

# Happy


**AS THE GRASS WAS GREEN**

With a landscape of gentle mountains ideal for walking, sumptuous manor hotels that conjure a romantic past, and the world's only Michelin-starred Welsh-Japanese restaurant, Snowdonia, in North Wales, is filled with surprises.

**BY SARAH MOSS**

**PHOTOGRAPHS  
BY TOM PARKER**





*Bodysgallen  
Hall & Spa, a hotel  
in a 17th-century  
house near the  
coastal town  
of Llandudno.*

*Pistyll Rhaedr  
waterfall, on the  
outskirts of  
Snowdonia  
National Park.*



## IT WAS APRIL — LAMBING TIME,

which is also bluebell time and wild garlic time—when my two sons and I arrived in North Wales.

People from the northern English industrial cities have been going to the Snowdonia region to climb the mountains for generations; it's a couple of hours' drive west from Manchester, Liverpool, and the Midlands. These are my family's nearest mountains and coast, so since the children—12-year-old Felix and 16-year-old Matt—have been old enough to hike, we've visited often for long weekends, as I did as a child with my parents and grandparents. The area was established as a national park in 1951. In Britain, national parks include farms and villages, so this is an inhabited landscape where houses, boundary markers, and places of worship have stood for centuries.

My sons and I were heading for a night at Ynyshir, a Michelin-starred Welsh-Japanese restaurant with overnight

accommodations on the Dyfi estuary, but it was only midday when we reached the nearby Georgian market town of Machynlleth. “We’ll have a walk,” I told the kids. It was a sunny day, and we had been in the car all morning.

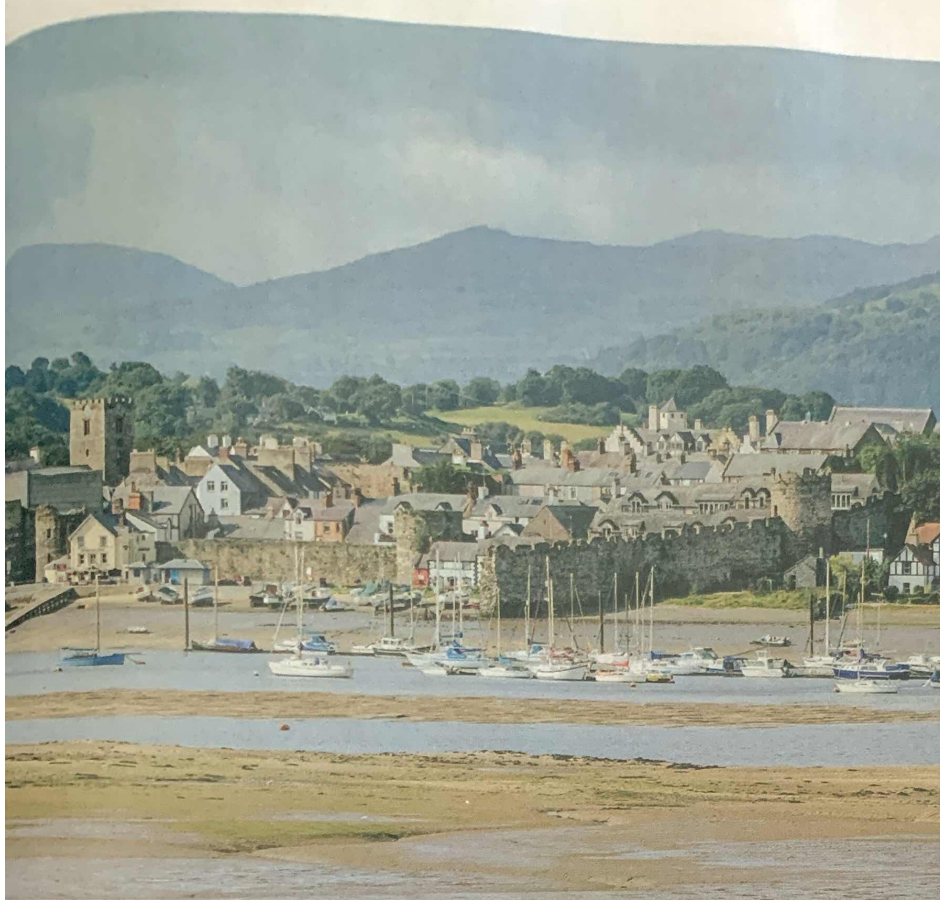
Machynlleth has art galleries, antiques shops, and two delis that stock local cheeses, sourdough bread, and *bara brith* (literally “speckled bread,” a traditional spiced tea loaf with raisins). There’s a late-medieval building housing an exhibit on the life of Owain Glyndwr, a 15th-century prince of Wales who led a revolt against the English Henry IV and appears in Shakespeare, wild-tempered and waving a leek.

