

# HOME GROUND

Travel far and wide if you will, but you'll never be as content as when on familiar terrain.

WORDS HANNAH JAMES PHOTOGRAPHS TOM BAILEY

**F**irst question: why do you go to the mountains? I'm not sure about you, but they put me in my place. They're pure escapism from daily life. Be it silence or howling wind and driving rain, they are raw, wild and pure, which allows me to experience being thankful and alive in a way almost nothing else can. Now, I want you to think about this: how much do you know about home? Do you ever wander local paths and wonder whose feet trod them before yours? What were their stories?

Understanding where you come from, the area that you live in, its history: knowing the pathways, the roads, the trees and the hills can help you connect to your environment on a whole other

## TRAIL'S ROUTE

Strenuousness ●●●●●

Navigation ●●●●●

Technicality ●●●●●



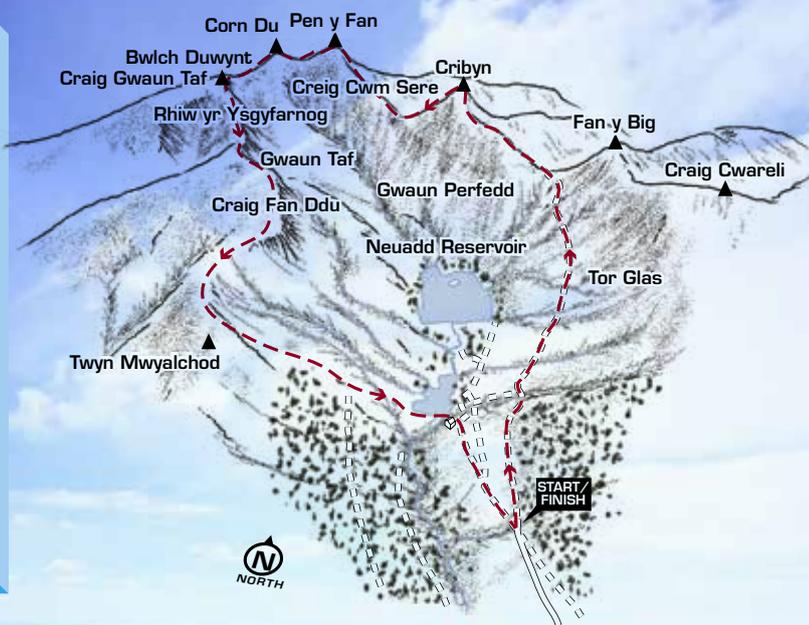
**Distance** 12.4km  
(7¾ miles)

**Time** 3¾ hours

**Total ascent** 745m

**Maps** OS Explorer  
(1:25,000) OL12

**Start/finish** S0035173



JEREMY ASHCROFT

With wide-open views like this, it's no wonder the Brecon Beacons are such popular peaks.

level. Combine this knowledge with your love of how the mountains make you feel, and you've found a very special place. Mountains all around the country beckon but the familiarity of the Brecon Beacons – my home – always resonates with me and calls me back. It's a place that I hold dear; and I feel a duty to share with everyone just how great the Beacons can be.

The Brecon Beacons National Park is one of three such designated areas in Wales and it's incredibly diverse, covering the Black Mountain range in the west as well as the Black Mountains further east. These hills aren't as rocky and wild as those in north Wales, but they certainly aren't to be sniffed at. Pen y Fan, in fact, at 2,907ft is less than 100 feet short of being included in the Welsh 3000s. There are many routes to the top but like many mountains, the most obvious way isn't always the best. Tracks from Storey Arms meander their way gently to the summit but tend to be a tourist highway. They're easy to find, easy to walk and – best of all – easy to avoid. Starting from the A470, they don't truly take in the splendour of the Beacons either. Instead, on our recent visit, we would be walking a classic route – and one of the best ways to experience these distinctive mountains: the Brecon Beacons Horseshoe.

We would be approaching from



**Cotton grass usually indicates wet ground, but luckily for us the going was dry and firm.**

Talybont-on-Usk. You can actually make this walk much longer if you choose to: park further down the road and you can stroll through the forested hillside before you come out next to Neuadd Reservoir. In front of you, stretching into the distance, you will see an old Roman road cutting its way up Tor Glas, below Craig Cwmoergwm and up to the col, Bwlch ar y Fan, between Cribyn (2,608ft) and Fan y Big (2,359ft). From here you can trace out your entire route – an enticing prospect, as you'll be getting some serious hill time.

For once the weather played the game and the sun was out. In fact, it was at the other end of the spectrum to our expectations, and it was sweltering. It

was only when we were a couple of miles into the walk and approaching Bwlch ar y Fan that the awful realisation hit: I didn't have enough water with me. I had two severe slopes to climb, loaded down by my backpack and with only a whisper of wind. There was nothing I could do to quench my inevitable thirst; for although we had equipment for purifying water with us, there was nothing but muddy, stagnant sludge anywhere. I couldn't believe that I'd run out – I just hadn't expected it to be as hot as it was. Changing tack to preserve the little water that was left, I sipped slowly rather than gulping it down without a second thought.

