



WHERE Snowdonia, North Wales

START & FINISH Llanberis Youth Hostel

DISTANCE approx 11 miles with 3,485ft of ascent

WORDS Julie Rand **PICS** VC Godalming & Haslemere



1

BIKING SNOWDON

You can climb up and down Snowdon with sensible footwear, a cagoule and a flask of coffee. Or, like **CTC's Julie Rand**, you can take your mountain bike...

You're not thinking of riding those back down again, are you?' barked the crusty colonel as he strode past us one beautiful Saturday morning in early October. We had just pushed our bikes through the gate at the start of the Llanberis path to begin our venture up Mount Snowdon (or Yr Wyddfa, meaning tumulus, in Welsh). At 1,085m, it's the highest mountain in England and Wales.

Clearly, we weren't about to take our bikes to the top just to walk them back down again but his remarks did not inspire me with confidence as I looked up towards the summit five miles away. What had seemed a good idea when idly tossed around in the pub back in September was now a reality and the enormity of the undertaking began to dawn on me.

The colonel's concerns were not for our well-being; this was one of the first weekends after the voluntary ban on cycling on Snowdon during peak hours ended for the winter. 'You do know that it's quite busy on here today?' and 'You're not going to come back down this way, are you?' were just some of the remarks directed at us as we passed rambler after rambler.



REAL MOUNTAIN BIKING

I could understand their worries: despite being officially 'allowed', the fine weather and calm conditions had encouraged an enormous number of day trippers out to attempt the challenge – although relatively few of them had decided to encumber themselves with 13kg of metal and rubber to add to the excitement! To ride back down the Llanberis Path – a bridleway – would have been not only anti-social but also fairly frustrating, given the number of children, adults, and dogs on the track. Luckily, we were to descend by the less popular but technically challenging Snowdon Ranger Path.

People have been exploring mountains by bike way before walking became a mass participation activity. The likes of Wayfarer were engaging in what became known as rough-stuff at the start of the last century, fearlessly taking their heavy machines over mountain passes years before modern mountain biking was 'invented' in California in the 1970s and '80s. Our mistake – if you could call it that – was to start the expedition after a leisurely breakfast and too much faffing. According to some sponsored walk officials at



DO IT YOURSELF

› A 'voluntary ban' negotiated by cycling organisations (including CTC) and Snowdonia National Park agrees that riders should not cycle on most bridleways on Snowdon between 10am and 5pm from 1 May to 30 September. You can still complete an ascent during the summer months if you get up at first light, but do remember that the weather can change rapidly and that you may get delayed. A fit rider can accomplish the return trip in 3-5 hours. Outside of peak times, advise Llanberis Mountain Rescue of your plans: 08448 484064

the gateway, apparently 70 or 80 riders had already passed through on their way to the top – although we only saw a dozen or so other cyclists the whole day, indicating that those in the know leave as early as possible to avoid the crowds.

Our small party from VC Godalming and Haslemere, a CTC-affiliated club, consisted of myself and my husband Roland, Neil, Ed, 'the other Julie' – and my 18-year-old son Louie, a committed couch potato who had only allowed himself to be dragged along on the condition that he could bring his full-suspension downhill bike. The weight of this machine meant that trying to stay together as a group was pointless – the faster riders streaked off into the distance, making easy work of even the steeper, rockier sections. The rest of us doggedly lugged our bikes over every lump and bump, encouraged by regular doses of Kendal mint cake and visions of a slap-up lunch at the top.

GOING UP

As we laboured up, riding where possible, the landscape opened up magnificently behind us, revealing the Isle of Anglesey and the North Wales coast jutting out into a shimmering Irish Sea. On a very clear day, it is possible to see the Irish coast from Snowdon, apparently. We watched amused as a flock of rather foolhardy sheep ran along the track of the mountain's steam railway, moving aside just before the bright red train carrying its cargo of day trippers caught up with them. Louie eyed the passengers inside enviously – had it been an option, he would have

“I looked up to the summit five miles away. What had seemed like a good idea when idly tossed around in the pub was now a reality”

certainly taken it. Being a downhiller, he is used to riding at trail centres that provide uplift; as cross-country riders, the rest of us are of the opinion that you enjoy the descents more if you feel you have earned them!

As the track became ever steeper, I began to wonder if it was really worth the effort of taking the bikes up with us. 'Isn't the whole point of wheels to make life easier?' I mused after I tripped over while hoisting my BMC Trailfox onto my shoulder to climb up the near-vertical section of rock to where the track goes under the railway line at Clogwyn.

