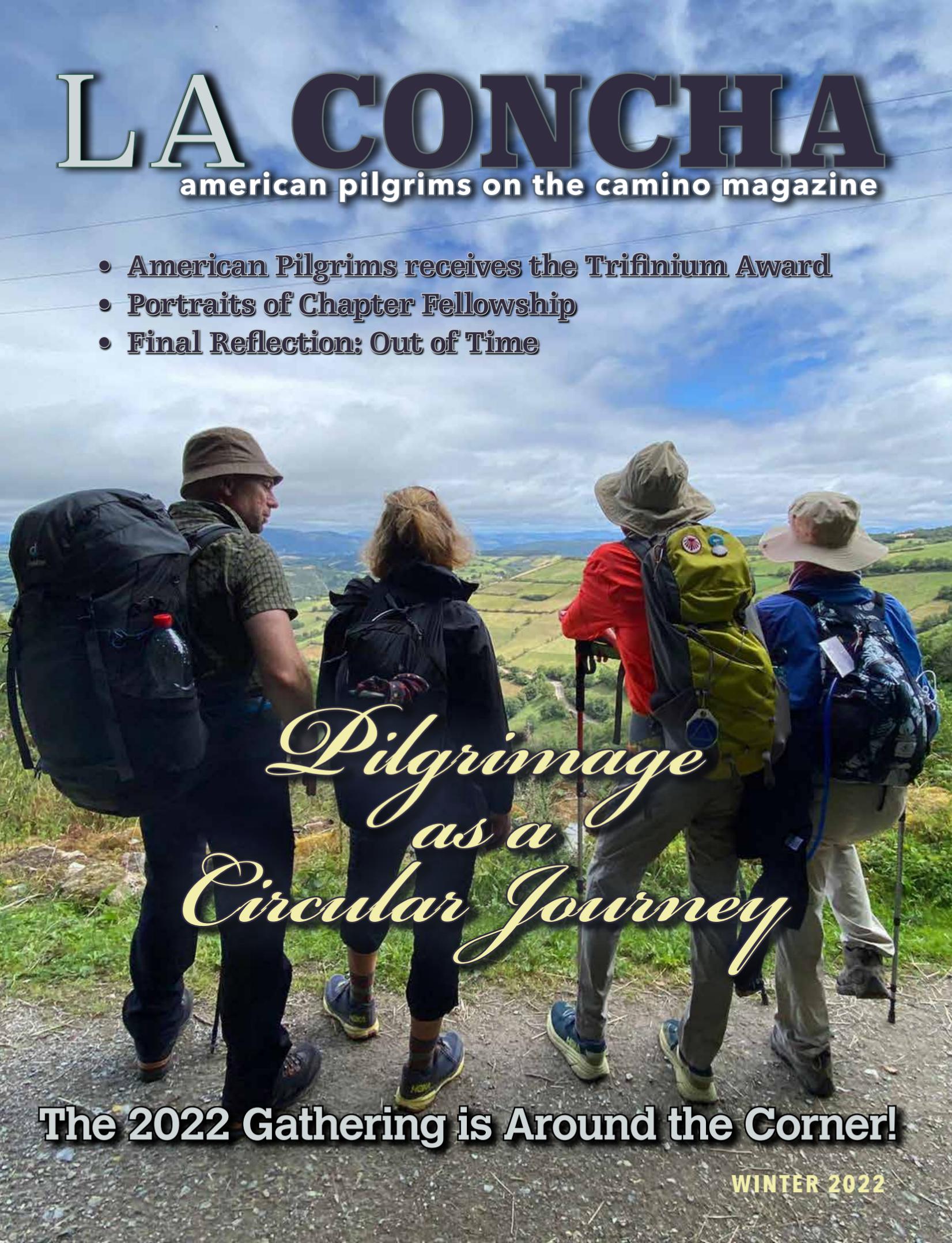


# LA CONCHA

american pilgrims on the camino magazine

- American Pilgrims receives the Trifinium Award
- Portraits of Chapter Fellowship
- Final Reflection: Out of Time



*Pilgrimage  
as a  
Circular Journey*

**The 2022 Gathering is Around the Corner!**

WINTER 2022

# CONTENTS

## WINTER 2022 ISSUE

**3 Editor's Welcome**

**4 Chair's Message**

**9 News from American Pilgrims**

*From looking backward on its award winning grants program to forward at its 2022 Gathering, American Pilgrims is celebrating the joy in the unending journey of its life as a pilgrim community.*

**17 Chapter News**

*Cheer on a season of chapter engagement with great updates from chapters around the country.*

**19 Pilgrim's Way**

*Pilgrimage as a circular journey: Enjoy meditations on the ways pilgrims have navigated the past and the future through an embrace of the present.*

**39 Arts & Culture:**

*Connect with history and discover member-recommended resources that could deepen your pilgrim experience.*

**50 Final Reflection:**

*In his essay, Stephen Drew contemplates the currency of time as one finds it on the Camino.*

**52 How to Submit to La Concha**

*A call for submissions; what and where to submit for consideration.*

COVER Photo: Contemplative Overlook Near O'Cebrero. Photo by Robert Shea.

