

The Pennine Way

Wreathed in mist, braced against icy rain and a screaming wind, I strode out across the bare millstone grit of Kinder Scout. London lay 240km behind me, but it might have been on the other side of the Earth. Here there were no skyscrapers and no sign of the sluggish Thames; no Tube, no crowds, no traffic. Just the sharp wind hurling rain at me from a bank of fog. This was day one of the Pennine Way: a 460km, 16-day walk through some of England's finest back-country. I drew my jacket close and pressed on towards the invisible horizon.



It would be trite to say that my first strides on to the Pennine Way – something of a rite of passage for British long-distance walkers – set the tone for the rest of the journey. The Pennine Way so diverse in weather, terrain and wildlife that no meaningful conclusion can be drawn from any single day on the trail. As an epic challenge, it must be indivisible: the route can be split into smaller weekend trips, but only the full walk will ever really count as the Pennine Way. That's my Pennine Way. And this is why and how I walked it.

Established in 1965, the Pennine Way heads north

for about 430km from the Peak District in England to Kirk Yetholm, a tiny village in southern Scotland. There are a few optional loops and diversions, making it mad-deningly difficult to pin down an exact distance, but whatever route is followed the average Pennine Wayfarer will ascend more than the height of Everest. Starting in the bare millstone grit hills of the Peaks, it skirts the edge of the Lake District, tracks through the moorland of North Yorkshire and reaches Scotland via the rolling mountains of the Cheviots.

For as long as I can remember, hills have been in my heart: much of my child-

hood was spent on long walks across the Cotswolds, a range of limestone hills close to my hometown, Cheltenham. I loved the hills, and my childhood love followed me into adulthood. By the time I started to look at the Pennine Way, late in 2017, I had walked some of the world's finest long-distance trails: the Inca Trail, as an 18-year-old in 2000; the Annapurna Circuit in Nepal's glittering Himalayas in 2013; and Scotland's spectacular West Highland Way in 2014.

I needed a bigger challenge: something life-changing. What better than a walk of such notoriety that one of Britain's most famous walk-

ers, Alfred Wainwright, outright hated it? ("You won't come across me anywhere on the Pennine Way," he declared after a couple of attempts at the route in appalling weather. "I've had enough of it.") It's a sentiment many Wayfarers come to respect – not least when they reach the end of the trail, where a pub continues to honour Wainwright's promise of a free half-pint of beer to anyone unwise enough to have completed the full walk.)

As well as allowing me to indulge my love of wilderness, hills and walking, the Pennine Way would provide me with superb photographic opportunities. As an aspiring professional photographer,

I needed the challenge to put my travel and landscape skills to the test and had found that adversity fuels my creativity. Two of my highest-earning and award-winning pictures were made in appalling conditions – a hail-lashed headland in Iceland and a drenched clifftop in northern Scotland – and I'd come to love the challenge of making a landscape that captured awful weather. So as I set off from Edale on that first Pennine Way day – directly into a storm cloud – I didn't feel daunted.

Even so, the weather on that first day was intimidatingly foul. I was barely able to shoot any photographs

at all for my first couple of days on the trail. My guidebook promised me expansive views – the reality was 30-metre visibility, my horizon reduced to vague shadows emerging from the murk. I soon found that foul weather, when added to physical exhaustion, quickly loses its photographic appeal.

Later into the walk – the night before I was due to ascend Cross Fell, the Way's 800-metre high-point – a colossal lightning storm terrified me as lightning streaked down into meadows either side of the country lane I happened to be traversing. Bolts tore across the night sky, throwing Cross Fell and ...



its neighbouring hills into silhouette against searing flashes of magenta and blue. The next day's approach to the 800m peak marked the worst weather of the trip, as neighbouring Great Dun Fell and Little Dun Fell were entirely consumed by storm clouds and gale-force winds while I crossed them. No photos there: just memories of feeling awed by the storm's violence.

Often I found that the rain-lashed hills had been churned into deep mud by cattle, sheep and other walkers. Mud sometimes seemed little short of malicious. It slowed me down and sapped my energy, leaving me wondering if each step was worthwhile. It exerted such an infuriating effect on me that at times I found myself screaming foul abuse at it – as though this could help dry it up. No such luck: to wet boots, add a sore throat and blushing cheeks as I saw a group of ramblers marvelling at a man apparently shrieking at the bare earth.

The rain wasn't a constant problem: some days were so hot that they brought challenges of their own, not least when I found myself alone on expansive moorland baking under an unforgiving, hot sun. Set against those exhausting conditions, I rather came to prefer the rainy days. As tir-



ing as rain could be, it did carry a benefit: as long as I was braced against awful weather, my by-then excruciating feet stopped bothering me. Every time I paused for water on hotter days, my feet and knees were engulfed in pain.

