



GEMS AMIDST THE GREEN

When summit-seeker **Sarah Stirling** moved from Chamonix to Snowdonia three years ago, she unexpectedly fell in love with hunting boggy valleys for their mirrors

PHOTOS: SARAH STIRLING



NORTH WALES



AFTER LOOKING AROUND to check I was alone, I put down my rucksack, stripped off my human cares and stepped in – pure, peaceful bliss. Deliciously mossy weed cushions shifted my awareness to my toes: I stopped thinking. And then I was on a level with the water skaters.

I used to hate cold water. But if you explore a wild area often enough, its character slowly bends you, like a windblown tree. Living in towering Chamonix for four years had expanded me – my limits, thighs, ego, and taste for brash colours. I hadn't guessed, though, when I packed my bags for Snowdonia, that the move would uncover new depths.

Behind my old miner's cottage home there's a green horseshoe of peaks called the Moel Eilio ridge. Looking down from up there, not long after I moved here, I noticed that all the dips and clefts in the saturated green were lit up with sunlight and shimmering blue. Water was, in fact, everywhere: glistening, wind-whipped, in mountain cwms, rushing over into waterfalls, tinkling alongside villages and sitting silently on huge valley floors.

All these jewel-embedded valleys, sparkling with life, were set off beautifully by Snowdonia's ancient dragon's-back tops. Pushed up by volcanoes aeons ago, they've seen it all. And in between the lakes and summits, all was green. The 'white plague' as George Monbiot calls them – sheep – have denuded much of the North Walian landscape. However, river gullies and craggy outcrops shelter the past – ancient, stooping trees, overgrown with moss and filled with birdsong. All these juxtapositions are breathtaking: it's like walking through the essence of everything; a mini-world.

That's the other thing I noticed – the miniature size of all this beauty, compared to Chamonix, or even Scotland. Looking around, everything here felt within easy reach. Peaks, lakes (known here as llyn) and woodlands demanded to be strung together. I felt that I could get to know this backyard intimately, as Nan Shepherd knew the Cairngorms. At the time I was reading her book *In The Cairngorms* and beginning to feel inspired by the author's forays 'into' mountains rather than 'up' them.

And then I injured my Achilles heel – and found my metaphorical Achilles heel, too. Unable to stride along the tops, I found that my mood suffered. Ever the nosy journalist, I began researching natural highs and discovered something interesting. When you exercise, as you probably know, your brain produces feel-good rewards; the amount depends on the intensity of your 

[left] Looking down on Ffynnon Llugwy from Bwlch Eryl Farchog
[below] Swimming in a bright blue Llyn Ogwen



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workout. But did you know that intensity doesn't have to mean further or faster? When wild swimming, I discovered, high intensity is provided by a dramatic temperature drop.

And so it was that I hobbled to a llyn right at the foot of Snowdon one day, threw myself in and scabbled hastily out, gasping as if half-drowned. I was about to declare that I'd never do that again when I felt the afterglow – a cocktail of full-body awake, pure and just like sitting by a fire after a long winter hike. I'd barely walked half a mile, yet felt exhilarated.

As my Achilles improved, I began going on regular short walks. I found myself increasingly drawn to seeking out llyns. In his wonderful book, *Waterlog*, Roger Deakin describes dreaming and swimming becoming inextricably linked – “I grew convinced that following water, flowing with it, would be a new way of getting under the skin of things” – so it was with me. At first the water felt shockingly cold but gradually, as I dipped a few times a week, the temperature began to feel normal. I realised that I'd acclimatised, as one would for altitude. A hidden world was opening up.

Mountain lakes and rivers are often literally off the beaten path, untrammelled by signposts or even footpaths. They are what the Greeks call *agrafa* – unwritten places. I had to tune in to the landscape – contours, boulders, bogs – to reach them. When walking mindfully like this, I began to notice more, like all the different colours of Snowdonian lakes. You can find electric blue (reflecting a hot, clear sky), green (lots of plant life), black (deep), brown (storm-stirred), matt white (icy) or a shivering upside-down landscape (windless) – water amplifies whatever is around it.