AT RIGHT: The Pilgrim Statue along Francés near San Roque. Photo by M. Lane Holbert.

Artwork unattributed in this issue is original or licensed and provided by Francine Mastini.



The mission of American Pilgrims on the Camino is to foster the enduring tradition of the Camino by supporting its infrastructure, gathering pilgrims together, and providing information and encouragement to past and future pilgrims.

# LA CONCHA

## BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2021

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American Pilgrims on the Camino

120 State Avenue NE #303

Olympia, WA 98501-1131

Fax: 1 650 989-4057

americanpilgrims.org

American Pilgrims on the Camino is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization registered in California.

Dear Fellow Pilgrims,

At the end of his 1948 cycle of poems collectively titled *Four Quartets*, T.S. Eliot has this to say about the end of a world war, and with it, a way of being:

What we call the beginning is often the end

And to make an end is to make a beginning.

The end is where we start from [...]

"Little Gidding," *Four Quartets*

Although it is not documented anywhere in his biography that he ever visited Santiago, I like to imagine that these lines sprang into his mind while he stood beneath La Puerta de Las Platerías in the Cathedral, staring up at a papal seal sculpture that has been curiously marked: it possesses an inscription of the Omega on the left, and the Alpha on the right. The end, if we are to read it faithfully before we pass through the archway and back into the light-flooded streets, is the beginning.

Each year American Pilgrims identifies a theme that guides our action and attention toward our growth as a community of pilgrims. As we complete this year, we pause to consider this year's: Circular Pilgrimage. How does one mile marker of one's journey dissolve into the threshold of another? Once one accepts that they are a pilgrim, there is really no end to that identity or experience, only more profound and humble beginnings.

In this issue, we are happy to share so much good news about the circular pilgrimages taking place at every level of our community of pilgrims. Head to the News from American Pilgrims section to discover how the organization is gaining international recognition for our work and using that recognition to deepen our impact. Learn how departing board member Carmen Marriott sees her time of service as a primer for what comes next. Peruse the Chapters News section to see snapshots of how our pilgrim communities around the country continue to support all who seek to know the spirit of the Camino more deeply. And of course, read pilgrim testimonials within The Pilgrim's Way section—many of which focus on how a return to the Camino within the era of COVID-19 creates new physical, emotional, and spiritual challenges.

As this season of your journey as a pilgrim ends, it is my every hope that this issue of La Concha invites you to ponder, with wonder, where this beginning will take you.

In peace,

*Megan*

Megan Muthupandiyen, Editor in Chief

AT RIGHT: The papal seal above La Puerta de las Platerías in the Cathedral of Santiago features the alpha and omega reversed. Open source image.



## LETTER FROM THE 2021 CHAIR

As a Board of Directors, we recently met to conduct a strategic planning and goal-setting session. We reviewed our mission, vision, and values, progress on key initiatives, and we imagined what our future as an organization might look like. In preparation for this session, we reached out to members, non-members, volunteers, and other key constituencies across the organization for some frank feedback and ideas to help shape our thinking. The input we received was valuable and resulted in focused actions in the three key parts of our mission: providing information and encouragement to pilgrims, supporting the infrastructure of the Camino, and gathering pilgrims together. Among our goals for the next year, we will:

- Leverage our improved technological tools to more efficiently accomplish the mission: Over the past several years, American Pilgrims has successfully modernized our administrative, financial, and communications tools, as well as our website. Over the next year, we will use our improved capabilities to broaden our outreach and inspire people to engage with our community of pilgrims.
- Rekindle the Camino Spirit through the return of our annual Gathering of Pilgrims, the restart of our hospitalero training program, and increased investment in our Grants program to support the infrastructure of the Camino.
- Multiply the impact of our efforts by identifying and communicating volunteer opportunities that take advantage of the diverse talents of our pilgrim community.

In addition to the planning session and routine business, I am pleased to report that we approved the nomination of Joe Curro and Paula Jager to serve a three-year term on the Board of Directors and elected the following slate of officers for 2022: Steve Lytch, Chair; Sara Gradwohl, Vice-Chair; Bill Artz, Treasurer; and Allison Venuto, Secretary! The organization will be in good hands under their leadership.

We also congratulated Carmen Marriott for her six years of dedicated service to American Pilgrims on the Camino. The organization has benefited greatly from her leadership, and we wish her all the best in her future endeavors.

On behalf of the Board of Directors, thank you all for your support of American Pilgrims on the Camino, and we wish you all the best in 2022!