As the boys peered through the glass case at the letter Glyndwr wrote to

▼  
*The drawing room at Palé Hall, a Victorian manor hotel just outside Snowdonia National Park.*







Conwy, a market town and seaport built in the 13th century.

Shoe designer Ruth Emily Davey and her family at her shop in Machynlleth.



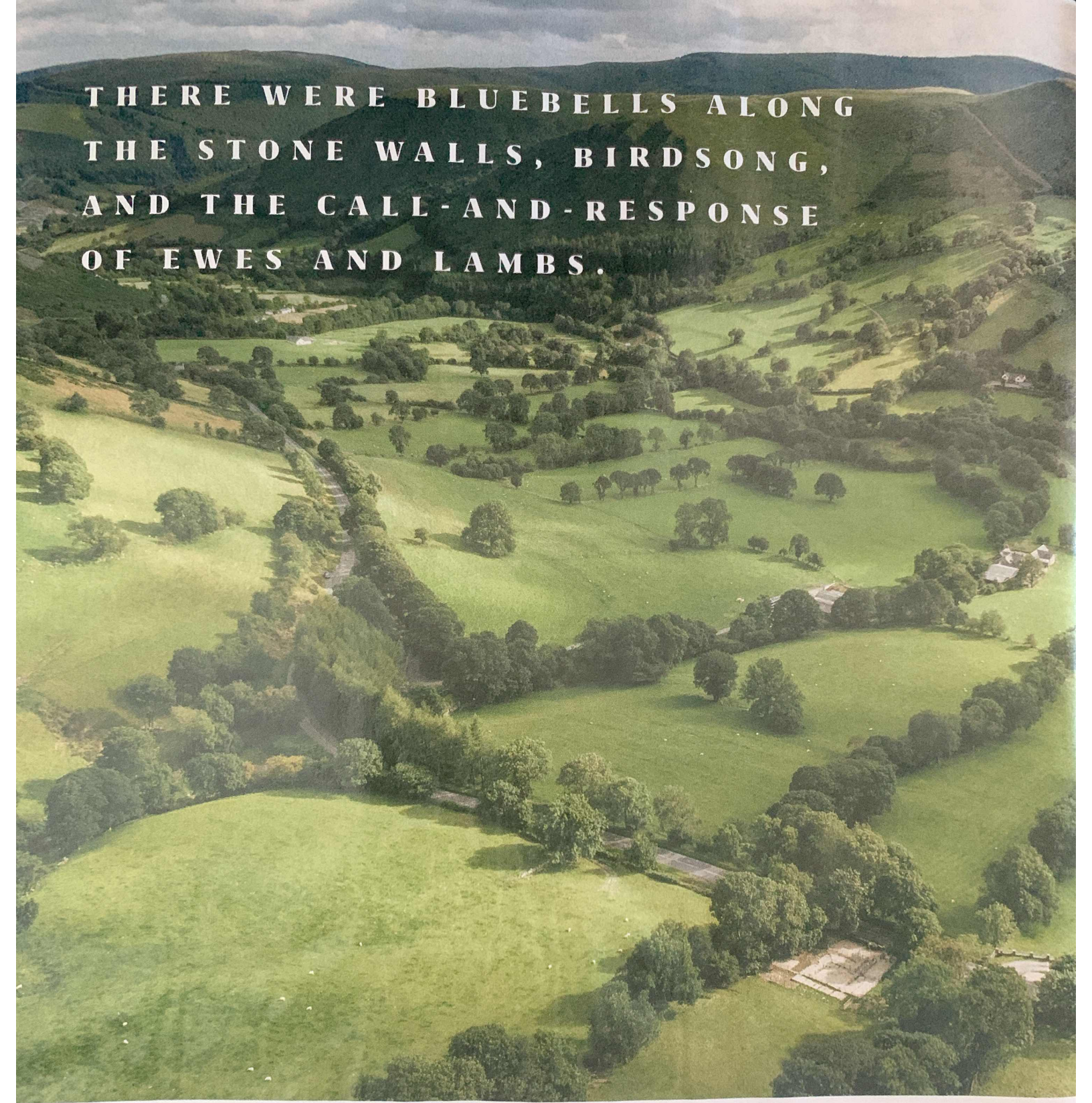
the king 600 years ago, I spotted a shoe shop unlike anything I'd ever seen before. There was a very old sewing machine and cut-out leather pieces on a table in the window, reminding me of our old illustrated copy of *The Elves and the Shoemaker*. "Just a minute," I said. "I won't be long." Inside, the shelves held brogues and boots and Mary Janes as bright as candy. The shoemaker was Ruth Emily Davey, who designs and makes each pair to order. I stroked some gold brogues while I listened to a customer discussing her perfect shoes. I imagined mine: silver, or peacock blue and green. Matt came in. "Mum," he said, "we're actually really hungry."

