

The Cambrian Mountains

Jules Hudson explores the rugged Cambrian Mountains, and reveals how their beauty has inspired his very own *Escape to the Country*

Words: Jules Hudson Photos: Rob Scott



Over the years I have been lucky enough to visit almost every corner of the British Isles. From the brooding Scottish Highlands and the staggeringly beautiful Lake District, to the flat lands of East Anglia and the intimate beauty of the south-west, I have found that our rich array of landscapes has a limitless capacity to surprise.

Picking a favourite escape has therefore been tough, but in considering a place that both sticks in my mind and allows me to switch off from the rigours of day-to-day life, there is one clear winner:

the Cambrian Mountains of mid Wales. To many they are unknown, but to those of us that roam them, they offer an escape of quiet and hidden beauty, and for the last 20 years they have been my home. »



Countryfile presenter Jules and his dog Harry in their wild homeland – Teifi Pools in the beautiful and unspoilt Cambrian Mountains



» The rock that forms the Cambrians was laid down more than 500 million years ago. Since then, the earth has been buckled, heaved and then scoured by glaciers to create the modern mountains. They cover practically all of mid-Wales, sandwiched between the great national parks of the Brecon Beacons to the south and Snowdonia to the north. Look at a map, and you'll spot few, if any, settlements within them, much less roads. Over the years they have been described as "the green desert of Wales" because so little that is man made is here.

"To many the mountains are unknown, but to those of us that roam them, they offer an escape of hidden beauty"



Attempts to add the Cambrians to the growing number of national parks have, in the past, been thwarted, but are now gathering pace once again. But the lack of any designation has kept them off the radar of many people for years. As a result, those of us lucky enough to live here have had them all to ourselves. Walk across the mountains and you'll be hard pushed to meet another living soul.

It's this quiet and brooding solitude that captivates all those whom I've shared these hills with. These peaks are the guardians of a region, providing a real sense of timelessness in a world that itself seems to be getting ever smaller, busier and louder.

Tolkienesque landscape

To give you a taste of what my portion of the mountains has to offer, I packed the family spaniel Harry, and our photographer Rob into the Land Rover and headed off for a day in the hills. Our first stop was Cors Caron, a unique wildlife haven on Tregaron bog. Sometimes known as the Red Bog, this wetland reserve covers 800 hectares, and is the largest raised bog of its kind in western Europe. We caught up with Iestyn Evans from the Countryside Council for Wales, who explained more: "The bog is home to a rich array of wildlife. We have ponies that graze parts of it, shrews, otters, adders, curlews and teals, to name but a few, and of course above us is always our growing population of red kites."

Iestyn and his team are justifiably proud of the success of Cors Caron. It now attracts more than 50,000 visitors a year, and thanks to nine miles of boardwalks and pathways, it's accessible to everyone.

History is never far away here, and one of my favourite spots is the remains of the once great Cistercian abbey at Strata Florida, just a



few miles north of Cors Caron. Begun in 1184, the great western doorway is arguably the most iconic part of the abbey to survive. The Cistercians were keen on wild and solitary locations, and here they certainly achieved that. In the hills to the north overlooking the abbey are the Teifi Pools, in an area that feels totally untouched.

The bare peaks and rocky outcrops around the pools look prehistoric; the myriad of hollows and lakes are the source for the great River Teifi itself, which snakes its way down to the valley bottom, through the red bog and on eventually to the Irish Sea at Cardigan.

One of the striking things about the Cambrians is the extent to which the landscape can change. If you want to get a real sense of just how varied it can be, there is no better trip than from the ancient market town of Tregaron to Beulah. Over the course of 20 miles or so, the Abergwesyn Pass reveals some impossibly beautiful scenery and is one of the only routes that actually cuts through this part of the mountains. The changing horizons that greet you round many a corner are made up of dense sweeps of forestry and wide open upland moors.

