

WHAT TO EXPECT ON THE CAMINO

By Jim Carpenter

Littleton CO

For more than twelve hundred years pilgrims have been making their way across Europe to Santiago de Compostela and the tomb of Saint James, the apostle and friend of Jesus. They have crossed the Pyrenees, the farms and fields of northern Spain, the high desolate plateau of the *meseta*, the scrub-covered *Montes de León*, and the misty green mountains and valleys of Galicia, finally reaching the grand city named after the patron saint of Spain and the even grander cathedral that holds his remains. They have numbered in the millions – peasants, paupers, merchants; kings and queens; saints, sinners, priests, and religious; young and old, rich and poor. They have come in remission of their sins, to exorcise demons, to gain indulgences, to seek God's healing grace for themselves or in hopeful prayer for loved ones who suffer, as sentences for crimes or other misdeeds, and in some cases, perhaps just out of curiosity.

Now you are about to embark on this great journey, to add your footprints to those of the millions who have beaten this path before you. Along the way you will cross mountain ranges, rivers, fertile fields of wheat and corn, vineyards stretching to the horizon, pastures filled with sheep and cattle, and vast steppes of nearly treeless prairie. You'll pass through large cities with buildings of glass and steel and miles of shops and factories along busy streets; through suburbs of modern and traditional homes; around schoolyards filled with joyful children and through parks with pensioners on benches watching the world go by. You'll pass through tiny hamlets centered around a centuries-old church, and through ancient villages with cows and chickens wandering in the streets. You'll walk alongside modern super highways, beside high-speed rail lines, along quiet back road byways, serene farm lanes, simple dirt pathways, and rocky mountain trails. You'll cross ancient stone bridges and modern steel and concrete spans and overpasses. You'll cross simple slabs of stone or mere stepping stones over rivulets and brooks. You'll walk on concrete, asphalt, gravel, dirt, flagstones, cobblestones, and two thousand year-old Roman roads of carefully cut and placed stones. You'll walk through mud, water, dust, and manure. You'll walk through forests of oak, beech, pine, and eucalyptus trees; through fields of sunflowers, wildflowers, heather, and ferns. But always you'll be walking, one step after another for mile after mile after mile.

You'll hear the tinkling bells of sheep, clanking bells on cattle, and the deep gongs of ancient bells in church towers calling people to prayer. You'll hear children laughing, dogs barking, and occasionally the singing of pilgrims as they walk. You'll hear the tap-tap tap-tap of walking sticks – your own if you use them or those of fellow pilgrims walking beside you or overtaking and passing you. You'll hear the roar of traffic, the sound of speeding trains, the distant sound of jets passing far above, and the put-putter of a tractor in a farmer's field. You'll hear birds singing, crickets chirping, and perhaps the bleating of sheep on a hillside. As you pass through a village you may hear the conversation of people sitting at sidewalk tables or park benches, and perhaps the sound of a radio playing in a bar or the open window of a house. You'll hear the distant rumble of thunder and the sound of rainfall all around you. You'll hear the swish-swish of irrigation sprinklers in a field and the swooosh-swooosh of the giant wind generators as you

walk along a ridge line. And you'll hear the quiet of the sunrise as you walk along a narrow pathway, basking in the coolness of a new dawn.

You'll be intimidated and elated, discouraged and encouraged. You'll laugh a lot and perhaps cry a little. You'll be wet, dry, sweaty, and shivering. You'll walk in daylight and darkness, in rain, sun, mist, and fog – and maybe even snow at times. Your shoulders will hurt, your back will hurt, your legs will hurt, your ankles will hurt, your feet will hurt. Your head will ache and your nose will run. You'll have blisters, you'll have tendonitis, you'll have shin splints. You'll limp and you'll hobble – but as you look around, so will everyone else.

You'll eat a ton of *tortillas de patata*, mountains of *ensalada mixta*, at least a million french fries, delicious fresh pastries, bread to die for, hearty *bocadillos de jamón* or *atún*, and more *tapas* and *pinchos* than you can imagine. You'll drink gallons of *café con leche* and *vino tinto*, and probably more than your share of *cerveza* as well. And in spite of all that, you'll lose weight as you walk.

You'll spend hours talking as you walk with friends, and hours of quiet contemplation as you walk alone. You'll suffer physical pain, wrestle with demons, and eventually you'll discover an inner self that you never knew existed.

You'll meet people from all over the globe. You'll make friends for a day, a week, or a lifetime. You may even meet an angel along the way.

In short, as the *hospitalero* Acacio told his guests over a simple but memorable dinner in a humble *albergue* in a sleepy village, “You don't *make* the Camino, you *live* the Camino.” And when you finally stand in front of the Cathedral at Santiago with tears streaming down your cheeks, you'll know that your Camino has not ended – it's only just begun. *Ultreia!*