

My Camino

I have long wanted to do the Camino de Santiago pilgrimage in northern Spain but waited too long to do it the “right” way -- with a backpack and walking the whole 500 miles (790km). I looked at various companies but they seemed to target either heavy-duty walkers or were sightseeing tours with no walking at all. In reading one of my travel newsletters (www.journeywoman.com) I came across a recommendation for Garry Budin, who lives in Santiago de Compostela and guides the Camino. I emailed, explained my situation and asked about options. He wrote back that a company called Teachers Travel/Walkers World (www.teacherstravel.com/ www.walkersworld.com) might be just what I needed and, guess what -- he guides for them too.



I checked the company’s website and the itinerary looked perfect as it includes two guides, a support vehicle, covers a lot of the cultural aspects of the Camino and uses expert local guides in the major cities of Burgos, Leon and Santiago de Compostela. Walkers are divided into two groups, hearty walkers (called the sportif group) and leisurely walkers (the tranquil group). I signed up!

I felt more than ready for this adventure:

1. the companies FAQ states that participants (tranquil group) must be able to walk 10km..... Check
2. boots broken in..... Check
3. have appropriate wicking clothes and rain gear Check
4. have an ipod (actually two) full of favorite tunes and good walking music.... Check
5. have a copy of “The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook” by Gitlitz and Davidson - the best book ever written on the historical and cultural aspects of the Camino -- Check.



Our Trio of Guides

The guides were excellent. Garry Buden is an Australian who has lived in Spain for the past 10 years and has done the Camino numerous times. His own company Spanish Adventures (www.spanishadventures.com) arranges group and private tours in Spain and Portugal as well as arranges for luggage transfer and support vehicles for the Camino.

Debbie Wilson (British with the soul of a Spaniard) is the assistant guide and is a great complement to Garry. She is charming, gracious, perceptive, kind, added oodles of finesse and much, much more to the published



And as luck would have it, Pablo, Debbie's husband (Argentinian) came along too. This was a huge plus as he functioned as an additional guide and since he often sat at the back of the bus we could talk with him and ask questions on a more private basis.

So, it was a great trinity of souls guiding us. There was no way I was not going to have a good, productive and enriching time on this trip.

I took this photo on our last night. Garry, Debbie and Pablo read a humorous poem that mentions each participant. It is the only photo I have of the three guides together!

The Walk

Our group met in Bilbao and immediately travelled three hours to Roncesvalles, and our first hotel. must mention that I am very happy I didn't start this trip jetlagged. For anyone considering this adventure, it is worth it to arrive early and spend extra time in Bilbao. The Guggenheim building is spectacular (the collection however, all modern art, just so-so). If you want to see a good collection, the Museum of Belles Arts is excellent and presents its collection in chronological order. Also by arriving a few days before, you won't start the first day walking in the Pyrenees jet-lagged and bleary-eyed.

The next morning we traveled to St. Jean-Pied-de-Port just over the Pyrenees in France. This is the "official" start of the popular "French Route" of the Camino de Santiago. We had free time and most of our group of 21 found our way to the Pilgrim's Office to pick up a "Pilgrim Credential". You are

“stamped in”, your name goes in a register and you are listed as an official “pilgrim.” This paper entitles you to stay at auberges (which are dormitories - but we stayed in hotels and paradors), and for various discounts along the way including some museums. This is what you show 500 miles later at the Cathedral office in Santiago de Compostela to prove you completed the walk and are eligible to receive your Compostela. This is a kind of a certificate of completion -- with the added plus of lessening your time in purgatory!



We all enjoyed getting our stamps (called seillo in Spanish) in various places -- our accommodations, restaurants, coffee-bars, churches, museums and one, from a man who sets himself up at the beginning of a teeny village, stamps your credential and gives out candy along with a cheery “Buen Camino!” It is a fine record of our travels thru Spain’s northern provinces of Navarre, Castile y Leon, La Rioja and Galicia.

“There’s a slight incline” (Garry)

The trip was perfect. No matter what your walking ability, accommodations were made. There were the hard-core walkers and the “tranquil” group and, as predicted, I would come to know the “sweep” guides (Debbie and/or Pablo) and the support vehicle driver pretty well. I didn’t mind that one bit!

The two symbols of the Camino are the shell which signifies you are on the right path; and the arrow, which is the direction you should be going. The entire route is well marked.



