

The CAMINO de SANTIAGO

Walking the Way of St. James Across Spain

by Brandon Wilson, © 2005, all rights reserved



Although they say it's the journey that matters and not the destination, I, too, had my doubts. That was until I heard about Spain's Camino de Santiago. And what a difference that trip has made.

If the idea of exploring Europe is met by a "been there, done that" response, think again. There's a unique option whose concept started long before the advent of those whirlwind package tours. You can walk all or part of the Camino de Santiago across northern Spain. It provides an intimate, at-your-own-pace exploration of a country steeped in magnificent beauty, art, history and faith.

Traveling the Way of St. James originated over a thousand years ago when pilgrims or *peregrinos* from throughout Europe set off from their homelands toward the edge of then-known world and Santiago de Compostela. They came in search of miracles, as penance, or in devotion to St. James the Apostle who is entombed in the cathedral. Pilgrims in those early days, who included even royalty and popes, faced bandits, extreme illness, wolves, difficult river crossings and dangerous encounters with the

Moors. Fortunately today those challenges no longer exist, allowing millions to make this journey with much less life-threatening hardship.

Many begin their odyssey from St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port just across the French border in the rugged Pyrenees, or as I did in Roncesvalles on the Spanish side. In Roncesvalles, you can register and obtain a Pilgrim's *credencial* that identifies you as a *peregrino* and allows you to stay in *albergues* or *refugios*, those hostels with bunkbeds or modest inns along this 500-mile path.

Each day you set out in the cool early morning air either alone, in couples, or a group, depending on your inclination. This is no tour. Everyone sets their own pace shepherded by well-marked arrows or signposts.



This well-worn path wends its way through vineyards overflowing with grapes ready for harvest, among apple and pear orchards, across fields thickly scented with thyme, past a checkerboard of fresh vegetables, then over the desolate, windswept *meseta* or plateau. It climbs thousands of feet to secluded mountain Brigadoons, such as El Cebreiro with its traditional Celtic round stone houses. Then it descends

to tree-lined Galician pastures dotted with *hórreos*, those elaborate grain storage bins resting on stilts and sometimes topped with crosses.



Setting out at an easy-going pace with our purposely light eleven-pound backpacks, my wife and I trekked only twelve miles at first, until reaching a comfortable public *albergue* in the early afternoon. These inns are located in unusual settings, from historic 16th century convents to hospitals run today by the Knights of Malta to modern prefab complexes run by volunteers. All provide basic dormitory-style bunk bed accommodations and showers. Many even include common kitchens, laundry facilities or Internet-connected computers. They hold 20-800 travelers each night. Charges are modest, from a simple donation to \$6-8 a night. Bedding is usually not provided, so it's a good idea to bring a sleeping bag.

It wasn't until a few days later that we began to slowly increase our distance to about twenty miles each day—but then again, that was our choice.



So who walks the Camino de Santiago today? Thousands of travelers of every age come from around the world. In just one typical year, there were over 25,000 pilgrims from seventy-two countries.

During my first Camino experience in 1999 and again with my wife this past summer, I met a virtual UN of *peregrino* travelers, ranging from a good humored university administrator in his sixties who hiked nearly a thousand miles from Dijon, France to twenty-something Spanish students. I was amazed to meet a couple in their 70s who'd hiked and biked from Holland and was impressed to see a pilgrim with MS on a specially-designed bicycle.



What attracts folks to the Camino? For many, it is the solitude and chance to simply unplug and shut out the distractions of an increasingly busy world. For others, it is a chance to meditate, to reaffirm their faith, to search for answers, to give thanks, to find inspiration. This is the perfect venue, since it is ideally more of a walking meditation than a marathon.



For others, it is the chance to discover precious, little-seen art and architecture, such as Astorga's magnificent Bishop's Palace built by renowned architect Antonio Gaudi. It's an opportunity to stroll ancient Roman roads and appreciate twenty-arch stone bridges like the Paso Honroso, commemorating a month-long jousting tournament in 1434. Or you might explore 13th century castles such as the one in Ponferrada built by the Knights Templar, or the elaborate fountains, frescoes, sculpture and relics sequestered in tiny Romanesque churches along the way.

