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On pilgrimage in the Pyrenees

Frank O'Neill, Anne MacGregor O'Neill, Lay Spiritans



Walking is amazing. One reads more and more about the health benefits of walking. That is exactly what we did. We walked 788 km from S. Jean Pied de Port, in the French Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela, in north-western Spain. This walk is known as the Camino de Santiago (the Way of St. James). There are many routes or Caminos to Santiago and this particular one is called the Camino Frances. It is probably the oldest route, the most popular and the best serviced.

Santiago or St. James, an apostle of Jesus, supposedly travelled to north-western Spain to preach after the death of Jesus. He made six converts and then returned to Jerusalem where he died under Agrippa I in 44 AD. His body was then “miraculously” carried by a stone boat, without sails, oars or a crew, back to Spain where he was buried by his disciples. Later in 813, his body was discovered by a monk and his bones were authenticated by a local bishop. Thus began the pilgrimages to Santiago.

We flew to Barcelona travelling over the pilgrimage route and took a bus to Pamplona. After missing our train to S. Jean Pied de Port, we found a taxi driver willing to take us there. On the way we learned that he regularly ran with the bulls in Pamplona and thought nothing of it. He drove the same way. Although he was a good driver, it was like being with a grand prix competitor as he negotiated the many twists and turns through the Pyrenees. An hour and half later we were there — a journey that would later take us three days to walk.

Everything slowed down

We mention this common, modern-day way of travelling because with flying one sees nothing of the route below. In a taxi the trees were a blur and the countryside whizzed by. But when we began walking everything slowed down. Walking allowed us the opportunity to notice and appreciate the beauty of the poppies and other wild flowers growing along the side of the road, as well as the pasture lands, the wheat fields and the vineyards.

The first day of the pilgrimage was over the Pyrenees, a walk of 27 km to Roncesvalles. It was a beautiful spring day and as we climbed higher small villages could be seen in the distance

below. It was hard to believe that two people had died on the same route a year ago because they had ignored the warnings of bad weather.

We averaged approximately 23 km a day, rising at 6:00 a.m., generally on the road by 7:00 and reaching our destination most days between 12:30 and 1:00 p.m. There were usually two rest stops at wonderful small cafes for café con leche and tortilla patata. We slowly became more conditioned to carrying our backpacks and after about one week of walking our minor aches and blisters were a thing of the past.

Daily programme

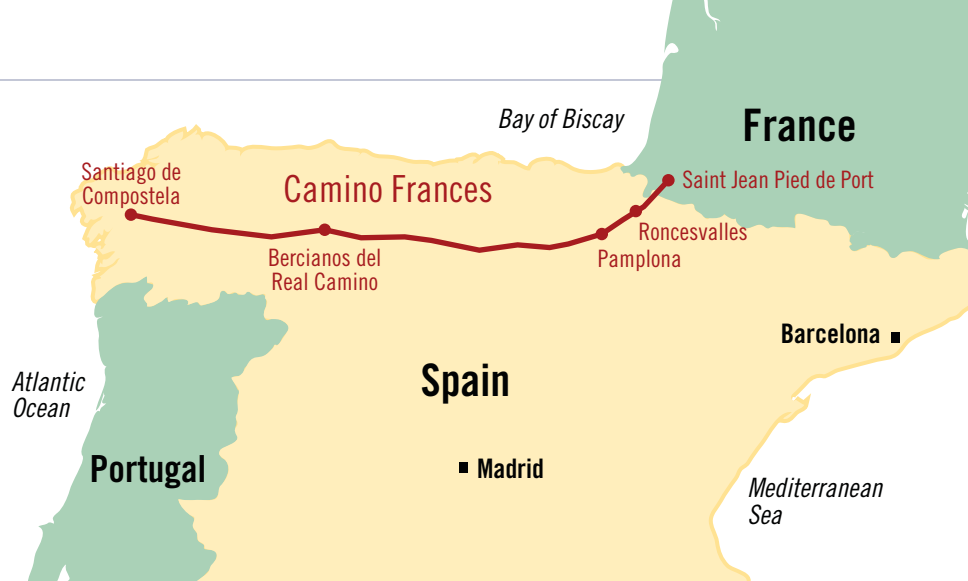
Each afternoon, upon arriving at our destination, we would sign in at an albergue (what we would call a hostel in North America), have our Camino passport stamped, choose our bunks, shower, do laundry and go for lunch and refreshments. The churches in the many towns and villages were extraordinary in size and ornate in detail. There would often be an evening Mass followed by a pilgrim's blessing. Many pilgrims attended these services.

