

The Vale of Ffestiniog & Porthmadog

Heart of Snowdonia



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Vale of Ffestiniog & Porthmadog

Heart of Snowdonia

Slap bang in the middle of Snowdonia this is the heart of the national park. Rugged mountains on 3 sides and sandy beaches along the shore.

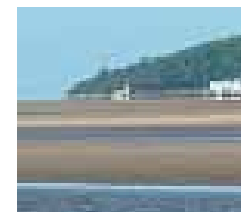
Slate from Blaenau was the cutting edge of lightweight, roofing technology – grey gold. For years it came down by packhorse to the quays on the Afon Dwyryd and was rowed out on the tide past Portmeirion to waiting ships.



Victorian ingenuity marks the mountain with what look like enormous ski jumps – beds on which pairs of tramways operated with the weight of a downhill wagon hauling an empty one back up. These connected to the Ffestiniog Railway which opened in 1836 as a gravity train with horses pulling the empty wagons back to Blaenau.

The final mile of the railway runs along The Cob, an embankment built by William Madocks to hold back the sea. A natural by-product of this was a deep water port at the northern end, hence Madocks's Port became Porthmadog, where boats and yachts now bob at their moorings.

In the 1860s the railway was modernised to steam and nowadays the area is a popular place to relax or have fun: the walking is superb with everything from upland hikes and long views to evening strolls on the beach as the sun sinks behind a castle into the sea.



Llan Ffestiniog was the original and ancient settlement, rooted deep in Welsh history, whilst Blaenau, which means uplands, is the modern town built during the booming slate industry.



continued - Vale of Ffestiniog & Porthmadog Heart of Snowdonia

Half way down the Vale is Plas Tan y Bwlch - stately home of the Oakeley family, owners of the largest quarry, but now the study centre for the national park. It provides a diverse range of courses from bird watching to harvesting (and frying!) wild mushrooms.

Our landscape has a familiarity and dreamlike quality, probably due to being used as a location for so many films such as *First Knight*. It looks like the landscape of a bygone era, how things should be before being spoilt and overcrowded. Space to breathe fresh air blown in across 3,000 miles of the Atlantic.

The Romans built a fort by Trawsfynydd and one of the original stones, commemorating the troops of Marcus completing their section of the walls, is now built into the door of the pub in Maentwrog. 'I'm just off to do some archaeology!'

It's been a highly rated destination for many years. Lord Lyttelton's blog in 1776'Nothing remarkable occurred in our ride, until we came to Ffestiniog, the Vale before which is the most perfectly beautiful of all we had seen with the woman one loves, with the friend of one's heart, and a good study of books, one might pass an age there, and think it but a day.' ■



Llechwedd

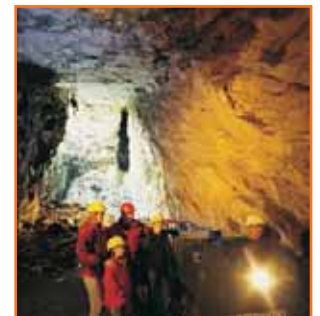
Like a theme park but for real, more exciting, full of pioneering spirit and ingenuity. Not a museum but where, since 1836, our ancestors clocked on for work with examples of the conditions in which they worked, the sorts of jobs they did and engineering challenges to be overcome. It's a living quarry still producing slate products today but with a fraction of the workforce, health and safety galore and you don't have to work 6 days a week or 12 hours a day!

The caverns at Llechwedd take you into the dark world of the miners with the options of a deep mine tour and a ride on a narrow gauge train along the level, miners tramway. What did they do down there all day? Where did they eat? Did they really sing? Back on the surface are demonstrations of slate splitting and trimming to the right size before packing in slate wagons for onward transport down the incline to the Ffestiniog Railway and beyond.

You can see a 'wild car', the ultimate commute down a mountain, and hear how another nearby mine was used to store the contents of the National Gallery during WWII. In recent years 3 pairs of choughs have chosen to nest in Llechwedd.

Walking through the Victorian Village you have an opportunity to convert currency, not to euros but back in time, with the prevailing rate of £2-40 to sixpence. The sixpence goes a long way in Ffestin's sweet shop, with its shelves of glass jars filled with traditional boiled sweets, and can quench a thirst in the bar of the Miners Arms.

Come rain or blistering sun this is a perfect all weather attraction – a bit of nostalgia for the seniors and fun come education for the juniors.



