



# LIVE THE MOUNTAIN LIFE

RUN A HOSTEL | SHOOT THE MOUNTAINS  
GET QUALIFIED | WRITE ABOUT YOUR HIKE  
MOVE TO THE HILLS | PLAN EXPEDITIONS

Ever wish your life could just be one big adventure? No office, no Zoom meetings, no commute or mind-numbing traffic jams. Just day after endless day of living, working and playing in the mountains and – more importantly – getting paid for doing it. We're talking about properly living the dream here. About taking your passion for exploring wild places and turning it into a full-time career that allows you to leave behind the urban lifestyle once and for all. We spoke to six people who have done exactly that, and are now officially living the mountain life.



On Piz Badile, a 3000m Alpine peak straddling the Italian-Swiss border, celebrating Leo's 40th.

## THE ADVENTURE PRO

*As one of the world's most famous adventurers, LEO HOULDING is living the dream. Travelling the world as a full-time professional, he's climbed in Yosemite, flown off peaks on Baffin Island in a wingsuit, climbed Everest, kite-skied across Antarctica, and a hell of a lot more we don't have space to list here. From an early life of sofa surfing and living off tuna sandwiches, Leo has made a living doing what he loves most – dodging death, completing multi-million-pound expeditions, and achieving feats not matched by another human being on Earth. But it's much more than just luck, as he explains...*

**Y**ou know, it wasn't by chance that I'm living this life. When I left school at 16, I very much set out to live a life of adventure and to be a professional climber. I started out living with very little money, living off pasta, tuna sandwiches and a lot of sofas, with stuff stashed in people's lofts all over the place. Fortunately, in 1998, after two years of being a full-scale bum, Berghaus approached me and were like, 'Hey, we're looking for some younger up-and-coming climbers'. And I got sponsored by Berghaus from the age of 18, which is, wow, 22 years ago – more than half my life. To be honest, that's been the kind of bread and butter which has enabled me to do lots of other stuff.

Berghaus pay me a retainer, which has gone up a lot since the start. It's not enough to do everything on. But it

means that I don't have to have a day job. In that very first year (1998), I went to Yosemite in California and did some really impressive stuff that put me out onto the world stage. From that I got quite a lot of television work in my early 20s and got a bit of a name for myself, and at the time TV was pretty lucrative.

**"I NEVER THINK OF MY LIFE AS A JOB. IT'S A PASSION THAT'S ALSO A PROFESSION"**

It is definitely the life I always dreamed of. I'm about to start writing a book, and looking back at all the things I've done, I'm like, 'Oh my God. Wow, I really have done a lot of cool stuff'. I feel very grateful to be able to do these bigger trips I've been doing in recent years – they cost hundreds of thousands of pounds. But it's not easy, nobody rings you up and says, 'Here's 100 grand to go and do something you've always dreamed of.'

A lot of expeditions are a massive suffer-fest too. We talk about taking a good spanking. You put yourself into very difficult situations and try to get out of them. And you spend a lot of time in uncomfortable positions – carrying heavy bags up hills pouring with sweat, being eaten by mosquitoes, or hanging for hours and hours in uncomfortable



places. I've spent so much of my life in those really uncomfortable positions. There are times on every trip I've done where it's kind of hell. I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. But when you catch up with your mates about something that happened decades ago, never, ever do you recount the story where everything went according to plan and you did something really hard and you got to the top and back for beers and medals. It's always the ones where the shit hit the fan and it was a life-threatening epic or something funny happened. It's the ones where you fight tooth and nail, where you snatch success from the jaws of defeat at the very last minute, that are without question the most powerful, memorable experiences. I never think of my life as a job. It's a passion that's also a profession. And it did change probably in my early 30s. When I got married, and kids were immediately on the horizon, all of a sudden, it's like, 'Oh, I should probably start thinking a little bit about the rest of my life here because it's going to be a bit of a rude awakening'. I think one of the downsides of this life is a great deal of insecurity. You're always one slip away from the end of your career. But on the other hand, that's part of intentionally doing risky stuff. You learn to deal with uncertainty. It's part of the thrill. So, I tend not to worry too much about the future. You're just aware that it's there. There is a dark side to adventure sports. I had a bad spell a few years ago, where one of my best friends died.

