

Group & Family Activities *in Snowdonia*



Introduction

Snowdonia is unique among the mountain areas of the UK in having within a small and accessible area a fantastically varied natural playground with a range of excellent venues where group activities can be enjoyed. Furthermore, there is an abundance of high quality professional providers in Snowdonia who have extensive experience of providing these particular activities. Finally, it is worth noting that the venues for gorge walking and white water rafting are renowned for being sheltered from rough weather, while the coastal areas used for sea level traversing frequently bask in sunshine when the mountains are covered by clouds & rain.

Why Try a Group Activity?

Group activities...

- are fun from the first moment!
- don't need any special expertise or fitness!
- give you the chance to explore beautiful and exciting natural environments!
- involve teamwork in an enjoyable setting!
- can be pitched at just the right level for your particular group!
- can be arranged to fit the amount of time you have available!

Definition of 'Group Activities'

The activities included here (gorge walking, sea level traversing, white water rafting and challenge courses) are adventurous outdoor activities offered by providers that are not considered sports in their own right. There are neither clubs for participants, or courses on which to learn the relevant skills. These activities are all great fun, and can provide challenge, healthy exercise and opportunities to explore interesting environments. They can be done purely for fun and recreation, or they can be presented in order to allow groups to address their educational or development training objectives.

Organising a Group Activity

The organisation of an activity session for a group of participants involves careful planning to ensure smooth running and an enjoyable experience for everyone. The following checklist and notes are provided as an aid to the planning process:

Find a suitable provider (One way of doing this is through www.snowdonia-active.com / activity directory / activity holidays)

The provider will need to know:

- Who you are? (Numbers, age, ability, previous experience of outdoor activities.)
- What you would like to do?
- How much time you have available?
- What are your objectives for the session? (In as much detail as possible.)

In the case of children and young people, who is 'in loco parentis', and will that person remain with the group throughout the activity ▷



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session? (It would be quite unusual for this not to happen, and would need to be discussed carefully with both parents and the provider if young people were to go off on an activity with an instructor without the ‘in loco parentis’ person being present throughout in case of problems such as illness, distress or poor behaviour. It is part of the guidelines of most youth organisations that both male and female leaders should accompany mixed groups of young people)

You will need to record (and be prepared to pass on to the provider if necessary):

- Emergency contact numbers for next of kin of each participant
- Health / medication notes for each participant
- Swimming / water confidence notes for each participant
- In the case of children and young people, informed parental consent to participate in the activity
- In the case of children and young people, parental consent for emergency medical treatment should it become necessary

You will need to know (and pass on to participants and in the case of children and young people, to their parents):

- Safety credentials of the provider
- Check public liability insurance of the provider
- Emergency contact details for the provider
- Provider’s experience of working with your type of group
- The cost of the session
- Time and place for meeting
- Finish time and place of the session
- What participants need to wear / bring with them
- Check that all specialist equipment will be provided
- Is the activity weather/conditions dependant?
- If conditions are not suitable, is an alternative all-weather activity available?
- What are the arrangements for changing / toilet facilities before and after the activity?

Further notes:

The provider will not normally provide accident insurance or insurance for the clothing and other belongings of participants. The party organiser should discuss this aspect with participants or their parents and appropriate insurance should be purchased if necessary.

Activity providers offering sessions to young people are required by law to hold an AALA (Adventure Activities Licensing Authority) Licence if they offer as activities trekking, climbing, water sports or caving. The licence must be available for the client to inspect. The licence lists within the four general activity categories all the activities that the provider is authorised to provide. Gorge walking and sea level traversing are covered under the heading of ‘Climbing’, whilst white water rafting is part of ‘Water sports’. An AALA licence is an assurance that the safety management system of the provider has been inspected in detail and found to be sound. Where there is an AALA licence, you can assume that instructors will be appropriately qualified and experienced, that equipment will be suitable, that risk assessments have been carried out and that there are appropriate emergency procedures in place.

Activity providers offering activity sessions to adults only are not required by law to hold an AALA licence.

There is no nationally recognised qualification for instructors of gorge walking or sea level traversing. An instructor holding the Mountain Instructor Award (or the 



Mountain Instructor Certificate) will have been trained and assessed in the climbing and rope work skills required. The water hazards skills required to lead these two activities will be covered by a combination of relevant water sports qualifications, experience & training.

