

Walk Like a Templar: Trekking 2600-Miles to Jerusalem

by Brandon Wilson © 2008

They often say, “Be careful what you wish for—you just might get it.” Well, little could I imagine six years ago when the idea of walking to Jerusalem first entered my addled brain that I’d find myself actually attempting that trek—but life had other plans.

It all began innocently enough. I’d backpacked through nearly one hundred countries, but after checking the “must-sees” off my list I was looking for something more. Challenging? Intense? Satisfying? Well, a thousand kilometer trek across Tibet in 1992 with my wife Cheryl allowed me to glimpse the possibilities outside the usual traveler’s box.

While exploring the remote Himalayan countryside and turmoil in the oppressed Land of Snows, we discovered personal, global and philosophical answers. We encountered extreme physical challenges. After forty days of pushing our bodies and minds to the limits, at altitudes up to 17,000 feet thru blizzards and dodging bullets, my wife and I actually survived. Staying with families along the path, we wallowed in Tibet’s nuances one step at a time. We talked with weary monks over far too many cups of yak butter tea. As they revealed their faith in the Dalai Lama’s return, we re-discovered my own. Between cups, we found time to marvel at nature with childlike wide-eyed wonder. Plus, we enjoyed the meditative solitude and chance to disconnect from the frenzy of the outside world, if only for a little while.

Most importantly, for me it emphasized the necessity of traveling lite on the trail—and in life—as walking became transcendental, “a trampoline for the mind.” Unfortunately, it ended all too soon. I’d become an addict. For years, I longed again for that pleasure of the trail.

Finally in 1999, I decided to drop everything to follow my restless wanderlust. That fall, I set off trekking across Spain for 500 miles on the famous Camino de Santiago. Surprisingly, it brought back that rush of satisfaction on so many levels and made me wonder why I’d waited so long? Plus it forced me to reconsider how much I’d packed for the thirty-day trek, as I whittled down my load from twenty-two to just fifteen pounds.

Each day, after walking alone or in a small group, we’d run into the same folks at the albergues and share laughs over a bottle of wine. Call it fate, but I kept running into one fellow in his sixties. Émile was a likable Frenchman with bushy white beard and amused blue eyes. One day he shared his plan to walk with his wife from his home in Dijon to Jerusalem, some 4,500 kilometers. Although I admired his fantasy, people’s dreams and realities seldom meet. However, we managed to stay in touch over the next five years as I continued to walk historic long distance trails, including the St. Olav’s Way across Norway and the 1,100 mile Via Francigena from Canterbury, England to Rome. My wife and I even managed to trek the Camino together again in 2005.

Imagine my surprise one morning when out of the blue I heard from ol’ Émile.

“My wife is unable to trek to Jerusalem as we’d planned. Would you like to come along?”

It certainly took me by surprise, but what could I say, other than, “Of course!”

It was already December and he planned to leave in April. Although I offered my assistance, by then he’d chosen the route and rough stages along the 4500-kilometer trail since he’d been planning the journey for six years. Our path would loosely follow that of the old Roman way that was later trekked by Crusaders, pilgrims and Templars on their way to Jerusalem. It would take us across two continents and twelve countries. Then as now, the trail was fraught with uncertainties.

We might not have to face wolves, roadside bandits, brigands and Moors, but we had our own challenges. A thousand years ago, people often traveled together for safety and support. Escorting pilgrims safely to Jerusalem was one of the original duties of the Knights Templar. However, we would be on our own, unsupported for up to seven months.

Next there were the packing challenges. How could I carry fifteen pounds and still be prepared for temperatures ranging from near freezing in Germany to brutal one hundred degree days in Turkey's Anatolia? Then since we were traveling lite, we'd walk without a tent and would rely on finding safe, affordable accommodation every night. At times, given the distance between villages, this might force us to walk nearly sixty kilometers a day in Turkey. Plus, on a modest peregrino budget of just thirty dollars each per day, we'd have to hone our negotiating skills—and rely on the kindness of strangers.

Then, of course, there were the language challenges. We could do well in English, French and a smattering of German, but what about Serbian? Bulgarian? Turkish? Arabic?

Although the first part of our way would follow the bicycle path along the Danube River, after reaching Budapest we'd be on our own to find other trails or small roads (to avoid ending up as road-kill along the trucking trail to the Middle East). Speaking of which, as usual, the region was rife with tension. Would we be allowed to walk through Syria, a member of our government's proclaimed "Axis of Evil?" I was unable to get a Syrian visa in advance, since they were only issued for six months and their Turkish consulate recently stopped providing them to Americans.

There were all these logistical questions—and more. Just as important were the physical and mental challenges: Could our bodies survive a distance equivalent to crossing North America? Could we walk the daily equivalent of a marathon—and have the mental stamina to do it again day after day? Only time would tell. As for me, although I liked to explore options in advance, I'd learned not to over-obsess to the point of talking yourself out of another adventure. Besides, in Tibet I'd learned that you just have to have faith when you approach an odyssey like this and realize that the universe will provide.

