

WINTER WONDERLAND

The Pennine Way is a beast of a long-distance walk in summer. But backpacking it in winter elevates the challenge to an epic endeavour, as Will Millard discovered

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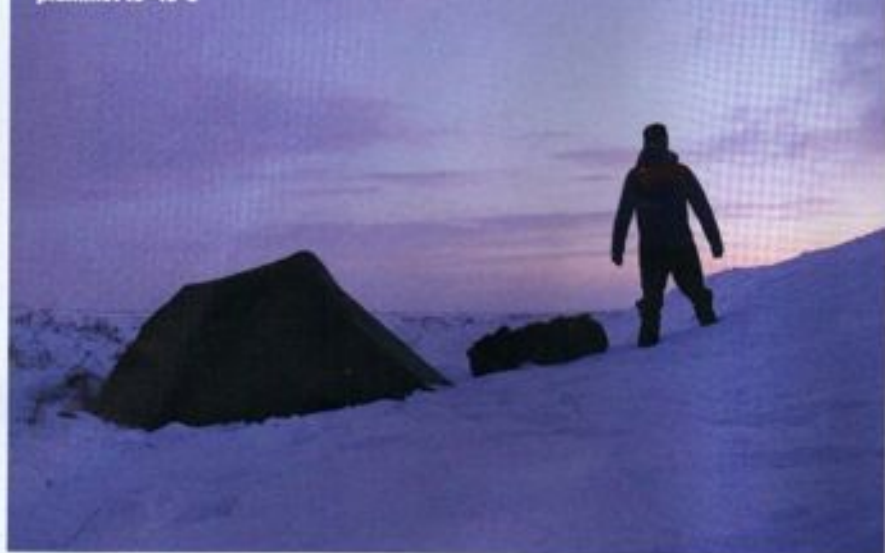


A snow-covered Kinder Scout gets Will's trek off to a spectacular, if perishingly cold, start

WALKING IN A WINT



Sunset on Black Hill,
as temperatures
plummet to -10°C



AS ANY EXPERIENCED outdoorsman will tell you, in an extreme environment the combined force of several seemingly inconsequential errors can quickly snowball towards all-out catastrophe.

I was feeling pretty pleased with myself. The tent was up and I was in it, unscathed and sheltered from the gale outside, and making steady progress after another day of walking in waist-deep snow. All that remained was to get a brew on and settle in for the night.

I looked down at my boots and laughed. My left foot had been submerged in a deep bog earlier in the day, and was now completely encased in an inch-thick block of ice. It looked like something out of a cartoon. I discarded my gloves to break off the worst chunks and started to work on the rock-solid laces. Then I realised I couldn't feel my toes. Then I realised I couldn't feel my fingers. Suddenly I was in quite a bit of trouble. It was well below freezing outside, and now, quite needlessly, my fingers and feet were at real risk of frostbite.

I plunged my defective digits back into my ski gloves and squeezed them tightly under my armpits. Desperate wiggling eventually brought the blood screaming back into the tips, and soon I was able to get my stove out, light it and melt a pan of snow to pour over my boot and finally free my foot.

An hour later, deep within my sleeping bag and nursing a cup of tea, I wonder what Scott of the Antarctic would have made of my ridiculous performance. Not a lot, probably. I'm not in the Antarctic for starters. I'm hidden in a gully just below the summit of Black Hill in the Peak District. I can hear planeloads of holidaymakers circling into Manchester Airport overhead. Yet for the cost of a single train fare to Edale, I'm having an absolute epic. It feels brilliant.

I've decided to take on England's toughest national trail in winter. The Pennine Way traverses the backbone of Britain as it follows the Pennine range for 268 miles, from the

Peak District and through the Yorkshire Dales and Northumberland, concluding among the Cheviot Hills. This is a truly thrilling tramp through some of the finest countryside the North of England has to offer – but be warned, 'the Way' takes some serious planning and a fair bit of training.

A cursory flick through some of the more famous trail guides is enough to put you off for life. The granddaddy of them all is Alfred Wainwright's classic *Pennine Way Companion* (1968), which contains confidence-boosting lines such as, "One gale so shriveled some of the organs necessary for a full and enjoyable life that I feared they were perished forever." I reassure myself by remembering that Wainwright was walking at a time before Gore-tex, and that today the worst sections of the trail are paved with very welcome flagstones. With a few sensible precautions, there is no reason why you can't join those Pennine Way immortals who eventually stagger into Kirk Yetholm's Border hotel and utter the immortal lines, "I am here to claim my free half-pint and certificate, please."

So, why winter? Contrary to popular belief, I am not a masochist or mentally ill. Yes, there is cold weather and limited daylight to contend with, but the worst of the boot-swallowing bogs are frozen solid, and with wet weather dominating our summers of late, I am willing to bet that more walkers now take on this challenge off-season. You need to get out there before they do – because believe me, when the weather isn't rubbish, you'll get some of the very best views this walk has to offer all to yourself.

But the Pennine Way is too impressive to walk alone. I've been abroad for much of the last five years, and missing my friends a lot. If it's going to take 268 miles of winter hiking to get the lads back together and make some fresh memories, I figure it's well worth it.

Things began innocuously enough, with a bum-slide down the snowy slopes of Kinder

continues over>



"Apparently there's
an amazing view round
here somewhere" ... Will
looks for High Cup Nick



Keen (and clean)
in Edale; just
268 miles to go



Top tips: the Pennine Way in winter

1

Listen to your body - look after your feet, cover chills, soothe aches and don't let niggles develop into problems that could potentially stop your walk.

2

Keep a strict wet and dry routine - carry a spare set of thermals, fleeco, gloves, socks and hat that you can wear at night, and keep them dry during the day.

