



# Everybody into the Bog

The happiest town in Wales hosts the oddest of sporting events /// By James Sturz

Julia Galvin of Listowel, Ireland, has competed in the World Bog Snorkeling Championships in Llanwrtyd Wells every year since 1999.





Writer and bog snorkeler Sturz catches his breath and the attention of snorkeling fans.

**The first look always comes the day before.**

You could be high above Lillehammer, eyeing the drops and curves of the giant slalom, or on the Bonneville Salt Flats, preparing to break a land-speed record. Except that on this particular Sunday in August, I'm in a sodden pasture on the outskirts of **Llanwrtyd Wells**, Wales, officially the smallest town in all of Britain, where I've come to swim in the 23rd annual World Bog Snorkeling Championships. Tomorrow is race day. I'm feeling good.

Before me, the water in the **Waen Rhydd bog** shimmers like opals while the reflections of cauliflower clouds bounce across it. Carnivorous sundew

plants quiver. Rushes spear the air. A fence runs alongside the course, tufts of wool trapped in its wires. The morning is quiet, save for the madrigal of **bleats**.

**When I was six months old**, my parents hired a Welsh au pair. It was 1966, her name was Margaret Jenkins, and she came from **Ystalyfera**, a coal-mining and iron-working village outside of Swansea. She left us after a year, but first her mother sent a **letter**:

*Dear Mr and Mrs Sturz*

*I wish to thank you very much for looking after Margaret, and for being so kind to her.*

*I hope that you both, and the little ones, are in the best of health as we are.*

*You wanted to know about the lady with a rat on her face.*

*It's true, it is years since I saw her very close, and I would not like to see it again.*

*I have seen the lady from far since it was about last year.*

*Here is another thing for you to hear, I have seen a man in Cardiff,*

*who has got one side of his face as a pig, and his feet are a pig's feet.*

*This is very true Mr Sturz, and no fairy story, but it's up to you if you want to believe or not.*

*Yours sincerely*

*Mrs Jenkins*

Once Margaret left New York, my parents never heard from her again. But the letter remained, with the town's name and the family's street address at the top. Long before I had heard of its bogs—before I'd read Roald Dahl or **Dylan Thomas**, or learned it was the birthplace of **Merlin**—Wales already seemed a magical place; I imagined it teeming with stories. If I wanted to win this race, a bit of that magic wouldn't hurt. The only place to start was with the Jenkinses.

So I had driven north from Cardiff, the capital of Wales, to Ystalyfera on my way to Llanwrtyd Wells. (One advantage of a **country** as small as Wales is that **everything's on the way**.) Did it **rain** during the drive? Do sheep leave droppings in green pastures? Ystalyfera's main street has two pubs, the New Swan Hotel and the Old Swan Inn beside it. I pulled my raincoat closed, and visited both. Ystalyfera is not a town with tourists.

I ordered ale and met a man named Lyn, and another named Lynn, and then a local kid who slid into my car to show me where to drive. No, Margaret was gone, but I met two of her four brothers. (Margaret was one of four sisters.) We drank tea and looked at photos. They asked how on earth I was there. To snorkel in the bog? In Llanwrtyd Wells? "Everyone in Wales knows about the bog!" "Margaret lives in Jacksonville, Florida—is that very near New York?" "But we'll watch you this weekend. It'll be on the BBC!" "Then tonight at the Swan, we're going to have a story!" It didn't matter which Swan they meant.

"You *do* know the bog is cold?"

**My route to Llanwrtyd Wells** had wound through the forests and glades of Brecon Beacons National Park, past high moors and heaths, and into Powys County, Mid Wales. The town's history began with the Stinking Well. Theophilus Evans, vicar of nearby Llangammarch Wells, saw a healthy-looking frog splashing in its waters and speculated they might cure his scurvy. That was 1732, and for 36 years he visited daily, bathing in and quaffing its sulfurous fluids. Llanwrtyd Wells hasn't grown much since then. Today, its springs are capped (as conventional medicine advanced, so did objections to the stench), and the town's official population is just 604, although that number swells before the race. Outside the bay window of my room at Lasswade, the Edwardian country house where I lodge, there's nothing except fields of sheep.

Pronounced "hlanoortid wells"

Pronounced "wine hreethe"

Human population of Wales: 2.9 million. Sheep population of Wales: 12 million.

