



# Old paths newly discovered



In a two-part series, **Fr Michael Collins** traces the pilgrim route to Rome

**A**ll roads lead to Rome. That's what the old adage claims.

For centuries, pilgrims have made the often arduous journey to visit the tombs of St Peter and St Paul in the Eternal City.

In recent years, a growing number of people are rediscovering the beauty of the ancient European pilgrim routes. The Camino of *Santiago de Compostela* in northern Spain is now thronged during the summer months.

In Italy, the *Via Frangigena* is experiencing a renaissance. The old route, literally the French Way, originally ran from Canterbury to Rome. It largely followed the ancient Via Cassia, built by the Romans, to link the city with the north of Italy.

In the early Spring of 990 or 991, Sigeric the Serious, the Archbishop of Canterbury, set out on pilgrimage to Rome. Crossing the Channel at Dover to Calais, the archbishop took the route leading down through modern-day France, Switzerland and crossed the Alps into Italy.

## Middle Ages

The route was already popular in the Middle Ages. Sigeric travelled about 12 miles a day, probably on horseback. Each evening, he stayed in a different town. His scouts were sent ahead to find an inn and arrange the evening meal.

Sigeric made the trip in 79 days. After a two-day stay in Rome where Sigeric received the pallium from Pope John XV, the English prelate set out on the journey home.

On his way, he compiled a diary of each town in which he stayed. The text was soon amplified by other scribes, who noted the best inns in which to sleep or to eat.

Today, it is still possible to follow the ancient *Via Frangigena*. The towns named by Sigeric still exist, quaint backwaters which emerge to surprise us from the medieval world. The Dublin-based tourist agency, Camino Ways, has devised a journey which allows Irish pilgrims and tourists to enjoy the enchanting route.

The ancient *Via Frangigena* is not yet as popular as the Spanish Camino but it is equally fascinating and interest is growing every year.

In medieval times, most pilgrims stayed in hostels run by convents or monasteries. The majority of pilgrims were men. Today only a few such religious houses still exist and offer hospitality.

In recent years many hotels have come on board and tapped into the growing Italian market.

Very few modern travellers have either the time or the inclination to spend three months on the road from Canterbury to Rome.

Some like to divide the trip over a few years, spending a week or two at a time. Camino Ways have tailored a number of highly attractive options.

## Transport

When I spoke to Roland Monsegu, director of Camino Ways, he showed me the route, conveniently divided up into 16 sections.

There were a few ways to travel. I could walk, hire a car, take a train or bus, travel by bicycle or even go on horseback. Walking seemed the least complicated and ensured that I would be close to nature.

Having looked at the op-

tions going from England, through France and Switzerland, I opted for the Italian Way. The thought of strolling through the gentle hills of Tuscany and the plains of Lazio was impossible to resist.

As I had only one week of holidays left, I had to curtail my time. Roland suggested an itinerary which brought me to several of Sigeric's towns. I had been to Montepulciano and San Gimignano many times, so these I sacrificed in lieu of places I had not yet visited.

I was furnished with maps and details of the route. It was up to me how I decided to travel and how long I would spend each day.

Getting there is so easy. One can either fly to Bologna with Aer Lingus or to Pisa with Ryanair. From each airport it is only an hour by train to take up the ancient route. My luggage was collected each day from the hotel and brought to the next hotel. All that was required of me was to walk along the beautiful road.

I set myself a gentle pace. I enjoyed visiting the churches and museums in each town. I admit I spent a little too long each day having coffees in the charming squares of the villages I passed through. On more than one occasion I spent so much time in the museums that the day had slipped by.

Fortunately, there are excellent bus and train routes which connect each town and I was able to literally hop on public transport to get to the next point on the itinerary.

*Next week, Fr Michael traces the route between medieval Lucca to the Etruscan town of Vetralla, the last post before the Eternal City. More information is available on [caminoways.com](http://caminoways.com)*