There's a bird sanctuary on the estuary between the town and Ynyshir. We ate lunch at a picnic table among the reeds there, and then walked over boardwalks lined with basking lizards to an elegant four-story blind, from which we saw nesting ospreys, annual visitors for some years. Through telescopes, we watched for the male to return to the chicks. A band of rain passed, drumming the roof and darkening the ground, then moved away toward Machynlleth before the father osprey came in low over the trees bearing a fish bright in the returning sunshine.

Ynyshir looked like what Jane Austen might describe as a modest but genteel family residence. The grounds were trim, with contained outbursts of azalea and rhododendron, while bluebells and the last daffodils spread over the lawns. Where you'd expect a statue or a fountain in the center of the gravel turn, there was a firepit. We were ushered into the bar, and

told that chef Gareth Ward likes to offer guests a cup of broth when they arrive. Ward, in charge since 2017, is gunning for Ynyshir's second Michelin star and is utterly committed to the difficult project of running an innovative haute cuisine restaurant two hours from the nearest city in a beautiful but not prosperous part of Wales. We sat on wooden chairs covered in sheepskin. The boys were wide-eyed at the animal skulls on the dark walls and at the stemmed



An aerial photograph of a verdant valley. The landscape is characterized by rolling green hills, a network of stone walls, and numerous trees scattered across the fields. A narrow road or path winds through the valley. In the distance, more hills are visible under a cloudy sky.

