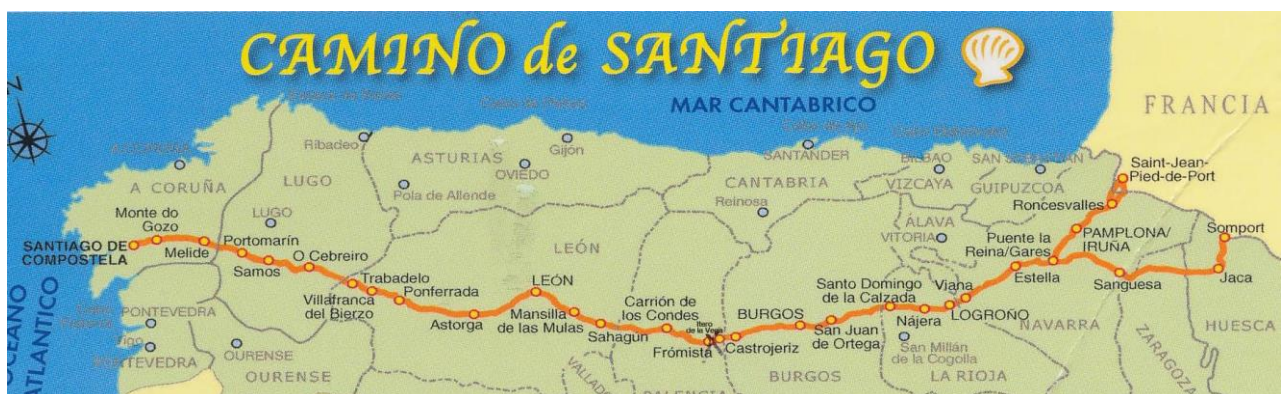


# CAMINO de SANTIAGO – 2013

St Jean Pied de Port, France to Santiago de Compostela, Spain



Robert Stevenson July 2013, Revised May 2021





## QUO VADIS EL CAMINANTE

Where goeth thou Traveller

### INTRODUCTION

This is a personal account of my impressions and experiences in walking the 790 kilometres from St Jean Pierre du Port in France to Santiago de Compostela in Spain. The Route is an ancient Pilgrim Route known as the Camino Frances – or The Way. As you will see I started in 2012 but had to return home from Logrono having covered only 164 kilometres. In 2013 I returned to Logrono, where I had stopped, and carried on to walk the remaining 625 kilometres or 385 miles.

At times I refer to ‘The Book’. This always means the classic guide written by John Brierley for the Camino Francais ‘The Pilgrim’s Guide to the Camino de Santiago’. I carried no other book. I planned carefully for my walk in 2012 but when I did final checks was worried that my rucksack had crept up to 9.2 Kilos, just over 20lbs. I weighed myself and was 12.1 Stone. By the time I got back my rucksack was down to 7 kilos, many possessions were abandoned by the wayside. The recommended weight is 10% of bodyweight max. It is really surprising what you can do without if you have to carry it!

Distances are minimum distances taken from The Book assuming you never get lost (which you do) and do not have to trek around towns looking for a place to sleep and food, which you do. So actual distances walked are always greater.

Towns referred to in sub headings are where I spent the night on that date.

The first thing you need to do the Camino is time. If you are a fairly average person carrying your own rucksack and doing it in one go I think you need at to allow five weeks actually walking. But it is preferable not to be pushed for time.

The second, unless you are a free agent, is the support of your family. I was very fortunate and wish to pay tribute to my marvellous and supportive family without which I could not have done it.

I carried everything on my back and booked no rooms ahead. That is the way the old Pilgrims did it.





## Part One – St Jean Pied de Port, France to Lograno, Spain. 2012

### Monday 30th April

I set out with my backpack at 0540 by train from Brockenhurst and caught the 0912 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Gare du Nord. Terrible queues at Eurostar and Security Checks like an airport with sniffer dogs running up and down. Crowded and unpleasant. A shabby cramped train. Very disappointed as I had chosen Eurostar and the train to Bayonne to avoid the nightmare of airports. I then had to get across Paris to Gare Montparnasse to catch the train to Bayonne.

So I needed a Metro ticket to get from Gare du Nord to Gare Montparnasse. I knew I needed a yellow ticket machine and had my € change sorted. I was looking doubtfully at a green machine when a North African type guy asked in good English where I wanted to get to. Foolishly I said Montparnasse. “Ah – I show you” he said. He took me round the corner to a yellow machine. But as I studied it he said again “I show you”. He put a card into the machine and pushed, very fast, various buttons, the machine issued a ticket and he asked me for €22. I refused. He demanded my card to pay. I said no I would give him €2 which was about right. I turned to walk away and found myself hemmed in by 3 more North African type guys who said I owed him money for the ticket and must pay. I refused but it got more menacing. In the end I decided it was a negotiating situation and after bargaining gave them €9 which they grudgingly accepted. Strangely there was nobody else about. Angry with myself I went to the ticket gate and put the ticket in. The gates, as in the London Underground, flew aside but when I strode through I jammed. My backpack was too wide to go through. I reversed out and took it off hoping to get it through sideways, but the ticket only opens the gate once. Still nobody about, no officials. Not wanting to trail back to the yellow ticket machine again with its ‘helpful’ north Africans. I looked for a solution. There were alternative tall doors but they were locked, and no official was in sight. Then I saw a narrow 3 foot high slot for suitcases at the end of the automatic gates and thought; “if I go first, I should be able to drag the rucksack through behind me”. I went through forwards on my hands and knees planning, once through, to turn round and pull the backpack after me. I was a very tight fit and I was trying to get my bottom through, which must be bigger than I thought, when a polite voice said – “Monsieur”? I looked up and there was the missing official looking down on me. With a heave I got through the gap and stood up. He produced keys, opened the gates, and got my sack for me. He said in a kindly, pitying, way “vous êtes anglais”? I decided it was no time to tell him I was Scots. I realised he had been sitting in some hidden office watching the CCTV screen that is the incarnation of ‘Big Brother’ and only hoped my performance would not appear on U-Tube. Somewhat ruffled, and wondering how I ever thought I was going to get to Santiago when getting through Paris was so hard, I got the Metro to Montparnasse station.

At Montparnasse I found the Bayonne HGV train and settled in for the 3½ hour journey with a small bottle of wine to celebrate surviving the crossing Paris.

I had booked Hotel du Basque in Bayonne, an old station hotel, and although shabby with a narrow entrance the room was fine. Narrow stairs led to the third floor and as everyone had rucksacks you could not pass another backpacker. The daily mountain train to St Jean Pier du Port (St Jean at the Foot of the Pass) did not leave until three o’clock next day so that would give me a chance to explore. I looked for somewhere to eat and, after being alarmed at the prices, and seeing all the elegant well dressed people inside, I felt the restaurants in the centre were not for me. I had only my walking clothes, practical but not elegant. I found a little, and very friendly, bistro in an alley near the station which did me a very nice three course meal with a beer and a glass of wine for €11.70.



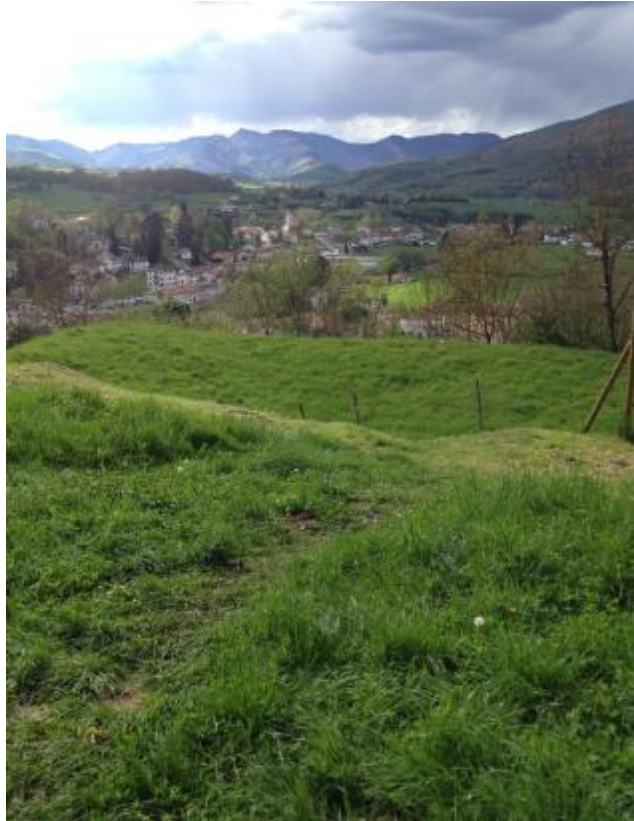
Setting out at 0500 from home. A Train to catch.

## **Tuesday 1<sup>st</sup> May – Bayonne to St Jean**

I woke up rested and lazy to a beautiful sunny Spring day. I walked round the walls of the old fort on the River Nive. It was the great French Base on the French side of the Western Pyrenees. The old fort must have been formidable with huge concentric ditches situated in a triangle between the Rivers Nive and Ardour. To the East of the fort is higher ground so it would have been vital to avoid ships getting any further up the river and siting cannon on the overlooking hill.

Bayonne was fiercely in support of Napoleon and when British forces crossed the frontier from Spain they besieged, or more accurately, blockaded it. They threw a pontoon bridge across the River Ardour estuary – how did they do that?

The mountain train, crammed with people like me in walking boots with rucksacks, crawled up along the banks of the river Nive. Stopped at two tiny stations and then end of line at St Jean. Booked into my hotel and went to explore. All very Basque with names in French and Basque languages. St Jean Pied de Port means St Jean at the foot of the Pass. A substantial Vauban fortress dominates the little town and guards the pass. It was Napoleon's favourite route for his armies invading Spain and is usually called the 'Route de Napoleon' or 'Passe Napoleon'. All the Pyrenean passes have forts at each end. My own favourite is at Jaca to the east on the Spanish side. Unusually the fort at Jaca has not been built around and the flat cannon covered approaches give a vivid impression of its power.



Looking Down at St Jean from the Vauban Fort

## **Wednesday 2<sup>nd</sup> May. St Jean to Orisson.**

I originally planned to leave St Jean Pier de Port and to get to Roncesvalles (Roncevaux in French) that day. It is 25 Kilometres, about 16 miles, but climbs 1,390 metres from St Jean (4,560 feet) to cross the pass so equivalent to about 20 miles. At the summit it is 1,450 metres (4,750 feet) above sea level. Now you see why I fussed about the weight of my sack! Then I discovered there was a new Auberge at Orisson just 8 km (about 5 miles) from St Jean. Although 16 miles didn't sound too bad I decided to book Orisson for the first night and give myself an easy time. There is no stopping place after Orisson till you get to Roncesvalles, unless you sleep on the mountains, which I did not plan to do.

I went to the Pilgrim office and got my Camino Passport (Credencial del Peregrino) stamped. She asked where I was heading for and



The Pilgrim Gate - Porte St Jacques



noted Auberge Orisson. It seems they check the correct number make it over the mountains.

She said it would take 2½ hours to get to Orisson which seemed about right for 5 miles, but it took me over 3 hours!

I stuck my head in the church of St Jean where pilgrims for 1,000 years have prayed for protection crossing the high pass with its treacherous weather and evil bandits who would kill you for your sandals. I feel for them. At least I met no bandits. You could add a kilometre to your walk by detouring down the River Nive which sounded attractive. So I passed through the Pilgrims Gate, Porte St Jacques and set off down the Nive in high spirits with only around 5½ miles to go.

Most of what I can say about the actual walk that day is unprintable. Only 5½ miles but pure hell. I do not remember ever finding a walk so hard.

The book calls it a 'Baptism of Fire'. They should be taken seriously. I wrote after arriving in Roncesvalles:-

"I am filled with pleasure and relief for making it so far. It has been hard and my mind has had no room for business and unimportant things. My feet, my knees, and my legs hurt but that doesn't bother me as I think they can hold out. How in the hell did armies dragging cannons, soldiers carrying 80 pounds on their backs make it? I only carried 9kgs – and I could have carried no more."

There were few Pilgrims en route and like me they hardly had the breath to say 'Bonjour'. I paused frequently to rest and let my pulse rate slow down. Most of the way it was a narrow tarmac road which seemed to my increasingly fevered mind to have a permanent gradient of 45 degrees. I stopped looking ahead which was just too discouraging and gazed fixedly at the road at my feet. All mental effort went in to keeping one foot going in front of the other. I rested frequently. My ideas about listening to some hours of Spanish lessons (all set up on my iPhone) were a joke. The mind became numb. A corner was cut off by the only unmade path that day which was even steeper and rough with horrible hairpins. Every corner turned merely revealed another stretch of path going up. I lay flat out on the grass for a bit and then staggered grimly on. When I re-joined the tarmac road I looked ahead and could see a 'viewpoint' in a layby about ¼ mile away shown on the map as a Table d'Orientation. I had now concluded that Auberge Orisson was a cruel joke and either did not exist or was 10 miles away. As I approached the Table d'Orientation an ambulance with a blue flashing light passed me on the road then pulled in ahead of me. Two men got out, extracted a stretcher from the back and put someone on it, put them in the ambulance and drove off back downhill towards St Jean. A taxi came up the hill and a woman, with two teenage girls, were helped weeping into it. The taxi then followed the ambulance. Very sobering. Disconcerted I began to ask myself what on earth I was doing there.

It was warm in St Jean, so far below me now. Here it was colder and all around were snow covered mountains, waiting for me tomorrow. I looked about for possible spots to spend the night if there was no Orisson. I plodded on with apparently nothing but ever higher mountains ahead and then topped a hill and saw, not too far away, a dream. A little refuge. A wooden building with a tables and chairs cantilevered out over the side of the hill – Auberge Orisson.

Inside a girl was frantically trying to serve lunch, book in arrivals and serve drinks all at the same time. After 10 minutes she got to me. She greeted me warmly. Was I OK? "Of course" I said. I have a bunk booked for Stevenson? Yes, Mr Stevenson – very good. She told me



Auberge Orisson

dinner was at 6.30. Breakfast was at 7. Did I want lunch to take with me tomorrow? I did.

“Follow me”. A brisk resume. This is your bunk room. “Showers there, boot rack here, dinner at 7”, and she disappeared. It was a small room with 3 two tier bunks. In one a very large man was asleep. I put my boots in the rack outside, hoping nobody would pinch them, and lay down on a bottom bunk – and in seconds there were two sleeping men. After my experience that day, tomorrow seemed an alarming prospect and I did have doubts. But after a Siesta I felt more positive.

About two hours later I was woken up by two noisy Italian women taking over the two tiered bunks opposite me, sharing what I had thought was a men's bunk room. I had not realised that, apart from some of the more religious establishments, all the bunk rooms are unisex. I got up and had a shower then went and drank several cold beers looking over the mountains to the snow covered tops in the distance. I wrote to Elisha and left the letter to be posted by the Auberge.

Examining the Camino book and trying to work out why a little over 5 miles had given me such a tough time I realised I had just underestimated – the book calls the first day a ‘Baptism of Fire’. Right! The 5 mile climb from St Jean at 170m above sea level to Albergue Orisson at ~ 750m above sea level is 580 metres - is 1,902 feet. I make that a 14% gradient. All I can say is it felt like a lot more! Looking back I still cannot believe I found 5 miles so hard. To anyone who thinks I exaggerate – please do try it (and no cheating by sending luggage ahead in a taxi).

I think it was the 9 Kilos of the backpack and the unremitting climb that resulted in us all agreeing it had been hell. A cheerful collection of people appeared for dinner to volubly exchange their horror stories. All served on long trestle table with benches to sit on. Large bowls of soup were put on the tables and we helped ourselves. Then chops and as much wine as you liked all included. Afterwards the amazing girl, who had served everything, asked us to introduce ourselves and so we got Germans, Americans, Brits, Korean, Australians, Italians etc explaining their presence. My very large German youth from the bunkroom came, he said, to lose weight.

The remaining 17 kilometres (10½ miles) rises another 700 metres (2,296 feet) to the Col de Lepoeder at 1,450 metres (4,719 feet). There is then the very steep decent ) to Roncesvalles.



Dinner at Orisson

**Thursday 3<sup>rd</sup> April – Orisson to Roncevelles.**



The next day was demanding and much longer though less steep. But not as bad. We got breakfast with coffee served in huge bowls without handles. I had ordered lunch to take with me and got half a baguette filled with local smoked ham, similar to Parma ham. We only had another 10 miles or so to go and another 2,300 feet to climb, and of course 1,640 feet to descend, but it was hard work. It must have been tough being a Napoleonic soldier. And if you collapsed the Spanish Guerrillas got you and you died the most unpleasant death they could devise. Roasting over a slow fire was popular, stating with your feet. What softies we are now.

I saw the Korean girls who had been at dinner periodically as we passed and re-passed. I talked a bit to Kim (she took this picture for me) who had been in Australia for a year as a nurse. This was her first time in Europe, she had flown to Paris, caught the train, probably the same one as I did, to Bayonne and St Jean, and had allowed 30 days to walk to Santiago. I hope she managed. I asked her why she was doing it.