Wonderfully, I also noticed, water creatures accept you indifferently as one of their own once you are immersed. My long-term ambition is to drift downstream past an otter.

I then realised, with a shiver of horror, that I was 'on trend'. Swimming in lakes and rivers isn't new of course; although the label 'wild swimming' is a

[right] Warming up after breaking the ice for a wintery dip in Llyn Clyd, with Y Garn behind [below] Shattering a perfect reflection in Llyn Dwythwch below Moel Eilio





modern take for the ‘rewilding’ age, our appreciation for taking the plunge outdoors has been rather cyclical. It was, for example, made fashionable by the 19th-Century Romantics: Wordsworth and Coleridge loved a dip in a tarn. Popularity for the pursuit bubbled up again at the turn of the 20th Century. When George Mallory trained for his Everest attempt in Snowdonia, he wrote home: “three new climbs, bathing each time on the way back”. By the 1930s, swimming clubs had sprung up on the banks of rivers up and down the land.

The physical health benefits of cold water have long been lauded; but this time, as outdoor swimming enjoys another revival, it’s being linked to huge mental health benefits too – thanks partly to a growing body of research into natural highs. Here are three of my favourite Snowdonian lake walks. Getting in is optional but, be warned, it’s addictive...

SWIMMING DOWN SNOWDON

Viewed from above, Wales’ highest mountain forms a sprawling starfish: eight paths stride up its various ridges and meander up its valleys. This bird’s-eye view also reveals hidden blue gems. The best swim-spot on Snowdon is sunny, south-facing and dubbed ‘The Watkin Pools’ by locals in the know. It’s a cascade of waterfalls, a series of dipping pools with rock slides and jumps in between. The pools are so clear that you can see all the pastel colours of the pebbles at the bottom. There are limitless options for combining a walk up Snowdon with the Watkin Pools. The stream emerges high on Snowdon at about 700m and runs roughly parallel to the Watkin Path. The best pools are at the foot of the mountain, so it makes a refreshing end to a walk. ➔

NORTH WALES



[above] Looking down on Llyn Idwal
[right] Getting into Llyn Padarn, Llanberis's village lake

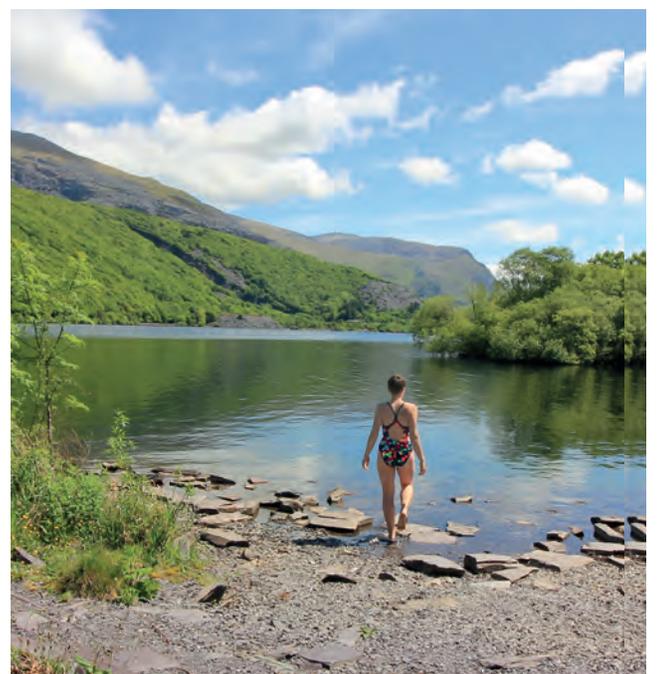
If you don't mind a non-circular route, I'd recommend climbing Snowdon via the Llanberis Path and descending the Watkin. You can peel off west just before the summit to visit the magical, tiny Llyn Glas, which has an island of conifers in its centre. Alternatively you can head down to turquoise Llyn Du'r Arddu, which sparkles underneath the legendary cliffs of 'Cloggy' (Clogwyn Du'r Arddu).