And a load of my other close friends died. Pretty much all of them wingsuit BASE jumping. When you see it close up, it really does make you question your values, especially as a father and as a husband. When my best mate, Sean Leary, died in 2014 in a wingsuit flying accident, my daughter was six months old, his wife was seven months pregnant. And it just made me think, 'Oh, shit, you know, maybe this isn't that cool'. It's not just wingsuit flying. When you go into super remote, big mountains, you are putting yourself in harm's way. We take a lot of precautions, but there's no denying the fact that, statistically speaking, in my line of work, you're 100 times more likely to die prematurely than most people. I haven't BASE jumped since. I had a really profound experience in 2014, actually. A few months after Sean died, I was doing a big job for Discovery Channel and had a series travelling the world getting paid a lot of money to do amazing stuff. But in a nutshell, at the last minute I decided I needed to fly out to Borneo a few days earlier than I was due to. The production company said no, so I said I'd go unpaid because we need to do some prep. That saved my life, because I should have been on that Malaysian Airways flight that got shot down over the Ukraine. I actually had a booking on that plane, and I still have the email with my seat reservation. All 298 people died. And really, I couldn't believe how close I came to the proverbial 'you might get hit by a bus tomorrow'.

Yeah, I put myself in harm's way intentionally. Yeah, I'm a parent. Yes, you could call that irresponsible. But pretty much the closest I've ever come to dying was that one decision, the click of a mouse. If I hadn't said 'reschedule', I wouldn't be here right now. It just made me remember that we are not in control of our own destinies. You can try hard to live the life that you want to lead, certainly. I do feel very, very lucky to have lived this life, but I didn't buy a ticket in a lottery. This is what I set out to do when I was 15 years old. That's not to say there hasn't been luck involved. But it doesn't come to you on a plate. And you could live in a bubble and try to avoid risk and desert your dreams, but then still get hit by a bus or die of leukaemia. So, it really was positive thing for me not to die in that plane crash. It rebooted my motivation after Sean's death to just carry on getting after it. Definitely with a more measured kind of approach. In some ways, some of the stuff I do these days is way more hardcore than anything I did in my 20s. But I feel like I do it now with a higher margin of safety because of the experience and knowledge I've gained. We want to inspire our children to live the best life they can. And I don't think I would be a good role model to my kids by abandoning my own dreams. We all want our children to dream big and to follow their own passions.

Leo in the Antarctic on his Ulvetanna expedition in 2013.



I DID IT!

"I was inspired to become a full-time Winter Mountain Leader, guiding all over the UK and abroad, after a **Trail** mag meet-up back in the early 2000s. Will I ever go back to the old 9-5 whatever? Not on your life!" **Johnny Walker**



Debbie above the Eden Valley on her all-terrain wheelchair.

THE OUTDOOR ACCESS CHAMPION

DEBBIE NORTH is a passionate hillwalker and former school headteacher who has become a trailblazer for disabled access in the UK's hills and mountains since suffering from spinal degeneration. In 2015 Debs completed Wainwright's 190-mile Coast to Coast trail from St Bees to Robin Hood's Bay using an all-terrain wheelchair, and since then has gone on to become the outdoor access champion for popular walking website The Outdoor Guide. (theoutdoorguide.co.uk)

