

Leave No Trace Outdoor Ethics for Camino de Santiago

While your Camino experiences will be personally satisfying, your pilgrimage can have adverse impacts on the places you visit and the people to meet. Your impact can be lessened if you practice Leave No Trace. The foundation of Leave No Trace is the Seven Principles for reducing the impacts caused by outdoor activities.

Principles of Leave No Trace

- Plan Ahead and Prepare
- Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces
- Dispose of Waste Properly
- Leave What You Find
- Minimize Campfire Impacts
- Respect Farm Animals and Wildlife
- Be Considerate of Other Visitors

Plan Ahead and Prepare

Camping will not be covered in depth in this information since most pilgrims stay in albergues or hotels. If you are considering camping, keep in mind that wild camping is not permitted in Spain. You will need to locate the owner of the land and pay for permission to camp. Things to consider: Your pack will be 50% heavier with cooking equipment, tent, sleeping bag, etc. Is your Spanish good enough? What about rain? When will you dry the dew from your equipment? Is it worth it when, for 5-10 Euros you can have a warm bed, hot shower, roof, table, chair, kitchen, electricity, and camaraderie?

If you snore, anti-snoring mouth guards (both prescription and over-the-counter) are readily available. A sleep study prescribed by your doctor might even diagnose sleep apnea, a dangerous yet treatable condition. Mitigate your snoring before your pilgrimage.

Buy rubber tips for your walking poles. Metal tipped poles will slip on cobble stones and the tip-tip-tip through the village at o'dark thirty disturbs later rising Spaniards.

Always carry a small plastic bag for trash (a cinch strap on your equipment lets you easily carry larger trash) and a lightweight plastic trowel in case you need to defecate between villages

Exchange contact information with pilgrims you meet. Prearrange a meeting place or a way to communicate. If you leave a paper note, be sure to date it so it can be removed when obsolete. Arranging rendezvous with fellow pilgrims by writing on walls with permanent markers is considered graffiti, and is never in style. You wouldn't do it in your own hometown so don't do it in Spain.

Albergue dorms are for sleeping, not for early morning dressing or packing. Have your equipment pre-positioned so you do not disturb sleeping pilgrims. Dress and pack in the bathroom, shower room, laundry, hallway, or even outside.

Travel and Camp on Durable Surfaces

Walk on the established Camino—even where it’s wet, muddy, or rocky. Trails become progressively wider and form parallel paths when people walk on the edges of the trail. Walking on the edge of the trail destroys the vegetation, compacts the soil, and encourages others to do so. Once trailside plants are destroyed and the soil compacted, erosion can continue with or without additional foot traffic.

Always use established roads and trails to visit places of interest as unestablished or “social trails” mar the area and promote erosion.

If you have sorted out legal camping use locations where the ground cover is already worn away. Do not build a ground fire as this sterilizes the soil and the ash will mar the surface. Wear soft-soled shoes and concentrate your activities in the center of the site to avoid enlarging it. Tents, packs, gear, and the kitchen area should be concentrated in one area on previously compacted, naturally resistant, or reinforced surfaces. This approach protects surrounding vegetation and prevents development of “satellite” sites. Leave your campsite clean and natural looking— Before departing, naturalize and disguise the site by replacing any rocks or sticks you may have moved.

Dispose of Waste Properly

With the ready availability of toilet facilities most pilgrims never defecate except in plumbed village toilets. For the few times you do need to defecate while between villages remember the four objectives of proper human waste disposal are:

- Avoid polluting water sources
- Eliminate the spread of disease
- Maximize decomposition
- Minimize the chances of social impacts