Pronounced "uhstallavehra"

English was her second language. Welsh was her first.



A single scoop of vanilla in a waffle cone—with muck topping, please.

Who wrote, "...the drugged, bedraggled hens at the back door whimper and snivel for the lickerish bog-black tea."

Thought to be based on the sixth-century Welsh holy man Myrddin, born in Carmarthen.

Great Britain is made up of three countries: England, Scotland, and Wales.

Cardiff's average annual rainfall: 42 inches.

"Welsh Gold"

One fifth of the population of Wales speaks Welsh.

The miniskirt's inventor, Mary Quant, was Welsh.



Mr. Incredible braves the murk.

Catherine Zeta-Jones was born in Swansea.



Snorkelers in wetsuits are serious. Snorkelers in costumes are more cheeky.

Eddie Bowen. Bowen also played a key role in the development of radar during World War II.

Blanket bogs, raised bogs, quaking bogs, muskegs, and fens, for example.



A bog snorkeler's challenges: low visibility, cold, leeches, and the occasional dead sheep.

Wellington boot throwing

Huw Lobb of London

The town's soul is its pub, the Neuadd Arms, a place for singing and storytelling. On the night before the championship, everyone gathers there over local **Aur Cymru** "session beers"—so called because their "little boy" 3.8 percent alcohol content means you can drink eight or nine pints in a drinking session. On this particular evening, the singing is mostly in Welsh, with the older men at the center of the pub, while younger ones edge close, but without the same command of the **language** or songs.

What's the bog like? I ask them. "The water's quite cold," a woman in a **miniskirt** says. "But it'll get warmer after 200 people have urinated in it," she adds pleasantly.

"No, don't take her seriously," one man replies. "It doesn't get any warmer."

The final pronouncement comes from Gordon Green, the Neuadd Arms' former owner, who introduced bog snorkeling in 1986 to attract visitors to the town. In the last 23 years, he's watched his sport spread to both Irelands and Australia.

"The only thing to watch out for in the water are dead sheep," he warns, as John Davies, the farmer on whose land the race will be held, solemnly nods.

"And water scorpions and leeches," various people suggest.

"There might also be trout."

**I'm an avid scuba diver**, but since the moment I decided to snorkel the bog, I've been stumped about how to train. When I called one veteran snorkeler over the summer, she suggested swimming in a pool with my eyes closed. By the time I reached Llanwrtyd Wells, my regimen had consisted mostly of eating lamb and watching **Catherine Zeta-Jones** movies (she's awfully robust in *The Mask of Zorro*).

The rules of bog snorkeling are simple: Swim two lengths of a 60-yard, four-foot-wide, four-foot-deep trench, without using conventional strokes. Techniques vary, but most contestants simply kick, keeping their arms at their sides. Wetsuits are standard apparel, but some snorkelers prefer "fancy dress." In 2008, this includes a very convincing Mr. Incredible (convincing, alas, until he enters the water) and a guy with an ironing board strapped to his back ("Extreme ironing," he explains seriously). The world record-holder is Joanne Pitchforth of Heckmondwike, West Yorkshire, who in 2007 clocked a bone-shivering time of 1:35.18. Joanne doesn't mess with wetsuits or costumes. Her training? Another newish sport: underwater hockey.

**The morning of the race**, the sky comes down. It's an enduring irony that a **Welshman invented artificial rain**. But today's downfall looks natural. And horizontal. The sheep are unfazed, but the pine trees shiver. Then it occurs to me that horizontal wind can push you forward.

Bogs are plentiful in Britain and the western coast of Europe—abundant enough for there to be **different kinds**. But one thing they all have in common is peat, the soil-like buildup of partially decomposed vegetation, formed when excessive rain prevents decay. Peat is made of trees, grass, fungi, leaves, mosses, lichens, and insect and animal corpses. Scotch drinkers know that burning peat during the whiskey-making process adds to the drink's flavor, and archaeologists know peat's acids and lack of oxygen preserve bodies well. In Britain, the most famous bog discovery was the first-century Lindow Man, in Lindow Moss, Cheshire, whose last meal of cereal grains was intact in his stomach. Even older bog bodies have been found in Denmark.

But in this particular mire, the only men and women who will be buried past their necks are living. By the morning of the event, held each year on the last Monday in August, 170 snorkelers have paid £15 to race, and several hundred more people have come to watch. The ground is littered with sheep droppings and tufts of wool. Puddles expand in the tall grass. There's an army tent to register, and an army tent for women to change. Between them, there's another tent with medics.