Buen Camino,

*Dave*

Dave Donselar  
2021 Chair, Board of Directors



Chairman, Dave Donselar  
at our annual Gathering of  
Pilgrims. in Lake Tahoe, 2020



In October, Western North  
Carolina chapter members Vince  
Pratt, Mike Gardner, Martee Fry,  
John Kennedy, Don Walton, and  
William Werme spent the eve-  
ning with the board during their  
October board meeting. Photo  
by Dave Donselar.

## And the winner is... us!

by the Board of American Pilgrims

The International Jacobean Trifinium Award was instituted in 2012 by the Spanish Federation of Associations of Friends of the Camino de Santiago. Every three years, it recognizes an individual, an initiative, and an organization whose work embodies the pilgrim spirit by supporting the Camino de Santiago and contributing to the development of the Jacobean pilgrimage.

On the morning of September 9, 2021, American Pilgrims on the Camino was awarded the Trifinium Award for the Camino aid we have provided through our Grants program! The rationale for providing us with the award is as follows:

*"Por su programa altruista de ayuda y subvención (support) a entidades y organizaciones jacobeanas que trabajan en España, Portugal y Francia por el Camino de Santiago y por facilitar el tránsito de los peregrinos. Programa cuya primera iniciativa tuvo lugar en 2009 en Fuenterrroble de Salvatierra (Salamanca) con la puesta en marcha de la 'Casa de América'. Para el Año Santo de 2011 el programa se perfeccionó, siendo desde entonces una iniciativa de ayuda y subvención jacobea "muy estable, efectiva y dinámica."*

*[We extend this award to American Pilgrims on the Camino] for its altruistic aid and financial support program to Jacobean entities and organizations that work in Spain, Portugal and France on the Camino de Santiago, and for facilitating the transit of pilgrims. [The American Pilgrims' Grant Program's] first initiative took place in 2009 in Fuenterrroble de Salvatierra (Salamanca) with the launch of the 'Casa de América.' In the Holy Year of 2011 the program was [improved], and since then it has been a very stable, effective and dynamic Jacobean aid and grant initiative.*

Over the past ten years pilgrim donations and membership fees to American Pilgrims have made it possible for us to donate over \$400,000 to support infrastructure projects on various routes on the Camino. During the awards ceremony it was especially gratifying to meet many of the grants recipients face-to-face, and to hear the real impacts of our grants for their associations and pilgrims. We were delighted to be in the company of two other honorees: in the One Life category, Ángel Luis Barreda, and the Estella Association for the One Work category. The awards ceremony took place in Madrid in October during the XII International Congress of Jacobean Associations.

Help us extend our appreciation to all donors and all volunteers who have been involved with the grants team since 2009!

In order to find out more about our Grants program's current initiatives, please visit our [GRANTS PAGE](#). Donations to support the 2022 Grants program can be made on our [DONATIONS PAGE](#). If you choose to donate, please indicate your donation be earmarked for the Grants program in the Comment section of the donation form.



American Pilgrims on the Camino's Trifinium Jacobean award declaration. Photo by Sara Steig Gradwohl.



Carmen Marriott (center) accepts the Trifinium Award on behalf of American Pilgrims at the October presentation ceremony in Madrid. Photo contributed by Carmen Marriott.



American Pilgrims on the Camino's Trifinium Jacobean award. Photo by Sara Steig Gradwohl.

## Notes from Second Meeting of Municipal Friends' Groups

by Ruben Mendoza  
Katy, TX

On behalf of American Pilgrims on the Camino, Steve Lytch and I attended the *II Encuentro de Asociaciones Municipales del Camino de Santiago* (2nd Meeting of the Municipal Associations of the Camino de Santiago) in Frómista, Spain, August 27-29, 2021. Through these three days we were able to share our unique model of camino fellowship and stewardship as a pilgrim association and to garner ideas from other associations about how to continue our work at this challenging time.

On the first day we attended a welcoming ceremony by political dignitaries in Palencia, Spain. Attendees from associations as far away as Argentina and as close as Belgium were present. The welcome session provided the associations with a perspective on the importance of the Camino to the economic and tourism industries in both Palencia and the greater region. The COVID-19 pandemic affected the hospitality and tourism industries in the region during 2020, but the region is starting to bring back operations along the Caminos in 2021. Our hosts shared information on the history of the Camino and the region with both pride and a sense of optimism for the future.

On the second day other member organizations joined us virtually. Major associations in Spain shared news on the activities in which their regions are engaged in order to restore the opening of the Camino. Mayors placed emphasis on the role authorities are taking to ensure that health protocols are followed by those offering hospitality

services. The Guardia Civil also spoke to the group, discussing new initiatives that are being made to make the Camino safer for all. One is an app called COPS, which is a tool pilgrims can use to report incidents and share their location with people whom they choose. Additionally, civil service officers indicated that there are plans to install mobile police stations along the Camino for pilgrims to report incidents and seek assistance.

