

# A SHORT GUIDE FOR PILGRIMS TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA ON THE CAMINO FRANCES

© Antti Lahelma,  
who walked the Camino with Jukka Mölsä

## CONTENTS

1. El Camino de Santiago - what it is and why to take the trip
2. History of the pilgrim's route
  - The Santiago Legend
  - The Medieval Pilgrimage to Compostela and the Spanish Reconquista
  - Pilgrimage to Santiago after the Middle Ages
  - The Modern Camino de Santiago
3. Practical considerations for taking the trip
  - Where to Start?
  - When to Go?
  - How Demanding Is It?
  - Avoiding Some Common Health Problems
  - Is It Safe for a (Blonde) Woman to Walk Alone?
  - Is It Easy to Get Lost?
  - On Bicycle Or On Foot?
  - How to Get There?
  - What to Take With You?
4. Conditions in Spain
  - Language
  - Opening Hours
  - Finding Food And Spanish Food Culture
5. Some highlights of the route
  - St. Jean Pied-de-Port - Pamplona
  - Pamplona - Logrono
  - Logrono - Burgos
  - Burgos - Leon
  - Leon - O Cebreiro
  - O Cebreiro - Santiago de Compostela
6. In Santiago - Now What?

*When in April the sweet showers fall  
And pierce the drought of March to the root, and all  
The veins are bathed in liquor of such power  
As brings about the engendering of the flower,  
When also Zephyrus with his sweet breath  
Exhales an air in every grove and heath  
Upon the tender shoots, and the young sun  
His half-course in the sign of the Ram has run,  
And the small fowl are making melody  
That sleep away the night with open eye  
(So nature pricks them and their heart engages)  
Then people long to go on pilgrimages  
And palmers long to seek the stranger strands  
Of far-off saints, hallowed in sundry lands*

### **The Canterbury Tales**

## 1. EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO - WHAT IT IS AND WHY TO TAKE THE TRIP

In the High Middle Ages, all roads led to Santiago de Compostela. The city, located in north-western Spain, was one of the three main holy cities of Christendom (the other two were Jerusalem and Rome). As a center of pilgrimage, it was perhaps number one. Rome was too intimately tied with the Papacy - a pilgrimage there wasn't a mere spiritual journey but also a political statement which meant taking sides in the power struggle between the Pope and the Emperor that tormented the medieval cosmos. Jerusalem on the other hand was much of the time inaccessible or dangerous to reach due to being held by the moslems. Santiago benefited from these struggles; it was neutral, safe ground - less dangerous than Jerusalem and less confusing than Rome.

Every European country had its holy places, but in Santiago the medieval idea of pilgrimage reached its undisputable zenith. The very word "pilgrimage" became almost synonymous with going to Santiago. Dante (in *Vita Nuova*) himself wrote that those who travel across the seas [to the Holy Land] may be called 'palm-bringers' and those who visit Rome can be called 'Romegoers', but the title of 'pilgrims' belongs to those only who are going to or coming from the House of Galicia, the holy grave of the apostle James. Innumerable pilgrims (at the height of the pilgrimage perhaps half a million per year) made their way to the grave of St. James in Santiago de Compostela, bringing prosperity to the towns and monasteries along the pilgrim's route. A memory of their numbers is still reflected in the fact that in Spanish "El Camino de Santiago" or St. James' Way also means "Milky Way" - a metaphor suggesting that there were as many pilgrims as there are stars in the sky.

Since people came from all over Europe, there exist not just one but several routes to Compostela and no one "official" starting point. In France alone there were four towns that marked the starting points of different routes to Santiago: Arles (Via Tolosana), Le Puy (Via Podense), Vezelay (Via Lemovicense) and Tours (Via Turonselle). A lot of people simply started walking their way down south towards the Pyrenees from wherever they lived. In Spain, these routes combined into two main routes: Camino Aragones for those who crossed the Pyrenees through the Somport Pass, and Camino Frances for those who used the Roncesvalles Pass. Still other routes, coming from the northern Spanish seaports and the Christianized 'mozarabic' areas of southern Spain, joined the Camino Frances before arrival to Santiago. Of all the routes, it is the "French route" or Camino Frances that is by far the most important both historically and in modern times.

Today the Camino is still being travelled by thousands of people, although most of them for other reasons than those devout medieval Christians, hoping to evidence miracles at the saint's tomb or receive the absolution promised by the Church. The flow of pilgrims waned once, but never completely dried up, and is now most definitely on the rise again. Why do people voluntarily take the trouble to walk almost 800 km to reach the alleged grave of a saint who in truth probably never was buried there and anyway they could go by car instead? Reasons vary - I'll try to list some.

For some, it is simply an inexpensive sports holiday in beautiful surroundings and good company. We talked to Spaniards who said they came to the Camino because they couldn't afford to go to Ibiza (I'm not joking). Some people take it as a 'manhood trial' of some sort. Others want to get rid of a couple of extra kilos. As a form of tourism, walking has surprisingly much to offer; you get to see things, people and places you would never notice from a bus or train window.

Others go there because of the history, art and architecture of the pilgrim's road. The Camino played an important role especially in the spreading and development of romanesque art and architecture, of which there is still lot to see along the route. There are also fine examples of Spanish 'plataresque' gothic style, such as the cathedrals of Burgos and Leon, as well as many pompous baroque churches and palaces built with gold and silver pillaged from the New World.

Still others have a spiritual reason of some sort. The Camino attracts many followers of 'alternative' lifestyles who come there hoping to experince something out of the ordinary or mystical. Not all are 'alternative', either: many ordinary Christians walk the Camino for Christian reasons.

Finally there are many who walk the Camino for purely personal reasons, i.e. to reflect on their life, marriage, death of a relative, etc. A month or so of walking through Spanish countryside 'disconnected' from the rest of humanity can be a good opportunity to sort things out.

Obviously, many people have more than one reason. The possibility of combining all of the above into one trip is what makes the Camino an unusual experience.

