

A pilgrimage with prosciutto

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ITALY

WE were following in the footsteps of kings and queens and saints and scholars, including the preposterously named 10th-Century Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric the Serious. And I bet none of them had to use an iPhone 4S to help find their way to the Eternal City.

Welcome to the *Via Francigena* — the ancient pilgrim route from Canterbury to Rome. Think of the *Via* as the *Camino de Santiago* with a bit more grunt.

For enthusiastic walkers and hikers, the road to Rome is a level higher than the *Camino* — a more strenuous test of stamina and far from the madding crowds that pack the pilgrim trail in Spain, particularly on the popular last 100-kilometre trek into Santiago.

You just have to love the Italians. How can a nation that can produce Leonardo Da Vinci, Michaelangelo and works of art like the Ferrari 250 GTE and Alfonso Bialetti's espresso coffee pot not be able to erect a few signs that consistently point the right way?

On the *Camino* (we did a section of the Northern Route from Bilbao to Santander last year) you can't go wrong, with bright yellow arrows set up at every turn.

The red, white and black *Via* signs sometimes proved more elusive, and the heavy rains last winter played havoc, pulling down trees, washing away hill paths and forest tracks inevitably leading to detours obviously not listed in the *Lightfoot Guide to the Via Francigena* — the essential guidebook provided by operator Camino Ways of Dublin.

Of course we got lost — though I prefer the term (sometimes greeted after five hours of walking with a frosty stare) of "temporarily unaware of our exact location".

That was when the iPhone proved invaluable — not just the sat nav and Google maps but the simple utility tool of the compass included on all

iPhones. It saved us from our own stupidity, and miles and miles of walking.

Camino Ways helped ignite Irish interest in the *Camino* — especially among those who have just a week or so to dip calloused toes into a walking holiday, but the *Via Francigena* is relatively virgin territory.

We met just four other walkers — Milanese buddies being followed by a documentary film crew. We broke bread with them on a high plateau. Ironically, we had started the walk that day an hour ahead of them but a missed sign meant we got lost. It was serendipitous. We picnicked on bread, olives, cheese and salami with our new friends, who had wine. It was fun to search each day for the perfect spot to enjoy an *al fresco* repast.

We saw five students through the heat haze resting from the midday sun in the shade of a hazelnut grove. (If you want to know who puts the nuts into Nutella, it's the farmers of the rich, dark chocolate soil in Lazio.)

The package includes accommodation, always of a good and sometimes extraordinarily high standard, and dinner and breakfast with luggage transferred to the next hotel as you walk with just a small rucksack with the day's comestibles and other essentials.

We flew to Rome with Aer Lingus (flights not included in the package), and took the train into Rome's architecturally stunning Termini station — though in retrospect the shuttle bus from the airport would have been cheaper and more convenient.

A short three-stop hop on the metro from Termini station brought us to Roma Ostiense station and from there it was a little over two hours on the train to Viterbo — a glorious hilltop town with a medieval wall surrounding an ancient heart.

At Ristorante La Loggetta we enjoyed prosciutto, salamis and bresaola, the air-cured beef of the Valtellina region, with fresh mozzarella oozing with buffalo milk. We ate Italian style, a second course of pasta followed by a meat or

fish course, in this case Saltimbocca — literally "jump in the mouth" — veal beaten to a thin strip anointed with fresh sage and wrapped in prosciutto before being flash-fried in garlicky olive oil and butter with chilli.

And so over the next four days we took a meandering pilgrim's path towards Rome walking ancient rural paths, sometimes directly across fields and woodland. The dawn chorus lasted until dusk.

We averaged 25km a day officially, but probably clocked up nearer 30km (18 miles or so). Vetralla, Sutri, Campagna di Roma and Isola Farnese near Storta followed. You need to be fairly fit, a seasoned walker and have your wits about you to follow the trail which adds a certain frisson.

Food was outstanding — though perhaps hunger is a great sauce. At Sutri, where the Etruscans hung out nearly 3,000 years ago, we stayed with Angela and Valentino, farmers who run a wonderful Agriturismo at Montefosco (www.agriturismomontefosco.it) which is recommended. We were the first Irish ever to stay there, though Dutch and German walkers have been enjoying their hospitality for years.

