

Walking the Camino alone.

April 26<sup>th</sup> till May 25<sup>th</sup> 2006

The trip to Spain was rather quick for the distance. I arrived at 10:30 AM in Paris on April 25<sup>th</sup> and the train took me to St; Jean Pied de Port by 8:PM of the same day. I had reserved a bunk at the Esprit by E-mail before leaving home. When I arrived at the refugio the welcome note on the pillow was a real pleasant surprise. In the morning of the 26<sup>th</sup> of April I went to the Pilgrims office where they signed me in and gave me advice on the walk over the Pyrenees. They did mention that there was some fog. Before starting my walk I found a store where I bought a staff and a cockleshell. It felt real good getting on the way, going up those mountains. My backpack weighing at 10kg. Didn't seem to be any problem. On passing Untto I decided to keep going and at the second newer refugio- bar I stopped for a tea.

The people there talked about the fog higher up and about the cold. It being still early I kept going on. The higher I got the less there was to see. Everything was wrapped in a white sheet of fog. At the cairn and cross where one turns to the right I found it most difficult to stay on the correct path until reaching the barbed wire fenced road. There one passes the fountain of Roland and a cattle grid.

On reaching the col de Lepoeder it seemed wiser not to take the path down through the forest. The fog now was thicker and the trees seemed to be huge gray shapes. I decided instead to walk the longer way of the road.

On reaching the Col d'Ibaneta some panic set in until seeing the sign that pointed towards a path down to the Abbey of Roncesvalles.

It was 8:PM when the two ladies in the refugio rescued me. They took my backpack and placed it on the bottom bunk. They signed me in and gave me a warm cup of bullion. It was a good feeling just having survived the first Etape of the Camino.

The next morning all was forgotten. Back on the road by 7:AM going towards Zubiri. The day after Arre Villava. Followed by Puente La Reina. I had only 35 days to do this Camino and that included the return trip to Canada. It was important that I pushed a little.

In Puente la Reina there were many French people. I befriended Christine and Sylvia. We met on our walk. Sylvia encouraged me to take it easy. It was getting real hot so I followed the advice.

In Estella we were awakened by some passing musicians at 6:AM everyone was on the road early. Many a time I would get up early it being easier then

walking in the noon heat. The weather was real good daytime, a lot of sun and heat. Nights would be cold. The following day it was off to Los Arcos and then Viana.

My favorite place is Navarette. The restaurant is right next door to the refugio. When you're hungry there is no running around to look for food. It is also a very clean refugio. The village is constantly under construction. There is continuous building going on even older buildings have been torn down and replaced with newer constructions.

After Navarette came Azofra. The road to Azofra was under construction too. About 2KM was covered with red muddy mess. My shoes were loaded with mud which made walking extra difficult. A backhoe was digging into the side of the road leaving huge wounds to make for a wider road. Another machine serviced a dozen heavy-duty trucks loading them with the red earth. Two French Canadians and I we reached the refugio early in the afternoon.

After Azofra the road took us past Santo Domingo de la calzada. The road was dusty and never-ending going straight out west. There was nothing but rolling hills.

Granon a really great surprise. The refugio is in the church and when I arrived it was full. The hospitalero turned no one away. I counted 50 People we all slept on the floor on thin mattresses. Some people even slept in the church. The best part was eating time; they managed to feed all with a huge pot of paella, salad, bread and a few bottles of vino tinto.

Tosantos was another experience not to be forgotten. No one was permitted to leave before 7:AM; the hospitalero needed his sleep.

That day I needed my poncho as it was raining a little. After walking a couple of hours it got hot again.

San Juan de Ortega was 21km away yet and that is a very hard stretch of old country road. There is nothing but stones and mud. It also has a heart-break hill where all must struggle to get up to the top. Many pine trees with blue flowers grow along that road. The real nice thing about getting there was the nice hot shower; this was because I arrived early. In the evening after Mass the priest took us all into a large room where he served hot garlic soup in metal cups. There was also a big change in the weather it got real cold I wore a sweater to sleep.

At six thirty following morning back on the road going towards Burgo. The first half-hour was a beautiful stroll through a dark pine forest and then up a mountain all covered with stones. Ten kilometers going in and out of small enchanting villages before reaching Villafria. A long stretch of hard dusty

sidewalk and city streets followed. The refugio in Burgo is situated the other side of town in a lovely park a good place to rest.

