



## Llyswen

The more you run the risk of getting lost the more certain you are of seeing the best of Wales. Become a mapaholic. Large-scale maps are the essential key, repaying their small cost many times over. What follows demonstrates dramatically why my freewheeling exploration philosophy works so well.

The most renowned section of the Wye Valley is the winding 23 miles between Goodrich and Chepstow. But from Builth Wells to Rhydspence, there's an equally seductive 23-mile scenic extravaganza. Llyswen is at the heart of this superb stretch of the upper Wye; man-made and natural delights lie in all directions. I've set-out two day-long tours; but even a week wouldn't do the area justice.

**Tour one.** Start at Ashbrook House in Clyro, once the home of Revd Francis Kilvert. He spent seven happy years as curate there (1865-72); *Kilvert's Diary* (1870-79; Penguin) is essential and compulsive reading. The house, now called Kilvert Gallery, near the post office, is the home of Liz Organ and Eugene Fisk. Enjoy the numerous treats in their contemporary art gallery home with its garden and stream (closed Mon).

Before you leave buy Jeremy Sandford (text) and Eugene's (line drawings) guide to Hay-on-Wye: *Hey Days in Hay*. Rarely have I read such an affectionate, irreverent guide. Hay is much more than just "The Town of Books"; dozens of shops, from an old cinema to small front rooms, stock millions of second-hand books. Hay, writes Sandford, is a "sacred oddity"; so, too, is this finely written and illustrated smile-a-page guide.

At Hay call on the outstanding tourist office (main car park) for a varied choice of literature, and advice, on the area.

South into the Black Mountains, over the 1,778ft-high Gospel Pass with the twin peaks of Hay Bluff and Twmpa guarding the summit. Once over the top there's a dramatic change of scenery. Descend into the Vale of Ewyas, an 11-mile-long steep-sided, glacial valley of old red sandstone. Within two miles the valley floor is a wooded delight.

The vale has many historical and religious sites – two being especially noteworthy. Llanthony Priory is a mystical ruin; first built in the 12th century the site has many a tale to tell. Turner painted his startling watercolour of the priory in 1794 – a copy of which is on one of three excellent information boards at the car park.

Cwmyoy, on the river's east bank, has a church, St. Martin, with a tower that out-leans Pisa and where walls and floors and ceilings have no spot-on right angle; all courtesy of subsidence.

An ecclesiastical gem is in the next valley, west of Cwmyoy, high above the Nant Mair stream. This is my first *must*: seek out Patrishow (Patricio) and the

tiny St. Issui Church. The setting is both inspiring and serene. The interior has a superb 15th-century carved wooden rood screen and several early wall paintings. You'll find it difficult to leave this bit of heaven.

Now do a clockwise tour of the Sugar Loaf, just under 2,000ft high. Head for the Mynydd Llanwenarth car park, at 1,132ft and south of the mountain. Here there's an observation table; better still climb to a point 300ft higher for views of Sugar Loaf, the Usk Valley, Mynydd Llangattock and, to the far south, the Mendips in distant Somerset.

Tretower has the ruins of what was once a formidable fortress and, alongside, in prime condition, a remarkable medieval manor. Totally different, and ideal for all the family, is the newly-created Llangorse Riding and Climbing Centre at Gilfach Farm, east of both the B4560 and Llangorse Lake. The indoor natural and artificial climbing surfaces are terrific; there's also riding, walking and trekking – and the best views of the lake below you to the west (details: 01874 658272).

Finish the day at Pwll-y-wrach Nature Reserve, 500 yards past Mid Wales Hospital, south-east of Talgarth. A walk descends through broadleaved woodlands of sessile oak, ash and elm to the River Enig; at the path's end there's a 25ft-high waterfall.

**Tour two.** From Llyswen cross the Wye on the B4350 Boughrood bridge. Left at Cwmbach and climb through shady woodland, across a common and past blackberry hedges to The Begwns, moorland 1,300ft high. Share the solitude with raptors and skylarks; the southern horizon is a mountain wall – the high heads of the Brecon Beacons to the far right and the Black Mountains to the left. I hope you have a clear day.