The rest of the second day was spent discussing and sharing the following three questions:

- What activities can be undertaken to support the Way of St. James abroad?
- How can we best support associations and association members?
- What role do our associations play in preserving the spirit of the Camino?

The major discussion points that the associations raised through the course of exploring these questions are outlined in a column on an adjoining page. During this conversation, the group also made some suggestions to the Spanish associations. These included reducing tariffs along the Camino for pilgrims to visit tourist or religious places, organizing volunteer crusades to improve the Camino (clean up, signage, etc.), increasing information-sharing among Spanish and non-Spanish associations, increasing the walking requirement to secure a Compostela, and improving fire protection requirements in albergues.

On the third day we traveled from Frómista to Carrión de los Condes and were given a tour of three churches and museums that are currently exhibiting paintings and sculptures in Burgos, Carrión de los Condes, and Sahagún. The beautiful exhibitions are different at each of the three locations but possess the same themes, each celebrating the passion and humility of the human spirit. (cont.)



Steve Lytch at lunch with Dutch and Danish friends. Photo by Ruben Mendoza.

## What activities can be undertaken by associations to support the Way of St. James abroad?

### All associations should

- Engage with new pilgrims as spiritual pilgrims.
- Treat the spirit of pilgrimage as a current and vital force.
- Share the tradition of pilgrimages and Camino history with all whom they encounter.
- Promote Zoom discussions and Camino-related videos within their organizations.
- Consider sponsoring information centers, Facebook groups, digital magazines, lectures, movies, and walks.

### The Spanish associations should

- Coordinate information-sharing regarding open albergues and their reservation and COVID-related policies.
- Develop and maintain guides with up-to-date information regarding conditions on the Camino.
- Provide resources that explain Camino history, religion, pilgrimage traditions, culture, and “acogida tradiciona.” (traditional ways of welcoming pilgrims).



Several notable efforts within Scandinavia were recognized by the group. The Danish Pilgrims’ route, 1,000 kilometers in length, is moving toward being fully marked, and efforts are being made to coordinate pilgrim routes in other Scandinavian countries. (cont.)

## Key Takeaways from the Meeting

- Associations in Spain and elsewhere are promoting the Camino in ways that focus on the traditional pilgrim welcoming!
- Support for the Camino from outside Spain is vibrant. There are more than 300 groups around the world whose mission is to support Camino culture, restoration, and protection.
- Collaboration and communication with Spain is a must to restore the Camino after the pandemic.
- Spain’s national and regional governments want a safe, secure, and attractive Camino and are doing their best to improve historical, cultural, gastronomical, and infrastructure awareness of the Camino.

*With these things in mind, American Pilgrims will continue to support its mission, vision, and values on the Camino, through grants, hospitalero training, Gatherings, chapters, etc.*



## INTERNATIONAL (CONT.)

### How can we best support pilgrim associations and association members?

Within the virtual material that we provide pilgrims, we should humanize the Camino as a living story.

Associations should speak to and recognize the seven basic motivational factors pilgrims have for undertaking the Camino.

The new pilgrim is a person who is searching; we should nourish pilgrims with information but respect their motives.

Associations must work together to provide information on how to support albergues along the Camino and provide funding for some albergues to remain solvent in this time of COVID.

Associations should use Zoom as a means to maintain and strengthen relationships with their local pilgrim community.

### What role do our associations play in preserving the spirit of the Camino?

We can facilitate and engage in communications among international associations of friends of the Camino of St. James.

We should preserve the spirit of the traditional Camino way, i.e., “acogida” or welcoming.

We should seek to find common projects where international associations and Spanish associations can work together.

We should unify associations to embrace the new digital world and adapt to upcoming changes in communications while continuing to promote the values of the Camino.

We should maintain the spirit of the Camino when gathering pilgrims locally.

## The Gift of Membership

*by Tom Labuziowski  
on behalf of the Membership Committee  
South Bend, IN*

As a cherished fellow American Pilgrim, you know two of the pillars that we all strive to share in our pilgrim hearts are GRATITUDE and COMMUNITY. At this time of the year, we are grateful for our Camino experiences and for our beloved pilgrim friends. As you know the joy of being a member of American Pilgrims on the Camino, might you during this holiday season give the gift of membership to a special relative or Camino friend? This is a generous, meaningful way to share gratitude and community and to be a true Camino angel to someone dear.

**FOR MORE INFORMATION ON GIVING A MEMBERSHIP WITH A CREDIT CARD OR CHECK PLEASE EMAIL [MEMBERSHIP@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG](mailto:MEMBERSHIP@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG).**

# INTERNATIONAL American Pilgrims Attends the XII Jacobean Congreso in Madrid, Spain

by Carmen Marriott  
Tucson, AZ

**What a wonderful buzz to be part of the XII Jacobean Congreso in Madrid this year!** Spain has opened up to vaccinated Americans, pilgrims and tourists alike, and I was privileged to attend the meeting as the board representative of American Pilgrims on the Camino.