You don't want to rest no longer then the next morning. Walking out of Burgo at 5:Am was easy but it took a long time. All was still in the streets; no noises and no car .I had to be very careful not to miss any signs or arrows. Then there was a stretch trough a forest that was a bid scary in the darkness. When daylight appeared in the east I finally could see where the road let. It was all straight west. On the Meseta it got quiet hot. Walking alone in such heat can be mind testing and hard on the feet. My feet were screaming, burning and swelling by now. There is no shade on the Meseta just fields and more fields of cultivated land. Wherever you look there is the thin line of the horizon earth touching the sky. A German pellegrino caught up with me and we walked together for a while. We stretched our necks to see something in the distance. Finally a tower was visible .We had to get real close, there in the valley was Hontana. There is a new refugio, Meson El Puntido, one of the nicer furnished. The older refugio in the ruen Viaje owned by Victorio Diaz was closed by government order.

When you put in a few extra km in a day you start loosing some familiar faces. Now there is a stronger feeling of being alone as you continue.

So next day the road takes you towards Boadilla del Camino and on to Castrojeretz. In Castrojeretz I followed a couple of pellegrinos but they did not follow the flesha .So I quickly searched for the church, from there the way was visible. No, I was not lost just off the road a bid. Leaving Castrojeretz , in front of you there is a huge Mountain to climb Alto de Mostelares. At the top you see the Meseta flat out into the province of Palencia. The climb up went real well but then going back down on the other side, well I was real careful this time. One woman from Finland she came running down laughing at my tiny, careful steps.

This part of the Meseta is treeless. You see really nothing except for wheat fields that just start showing growth and spring flowers bordering the fields. You see the wind moving the wheat like gentle waves on the ocean.

In Boadilla del camino the refugio is full to the brim. There is a line for the showers but all are happy to be there having a good rest. Supper is early at 7:PM. We all sit around in the backyard talking about the day's events.

May 11 Thursday up and away at 6:30 AM it is a 24-km trek to Carrion de Los Condes. A very nice straight walk. For at least 5Km along a canal where

the frogs croak and the birds let themselves be birds with no fear of passing pellegrinos. The weather too was cool making the walk fast and easy. At noon it got as usual really hot. For about 15 km the walking was on a gravel road right next to the highway.

Terradillos was another day walking in a straight line but this time on an old Roman road, there were big nasty stones. To walk a road like that you learn the meaning of endurance. At the refugio they gave me the last bunk. There were a few familiar faces so at the restaurant we sat together at a round table. There was Claire from Quebec, Jean from Marseille, Irma from Finland and Fernandez from Spain. We eat real good food. There was soup fish, potatoes salad and ice cream. It was a lovely evening.

In the morning I left at 5:AM, as the cooler mornings are easier. The walk to El Burgo Ranero was 31km and still a part of the Meseta. This road is full of mystery and silence and if you accept it then there is peace. The mind must be firm to go on a road with no shade only stones under foot, hot sun and nothing else. Yet how lucky we are to have this experience.

The refugio Domenico Laffi in El Burgo Ranero had lots of hot water to be enjoyed while taking a shower. There was also a small store not far away where I was able to buy some supplies for the next day. The hospitalero warned all about the youth concert scheduled for that evening. The whole nightlong we had to listen to the youth concert.

Leaving El Burgo Ranero at 5 was quiet something. The youth concert was still going strong and the sound followed me an hour later.

In Reliego the bar was just opening. I needed some rest so sat down on a red plastic chair in front and eat an apple. The birds were going after my little bids of apple that I dropped. After ten minutes I walked away to exit the town. A real nice man looking out of his window told me “ momentito signora”; He came downstairs still talking about the amarillo flesha that weren't there. He walked with me showing me the right path out of town.

In Mansila de las Mulas I bought a large piece of chocolate and took an hour rest. Going all the way to Leon another 21 km would require extra energy. The walk now was a mixture of highway, country and inner city. Inside the City of Leon the yellow arrows were visible making that trek easy. At 5:pm I arrived at the refugio but that is no problem there are 100 bunks.

May 15<sup>th</sup> I noticed some pain on my right foot again. I decide then to make my walk a little shorter to San Martin del Camino. Going out of the City of Leon was different. There was nothing but highway, cars and trucks. Luigi the Frenchman walked with me, he still suffered with his feet. The refugio was barnlike, very long. There where not many pellegrinos.

Next morning I quickly left and walked straight out of town. It was still dark had to use my flashlight. In Hospital de Orbigo took a 20-minute rest. I had to traverse a very long celebrated bridge, Puente de Orbigo. This was a real nice place. The cobble stoned street and sidewalks all very need and colorful. After my little rest I continued on to Astorga where Jean, Luigi and Claire overtook me.

In Astorga there was a lot going on. I took many photos as I followed the yellow arrows. Astorga is really a nice place for touristes.

