

PILGRIMAGE

CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

2012 - 2013



CAMINO PORTUGUESE

2017



FORWARD

Confusingly there are many pilgrimage routes, or ways, to Santiago de Compostella in Spain. You can walk from Seville, Madrid, Barcelona or Lisbon in Portugal. However when people refer to the Camino de Santiago they generally mean the main route which runs from Pied de Port in France over the Pyrenees. The route is referred to variously as The French Way, the Camino Frances and the Way of St James.

I shall just refer to the main route, the French Way, as the Camino de Santiago. My second shorter walk I refer to as the Camino Portuguese.

I walked the Camino de Santiago which is my main story, setting out in 2012.

Then four years later the much shorter section of the Portuguese Camino from Porto in Portugal to Santiago de Compostella in Spain.

Rather than publish two memoirs separately I thought it made sense to combine them in one book.

The 'path', or 'way', can be seen as a metaphor for life. There are low points where you wonder if you can summon up the will to carry on. Where you expend the last sparks of energy, but somehow do 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 and stony path, I have shouted out to the gods. 'Thank you for such a fantastic life and day'.

NOT ALL WHO WANDER ARE LOST

Saint James, or Santiago

Santiago de Compostella

While there may be no historical evidence to support the contention that St James¹ preached in Galicia, there is some anecdotal testimony to that effect. It appears that some years after Christ's crucifixion St. James sailed to Galicia and Finisterre and commenced his ministry there. Finisterre, the finish, or the end, of the earth was an evocative place then. The most western point of Europe. Perhaps St. James told his disciples 'We shall take Christ's teaching to the end of the world'. In that context it does not seem as unlikely as I had at first thought.

It appears that St James's mission met with only limited success and he returned to Jerusalem where he was summarily beheaded by Herod Agrippa of Judea in 42 A.D. Following his martyrdom, St. James' disciples brought his body back, landing at Padrón² in order to be buried at World's End *Finis Terre*.

Queen Lupa and the Roman Legate conspired to destroy St James' body and the disciples but they managed to escape over a flooded river whose bridge collapsed behind them. They got as far as Libredon (now Santiago) where they finally laid St James' body to rest. The mists of time grew over these remarkable events until they disappeared from collective memory.

The Santiago story emerges again in 813 when a shepherd named Pelayo was drawn to a field in Libredon by a 'bright light' or star. Thus we have the field *compos*, of the stars *stella*, of St. James *Sant Iago*, which gives us *Santiago de Compostella*.

The bishop of Padron seized the moment and 'confirmed' the discovery of the tomb of the Apostle and so the story of St James was resurrected in perfect timing to spearhead the re-conquest of Spain for Christianity from the Moors or Moslems. Each time St James appeared at the crucial moment in a battle to turn the tide, the battle was won.

Thus we have the image of St. James the Moor-slayer, *Santiago Matamoros*, depicted as a knight in shining armour astride a white charger decapitating Moors with his sword.

St. James became the patron saint of Spain and remains so to this day.

The first written record of pilgrimage to Santiago was when Bishop Gotescalco journeyed there in 950. So you can claim that the journey you make has been made for 1,000 years.

For centuries, the *scallop shell*, which is typically found on the sea coast in Galicia, northern Spain, has been the symbol of the Camino de Santiago, and its pilgrims – los peregrinos. Pilgrims returned to their countries of origin wearing the scallop concha shell on their habit or hat to demonstrate that they had reached Santiago and prayed in its famous gothic cathedral.



¹ There were two apostles named 'James' in addition to James, the brother of Jesus. The first of these was James, the son of Zebedee, who was the brother of John (the purported author of four New Testament books).

² Padrón was believed to be the landing place where the disciples landed with the body of St. James. The church is full of extraordinary paintings and mementos of the landing.

I stayed a night in Padrón when I walked the Portuguese Camino in 2017. It is well worth a visit.

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CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

2012 & 2013

St Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostella



By Robert Stevenson
Updated 22/10/2023

INTRODUCING THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

This is a personal account of walking the 800 kilometres from St Jean Pierre du Port in France to Santiago de Compestella in Spain. The Route is an ancient Pilgrim Route variously known as the Camino Francais, the Camino de Santiago, or just 'The Way'. 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 or map.

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 20 lbs. I weighed myself and was 12.1 Stone, about 76 kilos. The recommended weight is 10% of bodyweight max, so my max rucksack weight should have been a kilo less, say 7 kilos. By the time I got to Santiago my rucksack was indeed down to 7 kilos, many possessions having been abandoned by the wayside. It is really surprising what you can do without if you have to carry it!

Distances are minimum distances taken from The Book. They are only valid 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. You may want to take side trips to see places of interest, which I did. 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 whole 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 thing you need, 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 only one room ahead. That is the way the old Pilgrims did it.

You never used to be able to book ahead and accommodation priority in hostels was given to those on foot with a sack. Cyclists came second and those arriving in a car were way down the list. The advent of mobiles phones has changed all this and the only hostels that stick to the old rule are government owned. They are not generally very nice. Privately owned hostels are friendlier and more helpful. The rapid emergence of organised travel companies block booking rooms ahead for their parties has made it ever more difficult to travel freely. Shouldn't be allowed!

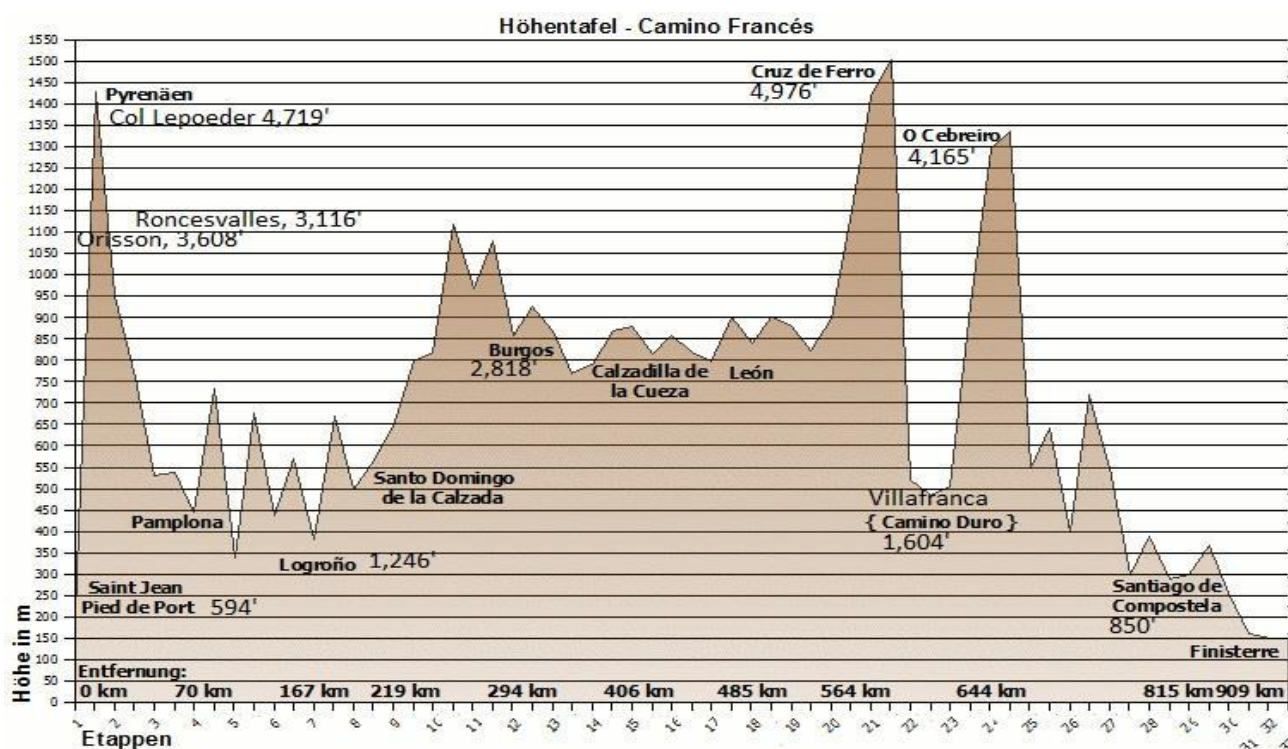
I met a few people with donkeys, but no wealthy pilgrims on horseback as in the past.

There were some cyclists, but not too many then. I know cycling is a wildly popular thing now. But when descending a narrow steep stony path to hear a loud angry yell from behind, 'get out the way', as some out of control idiot came hurtling down the path did not endear them to me.

You can start walking from Geneva if you want a seriously long walk, but I chose one of the two hubs for crossing on the French side of the Pyrenees, St Jean Pied de Port (translates as 'St John's foot pass') to Roncesvalles.

This involves getting yourself to Bayonne and then to St John.

In some ways my preparation was very poor. I was only moderately fit. I took the view that you just got there and started walking. I felt sure if others could do it I could too. Of course, I read The Book but not in any detail. Had I seen the topographical map below I might have hesitated. It actually looks worse that it is as it's horizontally compressed to fit on the page. But it does give a graphic warning of the mountainous nature of the country ahead.



The passage over the Pyrenees is not that bad with a little common sense, but every year someone dies up there. Usually due to ignoring warnings from the Pilgrim Office about the weather conditions. If French Mountain Rescue have to rescue you, and you ignored a warning, they will charge €1,000 for your foolishness.

Reviewing my account, I see that I really wrote it for myself. Just reading it brings memories of people and places flooding back.

GETTING TO ST JEAN PIED DU PORT

Monday 30th April 2012

I set out from home with my sack catch the 05:40 train from Brockenhurst and take the 09:12 Eurostar from St Pancras to Paris Gare du Nord.

