



IMAGE TRAVEL

Maybe you're bored of the beach break, or perhaps skiing has become a snooze; travelling alone for the first time or you simply fancy making a little more out of your annual getaway. Whatever the reason for thinking outside the holiday box this year, the perfect escape awaits. It's time to lace up your hiking boots and embark on an adventure of a lifetime in the form of trekking the Camino. This is no ordinary walking holiday, but a personal adventure that will take you out of your comfort zone, leaving you potentially blistered, but hopefully enlightened. Think of it as the ultimate mind, body and soul experience.

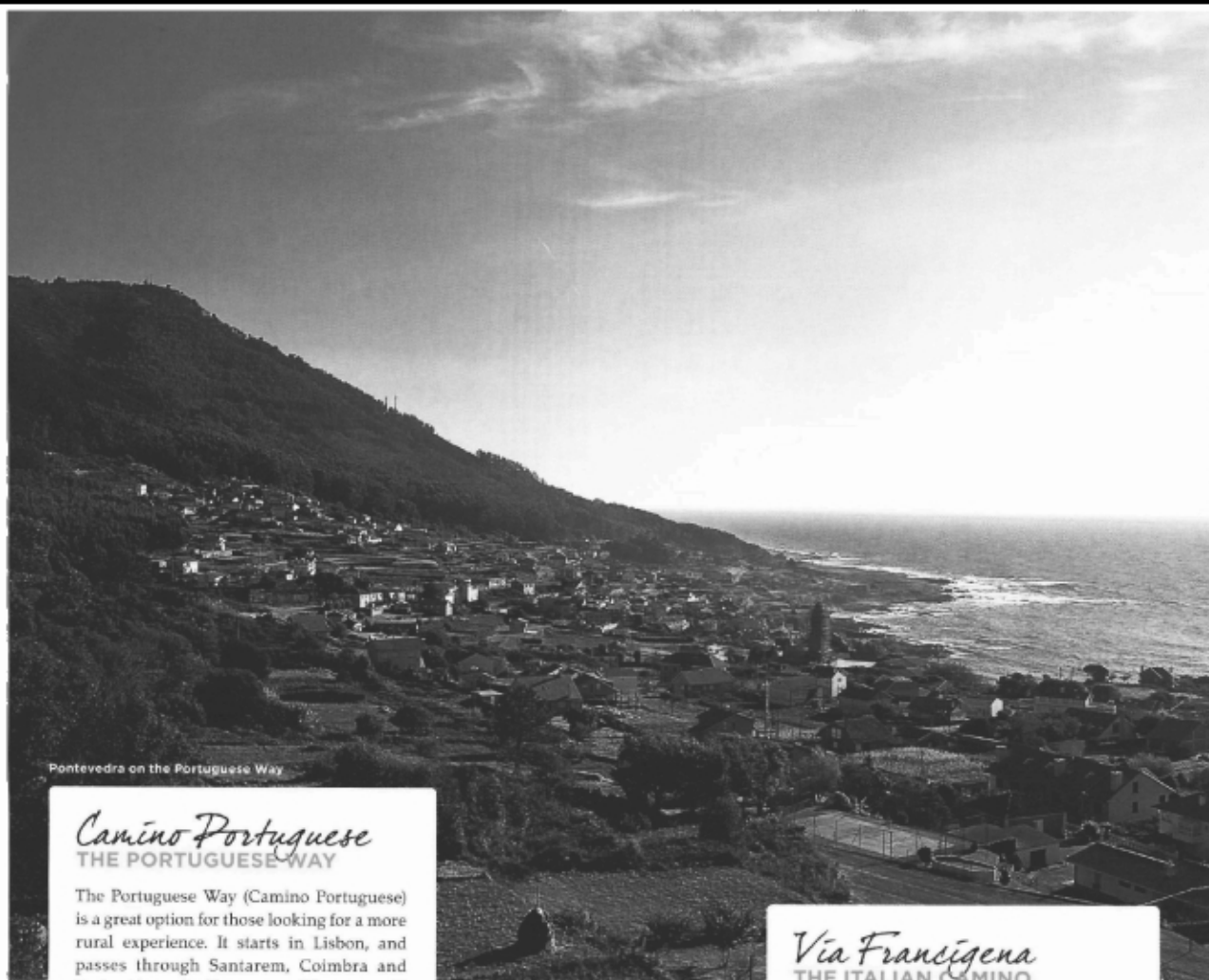
Most foreign trips are about the destination, but when it comes to the Camino, it's all about the journey. Although these trails started out for Christian pilgrims, who set out each year from popular starting points to the sacred sites, including the famous Camino de Santiago in Spain, France, Portugal, the mighty Via Francigena, from Canterbury to Rome, and the less known, but extraordinary St Paul's Way in Turkey and Jesus Trail in Israel, more and more people are taking to the trails for other reasons. The religious aspect still entices many, but the majority of travellers and hikers who walk the route do so for the chance to travel, sport or simply the challenge of weeks of walking a foreign land. Many consider this experience less

