



# The path well taken

Whether it's the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, the Kerry Camino or the Holy Land, there are many reasons to join a pilgrimage, from the deeply spiritual to the opportunity to take a different kind of holiday break. Just make sure that your overworked feet are up to the task before you set off

Words: **Nadine O'Regan** and **Catherine Murphy**

## **An accidental pilgrim**

By **Nadine O'Regan**

"Do you want to carry the cross?"

Our group organiser, a nice gentleman called Eamonn from Marian Pilgrimages, looks at me. "You haven't carried the cross yet, have you?" he says, gesturing to the cumbersome plywood affair currently being hoisted over-shoulder by four pilgrims in our gathering.

"Er, no," I say. "As a matter of fact, I have not carried the cross."

We are meandering down the Via Dolorosa ("the way of suffering"), the narrow cobble-stoned strip in Jerusalem in Israel, held to be the path Jesus took to his crucifixion. There are nine stations of the cross on the route, where pilgrims pause under the hot sun to say the Rosary. Jostling for their attention are tourist shops, where swarthy, skinny traders hawk their wares: coffee, leather handbags and even the odd caged, squawking parrot.

In our group of around 35, almost everyone has carried the cross, which has been supplied by a local photographer who, in an agreement with our tour organisers, is snapping discreet pictures of us to sell afterwards. Awkwardly, I explain that I don't want to carry the cross because I'm not religious.

Similarly, earlier in the tour, I refused to be rebaptised in the river Jordan. I did sing with the other pilgrims in the beautiful Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, on the spot where Jesus was said to be born, but mainly because I like singing.

In one of his church sermons, Father Carlos, an earnest American priest among our number, has clucked from the altar about the "members of our flock who have lost their way".

I'm pretty sure I'm the bad sheep he's talking about. In Tel Aviv, when the airport officials pull me away from our group of 30 pilgrims and five journalists, to ask me a few extra questions, I feel I've a sign on my head: 'Beelzebub has the Devil put aside for me'.

And yet I'm here, on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land, and happy about it, snapping pictures of the stunning unfurling landscape from my seat in our gleaming tour bus which - over the course of five days - will bring us to important historical places including Cana (said to be the site of Jesus's first miracle), Nazareth (for the church of the Annunciation), Mount Tabor, site of the Transfiguration, and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem.

where Jesus was buried.

Even for the non-religious, a pilgrimage has huge allure. Whether you're talking about the Camino de Santiago or the Holy Land, more and more work-stressed professionals are downing tools and finding a curious solace in pushing themselves, physically and mentally, into new terrain. Many aren't necessarily in search of faith, but simply an unusual kind of break, a chance to take time out from their lives and experience a new way of being (albeit one where wi-fi is also available, via our gleaming tour bus).

Much of the tour is about seeing the Bible stories from your childhood spring to vivid life. At a sycamore tree in Jericho, our guide tells us the story of the tax-collector Zacchaeus. At the Church of Cana, we hear the story of Jesus turning water into wine. On a boat-ride on the Sea of Galilee, as the light deepens into evening, an Irish priest travelling with us, Father Charlie Kiely, reads from the gospel and we hear the tale of Jesus walking on water.

Rituals and rosaries are very much part of the programme. At the Church of Cana, four of the couples on our pilgrimage renew their wedding vows and emerge from the church laughing and happy, ready to buy Wedding of Cana wine, on sale in the string of small open-fronted shops nearby. At a heavily touristified stretch of the River Jordan, where bright pink flowers adorn the walkways and ducks glide past, pilgrims delightedly take off their shoes and wade into the muddy water, where Father Adrian, an American priest in our gathering, douses their foreheads with holy water from a plastic bottle and asks them to cast out the devil and endorse their love of Jesus Christ.

Pictures of celebrities who have visited the river – including the late Whitney Houston – beam out from a nearby placard. Videos of the baptism can be bought for \$15 afterwards from the large tourist shop that backs onto the river.