“To find myself”. I resisted the silly quip about ‘When had she lost herself’ that rose to my lips and enquired no further. Do any of us really know why we are here? We crossed the border into Spain and by this time the wind was very strong. I passed the place where the guy in the film ‘The Way’ was supposed to have died and there were patches of snow all around us. I had not heard of the film ‘The Way’ but most had seen it and a number were there because of it.

Most walkers used walking poles, which I have an emotional objection to, and kept urging me to get some. These poles were a curse when you stopped. Everybody piles their poles. It looked as if a regiment of midget Lancers had just arrived. We crossed a road where a bus had stopped and unloaded a crowd of French walkers, not on the Camino. All waved walking poles. They spread across the path with spiked walking poles brandished in all directions and it was very difficult to pass them safely. Then, to my relief, they took another path.

It was much colder higher up in the snow patches. I was glad of my Dad’s old coat and my old jersey. Snow covered mountains in all directions. We came to a refuge hut quite recently built. Apparently because in the exposed heights too many people were getting into serious trouble. I looked inside. No door, just a shelter against the wind and rain – and full of rubbish. Empty drink cans, plastic bottles (most seem now to be convinced they have to carry a litre of water) and paper rubbish. Depressing.



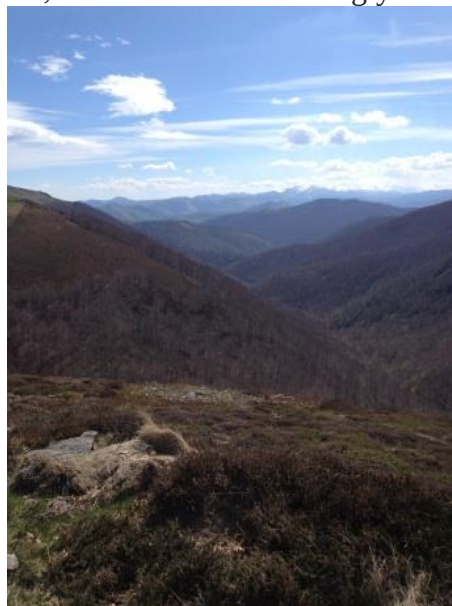
On up to the height of the pass. Before every motor road you cross there are warning signs – cars. It seems a number of people, having walked so far in solitude, have walked unthinkingly onto the road and been hit by cars – even though I saw none.

The relief of reaching summits I soon realised, was illusory. After you have gone up – you must go down. The book warned that the danger of injury was going down rather than climbing; and now I understood. Completely different muscles are used. Only 100 feet below the summit on a steep rugged track we came to the single track tarmac road over which the path crossed – and the path was taped off! The book said it was a difficult descent sometimes closed and after rain it was dangerous. So I considered the position. Then an American and his wife arrived and we debated the matter. The tarred road was safe but 2 km longer as it zig zagged down. My first instinct was to take the road and be sensible – but I don't like tarred roads. Anyway, some kind of agreement was reached, we said “the hell with it”, stepped over the tape and carried on. It had rained heavily recently but the track was not that wet. Nevertheless it was very steep and very broken with fallen trees to be climbed over, and I took the greatest care not wishing to fall or twist an ankle or knee. We descended carefully through light wooded country to dense wood with beautiful tracks but still very steep. I rested frequently, often taking off my backpack. I now understood why they taped it off!

The American soon left his wife behind. This sounds unkind but it is a major issue. You cannot cover long distances with a person who has a different pace. It is really hard. When I stopped to rest she, several times, caught up with me and stopped and rested too. She was cross with her husband for having gone on ahead and was, she said, reassured by my company. We did not see another soul on that descent. I presume anyone else on the path that day had the sense to take the longer, safe, route. She seemed to think I found it easy and was always pleased to see me.

The descent seemed to go on forever. Part of the repeated miscalculations I made about descents. After the climb it is a 500 m (1,767 feet) down to Roncesvalles. This in 4 miles so a very steep gradient. Again, I thought it would never end. Finally I arrived at Roncesvalles about 2:30 pm, a tiny place with a population of less than 100!

By far the biggest building in Roncesvalles was the medieval pilgrim's hostel, Albergue de Peregrinos Orreaga. Legs, feet and knees tired. There were also two bars with some accommodation advertising Pellegrino (Pilgrim) meals. I walked up to the Hostel, through the archway, a courtyard and into a further large rectangular courtyard to the right. In the far corner there was an entrance with rucksacks piled outside. I went in and found I had to fill in a form. Amongst the questions were: was I on foot? Yes. What religion was I? I wondered if I might get favourable treatment for answering Catholic, would they know I was a fake? I considered ‘no





religion' but wondered if I might not be given a bunk so in the end, doubtfully ticked Protestant.

Of course, they never looked at the form at all! I asked for a room, was relieved of €10, given a bunk number, and told sternly to leave my boots in the rack downstairs. I texted Anne-Marie, 'Tired in body but not tired in spirit' as she anxiously followed my progress.

I went for a beer and I was welcomed effusively by people I had met in Orisson who had sent their sacks on by taxi and by people who, after the climb to Orisson had decided they would never make it over the top and took their luggage and themselves by taxi to St Jean and on to Roncesvalles! They had not thought I would make it carrying my sack for some reason. But I did.

Many pilgrims were starting from Roncesvalles. They all said they could not do the Pyrenean crossing – I take their point. A Canadian guy who had walked from Orisson, a Mountie, who had not brought food, was hallucinating and on his last legs when he got here. He said it was the worst thing he'd ever done. Still, most people who set out made it and here we are. The secret I think is to walk at your own pace, not to try too hard to keep up with others and rest whenever you need it. Having done the Pyrenees I have no fear of the road ahead.

Recently it seems the government of Navarre had spent a lot of money modernising the facilities, and I was impressed. Rows of clean small bunk rooms, each with 2 double 2 tier bunks. Excellent clean washing facilities and toilets. My only gripe was that if you were in a top bunk, as I was, it was difficult to get down. There was no handhold to control your descent on the three rung ladder to the bottom bunk so you tended to fall the last couple of feet.

I bought a ticket for the Pilgrim Dinner at one of the bars and there I met the American wife on her own and she thanked me warmly for 'getting her down off that dammed mountain'. I was puzzled not having been aware of providing any help at all, so asked in what way. It seemed that each time she was just about to despair and give up she would find me having a rest (her husband got some stick for having long since disappeared into the distance).



Pilgrim Hostel at Roncesvalles.



Farewell my Father's Jacket



Apparently I cheered her up. “You always looked so relaxed. So in control. You just said to me. “Take it easy and watch your footing. Rest when you like it, and it is only another few miles”. Well sometimes you help without knowing it.

When I put my boots on in the morning, the door I had entered by was bolted. Another door on the other side of the old hostel had been opened. An official looking lady wished me ‘buen camino’. I asked why the door I had come in by was shut. “Because on a pilgrimage you never go back”, she said. So many impressions.

I left my father’s old coat and my old jersey in the Hostel to save weight. It was part of the plan. The old clothes could be left behind. It would be warmer now I was over the Pyrenees and in Spain in May I thought – silly me! I was to bitterly regret the absence of warm clothes later and had not realised that higher mountains than the Pyrenees lay ahead.

### **Friday 4<sup>th</sup> May – Roncesvalles to Zubiri**

When I woke up this morning I had slept well and was relaxed but my feet hurt. I left ancient pilgrim hostel at Roncesvalles at 7.15 in cold grey weather. They want you out by 0800 latest. No breakfast. Not even coffee. There is nothing in Roncesvalles, even the bars were closed. It was cold and overcast on an empty stomach. The signpost said encouragingly 790 km to Santiago. No coffee no breakfast anywhere. So only about 15 miles to Larrasona. Still quite hilly. Three miles on I got to Burgette in the rain. A nothing much place but they had a bar where I got a Croissant and a coffee. Bliss. The track turned off the main street and followed a gravelled path for some distance before it turned into a track and became steep, crossing a couple of rivers on stepping stones. Many tiring descents on very rough ground.

Another 3 miles on I stopped at the church in the tiny village of Espinal. There was a very small shop there and I bought a loaf of bread just before it closed. I sat on the church wall and ate it hungrily. Later in Gerendiain I found a small bar on the river Erro crowded with pelegrinos. They had a lovely clay oven cooking delicious things in the open. I got a coke and sat. Five minutes later two Korean girls tuned up and came and sat with me. Then on and on through narrow beautiful woodland paths up and down hill. How pilgrims on horseback could get past walkers I don’t know. Then approaching Zubiri I got the feeling that was as far as my feet were going that day. I had meant to get to Larrasoana but fell about 2 miles short. Two of the Korean girls caught up and had come to the same conclusion. So I turned over the old Roman bridge into the little town and booked in to an Albergue El Palo that took my washing. There are municipal and private Albergues. In my experience the private ones are best. There is no difference in prices but I think the private ones have to try harder. They generally have smaller dormitories and better plumbing. Zubiri is the height of civilisation with a cash machine and stamps available. I went into a bar for a beer and there were six Korean girls at a table who recognised me and called for me, “Robert, Robert”, to come over and join them. They chattered away happily and



were great fun.

I had dinner in the Albergue, usual Pilgrim's meal. Found myself next to the Americans again and opposite a mildly alarming woman from Swanage in Dorset who had recently become a Quaker missionary. She had a farm and was OK but for the underlying zeal. She taxed me as to why I was there, asked why my wife wasn't with me and when horses came up and she found out I rode, asked if I hunted. I confessed I had. I then got a very reasoned thing about how I justified the killing of God's creatures for amusement. It then turned out that she had hunted – but that was before she had 'seen the light'. I think she wanted me to understand there was still hope for me. I did not linger at dinner that night, disliking her self righteous certainty.

At breakfast I ate little but enjoyed my coffee. The girl serving brought some cakes and biscuits and seeing I did not eat them came over and indicated I should. I refused, but she wrapped some carefully in tissue, leant over my shoulder, and put them in my pockets smiling and apparently saying I should eat and must take them. Aren't people nice. I did eat them later too. Hope to make Pamplona today, God and feet willing. My Spanish lessons are making slow progress as I am generally too pushed to pay full attention.

I had left Dad's jacket in Roncesvalles having served its purpose and wonder what else I can discard. Having passed several people who I had not met, who tried to talk to me, I plan to put a notice around my neck. Saying "I am not really anti-social. It is just that I haven't the breath left speak". It was no exaggeration.

### **Saturday 5<sup>th</sup> May – Zubiri to Pamplona.**

Set out along lovely paths heading for Pamplona. The path crossed the Rio Arga by yet another Roman Bridge, leading to a short distance on a main road at Zuriain. Two men were sitting on the wall and one called to me,

"You English?"

"Yes".

"Good place to sit this".

"Maybe, but I'm hoping there's a bar round the corner."

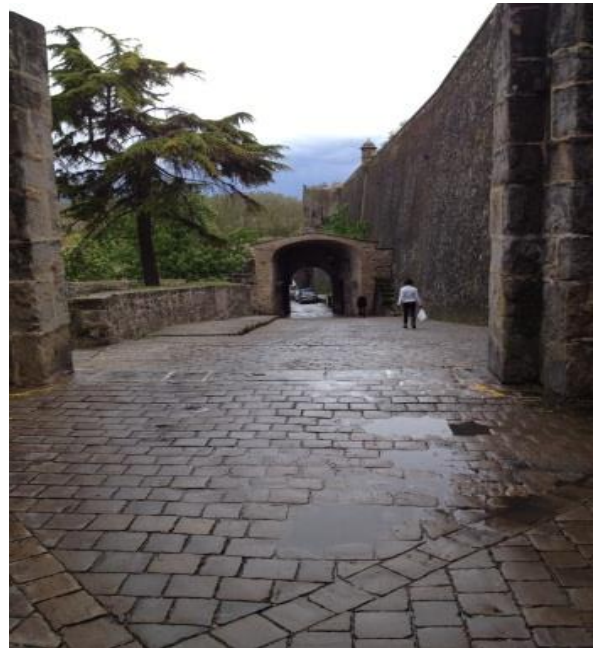
"No, Tried that."

"OK, looks like a good place to sit", So I sat down.

"Names Richard", he said, "and this is Lars from Denmark. You going to walk with us a bit?"

"OK"

We had the usual where did you start from? Where you from? "Southampton!" He said. "I've been



The French Gate to Pamplona



to



working on a film in Winchester for months – Les Miserables.”

“You an actor?”

“No - sound technician.”

We walked on. He asked me how old I was, the only person who ever did so. I hesitated and told him. “Jesus”, he said in disgust, “another bloody Sean Connery.” Unsure of what he was getting at I changed the subject firmly. Another up and down day. Further on I came across Sue and another small Korean girl I had not met. I did not grasp her Korean name, I think it was Kwong. She had a huge sack and I soon realised she was in distress. I walked with them a little chatting to Sue. Kwong said nothing, she spoke only a very few words of English. We stopped and I looked at her sack. “That looks awfully heavy to me”, I said and lifted the bottom, while it was still on her shoulders, to judge weight. “Aw nice”, she said. It was far heavier than my sack and she was not more than half my weight. I realised her waist belt was not done up. Sue told me it was broken. So Kwong was taking the whole weight on her shoulders, no wonder she was in pain.

“She will buy a new sack in Pamplona” said Sue.

“She will never reach Pamplona”, I said.

“How about we swap sacks. I’ll carry hers and she can carry mine, it’s much lighter and has a waist belt to relieve her shoulders.”

Sue explained in Korean, and said thank you for the offer but Kwong would be all right. I think Kwong, not speaking English and far from home was a little doubtful, understandably. So I walked on. I saw Sue again later with no Kwong, she said she was coming on very slowly. Later in Cizur Menor I saw another of the Korean girls who told me Kwong had made it to Pamplona and had a new sack and was fine. Tough these Korean girls.

You cross the river, Rio Ulzama, by an ancient stone bridge leading to an Albergue, Convento de la Trinidad, built 11<sup>th</sup> Century. You are abruptly out of the countryside and into the extensive and seemingly endless suburbs of Pamplona. The Quaker missionary woman from Swanage strode past me having sent her luggage ahead by taxi. I approached the old City by the pilgrim route through the French Gate and the fortifications are massive. Only did 14 miles that day but feet are very sore with blisters on left heel so not sure how far I’ll get tomorrow. I have indulged myself with a €45 room in a narrow pedestrian street right in the centre. A bath! A bed! Privacy! Going to Casa Paco for dinner as recommended by lodgings. Very scruffy little place but food was good. Had not eaten all day so ate



The Stone Bridge over Rio Ulamza





everything to amusement of the waiter.

### **Sunday 6th May – Pamplona to Cizor Menor**

I set out at 7:30 and paused to look again at the Citadel, an amazing Vauban fortress. How could anyone have ever taken that by siege? The French abandoned Pamplona after Vittoria so Wellington did not have to besiege it – he must have been mightily relieved. A long tedious trudge out through the suburbs, guided by the hard to spot pavements studs Miles of road works clearing the suburbs then a long steady climb on the road to Cizur Menor. By the time I got to Cizur Menor I was kaput. Done. Feet on strike. The hostel Albergue Roncal did not open until half twelve and it was only about 11. So I sat outside a little bar with a beer and wrote letters. A Korean girl came up and sat with me and chatted for a bit, talking of Korea, North and South.

Now 12:30. Paradise. I have hobbled into this hostel, Albergue Roncal, in my socks, carrying my boots. I have only made about a miserable 3 miles. A lovely woman took a look at me and said to sit down. Do not worry about your feet she said. Rest and come to my hospital later at 4 o'clock. I will mend your blisters. I went through the gardens to my bunk room with tables laid out and they had WiFi. I had cut my blisters with my pocket knife the day before but they were still very painful. I slept and went back at four and she was treating other people's blistered feet – much worse than mine, many with blisters on their toes as well. She put lotions on my heel, cleaned a smaller blister and put a blister plaster on. No charge. That evening I went to the place to eat she had mentioned in the empty modern market square. You must remember these villages are very small places.

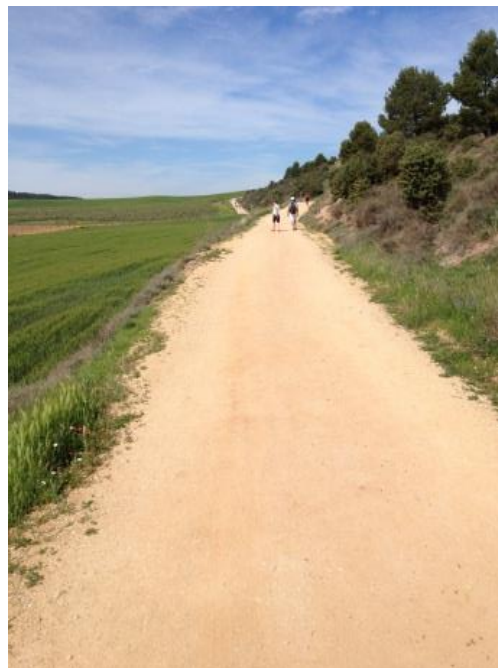
A cheerful girl of about 17 came and, I imagine, listed what was available to eat. There was no printed menu. Nobody spoke a word of English. And I could not make myself understood or understand her. I had eaten nothing that day. No breakfast, not even a coffee, no lunch so as you might imagine I was very hungry.