To continue from Astorga was another 4km to Murias de Rechivaldo. The refugio the nicest I seen so far, looked more like a little hacienda and it was so very clean and comfortable.

Going towards El Acebo next morning was again real different. It was all up and down mountains and at some places I got scared walking on the edge of a cliff, not my favored spot. The mountains all around me in their deep red and green mantels looked more like giants. I but a little ant with careful steps tackling tones that protrude from the earth. I am awed struck by the beauty and power. Then there is this never-ending climb up to El Cruz de Ferr. A huge pole with this little cross on top stands straight a giant's javelin. All around it a mountain of rocks and stones that people bring from home. I too left something precious on top. It was easy going up there but Claudio the Italian came up to secure my save descends.

Thursday May 18<sup>th</sup> at 7:am was late to get started, however the descend down the mountain would be saver. It was very steep one must see where to put your feet. I was happy arriving in Ponferada.

In Ponferada I stopped at a Bar for tea and a croissant, a nice lady from the Netherlands sad beside me and we chatted a little about our mountain experiences. We had a nice rest something a pellegrino needs now and then. Ponferada is a nice big city .I bought some supplies, cheese, one apple, one pear and schocolades. Then took a few photos and retired to the refugio. This was supposed to be my rest day.

In the morning we had to wait for someone to open the gate at 6:am. Many pelegrinos left at the same time. It was difficult to get out of Ponferada as it was badly marked. I followed other pellegrinos and finally after asking some locals we found our camino.

Luigi walked with me again he was now limping badly. We were going towards Villafranca del Birzo. I gave Luigi my heel Protectors that seemed to help a little. He did however stop often and needed to rest. I continued on. It was the last time I saw Luigi. Hope he finished his camino.

The refugio in Villafranca del Birzo was full. There were many new pellegrinos, new faces. Two ladies from Quebec traveled only by bus they told me. We eat supper at a communal table; the food was good and plentiful.

I got on the road at 7:am and traveled past Pereje, Trabadelos, Vega de Valcarce, Ruitelan, La Faba and Laguna de Castella up to O'Cebreiro. A 28 Km trip most of it was straight up over mud, stones and sheep dung. The most difficult climb ever for me. Irma the Swedish woman was with me. We arrived at 5:pm and we were not the lasts to arrive. The refugio was full, the hotels were full and all private places were completo. Many people had arrived by bus. There were many tourists. We looked all over for a place to stay with no luck. At 7:pm we called a Taxi who drove us to the next refugio. I never got a stamp form O'Cebreiro so much confusion. So we Lost 20 km from our Camino.

May 21<sup>st</sup> back on the road to Morgana. It was a long walk. The wind was blowing madly and it rained too. In Morgana the little refugio was completo but the lovely hospitalera she called someone who had a private place for me to stay.

In the morning I was ready to go to Ventas de Naron. It rained for a little while, at 20 Km I called it quits for the day. The refugio was very large. There were many pellegrinos . At the restaurant next door it got laud. I eat a plate full of hot paella and then retired.

At 7:am in the morning of the next day I left the refugio and left also my old worn shoes. My feet enjoyed the newer pair and never again had any more pain. Leaving Ventas de Naron was an easy walk going past Ligonde, Palas de Rei, San Xubian, Ponte Campana, Casanova; Leboreiro to Melide. The refugio in Melide was pretty good with plenty of hot water. There was room for many pelegrinos. I had a great Salada Mixta at the restaurant next door.

Now things became easy after Melide. The goal was Santa Irene. A 31km trek. It was a long walk mostly in and out of Forest. There still were many Eucalyptus trees. The smell Fantastic to breathe in. The refugio of Santa Irene was right there on the highway. It was the worst of all refugios, well there had to be at least one. It needs a plumber badly and a little elbow grease. There is no food around unless you stop at the other refugio further

away. They cook for the pelegrinos at a higher price. So I eat what was in my backpack, a piece of old bread and some chocolate.

At 7:am in the morning I turned my back on Santa Irene and never looked back. I did forget my towel, so close to the end.

The walk was one of the best much of it trough forest up and around little villages. As I got closer to Monte del Gozo it got tougher going mostly uphill. Somehow it was all right going up or was it that the body got used to it. At the giant refugio of Monte del Gozo I eat some lunch. After I picked up my backpack and my staff and went looking for the office. All was still closed so I could get a stamp. It was closed till 3pm.

Santiago was just 5 km away. The way was downhill right into the city. It was the end of my Camino. It was all finished. In church I missed the Botafumero. At the office with no reasons to explain an unexpected feeling of sadness befell me. I started crying when the girl handed me my Compostella.

Buen Camino.

Josephine.