the rocky ground was hard for sleepy feet to tackle. Mountains often have "false summits" where you find that the target you set yourself isn't the summit at all - somewhat dispiriting after 14 hours walking. But morale was never a problem: we sang, told jokes, put on funny voices. By this stage energy ebbed and flowed, but whenever someone felt ready to drop there would be others to cheer them on.

And so we reached Carnedd Dafydd, followed by Dafydd's big brother Carnedd Llywelyn and the lonely peak of Yr Ellen, then on to the great plain

of the Carneddau. Only three more peaks to go, but we were really weary and the light was starting to fade. Foel Grach was reached, then Garnedd Uchaf. We put on our head torches: sheep's eyes shone eerily back at us and a group of wild ponies stood silhouetted against the night sky, doubtless wondering what we were doing up there so late at night.

Finally we reached the last peak, Foel Fras, having completed the challenge in an impressive 17 ½ hours. But we still had nearly four miles to walk. Knowing I was taking my mountain leadership training, our guide asked if I would like to lead the group off the mountain. I felt like a kid allowed to sit on a parent's knee and steer the car!

Back at Pen y Pass, I felt cold, tired, sick, full of aches and pains - and really proud. We had not just done it, but done it in good time with a group of warm, funny, fit new vegan friends who had quickly bonded into a wonderful team. And we had raised a lot of money for the animals too. But the really great news is that five of us are taking on a new challenge in August - hopefully the first of many more to come.

For further information see www.vegan15peaks.info. The event was organised by the Extreme Vegan Sporting Association and led by Lupine Adventure Co-operative www.lupineadventure.co.uk. If you are interested in hill walking with other vegans, email kirsch.b@live.co.uk or call 01745 839006.

