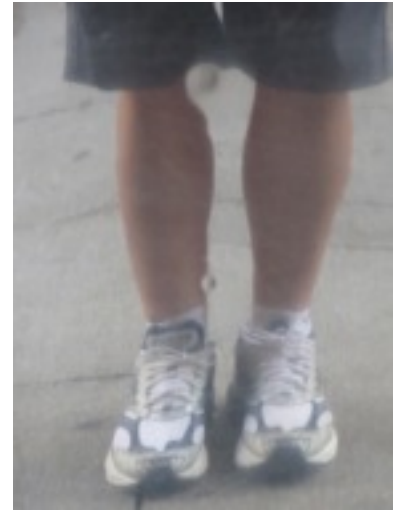


No Walker Left Behind

The Camino, THE CAMINO. What is it about this part of the world? Was I a pilgrim in a former life? What calls me back? Is it the spirit of the place, the people I meet, the beauty of the small towns and villages along the way? Who knows, but here I am on the Camino de Santiago again!

This time not on the northern Spain (French) route, but the Portuguese route. Walkers World and guide Garry Budin offer a stellar itinerary with the grand finale being the attainment of the Compostela (document that lessens your time in purgatory) after walking the last 100 km. (62.13 miles) to Santiago. It can't be just any 100km, or I would qualify, but the LAST hundred. And you must have the documentation of stamps in your pilgrim credential to prove it.



After I fell in Sicily and messed up my knees, I realized I couldn't maintain the level of walking needed for this journey. I contacted Garry and offered to cancel. "No - we'll take care of you" was his answer. And he has.

There are 23 participants on this trip and three guides. Garry, leads the fast group, Ines (the spitting image of Emmy award winning actress Salma Hayak) walks with the middle group and her husband Enrique is the sweep guide.



Inez or Salma? Salma or Inez? You decide!

Thanks to Kevin Larkin for providing Ines' photo

Each evening Garry briefs the group on the next days walk -- weather, terrain, elevation, coffee and lunch stops and anything else they need to know.



Gary designs a program for me too, with a briefing for my “urban trekking”. I’m given route maps, town maps, even business cards for the restaurant/cafe where I am to wait for the rest of the walkers. He also loans me a cell phone that keeps me tethered to him whenever I’m away from the group.

This is a sample of the info. Garry provides for my (easy) walking and “Urban Trekking”: maps, elevation charts, brochures and business cards.

I generally start out and walk with everyone each morning, Enrique and I walk together for a few minutes, then he goes ahead keeping an eye on those in front of him and me behind him. There are pre-determined places where the bus waits for tired walkers.



This is a good example of the picturesque trails I enjoyed walking. Enrique has gone ahead of me to show me the way as well as keeping an eye on the group ahead.

After a few hours, I’m done and the support bus takes me to the next meeting place. Most times it is a picturesque village and I am free to explore to my heart’s content until it is time to rendezvous with the group. This is the “Urban Trekking” part of the program and I love it!

The other aspect about this trip that I enjoy is the accommodations. We stay mostly in Pousadas (in Portugal) and Paradors (in Spain) - historic buildings which have been retrofitted to a high standard hotel. We have stayed in walled fortresses (The Conde de Gondomar in Baiona), a 16th century Renaissance Palace (Parador Pontevedra), a 13th century Monastery (Monasterio Aciviero) and other equally as interesting and spectacular properties.

My traveling companions are mostly Canadians, with four Americans and two Australians. We are a friendly, well-functioning, compatible and on-time bunch. All are dedicated walkers, some are marathon runners. To say they are goal oriented is an understatement -- they are here to WALK. Their goal is to be eligible for their Compostela. According to tradition, attainment of this document is akin to a "get out of purgatory free" card. The rest of us will just have to suffer a little more before we get to heaven.

We are a well-outfitted lot too -- technical, yet fashionable, clothes, good travel equipment, quality boots. My favorite fashionista fellow traveler is a woman who matches her shoelaces to her outfit. What a great idea and she always looks wonderful!

I'm grateful that my fellow travelers are really good about not making too many jokes about Americans. Though some did have definite opinions about our crazy presidential election.

THE WALK

Each morning, our bus takes us to a starting point and these hearty souls peel off the bus and take off like the Blue Angels.



Photo by Peter Dwyer

Not me..... I have to adjust my poles, put on my gloves, take a few deep breaths and..... then.....start.....walking.

Garry plans for me to walk the "pretty parts" with easier terrain and no "slight inclines" - as he refers to steeper areas. I do the best I can and trudge along in spite of the heat -- Spain and Portugal are experiencing unseasonably high temperatures (100°+) this summer.

Enrique, as the sweep guide usually walks with me for a few minutes, then goes on ahead to trail the others, but keeps me in sight. I love this. I guess I'm a trail hog and want it all to myself. Is it easier to walk on that side? What about over there? Soon I move over..... then back. I'm all over the place.

I love walking these country lanes with fields of corn, potatoes, tomatoes, cabbage, turnips, kale and other vegetables on either side. These fields often have large agricultural water sprayers and it is a special treat to get into position then wait for the shower of cooling water. No matter the clothes, no matter the hair -- we are on pilgrimage and are supposed to be messy looking!