Up and Over the Pyrenees

I must admit that for me it didn't start well. In St. Jean-Pied-de-Port we were told to leave anything we wanted on the bus and we could retrieve it after exploring the village and before beginning our walk. Guess what I misunderstood the directions and the bus left with my fleece, rain jacket, gloves and walking stick! And here we were to transverse a section of the Pyrenees known for bad, unpredictable weather as well as rocky and steep terrain. This is where Emilio Estevez died in the film, "The Way". Oh great.... I was not a happy camper.

Pauline, a member of our group offered her fleece vest; Garry, the guide handed me his walking stick. Ok, this is better. But going from bad to worse - it started with a "slight incline" and I was out-walked within 15 minutes.

This hike took me about 6 hours and essentially it was a slog over the Pyrenees from France into Spain. It was cold, windy and foggy. The "spectacular views" described in our itinerary were non-existent as visibility in some places was just a few feet. If it weren't for Michael, who helped me down the steep bits, it would have taken me hours longer.

Walking groups formed in less than an hour.

There were about six strong walkers

A whole bunch in the middle group

Then me.

It wasn't that I couldn't keep up. It was that I didn't enjoy the steep parts and walking for walkings' sake. I wanted to see something, not just my boots! Where were the cute villages to rattle around in? The scenic coffee stops? What about the museums to explore???

So with Debbie's advice and often Pablo's counsel, I concentrated on the easier, flatter walks. Other times, the support bus took me to the group meeting point, usually a village. We called it "urban trekking" giving me the opportunity to explore the town or village on my own. "The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago" which I thought would just be an interesting read, now became essential. I read my copy at night, then used Garry's book on the bus. This gave me insight to the history of what I was going to see and some word on the architecture. So on the days with difficult or long walking, I had my own urban adventures - along with a few serendipitous golden moments. This had the added advantage that no other group member had to wait for me as the last thing I wanted to be was the "American who couldn't keep up."

I had certain goals in mind. These villages are small and often just line the road with maybe a few side streets. I could sometimes walk them end-to-end. I sought out churches and museums (some really obscure) and soon found myself on a quest to locate and photograph the old crosses that marked the Camino route from the 15th to 19th centuries before the shell symbol took over.



So What do you discover when you explore on your own? The old directional crosses (before the shell and arrow symbols took over) and strange monuments that locals love to talk to you about.



And my favorite activity -- talking to people. It helps that I speak a little Spanish and I can truly say that my language capabilities improved. In fact, I can better understand people's various accents now. I even found myself using the "th" sound, i.e.: not Barcelona, but Barthelona or Galicia/Galethia toward the last days. I had some wonderful conversations in these towns and got lost a lot. It made me happy.

If one does all the walking on the itinerary it would be about 200 km. (125 miles). I guess I did way over half of that including my village walkabouts.

I do want to mention that our hotels were great. Some were magnificent 4-star paradors (historic buildings turned into hotels), others were small-family run, atmospheric and sometimes very cozy places. They were all in the very best locations and center-city. I've posted reviews on the hotels (and some restaurants) on tripadvisor.com and can send the list and evaluations - just ask!



Our hotel one night, - the lovely parador Monasterio San Milan connected to 16th century Yuso Monastery, a UNESCO site. The elegant rooms are huge, comfortable and the food excellent.

Some minimal problems

Blisters! I got my worst one on the Roman Road (day 5) near the village of Cirauqui. It is long downward trail with sharp unstable rocks that really tore up my feet and I lost the will to walk any more that day. One woman's blisters were so bad, she had to see a doctor!

Another problem was diet. Though our included restaurant meals were excellent, in Spain you have to actively seek out fruits and vegetables. Luckily our gargantuan picnic lunches had lots of great salads!



Here Pablo works on one of our picnics. One table was laden with cheeses, sausages, breads and gazpacho soup; and the other table a variety of salads as well as fruit. We never went hungry on this trip!

I was getting severe leg cramps at night and didn't think it was due to being dehydrated. In talking with another participant about this, she said it could be because of a potassium/magnesium/calcium deficiency due to the heavy carb and meat diet Spain is famous for. I visited a pharmacy the next day and bought supplements which took care of the problem. Thanks Iris!

Angels along the Camino

The beauty of the Camino is the people you meet. If I were to do this over again, I'd sew a USA patch on my backpack as this is a great conversation-starter. I'll always remember the three old women in Leon who after giving me explicit directions to the Benedictine Monastery (to pick up a Pilgrim Credential for someone who needed one) spent time asking me about the US and why I would do the Camino, the old man in Burgos who walked and talked with me along their river walk, the docents at the various museums and churches who answered my many questions and many, many more encounters.

And there are some people I'll never forget and I call them my "my Camino angels" (one little devil too) -- many times they came out of nowhere to help, to teach, to make my day.



