

Principals' Pilgrimage



Part 1

The Camino France is the most famous Camino de Santiago trail. Journeying with my colleagues, we managed to cover a distance of 117.2 km in six days, with one rest day in between. On average we walked a distance of 24 km per day. The surface of the trail changed constantly from gravel roads to narrow goat tracks, and from ancient paved roads to gushing streams. Hurricane Kirk tore through Europe and the tail end did not spare us. For two days we walked through torrential rain, but this just added to our experience. We were also blessed with some fine weather which really brought a spring to our step.

Before we embarked on the Camino, our guide encouraged us to drink in the sights, the smells and the sounds as we walked the UNESCO listed trail. He also reminded us to acknowledge fellow travellers with the warm greeting, “Buen Camino” which loosely translated/means, “(May your) path be good”.

The terrain and landscape constantly changed. Often, we walked through fairytale forests. At other times we would be traipsing through medieval villages, with local farmers herding stock reminiscent of farming in years gone by. We were often greeted with sweeping farmland, not to mention the cornfields and chestnut trees ... often as far as the eye could see. The terrain was never flat; always undulating. Some days involved a lot of climbing (thank God we had bought our walking poles). Towards the end of Day 3 we conquered three enormous valleys where the descents were equally as steep as the ascents. Our Swedish/Spanish guide, Daniel, reminded us prior to conquering the valleys, “When you continue walking down, down, down, you will eventually reach the valley floor, and then you will require all your energy to climb up, up and even further up.”

The wonderful part of walking the Camino was coming across such a variety of people from all corners of life, Hawaii, Mexico, Canada, United States, Austria, Italy, New Zealand, even Sydney. All walking with a positive spirit and the same destination in mind. There were families (some spanning a number of generations), young couples,

very elderly couples, groups of youths singing, dogs on leads, cyclists in groups ... you name it, we saw it.

The recurrent theme throughout our pilgrimage was, "You never walk alone." So, while we undertook the journey at our own pace we often walked with friends/colleagues who traveled at a similar pace, often making acquaintances with pilgrims from various corners of the globe who shared their stories.

All walkers on the Camino have a passport of sorts, referred to as a 'Credencial'. The aim is to stop on a number of occasions each day and have this document stamped as evidence that you have completed a section of the route. The Credencial could be stamped at many places along the way, including medieval churches, shops, homes and humble cafes.

Through sun, rain, storms, mud, hills, injuries, blisters and even a hurricane, our group sustained a genuinely positive, collegial and humorous demeanor throughout the Camino de Santiago.

Part 2

The Camino de Santiago is more than just a popular route; it's a globally cherished treasure. Since 1993, the Camino has been recognised as a UNESCO world Heritage Site. The final destination for any Camino is the township of Santiago de Compostela. In other words, all Caminos (or Ways) lead to Santiago. The captivating tale behind this pilgrimage is truly remarkable. For it is believed that the remains of the Apostle St James the Great are at rest within the majestic Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. This extraordinary find dates back to a shepherd in the 9th century.

James took on the role of a missionary after Jesus's crucifixion and the subsequent rise of the Christian Church. Like many apostles, he embarked on journeys to spread the teachings of Jesus Christ. According to historical and ecclesiastical accounts, he travelled far and wide, even reaching modern-day Spain and Portugal to preach the Gospel. Though faced with adversity, his courage and determination never wavered. People believe James' remains are interred in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, a revered pilgrimage site. This site has become one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in the Christian world, attracting hundreds of thousands of pilgrims annually.

At the conclusion of our pilgrimage the principals agreed to gather in a small square in the town of Santiago de Compostela. Our group dribbled into the square over a period of roughly two hours during our last day of walking. When the last arrived, we all walked as a collective group further into the town and gathered in the enormous expanse (square) in front of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela (or the Cathedral of St James). Here we gathered with many other pilgrims who had finished the journey for group photos.

The following day we joined many other pilgrims for midday mass in the cathedral. Prior to the mass we had the opportunity to visit the site where the remains of St James are interred. Towards the conclusion of the mass, the Botafumeiro – an enormous incense burner – is lit and swung from the ceiling. People had told me of its enormity but nothing prepared us for what we witnessed on the day. The Botafumeiro is swung across the length of the naves of the church above the heads of all in the congregation. According to legend, the first temple censer was built for hygienic reasons during the eleventh century. On our final day in Santiago, we drove out to Finisterra which is one of the western-most points in Spain. For some, this is the final destination of the Camino. This location is also referred to as the End of the World, for in medieval times the traveller could journey no further. We were fortunate in that the hurricane-force winds that blew here in the days prior had now fully abated. The End of the World was eerily still and calm, and for the first time in days, the sun cracked through the dark clouds. The only sign of life – nine goats feeding themselves on a rocky outcrop that was surrounded by the swirling waters of the Atlantic Ocean. We had made it!