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Below: Gwydir Forest
Right: Mawddach
Trail by the estuary



SOPHIE GORDON

Cycling UK campaigns officer

Fighting for breath, I concentrated on keeping my pedals moving over the rocky terrain, trying to maintain enough momentum to keep the front wheel in a vaguely straight line. I could see the bright daylight breaking through the trees ahead of me at the top of the climb. Just a little bit further...

To my relief, the climb eased as I emerged from the forest, and I paused to take in the view. Across the valley to my left were the Rhinogydd hills. The shining expanse of Llyn Trawsfynydd reservoir lay below me, with its hulking decommissioned nuclear power station looking out of place on the far side. Ahead, the gravel track of the Sarn Helen Roman road curved around the hillside, leading down towards the water. Not far to go now. One more photo, then I let my wheels start rolling downwards to enjoy the swooping descent into the valley.

That was one of those days on a cycling trip where by the time you reach your overnight stop, the morning feels a world away. We might have ridden fewer than 40 miles but the steep climbs, challenging terrain and contrasting landscapes made it feel like we'd travelled much further.

Five of us were test riding the Traws Eryri (Trans Snowdonia) trail, created by Cycling UK in partnership with Natural Resources Wales and launching at the end of August. Starting in Machynlleth, the trail wiggles its way through the spectacular mountains and forests of North Wales

to finish at the sea beside Conwy Castle. While most of the route uses existing bridleways, forest tracks and cycle paths, a few sections required negotiating permissive access with landowners to be able to ride through amazing areas that would otherwise be unavailable to bikes.

CADAIR IDRIS AND COED Y BRENIN

We'd started the day in Machynlleth, at the southern end of Eryri (Snowdonia) National Park. A fairly gentle first few miles meandering beside the river eased us in for a steep zig-zag climb up into the forest. Then we were out into the open and it felt like the adventure had properly begun, as we headed through the hills on undulating gravel tracks skirting around the western bulk of Cadair Idris. Rounding a corner, we could see the sands of the Mawddach Estuary laid out below us. We dropped down to the beauty spot of Cregennan Lakes, where we encountered the first other people we had seen that day.

After looking down from high above, we were now gliding along the Mawddach Estuary Trail, smiling at kids wobbling along the path. The tide was low, and we lingered taking photos of the swirly patterns of silver water on sand. Eventually our rumbling stomachs prompted us to press on to Penmaenpool, where Phill from MTB Cymru was waiting with our lunch by the historic toll bridge.

Normally I'm a bit of a purist about cycle trips: I like to know that I'm carrying all the gear I need – a tortoise with my house on the back. For this one I'll admit I appreciated being supported by Phill. I've done several off-road trips but I'm not the most confident mountain biker, and being able to ▶

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