## 2. HISTORY

### The Santiago legend

The Camino Frances follows roughly the ancient Roman road Via Traiana (some traces of which may still be seen along the Camino) from Burdigala (modern Bordeaux) to Asturica Augusta (Astorga). There is evidence that a tradition of some form of pilgrimage along the Camino Frances may have roots in Roman or even prehistoric times, for throughout the ages many pilgrims - instead of stopping at Compostela, the end point of the Christian pilgrim's route - continued some 80 km. to the far-westerly point of Finisterre, or "the End of the Earth", a place with many connotations of mythical or mystical nature.

According to the gospels, St. James was one of the twelve disciples of Jesus; a son of the fisherman Zebedee, he and his brother John were called by Jesus while mending their nets by Lake Genesaret. What happened to old Zebedee after his offspring had forsaken him for a doomsday prophet, the story remains silent. The boys received from Jesus the name 'Boanerges', "men of thunder", because of their impetuoussness. The gospels attribute a couple of miracles to James, such as the raising of the daughter of Jairus. The Acts of the Apostles relates that he was the first of the apostles to suffer a martyr death, being executed by king Herodes Agrippa I around the year 44 AD. One legend claims that his accuser repented in the last minute and was beheaded with James. James is known as "the Great", to distinguish him from another St. James, who is known as "the Younger".

In Spain, James was to become the most popular of all saints and a number of legends evolved around his cult. According to a tradition that dates back at least to the 7th century, James preached the gospel in Spain, more precisely in Galicia or the north-western corner of the Iberian peninsula. The *Legenda Aurea* of Jacobus de Voragine tells us that the new teaching wasn't well received and despite all his trouble the saint only managed to make nine converts. He returned to the Palestine, was killed, and his disciples brought his body back to Galicia - in a miraculous boat that went without sails, steered by God himself. They landed at Iria Flavia, asked for a burial place from Queen Lupa ("she-wolf") who ruled the land, but Lupa proved to be a nasty pagan who made the life of the disciples difficult in various ways. After several miracles, adventures, dragons and whatnot, Lupa naturally converted to Christianity and had her palace transformed into a church where the saint's body was buried.

The grave, we are told, was then 'forgotten' for eight hundred years. Under the reign of Alfonso II (789-842) a hermit called Pelagius then received a vision in which the burial place of St. James was revealed to him. The place of the grave promptly was surrounded in a miraculous light and the bishop of Iria

Flavia, Theodomir (d. 847), proceeded to investigate the site and declared it the grave of St. James. The bones of the apostle were an immediate success: Alfonso II built a church on the place and James soon received veneration as the divine protector of Spain, although it must be added that an element of doubt regarding the authenticity of the grave has always been present. A much later legend has it that the name 'Compostela' would be derived from 'Campus Stellae' or 'star field', after the miraculous (star-)light that showed the place of the grave. According to modern philologists, however, it stems from the Latin word "compostum", meaning burial place, referring to the Roman necropolis located on the site.

### **The medieval pilgrimage to Compostela and the Spanish Reconquista**

This discovery of a heavenly protector couldn't have been better timed. The Arabs (or 'Moors') had in 711 invaded Visigothic Spain and conquered most of the country, leaving only a few small mountain kingdoms in Asturia (northern Spain) to resist the onslaught of the Arab civilization. In such conditions, divine aid was needed; this arrived in the form of 'Santiago' or St. James, who made an appearance as a heavenly warrior during the battle of Clavijo (834), when Ramiro I of Leon defeated the army of Abdurrahman II. This manifestation of the saint as Santiago Matamoros or "Moor-slayer" is one of the more grotesque aspects of the cult; along the route, artworks showing him as a mounted swordsman, trampling dark-skinned infidels seem to be even more popular than the peaceful representations of St. James as a gentle pilgrim. "Santiago!" remained for centuries the battle-cry of the Spanish warriors and conquistadors conquering new lands for their king.

The monks of the influential French monastery of Cluny cunningly saw in promoting the Compostela cult a way of strengthening the Christian resistance to Arab dominance of the Iberian peninsula, and encouraged pilgrimage by arranging complete absolution for those who reached the grave. Hospitals, bridges and hostels were built along the route to ease the difficult and dangerous journey. Like the Holy Sepulchre of Jerusalem, the grave of St. James became a symbol of the crusader ideology.

The first foreign pilgrim on record is a French bishop of Le Puy, Gottskalk, around the year 950, but as soon as the early 12th century the pilgrimage had grown into a veritable mass-movement. The *Codex Calixtinus*, a manuscript dealing with among other things the Charlemagne legend, contains a guide to Compostela written around 1130, presumably by a French monk called Aymeric Picaud. Apart from being an invaluable source of information about the medieval pilgrimage, it is the first European travel guide written (excluding classical Greek or Roman ones). Santiago became also tied to the legend of Charlemagne, who according to *Codex Calixtinus* saw a dream in which he was told to follow the Milky Way to the grave of the apostle James. The *Song of Roland* relates the story of his crusade against the Moors and his defeat at the Battle of Roncesvalles, which took place in the year 778. Many, if not most medieval 'celebrities' such as St. Francis of Assisi and St. Bridget of Sweden did the trip to Santiago, or at least had someone do it for them (which also entitled one for the absolution). This brought money and various crusader groups to Northern Spain, helping to finance and better organize the 'Reconquista' or reconquest of Spain for Christendom. St. James became the patron and symbol of this Holy War, in whose name zealous crusaders made their vows.

Whole towns were born along the pilgrim routes, with a special kind of town plan, architecture and art. Flowing from this artery of high medieval culture, romanesque, gothic and Arab influences spread in small veins to the farthest corners of Europe - its far-reaching and unexpected results can hardly be underestimated. It may perhaps be said that never before or after was Europe so intimately a single civilization, with a single goal: the grave of James.