For the non-religious, the pleasures are different, perhaps simpler: a cup of coffee in the unfamiliarly strong morning sunshine, a chance to meet new people, a sing-song late at night in the hotel, floating in the Dead Sea (an amazing experience), the Wailing

Wall in Jerusalem, or a camel ride by the Mount of Temptation. Outside the Church of Cana, a trader on the dirt scrub leading up to the church hands me a blood orange, huge and juicy, that still has a stalk and two leaves clinging to it, and laughs off the idea of me paying for it.

The landscape throughout is beautiful, mainly flat terrain with the Jordanian mountains in the distance, dotted with orange, tomato, mango and olive trees, eucalyptus and almond trees with white flowers that are really more like big bushes.

We stop near Mount Arbel, just north of Tiberias, and do a short walk into a wildly overgrown landscape rich with the smell of green grasses, flecked by red poppies and populated by tiny crabs. We look up to the natural caves where Jewish people once lived. "You can do a three-hour trail here if you choose," our guide tells us, before showing us a tree whose thorns, he says, were of the kind pressed into Jesus's head at the crucifixion.

Spring is the perfect time to visit Israel, our guide tells us, because it's dry and the mountains are green. We stop briefly at the Sea of Galilee, and as the sun glitters on the water, I feel a great sense of peace – perhaps ironically, given the location.

Israel and Palestine are far more controversial and challenging destinations than some other pilgrimage destinations, which makes them more important to tackle via the safety of an organised tour, with excellent guides in a companionable atmosphere.

Before the trip I find myself googling 'safety in Israel', but actually we see relatively few hints of the extreme strife that has plagued these regions. In Jerusalem, Israeli soldiers, clasp rifles, lounge cockily in the city streets.

In Bethlehem in the suffering West Bank, which is noticeably poorer and more run down, a mural by Banksy – of a pigeon in a flak jacket, a leaf of peace in its beak – adorns a wall leading into the city.

One of our guides is Palestinian and living in Israel. "We are mixed together. I believe we have to manage together," he says. "I think Palestinians

are stupid and Israelis are stupider. If they make peace together, everyone will be coming here and they will just have to collect the money in baskets."

The pilgrimage tour buses, even those travelling to Palestinian territories, are generally left alone by Israeli security forces, he adds. We pass in and out of Bethlehem without encountering any difficulty.

Of the 30-plus people who are here, a mix of Irish and American pilgrims, many of them have physical ailments. One lady needs a wheelchair, another uses a walking stick that converts into a seat. But the organisers handle every obstacle beautifully and deftly.

There's a familial feeling, with sing-songs, post-dinner drinks and card games, and much laughter. At one point, Michael, one of the organisers, tells us we have to sign an admission slip on the bus. But hidden inside his folder is a huge birthday card for Christine, one of the American pilgrims. It's a sweet touch and a sign of the trouble the organisers take to make the experience a positive one for everyone involved.

For a few of the pilgrims who have been on many such trips, they'll candidly admit that for them, it's less about religion than experiencing that familial feeling. Having a cigarette (you can smoke anywhere) or a slow cup of coffee while finding out about the totemic, complicated history of the region, is just as much part of the joy of the trek as the religious experience itself.

But for most of the pilgrims, the height of their personal journey comes in Jerusalem, at the Garden of Gethsemane, where our guide retells the story of Judas's betrayal of Jesus, and at the Church of the Sepulchre, and the tomb where Jesus was buried and rose from the dead.

Sometimes I turn to find a pilgrim crying, the tears spilling down their faces, overcome by seeing their faith brought to such physical and vivid life. You don't need religion to feel moved.

*Nadine O'Regan travelled to the Holy Land as a guest of Marian Pilgrimages (see [Marian.ie](http://Marian.ie) or call 01-8788159) and Turkish Airlines, which has flights 14 times a week from Dublin to 270 destinations (see [turk](http://turk)*

*ishairlines.com)*

## **Camino de Santiago**

**By Catherine Murphy**

Years later, my memories of walking the Camino de Santiago remain vivid. A group of nine female friends met to walk the first stage of the Camino Francés, starting in St Jean Pied de Port in France and marching through Roncesvalles, Pamplona and Puente de la Reina before finishing in a little town called Los Arcos.

