



by
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My husband and I walked our first Camino de Santiago (The Way) in 2016. We walked 800kms starting in St Jean Pied du Port finishing in The Cathedral in Santiago de Compostella -800km up and down very steep hills, in rain, snow, sleet, through mud, or water, on roman roads, over, up and down shale, boulders, rocks, pathways.

And I know it sounds crazy but when you get into the last 100k's you don't want it to end.

5 weeks of living from a backpack – the clothes you are wearing, and one change of everything except socks because they are the most important thing you will wear., your cold weather gear, your wet weather gear, your toiletries, towel, medications all essential - 10% of your body weight on your back.

It is a challenge physically, mentally and spiritually if you have even one gram of spirituality that you acknowledge.

Physically - you will be challenged! but anyone can do it!!! If you listen to your body, consider your health and walk at your pace. The Camino is fraught with danger for those who don't listen to their bodies.

Mentally -You are forced to live one day at a time, sometimes one hour at a time. You don't know how your body and brain will cope; be ready and willing to adjust. Aspects of your past or current life may rise to your thoughts? 800ks is long enough to come up with strategies to deal with all of these.

Spiritually -are you going to get closer to God or lose Him in the routine and attractions?

Why did we walk this Camino? to strengthen our relationships with God, each other, fellow pilgrims and the earth. we each had a personal spiritual and physical reason.

At the beginning, you are so excited, it is exhilarating. You cannot stop smiling even when the terrain for the first 1 or 2 days is up and over the Pyrenees.

My personal experience:

Started off really well, I could walk, climb up hills, go down hills, engage with others and pray without ceasing. After a couple of days, I chose a focus for each day's prayers eg family, our parish, parishioners, specific needs of which I was aware, my work colleagues, my students etc, this worked for a while. I sang hymns that came to mind, thanked God for blessings etc, etc.

Then the body started to feel the stresses I was placing on it. For a significant time from the beginning we walked together for most of the way. I had to walk faster than I was comfortable with on flats (on the Camino: flat = not steep. The Way was more crowded than expected so sometimes beds were hard to find. Generally, No bed = walk on. Walking too fast is a big mistake.

When we released each other from walking together all the time, I was determined to slow down on the flats and to walk at my pace. I saw a woman walking alone ahead of me. Every time someone walked past her she looked sideways at them which I interpreted as she would like some company. I can do that I thought. I can be a companion on the way. So I caught up with her, we introduced ourselves etc and chatted and walked together for about 45mins.

At the end of this time we parted company and she told me that she recorded the names and country of origin of everyone that she talked to each day. I realised that God had put Mary from Ireland there for me not the other way around which was my original thought.

After my intentional slow down I was more at peace, felt less rushed, felt less physical stress, I took time to appreciate people, surroundings and experiences to recognise more opportunities to connect with God in different ways. I was intentionally thankful.

Rich spiritual experiences along the Way: Ronscevalles: a private organ recital – it was the organists practice time,

Zubiri: locals who keep the churches open every day, read about the church – name your language, write a prayer on a post it note and stick it up next to Jesus, ring the bell, let people know that you are here and God is here.

Los Arcos: A Pilgrim mass is followed by a procession around the cloisters attached to the church,

St Juan de Ortago: Pilgrim mass was held at which we were invited to participate by reading (in different languages), then each pilgrim was given a cross,

Fonfria: Pilgrim Mass, the priest invited 4 pilgrims from different countries out to the front of the church to sit and face the congregation. The priest washed the first pilgrim's feet, he passed the jug and bowl to the first pilgrim who washed the feet of the second pilgrim, and so on down the line – service, humility, compassion, inclusion.

In these experiences you could feel the love of not only God but of the clergy for the pilgrims passing through and the other pilgrims. Service, humility, compassion, inclusion.

After these experiences I visited the Burgos cathedral – I found it difficult to find God in the opulence and the sheer thousands of people walking through. After this I avoided Cathedrals – just kept the thought of the cathedral at Santiago being my next one.

Churches were where it was happening for me. Regular people doing amazing things for pilgrims they have never met and likely may never see again. This is very humbling. We stayed at Carrion where the sisters had vespers at 5pm I was the only one in the church for 20mins listening to 4 pure voices offering sung prayers of Psalms to God. It didn't matter that this was in Spanish – you could feel God's presence in that space, then at 5:30 they organised a song session for the pilgrims, many added to the already provided hymns with their own favourite hymns. This was followed by a church service and then a laying of the hands by the 3 priests present and the Superior of the nuns. We were each given a hand crafted star to remind us of God's love for us –how brightly it shines always. It is

never a burden; it is a joy. Their joy was visible in their faces and audible in their singing and speaking. Then the sisters told us that they would pray for each and every one of us personally for the next 14 days and if we wanted a specific prayer just let them know. They had 52 beds plus extras if needed every night. Do the maths – that is over 700 prayers by name, everyday for the pilgrims passing through.