I live on a hill farm just outside Nateby in Cumbria with my husband, Andy, and our three cats. The situation is perfect – the Yorkshire Dales National Park is literally at the end of the farm track and the Lake District no more than 30 minutes away. You can see Blencathra from the kitchen window and also the North Pennines on a good day. On a bad day, you can see sod all. It just so happens that when we first walked the Coast to Coast together in 1999, we walked through the farm and were within touching distance of the house we now live in. We kind of said: "Wouldn't this be an amazing place to live?" That was a dream we casually held onto for a couple of miles, then just as casually dismissed as unrealistic. I think people often find themselves brow-beaten into throwing their dreams away for many reasons; and I think it's very sad. For a living I champion access in the

countryside. This covers a wide range of activities, from working with the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority and The Outdoor Guide in a cause that's constantly evolving. There are meetings to attend, letters and articles to write, interviews to do, talks to prepare and, the best bit, being outdoors adventuring. I used to be a headteacher, which I loved, and balanced that with time in the hills. When my health deteriorated, I knew I had to do something else to stop myself withering on the vine – so I decided to become a pioneer! I've always loved a challenge and I still wanted to climb mountains, do long distance walks and blaze my very own trail. Spinal degeneration wasn't going to stop me. Everything else fell into place from there. It was as though the lifestyle chose me.

I got to this by point by having a dream to focus on, then dreaming some more when each dream became real. There was never a real, solid plan as such. No specific targets, objectives or deadlines. We let our passion for the outdoors be the guiding light. In many ways, we just did it – much to the alarm of family and friends. I love living where we are and doing what I do. If I had to change anything, it would be less meetings and more outdoors! If you're thinking about trying to live a more outdoorsy lifestyle, my advice would be just do it! If you've got a passion and a dream then you've got to go for it. I know that's really easy to say, but you could spend your entire life sitting around planning and waiting for the right moment.

I DID IT!

"Formerly a maths teacher, I now run my own business taking people walking and climbing. Keeping it varied really helps to keep it fun." **William Legon**



# THE MOUNTAIN GUIDE

MATT LE VOI is the director of Lakeland Mountain Guides – a company that provides outdoor activities across the UK – and has pushed it every step of the way from it was formed in 2012. He holds the Winter Mountain Leader Award, is a Rock Climbing Instructor and has a First Class honours degree in Adventure Tourism Management. Matt's climbed Scafell Pike over 400 times and is as happy walking in the Highlands with his dog Lexi as he is climbing in the Himalayas. (lakelandmountainguides.co.uk)

Matt kitted up and doing what he does best – working and exploring in the British mountains.

As soon as I tell people I grew up in West Sussex, their next question is usually: "So how did you come to run a guiding company in Cumbria?"

Growing up on the south coast of England certainly didn't have the lumps and bumps I'm used to now, but I still had an outdoorsy upbringing. We enjoyed camping holidays, mountain biking on the South Downs and regular riverside walks. I think it is a greater irony that despite living within a couple of miles of the sea for 18 years I only learnt to sail, kayak and canoe on an inland reservoir in the West Midlands while at university. Who needs southern seas or warm French rivers anyway?

I was fortunate enough to meet a Cumbrian 'Lass' at university and, with the aspirations of being an outdoor instructor once I graduated from my Adventure Tourism Management degree (business degree with adventure sprinkled on), it made so much sense to relocate to Cumbria. I was also lucky to get a full-time guiding job as a fresh-faced Mountain Leader almost immediately and so my career in the mountains began. A year and half later redundancy struck, but this cloud had a platinum lining and at the age of 22 I delved into self-employment. Lakeland Mountain Guides was born.

Amazingly, that was all 8 years ago and since then we've helped thousands of people achieve personal goals, hosted days for charities and corporates, pushed people further than they ever knew they could go on challenge events, and passed on vital summer and winter mountain skills to those keen to expand their knowledge. Although the admin of the company, and our more recently formed international trekking company, falls into my lap and therefore ties me to the desk from time to time, I still aim to get myself out into the guiding seat as much as possible. That's where I'm at my happiest.