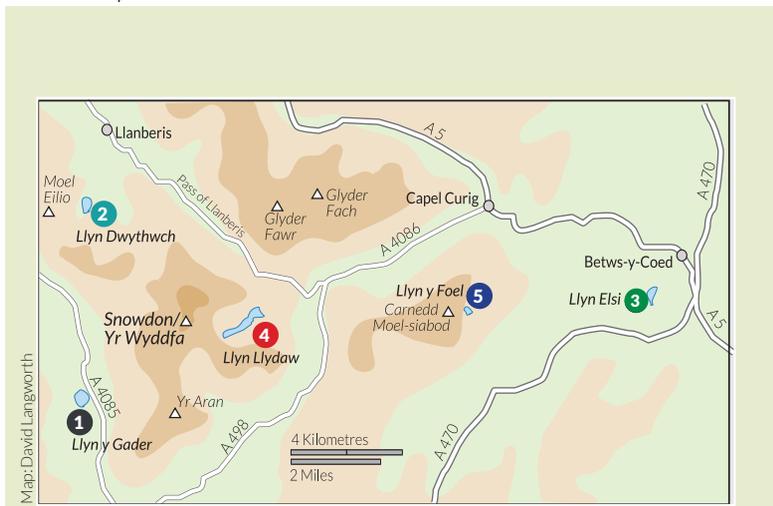
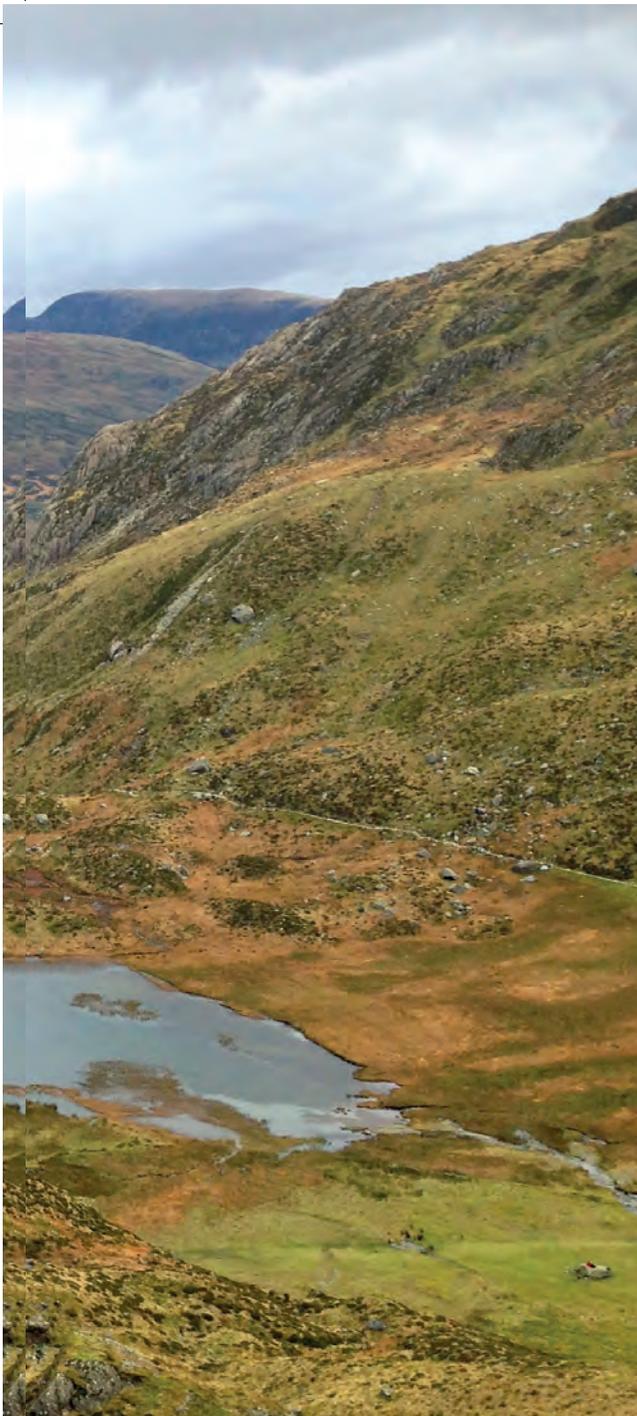
If you'd prefer a circular walk, I recommend parking at Craflwyn Hall near Beddgelert and ascending Snowdon via Yr Aran, a shoulder peak. Route-finding can be tricky but you'll be exploring a wonderful, forgotten part of the mountain. Then descend the Watkin Path, eager for a dip.