There were terrible queues at the Eurostar check in. Security Checks like an airport with sniffer dogs running up and down. The whole journey was crowded and unpleasant. The train was shabby cramped. I was very disappointed as I had chosen Eurostar and the train to Bayonne to avoid the nightmare of airports and to be allowed to carry my pocketknife for the walk. Once in France I had to get across Paris to the Gare Montparnasse to catch the train to Bayonne.

So I needed a Metro ticket. I knew I needed to find a yellow ticket machine and had my Euro change sorted. I was looking doubtfully at a green machine when a North African type guy behind me asked in 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 approached it he said 'I show you' and rushed up to it. He put a card into the machine and pushed, very fast, various buttons, the machine issued a ticket and he asked 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 two more North African type guys who said I owed him money for the ticket and must pay. Nobody else was around. I refused but it got more menacing. In the end I decided it was a negotiating situation and after heated argument gave them €9 which they grudgingly accepted. Angry with myself I went down the steps to the ticket gate and put my ticket in. The gates, as in the London Underground, flew aside but when I strode through my backpack was too wide and I stuck. I reversed out and took it off hoping to get it through sideways, and tried again, but the ticket only opens the gate once.

Not wanting to trail back to the yellow ticket machine again, where my North African friends might be waiting, I looked for a solution. There were proper doors for luggage, not double gates as in UK, 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 went head first, I should be able to get through and drag the rucksack after me. I went through forwards on my hands and knees, planning to turn round and pull the sack. It 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 questioningly - 'Monsieur' I looked up, and there was the missing official looking down at 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, as a statement, in a kindly, pitying, way 'vous et anglaise'. I decided it was no time to tell him I was 'ecossais'. 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.

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 of Paris.

I had booked the Hotel du Basque in Bayonne, the old station hotel and although shabby with a narrow entrance from the street the room was fine. Narrow circular stairs led to the third floor. As everyone had rucksacks you could not pass another backpacker so it took some time to get up there.

The once a day mountain train to St Jean Pied du Port 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 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.

Tuesday 1st 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 had been the great French military base on the French side of the Western Pyrenees in the Napoleonic Wars, guarding the coastal route.

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 in 1813 they blockaded it, rather than bother with a siege they then by-passed it. A pontoon bridge was thrown across the tidal River Ardour estuary – how did they do that?

The tiny mountain train ran from a siding behind the station platforms up the single line to St Jean. It was crammed with people like me, in walking boots with rucksacks and high hopes. It crawled up along the banks of the river Nive. It stopped at two tiny stations and then end of line at St Jean. I booked into my hotel and went to explore. All very Basque with names in French and Basque languages.

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 'Pass Napoleon'. All the Pyrenean passes have forts at each end. My own favourite is an alternative crossing point emerging at Jaca 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

WALKING THE CAMINO

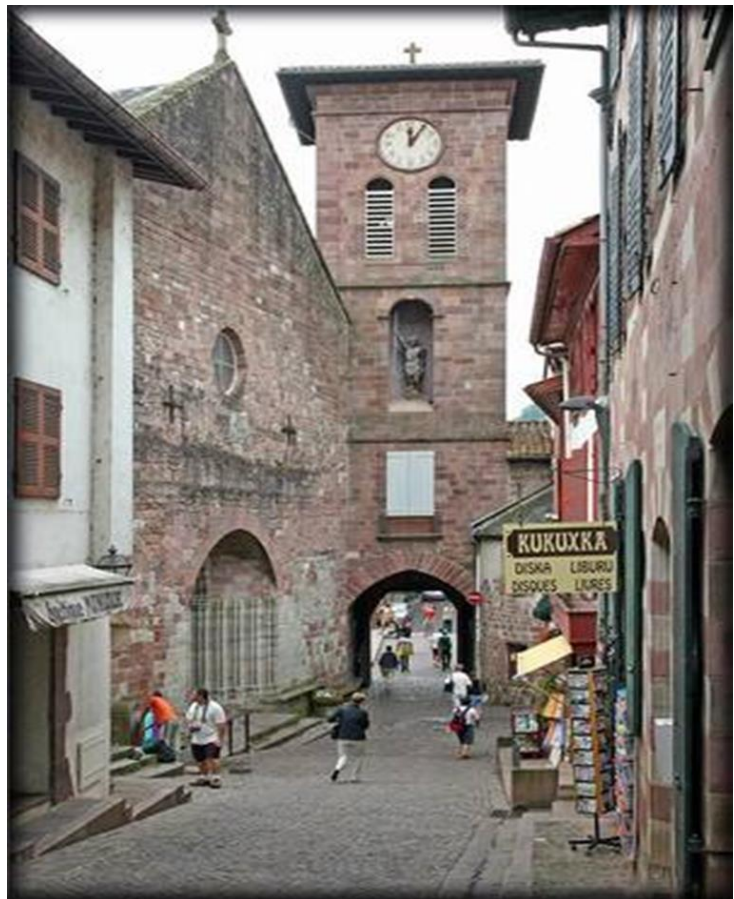
Wednesday 2nd May. St Jean to Orisson.

I originally planned to leave St Jean Pier de Port and to get to Roncesvalles (Roncevaux in French) that day. It is about twenty miles (adjusted for height) but the Col de Lepoeder summit it is 1,450 metres (4,750 feet) above sea level. So you have to climb 1,390 metres from St Jean (4,560 feet) to cross the pass and then descend 500 metres to Roncevelles. A good day's walk! Now you see why I fussed about the weight of my sack!

But I had discovered there was a new Auberge at Orisson, the Refuge Orisson, just 8 km (about 5 miles) from St Jean. Although twenty 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 took advice and booked a bed in advance. They only had 18 bunks in three rooms and I didn't want to be caught out. It was the only place where I booked ahead.

I went to the Pilgrim office and got my Camino Passport (Credencial del Peregrino) stamped. She asked where I was heading for and noted Auberge Orisson. It seems they check the correct number make it over the mountains. She said it would take 2 ½ hours to get to Orisson which seemed excessive for 5 miles. I thought it far too long – but it took me over 3 hours!

I stuck my head in the church of Notre Dame where pilgrims for 1,000 years have prayed for protection crossing the high pass with its treacherous weather and bandits who would kill you for your sandals. I felt for them. At least I met no bandits. I lit candles in the church for my family and passed through the pilgrim Gate as hundreds of thousands had done before me. You could add a kilometre to your walk by detouring down the River Nive before crossing further down, which sounded attractive and I had plenty of time. So I passed through the Pilgrims Gate, the Porte St Jacques and set off down the Nive in high spirits with only around six kilometres to go.



*The Pilgrim Gate - Porte St Jacques.
On the left, L'Eglise Notre Dame*

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’re not joking. 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 9 kgs – and I could have carried no more.”



The Path to Orisson

I was truly thankful I'd booked the refuge at Orisson. I was only moderately fit, like most of the others, and I was 72 and caution paid off. 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 having some hours of Spanish lessons (all set up on my iPhone) were a joke. My mind became numb. A corner was cut off by the only untarmacked section of the path that day. It was even steeper and rough with horrible hairpins. Every corner turned merely revealed another stretch of track 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. Two men got out, extracted a stretcher from the back and put someone on it, slotted them into the ambulance, and drove off back downhill towards St Jean. A taxi came up the hill and a woman with two

Orisson comes in sight

teenage girls were helped, weeping, into it. The taxi followed the ambulance. It seemed he had had a heart attack. Very sobering. Disconcerted I began to ask myself what on earth I was doing there. I'm sure the scenery was beautiful, but I was in no state to appreciate it.

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.



Their website warns:-

REMINDER!!!

We only accommodate people who are walking and without following vehicle(s).

Anyone not complying with these conditions will not be accommodated at Refuge Orisson and will have to find alternative accommodation on their own.

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 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, no boots in the rooms, dinner at 7 and she disappeared. It was a small room with 3 two tier bunks. In one a very large young man was asleep.

I put my boots in the rack, hoped nobody would pinch them, and lay down on a bottom bunk – and in seconds there were two sleeping men.

After today 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 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 five 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 five mile climb from St Jean at 170m above sea level to Albergue Orisson at about 944 m above sea level is 774 metres – 2,500 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).

The remaining 17 kilometres (15 miles) to Roncevelles rises another 506 metres (1,660 feet) to the Col de Lepoeder summit at 1,450 metres (4,719 feet). I think it was



Dinner at Orisson

the 9 Kilos of the rucksack and the unremitting climb that resulted in us all agreeing it had been hell.

A British woman arrived, shattered by the climb as most of us were, and found no room at the inn. The poor girl was reduced to tears, she pleaded to sleep on the floor, but in the end she had to call a taxi and return to St Jean.

A cheerful collection of people appeared for dinner to volubly exchange their horror stories. I was clearly the oldest. 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 had come, he said, to lose weight. There were some five Korean girls, all Christian setting out on the walk of their young lives.

Thursday 3rd April – Orisson to Roncesvalles.

The next day was demanding and much longer though less of a climb. We got breakfast with coffee served in huge bowls with no 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 15 miles 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, starting with your feet. What softies we are now.

I saw the Korean girls periodically as we passed and re-passed. I talked a bit to Kim who had been in Australia for a year as a nurse and spoke good English. 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 then to St Jean. She had allowed 30 days to walk to Santiago but then she had to back at work. I hope she managed it. I asked her why she was doing it. 'To find myself'. She said. I resisted the silly quip, 'where had she lost herself' that rose to my lips and enquired no further. Do any of us really know why we are here? I was to discover that many did have clear objectives. Penance for some past perceived sin was common. Faith was



often the reason. Bereaved husbands and widows walked to remember, or to forget. The mountain scenery was wonderful and I felt much happier as I plodded up into the snowline. 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 (I recognised it when I later saw the film with Martin Sheen in the star role) and there were patches of snow all around us. I had not heard of 'The Way' before but most had seen it and some 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, and everybody piles their poles. It looked as if a regiment of midget lancers had just arrived. We crossed minor 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 and the wind was very strong. I was glad of my Dad's old coat and my old jersey. There were snow covered mountains in all directions. We came to a refuge hut quite recently built. Apparently this was 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. Walk to beautiful places and leave your trash!