We arrived in Bilbao to a mid-June heatwave. Basque grannies were dying in the heat and there we were, about to hike between 25 and 28km a day in 38 degrees.

There wasn't an ounce of religion between us. We weren't there to follow in the devout footsteps of our medieval forefathers or follow the way of St James to Santiago de Compostela.

Some were walking the Camino to challenge themselves physically and mentally, others because they loved Spain, hiking or being on the open road. The lure of pintxos and rioja at the end of each day was an additional factor.

It was just before the surge in Camino popularity among Irish people. Our descriptions of the trip were often met with ridicule. "You're going to sleep in dormitories with dozens of strangers, get up at 5am to walk 25km, stick to 10pm curfews, and that's going to be fun? Don't they get bedbugs in those places? Ugh!"

On paper it didn't sound great, but I still tell people that the Camino de Santiago is one of the best things I've ever done.

Yes, there was orchestral snoring in 70-bed dorms, and tired groans from friends who started walking at 4.30am because they couldn't sleep anyway. Some refugios tried to separate chronic snorers into 'snoring rooms', but few people cared to admit their nocturnal habits in advance.

When earplugs didn't work, my survival tactic was to try to find a rhythm in the snoring and fall asleep to it.

There was waking up at five in the morning on a thin mattress on a monastery floor, next to a 15-stone

Frenchman who you hadn't planned on going to bed with the night before.

There were blisters on feet that stopped one friend from walking a good part of the route. There were tense scenes at lunchtime, as nine very tired women argued about where to eat and whether they had the energy to walk there. There were conversations about whether it was safe for women to walk sections alone.

There were queues to register and grumpy guardians in refugios where, in return for paying a few euro a night, we had to have the right stamps in our pilgrim's passport to show we were walking the way.

Beds couldn't be booked in advance and, during busy summer periods, refugios could get totally booked up, leading to a race to get to the next place early and grab a bed. (With companies like Camino Ways and Follow the Camino, it's also possible to pre-book hotel accommodation and have your luggage transferred each day.)

And yes, there were sections of the walk that took us through industrial city outskirts or along main roads, not exactly heaven for hill walkers.

We walked with about 8kg of gear each, just enough for a change of walking clothes, rain gear, flip flops and other essentials. Walking gear had to be washed out each evening and one of my favourite memories is of a friend setting out at 6am from Roncesvalles, her Bridget Jones big knickers gaily hanging out to dry from her backpack.

There were also gorgeous vineyards and hilly climbs, rustic villages steeped in history and €10 'pilgrims' menus' each evening. One major bonus on the Camino is that it's cheap.

There were people from all over Europe and beyond, telling us their stories as they walked part of the way with us, friendly strangers who laughed and sang to ease the pain of 28km walks. Inevitably, there was

the slow walker, the one who no one thought would get there but always did.

There were moments of hilarity; smuggling a bottle of red wine into an austere convent in Pamplona, or searching frantically for suitable 'comfort stops' (places to urinate) on the open road.

There was the satisfaction of completing those kilometres every day – for some, it was an intensely emotional feat, with tears of exhaustion and elation at the end of our trip.

For some, the Camino Francés has become too popular and crowded, but during less busy periods it can be a pleasantly social affair. Many of the people we met along the route were completing the whole 791km, which filled us with the desire to stay on the road.

Strangers become friends, and locals greet you with the phrase “buen camino” – have a good way.

For those who complete the final 111km from Sarria to Santiago de Compostela, there's the pain of queuing to get your 'Compostela', the certificate that says you've walked at least 100km of the route.

But there are also a cathedral rooftop tour, the buzz of a university town and excellent local food. There's the gift of beginning and ending in elegant cities such as Bilbao or San Sebastián.

And that is the sum of the Camino de Santiago's parts – the sense that, above all, you are part of something, an adventure that works at many different levels for many different people.