People walked for many different reasons, most from religious or spiritual motives, others were working out personal issues, some just for the adventure, while still others were taking a break from stressful jobs and lives.

A night to remember

The small hamlet of Bercianos del Real Camino appeared deserted, with few trees and little vegetation. It had been a hot day with few opportunities to stop for water. The parroquial albergue did not look inviting: its dark brown brick had seen better days. We arrived at noon — it didn't open its doors until 1:30 p.m.

Normally we had a few choices for the evening meal: either go out to a restaurant or, as we often did, go to a local grocery store, purchase some food and wine and return to the albergue to prepare it. In Bercianos, with one small convenience store and limited supplies, there was only one option: the



Pilgrims were invited to have dinner together at the albergue.

Donations from the previous day's Pilgrims were used to buy food. The priest who ran the parroquial albergue asked for volunteers to cook the evening meal. This was the first time on the Camino we all ate together. With Pilgrims speaking many different languages there was a lot of body language and much laughter at this meal. There was no charge for the meal or the bed, only a request for a donation towards the next evening's dinner. Before dinner the priest said Mass in a small chapel in the village. He spoke slowly and clearly so that those with minimal Spanish could understand and follow him. After the shared meal those who wished were invited to come together to reflect on their journey and to pray.

During the night, on a trip to the washroom, the priest was found scrubbing the toilets.

The exterior look of the town and the albergue were in direct contrast to the warmth and welcome felt by all who spent a night in Bercianos. In a less-than-perfect situation, this priest and a small group of volunteers went out of their way to accommodate and nourish both body and soul.

Municipal albergues

Unlike some guide books on the Camino, even some written in the last ten years that criticized the municipal albergues, we found them to be inexpensive, well kept, clean, no bed bugs





and very welcoming. No albergue has solved the problem of snoring where two, ten or maybe even twenty people were sleeping in one dormitory-style room. If you did not sleep well one night you sure did the next. For some pilgrims, earplugs were a must.

Considered a safe journey, some men and women choose to walk it alone. Although you are never far from others, people respect your privacy and give you whatever space you need. After the first night we never locked our bags and never thought of it again.

Entering the present moment

During the first several days we could tell you where we had stayed, and could describe the accommodations in detail. However, after ten or twelve days it became more difficult remembering where we had been and where we were going. It seems that we entered into the present moment or what some have called the Now. It came down to the simple act of walking, enjoying the moment under a blue sky, passing through farmers' fields and lush forests, alongside streams and rivers and enjoying the company of others. Yes, the Meseta was long and hot — one guidebook referred to it as “the shadeless treadmill”. However it was awesome to be under that huge blue sky dome, dotted with just a few white clouds. The pace of life had slowed down. We did not fully appreciate this until we came back to Toronto and our hectic lives.

Journey's end

Many people have asked us if you need to register ahead of time for the pilgrimage. No, there is no sign-up sheet and no designated starting point. You start where you want, when you want and finish it in your own time or when your holiday is over. In Santiago de Compostela you present yourself at the Oficina del Peregrine with your Camino passport. The pass-

port is a collection of the all the stamps that you received from each albergue. You receive your compostella, the final proof that you have walked the Camino. Your nationality is recorded and the place of your departure is read out at the next day's Pilgrim Mass in the cathedral.

To reach Santiago and to attend the noon day Mass at the cathedral was certainly our goal when we started our pilgrimage 37 days before. The cathedral is so massive — it takes a few visits to truly appreciate its beauty, history and craftsmanship. Although the cathedral did not disappoint, it was the journey — the walking and not the destination — that mattered. At the end, the destination seemed only to be the beginning. The Camino offers you much: a simpler way of living, less complicated, cheaper travel, time to reflect and to notice life around you.

So lace up some hiking boots, grab a pack, some hiking poles and give it a try.

Buen Camino. ■



Santiago de Compostela Cathedral.