

# RETURN TO YOUR TREES

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Words by Claire Nelson & Photographs by Beth Squire

Wild and wonderful reasons to hike in the Brecon Beacons.

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There is a Welsh proverb, *Dod yn ôl at fy nghoed*, which means ‘to return to a balanced state of mind’ - or, to translate literally, ‘to return to my trees’. I’m someone who is often looking to return to her trees, and in all my years in the UK, one place I keep managing to find them is Wales; tramping its rugged tracks in a determined bid to restore the balance so frequently eroded by city living.

My very first walk in Wales happened more or less by accident. I was young and brand new to the UK, as were my friends (hell, we were still pretty new to each other), and we whisked ourselves off on a spontaneous weekend to Cardiff for no reason other than we’d never been to Wales. Through heedless planning, we found ourselves there on a bank holiday, the city dormant, shops shuttered and us at a loose end. “You should go to the Beacons,” several locals had told us. Beacons? What were these Beacons? We looked it up on a tourist map.

This was the Brecon Beacons National Park, roughly 1,340 square kilometres of South and Mid Wales, stretching from the Black Mountain region to the west, through the central Fforest Fawr (Great Forest), the six peaks of the Brecon Beacons themselves and the Black Mountains to the east.

A national park? Well, why not - it was one of the only things open. For reasons unknown, we took a taxi there. Dressed in trainers and sweatshirts, bags of sandwiches clutched in our hands, we clambered through the wooden posts of a gate and simply began to walk, quickly discovering that the only way to go was up. One foot in front of the other, constantly climbing, every time we stopped for breath stealing an opportunity to look back at the way we’d come and acknowledge the magnificence of our surroundings: the way the hills slipped away below us into valleys of windswept grassy uplands, and lagoon-like lakes that crept into view as we got higher, like treasures revealed. So *this* was Wales.

I would come back to Wales over the years, always for the hike, for the wilds, for the taste of the air, tramping up hills intentionally and wholeheartedly. To return to my trees. Which for me, turned out to be the Beacons.

Some years later I returned to that same trail, albeit with different friends and in more appropriate walking gear. Just as well too, as on this occasion the route was engulfed by mist, everything blurred into white and the air so clammy and cold that I’d had to tug my merino hat down

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*Pontsticill Reservoir  
& Pen y Fan (background)*

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low and pull my fleece neck buff up over my nose so only my eyes were visible. Not that there was much to see - just the path beneath our boots and the ghostly shape of the escarpments sheering away on either side. The treasures of the valley remained hidden and, at the same time, we'd become momentarily concealed from the rest of the world. In the search for my trees I was briefly lost, and when we emerged through the clouds on our way back down, I felt resurrected.

We would regain views the following day, peeking out of our tents to a morning bright and clear, perfect for a leisurely meander over the sandstone slopes of the Black Mountains in the east. Our goal was the top of a 690-metre hill by the name of Lord Hereford's Knob (Twmpa) - cue a lot of giggling. But this place was too lovely for knob jokes, given the majesty of the scene; rolling hills and fields of heather. A falcon soared overhead, wings stretched out into neat points, competing with a lone hang-glider floating over the valley.

Not far from there, on the eastern hem of the park, lies the market town of Abergavenny, a place I would later come to stay one New Year's Eve. At

the time I was deep in the doldrums with plans to stay in and fester. Instead, friends coaxed me last-minute to join them in a tumble-down, thatched-roof cottage, promising the trip would soothe me. And of course it would. All I needed was to return to my trees. Indeed, the cure was found in cloud-cloaked tramps through the frosted fields of the Usk Valley at the edge of the Beacons, boots crunching over ice and scree, feeling the wind whipping through my hair on the crest of a ridge and returning home for wine beside the fire. Even in the depth of winter, Wales has the tools I needed to feel restored. *To return to a balanced state of mind.*

There have been some glorious dabbles in other parts of the country, though always with special adoration for the Welsh national parks. The Pembrokeshire Coast is one, and an August Bank Holiday was spent camping there with mates, tents pitched on a high field in salty Tyddewi, looking straight out across the sea. During an exploratory amble along a beachside cliff we stumbled upon a group of wild ponies, as surreal to us as unicorns, basking in the golden glow of the afternoon sun. Heading back, we followed hill trails

and called out echoing 'hello's into sea caves, eating wild blackberries plucked from the thickets along the way.

The third, and largest, of Wales' national parks is Snowdonia, up in the north. One autumn it called three of us to a rustic cabin, with plans to head up Carnedd Dafydd - the third highest peak in Wales at 1,044 metres. But as soon as we had dropped our bags on bunks an unforecasted blizzard set in, making conditions far too dicey to go ahead. Forced to abort Snowdonia hiking plans, my companions and I sat on the floor beside an electric heater and stacks of old *National Geographics*, poring over a map. Outside the icy rain drenched the green fields, the grazing sheep wholly unbothered. Plans can be ruined by weather but Wales cannot. "We should go to the Beacons."

We drove south to the very western edge of the Brecon Beacons National Park, to the Black Mountain region (not to be confused with the Black Mountains in the east) and tramped our way across the lower, snowy peaks of Mynydd Du, until the wild weather finally tracked us down, forcing us to surrender to the comfort of outdoor gear shops and cheerful tearooms.

Time and again the Brecons seemed to call me back. *To return to my trees.* Another year, I coaxed 10 friends to spend the Easter weekend camping in Llandow, west of Cardiff. In true bank holiday style, it rained relentlessly. Spirits were thoroughly dampened. Thank goodness then for the Brecons. On day three we bussed our way to the south-western side of the national park, where I'd arranged for us to go gorge walking in Waterfall Country. We donned wetsuits and helmets in the carpark, everything sodden - the tarmac, the trails, the gear, my friends and their moods. In a moment of semi-affectionate mutiny, everyone nominated me to be first to leap into the shocking cold of the river.

Soon it didn't matter that we were wet - we were wetter still after floating down the time-worn waterways that cut through lush, steep-sided gorges, creeping in and out of natural rock caves and picking our way on hands and knees behind gushing waterfalls, soaked through but grinning with renewed camaraderie. Later, back at the campsite, everyone towelled off, tugged on dry clothes and set off on country roads to the pub, feeling restored, just as the rain stopped and the evening sun broke through the cloud. I didn't tell them they'd just returned to their trees too.