The conference theme was “Camino de Santiago, Caminos de Europa”—a look at the Holy Year and the Year of Jacobeo (Xacobeo in Galician). We met at the headquarters of ONCE (Organización Nacional de Ciegos Españoles), a Spanish not-for-profit organization for the blind and visually impaired. All presentations were accompanied by sign language interpreters, and several of the presenters were advocates for the accessibility of the Camino and technologies benefiting us all.

The Congreso agenda was replete with historical, economic, religious, and other information related to the Camino de Santiago and to the international Camino organizations. Discussions regarding the impact of COVID-19, both in the past and future, were mostly hopeful. We discussed the complicated nature of the economic impact of COVID-19 and other factors on the Camino.

Several presenters highlighted new and continuing challenges for the traditional albergues, donativos, and the preservation of some of the more ancient hospitality traditions on the Camino. We discussed the difference between how an hotelero, a person who takes care of his guests, is different than a hospitalero, and the “acogida,” the special way of caring for a pilgrim. These traditions have been challenging pre-COVID-19, and will only be more difficult post-pandemic.

We were left pondering many questions with no easy or necessarily correct answers, but matters important to the Camino de Santiago. Here are a few worth noting:

- How can we best manage the crowdedness of the Camino Francés, and what impact will the Holy Year have on pilgrim numbers?
- How can we best manage issues relating to tourism and cultural preservation?
- What is the difference between a “hospitalero” and a “hotelero,” and how can we preserve the ancient hospitality traditions of the Camino?
- Where are we seeing a banalization of the Camino experience? How can we avoid it?
- What are the positive and negative impacts on the Camino, pilgrims, and the economy, of a 100-kilometer requirement to obtain a Compostela?
- What is the difference between pilgrimage and walking?

I'm grateful for the opportunity to share the spirit of the Camino with almost 200 international Camino pilgrims, scholars, and enthusiasts during the Congreso, and to be able to accept the award American Pilgrims received for our Grants program. The event provided an excellent opportunity to build and strengthen our pilgrim community and values. (For more information on the award that American Pilgrims received during the Congreso, please read “And the Winner is. . . us!” on page 5.)



## MEMBERS

### Volunteer Spotlight: Carmen Marriott: Guardian of our Mission

by the Board of Directors, American Pilgrims on the Camino

**Carmen Marriott had just completed her first Camino** when she received a notification from American Pilgrims on the Camino that the board was seeking candidates with legal expertise and Spanish-language skills to fill in needs in their governance and external relations teams. A corporate lawyer, she possessed both . . . and like many people who have stepped into leadership roles at every level of American Pilgrims, she received the information as a sort of calling. “I hadn’t been a part of the organization for very long,” she explained, “but I had experiences and expertise that I could share, which would hopefully benefit the organization as it lay a foundation for its next stage of growth.”

At the onset, it was clear she was a high impact leader. “From our time on the board together,” former Board Chair Jeff Stys reflects, “I counted Carmen as both a valued colleague and friend. Her passion for the Camino and her knowledge of best practices in nonprofit management made her an ideal board member. She constantly and effortlessly helped to ensure the board was doing an even better job as guardians of our mission.” “Carmen was the right person at the right time with the knowledge, experience, and motivation to help our volunteer Board move to more effective, efficient ways of functioning,” Cheryl Grasmoen adds.

Six years later, her influence continues to be widely recognized by volunteers at all levels of the organization. As former Board Chair Dave Donselar notes, “Carmen’s greatest legacy for American Pilgrims is how she nurtured and grew our Grants program. She empowered a team of volunteers to create and manage a thorough, methodical process that has continued to improve and grow as she turned it over to the next stewards of the program, which is a sign of her outstanding leadership.”

From her work building our relationships with other Friends of the Camino associations, working with the coordinators of our chapters, and in building the infrastructure of our Grants program, to her personally enriching work as an hospitalero and a member of the hospitalero training team, Carmen has helped American Pilgrims continue to mature into its mission in extraordinary ways.

As we see her depart from the board, we collectively wish her the opportunity to spend much time with her beloved grandchildren and family, but know that she will continue to be an invaluable member of the American Pilgrims community. In the words of Emilio Escudero, “Carmen has been, and I expect will continue to be, a fervent supporter of our American Pilgrims mission and especially our chapters. My hope is that she continues to grace our work and us with her experience, energy, directness, people skills and self-deprecating humor. *No te vayas lejos.*” In this, he speaks for us all.



Carmen on the last stage of the Camino del Norte, her first Camino. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

Dave presenting Carmen with a gift of appreciation for her 6 years of board service at the October board meeting. Photo by Sara Gradwohl.