In the 15th and 16th centuries, changes emerge in the motivations and reasons behind the pilgrimage. New types of pilgrims appear. For knights, pilgrimage was a pleasant way of spending time and having a little adventure. Aristocrats and merchants came in search of business opportunities and partners. Courts of law sent criminals to Santiago as a punishment, even for petty offences; for instance, a man from Mechelen (Netherlands) was sent to Santiago for disturbing people at night. Beggars earned their living

by acting as surrogate pilgrims, paid e.g. by some convict or rich merchant. The last two groups in particular caused the prestige of the Camino to decrease by the end of the middle ages. Late medieval pilgrims carried a sturdy staff of fresh wood, the 'green cross' - not only to support themselves but, perhaps more important, to defend themselves against fellow 'pilgrims'.

### **Pilgrimage to Compostela after the middle ages**

The heyday of the pilgrim's route was during the Middle Ages, and when in 1492 the Reconquista was completed and the Moors had been ousted from their last stronghold of Granada, the cult partially lost its *raison d'être*. The protestant Reformation meant an end for pilgrimage from much of northern Europe. The ill reputation of the Spanish Inquisition decreased the flow of foreign pilgrims, as did the French civil war (between protestant Huguenots and Catholics) of the 16th century that lasted for 40 years; that the southern part of that country was protestant for a long time was a severe blow to the pilgrimage. Pilgrims became objects of suspect and the pilgrimage was associated with criminals and poor people. In the 17th century, the Spanish national cult of Santiago experienced a crisis when it was challenged by that of saint Teresa of Avila, a hugely popular 16th century mystic (who later became the first female Doctor of the Church). St. James remained the patron of Spain, but the quarrel left the cult much weakened.

The cult was kept alive in the 17th century in Central Europe by the confraternities of St. James in Flanders, France, Germany and Switzerland. That the cult of St. James's grave still remained important in Catholic Europe is witnessed by the fact that when Oliver Cromwell terrorized Ireland, a large number of Irish Catholics went on exile to Compostela. In late 17th century, the pilgrimage experienced something of a revival and reached a new (if more modest, honestly religious) peak, but mid-18th century again saw a marked decline. The revived charity organizations along the route lured again large numbers of beggars and 'falsos peregrinos', and wars in Poland and Austria scared potential pilgrims. The French revolution and Napoleonic wars finally put an end to large-scale European pilgrimage. The confraternities maintaining the hospitals and other facilities along the route disappeared and the pilgrimage was confined to a Spanish and Portuguese phenomenon. The scientific and industrial revolution in 19th century also rendered the pilgrimage obsolete in the rest of Europe.

In the year 1879, the long lost remains of the saint that had been hidden in 1518 were rediscovered in excavations, and a papal bull from 1884 confirmed the authenticity of the bones. Year 1885 was a holy year of the saint James, and pilgrims from all over Europe again made their way to Santiago. The flow of pilgrims grew again little by little. In 1937 the apostle James was officially restored as the patron saint of Spain and the medieval cult acquired new ideological significance during the four decades of Franco's fascist dictatorship. Historical interest in the pilgrimage has increased in this century, bringing more publicity and tourists to the route.

### **The modern Camino de Santiago**

In the second half of the 20th century, and in the past decade in particular, there has been a major renaissance of the pilgrim's route. Through the efforts of local enthusiasts, supported by the Catholic Church, the Spanish state and lately by the Council of Europe (which in 1987 issued the so called Santiago declaration, urging European states to work towards the revitalization of the pilgrim's route, an important part of the common European heritage), the Camino has been rediscovered - first by the Spaniards themselves, and now it is becoming internationally known once more. An infrastructure resembling the medieval system of hostels and confraternities has begun to develop anew. Even in Spain, the Camino is considered a 'new' thing by the general public; apparently it first became well-known in the country after the "Anno Xacobeo" of 1992 when the Pope visited Santiago de Compostela and a major effort was made to improve the facilities along the route, especially in Galicia (the province where Compostela is located).

It is expected that the year 2004 will give a major boost the modern Camino de Santiago, bringing Compostela once again to the focus of European and international attention, for it will be an 'annus mirabilis' for the Catholic church (during which pilgrimage is supposedly exceptionally beneficial) and Santiago de Compostela will be one the so-called 'cultural capitals' of Europe. Fortunately it seems unlikely to me that walking the Camino would ever become real mass-tourism - it is too laborious and there's not much money in it. Furthermore, year 2000 will be so inflated with happenings the world over that little Santiago with its 80 000 inhabitants will unlikely make the major impact it hopes for. But you never know. In June-August of 2003, 69,000 people were registered walking or cycling the Camino, and the figure is rising sharply.

### 3. PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR TAKING THE TRIP

#### **Where to start?**

There are several alternatives, the main ones being St. Jean Pied-de-Port (in the French Pyrenees), Roncesvalles (on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees) and Somport (east of the other two, in French Pyrenees very close to the border). But there are some who have started walking (or cycling) all the way from Paris, Arles, or wherever one happens to live; and many more who decide to do only a part of the trip, beginning from e.g. Burgos or Leon in Spain. The distances to Compostela are roughly as follows (numbers vary slightly depending on the source): from St. Jean 764 km, Roncesvalles 737 km, Somport 836 km, Burgos 475 km, and Leon 300 km. There is, in my opinion, hardly any point in starting any nearer than Leon, but that of course does not stop a lot of people from doing so.

It is, of course, quite possible to do a part of the trip without getting to Compostela, e.g. from St. Jean to Burgos. As the landscapes in the Pyrenees are perhaps the most beautiful along the route, this might be recommendable if you have only limited time. But the last stage before Compostela (Galicia) is very beautiful too. If you decide to start in the Pyrenees, I would recommend St. Jean. The route from St. Jean to Roncesvalles is perhaps the most beautiful along the entire Camino. It is, however, also physically perhaps the most demanding (at least if you take the so-called Route Napoleon), so leave early in the morning so that you can hold enough breaks.

#### **When to go?**

The pilgrim's hostels are mainly open from the beginning of May to the end of October. Some are open year-round, and there are private bed & breakfast type lodgings even in small villages (as well as actual hotels in larger places, of course), so it's certainly possible to walk on the camino off- season but it takes more planning and money.