Instructors of group activities are usually expert at setting an appropriate level of challenge and technical difficulty for participants. However, organisers of groups should bear in mind that this becomes increasingly difficult if the range of ages, fitness, and physical ability in the group becomes very wide. If this happens the instructor has little choice but to set the activity according to the least able people in the group, which could lead to others becoming bored, frustrated or disappointed.

Gorge Walking

Gorge walking is an activity that takes place in a gorge or a steep, rocky river-bed. The first gorge walkers in Snowdonia were rock climbers and mountaineers who had come to the area for the climbing and who sometimes looked for entertainment of a different variety on a wet or short day.

Groups gorge walking today are sometimes undertaking the activity for purely recreational reasons, but the outdoor training world has recognised the great potential of gorge walking as a medium for teambuilding and for personal development.

The idea of gorge walking is to use a steep and rocky stream bed as a natural obstacle course and for the group to make its way along the watercourse without getting out onto the banks.

The activity may involve crossing stepping stones, jumping across gaps, climbing up rocky steps and waterfalls, traversing rock walls, the use of combined tactics and various rope manoeuvres.

The climbers who went gorge walking usually made an ascent of the watercourse, and generally preferred to stay dry if possible. The activity has diversified and some groups now choose to make a wet ascent, perhaps being dressed in wetsuits and climbing up the gorge by wading, swimming and tackling waterfalls directly. Another variation of gorge walking involves descending the watercourse by scrambling, climbing, sliding down slabby waterfalls and perhaps jumping over steep ones with deep pools below. Where a gorge with large steep waterfalls is descended using a series of abseils the activity is known as canyoning.

The gorge environment is beautiful, with sculpted shapes of water worn rock, dappled light filtering through the trees, waterfalls, sparkling rapids, deep pools of water, and everywhere the greenness of ferns and mosses. The music of water adds to the special atmosphere. Every variety of water sound will be heard. At different points the group will hear the dripping, trickling, splashing, rippling, gushing and crashing of water.

The protection of the gorge environment is very important. Some of the plants growing in the gorges of Snowdonia are not only beautiful but also rare. Groups should enjoy their activity whilst being careful not to damage plants and trees or to cause erosion of the banks of the gorge. The most important tactic in achieving this is to choose a route following the water-scoured centre of the river bed, and keep excursions onto the river bank to a minimum. For this reason it is generally undesirable to have non-participants accompanying the group on the banks to watch and take photographs. People doing this are probably causing more environmental damage than the group itself (& incidentally, are often putting themselves at risk by trying to find good viewpoints at the rim of the gorge).

Because of sensitive environmental and access issues, providers of gorge walking sessions for groups are usually reluctant to divulge the venues they use. The decision has been taken not to list any venues here, and not to recommend gorge walking to the public on a 'go & try it for yourself' basis.



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It is often the case that a gorge will be a sheltered place when strong winds and rain are making the mountains and open countryside uncongenial. However, after rain the water level and flow in a gorge may become too strong for the activity to be carried out safely. A gorge walking leader will be able to judge what is a safe water level for a particular trip, and will also know how fast the water level can rise and whether or not there are man made influences (such as dam release mechanisms) in the catchment.

The safety equipment required for gorge walking includes protective helmets, sometimes climbing harnesses and ropes, and in some circumstances buoyancy aids are worn. The ability to swim is generally not essential, but the activity may not be suitable for people lacking in water confidence. The leader of a gorge walking session will want to know in advance about the level of water confidence of all party members.

Sea Level Traversing

The first practitioners of sea level traversing in Snowdonia were probably local people out beachcombing after storms, looking for wood and other useful items washed up by the storms. The next generation were holidaymakers, clambering on coastal rocks as part of a trip to the seaside. Rock climbers turned their attention to the sea cliffs of Snowdonia in the nineteen fifties, and some of them, having needed to traverse the cliffs at sea level to reach a climb, realised that sea level traversing could give an enjoyable outing in its own right. After some accidents and near misses the early sea cliff climbers learned to have a healthy respect for the activity, which can be extremely hazardous if sea conditions have been misjudged.

