

The Ramblers' Railway

by Yousef Najib

The ticket pressed firmly in my hand. It's my passport to an adventure. Why does it always create tension and excitement? Does everybody else love travelling by train as much as I do? Almost silently, the train races its way alongside the platform and comes gently, gracefully, to a standstill, as if reminding any impatient, jostling passengers to also board graciously, in an orderly, considerate fashion, befitting the occasion. Whistles blow, doors slam and it's time for take-off. The rhythmic beat of the train is like music to the ears. It pulsates like a drumbeat, perhaps it's the heartbeat of the train itself. The throb intensifies as it gathers speed.

A hidden, everchanging landscape rushes past, a panorama of hills and havens, woodlands, valleys and villages. Glimpses of places I've never seen and glimpses into the lives of others. Vast tracts of unspoilt, inspiring countryside, suddenly hidden from view by walls of bricks and concrete as towns and cities whizz by.

Some travellers are glued to their laptops and phones, oblivious to the outside world. Others are mesmerised by the unfolding, fast-moving world outside, almost like football fans not wanting to lose sight of the ball as it shoots past them from the striker's boot. There's plenty of excitement and there's still more to come as the game and the journey are still in progress. For some, the train's steady, predictable rhythm induces sleepy snoring.

For train enthusiasts, one train journey can soon lead to another more adventurous and challenging day out. Beside the breathtaking Peris Lake in Llanberis, Gwynedd, is a standalone railway with links to no other. A ticket offers you a ride to the top of the highest mountain in Wales.

It's half term, mid-October and autumn has arrived in Snowdonia. This is a promised and carefully planned excursion. "Must be well prepared," often repeated words from my mother. "Remember, this train does not have a first-class carriage, heating, carpeted floors or luxurious trimmings. It follows a path once used as a pony track. No trainers. You'll need your strong boots and warm, woolly jumpers, hat and gloves. Don't forget your new lens." Dad, a keen Snowdon hiker, joined in:

"The train will take us right to the top, 1085 metres: that's 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ miles and it takes more than two hours to reach the summit. This is a heritage, narrow-gauge adventure. Off we go!"

Soon, we're all aboard. Slowly, surely and reassuringly, train number 4 – 'Wyddfa', the Welsh name for Snowdon – takes us on our journey. We settle into our seats, senses alive. It's no time for airpods and watching 'YouTube shorts'. It's time to wonder, to create memories and snap some shots. It's almost theatrical, as though a film were unfolding right before our eyes, with an incredible backcloth. We're the audience, drawn into the dramatic scenes. "How would you describe this?" asks Mum, "spectacular?"

