

# The Road to Compostela: A Doctor Takes Stock

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Beneath the high altar of the [Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela](#), in the wind-worn province of Galicia, Spain, lies a silver [sarcophagus](#) containing the relics of St. James the Greater. For a thousand years, pilgrims have been beating a path to his bones. The most fabled trail follows the Camino Frances, which stretches nearly five hundred miles from east of the Pyrenees to Santiago. In 2002, nearly seventy thousand people completed the journey and so earned a certificate, or *compostela*, from the Archdiocese of Santiago. The numbers will quadruple this year when the feast day of St. James (July 25) falls on a Sunday (a so-called Xacobean Holy Year). Penitent travelers can expect a full discount on their [purgatorial](#) bill instead of the usual half off. The popularity of the pilgrimage is hardly new; in fact, it peaked in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, when some years over a half million souls traveled a route already serviced by a system of hostels and military outposts.

Who was James, and why has he become a posthumous celebrity in Spain? The Gospels say that he was the son of Zebedee and brother of John. They were fishermen by trade until Jesus summoned them. James belonged to the apostolic inner circle and witnessed the raising of the [daughter of Jairus](#), the [Transfiguration](#), and the [agony in the garden](#) of [Gethsemane](#). His martyrdom is the first--and only one--among the Apostles to be recorded in Scripture. He was [beheaded](#) by Herod Agrippa in A.D. 44, and his body was thrown to the animals. Friends stole it away on a stone boat bound for Spain, where it lay quietly in a Roman mausoleum for over 750 years. In 813 the monk Pelayo discovered it, Bishop Tiomidoro authenticated it, and King Alphonse II built a modest cathedral over the grave of Spain's new patron saint.

Pilgrims--now as always--walk the camino to Santiago for mixed reasons [see Paul Moses, page 26]. Gone is the medieval angst over "salvation," though the vast majority of today's hikers harbor some spiritual intent. The militant nationalism that helped end Moorish occupation of the peninsula in the fifteenth century has been replaced by national and European pride. Modern walkers love to travel, and many long for the diversion of strange lands and foreign tongues. Some simply value the physical exercise, while many just need a holiday. Still, the notion of pilgrimage suggests something more. People of all faiths and in every age have responded to the restless desire for [theophany](#) by walking to where holy men and women lived and were martyred in the service of a god.

The mortal remains of the saints--revered by Catholics as relics--belong to the fleshy fabric of the Catholic tradition. We respond to the power of touch, and to "seeing with our own eyes." We literally race with Simon Peter to Christ's empty tomb, and we side with Thomas, who needed to probe the wounds of the risen Lord. Catholics still queue for candles crossed at our necks on the feast of St. Blaise, wear the smudge of Ash Wednesday, and kiss the wood on Good Friday. We bless ourselves with holy water and take Communion under both species, to more fully experience the Real Presence.

Relics lend a tacit proof of someone's holiness. They encourage recollection, prayer, even pilgrimage. We are even inclined to acknowledge someone's holiness if she lies [incorrupt](#) in a glass case. Bones prove not only that the saint once lived, but that she still mingles in the traditions and triumphs of the church. They reconnect us to that first, unmarred moment when our faith was potent, undoubting, alive. They unite us worldwide through their being imbedded in every [consecrated](#) altar, a practice tied to the early Christians who celebrated Mass over the bones of the martyrs in the [catacombs of Rome](#).

Last October, I became another thread in the still-unfolding tapestry of camino history. With three friends, I spent twenty days walking the pilgrimage route to Santiago. Our itinerary reflected the times: we flew to Madrid, rented a car, and spent the first night in the monastery of Santo Domingo de Silas, where we adjusted to jet lag and treated ourselves to the sounds of ancient chant. The following day we hopped a train from Burgos to Sahagun, and began to hike the Camino Frances. All our efforts to prevent swollen limbs and bubbling blisters quickly failed, and we were required to hire a taxi to make up lost time. This fall from grace is forgiven in a common camino prayer: "Blessed are you, pilgrim, if what concerns you most is not arriving, but arriving with the others. Blessed are you, pilgrim, if you discover that a step backward to help another is more valuable than one hundred forward without awareness of those at your side."

