



**HERITAGE:**  
The world famous Catedral de Santiago de Compostela

# A pilgrim's progress through the rain in Spain



**Leslie Ann Horgan** completes a portion of the Camino (and a few portions of seafood)

**A** feeble ray of sunshine gently nudges apart the morning mists as we pull up to the lighthouse at Finisterre. As the swirling wall of white slowly recedes over the sea, it truly does look like 'finis terrae' – the end of the world.

This hallowed spot in north west Spain is also the final point of a spiritual journey that stretches back across centuries. On the side of the road a stone obelisk bears a picture of a scallop shell and a bronze plate marked 0,00km. This is the end of the Camino de Santiago – the Way of Saint James.



Further on, the land slopes sharply down to the sea. Here, the cliff top is dotted with black scorch marks where pilgrims have burnt their walking sticks in a final act of spiritual cleansing.

Having begun in the 9th century as a Catholic pilgrimage, the Camino has become popular in recent years as an adventure holiday. The most popular route, known as The French Way, begins in the Pyrenees in France and stretches some 800km to Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

Those who don't have an entire month to dedicate to the trek can do one of the eight sections at a time, the last 100km from Sarria being the most popular.

Pilgrims get a special passport stamped along the way; you must do 100km on foot, or 200km by bike or horse, to earn your certificate. For the most devout, or the fittest, an extra three days takes you to Finisterre, a place of worship since pagan times.

Standing here amongst the modern-day burnt offerings, I am more than a little guilty. Having walked a mere 5km of the Camino myself, it feels like cheating to be snapping photos at the finish line.

We started out at the stone cross in San Xia do Camino, a hamlet as pretty as it is petite. Yellow arrows daubed on roads and moss-covered trees guide the way out into the countryside.

The path winds through fields and woodlands, rock, mud and streams. Everywhere there are stone farmhouses, their red tiled roofs bent, like the pilgrims' backs, under the weight of rain and prayers.

There's a peace to the place, and with hoods up against the rain, we were cut off into our own blinkered worlds. Every so often we passed an obelisk marking the kilometres to

Santiago. But for us they signified the distance to O Coto, where an excellent lunch of meatballs at the Casa de Los Somoza was a hearty antidote to the rain.

Later, we arrived into Santiago de Compostela by bus rather than on foot – but this does not lessen the city's impact. A modern sprawl that's home to 100,000, it wraps around the stone streets of the old town. In the heart lies the building that has drawn pilgrims for thousands of years – the Catedral de Santiago de Compostela.

After weeks of simplicity on the Way, at the end is this towering edifice that drags your eyes up to the heavens. It was here in 814 that a hermit is said to have discovered the tomb of St James. A church was built around it, which grew into the enormous basilica that exists today.

**I**n Santiago it's impossible to escape reminders of the pilgrimage. Everywhere you see the motif of a shell – once the proof that pilgrims had made it to the Atlantic coast where scallops are found, now the official sign of the Camino.

I'd recommend a stop at the Santiago Turismo office – a tour with one of its guides (€12) will explain the significance of the cathedral's facades, the squares that surround it and the many associated rituals. For instance, upon reaching the city, pilgrims are

recommended to head to the Parador. Though it's now a five-star hotel, it was once the pilgrims' hospital.

There are equally ornate surroundings in the cathedral, although it was hard to get the full impact of the Porta da Gloria, the original entrance to the church – it is currently under repair. In the crypt that lies under the main altar, you can say a quiet prayer in front of the silver casket that holds the relics of St James.

Most of the buildings in the old town are ancient and ornate – many are in use by the University of Santiago de

Compostela. For all its history, the presence of 40,000 students makes Santiago a vibrant city.

My base at the Hotel Compostela was right on the border of the new and old town. The modern city is bustling but run down, a host of student accommodation interspersed with pretty parks. The highlight for me were the bountiful Zara stores.

A generous portion of pinchos – never to be called tapas in northern Spain – costs about €2.20, while the city's best restaurants are clustered around the Mercado de Abastos. The Café de Altamira offers a gourmet twist on the Galician favourites of octopus (pulpo) and hake (merluza). For a less fussy experience, – and more bizarre décor – try the Restaurante Don Quijote on Calle Galeras. While sea-



food and shellfish dominate here too, I watched open-mouthed as locals tucked into pigs' trotters.

When it was time to go, I headed for the airport with a scallop shell marked with a crucifix in my case – €1's worth of luck for my trip. I intend to go back and hang it at the end of the world some day, when I've walked more than 5km of the Camino.



**MILESTONE:** The last marker on the Way of St James



**TREAT:** The Hotel Compostela, left; pulpo, a local favourite, above

## GETTING THERE

**Aer Lingus** operates three weekly flights from Dublin to Santiago de Compostela on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays from April to October, and an additional flight on Wednesdays during July and August. Flights start at approximately €160 return. See [Aerlingus.com](http://Aerlingus.com). **Camino Ways** specialises in Camino de Santiago walking and cycling holidays. A classic seven-day experience covering the last 100km of the French Way from Sarria starts at €565 per person sharing, from April to October. See [caminoways.com](http://caminoways.com). For local information and to book guided tours of Santiago de Compostela, visit [santiagoturismo.com](http://santiagoturismo.com). For tourist information about Spain visit [spain.info](http://spain.info).