Fecal matter left on the surface is tracked by pilgrim boots into villages and albergues, rain washed into irrigation canals where it is pumped onto food crops, rain washed into streams, carried by flies to your food, and is unsightly. If you do need to defecate between villages, move 200’ (70 steps) away from any structures, trails or water sources and dig a 6-8” deep and 4-6” diameter cat hole (your trowel may have embossed measurements). Avoid eroded areas where your feces might be unearthed by rain. Use a small zip style bag to carry out toilet

paper, wet wipes, and any other hygiene products. Burying them increases the risk of animals digging them up and spreading them in the area. If packing out used toilet paper is not an option, bury deeply in the cathole. Cover your feces with the dirt you dug out of the hole, and disguise the hole by covering with leaves and twigs. An exemplary trowel is the GSI Outdoors Cathole Sanitation Trowel available through REI (3.1 ounces, under \$5.00) and the Big Dig Titanium Cat Hole Trowel (0.6 ounces, \$36). In cases of an emergency it is acceptable to defecate first and dig your cat hole afterwards.

While it is unlawful to put untreated human feces in the trashcans found in communities along the Camino, an alternative is to carry a couple Cleanwaste Go Anywhere Waste Bags (12 for \$34, 3 ounces each) to encapsulate and carry your waste to the next village's trash containers. Feces don't weigh any more outside your body than it did inside your body. For the few kilometers to the next town, it will help prevent the spread of disease, keep water sources clean, and will leave the Camino better than you found it. If cave explorers and canyon rafters can do it, so can Camino pilgrims. Again, leaving feces on the surface of the ground is never acceptable.

While the odor of urine can be a problem in many areas, it is typically not a serious health concern unless highly concentrated in large amounts. Feel free to "bless the fields" well away (200') from trails and water sources. Remember, tens of thousands of people walk the Camino each year and the impact of thousands of people just ducking around a stone wall adds up. Do not urinate against stone surfaces, inside any structures, or on the Camino itself. There needs to be active bacteria to break down the odor producing chemicals, hence the recommendation to urinate well away from structures, hardened surfaces, or against stone walls.

Wildlife with salt-deficient diets sometimes defoliate plants to consume the salt in urine, so urinate on bare soil if possible rather than on vegetation. Consider diluting your urine by rinsing the site if you have enough water to do so. If toilet paper is used, simply place it in your trash baggie and carry it to the next village for disposal in their trash cans.

Food waste (apple cores, banana peels, orange peels, bread crusts) also go in your trash baggie. You might be tempted to toss it into the bushes. However, this is an un-natural food source that has been documented to harm birds and insects along trails. Aggressive birds like jays and crows follow the food waste humans toss aside, crowding out the less aggressive birds that should be in that environment. Even though it is biodegradable, these items still don't belong there. Ask yourself: would the item be there if you hadn't brought it there? If the answer is no, pack it out.

Cigarette butts also go in your trash baggie. Nicotine is a natural insecticide. Just a few butts washed into a puddle can prevent insect eggs from hatching, depriving insects and birds of their natural food source.

Leave What You Find

People visit the Camino for many reasons, among them to witness nature's mysteries and surprises. Objects in nature derive much of their beauty from their surroundings and never look quite the same back home. When we leave rocks, shells, plants, antlers, feathers, fossils and other objects of interest as we find them, we pass the gift of discovery on to the pilgrims who follow.

Discovering evidence of earlier cultures such as clay pottery shards, rock art, and antique glass is exhilarating, and it's tempting to take such things home as souvenirs. Archeological and historical artifacts are reminders of the rich human history of the Camino and belong to all people for all time. It is expressly forbidden to take "any movable property belonging to the Spanish Historical Heritage or export it without authorization. The state shall carry out any actions leading to recovery of illegally exported property." All objects found by chance are considered of the public domain. The discoverer shall immediately notify appropriate authorities. (Law 16/1985 dated 25 June, Spanish Historical Heritage)

AVOID SPREADING NONNATIVE PLANTS AND ANIMALS.

Invasive species of plants, animals, and organisms can cause large-scale, irreversible changes to ecosystems. We can help prevent the spread of invasive species by following a few practical suggestions.

- Don't transport flowers, weeds, or aquatic plants into wild lands.
- Empty and clean your packs, tents, boats, fishing equipment and other gear as you move on to new regions and after you return home. Water, mud and soil may contain harmful seeds, spores, or tiny plants and animals.
- Clean the dirt out of your boots or tire treads.
- Never discard or release live bait.
- Make sure pack stock and pets are immunized, recently de-wormed, and their coats are free of seeds, twigs, and harmful pests such as ticks.