THE WATERY WELSH MATTERHORN

Cnicht, jokingly dubbed the Welsh Matterhorn because it resembles a perfect pyramid from some angles, rises from a boggy and beautiful back of beyond dotted with enchanting llyns. I usually park opposite Gerhynt Quarry (SH632483), and walk up Cwm Gelli-Iago to the southern end of Cnicht's ridge, pausing at an atmospheric, unnamed llyn en route.

From here a Grade 1 gully scramble leads to a shoulder; then the summit appears as a satisfying cone. The ridge views are spectacular, stretching right





WHAT TO PACK

In addition to standard walking gear, I pack:

- Swimming costume
- Travel towel (or towelling robe if not walking far)
- Warm jacket (always nice to pull on a down jacket after swimming)

I also consider

- Wetsuit boots (not essential, but useful for particularly cold water and stony entries)
- Goggles and swimming hat
- Waterproof walking boots are useful in boggy ground!

OTHER SNOWDONIAN GEMS

- 1** Stride along the Nantlle Ridge and then dip in Llyn y Gader (SH566524)
- 2** Walk the Moel Eilio horseshoe and return via Llyn Dwythwch (SH576574)
- 3** Stroll up to and around Llyn Elsi (SH786554) from Betws-y-Coed
- 4** Scramble Snowdon's Crib Goch and descend via Llyn Llydaw (SH626545)
- 5** Climb Moel Siabod via Llyn y Foel (SH716544)

across to the Irish Sea over untracked, wild terrain. Striding past the summit, you reach the grassy banks of Llyn yr Adar, a bath with mountain views that's sunk into Cnicht's shoulder. From here, I sometimes detour to the Llynau'r Cwn (Dog Lakes), which sit in rocky hollows further east, before descending to Llyn Llazi.

This last one, set in a wild cwm with waterfalls tumbling down the cliffs behind it, is simply spectacular – you expect dragons to soar down at any moment. If you follow the path downhill from here, through a natural rock garden, there is a picturesque waterfall pouring down the cliffs into rocky pools, curtained by drooping tree branches. We found these idyllic for a shower after stepping knee-deep in a bog! You'll then regain the road 800m from where you started.

THE DEVIL'S COOKING POTS

Cwm Idwal is a dark, brooding bowl of cliffs encircling a stunning, shingle-shored lake. At the back of the lake, a black crack resembling a chimney is nicknamed the Devil's Kitchen, because when there is cloud on the mountain it looks as if smoke is coming out of this fissure. I guess that makes Llyn Idwal the Devil's Cooking Pot! It certainly makes an atmospheric swimming pool.

Climb the path to the left of the Devil's Kitchen to reach a small lake floored with shattered rock: Llyn y Cwn. To the right, the summit of Y Garn beckons; scramble up the scree slope to the left instead to reach the summit of Glyder Fawr.

Scamper across to the smaller Glyder Fach, pausing to stand on the famous Cantilever Stone, and descend to Bwlch Tryfan. Just above it, there is a postcard view of Tryfan. Take the obvious path down to Llyn Bochlwyd, nicknamed Lake Australia due to its shape, which occupies a quiet shoulder above Llyn Idwal. It's a spectacular, rock-fringed mirror with huge views. Follow the frothing Nant Bochlwyd back to Llyn Ogwen and rejoin the crowds, who may wonder why you have wet hair and such a huge grin. ▽