Another thing to take into consideration is of course the weather. As the route goes through very different kinds of environments it is impossible to give detailed information about what it's going to be like. Generally speaking, July and August will be hot; early spring and late fall you risk the chance of very cold and wet weather in the mountains. But this is not to say it can't be chilly and wet even in the middle of summer, mind you. From the point of view of weather, May might be the best month to go: I'm told that all the flowers will be blooming then, the sun won't have scorched all green things into a yellowish-brown hue yet and the air will be pleasant for walking. It also shouldn't be too crowded along the route yet.

However, if you *want* to meet a lot of other pilgrims, July-August is the best time to go. The Spanish holiday season begins in August - lots of locals will start the Camino around the 1st of August. Theoretically this might meant that some refugios will be full, but the author never experienced that situation, and was assured that no matter how full they'd always find some place to sleep for a tired pilgrim. However, I don't know how the refugios are going to cope with the coming "holy years" when the flow of pilgrims is expected to soar.

To put it briefly:

- November-April: you'll be walking almost alone, weather will be less than ideal.
- May-June: pleasant weather, blooming nature, relatively few and mostly foreign pilgrims.
- July-August: weather can be hot at times, but mostly not too hot for walking. There'll be a lot of pilgrims, the majority now being Spanish.
- September-October: the Spaniards go back to work, and so do most other nationalities. Weather will be pleasant, at least in September. Refugios may start changing their opening hours (for worse).

### **How demanding is it?**

The distances to Compostela may look scary on paper, and no doubt some people will think that they can never make it all the way, but walking 700km is - surprisingly - not physically very demanding at all if you reserve enough time for it. Walking some 20km per day, having a few days for rest every once in a while, will get you there in a little more than a month. Preparing for the trip in advance is a good idea and reduces the risk of getting problems with your feet, but 20km isn't that much, almost anyone can do it even without any practice, and it's quite possible to walk much longer distances per day. If you've had no exercise it's best to start with modest distances and, as you get used to walking and your physical condition starts to improve, you can increase the distances little by little. Afternoon heat limits the time you can walk - after around three p.m. it can become so hot that walking becomes unpleasant. Therefore it's wise, in hot areas, to start walking very early in the morning - even before sunrise - so that you can reach the next refugio around noon and rest during the worst heat. Walking in the pleasant cool air under the stars, which can be very bright in these sparsely populated parts of the country, has its own charm, but you should have a flashlight so you won't hurt yourself or miss the Camino signs and get lost.

### **Avoiding some common health problems**

Tap water in Spain is quite o.k. to drink. This even goes for the public drinking fountains, except when it says otherwise ("Agua non potable" meaning that the water isn't good for drinking; if there is no sign but you're unsure, ask a local). To be on the safe side, however, you can always drink bottled water in the beginning and then gradually move to tap water as your system gets used to the new bacterial environment. You may also wish to avoid any mayonnaise-based foods such as the ubiquitous 'ensalada rusa'. To avoid the risk of getting a tourist diarrhea, you can start eating lactic acid tablets already before leaving to Spain. If you do get a diarrhea, take it easy with walking and drink more water than normal: the risk of dehydration increases with diarrhea.

Although it's common sense, I'll have to emphasise the importance of drinking enough water. Drink at regular intervals even if you're not thirsty. Don't spare the water; in most cases you'll have plenty of opportunities to refill your bottle. After a while you'll be able to judge the necessary amounts to drink daily (if you don't have the normal urge to pee and/or it turns dark you're not drinking enough), but especially if you're not used to a hot climate you may in the beginning experience mild dehydration or heatstrokes (possible symptoms include nausea, vomiting, dizziness, fever and diarrhea) if you forget to drink enough.

The hygiene in the showers and toilets is often wanting. Use shower sandals to avoid getting infections (blistered feet are an easy target). Stretch your feet before and after walking the day's etappe; ruptures are a very common problem. Be careful and walk slowly when you're descending steep hills or mountains. With a heavy backpack adding weight, descending puts a great stress on the joints and muscles of your feet; use a walking stick to climb down smoothly. Cover your head to avoid sunstroke.

### **Is it safe for a woman to walk alone?**

A lot of women have sent me mail asking this. As a man who didn't walk alone, I'm not in the best position to answer. However, I did talk to several women who were doing the Camino alone and never heard of any unpleasant experiences. The Camino mostly goes through peaceful countryside and sleepy small towns - not bustling cities or holiday resorts - that would seem to me as unlikely scenes for sexual harassment. Even the Spaniards in this part of the country seem to be rather more reserved and taciturn than the stereotypical, pushy beach Adonises from Torremolinos. One might also hazard a guess that the fact that the pilgrims are, at least in principle, on a spiritual journey, and not looking for cheap booze and casual sex like some beach tourists, makes them less interesting for a Spanish macho guy and decreases the possibility of cultural misunderstandings.

In any case, the constant flow of other pilgrims along the route, especially during the Spanish holiday season (August), should make it fairly secure. Much of the time you'll be within eye contact with other pilgrims; if you aren't, make a short pause and a familiar group of pilgrims will probably pass you. It's fairly easy to make friends along the route, so even if you're travelling alone, you can always join a few fellow pilgrims if you feel insecure. Common to all pilgrimages is the phenomenon of a group of pilgrims forming a special kind of a temporary community that travels at roughly the same pace - people with different backgrounds brought together for a short period of time by a common goal, like Chaucer's characters on their way to Canterbury. With this community of pilgrims, you'll rarely be really alone, whether you like it or not.

