

Camino Topics

This essay serves to introduce a number of musings on topics related to the art, music, history and general culture of the Camino de Santiago, the regions through which it passes, and Santiago de Compostela itself. These essays have been written with the philosophy that knowing a little about the country through which a traveler passes makes the journey more meaningful and more enjoyable. I take my canvas to be all of Europe, not just the Iberian Peninsula, and, on occasion, perhaps areas beyond Europe as well, for I define the Camino as being all of the routes that a pilgrim might take on his or her way to Santiago de Compostela, not just the *Camino Francés*, the most popular present day route. Some of my commentary shall be a little bit scholarly with footnotes, references and all that, while other postings will be more informal. Among them we will explore some aspects of medieval music, food, language and civilization.

I have taken great latitude in my subject matter but a few topics are off the table. I do not discuss practical questions of the type "Which boots are best?" "How much weight should I have in my backpack?" or "How do I get from Madrid to Somport?" Along with most people who have walked the Camino, I have opinions on some of those matters, but I shall not discuss them here. Likewise, I try to skirt matters of theology and the spiritual aspects of the pilgrimage as far as possible, leaving those subjects to others with stronger qualifications and interests than mine. It is, of course, impossible to entirely avoid theology and religion when writing about a pilgrimage, but when it becomes necessary to discuss them, I try to avoid inserting my own opinions.

Some caveats are necessary, so let me introduce some of my interests and limitations. I do not come to the study of the Camino as a professional scholar of art, music, anthropology or history, for I am trained as an urban transportation specialist. Rather I am, in the original sense of the term, an *amateur* that is to say a lover of the subject rather than a professional scholar. Over time I hope that I have also become a bit of a *connoisseur* in the way that the great art historian Bernard Berenson used the term, someone who has an eye for a subject and is able to see the best parts of it. Over the many years of my acquaintance with Spain, it has become a kind of spiritual second home and a bit of an obsession, so that I have spent many holidays in Spain and many leisure hours reading about Spanish history and culture.

Probably in an unconscious reaction to study and work on some of the most modern aspects of the world and its technology, I have become a lover of things out of the past. As high school student, I chanced on a picture book of gothic Cathedrals, and I was soon hooked on the medieval era, though over time my interest in architectural history has retreated to the Romanesque period so well represented by churches and other structures along the Camino. Despite years of childhood musical tuition, I play no instrument and have a singing range of about half an octave, but I love music and some years ago became enthralled by early music, which I define as music written before 1600. My interest emerged at roughly the same time there was an explosion in the number of early music performances making it widely available to listeners.

Walking is my physical activity of choice, and hiking is my favorite outdoor activity. Close to home I have mostly done day hiking, for extended backpack trips usually require more time and preparation than I can devote to them. Over the years I have

been lucky to live in areas with great nearby day hiking possibilities including the San Francisco Bay Area, London, the Mid-Atlantic region, Southern California and the Pacific Northwest. My long hiking trips have been on vacations in the mountains of Southern California and New Mexico, the Alps of Austria and Germany, the Massif Central in France, the Chilean Andes, Patagonia in Chile and Argentina, Mexico, the highlands of India, Pakistan, Thailand, Malaysia and Japan, and most recently in Guatemala and the mountains of British Columbia. And of course in various parts of Spain. While I love to walk, I also like a comfortable bed every night and showers and hot meals every day. When the opportunity to do a long walk with the promise of a bed, a shower and a hot meal at the end of each day arises, my ears perk up. They certainly did when in the early 1990s I first learned about walking the Camino. The confluence of my interests and experiences made walking the Camino in Spain an almost ideal way to spend a month. Never one to do anything just once, I then convinced my wife to walk part of the Chemin St. Jacques in France with me, and a couple of years later I walked the Spanish Camino yet again.

Eventually I hope to walk one of the other routes to Santiago, most likely the *via de la Plata* from Sevilla or, if I cannot find the time for that, the *Camino Portuguese* from Oporto. Spending a month or more as *hospitalero* in one of the *albergues* along the route is also in my future plans. And another walk on the *Camino Francés* is not out of the question, for I found the months I devoted to my two walks to be among the best of my life. I have written these ramblings as a contribution to the American Pilgrims on the Camino web site (americanpilgrims.com). It is my hope that visitors to the web site will find my musings and comments to be interesting and informative; that the collection will help to make their walk or bicycle trip to Santiago, past or future, more meaningful and more enjoyable.

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