# LIFE IN THE SLOW LANE
## A PILGRIM'S VOYAGE

*Fergal Woods*

FOR YEARS, I have been reading and hearing about *Santiago de Compostella*, about its mystical and mythical place in Europe's cultural heritage. Situated in a remote corner of north western Spain, it annually attracts over 100,000 pilgrims. Complete with backpacks and walking poles they make their way along a variety of long-distance trails, which are collectively known as the *Camino de Santiago* or the way of St James.

The vast majority of walkers pick the so-called *route Français*, which usually begins at the border (you can literally start anywhere!) and heads south of the Cantabrian Mountains. In the summer of 2006 I decided to attempt the less-travelled option, the *Camino del Norte* or the coastal way, which passes through Spain's 4 Atlantic provinces. The advantages of this route are its cooler climate, and its isolation (which means it lacks the *conveyor-belt effect* of its southern sister). The infrastructure however is not so well developed, with fewer refuges, and some wayward and inconsistent marking of the trail.

I set off from Bilbao on mid-Summer's day, my point of origin being the city's Cathedral, appropriately dedicated to St James. In many ways the Basque city is not the ideal starting place. I had to contend with an interminable set of steps rising out of the city. The Basques have nicknamed their largest city *the Hole*, and for good reason! I realised on that first climb that my 10 kg backpack was too heavy. I walked through the industrialised port suburbs along the road, passing a number of factories, and concluded that this wasn't quite what I'd expected.

The combination of road walking with a heavy backpack led to every hiker's nightmare—blisters—in a very short time. I reached the coast the first evening, and crossed into Cantabria the next afternoon. You get around by following the yellow arrows painted on footpaths, electricity poles, walls, etc, but these are not always easily seen. Cantabria was relatively easy to navigate. Once you were out in the open then you had the sea to your right and the mountains to your left.

In addition to the yellow markers there are intermittent stone pillars (like old milestones) with a shell design (the symbol of pilgrims) indicating the direction. The provinces only offer advice about their own region, different associations mark their own routes independently, and guide books offer further alternatives. All of which is rather confusing, so many stick to the roads

I walked with a French guy, Jean Batiste, for a few days and he gave me excellent advice, telling me to post my boots home. He had started near Paris a month or so earlier and had the same problem with blisters. Hiking boots are too heavy for continuous road travel. Sure enough walking became easier in my trainers. I'd also visited some of the countless pharmacies along the way to purchase blister pads and plasters.

Both of us developed homicidal tendencies towards dogs. 9 out of 10 Spanish dogs must not be getting their favourite pet-food, because they are an angry lot who bark loud and long at every walker, and only quit once the dog at the next farmhouse has taken up the battle cry! I'm starting a petition for the EU to ban dogs over knee high, and failing that will apply for membership of the Drumshanbo Gun Club!

I found it strange at first that most people walk on the right in Spain, because they drive on the right there. Some of the overtaking I witnessed at close hand convinced me you're more at risk from overtaking than from oncoming traffic. In addition, walking on the right meant you weren't getting pushed back or having your hat blown off by the slipstream of a passing truck. To their credit I must point out that probably a dozen cars and trucks a day hooted encouragement or waved when they saw my backpack. This gave a great boost and definitely helped at times when I was feeling weary. One other plus for the Spanish motorist was that every Tomas, Ricardo and Enrique wasn't poncing about in a 4-wheel drive or people-carrier. There were none of these to be seen along the N-634, and I got to see a lot of that road!

The Alberges (or pilgrim hostels) were of varying quality. You get the list of hostels from tourist information, and usually plan your daily itinerary based on walking from one Alberge to the next. They are run on a voluntary basis and are sometimes free,or just a token contribution is requested. Some of them lacked hot water, they are not always well sign-posted, and 2 that I used had no Hospitaller (caretaker) to sign my *Credencial.* This is the passport-type document pilgrims are given at the start of the Camino, and must be shown to gain admittance to the Alberges. It is supposed to be stamped each day as evidence you've completed your journey.

The locals were extremely helpful and friendly. Everybody was familiar with the Camino and able to give directions. Each time I produced a map however it tended to be ignored. Rather cruelly I recalled that the Spanish had to hire an Italian to help them find America! Perhaps map-reading is not one of their strong point. On one occasion I was walking along a narrow-gauge rail track when I heard a child shouting behind me. I ignored him for a few seconds before realising he was trying to attract my attention. He was all of 5 or 6, and pointing back 10 metres behind me to a direction marker I'd missed. Talk about guardian angels! Every day I was greeted with numerous *buen Caminos* and it never failed to put a renewed spring in my step.

Lovely Asturian coastal towns like Llanes, and Ribadesella, came and went. The overcast conditions of the first week were replaced by much warmer weather and the air was heavily scented as I passed through forests of eucalyptus and pine. I decided to stop at a town called Villaviciosa, located at the end of a long estuary. A delightful surprise awaited me in the pension (cheap hostel) I used. *The Café de Sol* had—luxury of luxuries—

a bath! Just what my feet (and perhaps the rest of me) needed. Better was to follow. The town had a lovely old quarter with a fine church, whose sandstone was gleaming golden in the early evening sunshine. The balconies of the townhouses were crowned with bright flowers and I was feeling good at having reached the halfway point on my journey. I was about to look for somewhere to eat when I heard the unmistakable drone of bagpipes with an accompanying drum roll. I followed the sound and came to a large school playground, where a marching band of 20 pipers and half a dozen drummers was rehearsing. The sound they made was one of the most awesome and inspiring I have ever heard. The pipes played in Asturias and (with even more popularity) in Galicia are called *gaitas*, and they make a rich powerful sound, especially when played by an ensemble. I hadn't been aware that Asturias (like Galicia) claims a Celtic inheritance. All of the group looked to be under 30 and it was a privilege to see so many young people so proud of, and so dedicated to, their traditions. Seeing this performance was the undoubted highlight of my entire trip.