Sea level traversing carried out as a group activity involves choosing a section of coastline where there is the opportunity to make a journey along the cliffs above the sea, at a standard of climbing or scrambling appropriate to the ability of the group. There may be unroped sections where a slip would lead to a simple fall into deep water and an easy exit. Where the climbing is high, the landing poor or the exit from the water difficult, a rope may be used, possibly in the form of a clip-line to which the group members are attached as they move along the cliff. Narrow clefts (or zawns) may be jumped across. Sometimes a Tyrolean Traverse may be used. This is where a rope is anchored at both sides of a zawn, and tensioned so that group members can be attached and cross the zawn suspended from the tight rope. Sometimes a zawn may be crossed by group members jumping into the sea and swimming across.

The ledges at the foot of sea cliffs are an interesting and exhilarating place to spend time. The cliffs can be a suntrap in fine weather and there is the opportunity to see rock pool creatures, sea birds and sometimes a seal. The sight and sound of the waves gives constant interest and movement.

Because sea level traversing is taking place on the band of the cliffs that is regularly washed by the waves at high water, and pounded by waves during storms, the rock is generally strong and sound. The risk of environmental damage by sea level traverse groups is minimal when they are on the intertidal rocks. However, there may be access restrictions in some places when seabirds are nesting. Choughs and peregrines also frequent the same cliffs as the climbers and sea level traverse parties.

An experienced instructor will be able to judge the ability level of the group and will set challenges that test everyone without anyone feeling overstretched.

Coasteering

This is a similar form of sea-level exploration where typically a journey is made from one bay to another, following the base of the sea cliff, close to the water's edge. There will be climbing sections, rocky obstacles, gullies and boulders to be overcome. Often the harder sections are bypassed by jumping into the water. In fact the main difference to conventional sea level traversing is that ropes are not normally used and there is a greater degree of contact with the sea (i.e. jumping into the sea and sections of swimming). As a result, coasteering groups will tend to wear wetsuits rather than conventional clothes and waterproofs in order to stay warm in the water. ▶



“ *White Water Rafting is an exciting activity where a group makes a descent of a stretch of a rapid river in an inflatable boat..* ”

White Water Rafting

This is an exciting activity where a group makes a descent of a stretch of a rapid river in an inflatable boat. The fun is fast and furious and participants usually get wet.

Canolfan Tryweryn National Whitewater Centre at Bala (www.ukrafting.co.uk) is the only provider of white water rafting for groups in Snowdonia. Their website has plenty of information or telephone their office for further queries or to make a booking (01678 521083, Monday to Friday 9am to 4.30pm) The flow of water in the river is controlled by dam release - it is not advisable to arrive at the Centre in the hope of white water rafting without having made a booking as there may be no water being released.

The setting for white water rafting on the Afon (River) Tryweryn is beautiful. The water is clean & the river flows through attractive woodland and farmland. The Centre is also a busy venue for kayaking and canoeing.

There are three ways to enjoy white water rafting at Bala. There is the 'Experience' (a chance to have two runs down the river in a big raft), the 'Extravaganza' (a two hour session offering an opportunity to pick up some basic skills in rafting and usually consisting of four runs down the river in a big raft) or the 'Orca Session' (an Orca being a much smaller two-person inflatable).

The Centre is also happy to discuss the possibilities for corporate and sponsored events using their white water rafting facilities.

All participants need to be able to swim. The minimum age for the big rafts is 12 years and for the Orcas is 16 years of age. Participants can bring their own long leg wetsuits or they can hire them from the Centre. All other safety equipment (helmets, buoyancy aids etc) is provided by the Centre. The big rafts each take from four to seven group members. All the raft guides at Canolfan Tryweryn hold the appropriate national qualification and careful safety briefings are conducted at the start of all sessions.

White water rafting is one group activity where there are good facilities (café, toilets, riverside terrace) and where non participants can observe the activity (and also the canoeing and kayaking) from a safe location.

Other Outdoor Activities

There are also numerous other outdoor activities which are suitable for group participation. Climbing and walking in particular are popular activities, of which there are abundant opportunities in and around the Snowdonia area.

