

Corn Du Powys

Tempted by a forecast for heavy snow, James Osmond heads up one of the more accessible peaks in the Brecon Beacons and comes across a stunning winter scene

I am not a particularly intrepid mountaineer, but I do like the idea of exploring mountain environments when they're covered in snow. Fortunately, in Britain we have plenty of mountains with summits that can be readily reached, even in thick snow, in little more than some appropriate clothing and a pair of sturdy walking boots. Of these, few are quite as straightforward or reward you with such amazing views as Corn Du in the Brecon Beacons. Be warned, though, despite its relative ease of access, conditions can deteriorate quickly in the mountains, and you should go prepared.

The Brecon Beacons consist of six mountain summits that join to form a long, meandering ridge. Protruding from this central ridge is a series of spurs separating several parallel round-headed valleys, or cirques. This all adds up to create a fascinating glacial landscape full of unusual shapes and patterns, which can easily keep a landscape photographer busy for a full day.

I had visited here a few times before, but never in heavy snow, so when the forecast predicted overnight falls in

southern Wales last winter I knew it was time to return. When it comes to snow, the limiting factor in terms of where you can go is usually the state of the roads. Major roads tend to be ploughed and gritted, but minor roads are a bit more of a lottery. Corn Du is right at the western end of the Brecon Beacons ridge and a major road runs through the valley below it, so it is an ideal mountain to aim for in challenging, snowy conditions. From the Storey Arms car park, a well-maintained path heads directly to the summit. It takes about an hour to an hour and a half, so to be at the top in time for sunrise you need to start the walk in the dark. On this particular morning, though, under clear skies and on a blanket of untouched white snow, there was enough ambient light to allow me to find my way without using my head torch.

From the top, there are incredible views towards the summit of South Wales' highest peak, Pen y Fan. I took a couple of shots in the golden light from the rising sun before heading down to explore the ridge between the two peaks. This is where things began to get really



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How to get there From the M4 junction 32, take the A470 towards Merthyr Tydfil and Brecon. After about 29 miles, you will see the Storey Arms centre on your right and a sizeable car park opposite it on your left. The path to Corn Du starts from the red telephone box next to the Storey Arms outdoor centre.

What to shoot Views towards Pen y Fan from the summit. Views of the summits of Pen y Fan and Corn Du from the ridge between the two. **Best time of day** Early morning if it has been snowing, when the snow is still pristine and untrodden – it is a very popular walking destination.

Nearest food/drink Tai'r Bull Country Inn, Libanus, Brecon, LD3 8EL, 01874 622600, tairbull.com.

Nearest accommodation Llwyn Onn Guest House, Llwyn Onn, Cwmtaf, Merthyr Tydfil, CF48 2HT, 01685 384384, llwynonn.co.uk. **Other times of year** In midsummer, the sun sets far enough to the north to illuminate the north face of Corn Du, picking out the amazing patterns of striated rock on this side of the mountain. **Ordnance Survey map** OL 12 **Nearby locations** Afon Mellte Waterfalls (8 miles); Llangorse Lake (15 miles).

interesting. The wind that persistently blows over the ridge had moulded the snow into all sorts of weird and wonderful patterns, but that was not all. One of the reasons the Brecon Beacons are so satisfying to photograph in winter is that the ridge runs roughly west to east. This means the low sun, following its southerly trajectory, only illuminates one side of the mountains, leaving their north-facing slopes in shadow. The resulting contrast really emphasises the distinctive topography here, and when I found a wind-sculpted snow-wave that mimicked the shape of the wider

landscape, I knew there was a special shot to be had.

I chose a low viewpoint and used a wideangle lens to emphasise the shape and texture of the snow pattern in the foreground, while also capturing the entire summit plateau of Corn Du in the background. By now, it was mid morning and cloud had started to form overhead. This allowed patches of light and shade to move across the scene, so I took several frames with different lighting patterns. The ones where soft, cloud-diffused light fell on the foreground seemed to work better than those with

direct sunlight throughout the scene. There was also another advantage in having some cloud cover. When taking photographs in the snow under clear skies, the shadows have a tendency to look unfeasibly blue, as the snow reflects the blue sky above. If there are clouds in the sky, there is less blue around so the shadows appear as a more natural, muted tone.

As a tide of walkers began to appear on Corn Du, I decided to head back down the mountain, satisfied that I'd had the place to myself for several hours. n

Wind-sculpted snow patterns with Corn Du beyond. Canon EOS 5D MkII with 17-40mm lens at 17mm, ISO 100, 1/200sec at f/13, tripod, cable release