Personal challenges aside, in these times of escalating wars and increased suspicions, I chose to trek this trail for an additional reason. I wanted it to be a trek for peace along a path once associated with war. I wanted to talk with others about choosing peaceful methods to settle our differences. From past experience I knew that once people walk a trail together, share food and wine around a table and learn more about each other's lives, they realize that our needs are not all that different. Although our cultures and religions vary, we all want about the same things for our families. Once you peel away the fear and paranoia, it becomes much harder to kill them. So this became my quest—to pioneer this pathway so that it might ultimately become a trail for peace for others in the future.

Finally, before setting off it was essential to tweak my gear to make it as lite and flexible as possible. So I chose a lightweight ultra-marathon shoe, instead of boots more appropriate for the Appalachian Trail. Montrail, now part of Columbia, supplied water repellent Susitnas® for the first rainy months. I'd switch after Linz, Austria into their Continental Divides® with a breathable web top for the sizzling road portions. LEKI US donated lightweight Nordic poles similar to what they'd supplied for my cross Norway hike. Then I got a pro deal from GoLight to add some clothing to their backpack, weighing just twenty-two ounces. The rest of my gear was basic. I'd take a Polarguard vest, Capilene shirt and Goretex rain shell and pants for layering. I'd send these home with my wife after we met in Budapest and switch into hot weather gear: shorts and two breathable nylon t-shirts. I'd carry just a sleep sheet. Otherwise, I'd bring a first aid kit designed for possible foot problems, a compact digital camera, journal, synthetic camp towel,

MagLite, compass, a concentrated energy drink and a few odds and ends that brought my total pack weight in at about fifteen pounds. I'd pick up any food and liquid I needed along the way.

April 23rd arrived all too quickly and after a going-away party for us in Dijon, we set off. Our trek began along the canals of France, paths once used by mules pulling barges from village to town. Even from the start, we hit a reasonably quick pace, averaging about thirty kilometers a day. Although experienced walkers, Émile and I were not exactly "joined at the hip" and set our own pace. I took the lead until reaching an intersection where I stopped long enough for him to catch up, since his gear was best suited for shorter distances on rugged terrain. His pack was twice my size and his boots were heavy leather. So he worked all that much harder each day to keep up.

As anticipated, the weather in France and western Germany dogged us with numbing rain and then snow through the Black Forest. Then more frequent showers had us donning rain gear several times a day, keeping us on our toes. As always, improvisation was key.

It's ironic. You take journeys to break routine—only to find that you've replaced them with another before you know it. After spending a night in a local "privat zimmer" or guesthouse, we'd have a hearty Bavarian breakfast and then head back on the trail by 6:30 or 7:00 a.m. Then we'd stop to warm up at 10:00 and again for lunch at noon. Averaging between four and five kilometers an hour, we'd try to arrive in a village large enough to have accommodation by 2:00 p.m. Some days this was more successful than others.

Although the canals took us through some beautiful areas, we were relieved to finally arrive in Donaueschingen, Germany—the source of the Danube River. The Donau Radweg, or Danube bicycle path, is an enviable example of what countries can do to promote fitness and outdoor sports. Well maintained, mostly flat and well marked, it spans a total of 1,367 kilometers along the Danube Valley through four countries all the way to Budapest. Even though I'd brought a Cicerone guide to the trail, we also bought local cyclist guides, helpful especially for finding villages with "zimmer frei" or private rooms.

Fortunately, for as busy as it might have been, we were alone on the trail most of the time. Cyclists, inline skaters and joggers were (sensibly) inside, out of the frigid rain. So we continued to walk undeterred six to eight hours each day, slogging through rain for eighteen out of twenty-one days in Austria. However, it wasn't all torture.

We savored the local cuisine. Émile worked his way through variations on tripe, his favorite dish, while I discovered that nothing could warm you up quite like Swabian sauerbraten with red gravy, kraut and spätzle. Usually, it was all topped off with a delicious local white wine, pear schnapps, or Dunkel Hefeweizen, a dark, unfiltered wheat brew that's a meal in itself.

We also explored sites along the way, taking one day off about every ten to rest. It was a movable feast from the baroque grandeur of timeless cities like Regensburg with Walhalla, its Grecian-like temple dedicated to Teutonic prowess to the serene monasteries of Weltenburg; from the shocking concentration camps of Mauthausen to the crown jewels of Linz, Vienna and Bratislava. Life was different every day, unpredictable and unforgettable.

Even from the start, we met people along the path whom we called "angels." Spotting us wet, famished or bedraggled, they'd invite us into their homes for a bowl of lentil soup or bottle of wine. After learning we were "pilgrims," sometimes they'd offer us a free or discounted room. Or maybe direct us to the right path at a critical junction in the trail. Some days, it was almost too easy. However, soon all that would change.

Once outside of Budapest, we became true pioneers. The "radweg" ended. In Serbia, our sleek bicycle path deteriorated into badly maintained two-lane roads littered with memorials to those who'd passed away in the process of getting from there to here. One day I counted twenty, just in a morning. It became harder to find food (although beer was more plentiful). Each night we had

to search longer for a place to stay and then negotiate harder for a “local” price, versus the higher non-Eastern one.