At Rabanal the Brothers have half an hour of Gregorian chants before the Pilgrim mass,

O’Cebreiro church you can feel silence, prayer and respect, hundreds of prayer candles, bibles in every language and you could touch them and sit and read them, Be led to find another passage, then another, a chance to Be still and Be for such a short time or a long time – your choice.

Sounds like there were heaps of wonderful experiences and there were; but there was also the reality of getting up, packing, putting on your pack, walking, eating, walking, washing clothes, sleeping in dormitories etc. moving forward each day.

By this point I was struggling with unmet expectations that I had of my journey of the Camino. I was in touch with a couple of very good friends and discussed some of the issues but not in great detail. From these trusted friends. I received 3 messages

1. Be patient; God’s timing is not our timing, this is the start of a process not the whole process
2. This is a transitional time for you.
- 3 Ask and you shall receive, seek and you will find and knock and the door will be open to you.

So God, through 3 wise friends put 3 things together for me. I knew there was an opportunity ahead at Samos where there is a 600year old Benedictine monastery. So Col and I chose to spend an extra day there. The time here was well spent. I realised what I had been missing. I realised that I needed to reconnect with God the way that I has suited me best over the past 8 or so years. My home routine starts with reading daily devotionals and bible readings. This is not possible in the Camino routine but I had not been responsible in finding another time during the day to make this vital for me connection and to recognise and experience the many other ways of connecting with God. I had lost sight of God because my vision was too narrow.

I took time to Be still and to feel the centuries of God’s presence in that place, took a tour of the monastery, to hear the stories. While trying new ways of experiencing God I had forgotten my tried and proven way. I am now still learning by intentional focus on new ways which I know I need but have learned not to abandon one for the other.

In living the Camino routine and being frustrated by unmet expectations I had been distracted from realising and appreciating all the things in front of me in the moment. That evening I attended vespers, about 8 monks singing psalms, this was followed by a pilgrims mass and blessing when each pilgrim was given a rosary. At the end of the service the presiding priest sang a song of protection and guidance for pilgrims on their journey. The priest sang the verses and his parishioners joined in the chorus. Very touching – not only do the monks come to church every night, as you would expect, but so do enough parishioners to do readings and sing for the pilgrims. A small town but parishioners practicing and expressing God’s love to pilgrims passing through - service, humility and compassion, inclusion... every night of the year.

The hospitality of the Spanish people was amazing. They are kind, generous and loving people. They cannot do enough for you. If you are in trouble, they are there to help. Whatever your need, they are there. They serve and smile and serve again. The albergue in Bercianos is run by 3 brothers (blood brothers in their 70's/80's. 46 beds. You cannot book ahead. When you arrive if an albergue is not open, you put your pack into a queue. When the albergue opened one of the brothers came to the pack queue, counted the packs, got to 46 saw about another 15 packs, threw his hands up into the air and walked back in. If there are no beds in private albergues, that is it - walk to another albergue or another town till you find a bed.

Here the brothers had a collection of 20 gym mats, they were placed on the floors of firstly the chapel, then the meeting room, then in corridors. Everyone got a bed or mat. These brothers also prepared meals for everyone so there was a shared meal for the evening. This place is run by donations into a box at the door. Here no one is turned away and everyone is fed. We didn't know it then but the next available beds that night were 20 km down the track.

From our point of view the Spanish people provided us with rich potentially life changing experiences but think of their point of view – they do this every day and/or every night for between 10 and 12 months of the year. Cleaning up after we leave – rooms, beds, floors, bathrooms, kitchens, dining spaces, taking registrations, guiding you to the beds, providing information of location of amenities, and local things to see or do and sometimes cooking our meals etc every day , day after day. What a service provided to pilgrims. It is very humbling to have people serve you in this way and not even let you help.

So what were the Highlights?

God experiences at small churches, Pilgrims masses and blessings. Hospitality. Flowing water. Santiago and Finisterre.

The Camino experience creates a community of a mobile global Christians (and Muslims: yes you did hear that correctly.) Collectively looking out for each other, chasing after pilgrims who had missed a turn, offering help and first aid supplies, water, sharing food, asking after pilgrims (have you seen Bill, how is Robyn,) sitting with and striking up conversations with others about spiritual matters. Caring about your physical, emotional, spiritual and mental needs.

