



Duration
Seven nights

When
Summer 2021

Why?
Get-together for extended family in a gorgeous setting

CAMBRIAN MOUNTAIN CATCH-UP

Beautiful landscapes in this Welsh wilderness were a glorious backdrop to a long-awaited family reunion for Marcus Leach



Photography: Shane Imbrey

Until now, I thought moments like this only existed in books. As we rode along the dusty gravel track, the sky a deep apricot, the sun slowly sliding towards the horizon and the waters of the reservoir shimmering before us, it was hard to believe that we had this glorious corner of the world all to ourselves.

Cresting a rise in the trail, we stopped, falling silent as our eyes feasted on the view in front of us. People travel the world in search of experiences like this, sometimes never to find them, and here we were, in the heart of Wales, lost in the perfect moment.

Family tours

Our family has been coming to the Cambrian Mountains for several years, each of us captivated by its wild expanses and quiet beauty. Known as the 'green desert' of Wales for its remoteness, the area has given us many memories; but none so special as this, when son Harrison, my Mum and I stood admiring the dramatic landscape.

A few hours earlier, setting off on our bikes along the gravel track that starts by Claerwen Reservoir, none of us could have imagined the evening would be so sublime.

It was a night that, with all of the restrictions on travel, bubbles and contact with other people, would not have been possible a few months ago,



further adding to its significance. We'd been planning a wider family adventure for some time, although in truth didn't know when it would be possible until recently, and only then because of the addition of a Bailey caravan to go alongside our Adamo motorhome and my sister's family tent (read 'small house').

The one thing we did know in advance was that when it was at last possible for us to get together for the first time in 18 months, the Cambrian Mountains would be our destination of choice.

Not only because my sister and her family had never been there, but also because we knew it would be the perfect place to roam and be at one with nature. As with all families, we each have our different interests, but one passion that unites us is our love of the outdoors, being away in the mountains walking, running, cycling, swimming and kayaking.

Rolling hills, rippling valleys

Despite the name, there are few distinct peaks in the Cambrian ranges, but what the area lacks in dramatic summits, it more than makes up for with the understated beauty of its rolling hills, wild moors, wide lakes and rippling valleys.

The nature of this historical landscape means there's little in the way of infrastructure, adding to its charm and meaning most campsites are ➤

1 Marcus, his Mum and son Harrison enjoyed a fantastic cycle ride by the reservoir, during a glorious sunset

2 There's excellent walking and cycling in the Cambrians, but driving is also a great way to explore



Cambrian Mountains top 5 attractions

Elan Valley Loop

Starting and finishing in Rhayader, this is a beautiful drive or cycle ride to enjoy the countryside and marvel at the dams and reservoirs. The roads are a little narrow in places, but there are plenty of passing spaces along the way.

Capel Soar y Mynydd

Dating from 1822, this charming Methodist Chapel once served the hill farmers of the remote valleys. It remains a place of worship. There's a wonderful there-and-back trail by the Llyn Brianne Reservoir.

Teifi Pools

Situated near the village of Pontrhydfendigaid, Teifi Pools is the collective name for a group of beautiful lakes. Combine this trip with a visit to the ruins of the medieval Cistercian abbey of Strata Florida.

Claerwen Reservoir

The road to Claerwen Reservoir from Elan Village is worth the drive in itself, but the real beauty lies beyond. Where the Tarmac ends, a single-file gravel track continues, snaking around the reservoir and into the wilderness. Ideal for mountain bikes, doable in a 4x4 and a great walk.

Llyn Brianne Reservoir

Most people head for the dam wall, which is an interesting walk, but not the best bit. That is at the other end of the reservoir, where a small island juts out into the water, next to shallow shores. Here, fire pits and barbecue spots make this a perfect place to spend the whole day at the water's edge.

on the edges of the 'green desert'. For us that meant a week-long stay at the small but wonderful Dissert Caravan & Camping Park, run by Mike and Ann Hobbs, a site we had vowed to return to ever since stopping there for a night the year before. Given we are usually on the move fairly regularly during our trips, it was reassuring to arrive knowing we wouldn't have to break camp again until home time.

