SPAIN

Camino de Santiago: A pilgrim's progress

A short stint on Camino de Santiago — one of the world's greatest pilgrimage routes — brings its own rewards. But you have to learn to tackle it at your own pace to truly appreciate the stories, the characters and the cultural immersion along the way

By Pól Ó Conghaile. Published on 20th November 2014

Miguel and Pompon the donkey on the Camino de Santiago. Image: Pól Ó Conghaile.

I'm passing through the woods, somewhere between Arzúa, in northwest Spain, and O Pedrouzo, when I bump into a man and woman walking a donkey. A sturdy pair of pannier bags straddle the animal. The woman wears a baseball cap, nose stud and T-shirt. The man's trainers are bound together with two types of tape. I've only been walking for a couple of days, but already I'm exhausted. It feels like there are hard-boiled eggs inside my calves. But this pair of pilgrims soon put me in my place. The man and donkey have walked from Lyon. That's Lyon in France, some 870 miles away.

I strike up a conversation with the young woman, Stacey. She hails from Melbourne, where she works as a waitress. Her Camino began 280 miles back in Burgos, northern Spain. She met Miguel and Pompon (the donkey) several days ago, and they've been travelling together ever since, headed for Santiago de Compostela.

"But that's just the destination," Stacey says. "The whole point is the journey."
Slowly but surely, I'm coming round to that view. The Camino de Santiago is one of the world's great pilgrimage routes, measuring hundreds of miles in length (depending on your starting point) and dating back to medieval times. It's been a lifelong ambition of mine to do it, but work and family commitments have always seemed more pressing than several weeks walking in northern Spain.

In recent years, however, shorter Camino trips have become much more popular. Tour operators can bundle accommodation and luggage transfers in packages starting from the 100km minimum required to attain a certificate of completion. So rather than wait, I decided to scratch the itch with a taster.

Setting it up was easy. Most short-haul pilgrims set out from Sarrià, a market town 100km from Santiago de Compostela on the French Way. Booking with tour operator CaminoWays.com, I was able to pre-book rooms and have my luggage transferred between them as I walked, carrying just a camera and daypack on the trail. If truth be told, however, by the time I was in the taxi taking me towards my starting point — passing a long line of pilgrims plodding through the Galician countryside — I was beginning to wonder whether I'd bitten off more than I could chew.

My heaviest day scheduled me in for 18 miles ("It takes around seven hours," a cheery barman told me). But I couldn't recall the last time I'd walked that distance — if ever. Sure, I'd gotten several big hikes under my belt beforehand, but nothing of this length. I worried about blisters, knobbly knees, tight hamstrings and dehydration. I packed blister plasters, rehydration sachets, heat packs and anti-inflammatories. I'm fairly fit and well-travelled but I could still picture my leg locking in the middle of nowhere in 30C heat.

Ionut Preda stamps a Pilgrim's Passport. Image: Pól Ó Conghaile.

Then I made the mistake of setting off too fast. Following the yellow arrows and scallop-shell markers that line the route, I stared picking off the miles at a rapid clip. I passed farmhouses, crossed stone bridges and stopped into crumbly little churches where old men ground inky stamps into my Pilgrim's Passport. I listened to birdsong and the crunch of fellow walkers' boots on gravel, stopping only briefly to chat with people I met along the way. One was Ionut Preda. He was sitting by a stream with a wooden board on his knee. On it was a wax sealing kit, which he used to stamp passports in return for a donation. "I'm a Paralympian," he told me. "Javelin. My stamp is my sponsor." He'd lost part of his right leg in a crane accident, I learned, and made a promise to his dying father that he'd one day win a medal at the Paralympics. He stamped my passport, I took his picture, and we parted ways.

Then my calves seized up. I remember the moment precisely: I was sitting in a restaurant eating *pulpo* (octopus) — a speciality throughout Galicia. Walking through the door, I passed a woman stirring two enormous pots. She plucked out an octopus, snipped it into pieces with scissors, sprinkled it with paprika and salt, and served it up on a small wooden plate with toothpicks and crusty hunks of bread.

Given time to relax, my body reasserted itself. The blisters on my feet — which I'd been ignoring — began bulging like thick bubbles. My calves started to cramp. 'Don't look at us, buddy,' they seemed to say. 'You're driving this thing.' I forged on, but that night, heat packs and hot baths were required. I felt like a fool.

“I call it the donkey effect,” said Stacey, describing her remedy. Setting off from Burgos, she told me, she’d also set too quick a pace — hoovering up 21 miles a day in just several hours. She found it tough going. She was wrecked, sore, too tired to talk properly. She justified it by saying that’s the kind of person she was — she did things intensely, and the Camino was no different. Then she met Miguel and Pompon. By then, the pair had been walking the Camino for weeks and had covered over 620 miles. They were walking just as far as Stacey, but taking far longer to do it, with Miguel guided by the animal’s pace. When she walked alongside them, she had to slow down. The ‘donkey effect’ eased her fatigue, and she felt herself becoming reflective, striking up more intimate conversations.