My aspiration for the best part of my life was to join the military, but after some time in the Officer Training Corps I realised this wasn't going to be for me, but what I did discover was a career as an outdoor instructor would offer me many of the life attributes I was seeking. As far as job satisfaction goes, it has to rank amongst the highest. What's not to like about heading into the outdoors (generally mountains for me) for a day of exercise with like-minded people? Some days you will really earn your money, but they are also the days when your clients will probably have achieved something really great. Knowing you have

facilitated someone tackling Striding Edge or getting over their fear of heights with an abseil is a satisfaction level you'll never bore of.

Living in close proximity to the mountains is also fabulous and I'm happy to accept the levels of precipitation for having a lumpy playground for walking, running and climbing adventures whenever I please.

## I DID IT!

"My wife and I threw in the towel on careers 3 years ago to upgrade our Mountain Leaders award to International Mountain leader, and now live and work in the Alps. We lived on a narrow boat for 10 years to save cash and in a van while doing the courses. 2020 has been tough. Now we're spending a couple of months on a small island in Norway. No pay, but food is included with accommodation!"

Jason Day



Jethro introducing his son to Snowdonia's winter mountains.

# THE ADVENTURE PHOTOGRAPHER

JETHRO KIERNAN is an award-winning photographer and Mountain Leader who lives just outside the village of Llanberis in Snowdonia. After growing up in North Wales then relocating to pursue a career away from the outdoors, he found the lure of his native mountains too strong to resist and moved back to raise his own family. He now balances the demands of a day job with his love for photographing the mountains of Snowdonia and passion for raising his kids in the environment he loves. (jethrokiernan.com)

Work for me involves juggling a few career strands. Like many people who choose this lifestyle, mine includes photography, work as a rope access contractor and a developing career in the outdoor industry. This adds a few extra layers of complication to the work-life balance conundrum but is what a lot of people take on to allow them the flexibility to get in the mountains and lead that outdoor lifestyle.

Having grown up on the North Wales coast and spent time in the mountains as a child and a student at Bangor Uni, it took moving away to really appreciate what I'd always taken for granted. It didn't take too many years for me to gravitate back to the mountains and the people who live there, photographing climbing and mountains on slide film for climbing magazines in the '90s while

travelling and hanging off ropes fixing things as a rope access worker.

For a while the financial practicalities of raising a family meant that photography and the mountains took a bit of a backseat. However, inspired by friends and my own kids' growing interest in the outdoors I began to pick up the camera seriously again and gain qualifications in the outdoor industry, starting with Mountain Leader with a view to spending more time in the mountains and at home, and less time behind a desk or hanging off a rope (unless it was taking climbing pictures).

Climbing and adventure photography isn't the most lucrative occupation, but by shifting the balance between my various jobs it's allowed me to spend time climbing and mountaineering while satisfying my creative urges without bankrupting us.

For me, it's not just about being in the mountains but being around people who share that love for adventure and the outdoors, meeting up for coffee and hatching plans for climbing, cycling, camping out or next winter's trips to Skye. And, it's pretty handy to have friends available to go out and photograph.

Living in the mountains also allows a little flexibility and spontaneity. You can grab a quick evening scramble, a mountaintop sunset or an evening swim in the lake to cool off.

The one thing I would change would be to have begun to shift the balance in the various jobs much sooner. Being able to share this with people, either through taking them up into the mountains or by sharing it through my photography, is a privilege. And having my kids grow up with the outdoors as part of their lives is priceless.



# THE REMOTE HOSTEL MANAGER

A love of walking in the mountains inspired JAN ROBINSON to live a life much more in tune with nature. Located 15 miles from the nearest road and surrounded by mountains and moorland, she found happiness 10 years ago when she began managing the remote and inaccessible Loch Ossian eco youth hostel in the Scottish Highlands.



