

El Camino de Santiago 2010

My wife Joanne and I were asked to speak to our experience in walking a portion of the Camino de Santiago this autumn. She is unfortunately out of town today but I'm happy to present her part of the account as well.

Let me first tell you something about the pilgrimage known as the Camino. The 'back story' starts after the crucifixion of Jesus. The apostles spread out to disseminate the Word and James sailed the length of the Mediterranean to Spain. Imagine the trip in those times! However, some years later he was unwise enough to return to Jerusalem and for his trouble was beheaded by Herod. Two of his disciples spirited his body away, rather than have it fed to the lions. They took it in a boat to return to Spain. Now imagine that journey! When they reached the north-west corner of Spain, known as Galicia, his remains were buried and quickly forgotten.

Almost 800 years later Christians were directed to rediscover his tomb by stars shining over a field - 'campos' for field and 'stella' for star giving the name 'Compestela' to the site. Around that time, Saint James, or Santiago as the Spanish called him, became a prominent mythical figure as the Spanish Catholics began to reclaim their country from the Moors. Some even claimed to see him on horseback during the ensuing battles. In any case, he became the patron saint of Spain and people began to make a pilgrimage to his burial site and the city that grew around it, Santiago de Compestela.

In medieval times many thousands of pilgrims walked from all over Europe to Santiago, and it became the third most important pilgrimage after Jerusalem and Rome. Why did they make this difficult and sometimes dangerous walk? Probably for as many reasons as do the walkers today. Many European cathedrals have a depiction of Judgement Day on their facades. If you look closely at the carvings, the lucky folks going to heaven are largely the clergy and the nobility. A common person hoping to be in that group would have to do something special like making a holy pilgrimage. Some might go to give thanks for a blessing. Others probably went for the sheer adventure or to leave their lives behind for a while.

Though popular for hundreds of years the Camino began to lose its luster in the last century or so. Only in the past few decades have the numbers begun to swell again; more than 100,000 making the walk each year. The reasons are varied - a new spirituality, an interest in walking, a need to 'opt out of' the every-day grind for a bit.

There are several routes from Western Europe that converge on Santiago de Compestela; the best known one is the so-called French Route which begins in the Pyrenees. After a steep descent into the Basque country, the path crosses northern Spain, over the Castilian plain, including Pamplona where

the bulls run, to end in the rolling hills of Galicia. Overall it is a little more than 800 km and walkers will need at least a month to cover it. There are dozens of pilgrim hostels, or refugios, along the way where you can stay overnight for a pittance.

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Wherever you start, you can obtain a credencial or passport, such as this one, which you have stamped along the way, in inns, cafes and churches, to prove that you indeed walked the Camino.

On the last day, when you see the spires of the Santiago Cathedral from Mount Joy, the roads are clogged with walkers. Whether travelling light or seriously backpacking, many of the pilgrims wear a scallop shell, some with the cross of Saint James painted on them. When you reach the old city, most people go first to the Pilgrim Office to trade their credencial for a Compestela, or Pilgrim certificate. Then you would go to the cathedral, enter the crypt to see the grave of Saint James and then up to the apse behind the main altar to give the statue of the apostle a 'brazol' or hug. Either that day or the next, you would likely attend a Pilgrim Mass to give thanks for a safe journey completed. A highlight would be the swinging of the Bottafumeiro, a huge incense holder, more than a hundred pounds of solid silver, directly over your head. In early days, there was a practical reason for this – to fumigate the pungent pilgrims and their unwashed clothes. Later these clothes would most likely be burned. Our hygiene was fortunately different, but for us the pilgrimage was now over as well.