

# Pilgrims' Progress

*MEDIEVAL PILGRIMS HIKE THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO HOPING FOR A MIRACLE. MODERN-DAY ONES, SUCH AS PEG AND RUSS HALL, DO IT FOR THE PHYSICAL AND SPIRITUAL CHALLENGE. OH, AND FOR THE BRAGGING RIGHTS, TOO*

BY PEG ROONEY HALL

**M**Y HUSBAND, RUSS, and I first heard of El Camino de Santiago de Compostela from his sister, a medieval history enthusiast. In 2007, she and her husband decided to walk 250 miles along the 1,000-mile long, 1,000-year-old pilgrimage trail that traverses through parts of France and Spain.

We thought they had lost their minds. They were in their 60s. It would be like walking from Gainesville through Jacksonville to Savannah, and 50 miles farther! Why would they want to do that?

They survived it. They loved it. They showed us their pictures when they got back.

'Wow,' I thought as I gazed at a photo of the

two of them sitting at a trail-side café toasting their day with wine and snacking on fresh-baked bread. "This looks civilized!"

Despite having laughed our way through Bill Bryson's "A Walk in the Woods," Russ and I had no desire to go anywhere that resembled Bryson's experiences on the Appalachian Trail. But unlike the AT, the Camino had no bears or bad guys. You did not have to sleep outdoors in a lean-to shared with mice or ford streams holding your backpacks overhead to keep your clothes dry. Russ' sister and brother-in-law slept in albergues, which they described as pilgrim hostels. They rested along the way at caf  bars, enjoying wine and cheese, caf   con lech  , homemade pastries, and indoor toilets. They weren't all alone in the woods, but surrounded by a steady stream of fellow pilgrims walking through open fields and picturesque medieval villages.

Every year, some 150,000 people walk part, or all, of this trail. Santiago was one of the three

primary early Christian pilgrimage destinations, the others being Jerusalem and Rome. And though most medieval-era pilgrims undertook the arduous journey for strictly religious reasons — seeking forgiveness for sins or in search of a miracle — most modern-day pilgrims do so for a wide range of reasons. For some, the trail represents a spiritual journey to self-enlightenment. Others hike the trail for the physical challenge or for its historic and cultural significance.

The more Russ and I heard about the Camino experience of his sister and brother-in-law, the more open we became to following in their footsteps. When we retired a few years back — Russ from his job as director of the Florida Integrated Science Center and me from a professorship in UF's College of Journalism and Communications — we had made a pact with each other to try new things. This would be new. We are not athletes, but neither are they. We are not religious, but neither are they. We like our creature comforts, but so do they.



PILGRIMS HIKING ALONG THE EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA ENJOY A PASTORAL SETTING OF BLUE SKIES, FLUFFY WHITE CLOUDS, ROLLING HILLS AND THE WINDING FOOTPATH.





PHOTOS COURTESY OF PEG ROONEY HALL

We sized up a vacation spent hiking the Camino with our checklist of preferred travel experiences: Interstate driving ... no. Ten pounds to lose when we get home ... no. Floating a loan to cover the cost ... no. Moving at our own pace ... yes. Birds, frogs, forests, fields, culture, legends ... yes. Cheese and wine ... yes. Bragging rights ... yes.

We had to admit that walking the Camino would be an almost perfect fit with our preferences. We decided to give it a try.

## A LEGENDARY EXPERIENCE

Although in medieval times, pilgrims simply walked out of their village homes all over Europe and headed for Santiago, over time, preferred routes were established. The most popular now begins in LePuy in central France, continues for about 500 miles to St. Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenees, crosses over to Roncesvalles on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, and traverses another 500 miles through northern Spain to the grand cathedral of St. James in Santiago.

Stories of the Camino's origins and miraculous occurrences abound. According to legend, when Jesus' disciples divided up the world to spread Christ's message after his death, the apostle James the Elder—St. James—drew the lot for the Iberian Peninsula. James had a really rough time, apparently making only about a dozen converts in his months of difficult walking and preaching from the Atlantic coast to the Pyrenees in what would become Spain. Disheartened, he returned to Jerusalem. Despite what poor James saw as his dismal failure at

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

■ Peg and Russ Hall moved to Gainesville in the late 1990s, when Russ became the director of the U.S. Geological Survey's Florida Integrated Science Center and Peg became an associate professor of public relations at UF's College of Journalism and Communications. They retired in 2006 and have subsequently done consulting with nonprofit organizations in Eastern Europe, published a book about their adventures exploring the world of American artisan cheese, and hiked parts of the Camino three times. They celebrated their 45th anniversary this year on the Camino.

spreading the word, King Herod beheaded him for having tried.

