

The South Wales Traverse

Completed by Yiannis Tridimas on Sat/Sun 28/29th March 09
Statistics: Distance 113km; Ascent: 5340m; Time taken: 22:07

I had thought of attempting this challenge many years ago but never found the time to do it. It was Rob Woodall's recent suggestion to join him in his attempt that prompted me to seriously consider it.

I have limited knowledge of those beautiful hills in South Wales. I had done the Black Mountain race a couple of times some years ago as well as the KIMM in the Brecon Beacons.

It is said that Rob planned the SWT as a 'training' session for his forthcoming Meirionnydd round attempt in May. This meant a date for the SWT early in the season – not the best time of the year with long nights and uncertain weather. Mindful that I would have to do many hours in the dark, I decided to familiarise myself with the area. The weekend after a successful High Peak Marathon found me in South Wales. I spent most of Saturday receiving the first section (Carmarthen Fan) and after spending the night at Llanthony I received a good part of the Black mountains with particular attention to the forest at Blaen-y-cwm. That meant that I had local knowledge of the bits I was likely to do in the dark. The rest I could navigate.

Rob is a faster runner than I am, so I was not going to run with him. I planned to start around one hour earlier. This would bring in an element of competition and would make Wayne's road support much easier. The Brecon Beacons and the Black mountains are separated by a valley through which the river Usk flows. The most convenient crossing of the river is a bridge in the private estate at Glanusk Park. As I was not keen to rely on permission to cross the bridge and since I like doing my own thing, I decided to give the estate a miss and make my way across via Mynydd Llangynidr and Crickhowell. This, according to the map, would add over 1km but it appeared to me to be a more straightforward route.

The two weekends before the 28th were dry, mild and almost ideal for such an adventure. I suggested to Rob that perhaps we should go a week early at short notice as the weather forecast was predicting a change towards the end of March. This could not be done since Wayne was not free to support us that weekend.

On Saturday 28th Rob, myself and David Waide arrived at Llanthony and had a few hours sleep in our cars at the Priory car park. Wayne arrived after midnight and transported us to the start. It was a dark and blustery night when I set off at 04:12. Rob and David were to start at daybreak.

I was carrying a rucksack with spare gear, food and drinks and my mobile phone. For navigation I had maps for the whole route and a gps in which I had entered all 31 tops and used it only occasionally to check that I was heading for the right hill.

I navigated to the first hill and over Foel Fraith in limited visibility. On the way up the rocky second hill there was a hail shower. Soon after day broke and on the way up the slope of Waun Lefrith, it begun to snow. There was a significant accumulation of snow on the ground all the way past Fan Hir, the last hill in the first section.

I arrived at my first rest point in good spirits, inside my estimated time and after a brief feeding stop I headed up the steep Fan Gyhirych. I had not been on this section before, so I was careful with navigation, particularly as there was thick cloud covering the top and snow was falling. Before I started ascending to Fan Nedd the weather cleared and stayed clear for the rest of that section, which offers some good running on grassy slopes. I reached the second stop inside my estimated schedule. There were

lots of people about by now, climbing the magnificent Brecon Beacons. With Rob and David still not in view I headed up the third section. I was feeling quite euphoric and the element of competition introduced by the 'chasing start' helped to keep me pushing on. Soon I reached Allt Lwyd and made my first mistake in the forest by taking the wrong track. I soon remedied that by some serious bramble bashing and got to my third rest stop at Abercynafon. I had more food and drink and took my jacket off as it was warmer now and there were no high hills for a while. As I was getting ready to leave Rob and David appeared. After exchanging greetings I went off while they had their break. From Cefn yr Ystrad I headed towards Crickhowell. The long stretch over Mynydd Llangynidr was undulating and quite rough in parts. Near the B4560 I met Wayne who took a couple of photographs and then dashed to Cwm gu to meet Rob and David. I picked up some food I had stashed by the road and carried on down along an endless tarmac road, walked through Crickhowell and made my way up footpaths past table Mountain to Pen Cerrig-calch. From the bridge at Crickhowell to the top it is the longest climb in the route and it felt like that. I was tired and was now going through my 12 hour low. There were loads of stud marks on the ground – the Pen Cerrig-calch race was run earlier on. The day was coming to an end and there was a chill in the air. Thankfully the strength of the wind was diminishing. Near the top I put on my windproof jacket again and forced some food down. This was an area I was familiar with from the Black Mountains race. As the ground levelled off I started feeling better again and pressed on. I assumed Rob and David were ahead but could not see them. On reaching the top of Waun fach I turned my headtorch on as it was quite dark by now. In the col before Pen y Cadair Fawr my mobile rang. By the time I got to it, it stopped. It was Rob. I called him back and he said "I am on the way up Pen Twyn Mawr", one hill ahead of me. I found out later from Wayne that he used the singular as David had retired at Cwm gu.

I had no problem getting through the difficult forest to the last feeding stop as I had reced it two weeks before. Without a recce this descent as well as the way up to the next hill could be a complete nightmare.

The toughest of the remaining climbs up Chwarel y Fan was not too bad. Once above the forest I saw Rob's torch, he was just reaching the top. The long ridge run to Rhos Dirion went on for ever. The light northerly wind was very cold and ice crystals were glistening on the peaty ground. The sky was clear and the thin crescent of the moon on the west was too faint to make any difference.

Navigation was not much of a problem from now on. The problem was keeping moving and staying warm. I made a small detour on the way down Gospel pass by following the wrong path briefly. The last stretch along Offas Dyke path seemed interminable but thankfully the wind was from behind. On the final descent to Llanthony through the fields and stiles I followed a gps trail from my recce two weeks before. This saved me searching for the invisible path, something that gave Rob a few problems, as he told me later.

At the priory car park, Wayne was asleep in his car and Rob, who had finished a short time before me, was having some food and resting.

After a few hours sleep in the back of the car I woke up to a warm sunny day. I was glad this was over so I could start thinking of the next adventure further north.

I am grateful to Wayne with whose support this challenge was a success.

Yiannis Tridimas



FIRST SECTION in early morning viewed from the A 4067. Fan Hir and the hills behind it in the grip of wintry weather. Photo: Wayne Percival



Feeding time opposite the Storey Arms. Photo: Wayne Percival