I was slightly confused to be greeted at the Alberge in Soto de Luina by a man with an Irish accent who knew my name! The mystery was solved when I met Ermano in the dorm. He's a 74 year old Italian who's on his 6th Camino, and we'd bumped into each other 3 or 4 times, and roughly knew each other's itinerary. Ermano had told the other Irishman, Willie Coyle, to expect me. Willie was from Rush in Co. Dublin, but was married to a Kiwi, and had lived for 18 years in Auckland—not that you'd know from his accent!

I mentioned to Willie that I'd been to New Zealand, and had stayed with fellow Drumshanbo man, Aidan Heron in Hamilton. He laughed and said 'you won't believe this but I worked part-time for his brother Joe!' An even stranger coincidence was revealed a few days later when the town of Gisborne came up in conversation. I told Willie I'd spent a weekend there with a rower who'd represented New Zealand in the 1984 Olympics called Bryan Wilson. I was dumbfounded when Willie said 'How did you get on with his wife Phillipa, my wife is related to her!' It's a very small world!

Asturias calls itself a *Natural Paradise* in its tourist brochures, and it's actually quite hard to argue this claim. Almost one third of the province (which has a very long history as an independent Kingdom) is protected national park, or nature reserve. By the end of the first week in July I'd left all this behind me, and stood gazing at Galicia across the Eo estuary from the big bridge at Ribadeo, and on the last leg of my journey.

Rather than veer inland, I chose to hug the coastline for as long as possible, and spent my last long *road day*. Galicia, to my mind, has made the best effort to provide off-road trails for walkers. They also have by far the best signposting so one hardly needs a map there at all. Just to reinforce the lack of co-operation already referred to, the Galician *shell* indicates the opposite direction to the other provinces!!

The number of pilgrims in the Alberges was increasing as we neared Compostella, but I'd still hardly seen anybody actually walking. I met Willie again at Miraz in a new hostel set up by an English group called 'the Confraternity of St James'. It was full so I'd to sleep on a mattress on the floor. We watched the World Cup final in the village's only bar (which had as a pet the only friendly Alsatian in Northern Spain). We were now about 90 km away from our destination.We passed through Sobrado with its remarkable Cistercian Monastery and the only lake I saw on the entire Northern Camino, and continued on to a small town called Boimorto. We were dismayed to find it had no accommodation. A young barman made a phone call, while one of the locals bought us a drink. A few minutes later a local government official arrived in the bar and brought us over to the nearby Sports Complex. He insisted on cleaning out the showers, left us the keys, and showed us where to leave them. I slept on a huge crash mat and couldn't help thinking that an Irish town of comparable size wouldn't have a large sports hall, far less a local official who'd go to the same bother for complete strangers.

Our path had now merged with *Camino Français*, and we passed dozens of walkers, some of whom were wilting in the afternoon sun. The pillars counted down the distance to Santiago, and we had lunch about 12kms out. Shortly after this we passed the city's airport. We both expected to see the Cathedral's twin towers in the distance but this was not to be. *Compostella* has expanded so much that peregrinos are now deprived of this sight until they make their way through the new town, and into the Praza de Obradoiro

The wonderful old building (and it's portico of Glory) is one of the loveliest legacies of Antiquity (work started on its construction in 1075). It was a sight for sore eyes (and feet), and marks the end of the pilgrimage. One last task remained. I climbed up more steps to the office next door to the Cathedral and got my credencial stamped for the final time, and was presented with my certificate. It was July 11, and the 650-plus km journey had taken me 3 weeks. Certificates are awarded to everyone who completes the last 100 km on foot (or bicycle, or horseback), and mine is one of my proudest possessions.

Walking through the back roads of the Galician countryside was like travelling back to the west of Ireland in the 1950's. Farmers and their wives out saving hay, well-stocked vegetable gardens, cattle blocking narrow lanes and dilapidated old tractors were commonplace. There wasn't a satellite dish to be seen, or mobile phone to interrupt the birdsong, and the pace of life was so laid-back that neither Willie nor I was in the slightest surprised when we came upon one farmer stretched out across the middle of a road,

sound asleep! His wife was sitting beside him, presumably on the off-chance that something mechanical just might venture their way sometime in the near future.

It was humbling to think that I'd walked some of the same trails as kings and lepers, troubadors and bishops, and comforting to realise that all of these would have been barked at. The sense of tradition is so powerful that the implausible legend of the discovery of the Apostles bones scarcely matters. Hardly any of the pilgrims I came across were overtly religious, and, for me, the most spiritual thing was the act of long-distance walking itself. This brings its own form of contemplation. Setting out, I had vague notions of working out in my head important topics like home improvements, career review and pension details. These were soon relegated and replaced by much more important issues like 'coffee or soft drink', 'apple or orange?' 'will I change the blister pad today or tomorrow?' **I ended up using a technique I've learned from my geography students—let your mind go blank! You'd be amazed how relaxing and how productive it can be to actually stop thinking. Your imagination takes over, and all sorts of weird and wonderful thoughts flicker in and out of your consciousness. This makes life very easy to appreciate.**

If I haven't put you off from walking the *Camino* just remember—don't go in search of anything specific and you'll come back with wonderful memories, and you're sure to find something you didn't even know you were looking for! **Anyone fancy the *Camino Portuguese* next summer?**