

Along the Camino -- Again!



This map shows our route in Spain and Portugal. There was no pre-trip in France on our departure.

I have now traveled this route three times - in 2013 I walked the Camino de Santiago across Northern Spain with Walkers World. It was very close to a spiritual experience as this centuries old trail attracted kings, queens, popes, writers and pilgrims walking to the holy town of Santiago de Compostela. And I follow.

(link: <http://estherperica.com/PDFs/CaminoPartOne.pdf> and <http://estherperica.com/PDFs/CaminoPartTwo.pdf>)

In 2015, I returned with Passport Travel and did just about the same route, but this time concentrating on visiting UNESCO sites and museums as there was no time to visit on the previous trip.

(link: http://estherperica.com/PDFs/2016_YelloTote-Spain-Portugal.pdf)

And now, I have just finished the same route - from Bilbao to Lisbon with Overseas Adventure Travel, where we travel close to the ground, are immersed in the culture, and have numerous opportunities to meet the people.



Each of these travel layers contribute to a well-knit and strong fabric of understanding and a comfortable feeling in this most fascinating and lovely place.

I begin in Bilbao. You know that with using points for a flight, you never get the date you want. So I arrive in Bilbao five days early. What to do? Well, get over jetlag for one thing as well as have dinner with travel friend Karyn who is traveling on the same itinerary five days ahead of me.

And of course, spend time with the lovely Marta, president of Bilbao Greeters at her beach house in Axpe and a do beautiful river and seaside walk. She is an amazing woman and my go-to person in this part of the world.



Left: With Marta in a 15th Century chapel near her house
Above: the original key to the chapel.



Left: Chef Carlos prepares our lunch of grilled Bonito (Albacore Tuna) with garlic and butter

Above: the delta at low tide.

We spend the day in Urdaibai, a UNESCO biosphere reserve at the top end of Spain. She planned a great day -- a stop at the 16th century Ermita de Santo Cristo chapel and a chat with Ana, the volunteer who cares for it. Her mother cared for the chapel before her and her mother before her. Ana didn't know who was the first in her family to act as volunteer caretaker but it has been so for centuries. Her son will take over her duties when it is time.

We follow a lovely trail, all the while enjoying the beautiful views, we stop here and there for a sit; and at Restaurante Asador Portuondo for a magnificent lunch. Soon it is time to meet my 14 fellow travelers and guide Emma to embark on OAT's Northern Spain and Portugal itinerary. A well-traveled group along with an extraordinary guide turns out to be a wonderful combination.

When Emma was born, the angels danced, sang and showered her with everything -- beauty, brains, a good heart, sensitivity, energy, height and ... she's even a blonde! She is a working forensic archaeologist and is currently directing a dig and researching medieval pilgrims who died while on The Camino. She soon will work on her Ph.D at Oxford. Every one of us love her.

Emma is energy personified



Our trip is an cultural journey -- we travel close to the ground, experiencing the small villages and towns of Northern Spain and Portugal. The largest city on the itinerary is Lisbon (pop. 530,847). We eat at lovely, local and often historic restaurants and cafes - the menus selected by OAT to offer a good sampling of local foods.



And of course the pièce de résistance is always the medieval town of Santiago de Compostela. I am able to do my favorite things -- spend time and have lunch in the Parador Los Reyes Catholicos (has been welcoming pilgrims since 1499), visit the church museum, have a cappuchino at Cafe Casino (open since 1873) and just walk around this architecturally magnificent Romanesque and Baroque city. Several of us do the Cathedrals Roof Tour and when I return in two weeks (yes, I'm going back -- more about this later) I hope to do the Crypt Tour.

As for highlights - there are too many to count!

Following the Camino again is pure joy. Our group did two walks along the Camino and it was nice to be on the trail again.

We spot a very nice brass Camino marker in Leon.



We happen to visit Aviero, usually a sleepy little town, on its once-a-month Sunday antiques market. Our wonderful guide even loans me 100euro "just in case" I find something wonderful and need more money to pay for it. (I paid her back!)



In Pamplona we follow the entire route of the Running of the Bulls from where the bulls are kept in a pen; to the stadium where they are readied for the bullfights later in the day.

Above: Trail marker for the running of the bulls. The route is clearly marked (hopefully the bulls will follow it!)

Right: Some unlucky runners. (our group was up for anything and we loved photo ops!)



Embarking on a Ale-Hop Shopping Safari --- Ale-Hop is a chain of stores several steps up from dollar stores. Everything is well selected, inexpensive and cute. Last May I bought packets of paper napkins that look like euro notes. These were such a hit at home that I wanted to buy more. Guess what -- even though I check in every Ale-Hop store I run across, they are completely out of stock. I guess they are a hit here too.



I love Ale-Hop!
Photo by Emma

Meals -- the food in Spain and Portugal is stupendous. On one memorable lunch, we enjoy 12 courses, and all the wine anyone wants. The meal was so spectacular, I kept a list:

- Crispy, crunchy bread
- Crab spread and crackers
- Kale Soup
- Shrimp
- Mussels
- Pork
- Cod Fritters
- Roasted goat cheese
- Chicken breast
- Egg and fries casserole
- Green Peppers
- Calamari (it was so good, they gave us extra!)
- Crepe Brulee for dessert
- And the wine flows freely!



We waddled out of the restaurant, groaning over our distended tummies.

An off-the-tourist-track highlight is visiting Emma's dig at the medieval San Miguel in Excelsis Church in Navarra. She specializes in forensic archaeology and is studying medieval pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago. Where did they come from? What did they eat? How did they live? How did they die?



Above: the 9th century church is on a mountain top in Navarra.
Right: archaeologists work on excavating a medieval skeleton



The pastor of the church also talks to us of his historically significant building, even taking out a holy relic from the safe and giving us a close-up view at a piece of the true cross. It is a rare privilege all the way around



We have excellent local guides - each a specialist in their city. No question could stump them -- though some in our group try.

As for a favorite city - especially for shopping - it's Porto. First of all, it is stunningly beautiful. The light is so bright, many houses are covered in hand-painted tiles, there is a rich concentration of Baroque architecture, and there are picturesque areas by the river. There is fun shopping along Rua Santa Catalina and Rua das Flores along with street artists and craft markets everywhere you look.



For that San Francisco (my home town) feeling -- it has to be Lisbon.



Its not the Golden Gate; its the 25th of April bridge in Lisbon!

Our hotel is perfectly located and we have daily walking tours exploring the city's neighborhoods:

- Baixa, with its picturesque squares, statues and fountains
- Bairro Alto - the hilly part
- Alfama, with its narrow, winding streets
- Chiado - along with a visit to the Carmo Museum, the ruins of a large gothic church including a small archaeology museum
- Belem, of course - which has the famous church and monuments Lisbon is known for



The trip is active. Several women have smart phones and kept track of steps. At our final dinner, we learn we have walked 103.4 miles!



Our Farewell Dinner is in a magnificent 17th century palace, now the Casa do Alentejo Restaurant in central Lisbon where we have a table in the ballroom.

As luck would have it, this adventure was great training for the next phase of my journey, walking the Portuguese Camino de Santiago. After the OAT trip ends in Lisbon, I take the train back to Porto. Time to join Walkers World for the next adventure which takes me back to Santiago de Compostela!



The Camino crosses a Roman Bridge in Pamplona
Photo by Evie

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