Hostess gifts are appreciated, but do not give wildflower seeds from your homeland (such as the California poppy) as they can become invasive. While you will be awed by the beautiful Spanish broom plants, they are a serious invasive pest in areas with climates similar to Spain, such as California. Be sure no seeds hitchhike home.

Minimize Campfire Impacts

Campfires are generally rare on the Camino but can cause lasting impacts if built improperly. Campfires are often beautiful by night. But the enormous rings of soot-scarred rocks—overflowing with ashes, partly burned logs, food and trash—are unsightly. More importantly, campfires can and do ignite wildfires. If a campfire is important to you, use an established fire ring.

- Ask about pertinent regulations and campfire management techniques.
- Judge the wind, weather, location, and wood availability. Decide whether it's safe and responsible to build a campfire.
- Where there are no fire rings or grates, bring a fire pan or set aside time to build a mound fire.
- Have a trowel or small shovel and a container for saturating the ashes with water

Respect Farm Animals and Wildlife

Wild animals need pilgrims who will promote their survival rather than add to the pressures they already endure.

OBSERVE FROM A DISTANCE. Always watch or photograph animals from a safe distance to avoid startling them or forcing them to flee. Do not follow or approach them. Back away if animals react to your presence. To leave the area, move away from the animal even if you must detour from your intended travel direction. You have more options in your movements than animals do. Treat them generously.

NEVER FEED ANIMALS. Feeding wildlife damages their health, alters natural behaviors, and exposes them to predators and other dangers.

Traveling with a dog on the Camino is complicated as they are not allowed in most albergues, forcing you to camp. If you do travel with your dog, remove pet feces from trails, picnic areas, and campsites by disposing of it as you would any litter. Always use a collar and a short hand-held leash to control your dog.

When you encounter Spaniards using the Camino to move livestock, step off the trail, stand still, and speak in a calm tone so your presence is not startling. Do not feed local dogs you may encounter as this only encourages begging which some pilgrims might interpret as aggression. Do not entice dogs to follow you. Even if they are collarless and loose, they probably belong to somebody; if they follow you too far they may become lost and truly end up homeless.

Be Considerate of Other Visitors

RESPECT OTHER VISITORS AND PROTECT THE QUALITY OF THEIR EXPERIENCE. Some people visit the Camino to prayerfully enjoy quiet and solitude. Others come for camaraderie. Both Camino experiences are equally authentic. While our motivations may vary, there's always room on the Camino for people with open minds, generous hearts, and tolerant dispositions. Choose to maintain a cooperative spirit on the Camino. Our interactions should reflect the knowledge that we can and do rely on each other. More often than not, our

experiences ultimately depend on our treatment of others and their attitudes toward us. You may go for the Camino, but most of your memories will be about the people you meet.

Parasites are a fact of life on the Camino. If you are aware of a bed bug infestation, politely, but firmly ask to see the albergue's inspection form (it will be posted on a wall). Take a picture or record the information from the form. Call the number on the form and report the infestation yourself. Bed bug infestations are very expensive to eradicate. Your host has probably been trying to take care of it themselves. Unfortunately, people are being bitten, the reputation of Spain is suffering, and albergues down stream are being impacted.

To minimize the spread of bedbugs use lockers, coat trees, or shelves to keep your backpack and possessions off the floor. Avoid leaning your backpack against other pilgrim's backpacks. Do not lean your backpack against mattresses, especially overnight. Avoid taking tomorrow's clothes to bed with you. Inspect mattress seams for bedbugs (newly hatched are 1/16th of an inch and white while adults can be as large as apple seeds and blood red), discarded exoskeletons, and insect droppings. If you see blood spots on the mattress in the morning, you were certainly visited during the night. Turn your bed clothes inside out and inspect the seams for hitchhiker insects. If you suspect bedbugs, machine dry anything that came in contact with your sleeping area so you do not transport them to the next albergue.

