

Travel

Power Down

More comfortable than camping, an almost-off-grid cottage in Snowdonia has Rhiannon Batten going mindfully wild in the country

IT'S THE BEST bath I've ever had. The pipes beneath me gurgle gently, after puffing up a supply of hot water from the Aga, and I lie in the high enamelled tub soaking up a view of the valley through floor-to-ceiling windows; a patchwork of greens that ran the full Welsh spectrum from sheep-dotted grass and woodland spinach to mountain khaki. It's summer so there's no need to light the candle in the bath rack. Instead, I shut my eyes and listen to the polyphonic bleating of sheep, and the muffled hooting of an owl.

The setting for this idyllic dip is Garth Gell Farmhouse, a partially off-grid holiday cottage 10 minutes' drive from Dolgellau, in Snowdonia National Park. Built in 1805, the house was bought by current owner Lewis Holland's family in 1988 and meticulously restored over the space of a decade, having been uninhabited for the previous 40 years. Now a vision of pared-back Snowdonian style, recently listed on Airbnb, it has been used until this point by friends and family only – as

an affable but comprehensive guest information guide attests to. "We hope you and your party thoroughly enjoy your stay at Garth Gell," it says, before elegantly warning that "there is very little that happens in the valley that [neighbour and sheep farmer] Mr Jones is not aware of."

The fact that the four-bedroom farmhouse is also still in regular use by the owners adds to Garth Gell's charm. Designed by Lewis's wife Kathleen, a children's knitwear designer, the interiors are the antithesis of a quick trolley dash at IKEA. Instead, the place is decorated with rustic stoneware bowls, precious paintings, fine bedlinen and colourful textiles that nod to Kathleen's Peruvian childhood. Surf Snowdonia wave pool, cycling the Mawddach Trail, visiting ancient castles and climbing Cader Idris are some of many things to do while you're staying, but the real appeal of a visit is the don'ts. Reached via a little humpback stone bridge and a bracingly steep track, Garth Gell is, ultimately, a place to





Kitchen



The bedroom looks out onto the valley

arrive and then switch off.

Never connected to mains utilities, the house does have some basic power thanks to solar panels (phone charging and table lamps – yes; hair drying – no) but the water supply comes from a natural spring, there is no landline, mobile phone reception is elusive and the second bathroom is dependent on a woodburning stove for hot water. One of a new wave of indulgent off-grid escapes (others include Eilean Shona in the Inner Hebrides, and Hex Cottage in Suffolk), Garth Gell caters to those who like the idea of leaving social media and central heating behind but prefer a comfortable bed to a

tent and a well-equipped kitchen to foraging. It's what you might call *quite* off-grid. Or, as the guest information describes it, “consciously low-tech”.

While more spartan off-grid retreats increasingly seek to counteract a dependency on technology, the lure of the quite-off-grid holiday is not so much abstaining from digital life as appreciating the analogue; there's mindfulness, after all, in tasks like chopping wood, stoking fires and boiling stovetop kettles, and the promise of the kind of comatose sleep that comes only with physical fatigue.

The first challenge is allowing



The super cosy living room

yourself to switch off. But when you make the decision to hold back from racing around the region's "must-do" sights, the "must-don'ts" start to materialise. From the night-time stillness of a sheepskin-covered chair in Garth Gell's garden, another (mindfully chopped) log on the firepit, the stars seem mesmerisingly diverting. Waking up in a bed directly above the Aga, the cosiness is so enveloping I feel a bit like a freshly baked croissant – and stay burrowed in the warmth much longer than I normally would. Dinner becomes an event rather than a chore when eaten by candlelight around the

kitchen's big farmhouse table – or out on the hillside (another thing the quite-off-grid lifestyle does, I discover, is dissolve the boundary between inside and out).

One evening we take a bottle of Welsh wine up to the remains of old gold mines that pepper the hills above the house and spend the golden hour sipping it from tin cups as the sun slowly sinks and buzzards soar overhead.

Another day we walk a couple of miles down-valley to the George III pub at Penmaenpool. Gerard Manley Hopkins was so moved by the reflective beauty of the Mawddach Estuary that he wrote a

TRAVEL

poem about it for the inn's visitors' book in 1876. That rugged beauty remains just as striking today. Leaving the farmhouse, we wind downhill, past fields flecked with drystone walls and clouds of caramel-nosed Welsh mountain sheep, into a wooded RSPB reserve. Ferns underfoot, spindly birches and stately oaks overhead, we're deep in the living, breathing, bird-singing sculpture that is the Celtic rainforest. Until a footpath takes us to the little toll bridge that will take us over the water to the pub.

There, we sit and wash down bowls of chips with Welsh cider,

watching the shadows of clouds ripple over the surrounding mountains, shading their kaleidoscopic greens in turn. On our way back up to Garth Gell, we stop to cool off in a series of inky pools in the river, clambering over boulders so covered in moss it's like treading on carpet. Inching out into deeper water, we slowly submerge into its glossy depths, enjoying the tingling cold. I was wrong, I decide. This is the best bath I've ever had. ☺

*Garth Gell sleeps six.
Rental rates start at £200 per night
(garthgellfarmhouse.co.uk).*

The farmhouse in its idyllic valley setting