### **Is it easy to get lost?**

Not very, but no doubt you will get a little bit lost a couple of times anyway. The route is usually quite well marked. There are several types of marks: the most common ones are simple painted yellow arrows or just spots of yellow paint on buildings, trees or rocks; then there are blue signs with a schematic, yellow scallop shell (like the one in the top of this article) and perhaps a picture of a pilgrim; and the third common type is a grey stone slab with a carved scallop shell and sometimes the distance (km) to Santiago. It happens that there are rather long stretches of the route without any signs, but this is relatively rare; usually if you cease to see the yellow marks or other signs around, you've simply taken the wrong turn at some point. It is also quite common that there are two or more alternative routes between the villages and towns of the Camino; this can generate some confusion, especially as the less popular routes may also be less well marked (if at all). The locals know where the route goes and often wave and shout at you if you're about to go the wrong way. Passing cars may honk and even stop to show you the right way (but they often honk simply to greet pilgrims). If that doesn't happen but you're still unsure, ask rather than walk; it's very frustrating to walk back several kilometres to find the Camino again. A simple "¿Dónde es el Camino de Santiago?" (where is the road to Santiago) should do the trick. The maps and route descriptions in most guidebooks are far more useful than any regular maps (such as Michelin's), so be sure to carry one with you in case you get lost. A compass or any other maps you shouldn't need.

### **On bicycle or on foot?**

Cycling is a popular sport in Spain and many people choose to do the Camino on bicycle. It will of course be faster, especially where the Camino is in decent shape and the countryside is flat, as is usually the case all the way from La Rioja to the province of Leon. There are however quite a few stages where cycling is impossible or at least not advisable because the Camino is just a narrow, poorly kept path. That means cyclists quite often have to resort to asphalt roads instead of the actual Camino. Another argument against cycling is that it is too fast; only walkers can really get to know each other because most people walk roughly the same distances each day. "Real" peregrinos walk; most cyclists are there on a sports holiday. In pilgrim's hostels or 'refugios' preference is, in principle, given to pilgrims travelling on foot, but in practice even cyclists should encounter no problems in getting a place to sleep.

### **How to get there?**

That depends of course on where you start. Flying to Madrid and taking a train to Pamplona is one way (trains are relatively cheap in Spain). There should be a bus going from Pamplona to Roncesvalles (the downside of taking it is that when you get to Roncesvalles you've already seen the Roncesvalles-Pamplona stage through bus windows), but apparently not to St. Jean Pied-de-Port, which you have to reach through France. In general, the bus system in Spain is rather confusing and only seems to cover the bigger towns, not every small village. What we did was to fly to Bilbao, then take a bus to Hendaya on the French side of the border and from there a train first to Bayonne, and from Bayonne finally a local train to St. Jean. That may sound a bit complicated but it went surprisingly smoothly. There may be easier ways than that (such as taking some cheap flight to Paris or Toulouse, then a train to Bayonne and St. Jean), but you'll have to find out for yourselves. Ask at your local Spanish tourist office.

### **What to take with you?**

Now this is important: TAKE AS LITTLE AS POSSIBLE. We heard the same warnings but all the same took *far* too much weight to carry. Our backpacks would've killed us were it not for the post office in Pamplona from where we sent some of our stuff back home. Even then it was quite painful sometimes. You'll probably not heed this warning anyway, so blame yourself if your trip is ruined by having to quit because of problems with your feet or your back. :) Seriously, even 10 kg is a lot to carry for this trip - remember that you may have to carry it every day for a *month* (if you do the whole Camino), up and down hills and mountains. Before you leave for Spain, be sure to check how it feels to walk with your backpack on.

#### I'll try to list the essentials:

*Hiking shoes.* One pair is enough, in my opinion, but they have to be comfortable, let your feet breathe and strong enough to last almost 800km of continuous walking. If you buy new ones, let your feet get used to them well in advance. They should be good for walking both on asphalt roads (sometimes long streaks of it form a part of the Camino) and narrow gravel paths with the occasional climb or mud puddle. Choose your socks with care too.

*Sleeping bag.* Take one that is as light as possible; it obviously doesn't need to be very warm. A simple woollen blanket might be even lighter than a sleeping bag and most of the time warm enough, but even during the hottest time of the year there is always a possibility of chilly nights, so a sleeping bag might still be a better idea. Some refugios have woollen blankets for use but this is nothing to count on. Mattresses, however, are available at the refugios so you shouldn't need a camping mattress.

*Clothing.* Again, only essentials. One pair of shorts and one pair of long trousers is enough (a skirt or a sarong might also be comfortable). A few t-shirts and perhaps one long-sleeved shirt (in case of sunburns). A light sweater, fleece jacket or similar is a good idea; it can get chilly even during the summers in some parts of Spain (for us that happened in the middle of Castilla!)

*Rain gear.* There can be heavy rain, especially in mountainous regions, so you should take some sort of a light rain cape or coat with you.

*Sun protection.* The sun of Castilla can be scorching; take good sun lotion and especially a hat of some sort, preferably broad-ringed. Sun-glasses may be useful, too.

*A guidebook.* The Camino is usually well marked, but at you'll probably get lost sometimes anyway, so it's good to have a guidebook with maps of the route. Also you'll miss most of the point of the whole trip if you know nothing about the history and legends of the various towns and monuments, many of which are associated with the medieval pilgrimage. If you don't manage to buy or order one before the trip, you should be able to find one in St. Jean or Roncesvalles (guides in Spanish are easy to find anywhere in Spain, but English ones much less so).

*Water bottle.* You'll need to carry water with you throughout the trip, so it might as well be a good bottle instead of any old used Coke bottle. One that you can attach somewhere, yet be able to reach without having to take your backpack off would be ideal. A volume of a litre should be enough; most villages have fountains (*fuentes*) that you can use to refill.

*First-aid kit.* Most small towns have pharmacies, but it's good to have the basic medicines and bandage equipment with you. All sorts of minor problems, mostly associated with feet, are very common among the peregrinos travelling by foot. There are special 'skin-like' plasters (Compeed is one brand name) specially developed for blisters; they are rather good, but even they wear off pretty soon if you continue hiking.

*Swiss army knife.* Always useful, although I suppose you can live without it. Doesn't weigh much so I recommend taking one.

*Personal Documents.* You'll need, of course, a passport, any documents relating to health and a pilgrim's passport that you'll need if you want to sleep in the pilgrim's hostels or refugios. A travel insurance is a good idea, given the relatively high frequency of all kinds of small injuries. For European Union citizens it is advisable to carry a document called E-111; in case of injury, it will enable you to be taken care of as if you were a Spanish citizen.