By the time we parted ways (I stopped to spend the night at Amenal before the final nine-mile stretch to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela), these travellers were starting to sound like prophets.

“We’re getting to Santiago tonight, right?” Stacey asked.
“Yes,” Miguel smiled. “It is written.”

Stacey laughed. She planned to walk right through the city that night, she told me, carrying on with her Camino towards Finisterre, 62 miles further at the westernmost point of the Iberian Peninsula. Nor was that her finishing line. Miguel’s Camino was ending in Santiago, but Stacey had agreed to turn around and walk Pompon back to Burgos.

Pilgrims on the Camino. Image: Pól Ó Conghaile.

The Camino connection

I love the fact that pilgrims like Stacey, Miguel and Pompon have been walking the Camino for over 1,000 years. Traditionally, their destination is Santiago, where the relics of St James are said to lie behind a glittering altar in the cathedral. Legend says a star guided a local shepherd to his remains, and my guidebook (John Brierley's *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino De Santiago*) dates the first written record of a pilgrimage to 950. But of course it's impossible to know how authentic the relics really are. Not that it matters, as the pilgrimage routes have since taken on lives of their own. Visitor numbers have increased tenfold in a decade, Brierley says. New routes, like the French Way, have joined the historic trails. Its final 62 miles could never be called one of the world's most beautiful walks — trickling streams and oak woodland are interspersed with traffic, industrial estates, Santiago Airport and used wet wipes strewn about the bushes — but its atmosphere is utterly unique.

There's camaraderie and conversation. Pilgrims range from older couples to young families. There's a father and son with their pet greyhound, a nun saying the rosary, a pair of girls listening to One Direction. Some carry the weight of the world on their shoulders; others hop along in brightly coloured cotton tank tops. All are generous with their time and tips, however, and all carry a souvenir scallop shell — the grooves on its top symbolising several paths merging at one destination. There's an unspoken understanding, a connection that exists simply by virtue of the fact we're on the Camino.

And once I do find my pace, when the donkey effect kicks in, I notice a certain cadence starting to emerge. My steps get hypnotic. I zone out and let the thoughts wash over me like the gently rolling countryside. At times, when the ancient paths crisscross a main road running into Santiago, it's like parallel universes colliding. It's as much a journey into myself as Galicia. Perhaps that's the value of a taster. My Camino isn't long enough for me to reflect deeply on my life, or to ask the big questions, but it's certainly enough to get a sense of the cultural immersion, the stories and the characters ("love on the Camino; death on the Camino," as Stacey put it) that make the route so compulsive.

On my final day, I set off shortly after dawn. It isn't long before the suburbs of Santiago begin to engulf the pilgrims. Entering the city limits, the trail crosses a motorway, passes monuments, parks, barbershops and bars. The buildings grow taller; the streets more crowded. Pilgrims mingle with locals; their strides are interrupted by pedestrian crossings. Through a gap in the buildings, I see the cathedral towers. It's noon. Bells start to ring, and I pass through the arch of the Pazo de Xelmírez into Praza do Obradoiro and the teeming tourist melee.

Some pilgrims are lying flat out. Others are whooping, high-fiving and shooting selfies. Others look stunned, like spacemen returned to Earth. Naturally, I feel a sense of relief and achievement. But I also feel strangely thrown. After a few days out in the open, the city hubbub feels unusually hectic. It's almost too much of an adjustment. I decide to return later, when things have quietened down. Instead of traipsing into the cathedral, I head to a nearby park and lie down in the shade of a tree. I guess Stacey was right — the journey was the destination.

ESSENTIALS

Getting there

EasyJet flies direct from Gatwick to Santiago de Compostela. Ryanair flies from Stansted, and Vueling from Stansted to A Coruña.

Average flight time: 2h.

When to go

Spring and autumn when it's cooler and quieter; temperatures are around a pleasant 22C. Winter offers fewer flights, hostels and daylight hours.

More info

The Confraternity of St. James is an educational charity run by current and former pilgrims. There are lots of tips, guidance and historical information on its website, along with a useful discussion forum.

John Brierley's *Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago* was the book I saw poking out of most backpacks. It's good on practical advice and stage maps, and wears its spiritual side very much on its sleeve. RRP: £17.99. (Camino Guides)

In Santiago itself, the Pilgrim Office provides toilets, backpack storage and the all-important certificates. *Oficina del Peregrino. T: 00 34 981 568 846.*

How to do it

Camino Ways offers walking and cycling trips including hotel/hostel accommodation, luggage transfers, a holiday pack and dinners during the hike. A six-night walking package covering 100km from Sarria to Santiago costs from £388 per person in low season. A seven-night, 200km cycling package costs from £636 per person, including bike hire.

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