

ALONG FOR THE RIDE

BETHAN HILL EMBARKS ON AN ADVENTURE ON HORSEBACK, THROUGH THE SPECTACULAR ROLLING WELSH COUNTRYSIDE



THIS PAGE FROM LEFT
The Radnorshire Hills.
Bethan and Lizzie riding
down from the Radnor
Forest. OPPOSITE
The ride takes in
quiet forest brideways



On foot, there's only so much ground you can cover, and by bike you're going too fast to really take in the scenery. But on horseback, you can travel for miles and miles and take everything in.' So says Charlotte Sainsbury-Plaice, who co-owns, with her friend Zara Colchester, the riding-holiday company Stately Rides (the subject of a 'Lifestyle' feature in the May 2015 issue of *House & Garden*). Originally, they focused on rides in the Cotswolds, but after Zara relocated to a farm in Clyro, Powys, two years ago, they decided to branch out to the Welsh countryside as well. They've been busily planning some new routes in this area for the summer, and my friend Lizzie and I are among the first to try one of them.

Arriving in Wales from London, we spend the first night in the beautifully converted two-bedroom annexe at Zara's farm, decorated with seagrass flooring, bright, patterned textiles and rustic wooden furniture. During a supper of homemade oxtail stew, we discuss our riding itinerary and swap horsey anecdotes. Then it is early to bed, for we have a long day ahead of us. There are 21 miles to cover and, as we are riding in February, the Welsh weather is not promising glorious sunshine. 'You'll need to be fairly robust,' Zara warns.

We awake to the honking of the farm's geese and head inside for toast, bacon and freshly laid eggs, before mounting our trusty steeds, Bella and Crosby. Our guide is Steve Lloyd, a local farmer, experienced horseman and friend of Zara's, who is entrusted with navigating the routes up hill and down dale. No mean feat, as after 10 miles or so, one fern-carpeted hilltop is difficult to distinguish from another. The views, however, are stunning.

We ride over the Begwyns moorland, through Steve's home village of Painscastle and then up and over the Llanbedr, Radnorshire and Glascwm hills, with Steve highlighting geographical points of interest, as well as the houses of his friends and family, many of whom have lived here for generations. Aside from the odd farmer in his tractor, we see no other soul - an amazing phenomenon when you live in London. The horses, though excited by all the open space, are well behaved and we quickly become used to their little quirks; Bella's lower lip quivering with anticipation is a particular source of amusement. Yes, our eyes water on the faster uphill canters, but this is mostly because of the wind.

Ah yes, the weather. The dry, still conditions we had set off in quickly give way to wind and horizontal rain. We don't really notice, though, as we are focused

on our horses and the views, which go on uninterrupted for miles, even through the mist. It all feels strangely romantic, as if we are galloping through the pages of a Brontë novel. It is only when we are met by Zara, Charlotte and the Stately Rides team halfway at Cwm Kesty for lunch that we realise how sodden we are. This explains why the rides usually take place in the summer.

After a quick picnic, we head off again, with another 10 miles to cover to The Old Vicarage B&B at Evancoyd, our stopover for the evening. We ride on along quiet lanes and bridleways to New Radnor, passing through the Radnor Forest and over the 610-metre-high Bache Hill, until we reach the B&B at around 5pm. Our hosts have arranged afternoon tea for us, before a restorative bath, quick change and departure for dinner at The Stag Inn in the nearby village of Titley. Nothing builds an appetite quite like a long ride and all that fresh air, and the food was delicious and plentiful.

This ride is intended to be four days long, covering around 80 miles in total, from Zara's farm to The Old Vicarage, then on to Stokesay Court near Ludlow, where a night is spent before the two-day journey back. This imposing house featured in the film *Atonement* and embodies what Stately Rides is all about - brilliant riding combined with stays in grand

houses. As we are there only for a weekend, we are riding back to Clyro on the second day. Having got to know our horses, and feeling more confident in our riding skills, we throw ourselves into some extended trots and canters.

Our final stop is at the Roast Ox Inn in Painscastle for lunch before we head home. Though our legs, backs and other unmentionables are, by this point, rather sorer than when we had arrived, we feel as if we have truly escaped from it all. Winston Churchill said, 'No hour of life is wasted that is spent in the saddle,' and the long hours of this weekend have been put to very good use.

ways and means

Bethan Hill travelled as a guest of Stately Rides (statelyrides.co.uk). The four-day Welsh ride to Stokesay Court and back, including all accommodation, meals and luggage transfers, costs from £600 per person per day ☐

It feels strangely romantic, as if we are galloping through the pages of a Brontë novel

CHARLES SAINSBURY-PLAICE; FINN BEALES; BEN WHITMORE/GALAMY STOCK PHOTO