Ffestiniog Railway

It's the thread that holds it all together – the downhill corridor for slate that now carries people in comfort. Not any old heritage railway but, together with the Welsh Highland, the longest with the most spectacular scenery. Combined with a visit to Llechwedd it brings the industrial revolution to life in a gritty yet uplifting way.



An extract from a guest book written by a mother reads: *'..... none of us want to go home. The trains are a real treat - my 3 year old son and 40 year old husband were suddenly the same age!'*

Most of us yearn for the 'great outdoors' but it's not always possible to get out and into it – with the railway you can take young children, aged relatives or a gammy leg to all sorts of places and views. A moving armchair with a window on the landscape of Snowdonia complete with buffet car service to your seat.



For walkers a ride on the trains expands horizons for longer walks. From the station at Tanygrisiau, across the Moelwyn peaks then catch a train at Tan y Bwlch. Look out for the wild goats. And for the rock cannon! For the less energetic a ride to Britain's only railway loop at Dduallt, then downhill alongside the railway through Coed y Bleiddiau or 'forest of the wolves' - was the last wolf in Wales really shot here? Did Lord Haw-Haw really stay in this cottage? And onwards to a pub in Maentwrog or the café at Tan y Bwlch.

The railway unites people from all ages and walks of life. As for service, the staff on board the trains are highly trained and motivated volunteers – no question of a skin deep 'have a nice day' but real devotion to duty.

Portmeirion

Just as Snowdonia is another world so is Portmeirion with its cheery pastel colours set against craggy rocks and the rise and fall of the tide over miles of sandy expanse. For many it's a shrine to the TV series *The Prisoner*, recognisable over 40 years since the last episode. White-edged blazers, as worn by Patrick McGoochan, are on sale at No 6!

To slowly walk around the many footpaths and the village is like being on a journey of discovery, little quirks and oddities at every turn. Man-made structures jutting out from rocks or built around the trunks and roots of trees – despite being so bizarre it all fits in.

Sound travels far across the flat waters of the estuary and the background rumble of distant breakers floats in on the westerly breeze. The warming effect of the gulf stream is very evident along this coastal strip with luxuriant, almost tropical plantlife – cocktails beneath a palm tree on a balmy summer's eve with the sound of chirping crickets and the fresh smell of the sea.

Many people choose Portmeirion for their wedding and it makes a great special break whatever the occasion. As well as posh hotels there are self catering options to choose from or a day trip – just a mile's walk from the Ffestiniog Railway or a bus ride from Porthmadog. If you're in a rush they do have a heliport.



Other local attractions

The quality of our fishing has spread far and wide and since 2004 we have watched ospreys (fish eagles) plunging 50 mph into the water for trout and mullet to feed their chicks. Apart from the webcams and high powered telescopes there are enthusiastic guides from the RSPB to point you in the right direction – the only breeding pair of ospreys in Wales makes them very special and they fly in from West Africa every spring. Hopefully they will form the nucleus of a colony and man-made nests have been erected to encourage new settlers.



The **Welsh Highland Railway** travels from Caernarfon via Beddgelert and terminates close to the osprey nest with drivers foregoing their enthusiasm to blow whistles and disturb the nesting birds. In 2011 the final stretch of the line to Porthmadog should be operational.

With a similar name is the **Welsh Highland Heritage Railway**, close to the mainline station in Porthmadog – what it lacks in length of track it makes up for as a heritage attraction (the world's first narrow gauge buffet car) and with lots of good value entertainment for young families.

Either side of the beaches are **Harlech Castle** built by the English and Cricieth by the Welsh. For those liking their history more mature there is the Norman motte and bailey built on top of the Roman fort, **Tomen y Mur**, just outside the village of Trawsfynydd and nearby **Bryn Cader Faner**, a mini Stonehenge but with better views.



The **Llys Ednowain** heritage centre in the middle of Trawsfynydd has an engaging multimedia exhibition of the martyr St John Roberts and the poet Hedd Wynn – local heroes.

Mountain walk

Every April runners compete in Ras y Moelwyn, a race over the peaks. 10 ½ miles and 2,800 feet of altitude typically won in 80 minutes – but as a walk we'll skip the start and budget a whole day!

From the café at Tanygrisiau follow the track into Cwm Cwmorthin, a steep sided glacial valley. To the right is the mine nicknamed 'The Slaughterhouse'. To the left the path on an old tramway beside the lake overlooked by a quarrymans' barracks and a grand but dilapidated chapel. You may have walked just 30 minutes but you are in another world – magic.