Our route is marked by the same ancient crosses that marked the way for pilgrims centuries ago, before the yellow arrow took its place. It is punctuated by teeny roadside chapels as well as small, often Romanesque style churches. We travel over several medieval bridges and even some Roman ones.



We also follow a Roman Road for a bit, and in Portugal, we sometimes parallel the pilgrimage route to Fatima. Their route is marked by blue arrows, while ours is marked with yellow.



And, we often met Fatima pilgrims going the other way!





In some places, there are thermal hot springs and we find communal washing stations where, in centuries past, women gathered to wash clothes, keep in touch and no doubt, gossip.

Today, these thermal springs serve as very welcome soaking pools for tired feet!

I especially liked being near a small village at 12 noon to listen to its churchbells mark the time.

As the days go on, blisters, shin-splints, and heat take their toll and others ride the support bus with me. I am happy for the company.

PILGRIMS

There are many young Pilgrims on this trail - with their heavy packs, good, broken-in walking shoes, well-used trekking poles who are walking the entire way to Santiago. At cafes (called bars here) we always run into a few resting, drinking coffee, catching their breath, treating their blisters or having something cold to drink. Often all of the above.

Cafe Esperon

On Day 8 Garry starts the big push toward Santiago de Compostela. He divides everyone into two groups and I see the writing on the wall. They are doing up to 24km (15 miles) a day -- way beyond my capabilities. I ride the support bus to the first coffee stop, then again to lunch. At each place I wait for the group. After lunch one day, I'm dropped off at Pazo Lestrove (a 16th century archbishop's mansion, now parador) in Padron along with the luggage then am on my own to explore this town which has Celtic roots and sports a Roman bridge and a 12th century Church.

One morning coffee stop is at Cafe Esperon - a teeny hole-in-the-wall cafe. It doesn't look like much, but it has become a gathering place for pilgrims. I order a coffee, then move to a small room with only one table. Over the years, pilgrims have written messages all over the walls, some messages are quite long, some only have a name. It is "pilgrim corner!" Soon two young German girls come in.



The conversation begins:

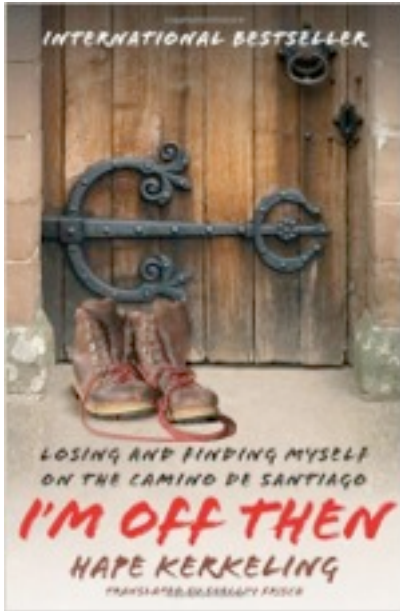
Where are you from?

How is it going?

Where did you start?

Are you staying in the alberges (pilgrims hostels)?

Are you OK (meaning, how are your blisters)



Its an easy conversation. I also ask the girls how they knew about the Camino. They read Hape Kerkeling's book, ("I'm Off Then: Losing and Finding Myself on the Camino de Santiago")! This is the same book I picked up in a book exchange in Ushuaia, Argentina! Hape is a German comedian who did the walk on his own in 2001 and wrote of his adventures in a spirited, engaging way. The girls tell me stories of what it's like to stay in the albergues -- the noise, the snoring, the stress of finding one with space for them each night. The price - very reasonable: 5 euro a night in Portugal; 6 euro a night in Spain.

I didn't know about the Camino until I was in my 40's!

Soon a mother and daughter from the Netherlands join us. The mom is 82 and is fulfilling a life-long dream. They have walked from Tui - a town at the Portugal/Spanish border. The mom and I have a great conversation, even though she doesn't speak English and I don't speak Dutch. Amazingly, she doesn't look tired or worn out. They are doing the entire way on their own - no guide, no support bus.

We each write our names on the wall then go our separate ways wishing each other a "Buen Camino" (the traditional pilgrim greeting).

This is the joy of the Camino -- meeting, talking, sharing.

There are a million stories on the Camino. I wish I could sit awhile at Cafe Esperon and hear them all.

SHOPPING

With all this time in villages, I have plenty of time to window shop. Of course there are items made of cork -- mostly purses and bags. Portugal has beautiful embroidered linens and towels, straw handicrafts and great shoes. Some of the major shoe brands have factories here - Mefisto, Lemmon Jelly, Fly London, Benneton, Ecco, etc. and in both in Portugal and Spain, shoe stores abound. I even run across some BernieMev's (made in NY) shoes in Ponteverde -- on sale, no less.

The larger cities like Braga and Viannah do Costelo have malls which are like my mother-ship. I never feel lonely there as European store names are so familiar. they cheer me up and I never feel too far from home. The stores are like old friends: Mango, Zara, Calzedonia, Intimissimi and of course, Ali Hop!