*Money.* Living will be cheap while you're travelling on the Camino. Spending nights at the refugios is either completely free or you have to pay a nominal price of around 4 to 6 Euros. In cheap restaurants and bars a *menu del dia* or menu of the day costs around 6 to 8 Euros. Foodstuffs are cheap if you manage to find a foodstore. It's better not to carry too much cash around; take a credit card or a Bank Card (ATM's are easily found. It will be difficult to find a bank that changes traveller's cheques in small towns. Some banks take a large commission; Caja Espana, if I remember correctly, takes none.

*Towel.* Perhaps one with large, friendly letters saying "DON'T PANIC". Also any other things related to simple personal hygiene: toothbrush & paste, shampoo, deodorant, etc. But don't exaggerate, take too little rather than too much.

#### Optional:

*Cooking equipment.* Our experience was that carrying heavy cooking equipment with us was a mistake. Most people we met said the same. So we sent it by mail back home to Finland. A majority of refugios have stoves for the pilgrims to use, as well as kettles, frying pans, plates, cutlery, etc. - many even have salt, sugar, olive oil and other basic foodstuffs for everyone to use. It is true that sometimes there either is none or the stove is out of order, but then one can usually go to a local bar and eat what's on the menu. In a few cases there is no kitchen in the refugio and no bar around; whether you prefer to eat dry or canned food in such cases or carry the heavy equipment is up to you.

*Spanish dictionary* (if you don't already speak the language). You can rather easily do without it with sign language and guessing (Spanish isn't that difficult a language), but doing the Camino would be a good opportunity to learn some Spanish. If do you take one, it has to be light.

*Flashlight.* If you start walking very early in the mornings (which is often a good idea), you may miss the Camino without a flashlight.

*Shower sandals.* Showers and lavatories in the refugios aren't as hygienical as they might be. Since a foot infection might well ruin your trip, some sort of rubbery sandals may be worth carrying.

*Light spare shoes.* If you want to let your hiking boots rest for a while, e.g. while spending time in some large city along the route.

*Walking stick.* This is not just because it makes you look like a Real Pilgrim. A walking stick will in fact be useful for maintaining balance, especially if you have a heavy backpack, as the Camino is sometimes just a narrow and steep path. It may also come in handy against the ubiquitous half-wild dogs, if they should be a problem (some people reported attacks, especially in Galicia; our experience with Galician dogs, however, was quite pleasant). Some pilgrims use expensive-looking specially made walking sticks, but you can make one that is just as good yourself. Refugios may also give away sticks left behind by earlier pilgrims.

*Scallop shell.* This, on the other hand, serves no other purpose than helping others to identify you as a pilgrim. Scallop shells were worn by medieval pilgrims to Compostela as a token of their status as pilgrims. Nowadays some wear them, others don't. Whether you think it makes you look silly or neat is up to you. They can be bought at e.g. some refugios.

#### 4. CONDITIONS IN SPAIN

##### Language

English isn't widely spoken (French seems to be more common), although it is becoming increasingly popular and young urban people often speak at least a few words of English. A basic knowledge of Spanish will help immensely - but you can do without. Your co-pilgrims, who will be an international lot and many of them a real polyglot, will be able to help you most of the time when help is needed, and you should soon develop a basic vocabulary yourself.

It's worth remembering that what we call "Spanish" is in fact the dialect of Castilia (called *Castellano*), and is only one of the several native languages spoken in that country. The Camino goes through areas where Basque is commonly spoken (Navarra) and in Galicia signs are written in *Gallego*, a language more closely related to Portuguese than Spanish.

##### Opening hours

The Spanish system of opening hours takes some getting used to and may cause moments of intense frustration for the pilgrim. The difficulty, I think, arises from the fact that instead of a light lunch, Spaniards are in a habit of eating a heavy dinner - *el almuerzo* - around noon. The shopkeepers, bankers, etc. close their doors, stuff themselves senseless with heavy Castilian food and are only able to function again around 4 p.m. At least in smaller places this means that there'll be no food available - anywhere - until it's time for supper (*la cena*). Another reason is of course the afternoon heat.

The general rule of opening hours is something like this: most places are open in the mornings from around 10 a.m to around 1 p.m, and then once the siesta is over, from around 4 p.m to about 8 p.m. However, the shops may close simply if there aren't enough customers on that day and hour, or if the owner thinks it's a good time to have a drink in a bar with his pals or, perhaps, a nice little nap. This is the Spanish countryside, and the rat-race efficiency of Scandinavia or America hasn't quite penetrated here, for better or worse. Some places are open on Saturdays and even on Sundays, and then again some aren't. Then of course there are various *fiestas*, usually with lots of *toros* that arouse local enthusiasm but make things even more complicated for the peregrino trying to find an open foodstore. Which leads us to...

##### Finding food & Spanish food culture

As I've already implied, finding food can be a problem in Spain. Foodstores are relatively rare and it's common that there is none in a medium-sized village or even a small town. Even when you find one, they are usually rather poorly equipped. *Supermercados* are even rarer, only found in medium-sized or large towns and cities - and even there they are often a far cry from what one would expect of a supermarket. It

is unlikely that you'll starve to death for failing to find food here, but it may nonetheless be a good idea to buy some dry or canned food to carry with you when you can, even if it brings some extra weight to your backpack. Just in case.

There is a bar of some sort in practically every village, no matter how poor, and you can usually buy at least *bocadillos* (sandwiches, usually poorly made dry pieces of bread with some *jamon* [dried ham] or *chorizo* [very good Spanish salami] stuffed in between) and *tortillas* in them, sometimes main courses too. *Tapas* or the various small delicacies Spain is famous for aren't really a part of the food culture of this part of the country, although one can find them in some bars, especially of course in big cities.