The track rises up to more mines and a crossroads. To the right are lakes full of brown trout and Cnicht, the 'Welsh Matterhorn'. Straight on and down to the village of Croesor with its community café and gallery. Or left and up to Moelwyn Mawr, the tallest of the peaks at 770m.

The views are huge with Snowdon looking a short walk to the north, Cadair Idris to the south and coast as far as the eye can see.

Drop down to the craggy ridge of Craigysgafn looking over the upper dam of Britain's first pumped storage hydro electric station. At times of peak demand the plug is pulled and water races down through turbines to the lake at Tanygrisiau.

Onwards to the top of Moelwyn Bach with a bird's eye view of the Vale of Ffestiniog, tiny steam trains crossing the Cob to Porthmadog and miles of sandy beach framed by castles at Cricieth and Harlech.

Walking across the dam wall it feels like a giant's amphitheatre – no way Barnes Wallis could get bouncing bombs in here!

Ras y Moelwyn goes up and over Moel yr Hydd but if you feel you've had enough, a stroll down the engineer's road will be gentle on the knees and bring you out at the starting point.



Woodland walk

Half way down the Vale, between Plas Tan y Bwlch and the railway is Llyn Mair (Lake Mary) surrounded by oak woodlands with easy footpaths. It's highly accessible walking yet not so busy as to spoil the serenity.

The café by the station, where down trains meet the up trains, is a good place to start and finish a circular walk.

Follow signs down the hill - along the way there are wood sculptures and displays explaining the rarity and importance of this woodland, how the oak was used in shipbuilding and to make gnarled fence posts that last forever. 3 cross-sections of trunk, each with a different size foot set in the top, indicate the relative age of each tree – don't panic, it's nothing to do with the 3 bears.

Cross the narrow road into the picnic area where ducks hang around waiting for scraps beneath a giant dandelion seed ball. Follow the paths anti-clockwise around the lake – if you keep turning left you can't go wrong! At the far end water flows out to the millpond which was used to power the flour mill, saw mill and the turbine generating electricity for the Plas.

Voles, badgers, foxes and 9 species of bat live here with several reported (but unconfirmed) sightings of pine martens. Spring and summer are good times to see and hear the pied flycatchers, redstarts and wood warblers. Goshawk, nightjar and osprey also visit.

As you go round you'll see numerous turnings – there is a web of paths including walks alongside the railway and down through the woods to the Plas or the pubs in Maentwrog. Leaflets are available from the Ffestiniog Railway (at Tan y Bwlch station, Porthmadog and Blaenau) and from Tourist Information Centres.



Coastal walk

From the bridge at Porthmadog harbour follow the edge of the quay. If you're lucky you might see an otter teaching her pups to catch crabs – so much easier to train on than fast fish.

This is the start of the Llŷn coastal path but you don't have to go 84 miles! Behind the yacht club past busy boatyards and thence over a small hill with posh houses and into Borth y Gest.

It's difficult to imagine this village once teeming with shipwrights and carpenters. When the tide retreats and boats lean onto their sides, oystercatchers come poking their beaks in, foraging for cockles.

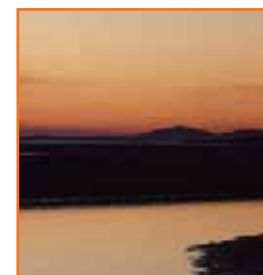
Quayside benches, next to the free car park and clean toilets, help to steady binoculars trained on the rich variety of birds that profit from the sands across to Portmeirion.

Continue past the pill box standing sentry over the bay. Currents below race past with a brief respite at turn of tide – savvy locals, in their coxed-four Celtic longboats, time their voyages well as they train for regattas.

At any stage you can turn off the path and drop down to the connected coves and beaches isolated by rocks at high tide. Many locals enjoy *moules marinière* from here and swear by the purity of the water. Winkles are said to be good but they look a bit too much like snails.

Across the estuary Harlech Castle provides a model for would-be castle builders. It's an inspiring place to explore, to play in or catch a sea bass – all that's best about beaches and coves without the crowds.

A good return trip in less than 3 miles or from the Borth y Gest car park in just a mile – you can go as far or near as you like with a café break overlooking either harbour.



Biking and other activities

A bikers' hub in the triangle of trails at Coed y Brenin, Betws y Coed and Penmachno. Quiet lanes and scenic routes on our doorstep with exciting plans for downhill biking above Blaenau and a family trail around Llyn Tanygrisiau.