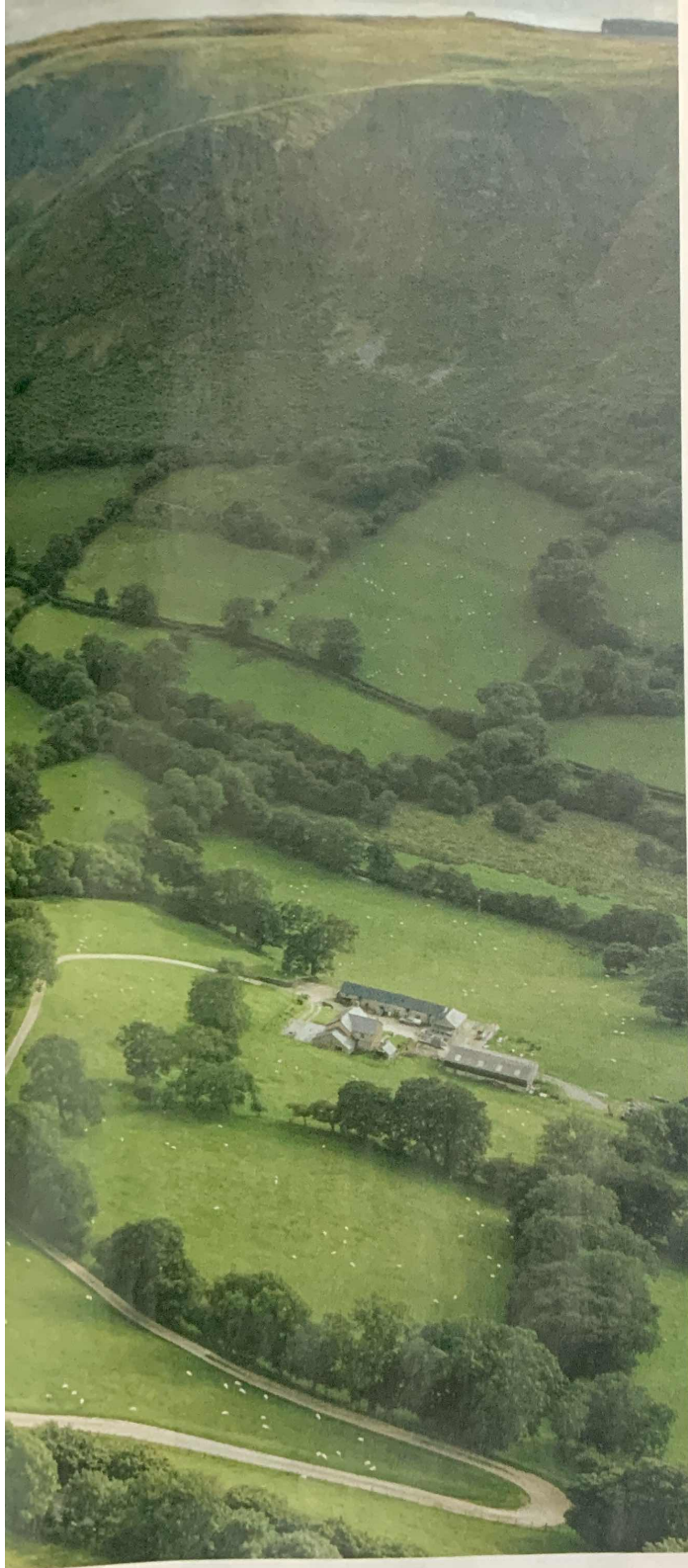
THERE WERE BLUEBELLS ALONG  
THE STONE WALLS, BIRDSONG,  
AND THE CALL-AND-RESPONSE  
OF EWES AND LAMBS.

ceramic cups with the texture of old bone in which the broth was served. The server announced duck with a citrus base, lemongrass, dulse from the local beach, and Wagyu fat. *I don't want duck in the middle of the afternoon*, I thought. But when

I tasted it, it was exactly what I wanted, and the boys tipped those strange cups for the last drops.

We spent the rest of the afternoon walking up the valley from the hotel grounds. More bluebells, and aqueous light dappling through the new beech and oak leaves. Ynyshir proclaims itself “meat obsessed, fat fueled.” Here were the lambs and calves browsing in the fields in their last weeks





▲ A valley in the Berwyn hills.

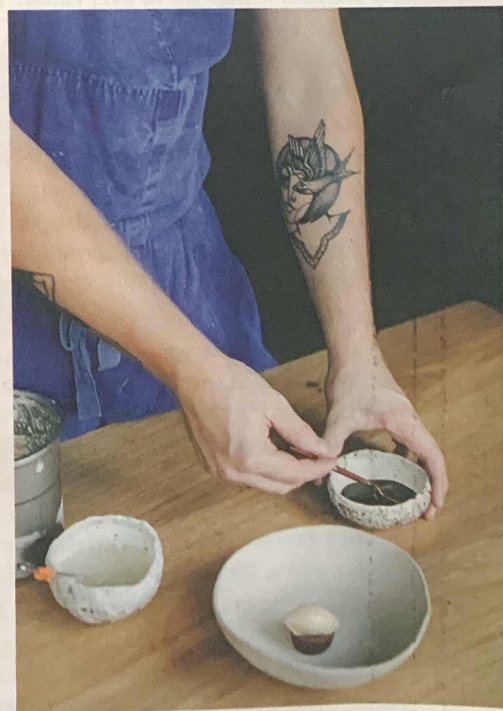
fascinated from the moment we were seated and watched one of the staff make a caramel sauce. “It’s for your sticky toffee pudding,” he said. Dessert seemed a long way off.