The relief of reaching summits I was to soon realise, was illusory. After you have gone up – you must go down. The book warned that the risk of injury was going down rather than climbing; and now I understood. Completely different muscles are used. If you trip you fall further and faster. Only 100 feet below the summit on a steep rugged track I came to the single track tarmac road over which the path crossed – and the path was taped off! A sign said to use the road. 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 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 roads. Anyway, some kind of collective 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 really difficult fallen trees to climb over and I took the greatest care not wishing to fall or twist an ankle or knee. We descended cautiously through lovely lightly wooded country to dense wood with beautiful tracks but still very steep. I rested frequently, often taking off my sack. I now understood why they had, very sensibly,



taped it off! I found it very challenging.

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 walking pace. It is really hard. When I stopped to rest she, several times, caught up with me and stopped and rested too. She seemed to think I found it easy and she said she was always relieved 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 3 miles so a very steep gradient.

Finally I arrived at Roncesvalles about 2:30 pm, a tiny place with a population of less than 100. By far the biggest building was the magnificent medieval Pilgrim's Hostel, Albergue Roncesvalles.

A Notice at the gate said:

Since 12th Century
ALBERGUE RONCESVALLES
has received:-
All Pilgrims - Sick & Well
Catholics
Jews
Pagans
Heretics
&
Vagabonds



The courtyard at Roncesvalles as you enter. You can see the entrance to the accommodation with piled backpacks.

My legs, feet and knees were tired. I walked up to the Albergue, through the archway, across a square 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 bed, was relieved of €10 and 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.

There were also two bars with some accommodation advertising Pellegrino (Pilgrim) meals in Roncesvalles. The Albergue served no food. I went for a beer and I was welcomed effusively by people I had met in Orisson who had sent their sacks on ahead 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 the long road route by taxi! They had not thought I would make it carrying my sack. But I did.



Many pilgrims were starting their journey 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 taken foods with him, was hallucinating and on his last legs when he got here. 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 had no fear of the road ahead. This turned out to be naïve in the extreme. I had not noticed the higher and more difficult Cantabrian mountains lay 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 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). 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 to set out in the morning the door I had entered the Albergue 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 would be warmer now I was over the Pyrenees I thought – silly me! How I missed that coat later on.

Friday 4th May – Roncevelles to Zubiri

When I woke up this morning I had slept well and was relaxed but my feet hurt. I left the ancient pilgrim hostel at Roncevelles at 7.15 in cold grey weather. They want you out by 08:00 latest. No breakfast. Not even coffee. There is nothing in Roncevalles, even the bars were closed. It was cold and overcast on an empty stomach. The signpost said encouragingly 790 km to Santiago.

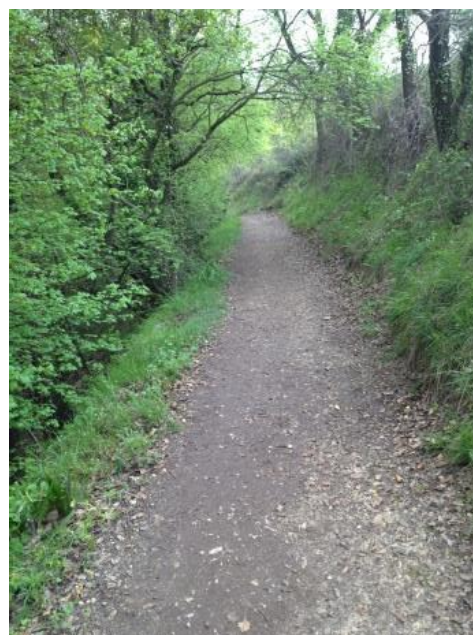
. No coffee no breakfast anywhere. So only about 15 miles to Larrasona. Still quite hilly. Three miles on I got to Burgette in the rain. A nothing much place but they had a bar where I got a Croissant and a coffee. Bliss. The track turned off the main street and we followed a gravelled path for some 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 bunk rooms and better plumbing. The village of 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 Pilgrims meal. I 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, enthusiastically. I then got a very reasoned interrogation as to how I justified the killing of God's creatures for amusement. It then turned out she had once fox hunted herself – but that was before she had 'seen the light' and found salvation. I think she wanted me to understand there was still hope for me. I did not linger at dinner that night.



At breakfast I ate little but enjoyed my coffee. The young 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 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 with gratitude. I hoped to make Pamplona that day, God and feet willing. My Spanish lessons are making slow progress as I am generally too pushed to pay full attention. Chanting Spanish verbs as I panted up mountain slopes was just too much for me.

I had left Dad's jacket in Roncesvalles having served, I thought, its purpose and wondered what else I could discard. I was passed by several people, who I did not know, who tried to talk to me. I plan to put a notice around my neck. Saying, perhaps "I am not really anti-social. It is just that I haven't the breath left to speak".

Saturday 5th 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, I said, but I'm hoping there's a bar round the corner. No, he said. Tried that. OK, I said, looks like a good place to sit, and I sat down. Names Richard, he said, and this Lars from Denmark. You going to walk with us a bit? OK I said. We had the usual where you start from, where you from thing. Southampton! He said. I've been working on a film in Winchester for months – Les Miserables. 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 much 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 thanked me for the offer said but Kwong would be all right. I think Kwong, not speaking English and far from home was



The Roman Bridge over Rio Ulamza



The French Gate to Pamplona

a a little doubtful, understandably. So I walked on. I saw Kwong, she said she was coming on very slowly. Later 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 11th Century. You are abruptly out of the countryside and into the extensive and seemingly endless suburbs of Pamplona. The Quaker woman from Swanage strode past me



having sent her luggage ahead by taxi.

Approached the old City by the pilgrim route through the French Gate and the fortifications are massive. Only did 14 miles 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. I had not eaten all day so ate 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. 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. I knew a little of it having stayed with a Korean woman in Malawi and she was keen to talk.

12:30. Paradise. I have hobbled into this hostel, Albergue Roncal, 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 have 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 came back doubtfully with a plate of salad with some prawns. I beamed and burred, bueno, encore and piled into the salad ashamed I had not managed to learn any Spanish. Her little face lit up. 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. One had long straggling hair 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. 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 and they laughed at my adventures and I left them to their free lodging on the pavement.

Monday 7th May Cizur Menor to Uterga

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, dumping one half. I had left my spare trousers in Pamplona so my sack is steadily getting lighter.



The long climb up to the distant windmills



Fools Paradise. I thought the walk downhill would be much easier. It wasn't!

Tuesday 8th May - Uterga to Lorca

Up and on through Obanos and Puente La Reina. Raining heavily and plodded through

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. 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. Now I know what they meant when they said the road was hard. Tonight have choice of Lomo or Chistorra. 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. It was raining this morning then turned hot. Then just now a lightning thunder storm with heavy rain 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.



The Hostel in Lorca



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! Lovely town with unusual old bridge. Wandered about and read and had a beer.

Thursday 10th May – Estella to Los Arcos

Estella really was the worst hostel I stayed in. Around 100 people in the room, very cramped, 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. Strode out this morning. Feet much improved. First 10 days are the worst. Hot now and many walkers burned. Did about 14 miles to Los Arcos.



Municipal Hostel at Estella

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 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!



Welcome Beer in Lorca



Free Wine at the Bodega. Scallop shell as a cup

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, 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.

‘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?’ He asked.

‘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 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. Viano?'
 '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.'
 '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'. Been married 25 years' he said. Still a great woman. 'What she think of you coming here.' I asked. 'Not sure. Called me a dirty rotten son of a bitch, said don't come back', then slammed the door on me as I left. You?' 'Yes.' 'What she say?' 'Said I should be Court Martialed and shot for desertion.' 'Uh Huh.'

We walked on and it got hotter. 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



Torres del Rio. Typical Spanish Village

about the old British Navy. He thought the Queen was marvellous. America is in a mess he said, 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 he 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 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 said, 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 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.' As we climbed to the centre of Viana we came to a large ornate church, Iglesia Santa Maria. Colorado paused. 'Think we could take a look?' 'Sure.' So I found myself, sweating with my 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 but who cares. He was enchanted.

We cleared Viana. I knew only about six miles to go but it was desperate hot. 84° I believe (about 29° centigrade). 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 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. You look very tired'. I had no idea who she was. Blonde, German I think. I thankfully took off my sack and 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 that 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) descending the usual slope I stopped at the 'gatekeeper' and 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. Five minutes later the couple from the shade arrived. She greeted me again 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 – she said. 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 said. 'I must have been dreaming. I'm good.'

When I got to Lograno I couldn't stand the idea of another night in a hostel and reeled around until I saw a 2 star hotel and went in making excuses to myself about the cost. The receptionist gave me a room for €50 and I took my sack up. I looked at 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 at reception stopped me. 'Senor' she said. 'Should you not rest? You are very tired I think.' How nice people are I thought.

Why should she care about this dusty sweaty man in boots and carrying a sack into your nice clean hotel - and you notice that he tired. 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 round the corner to a lovely bar on the square.

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.



is

Showing Signs of Wear in Lograno

Saturday 11th May – Lograno to Santander

I had to go home Business urgently demanded it. Just as blisters were passing and feet hardening and, though tired, I was settling in. I decided to go on 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 and fixed a ticket. A comfortable bus journey. 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. It is misrepresentation to call it, as the Spanish do, Costa Verde. It should be Costa Neblinoso³. I ate and slept well with nobody stepping on me at four in the morning. You do learn to appreciate small mercies. I'd only done about 110 miles, but I'll be back to carry on.