My very first Camino Angel..... Way back in early September on my "Spain's Cultural Capitals" trip, our tour made a stop in Tarragona, a lovely Roman town. A wonderful man sells jewelry as well as large items like trays and lamps made of shells. During our walking tour I zipped into his shop to see if I could buy a shell to wear on my backpack on the Camino. First he offered a gigantic one -- way too big! Then a smaller one materialized -- perfect. He gave it to me as gift, along with a hug and my first "Buen Camino."

The "shell man" of Tarragona.

Javier (day 1)..... it was our first walking day. I noticed him struggling along the mountain trail, wearing worn-out tennis shoes and carrying a large pack with a sleeping bag dangling from it. He was struggling already. Later I saw him sitting off to the side, shoes and socks off inspecting his blisters. A few hours later he caught up with Michael and me and asked if we had any food. Javier explained he had left the auberge before breakfast and didn't realize there was nothing available (not even water!) on this part of the trail. I handed him a hi-protein nutrition bar, Michael gave him an apple. He was grateful. He walked with us for awhile and we learned he is doing the Camino in memory of his father who passed away recently. I always wonder if he made it to Santiago de Compostela.

Monica --- (day 8) Pablo had suggested I take the support bus this morning as the group was walking a long, difficult section. I could have a look at San Anton on my own, and wait for the group.

I still think of Monica preparing food for 12 pilgrims who wish to spend the night. She has done the Camino three times and is a volunteer at the ruins of the Convento de San Anton (St. Anthony). She told me it was her way of "giving back." These 16th century ruins are on private property and the owner allows pilgrims to have a meal and sleep there -- no charge.

In the makeshift kitchen, Monica was busy preparing vegetable soup for dinner when a group of pilgrims came in and asked for the "seillo" or stamp on their Pilgrim Credential. I could tell the timing was not right for her so I offered to go on "stamp duty" until my group arrived. I worked for about an hour and it was a wonderful experience, greeting pilgrims from all over the world, stamping, dating and signing their credential, and wishing them a heartfelt "Buen Camino." It gives me great pleasure to think that every one of those credentials now carries my signature. I even took care of those in my group!

The Irish Angel (day 8- this was a good day for Angels!) At Zoilo Monastery (turned Parador) I was at the end of a long line of people waiting to get themselves and their luggage onto the teeny-weeny elevator to go up to the rooms. She came around the corner, looked at me and asked if I had seen the cloister yet. We went thru a nondescript door into the most beautiful cloister, gardens and chapel I had ever seen. She guided me around and made sure I saw everything. When we came back out, the line had gone way down. It was time well spent. I never saw her again.

The Wayward Monk (day 13) (this is the little devil part).....He runs the gift shop and sells tickets to visit Samos Monastery. He engaged me in conversation, called me “majissima” (I have yet to find a good translation) and other complimentary (I think) terms, all the while standing very close to me with a bit of hands-on.

I had taken the support bus (I liked that bus!) to the town of Samos to do some urban trekking and wanted to get a head start visiting the extensive monastery-museum to take photos. I planned to do the official tour later with Garry and the rest of the group. I was the only one who showed up for the monastery’s 4:30 tour, so the monk told me to go in and explore on my own (I loved this and he couldn’t have made me happier!). He explained where to go, and gave me a little push thru an impressive wooden doorway. In addition, the monastery has a large gift shop so I returned to check it out and was subjected to a little more”majissima” language and close encounters.

His face fell and eyes widened when Garry arrived and he realized I was part of his group. (Garry is well known on the Camino) He was more surprised when Debbie came in as she had chatted with him previously about his behavior. Darn -- the fun was over!

Sorry about this - but I’m going to get a little woo-woo now.

You don’t have to be looking for anything or want to find anything when you do this walk. It can be just a beautiful hike in Northern Spain. But there’s something special about being here. There is a spirit to it. It’s a thousand year old trail - saints have walked it, kings and queens walked it, Pope Frances walked a portion of it. The entire trail has been named a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Today thousands of people, young and old are walking it. The Cathedral Office in Santiago claims between 1000 and 1500 pilgrims (and hikers) arrive in the city each day. Each person comes with their own motivations of what their Camino should be. No matter how much or how little of the Camino you do, it is just right.



Hello God.....it's me.....

If you're on the Camino, you visit a lot of churches. There seems to be one about every 100 feet. That is what the ancient pilgrims did and we continue the tradition. Their Camino directionals were the ancient crosses, fountains and these 10th thru 19th century churches. Some are a step up from chapels -- small, simple, rural affairs with plain altars and dusty wooden statues; and others are huge, elaborate and laden with gold stolen from the Incas.