## GIVE TIME GIVE BACK



**Hablas  
español?**  
**Parlez-vous  
français?**  
**Você fala  
português?**

Interested in occasionally translating  
video and audio documents for  
American Pilgrims?  
CONTACT COMMUNICATIONS@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG



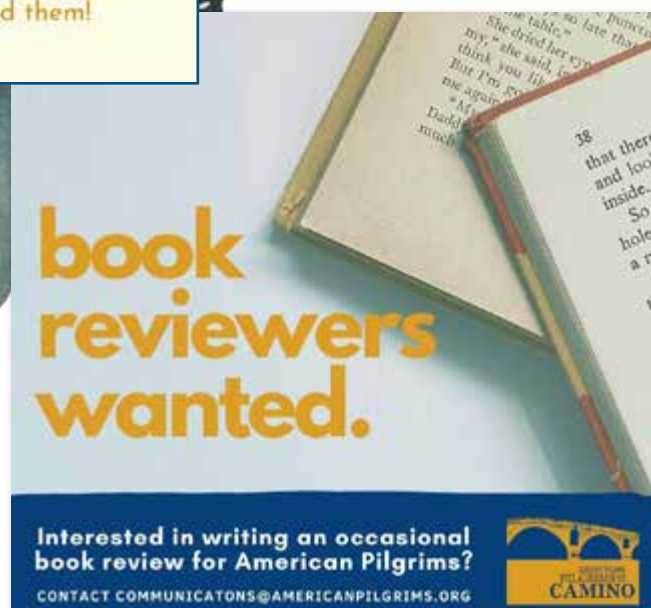
**AMERICAN PILGRIMS**



**VOLUNTEER SPOTLIGHT**

Do you know a volunteer who  
exemplifies American Pilgrims' values of  
community, service, gratitude and  
simplicity? Nominate them to be  
featured in our new quarterly volunteer  
spotlight.

Nominations can be emailed to  
[communications@americanpilgrims.org](mailto:communications@americanpilgrims.org).  
Be sure to include their name and to tell  
us why you've nominated them!



**book  
reviewers  
wanted.**

Interested in writing an occasional  
book review for American Pilgrims?  
CONTACT COMMUNICATIONS@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG



## USEFUL NEWS FOR PILGRIMS

### Get Prepared for the 2022 Gathering!

*by Dave Donselar, Chair of the 2022 Gathering  
Alexandria, VA*

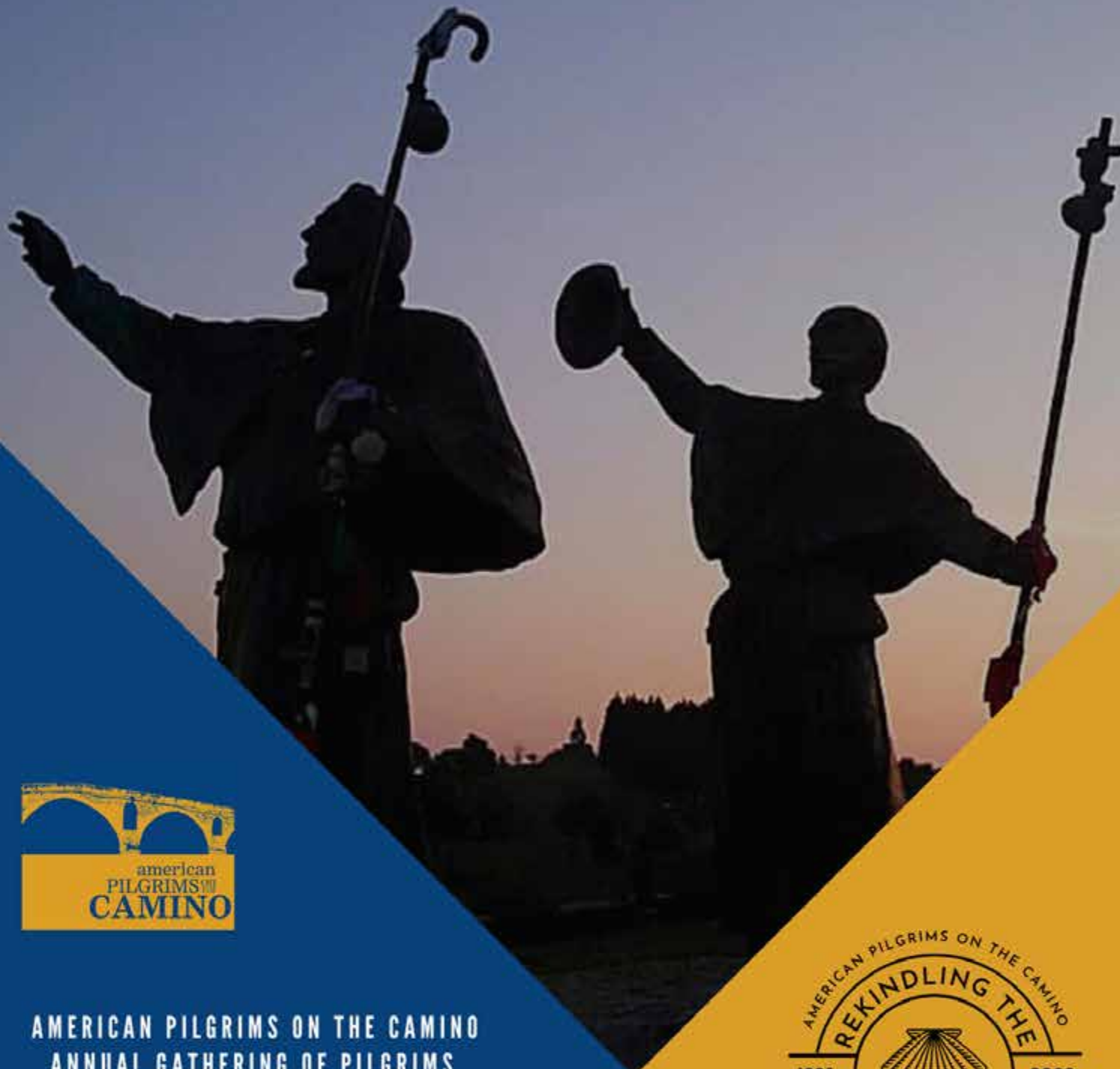
The 2022 Annual Gathering of Pilgrims is just around the corner! I think we're all ready to ***Rekindle the Camino Spirit*** and get back out there, don't you? This will be American Pilgrims on the Camino's 25th year of gathering pilgrims together and we look forward to seeing you at the YMCA Blue Ridge Assembly in Black Mountain, NC (near Asheville) from March 31 to April 3, 2022.

