

Wild fitness in the UK

How I fell for the Brecon Beacons

A women-only fell running and yoga course in Wales is a thrilling way to get into the wild, says **Jenny Coad**

If the past 18 months have felt like an uphill struggle, you might question the wisdom of spending a weekend fell running in the drizzly Brecon Beacons. However, it's as much about the downs — giddy, exhilarating — as the ups, and my two-day course near Abergavenny in Wales had the benefits of expert tuition and (joy) new companions.

I was on the first fell running and yoga course by Element Active, an outdoor adventure business started four years ago by Ruth Pickvance, a British fell champion. When Pickvance retired from racing she wanted to set up something that would encourage others to get out into the wild. She began offering trail-running courses and found that very few men signed up, which is why she started women-only weekends; mine was in the company of 13 others, most of them in their forties.

The advantage of a gang of women is, Pickvance says, that they create a supportive rather than competitive environment. I'll say. There was no jostling for first place at the start (as you experience at Park Run), no overtaking then blocking the path of a fellow runner. It was more "After you", "Bouncers [as the faster women became known] at the front", "Is this pace OK?" — and so on. It was a blissfully testosterone-lite zone. Although we were all still there to push on and improve.

Which was where Jack Maitland came in. Maitland, another British fell champion, triathlete and coach to the Olympic medal-winners Alistair and Jonathan Brownlee and the long-distance runner Beth Potter, was there not to whip us into shape, but to encourage us to tackle hills more efficiently, as well as to cultivate the confidence to fly down them.

On the first morning he led us up to a rock-strewn, slippery, narrow slope in the mizzle. It's 99 per cent practice and 1 per cent theory, as he put it, so there was no getting round it by simply making notes. Usually I'd slog up a hill staring at the ground, but Maitland said you should stand tall, keep yourself upright and use your arms. "Don't beat a drum with them," he told us. "The action's in the shoulders."

Up we went. I'd made sure to tell everyone that there are no hills where I live, and although I've dashed up my fair share of escalators, you won't catch me running down them. Small steps, counselled Maitland, who would make tiny corrections as he descended, seeking the best path. On the third go I was enjoying it. And we were rewarded by a grassy Iron Age hillfort to lollop up and down.

We had a warming lunch of vegetable soup, sourdough from the Angel Bakery in nearby Abergavenny and apple crumble (elite-athlete fuel) back at base — the atmospheric threshing barn at Llwyn



Jenny Coad running in the Brecon Beacons

Need to know

Jenny Coad was a guest of Element Active and the Angel, Abergavenny. Fell running and yoga weekends from £235, including all tuition, yoga equipment and lunch on both days. The next retreats are on September 4-5 and November 13-14 (element-active.co.uk). B&B doubles from £145 (angelabergavenny.com)

Jenny, second from left, with her fellow runners



Celyn, the Landmark Trust's 15th-century property in the Llanthony Valley. Then we were out again, this time armed with maps.

Pickvance's mantra is "simplicity and self-sufficiency", which essentially means staying safe in the mountains while not being overburdened. In other words tuck your waterproof into your shorts (she gave me a featherlight one by inov-8) and always carry water and a phone. This is a woman who would fit a run into her working day by wearing her kit underneath her clothes to save time — respect.

We were navigating the horseshoe-shaped Hatterrall Hill (a 4km route), which has a long, steep start, valley views below a ridge and glimpses of Newport Bridge and the silvery sea. Walking was permitted — we had to digest that crumble — on the way up, and that was a chance to chat with my fellow runners.

I learnt that Issy, 56, had started running four years ago when she was going through a divorce. Since then she has changed her career, moved cities and now

has a qualification in running leadership. "I want to inspire others," she said. Running had been more than just exercise during the successive lockdowns, we agreed; it had become a way to get out of the house and maintain a social life.

On hikes I've often seen fell runners and thought: "Rather you than me." Now it was the other way round. It wasn't even raining. The clouds cleared and the heat rose off the tickly shoulder-height ferns as gravity rushed us down to the bottom through the fronds.

The finish was at the "crooked church" of St Martin's in Cwmyoy. Built on landslide drift, it has shifted on its unstable base over the years, so the bell tower is at an angle and inside it feels like a bizarre hall of mirrors, with skewwhiff windows and sloping stone archways.

At this point I was ready for a gin and tonic, but tea and biscuits at Llwyn Celyn hit the spot and a lie-down beckoned in the form of yoga. Both days were bookended by classes led by Kirsten Steffensen, a twinkly Dane who co-founded the Sports Ashram in Leeds with Maitland.

Her advice to "work with what you have, not what you wish you have" seemed as pertinent to life off the mat as on it. And it was supremely relaxing at the beginning and end of each day to stretch and lie still listening to the rain, bleating sheep and swooshing wagtails. Those who felt that yoga wasn't for them agreed that the classes were a revelation — they could do it and it absolutely counted as a workout.

I did get that gin and tonic, a pink grapefruit and pomelo number in a goblet hefty enough to count as gym work, at the Angel Hotel in Abergavenny, which has been an inn since 1829 and was where I was staying.

Others were (rather bravely) camping and a group from Oxfordshire, who all met running, were in the threshing barn bunks, which they said could have done with some extra padding, but were good for the price (£14pp per night). You can also hire Llwyn Celyn next door and there are plenty of local B&Bs. The advantages of the Angel? Post-exercise comfort with a bath, a supremely soft bed and the fortifying burger by Tom Hixson of Smithfield, plus more of that sourdough from the associated bakery for breakfast. Although they were charging £4.60 for a cup of tea.

There is plenty to explore in "Aber", as it's known, but I was conserving my energy for Sugar Loaf — at 596m one of the highest and most recognisable peaks in the Black Mountains. I teamed up with Kate, a vet who lives locally, and Jen, who is training to be a paramedic, to conquer the Loaf on a roughly 6km run. Quite often it was faster to stride, especially at the final ascent, which was almost a scramble to the top. When a walker suggested that we were "meant to be running", we assured him that fell runners always walk up the steep bits. There was companionable conferring over where we actually were on the map and glee at the undulating grassy descents where you could really let go while still (sort of) holding a conversation.

Later, over recovery veggie lasagne, Ruth told me that the course "is really all about getting women into wild places". It's that and more. After such a long period of insular and isolated living, it was a liberation to be in this beautiful place with such a great bunch of people spurring me on.

Great fitness trips overleaf