I tried to explain I would like food, any food, anything. I did not care what. I just wanted food. She brought a bottle of wine. I tried again and she looked unhappy, but she came back doubtfully with a plate of salad and some prawns. I beamed and bumbled, bueno, encore and piled into the salad, ashamed I had not managed to learn any Spanish. Her little face lit up with understanding. She beamed happily and rushed off. In no time I had a plate with 3 chops, chips, cheese and bread. I ate it all and we parted on the best of terms.

Outside the door were a couple of villainous looking Spaniards sitting on the pavement with bread and wine. One had long straggling beard and was bald on top. He looked just like one of the professional killers in the James Bond film 'Diamonds are Forever'. The other looked equally doubtful.

"Senor, take wine with us. You are English, yes?"

Tired but intrigued I limped over and sat down with them. I had already had wine with my meal but they seemed friendly, so I 'took wine with them'. They were on the Camino but slept out and would spend the night under the eaves right there. They used the facilities in the Albergue. We chatted a bit, they laughed at my adventures, and I left them to their free lodging on the pavement.



## Monday 7th May Cizur Menor to Uterga



The long climb up to the Windmills



Fools Paradise. I thought the walk downhill ahead it would be much easier



It wasn't!

Today it was a long steady steep climb to the top of crest of the Alto de Perdon ridge with its line of wind turbines. I rested on the crest looking thankfully down on the plain below. Now it would be easier. I never learn! A long ankle wrenching descent again, just as hard as the climb. I only made around 11 miles before giving into my feet (do they do foot transplants?) and to a particularly tempting little Albergue. Uterga is a lovely little place. Food, a bunkhouse and wine. A little beer garden. WiFi. What more can a man want? I have fixed a Pilgrim Dinner for 7 o'clock. It is the only place I saw where they sold some pilgrim type bracelets and medallions so I got some for the girls. I have done my washing and hung it over the bottom of my bunk. I dumped my red jersey, my shaving gel and cut my towel in half and dumped one half. I had left my spare trousers in Pamplona so my sack is steadily getting lighter.

## Tuesday 8th May - Uterga to Lorca

Up and on through Obanos and Puente La Reina. Raining heavily and plodded through the quiet small streets over the bridge, once again over the Rio Arga and so eventually to Lorca.

Just made Lorca and grabbed a bunk at a small hostel. Picture on right. Only made around 14 (maybe 16) miles today but at the expense of more blisters. Some of the track is really rough with big cobble stones slippery with rain and clay and the steep downhill slopes.



The Hostel in Lorca



Knights Houses in Lorca



Welcome Beer in Lorca



Now I know what they meant when they said the road was hard. Tonight I have choice of Lomo or Chistorra (meat or sausages). It is my left foot and knee that trouble me, right leg is fine. Could that be to do with the old break I wonder. I am in a small bunk room for €7 with a balcony where my washing (I now have little left to wash) is hung out.

This tiny place of Lorca is ancient. The old arms of the knights are on the houses, I love it. I can just image the knight riding out of the gates with his Sancho Panza setting off for the Crusades. His wife and family at the doorway bidding him farewell. It was raining this morning then turned hot. Then just now a lightning thunder storm with heavy rain is flooding the streets. Tomorrow they tell me will be 34 C. I am sitting quietly with a glass of wine but am talked to by French Swedish and Australians. Very amiable. One could take all year to do this because there is so much to see. The owner who runs the place speaks English having lived in America, most unusual. I doubt if I will get to Santiago because I do miss Elisha and am sad to think of her on her own and my feedback is that she is not happy. In fact she is saying she is going to have me Court Martialled and shot for desertion.

### **Wednesday 9th May - Lorca to Estella**

Off in the early morning and a good walk to Estella of only about 5 miles. Beginning to slowly settle into this. Still a bit sore but feet improving and blisters no longer very significant. Steep up and down again and took the Municipal hostel as I entered the town. I was impressed as it was only €5, though for an extra €1 you got throw away sheets included! Lovely town with unusual old bridge. Wandered about and read and had a beer.



Municipal Hostel at Estella

### **Thursday 10th May – Estella to Los Arcos**

Estella really was the worst hostel I stayed in. Around 100 people in the bunk room, very cramped, dirty, boots by the bunks. Then wakened at 4 as 75% of people got up and dressed noisily and left by which time it was impossible to get back to sleep. I abandoned my sleeping bag and mat and set off. Another great mistake. Strangely I just had no idea what lay ahead. I strode out that morning. Feet much improved. First 10 days are the worst. Hot now and many walkers burned by the sun. Did about 14 miles to Los Arcos.

Not far on the shape of a huge monastery came in view on a hill top, the Monasterio de Irache. Apparently a community of monks had been there since the 10th century, but, in 1985 finally gave up due to the lack of novitiates. Now the great building lies



Free Wine at the Bodega



empty. Not long after, at about seven o'clock the path passes the Bodega Irache wine fountain for pilgrims. It serves free red wine or water from a tap. Help yourself. It is not my usual time of day, 7.15, for drinking red wine but I had to try it. So I filled my shell and drank. On and up past a film set castle on a hilltop.

Los Arcos was good and I was determined to find a nicer hostel. I did, Casa Abuela on the corner of the square. Nice, friendly with smallish bunk rooms. Sun was out. Had a beer in the square and booked a pilgrim dinner. A good evening but a bad morning!

### **Friday 11th May – Los Arcos to Logrono**

Breakfast, 6.30. Sat on my own and drank coffee out of a thermos – good coffee too. Nobody there. All the other bastards, male and female in a group, had gone from my room. Noisily starting about 4 am. I felt very anti-social. A biggish guy, about my height I suppose, with a cowboy hat which I admired, came and sat at the other end of the table.

“Morning”, he said.

“Morning” I said grumpily.

“You on your own?”

“Yes.”

“How’s the coffee.”

“Good” I said. Seeing he was a talker who couldn’t take a hint I moved up four chairs.

“Where you heading?”

“Lograno.”

“Me too.”

“Where you start?”

“Le Puy.”

“Through St Jean?”

“Yup, went to Lourdes.”

“What’s it like?”

“Full of Nuns.”

“Where you from?”

“Colorado – you?”

“Scotland.”

Another 3 pelegrinos came down and started chatting. I finished my coffee and went to get my sack, brought it down and got my boots. Put them on and went to the door. Waved and went on my way.

Stopped 5 miles on at Sansol in a little bar and had a coffee and a coke. Still surly and angry with the 4 o'clock risers so spoke to nobody. Bunch of Koreans but none that I knew.

Set off to Viana knowing it around 7 ½ miles. Just got started and cowboy hat swung up behind me.

“Oh, hi Colorado” I said.

“Hi Scotland. Viana?”

“Yes.”

I thought he might be a good pacer so lengthened my stride and walked along with him. He had black hair, suppose about 45 and, like me, unshaven. It got hotter.

“Like Colorado here”, he said – “hot stony and dry.”



Torres del Rio. Typical Village

“And uphill.” I said.

“That too.”

“Why you here?” I asked.

“Like walking I guess. Hunting too. You?”

“Don’t know.”

He said something about youngsters. I said I had a Granddaughter who had never heard of Sophia Loren.

“Uh Hu. Preferred Claudia Cardinale myself.” He paused reflectively. “Lot of woman.” Another pause. “So is Sophia Loren. I been married 25 years, she still a great woman”.

“What she think of you coming here.” I asked.

“Not sure. I said goodbye. She called me a dirty rotten son of a bitch, said don’t come back, then slammed the door on me as I left. You married?”

“Yes.”

“What she say?”

“Said I should be Court Martialled and shot for desertion.”

“Uh Huh.”

We walked on and it got hotter. Colorado gave long pauses between speech, giving the impression he thought carefully about what you said before replying. He’d said there was a Fuente (Fountain) over the next hill. There wasn’t.

“Just like Colorado” he said.

“Dry and steep.” He stopped a couple of times to breathe. I was afraid if I let myself pause I’d not get going again, but paused. Then on a crest we met a couple of people he knew and stopped to talk. I just carried on. Twenty minutes later he caught up.

“Hi Scotland, just dogging you.”

“Hi Colorado – whereabouts in Colorado?”

“Denver.”

He talked of Iran, the great block of ice that was going to cause a tsunami 1 mile high when it broke off the ice shelf. He knew a lot about the old British Navy. He thought the Queen was marvellous.

“America is in a mess, so is most everywhere else, but the UK has stability because the Queen is always there.”

Startled to meet an American monarchist I fell silent. As we tramped into Viana he met an ugly large black and white mongrel and petted it. I said nothing.

“I don’t see Europeans pet dogs much.”

“Bad idea petting unknown dogs” I said.

“I do.”

“Been bitten?”

“Yes.”

“Bad news in Africa.”

On the path into Viana there was a Fuente. Cold water poured out the taps. I took off my hat and sun glasses and doused my face in the glorious cool water. Colorado soaked his hair, his hat and let the water run gloriously over his head.

“I’m stopping for a coke first place I see.” He said

“I gotta eat.”

The first scruffy plastic chairs outside a bar we sat down. And drank two icy cokes each. We took our boots and socks off and sat in the glorious shade in bliss.

“You gonna eat.”

“No, I’m moving on.”

“You mind telling me what your name is?”

“No problem. It’s Robert.”

“Robert uh.”

“And yours?”

“Byron – like the poet.”



“Well, Hi Byron.”

We climbed up (all the way was either up or down. They don't do level). I wondered if I could possibly keep his pace up but thought it my best chance of reaching Lograno some six miles further on. He knew of Wellington and Nelson in some depth. I asked him what he did. He was a mechanic in Denver and had chucked his job to walk on the Camino. I said he must read a lot. He paused then said very slowly.

“Nope – I can read – but I'm awful slow. I don't read much.”

“How you know so much” I asked, amazed and sorry I had embarrassed him.

“Learned all I know from TV Programs – God I love them.”

It seemed he loved the wilderness and spent much of his spare time in his truck in the hills of Colorado hunting. He slept in the truck and had a Television where he watched endless recordings, particularly historical ones.

As we climbed to the centre of Viana we came to a large ornate church, Iglesias Santa Maria. Colorado paused.

“Think we could take a look?”

“Sure.”

So I found myself, sweating with sack and sore feet, sitting in the church – very cool and silent. Colorado took his sack off and prowled around the church then came back and sat down. He told me all about the reformation. Sort of a new version perhaps, but who cares. He was enchanted.

We cleared Viana. I knew only about six miles to go but it was desperate hot. 29°C I believe. We met some other people he knew. My feet were really sore now and I was sure I could not keep up but he'd done me well. I'll catch up later I said. He went on and I sat on a wall. Never saw him again. Really sorry now I didn't take a photo of him.

I went on alone and at one stage became sure I was lost. Just the hard dusty tracks, lots of them, stretching into the distance. After a bit I climbed up a hill with a few trees and some shade. In the shade of the trees a man and a girl were resting, and she called to me –

“Robert, rest awhile Robert.”

I had no idea who she was, although obviously I'd met her. I'm really awfully bad at names and remembering people. Blonde, German I think. I thankfully took off my sack, put my back against a tree and slept immediately for a few minutes. Then I woke and got going again leaving them. The guy, who I think had designs on her I wasn't part of, seemed pleased to see me move on. Miles later after the grim journey through the suburbs and road intersections of Logrono (Capital of the Rioja wine region) on a long weary rough slope I stopped at the 'gatekeeper', bought a coke and paid my due of a few cents for good luck and in memory of Felisa, the legendary gatekeeper, whose niece, also Felicia, today stamps your Credencia. I sat on the dusty wall Five minutes later the couple from the shady trees arrived. She greeted me again warmly, and he again ignored me. I told her of the legend of the gatekeeper and she insisted he gave Felisa a few cents for good luck, which he grudgingly did, but it did not seem to increase his fondness for me.

“Robert – we were concerned about you. We could see you in the distance and you were wandering from side to side of the track”.

“Sorry, I must have been dreaming. I'm good.”

I never did remember her name.

When I got to Lograno I couldn't stand the idea of another night in a hostel and reeled



Showing Signs of Wear I think in Lograno

around until I saw a 2 star hotel and went in making excuses to myself about the cost. I went through spotless glass swing doors and paused, wondering if I would be allowed in. She greeted me kindly and gave me a room for €50. I took my sack up to the room. I looked at the clean sheets and a lovely bath. Now the checklist – first a cold beer then a bath, then sleep. Later dinner. I put on my sandals and went down. The girl stopped me.

“Senor” she said. ‘Should you not rest? You are very tired I think.’ How nice people are I thought. Why should you care about this tired, dusty, sweaty man in boots and carrying a sack, into your nice clean hotel - and you notice that he is a little shaky. I assured her I had a plan. First a cold beer, then a bath, then sleep – but first a cold beer. She smiled,

“that is good Senor” she said, and directed me to the nearest bar.

The hotel was ideal. Right in the centre of this rather charming town. I walked all of 50 yards to the bar.

“Dendo Cerveza por favour.”

She got a glass. ‘No No’ I said. ‘Grande y Frigo.’ She smiled, went to a large fridge and produced a huge tankard, a litre I think, covered in frost. I took it outside and on the side of the Plaza Mayor. Just sat looking at my beautiful beer on the table. I reached for my iPhone to take a picture of this wonderful frosted cold golden beer. But I had left my phone in the hotel.

### **Saturday 11th May – Lograno to Santander**

I had to go home. Just as the blisters were fading and, though tired, I was settling in. A phone call relating to business made my return necessary, not the plan at all. I chose the ferry from Santander. I have been to both Santander and Bilbao previously in our boat, and much prefer Santander with its amazing entrance. I decided to go on the Saturday as busses were less frequent on Sunday and the ferry was Monday. I got the bus times from the tourist office and wandered down to the bus station to buy a ticket. A comfortable bus journey, passing signs to tempting places like Vittoria. It was hot in Lograno with clear sky, but as you pass the mountain chain heading towards the sea, the fog and cloud come in. As with all out visits to Santander and that coast – it is misrepresentation to call it, as the Spanish do, the Costa Verde (Green Coast). It should be Costa Foggy. I arrived on Santander and – no room. All hostels full. No rooms anywhere. Having spent a couple of hours walking the streets I tried a 3 star Hotel in desperation. No problem, for €60 got a very nice room. I ate and slept well with nobody stepping on me at four in the morning. You do learn to appreciate small mercies.

### **Sunday 12th May**

A better day and the sun shines. Booked a second night. I examined the local boat trips and discovered for a few Euros I could go the creeks and sand bars where, a few years ago, I had tried to find a mooring for my boat, only to be told to go away – Privado! I had a lovely time, marvelling as the little ferry crept up the channels, that I had been mad enough to come in from the sea for a first time and try for myself. We went to Pedrena and then across to Somo where I got off and had a lazy lunch. I realised that just beyond where I had turned back was a bridge with plenty clearance and a river beyond it I could have anchored in. Had I but known.

### **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> May**

I watched Santander fade into the distance as we picked our way down the channel, and promised I’d be back next year.





## Part Two – Logrono, Santiago de Compostela. 2013

As you will have seen I started in 2012, described in Part One but had to return home from Logrono having covered only 164 kilometres (102 Miles).

In 2013 I returned to Logrono, where I had stopped my walk. I took the Brittany Ferry from Portsmouth, back to Santander and then bus to Logrono, and carried on to walk the remaining 625 kilometres (388 Miles).

### Friday 3<sup>rd</sup> May –Logrono to Ventosa. 16k.

I left the Logrono Hostel at eight o'clock and I felt very flat and unenergetic. It was damp, dark and chill. What with a day and night sitting on the ferry and 4 hours on a bus in pouring rain, I was not raring to go and felt alone. But gave legs a kick and set off. No cafe anywhere in the centre open at eight o'clock which was a surprise - so no coffee.

For a moment I did wonder why I was doing it. Was there a purpose. Inner peace? Surely not. Surely I'm not getting spiritual?

I walked slowly down towards the River Ebro looking for the Camino signs. I wondered if I would ever recreate the extraordinary easy going friendships of the Camino. Was I making the mistake of going back?

But in no time it was all there again. Tap, Tap on my shoulder. She was a young tall girl with rings in her nose, ears and goodness knows where else. She exuded energy and a huge smile. 'Is this way to Camino', she said with authority, pointing up an alley to the left. 'You are lost'. 'I was looking for an arrow'. I said gently.

I thought it was further down towards the river that you turned left, but she was company and I didn't argue. After 50 yards she said 'I am wrong. We must find a big church with Saint Iago on a horse'. We retraced our steps. I established that she was not Dutch as I had thought, but a Basque from Navarre. We found the arrow and the church. And she sped off happily at twice my speed.

The Book warns about the danger of getting lost extracting yourself from the endless Logrono suburbs after you clear the old town. So I was very careful. Somewhere there is always a sign. A yellow arrow daubed on a tree, or a wall, or the pavement, or anything, or in a shop window. A shell, a manhole cover with a shell cast in, a brass shell in the pavement.

