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WHERE: Trans-Cambrian Way, plus Black Mountains  
START/FINISH: Radstock, Somerset; Dovey Junction, Powys  
DISTANCE: 240 miles over five days  
PICTURES: Martin Parfitt. Main photo by Alamy

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## GREAT RIDES

# ACROSS WALES IN WINTER

*Martin Parfitt mountain biked 240 miles through the Black Mountains and along the Trans-Cambrian Way – in January, with a bivvy bag*

**F**our paninis and two side salads, please.' The waitress in the warm coffee shop in Usk brought me several sets of cutlery and asked me when my friends would be joining me. They wouldn't, I explained; it was all for me. After riding for six hours, and with dusk approaching, I wanted to fill up with as much food as I could eat before heading into the snow-covered Black Mountains.

I had left home in Radstock at ten that morning in sleet and snow showers. The lanes were frozen. It set the tone for the next five days, which I spent riding, pushing, and bivvying in some of the toughest conditions I'd experienced in more than 20 years of mountain biking.

## Bivvying in the snow

Refuelled by my café stop, I set off in the growing darkness towards Abergavenny and the Black Mountains. As I climbed, the quiet lanes grew thick with compacted snow and ice. It made for very slow going. Yet by the end of the first day, I had covered about 80 miles. Considering the conditions, and the camping gear I was carrying to enable me to survive, I was very pleased with my progress. I set up my bivvy among the pine trees deep in the Mynydd Du Forest, where I hoped it would be a couple of degrees warmer.

I had a surprisingly comfortable night, although I had to shake the ice from the outside of my bag in the morning. Despite the cold, I could see and feel the sun's rays through the trees. It was to be a glorious

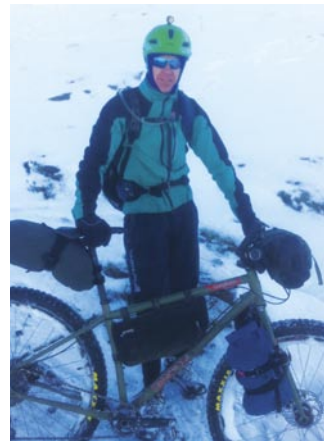
day. I left the shelter of the forest and began the long, gentle climb up past the Grwyne Fawr reservoir in bright sunshine and deep snow. Fortunately, I had been this way before and knew the direction the track took over the mountains, which rose to 700 metres above sea level at the top. This was what I had dreamed of and hoped for: snow-covered mountains!

Squinting despite my sunglasses, I took in the view: iridescent snow and a dazzling low sun in an azure sky. As I approached the northern edge of the Black Mountains, the rest of my journey unfolded before me: snow covered hills as far as the eye could see. There was Radnor Forest to the north, and to the far north west I could see the Cambrian Mountains.

## Increasing cold

A steep descent took me to Hay on Wye, where I stocked up on food and drink. A generous cyclist gave me a USB cable to replace mine, broken the previous night after a slide on the ice whilst it was charging my handlebar-mounted phone. This meant I could head off for the Radnor Forest that afternoon (a Sunday) instead of having to wait until the shops opened next morning.

I set off as the sun was setting, and having gained height again, was able to look back to where I had travelled from that morning. Once again, snow and ice reappeared as I climbed above 300 metres. If anything, the off-road sections on fresh snow were easier and faster than the



## DO IT YOURSELF

› Try it in the summer first, not winter! I had ridden this route the previous summer so already knew where I was going. Bivvy experience and equipment choice are crucial to staying comfortable, and are more important than fitness. Every night spent in a bivvy is a learning process. You will never have the perfect set up, but you learn to deal with any issues you do encounter. You can find lots of tips and advice from [bearbonesbikepacking.co.uk](http://bearbonesbikepacking.co.uk). The Bike & Bivi Facebook group is also useful.



» compacted snow on the lanes.