*For more information on the routes to Santiago de Compostela, see [caminoways.com](http://caminoways.com) or [followthecamino.com](http://followthecamino.com)*

## **The Kerry Camino**

**By Catherine Murphy**

The Kerry air is balmy. Grassy fields look like they've been Photoshopped to hyper-green. We breathe in the succulent scent of gorse.

On an unseasonably warm spring day, the white expanse of Inch Strand opens up before us. There are oohs and aahs as the amateur photographers among us struggle to capture the beauty.

We stop at Sammy's on the Beach to slurp plump fresh oysters from their shells. Hiking boots come off to rest tired feet; sunscreen goes on to protect pale Irish skin. There's talk of swimming in the sea.

We've just walked a section of the Kerry Camino with a gaggle of friendly locals: slogging up hills, crossing forest streams and talking the length of quiet country boreens for 12 scenic kilometres.

The Kerry Camino forms part of the 160km Dingle Way and latterly, the Wild Atlantic Way. While it might be a clever

play on Spain's famous Camino de Santiago, there are established links.

In the sixth century, St Brendan the Voyager is said to have made the pilgrimage as part of his epic seven-year journey. A pewter scallop shell, which symbolises the Way of St James, was found at Ardfert Abbey in 1992, further proving those links.

Dingle, where the Kerry Camino ends, was also once a starting point for pilgrims making the journey to Santiago de Compostela via La Coruna.

With 58km of trails taking walkers from Tralee to Camp, Annascaul and Dingle over three days, the Kerry Camino could never pretend to be a match for the almost 800km French Way to Santiago, although those who complete it get a pilgrim's passport as they would in Spain and a certificate when they finish at St James's Church in Dingle.

What it does have are beautiful natural landscapes, culture, history and hospitality in abundance, with a big dose of Kerry banter thrown in.

The brainchild of a group of Tralee volunteers – retired firefighter Michael O'Donnell, walking guide John Ahern, teacher Adrienne McLoughlin and former town councillor Grace O'Donnell among them – it's hoped that the Kerry Camino will attract not only overseas visitors, but Irish people preparing for the Camino de Santiago or one of the many other 'ways' now being explored around Europe.

We base ourselves at the Grand Hotel in Tralee, a family-owned hotel that is grand in the best sense of the word. Situated on the site of a former Norman castle, it offers a warm welcome and a breakfast fit for any pilgrim, with old-style fish and onions on the menu.

While walkers will find a selection of B&Bs along the way, they could also opt to base themselves in Tralee for the duration, driving to and from their starting point each day.

The Kerry Camino starts at the impressive St John's Church in the centre of Tralee, from where we get a whistle-stop tour of the town to hear about its medieval history and former glory days.

We opt to start walking from Camp, getting the first stamp on our passports from Michael O'Neill at the Railway Tavern and the last stamp of the day at Sammy's On The Beach.

Afterwards, we visit Dingle, stopping off at the tiny St James's Church, which was built by the Spanish and is now the setting for TV music series *Other Voices* as well as

the end point for the Kerry Camino.

Perhaps most fitting of all – at least if you believe that any camino should have a religious element – we meet Monsignor Pádraig O'Fiannachta at the town's An Diseart spiritual centre.

A former professor of Irish at Maynooth University and translator of the Bible into Irish, the Monsignor shows us this former convent's hidden treasure – a small church within the building which boasts a stunning display of Harry Clarke stain glass windows.

If ever there was a perfect place to host pilgrim masses or offer tired walkers refuge, this is it.

*Ireland Ways* ([irelandsways.com](http://irelandsways.com), tel: 01-5252886) offers Kerry Camino walking packages.

For further information, go to [kerrycamino.com](http://kerrycamino.com) and [mydestination.com/Kerry](http://mydestination.com/Kerry).

**NADINE O'REGAN  
IN TEL AVIV, WHEN THE  
AIRPORT OFFICIALS PULL  
ME AWAY TO ASK EXTRA  
QUESTIONS, I FEEL LIKE  
I'VE A SIGN ON MY HEAD:  
'BEELZEBUB HAS THE  
DEVIL PUT ASIDE FOR ME'  
CATHERINE MURPHY  
WE ARRIVED IN BILBAO  
TO BE GREETED BY A  
MID-JUNE HEATWAVE.  
BASQUE GRANNIES  
WERE DYING IN THE  
HEAT**

## ***So many ways, so little time***

When people talk about the Camino, they're usually talking about the most popular route, the French Way/Camino Francés which starts at St Jean de Pied de Port in France and brings walkers almost 800km to Santiago de Compostela.