religious, but more of a spiritual adventure; the perfect challenge for those hoping to discover something about themselves or simply wanting to take stock, meditate or take some much-needed time out from the breakneck pace of life.

Purist pilgrims might insist that a trail is done in one go – 500-odd miles that could take between 30 to 40 days, but really, these days, anything goes on the Camino. You set the rules. You can go for a weekend, a week, or return again and again to complete it. It's up to you. Whichever route you choose, you can expect breathtaking scenery, great exercise,

interesting attractions, economical places to stay and great food. But that's just for starters. You'll soon become in tune with your own body as you push it physically and mentally. You'll be thrown up against a wide variety of people from all over the world, all with different stories to share. If you're really lucky, you might even spot a movie star or two – Brat Packer-turned-backpacker and travel writer Andrew McCarthy wrote about his Camino experience in *The Longest Way Home* (Simon & Schuster) and Martin Sheen travelled it with his grandson, Taylor Estevez, prior to starring in Emilio Estevez's film *The Way*, which was inspired by the trip. Hollywood stamp of approval aside, the Camino is well worth the trek. While you might miss your sangria at sunset or momentarily long for the après-ski, in exchange the Camino can offer something spiritual, unique and possibly even life-changing. In the immortal words of Aerosmith, get ready to walk this way ...

“If I ever find myself lost in life, I know all I have to do is walk the Camino.”



Pontevedra on the Portuguese Way

Camino Portuguese THE PORTUGUESE WAY

The Portuguese Way (Camino Portuguese) is a great option for those looking for a more rural experience. It starts in Lisbon, and passes through Santarem, Coimbra and Porto. Along the Portuguese Way, you will travel along terraced fields, vineyards and sleepy villages. **Maeve Heffernan** travelled the route with her sister in May.

"From our first chat, prompted by an airfare sale, to our arrival at the steps of Santiago Cathedral, our Camino was a magical, rewarding and fulfilling experience.



Tui, Portugal

Opting for the quieter route, our walk started in the beautiful border town of Tui with an evening stroll into the fortified town of Valença. With Tui Cathedral at our backs, we began our walk proper and soon were trekking on the Via Romana, tracing ancient tracks and on up into forests of pine, oak and eucalyptus. The uphill forest trails brought us to the stunning harbour town of Arcade and a two-star hotel with a five-star view. On to Pontevedra, a bustling mediaeval town, and an evening sampling local tapas and albariño wine. The striking part of this walk is how rural it is. We really experienced how people live as we weaved our way through hamlets with vineyards and sheep living at the end of the garden. Every house has a bread bag hanging outside for their daily delivery. Our standout moment was a surprise encounter with six horsemen descending through the forest as though through a door in time."

Maeve Heffernan booked her Camino holiday with specialists caminoways.com, 01 525 2886.

Via Francigena THE ITALIAN CAMINO

The Via Francigena is an ancient road to Rome, passing through England, France, Switzerland and Italy. The route travels through some of the most stunning scenery in Europe, with the majority of the walking taking place on off-road tracks and ancient Roman roads, finishing at the Vatican. **Fr Michael Collins** made the journey solo.