"Good morning," the announcer says, as the rain falls. "Whose idea was this, anyway?" The first snorkeler enters the water at 10:22 a.m. She's Kerrie Stroud, a bog virgin from Dorset who wears pink pajamas. She swims without fins, and flounders in the clear brown soup. Five minutes and 17 seconds later, she crawls out on her knees, emerging like a water lily. "It's fucking cold," she groans. "And bloody disgusting." She's followed by a man in white overalls, whose face is painted orange and topped by a bright green wig. He churns the water behind him, sending spectators recoiling, until the bog resembles a chocolate float.

It's true the British love their specialty sports. Yes, there's soccer, cricket, rugby, and tennis (the lawn variety was invented in Wales). But what of **wellie wanging**, shin kicking, cheese rolling, pea shooting, black-pudding throwing, coal carrying, stinging-nettle eating, and dwyle flunking (in which two hardy and well-lubricated teams dance around each other while flinging beer-soaked cloths)? On the very day I race in Wales's renowned bog, I could have competed in the World Gravy Wrestling Championships in Pennine Lancashire. Even Llanwrtyd Wells doesn't limit itself to one event. In 1998, the World Mountain Bike Bog Snorkeling Championships were introduced, using bicycles with water-filled tires and leaded frames. Since 2005, there's also been an annual Bog Snorkeling Triathlon. And the town's first creation was the Man Versus Horse Marathon in 1980. It took until 2004 for a **man** to win.

FROM TOP: JAMES STURIZ; PAULA DE LA CRUZ; RUTGER GEERLING



Yet today nobody is focusing on anything besides this race, which is clear when reigning champ Joanne Pitchforth enters the water. She slides into the goop even before the preceding contestant has finished. The secret, she says, is acclimating. Her husband, Haydn, whose best time is only six seconds slower than his wife's, swims in an adjoining trench. It's nice practicing a sport with your partner.

Pitchforth is streamlined as she kicks. The spectators roar. I study her carefully, noting her form. But when she finishes, the timer yells, "One minute, 54 seconds!" It's the second-best time so far today, but doesn't come close to **equaling her record from the year before**. There's talk of a slow course. People look up. Clouds swell over the hillsides. Rain comes down. You can't do anything about the weather.

As the day progresses, the bog grows muddier as chunks of peat detach from the banks. The water transforms from chocolate soda to Yoo-hoo to Frappuccino. The sheep look on, mostly minding their business, which is **eating the grass**.

"What a wonderful day for this!" Gordon Green coos.

Since selling the Neuadd Arms in 2001, Green has been trying to lessen his role in the event, and this year Sheelagh Tompkins, a local nurse, is taking charge. She admits she's the only organizer who's ever swum in the bog intentionally. She adds, with medical authority, "It does your skin a world of good."

Then my turn arrives. As I ready my gear, the snorkeler before me abandons the course mid-lap and scurries from its banks like a water vole.

"You're up!" the timer tells me. I step into the water, and cold oozes around me. But there's no time to consider it. "Five-four-three-two-one!" she shouts, and I'm off.

I kick hard and can hear the crowd cheering, but my mask is immersed in semi-gloss paint. Trout? Before entering the water, I'd marveled at the newts and **water scorpions** some kids had caught. So now I just kick. The first lap seems endless.

Soon, I'm huffing. I've already seen snorkels dip below the surface, and racers come out of the water coughing up mouthfuls of muck.

By the second lap, I feel each kick in my calves and thighs. But I haven't traveled this far with the well-wishing of the Jenkins clan just to give up. So I keep kicking, even as I careen into the banks. The announcer declares, "Our chap from New York's taking the scenic route!" The only thing I see is a clump of reeds stuck in my mask. Then suddenly the cheers get louder, and I push my arm forward.

"Two minutes, 11 seconds!" By the end of the day, I've placed 27th.

**The 2008 champion, Conor Murphy**, hails from Northern Ireland and finishes in 1:38.09. A former triathlete and competitive swimmer, he's fresh from winning the Northern Ireland Bog Snorkeling Championship the previous month (held on **International Bog Day**, in Dungannon's Peatlands Park, no joke). He wears short fins and a wetsuit, and has honed his technique by videotaping his time trials. On land, Conor's a dead ringer for the cartoon character Tintin. When he swims, he uses dog paddle, and looks like a skiff with an outboard motor.