An injury is an intrinsic part of the Pennine Way: such a reliable feature that sore

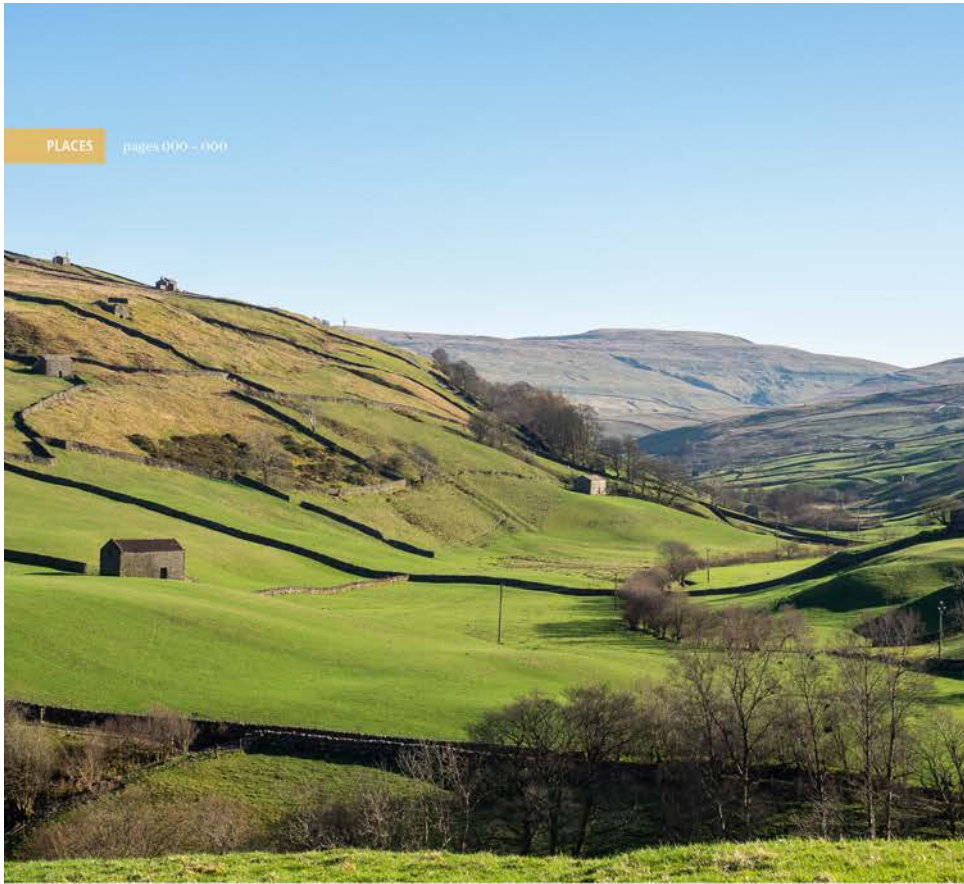
knees, aching shoulders and bruised heels might as well be mapped, as permanent a part of the route as Hadrian's Wall or Pen-y-Ghent. Each walker carries on his or her body a landscape of infirmities. There were points where I ended a days walking in such pain, and so dispirited by the bad weather, that I was left wondering if I could continue.



Some days seemed intent on forcing me to quit. I might find myself traipsing across bare moors, my map and compass little help as the trail petered out. Or I might

find myself on a well-marked woodland trail, suddenly plunging up to my waist in mud as the path turned into a quagmire. The will to press on could be hard to find, espe-

cially on days when I didn't see another person for eight hours at a time. Although I never felt truly lonely, there were moments when a fellow walker might have ...



helped buoy my mood. I am usually a solitary walker, but I finished the Way with a new-found appreciation for company.

Despite the injuries, the solitude and the weather, the Pennine Way rewards walkers with views that are hard to match. Eleven days into the walk I found myself shaken by Cauldron Snout, a violent cascade of peat-brown water churned white over towering rocks. That same day I stood at the top of High Cup Nick, an immense glacial

u-valley gouged out of a hillside, stunned by its spectacular scale. These views – and others – helped redouble my determination to press on.

My determination also drew strength from wildlife. An awful, exposed trudge across the wild heather plain of Ickornshaw Moor under a blazing sun led me to pitch my tent in a farmer's field. As soon as my tent had been pitched and my rations rehydrated I sat on my porch looking out at the sun setting sedately over

the misty Yorkshire Dales. As I lay in my sleeping bag the hillside reverberated with birdsong. Burbling skylarks; drumming snipes; whistling, aerobic lapwings; hooting pheasants blasting skywards; clattering red grouse rocketing across the moors; and, best of all, the distant lament of curlews.

The final day of the walk drew together the physical challenge, variable weather, injuries, wildlife and photography into a single exhausting effort: a 26-mile walk



across the Cheviots, on a day that surged through withering sunshine, gale-force winds and driving rain. Appropriately enough, some of the features of the final stage bear names that suited the conditions: Windy Crag, Windy Gyle and Windy Rig, Foul Step and Murder Cleugh. Eventually, I found The Hope close to Kirk Yetholm.

Every time I crossed a stretch of flat peat, I would

be rewarded with an ascent of one of the Cheviots' steep hills. On I pressed, up and down Ogre Hill, Beefstand Hill, Mozie Law and – eventually – the spectacular exposed summit of Windy Gyle. Around me, in gin-clear visibility, I could see distant storms racing across remote hilltops, shrouding dark peaks in opaque grey columns of rain. Even in the bitter wind, I felt invigorated.

Memories surged back of that first day on Kinder Scout: the whirling storm and the utter isolation. Sixteen days in, past Hadrian's Wall and Wark Forest, far beyond Kinder Scout, Cross Fell and Top Withens, I strode on. On, past mountain goats and farms, road signs and the final Pennine Way finger-post. On to Kirk Yetholm, tears and memories of the Pennine Way: the best ordeal of my life. :