



WAY TO GO

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STRETCH OF SPAIN'S LEGENDARY
CAMINO DE SANTIAGO,

ONE OF THE WORLD'S
MOST POPULAR PILGRIM PATHS.

MY

MY FRIEND Jasmine and I are on a walk that feels like it will never end. For the fifth day in a row we have rollicked through woodlands, across Romanesque bridges spanning wintry rivers, past hamlets and dewy meadows. Along silent, sun-dappled paths under dense and ancient canopies. Past blood-red toadstools and ancient *hórreo* granaries. Via posy-covered graveyards encased by low, mossy walls and dainty stone churches with belltowers. Golden light has burst like a halo around the rusted crimson leaves of autumn that surround old Spanish oaks. In the tall poplars that watch over them, starlings have warned us that we're late to pass, that we won't arrive at our sleeping place before night falls. And now we're standing in a prosaic tunnel, eating windfall apples, reading the messages on

the walls. One is funny, punchy and hopefully true: "I saw God. She was black." Others are simple: "*Memento vivere*" (Remember to live). Most are innocuous, proof that 800 kilometres doth not a philosopher make. "Love is love!" "Just open your eyes!" "Don't fight the feeling, invite the feeling!"

We are on the world's most famous pilgrimage, the Camino de Santiago, a trek with nine major routes, all of which end at Santiago de Compostela in north-western Spain. During the Middle Ages, this town ranked as the third city of Christendom. In 813 BCE, the tomb of Saint James the Apostle, the evangelist of Spain and her patron saint, is thought to have been discovered near Finisterre on the rugged Galician coast and moved to Santiago de Compostela – and the pilgrimage was born. Then, as now, the most popular of the nine routes is the 770-kilometre Camino Frances (French Way), which starts over the Pyrénées in France.

In 2017, the pilgrim office issued 301,036 certificates. Why? Martin Sheen's 2010 film, *The Way*, helped. In it, an American travels to Spain to retrieve his son's body and experiences personal transformation. Then there was this year's BBC documentary *Pilgrimage: The Road to Santiago*, which set British celebrities on the path. Both focused on the metaphorical journey born of the literal one. "Pilgrims" is a loose word to describe those who walk the Camino. While 50 per cent proclaim their reasons are purely religious, most are seeking more than just a walk. For humans, the idea of pilgrimage retains appeal.



A bridge over the Río Furelos, near Melide, where two Camino routes, the Primitivo (Original) and Frances, merge into one



A pilgrim in the streets of Santiago de Compostela

My quest? Somewhere in the middle. I was raised and am still culturally Catholic – drawn to the Virgin Mary, smells, bells and sung Latin – but I’d be considered an outsider in the eyes of the mega faithful for a million reasons. In short, I’m not here seeking to venerate the apostle but I have come with an open heart. And if I have a “Road to Damascus” moment while drinking albariño in an *albergue* (hostel), well, game on.

Blame my “lapsed” status but we’re striding only the last 115 kilometres from Sarria (the least you can do while still qualifying for a certificate) in November, as part of a Follow the Camino (follow thecamino.com) tour. The company specialises in self-guided and guided group trips on the Camino, following the nine main routes. We don’t carry our own bags; they get picked up and moved on.

November, the taxi driver tells us on the way from Santiago de Compostela airport, is a “terrible” time to do the route. “You haven’t come for long enough, plus no-one comes now,” he says. “It rained all of last week.” Thanks, misery guts. But not a splash of rain falls on our heads and we walk unburdened by crowds, counting about 10 other pilgrims a day. That’s the idea. (I met a philosopher in London who travelled to Spain one summer to gather his thoughts. He ended up in a group that included a chatty sex-toy saleswoman who moonlighted as a white witch. I made a mental note to go in winter.)