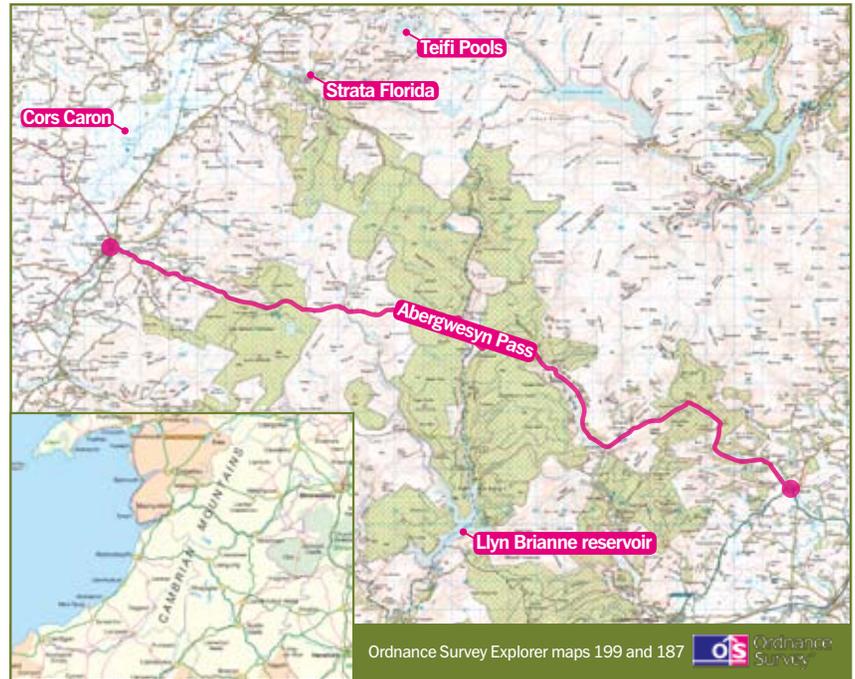
Deep valleys with steep sided escarpments wooded with ancient oaks and birch lead you on through this captivating route. I often liken it to driving through a chapter of Tolkien. It is one of those journeys that once made is never forgotten – even the presence of the road itself seems like an intrusion.

Preserving the landscape

Wales is, of course, infamous for its weather. There are times during the year when this seems like the wettest place on earth, but lately the rain has been put to good use. South of the Abergwesyn Road is the Llyn Brianne reservoir, created in the late 1970s by building the highest dam in Britain, some 91m (300ft) high. It now provides water for Swansea, Port Talbot and Neath.

Modern Llyn Brianne contrasts sharply with the ancient serenity of one of the most photographed and painted chapels in Wales. Sited beneath an ancient byway, the chapel of Soar-y-Mynydd is a genuine step back in time. Nothing has been added to detract from the original – not even electricity. In its heyday this would have been a busy place. These days, many of the upland farms that it would have served have gone, but the chapel has survived.

It's the changing fortunes of agriculture and life up here that Rob and I discussed as we headed off-road over the remaining portion of our route from the chapel back home to Llanddewi Brefi, past the remote youth hostel at Tyncornel. A cup of tea awaited us, but not before we made one final stop.



- 1 The Abergwesyn Pass bucks and rolls through some of the most remote scenery in Wales
- 2 Jules, Harry and Iestyn Evans (left) from the Countryside Council for Wales walk along Cors Caron's boardwalk
- 3 Llyn Brianne reservoir
- 4 Built in the 1820s, Soar-y-Mynydd chapel has resisted modernisation

We caught up with an old friend of mine whose family have farmed here for eight generations, and who now looks after 1,000 acres of mountain above my home. Owen Jones is the latest in a long line of farmers in his family. What does he think about the idea that the Cambrians may once again be considered for national park status, or at the very least as an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB)? "If it brings in investment, but doesn't compromise farming, then it has to be a good thing. We are, after all, guardians of this landscape, and it doesn't just look after itself." It's this sense of paternal care that runs through the veins of all the farmers I know here. "This is home, these mountains are a part of all us, and can be so whether you are born here or not," he smiled.

And I have to agree with him. There is a magic to the mountains that is all their own. Yet the skyline in many parts is now threatened with more wind farms. Local opposition is fierce. National park or AONB status may preserve the landscape in the face of these proposals. But despite the lack of official recognition, nothing can detract from the obvious – this is an area of outstanding natural beauty, and it has been for thousands of years. I hope it stays that way. ☺



Places to stay

Youth Hostel Tyncornel (left) Llanddewi-Brefi SY25 6PH

☎ 01980 629259 🌐 www.yha.org.uk

Black Lion Hotel Pontrhydfendigaid SY25 6BE

☎ 01974 831624 🌐 www.blacklionhotel.co.uk

Find out more

Cambrian Mountains Society 🌐 www.cambrian-mountains.co.uk

Countryside Council for Wales 🌐 www.ccw.gov.uk