THE SUNDAY POST, BY ANDREW CAWLEY

I guess you could say I'm an old hippy really! Growing up in Sheffield in the 1950s I discovered a love of the mountains from a young age. Before moving to Loch Ossian, I lived in an 'off-grid' community in the north-west of Scotland, where you had to cross by boat or walk-in about 8 miles, so I was used to living remotely – car-free, wind turbines, composting toilet and so on. When I saw a job advertised at Loch Ossian, I submitted an electronic application, was interviewed by phone the next morning, and walked in here in the middle of a blizzard to start work. That first walk up the track from the station was so amazing, I felt really lucky. Loch Ossian hostel has changed so much in the 10 years I've worked here. Initially we had only wind power. If the wind didn't blow, you either turned on the generator, or sat reading with a headtorch on. I think it's good to be aware of where your energy comes from. No TV or radio signal, no central heating or showers, gas bottles to hump about, wood to chop, coal scuttles to fill.

The first couple of winters here, I read a lot! Three years ago, we got connected to hydroelectricity and life was really transformed. Hot showers, laundry facilities, electric kettles and fridges, central heating, even Netflix and iPlayer for the staff flat (although still no Wi-Fi!). The hostel is only a mile from Corroir train station. But certainly in the winter when I get off the train in the dark, and it pulls away and leaves me in what feels like a huge, uninhabited, silent darkness, it's a powerful feeling. I can't afford to be afraid of the dark, or intense weather, or daunted when things go wrong – like power cuts, minor repairs, rail closures. I'm pretty self-sufficient, but Hostelling Scotland and the Corroir Estate help with technical

“THE FIRST COUPLE OF WINTERS HERE, I READ A LOT!”

problems, or calm me down on the phone when I'm sat in the middle of a massive gale, wondering whether a tree's going to fall on us! There's no vehicle access to Loch Ossian apart from for contractors and I love to promote car-free tourism. Living a long way from the shops and having to carry shopping in a rucksack on the train and then up the track makes it easy for me to resist buying rubbish. I find it incredible that of all the materials flowing through the consumer economy, only 1% remain in use six months after sale, because they are designed to break quickly or become unfashionable. I work three weeks on and one week off, so I do get to visit family and friends, and for my 'big holiday' I go chasing the sun! But being in nature is good for us mentally and physically and living at Loch Ossian Youth Hostel you experience silence and natural light, moonlight, starlight, rather than being constantly exposed to stress, traffic and pollution. The best things in life are free. And it doesn't get much better than this.



This is what Sarah calls a job! In the mountains high above Applecross in North-West Scotland.

# THE OUTDOOR WRITER

SARAH RYAN is a regular writer for Trail, but from April to October she can be found in the Cairngorms National Park, where she runs 'The Wild Walk Home' providing mindful wild camping retreats. This winter was spent in lockdown not far from the Peak District in Sheffield with her partner, friends, a fire and a dog. (thewildwalkhome.com)

On Thursday afternoon, it started to snow. Well, sleet really, thick blobs splatting against the window and sliding wetly down to puddle on the windowsill. But if it was slushy here, on a terraced house at the bottom of a hill, that meant it would be drifting snow on the Peaks. I jammed my feet into my boots, looped the dog lead over my shoulder and drove for 15 minutes straight into a whirl of snow, fog and rock. The next day I did the same thing and the day after that, a Saturday, climbed up the north edge of Kinder Scout into knee-deep snow and a quiet, pristine wonderland. I've moved to be closer to the hills twice now. First to the Trossachs between Loch Lomond and Ben Lawers, the second to split my time between the Cairngorms and Sheffield. The decision of whether to move or not is a blunt one: stay or go. It packs into one week and several boxes, which are then piled

in the back of a van. But that hides a lifetime of complexity. I'm a new aunt and I want to have a good relationship with my niece, see her grow and take her on adventures in the hills. I want to spend time with my parents while we're all fit and able. I have good, long friendships that I cherish. And there's the money thing – the potential for earning more and being able to go on holidays to the Alps, Himalayas or Japan, is much greater in the cities down south. There is the question of whether my partner will want to come with me and what it will mean if he doesn't. There are a lot of things tying me to the south. But there's also a big old rope around my heart pulling me north. When it comes down to it, I don't want a big house. I want a view. I want to