Seeing no sign I paused to retrace my steps. Up popped the Ringed Basque with another girl in tow. 'Hello. You are lost again'. She said cheerfully. She was right this time, I had passed a very faded yellow arrow on a tree behind a lamppost. The Ringed Basque hared off and I never saw her again.



The Missing Church at Logrono



Well going in the right direction

The other girl was from Cork in Ireland and walked with me chatting happily about walks in Ireland. I talked of the Retreat to Corunna and she capped my story with the Retreat of Barú Sullivian in 16 something, presumably from the beastly English, who left Cork with 1,000 followers and arrived in Castlebay with only 17. She had walked it all the way.

All the old questions I remember so well. What is your name? Where are you from? Why are you here? Where did you start? She had come over the Pyrenees but on the low road, the Pass Napoleon being blocked by snow and 70 kilometre winds. She was full of joy and energy. She had done the whole Camino before but was drawn back and doing it again in stages.

I stopped at ten o'clock, after a tedious slog through the outskirts along concrete paths beside busy highways, at an isolated cafe with a view over a reservoir and clear of roads at last. Beautiful and quiet. A ham roll and coffee.

I stopped for lunch in Navarette, a lovely old Pilgrim town, and then wandered on so did ten miles instead of the maximum of six I had promised myself for the first few days. The sun shone and it got warmer. Snow on the hills and very cold at night. I stopped at Ventosa. No sleeping bag and of course bare mattress. I asked for a blanket and it was cheerfully provided, I wrapped myself in it and slept well.

So feet sore and I hope I will not pay for it. Ventosa is a tiny Pilgrim place with one hostel, San Saturnino, one bar and no shop. But a wide bunk for €9 and only six bunks per room, a ghost village. They had a kitchen as many hostels do and it was crowded with people preparing their own food. Only 16 kilometres but I was on my way at last. Snacked at a deserted bar and then to bed.

**Saturday 4<sup>th</sup> May – Ciruena 25.4 k.**



Well, for €3 its OK

Rioja Vinyards





Dinner Included

On – and on - to Ciruena. I set out at 7.05. The road was very hard and much of it alongside motor roads. Feet at limits, but think I'll get away with it. Spirit is willing but the flesh is dodgy.

Another Ghost village purely kept alive by the Camino. The original tiny Camino village now lies beyond miles and miles of brand new apartment blocks and a Golf Course. All 'Se Vende' (For sale) and unoccupied. I finally found the tiny original centre. Got there at 16.30. Beer never tasted so good even if it isn't real ale.

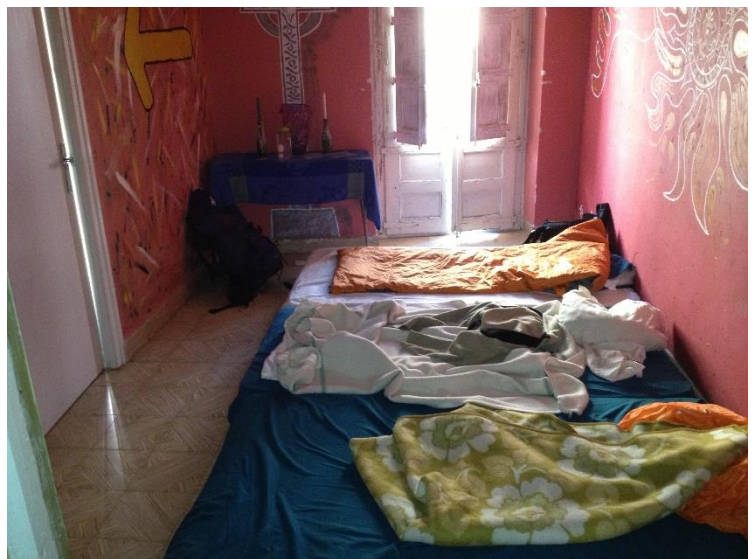
There was an old pilgrim convent but I

Mountains coming up!

took a room for a reasonable amount in a private hostel which was part of the only bar in town where you could eat. My bed was in a room of three beds with its own bathroom but I was one of only two people there and had the room to myself. I met an Australian at dinner, David, who confided he was over 70. He had terrible shakes and clearly was not going much further. Most disconcerting.

### Sunday 5<sup>th</sup> May - Granon

A hard road on the feet with new roadworks everywhere. All part of Spain's s|pending spree. Granon is charming, quite removed from the modern world and away from the road. I felt very tired today so stopped. My feet are sore and so I have done a short 10 kilometres. Granon is a little Camino dependant place. So many of these places are entirely dependent on pilgrims as they have been for a thousand years. Great company with



Germans and Australians and spent afternoon sipping beer.

The House of Smiles



Mine Host

Feel much better. So I went for the luxury option. My billet includes dinner and breakfast (well coffee) and is 'doñatio'. In other words if you feel you can afford it a donation is appreciated. If not it is free. €3 is generally acceptable but mine host does not see what you put in the box and it is purely voluntary. Many people put in much more, one German girl put in €15. It is a charitable institution. There are three mattresses on the floor in a small room touching each other. So I find myself shoulder to shoulder with a large thunderously snoring, snorting German, Franz Joseph,



**Reads – I never thought I'd see the day I spent more time on my feet than my face!**

besi  
de  
me

who looked just like Gert Fröbe, the German in 'The Magnificent Men in their Flying Machines' and he has a Canadian on his other side. I got on well with Franz Joseph but he thrashed about alarmingly in the night, I shrank to the far side of my mattress not wanting to end up with his arms around me. Definitely the simple life but I was too tired to argue. We all in the same boat and have laughed a lot over our beer.

There were dormitories attached to the church but run by Nuns I heard, who insisted you attend Mass.

Dinner was included which was hilarious. A huge Tureen of Potato Soup plus Rice and a touch of mince plus bread and wine of course and a lot of good humour. A woman of about 40 was in pain and distress and dinner and then went out and was sick.

A Doctor was called. It seems it was some form of traumatic exhaustion. She had driven herself on for around 45 hours.

Usually the rooms and bunkhouses are all sexes mixed together. Here the girl's got bunks in a separate room while us guys slept on the floor. Discrimination I call it.

The nights are cold here but fine days though cool. Borrowed a blanket last night and was cold even wrapped in it.

**Monday May 6<sup>th</sup> - Belorado**

I set out from Granon at 6.30 and arrived about 3. Very basic Albergue for €5. Cramped but had dinner in bar and slept well. Didn't make much progress today, not feeling great and tummy a bit upset. Not hardened up yet. This place is another once great crumbling old Spanish village. All for sale or 'liquidado'. Without Pilgrims they would be utterly derelict. Took a room at €20 tonight as a bit frail but will be good tomorrow.

**Tuesday 7<sup>th</sup> May - St Juan de Ortega**

Walked on from Belorado to St Juan. 24 ks. Tired by time got there but well. Population of St Juan is 20! Tiny classic isolated Pilgrim place. Very cramped draughty noisy hostel but only one in town. Talked to an American woman who had accidentally taken the Pass Napoleon across the Pyrenees having missed the warning it was closed. Five walkers were caught in this way and she had taken pictures, Amazing. Deep snow all round, up to their knees in it and snowing heavily. All of them were crusted in snow. By chance one of them, a Belgium, had a proper GPS. Without that she thinks they would have died up there. I agree with her. Shared dinner table with a couple of cheerful French. I have been told several times how the French hate the British, but I have met many and never found it so.

**Wednesday 8<sup>th</sup> May - Burgos**

A pleasant walk in lovely country then a very tedious slog through endless modern suburbs to get into Burgos during which I got lost more than once. I stupidly took a room in the first small hotel I found, an overpriced room in Hotel Jacobi @ €45. But good wifi in room so updated, looked at news, what a waste of time, and Skyped family getting Elisha, Kathryn and



Anne-Marie together – great. The narrow room stank of cigarettes in spite of no smoking signs. I complained – the proprietor said gloomily it had been a girl in the room the night before and he had stopped her smoking elsewhere in the hotel.

I went to explore Burgos, a town I have been to twice before and like.

### Thursday 9<sup>th</sup> May – Tardajos

Now wondering what to do. Should I have another night at Burgos? Think I might but in a Hostel. It is a truly beautiful town. I went up the hill to the Castle at 8.30 – but of course it's shut. The sign at the gate which I studied carefully say it will open at 11.00 on weekdays in May. They are doing a lot of work re-building it from the existing rubble. I walked round and took some pictures. It does not look very strong. The walls look more medieval and surely no match for cannon. But it was well defended by a determined commander when Wellington unsuccessfully besieged it, the approaches were steep and there were numerous outworks. Maybe there were ditches there too which have been filled in.<sup>1</sup>



Burgos Castle

Shall I walk on or re-visit the Castle at 11? I won't make Hornillos but could do a few miles. Not many places to stay in Hontanas though. So with my distrust of anything in Spain run by 'jobs for life' government employees I went to the Tourist Information Office. 'The castle is shut till July' she said. 'But', I protested, the signs said the Castle would be open at 11.00 in May, I read them this morning. She shrugs and repeats slowly and emphatically, because I am obviously stupid. 'The castle is not open till July'. I point out that this is the third time I have tried to visit the castle and always at times the sign says it is open. She shrugs.

So I decide to walk on.

The suburbs going out are as tedious as those coming in. It is raining. There are road works everywhere. Kids, at least I assume they are mentally retarded kids, have spray painted out most of the arrows and shells. I struggle grimly on musing on the mentality of spray painters and coming up with ideas of what to do with them.

It turns out to be miles before I can find anywhere to stay. Eleven kilometres.

I negotiated massive motorway building project in the mud with driving rain to cheer me up.

As I entered Tardajos I stopped at a little food shop mistaking it for a bar. A soaking wet and obviously distraught German woman sat weeping outside under a canvass awning. Apparently the Hostel they had planned on was closed and they had nowhere to go. Her husband tried to comfort her without success. Embarrassed and unable to help I just hiked on hoping I could find the small eighteen bed Municipal 'donativo' hostel and get a bunk. I found it with difficulty and relief. An anonymous dank modern brick building with no sign or name. It was closed till four o'clock another wet figure sitting at the door told me. So I waited outside while the rain teamed down and a couple of other hopefuls arrived. At around three the custodian took pity on us and let us in from the rain. Not bad. Tardajos like so many Spanish villages gives a good initial impression of being



Better than a Rucksack? The French owner and his donkey had walked from Bordeaux

<sup>1</sup> See more about Siege of Burgos in Notes

uninhabited.

There was a small bar opposite which in spite of appearances was not closed so I went in for a beer, splashing through puddles and mud to get there. Then I went back to the hostel for a rest and returned at six to get something to eat.

It was here that I first met Catherine Pervasi. The bar was busy and the only seat left was at a square table. Sitting at it was a woman with an iPad she was busily typing on. She looked very focussed and I felt she probably did not want company so I hesitated. She looked up. 'Do sit down'. She said. The usual questions revealed that she was Australian and lived an Australian 'alternative lifestyle' in a community East of Sydney. Shortly after that she packed her iPad and returned to the hostel. I ate my dinner and plugged my iPhone, which endlessly needs charging, into the wall socket she had been using. I did not see her at the Albergue.

### Friday 10<sup>th</sup> May - Hontanas

I had hoped to walk on to Castrojeriz but stopped for the night at Hontanas. I left Tardajos at 6.30 this morning and arrived at Hontanas at 12.30. Having walked endlessly on a high flat featureless plain (the Meseta) you suddenly come on a hidden valley and there is this tiny, delightful, village.



Track to Hontanas



Hontanas Appears



It's not a mirage – it's Hontanos



A beer in Hontanas



I wanted to walk on to San Anton, only another 3.5 miles but, according to The Book, the accommodation is in a ruined church and there was no electricity. Food is 'sometimes possible communally' it said. The next stop was another 10 kilometres so I decided a bunk here in Hontanas was the best bet.

### **Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> May – Itero de Vega**



*Lazy afternoon at Itero*

Walked from Hontanas to Itero some 8 miles, so a short day. End of first week back and only 95 miles. Weather much better after yesterday's rain. But much of the track is now deep red mud so hard going. Stopped cyclists dead, every



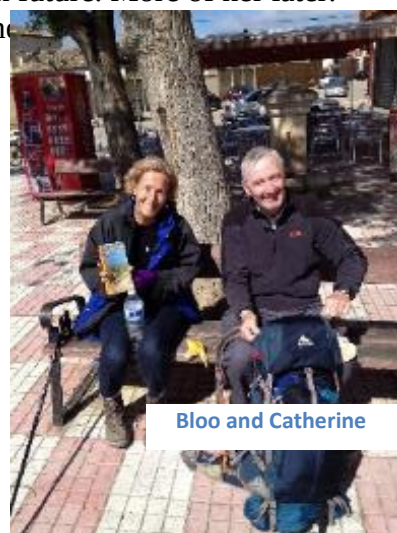
*The Next Lodgings –  
San Anton*

cloud has a silver lining! Of course they have light cycling shoes so when bogged down are ankle deep in mud and not happy. Still cold but sun warm and sky full of swallows. Feel very well but cautious about feet. Supplied plaster and treatment today to German Franz Joseph on way. I had last seen him in Granon where he had the mat on the floor next to me. How he could walk at all with the blisters he had beats me.

A pleasant Hostel with rooms with only five beds each. I realised with surprise that Catherine Pervasi from 2 days ago is in the bed next to me. I nod politely to her and she responds in the same way. No words are exchanged. Sitting sleepily outside in the sun with cold beer and studying The Book. Catherine comes out and sits on her own on the step. I considered going to talk to her but she looked very happy with her own company so I just dozed.

Then in came a girl with two dogs. One dog was a large black woolly sort of dog. The other a small short haired brown dog tied by a lead to the big one. The big dog wore a pannier on each side. My first reaction was irritation. Why did some people insist on dragging dogs around with them? Then I realised there was actually a dog kennel the big dog was settled into so there was provision. The girl was seemed to be of a cheerful disposition. But, being in a solitary mood, I ignored them. I met up with her later on a number of occasions. Her name was Lena, she was 22 and Swedish. This was her gap year and on her return she was going to University to study mathematics. She was charming and friendly always giving me a big kiss when we met up in future. More of her later.

I went in to eat as soon as the dining room had opened and was on my own at a table for four and eyed the menu. Catherine came in and said was it OK to join me, 'of course' I said, 'by all means'. She sat and said she was being joined by two men she had met and I said fine. The two men turned out to be Bloo Anderson and Archie McRoberts, both Scots. We had an excellent dinner during which we got to know each other and found out we got on very well. Bloo is an ex army Colonel who was a Para and who flew Apache strike helicopters. Later he trained pilots. I walked with them from the next day on, joined by Bob McEvoy an Australian ex army Colonel who was an artillery man, until I was later taken ill at Mazariffe. Our conversations ranged over a wide area including, I remember, how to grieve.



Bloo and Catherine

### Sunday 12th May – Villarmentero de Campos

The next morning we assembled for a coffee promised for seven o'clock and Bloo, Catherine and I set off together. We were joined by Bob McEvoy who Bloo had last seen in the Pyrenees. Archie had set off on his own earlier. We walked on to Villarmentero de Campo. About 15 miles so it was a long day. We stopped for a rest and a sandwich later on a grass bank sloping steeply down towards the river. Both had been keeping an anxious eye on me as I had accidentally mentioned some event in Northern Ireland, where Bloo had served, which enabled him to calculate my age. They seemed astonished. They seemed convinced I would slip down the bank or something. Villarmentero de Campos is, see picture, an extraordinary tiny place with Tepees and drain pipes to sleep in plus some bunks and a promised vegetarian meal for dinner for €7 offered by a cheerful English girl hostelerio in her



Villarmentero de Campos

late teens I think. There was nowhere else to eat. Bloo and Catherine were very taken by the Tepee but although the day

was hot the air was getting cold again and with no sleeping bag I opted for a bunk. Then Lena pitched up with her dogs. I had seen her before at Iterio but not spoken to her. Lena carried her own tent and slept in it with the dogs as they were never allowed in the hostels or Albergues. Consequently her rucksack was around 18Kgs and her feet were in a pitiful state. The cheerful English hostelerio had been into Carrion in the van with the money she had collected and come back with pasta, two small tins of Tuna for me as, I had said emphatically I was not a vegetarian and needed meat, bread and lots of wine, but there was no sign of any cooking. A search revealed her puffing reefers and in a world of her own, dinner had slipped her mind! Combined efforts of hungry walkers produced some tasteless pasta. Plenty of wine though and I was solemnly given the two small tins of Tuna. The English girl showed up and wandered around while we ate looking happy, being friendly, and confused.

We were all incredibly cold that night. There was a hard frost in the morning. No heating at all. Lena froze between her dogs, even the dogs froze. Bloo, Catherine and Lena were shaking uncontrollably in the morning as they crawled unhappily from their tents and I was no better. I had managed to get one thin blanket but what with no food and no sleeping bag I was freezing. My bunk was against the outside wall which a single thickness of bricks so if you turned over and touched the wall with your back, it was damp and as cold as ice.

