



Learning to Walk on the Camino de Santiago

Many of us take walking for granted. But for others like Brendan Harding walking is still a skill to be learned and appreciated.

It wasn't the ideal start to a long walk, but then again a hangover never is. There are those who swear by a walk taken at a brisk pace in the biting wind, those who will stamp their feet adamantly and decry from their perch at the bar the merits of a 'stirring' perambulation to restore the senses and enliven the appetite. And, for all I know, they may be right. But this was to be no mere dawdle from the front door to the park, twice around the fountain, and back again. Not by a long-shot.

The reason for my delicate nature was this, as a travel writer new places stab my curiosity like a picador's knives goad a bull. No sooner had I dropped my bags at the hotel than the last rays of the autumnal sun drew me out into Bilbao's narrow streets and alleyways. It was in the Ariatza bar, a truly Basque place, that I met Pedro; bar owner, fellow traveller, conversationalist and purveyor of the best of the best of the Basque country's tapas, Pintxos. We spoke, I drank. Caught up in the exuberance of the moment I met others of a like mind and was ushered through the darkening streets from bar to bar with song on our lips. Twice or more I earnestly attempted escape, but there was always another local wine or another herby chupito to be sampled. And so it went...

But first I should explain why I was now standing on an empty beach outside the Basque city of Bilbao on Spain's northern coastline looking left and right, again and again in bewilderment as a drum banged a

numbing rhythm in my head.

I have long wanted – and even planned, usually by the comforting glow of a blazing fire – to undertake the Camino de Santiago; that famous pilgrim's route which runs like arteries through the countries of Europe with all routes leading ultimately to the steps of a magnificent Spanish cathedral in the grey-stoned streets of the Galician town of Santiago de Compostella.

I had been there, I had seen those very Peregrinos arrive alone, exhausted and confused, or in excited Gore-Tex-draped groups, wooden staff in hand, scallop shell dangling by a string from their sun-reddened necks, backpacks hefted high between their aching shoulder blades. I had seen them come in pain and in triumph and had wished to be amongst their numbers, and now I was.

It was nine in the morning and the beach at La Arena was almost empty. A Labrador, the colour of the beach's wet sand, toyed with the incoming waves, snapping at their juvenile white caps while his deep bark was stolen by the fresh sea breeze. A runner, whose fitness and fortitude I admired openly, ran the length of the long sweeping bay clad only in shorts and shoes. I pulled the scarf tight about my neck and descended the steps towards the beach and into the unknown.

This was to be no mammoth trek. It would not end in jubilation on the cathedral steps or with the sound of a final

stamp on the pages of a Pilgrim's passport; it was a mere trifle to those accustomed to long distance walking. I would walk, unfit, as best I could, over two days from the outskirts of Bilbao to the town of Laredo in nearby Cantabria along a paltry sixty kilometre section of the legendary Camino.

My first obstacle arrived within minutes and threw me into despair. At the end of the beach my only egress, a bridge over the Rio Barbadun was boarded up. I had barely begun and already the Gods were playing dice with my progress. For over an hour I scoured the nearby roads for signs of a detour as the chimneys of a nearby chemical works spewed their exhausts into the air. Eventually, pinned to a wall on a sheet of worn paper, a yellow arrow and the stencilled symbol of a hiking man pointed me towards my quest.

At last on the trail proper, I began to settle into the rhythm of placing one foot before another, over and over again. The sound of the Basque sea crashing on the rocks below the winding path and the solitude of being alone with nature eased my earlier anxieties. Overhead, seagulls hung on the breeze like children's kites, inquisitive seals poked their heads from rocky sea pools and long-horned goats eyed me from their hilltop lookouts. In the distance, on a rocky promontory, the town of Castro Urdiales, my day's destination, changed colour under each passing cloud. As I stood on a headland admiring a flock of petrels as they skimmed the sea's wave tops I realised my head no longer thumped – perhaps they were right after all.

The route along the coast was easy at first; passing long abandoned mining settlements and tiny tumbledown farms whose gardens were filled with pumpkins and squashes, peas and fruits. Sturdy Basque horses with bulging muscles and short square heads whinnied as I passed

empty-handed. Suddenly, the deception of Castro's nearness evaporated as the trail turned inland my heart sunk low. Through a mountain tunnel and beneath an overhead motorway Castro disappeared from view and the landscape changed from an easy flatness to the sight of buckling green hills and mountains. I had entered Cantabria.

Once in mountainous Cantabria I followed the course of the old road from Bilbao to Santander over slowly rising, energy-sapping hills where rain clouds hung in wait. It was quiet up here in the hills; great flocks of silent vultures rode the morning currents in ever-searching circles. In a secluded valley a family of wild pigs trotted in line through the olive trees and from a steep hillside a lone, yellow-haired sheepdog watched his flock offering a single deep noted muttering to alert me of his watchful presence.

My legs ached, my shins burned like coals and ancient roadside churches, mills and granaries lost their aesthetic appeal. My sole concern was the constant effort. Doubt began to creep through my mind; am I mad I asked myself over and over again as sweat ran in rivers down my back. It was then I remembered the words of a mountain guide I had known on the Spanish Island of El Hierro as he watched me struggle on a steep ascent; "it is not about the destination," he said, "it is only about this step, then this step and the next and the next..." With his mantra ringing in my ears I abandoned my notions of time and distance, instead falling quietly into the realisation of one step at a time. From time to time I would look back at a point in the distance from where I had come and smile, but never forward, never towards the end.

Friendly dogs came to greet me, villages disappeared behind me, people in cars waved, and the rains came and went. And then, without realisation, without knowledge of its

coming I stood in the quiet siesta-hour sleepiness of Castro Urdiales and looked back. I could see far off in the distance my point of embarkation, the place where I had doubted myself, cursed myself for such foolhardiness, and wished I was anywhere else but here, and smiled.

A wave of emotive relief swept across me as I stared out to sea. Tomorrow would come and go too, I realised, just as today had done and the miles between here and there would be eaten one step at a time. And although muscles may ache, and blisters may form, that sense of peace and satisfaction of having undertaken a journey no matter how small, of being a Peregrino, no matter for how long, would lift my feet over and over again until there were no more miles to conquer and no more steps to take.

The author was a guest of **CAMINO WAYS** an adventure tour company dedicated to walking the historic pilgrimage routes of the world. **CAMINO WAYS** can be contacted at www.caminoways.com Email: info@caminoways.com Tel: +353 (0)1 525 28 86

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▲ Paella dish



▲ Camino marking post



▲ Castro Urdiales



▲ Basque horse



▲ Seaside town

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