

## The Camino de Santiago II

If the pilgrimage route from St. Jean Pied de Port, France, to the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela, Spain, is 500 miles, I walked 450 – 28 days from start to finish to complete the pilgrimage. If the Catholic Church still awards plenary indulgences for walking the Camino de Santiago, I am owed 90% of one.

Not until you have had the experience of walking from city to city do you realize that every city of size has a three- to five-mile industrial stretch from its outskirts to the city center. Almost without fail, you walk by the city garbage disposal site, the waste treatment plant, the city maintenance yard, the automobile salvage yards, the railroad switching yards, and the heavy industrial sections, which will include the fertilizer and cement factories and the stockyards. You pass by the trucking terminals, the blocks of warehousing, the radio and television station tower facilities, auto row, and a variety of retail strip centers before you cross a bridge or some other demarcation that brings you into the downtown area. I have no doubt these urban industrial miles count as part of the pilgrimage route, but after two and a half weeks walking these urban strips, I resolved my personal moral dilemma about whether these miles go to the heart of a pilgrimage. Thereafter, I made the tactical decision to look for a bus or a taxi once we arrived at the city's fringe, and what a relief that was at the end of a ten-hour walk! To justify my decision to forgo these urban miles, I looked to the same principle that Ronald Reagan, former governor of California, used for moral guidance when he was asked about the need to preserve old-growth redwoods. But instead of using the word "redwood," mine says, "Once you have seen and walked one urban industrial strip, you've seen and walked them all."

Twenty-six miles was our longest walk day; there were many 20-mile days, and never a day less than 12 miles, as I recall. I hear and appreciate your comment: this is not a pilgrimage pace but a forced march. You are quite right, but put yourself in our shoes. With round-trip airline reservations fixed months in advance, we had allowed 31 days to complete the pilgrimage. As true Americans, ever-competitive and overachieving, we met this challenge by pushing ourselves to the limit every day to reach the finish line.

The modern-day reality of making the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage is that most people do so by means of touring buses. Catholic groups (and others) from all parts of Europe, but especially Ireland and Great Britain, along with their chaplains and tour guides, arrive every day at the cathedral in Santiago to participate in the noon mass that marks the end of their successful pilgrimage. Any walking is limited to a handful of sightseeing stops along the 1,000-year-old historical route.

The next largest group of pilgrimage-goers are cyclists who come from throughout the world – year by year, increasingly popular in the United States – to join prepackaged two-week vacation/pilgrimage tours. Then come many Spaniards who take a week each year to walk a specific section of the Camino, so that in the course of their lifetime, they will have completed the pilgrimage in full. Walkers like myself fall into the next-to-last category. These would-be pilgrims have allotted a specific period of time to make their pilgrimage, whether part-way, thereby beginning much closer to Santiago, or starting in the Pyrenees to attempt the entire 500-mile route. Finally, there are the true pilgrims, those who stop their lives in order to give themselves completely to the purpose of the pilgrimage.

Among the several dozen people I met during the course of the Camino, especially during the first two weeks, I would classify three people as true pilgrims. The first was a 40-year-old woman from Brazil who had been inspired by Pablo Neruda's best selling book about the meaning of the Camino pilgrimage and was following in his footsteps. Another was a young man from Holland in his early 30's who undertook his pilgrimage as a sort of walk-a-thon pilgrim. He was redeeming pledges made on his behalf to benefit poor children in the school where he taught. He began his walk in Le Puy, France, which would add an additional 150 miles to the more traditional route. The third pilgrim was an engaging middle-aged Austrian businessman (in medical sales, I think) who seemed to be searching for a life-changing experience.

Along the route, these pilgrims would seek lodging either in the bare-bones but almost free lodgings called *refugios* (also known as *albergues*) provided by local governments, or in some locales, in the simple but more comfortable housing provided by dedicated residents whose adopted mission was to house people walking the pilgrimage route. They were under no personal time

constraints; their sole purpose at this time in their lives was to make the pilgrimage, but they did so at the rate of 10 miles per day, never more than a five-hour walk. They would arrive at their destination in the early afternoon, take their full midday meal, rest for a bit, visit local historical sights, and in the evening, they ate, drank, and socialized with other *peregrinos* (the Spanish term for people making the pilgrimage). Day after day, the same routine, it never varied. However long it might take to reach Santiago de Compostela was seemingly of no concern to them; it would take as long as it took. Each one exhibited a certain sense of personal detachment similar to the kind I had seen in an earlier life among certain contemplative religious monks.

True pilgrim or not, I believe that every person I met experienced some personal benefit from making, or attempting to make, the Camino de Santiago. Making a personal decision to participate, then the arrangements to relocate to another country, and, finally, taking part in a centuries-old religious cultural tradition is a liberating, challenging, exhausting, and humbling experience.