watch the mountains whiten with snow in the winter, melt to brown, burn green and turn fox-red in the autumn as the bracken breaks. I want to turn the years with the hills and become a wizened old woman, muscles made wiry by years of walking. It's not that I don't want other things – clearly I do. It's just that the vivid colours of bog asphodel, sphagnum moss and striated snowy peaks are constantly tugging at my heart. In the end, something wriggly in me only settles down in the hills, and something fiery in me only lights up there. And so here I am in Sheffield, minutes from the Peak District and a few hours from my family. In the summer, I'll go north. In the end, it wasn't so much a decision to move as a decision to stop fighting the need to do it.

**I DID IT!**

"I'm a former Royal Marine and, after getting injured in Afghanistan, I was introduced to climbing through a scheme known as Battle Back. From there I got qualified and now run my own company with a small team of instructors. Truly grateful to be working in the outdoors full-time!"

**Crag 2 Mountain**



# BRITAIN'S BEST MOUNTAIN TOWNS

Thinking of packing up and relocating to the hills? Here's our pick of the best places to live.

## AMBLESIDE

When it comes to towns with the most mountains, Ambleside tops the chart – with a staggering 176 over 2000ft within a 20-mile radius – including Fairfield, Helvellyn, Scafell Pike and The Old Man of Conistone. It's also quaint and packed with gear shops, cafés and pubs. Watch out for the summer tourists and the staggering house prices though!

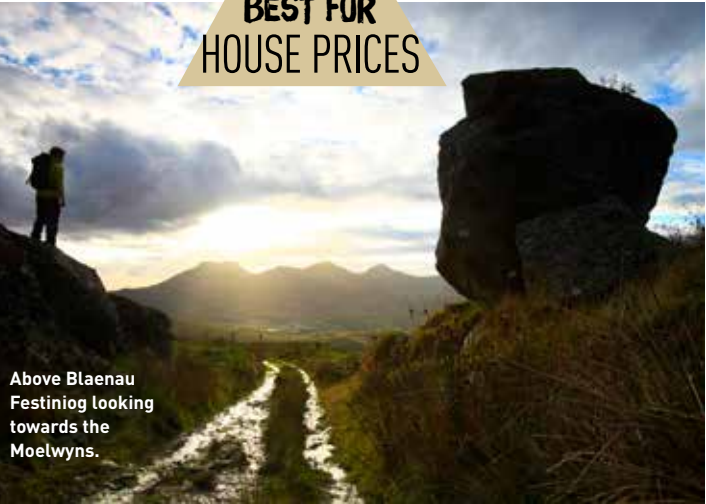
- ▲ MOUNTAINS 176
- ▲ PUBS 8
- ▲ AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE £386,860
- ▲ ANNUAL RAINFALL 1026mm
- ▲ POPULATION 2600

BEST FOR HILLS



Fairfield Horseshoe, on the doorstep of Ambleside.

BEST FOR HOUSE PRICES



Above Blaenau Ffestiniog looking towards the Moelwyns.

## BLAENAU FFESTINIOG

Like a little island of affordability, Blaenau is right in the centre of Snowdonia. The slate mining history that characterises the town and immediate landscape means it is excluded from National Park status. It isn't the prettiest, but it is almost impossible to imagine a more perfect location for access to the giants of Wales. The Moelwyns are right on your doorstep, and it's being improved all the time, so maybe it's time to grab a bargain?

- ▲ MOUNTAINS 95
- ▲ PUBS 4
- ▲ AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE £96,328
- ▲ ANNUAL RAINFALL 1129mm
- ▲ POPULATION 4000

### I DID IT!

"After many years of visiting all the upland areas of the UK I moved to **Capel Curig** 8 years ago. I can't imagine living anywhere other than Snowdonia, it has everything an outdoor enthusiast could ever need."

