



Zahrah enjoying nature while heavily pregnant with her second child – her children now love to hike with her.

WORDS: JOANNE EBSWORTH. IMAGES: BERGHHAUS AND ZAHRAH'S OWN.

# “The outdoors should be for everyone”

Zahrah Mahmood MBE, 35, took up hillwalking in her 20s to cope with stress. Now, the hiking influencer and mother-of-two, better known as The Hillwalking Hijabi, is encouraging women from all backgrounds to reap the calming health benefits of walking in nature.

GROWING UP IN GLASGOW, going out into nature for the purpose of walking was never a part of my life. My dad was an immigrant, arriving here as a teenager, and he worked seven days a week all his life to provide a better life for his children, so there was never the time or capacity for weekend hikes and camping trips. It wasn't a negative thing; it was just never on my parent's radar, so it wasn't on mine, and if we had a bit of free time at the weekends, we'd see our elders or do voluntary work.

After completing university, in my mid-20s and studying to become a chartered accountant, it hit me that I was really anxious about the exams. Two friends I was studying with decided it would be a good idea to get me out of my head by taking me up a mountain for my birthday, and while it

was an odd present, it's one that had a lasting impact.

We went up Ben Lomond, a Munro [Scottish mountain] more than 3,000 feet. I really struggled the whole way up, but one of the things I noticed was I wasn't thinking about anything apart from reaching the top. I liked that, and it was an amazing feeling to reach the summit. But I also noticed I felt a bit out of place. Apart from being the only person who looked like me, and the only person wearing a hijab, everyone else seemed to be gliding up while I found it incredibly challenging. I took this as a wake-up call.

Initially, I decided mountains weren't for me, so I started walking everywhere instead of driving and soon signed up for The Kiltwalk: a 22-mile charity walk from Glasgow to Loch Lomond. However, a few





At Goat Fell summit, on the Isle of Arran.



Hiking Ben Vrackie path, in Perthshire.

months later, I went through another difficult time in my life and decided I needed to get away from it all. I messaged my friends and suggested we walk up a more manageable, less busy hill. The hill ended up being a lot smaller than the mountain we'd previously climbed, but the hike was just as rewarding in terms of being out in nature, taking in the beautiful views, and getting out of my head. I felt grounded and at peace.

That's when I got bitten by the hillwalking bug and, over time, I noticed I was feeling stronger physically and mentally, as well as feeling more connected to the earth, my spirituality, and my religion. Having a goal of trying to reach the top of a hill – rather than just walking round and round a park, for example – also left me with a real sense of achievement.

### CONNECTING WITH OTHERS

I started my Instagram account to connect with like-minded people and share my own outdoor adventures. While I attracted more Muslim and Asian women to start with, my audience has changed over the years to reflect my own journey through life, and it's been lovely to connect with people from all different communities and backgrounds facing barriers to accessing the countryside. The outdoors should be for everyone, and I hope the advice and inspiration I provide through my platform as a hillwalker and a

mum – and in my role as honorary president of Ramblers Scotland – helps lots of people to get outdoors and share in the many wonderful benefits and joy I get from being outside in green spaces.

When I first started walking, I had to be up high and somewhere secluded. But since I gave birth to Harris in 2021, and then Hafsah in 2024, I've scaled things back a bit, and I'm finding joy in being outside walking on the flat with them. My walks now are determined by Harris's abilities because he's only four, and I can't carry both of them up a hill! But it's amazing to see him walk up little hills I would have struggled with when I first started.

It's so important to me that walking outdoors is a part of my kids' upbringing, because I certainly didn't experience it growing up, or see people that looked like me hiking in outdoor spaces. Representation is everything, otherwise you can feel like you don't belong, so we must try to challenge cultural norms. Getting to work with the outdoor brand Berghaus to create modest activewear made from performance fabrics, including a hijab, has helped to shift the narrative of who gets to belong in nature.

I think change is happening, and there's an increased interest in connection through nature now, with lots of community-led groups making walking more inclusive and familiar. My main advice to beginners is to



In Northumberland National Park.

start small, go at your own pace, and know that you do belong in the outdoors. Just because you haven't seen someone in that space that looks like you, doesn't mean it's not for you. And you don't have to be climbing up big mountains and hills, either. Just walking to the park or around the block can help you reap the physical, mental and social benefits of being outdoors.

I know so many amazing women within my community, and we all make such sacrifices for our families and communities. But you can't pour from an empty cup, and I'm sure that's the case for all women. Getting outside is one way to refill it, so just breathe, reset, show up stronger, and don't be afraid to take up that space – not just for everybody else, but also for yourself.

● Zahrah Mahmood MBE is an ambassador for Berghaus. A short film chronicling her work, called *The Ascension Series: Zahrah Mahmood*, is available to view on the Berghaus YouTube channel. Follow her at [instagram.com/the\\_hillwalking\\_hijabi](https://www.instagram.com/the_hillwalking_hijabi).