A simple altar to Santiago (St. James).



And finally, Santiago de Compostela and its magnificent Cathedral, where the bones of St. James reside. You start to feel different when you enter this town and for some strange reason you feel like you've been here before. First this old, walled city is stunning. It must have been the icing on the cake of religious experiences for those ancient pilgrims. They would have been on the road for so long, stayed in dirty, cramped quarters, or even slept rough for months. Then to arrive to this gleaming city with its massive and overwhelming churches, monasteries and convents.

The main entrance of the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. I took this picture of the diorama of the church in the Pilgrimage Museum as my camera could not capture the actual building in one frame.



And it does feel a little bit like heaven when you get here. You know how they say that you meet everyone in heaven? You will see people you've met on the trail and it's a good feeling. I ran across a man who sat at a table next to me at some nondescript coffee stop. We exchanged a few words then, and acknowledged each other here. I saw the Oriental man who asked to fill his water bottle from the tap at the ruins of San Anton (and didn't say thank you). Some people in our group spotted the unicyclist who we saw on our very first day!

I ended up spending 4 days in this lovely city - one with the group and three on my own exploring the medieval streets, visiting any museum I could find and even doing a little shopping.

A trip to the end of the world

On the first extra day, I joined others who had also stayed and continued the trail (by bus) to Finistere, which in medieval times was considered the end of the world (Finis = end; tere = earth).

Since it was a Sunday, we had gone to 10:00 mass at the Cathedral, and afterward the mass they swung the Botafumeiro - a huge silver incense burner that swings through the entire transept. In fact at one point, I thought it was coming straight at me and ducked. It is part of the ritual which sanctifies the church and all those in attendance. In the old days the incense also masked the odor of all those smelly pilgrims! The Botafumeiro is used only about 25 times per year so we were fortunate to be present that day. Then we were picked up at 1:00 for the trip to Finisterre



The Botafumeiro is about four feet tall and weighs 166 lbs.



This outcrop on the ocean is the REAL end of the Camino and another three days walk, or two hours by bus. Garry organized the transportation and fifteen of us (a really good price at 20 euro a person) went. Our driver was excellent. Marisol took us to various viewpoints, dropped us at a restaurant where Garry had made a reservation-- and showed us a lot more than we bargained for. Even where at the furthest point out, pilgrims burn their clothes and throw their boots in the water!

As for museums I especially enjoyed the Cathedral's collection. Yes, I had seen many museums these past few weeks but didn't want to miss this one. I even rented the audio-guide (and was given the pilgrim discount). The ticket allows entry into parts of the immense Cathedral not open to the public as well as a close look at the Portico of Glory - the former, elaborately carved entrance. I was down in the crypt, up in the rafters, rattled around the inner cloister, the treasure room, relics room and tapestries rooms.

I spent time in the Bishop's Mansion which was really a large room with displays. The best was a digital copy of the Codex Calixtinus. This 12th century piece of incunabula traces the pilgrimage route from southern France to Santiago de Compostela and is considered the first travel guidebook ever written. I was totally fascinated turning the pages on this digital copy and must have spent 20 minutes on this exhibit alone. It took me three hours to get thru the museum and every moment was a jewel.



The beautifully illustrated Codes Calixtinus, the first travel guide ever written.



Just so you know.....

Be forewarned..... guess who's doing a multi-part series on "Spiritual Places of the World"? Oprah! Her team followed a "pilgrim" on the Camino in late August/early September. This program will very likely do for the Camino what "Eat, Pray, Love" did for Bali -- bring oppressive crowds and many,many problems. So go before this special airs!

In Conclusion

Somewhere along the trail, I noticed a woman with a great T-shirt that said:

I was so far behind

I thought I was first

This was me. And I loved being last. There was no one on my tail hurrying me along, and the only footsteps I heard were my own. The whole, wide trail was mine and I could get lost in my thoughts and not worry about bumping into anyone. And I knew Debbie or Pablo were keeping an eye out that I stayed on the right path. I liked knowing that St. Frances of Assisi walked the same trails and millions of pilgrims since him. When I was “off” Camino, I was an explorer - experiencing, enjoying and talking.

As for the iPods -- never got them out. Didn't need them. My music on the trail was the wind, the birds, and my own breath. And my feet were the rhythm.

It definitely was a “Buen Camino”!



My boots at the shell in front of the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral. This is the end of the trail for most pilgrims.