"I arrived in town last night, and had two pints at the pub," he says after the race. "Then I went to the bog and swam 20 laps to get a feel for it. Then I returned to the pub and had another nine pints. But I got to bed by 11:30, and got up this morning for an Irish fry-up—sausages, bacon, eggs, toast, beans, and black pudding. That was mostly to soak the alcohol up." Still, he's disappointed he missed the world record. "That's what I came for."

We've all come for something this year. From across Wales, England, both Irelands, Germany, Slovakia, New Zealand, Australia, and the United States. In prior years, competitors have come from France, Belgium, Holland, South Africa, and Russia, too. We could have gone to Hawaii for a triathlon or to Boston to run a marathon. Instead we have come here to swim through cold, water scorpion-infested muck. In the rain. Why?

Last August, a study by the Universities of Manchester and Sheffield found that Powys was the happiest county in Britain in which to live. It's certainly hard to imagine an unhappy person dreaming up bog snorkeling. I leave Llanwrtyd Wells wanting to race again. Only next time, like Conor Murphy, I'll train. I will sharpen my technique until I can slice through soup. And I'll sit in the pub, soaking up songs and stories.

Once I get back to New York, I call Margaret Jenkins. She has heard from her brothers and is expecting my call. We speak for more than an hour, of how we'd been once and are now. But there still is the rat. "Oh yes, that's true!" she tells me. She remembers the lady. "It was on her face, and a tail went around her neck." It was jet-black, and hairy, and a foot long. Forty-two years after leaving Wales, Margaret still recognizes a good story.

Then she admits, "No, it wasn't really a rat. But it looked like a rat."

She laughs when she hears I've gone snorkeling in Llanwrtyd Wells. Now that is a tale!

But none of the Jenkinses know anything about Cardiff and the pig. **A**

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JAMES STURZ has snorkeled with South African great white sharks and scuba dived in 100-degree geothermal springs in Utah and in frozen New England lakes. He's also the author of the novel *Sasso*, set in an Italian hill town, very far from the water.

For travel resources, see the Guide, page 94.

Robert Recorde, a Welshman, is credited with inventing the equal sign in 1550.

Sheep graze for an average of seven hours a day.



Peat: It can help you look younger, too.

Water scorpions breathe through their tails, which they extend above the water's surface like snorkels.



Unlike some humans, most other mammals in Wales have the good sense to stay out of the bogs.

The last Sunday in July



2008 World Bog Snorkeling Champion  
Conor Murphy.

seasonal ingredients, the half- and full-day courses include morning market visits and neighborhood walking tours, followed by hands-on preparation of lunch or dinner. Pâtisserie classes are also available. **\$364–\$531 per person, promenadesgourmandes.com**

## Everybody Into the Bog

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**Llanwrtyd Wells, home of the World Bog Snorkeling Championships, sits about 60 miles north of Cardiff, the capital of Wales. The country measures just 8,005 square miles—imagine New Jersey with 641 castles, 12 million sheep, and a staggering, rocky coast. The best way to see it is to drive.**

### LODGING

#### Lasswade Country House and Restaurant

Owner/chef Roger Stevens serves garlic- and rosemary-infused lamb in a cozy dining room and on an elegant sheltered porch.

**Doubles from \$130, Station Road, Llanwrtyd Wells, 44/(0) 1591-610-515, lasswadehotel.co.uk**

#### Neuadd Arms Hotel

Local ales and braised lamb shank in red wine and rosemary gravy are specialties at this family-run hotel in the heart of Llanwrtyd Wells. Locals frequent the lounge and bar and swap tall tales.

**Doubles from \$115, The Square, Llanwrtyd Wells, 44/(0) 1591-610-236, neuaddarmshotel.co.uk**

#### Llwynywermod

About 15 miles southwest of Llanwrtyd Wells, you can check into one of the cottages converted from barns adjoining Charles and Camilla's holiday estate.

**Cottage for four from \$825 per week, 44/(0) 1579-346-473, duchyofcornwallholidaycottages.co.uk**

#### Crown at Whitebrook

A luxurious "restaurant with rooms," the Crown stands out as the only Michelin-starred restaurant in Wales. Chef James Sommerin's menus feature regional seafood, fowl, lamb, and cheeses.