³ Neblinoso – Foggy.

LOGRONO TO SANTIAGO



As you will have seen I started in 2012, but had to return home from Logrono having covered only 164 kilometres (102 Miles). In 2013 I returned to Logrono, where I had stopped, and carried on to walk the remaining 625 kilometres (388 Miles).

Friday 3rd May –Logrono to Ventosa.

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 again 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



The 'Missing' Church at Logrono. Santiago Santiago el Real Church. Matamoros, St. James the Moorslayer on his horse.

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 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 Baru Sullivan 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.



On stony ground - Rioja Vinyards



The mountains are waiting for me!

Saturday 4th May – Ciruena 25.4 k.

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 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 5th May – Granon

Well, for €3 a night including dinner its OK

A hard road on the feet with new roadworks everywhere. All part of Spain's spending 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



Not exactly Premier Inn, but for €3? Nearest mat is mine with my hat.

thousand years. Great company with Germans and Australians and spent

afternoon sipping beer. 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



Dinner Included

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, beside 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 having spent the afternoon drinking beer with him and his friends, but he thrashed about alarmingly in the night. I got as close to my side of my mat as I could not wanting to be embraced. 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 6th - 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 €2 but will be good tomorrow.

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



Tuesday 7th May - St Juan de Ortega

Walked on from Belorado to St Juan. 24 ks. Very tired by time. Population of St Juan is 20! Tiny classic isolated Pilgrim place. Very cramped draughty noisy hostel but the 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. There were five walkers in her party who were caught in this way and she had taken pictures. Amazing. Deep snow all round, they were up to their knees in it and it was snowing heavily. All of them were crusted in snow. No smartphone signals. Only one of them, a Belgium, had a proper GPS. Without that she thinks they would have died up there. I agree with her.



Think I need a Siesta

I Shared a dinner table with a couple of cheerful French. I have been told that the French hate the British, but I have met many French, and never found it so.

An old friend texted me asking for a picture to show how I was getting on. I sent her the one above. Her response was, 'Bob, I wanted a picture of you. Not some exhausted old tramp you met on the way'.

Wednesday 8th May - Burgos

In this picture I think I am standing at the very place the Black Prince pursuing his foes came upon an enormous army on the plain I am looking at. What a vista. What history.

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 at €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 9th 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

Burgos Castle

Wellington unsuccessfully besieged it, the approaches were steep and there were numerous outworks. Maybe there were ditches there too which have been filled in.

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. 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 says. '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. For eleven kilometres I negotiated massive a 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



Rucksack and a donkey. The French owner and his donkey had walked from Bordeaux

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 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 Perversi. 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 in my iPhone, which endlessly needs charging, into the wall socket she had been using. I did not Catherine at the Albergue.

Friday 10th May – Hontanas

Weather much better after yesterday's rain. But much of the track is now deep red mud so hard going. The mud stopped cyclists dead! Of course they have light cycling shoes so when bogged down are ankle deep in mud and not happy.





Hontanas comes in sight. The path can be seen winding on up the hill beyond the village.

I had hoped to walk on to Castrojeriz but stopped for the night at Hontanas. Still cold but sun warm and sky full of swallows. 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.

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, sharing the company of all the other cheerful pilgrims was the best bet.

Hontanas. Amiable pilgrims enjoy a beer.

Saturday 11th May – Itero de Vega
Walked from Hontanas to Itero some 8



miles, so a short day. End of first week and only done 95 miles.

Feel very well but cautious about feet. Supplied plaster and treatment today to German Franz Joseph on way. I found him sitting by the side of the track gazing sadly at his bare ruined feet. 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 on his heels and bleeding toes he had beats me.

A pleasant Hostel with rooms with only five beds each. I realised with surprise that Catherine Perversi from 2 days ago is in the bed next to me. I nod politely to her and she responds in the same way. 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 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 sat 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 all got on very well. Bloo is an ex army Colonel who was a Para and who flew Apache strike helicopters. Later he trained Apache pilots in Italy. I walked with them from the ne Mazariffe. We were joined by Bob McEvoy an ex Australian army Colonel who was an

artillery man. Our conversations ranged over a wide area including, I remember, how to grieve.



Sunday 12th May – Villarmentero de Campos

The next morning we assembled for a coffee promised for seven o'clock. Bloo, Catherine and I set off together. We were soon 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 Campos. 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 an extraordinary tiny place. There is a weird assortment of sleeping places. 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 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. Time went by 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

Villarmentero de Campos

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 13th - 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. Even with a dog each side of her she had been bitterly cold. 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 with me, 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 track seemed endless. No shade. Bloo and I kept stopping to wait for Catherine who got fiercely emotional and cried in pain and demanded angrily we carry on and leave her. My heel hurt like hell. I had stupidly accepted half a banana from Bloo which, as bananas 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 irritated 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'.⁴



Crowded Bunkhouse at Calzadilla de la Cueva

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 14th 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. Idle time was wasted irrecoverable time. 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 out loud. 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

⁴ In 1942 the Japanese forced the Americans army in the Philippines, to surrender. A total of 83,000 Americans & Filipinos. The Japanese marched the prisoner without food or water for five days. If you fell down you were shot or clubbed to death. Between 7,000 & 10,000 died. It is still known as the Bataan Death March.

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 up 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. 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, and his father was a Scots soldier. He spoke fluent 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 had 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. You can take the man out of the army, but not the army out of the man!

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. He had to be airlifted back to UK. Hope he was insured.

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

After dinner we repaired to our five bed room. I wish I had a video of it. Forgive me for talking yet 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 big 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 15th 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 tramp on to Sahagun and grab bunks for all in the old Monasterio de Santa Cruz.

On Catherine's 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 I thought a glass half full. Bloo said glass half full too. She nodded sadly, and said she was a glass half empty person.

We get her an appointment at four o'clock for a foot massage. In case you think Catherine gets special treatment as a woman



Bloo and Catherine at Sahagun



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, to me, a gentle, supportive, interested person.

He hoped he had changed. My heel is sore but definitely better since the fluid was drained.

Bob, a quietly devout Catholic, had been to a Pilgrim Mass and been terribly moved. Nuns had come 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 them 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.



They put a roof on the old Monastery to make a bunkhouse. In January 1809 the Monastery was packed with British troops starting the retreat to Corruna.

Thursday 16th 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. She turned her face to the wall and ignored us as we said farewell. 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 a biting wind headwind. We are a little worried about Bloo who was desperately cold.

We passed a black Labrador lying by the trackside. It's owner knelt over it, helpless. It was clearly dying. Its poor paws were a mass of blood, cut to ribbons by the endless flinty tracks. The owner, English, had failed to understand that the long hard road would do this. He could not carry the dog. It was a distressing episode. We had thought it a bit

of a joke seeing Lena's dogs with their specially made boots. But all credit to her. She had thought about their welfare and prepared them for their journey. We walked sadly on, unable to help.

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 still 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 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 locally in a bar I had noted walking in.

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.

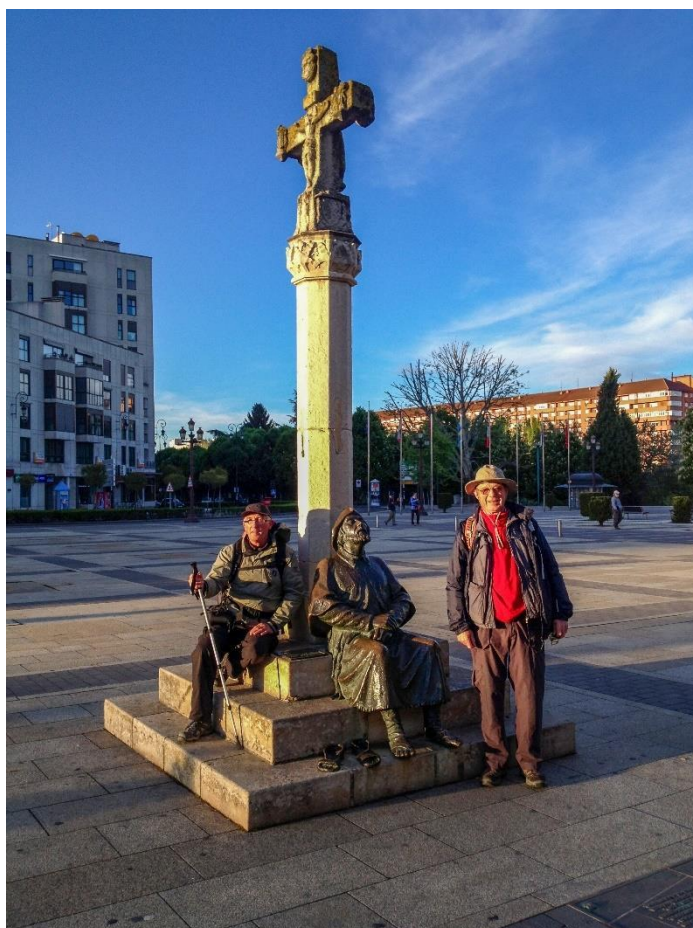
I really feel I could walk for ever now. I am fit and strong with a beautiful supportive family. What man could want more? The company helps so much too.

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 septic 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



Archie, Pilgrim and Robert in Leon

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. Awoke 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 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. We were all rather quiet.

We rounded a weary corner, and there, with her dogs, was Lena and Richard outside a bar. They appeared overjoyed to see us, as we were to see them.