A typical day began before 7 a.m. in an open dormitory. Life would stir and release its shadows, as we rolled from our bunks and hobbled to the water closet. Little lights would dart, sinuses snort, and suddenly the whole [amebic](#) mass was moving, whispering, packing, walking to start the new day. I dressed in layers of nylon, polyester, blended wool, fleece. Soon we would gather on the tarmac and brace ourselves against the morning chill, looking for a directional arrow or a pilgrim just ahead as our guide.

By [midmorning](#), we usually wound around a tiny table in a smoky bar, sipping the life force that is *cafe con leche grande*. Then we circled in prayer and were off again. We walked until early afternoon. On a stone fence or mat of grass, we would unpack our picnic booty--bags of apples, oranges, bread, cheese, ham, juice, and chocolate--and savor the still and the [weightlessness](#) of

the moment. Then having molted a layer of clothing, we swung on our packs and trudged further westward. By late afternoon the sky had [darkened](#), and we hurried to the nearest *albergue* (hostel), had our certificates stamped, paid the suggested offering of three euros, and staked out a bunk with our backpacks. Chores followed: a shower, washing clothes, nap, and journal entry. If we were lucky, there was a cold San Miguel or Mahu beer waiting in a nearby bar. Luckier still, we might find a [vespers](#) service at 7 p.m., and a much anticipated pilgrims' meal in a local restaurant. The *menu del dia* usually consisted of white bean or [tripe](#) soup, green beans, or egg and potato omelet. The second course was a choice of trout, hake, veal, or chicken, garnished with French fries. Dessert [invariably](#) included fruit, flan, or yogurt, and all for six euros! Before dinner was even served, we had devoured a basket of [chewy](#) bread and a bottle of unlabeled wine. We laughed, lounged, [unwound](#) from our day as we planned the next.

By ten o'clock we had collapsed on our bunks and set weary thoughts adrift on the tidal snores [resounding](#) through the hall. We dreamed pilgrim dreams of hot showers, painless feet, and warm breezes to dry our dripping laundry.

Pilgrims accept a new denominator: Their sole purpose is to walk, and to walk toward Compostela. With a fresh simplicity they soon come to their senses. Days are drenched in the strong scent of cigarette smoke, all-purpose soap, cow manure, eucalyptus leaf, espresso coffee, and the bouquet of our toil and sweat. Our meditation is punctuated by crunching gravel, barking dogs, crowing roosters, lowing cows, screeching espresso machines, honking bread trucks, and the dim whine of traffic on nearby national highways.

The camino is like a moving monastery, but one where you can laugh out loud. Everywhere, *cruceros* (stone crosses) rise along the roadside, chapels dot the deserted hills, church bells toll, and parish priests wave as if in [benediction](#). My personal devotion became placing a pebble on the official camino monuments that bear a [scallop](#) emblem, and offering the Jesus Prayer: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me a sinner." Oriented by yellow arrows and concrete markers, we joined the sure, unbroken line of pilgrim ants.

As a foreigner, I was aware of my vulnerability, and grateful for my good fortune. There is an often-repeated saying on the camino: the tourist demands; the pilgrim gives thanks. In Spain, a pilgrim is never made to feel a stranger. The look and smell of him seem to provide comfort to those he encounters. No one questions his intentions or his sacrifice. By his walking stick, scallop shell, and backpack, he is known and respected, greeted and received as a blessing. This marriage of giving and receiving has worked for a millennium, and is working still. It is one of the great consolations of the pilgrimage, and one deeply missed when it is over. For what does the world really know of the pilgrim? Only that he is walking, walking toward Compostela.