Descend to Painscastle, past hedgerows festooned in summer with honeysuckle, wild roses and foxgloves. Then ascend Llanbedr Hill, a colourful contrast, through the seasons, of bracken, heather, ferns and gorse on rounded, deserted hills. Just past "Ireland" look right to the distant Malverns. The descent of Rhulen Hill is an exciting thrill. Detour to the 12th-century St. David's Church at remote Rhulen; a tiny, whitewashed building of simple dignity.

Back to the Edw Valley, one of Wales' best kept secrets. At the first crossing downstream (sign Llwyn Farm) stop and then stand and stare on the bridge: soak in the sights and sounds of three steps of falling water, birdsong, broadleaved trees, rocks and pools. Further down the valley, 400 yards past the first cattle grid, is a picnic area, invariably deserted, beside the Edw; ideal, incidentally, for paddling – adults and kids alike!

At Aberedw find time for a noggin'n natter at Malcolm Gartery's refurbished Seven Stars pub (open 12-2 and 7-11). Chuckle over the poems written by the Edw Bard: ask the landlord to explain the hows and whys!

Now a second *must*: Alan Cunningham's Craft Centre at what was once Erwood railway station, south of Aberedw, beside the B4567. Alan's a master woodturner; his work is magnificent. Admire, too, his before and after 125-year-old railway coaches. "After" is now an art gallery; the paintings on display are an utter delight.

Nearby make three sharp ascents for majestic Wye views. Climb the B4594 east from the Wye bridge for a panorama of the whole valley. Next to Brynhaul for views south; the turn is off the A470 1,200 yards from the bridge. Then to the stand of pines atop Twmpath for views north; the climb's start is opposite the bridge. Each one of three ascents is a rewarding detour.

Finish the day with a short run south-west. First to unspoilt and unsung Brecon. The cathedral, built in the 14/15th centuries, is a handsome, dignified treasure, as is its visitor centre, a tithe barn. The town's newly-constructed Theatr Brycheiniog is a modern counterpoint, a courageous, deserving-success enterprise.

Two last ports of call, the second a *must*. First to the Brecon Beacons Mountain Centre, 5 miles south-west of Brecon, above Libanus on the A470 – you'll enjoy fine views, walks, information displays and a wide range of books, maps and leaflets. Then to the talented Ruth Lyle at the Glynderi Pottery, 400yards north of Sennybridge. Her gallery and workshop are combined; a nice touch is the area set aside for children where they can make their own clay models and muck-about to their heart's content.

### Where to eat and stay

**The Griffin Inn**, Llyswen, Brecon LD3 0UR (01874 754241; fax 01874 754592). A creeper and flower-clad 15th-century sporting inn, run by the so-friendly Stockton family. Three generations are involved, led by Richard and Di, inn-keepers *par excellence*. Young chef Andy Addis-Fuller and his team conjure up appetising, quality fare with a wide, enterprising choice; top marks for their slow-cooked dishes and the use of Welsh produce. Bar lunch Mon-Sat £5-£13; Sun £14. Dinner £15 and à la carte. Rooms (7) £40-£80 (inc' breakfast). Closed 25/26 Dec. Sunday dinner residents only. Cards All.

**Llangoed Hall**, Llyswen, Brecon LD3 0YP (01874 754525; fax 01874 754545). Sir Bernard Ashley's luxury hotel, the Principality's finest: an Edwardian country house, redesigned by Sir Clough William-Ellis in 1912, now a treasure-chest of antiques and paintings. Two masterful young men are the heart and soul of Llangoed: general manager Andrew Brockett has hotelkeeping in his genes; Ben Davies is Wales' only Michelin-starred chef. On a tight budget? Then relish the superb quality-value lunch menus and soak up all the luxury as a bonus. Lunch Mon-Sat £15-£18; Sun £21.50 (inc coffee and *petits fours*). Dinner £36.50-£43. Rooms (20) £270-£300 (inc breakfast). Cards All.

**Maps** OS Landranger 147/148/160/161.