A bit more on Lena and her dogs. She was from Sweden, somewhere 600 kms north of Stockholm. The dogs were Vega (The Bouvier), and Yoda, a mongrel from Malaga. On holiday Lena had taken pity on this starving urchin dog. She took it to the vet, had it totally checked out, got it all necessary shots and adopted it. She had travelled overland from Sweden with her two dogs to St Jean by train. The dogs were carefully equipped with purpose designed panniers for Vega, and, for Yoda, with short hair, a smart red coat against the cold. Both dogs had custom made dog shoes to protect their feet.

As dogs are never allowed in Albergues she carried 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 to protect him from the cold. 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 Yoda's head suddenly appear from her bosom, as she takes no notice at all and carries on talking. General opinion amongst 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 flash of insight into a Stonewall Jackson episode. Bloo's wife Lee sounds a tremendous woman and he talks often of her. She was accidentally shot in the head in America by a hunter but survived.



Richard, Archie, Lena, Bloo, Robert & Bob



The walk into Leon through the suburbs was tedious as you come to expect when approaching towns. 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 18th 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 knew Archie, Bloo and Bob wanted to go on, and I told them to, but they wouldn't leave and fussed around like old hens. They say we are finishing this arry
me. Just see how I get on. Country is high plateau with that bitter wind.



Bit Tired I Think

Sunday 19th 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 (you normally have to be out by eight and cannot spend a second night), booked a room for me in the hotel we had stayed in 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 20th 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.

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 22nd May - Astorga

I had been three nights in the Hotel in Leon. 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 bought 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. I will just plod on until my strength comes back, but I 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. ⁵

Thursday 23rd May – Santa Catalina de Somoza



Sc The Road to Santa Catalina



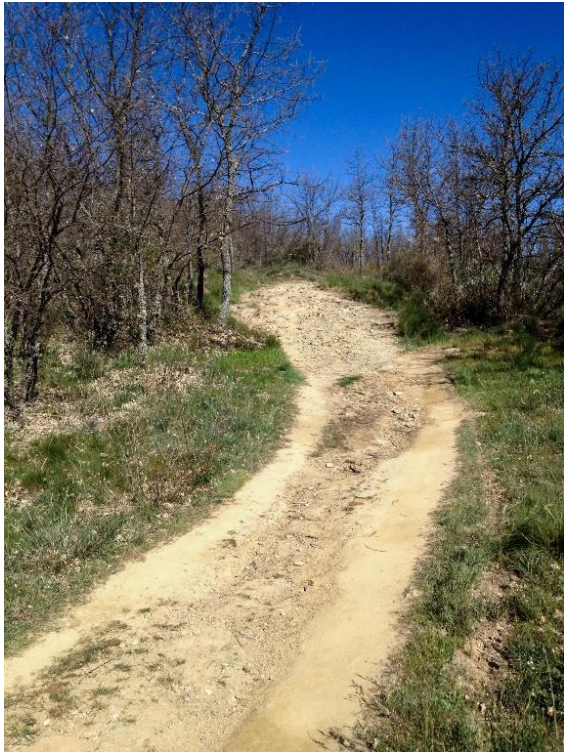
Santa Catalina

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

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

⁵ See more about The Retreat to Corunna in Notes

Friday 24th May - Rabanal



The path to Rabanal

I walked only 7 miles to Rabanal and got a bunk at Gaucelmo Auberge. An 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 an English hostelerio at breakfast. 'Have you coffee. Have you sugar?' Hostelerios have almost always done the Camino so that they understand and relate to the pilgrims. In a



Rabanal – Gaucelmo Auberge

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', she said '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 is going like a steam engine and will be in Santiago on Monday. Then he heads on to Finisterre. Bob is temporarily lost. Poor Archie limps on somewhere after I saw him at 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.

Saturday 25th 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 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 26th May - Acebo



The Cruz de Ferro, or Iron Cross

I set off from Rabanal much refreshed, for Molinaseca but only got as far as Acebo.

A beautiful 17k walk through the mountains from Rabanal with a rough broken path and a killing descent to Acebo.

First there is the climb up to the Cruz de Ferro (the Iron Cross) standing 4,934 feet above sea level. It is a humble monument, just a pile of small stones and an insignificant wooden post with an iron cross on top. Pilgrims traditionally leave a small stone there.

You can collect one on the way or bring one with you. Stones are left to symbolize you are leaving all your burdens behind. Words, pictures and messages are on some of the stones. The little Chapel of St. James was built in 1982.

I am good but others less so. Booked into €5 top bunk at Acebo, but free blankets so swiped two.

The picture above is of the Camino track. Not far away is a 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.

The descent to Acebo might not look much on the picture but it was hard and steep.



The descent to Acebo



Acebo comes in sight

On the Retreat to Corunna there was five feet of snow and paths were ice. There was little food, and of course, bitter cold.

Monday 27th 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 Pontferrada 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 good look around at Cacebellos. Here the British made a stand against the pursuing French. They were pushed back over river in some haste, abandoning the attempt to hang a couple of looters. It is a neglected minor area of history and I tried to re-create the drama of it in my mind.

Rifleman Thomas Plunket, had crossed the river and was with his comrades on this river bank.

Cacabellos – Rifleman Plunkett's Position

The French commander, was a dashing and talented young general, Auguste-Marie-Francois Colbert, said to be the most handsome man in the French army. He was sitting on his horse on the opposite bank directing his men. Plunkett was determined to bring him down, and did, hitting him in the head. It was thought to be the longest aimed rifle shot of the time and Thomas Plunkett became a noted figure.⁶

Tuesday 28th May - Villafranca

Well, I 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 well. 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

⁶ See Historical Notes

Saturday, leaving for UK on Monday. Safe journeys. Aye. Bloo'.

So poor Bloo had 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!

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 advertising wifi. No, of course, not really.

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

If I follow the 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 Cebriero tomorrow on the top of the mountains.

Wednesday 29th May – O'Cebrerio

Another walk I will remember for a long time.

Arrived at O'Celebrio at 2.30. So 8.5 hours. 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 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. The village is very small.

The private hostels were all full, so when the girl at the municipal



Just went on up for 31kms

hostel said I could have a bunk I was quite emotional. I went to find food and warmth in a restaurant. I had a splendid meal and a glass or two of wine and felt better. It had been a bad day but was looking up.

On returning to the hostel I was brought back to earth. It was a miserable government, or Junta, hostel which meant utter lack of interest, few facilities and no blanket. An American woman of around sixty, also without a sleeping bag, asked the girl if she could have a nice warm young Spaniard to keep her warm since there were no blankets. The po faced expressionless 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'. The place even looked like a prison. I really had no option, 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 boots. I know it was not ideal but the water was on the outside and what options did I have? Of course, I had no sleeping bag.

Thursday 30th May - Triacastelo

I don't know if I slept at all. I left at 7 without breakfast. I would have left earlier but was concerned about getting lost in the thick fog and dark forest tracks. I thought it would be, 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.

A British girl of around 25 collapsed. She was part of an organised group with a leader who were passing me as I sat resting, 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



View from the highest point.



Beautiful Triacastela Comes in Sight. I never want to see these mountains again as long as I live

mountain in thick fog. 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 Triacastela.

Some 12 miles took 7 hours! It was a dreadful descent. When Triacastela finally came into view far below it looked to me be one of the most beautiful sights I had ever seen.

Only about half a mile short of Triacastela I was sitting on a stone marshalling my few resources, and I think I must have 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 waving hands 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, supposing 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 had been unable to get any 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 charge did seem to be very low. I got to my feet and tried to walk nonchalantly on.

I made it to Triacastela, only 30 kilometres but I found it terribly hard work. No more government hostels for me.

I found a lovely private Albergue. Clean. A kind, concerned, 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 I was warm and rested. I was twice the man.

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

Friday 31st May – Sarria

I got into Sarria at two. I had slept 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 Compostella, 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 5th, but not on 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, that I can maybe. To meet new and amazing people like Bob, Archie, Bloo and Catherine. The astonishing thing on the long and sometimes



At last, clear of Mist

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.

I have had a very fortunate life but nobody's life is all easy. The 'path', or 'way', is to me a metaphor for life. There are low points where you wonder if you can summon up the will to carry on. Where you expend the last sparks of energy, but somehow do 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. The British had retreated to Cacabelos hotly pursued by French cavalry under the command of .

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 1st June - Portomarin

I left Serria 7.15 and arrived 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 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 2nd June – Palas de Rei

Now at Palas de Rey. 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 ate lunch, 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



Easy Walking

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 Inshallah as the Arabs say. I keep checking the map to make sure it is true.

Apparently Bob will be in Santiago so I 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.

Monday 3rd June – Ribadiso

A lovely gentle stroll in the countryside. I walked a little with a Danish girl called Sidsel, pronounced 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, I knew, 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 of dealing with 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 o'clock in Ribadiso. A 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.

Eight hours march seems to be normal now. Will start checking where I book in at the Cathedral to get my Compostella. I really am actually going to make it!

Tuesday 4th June – Santiago de Compostella

I prepared for an early departure without waking the rest of the sleepers. Rucksack 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



Coffee Stop



The Last Long Day

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 a 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.

I felt good and strode on covering ground well. It was a lovely day. I stopped for breakfast further on. I had a confusing email from Anne-Marie about their coming to Santiago to meet me. 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 74th 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 I plodded on. I 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 Roma History 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 the old pilgrims often did just that.

I went and has 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. I was not at first recognised.

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, eventual doing just that. I blame the wine, and so went happily to bed.



Reunion at Santiago on my Birthday

Wednesday 5th June - Santiago

I awoke to the luxury of space, a soft bed with a warm blanket and a huge buffet breakfast. We went to explore Santiago which Anne-Marie and I had never visited before.

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.



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

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 now 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 6th 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 7th 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).