"I began my visit in Florence, the wonderful city packed with treasures of

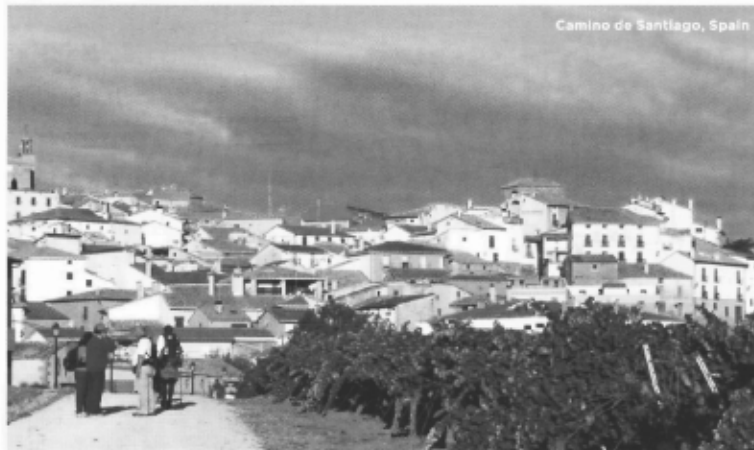


Italian Way, Tuscany

the Renaissance. I took up the old Via Francigena in Lucca, which is bulging at the seams with fashion shops and leather goods. I stayed at the Hotel Puccini, directly across the street from the great composer's native home, before embarking on the road to the mediaeval town of San Miniato. Although the town is famous for art, the nearby restaurant proved an irresistible attraction, where I dined on white truffle pasta and exquisite steak with Parmesan and black truffle shavings. The trip was made all the easier, as my suitcase was transferred from hotel to hotel, and meals were arranged each evening. Another day's walk brought me to Monteriggioni, a charming hilltop fortified town. Next stop was Siena, one of the jewels of Tuscany – there is no other comparable city in Italy. I stayed in the elegant Grand Hotel Continental, built as a wedding gift by Pope Alexander VII for his niece. Many people undertaking the Spanish Camino talk about the great spiritual peace and camaraderie. The Via Francigena likewise offers time for contemplation. My journey ended in Rome, where I spent a few days in the busy capital. From time to time, I found my mind wandering back to the flaxen-coloured fields of Tuscany. The journey is probably best made with a companion, with something to appeal to every taste. The Italian Camino offers each traveller a new horizon, and leads us on a journey into ourselves."

Fr Michael Collins travelled with Greenlife Tours, 01 525 2886; caminoways.com.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GETTY IMAGES AND DREAMSTIME



Camino de Santiago THE WAY OF ST JAMES, SPAIN

The Camino de Santiago, or Way of St James, is the pilgrimage to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in north-western Spain. Catholic lore has it that the remains of the apostle Saint James are buried here. **Natasha Murtagh** travelled with her dad, **Peter**. Together they charted their experience in a book, *Buen Camino*.

"I did the Camino for the first time nearly five years ago, but it still remains the best experience of my life so far. I have yet to do something as enriching or influential as the Camino. Doing it at the age of 16 helped shape me into the person I am now. My dad asked if I would like to do a bit with him. Without hesitation, I said yes and we embarked on our 300km walk from Leon to Santiago. Each day brought a different story, a new friend or a wonderful memory, all of which we shared together.

"From then, we said one day we would complete the whole 900km walk and in 2010, when I was 18, we did. For an 18-year-old, having just completed her Leaving Cert and feeling very much like a young adult, the Camino was the perfect thing to do at that time to make everything a little bit clearer. The Camino gives you time – time with new friends, with a loved one, but also time alone. It makes you detach yourself from the busy, stressful life at home, giving you an opportunity to realise what's important in life and what we should all really focus on. I believe that I will walk the Camino with the man I will marry, my children and maybe even my grandchildren. My memories and experiences on that walk mean everything to me, and if I ever find myself lost in life, I know all I have to do is walk the Camino."

Buen Camino by Natasha and Peter Murtagh, €16.99, is published by Gill & Macmillan.

