



Learning to walk



small WORLD

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A kind of travel column

Many of us take walking for granted. But for others, like travel writer BRENDAN HARDING, walking is still a skill to be learned and appreciated

IT WASN'T the ideal start to a long walk, but then again a hangover never is. There are those who swear by a brisk walk taken in the biting wind, those who will stamp their feet and decry from their barstool the merits of a 'stirring' perambulation to restore the senses and enliven the appetite. And, for all I know, they may be right. But this was to be no mere dawdle from the front door to the park. Not by a long shot.

But first I should explain why I was now standing on an empty beach outside the city of Bilbao in Spain's Basque coastline looking left and right in bewilderment as a drum banged a numbing rhythm in my head.

I have long wanted – and even planned, usually by the comforting glow of a blazing fire – to undertake the Camino de Santiago, that famous pilgrim's route which runs like veins through Europe and where all routes lead ultimately to the grey-flagged streets of Galicia's Santiago de Compostella.

I had been there, I had seen those Peregrinos arrive alone, exhausted and confused or in excited groups, wooden staff in hand, scallop shell dangling from their sun-reddened necks, backpacks hefted high between their shoulder blades. I had seen them come in pain and in triumph and had wished to be among them ... and now I was.

It was nine in the morning and the beach at La Arena was almost empty. A Labrador, the colour of the beach's wet sand, toyed with the incoming waves, while his

bark was stolen by the fresh sea breeze. A solitary runner, whose fitness and fortitude I admired, ran the length of the long, sweeping bay. I pulled the scarf tightly about my neck and descended the steps towards the sands and into the unknown.

This was to be no mammoth trek. It would not end in jubilation on the cathedral's steps or with the sound of a final stamp on the pages of a pilgrim's passport – it was a mere trifle to those accustomed to long-distance walking. I would walk unfit, as best I could, over two days from the outskirts of Bilbao to the town of Laredo in nearby Cantabria along a paltry 60 kilometres of the Camino.

My first obstacle arrived within minutes and threw me into despair. At the end of the beach, my only egress, a boarded up bridge over the Rio Barbadun, mocked my way. I had barely begun and already the gods were playing dice. For more than an hour I scoured the nearby roads for signs of a detour. Eventually, pinned deceptively to a wall on a sheet of worn paper, a yellow arrow and the stenciled symbol of a hiking man pointed me onwards.

At last on the trail proper I began to settle into the rhythm of placing one foot before another, over and over again. The sound of the Basque sea crashing on the rocks below and the solitude of being alone with nature eased my earlier anxieties. Overhead, seagulls hung on the breeze like children's kites, inquisitive seals poked their heads from rocky pools and long-horned goats eyed me from their hilltop

lookouts. In the distance, on a rocky promontory, the town of Castro Urdiales, my day's destination, changed colour under each passing cloud. As I stood on a headland admiring a flock of petrels as they skimmed the sea's wave tops I realised my head no longer pounded – perhaps they were right after all.

The route along the coast was easy at first: passing long abandoned mines and tiny farmhouses whose gardens were filled with pumpkins and squashes, peas and fruits. Sturdy Basque horses with bulging muscles and short square heads whinnied as I passed empty-handed. Suddenly, the deception of Castro's nearness evaporated as the trail turned inland and my heart sunk low. Through a mountain tunnel and beneath an overhead motorway Castro disappeared from view and the landscape changed from an easy flatness to one of buckling green hills and mountains. I had entered Cantabria.

Once in mountainous Cantabria, I followed the course of the old road from Bilbao to Santander over slowly rising, energy-sapping hills, where rain clouds hung in wait. It was quiet up here in the hills: whirls of silent vultures rode the morning currents in ever-searching circles. In a secluded valley, a family of wild pigs trotted in line through an olive grove; and from a steep hillside, a lone, yellow-haired sheepdog watched his flock offering a single deep-noted muttering to alert me of his watchful presence.

My legs ached, my shins burned like coals as ancient roadside

churches, mills and granaries lost their aesthetic appeal. My sole concern was the constant effort. Doubt once again crept through my mind: am I mad? I asked.

It was then I remembered the words of a mountain guide I had known on the island of El Hierro as he watched me negotiate a steep ascent: "It is not about the destination," he said, "it is only about this step, then this step and the next and the next ..." With his mantra ringing in my ears I abandoned my notions of time and distance and fell quietly into the realisation of one step at a time. Frequently, I would look backwards at a point in the distance and smile, but never forward, never towards the end.

Friendly dogs came to greet me, villages disappeared behind me, people in cars waved and the rains came and went. And then, without realisation, without knowledge of its coming, I stood in the quiet siesta-hour sleepiness of Castro Urdiales and looked back. I could see far off in the distance my point of embarkation, the place where I had doubted myself, cursed myself for such foolhardiness and smiled again.

A wave of emotive relief swept across me as I stared out to sea. Tomorrow would also come and go, I realised, just as today had done, eaten up one step at a time. And although muscles may ache and blisters may form, that sense of peace and satisfaction of having undertaken a journey, no matter how small, of being a Peregrino, no matter for how long, would lift my feet over and over again until there were no more

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miles to conquer and no more steps to take.

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