So ends my account of the Camino Santiago – The French Way.

It was an experience I will never forget. I'm not sure now in 2023 I could do it again. So do it while you can.

HOW TO DO THE CAMINO FRANCÉS

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 pilgrims have been doing for 1,000 years. It is my personal experience which may be very different from that of others. A lot of the people I met, and all of them who I walked with were on their own, at least when they set out on their own. It is in some ways less stressful and gives you a wider experience I think.

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 Compostella (The Certificate to show you have walked the Camino).

Assuming you are doing it (in my view) 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. Light sandals are essential for the evenings to let your feet relax and breathe.

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. They cannot cure blisters but they can help you not to get them. 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. They now plan to walk the Highland Way.

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 Perversi

Catherine having done some farm work in Spain went to Italy and sought out her Italian family on her father's side. Last heard she is working in 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 Compostella 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 a Rucksack to hide him.

Thursday, May 16, 2013 Bob and Bloo and the province of the mind

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?' Maths 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'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.*

From Catherine Perversi's Blog.

THE RETREAT TO CORUNNA



'The Rearguard'. General 'Black Bob' Crawford and a Party of Riflemen before Astorga.

Sir John Moore's famous retreat to Corunna in January 1809 started at Sahagun (Pronounced Sa a goon) and ended, of course, at Corunna. 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 will just sketch the background.

Sir John Moore took command of the British army in Portugal in August 1808. The army, under Arthur Wellesley (later the Duke of Wellington) had defeated the French and forced them to evacuate Portugal. They were confident with high morale.

Sir John's instructions were to 'drive the French back over the Pyrenees'. On 21st 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. 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. 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 Meseta 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 1st 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 General 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 the 95th Rifles. The men behind poor Colbert 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 2nd 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 British 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 undisciplined 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 of his men through an icy 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. He was, of course, a Scotsman.



Sir John Moore's Tomb in Corunna today.

On 10th 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 assembled 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.

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. 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.

Rifleman Thomas Plunkett

Thomas Plunket (1785–1839) was an Irish soldier in the British Army's 95th Rifles regiment. He served throughout the Peninsular War and later in the Waterloo Campaign of 1815 where he was badly wounded.

He became famous in the retreat to Corunna for killing the French General Auguste-Marie-François Colbert with an extremely long range rifle shot in the fighting at Cacabelos. Then killing the general's aide-de-camp, who had gone to his side to render aid.

Colbert was at the head of his forces preparing to charge the confused, and partly drunken, British forces still streaming over the bridge. Given the distance involved he would have seen no reason to fear the riflemen on the far bank and indeed he does seem to have been beyond the normal accepted accurate range of the Baker rifle of about 200 yards. Plunket ran forwards to the foot of the bridge, adopted the approved prone position, lying on his back and supporting the rifle barrel on his feet. He fired at Colbert, prominent on his horse and killed him. Some French accounts credit Colbert with some brave last words before he died.

Plunket only just made it back to his own lines, but the deaths of the two officers were sufficient to throw the pending French attack into disarray.

Plunket was probably typical of the riflemen of that time. He was often in trouble for drunkenness and definitely 'a character'. He was a good dancer and a show off. He was also a noted sharpshooter and a brave man.

Bernard Cornwell's fictional account of rifleman, Richard Sharp in *Sharpe's Rifles* gives a marvellous impression of what life was like for a rifleman in the retreat.



Sources: The sources used for the descriptions given are all easily 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.

Comment 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.

Comment 2: I recalled my father's description of the destruction of the transport, trucks and cars this time, not horses, on the beach at Dunkirk. It was done 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.

My Dad had to shoot Morlich, his faithful Dalmatian, who was as quick into a ditch as the men when aircraft engines were heard. He left Morlich, named after Loch Morlich in the Cairngorms in the sand dunes.

Comment 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 as if you fought right through the Peninsular war. You died of Yellow Fever or Malaria. Not even the possible satisfaction of a little glory and a campaign medal.

THE PORTUGUESE CAMINO

Porto to Santiago in September 2017



Robert Stevenson 2023

THE PORTUGUESE CAMINO 2017

I set out on Wednesday 13th of September 2017 for a walk in Portugal from Oporto (Porto in Portuguese) to Santiago de Compestella in Spain. This is the last major section of the Camino Portuguese which starts in Lisbon. I had walked the 500 miles of the Camino Francés in 2013 and wanted to do a shorter alternative Camino.

I caught the early train from Brockenhurst to Gatwick and Elisha, in a new dress and looking fantastic, saw me off.



Elisha wishes Robert goodbye at Brockenhurst



Mario at the Bluesock Hostel



Superbunk at the Bluesock Hostel

I flew from Gatwick to Porto where I had pre-booked a bunk at the Bluesock Hostel. I used the Metro to get into town from the airport and arrived happily with my sack. The location was good, right on the bustling river Douro bank where I wanted to be.

Reception was smart, clean and modern with glass doors. I was greeted by a tall man, in his twenties I imagine, with a large black beard, who introduced himself as Mario. He studied his computer, looking at me repeatedly and asked for my passport. He examined it carefully and asked me to confirm that I was Robert Stevenson, born 4th June 1939. Puzzled, wondering if there was a problem, I confirmed I was. Mario then asked if he could have a photograph with me. I agreed with a mental shrug. A girl was extracted from the office and I was photographed beside a beaming Mario, towering over me, with his arm around my shoulders. 'Why did you want a photograph?' I asked curiously. 'You are by far the oldest person we have ever had stay in our hostel and we are very pleased to see you' said Mario. 'I wanted a picture for our Facebook page'.

So, swept along on a wave of goodwill, I found my bunk and left my stuff, having evicted two Chinese girls who had got the wrong bunk. It was a lovely clean bunk with its own light and power and a curtain. To top it off there was a capacious drawer with a lock underneath which my backpack fitted into. Definitely a superior hostel.

I had a pleasant dinner on the river bank looking across the Douro to the heights in Villa Nova and so to bed.

The next day was my history day. In 1808 Porto was held by the French under Marshall Soult. Sir Arthur Wellesley (Later the Duke of Wellington) was in command of an army made up of British and Portuguese troops. He sent his army across the deep fast flowing river in small boats and seized Porto. Soult retreated over mountain paths to Spain leaving behind all his artillery and wheeled vehicles. It was a fantastic coup. I wanted to walk the key locations of the crossing.



My View at dinner. Across The Douro to Villa Nova where Wellington had stood

I walked about five miles visiting the Bishop's Seminary which British troops had occupied, Soult's Headquarters at the Palace of the Carrancas, now a museum and the Mosteiro da Nossa Serra do Pilar in Villa Nova, from where Wellesley first surveyed the French positions. See Appendix 1 for more information.

I had booked two nights in the Bluesock Hostel but I was booked on a flight out of Santiago on 23rd September and worried about dates. I only had eight days actual walking time.

I estimated about a hundred miles was a sensible distance to walk giving me an average of around 13 miles a day to cover. Ponte de Lima to Santiago was 90 miles in the book but I knew to allow for getting lost time and diversions. I didn't want to hurry too much. If I started out from the centre of Porto it would be 150 miles. Too much. The trek out through the dreary suburbs of Porto was lengthy and unappealing anyway.

If I set out from Ponte de Lima it was only about 95 miles and given the inevitable diversions that would neatly make my hundred. So I decided to catch the five o'clock bus that day to Ponte de Lima and get myself started. I caught the bus to Ponte de Lima at ten past five that evening. I had already booked a bunk in the HI Hostel (youth hostel) there. The bus left late. The route was long and twisting.

It stopped at Barcelos, way off the route, and we were all made to get off without explanation. The bus drove away to shouts of alarm from the Portuguese passengers and, not least, me as my backpack was in it. Half an hour later it returned, he'd gone to fill up with diesel! At around eight, an hour later than scheduled, I was dropped at Ponte de Lima bus station.

The little bus station was deserted. I found myself in a bleak suburb so I walked towards what I hoped was the town but there were no helpful signs and efforts to ask the way where not a word of English was spoken merely resulted in enthusiastic pointing and urgings – all of which were wrong. It was getting dark. Having wearily walked back and forwards following totally useless directions and unable to get Google maps



Lovely Pont de Lima from across the river.

as no wifi or 4g available for the iPhone I finally, in desperation, got a taxi through a bar which was trying to close. They spoke no English and I was the only customer but ‘taxi por favour’ produced a scrawled number for me to ring. The phone was answered by a taxi driver who spoke only Portuguese, but he called his wife who had a very little English; the bar girl give her our location and I sat and waited. To my great relief, as it was now totally dark, the taxi arrived. I showed him the address on the booking form for the hostel, he beamed happily and off we went. I was five kilometres from the town centre and the youth hostel and nobody had pointed in the right direction! I was very relieved to get there.

I tipped him €5 and he was effusive with thanks - I'd have happily given double to be rescued as I was.

The HI Hostel was a cheerless concrete building. I shared a four bunk room with a Lithuanian and a two Spaniards who were asleep when I arrived. I had a top bunk giving an uncomfortable night. I walked in the dark into Ponte de Lima half a mile away to eat. It was some Portuguese dish. I have no idea what it was. It tasted of very little.

In the morning I set out across the bridge at Ponte de Lima, a most attractive riverside village. I would have liked to stay longer. I caught up with a party of some 20 women who turned out to be Irish and walking in an organised group. More of organised groups later. There were keen to chat and I had some trouble extracting myself. They introduced themselves including a small girl called Mariana. I vaguely asked her what part of Ireland she was from. The others laughed and said she was from Brazil. I said something like ‘Oh far more exotic’ and walked on.

about 14 miles to Rubiaes which included the roughest part of the route with a steep stretch over uneven boulders which was really quite difficult at times. Cyclists found it a real problem having to carry bikes and panniers over the stones. Resting at the summit and enjoying the view I was in good spirits.

