

# Snowdon Mountain Railway – Mountain Top Adventure

The Snowdonia National Park, the second-largest after the Lake District National Park, England covers 840 sq miles (1352 sq. km.) of North Wales. The majestic Snowdon Mountains covering a fairly compact area in its northern part are undeniably spectacular. At 3560 ft (1,085 m), it is a true mountain, the highest peak in Britain, south of the Scottish Highlands.



Its Welsh name is Yr Widdfa – meaning 'great tomb'. Legend says that a giant ogre Rhita killed by King Arthur is buried on the summit while for others Arthur's knights still sleep beneath it. The English name is derived from an old word for snow covered peaks in winter.

Besides impressive mountains, the park has rivers, lakes, waterfalls, forests, moorlands and glacial valleys. Remains of erstwhile slate mining and quarrying operations, once a major industry exist as also Stone Age burial chambers, Bronze Age burial cairns, Roman forts, Welsh and Norman castles.

## **Railway on the Summit**

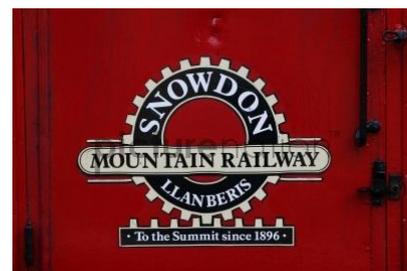
The Snowdon Mountains is the area where members of the first successful attempt on Mt. Everest trained and where many best-known mountaineers continue to practice. About half a million people climb, walk or take the Snowdon Mountain Railway annually in the little one-coach train travelling from Llanberis to Summit station, a rise of 3,140 feet.

The railway was the inspiration for the fictional Culdee Fell Railway, appearing in the story book 'Mountain Engines', part of the 'The Railway Series' by Rev. W. Awdry whose Thomas the Tank Engine and Friends continues to be popular.

A narrow gauge, it is the only public rack and pinion railway travelling for 4.7 miles/7.6 km with an average gradient of 1 in 7.86 (the steepest gradient is 1 in 5.5 occurring in a few places). The single red carriages are pushed up the mountain by either steam or diesel locomotives. The line is owned and operated by Heritage Great Britain Plc., operators of several tourist attractions in U.K.

The railway runs in some of the harshest weather conditions with services often curtailed or closed in

winter (Nov.–March). Nonetheless, ever since its operation from 1896, this tremendously ambitious feat of engineering remains to this day a very popular tourist attraction.



The Swiss Locomotive and Machine Works of Winterthur won the contract for building Nos. 1–5 locomotives from their experience from 1895–96. In 1922–23, locomotives Nos. 6–8 came from the same manufacturer, similar in size, power but of a slightly different design. From 1986–92 four diesel locomotives (Nos.9–12) were brought from the Hunslet Engine Company of Leeds to work trains up the line.

There are regular direct buses from Bangor and Caernarfon and in summer from Llandudno, Beddgelert and Betws–y–Coed to Llanberis from where the journey begins at 353 feet (108 m) a.s.l. and continues through woodland, across an impressive viaduct before starting the long haul upto the ridge and onto the mountain itself.

The first stretch of line is uphill at 1 in 50, steep for a main line but shallow compared with the 1 in 6 incline that begins shortly afterwards. The Llanberis complex has two platforms for arrival and departure, company offices, locomotive sheds and workshop buildings for staff in addition to a forecourt housing a cafe/picnic area. Traffic and train movements are controlled from Llanberis: communication between Llanberis, Clogwyn and Summit, as well as to trains' guards, is by two–way radio.

Hebron station at 1069 ft (326 m) is named after the nearby Hebron Chapel. Halfway at 1641 ft (500 m) as the name suggests, is midway along the line and close to the Halfway House Café on the nearby footpath. Clogwyn station at 2556 ft (779 m) is located on the exposed ridge and overlooks the Llanberis Pass and the Clogwyn Du'r Arddu cliffs, a popular climbing spot.

Wind speed is measured at Clogwyn and used to determine if trains can continue to the Summit station at 3493 ft (1065 m), only 68 feet (20 m) below the summit. The station has two platforms that link directly to the summit buildings and to a path leading to it. Here, arriving trains generally alternate between the two platforms. The line has three passing loops, at 15 minutes interval at Hebron, Halfway and Clogwyn on the north–west side of the main running line, i.e., the 'downhill' side where the mountain slopes away from the line. Thus, if required, the line could easily be converted to double track without the need to cut into the rock face to widen the formation. It is possible for two trains – a 'Doubler' to run together 'on sight', which involves the second train following shortly (more than 2 but less than 5 minutes after the first) and keeping a safe distance throughout. All platforms and passing loops are long enough to accommodate the same.



## **If You Go**

The weather on Snowdon is unpredictable, changing very quickly with mists and rain. As such, sunshine and clear visibility cannot be guaranteed and carrying weatherproof clothing is essential. Even on fine days in Llanberis, weather uphill can be very different. It is always advisable to check the forecast because given good weather, views from the train and summit (over a 30 min stay at the peak) overlooking onto the Isle of Man and the Wicklow mountains, Ireland is breathtaking.

The train then begins its descent arriving back at Llanberis 2.5 hours after the journey began (one hour to the summit and an hour downhill at an average speed of 5 mph or 8 km/h with stops). The first departure is at 9 am with trains running at frequent intervals until late afternoon. On Bank Holidays and in summer when the service is very popular and most tickets sold out, departures are half-hourly with the last at 5 pm.

Hence, it is advisable to pre-book or arrive early to avoid disappointment. Trains run subject to carrying at least 15 fare-paying passengers. The trains cannot proceed to the summit when weather conditions become severe. In this case, there are lower stopping places at Clogwyn (the three-quarter point) and Halfway when reduced fares are offered.

Most passengers do not care whether the trains are powered by steam or diesel. The use of diesel locomotives allows more trains to be run with the same number of carriages due to reduction in operating costs and thus extends the operating season considerably. For increased safety, each vehicle is fitted with an automatic brake that is triggered if the vehicle exceeds a specific speed, a carriage running away or a locomotive failure.

For toilet facilities, gifts and souvenirs of the experience, there are gift shops at Llanberis and Summit. The Café at Llanberis offers drinks and snacks. Here one can also purchase a return ticket at £18 (£15 for students); most passengers being tourists avail the round trip; they are not allowed to leave or join trains at Halfway. Down-only journeys for those wishing to walk down can be made from the Summit and Clogwyn on a stand-by basis. Bulky luggage is not allowed. The management also reserves the right to close, temporarily withdraw or alter any facility at any time without prior notice for technical and operational reasons or inclement weather.

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