The long descent around Cwm-Gwilym was fast and furious. It proved that even a fully-rigid bike loaded with bikepacking gear doesn't detract from the adrenaline buzz of downhill sections. When I reached the bridleway gate at the bottom, I was punching the air. That night I rode through a gusting snow storm until 8pm. I found a small sheltered quarry on the hillside to set up camp, near New Radnor.

Unknown to me, the forecast was for one of the coldest nights in years: minus eight. What I did notice was the clarity of the winter sky as I lay down to sleep. There were so many stars visible it became difficult to pick out the constellations.

### Sunburnt in January

I awoke next morning immediately aware of the shocking cold. It was like nothing I had experienced before. There was a coating of solid ice on the *inside* of my bivvy bag. The water bladder in the backpack that I had used as a pillow had frozen solid. More worryingly, my SPD boots – stored in a bag outside the bivvy bag – were also frozen. Unable to get my boots on, I had to pack up camp wearing just my thermal Sealskinz socks. I couldn't ride either, not only because of my boots but because the links in my chain were iced over. I had had to ford two rivers the previous night; obviously the water had stayed on the chain.

It was another gloriously sunny day as I gingerly made my way down off the hill in my socks, partly walking, mostly sliding. Help

## SQUINTING DESPITE MY SUNGLASSES, I TOOK IN THE VIEW: IRIDESCENT SNOW AND A DAZZLING LOW SUN IN AN AZURE SKY

came, however, as it often had on previous adventures. At a remote house, I was given a welcoming cup of coffee and two bowls of water to thaw my boots.

A short section of road took me to the village of New Radnor. After the morning's problems, I resorted to comfort-food buying in the village shop. I bought far more than I could carry, so had a half-hour binge outside the shop before continuing. The final section of Radnor Forest was again deep in snow and bathed in sunshine. I was beginning to feel sunburnt.

Losing height again, I cycled into Knighton and restocked to begin the Trans-Cambrian Way. That starts in Shropshire on the England-Wales border, and crosses Wales, ending on the Dovey estuary. It was evening before I departed. Climbing Beacon Hill near Knucklas was the steepest section of my route. Once on top, I found some shelter and made camp. I would not be leaving my boots outside of my bivvy this night. I didn't have any choice, as it turned out: my laces were frozen and I couldn't get my boots off. I slept with them on.

### The Welsh wilderness

The next morning, I sensed a change in the weather. It was still bitterly cold but now dull and overcast. A weather warning appeared on my phone, predicting more snow. I

arrived in the small town of Rhayader late in the afternoon and called in at Clive Powell Mountain Bikes. I had no issues with my bike or equipment; I just wanted a browse. But I left the shop with invaluable local knowledge. Clive advised against following the off-road section south of the Caban Coch reservoir, which he said was technical and potentially dangerous during the summer, let alone in the deep snow of January in the dark!

I followed Clive's advice and his suggested alternative route, which took the road to the north of the reservoir. A small roadside sign directed me to the accommodation Clive had mentioned: a bird hide on the edge of the water. After sleeping outdoors, it was luxurious. There was a wooden bench where I could sit and eat my supper, room to sleep, and even room for my bike.

It was overcast the next morning too, but the predicted snow had not arrived. I set off through the Elan Valley, slightly disappointed by the low cloud spoiling the views. Claerwen Reservoir showed a mirror image of the hills on its black surface.

The next four hours, I rode through the Cambrian Mountains without seeing a sign of civilisation – not a road, building, vehicle, or person. It's one of the last wildernesses of England and Wales. By mid-afternoon, »





● **Left** Snow and hills meant some walking was required – some of which Martin did in his socks...

● **Below** Camping in these conditions required good quality kit. Temperatures fell to minus 8 centigrade

## Fact File: ACROSS WALES IN WINTER

**DISTANCE:** 240 miles Day 1: 80 miles. Day 2: 40. Day 3: 40. Day 4: 50. Day 5: 30

**ROUTE:** I followed Sustrans routes from Radstock to Abergavenny, via Bristol, the Old Severn Bridge, and Chepstow. Then I went off-road over the Black Mountains to Hay on Wye and through Radnor Forest to Knighton. That's the start of the Trans-Cambrian Way.