We were late, and Valentino thought us lost and so drove out from the farm to look for us. He found us too, and ferried us the last couple of kilometres to his farm. Two ice cold beers arrived in jig time and we later enjoyed a wonderful meal. Everything was home-made or home-produced including wonderful pork from Saddleback pigs fattened on hazelnuts. "It is nostra" (ours) Angela said as each course arrived. And that included the robust wine made by her father.

The last day's walking is a 17km ramble through the busy suburbs to finish on the Appian Way, but after the wildness of the Lazio countryside we just didn't fancy it and instead took the suburban train into Rome.

Our hotel was near St Peter's Square (*Domus Carmelitana* — recommended) and on the Saturday evening we went to the Basil-

ica. We had the place almost to ourselves between 5.30 and 6.30pm when a burly young cleric started swinging out of a bell signalling that the Vatican City was closing up for the night just like an old-style Dublin publican calling time — "Have yis no Rome to go to" he seemed to be saying.

Well, we did. The last night was spent under the stars enjoying an outstanding meal and Italian street life not far from the Palazzo Venezia.

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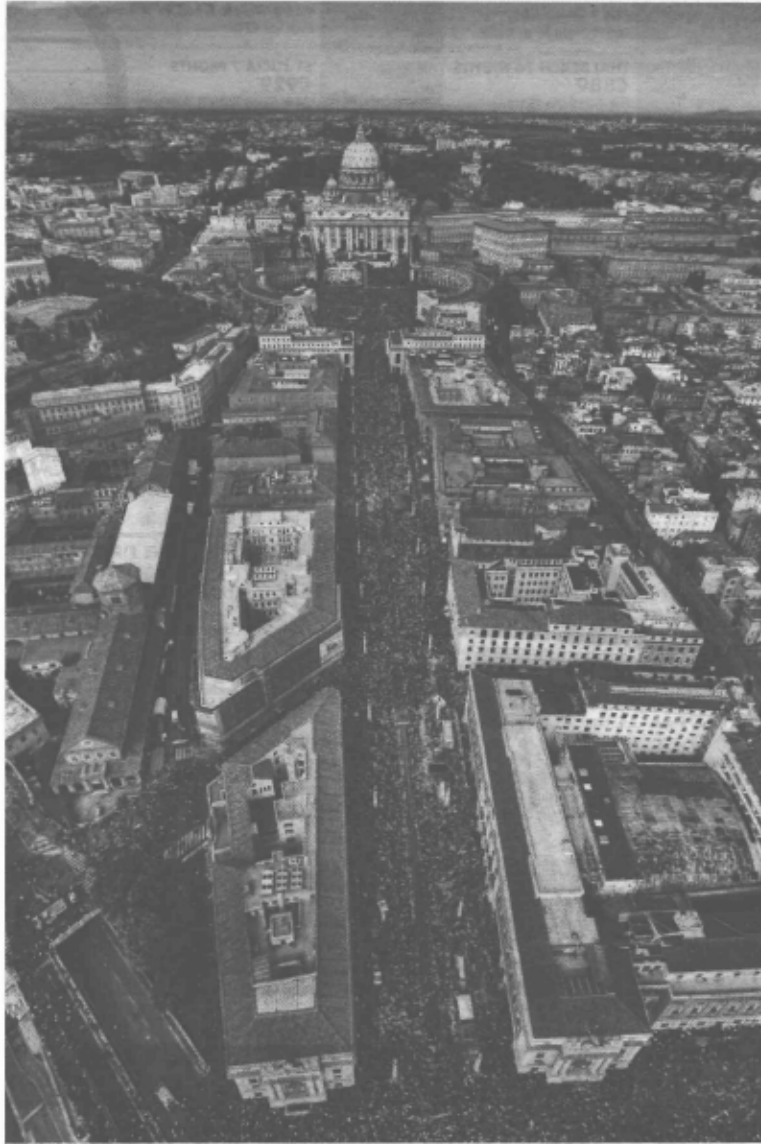
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ETERNAL CITY: The Via Francigena follows the old Pilgrim route from Canterbury and goes all the way to Rome. It is now possible to do a walking tour along the Italian leg