**Doubles from \$190, Whitebrook, near Monmouth, 44/(0) 1600-860-254, crownatwhitebrook.co.uk**

#### Warpool Court Hotel

Stroll the Pembrokeshire coast on footpaths near this hotel. **Doubles from \$215, St. David's, 44/(0) 1437-720-300, warpoolcourthotel.com**

#### Bodysgallen Hall and Spa

This 17th-century manor house on Wales' northern coast overlooks 200 acres of private parklands and gardens. **Doubles from \$290, Llandudno, 44/(0) 1492-584-466, bodysgallen.com**

### MUST-DO

#### Devil's Staircase

Take a car or mountain bike up this switchbacking road that leads from Llanwrtyd Wells to Abergwesyn Pass in the Cambrian Mountains.

#### Hay-on-Wye

Some 30 miles east of Llanwrtyd Wells, Hay-on-Wye features the world's greatest concentration of secondhand bookstores. Farther south along the River Wye stand the 13th-century ruins of Tintern Abbey.

#### National Botanic Garden of Wales

Stop and smell the roses—and view some of the rarest plants in Wales—at the 500-acre national garden and the small but exquisite Aberglasney gardens near Carmarthen.

#### St. David's Cathedral

This cathedral, a pilgrimage site for centuries, was built in Pembrokeshire at the site of a

monastery built by the patron saint of Wales. While in the town of St. David's, try the fish and chips at the Farmers Arms (14 Goat St.).

#### Snowdonia National Park

The highest mountain in Wales rises above this park, where Edmund Hillary trained before climbing Mt. Everest. Drive inland from the coast to the hiking center of Betws-Y-Coed.

#### An Old World Finds a New Path

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**Even in a day trip from Marrakech, Morocco, you can reach Berber villages in the High Atlas Mountains. But you'll see more of Berber life on trips that go deeper into the High Atlas and Anti-Atlas. If you're not an experienced adventure traveler like Jean-Yves Brizot, sign on with an outfitter that specializes in escorting small groups into Berber territory.**

### LODGING

#### Hotel Taghadoute

The café at this simple, centrally located hotel is a popular gathering spot for locals. **Singles from \$25, Route d'Agadir, Tazenakht, Province Ouarzazate, 212/(0) 52-484-1393**

#### La Villa des Orangers

Behind a plain wooden door lies an opulent ryad—a traditional Moroccan palace—with elegant garden courtyards. **Doubles from \$455, 6 rue Sidi Mimoun, Marrakech, 212/(0) 52-438-4638, villadesorangers.com**

#### Villa Catherine

Villa Catherine, an eight-room boutique hotel, sits at the foot of the High Atlas Mountains,

### PRICING KEY FOR DINING

\$ = entrées \$10 and under  
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20 minutes from Marrakech. **Doubles from \$95, Sidi Ghiat, Douar Aimerine, KM 13, Route de l'Ourika, 212/(0) 67-817-5142, villacatherine-marrakech.com**

### OUTFITTERS

#### Authentic Morocco

Travel at your own pace on a customized tour through Berber country, starting in Marrakech and continuing through Ouarzazate, the Todra Gorge, and the Draa River Valley. Sip mint tea with locals and shop for Berber housewares at the souk in Rissani. **44/(0) 117-373-9145, authentic-morocco.com**

#### Heritage Tours

##### Private Travel

Heritage employs knowledgeable and well-connected guides who lead visitors to Berber villages in the High Atlas Mountains and small B&Bs in the Sahara. **800-378-4555, htprivatetravel.com**

#### Sahara Soul Travel

Potential highlights for a Morocco-centered excursion include spending the day with a Berber family in the Ourika Valley and shopping for hand-loomed rugs. **800-799-3080, travel-tomorocco.com**

### SUGGESTED READING

#### *The Caliph's House:*

*A Year in Casablanca,*

by Tahir Shah

BANTAM

In this darkly humorous 2006 memoir, Shah and his young family encounter a multitude of obstacles when they move from England to Morocco.

#### *Mogreb-El-Aksa:*

*A Journey in Morocco,*

by R. B. Cunninghame Graham

MARLBORO PRESS

British adventurer Graham originally published his travelogue in 1898, detailing daily Berber life and his four-month imprisonment in the High Atlas Mountains.

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