**CONDITIONS:** Sub-zero temperatures, sleet, snow, ice, occasional mud.

**BIKE:** An upgraded Genesis Longitude

**KIT:** Integral Designs Cocoon Bivi, Vaude Xtreme Lite 800 sleeping bag (used with a Sea to Summit Thermolite Xtreme liner and a silk liner), Vango Trek sleep mat. Alpkit drybag for bars, Alpkit drybag for seatpost. Salsa Anything cages with drybags, cheap framebag from eBay, Osprey Escapist 25-litre backpack with 3L bladder.

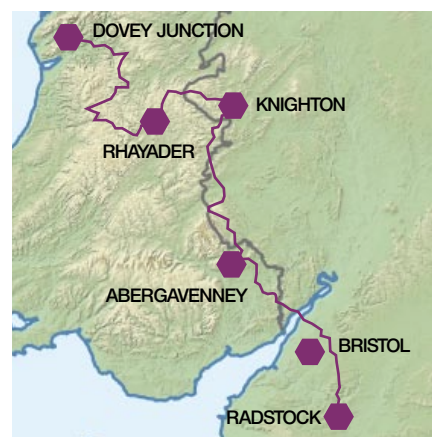
**MAPS & GUIDES:** OS maps and Viewranger to get to Knighton. Then Trans-Cambrian Way using the IMBA map and guide booklet pack. See [bit.ly/1Fbd62J](http://bit.ly/1Fbd62J)

**GLAD I HAD...** Sunglasses to prevent snow blindness. Maxxis Minion 2.5 inch tubeless tyres, which performed faultlessly and meant I didn't have to change a tube in seriously low temperatures.

**NEXT TIME I WOULD...** Take sunscreen.

**MORE INFORMATION:** I was raising money for Hope 4 Harmonie, a 1-year-old girl from Bath who contracted meningitis and had her arms and legs amputated. Details at [justgiving.com/martin-parf](http://justgiving.com/martin-parf)

## ACROSS WALES



## THE WATER BLADDER IN THE PACK I HAD USED AS A PILLOW WAS FROZEN SOLID. MY BOOTS WERE FROZEN TOO; I COULDN'T GET THEM ON

» and after a great deal more climbing and descending through deep snow, I arrived at Llangurig. I had a hot meal and a drink, and recharged my phone, its power pack, and my legs. After several more coffees, I was ready to head off through Hafren Forest. Route-finding was difficult in the maze of fireroads at night, but I eventually found the visitor centre and made camp in a wooded clearing next to a picnic table. It would be my last night in the wild.

### Whiteout

The last major obstacle facing me was the hill of Foel Fadian, which is over 500 metres high. Then I would have to cycle cross the remaining moorland and descend steeply to Dovey Junction. I didn't lose sleep over this.

Waking, however, I was met by thick, low cloud. Visibility got worse as I gained height, until it was a complete whiteout. I was unable to see further than 20 metres ahead,

and it was difficult to distinguish between snow and cloud. With a great deal of help from the Viewranger GPS app on my phone, I found my way across the moorland. As I crested the top of the remaining hills, the snow suddenly vanished. The western side faced the slightly warmer air coming from the Irish Sea. I was nearly there.

I arrived at Dovey Junction's cold and deserted platform with only 20 minutes to wait for the next train to Birmingham. I felt conflicted: I'd achieved my goal but didn't want this to end. This had become the trip of a lifetime. I had often looked at photos of snow-covered mountains, dreaming of what it might be like to be amongst them. I never imagined I would travel through them by bike, let alone sleep on their slopes in the depths of winter. ●

*Martin Parfitt has been mountain biking for 20 years and bikepacking for three. This was his third long distance ride.*