For some, it is simply the opportunity to take part in a rich tradition of wandering the same path in the same spirit (and earning the same aching muscles and blisters). Lasting friendships are forged as you join an international brotherhood of millions of *peregrinos* from over the past millennium.

Whatever the reason for your personal journey, one lasting highlight is Spain's rich culture. If you're lucky, you might arrive in a village during their version of the running of the bulls, or during a Saint's

Day festival, as we did in Puenta la Reina, aglow with savory cuisine, great local wine, traditional costumes, serenades from street musicians and concerts in the plaza.



Or just revel in the exploration of traditional delicacies, from the wonderful selection of rustic *chorizo* (sausage) and hearty sheep cheeses of the distinctive Basque region to Portomarin's enormous almond pastries, *Torta de Santiago*, decorated with sword and shepherd's staff. Discover the delicious variety of affordable *tapa* (appetizer) bars. Experience grilled *pulpo* (octopus) in a rowdy *pulperia*. Sip delicious *viño* tinto wines across Rioja, Burgos and the *bodegas* of the Mesa, or apple cider and delicate white wines poured at arm's length into pottery saucers in Galicia. It's doubtful that you'll ever find these at home.



Whatever your motivation, villagers will occasionally surprise you with a "Buena Camino!" from their modest doorstep or second floor window, or graciously fill your water bottle. *Peregrinos* have trod this path for a thousand years and these towns have a long tradition of hosting travelers.



When you arrive in the holy city of Santiago de Compostela, one emotionally charged finale is to attend the Peregrino Mass, featuring the world's largest incense burner, the *Botafumeiro*, swung back and forth across the transept by eight men. Then join the throngs in paying a reverent visit to the Apostle St. James' tomb. Later, with your *Pilgrim's Credential* filled with stamps from all of your *albergue* stays and church visits in hand, go to the Office of Peregrinos to receive your official certificate or *Compostela* as proof of your pilgrimage.

Afterwards, you can relax and enjoy the culture and dining of this beautiful university town, or do as I did on my most recent journey and trek another three days to Finisterre—the "end of the world" (in days before Columbus). And no, beyond there I haven't found any dragons.



As always, it *is* the journey that matters, not the destination. Remember this, and with any luck you'll find whatever answers *you* seek. As a wise man once said, "Solvitur ambulando" or "It is solved by walking." Try it for yourself and see.

Brandon Wilson is a Lowell Thomas Award-winning author/photographer/explorer. He has walked ten long distance paths, including the Camino de Santiago (twice), the Via de la Plata, the Via Francigena from England to Rome, and the St. Olav's Way across Norway. In 1992, he and his wife Cheryl became the first Western couple to hike an ancient pilgrimage trail 650-miles across Tibet, as chronicled in his IPPY award-winning book, *Yak Butter Blues*. In 2006, he and a friend founded a pilgrims path following the route of the First Crusades from France to Jerusalem, naming it the Templar Trail. Their adventure is told in Brandon's book, *Along the Templar Trail*, named 2009 Best Travel Book by the prestigious Society of American Travel Writers. His other books include: *Dead Men Don't Leave Tips: Adventures X Africa* and *Over the Top & Back Again: Hiking X the Alps*. They are available from Amazon.com or from your favorite bookstore. Visit <http://www.pilgrimstales.com> for a preview and more.

Details:

How long does it take: Walking the Camino can take as little as 26-30 days if you plan to do it in one stretch. Or take as long as you wish. Many hike two weeks one year and two the next. Bicyclists typically spend two weeks on the trail. It's essential to carry as little as needed.

Best time to go: People trek the Camino year round. Summers are *very* crowded and hot, with no shade in many sections of the trail. I strongly recommend spring or fall treks. The weather is better and the crowds are fewer. Fall temperatures range from 80 to 40 degrees (F), and winters can be quite cold with snow. Plan on rain any time of year, but especially in verdant Galicia, Spain's equivalent to America's Pacific Northwest.

How to get there: Fly to Madrid or Barcelona. Most frequent connections to Roncesvalles are through Madrid. Take a bus to Pamplona, then a bus the next day (only 1 daily) to Roncesvalles. Bus connections also available though Barcelona. Or, fly to London and catch an inexpensive flight to Bayonne, France, not far from St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

For further information contact:

Confraternity of St. James, First Floor, 27 Blackfriars Road, London SE1 8NY www.csj.org.uk