From the town of Sarria we walk through big misty landscapes replete with old farmhouses (some abandoned, others boasting paddocks heaving with pigs) and emerald fields speckled with the

giant pumpkins of late autumn until we reach the medieval town of Portomarín on the Miño River. On the way to Palas de Rei, we encounter seven pilgrims (including Brazilians and some Korean Catholics) and one man on a broken-down e-bike. (“Serves him right, lazy git,” murmurs Jasmine.) Pilgrims greet us with a simple “*Buen Camino!*” as we pass. A café in the open countryside appears whenever we need a *cortado* (espresso coffee with milk) or a fresh orange, the sweet pulp straight out of Seville. We lunch on lentil stews, empanadas and tarta de Santiago – the almond cake of Saint James. One day we ask for vegetables with our rump of veal. The waiter rolls his eyes. “We don’t have vegetables,” he says. “This is a *churrasquería*.”

Our lodgings range from basic guesthouses to cosy family-run hotels. At Palas de Rei, our hosts call a masseuse to take us to her parlour, PalaShama, where she covers our legs in parafango, a mixture of hot wax and mud sent by God to soothe muscles. Music drifts across the road from a café where a band cranks out jigs on accordions, tambour and *gaita* (Galician bagpipes). Our favourite hotel is Casa Brandariz near Arzúa (casabrandariz.com) with its flagstone floors, *caldo gallego* (thick vegetable stew in a meaty broth) and delicious chicken confit. At Pulpería A Garnacha restaurant in Melide (pulperiaagarnacha.com), the owner’s sales technique is to open the window and shake an octopus at us.

There are constant reminders on the path that this is a spiritual journey. Village crucifixes are dressed with ribbons, notes and votive offerings. A family has tied a laminated square – depicting a father’s face – to a branch, with a quote: “How long does a man live? As long as we carry him inside us... For as long as we ourselves live.”

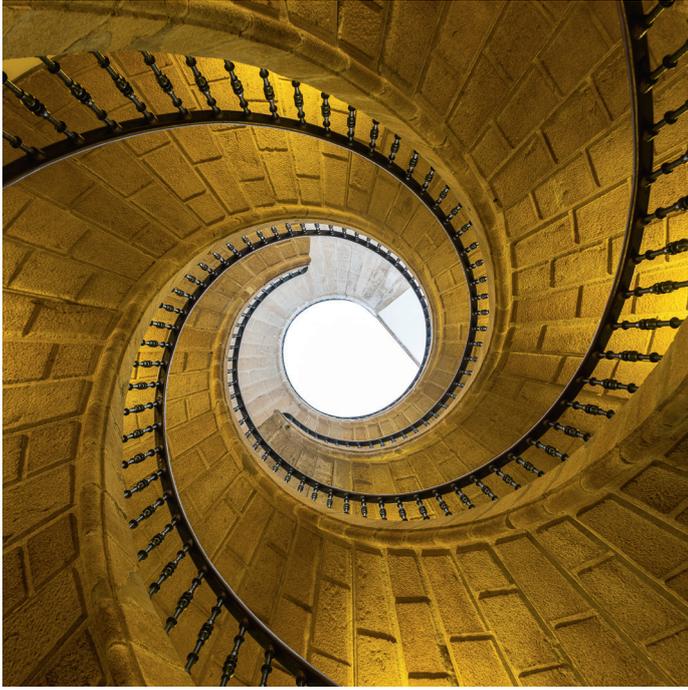
In Melide, on the Río Furelos, 10 lucky black cats sit at intervals on church steps like furry sculptures. At Arzúa, I abandon my old trainers for new ones and invest in a knee support that cannot stop my pilgrim’s limp.