The men who cooked the food also brought it to us. Each course was announced like an aristocrat at a ball. “Not French onion soup,” which had layers of Japanese flavor you wouldn’t think possible in a clear soup. Aylesbury duck leg, confit and deep fried, obviously too rich, until you ate it. Chicken *katsu* served on a metal skewer that made Felix look as if he were swallowing a sword. “Mum, that’s some powerful goodness,” he said. There was a seven-day-fermented sourdough bread with miso butter, made with local grain that had been milled in the back room. Chili crab—Felix had previously claimed not to like crab but greeted this by singing a single note of praise. Aged mackerel—we had now suspended everything we knew about food and were simply marveling like newly weaned infants at each flavor.

Black cod. Pork belly. Duck liver with apple, spelt, and eel. If I wanted that pudding, I needed to hold back. I took one revelatory mouthful each of the salt-aged deer, the Welsh lamb rib, and the scallop with elderflower vinegar and aged fat from locally raised Wagyu steer, and passed the rest to my sons. Wagyu beef in an outrageous tartare topped with green

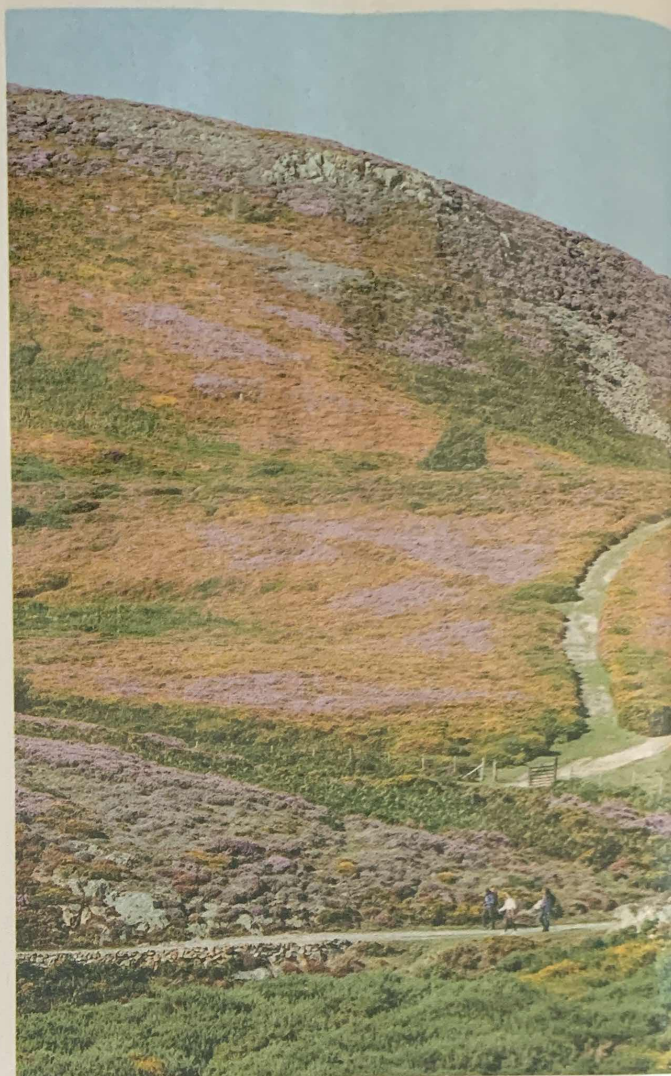
with their mothers. We came out above the trees, high enough to see the Irish Sea sparkling in the sunlight.

That evening we sat at the chef’s table for a 19-course tasting menu. I had warned the boys that we would be there a long time, but they were



▲ Preparing sticky toffee pudding at Ynyshir, a Michelin-starred Welsh-Japanese restaurant.





caviar, which looked like something you would step around on the pavement, but by then we would eat anything that came out of that kitchen. “I think there are still seven courses to go,” Felix said, and we thought we couldn’t do it until they brought a yuzu slushy, which miraculously restored our appetites. Still, six desserts, and only one piece—mine—left at the end, fudge made with Wagyu drippings instead of butter. “Those were the best things we’ve ever eaten,” the boys agreed. “That’s a new kind of food.” They thought, as we headed to bed at midnight, that there was no way they would eat breakfast nine hours later. They were wrong. We were handed fruit buns as we left, as if we might get hungry.

