



# CHILD'S PLAY

Is Wales' highest mountain the perfect starter peak for kids?  
We sent a rock star to find out...

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHS **PHOEBE SMITH**

Over half a million visitors a year would suggest the cat is well and truly out of the bag with Snowdon. Arguably, it's the perfect mountain for walkers. Undeniably, it's one of Europe's most spectacular. This is a peak of extraordinary, unrivalled versatility, one that's historically been used as a training ground for Everest-bound mountaineers, but also one where you could achievably stroll with your children to the summit.

There are no fewer than 10 recognised ways to walk or scramble to Snowdon's pyramidal 1085m top. The beginner-friendly Llanberis Path offers the most pedestrian ascent; the South Ridge holds the key to the mountain's secret back door; while the notoriously nerve-zapping and razor-sharp ridgeline of Crib Goch is reserved for those with a thirst for thrills.

Ultimately, Snowdon is a mountain for all. And, despite being the highest peak in all of England and Wales, in the right conditions it can also be



an ideal first mountain for kids to climb. Naturally, we wanted to put that theory to the test, so we went in search of an adventurous family looking for their first taste of proper mountain walking. We weren't expecting that search to lead us to a BBC radio presenter who also happened to be the lead singer of a multi-million-selling 1990s rock band. But that's exactly what happened.

The message arrived quite unexpectedly one Wednesday afternoon. Scanning through my emails, it was a pretty normal day. Then I saw it, the one that stood out above the rest. The subject line read: 'SNOWDONIA – February half-term?'

The message was from Cerys Matthews, the former frontwoman of rock band Catatonia and a current BBC Radio 6 Music presenter, who I'd accompanied on a wild camping trip a few months earlier. Having grown up in Pembrokeshire, Cerys is no stranger to the joys of the outdoors. Yet, after spending years on the road touring with Catatonia and then settling into family life in London, she'd lost the confidence to explore the great outdoors. ▶

# “WE HAD ONE SIMPLE GOAL FOR THE NEXT 48 HOURS – TO REACH THE SUMMIT OF SNOWDON”

Still – desperate to instil a love of the natural world in her children, and impassioned to fulfil a Welsh rite of passage that had, for whatever reason, evaded her until now – climbing Snowdon was now firmly set in her sights.

As we began planning the trip, Cerys confessed that her first concern was what kit she and her kids would need. “It’s really overwhelming,” she told me. “We’re complete novices. I just want to make sure we have the right gear.” So, a few weeks later we found ourselves in her family’s local Cotswold Outdoors shop, getting fully kitted out along with her 15-year-old daughter Glenys and two sons Johnny, aged 13, and Red, aged nine.

Fast-forward another couple of weeks, and we were all finally on the train bound for a two-day adventure in Snowdonia National Park. We had one simple goal for the next 48 hours: to reach the summit of Snowdon.

“I’ve got into the whole Everest history, so I’m fascinated by its links to Snowdon,” said Cerys as we arrived at Pen-y-Pass hostel, our home for the next few nights. Indeed, legendary British mountaineer George Mallory had stayed in this



Recreating an iconic pose from George Mallory and his climbing partner, outside Snowdon’s Pen-y-Pass hostel.

very hostel in 1909 while training for his first trip to the world’s highest mountain. Cerys was planning to take Johnny and Red to Nepal in April to do the Everest Base Camp trek. Her hope was that visiting the peak where Mallory and a host of other famous climbers had cut their teeth would inspire the boys. There was just one element out of our control – the north Wales weather.

Cloud, thick and wet, was all we could see outside the window the next morning. The forecast not only spoke of rain but gale-force winds too, meaning any attempt on the summit would have to wait until tomorrow. Instead, we went for a shorter stroll around the lower flanks of Snowdon to bed into our kit.

We woke the following morning to yet more mist but a more agreeable forecast overall. Everyone packed their rucksacks excitedly and we set off along the mountain’s popular Pyg Track – which starts from Pen-y-Pass and winds upwards past the lakes of Llyn Llydaw and Glaslyn – with the mist swirling and huge boulders lining either side of the path.

Glenys and Johnny skipped ahead with a

## Beginner hillwalking kit

Gear shops like Cotswold Outdoors are full of experts happy to give advice on mountain kit. Here are some of the key items Cerys and family picked up.

### Waterproofs

Vital for any British hillwalking, even in good weather as conditions can change quickly. Look for a very breathable and waterproof fabric such as Gore-Tex or eVent, plus sealed seams, an adjustable hood and large pockets.

### Walking boots

Getting the right fit is essential. Ankle support and a rigid sole are great for beginners.