Registration will open in early January. Members will be notified when registration opens. Visit the **AMERICAN PILGRIM'S WEBSITE** for additional details on the program including the most recent draft of the program, the cost, accommodations options, and the most up-to-date health precautions as we complete our preparations. Also be sure to check for email updates from American Pilgrims . . . we'll be sending out updates before the event!



### Hospitalero Corner: Training

Hospitalero Trainings are starting again in 2022. The first one will be March 29-31 immediately preceding the 2022 Annual Gathering in Black Mountain, NC. Watch our website for updated information. Registration will open in early January.



AMERICAN PILGRIMS ON THE CAMINO  
ANNUAL GATHERING OF PILGRIMS

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# ***REKINDLING THE CAMINO SPIRIT***

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**MARCH 31-APRIL 3, 2022**  
**YMCA BLUE RIDGE ASSEMBLY**  
**BLACK MOUNTAIN, NC**





*Today and always we  
seek your fellowship  
beneath the field of  
stars.*

*Warmest wishes,  
Your American  
Pilgrims Board*

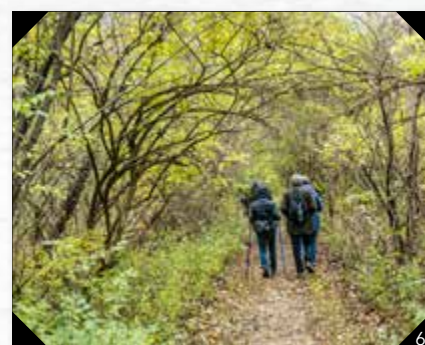




## chapter news

Pilgrim hands united. See Recovery Pilgrims in Pilgrims Way section for full story. Photo by M. Lane Holbert.

# WHAT WE DO TOGETHER



1. The Boise, ID Chapter did a "Camino for the Day" eight mile walk in November that included a small pizza cafe lunch, dirt trails, cement sidewalks, and blacktop routes through busy streets, parks and residential areas. Photo provided by Cathy Leamy.

2. Here are a few of the two dozen happy pilgrims who gathered on the afternoon of November 21 to pick up the new Albuquerque Chapter patches and get their credentials stamped with our new stamp. Photo by Linnea Hendrickson.

3. Anchorage, AK Chapter's St. James Day hike with the slow group. Fast group was WAY out in front. Photo by Diane Moxness.

4. San Diego Chapter November Hike in Carmel Valley. Photo by Karin Kiser.

5. The Central Iowa Chapter stopped for a photo on the High Trestle Trail Bridge over the Des Moines River. This annual sunset hike is a chapter favorite! Photo contributed by Dawn Bratsch-Prince.

6. On November 13, the Chicago Chapter of American Pilgrims on the Camino enjoyed a wonderful hike on the Raceway Trails in Carpentersville IL. Photo by Joe Barabe.

7. Colorado Front Range Chapter on Windy Point on Spruce Mountain with a little bit of Pikes Peak sticking out in the background! Photo by Christine Petty.

8. The DelMarVa Chapter enjoyed a mid-week stroll on the Ocean City, MD Boardwalk. Photo by Terry Shuchart.

9. Hoosiers Chapter Tapas Party at the home of Sara and Dan Gradwohl, October 2021. Photo by Dan Gradwohl.

10. Alligators and a beautiful trail often go hand in hand when hiking in Florida. The trail at Ft. Clinch is one of those areas in NE Florida enjoyed by Jacksonville Chapter members. Photo contributed by Miriam S. Gallet.