GLORIOUS SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

This has got to be my favorite town in Spain. The 270 acre square walled city is a well-preserved UNESCO site. I've been here three times just this year! I have favorite cafes, restaurants and walks. There is nothing I enjoy more than just wandering where the winds take me and I would love to say that I have walked every street. Not yet -- but I will!

I arrive each time with definite goals -- this time it's to take the Archaeological Tour of the Cathedral. Several years ago, archaeologists began excavating under the crypt and discovered Roman-era walls as well as evidence of early basilicas and some altars. There are also the remains of an ancient temple that stood here before the cathedral was built.

In Santiago de Compostela



I try to book the tour on the web. No luck. So I waltz up to the Cathedral (and crypt) entrance and ask about joining a tour. All full the one day I am available. Then I ask about a private tour. There are phone calls to officials and I am told to check back later. In the midst of all this, I am in touch with Garry. "Let me contact someone" he says. In less than an hour he calls back. A tour is set up for 1:00. This special tour ends up with just three people - a couple from Navarra, Spain and myself. It is wonderful



We meet the guide at the crypt entrance, then go thru a locked gate, up some stone steps to the main church. More locked gates, then we descend from floor level down stone steps to visit two areas beneath the church. At the first stop we walk among Roman ruins and over tombs, the guide, Pilar, pointing out evidence of Roman and medieval wells, streets, walls, and rooms.

Part of the necropolis in the excavated sector beneath the crypt. You can see part of the walkway we used so as not to disturb stones covering tombs.

Photo from Cathedral website

Then we surface in the church again, and descend through another set of locked gates and steps to subterranean walkways which surround the necropolis part of the excavation. There are exposed skeletons in stone coffins, tombs, carved sarcophagi covers and more Roman ruins. I even find a crystal bracelet and a coin that had dropped thru a grate in the church floor. Unfortunately it wasn't "finders-keepers". I am sorry that photos were not allowed, or I would have taken hundreds!

Who, but Garry, could arrange a tour that fits my schedule exactly??? His contacts and influence is far-reaching and he works miracles as needs arise.

CAMINO ANGELS AND ACTS OF KINDNESS

People are so kind to each other on the Camino and think of them as my Camino Angels. I met many - among them:

*Deborah and Pablo, assistant guides from the 2013 Camino who sent me extensive notes on each days walks, complete with links on what to see and do while urban trekking. Thanks to them, I knew about some fabulous small museums and historic houses to visit. It was the perfect complement to Garry's instructions and maps.

* When I was trudging along a dusty trail on a 100° + day a fellow walker engaged me in conversation and offers me water and a granola bar. I must have looked pretty bad!

•Francisco, a lovely man on the bus to Pontevedra who made sure I knew how to get to the historic center. (I took the public bus from Redondela to get a head-start on my Urban Trekking in this fascinating and picturesque Galician town)

•Eurico, a Lisbon businessman and my seat mate on the train from Lisbon to Lima who offered to let me use his own wi-fi hotspot to catch up on email during the three hour ride.



* Karol who owns her own 2-chair salon in Padron, just 16 miles from Santiago de Compostela. We had a wonderful and extensive conversation on color, conditioning and haircuts. Her advice has been heeded. She worked very hard to fix up the very bad haircut (it was 6 euro -- I should have known better!) received a week earlier in a small village when it was so hot that my hair "exploded."

- * Fernando Coelho, our support bus driver in Portugal who knows each small town like the back of his hand and advised me on what to see and do.
- * Enrique - the sweep guide who walked and talked with me each morning, then was sensitive enough to walk ahead so I could enjoy the trail on my own.
- * and of course Garry who made sure I had complete instructions and information to go off by myself. In reality, he ran two tours - one for the dedicated walkers, and one geared to my limitations. Not only that, but he worked many miracles on my behalf. And after arranging the archaeological tour at the Cathedral thru his connections in Santiago, I promoted him to a Camino Arch-Angel!

Garry points out a "Galicia is not Spain" graffito. He has very definite ideas about this! Garry loves the Camino and in many circles is known as Don Camino "Don" being a Spanish honorific,

Photo by Kevin Larkin



AND FINALLY.....



This was an excellent combination of trips - OAT's "Northern Spain: Pilgrimage to the Past" itinerary, or what I call the "Casi" (almost) Camino for sightseeing and touring, then walking as much as I could of the Portuguese Camino with Garry, Ines and Enrique and 22 other lovely people.

The group in front of the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. They had just walked the last 16 miles and from here went right to the Pilgrims Office to receive their Compostelas.

Everyone does their own Camino - so what kind of Camino did I do —

A Casi (almost) Camino?

A Walking Camino? (a combination of trekking and exploring)

A Shopping Camino?

A Talking Camino (yes, I foisted my “Spanglish” on anyone who would listen)

A Pilgrimage Camino? (visiting churches, chapels, roadside crosses)

No matter what name I give it, it has definitely been a “Buen Camino!”



Photo by Enrique Higuera