But there are many routes to Santiago including the English Way, the Portuguese Way from Lisbon, the northern coastal route from Bilbao and

the Aragonese Way.

Other 'ways' are also becoming popular in Europe and beyond. In Italy, the Via Francigena takes pilgrims through Tuscany and the beautiful Aosta Valley to Rome.

In the Alentejo region of Portugal, the Rota Vicentina takes walkers along unspoilt coastal routes, while in Japan, the Unesco-listed Kumano Kodo takes walkers through the forests, rivers, mountains and sacred sites of the Kii peninsula, following in the footsteps of pilgrims who made the journey a thousand years ago.

In Ireland, a network of ways has also developed. As well as the Kerry Way and the longstanding Wicklow Way, it's possible to walk the Barrow Way, Slí Cholmcille in Donegal and the Burren Way.

It's also possible to combine the Kerry Way with the Burren Way by taking a ferry from Tarbert to Killimer ([shannonferries.com](http://shannonferries.com)) and transferring to the Cliffs of Moher.

**Catherine Murphy**



**Top: traversing the Burren Way in Co Clare; above: the Via Francigena takes pilgrims through Tuscany in Italy**



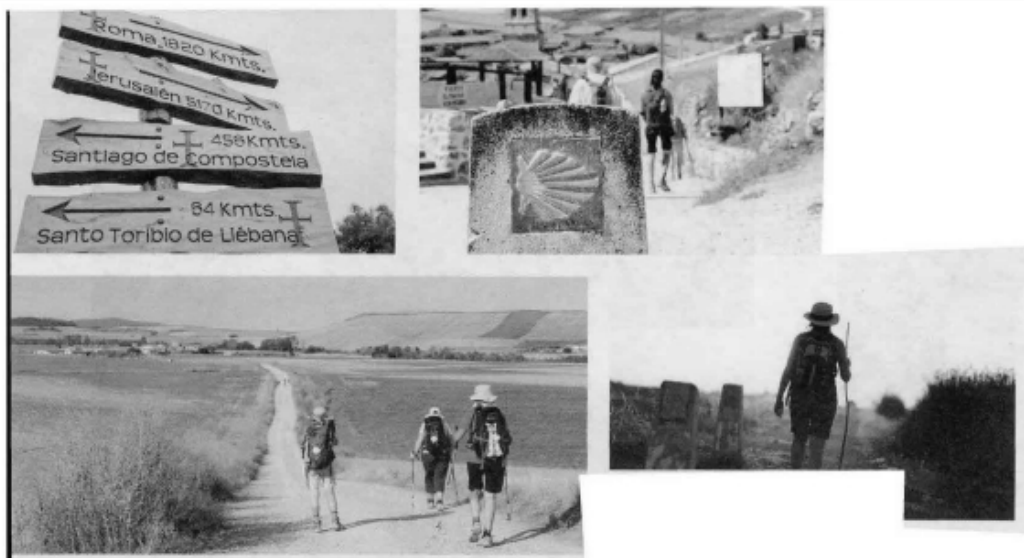
**Main picture: Good Friday processions on the Way of the Cross in Jerusalem, Israel**

Getty



**From top: Jerusalem's evening skyline; the Garden of Gethsemane; a small Banksy mural on the side of a souvenir shop; American priest Father Adrian with pilgrims at the River Jordan**





**Clockwise: a sign shows the various distances on the trail; the famous yellow and blue Camino de Santiago symbol; walking the trail is a gruelling but rewarding experience in the Spanish heat**



**Clockwise from top left: the Kerry Camino takes in 58km of walking over three days; a map to mark the journey; a roadside sign guides straying walkers; the Railway Tavern in Camp, Tralee**