Together again

There was a collective sigh of relief from all three families on the first night; we were together again at last, and what's more, the weather, at least by British standards, was perfect.

The kids were happy to run free late into the evening and play by the river running at the back of the site, while the adults sat around remembering what family time used to be like before lockdowns.

Some might bemoan the fact you have to drive to get to places in the Cambrian Mountains, but those drives are stunningly beautiful, and the places you travel to are well worth the effort.

As is the case with the road that snakes from Abergwesyn to Llyn Brianne Reservoir, flanked by trees whose exposed roots twist around rocks jutting out from the earth, then emerging into a vast steep-sided valley.

From here, it follows the River Irfon, before taking you up the Devil's Staircase, well-named for its gradients and switchbacks. Great fun in a 4x4, not so much on a bike, as I can confirm! ☺

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3 The roads can be narrow in places, but there are some brilliant views when you stop for a break

4 Leisurely family meals al fresco

5 Simple pleasures by the water, such as stone skimming and paddleboarding



6 When you travel with children, the simplest activities yield the most enjoyment, so our first day was spent skimming stones, stand-up paddle boarding and exploring the woods, hunting for a Gruffalo, much to daughter Dorothy's delight.

Next morning, Mum and I were up early for a bike ride on the road by Claerwen Reservoir, which I knew and was eager to share with her.

Off-road adventures

For all of its negatives, lockdown has had some unexpected benefits, one being that my Mum discovered a love of off-road cycling; hence our jaunt by the reservoir. She suggested returning with Harrison, who also enjoys riding off-road.

So later that day, having whiled away the hours swimming in the river just below the dam, the three of us found ourselves caught in a moment of staggering beauty. I have been lucky enough to travel the world, seeing spectacular sights

over the years, but that moment, riding with two of the most important people in my life, in awe of the natural world, takes some beating – and it was less than two hours from our front door!

It was hard to top that moment, but the nearest we came was a magical walk among the bluebells at Bailey Einon Nature Reserve. Never before have we seen bluebells carpeting the entire forest and meadows. It was like a scene from a fairytale, the air full of birdsong and the scent of the flowers.

The children ran free, soon finding a small river to play alongside as the grown-ups sat nearby, eating our sandwiches, content in our own little world – half expecting to see a fairy fly past.

Exploring on four wheels

For a family happiest roaming about on foot or two wheels, it was a touch ironic that a drive on the final day should have brought us so much enjoyment. Admittedly, this was no ordinary road trip, but instead, the famed circuit that starts and finishes in the fine old market town of Rhayader, taking in the spectacular reservoirs and dams of the Elan Valley.

When you're driving through the picturesque countryside where those reservoirs and dams are located, it's easy to forget they were built more than 100 years ago and to this day, serve as the main water supply for Birmingham.

We loved all of our adventures and activities during the holiday, but it was the time spent together as a family that was most meaningful.

Lazy mornings flitting between motorhome, caravan and tent, the children playing together, long catch-ups over coffee, longer evenings by the barbecue, talking until late and reminding ourselves that this is how family holidays should be. It's no surprise my Mum is already planning the next one – with even more of the family. ■

TOUR ESSENTIALS

WHEN TO GO

This is a place that can be enjoyed at any time of year, provided you are equipped for all weather conditions, but the region is at its best in summer and autumn.

WHERE WE STAYED

Dissertth Caravan & Camping Park

Dissertth, Powys LD1 6NL

Web dissertth.biz

We can't recommend this site highly enough. Small yet spacious, wonderful amenities, fantastic hosts in Mike and Ann, and the perfect location to explore the area.

OUR MOTORHOME

2021 Bailey Adamo 75-4I

EXPENSES

Fuel	£50
Pitch (five nights with hook-up).....	£120
Food (our share for three families)....	£120
Total	£290

6 Harrison helps out with preparations for adventures on the beautiful waters

7 Family mealtime is even better when there's a barbecue!