Finally, we arrive in mythical Santiago de Compostela’s labyrinthine streets. The cathedral’s towering, ornate beauty is even more sensational in the flesh. The façade, trussed in scaffolding for five years, has been restored and its baroque glory glows in the dusk light. Inside, candles flicker in the darkness. It’s late in the day when we arrive at the pilgrim’s office to get our “passport” stamped – the last of the pretty inkings from churches, albergues, restaurants and shops. The attendant comments that on summer days, up to 2500 pilgrims surge in and the

Flight path

SCQ

Qantas flies from Sydney, Melbourne and Perth to London with connections to Santiago de Compostela via partner airlines. qantas.com



The Santiago de Compostela Cathedral's mesmerising spiral staircase (left) and famed Botafumeiro

wait can top two hours. But we have time to gorge on cod-stuffed peppers and lamb shanks at O Dezaseis restaurant (dezaseis.com) and allow ourselves to drink a whole bottle of albarino.

We're staying next to the cathedral in the elegant Parador Hostal dos Reis Católicos (paradores-spain.com), converted from a hospital in 1954. The infirmary was founded in 1499 for pilgrims who had fallen ill or, to quote from a plaque in the courtyard, "got into brawls". A 19th-century expansion retained medieval adornments such as gargoyles, some of which are somewhat eccentric. One set showcases sins that pilgrims should avoid. We peer up and see a man getting intimate with a goat and a naked woman in a position that could best be described as downward dog meets *Kama Sutra*.

On Sunday we head back to the cathedral for the pilgrims' Mass. Jasmine turns to me and asks, "Do you want to hug the apostle?" So it is we find ourselves in the relic chamber, just the two of us, behind the golden statue of Saint James whose face looks out on the ornate altar. Below us is the Roman mausoleum believed to contain the relics of the saint himself. "Am I just supposed to hug him from behind?" I query. "Yes," instructs Jasmine. "I've seen it on YouTube."

At the end of the Mass is the swinging of the Botafumeiro – a giant censer swung to almost 180 degrees on a pulley system by a bevy of breathless red-robed gentlemen. The spicy bouquet of frankincense penetrates the air, a party trick said to cost hundreds of euros a pop. It's alarming to watch, as you can't help imagining what might occur if the solid silver casket came loose of its ropes. Which is exactly what is believed to have happened in 1499 when Catherine of Aragon dropped in for Mass on her way to London to marry Henry VIII. No-one was killed – it simply smashed a high window and went on its merry way. Nobody is concerned with health and safety here and neither am I. I'm focused on how I feel after days of meditative walking. And it's like the Botafumeiro: wild, graceful, fast and free, burning into the sunlit future at high velocity. ●

going is tough because of the altitude – one pass sits at 5600 metres. The longer option, starting in Nepal's Simikot, hugs the Karnali River to the border of Tibet before turning north towards Kailash, the holiest mountain for Hindus, Buddhists, Bonpos and Jains.

Japan Kumano Kodō

The Kumano mountains occupy a wild peninsula to the south of Osaka. Their most famous journey is the 68-kilometre Nakahechi route (en.visitwakayama.jp), a sacred path for Shinto and Buddhist believers. Expect pine forests, temples, tea plantations and a raging waterfall at the end.

Italy La Via di Francesco

Known in English as the Saint Francis Way, this 550-kilometre trail (viadi francesco.it) between Florence and Rome winds through the gorgeous fields of Umbria and links places notable in the life of the nature-loving Saint Francis of Assisi.

Colombia Lost City

This four-day hike (amakuna.com) is 46 kilometres there and back to the Lost City of the ancient Tayrona people in the foothills of the Sierra Nevada, which sounds like a breeze. But vertical climbs, lack of shade, mosquitoes, slippery mud, river crossings and nights in hammocks ensure it's not. Spirituality is found in the Kogi elders who protect the site.

WAYS TO GO

Five other spiritual journeys to add to your bucket list.

England Pilgrims' Way

This ancient, 190-kilometre walk (pilgrimswaycanterbury.org) links two great British cathedrals, Winchester and Canterbury. The route is a broken necklace of tracks, roads and paths (including sections of the North Downs) and areas of outstanding natural beauty.

Tibet Mount Kailash

The trek around Mount Kailash (tibettravel.org) is only 50 kilometres but the