Nick Livesey

BEST FOR SUNSHINE



The Aberystwyth coastline as seen from Constitution Hill.

## ABERYSTWYTH

This cute seaside town is perhaps not the most obvious of choice for a mountain life, but the wild and untamed Cambrian Mountains and Pumlumon Fawr of mid-Wales are just a short hop away. The sun often shines on the west coast while the rain clings to the Welsh hills, and you're within easy striking distance of either Snowdonia or the Brecon Beacons too.

- ▲ MOUNTAINS 6
- ▲ PUBS 52
- ▲ AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE £182,102
- ▲ ANNUAL RAINFALL 1028mm
- ▲ POPULATION 18,093

### I DID IT!

"I live in **Waunfawr** at the base of Moel Eilio in Snowdonia and was born and raised on a hill farm in Rhyd Ddu. I've lived and loved these hills since my childhood days, and despite the incessant rains and winds of the last month or more I still love them."

Ken Latham

BEST FOR GOOD PUBS

## EDINBURGH

Edinburgh could just be the city that has it all. It's the UK's answer to Canada's Vancouver, with all the benefits of city life – income potential, pubs and people – but with sea and mountains right on your doorstep. The Pentlands and the Lammermuir Hills are worthy escapes close by, but good road links will get you north and into the Trossachs and Highlands in no time.

- ▲ MOUNTAINS 5
- ▲ PUBS 195
- ▲ AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE £294,142
- ▲ ANNUAL RAINFALL 706mm
- ▲ POPULATION 482,005

### I DID IT!

"I'm in the **western Dales** and I wouldn't choose to live anywhere else. Lakes down the road. Wales and Peaks a couple of hours away. Scotland a tad further!"

Dave Gregory

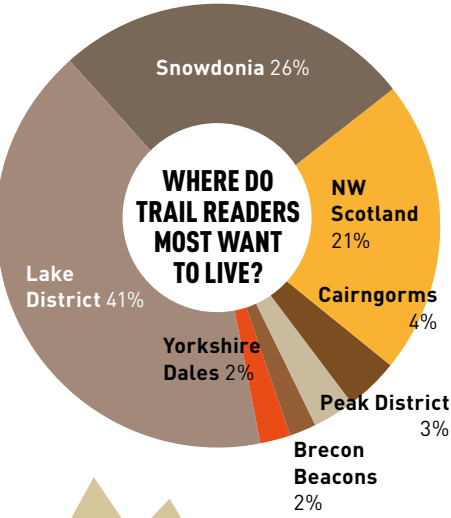
Edinburgh's Portobello beach and promenade.

BEST FOR ADVENTURE

## AVIEMORE

Sandwiched between the Cairngorms and the Monadhliath mountains, Aviemore is the closest thing you'll get to an Alpine ski resort in the UK. Spend your winters on the snow slopes (with 30km of runs and 11 lifts), then fill your summers with hiking, mountain biking, climbing or whitewater rafting.

- ▲ MOUNTAINS 45
- ▲ PUBS 10
- ▲ AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE £220,145
- ▲ ANNUAL RAINFALL 865mm
- ▲ POPULATION 3613



WHERE DO TRAIL READERS MOST WANT TO LIVE?

BEST FOR ACCESSIBILITY

## KENDAL

Situated just outside the national parks, between the Lakes, Howgills and Yorkshire Dales, it's conveniently just a quick nip from the M6. You won't have to spend hours on back roads to be connected to work or family in the rest of the UK, and the opportunities to explore England's uplands are enough to last a lifetime.

- ▲ MOUNTAINS 32
- ▲ PUBS 23
- ▲ AVERAGE HOUSE PRICE £262,325
- ▲ ANNUAL RAINFALL 1137mm
- ▲ POPULATION 36,014