A passing walker must have read my mind: 'Must have seemed like a good idea at the time', he remarked, before setting off nimbly up the path. The view had disappeared by now as, nearing the summit, the cloud descended into a swirling, ghostly mist. Somewhere below us the sound of a helicopter clattering near the sheer rock face of Clogwyn Du'r Arddu was a reminder that, despite the carnival atmosphere and hordes of trainer-clad walkers, this is rugged terrain and a serious challenge of fitness and skill.

After three hours of climbing – which included a short stop at the Halfway House café – we finally reached the top of Snowdon and the incongruously

IN THE PHOTOS

1) The weather can come in quickly on Snowdon. Be prepared for low cloud or rain however nice it is in Llanberis

2) A downhill bike makes the descent much easier but has to be taken to the top first. And despite the train, there's no uplift



modern Hafod Eryri Visitor Centre. Ed, Neil and Julie had been waiting in the crowded café for nearly an hour by this time but were happy to wait with us out of the cold while we refuelled with giant pasties and slabs of cake. There is no secure cycle parking here so we had to leave our machines unattended outside, fairly certain that they would be safe from any opportunist thief in such a remote spot.

GOING DOWN – HARD

Strapping on his full-face helmet, goggles, and pads, in the desolate, misty landscape Louie looked like an alien who had just landed on the moon amongst all the ramblers and their backpacks and anoraks. He shot off down the mountainside leaving us in his wake, the downhill bike finally coming into its own. The Ranger Path starts off as a relatively tame expanse of grassy hillside before turning into a field of jagged 'baby-head' rocks. Louie skimmed over them, revelling in the feeling of weightlessness after all the pushing up.

The rest of us were following at a slightly more sedate pace when disaster struck. I had dismounted to walk some of the sketchier sections when Julie, who was right behind me, caught her front wheel on a boulder and crashed to the ground on her face, smashing her top teeth into her bottom lip. As I looked at her bloodied and bruised face, thoughts of summoning Prince William from Anglesey in his rescue helicopter entered my mind but, fortunately, Ed had had the foresight to bring a comprehensive first aid kit. After he had applied some Steri-strips to the wounds, Julie

“The Ranger Path starts off as a tame expanse of grassy hillside before turning into a field of jagged rocks”

decided she could carry on. Emerging out of the cloud base into the sunshine, we watched as the big yellow rescue helicopter we heard earlier whirred about near the cliff edge of Clogwyn Du'r Arddu – clearly someone else was not so lucky...

The terrain continued to be a challenging series of rocky drops and tight switchbacks, rideable by most reasonably competent mountain bikers. But even Louie watched in awe as a lone rider effortlessly negotiated an extraordinarily tricky and steep gully of boulders and big drops on a Nukeproof Mega all-mountain MTB. It was hard enough to walk down carrying the bikes.

However, the bridleway does eventually turn into a long, thrilling piece of flat out singletrack, which reminded us all why we'd embarked on this crazy adventure in the first place. Laughing, we turned breathlessly to stare back at the vertiginous crags we'd just come down.

BACK TO BASE

It wasn't downhill all the way back to Llanberis. If you keep following the track straight down, it is easy to miss the small sign in the hillside that marks where the bridleways diverge. Carry on and you'll end up

IN THE PHOTOS

3) Author Julie: downhill it's mostly rideable, with care

4) The Llanberis Path: a climb that's *partly* rideable

5) A dedicated downhill bike isn't required. Trail bikes are okay

6) Louie at the summit, about to take advantage of the heavy bike and gear he'd hauled up there



on the A4085, the wrong side of the hill. Unfortunately, Louie overshot the turning, despite our frantic shouts, and had to be chased down, necessitating another slog back up. The correct track climbs steeply up a grassy bank. Once at the top, there is finally an epic descent past deserted ruins and over rocky water bars back to the Youth Hostel.

A bag of ice from the helpful warden and consultation by phone with a mountain biking dentist friend were enough to convince Julie that she didn't need a visit to A&E that night. Which meant that Louie could be rewarded for his efforts with more than just a sense of pride in his achievement at conquering Snowdon: a massive slice of sticky toffee pudding and a huge mug of hot chocolate at the renowned mountaineers' café, Pete's Eats in Llanberis.

'Wow, that was the best ride ever! When can we do it again?' he exclaimed, the arduous climb up now forgotten. I'm sure Wayfarer would have approved!



IN THE PHOTOS

7) Celebrating at the cairn at the summit. Just time to call in at the café before the long descent

FACT FILE SNOWDON

Distance: Approx 11 miles with 3,485ft of ascent.

Conditions: Rocky, steep, challenging. The weather wasn't too bad.

Start/Finish: Llanberis Youth Hostel.

Bike advice: As light as possible for ascent, but full suspension XC or trail bike for the descent. Full DH bike not necessary but fun.