Actual restaurants aren't very common; the ones that are there are not usually very classy (which is just as well if one is travelling on a tight budget) but offer cheap menus, many advertising a *menu del peregrino* or *menu del día* for around 6 to 8 Euros. As a rule, these seem to consist of 1) *ensalada rusa* (mayonnaise salad) or soup, 2) *filet ternera con patatas fritas* (a thin beefsteak with French fries) and 3) *flan* (a cream pudding), *helado* (ice cream) or fruits - *pan* (bread) and *vino* (wine, a whole bottle, and usually quite decent) are included in the price.

The quality of food is usually good given the ridiculously small price and you should get your stomach full, but it doesn't speak very highly of Spanish food culture that - with but insignificant variations - this same formula is repeated in nearly every (cheap) restaurant throughout the entire Camino. If you travel 700km in Europe, you normally get more variation and local colour even in burger joints - let alone real restaurants. The Camino is a great journey, but if you expect it to be a great culinary journey you may be disappointed. I know that my saying this offends some Spaniards, who for some reason seem to be very proud of their culinary traditions, but I hope they realize that this is a matter of personal opinion - not objective fact - and that we can agree to disagree. I must also stress that my exposure to Spanish food was of course limited and need not reflect the real situation. I was travelling on a tight budget and could not eat in the best restaurants. I hope other pilgrims may, after reading this, be positively surprised.

## 5. SOME HIGHLIGHTS OF THE ROUTE

### *St. Jean Pied-de-Port - Pamplona*

St. Jean is quite a beautiful small town on the foothills of the Pyrenees, crowned by a 17th century citadel designed by the famous military architect Vauban. The climb after St. Jean is steep but the views from the Pyrenees are rewarding and the nature is extravagantly lush with oak and beech woods. On the other side of the peaks lies **Roncesvalles**, associated with the legend of Charlemagne and Roland (who was killed in the Battle of Roncesvalles in 778, betrayed by the treacherous Ganelon of France). It is the site of one of the earliest pilgrim's hospitals on the route. The medieval Hospital complex occupies the central place in Roncesvalles (there is little else). From Roncesvalles onwards the mountains little by little become low hills and the lush nature turns dry. The Navarran white-chalked villages along the route are well-kept and nice looking. The suburbs of **Pamplona** begin when you get to the monastery of Arre. Pamplona itself is famous for its 'bull-run'; a festival during which the citizens give the the poor, mishandled bulls an opportunity to retaliate and trample a few (probably well-deserving) toro-enthusiasts. There are also some fine medieval churches, a medieval pilgrim's bridge, remains of the town walls and a citadel.

### *Pamplona - Logrono*

Leaving Pamplona, the landscape becomes drier. There is a fine view over the plain from the **Sierra del Perdón** hills which you have to cross. **Puente la Reina** is where the Camino Frances and Camino Aragones come together. The town has received its name ("The Queen's Bridge") from a large medieval bridge built for pilgrims. It also has an oblong shape typical of the towns that were born because of the Camino: one long street with very old houses on both sides. On the way to **Estella** there are some Roman remains (bridge and road); Estella itself has many fine gothic churches and a romanesque palace.

Between Estella and Los Arcos lies a *Fuente del Vino* or 'wine fountain', with actual red wine pouring from it. Leaving Los Arcos, you cross the border to La Rioja - the province where the best Spanish wines come from - and enter **Logrono**, the riojan capital. Logrono is a big, rather well-kept and pleasant city with some interesting monuments, but doesn't have the charm and pomp of Burgos or Leon.

#### *Logrono - Burgos*

At **Najera**, the beautiful Monastery of Santa Maria la Real houses a pantheon of the kings of Navarre. The cathedral of **Santo Domingo de la Calzada** is another beautiful gothic church; a curious detail is the 'chicken coop' inside the church, housing (live) chickens and cocks in memory of the 'miracle of the roasted cock' that took place here. The landscape around here is rather flat and dry, lots of wheat fields. After Santo Domingo you cross the border to Castilla y Leon; having passed Belorado, the landscape suddenly turns lush again as you climb to the **hills of Oca**, covered with oak and pine forest. Before Burgos comes the large monastery of **San Juan de Ortega**, abandoned alone in the middle of the forest. After San Juan you climb again to a steep hill, with a view from top over **Burgos**. Burgos is a big and beautiful city, best known for its 'silver' cathedral, a huge gothic building where the legendary knight El Cid lies buried. Contrary to what one might expect in Spain, the grave is marked by an unremarkable, ascetic red stone slab - no baroque grandeur or neon lights.

#### *Burgos - Leon*

After Burgos the landscape again becomes very flat and dry, with occasional canyon-like valleys. There are many, rather similar small medieval towns and villages here. At **Fromista**, there is a remarkable romanesque Church of San Martin - the exterior in particular is worth taking a closer look for its strange and fascinating decorative elements. After Sahagun, the real meseta or Spanish plains start. Even the valleys are gone now; there is nothing but flat corn field ad infinitum. This part of the province is also evidently quite poor. Many houses are built of unburnt mud bricks or adobe (a technique that I, as an archaeologist, associate with the neolithic stone age), towns are small and unimpressive, and some villages are in abysmal condition. Yet the very difference makes this part of Spain fascinating. The city of **Leon** (which receives its name from the Roman 'Legio VII Gemina') stands in stark contrast to the surrounding countryside: it is affluent, beautiful and has many handsome historical monuments. The gothic cathedral is perhaps slightly smaller than that of Burgos, but much more elegant; it is easily one of the most beautiful churches I have seen. The romanesque Real Basilica de San Isidoro has preserved a series of extraordinary 12th century frescoes; the entrance fee is well worth paying as it also enables you to visit the library and a museum. Long stretches of the Roman walls of the city have also been preserved. The City, with its broad avenues and narrow alleys in the old part, has in my opinion more charm and class than any of the other major cities along the pilgrim's route.

