



WALK THIS WAY

The final stop on the Camino, beautiful Santiago de Compostela, is a great destination for those on a city break — not just weary pilgrims, writes CLAIRE O'MEARA

Any mention of the Camino de Santiago tends to spark people's interest. It's a challenge many would love to undertake, but they often think they can't find the time or don't have the determination to 'do' the Camino. For many, it remains a never-realised dream.

I was labouring under a similar misconception: that I would need to take months out of the rat-race to experience this monumental spiritual journey that would change my life forever.

Then I spent four days in Santiago de Compostela, the historic end point of the Way of St James — and it turns out the Camino can be anything you want it to be.

From a full-on three-month spiritual life-changer, to a four-day gastronomic city break or an invigorating activity week, it's all on offer. The beauty of the Camino, and Santiago de Compostela, is its universal appeal. Yes, there's the spiritual side, but there are also more holiday-type attractions for those so inclined.

At first glance, I thought Santiago de Compostela was similar to other cities I had visited, but as I wandered around and picked up snippets of its history, I realised there is so much more to it.

Every cobble is steeped in history, with pilgrims visiting here since as far back as the 10th Century. The buildings, particularly the Cathedral de Santiago, all have a story — several, actually, depending on who you speak to. And the yellow arrows painted on the streets remind you that you're never far from the pilgrims' progress.

But it's not a case of pilgrims sitting under a Bodhi tree waiting for enlightenment. On the contrary, the entire city has a lightness as well as a down-to-earth and easy-going vibe.

The most popular package is for seven days (100k walking or 200k cycling), where you can either carry your bags or have them delivered to your resting place that night. Of course, you could go it alone. Before I had this taster, that would have been my preference, but the flexibility of these packages means you

don't feel that getting a little help is taking away from the experience.

Santiago de Compostela is a bustling university town, with people going about their daily business. Even in the cathedral it's business as usual, with mass and confessions taking place as you wander around in tourist mode alongside weary pilgrims visiting St James' tomb.

The old town is a sightseer's paradise but it feels more authentic than the tourist attractions of the Costa del Sol.

The Irish pilgrims I spoke to were there purely to try something different. I met three female friends in their 40s as well as a mother and daughter. Yes, many go for deeper, spiritual reasons — but it's a fun and friendly experience too.

The number of Irish pilgrims has risen to 5,000, from just 500-plus a decade ago. The clearest evidence of the Camino's growing popularity is the presence of both Aer Lingus and Ryanair, each edging for a share of this expanding market, with Aer Lingus operating three weekly direct flights from April to October.

The area, northern Spain's Galicia, isn't all that dissimilar to Ireland on a mild summer's day: hazy sunshine and every shade of green on the spectrum.

And the Irish connection doesn't stop there. You can now begin the Camino at St James's Gate in Dublin. 'The Friends of St James's' lets you download your Camino passport, stamp it for you and, hey presto, you're on your way.

And it goes without saying that the presence of the Irish pub is alive and well in the city, with Guinness on tap for those who aren't abstaining. However, Santiago de Compostela is also a foodie's city. In the higher-end restaurants we enjoyed dishes like cured mackerel and pickled fennel, lentil paella and pickled beetroot, with starters ranging from €7 to €15 and main courses a little more expensive.

All the eateries have a cheaper, more

informal option made up of 'raciones': platters of squid, octopus, omelette and cold meats. Tapas and delicious bread come free in the vast majority of places as a pre-starter — you've been warned — and the house wines are better than most top-tier ranges on offer in Ireland.

After all that, if you feel that you've overindulged, the beautiful Alameda Park is perfect for a morning run or, more realistically, a ramble and a coffee.

As with the rest of this city, there is accommodation for every taste and budget, and a historical back-story waiting to be told at every check-in.

One such accommodation is the San Francisco Monumento. On the surface, it's a typical four-star hotel with a pool, but delve a little deeper and you find it's housed in the Convent of San Francisco and funds the convent.

In the same complex they run a homeless shelter, a separate shelter for pilgrims, a church and a museum — all funded by the hotel. This sums up Santiago de Compostela: dig beneath the touristy veneer and you'll find something much more meaningful and profound.

If you venture to the Camino — whether for the whole journey or straight to the end destination — you'll come back with a sparkle in your eyes. I know I'll be back for more... just as soon as I can get that three-month sabbatical organised. **W**

**** For more information on the Camino, see caminoways.com. For a classic seven-day Camino de Santiago experience, prices start at €565 per person sharing (high season April to October). This covers the last 100k of the French Way.

Aer Lingus (aerlingus.com) operate three weekly direct flights from Dublin to Santiago de Compostela on Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays, from April to October. There is a flight on Wednesdays during July and August.

For information on Santiago de Compostela, go to Santiagoturismo.com and for more about Galicia, see Galiciamydestination.com/Galicia

HIGHLIGHTS:

THE 'BOTAFUMEIRO' CENSER IN THE CATHEDRAL is a huge metal container or 'incensory' (think giant pendulum) that swings incense back and forth over the pews, spanning almost the entire cathedral. A very special event, it takes place on holy days or requested days.

MUXIA is pretty spectacular. Waves crash against the rocks all-year-round. The church is under repair as it was struck by lightning last Christmas but is still worth the visit. Go under the kidney-shaped rock (you'll spot it) or stand beside it, depending on which story you listen to, and you'll be cured of your back and/or kidney pain. Plus, it apparently assists in conception.

THE Lighthouse ON THE COSTA DA MORTE (Coast of Death) in Finisterre is perched on the edge of the Atlantic, one of the westernmost points of Galicia. Stay the night for around €75 for a twin room and wake up to spectacular views. This is the last stop for many pilgrims, so take a stroll down the rocks to see discarded clothes and messages from the anointed.

PARADOR DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA is a beautiful five-star hotel in the same square as the cathedral. Formerly a hospice, you can pop in for a reasonably priced tea/coffee or glass of prosecco. And, if you manage the 100km, this 15th-century gem gives the first 10 pilgrims a day free breakfast.



Spectacular: Muxia church is worth a visit



Spiritual: The cathedral's famous 'Botafumeiro' incensory



Westernmost point: Finisterre lighthouse



Plush: Five-star Parador de Santiago de Compostela