Days were hard, different days for all of the above, but there was always someone there to share the journey – to sing with, laugh with, pray with, cry with. Some walk to share time with someone, others to give time to someone, to let go, to give thanks, because someone they love can't, There are some very heartbreaking stories about why some Caminos were being walked. Without those stories you might wonder about some behaviours.

Learning point: don't make assumptions, don't judge, listen, be open, just be there.

Christians praying together on the way, singing hymns reciting the rosary together. It is very empowering to come together with people you have just met or don't yet know, but know you are all on a point in a faith journey, We all come with the baggage of our lives and that's ok, that is life. Some struggle with unwanted thoughts and memories of past actions, you have to deal with them as they arise, and they might keep arising throughout the journey. You learn strategies to cope cause you are on a journey and the Camino is just part of that.

One of the Beatitudes of the Pilgrim is Blessed are you pilgrim, because you have discovered that the authentic Camino begins when the physical Camino ends.

Most people probably expect an epiphany but I did not meet anyone who had a spiritual mountain top experience there. The reality is; it is very much a Cursillo/retreat experience – powerful at the time but only transforming and empowering if you take up the fourth day experience and let yourself be transformed into what God has planned for you.

The Camino calls on you to contemplate, to be amazed, to welcome, to interiorize, to stop, to be quiet, to listen, to admire, to bless, to give and to receive. It teaches you we are here to serve others, to be humble, to be compassionate, to be inclusive.

Do not let unmet expectations rob you of the ability to recognise and be thankful for everything you have in front of you. God has blessed us in so many ways but sometimes we fail to see what is right in front of us. Even something as simple as our routine can be offered to God to use – it might surprise us where this leads. Isn't that one way that we can discover God's Plan for us.

My Camino 2016 was not over. It is another turning point in my life. It is the start of a transition - God transforming me - How will that look?

My prayer communication with God – how does/will that look?

God's timing.

Ask.. seek.. knock - and keep asking seeking knocking

Be patient. - slow and consistent, prayer and actions

Be open - maybe not what you thought, listen to others

Service, humility, compassion, inclusion - but I am human too!

PS We walked another Camino in 2018 From Le puy en Valey (France) to St Jean Pied du Port.

Planned another but highjacked by covid.....

But now the yearning is getting stronger to walk again – Spain again? Portugal? Australia? 2025.

The Beatitudes of the Pilgrim

- 1 - Blessed are you pilgrim, if you discover that the "camino" opens your eyes to what is not seen.
- 2 - Blessed are you pilgrim, if what concerns you most is not to arrive, as to arrive with others.
- 3 - Blessed are you pilgrim, when you contemplate the "camino" and you discover it is full of names and dawns.
- 4 - Blessed are you pilgrim, because you have discovered that the authentic "camino" begins when it is completed.
- 5 - Blessed are you pilgrim, if your knapsack is emptying of things and your heart does not know where to hang up so many feelings and emotions.
- 6 - Blessed are you pilgrim, if you discover that one step back to help another is more valuable than a hundred forward without seeing what is at your side.
- 7 - Blessed are you pilgrim, when you don't have words to give thanks for everything that surprises you at every twist and turn of the way.
- 8 - Blessed are you pilgrim, if you search for the truth and make of the "camino" a life and of your life a "way", in search of the one who is the Way, the Truth and the Life.
- 9 - Blessed are you pilgrim if on the way you meet yourself and gift yourself with time, without rushing, so as not to disregard the image in your heart.
- 10 - Blessed are you pilgrim, if you discover that the "camino" holds a lot of silence; and the silence of prayer; and the prayer of meeting with the Father who is waiting for you.

EL CAMINO

The journey makes you a pilgrim. Because the way to Santiago is not only a track to be walked in order to get somewhere, nor it is a test to reach any reward. El Camino de Santiago is a parable and a reality at once because it is done both within and outside in the specific time that takes to walk each stage, and along the entire life if only you allow the Camino to get into you, to transform you and to make to a pilgrim.

The Camino makes you simpler, because the lighter the backpack the less strain to your back and the more you will experience how little you need to be alive.

The Camino makes you brother/sister. Whatever you have you must be ready to share because even if you started on our own, you will meet companions.

The Camino breeds about community: community that greets the other, that takes interest in how the walk is going for the other, that talks and shares with the other.

The Camino makes demands on you. You must get up even before the sun in spite of tiredness or blisters; you must walk in the darkness of night while dawn is growing, you must just get the rest that will keep you going.

The Camino calls you to contemplate, to be amazed, to welcome, to interiorize, to stop, to be quiet, to listen to, to admire, to bless...Nature, our companions on the journey, our own selves, God.





