



THE JOY OF MISSING OUT – MY PILGRIM'S PROGRESS ON A SOJOURN THROUGH SPAIN

WOMEN'S HOUR

THE WAY OF ST JAMES – OR THE CAMINO – WAS A SPIRITUAL JOURNEY
TO SAVOUR FOR DEE O'KEEFFE, WHO FOUND SERENITY ON HER HIKE

IT'S not what you look at that matters, it's what you see," one of my Camino buddies Richard Lucid told me. It's a quote by Henry David Thoreau – I'd never read his famous book *Walden* and knew little about the great American author but the fact that he wrote about simple, Spartan living, amid natural surroundings.

A good vibe for anyone embarking on a pilgrimage, I think.

The Camino de Santiago, or Way of St James, tends to appeal to different people for different reasons – but it's fair to say that, like Thoreau, you can expect to connect with nature and that by doing so connect with your own self on a deeper level too.

Traditionally, pilgrims seek penance, enlightenment, the meaning of life, but on my Camino I also met people looking for love, others who wanted to lose weight, people doing it for the pure adventure and people who were grieving, looking for a time out and some spiritual meaning.

However, most of the pilgrims I met didn't have a 'why' – my guess is that sometimes this might come to you later.

Whatever a person's reasons, they all progress toward the Cathedral in Santiago where it is believed the remains of the apostle St James are held.

The Thoreau-esque simple living aspect comes from carrying all your belongings in your backpack and bedding down in Albergues each night – these can sleep dozens of other pilgrims, so earplugs might be a good buy.

The beautiful surroundings will remind you of our home country in all its green glory – definitely food for the soul.

What I came to appreciate most, however, was having the time to just think and talk and walk – with perfect strangers.

HORSEBACK

A huge part of the reason I wanted to do the

Camino was that I liked the fact that it would be a holiday with a work ethic – that the work ethic is multi-layered further appealed to me.

Sure, you're walking along doing something good for your body, but how often does your mind really get a chance to stop, collaborate and listen? There is an inner and an outer journey.

Most pilgrims walk the 800km journey (I saw cyclists, one jogger and heard tales of people doing it on horseback) – and visitors from Canada, Australia, New Zealand and the US most definitely do it all in the one go as it's the only cost-effective way for them to complete it.

Us Europeans, however, have proximity on our side and can undertake the Camino in parts, over an extended period rather than absenting ourselves from real life for a month or five weeks, which is how long the journey takes most people.

I began my Camino at the end, so to speak, and walked a mere 100km from Sarria to Santiago, with stops in Portomarin, Palas de Rei, Arzua and Ameal along the way.

My trip was organised by Camino Ways who lodged me in a three-star hotel each night – not exactly hard core pilgrim, but in the end you will find it doesn't really matter how you do it.

My seven-day experience is more than enough to convince me that I would love to go back some day and do the whole thing in one go – Albergues and all, which incidentally cost anywhere from €4 to €10 per night.

The first thing any journeyman should do is purchase John Brierley's *A Pilgrim's Guide To The Camino de Santiago*. It's ultra practical but addresses the aforementioned inner and outer aspects of the trip.

Nothing will actually prepare you for the brilliance of the experience. You need to walk it in your own shoes (proper walking boots already broken in are preferable).

My first 'Camino gift' was that I met an angel

at Santiago airport, she goes by the name of Phil Sharkey.

My flight had been delayed and in the spirit of all things 'fey' I forgot to alert Camino Ways to this fact.

So by the time the plane had landed, my taxi to Sarria had been and gone. And it also turned out that my phone didn't work abroad.

Phil knew a lost soul when she saw one — over coffee we, unsuccessfully, tried to get my phone juiced but eventually I borrowed hers and called Camino

Ways who sent a taxi back to the airport.

For Phil it was bye bye to the bus table and hello to a smooth transfer to Sarria, where her son Kevin was waiting for her.

DIRECTION

When I was planning the trip I was offered the option of bringing a pal but elected to go alone as I figured it would be more fun to leave it all behind — I can honestly say that I've never felt so safe in my life.

Even when you are walking in deep forest areas there is always someone in front of you and always someone behind you. You bump into the friends you meet along the way without ever having to make plans.

On my first morning I headed off at 9am — even I couldn't manage to get lost as you're never far from the next yellow shell or arrow pointing you in the right direction.

Portomarin was my destination on day one — I popped into a church on the way to light candles for the folks back home and some hours and many 'Buen Camino' greetings later I was climbing the old stairs into Portomarin.

I had passed a couple with their two grand children along the way and was to see them on and off during my five days of walking — I think I'll always wonder what memories those two young boys will have of their odyssey when they grow up.

So there I was on night one with no TV, no phone and no worries about tomorrow bar putting one foot in front of the other to get to another destination — so I decided to write the first of a number of 'letters' to people I care about.

I found some wifi in a local cafe and typed away on my phone.

The next day I bumped into Phil and Kevin again after stopping in one of the many cafes along the way for refreshment. We made our way

in the rain to Palas de Rei, getting to know each other a wee bit better on each walk.

The next day I met the charismatic Mr Lucid.

CHATS

I walked a few times with Richard and had great chats — his wife had done the pilgrimage five years previously, but he wasn't ready back then. By the time I met him he was a Camino legend and buoyed up by how far each step had taken him.