The dangers of today's camino are no longer the legendary wolves and witches, swindlers and the [highwaymen](#). Even the physical elements have been tamed by Gore-Tex and Thermolite. I confess that my friends and I lived royally on inexpensive food, fine wine, and clean accommodations. The real challenge of the camino for me involved an interior journey and the company it kept. I was self-conscious of my [snoring](#), my night terrors, my social insecurities. I battled impatience with the slower, less focused members of the group, and had to stifle my annoyance at their exaggerated mannerisms. I longed for the solitude of my darkened den in the hours before my family arises, the coffee steaming in the glow of my Macintosh. I was reminded of Kathleen Norris's observation that "living in community is all the [asceticism](#) you need."

It was only after my return home that I began to realize my deeper fear. How would I answer my wife and friends who wondered: "Why did you go?" and "Did it work?" I could have answered like the Japanese pilgrim I encountered who quickly tired of my interrogation: "The camino is for walking," he said, "not for thinking." I could have quoted Henri Nouwen, who after seven months in a Trappist monastery concluded: "It did not work; it did not solve my problems. And I know that a year, two years, or even a lifetime as a Trappist monk would not have 'worked' either. Because a monastery is not built to solve problems but to praise the Lord [in the midst](#) of them."

Of course, they are both right, but the camino is forever beckoning us beyond our tentative conclusions. It offers us a universal road, one that designates us pilgrims and marches us to God. It yields its wisdom incrementally for as often and as long as we return to it--whether in body or in spirit--in search of self-awareness and hope.

The trail begins in the Pyrenees, stretches to Compostela, and then flows abruptly to the sea at Fines Terra, transforming the pilgrim into a drop of water who is subsumed in the vast eternal stream. The camino is a finite journey, but one that spans the emotions of a life: youthful optimism to mid-journey focus, to a growing [inattention](#) to personal hygiene and social grace. The destination itself, [Santiago de Compostela](#), becomes the heavenly gates, the mythical Emerald City, its towering spires and baroque altars rising above the bones of a man who literally embraced Christ and died for him.

In the end, the pilgrim mustn't merely contemplate the journey, but walk it. Our task, as Thomas Merton once wrote, is to travel [to the ends of the earth](#) "and there find ourselves in the aborigine who most differs from ourselves.... Sitting at home and meditating on the divine presence is not enough for our time. We [must] come to the end of a long journey and see that the stranger we meet there is no other than ourselves--which is the same as saying we find Christ in him."

My trek to Santiago ended with a shrug of relief and disappointment. It was a day like all others in Galicia, where it is always raining, just rained, or about to rain. From Monte Gozo, where for centuries pilgrims have first glimpsed the beautiful spires of Santiago's cathedral, we could see only the thick morning haze. In fact, it was only when we ran smack into the nine-hundred-year-old edifice in the Plaza de Obradoiro that we realized its size and beauty. There we greeted other pilgrims with whom we had shared the camino, and took photographs of one another in tired, huddled poses. Then we entered the church and dutifully touched the base of the Tree of Jesse, where a hand's imprint has been worn deeply by endless repetition, and climbed the steps behind the high altar to hug the jeweled statue of Santiago Peregrino, St. James the Pilgrim. Candles were lit for those we had left behind, and in gratitude for our safe arrival.

That noon we attended the pilgrims' Mass and circulated among those whom God had improbably and inscrutably brought together. We were the "pilgrims from the United States, starting at Sahagun," the priest announced before a concelebrated Mass in English, German, and Spanish. The most moving moment, and one that I had not anticipated, happened during my descent to the sepulcher holding the body of St. James. Here the span of two thousand years vanished instantly, and the living rejoiced with the dead. My heart seemed to ache with what God had uncovered inside me. Another miracle was worked: the faith of an aging, secularized American had become childlike again.

The bones of the saints lie at the heart of our Christian faith: that a man named Jesus lived and died and proved himself the Christ. We know him through his disciples. And we harbor and honor their bones. Catholicism is not mere etiquette, philosophy, or law. It is an embodied faith, and bodies--living and dead--are what convey the Gospels' claims. Relics remain the hard facts of a religion that requires us to suspend our postmodern disbelief. This is one of the mysteries that the camino throws back at me still: We are Catholics to the bone.

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