### **Monday 13<sup>th</sup> - to Calzadilla de la Cueva.**

We found some coffee for breakfast and the remains of the bread. Lena was unhappily packing her tent, groundsheet and other doggy paraphernalia. Off we set in the morning knowing the next section was going to be hard. First around eight miles to Carrion where I ate a huge breakfast to make up for the night before. Then I walked through the small historic town and saw a sign saying only 401 kilometres to go. Bloo and Catherine had sat down in town for a foot session as we left Carrion. I was walking ahead of them and Bloo, as they caught up, got all army on the basis I was limping and made me stop at a service station on the edge of town. I was made to take my left boot off and he did army foot inspection. He diagnosed a bruised split heel and dismissed my 'it is only bad when I stop'. Catherine produced a first aid kit and they padded my boot and heel. I thanked Bloo who said, 'Ach with that foot I'd have done it even if you were no a Jock'.

Then 12 miles of old straight Roman road with absolutely nothing. No water and no shade. It was very hot and we were soon in trouble. Catherine was in a lot of pain. Off with her boot. Bloo lanced a blister on her toe and strapped her foot. She was getting a great deal of muscle pain down the front of her shin. Catherine said 'Monty Python'. She had explained very seriously to us before that this was her code which meant 'for god's sake go on without me. I just want to cry on my own', and that we ignored it at our peril.

Bloo himself had blisters and an old shoulder wound coming back giving an alarming and very painful looking swelling on his shoulder at the back just where his rucksack rested. That hot hard



Only 401 kms to go



Crowded Bunkhouse at Calzadilla de la Cueva



track seemed endless. No shade. Bloo and I kept stopping to wait for Catherine who got fiercely emotional and cried in pain and demanded we carry on and leave her. My heel hurt like hell. I had stupidly accepted half a banana from Bloo which, as always, gave me stomach cramps. Bloo kept trying to make me drink water on the basis I'd gone alarmingly pale. I thought we would end up carrying Catherine whose backpack weighed 14 kgs so kept going. We tottered into Calzadilla de la Cueva. Into the most crowded bunkhouse yet. All shattered. I hope this does not sound exaggerated.

We met up there with Nicole an American woman. A Japanese man (actually he was Korean but Nicole thought he was Japanese) with a notebook was asking her for the name of the road we had just walked (he had taken a bus). What do you call this road? He kept asking. 'Well I call it the Bataan Death March' said an exhausted Nicole and he solemnly wrote it down. We felt it was an excellent name and I will always think of that 12 miles of straight hot shadeless Roman road as 'The Bataan Death March'.

Nicole had at a previous stop danced. A small Irishman called David from Ireland's west coast, with a very strong brogue, had admiringly remarked 'My but you are fet'. Nicole, unused to the accent, unfortunately thought he had said 'My but you are fat'. It was too much after a long day, and she was a little plump. She turned on him and said with passion, advancing with murderous intent, 'and you're an idiot'. Hasty retreat of one injured Irishman trying to work out what the problem was.

## **Tuesday 14<sup>th</sup> May – Terrachilos de las Templarios**

We walked on today only 6 miles to Terridillos de Templario. A small place though no visible remains of the Knights Templar. The sun shone, it was a beautiful day. Outside the Albergue there was a grassy area with a picnic table. Catherine could go no further and was Monty Pythoning again. This exactly half way between St Jean and Santiago. We got there about midday. Bloo was keen to get on and cover some more mileage but Catherine said she was staying. My initial instinct was to go on with Bloo. Catherine asked angrily what was wrong with us 'Bloody Scotsmen'. Could we not take it easy for a day? It seemed a fair question. This led to a discussion between Bloo and I. I harked back to my early childhood and the saying, Scots I think, 'The Devil Makes Work For Idle Hands'. Idle time was wrong. You should always be doing something. Bloo thought about this and it seemed this was taught in his childhood too. Why are we driving on he wondered. We don't need to. So Bloo and I decided an easy day made sense. His feet hurt. 'Never had blisters in the army' he said. Everybody's feet hurt. We sat in the sun in the field.

I went into the really nice Albergue and eventually found a woman busy in the kitchen. Not open until two o'clock was the message. I thanked her and asked if it was possible to get three cold beers. She cheerfully sorted them out and I returned triumphant to the table.

Then Lena and Richard hove up with the dogs. It was doctor day. Lena, Catherine. Bloo and I all with feet up for treatment. Lena with huge blisters. Bloo, used to feet in the army, was doing a fantastic job, his huge First Aid Kit laid out, with needles and plasters. Catherine played her Ukulele and sang. The dogs slept in the shade, minus panniers, and we all laughed at ourselves and ate gherkins and oranges. Wonderful people. Richard wanted to move on and though we tried hard to get them to stay they loaded the dogs and limped off to do another 8 miles and promised to see us in Leon.

At about five minutes to two Bloo and I went back to arrange beds. To our surprise about twelve Germans had appeared and taken over. The Spanish woman was not there, they were not open yet, but the Germans had gone behind the desk and were all busy filling in the booking forms. Bloo and I looked at each other and shrugged. Five minutes later my woman appeared. She paused taking in the scene. Then she went up to each German and took his, or her, booking form which they handed over eagerly. When she had them all in a sheaf, she stood back, angrily tore them in half and put them in the bin. The Germans crowded forward protesting but she indicated Bloo and I at the back and beckoned us forward. 'Premier'. She said. So to our delight this lovely woman dealt with us first, gave us the pick of the beds and made the Germans do their forms all over again to teach them

not to go into her desk! Bloo and I found a nice room with five beds (not bunks!), three on one side and two on the other. We bagged the three beds. And put our stuff on them. We got more beers and went to report to Catherine who still sat in the sun strumming her Uke. I went back to the room to get something and a German woman was sitting on Bloo's bed. She had moved his coat to another. Obviously it was ideal if the three of us slept in the three side by side beds. I told her it was taken but there was no budging her. Possession, she seemed to be saying, was nine points of the law. So I went down to the table where Bloo and Catherine were and said the 'Bloo, there's a German woman in your bed. I can't shift her and I don't think she's your type. A change came over Bloo. His eyes narrowed and he strode off. Later I learned his mother was German, he spoke German, he had served in Germany and he did not like Germans being Germanic. He couldn't move her either. Down he went to our lovely woman. Up she came, assessed the situation and threw the German woman off the bed after a fierce dispute. Bloo returned triumphant.

We had an excellent dinner at which we were joined by Bob McEvoy who we last saw in Iterio. Bloo had first met him crossing the Pyrenees. Bob is an ex Australian Army Colonel and was later to intrigue me with his accounts of being a 19 year old Lieutenant in the Malayan Emergency lost in the jungle with 30 men and his part in the Australian force sent to the Vietnam War. Bob was an Artillery man which now includes missiles and explained many things to me about the Rapier Missile and the Falkland Islands.

Bloo was retired from the army as a Colonel having been a Para, an Apache helicopter pilot and finally a pilot trainer working for the Italians. His two sons have both served in Afghanistan. We talked a great deal and I rambled into stories of the retreat to Corunna. Now he keeps asking for more. He asked me to come and speak at his local historical society. Bloo was 62 and had had a second stroke and wanted to get fit again. This was his way of getting fit.

I wonder if I could have made The Bataan Death March without his fixing my foot. I'm sure Catherine wouldn't have.

Another guy died in the snow on the Pyrenees this year, the snow was much worse than last year, and another one was rescued and got a bill from the French for €1,000. A British guy fell out of a top bunk and damaged his back and was airlifted back to UK. Hope he was insured.

So - getting there. We all will. It sounds crazy having just wobbled on about feet but wish you were all here. It is an experience.

After dinner we repaired to our 5 bed room. I wish I had a video of it. Forgive me for talking again about feet. First Catherine dresses Bloo's foot. His little toe is awful not helped by him trying to remove the nail. Then he dresses her swollen strained foot and binds it up. I have tried to sneak away and pretend sleep. Bloo demands my foot. I assure him it is really good now with the rest. No avail. There was Bloo with his head torch on and his vast army first aid kit laid out examining my under heel which of course I cannot see. Catherine holds my foot still while Bloo diagnoses. 'It has got worse' he says. 'The under heel is a huge blue/black bruise with fluid under it. We've got to drain it'. Alcohol wipes, a knife and needles are produced. I consider the possibilities of losing my foot. Other interested spectators with helpful input gather. The fluid is triumphantly drained. We are watched malevolently by the German woman.



### **Wed 15<sup>th</sup> May – Sahagun**

Woke in Terrachilos de las Templarios to rain. My foot is plastered, Bloo's is bandaged and he binds up Catherine's foot again. She is in great pain and he is

full of Paracetamol. Coffee for breakfast. Catherine very quiet. She 'Monty Pythons' so Bloo, Bob, Archie and I carry on. 5 miles later we stop for coffee in a village and a worried Bloo goes back to look for her. He finds her sitting crying by the roadside. She angrily Monty Pythons him with emphatic gesticulations and he walks back to join us. Eventually a composed if very pale Catherine limps in. At last she agrees she needs a doctor but still Monty Pythons so we troop on to Sahagun and grab bunks for all in an old Monastery. On her belated arrival we escort her down to a doctor who sees her immediately and diagnoses a badly strained foot and Tendonitis. She must not walk for 4 days.

We all have a beer together and Raciones and make unhelpful suggestions. Mine was we get a little cart and pull her.

She, to my embarrassment toasts me. 'To the oldest of us who never complains'. Catherine asked me if I was a glass half full or glass half empty person. I said glass half full. Bloo said glass half full too. She nodded and said she was a glass half empty person which I thought sad.

We get her an appointment at four for a foot massage. In case you think Catherine gets special treatment as a woman let me say that an extraordinary bond forms in little groups like ours and the mutual support is amazing. Bloo told me one of the reasons he was on Camino was that he was grumpy and it was a side of himself he did not like. I expressed amazement as he is a gentle interested person. He hoped he had changed. My heel is sore but definitely better since fluid drained.

Bob, a quietly devout Catholic, had been to a Pilgrim Mass and been terribly moved. Nuns came and blessed him as a Pilgrim and gave him a little religious souvenir. He asked me if I was religious and I said no. He suggested maybe I'd like to attend a pilgrim mass and I said maybe I would. We all felt a most unchristian contempt for the tourist companies who organize 'Pilgrim Safaris'. Honestly 4WDs pick them up, drive then to within a couple of miles of their pre booked hostel beds where they get their Credentials stamped and they join us for dinner and no doubt think us unfriendly as we nurse our feet and share our pain.

Bloo, Bob, Archie and I are walking on tomorrow together feeling very sad about leaving Catherine. But we have her email and may see her later.

Bloo and I plan to try and kill some distance tomorrow doing 35 ks and then plan to take it easy for a couple of days in Leon. Hilarious non-stop section and three limping, no longer that young guys, are up for it. Bloo keeps trying to get me to talk to him about Wellington and I keep trying to get him to talk to me about his army life. We are both Scotsman abroad and he knows Rothiemurcus and the Dune near Aviemore, an area I know well too.

### **Thursday 16<sup>th</sup> May – Reliegos**

We left Sahagun at 7.15. Catherine had gone back to bed and was, apparently, asleep having said she did not want to say goodbye. We worry about her as we think she is a bit low but maybe she will catch us later. A very long walk to Reliegos. About 34 Ks or 22 miles. We are all very pleased with ourselves. I think my feet are not bad though helped by a chunk of paracetamol. Very cold indeed today with biting wind and a little worried about Bloo who was desperately cold. Tonight Bob said in recognition of my marching 22 miles with two ex-combat soldiers he was making me an honorary Australian and presented me with a gold kangaroo insignia which I will treasure. They are all in such pain and make nothing of it.

On Thursday night Bob lay down with a bag of ice on his swollen leg and fell asleep. When he



They put a roof on the old Monastery to make a bunkhouse



woke up the ice had melted. His bed was full of water and the floor beside his bunk was flooded. Good thing he was not in a top bunk.

Apparently a family have put out an Internet message to all the Hostels saying their 71 year old mother is on Camino and not been heard from since Pamplona and please can anyone who has seen her contact them. I bet mother is great and getting her own back!

I sit in a wifi bar with a glass of wine tapping away on the iPhone. The guys are doing pasta tonight but I want to eat proper food so will eat here in the bar.

The plan is to only do about 12 miles tomorrow and then stay 2 nights in Leon to relax. Archie's wife is dead. He is a plumber in Prestwick Scotland. After her death he started walking. His sons are grown up and 'I'm no going to sit in Prestwich on my own' he says. Colonel Bob's wife died. She was cremated and he planted a rose in her ashes and visits her whenever he is back in Australia.

I do occasionally miss a sleeping bag but I'll be ok. Met an American women of 60. She had dumped her sleeping bag. Seldom used it and too much weight.

I really feel I could walk for ever now. I am fit and strong with a beautiful supportive family. What man could want more? The company helps so much too.

Bloo now embarrasses me by introducing me as a military expert on the Peninsula War.

### Friday 17th May - Leon

Marched from Reliegos to Leon today. Bloo's idea of an easy day. 6 hours on the road with one brief stop for coffee. Found a hotel in Leon with 4 single rooms at €40 each. Luxury. Sheets. Toilet. Peace. Seems so long since we had that.

My enthusing about how well I felt was promptly punished. For the first time in years my sceptic sinus cold has struck. I can feel it coming and know what it portends. I am sure it was that bitter freezing wind yesterday, full in our faces all day. I have dosed myself with Anne Marie's magic Flumil Forte and Paracetamol. Groggy this morning but Bloo boiled some eggs and I had one. My body was devoid of energy today. The spirit was willing but the flesh definitely weak.

On arrival we had a couple of beers then a 3 course Spanish lunch with wine. I went for a siesta and just crashed. Woke and it was seven. But day off tomorrow! For good behaviour?

As you know I didn't eat with the others last night as it was pasta and I wanted meat and a bar with wifi.

This morning I overtook Mary on the road. A small Canadian woman who confided that although she told people she was 60 she was actually 68. It was an odd morning. Bob was way ahead going like a train. Bloo a hundred yards



Robert, Pilgrim and Archie



Ready to Go



Richard, Archie, Lena, Bloo, Robert & Bob



Lena, Dog Emerges

behind him radiating 'leave me be' and Archie and I trying to keep up.

I asked Archie what was up and he said there had been a rather heated religious discussion the night before when I was not there with Bob and Mary for the faith and Bloo for the opposition. Archie sensibly keeping out of it. We slowed slightly to talk to Mary. She said she had given Bloo something to think about last night and she was sure she had got home.

What? I asked. It seemed she was sure he was now thinking about god. Are you a Catholic? I asked curiously. Mistake. She was and laid into me. What she demanded was the one thing that every man owed god? 'No idea I confessed'. She was away. I hastily said I would give it deep thought and lengthened pace until she said she couldn't keep up and she would catch up with me later. 'Not if I see her coming she won't' I thought. (I now feel mean for that remark in my journal as I have learnt more about Mary and come to know her better, it was just how I felt at the time. She had also given Bloo a cross on a chain, which he wore. When it comes down to it, I was not there).

With an effort I caught up with Bloo marching grimly on. I knew now exactly how he felt. I got alongside him. Not yourself this morning Bloo? Pause. 'I'm just a grumpy old bastard' he said. Oh? He was of course mortified that in arguing he felt he had deeply hurt Bob and Mary. How could he have let himself be drawn in? Anyway we talked for a few miles and agreed there was no percentage in having discussions that challenged deeply held beliefs and the old Bloo came back. I have dropped the idea of going to Pilgrim Mass with Bob - he might think I'm serious.

Then round a weary corner and there was Lena and Richard outside a bar with her dogs. She appeared overjoyed to see us and we were to see her. A bit more on Lena and her dogs. She's from Sweden somewhere 600 kms north of Stockholm. The dogs are Vega (The Bouvier) and Yoda (The stray from Malaga). So Lena travelled from Sweden with her dogs to St Jean by train. The dogs are carefully equipped with purpose designed Swedish panniers for Vega, dog shoes to protect their feet and, for Yoda with short hair, a smart red coat against the cold. As they are never allowed in Albergues she carries a tent, dogfood, groundsheet etc ending up with a rucksack weighing in at some seventeen to eighteen kilograms. Since ten percent of body weight is as much as anyone should carry for any distance she is carrying about double the weight she should. When they stop Lena often tucks Yoda down her front. When he is sleepy he withdraws his head and you would not know he was in there. It is startling when you first meet Lena to see a Yoda's head suddenly appear from her bosom as she takes no notice at all and carries on talking. General opinion amongst the men was that this stray dog had struck lucky. We heard later that Lena had successfully completed her Camino and returned with her dogs to Sweden and was doing a maths degree.

Bloo has been lamenting he could not have recorded my Peninsular War stories. He knew nothing of the period but has thought deeply about war and armies and we have, I think, had mutually enjoyable conversations. Today we got well into the America Civil war and he gave me a blinding



Bloo & Lena, Dog Asleep

flash of insight into a Stonewall Jackson episode.

Bloo's wife Lee sounds a tremendous woman and he talks often of her. She was shot in the head in America by a hunter but survived.

