

TRAVEL

SPAIN | IRAN | BRUGES | CITY BREAKS

WALK THIS WAY

TERESA LEVONIAN COLE FOLLOWS IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF PILGRIMS ON THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO, PAST THE FARMS, FORESTS AND GRANITE CHURCHES OF GALICIA, AND STAYING IN HISTORIC LODGINGS

‘We have Pope John Paul II to thank for the revival of interest in the Camino,’ says Diego, our guide, referring to a pilgrimage to the shrine of St James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, north-west Spain. ‘The year 1993 was the first Holy Year, when Saint James’ Day falls on a Sunday, since his visit in 1989, and the first time the number of pilgrims topped 100,000.’ Thanks to the interest aroused by Paulo Coelho’s popular novel *The Alchemist* and the 2010 film *The Way* – combined with promotional efforts by the recently autonomous Galician authorities – by 2014, the figure had ballooned to 238,000.

Of the numerous routes to Santiago de Compostela, the Camino Francés from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port is the original and most popular. It is the basis of the twelfth-century *Codex Calixtinus*, the oldest travel guide in the world. This comes complete with gossip and advice for pilgrims who, since the ninth century, had been beating a path to the bones of St James at the third holiest site in Christendom.

With a friend, over six days, I followed in their footsteps, completing the final 116 kilometres of the Camino from Sarria. It was November, a time when the heavens generally break over the lush greenery of Galicia, and pilgrims are few. But brilliant skies and birdsong accompanied our journey along the well-signed trail, through forests of auburn oak and chestnut trees, fragrant pines and silvery eucalyptus, fallen leaves cushioning our steps. Armed with traditional sticks and the scallop shell of Santiago, we crossed Roman bridges and forded streams, passed ancient farms where corn dried

in distinctive Galician *hórreos* (raised granaries), dodged cows in tiny villages and stopped at bars for restorative slugs of *aguardiente*.

Lest we forgot the purpose of our journey, numerous *cruceiros* (ancient stone crosses), pilgrim fountains and romanesque churches of unadorned granite focused our thoughts. And as we limped past *mojónes* (milestones) marking the diminishing kilometres, we experienced the camaraderie of fellow pilgrims, who proffered plasters, knee braces and painkillers.

The many pilgrims’ hospitals that once lined the route have been recycled, but roadside inns – such as the now-dilapidated Casa Carneiro, where Charles V reposed in 1520 – remain a constant feature. While harder souls find authenticity in discomfort, carrying their worldly goods and putting up at dormitory-style hostels, we took the soft option. Daily, our luggage would materialise at our lodgings, taken there by taxis arranged by Camino Ways. The lodgings ranged from the occasional lacklustre hotel to the delightful seventeenth-century manor Pazo de Sedor in Castañeda. The latter is mentioned in the *Codex* for its kilns ‘to make lime for the building of the Apostle’s church’.

Nothing, however, rivalled the magnificent Hostal de los Reyes Católicos in Santiago de Compostela itself, one of the most beautiful paradors in Spain. Commissioned in 1499 by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella as an inn and hospital for pilgrims, it overlooks the cathedral: our journey’s end.

We arrived just in time for Friday’s Pilgrims’ Mass. The cathedral’s famous silver Botafumeiro, a container for incense, was lowered and lit. Rising again, it careered across the transept, billowing sanitising plumes of incense above the heads of the congregation and wafting our prayers to heaven □

ways and means

Teresa Levonian Cole travelled as a guest of Camino Ways (020-3468 1516; caminoways.com). A six-night Superior Collection trip from Sarria to Santiago de Compostela costs from £595 per person, including B&B accommodation and four dinners. Flights not included.

One of the pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela passes through the Galician province of Lugo