Harlech beach goes on forever - distant views of Snowdon, occasional dolphins, rare and secretive sand lizards in the dunes. The sandy coves of Borth y Gest join with Black Rock Sands, popular for jet skis at one end and families at the other – being able to drive onto miles of beach is a big advantage when there's lots to carry.



Behind the dunes at Harlech is Royal St Davids, ranked 73rd in the Golf Digest Best 100 courses outside the USA. Porthmadog's 14th hole, next to the beach and called the 'Himalayas', is unlikely to be forgotten. For views and rugged golf Llan Ffestiniog looks down on the Vale - maybe you'll have the course to yourself apart from a couple of sheep and the sound of the lark.

Rock climbing on south facing cliffs above Tanygrisiau. Countless miles of underground adits and mines. Both are best explored with a guide and a hard hat.

Kayaking and canoeing are popular with a classic paddle from the harbour at Borth y Gest up to the bridge at Maentwrog and back as the tide retreats, in the wake of the ancient oarsmen who took slate to ships at sea.



Fishing is fantastic. Wild brown trout in mountain lakes at up to 2,000 feet (the lakes, not the fish!). Llyn Trawsfynydd, venue of international competitions with boats for hire. Lakes brimming with rainbow trout. Salmon and sea trout racing up the rivers, mackerel and sea bass off the coast with plenty of crabs at the harbour. There is also a very popular fly fishing course at Plas Tan y Bwlch.



Towns and villages

Blaenau Ffestiniog is unmistakably built on the back of slate with the occasional blast of a siren to remind you. This rugged mining heritage inspires people in many ways – home to the former national poet of Wales, 2 male voice choirs and a silver band.

Surrounded by pasture and oak woodland **Llan Ffestiniog** has a rural feel with great views down the valley to the coast. When the village pub was closed and put up for sale the community got together and bought it as a co-operative to be the hub of village life.



Trawsfynydd means ‘across the mountains’, an ancient crossroads of the bronze age track from Ireland to Stonehenge and the Roman road connecting their forts. The lake, the largest in Wales by surface area, generates hydroelectricity and used to cool the reactors of the nuclear station which closed in 1991.

Maentwrog, named after the stone (Maen) thrown by giant Twrog, was built for the Tan y Bwlch estate in view from the grand house – residents were asked to refrain from hanging out their washing on a Monday so as not to spoil the view for weekend guests.

Penrhyndeudraeth, the ‘peninsula between 2 beaches’, is home to *Gwaith Powdwr*, where 17 million grenades were made! It’s now an easy access nature reserve and the shed for *pendil balistig* (the ballistic pendulum) makes a good viewing hide for birds such as nightjars.

Porthmadog is a bustling seaside town full of character and things to explore. It must be the world’s ultimate junction of heritage railways - on the ‘bucket list’ for enthusiasts. Spectacular bird watching off the Cob – might see the ospreys catch a mullet.



Food and drink

Vegetarians please skip this paragraph. Mountain lamb is all around and Welsh Black beef – so tasty, maturing slowly at nature’s pace. Salt marsh lamb is a regional speciality grazing on ‘salt meadows’ alongside the estuary, a rich diet of sea lavender, samphire and thrift. If ‘sheep is what sheep eats’ it’s no wonder it tastes so good. Not just free-range but free-range beside the sea - bracing air and exercise each time the tide turns.



The coaching inns of Maentwrog - so easy to imagine the horses being reined in or walked to the stables. The pub in Llan Ffestiniog, bought by a community co-operative led by Mel Goch: *‘there’s been a pub here since 1726, a vital watering hole for the cattle drovers before crossing the moors.’* It was also where the crew filming Roman Polanski’s *Macbeth* enjoyed a pint or two. *Dark Side of the Moose* and the autumn special, *Bog Myrtle Stout*, are two of the popular brews from the Purple Moose brewery in Porthmadog.

Street cafés in Blaenau and Porthmadog are great for people-watching. Cafés at Tanygrisiau and Tan y Bwlch make ideal breaks for walkers on the move. A Cadwalladers ice cream or fish and chips on a bench beside the harbour. Fresh mackerel caught and grilled on the beach.