Mountain biking is another popular activity in north west Wales with a number of famous trails located in area's such as Coed y Brenin and Gwydyr Forest. There is also a range of water sports that can be tailored to suit a group's needs. For example: canoeing and kayaking, surfing, windsurfing and sailing.

For further details of these specific activities, take a look at the other activity guides in this series. There are numerous activity providers based in the area who will be able to provide guidance on the types of activities most suitable to your own group or family.

Tailor Made Group Activities

Some of the adventure activity providers listed on the Snowdonia Active website will be happy to discuss the provision of a 'Challenge Course' for your group. This might, for example, take the form of a treasure hunt with clues to solve tasks and challenges along the way and perhaps a climb, an abseil or an improvised raft building session. The activity could be in the form of a competition with two or more sub groups taking part in the Challenge Course at the same time.

The key to success with this type of event lies in close communication between the group leader or organiser and the provider beforehand so that the provider can plan a Challenge Course that is suitable for the group and its aims.

There are many locations in Snowdonia where a Challenge Course could be held in beautiful and interesting surroundings. 



Family Activities

Some providers are happy to provide the group activities already mentioned for family parties. You will need to check with the provider if they have a minimum age for participants. Some activities lend themselves better than others to groups with a wide age range. For example, a climbing wall session is good because there can be a very easy route for the younger ones alongside a much harder one for older children & adults.

However, Snowdonia is also a great area for the type of trip or holiday where parents take turns to go off and participate in their own chosen outdoor activity while their partner finds a child-friendly activity for the rest of the family.

The following are merely examples from the huge number of child friendly places and activities that are close to outdoor activity venues. The list has been compiled to include lovely beaches and other places that can be enjoyed without cost and also some activities for which there is an entry fee:

- The Sea Zoo at Brynisiencyn
- Newborough beach
- Cable Bay beach (for surfers and families)
- South Stack Lighthouse (near Gogarth!)
- Borth y Gest beach (near Tremadog!)
- The Ropeworks (near Tremadog!)
- The Greenwood Centre (near the Llanberis Pass!)
- Castles (at Caernarfon, Conwy, Criccieth, Harlech, Beaumaris, Llanberis etc)
- Gelert's Grave, Beddgelert
- Glynllifon Park and wayfaring course
- Dinas Dinlle beach (and a chance to see the planes take off at Caernarfon Airfield!)
- The Slate Museum in Llanberis
- Llechwedd Slate Mine at Blaenau Ffestiniog
- The Electric Mountain in Llanberis
- Hiring a rowing boat on Llyn Padarn in Llanberis
- Portmeirion Italian Village (near Tremadog!)
- Bike hire / cycle trails
- Swimming Pools

Countryside Code:

Respect - Protect - Enjoy

- Be safe - plan ahead and follow any signs
- Leave gates and property as you find them
- Protect plants and animals, and take your litter home
- Keep your dog under close control
- Consider other people





Snowdonia-Active website

www.snowdonia-active.com provides a whole host of information about local activity providers, instructors and guides, accommodation and campsites, outdoor shops and cafes. Check out the Directory, a geographically specific database covering outdoor orientated businesses in the North-West Wales area. The site is host to a whole range of downloadable activity and area guides written by field experts. It also has links to numerous weather forecasting websites.

Public Transport

Although the Snowdonia area is well served with a modern road network there are many alternatives to travelling by private car. The Snowdonia National Park, the Llŷn Peninsula & Anglesey are criss-crossed with a network of local & regional buses, and rail links. In the northern part of the National Park the special Sherpa bus service connects the most popular walking & climbing areas to adjacent towns and villages.

UK Public Transport Information

<http://www.traveline.org.uk> gives links to public transport providers. Click on the map for inform

ation about coach, bus, rail, air & ferry services for North Wales & beyond.

Disclaimer

The writer and publishers of this leaflet accept no responsibility for the way in which readers use the information contained therein. The descriptions and recommendations are for guidance only and must be subject to discriminating judgement by the reader. Advice and training should be sought before utilising any equipment or techniques mentioned within the text or shown in any of the photographic images.

All the outdoor activities described in this guide contain an element of danger of personal injury or death. Participants in these activities should be aware of and accept these risks and be responsible for their own actions and involvement.



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