St. James' friends took his body back to Spain, burying him in a soon-forgotten spot. One lovely legend says he was miraculously transported over the seas in a stone boat guided by angels.

Eight hundred years later, during the wars between the Christians and the Moors in Spain, a shepherd reported to his bishop that he saw a star dancing over a field and found bones there. The bishop determined that the bones were those of St. James. He built a small village at the spot, Campus de la Stella (Field of the Star), and proclaimed that pilgrims were welcome to



**ABOVE: THE PILGRIMAGE ROUTE THROUGH SPAIN. AT LEFT: PEG AND RUSS TAKE A BREAK ALONG THE TRAIL BETWEEN THE VILLAGES OF CARRION AND CALZADILLA IN SPAIN.**

visit and to contribute a few pennies toward the building of a church to honor St. James. As pilgrims trickled in, reports of miracles soon began to spread throughout the land.

Before long, many pilgrims began to arrive from all over Europe, trekking over dangerous routes for weeks and months. Some reports place the number at more than one million pilgrim visits to Santiago during the Middle Ages. Some were in search of a miracle. Some were sentenced to the pilgrimage as punishment for a crime. Others were eager for the escape from the misery of medieval village life that pilgrimage provided. The pennies they left accumulated adequately to fund the construction of the cathedral, and the tiny town became the city of Santiago de Compostela.

The Codex Calixtinus, widely regarded as the world's first "tourist guide," was written in the 12th century to help pilgrims on the route. The original was lost but a very early copy has been in the guarded archive of the cathedral of St. James all these centuries until early July, when it apparently was stolen by professional art thieves. It has not yet been recovered.

El Camino de Santiago de Compostela sings with tradition, culture, old churches, and the ghosts of pilgrims-past. This is not an ordinary walk on a trail. You step into the Camino, rather than just onto it.

## GETTING READY

Our training began in September 2007 for a proposed May 2008 hike. We started with easy, three-mile hikes around our neighborhood and gradually worked our way up to a weekly 12-mile trek through the San Felasco Hammock Preserve, stuffing pillows in our backpacks for bulk and two half-gallons of water for weight. We could hardly believe that we did not collapse.

We also stocked up on ultra-lightweight backpacks, waterproof jackets, hiking boots, socks and sock liners, high-tech pants and shirts, all of which dried in the blink of an eye.



WILDFLOWERS DOT THE TRAIL  
LEADING TO THE MEDIEVAL  
VILLAGE OF HONTANAS.



RUSS APPROACHES  
THE RUINS OF THE  
15TH CENTURY  
CONVENTO DE SAN  
ANTÓN.



Eight months later, we were each 25 pounds lighter, and doing at age 65 what we wouldn't have dreamed of doing when we were in our 40s. We were ready.

## ON THE TRAIL

On that first Camino, we decided to hike 100 miles in France (so I could try to recapture some of my university-learned French) and then jump ahead by train and hike 50 more miles, over the Pyrenees and into Pamplona, Spain (to get the feel for the Spanish part of the Camino).

Alas, the first day of that hike was a disaster. It poured rain, turning our idyllic, woodsy path into a stream that overtopped our boots. I had

reserved a room in a town 15 miles from our starting point, thinking that with all our training we could walk that far. Wrong. Not the first day, not still jet-lagged. We started feeling weak and called the inn where I'd reserved our room. They came and picked us up. Got to practice my French.

But our life on the trail got better after that. On a typical day we walked 10 to 15 miles at a pace of 2.5 miles per hour. We got up about 6:30 a.m. and hit the trail about 7:30. If the inn where we stayed served breakfast, we ate there. If not, we walked to the first café-bar along the trail. There we'd take a break over coffee and often a tortilla

española, an omelet-like dish made with potatoes and onions.