The ‘feel’ of the walk was different from the Camino Francés. It seemed much busier and the predominance of organised groups definitely changed things.

15 Sept. Pont de Lima to Rubiaes



The Path to Alto de Portella.



The Climb Continues

A long downhill stretch took me to Rubiaes only to discover at the first hostel that the whole place was full, ‘Completo’. The implications of all those organised groups block booking ahead dawned on me. Further along there was a house with a girl sitting on the doorstep and smoking. The sign said Completo but I walked up and said hello to her. She spoke some English which was a good start. We chatted a little, she was full. I asked if she had any ideas as to where I might find a room. Then quite suddenly she said she

had just remembered she had another house and there might be room in it, she would check. She came back. She had a room and a driver would come to take me to it in about an hour. Later he would pick me up and take me to a restaurant for a Pilgrim meal and afterwards take me back. While I was waiting I could come in and sit in her lounge. I sat twiddling my thumbs and exchanged solemn looks with a little girl of about five.

A girl came in to the reception outside the lounge door, like me trying for a bunk. I could hear the conversation, she too was offered a place in the other house and came in to wait. I glanced at her without any recognition. She said ‘Robert! It is Robert?’ It was Mariana, the Brazilian girl who I’d met with the Irish group. I had assumed she was part of the Irish group but she had travelled on her own from Brazil to walk the Portuguese Camino and, like me, was desperate for somewhere to sleep.



Vineyards on the Camino Portuguese



The Alto da Portela Summit



Tapping Trees for Resin

About 20 minutes later a pickup truck arrived, Mariana and I threw our backpacks in and off we went. It took around 15 minutes to get to this house. It was deep in the woods along a narrow unmade track and we were shown to a large comfortable two bedded room, one double, one single. I was used to the unisex accommodation of Camino's but was a little disconcerted at apparently finding myself sharing the room with a 32 year old Brazilian I had only just met. But I need not have worried, this was her room. I was taken to my room, again a double and a single bed. It was a really nice, if strange, old house miles from anywhere. So we had, so to speak, landed on our feet. I think now that a room in the house in the woods was only allowed to walkers who were considered reliable and safe. There was no supervision and I suppose the risks of having the placed trashed or possibly drug use was high. Anyhow Mariana and I had apparently passed the test. We were completely on our own and, although there was a bathroom and shower, there was not even a kettle. So no coffee for breakfast.

The very friendly driver, obviously part of the setup, duly called to take us for dinner. There we found the Irish group of women again.

They had adopted Mariana who was unhappy about walking on her own but there was no bunk for her in the group's block booked accommodation. So we had an excellent pilgrim dinner, back to our house in the woods and so to sleep.



The House in the woods at Rubiaes



Valenca in Portugal

Rubiães to Tui 16th Sept 2017. 13 Miles

In the morning Mariana asked if it was OK if she walked with me. In her part of Brazil she said the murder rate was extremely high and nobody ever walked on their own. I said 'of course'. Mariana spoke fluent Portuguese and Spanish so language difficulties disappeared. We did another 15 miles with few challenges and we came to the Portuguese frontier town of Valenca on the River Minho.

I'd never heard of the Portuguese fortress at Valenca. It is huge and the old town inside is marvellous.

I found myself explaining to Mariana and two bemused Irish women the design of the multi-layered defences and the purpose of a fortress. The fort guards the border between Spain and Portugal and the wide deep river Minho between them.

Apparently it was besieged by the French in April 1809 and surrendered. We explored its ancient quiet streets and fortifications. A lovely place and I'd like to return. Then across the wide river Minho (the Miño in Spanish) by a footpath on the railway bridge to the Spanish town of Tui. Again charming and on a fortified hill.

I had decided pre-booking was essential and had got a bunk in the Hostal Albergue Villa San Clemente. I had managed to leave John Brierly's excellent guide book somewhere along the way which was exasperating. So I downloaded the maps on Kindle but very annoying.

The hostel was indifferent, hidden in a medieval street and only a discreet Camino sun tile to identify it. But they had the best, indeed the only, selection of really nice souvenirs in a showcase. Locally made and just the sort of thing I wanted to take home. The guy booking me in had a queue of people and grumpily waved me away. Mariana was in a different hostel or she would have unleashed her torrent of Spanish. I decided to get some things in the morning – but there was nobody there at all so I never got them but let myself out in the dark.

Tui to Porrino 17th Sept 2017. 12 Miles.

There was a very long stretch through a boring industrial estate complex and we got lost walking many extra miles. We spent the night of the 17th in Alojamiento Camino Portuguese in Porrino. It was across the railway line but close to the centre. Porrino centre was pleasant but nothing special. The hostel woman here advised where to eat, where to find breakfast and was there anything else? Around eight pm she went round talking to everybody in their bunks (nowhere else to sit) asking if they were comfortable and if they needed anything. She hoped the Camino was going well for me, and that I was at peace. I assured her I was.



Porrino to Redondela 18th Sept 2017.

I sat idly in my bunk before setting out, awake early as usual. This is an easier walk than Camino Francais. My feet are good though just a little sore. Could still be troublesome.

Anyway I got my boots on and headed off into the dark. Forecast was rain. An uneventful walk through pleasant gently hilly countryside.

Again I am struck about how kind people are. How supportive of each other. The hostels are on average cleaner and newer than before. I'd booked in to Hostel Santiago de Vilavella. I arrived about two but found it was closed, not open until four. So I passed two hours in a café eking out a glass of wine. When it opened it really was very nice and clean. Excellent showers, washers and driers which I made use of. Mariana was in a different Hostel but we met up for our Pilgrim dinner.

Redonela to Pontevedra 19th Sept 2017.

A long walk, around 20 miles according to Mariana, with a lot of climbing. Got into Pontevedra around five but – nothing to eat! It's a drab modern suburb where you enter the town. The Spaniard on reception showed us our bunks and I asked him where we could eat. He looked astonished and said nothing was open till nine. I thought he was wrong, or I must have misunderstood. So we went on a weary tramp all through town – and he



Pontevedra's 12th Century Burgo Bridge

was right. Nothing to eat. So in the end we had to settle for a cold roll with Spanish ham and a beer.

This is Spanish Spain where you go for siesta mid afternoon and then eat dinner late, often at eleven. One would have thought with a stream of hungry non Spanish walkers arriving some enterprising place would serve hot food, but no. No chef would work earlier Mariana established .

I was very tired and a touch worried. Surely I was not getting a cold.

Pontevedra to Caldas de Reis 20th Sept 2017.

I had a bad night and felt rather poor in the morning but tried to convince myself I was OK. Not having had a meal the night before didn't help. The tramp out of Pontevedra showed us its nicer side, the old town was most attractive, and the bridge was splendid. I would have liked a hot breakfast but that's not a Spanish thing. So we plodded on. It was 14 miles according to the map. By three o'clock my throat was quite sore and I knew I was getting a sinus cold.

We got to Caldas about five. It had been a hot and dusty day. We were booked into the Albergue "O' Cruceiro". It was OK and had a café/bar and a restaurant. At 8.30 we got a really good hot meal. I watch the suffering of people I walk with. The groups tend to saunter along sending anything heavy ahead by van. Many of the other walkers were now quite bad with blisters and sore feet.

My feet are really good, no blisters. My cold was not too bad but knew it would get worse, I could feel my strength seeping away.

Mariana had been struggling and I knew she was in a lot of pain. She had been limping increasingly as we approached Caldas.

I asked her if she could go on and suggested she should rest for a day or two. She said she'd see how she felt the next day. As I expected she sadly said in the morning she couldn't go on. I had a plane to catch so wished her the best and sadly left her nursing her leg.



Mariana

Caldas de Reis to Padrón 21st Sept 2017. 12 Miles.

I tottered alone into the Albergue Rossol in the centre of Padrón. It was a perfect location, but I was ill. I found a chemist and bought paracetamol, decongestants and throat pastels. I didn't feel up to eating or even a drink. I lay and shivered all night with my nose running and my throat nasty. Of course I endlessly got up in the night. What with my sneezing, coughing and trips to the loo the other bunk occupants must have cursed me.

The church of Santiago Apóstolo was just across the Praza Cantón Igrexa from the hostel. The barman urged me to visit as it was 'a most important church'.

So I reluctantly crossed the square and entered. It was an amazing little church

dedicated to Santiago, or Saint James. Later known as Matamoros or The Moorslayer. He returned to the Holy Land after years of missionary work in Galicia. However Herod was not good on Christians and had him beheaded. However a miracle reconnected his head and preserved his body. The funeral boat as shown in the picture, crewed by his disciples, brought Santiago's body from the Holy Land back to Galicia and tied tied up to the river bank. His body began its final journey to his burial place at Santiago de Compostella (Saint James of the Field) where the cathedral is now built. Amazing paintings of Santiago hang on the walls. The pièce de résistance however must be the Pedrón (Galician for stone), located under the altar, which is reputed to be the mooring stone to which the funeral boat of Saint James was moored. It is now believed to be a Roman altar dedicated to Neptune. Christianity was skilled in converting pagan festivals and monuments to the faith.