### Rucksack

Go for around a 30-litre capacity, and be sure to try it on first. Ventilation is key to avoid a sweaty back, with shoulder straps that don’t dig in when it’s full.

### Base layer top

Merino wool is good due to a high warmth-to-weight ratio, and it’s naturally odour-free. Look for a traceable and sustainable brand.

### Walking trousers

Look for a comfy fit – not too tight, with articulated knees to allow movement.

### Walking socks

Socks should offer support, flat-locked seams to prevent rubbing, and ventilation to stop over-heating.

### Dry-bags

Very few rucksacks are waterproof, so carry a selection of dry-bags to keep your kit and food dry. Colour-coding will help you locate what you need more easily.

### Hat and gloves

Beanies are small but warm, and two pairs of gloves – an inner/liner pair and warmer/waterproof outer pair – is best.

Showboating on the 1085m summit of Wales’ highest mountain, and already planning a return trip with a view!





Industrial relics on Snowdon's Miners' Track provide a fascinating insight into the mountain's history.

spring in their step. It was special to see a mountain through the eyes of those for whom it was a completely new experience. For these children the hills were still shrouded in mystery, a possibility still waiting to be discovered. They listened with amazement as I told them about the knife-edged ridge of Crib Goch, rippling high along the skyline above us, when we reached the point that its path cleaves away from the Pyg Track.

When our trail eventually joined with the Miners' Track above Glaslyn, I could tell the children's energy levels were beginning to flag. They couldn't quite believe how far they'd come when we reached the col at Bwlch Glas, impressively marked by a large stone fingerpost, and I advised them to add another layer of clothing and tuck into a chocolate bar before our final pull to the top.

Eventually we emerged above the tracks of the Snowdon Mountain Railway, which carries passengers from the town of Llanberis to the highest point in Wales, to spy the faint outline of the stone staircase leading to the mountain's summit-marking trig point. "Is this really it?" asked a surprised Johnny, a huge smile cracking across his face as he realised he'd almost made it to Snowdon's top.

Soon we were standing proudly as the highest people in the UK south of Scotland. "I can't believe we did it," said Cerys. We rejoiced for a moment before taking shelter in the Hafod Eryri Visitor Centre and filling our bellies with celebratory sandwiches. With several sets of tired eyes facing me I produced my secret weapon: a big bag of jelly babies. 'Enjoy not endure' has always been my motto!

Summit snaps taken and sugar coursing through our veins, we began our descent, choosing a slightly different route for the return leg by weaving through the old mine workings on the Miners' Track, where the clouds finally began to break. We reached the shores of Glaslyn, the lake where Welsh legend says King Arthur threw his sword Excalibur beneath the waters before making his way by boat to Avalon and the afterlife. The kids all listened intently as I recounted the tale.

When Pen-y-Pass hostel finally came back into view, the children were given permission to bound ahead at their own pace to experience the final stages of their first mountain adventure alone. Cerys and I, meanwhile, traced the edge of Llyn Llydaw and reflected on her family's collective achievement. "We'll all be tired tonight," she confessed, "But I doubt any of us will ever forget this day." 📷

## 5 PERFECT **FIRST-TIME** PEAKS

The UK is full of great mountains for beginners – and here are five of the best.

### ▲ **Cat Bells, Lake District**

This pint-sized (451m) peak near Keswick offers a shapely, rocky summit. The main path is easy to follow from the car park at Hawse End, and the views over Borrowdale, Derwent Water and Skiddaw make every metre worth the effort.

### ▲ **Mam Tor, Peak District**

A total ascent under 100m (depending on where you start) doesn't mean the 'Mother Hill' is in any way lacking. With its Bronze and Iron Age remains plus a smattering of caves and far-reaching views, it's an unforgettable hike.

### ▲ **Yr Eifl, north Wales**

This 561m triple-topped peak (right) not only offers majestic views down the entire length of the Llyn Peninsula, but also boasts one of the best Iron Age hill-forts in Britain at Tre'r Ceiri.

### ▲ **Ben Lomond, The Trossachs**

At 974m this is a sizeable Scottish peak and the most southerly of all the Munros, but in the right conditions via the well-trodden tourist route it's achievable by relative hillwalking newcomers – who, if lucky, might see peregrine falcons and even golden eagles.

### ▲ **Worcestershire Beacon, Malverns**

On the highest peak (425m) in the often-overlooked Malvern Hills, keep an eye out for the

ancient breed of Galloway cattle, introduced in 2015 to maintain the area's unique grassland.

**Climbing the north-east summit ridge of Yr Eifl on the Llyn Peninsula in north Wales.**



TOM BAILEY