3

You will be walking tired on the trail, so condition yourself by training on tired legs, with consecutive days of low-impact endurance work.

4

Do the walk at your own pace - luggage-carrying services can help with your load and some lovely B&Bs and pubs offer opportunities to dry out, rest up and walk easy.

5

Know your kit - a lot of unnecessary discomfort can come from faffing around with gear you don't know how to use. Trial it before starting on the trail.



Beer and bobble hats: Will's buddies join him on the trail



At High Force, in Wainwright's words "the finest falls in the country"

On the Pennine Way in winter, footbridges and flagstones are your friend



Scout with my Uncle Phil and his mate Big Chris, but by day three I'm really struggling. The mercury has dropped to -10°C at night, incomprehensibly cold for Britain, and I'm struggling to sleep. Experts describe the conditions as 'Level 3'. There is only one level higher, reached when cold weather is so severe and prolonged that its effects "extend outside the health and social care system."

I have already developed welts across my shoulders from my bag straps and I'm spending an hour at night just massaging my toes back to life. By the time I crawl into Hebden Bridge I am ready to give up altogether. But I have an ace up my sleeve. At 2am I squint through a blizzard from the doorstep of the guesthouse to see my old university mates Mark and Chris literally pushing their car through a foot of snow over a railway bridge. It has taken them seven hours to get here from London, and but for a handy snowplough appearing from nowhere on the M62 they wouldn't have made it at all. "Of course you're carrying on!" are Chris's first words as he bounds through the door in a brand new waterproof jacket. I feel instantly better, and after four hours' sleep we are back on the trail, pressing through snowdrifts towards the Yorkshire Dales.

On Sunday evening we sit red-faced and happy in a warm pub, having spent the previous night huddled together in a frozen two-man tent pitched inside a moor-top ruin. "That was such a great weekend," says Mark between mouthfuls of pie and mash, "it felt sooo long." Aside from the fact that we had barely slept, I knew exactly what he meant. Weekends outdoors with friends feel much longer than routine ones spent inside watching the telly with a massive hangover. They go home and I head onwards through the Yorkshire Dales with a spring in my step.

The weather has settled and the snow has mostly melted. I'm feeling fitter than I have in months, falling into the rhythm of daily walking from dawn till dusk and worrying

about little more than where I'll pitch the tent or which ration pack I'll try next evening.

My next bunch of old friends arrive at the charming camping barns at Holwick, County Durham, for a truly exceptional day. The 17½ miles between there and Dufton looks like quite a detour, heading resolutely west instead of arrow-straight north - but lordy, what a detour it is. As if the huge waterfalls of Low Force, High Force and the Cauldron aren't enough, the day finishes at High Cup Nick, a yawning chasm where a glacier has swallowed up the ground. Callum, Dan, James and I stand staring into the perfect symmetry of the abyss, as the sun begins to

"The Pennine Way will always produce something to lift you from your misery"

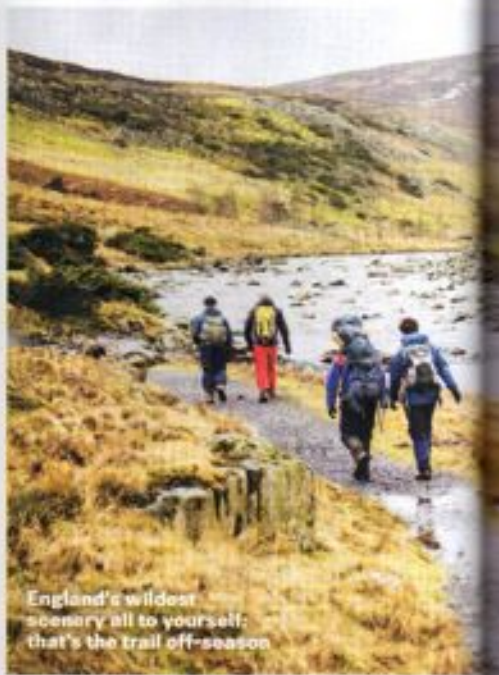
set at the head of the valley. "That's got a touch of God to it," murmurs Callum. We nod in agreement.

"If you start, don't give up, or you will give up at difficulties all your life." Wainwright's final words in his Pennine Way guidebook eventually carry me over the line after 17 incredible days. He's right, it is hard, and there will be moments that you'll want to pack it all in and go home. But if I have learnt anything, it's that the Pennine Way will always produce something to lift you from your misery. For me, the iconic Hadrian's Wall came after a day of eating sleet on the A689; I saw my first giant mountain hares whilst stumbling through a whiteout on Bleaklow Hill; and then had a red grouse for company for almost half a day on the calf-busting Cheviot Hills.

For those who have walked the Pennine Way, the real enjoyment will always be in the sum of its parts: bogs and all, this is an experience of a lifetime.



The Way involves a total ascent of 11,000m - more than climbing Everest



England's wildest scenery all to yourself - that's the trail off-season



Gear up: the kit you can't do without



WATERPROOFS

Essential. I wore the Berghaus Vohum Jacket with Berghaus PacLite Shell over-trousers. Both have large venting zips and are lightweight and breathable.



PHD MINIM 400 DOWN SLEEPING BAG

Made to order, this weighs only 670 grams but is comfy in temperatures well below freezing.



TERRA NOVA EQUIPMENT VOYAGER 2.2

This four-season tent stood up to gales and blizzards with no sign of weakness, plus it's quick to erect and only weighs 2.2 kilos.

PENNINE WAY GUIDE

Damian Hall's brilliant, frequently funny official guidebook has all the maps and directions you'll need.

WALKING POLES

I've not bothered with them for most of my life, but they saved me from the bogs.



The signposting's impeccable - and you get a free half-pint in Kirk Yetholm at the end