Bridge at Caldas de Reis



Albergue Rossol

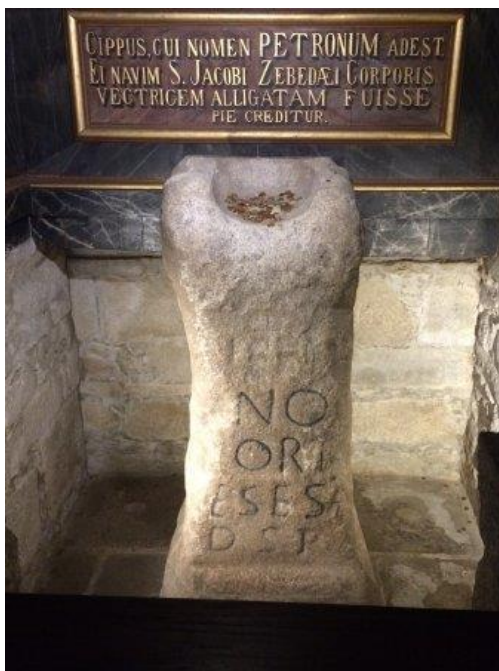
The Church of Santiago Apóstolo (St James the Apostle)



Santiago's body being taken back to Galicia



Santiago Matamoros slaying a Moor



The Pedrón. The old mooring stone

is



Clear Directions to Follow

It

Padrón to Santiago 22nd Sept 2017. 16 Miles.

I felt absolutely awful, just over half way, I gave in. There were three Brazilian pilgrim women at a bus stop. One had fallen and broken her arm which was in a sling, another had her leg bandaged and was limping heavily, the third was trying to look after them. I gathered that the bus would take us into Santiago and sadly decide to take it as I was really bad.

I was booked into Hostel O Fogar de Teodomiro in Santiago and spent night in a cold sweat. There was a hotel next door but it was full. It was by far the worst hostel I stayed in. Cramped, dirty and lousy facilities. Sad to give in but I had to lie down.

I trailed around Santiago looking for inspiration as I wanted to take home some

souvenirs, but my brain wouldn't work so I went back and just lay in my bunk.

THE PORTUGUESE CAMINO

So I finished my walk from Ponte de Lima to Santiago. Not very challenging. I enjoyed it but little of the feeling of having accomplished something that I had after doing the Camino Francés from St Jean. I regret I didn't take more time over it and that there was plane to catch. When I got ill I should have immediately booked a little hotel and rested for three days. I loved my day in Porto, but it was too rushed. Given the necessity of booking ahead, I felt that the freedom of being able to strike off in the morning with little idea of where I would sleep had gone. Next time I walk I will do it differently. If I have to book ahead I might as well book a cheap hotel room and be more comfortable. But one of the pleasures of the journey is meeting new people and that happens at hostels.

Next year I have new ideas. Maybe the Cevennes in France. Maybe strike across country in Spain following Wellington's army. But I doubt I will meet people in the same way.

Bicycles

Why do people take bicycles on a pilgrimage? You walk, or should. There were not that many bicycles but they travel in swarms. On the narrower parts of the track everybody walking is expected to crush along the side while bicycle after bicycle squeezes by, often bulging with panniers on each side. There was universal joy at the very rough section after Pont de Lima as cursing sweating cyclist tried to carry their infernal machines steeply uphill over large broken rocks – panniers and all.

Groups

Organised Groups now predominate on the Camino Portuguese. It seemed to me much more so than on the Camino Francés which I walked in 2014.

Independent lone pilgrims carrying their own pack are very much in a minority. The days when you could set out planning to stop when you were tired, or came across an attractive village, are gone. It is necessary to book ahead though the state hostels still refuse booking ahead.

This is brought about by the tour groups who block book ahead. To me it changes the nature of the Camino and I don't think I will do it again. I saw overweight unfit people managing a section, luggage taken on ahead, a van on hand in case they felt tired. They still turned up in Santiago claiming their Compostella to proudly take back home.



Soon I suppose paths will have to be able to take wheelchairs. Arriving on an electric buggy will still earn you a Compostella. OK that is the trend and I can't change it so I plan to walk on my own on other Spanish tracks in the future.

I will however greatly miss the chances of falling in with another lone walker and learning of other lives. Stop the world, I want to get off.

I took this picture in Caldas de Reis at the hostel. This is 'walkers' luggage waiting for the van to pick it up. Note the suitcases – for a walk! In the name of 'accessibility' I don't doubt.



Hostels

Hostels used to, until quite recently, give top priority to walkers carrying their own packs. People whose luggage arrived by van and cyclists were down the list and people who arrived by car were way down. Apart from the state hostels that's all gone now, but the state hostels do not tend to be that attractive. It's also to do with everyone having a mobile phone, it makes it so easy. We did meet one German youth who walked with us for a bit. He carried no phone and always headed for state hostels. A happy wanderer I thought but Mariana seemed glad when he went his own way saying there was something weird about him. In future I think if I have to book ahead I'll book a room. Why suffer the discomfort of a hostel, and the risk of bedbugs, if you have to book ahead?

THE BATTLE OF THE RIVER DOURO

The Battle of Porto or The Battle of the Douro. 12th May 1809

The grim and shameful retreat to Corunna in the depth of winter ended in January 1809 with the British army being taken off by the navy. Sir John Moore, who had taken command of the British Army in Spain after Arthur Wellesley (Later the Duke of Wellington) had been recalled as too junior, was dead. But there were still British troops in Spain. Arthur Wellesley, suddenly recognised as a winner, returned to Portugal and immediately marched north to Porto. He captured Porto from the French in May 1809 only three months after Corunna in an opportunist crossing of the River Douro.

Although I had been there twice before, once by car and another time in our boat, I took a day to examine in more detail the key location of this coup.

Porto sits on north bank of the deep, fast flowing River Douro and is famous to this day for its flourishing port wine trade. The French Marshall, Nicolas Soult, had been instructed by the Emperor Napoleon to seize Porto (often called Oporto in English) after the ousting of Sir John Moore's army.

When General Arthur Wellesley returned to Portugal on 22nd April 1809 as Commander in Chief of the remaining British forces (including the Portuguese) he immediately marched north to attack Marshall Soult and take Porto. He sent 6,000 men to Lamego to cut off Soult's retreat to Spain and led the main army himself. He had 16,000 British and 2,400 Portuguese troops. They were almost all young soldiers and untried in battle.

By rapid outflanking moves Wellesley forced Soult to retreat back from Coimbra towards Porto. On the 11th May Soult withdrew behind the river Douro, which was in flood, using a bridge of boats which he blew up behind him, abandoning Villa Nova on the south bank where the port lodges were sited. The Douro at Porto runs in a deep channel between two cliffs. Wellesley appeared on the south bank heights in Villa Nova at what is now the Monasterio de Serra do Pilar on the 12th of May. His artillery and troops, as was his custom, were invisible, carefully concealed from the French behind the ridge. From this commanding height he was able to carefully study the French positions through his telescope. Soult was unconcerned. Although Wellesley's force slightly outnumbered him he was well established behind a deep fast flowing river with an adequate force of experienced men. There were no boats of any kind on the south bank the British could use to cross. They had all been either destroyed or taken to the north bank.

Soult believed he knew the British well. They would come by sea. The French artillery was positioned to the west along the north bank of the Douro to sink the British ships as they sailed up the river. The infantry was placed to repel any landing. He was not to be misled by the approach of the British from the south towards the town. It was, he thought, just a feint. As far as he was concerned Wellesley could stand on the southern cliffs gazing through his telescope for as long as he wished. There was no way he could cross the Douro.

Soult had established his headquarters in the very comfortable Palace of the Carrancas, now a museum. With its beautiful interiors and enclosed courtyard it was well chosen and to the West of Porto centre. Like all good Frenchman Soult took food seriously and his personal chef made sure he ate well. He didn't appear at breakfast that day, the 12th May, until 11.00.

He waited for news of the British Navy' approach. Astonishingly there were no French troops on the north bank opposite the British.

But Wellesley had noticed a large stone building across the river to his right which appeared to be unoccupied and out of sight to the French troops who were all to the west of the town. This was the Bishop's Seminary for the training of priests. It was (and is) strongly built of stone and well suited for defence. I inspected it with interest.

A poor Portuguese barber appeared and led a Colonel Walters to a point on the bank where there was a skiff hidden by brushwood. He and Colonel Walters crossed the river and returned with four wine barges with the assistance of a 'Prior from Amarante' and four peasants. They were undamaged and unguarded. The position was explained to a delighted Wellesley who, after a further examination through his telescope could see no sign of the French. 'Well, let the men cross' he said. It was a bold move, a calculated risk. Each barge carried only 30 men at a time. The bay they landed in was hidden from the French, who still had not noticed, by a bend in the river. The first barge landed its troops who seized the seminary which was unoccupied and set about fortifying it. The crossing proceeded steadily. Amazingly it was an hour before the French realised what was happening.

When the news first reached Soult that the British were across the river he was having his breakfast (some accounts say he was asleep). He was incredulous and at first didn't believe it. Then he ordered artillery and infantry under General Foy to race to the seminary. But it was now a formidable well garrisoned fortress. To this day the route the French artillery had to take is along the river bank and up steep twisting narrow cobbled roads. The unseen British guns were now run forward and slaughtered the French gunners. The French infantry were driven off with heavy loss by musket and rifle fire from the seminary. Repeated French attacks were bloodily repelled. British troops continued to cross the river and reinforce the seminary.

Soult, concluding all was lost, fled with his entire force over a narrow mountain track and managed to get most of his troops back to Spain. But all wheeled vehicles and artillery had to be abandoned. The supply waggons were burnt. Strangely the French continued to regard Wellesley as a defensive general in spite of his other great attacking victories at Salamanca and Vitoria.

Wellesley had the satisfaction of eating the dinner prepared for Soult in the Palace of the Carrancas.



The Palace of the Carrancas. First Marshal Soult's, the Arthur Wellesley's Head Quarters. Here Wellesley ate Soult's dinner!



The Bishop's Seminary. The first small boat with the barber landed to the left in a bay.



The Bishop's Seminary



A memorial tablet to the British troops who occupied and defended the Bishop's Seminary