To make life even more difficult, midsummer temperatures soared to eighty and then ninety degrees. Although we attempted to stay along the Danube River, in Hungary the paths swarmed with mosquitoes. If we stopped longer than twenty seconds, we’d be covered in a black itchy blanket. And then, there was the humidity so thick that we’d be drenched in sweat by 9:00 and remain that way until well after sundown. So we were eager to head into the hills and make do with a little more climbing.

Still, even in countries as poor as Serbia and Bulgaria, we were aided by folks nearly every day. After finding someone who spoke English, I was even able to chat more with them about our peace trek. Invariably their response was warm and often emotional, as they’ve suffered from wars for centuries. Not surprisingly, we were asked to do newspaper or television interviews in the larger cities, reaching millions with a message of peace.

In reaching Belgrade, it was an ironic shock to learn that Israel and Lebanon were again bombing each other. Some news pundits speculated that it was the beginning of World War Three. So although we promised to re-evaluate our route when we reached Istanbul, for me the writing was already on the wall. To risk it all and walk through a war zone seemed reckless—even for me. It ran contrary to my belief that adventurers take extra time to make good plans and smart decisions—so they can live to tell the tale, right? However that was only the first surprise.

By the time we reached Bulgaria, the sweltering weather and fatigue were clearly taking their toll on Émile. He was ready to stop by noon, was dehydrating and becoming more disoriented. Yet I knew the hardest part of the journey remained—crossing Turkey. Well, by the time we reached the new Constantinople, Émile regrettably decided to return home. It was his choice and I didn’t try to talk him out of it. He had given it his best. Considering his earlier walk from Dijon to Finisterre, he had now walked the width of Europe—excellent for sixty-eight years old.

As for me, after a few days rest, I continued alone across the high, barren plains of Turkey. With the possibility of war spreading to Syria, I decided to head directly south to Alanya on the coast, steering clear of a new Ebola-type virus infecting parts of Anatolia. This route also coincided with the Crusader trail to Cyprus and then on to what was once Palestine. I was initially uneasy about folks’ reaction to an American trekking through a Muslim region, since our government’s policies are strongly criticized throughout the world these days. However, once we had a chance to talk over çay, or sweet tea, the Turks were surprisingly hospitable. Hardly a day passed that I wasn’t taken under someone’s wing and welcomed. Alanya’s television station even insisted on shooting an interview before I caught the quick ferry to northern Cyprus.

This option “B” as I called it was never absolutely guaranteed. The notorious Green Line had only recently opened for travelers between the north and south of partitioned Cyprus. So, I was relieved to cross without a problem. Trekking another three days along country roads through sleepy mountain villages, I arrived in Limassol, a city once captured by Richard the Lionheart on the island’s southern coast. Then hopping the weekly cargo ship, I made the overnight crossing to the recently shelled port of Haifa, Israel.

Fortunately while in Turkey, I’d learned about the new Israel National Trail transecting the country and had a chance to meet its founder in Haifa. Dany was very generous with his time, supplying me with topographic maps and a list of “angels” to assist along that final stretch to Jerusalem. This path was a welcome change, as it took me off-road into the rugged hills, then along the beach to Tel Aviv, and finally southeast toward Jerusalem.

Although the country was on a high state of alert, my hosts were inquisitive and equally generous, giving me a rare glimpse at modern Israeli life. They were a varied cast of characters:

from the freewheeling young couple living in their van to the war-hardened Army colonel; from the chicken farming couple to the lady with kids living on a kibbutz. Once again, I discovered that people are similar, no matter what their country, culture or religion.

Finally on September 29, 2006, after trekking 137 days over 4,217 kilometers (2,600 miles), I entered through celebrated Jaffa Gate into the Old City of Jerusalem. There was no fanfare and no welcoming committee. Only one solitary peace pilgrim entering a city held sacred by three major religions; a trekker grateful to all those who helped him realize another “impossible” dream.

If anything was accomplished beyond personal fulfillment, I only hope that I planted some seeds along the trail. Perhaps they will take root and this will someday become a true international path for peace that all may walk “lite” in brotherhood. Ready to join me?

#

BRANDON WILSON is an expert light trekker and member of the prestigious Explorers Club who has walked the 2620-mile Templar trail from France to Jerusalem, the Camino de Santiago and Via de la Plata across Spain and Norway’s St. Olav’s Way. He and his wife were the first Western couple to trek the 1000 km. trail from Lhasa to Kathmandu, and he was the first American to trek the Via Francigena from England to Rome.

Wilson is the award-winning author/photographer of **Yak Butter Blues** and **Dead Men Don’t Leave Tips: Adventures X Africa**. His Lowell Thomas Award-winning, no-holds-barred book, **Along the Templar Trail**, named *2009 Best Travel Book*, with maps, gear lists, distances/stages and photos from this amazing Templar Trail trek is available your favorite bookstore, or Internet booksellers. For a preview and to read free articles about other trails mentioned, please visit: www.pilgrimstales.com.