Lice are another reality of the Camino. If you experience intense night time itching in the pubic area or daytime itching of your head, you have probably had lice for several days if not weeks (you have to build up an allergic reaction to the bites before itching begins). Talk with a pharmacist for the appropriate medication and advice on machine drying your items on high heat. After your first treatment, you will not know if you still have an active infestation until 7-10 days have passed. During that time period you need to tell each albergue host that they need to machine wash and dry on high heat, not only the sheets, but the blankets as well. Do not slink away feeling ashamed; you have done nothing wrong. That is unless you do slink away and not tell your host that you are undergoing treatment for lice. Do not expose the pilgrims using your bed after you to lice as they will not experience symptoms for days or weeks, unwittingly spreading the insects to even more albergues and pilgrims.

YIELD TO OTHERS.

Walk humbly. You are, after all, on pilgrimage. The little things are often the most important. Simple courtesies such as offering a friendly greeting on the trail, wearing culturally respectful clothing, stepping aside to let someone pass, waiting patiently for a turn, or preserving the quiet, all make a difference. Show your respect to Spaniards whose communities support your pilgrimage. Be friendly, unobtrusive and self-sufficient. Ask permission to cross private lands, and obey all laws and restrictions. Likewise, don't disturb the livestock or equipment of ranchers, anglers, hunters, loggers, and others who derive their income from the permitted use of public lands. Leave gates open or shut, as you find them.

People leading or riding livestock have the right-of-way on the Camino. Hikers and bicyclists should move to the downhill side

and talk quietly to the horseback riders as they pass, since horses and other pack stock sometimes frighten easily.

If riding a bicycle, stay in control. When approaching others from behind, politely announce your presence with a friendly greeting or ring of your bell. Always proceed with caution as you do not know the hearing ability or ear bud usage of the pilgrims you pass.

KEEP A LOW PROFILE.

When charging your phone overnight, be sure it is powered off so incoming notifications do not disturb sleeping pilgrims.

Make sure your morning alarm doesn't rob other pilgrims of much needed sleep. Set your phone on mute and vibration only and wear it against your skin during the night. In the morning, be sure to cancel the alarm and not just hit snooze.

If you are using headlamps on the trail, be sure to not shine them on pilgrims walking by moonlight as you will spoil their night vision for many minutes.

Take rest breaks a short distance from the trail on durable surfaces, such as rock or bare ground. If the vegetation around you is thick or easily crushed, pick a wide spot in the trail so others can easily pass by. If possible, camp out of sight and sound of trails and other visitors.

When visiting a church, remember it is an active house of worship. Hushed tones are appropriate as long as there is no religious service in progress. A respectful silence will never be incorrect. Cover bare shoulders. As a general rule, do not step up onto any raised areas inside churches as they designate holy, sanctuary areas. If you are unsure of church etiquette, walk only in the aisles or where other folks are walking. You can always ask; your interest and concern will be appreciated. Flash photography is not permitted inside most churches as the high energy from the flash speeds the fading of paints and cloth. If your poles are metal tipped, be sure they do not strike the floor. Donate generously. The ancient buildings are an expensive burden on the dwindling populations of poor, rural villages.

Stay off of the stone walls.

LET NATURE'S SOUNDS PREVAIL. Avoid the use of radios, Bluetooth speakers, electronic games and other intrusive devices. To some, technology is a necessity even on the Camino. To others, it is inappropriate. Avoid conflicts by making a conscious effort to allow everyone his or her own experience. Teach dogs to be quiet.

As much as possible, keep the noise down, especially in houses of worship, at night, in the early morning, or in remote areas. When walking in the early morning, be considerate of the Spanish that keep later hours than pilgrims. Save your conversations for the countryside instead of the narrow city streets where your voices echo between the high stone walls.

Consider only wearing a single ear bud as two can be dangerous with farm equipment and bikes approaching from the rear.

Use cellular phones discreetly.

For those interested in learning more about Leave No Trace, please visit LNT.org.

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