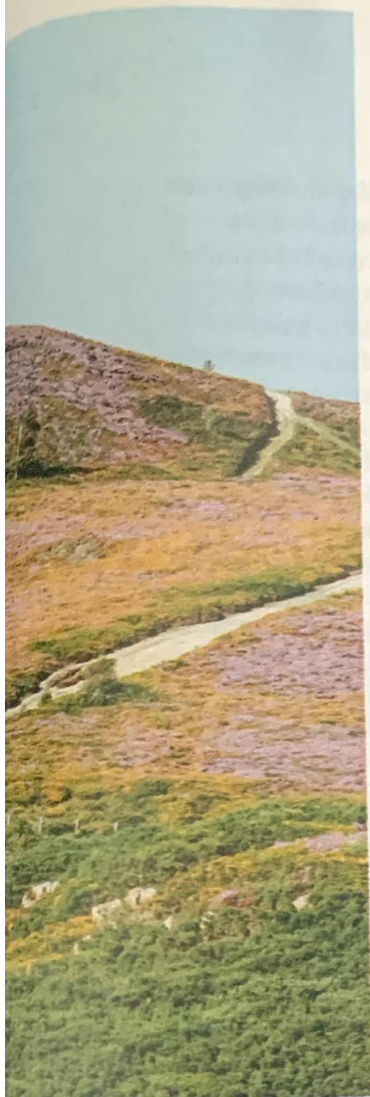
We got hungry. The next day we climbed Cader Idris, one of the more accessible mountains in Snowdonia. It was an easy three miles along the Minfford Path up to the black waters of Llyn Cau, where a goose goose-stepped along the lakeside path, and then a steep scramble up to the ridge. From there we could see for miles over rolling hills to the east and the mountains to the west. There was some rain, because it was Wales in spring. We huddled in the lee of a rock to eat the buns.

That night, a few miles beyond the lakeside town of Bala, we came to Palé Hall, a Victorian Gothic stately home with extensive grounds. Palé was the family home of Henry Robertson, an industrialist responsible for most of the railways in North Wales, and in 1889 Queen Victoria spent 10 days visiting; guests staying in the Victoria Room today sleep in the queen’s bed and use her bath. I felt like I was arriving at a 1920s country-house party. There was a baronial fireplace with a log fire in the hall, a grand piano, and sofas grouped around another fire. My room was up the grand staircase, almost in a tower, with a semicircular window that leaned out into the treetops like

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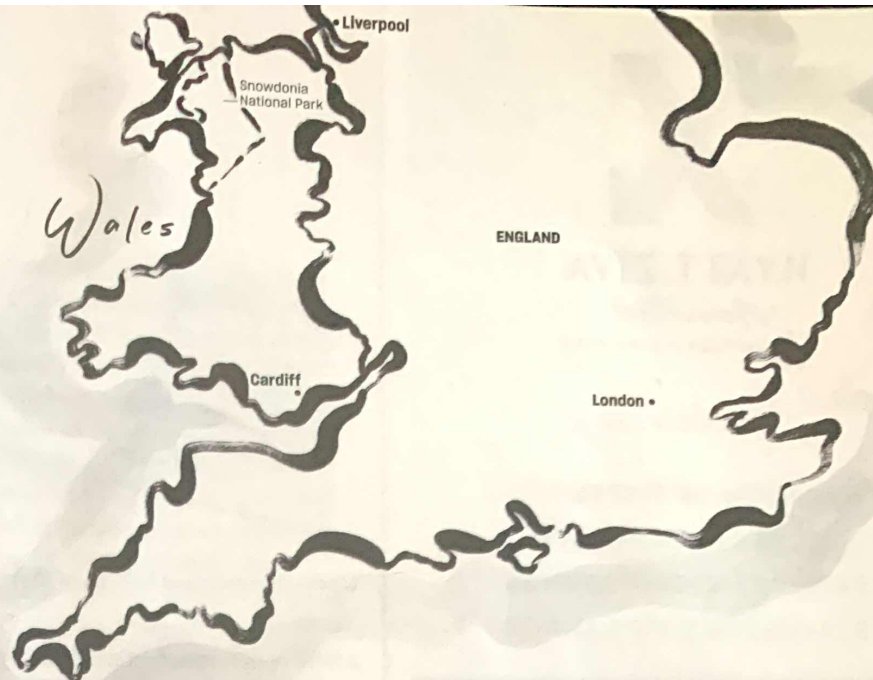