Like a lot of people, I move quickly through life — needs must and all that.

But if I wanted to spend time walking with others, which I very much did, then I had to go at their pace.

I missed out on nothing by adopting this approach — you can always take off when the urge comes. I spent five days walking, reading, writing, drinking coffee, eating delicious food and getting to know a bunch of people I may never meet again.

This was followed by two two nights in the beautiful Santiago — making new if temporary friends and feeling very grateful for the company of Phil and Kevin.

There's a real joy to be had in missing out on your ordinary life.

My Camino enabled me to further understand a mantra given to me by my mentor some time ago: "Nothing much matters, very little matters at all."

TRAVEL FACTS

- CaminoWays.com specialises in Camino de Santiago walking and cycling holidays.
- A seven-day package, walking the last section of the famous French Way Camino route from Sarria to Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia, starts at €489pps.
- Request a free quote online, call the team on 01 525 2886, email info@caminoways.com or visit the CaminoWays.com office in Dublin city centre for more information.
- Aer Lingus flies direct from Dublin to Santiago de Compostela three times per week from April 1.
- Do watch *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen, before you go, for some flavour.

THE TREK



PILGRIMS of all faiths and backgrounds have traversed the Camino for over a thousand years.

● The journey originally began at one's doorstep, though this is not conducive to modern trekkers, for example American pilgrims needing to cross the Atlantic.

● While there are a number of established routes leading to Santiago from all directions, the most popular is the Camino Frances, which crosses the Pyrenees mountains along the Spanish-French border starting in St Jean Pied de Port (above).

● The route covers 800km through northern Spanish countryside. Follow the yellow painted arrows marking the road.

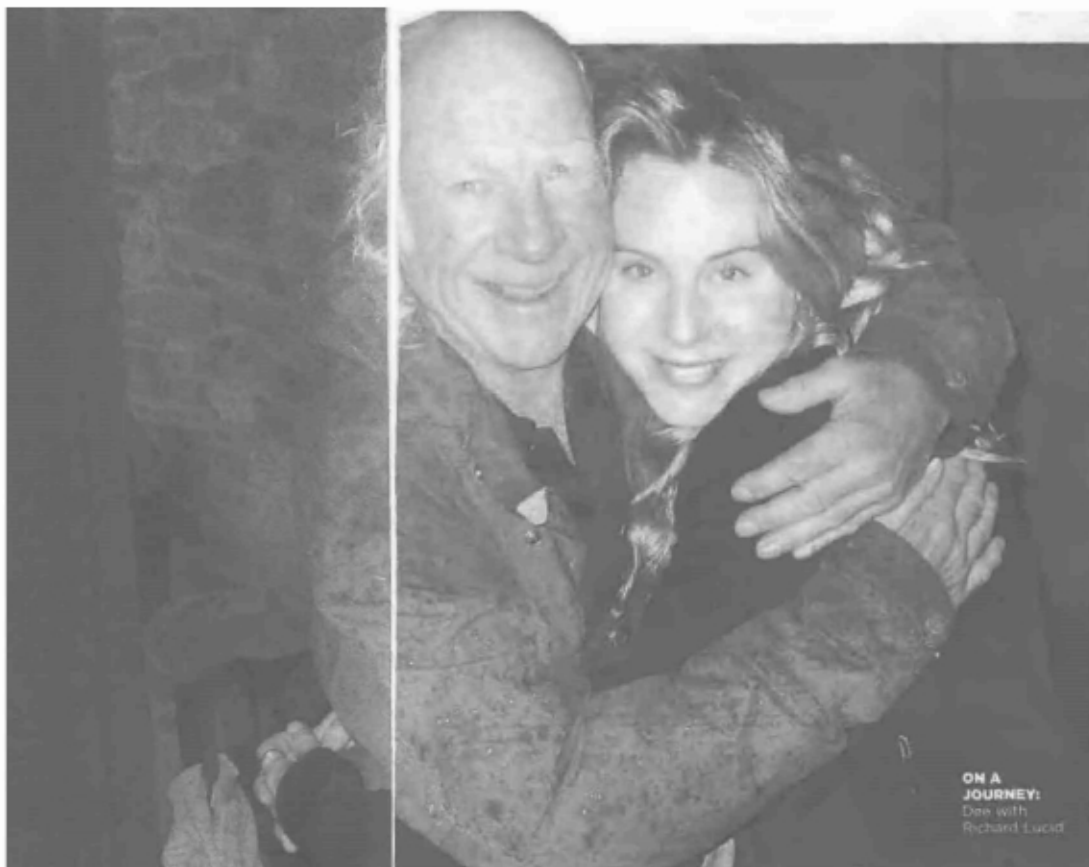
● It's up to you to set your pace — if a pilgrim walks 12-15 miles a day to reach the next town for the night, they can reach the Cathedral de Santiago in six to eight weeks.

● There is a Pilgrim's Mass held at noon each day in the Cathedral.

● Remember that in Spain all shops still close on Sundays — you may find some markets, depending on your location.

● Most importantly, remember to apply Vaseline to your feet every morning before setting off.

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WONDER: Pilgrims en route to Santiago (top) are pointed in the right direction by yellow shell symbols