After breakfast, we would press onward, either to another café-bar or to our destination for the day, arriving between noon and 1 p.m. We would shower, wash whatever clothes we wanted to clean, and go look for another snack.

Next we rested. After walking so many miles every day, our bodies demanded it.

About 7:30 p.m., pilgrim dinners are served. Spaniards typically eat dinner about 9:30 p.m.—much too late for pilgrims. So café-bars offer a three-course pilgrim menu for about \$10 per person. The first course consists of spaghetti, salad or soup. Next come French fries with your choice of pork, chicken or trout. The third course, dessert, is usually ice cream, yogurt or coffee. To drink, you can have water or wine—a bottle for two people—included in the price.

## THE CAMINO'S GIFTS

The beauty of the trail is one of the Camino's gifts to the pilgrim spirit. Granted, you work for it, having to climb hills, walk in all kinds of weather, and pay attention to drinking plenty of water. But spending day after day in nature, at a walking pace, with no demands on your time other than to walk with your eyes and heart open to your world, you find nature filling you up with itself.

We walked alongside rivers and canals, climbed lightly forested mountains with panoramic views, listened to sheep and horses wearing "cow bells" in fields in the Pyrenees, laughed

at the birds calling “cuckoo” to us in the mornings, crossed through rolling fields of wheat blowing in gentle (and not so gentle) breezes, looked down from high ridges on mist-en shrouded, blue-roofed villages, watched wind turbines cranking out electricity, and poked into abandoned stone buildings in medieval towns.

On the flip side, we had a few days of slipping on rain-soaked mud paths and having our boots practically pulled off our feet by the sticky clay the French call “la boue amoreuse”... the “loving mud.”

We spent 21 days hiking in the Camino that year. In 2009, we went back for more. But since we figured that would be our last time, we decided to hike the final 200 miles, into Santiago. After taking a year off in 2010, the Camino called us back this year, to walk the parts in Spain that we had not yet done. Now we have walked across the whole country. Bragging rights claimed!

## THE “REAL” CAMINO

Early on our 2009 Camino, a somewhat serious British pilgrim we met at breakfast warned us, “Before you reach Santiago, you can count on having the devil appear to you at least once. Be wary of his ways. He often takes the form of a taxi.”

This raises the question of whether, if you go with a tour, have a travel agent prearrange your inns, use a transport service for some of your luggage, take a taxi, ride the bus some days, or stay any place other than the albergues (hostels) along the route, are you experiencing a “real” Camino? Is your Camino “authentic” if you soften it up? We had heard that the “serious” pilgrims have been known to call those of us who don’t stay at albergues, the “fluffy-towel crowd.” But the towels at the inns where we stayed were often line-dried, so it wasn’t true.

There is only one rule for a “real” Camino. If you want to get a “Compostela,” a certificate

of completion from the Pilgrim Office in Santiago, you must walk the final 100 kilometers (62 miles) or bike the final 200.

How do they know at the Pilgrim Office if you have done it? Before you go, you get a “credential,” an accordion-like “pilgrim passport” with your name and place of origin written on it. The passport has blank boxes which are filled one by one with a unique stamp affixed and dated at each inn, bar, or church you visit along the way. We ordered ours online from the American Pilgrims on the Camino, an association that provides abundant information for American pilgrims and holds an annual gathering of pilgrims and potential pilgrims. You also can get your passport on the trail in St. Jean Pied de Port or Roncesvalles in Spain. When you present the completed passport in Santiago as authentication of your pilgrim status, they stamp the final box and give it back to you. What a souvenir!

## WHY GO?

Now that we’ve completed our Camino, many of our friends ask us the same question we had posed to Russ’s sister and her husband when they first told us about their plans to hike the trail: Why would anyone want to do *that*?

The answer is different for every pilgrim. My brother-in-law says he walks the Camino for the same unexplainable reason that he chops his own firewood even though he could buy it at Publix.

I do the Camino for the beauty of the countryside, the challenge for my body, the peace it brings to my mind, the filling up of my spirit. I do it for the joy of having my day’s work be simply putting one foot in front of the other until I reach a place to stay the night. I do it because it makes me grateful to myself for doing it. I do it because I can, and maybe next year I won’t be able to.

Oh yes, and I do it for the bragging rights. 