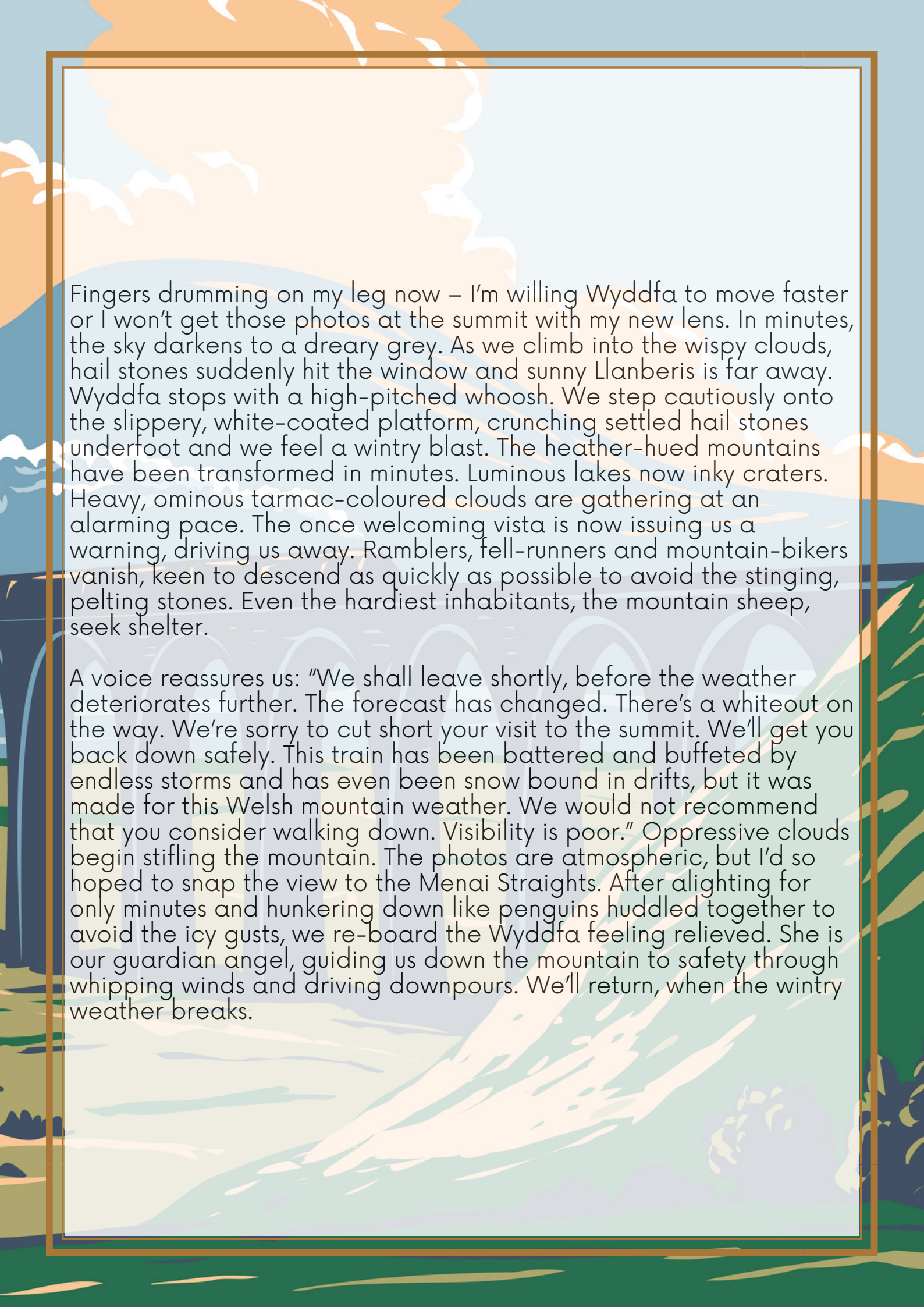
We soon leave the lowland areas and the laborious upward climb kicks in. The train twists and turns, reaching higher and higher, like a mountaineer pushing himself to the limit of his strength. This powerful, specially designed locomotive, has become our companion and our mountain guide. It's urging us to enjoy every minute and to marvel at every glimpse of a new peak or lake coming into view. Camera clicking.

"Which one is that?" I ask.

"Look at the map?" suggests Mum.

"Oh, it's Crib Goch. That's notorious," replies Dad. "Not for the faint hearted. Vertiginous 200-foot scree slopes on both sides and a narrow ridge to clamber along."

"Not today, thank you!" adds Mum. "I prefer to be a spectator. Oh, wait a moment. The weather's changing. Look at the clouds skimming across the sky. We've still got to get to the summit. Fingers crossed."



Fingers drumming on my leg now – I'm willing Wyddfa to move faster or I won't get those photos at the summit with my new lens. In minutes, the sky darkens to a dreary grey. As we climb into the wispy clouds, hail stones suddenly hit the window and sunny Llanberis is far away. Wyddfa stops with a high-pitched whoosh. We step cautiously onto the slippery, white-coated platform, crunching settled hail stones underfoot and we feel a wintry blast. The heather-hued mountains have been transformed in minutes. Luminous lakes now inky craters. Heavy, ominous tarmac-coloured clouds are gathering at an alarming pace. The once welcoming vista is now issuing us a warning, driving us away. Ramblers, fell-runners and mountain-bikers vanish, keen to descend as quickly as possible to avoid the stinging, pelting stones. Even the hardest inhabitants, the mountain sheep, seek shelter.

A voice reassures us: "We shall leave shortly, before the weather deteriorates further. The forecast has changed. There's a whiteout on the way. We're sorry to cut short your visit to the summit. We'll get you back down safely. This train has been battered and buffeted by endless storms and has even been snow bound in drifts, but it was made for this Welsh mountain weather. We would not recommend that you consider walking down. Visibility is poor." Oppressive clouds begin stifling the mountain. The photos are atmospheric, but I'd so hoped to snap the view to the Menai Straights. After alighting for only minutes and hunkering down like penguins huddled together to avoid the icy gusts, we re-board the Wyddfa feeling relieved. She is our guardian angel, guiding us down the mountain to safety through whipping winds and driving downpours. We'll return, when the wintry weather breaks.