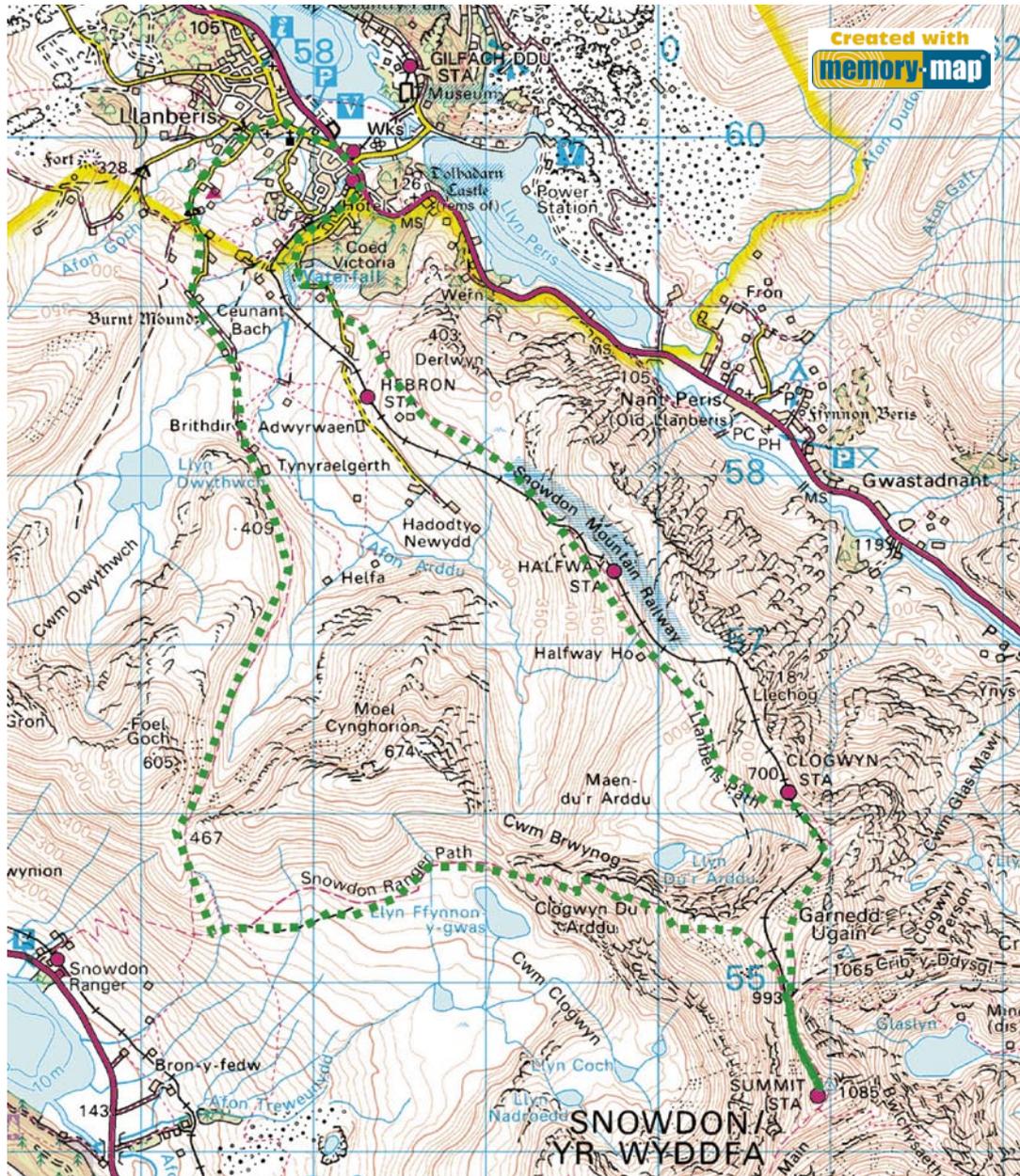
Where to stay: Llanberis YHA or Snowdon Ranger YHA – book early. Lots of B&Bs.

What else is there: North Wales has an excellent choice of trail centres and natural riding. We rode Penmachno and Coed-y-Brenin as well.

I'm glad I had...
Ed: first aid kit, up-to-date weather report, space blanket.
Louie: full-face helmet for jaggedy rocks; lots of water and energy bars; extra layers for the summit; my Morewood Shove LT.
Julie R: Ed's GPX route and first aid knowledge!

I wish I'd had...
Ed: flat pedals and shoes – easier to walk in than SPDs when carrying.
Louie: uplift for me and my bike!
Julie R: knee and elbow pads for more confidence on the rockier sections.
Julie D: a full-face helmet!

Download the route: there's a GPX track on the CTC Maps website: ctc-maps.org.uk/routes/route/2487/summary



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