

From North Leitrim to Northern Spain

A Walk Along "El Camino"

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FOR OVER 1000 YEARS European pilgrims have walked to the city of Santiago in Northern Spain.

According to legend the bones of the apostle St James lie there, and all who make the pilgrimage are promised great spiritual rewards. The route to Santiago is a famous European tradition and is known locally as "El Camino" which means "The Way".

On 28th March 2002, I stood in the centre of Paris beneath the Tower of St James. Santiago lay 1300 miles away and I was determined to walk "El Camino". I had spent the previous month travelling from Manorhamilton by bicycle and ferry. My rucksack was brand new and it held the bare essentials—sleeping bag, poncho, bowl, stove and a change of clothes. My only luxuries were a book and a small BBC radio.

Various routes to Santiago have developed over the centuries. Most wind south through France and eventually join up in Northern Spain. In the Middle Ages the routes were dotted with refuges and hospitals.

These provided shelter for weary pilgrims who battled against wolves and bandits. The Black Death also claimed many lives. Today much of the old infrastructure has disappeared and the main dangers facing the pilgrim are septic blisters, sunburn and the occasional stray dog.

It took three days of walking to leave Paris completely behind. The suburbs sprawled for miles and I got lost several times. My guidebook was in French and difficult to follow. I often took a wrong turn after mistranslating a direction. But worse was to follow. Walking became painful as the dreaded blisters started to appear. Each one took days to heal and often had to be punctured with a needle. In those early days I thought of nothing else but my feet! The weight of the rucksack also caused my knees and ankles to ache. I felt exhausted at the end of each day but a shower and hot food soon improved matters. I tried not to think of the miles ahead...

Slowly the surroundings changed and I reached the forests of central France. The weather stayed sunny and I often camped under my poncho. The forest camping was enjoyable until one night I heard the grunt of a wild boar moving through the undergrowth. The remainder of the night was spent in an uneasy doze as I waited for dawn. After two weeks I reached the small town of Vezelay, perched on a hilltop. Vezelay was a traditional meeting point for pilgrims and the local monastery provided free accommodation. I rested for three days, wandering through the ancient cobbled streets and dining with the monks. Mary Magdalene is reputedly buried there and one of

the crusades was organized from Vezelay. It is a town steeped in history.

Feeling refreshed, I set off again and followed a trail of yellow arrows indicating the way to Santiago. I was now on a part of the Camino called the "Limousine Way" which passes through the French region famous for its cattle. Over the next few weeks I made good progress through France with each day following a similar routine. The walking started at 9am and I usually stopped two hours later for a brew of coffee while listening to the BBC news. Another two hours of walking ensued before stopping in a field for lunch. Cooking on a small stove is a difficult art and my diet was basic – pasta and vegetables or rice and vegetables! The afternoons usually passed quickly and my French improved as I chatted to locals and stopped in tiny "epicerie" grocery shops to buy provisions. Accommodation was a constant worry as pilgrim refuges were rare in this part of France. If the weather was bad I stayed in cheap pub hostels called "pensions" otherwise I camped rough. Many of the locals had never met an Irish pilgrim before and I enjoyed explaining to them where County Leitrim was. During my days in France I met many pilgrims travelling by bicycle but only a few on foot. I was impressed by two Dutch ladies who

started walking from their own doorstep in Holland and a Frenchman dressed as a pilgrim from the Middle Ages, complete with wooden staff and a large leather hat.

After two months of walking I was nearing the Spanish border. The snow capped Pyrenees appeared on the horizon and all public signs were printed in French and Basque. Posters advertising bull fights were visible in the villages. By this stage my feet had toughened and I could walk up to 25 miles a day. The weather turned very hot and twice I spotted a snake sunning itself by the roadside. I arrived at the town of "St Jean Pied de Port" which means "St Jean at the foot of the Pass". This was the last French town before crossing the Pyrenees into Spain. It is a major point on the Camino and many people choose to begin their pilgrimage there. After weeks of solitary walking I was stunned to see a hundred pilgrims a day arrive from all corners of the world.

I bought a Basque walking stick for the mountains and started up the pass. Unfortunately it was raining heavily and mist obscured the views. I felt sorry for walkers on their first day as they struggled up the steep path. Ten hours later I stepped across a cattle grid which marked the border with Spain and descended into the valley below. That night was spent in a freezing dormitory with eighty other pilgrims. Over the next few days the nature of "El Camino" changed. The Spanish sun was very hot for walking and most people set off at dawn, stop-

ping by early afternoon. Pilgrims often walked in small groups which constantly formed and reformed according to walking pace. Refuges were available every few miles and tiny villages lined the route, each with a bar offering cheap pilgrim food. My diet consisted mainly of "bocadillo" bread rolls filled with cheese and ham and also egg "tortillas". At night people gathered together chatting about the days' experiences and tending their wounded feet. Everyone had a theory on how to treat blisters!

As the weeks passed Santiago drew closer, but three months of walking had taken their toll. I had lost a stone in weight and my walking runners were worn to shreds. I bought new boots and endured another attack of blisters as I broke them in. Several walking companions began to suffer from tendonitis, causing the leg muscles to swell. This was very uncomfortable and could only be cured by resting. However any hardship was eased by the stunning scenery and companionship. New walkers joined the route at different stages and I began to meet some Irish pilgrims, mainly from Cork and Limerick. It was great encouragement to hear the accents from home.

Galicia is the final region before reaching Santiago and its inhabitants are of Celtic origin. Unlike most of Northern Spain, this region is green and mountainous with high rainfall. I was reminded of the glens of North Leitrim as I walked along. The sound of the bagpipes could be heard in the bars at night and the

kilt is part of the traditional dress. The sense of anticipation was rising as I passed large stone markers, each displaying the number of kilometers left to Santiago. Hundreds of pilgrims now thronged the route and the refuges were packed at night. Local sports halls were used as make-shift accommodation. I woke up on Sunday 16th July only fifty miles from Santiago. The rest of the day was a blur as I walked continuously, stopping every hour for a quick snack and some water. I went on through the night and on Monday morning the fabled city of Santiago finally came into view...

It was a week afterwards before I was safely home in Manorhamilton and able to put my feet up. The walking had been an incredible experience and the memories will last a lifetime. There is no doubt but "El Camino" makes a lasting impression on all who tread its path.

Hubert McSharry Station Road,



Manorhamilton with the Award he received from Leitrim County Council in recognition of thirty four year's service. Hubert was much more than a diligent worker. He gave many extra unpaid hours to ensure that the town environment was well presented. At Festival time he often

started work hours before official starting time. The people of Manorhamilton again thank Hubert and wish him many more happy and contented years.