

## Our Camino

It has only been in the last couple of years that I have taken an interest in the Camino de Santiago (Way of St. James), a walking pilgrimage that dates back more than a millennium. Its origins predate the Crusades. It has become quite popular, especially after the release of the movie "The Way" featuring Martin Sheen, in 2011. Val even referred to walking the Camino as my obsession. Although the origin is religious, pilgrims today have a variety of reasons. It looks like a United Nations along the Camino. The entire Camino, starting from St. Jean Pied de Port in the French Pyrenees, to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, is 800 kilometers. To earn a "compostela" or certificate, the pilgrim has to walk a minimum of 100 kilometers. (You can go by bicycle or even horseback, but the minimum distance increases.) After some discussion, we decided to take a walk and coach tour, eschewing the minimum distance and the compostela. For this I am grateful to Val. It enabled us to see the best of the Camino and other attractions, while avoiding long stretches where the Camino ran parallel to roads having a speed limit of 100 km/hr (about 62 mph). It would be difficult to have a spiritual journey with cars and trucks zooming by. I might as well be walking from Fairfield to Hamilton.

The stretches of the Camino chosen by our tour company CaminoWays were spectacular. I imagine the start of the Camino along the Pyrenees would be both scenic and challenging. But our Camino route, starting from Rabanal to the final stage in Santiago, offers its own challenges. There are several very steep ascents, plus the highest point on the Camino. This point, at 1,504 meters (4,900 ft.), is Cruz de Ferro (Cross of Iron).

We walked for six days, averaging 10 kilometers. Our tour included visits to castles, cathedrals, museums and old towns. That added a few more daily kilometers. We started our Camino in the region of Castilla Leon, from Rabanal del Camino to Foncebadon and finally Cruz de Ferro. We gained about 500 meters in elevation. It was mostly uphill, steep in parts. As we gained altitude, you could see the plains of Castilla Leon receding in the distance. But the ascent was just a prelude. The bigger challenges were yet to come.

The second stage gave us a breather, Changes in elevation were gradual. It should be noted that no part of the Camino is flat. This section took us through orchards and vineyards. The grapes were a dark purple color, ready for harvesting. I didn't sample, since I don't think the owners would appreciate hundreds of pilgrims plucking their grapes. But Val did, saying it was very flavorful and sweet. That would convert to a lot of alcohol!

On the third day, we left the region of Castilla Leon and crossed into Galicia. We started our walk from the village of O Cebreiro, where the inhabitants have preserved the surviving traditional thatched roofed stone houses called palloza. From this point on, one will notice that the names, signs and menu items don't quite sound like Spanish. The language is Galician or Galego, which we were told is closer to Portuguese. The Camino got steeper and steeper until we reached the top, called Alto Do Poio. There was a cafe there, and every time someone made it, there would be applause, sometimes hugs. Besides me, only one other person in our group attempted and finished this section. We celebrated with high fives.

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The fourth day was even more challenging. Our group was joined by Don Pedro, the father of our guide Maria. He was probably no more than 60. Living in the area, Don Pedro makes it a point to see his daughter whenever she is passing through with a tour group. We started off together from our hotel in Sarria. No one else joined us. That should have been a clue. He set a blistering pace that I could barely match, but I hung on. A couple of kilometers out of town, the scenery is one of the most beautiful, with oak trees that are centuries old. Don Pedro pointed to one particular tree and said mil años, or 1,000 years. We finally made it to Ferreiros after more than 3 hours. Maria said we covered 14 km. Lesson of the day - don't walk the Camino with a Gallego. (People of Galicia are called Gallegos.) You know what Don Pedro did afterwards? He turned around walked back to Sarria, where he had parked his car.

Unfortunately, some "pilgrims" debase the Camino. In isolated stretches, signs of human waste abound. Markers are defaced with graffiti. I even saw one camper along the Camino, although camping is prohibited. I later found out that the our guide had a confrontation with the camper, prompting her to call the Camino police. Some fashion makeshift memorials or altars. Of course graffiti is as old as history. They can be found in Roman ruins.

The fifth section was mostly through eucalyptus forests. You are probably wondering. No, the tree is not native to Spain. Someone brought it from Australia, and it has now taken over stretches of forest. With its high oil content, the trees pose a fire hazard, thus no camping or fires. The sixth and last walking day was from Monte do Gozo to Santiago, a short 5 kilometers. The original plan was from our hotel in Lavacolla, 5 kilometers further out. But our guide, a good judge of our physical capability, made an adjustment. It was a good decision. We arrived at the cathedral before the 10 am Mass was concluded. We lucked out.

The Camino terminates at the Cathedral of Santiago, where the remains of St. James are believed to be entombed. There is a Pilgrim's Mass at noon, where the pilgrims receive their blessing. On Fridays, the Botafumeiro, or large incense burner, is operated after the Mass. Pulled by 5 men in maroon robes, the Botafumeiro swings across the transept, perpendicular to the nave. We got to experience it twice, after the 10 am and after the noon Mass. Clouds of incense disperse and waft over the pilgrims. Our pilgrimage had come to an end.

But our journey of discovery had other surprises. Several days prior, in the province of Lugo (one of Galicia's four provinces), we passed the parrochia of Orosa. So this is the region where our surname comes from. Then on our last day in Santiago, while walking through the Mercado de Abastos, Val spotted a store with the name Orosa. They sold "aves, huevos y caza" or fowl, eggs and game. (Rabbit is a favorite among Gallegos.) I would have loved to speak with the staff, but it was Saturday, an extremely busy shopping day in Galicia. There was a line of customers waiting to be served. I have unfinished business in Santiago. It has been a Buen Camino for Val and me. A Buen Camino in life to all of you as well!

Mario E, Orosa  
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A view of the Galician countryside from the Camino. I started from way down there. This was the steepest ascent, to Alto Do Poio.



After the Pilgrim's Mass, the Botafumeiro is swung in front of the altar. Note the two bishops wearing their mitre. One of them is Filipino.