



OUR JOURNEY ON THE CAMINO

FOR ALISON O'RIORDAN,
THE SPANISH PILGRIMAGE WAS
A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE

I have always been interested in walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain. My father completed the Camino Primitivo, the very first of the pilgrimage routes, in 2010 with a friend, and tales of their adventure had captivated me ever since.

Then, on listening to a lecture given by father and daughter, Peter and Natasha Murtagh, in 2012, who penned the book *Buen Camino* after their journey on the Camino walking trails, I just knew I had to experience it.

A good friend decided to join my dad and I on the pilgrimage across northern Spain to the reputed tomb of St James, whose shrine lies in the great cathedral named in his honour in Santiago de Compostela in Galicia.

As a group, we chose to do the last 110k of the French Way to Santiago, the most traditional of the pilgrim routes, through the north of the Iberian Peninsula. This is also probably the most popular route to Santiago de Compostela. It starts in the Pyrénées and covers some 800k.

More than 1,000 years old, the Camino de Santiago or 'The Way of St James' is rich in Christian history and heritage. It attracts people from all over the world, of all faiths and those of none.

Greeted with galeforce winds and rain upon landing in Santiago on a Tuesday afternoon in mid-October, we caught two buses: the first from Santiago airport to Lugo bus station; a second was a local bus from Lugo bus station to Sarria bus station.

On the bus journey, we met our first "peregrino" or "pilgrim", 36-year-old Dave from Cork. He was carrying his belongings for the week on his back. On arrival in Sarria, we had a meal with Dave. As we shared personal stories, we began what was to be the start of a new friendship on the eve of our gruelling trek.

The next morning, we began our walk, heading west in the direction of Portomarín, and covered mountain ranges, rustic

farmlands, oak woods, meadows, fields, valleys, rural villages and one-horse towns. Reassuring yellow arrows along with our route notes were our guides for the next five days.

Along the way, we passed cattle, charming little hamlets and "hórreos", which are typical granaries built in wood or stone, raised from the ground by pillars to avoid the access of rodents.

We met people from Australia, Mexico and Chicago; even the Chinese were eagerly taking photos on every bend.

Although we travelled as three musketeers, some people choose to travel alone, some with a spouse and others with friends. Everyone goes at their own pace, some cycling.

Each person has their own personal meaning and reason for being there. For some, it might be a journey to honour a deceased person, or a pilgrimage after an illness. Sometimes, it can be a time to reflect and get away from something or a search for greater meaning in one's life or to decide how one's future will pan out.

Many people establish a connection with others along the trek as everyone is so friendly; some getting into deep conversations with their unfamiliar fellow walkers. But others wish to be left alone.

For us, the sense of camaraderie reverberated from the cobbled stones along the historical pilgrimage. It was lovely to be wished "Buen Camino" time and time again, uttered in many a foreign lilt.

Nearly everyone walking had watched the movie *The Way*, by director Emilio Estevez, which tells the story of a father carrying the ashes of his son along the 800k pilgrimage from St Jean to Santiago. The movie had been inspiration for many embarking on the trek.

Wet gear was pulled from the backpack often as the rain poured down. Hot chocolate never tasted as good as when we were taking shelter.

Most people who walk, even if not religious, carry their 'credencial del peregrino' (free pilgrim's passport) which you fill to capacity with stamps from each place you stay and where you snack along the Camino. In order to obtain your certificate at the end, proof of having completed the special journey, you need to get your passport stamped every day and need to walk at least 100k to be able to request it.

After six hours of walking each day, a hot shower was warmly welcomed. Our luggage was transferred from place to place as we walked, waiting in the reception of our lodgings to greet us every evening. Meals were generally served at the hotels each evening, where we used vouchers.

Those staying in public hostels can't book in advance and it is on a first-come first-served basis.

A night's entertainment included us resting our legs and exchanging stories of the day's journey with fellow pilgrims. One of the absolute draws of the Camino is the people you meet on the dirt tracks. We surrounded ourselves with a nice eclectic collection of other pilgrims who we laughed with and also moaned with about exhausted limbs along the route.

Many pilgrims start their Camino Francés in St Jean-Pied-de-Port, the ancient capital of the Basque region of Basse-Navarre, and wind

their way through Roncesvalles, Pamplona, Burgos and Leon to the point where we commenced in Sarria.

These hardcore walkers have been going for up to five weeks, whereas our journey lasts just five days. But everyone respects each other's efforts. Tasting cooked octopus or "pulpo" in Melide en route, which was our halfway point, I saw several pairs of boots left abandoned on the side of the road.

For us, after the first day trekking to Portomarín came the delightful villages and towns of Palas de Rei, Arzúa and Amenal, before the majestic Santiago de Compostela.

Pilgrims frequently erect crosses and other messages into wire fencing along the way. Sometimes you won't see a motorised vehicle for days, whereas, at times, the quiet and melancholic world of the Camino can be shattered by the mechanical noise of farm machinery, animals and traffic.

Blister plasters came in handy for my two companions, as did a torch when we set out at 7am on our final day of the walk to be in time for the pilgrim Mass in Santiago at midday.

It is an overwhelming experience reaching Santiago, as bronze scallop shells pave the way on the pavements as if to welcome you to the much-

applauded city. We each felt uplifted and on an emotional high from the enriching experience as the historic baroque cathedral illuminated from the centre of the city.

For some pilgrims, it can be quite overwhelming, drying their tears as they realise their arduous journey has come to an end. It is wonderful to imagine walking the same route as the medieval pilgrims, whose journey dates as far back as the 9th century.

I am reliably informed that so far in 2013, nearly 210,000 people have walked to Santiago, and that's only the ones officially registered.

We quickly made our way to our hotel, a 16th century monastery, Hospedería San Martín Pinario, located 50 metres in front of the cathedral, where we spent two nights enjoying all Santiago had to offer.

Having caught the Camino bug, I decided before I flew home to return next year and do another route, the Camino Fisterra, also known as "the pagan end of the earth" with my dad.

Who knows, I may even complete all routes in the future!

GETTING THERE:

CaminoWays.com specialises in holidays on the Camino de Santiago.

A classic seven-day experience from Sarria to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, covering the

last 100k of the Camino Francés, starts at €489pps (low season) and €565pps (high season).

The CaminoWays.com package includes half-board accommodation,

holiday pack and luggage transfer from hotel to hotel.

The Superior Collection Camino package, staying at the best hotels on the Camino, starts at €673pps (low season) and €749pps (high season).

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