The walk into Leon through the suburbs was tedious as you expect. We passed a camping shop so I got more socks and Bob bought gloves as his fingers were frozen. Its holding onto these sticks I reckon. The gloves turned out to be so thin as to be useless and he burnt them at Finisterre. This is a Holliday weekend in Leon and the band is playing outside. Now 8.30 and wondering if I can scrape up the energy to go see.

### **Saturday 18<sup>th</sup> May – Mazariffe**

Day off abandoned. The team marches on. Saturday was difficult. I should have stayed in Leon. I struggled on with my cold getting an increasing grip of me. It was another bitterly cold day. I couldn't eat so just plodded and didn't talk. At Villar de Mazarife after 14 hard miles I was spent. About 1.30 I just crawled into a bunk and slept till 5.30 interrupted by muscle spasms.

I know Archie, Bloo and Bob would have liked to go on and told them to but they wouldn't leave and fussed around like old hens. They say we are finishing this together if they need to carry me. Just see how I get on.

Country is high plateau with bitter wind.



Bit Tired I Think

### **Sunday 19<sup>th</sup> May - Leon**

I hardly slept in Mazerife and in the morning was feverish and weak. From bitter experience of this infection I knew there was no way I could go on. Even Bloo and Bob had to recognise I was deeply unwell. They arranged for me to stay in the bunk until late morning, booked a room for me in the Hotel we had stayed at Leon and arranged a taxi to take me there. Bloo thrust an extra Fleece on me, Bob produced antibiotic tablets, Archie gave me lozenges and they departed hoping I'd catch up when better. I knew it would be several days before I could even start to catch up and at their pace there was no chance.

So I took the Taxi to the Hotel in Leon, had something to eat and just slept.

### **Monday 20<sup>th</sup> May - Leon**

I wakened a little better and had a lazy day. I got up late and wandered around Leon feeling very tired. Must get a grip. Lashed out on a much warmer and a thicker fleece plus a neck warmer. I was glad of both of them again later on. The man in the camping shop spoke English. He says it is warming up all next week but the Cantabrian Mountains are always cold and Galicia is always cold at night even in Summer, and has a lot of rain. Got some more Fumil Forti. Off for something to eat and bed.

### **Tuesday 21<sup>st</sup> May - Leon**

A bit better now but taken a 3rd night now as not ready to walk. Told Bloo and others by text I will start again from Mazariffe where I stopped and pointed out that, at first I wouldn't be able to keep up with them as am sadly weak.

I heard from Catherine who had heard from Bloo I was ill. You may remember we sadly left her in Sahagun after taking her to doctor and masseur. She had been told to take 4 days off. Course she didn't. Now she is hardly able to hobble and was taken to hospital in great pain and told she must not walk on that leg for 3 weeks! Is there a lesson there for me? I suppose she felt like me it was just a question of willpower. Didn't work for her.

So I hope to set off gently tomorrow. Here in Leon all day so got wifi and able to do texting, check bank etc.

### **Wednesday 22<sup>nd</sup> May - Astorga**



It took me a massive effort of will power this morning to crawl out of bed. I couldn't eat breakfast. By the time I had walked down to the bus station I was shaking. No bus went to Mazariffe before 4. So I took a bus to Astorga. I booked into the old restored Albergue by the church. Right up in the attic so although I got a bed as opposed to a bunk I hit my head on wooden beams every time I sat up. Had egg and chips and a glass of wine and just slept. I Plan to walk the shortest possible distance tomorrow and stop. Now that I have warm clothes the weather has got better and I'm not using them.

It has just been so cold here. There was snow in the ditches, the Cantabrian Mountains lie ahead and we are warned the snow is quite deep so I need to get myself together.

I was keeping up. Day after day. We were good. Now I'm just weak which I hate. Will just plod on until my strength comes back but lack spark.

Astorga is one of the early places the troops concentrated for the Retreat to Corunna. The wine cellars were broken open and British soldiers roamed about looting, or lay there insensible in the street. They had even broken open barrels of army rum to mix with the wine. Difficult to imagine as you sit quietly sipping a beer.<sup>2</sup>

### Thursday 23<sup>rd</sup> May – Santa Catalina de Somoza

Comfortable walk to this tiny place. Village mostly abandoned. Crumbling Church tower with stork's nest make it look like a Mexican film setting.



Santa Catalina



The Road to Santa Catalina



Santa Catalina

Pleasant Auberge.

I took a room to myself which was good but at night very cold again.

### Friday 24<sup>th</sup> May - Rabanal

Walked only 7 miles to Rabanal and got a bunk at Gaucelmo Auberge. I stayed at this just redone old pilgrim hostel. Restored and run by the British Fraternity of St James. The volunteers speak English and it is immaculate. Donatio with dinner and breakfast as well.

So welcoming and in English. Cathy a hostelerio at breakfast. "Have you coffee. Have you sugar?" Hostelerios are volunteers and not paid, who organise, clean, cook etc in Albergues. They have almost always done the Camino so that they understand and relate to the pilgrims. In a week she goes to Santiago to the Pilgrims office in the Cathedral at Santiago. For people who walk on their own and have "achieved this wonderful thing there must be someone who understands what they have done and welcomes them" she says. At this stage of the journey people who come the distance begin to slow down because having travelled so far the path has become a way of life and they hesitate to end it. "You must attend the midday mass for pilgrims at the Cathedral at Santiago". "But I am not religious I objected". "You are, you just don't realise it, and the mass is to celebrate your achievement. Do go. It is for you."

I plan to laze around here a little looking for the old Roman Gold Mines. I can now imagine that the journey will end and I am tired. Bloo going like a steam engine will be in Santiago on Monday and then heads on to Finisterre. Bob is temporarily lost. Poor



Road to Rabanal



To Rabanal

<sup>2</sup> See more about The Retreat to Corunna in Notes

Archie limps on somewhere after Cacabelos.

I wonder if they will have me another night here in the Albergue? Much better but still coughing.

I may stay in Rabanal tomorrow. See how I feel.

Bloo texted to tell me he did 90 Ks in two days. I hope he is not in Scotland before me! My biggest regret of this Camino is that I did not apply myself to some basic Spanish to build on as Bloo did. Weather freezing at night, hot in the day.



Rabanal – Gaucelmo  
Auberge

### **Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> May - Rabanal**

A second day lazing in Rabanal. Wandered around in the sun enjoying the warmth. Not allowed two nights in Auberge so taken room in a casa for a night. No wifi but can pick that up on the bar down the road. Plan to head on over the mountains tomorrow to Molinaseca.

A burly London businessman watching footsore walkers with sacks told me his father had told him that people who made things any harder than they had to be were idiots. He had sent his sack ahead by taxi. He asked where we had started from, he had started from Leon. I said we were just a sad bunch of idiots who had walked from St Jean carrying their sacks.

### **Sunday 26<sup>th</sup> May - Acebo**

Set off, much refreshed, for Molinaseca but only got as far as Acebo. A beautiful view of the mountains from Rabanal with a rough broken path and killing descent to Acebo. I am good but others less so.

Booked into €5 top bunk but free blankets so swiped two.

The picture is of today's track. Not far away is the new road. The taxi pilgrims follow the tarmac so they can call the car that follows them with their luggage if they get tired. At the approach to the village they get out, put on their sacks, brandish their walking poles in fine style and stride proudly in to their pre booked accommodation (they know they will be there) and tell stories of the road while weary walkers search for a bed.



Steep Descent to Acebo

The descent to Acebo might not look much on the picture but in The Retreat to Corunna there was five feet of snow and paths were ice. There was little food, and of course bitter cold. A splendid account of two modern soldiers walking 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary is in the Notes.



Acebo in Sight

### **Monday 27<sup>th</sup> May – Ponferrada, Nova Hotel**

On to Molinaseca, around 5 miles of further descent. Then hopefully onto Ponferrada. Another stretch to Villafranca then more mountains. At last I have got out of the very beautiful mountains which have either poor wifi or poor voice line but not both. Stopped in Molinaseca for Breakfast. I arrived in Ponferrada keen to see the expensively restored Castle of the Templars. It was closed. Went to the Information Office. 'Why is it closed? The sign on the door says it is open'. Ah, the people were tired so they are sleeping and the Castle is closed'. She shrugs.

Walked on through Ponferrada to try and get ahead a bit and found myself on the Western fringes. A very modern, apparently deserted, hotel by a new motorway came in view. A sign said 'Special Rates for Pilgrims'. I went in and asked how much. €20 but no breakfast! I took it. A full size bath, huge late Spanish lunch with wine for €10. Luxury. I'm actually on the last page of maps in The Book now and the end is in sight.

Having formed an impression of the Retreat before and after Acebo I finally stopped and had a look around at Cacabellos. The scale of the maps and sketches is all wrong and only with difficulty have I sorted it



Castle of the Templar Knights -  
Ponferrada

out. Now I think I have it and have sat on the bridge considering the angles. It is a neglected minor area of history and I do not think anyone has properly tried before to re-create the drama of it who has actually been there.

## **Tuesday 28<sup>th</sup> May - Villafranca**

Well did 20ks to Villafranca today and would have liked to push on another 8ks. But raining and not sure of a bed. Stopped west of the town about 2.15 but Albergue full. The girl who runs the Albergue offered to drive me to another hostel with a bed so off we went. This turned out to be the municipal hostel to the east of town I'd walked past 30 minutes before. Oh we'll. A bunk is a bed.

The steepest ascents apparently lie ahead. Villafranca is known as little Santiago as frail pilgrims who could not face the mountains ahead and the climb to O'Cebreiro could get their papers and be considered to have done their bit. I was greeted by an American girl Bella who said I'd done very well doing 20ks as this morning I'd said I couldn't manage more than 15. I said I didn't think we had met and had difficulty convincing her I was not called George.

I'll pitch for O'Cebreiro tomorrow but it is 30k+ and a climb of 800 meters so no promises.

Bloo texted following this morning.

"Hi Robert, glad you are making good progress. We left Archie at Cacabelos and he has since moved on to Sarria. Bob and I arrived Santiago yesterday and went to mass where I fell asleep on the floor! Missed the thurible swinging so am going back today. When do you estimate being here? We are off to Finisterre and will be back on Saturday, leaving for UK on Monday. Safe journeys. Aye. Bloo"

So poor Bloo disgraced himself by falling asleep on the Cathedral floor during mass when they were "swinging the giant smoky things" to which he had been looking forward. You can't take those Scotsmen anywhere!

Cannot believe how much I slept last night. Woke up and it was 7. Not on the road till 7.30.

Sitting in tiny bar which advertises wifi. No wifi. Nice Spanish Lady runs about serving endlessly eating and drinking Spanish men which turn out to be husband and friends. I mention to Spanish lady no wifi. She becomes distressed. There is wifi. I explain there is not. Eventually she identifies husband who speaks some English. After tedious conversation when explains to me the router is in the roof, the walls interfere, it is raining etc he admits the wifi doesn't work. I smile kindly to his upset wife and order another glass of wine. He turns back to his friends. On to another cafe with wifi. No of course not really.

If I follow book sections which are quite demanding, very best I could be in Santiago would be 5th of June. That assumes I can make 800m climb and 30k tomorrow. I would dearly like to arrive in Santiago on my birthday but question my capacity. Of course if I made it on 5th June Anne Marie's. birthday is just as good!

It is clear I shall not get to Santiago before Bloo and Bob which I much regret. I will definitely go to Pilgrim Mass when I do and am determined not to fall asleep as Bloo did on the floor.

Well I'm trying for an early night and an early 6 start tomorrow to see if I can make O Cebreiro tomorrow on the top of the mountains.

## **Wednesday 29<sup>th</sup> May – O'Cebreiro**

Another walk I will remember for a long time. Woke at 5.15 and on the road at 6. Arrived at O'Cebreiro at 2.30. So 8.5 hours on the hoof and hoofs were tired. Only had a coffee plus a bit of potato cake on the way. Wherever you touched or crossed a road some idiot with an aerosol paint spray had been. He (or she) particularly liked spraying each end of an arrow. You knew it was an arrow but could not tell which way it pointed. It has poured with rain and it is very cold. It felt



Cacabellos – Rifleman  
Plunkett's Position



Just went on up for 31kms



like an awful lot more than 32 k to me. A very long hard day and all uphill. The higher I climbed the thicker the cloud and the heavier the rain. I arrived in O Cebrerio in thick fog and rain hardly able to find the village, which is very small. When the girl at the municipal hostel said I could have a bunk I was quite emotional.

Below is the piece James Hinton wrote about the same journey in his piece on the Retreat. And he did it in January in a Kilt! Full Blog address is in notes. I empathised with all he wrote.

*We had a beer and decided the only thing to do was to go for the summit even though we were tired and wanted to rest. It was a hard climb and just when we thought we had done it we found we had another 4 km to climb. And when we reached farm buildings, once more we thought we were there, as we slipped in snow and mud in fog and snow flurries. At last we made it as darkness set in and people wanted our photos which we obliged despite being completely spent of energy. Thankfully the Albergue was open and after resting, wondering whether a heart attack would now perhaps claim me, we had a great dinner with lots of wine, and shuffled back in the swirling snow, shivering, teeth chattering in the snow blizzard back to our humble bunk bed. We were given some brandy and more photos taken. We felt proud of ourselves for overcoming adversity and climbing that 'effing' mountain.*



Higher you got, thicker the mist

### Thursday 30<sup>th</sup> May - Triacastelo

A British girl of around 25 collapsed today. She was part of an organised group with a leader so lots of people to help her. Mutters about her being on medication which rather made me wonder what she was doing on top of a mountain in thick fog. Been a bad day but looking up. Miserable government, or Junta, hostel which meant utter lack of interest and few facilities and no blanket. An American woman of around sixty, also without a sleeping bag, asked if she could have a nice warm young Spaniard to keep her warm since no blankets. The po faced girl said no. Maybe I could try asking for a Spanish girl I said to the American lady. 'Honey'. She said. 'I can get away with it, you try I bet that bitch calls the police'. Place even looked like a prison. I really had no option as the few other places were full, it was very cold and it was streaming rain. So I put on all possible clothes for the night. Long trousers. Short trousers. Both fleeces Ect. Neck warmer. Waterproof jacket and trousers (wet) and sandals. Not boots. I know it was not ideal but the water was on the outside and what options did I have? Did not sleep well. I left at 7 without breakfast. I would have left earlier but concerned about getting lost in the fog and dark on forest tracks. I thought it was flat and then a descent. But it just kept on going up on these soaking muddy stony paths. I started getting dizzy spells. I was afraid I might fall down in the mud and had horrid visions of actually collapsing and finding earnest youngsters leaning over me saying 'oh the poor old man, he's fallen down'. So every time I felt my balance going I sat down. Passers by asked if I was alright but I just said I was resting. Anyway I struggled to the top and rested frequently. Then started the long steep descent down the mountain. I began to think I'd never make to Triacagela. Some 12 miles took 7 hours!



View from Highest Point



Triacastela Comes in Sight

Only about half a mile from Triacastela I was sitting on a stone marshalling my few resources, and I think I had gone into some sort of suspended animation. In the distance I could hear voices and there seemed to be people waving at each other. I gradually became aware that the hands waving were inches in front of my eyes. I jerked myself awake to see two girls, Germans, waving their hands back and forward in front of my face and trying to talk to me. 'Sorry', I said, guessing they wanted their photos taken, 'did you speak to me?' They seemed very serious. Apparently they

were concerned I was ill, or possibly unconscious, as they could get no reaction. I thanked them for their concern and assured them I was fine, just resting. My throat was very sore making it difficult to turn my head and my battery did seem very low. I got to my feet and tried to walk nonchalantly on. I made it to Triacastela, only 30 ks but I found it hard work. No more government hostels for me. I found a lovely private Albergue. Clean. Kind woman. A bed with a blanket. Away from that dammed fog and wind. Very much warmer as had descended some 1,500 feet. Rested. Had pork chops and some vino tinto plus paracetamol and slept for three hours. When I woke up warm and rested I was twice the man.

I am just so glad to be out of these mountains. I don't know what the view is like when the fog has gone - and don't care.

### Friday 31<sup>st</sup> May – Sarria

Just got into Sarria at two. I had a beautiful sleep last night. Ate breakfast and not on the road till 8. Feel totally restored. Even stopped for a sandwich for lunch as thought maybe I wasn't eating enough. Quickly found a reasonable Albergue and he did me a clothes wash.

A key town Sarria. It is just over 100 ks from Santiago and 100 ks is the minimum distance you need to do to get a Compostela, or Certificate saying you have done the Pilgrimage. Consequently a lot of new people start from here and the vans carrying rucksacks run in fleets. Sprightly people in trainers with lunch packs on their backs stride past you light as air.

I do now believe I will enter Santiago on 5<sup>th</sup>, but not my birthday.

It's odd. It is hard doing this and anyone who says it isn't hasn't done it. Why do it? Don't know. To show to me I can maybe. To meet new and amazing people like Bob, Archie, Bloo and Catherine. The astonishing thing on the long and sometimes painful walks is how much you learn about people. Ask a question. Shut up and listen. Soldiers like Bob and Bloo who Harbour deep resentment for the lack of recognition from government for their dead comrades. They just talked. Catherine who carries the weight of the world on her shoulders and places little stones she has brought from Australia for her dead baby and dead brother thinks of the mother that didn't speak to her. I'd like to write it all down but won't because she spoke I think to me because I listened and she would never see me again.