▲ From left: Conwy Castle forms part of the town's medieval walls; the North Wales Path in the hills above Conwy.

▲ Dogs in the town of Dolgellau.

ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY



## Snowdonia's Pastoral Pleasures

### Getting There

From London, Snowdonia National Park, an area of 823 square miles, is four hours by train and a little less than five hours by car. Alternatively, take an hour-long flight from London Heathrow to Liverpool Airport and drive two hours to Snowdonia. North Wales is well served by local public transportation, with rail lines through the hills and along the coast.

### Where to Stay

A visit to **Palé Hall Hotel & Restaurant** ([palehall.co.uk](http://palehall.co.uk); doubles from \$290), near the village of Llandderfel, is like a visit to Downton Abbey: upper-class British tradition meets American comfort. The gardens offer space for adults to stroll and for kids to play, and from some bedrooms you can see centuries-old trees floodlit at night. We heard owls! **Bodysgallen Hall & Spa** ([bodysgallen.com](http://bodysgallen.com); doubles from \$232) is a stately home built around a medieval watchtower, with meticulously restored Jacobean gardens. There are some rooms in the main house and some in the 13th-century tower—though note that medieval towers do not have en suite bathrooms. More homey than Palé Hall, Bodysgallen offers a gym, pool, and easy access to Conwy and the Victorian seaside town of Llandudno.

### Where to Eat

**Ynyshir** ([ynyshir.co.uk](http://ynyshir.co.uk); tasting menu \$224), near the town of Aberystwyth, is a Michelin-starred Welsh-Japanese restaurant where Gareth Ward and his team focus on bold flavors and local ingredients. There are lavish rooms for overnight stays and beautiful gardens to wander.

### What to Do

We stopped in the charming town of Machynlleth, where we found the namesake shoe shop of **Ruth Emily Davey** ([ruthemilydavey.co.uk](http://ruthemilydavey.co.uk)). The **Dyfi Wildlife Center** ([montwt.co.uk](http://montwt.co.uk)), a nature reserve off the road from Machynlleth to Ynyshir, will open in April 2020; migrating ospreys stop there in summer. **Bodnant Garden** ([nationaltrust.org.uk/bodnant-garden](http://nationaltrust.org.uk/bodnant-garden)) has a collection of exotic plants and champion trees.

For walks in Snowdonia National Park, use Ordnance Survey Explorer maps OL23, OL18, OL17, and 255 ([ordnancesurvey.co.uk](http://ordnancesurvey.co.uk)). These show all the trails at 2½ inches to the mile.

Many visitors to the park tackle Mount Snowdon, the highest peak in Wales. We opted for a few more accessible (and child-friendly) walks. We took the Cader Idris circuit, beginning with the Minfford Path near Dolgellau and

continuing around the ridge and down the pony path. There's a short scramble at the top; hiking boots are recommended, but in good conditions it's an easy 6¼ miles.

From Palé Hall we drove 15 minutes to Llandrillo, in the Berwyn hills. This walk is gentler than Cader Idris, with broad trails and no scrambling, but it's also less popular, so the route isn't signed. We took the track east out of the village, turned right after a mile at the sheepfold, and continued past the prehistoric cairn circle up Moel Pearce to Cadair Bronwen. At the ridge, a path to the right leads along the river and past the prehistoric settlement and stands of trees toward the village, about eight miles altogether. From Conwy, we took the clearly signposted North Wales Path toward Pencychnant and then followed the easy high route along the hills above the coast.

