

An easy, mixed-terrain pootle on a day off between waterfalls-bagging in the Brecon Beacons

Distance: 11 miles  
Big hills: 0  
Challenge: ★★☆☆☆  
Cafe stops: 1



Pedalling to Pontneddfechan: easier done than said

# Ride & falls

In a bid to recapture his love of freshwater swimming, David Bradford heads to 'waterfall country' in pursuit of the perfect spot to take the plunge

Words & photos David Bradford

Cycling has always had its feral elements, whereas swimming was in danger of becoming a bleachily domestic affair. Thanks, then, to writer Roger Deakin for coining the term 'wild swimming' in the late Nineties, and to Daniel Start for writing a guidebook of that title.

The term has been gaining currency for years, becoming an indispensable buzz-phrase of the leisure zeitgeist. If you want to be extra with-it and wild, just add a bike: cycle to your chosen lake, river or pit before stripping down to your drawers and leaping fearlessly in. And pity anyone whose splish-time involves reversing down aluminium steps in the chlorinated and tepid ungreat indoors.

My journey started with, yes, Start, who

wrote a piece for the *Guardian* recently providing a roll-call of the 10 best places in the UK to go wild swimming. Being a zeitgeisty leisurista, I consumed the list in a reverie, was hurled back two decades and plopped into a river in Kent. Or was it Hampshire? Never mind. I was a chubby eight-year-old on a daytrip with a friend and his family on a hot summer's day. The water was cool and gin-clear; it flowed briskly as its surface bulged veiny patterns. It was magical: an intoxicating mix of fear (Rapids! Pike! Eel!) and glee.

When I finally came to my senses, newspaper still on my lap, I knew what I had to do: pick a destination, ride there, dive in and recapture the thrill. Go wild. My eyes homed in on the section about Lower Ddwli Falls in

the Brecon Beacons and its accompanying picture of an untamed damsel cavorting beneath a wall of cascading water. The recommended place to stay was Clyngwyn Bunkhouse, just a couple of miles from the alluring plunge-pool. I roped in a friend, got online and booked, in this order: hire bikes, train tickets, and a hut at Clyngwyn.

As the train crossed the border from England to Wales, rain streaked down the windows. Of course it did. By the time we arrived at Neath, it was pouring. To avoid starting our holiday soggy and tired, we took a taxi north-east to Glynneath, a journey of about 12 miles (£23), where we met Paul from Afan Valley Bikes with our hired steeds: two Giant mountain bikes perfect for our needs,



The waters of Sgwd yr Eira failed to entice

11 miles

**"The way-marker pointed directly to a towering rock face and its curtain of clattering, gnashing water"**

equipped as they were with racks, panniers and knobby tyres. The remaining three miles to Clyngwyn were mostly uphill but along tranquil roads with salubrious vistas, and better still, the skies were brightening.

Bags dumped, we promptly pedalled off to the nearest village, Ystradfelte, in pursuit of a slap-up meal. The New Inn — the only pub for miles around — looked promising, its frontage bedecked with slates promising a range of dishes including a hearty-sounding vegetarian option. Too good to be true? Uh-huh. "Two of the goat's-cheese-and-rice bakes, please," I ventured with hunger-crazed optimism. "Food? No food today," demurred the landlord. "I'm here on my own; I can't open the kitchen. I've only had two customers all day." Whether his tally included us I didn't dare ask, and we slunk out to the garden with a consolatory (albeit warm) beer. "Be sure to bring those glasses back in when you're done," the unavailing innkeeper called after us.

## Chasing waterfalls

Thankfully our host at Clyngwyn, Julie, was infinitely more hospitable and had furnished our lodgings with a welcome basket containing fresh bread, Welsh cakes, eggs and butter — plenty to placate our growling bellies. And she'd even collected a case of beer for us from the 'local' supermarket, 30 miles away. In another stroke of good fortune, the rain held off: we awoke the next day to grey skies but a light breeze and clement temperature — hardly swimming conditions but perfect for scouting out the best plunge-pools for when the weather warmed up.

Named waterfalls litter the OS map of this area, with barely a vowel among them. The roar from our nearest, ▶▶

STOP!



## GETTING HERE

We travelled by train from East Sussex to Neath via London Paddington, a journey of just under five hours. Our advance return fare cost just £45 each. Clyngwyn Bunkhouse is a cycleable 15 miles from Neath station.

## ACCOMMODATION

We stayed in the Shepherd's Hut, an outbuilding in the grounds of Clyngwyn Bunkhouse. It's as rustic as it sounds — without mains electricity or mains water but with all basic needs catered for: coolbox, battery-powered lights, chemical toilet, etc. It's in a beautifully secluded spot, two fields away from the main B&B site, where a proper toilet and shower are available. It's £75 per night for a minimum two-night stay and £55 per night for any additional nights. [www.bunkhouse-south-wales.co.uk](http://www.bunkhouse-south-wales.co.uk)

## PUBS

Few and far between in the immediate vicinity of Clyngwyn. Travel south about three miles to Pontneddfechan, where there are three pubs offering basic grub — don't expect gastropub-level indulgence, mind. If you have a car, perhaps try Glynneath or Merthyr Tydfil.

## BIKE SHOP

We hired mountain bikes from Afan Valley bikes for £20 per bike per day, with an additional £25 for dropping the bikes to us in Glynneath on arrival and collecting from us at Neath station. [www.afan-valley-bike-hire.com](http://www.afan-valley-bike-hire.com)

## PLACES OF INTEREST

Waterfalls, literally dozens. Buy an OS map and go fall-bagging. If you're very hardy — and aware of the risks, of course — take the plunge. It's super-cold, you've been warned. Also available: caving, climbing, abseiling, trekking, horse riding, etc.





**Melite gorge and waterfalls**  
 This is the throbbing heart of Waterfalls Country, with its many sublime yet unpronounceable falls, including Sgwd Clun-gwyn ('white meadow fall'), Sgwd Isaf Clun-gwyn ('lower white meadow fall') and Sgwd y Pannwr ('fall of the woollen washer').



Nedd Fechan valley: too cool for front crawl

**Start/finish**

**Nedd Fechan valley**  
 The village of Pontneddfechan yields easy access to the beautiful Nedd Fechan valley with its many majestic waterfalls — on which more info is available from the village waterfalls centre.

**Penderyn Distillery**  
 Whisky fans might like to visit this distillery, the smallest in the world, and sample the Penderyn Peated single malt, Brecon gin or even the Merlyn Welsh cream liqueur: [welsh-whisky.co.uk](http://welsh-whisky.co.uk).

## ROAD BOOK

From Clyngwyn, take the lane north to Ystradfellte, turn right and ride over the river. Keep going through the forest — there's a good spot for a picnic, if you fancy. At the junction, turn right onto the A4059 (don't worry, you won't be on the main road for long). Within minutes you will enter the

village of Penderyn, and you need to take the third right onto Lamb Road and follow the road up and round the sharp right bend past a patch of woodland. Where this little lane begins to turn left, you will find (directly ahead) a footpath, which opens out and yields superb views. Follow this clearly marked path in a westerly direction. Soon you will begin your descent down towards Pontneddfechan. The path gets rocky and rather technical in places, so take care — and watch out

for parties of potholing school children. Eventually the footpath emerges into a residential area and then into the heart of the village, where you will find a couple of pubs selling basic food. From Pontneddfechan, follow the lane — the one of which the ride started — north to head back to Clyngwyn. Alternatively lock up the bikes and take the well-signposted Waterfalls Walk north along the river and past the many picturesque falls. If it's really warm, you may even want to take a dip!