Approaching Cribyn from the east gives you a daunting view of the mountain. It bulges out and up, and looks like a monster to climb. It's only when you get down the other side that you see its sheer and sharp northern face, a wonderful contrast to the vision you encountered on the other side. It's impossible not to stare at it and appreciate its beautiful form. Shaped by ice ages past, the Beacons are a completely unexpected surprise among the surrounding hills. They soar upwards, high upon steep sandstone cliffs, their summit plateaux formed of thick red quartzite; they demand the attention of everybody for miles around. Really, it's little wonder they're such popular peaks. ▶

## “ Approaching Cribyn from the east gives you a daunting view of the mountain. ”



About to summit Pen y Fan, looking east with Craig Cwm Sere in the foreground and Cribyn behind.

The sun had brought everybody out of hiding because, as we all know, there's nowhere better to enjoy your day than on top of a mountain. The climb up Craig Cwm Sere and onwards to Pen y Fan is a gruelling slog, but once you've reached the summit you can see for miles and you instantly forget that you've inwardly been cursing the punishing climb for the past 20 minutes (I speak only for myself). The Black Mountains to the north-east are prominent in the distance with rolling valleys and Llangorse Lake in the fore.



Silly stuff on the summit of Pen y Fan.

If you draw your gaze closer to home you can see gentle, wide-brimmed but shapely ridges stretching away from the main summits. Originally formed by streams cutting their way through the sandstone that partially makes up the range, they were transformed into the U-shaped valleys they are today by glacial erosion.

It's mind-boggling, the history that these mountains have seen. After the last ice age finished some 10,000 years ago trees started to repopulate the higher



Looking back from the summit of Corn Du, with Pen y Fan's famous flat top behind.



Halfway! Now on to Craig Gwaun Taf, with the Beacons Way footpath cutting down towards the Storey Arms to the right.



land. It was the perfect ground for the hunter-gatherer and, in fact, there are records of people inhabiting the area since Neolithic times. It's generally accepted that this was a time of huge progression for the human species, with farming and established agriculture coming to light. They started to grow limited cereals, such as spelt and millet, and keep livestock. However, to accommodate this the woodland was cut back. Talking to the National Trust, who were undertaking path repairs on Pen y Fan, the high-level landscape used to have diverse flora and fauna but livestock stripped the mountains bare. In the tragic outbreak of foot and mouth disease in 2001, with the culling of the nation's livestock, the undergrowth made a comeback that could be seen all over the mountain.

It's nice, but in a way sad, to sit there

on the edge of the busy summit, away from the crowds, and contemplate what it must have been like here long ago. It somewhat removes you from the reality of people queuing to get their picture with the summit plaque and who don't have a clue they are standing on a Bronze Age burial cairn. I wonder if they'd be so keen to climb over it if they knew...

Indeed, when you progress on to the Beacons' second highest summit, Corn Du, you can see the Tommy Jones memorial below you, high on the ridge above Llyn Cwm Llwh. It commemorates a well-known local tragedy involving a little 5-year-old boy who lost his way – and his life – in 1900. All who grow up in the area know of it and never forget it; it serves as a stark reminder that many underestimate these mountains. Underwhelming, some may call them – but the Beacons are deceptively tough, as

more recent events proved, when three soldiers passed away from hyperthermia on an SAS selection march in 2013. Hyperthermia is triggered when the body absorbs more heat than it can expel and core temperature stays much higher than normal for a prolonged period. It isn't always caused by extreme heat, but can be due to a lack of acclimatisation and a high work rate (near maximum heart rate for a prolonged period of time).

With the sun glaring and the wind present but gentle, we set off along Rhiw yr Ysgyfarnog and away from the throng. Not many people walk this way, since it doesn't tie in with the popular walk from Storey Arms – which is a mighty shame, because it's a wonderful stretch of ridge with a fantastic view. With the main summits at our back we followed the ridge, walking along soft, peaty ground and hopping over boulder fields.

Crossing Graig Fan Ddu, we rounded a corner to find a cairn marking a somewhat difficult route down via a scrambly, scree-lined gully. Once you've hit the bottom of the scree a gently winding path leads over peaty ground towards Upper Neuadd Reservoir. By the time we reached the car again I was glad of the shade – and water.

It shocked me that, despite how stringent I usually am with carrying the right kit, food and more than enough water, I was still unprepared and thus succumbed to the sun and heat. With those SAS men in the back of my mind, I was reminded how easily you can get into trouble. It seems that, as well as I knew these mountains in both their tantrums and their beauty, they were still able to catch me off guard. Fatigued and nauseous, my head pounding and skin raw, it was a lesson very well learnt. **T**

The southern half of the horseshoe embraces the smaller Upper Neuadd Reservoir, with Pentwyn Reservoir in the distance.

“They were transformed into the U-shaped valleys they are today by glacial erosion.”