Smoke box chicken is a railway speciality – triple wrapped in foil the chicken and jacket potatoes are cooked in the smoke box at the front of the engine. A bit of shunting and 13 miles later, served with a billy can of gravy, it’s a treat for the drivers. That’s not on the menu but a fireman’s ‘breakfast on a shovel’ is served at the Welsh Highland Heritage Railway.

All tastes are catered for and if you’re making a packed lunch in Blaenau the bakery does a fine ‘Kurdish pastie’.



Staying here

Within the Vale of Ffestiniog & Porthmadog there is a wide choice from hostel accommodation at £19 per night, with secure storage for bikes, to B&B in a Portmeirion penthouse suite at £300 – secure parking for a Bentley presumed.

Great views are a given and places are full of character, not superimposed but the real thing. A sea captain's house or a boatman's cottage in the shipbuilding village of Borth y Gest. A quayside cottage overlooking Porthmadog harbour with Snowdon, Cnicht and the Moelwyn mountains beyond. A quarryman's cottage in Ffestiniog looking down the valley to sunsets beyond.

An upmarket country hotel complete with climbing wall in the basement – popular with groups as an after dinner activity. Stay in the converted barns of a 500 year old manor house, high up in the foothills of Moelwyn Bach, with a private platform from which to hail passing steam trains. B&B beneath the cliffs at Tanygrisiau with walks and climbs out the back door and a sauna to aid recovery in the evening.

Old coaching inns, sadly without the stables, but a link with the past and a good place to meet the locals. Or a tent pitched beside the river – a great opportunity to watch our wildlife and see the amazing shooting stars, so easy to see with the lack of light pollution, it gets really dark here.



Getting here and around

The Vale of Ffestiniog and Porthmadog have all the positives and intrigue of a foreign destination. With the excitement of travel but without the hassle - getting here is part of the fun.

The Cambrian Coast Railway brings people through mid Wales to Aberdyfi and thence up the coast as far north as Pwllheli connecting with the Ffestiniog Railway at Minffordd and Porthmadog. Illustrated maps bring to life the views from the train and during high summer a steam service usually operates along the coastal stretch.



From Llandudno on the north coast the Conwy Valley line passes through the market town of Llanrwst, to Betws y Coed and Dolwyddelan, with a view to the castle of Llywelyn the Great, and thence through a 2 mile long tunnel emerging beneath Llechwedd to connect with the Ffestiniog Railway.

More intrepid explorers might arrive by kayak on the coast or bearing rucksack and tent doing the Cambrian Way or Duke of Edinburgh awards.

By car it's best in daylight – the closer you get, the better it gets. Hedgerows become stone walls, hills turn to craggy mountains and suddenly the coast is in view. We might be remote but the main arteries of the A5 and A55 run close by – just 2 hours from Manchester and a bit further from Birmingham.

Once here you are in a highly effective hub of public transport – we might not have the frequency of an urban timetable but with planning this is an effective way of getting around. Walking works well in tandem with railways and many walks between stations are described in books and leaflets. Trains and buses, with a North Wales Rover ticket, make great ways of reaching busy hotspots without the pollution of cars and hassle of parking.



The changing seasons

It's a different place to different people at different times but it is all year round - the community goes about its business and welcomes visitors whatever the season. Students come and go at Plas Tan y Bwlch as the courses change with the seasons. The castles, Llechwedd and Portmeirion are open and steam trains run, albeit less frequently. The ospreys however are fair weather softies retreating to Africa for our winter!



Spring

Pied flycatchers fly in from Africa to have their chicks at the peak availability of caterpillars feeding on tender young leaves of the oaks. Baby lambs torment their mums and race around in gangs. Bluebells burst into bloom. Everywhere you look there is colour and optimism.

Summer

Beaches are at their best with long summer days and if we're lucky the mackerel are chased in by the dolphins. Up to 8 trains a day are running along the Ffestiniog Railway. Farmers and their dogs gather flocks of sheep off the mountains for shearing. Wild bilberries in the woods and mountains peak in August and the ospreys head south.

Autumn

Heather is blooming, wild goats are rutting on the Moelwyn mountains. Squirrels and jays are stashing food for winter. Leaves are beginning to turn. Chanterelles and other tasty wild mushrooms are at their best.

Winter

In recent years it's been more like 'Val de Stiniog' with walkers donning skis and crampons to get around the winter wonderland. Wildlife and nature are re-charging their batteries. A good time for peaceful exploration with an end of day supper in front of a log fire. Wide-eyed children on Santa specials at Llechwedd and Ffestiniog Railway.

