Battling the Storms of Snowdon: Expedition Fund Report

I never thought that I would look forward to a trip that involved being soaked to the bone, pelted by hail, and walking through a mud bath 3000 feet above sea level, and yet, when I heard that my friend, Yakshi, and I had been successful in our Expedition Fund applications, I couldn’t stop the rush of excitement. We had proposed this challenge to raise funds for Kidney Research UK: a double hike of Mount Snowdon, the highest peak in Wales, in one day (the 25th of June 2022).

There are three main considerations when it comes to hill-walking: having the right equipment, knowing the route, and being prepared for the weather conditions. While we had a good grasp of the first two, it was the third that was giving us the jitters. The Met Office had predicted high gusts (above 50 mph) and terrible thunderstorms during the day of our hikes, and unfortunately, no amount of refreshing the weather page was changing the forecast. Due to this, we decided that we would change our goal from two hikes in one day to two hikes in a 24-hour period.

The First Hike – 24th June

Yakshi had taken on the task of driving the entire way from Maidenhead to Llanberis, which took about six hours. As we got closer to the imposing peaks of Snowdonia, already shrouded in thick clouds, a pit began to grow in my stomach as the reality of the daunting challenge we’d set ourselves became clear. We were determined to do two hikes during our trip but were unsure if we could successfully do our first that evening, as the forecast looked terrible, and completing our first summit in the approaching darkness seemed misguided. Our deliberations were put to rest as the kind lady who was running our hotel enthusiastically told us to go for it in the evening itself.

The first hike started with a fellow “hill walker” warning us he had not made it past the Halfway Hut (at the halfway point) due to the high winds. We were unperturbed, and luckily, we found the weather mild and enjoyable, to begin with. The views were stunning, and before we knew it, we had buoyantly walked past the Halfway Hut, up Alt Moses (a steep incline involving many stone steps), the Killer Convex (a part of the path which crosses underneath the railway line and opens to breath-taking views of the valley) and had reached the sign pointing towards the Summit.

Here, the weather changed. We were alone at the top of Mount Snowdon in the fading light, surrounded by a bubble of thick mist - we couldn’t hear any sounds and struggled to see beyond three metres in any direction. It was unlike anything I have experienced: eerie and unearthly. This was our first time climbing the peak, and, although we had done our best to memorise the path from pictures, we didn’t know
where the summit was. This was exacerbated by the mist: we ended up “scaling” several small hills on the way to the summit, thinking we had finally conquered the peak of Mount Snowdon – this must have been much to the amusement of the sheep glancing at us while lazily chewing, as we were still about a mile away from the top.

We finally did get to the real summit and were rewarded with views of mist, which we took in while being buffeted by aggressive gusts. After taking the obligatory pictures, we hastily started our descent. From the summit through to the halfway point, we got to see the tendrils of mist magically lifting, and the evening sun seeping through the curtain of clouds. The undulating sheets of rain rapidly moving towards us took on a completely new perspective at the height of the clouds, and almost made the soaking we received manageable.

We successfully got back to our hotel room at 10 pm, with gravity having done most of the work for the descent. To our dismay, both of our bags (with our spare clothes, snacks, and equipment) were drenched. We made some makeshift drying racks out of the furniture in the room and hoped that when we woke up in 5 hours for the next hike everything would be dry.

The Second Hike – 25th June

The day of thunderstorms, and “hazardous weather above 300m” had arrived. Since we were going well above 900m, we decided to disregard this warning which was clearly for less experienced climbers...

It seemed windy enough at the bottom of the mountain, which we trudged to around 8 am in boots that were still wet, with painful knees that were shocked by the activity we had asked them to perform the previous evening. We weren’t dissuaded. We powered through the first half of the ascent, to the Halfway Hut, much quicker than we did in our first hike. It was only after this that the real adventure began.

After some initial hailstorms, it was dry and cold. The gusts of wind were so strong as to arrest our progress, and even cause the loss of footing in some places. Despite the terrible weather, many people were also trying to do the hike. The rain had caused the path to become slippery and muddy, and our already wet shoes seemed to absorb all the water on the ground. Once we were near the Summit sign a thin layer of mist set in, and after passing the sign, as if on cue, an incredibly heavy hailstorm started, which felt like it was falling from about 2 metres above us. It managed to drench us to the skin through all our layers, and conjured wind gusts that would’ve thrown us to the floor were we not holding each other’s numb hands, or the rocks.
The weather was truly horrific, and at several points, we did discuss coming down before reaching the top, but we were determined to achieve the goal we had set out to do, however, and with confidence that other people were braving the weather, we trudged on, soaked, shivering, and in utter misery, until the summit. There was no celebration on achieving the task with this hike, though, as we were both keen on escaping the hail and rain, which was so heavy and constant it felt as though it was searing through exposed flesh.

Somehow, after stopping every few steps of the descent due to our painful knees which seemed to have given in, we ended up lumbering to the railway bridge which separated Alt Moses and the Killer Convex. We decided that the shelter of the railway bridge, buffeted by the wind, rain, and hail, would be a good place to stop so Yakshi could layer up. Of all times for the zip of her bag to jam, this was the least appropriate, and so of course, it happened. We could barely see through the hail, let alone feel our numb fingers as we tried fumbling with the zips of her outer layers to put on the warm fleece. The experience was topped off by the feeling of putting freezing, numb hands back into soaked gloves.

Eventually, after getting down Alt Moses squelching step by squelching step at the pace of lethargic snails, we reached the Halfway Hut, which signified an exponential rise in safety, and therefore, mood. We were both still shivering and quite worn down, but after we each had a wet half of a Ploughman’s sandwich, and a snack bar, we felt strong enough to finish the job. The shadows of the clouds moving across the valley were stunning, and it was enjoyable making friends with the many sheep on the way down.

A warm shower, a change of clothes, and a hot dinner gave us enough energy to appreciate the adventure that we had been on. I was thankful and proud that we had completed the task despite the difficult weather, but was aware that things could have gone awry, a fact that was made too clear by the brave Mountain Rescue Team who were making their way up the mountain as we were descending.

We raised £937 for Kidney Research UK (Just Giving link: https://www.justgiving.com/fundraising/doublesnowdon4kidneyresearch), well above our initial goal of £500. I am very grateful to everyone who donated to such an important charity, and for the chance to climb the majestic mountain twice and witness the raw power of nature. It’s a trip I’ll remember for a long time, and I hope to return to Mount Snowdon!