#### *Leon - O Cebreiro*

The first important town after Leon is **Astorga**, another city with a Roman past. Astorga is smaller than Leon, but has a good number of historical monuments to show: a Gothic cathedral, a bishop's palace designed by the famous Art Nouveau architect Antonio Gaudi and several excavated Roman remains. After Astorga, the landscape rather suddenly starts to change: the foothills of the **Leonese mountains** begin, forests start to reappear and the mountains loom large in a distance. The climb, however, is not demanding at all this time; you get rather easily to the top, and the views are great. In the following fertile wine-growing valley lies the town of **Ponferrada**, with its fairy-tale Templar castle, and the beautiful little mountain town of **Villafranca del Bierzo**. After Villafranca, you climb again over beautiful green mountains, and this time the climb is rather steep until you cross the border to Galicia and enter the small, stony mountain-top village called **O Cebreiro**. O Cebreiro is famous for two things (or three, if you count the O Cebreiro cheese): the round 'paloza' houses (of which there are only a couple), supposedly still built like the ancient Celts did, and the 'miracle of O Cebreiro'. Associated with this miracle is the 'Holy Grail of Galicia', on display in the small church of O Cebreiro.

### *O Cebreiro - Santiago de Compostela*

After O Cebreiro, you descend again. Nature is now at times almost tropically lush. Long stretches of the Camino are so called '**corredoiras**', green corridor-like cart-tracks covered by 'ceilings' of tree branches. The rest of the way to Compostela is hilly and fertile, somewhat Central European -looking, with some drier areas of pine forests. There are also some Eucalyptus forests close to Compostela. Galician villages are of a special type: built entirely of grey slate, roofing and all, with peculiar looking 'horreos' for drying foodstuffs and a strong stench of cowdung floating everywhere. The towns along the Galician stretch of the Camino are nice, but most aren't very noteworthy, at least compared to what you've seen before. Triacastela, Sarria, Portomarin (built anew after a water reservoir submerged the old town), Palas de Rei and Arzua hold little that absolutely can't be ignored in terms of historical sights; the beautiful natural surroundings and good refugio facilities, on the other hand, make a stay enjoyable. Then, finally, comes **Santiago de Compostela**.

### 6. IN SANTIAGO - NOW WHAT?

*"Compostella, the sublime city of the Apostle, which enjoys all delights; the city in whose custody are the mortal remains of St. James, for which reason it is considered the most blessed and exalted city in Spain."*  
**Codex Calixtinus**

Arriving in Santiago after such an arduous, even dangerous journey must have been as and of itself a great moment to the medieval pilgrim; but its momentousness was further increased by a heavy ritualisation of the way the Holy City had to be entered. When the pilgrims came to the Lavacolla river, called 'Lauamentula' by Aymeric Picaud, they according to Picaud "take off their clothes and, for love of the Apostle, wash not only their private parts, but the dirt from their entire bodies". Such ritual washing in order to purify oneself before entering the Holy City has its prototype in the Holy Land, where pilgrims washed in the river Jordan before entering Jerusalem. Lavacolla river nowadays runs near an international airport by the same name.

Having cleansed themselves, the pilgrims would hurry to the summit of Monte do Gozo - the 'Mount of Joy', called so because from here the spires of Compostela first could be seen. They would race each other to the top, the first to get there becoming the leader of the pilgrim group. A 17th century Italian pilgrim, Domenico Laffi, wrote:

*"On seeing [Santiago], we fell to our knees and began to weep for joy and to sing the 'Te Deum', but we could not recite more than two or three lines, being unable to speak for the tears that streamed out of our eyes with such force that our hearts trembled, and our continuous sobs interrupted our singing. At last, our tears ceased and we resumed singing the 'Te Deum' and thus singing, continued our descent until we came to the city outskirts".*

Monte do Gozo has witnessed many an emotional scene, but today it is difficult to be overjoyed by the sight one encounters from its top: there are no spires to be seen, other than the antennas of the TV-station that now dominates the hill. All you can see of Santiago is a lot of busy highways and unattractive suburbs, making it quite difficult to convince yourself that you are experiencing something sacred or important.

The pilgrims would now continue to the city through a specific route until they reached the Cathedral. Inside the Cathedral, they touched the central pillar of the *Portico de la Gloria* in which St. James is portrayed welcoming the tired pilgrim - people still do this, and the innumerable hands have left deep fingermarks in the hard marble of the pillar. The pilgrims then hug the romanesque statue of James standing on the High Altar - a staircase leads to the statue, with tourists and pilgrims waiting for their turn to embrace the cold metal of this gilded bust that looks more like Charlemagne than a humble fisherman's son.

When the pilgrims had seen the reliquary of St. James, attended a pilgrim's mass and done the rest of the rituals, they could get a certificate, called "Compostela", of having completed the pilgrimage. Compostelas have been awarded since the 14th century to those who can prove that they've walked a certain distance along the pilgrim's route. Nowadays, a pilgrim can get - upon showing his or her 'credencial del peregrino' with enough stamps - the Compostela from the Dean's House in Santiago, Rua del Villar 1.

The city itself is certainly beautiful, rather more 'Portuguese' than the other major cities along the route, but not, perhaps, spectacular. It is perhaps best not to expect *too* much of Santiago or it may become an anticlimax for the trip. The refugio in Santiago lets you stay three nights free of charge, which is easily enough for sightseeing. The main sight is obviously the Cathedral, rising above the impressive Plaza del Obradoiro; a noble romanesque building, but the main facade unfortunately has been ruined by a pompous baroque coating more reminiscent of a wedding cake than a sanctuary. The south facade gives an idea of what has been lost. The contrast between the festive exterior and the rather ascetic interior is a disadvantage to the latter; the visitor expects to find a glittering jewelbox inside and is in for a disappointment. But the church is in fact quite a remarkable building, its bare walls pregnant with a silent, ancient spirituality that the market-place-like commotion, flashlights and commercialized religion inside can't entirely suffocate.

Officially, this is the end of the pilgrimage as the Church would have it. But throughout the ages, many pilgrims have continued past Santiago to Finisterre - "the End of the Earth" - on the Atlantic coast. Many still do, but there are no refugios along the route. However, it's only 60km or so and there are some refugios along the road. There is a daily bus to Finisterre as well.