I have had a very fortunate life but nobody's life is all easy. In a way the 'path' or 'way' is to me a metaphor for life. There are low points where you wonder if you can summon up on. Where you expend the last sparks of energy, but somehow carry on. There are high points when the sun is out, the swallows are in the sky and you are well and, as has happened to me on some high stony path, I have shouted out to the gods. 'Thank you for such a fantastic life and day'. I watch the awful pain suffered with bleeding blistered feet. But they carry on. I watched how they helped each other and are better people for it.

I'd love a pint of real ale in the forest. And a walk. And being lazy. Surely there is still some venture to be undertaken, and without the boat there are no voyages.

Nobody who has not set out on this crazy walk can understand I think.

Anyway I'm only 115k from Santiago! Get there on 5th.

### Saturday 1<sup>st</sup> June - Portomarin

Left Sarria 7.15 and arrived here in Portomarin at 13.30. Tried for a room but none so bunk again. Strange how much things have changed since Triacastela. Up till then everyone was asleep by 9



At last Clear of Mist



Waiting for the Taxi.  
A common sight.

latest. But in Sarria people had soft bags etc and had obviously not been walking.

Meant to push on another 5 miles but too lazy. So only done 14 miles. Tomorrow 15.4 miles so shall just eat and have Siesta.

### **Sunday 2<sup>nd</sup> June – Palas de Rei**

Now at Palas de Rei. Beautiful day though cool, and easy walk of 15.5 miles through lovely countryside. Left at 6.15 and arrived here at 2. Took a single room for the night feeling tired of bunkhouses. Very relaxed so eating and then Siesta. Talked to a Muslim called Ghanem from Kuwait today. First I've met on Camino. He was 24 and a student in Barcelona. He was there for spiritual refreshment and had been a little nervous about coming. But he had found himself totally accepted and met many people. He had only started at Sarria as a 'taster' but now planned when time available to walk from St Jean. Met another dog doing the Camino today.

Much smaller panniers and a sort of Labrador. Disgraced itself at a cafe by madly pursuing a Siamese cat, panniers flapping, with all in pursuit of dog. Only 43 miles to go. Can't believe it.

Plan to walk tomorrow to Aruza. Then Tuesday to O Pedrouzo and Wednesday 5th into Santiago. God Willing. Or Inch Allah as the Arabs say. I keep checking the map to make sure it is true.

Apparently Bob will be in Santiago so we must try and find him. Archie is lost and has no phone but he may be on the notice board. I have missed their company. Cool again today but I think I can get my shorts on tomorrow.



Easy Walking

### **Monday 3<sup>rd</sup> June – Ribadiso**

A lovely gentle walk in the countryside. I walked a little with a Danish girl called Sissel. She was a teacher of retarded children and had started from St Jean. Of course she had a lot of pain from her feet. Her actual name was Norwegian so I asked her if one of her parents was Norwegian. She laughed. She explained that her father, before he married her mother, had a Norwegian girlfriend of that name and wanted his first girl child named after her. Her mother was not keen and after negotiation she was named Sidsel which was a variation of the name.

She had come, she told me, because she felt mentally exhausted from the strain these children who would never actually get better. She wanted to do something that would physically tire her, not mentally. The Camino was a success for her.

The degree to which life is reduced to the next step, the state of your feet and where you will sleep is therapeutic. Although I had brought books and BBC Podcasts on my iPhone I never actually could be bothered to listen to any of them. It is another world strangely separated from the world you live in. I stopped at two again in Ribadiso. Just beautiful spot on river with an old Roman bridge. Sissie walked on and I never saw her again. That's the Camino, often just a snatch of somebody's life which you remember, and that's it. I ate with a British couple who had spent their lives in South Africa. They had visited many historical military sites there and I was interested. Spion Kop sounded particularly atmospheric and sad. One more day followed by one more night and then Santiago! Sleepy and unstressed. Plan to be on road tomorrow at 6 sharp. 8 hours march seems to be normal now. Will start checking where I book in at the Cathedral to get my Compostela. I really am actually going to make it!



Coffee Stop

### **Tuesday 4<sup>th</sup> June – Santiago de Compostela**

I prepared for an early departure without waking the rest of the sleepers. Rucksac packed, slept in my clothes of course, so at 5.30 quietly got out of my bunk, picked up the rucksack and tiptoed out. As I went through the door I brushed the wall with my left sleeve to guide me in the





darkness. The Spanish use cheap rocker light switches, my arm brushed a row of them I did not see – and the lights all came on! I fumbled madly with the switches putting on more lights before managing to get them all off again. The best laid plans of mice and men gang aft agley.

I marched on to Arzua and stopped there for a coffee and to ask directions as I could see no signs. The place was deserted but for a Camino girl (rucksack and shell) who sat in the window gazing down the street who seemed to ignore me so I sat away from her always anxious not to intrude on a girl on her own. As I got up to leave she said ‘Bon Camino’ and I asked her if she was OK. I have lost my friend she said sadly, I am looking out for him. So for all the easy camaraderie there are times when I realise I should have spoken to her when I came in and perhaps she was cautious in speaking to strange men.

[The Last Long Day](#)

I felt good and strode on covering ground well. It was a lovely day. I had a confusing email from Anne-Marie about their arrival in Santiago when I stopped for breakfast further on. It seemed to suggest they had rooms booked for that night. I consulted The Book and it seemed I had already done around 15 miles. A new idea formed in my mind. If they had a room booked, why not keep going? I knew I had a bed no matter what time I got there. Surely I could do another 15 miles. The day was beautiful, it was my 74<sup>th</sup> birthday, maybe I could make Santiago on my birthday after all. I rang Anne-Marie. Her somewhat opaque information, I now realised, had been because she and Elisha wanted to be in Santiago to meet me as I walked in as a surprise. Now I had spoiled it. I explained I was half way there so we agreed I would carry on but they were not due till around nine o'clock so I would get there first.

I marched on. The second 15 miles seemed twice the distance of the first 15 miles, or maybe I had not come as far as I thought. I got hopelessly lost on some country back road adding to the distance. After so much cold weather it had suddenly become hot. I began to wonder if I would make it. My estimated arrival was half six, I actually made it at half seven. At Monte del Gozo, about 4 miles from the cathedral, I was astonished, as I sat tiredly on a stone, to see a deeply tanned girl with rings in her belly button in a tiny bikini walking down the road with a man. One does not expect to see Spanish girls in this conservative part of Spain dressed this way. They stopped and turned out to be Irish. They enquired anxiously after me saying I looked all in. Look there's a nice bunkhouse here, he said. Plenty of room. Come with us and rest and eat. Walk into Santiago tomorrow. That's what we're going to do. I explained it was my birthday and I wanted to make it. I got up to carry on. Which birthday she asked so I told her. They doubted I would make it and I suspected they might be right, but plodded on. Descended from the heights, over the motorway, and into the awful confusing modern suburbs where I wasted time getting lost again. At last, to my joy and relief, I entered the Pilgrim's Gate and the old city and, finally, the Parador which Anne-Marie had booked. They seemed used to exhausted sweaty Pilgrims and showed me to a splendid room – WITH A BATH. I got into the bath and it was just heaven. I luxuriated in hot water and soap. I washed my hair and beard and it will remain as one of the great satisfactions of my life – how trivial. And my old teacher, Erich Meissner, said hot baths ruined a man. Hannibal's ultimate defeat by the Romans, he said, was due to the hot Baths and soft women of Capua emasculating his soldiers. Of course Erich firmly believed a cold shower at seven o'clock in the morning in December in the North of Scotland was just what a boy needed to start the day. Erich, I thought, you would turn in your grave to see me now.

I put on a cleanish shirt and trousers conscious Anne-Marie had told me Elisha was bringing clean clothes and intended to burn the clothes I had with me which must surely be verminous. Funnily enough pilgrims often did just that.

I went and had a beer and waited watching the taxis pull up. I had by then realised that I was, unless actually ill, able to bounce back very quickly, even when I thought myself absolutely deeply exhausted, after a little rest



and a beer. Perhaps it is all in the mind. I had been walking for thirteen and a half hours that day and covered over thirty miles. I confess I felt quite pleased with myself.

Elisha and Anne-Marie got out of a taxi and I walked up to meet them.

An emotional re-union. They booked in and went back the rooms, Anne-Marie was next door, and a bottle of Champagne on ice had appeared courtesy of Rory. So we celebrated my birthday and my arrival and everything. After obeying orders and changing into clean clothes we went for dinner in the superb old dining room in the cellars, but the day was catching up with me and I started falling asleep, I blame the wine, and so went happily to bed.

[Reunion at Santiago on my Birthday](#)

### Wednesday 5<sup>th</sup> June - Santiago



I am told the beard must go  
I can see why!

Awake to the luxury of space, a soft bed with a warm Elisha and a huge buffet breakfast. We went to explore Santiago which Anne-Marie had never seen before. At 11.30 we went to the Cathedral, Pilgrim's mass being at 12.00. I grabbed seats, knowing later arrivals would have to stand, and Elisha and Anne-Marie went off to explore. The cathedral filled up with Pilgrims, many still with rucksacks, and others, all chattering and taking flash pictures in all directions with smart phones and cameras. The photos would mostly be not worth having but in spite of cathedral wardens patrolling and asking them to stop they persisted right through the service. It really is very selfish and impolite. Were I devout I would take great objection to all these hands in the air endlessly flashing their cameras.

The service ended with the swinging of the two great incense burners, or smoky balls as Bloo was wont to call them. These are, I understand, the largest anywhere and require five people to control them. They are hung from the ceiling of one of the towers on thick rope. The retaining ropes were undone and the team gathered around some sort of hoop which controlled them. The huge incense burner were lit and started to swing from side to side over the heads of the clergy emitting increasing clouds of grey smoke which gently drifted down over the assembled priests. The balls swung further and further, and faster and faster, and then the swing was so pronounced they disappeared from view at the end of each swing. Like some sort of berserk pendulum clock. I now understand why they at one stage fell out of use. A team of some skill is needed to avoid the burners colliding and getting out of control. Twice I believe in medieval times the rope broke allowing a burner to fly off and crash. Once when the queen was at mass. They have come back into use with the revival of the pilgrimage in modern times. More pilgrims walked the route in medieval times than do now.

After this theatrical performance (difficult to see properly for all the hands high in the air clutching flashing cameras and iPads) people started queuing up. Now I know virtually nothing about catholic services but I did realise this was to do with communion. Anne-Marie nudged me. 'Dad, why don't you go up for a blessing, you've earned it'. In high good humour and very relaxed I asked her if she thought I should. She did. So I got in queue and went forward. I was faced with, I presume, a priest in a red cloak with a bowl of wafers. He handed them to some and put them in the mouths of others. Uncertain about presenting him with my open mouth I took the wafer. There seemed to be several priests handing out wafers so I politely took one each from the first three and returned to my seat. Anne-Marie and Elisha were convulsed with a mixture of laughter and horror. 'Dad', Anne-Marie explained, 'you should have crossed your hands over your chest, like this, to show you just wanted a blessing'. 'Now she tells me!' Anyway she now thinks I am possibly an honorary catholic. Doing well, honorary Australian and now honorary catholic. What with Bloo and myself they may ban Scotsmen from Mass.

We went on to a Pilgrims lunch and I went for a Siesta while Elisha and Anne-Marie explored the town and shops.

I made contact with Bob and we all went down to meet him at a bar. He had with him to my delight, Archie, Irene, Mary and an American who I had not met whose two daughters had come over to walk the last 100 miles with their father. It was a great reunion. Then Archie and Irene went off and the Americans left. The rest of us went for dinner and it was a great evening. I learnt that Archie and Irene were now together. Both had been widowed around four years ago and Irene had only come on a last minute impulse because her friend Mary was going. The latest news is that Archie, having spent some weeks having his knee treated, is off to Canada to spend time with Irene. It is really something. Two great people on their own getting together and we wish them all the best.

### Thursday 6<sup>th</sup> June - Santiago

We had a full day in Santiago which had turned suddenly cold again. We followed the shells marking the pilgrim route in back out to the edge of the old city, had a coffee and watched the



pilgrims approach the Pilgrims Gate, stopping and staring about them seeking the signs to follow, just as I had done.

### **Friday 7<sup>th</sup> June - Home**

A taxi picked us up to take us to Corunna Airport and it took us down through the suburbs I had walked through while Anne-Marie studied, fascinated, the Pilgrims walking in. She noted those looking fresh with trainers and light day sacks with scorn – not proper Pilgrims she said.

We arrived back in Heathrow where she had left the car and got to her house at around seven where Rory had prepared a huge barbecue, iced champagne, a feast indeed. Emily (Anne-Marie's youngest) was there and we talked and I answered questions and told anecdotes of The Way and the people I had met till late when Anne-Marie ran us home.

I had weighed myself before I left home did so again as soon as I got back. I was delighted to discover that I had lost exactly 14 lbs (6.1 Kg) in weight and was down to 12 stone (73.2 Kg).

## NOTES

### **How to do the Camino Frances**

Simple. You get yourselves to St Jean Pied a Porte with your rucksack, you put it on your back and you walk with it till you get to Santiago 800 kilometres away as the old pilgrims have been doing for 1,000 years. However there are ways of making it easier. I have to recognise that not everyone can get a month off to do it. Not everyone feels strong enough to carry their possessions. Not everyone will risk, after a long day having nowhere to sleep. So business has stepped in.

Increasingly as you get closer to Santiago fleets of vans collect the rucksacks and deliver them to your pre-booked room. Vans will also take you within a mile of the hostel so you can step out with your rucksack and arrive waving your walking poles and asking for your bed. And of course you can start from Sarria, just over 100 kilometres from Santaiaago, and still be entitled to your Compostela (The Certificate to show you have walked the Camino).

Assuming you are doing it properly, carrying your own things, the first thing to think about is the weight of your rucksack. I weighed everything and any item had to justify its place. No books for example (Apart from The Book!). I got my sack down to 5 Kilos and I had the least trouble with my feet of anyone I met. I even left out a sleeping bag, though I did suffer from cold on some occasions as a result.

Good proven light walking boots. Walking sandals are nice for some sections and keep the feet cool, but you still need boots for muddy and rough sections so it is extra weight.

Do not be deceived, the walking is very hard. You will get blisters and sore feet, the only question is – how bad?

Compeed Blisters Plasters are very good. But use them at the first sign of a blister, do not let the blister develop. The first few days are not usually a problem. You may conclude you have no problems. But as the days go by your feet, being asked day after day, to do around 15 miles on hard stony tracks, with an unaccustomed weight on your back, will start to play up. Keep your weight down. Don't do five miles in a grassy park with 10+ kilos on your back and conclude you are fit. Not the same thing at all!

One of the quickest ways to get trouble is to fall into step with someone who walks faster than you do. At the end of the day you may congratulate yourself on keeping up. At the end of three days you may well have crippling tendonitis, blisters and a lot of pain. We all make this mistake – walk at your own pace.

## NEWS OF FRIENDS

What of the people I met along the way? I have news of the following. There is a thread of lasting injuries to feet and knees which I am convinced is aggravated by carrying too much weight.

### **Archie McRoberts and Irene**

When we met them in Santiago I realised they were together. Bob told me Irene had approached him and asked him why Archie didn't speak to her. She explained she liked him but couldn't get him to talk to her. Bob, finding himself cast as matchmaker, cornered Archie and asked him why he didn't talk to Irene as she liked him. Archie was taken aback saying he didn't know much about talking to women but he thought Irene was 'grand'. Bob said something along the lines of 'well talk to her you idiot'. After extended hospital treatment for his knee Archie went to see Irene in Canada. Irene has had her foot in plaster for 6 six weeks. She is now coming over to Scotland and they plan to walk the Highland Way together.

### **Bloo Anderson**



Bloo returned to Rose House in Shropshire. Elisha and I stayed with him and his wife Lee for a night. As with many the Camino had a profound effect on Bloo and he yearns to return. He has applied for a position as a Hostelerio to try and recapture something of the magic. Bloo has walked Offa's Dyke and he and Lee are going to Australia to stay with Bob in 2014. Bob has been to stay at Rose House.

Bob McEvoy

Elisha and I had a Pub Lunch with Bob in Hampshire and he is in great spirits. Promised if we could come to Adelaide he could take me on some fantastic walks.

Catherine Pervesi

Catherine having done some farm work in Spain went to Italy and sought out her Italian family on her father's side. I get the impression they were surprised to see her. Last heard she is working in an 'alternative' community in the north of Italy. Also profoundly affected by the Camino. Suffered a great deal of ongoing pain in her foot and was coming to the conclusion it was a pain she would just have to live with – remember the Spanish diagnosis was Tendonitis. Her Italian relatives got her to a Consultant who said she had displaced, possibly broken, Metatarsal bones in her foot. Intense and painful physiotherapy seems to be working and she looks forward to the possibility of being able to dance and walk properly again. Typically, arriving at the Cathedral Office to get her Compostela Certificate, she, and a girl she was walking with, felt there was not enough ceremony and after all they had been through they deserved more than that. So they gathered some others and cheered and sang outside in the street – but were quickly shooed away by outraged officials.