### Travel Advisor

**Jonathan Epstein** ([Jonathan@celebratedexperiences.com](mailto:Jonathan@celebratedexperiences.com); 404-812-9298) is a member of T+L's A-List of the world's top travel advisors. He can incorporate a visit to the walking paths and historic hotels of North Wales into any British Isles itinerary. —S.M.





(Wales, continued from page 130)

in Llandrillo and climbing up the farm track to pick up an ancient green lane that led over the moors. The lambs in these last, high fields rushed to suckle, tails wagging, at our approach. There was a prehistoric stone circle on top of the rise, with clear views of neighboring hilltops that were marked with standing stones and burial mounds. Farming has transformed this landscape over the last two millennia, but since researching my last novel, *Ghost Wall*, I have been fascinated by places where I can intuit an Iron Age presence in the land.

Rain blew across the moor. We moved on, up, tracking across the heather to the ridge and then back along a path that followed the river rushing at the bottom of the valley, full of spring rain. We thought of hot baths when we got back, and though often the imagined hot bath disappoints—it's too late or not quite hot enough or maybe there isn't really time before dinner—this time I sank into the huge tub of scented water. It was perfect.

Our last stop, where the national park meets the coast just outside the medieval walled town of Conwy, was Bodysgallen Hall, a Jacobean manor house turned hotel built around a 13th-century watchtower. We took the mountain pass, descending through what were at one time mining towns into woodland, an area that was once the retreat of Victorian businesspeople and mine owners. We stopped en route at Bodnant Garden, developed in extravagant Arts and Crafts style in the late 19th century by the Lords of Aberconway, to admire the last of the spring blossoms from winding pathways along the river.

"It's like staying with Grandma," my sons murmured when we were taken to our cottage suite in a converted stable behind the main manor house. It's really not—my mother-in-law does not live in a luxury hotel—but I saw what they meant. Bodysgallen's furnishings are in an authentic shabby aristocratic style, not the fantastic 1920s glamour of Palé Hall but the faded chintzes and silver teapots of the old British landed gentry. We hurried to catch the one hour in which children are allowed to use the pool. The conversion of the estate's farm buildings into a spa is award-winning: from the outside, genteel 17th-century rural prosperity; on the inside, a gym with friendly staff, a pool where I swam peaceful lengths past the family crest on the wall, and a whirlpool bath that soothed my stiff shoulders after driving. On our way back to the cottage we wandered through the Bodysgallen gardens, more formal than Bodnant and designed two centuries earlier: a kitchen plot, woodland walks (more bluebells), a rose garden, a knot garden, and fishponds. I looked up to the house, which was a hospital in World War I and a school for evacuated children in World War II, and felt better about Britain than I have for a while.

We dined in state in the 18th-century dining room whose French windows look over the gardens to Conwy Castle. Dusk was falling, colors softening. This is a place for silver service, the full

panoply of starched linen and china, but the staff twinkled at Felix as they called him "sir" and offered him fennel-seed bread to keep him going until his game terrine arrived. The kitchen serves classic British cuisine impeccably done: local fish and game, fruit and vegetables from that garden, and a set of excellent Welsh cheeses for Matt while I tucked into a chocolate parfait.

Our last hike started in the winding streets of Conwy, where we picked up Welsh *oggies* (meat- or vegetable-filled pasties) before walking from the harbor along the North Wales Path out onto the hills overlooking the Irish Sea. It was another clear blue day, so still we could see the currents moving on the surface of the water. A cuckoo called from nearby, and there were Welsh ponies and foals as well as sheep grazing on the moor. This was easy, fast walking, the trail well-signposted across gently rolling upland. We passed a few houses, so high and remote that we were surprised they were inhabited, but the whitewash was bright, and there were flowers in the gardens and hens pecking in wind-stunted orchards. Would we live up here, wild and windy? People have, for millennia. Prehistoric house platforms, cairn-marked graves, and stone circles overlook the length of the trail. As we passed the last farm on the way back, the boys wanted to climb the conical hill of Foel Lus. We stood at the top beside the stone shelter that we didn't need on this sunny afternoon, looking down on land, sea, and wheeling birds. ✦