Lena

Bob tells me Lena made it to Santiago with dogs and Richard. After various problems involved with Spanish regulations about dogs in busses and trains she managed to get back to Sweden (without Richard) and starts her Mathematics degree this year. Solutions to dog travel seem to have included putting the small dog down her front and in Rucksack to hide him.

Thursday, May 16, 2013 [Bob and Bloo and the province of the mind](#)

From Catherine Preversi's Blog at [www.onconstantcraving.blogspot.com](http://www.onconstantcraving.blogspot.com)

*A few days ago I met Bob and Bloo, two Scotsmen, also travelling solo. We've been walking together.*



*Bob's 73, a grandfather, salesman, and extraordinary storyteller. His stories of the personal lives of European nobility from last century have restored my faith in history.*

*Bloo (don't ask!) is 62, an ex military pilot, with 35 years experience in the army. Last year he had a stroke, lost his power of speech, but with dogged will and support, has regained it.*

*When you're walking for up to 8 hours a day, every day, the heat burning down on you, the wind chilling you to the bone, your feet navigating the rocks on the path and screaming 'rest', it tests the fibre of your being, it tests the fibre of your doing. Out on 'the way', in conversation with the other, your common day-to-day censor, fried by the sun or buried underneath the old meat and peas in the deep freeze, becomes inaccessible. Camino Dementia! You become very personal, very quickly.*

*Keeping pace with the two B's has meant walking faster and further than I normally would. Two days ago, while walking the longest straightest stretch of nothing to date, a 16 km gravel road with no shade, no villages, and nothing to occupy the mind but mind itself, I asked Bloo to tell me what a soldier might be trained to 'think' in similar circumstances. He contemplated the question for a little while and replied 'see that puddle ahead? How far do you think it is?'. Make a guess, then step it out, he suggested. A bit later he continued. 'The horizon, do you want to know how far it is?' Math was never my strong point, but for the sake of conversation, I nodded. His response included words like height, square root and multiplication. Try it, he said. I spat the dummy. 'I'm not playing' I replied. 'That kind of game reminds me of questions thrown at me as a child, questions I could never answer. You remind me of my father!'. OUCH! He stopped, looked at me, and the offence was obvious! Censorius Unavailabilus! What a bitch!*

*Some time later, falling back to walk separately, my mind attached itself to how strong I was becoming, how powerfully I was walking, and, wait for it, comparing myself with the cripples on the path. Sure, I'd had some blisters but they'd healed. Fifteen minutes later, striding along confidently, my foot suddenly, and momentarily, went numb. I was concerned for half a minute, then not. A kilometre down the road I was crouched on the grass by the side of the road, shoe off, pain searing my foot, the two B's at my side offering comfort.*

*'4 days, no walking' said the doctor. Tendinitis!*

*Bye Bob and Bloo. Thanks for the lesson.*





## I THINK CATHERINE'S BLOG BELOW A BRILLIANT TAKE ON BUNKHOUSE LIFE

**On gums and bums. MONDAY, JUNE 3, 2013**

5.00 a.m. It's something you have to get used to on the Camino, being woken at insane hours, grumpy at the chorus of nasal trumpeters who've kept you awake half the night. Every night I have the earplugs at the ready, and every night they get inserted, fall out, get taken out because I feel like I'm suffocating via hearing-deprivation, get cursed, and despite my best efforts, get lost or swallowed during the night by the angel of mercy! Your typical pilgrim hostel is dormitory style, which you share with anywhere between 4 and 100 people. Neither privacy nor modesty belong on a pilgrimage. They're first world luxuries. Being woken to the sound of backpacks being dragged across the Floor, zips opening and closing, plastic bags being rustled, walking poles collapsing in a racket on tiled floors - it's not the kind of gentle introduction to the day I've come to expect and depend on. Not a morning person! I've had to process my resentment at being woken so cruelly. It doesn't get easier.

This morning I suffer the disturbance for 30 minutes, drifting in and out of sleep, and eventually get up around 5.30, my inner huff clearly audible, I'm sure. I sit on the edge of my bed, and drag my pack to my feet. If you can't beat them, you join 'em. The man on the top bunk, who I could particularly strangle this morning - the entire bunk was vibrating under the force of his gasp last night - is standing directly to my right, his hip virtually in my face, arranging something on his bed. He seriously needs to do something about the shock of matted hair on his back. Should I be the person to tell him? In front of me, at arm's length, is a large German woman bent double, attending to her blisters. Her arse is almost in my face. I retreat a little further back onto the bed. To my right, another man, from the top bunk on the opposite side. Some people shouldn't wear lycra. He's emptying the contents of his pack all over the floor - why don't you take up the entire floor space you selfish sod? - while clearing his throat and flossing at the same time. I duck to avoid a projectile. Oh for God's sake! Add to this the passing traffic of people moving backwards and forwards to the dunny, and you've got a pretty clear picture of the normal morning routine in your average pilgrim hostel. I lower my head a little deeper into my pack, ferretting unsuccessfully for the bag that contains the electrical stuff, ipad and phone charger, uke tuner, batteries, and head torch. Suddenly I hear tinkle, tinkle, the sound of something light and metallic meeting tiled floor. I squint down onto the floor. A pair of dentures smiles up at me! Oh please!!!! I look up, from one arse to another, but no-one seems to have noticed. On impulse, and wanting as little physical contact as possible with the 'visitor, I do what any empathic pilgrim would do and with great dexterity, and a further tinkle, tinkle, flick the dislocated smile back in the direction I presume it's come from. In an instant, a hand darts down into the semi-darkness and retrieves it.

I'm sick to the back teeth with it all!!

From Catherine Preversi's Blog at [www.onconstantcraving.blogspot.com](http://www.onconstantcraving.blogspot.com)

## THE RETREAT TO CORUNNA



*'The Rearguard' General 'Black Bob' Craufurd and a Party of Riflemen before Astorga*

Sir John Moore's famous retreat to Corunna in January 1809 started at Sahagun (Pronounced Saagoon) and ended, of course, at Corunna. So for 100 miles the retreat followed the track of the ancient Camino. Essentially from Sahagun to Sarria. I was very much looking forward to this section and nobody else seemed aware that we would be stepping on the same bloodstained ground on which so many died. Over 6,000 British soldiers, and maybe as many as 1,000 women and children were lost during the retreat which took place in late December and January. Often the army billeted soldiers in the very Churches, convents and monasteries that are now Albergues. I do not want to repeat what is said in James Hinton's Blog, 'The 200th Anniversary of the Retreat to Corunna' (see later Note), so will just sketch the background.

Sir John Moore took command of the British army in Portugal in August 1808. His instructions were to 'drive the French back over the Pyrenees'. On 21<sup>st</sup> December Moore arrived in front of Sahagun, triumphantly driving out occupying French cavalry. He planned to march on Burgos.

Moore established his headquarters at Sahagun in a wing of the Benedictine Convent (Monasterio de Santa Cruz, now an Albergue). The corridors were full of sleeping soldiers (from the Recollections of Rifleman Harris) where pilgrims now have the luxury of bunks. On Christmas Eve he advanced on Carrion with the intention of later attacking Burgos. The troops cheerfully expected to have a fight at last, and by New Year to be drunk in Burgos. His army was full of confidence and in high spirits.

However Moore got it all wrong, or was unlucky, depending on your point of view. Napoleon had crossed the Pyrenees into Spain bringing 200,000 troops. On Christmas Day Moore received information that Napoleon and his army were a great deal closer than he had thought, and faced with overwhelming numbers, decided to retreat to Corunna and evacuate by sea to save his army. The Retreat to Corunna had begun. This decision had two major consequences. Firstly the Spanish concluded they were being abandoned, and secondly the demoralisation of the British army. The

British soldiers were convinced they could beat the French and wanted to fight. Many threw down their muskets in disgust when told to retreat. This led to a complete shambles of drunkenness and looting.

Discipline broke down. The soldiers broke into wine stores and drank themselves stupid. They saw the Spanish as hostile and abused them, and any women unwise enough to be around risked rape. The following French were if anything more inclined to take by force, so this was a bad time for a girl to be out.

Probably the majority of the soldiers who died did so as the result of drink. They had to be left by the roadside where they froze to death, or were killed, or taken prisoner by the pursuing

French. <sup>Note 1</sup> The French cavalry suffered just the same weather conditions and were little better off for food, so they were not inclined to mercy.

The retreat of the British, closely followed by their French pursuers, took them through the high Mesata and mountainous terrain that Pilgrims are familiar with, in dreadful conditions of cold and snow. It was marked by exhausting marches, privation and suffering.

On the last day of 1808 the rearguard of the British Army stumbled into Astorga. They broke open the doors of the bodegas and as the wine cascaded into the street it mixed with army rum from staved in casks. They took off their caps, scooped up the mixture and drank it. Cart bullocks were shot, carved up and cooked in the street. It was bitterly cold, snow lay on the ground and the nearest adequate supply of food was Villafranca.

On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1808 Napoleon reached Astorga with 80,000 men. Napoleon wrote triumphantly:

*“My vanguard is near Astorga; the English are running away as fast as they can..... they are abhorred by everybody; they have carried off everything, and then maltreated and beaten the inhabitants. There could not have been a better sedative for Spain than to send an English army.”*

The British decided to fight a delaying action at Cacabelos. Already British troops had plundered several houses and broken into wine stores. Gallows were set up outside Cacabelos to hang three looters as an example. But the French, under the young and dashing General Colbert, were much closer in greater numbers than was realised. A chaotic retreat through Cacabelos (many of the rearguard were drunk) to the narrow bridge over the River Coa resulted. The gallows had to be abandoned with the condemned still not hung. The bridge became jammed with fleeing British troops, many of them very drunk. Inebriated Riflemen were firing in every direction. The French Cavalry charged in amongst the confused mass of troops, hacking their way through and taking prisoners.

The gallant Colbert, considered the most handsome man in the French army, was killed while leading the charge by a remarkable long range rifle shot from across the river fired by an, ‘irrepressibly vulgar’ rifleman, Thomas Plunket of 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles,. The men behind him galloped over his corpse. At that time the French did not use rifles and constantly underestimated their range and accuracy.

At Villafranca, at the foot of the Cantabrian Mountains, Moore again hoped to make a stand. The mountains were ideal for defence and the stores in Villafranca were well stocked. But on 2<sup>nd</sup> January a riot broke out. Houses and shops were plundered, churches pillaged and wine casks smashed open in the streets. Food stores were broken into and provisions pulled out, scattered about, and ruined. Fires sent billows of sparks and smoke into the night sky. Down by the River Vallcarso the Artillery burned all their stores. Several hundred horses were shot on the same spot to avoid them falling into the hands of the French. There followed more misery including the terrible passage over the Cantabrian Mountains through O Cebrerio, which I found a struggle in May with only a light rucksack, plenty of food and no French Cavalry at my heels. It was described as ‘the flight of an indisciplined rabble’. Many were now bare footed. The road was one line of bloody footmarks. For most pity was an emotion they could no longer feel. Women dragged their half dead children after them through the snow. There were not many women left now. Most of them were too ill or weak, or drunk to carry on. They were left behind and died by the roadside. Commissary Schaumann saw a woman fall up to her waist in a bog and as she was sucked down by the slimy, ice cold, water, the men behind walked over her head.



It is noticeable that the Light Division under General Robert ('Black Bob') Crawford suffered few losses. Black Bob was known as a stern disciplinarian and fear of him kept his troops under control – and they survived. Black Bob (who was killed assaulting the breach at Ciudad Rodrigo) was a small man with a huge voice who always rode a very large black horse. During the retreat he found an officer being carried on the shoulders of two men through a river to keep him dry. 'Drop that officer'. Ordered Black Bob. When the men hesitated he shouted again. 'Drop that officer NOW' The officer was accordingly dumped in the freezing river. Black Bob made it clear his men were there to fight the French, not carry privileged officers across rivers.

On 10<sup>th</sup> January 1808 the remains of Moore's exhausted troops staggered into Corunna.

On the hills surrounding Corunna Moore turned to fight as he could not allow French guns on the surrounding heights to fire on the British fleet in the bay below. The British soldiers, delighted to be allowed to fight at last, regained some discipline and defeated the French. The French still have the battle of Corunna engraved on the Arc de Triumph as a victory, but they would!

Over 5,000 cavalry and draught horses were clumsily shot, or had their throats cut, and pushed off the cliffs to form huge piles of dead and dying horses at the bottom where squads of soldiers with hammers beat to death any still alive. Men who had become indifferent to the death and suffering of their comrades wept unashamedly as they watched the animals die on the blood-stained beach. <sup>Note 2</sup>

Sir John Moore died in the battle after his arm was taken off by a cannonball. He lies in Corunna still in a little garden, or park, in his stone coffin on a plinth, mostly forgotten and green with moss. An enormous amount of material was lost. But the survivors were brought back to Britain by the Royal Navy. <sup>Note 3</sup> They were re-equipped and returned to Spain and Portugal under Sir Arthur Wellesley (Later the Duke of Wellington) and successfully drove the French out of Spain.



**Sir Jon Moore's Tomb in Corunna**

Sources: The sources used for the descriptions given are all available. Eye witness accounts were:

- 'The Recollections of Rifleman Harris' and
- 'On the Road with Wellington' by August Ludolf Schaumann' translated from the German.

Other information came from various books but in particular 'Corunna'. By Christopher Hibbert.

Note 1: On the retreat to Dunkirk many British soldiers were made Prisoners of War by the Germans in the same way, lying drunk in ditches, disgusted with being asked to retreat.

Note 2: I recalled my father's description of the destruction of the trucks and cars on the beach at Dunkirk by running the engines without cooling water until red hot, then throwing cold water over them. I was thankful there were relatively few horses there though the Cavalry, particularly the French Cavalry, had some and they were shot. Dad had to shoot Morlich, his faithful Dalmatian, who was as quick into a ditch when aircraft engines were heard as the men.

Note 3. To get life and death in those days in perspective it should be remembered that, should you have been posted to the Fever Islands (the Caribbean), where there was no fighting, you were twice as likely to die of Yellow Fever or Malaria as if you fought right through the Peninsular war. Not even the possible satisfaction of a little glory.



# THE SIEGE OF BURGOS



*The Siege of Burgos Castle - 1812*

Wellington marched north from Madrid and laid siege to Burgos Castle in September 1812. He had only three heavy guns and was short of engineers. He was so short of ammunition that he offered a few pence for each cannon ball collected that had been fired at them by the French. In fact the Castle was much stronger than Wellington had supposed and was courageously defended by the French under a competent commander, General Dubreton. The French were well stocked with food and had plenty of ammunition. They were however short of water. In October, learning that a superior French force was marching to relieve the castle, he gave up the siege. It was one of his few failures and he took full blame. “XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX. Anglo-Portuguese casualties amounted to 2,064 casualties against the French loss of 623 men

The castle at Burgos today does not at first glance strike me as a very strong, more like a medieval fortress. Of course as on the three occasions I have visited it has been closed, in spite of signs saying it is open, so it is difficult to judge its strength. The French had built within the old walls a high artillery platform which was strong and very effective. Whether this has survived the restoration work I cannot say. There was a deep ditch XXXXXXXXXXXXprobably a ditch round the castle originally and there were a number of outworks. Also the hill was bare in 1812 and is now densely wooded. There seems to be no local awareness of the siege and no references to it.

Later the French blew up the Castle in a massive explosion so most of it was reduced to rubble.



**Burgos Castle in 2013**



There is some suggestion that Wellington, when he marched from Madrid did not intend to besiege Burgos. He was certainly poorly prepared for it if he did. His forces were too small having left most of them in Madrid, he had hardly any siege guns and only five engineering officers. It seems unlikely that Wellington set out without having a clear plan of action but it is possible. The Portuguese troops, who were much respected by the British, showed little enthusiasm for storming ditches and walls in small numbers. The weather was awful for September with heavy rain all month so the wretched and dispirited troops crawled about in the mud digging trenches and mine shafts.

The French had rebuilt and updated the then ruined castle in 1812. They had added ditches and outworks to the citadel which the French forces of occupation had constructed around the mediaeval castle that dominates the city of Burgos

Strange how little effect the failure had on the campaign.



# *The 200th Anniversary of the Retreat to Corunna*

*By Private James Hinton*

The Retreat to Corunna follows exactly the path of the Camino for 100 miles from Astorga to Sarria.

There was talk in the army about re-enacting this event but it fell through. However two private soldiers decided they would do it. They set out in the uniforms of the time on 2<sup>nd</sup> January 2009 from Astorga. One Rifleman, from 95<sup>th</sup> Rifles, and one, James Hinton, from 79<sup>th</sup> Cameron Highlanders. I think James's Blog is fascinating for anyone who has walked it on Camino – and the hardships of doing it on January come through clearly, especially when you have found how cold it is in June!

The Blog is at [http://www.the79thcameronhighlanders.co.uk/200th\\_anniversary\\_report.htm](http://www.the79thcameronhighlanders.co.uk/200th_anniversary_report.htm) and I recommend it.