# CHAPTERS: BETTER TOGETHER



11. On November 13th, twenty-one members of the Lake Tahoe Chapter enjoyed a seven-and-a-half mile hike along the high desert country surrounding Reno, NV. Photo by Vern Howard.

12. The North Texas Chapter celebrated a Walk and Pot Luck in Keller, Texas, on November 13th. Photo by Joe Zarcaro.

13. A few members of Okies on Camino (NE Oklahoma Chapter) during our recent hike in the Ozarks! Photo contributed by Roni Jackson-Kerr.

14. Group photo of the Portlandia Chapter during a chapter walk on the Columbia River front in Vancouver, WA October 17th. Photo contributed by Linda Smith.

15. Silicon Valley Chapter enjoying a blustery fantastic hike at Windy Hill Open Air Preserve. We're happy to be meeting and hiking again! Photo by Linda Newman Andersson.

16. A September hike at St. Mary's College, Notre Dame, IN. Photo contributed by Tom Labuzinski.

17. Southern Wisconsin Chapter of American Pilgrims on the Camino gathered at Devils Lake State Park November 13th for a six-mile hike. Photo by Laura Breedon.

18. Raleigh, NC Chapter celebrating St. James Day (2021) with tapas, tarta de Santiago, and sangria at the Blue Corn cafe in Durham. Photo by John L. Saxon.

19. The St. Louis Chapter celebrates fall on the Bluff View Trail in Glencoe, MO. Photo by Vivian Sierra.

20. Texas Gulf Coast Chapter stop for group selfie on a beautiful day hiking around Buffalo Bayou in Houston. Photo shared by Linda E Shubert.

21. The Western North Carolina Chapter out on their monthly Camino hike (Nov. 7th) through Asheville. Photo credit: Bill Werme.

## Hike Evokes the Camino Experience

*by David Jennings, Co-Coordinator of the Lake Tahoe Chapter  
Kings Beach, CA*

A beautiful fall day, awesome vistas, and wonderful people...

Monthly hikes are a common activity for the majority of local chapters, and the Lake Tahoe Chapter is no different. One of the chapter's October loop hikes included points of interest that had such intriguing names as Slaughterhouse Canyon, Prey Meadows, and the midpoint destination of Skunk Harbor. For this six-mile hike the group was represented by men and women in equal numbers. Half were veteran Camino Pilgrims and the others were Someday Maybees. The 900-ft. elevation gain made it a strenuous physical endeavor that added to the bonding.

Arriving at Skunk Harbor, a popular summer Tahoe beach, everyone was awestruck by the panoramic natural beauty of lake, mountain, and forest. It was the ideal place to pause for a snack/picnic and share our feelings, ideas, dreams. The natural setting, the sharing, the simplicity, the openness, the total camaraderie that formed at that point echoed the Camino experience that some of us had gone through and that the others had heard about.

The accompanying photos have a central invisible presence, not seen, but felt by all present—the “Spirit” of the Camino. And that spirit moved people: since the completion of our chapter's autumn hike, two of the Maybees are now planning for the Camino. ☞



Two geese at Skunk Harbor, Lake Tahoe.  
Photo by David Jennings.



A Camino-like experience at Skunk Harbor, Lake Tahoe. Photo of the members of the Lake Tahoe Chapter by Suzanne Del Sarto.



AFTER  
WINTER  
COMES  
SPRING

## Pilgrimage as a Circular Journey

Arzúa, Galicia. October, 2018. Photo by Thom Ryng.

## The Meseta: A Chapel Without Walls

by Rick McAllister  
Saint Augustine, FL

I have walked the Camino Francés three times. The first in 2014 was the most profound by far. The second (2016) and the third (2018) allowed me to concentrate more on the structural and historical aspects of the landscape surrounding the path we chose. If you interviewed 200 pilgrims about their journey, you would undoubtedly have 200 unique stories. However, the statisticians will classify each into one of a few categories: an adventure vacation, a response to curiosity, or an attempt to let a physical challenge provide you with spiritual answers or clarity. Many respond to all three.

Two thoughts challenged me: one was physical, and one was mental. The physical one is the same that most senior citizens ask themselves before their pilgrimage: can my 69-year-old body respond to the physical demands of the 500-mile hike? The mental one was a big unknown, but that very mystery turns a hike into a pilgrimage. I am a Vietnam combat veteran and, over the years, have had some PTSD-type thoughts dealing with “survivor’s guilt.” Most counselors feed you their rhetoric and ultimately tell you, “it just wasn’t your time.” My family and friends were more influential for me. Anyone looking from the outside would tell you that I have a full, successful, and rewarding life, and they would be right. But the questions lingered.

Leaving St. Jean Pied de Port in early April, crossing the Pyrenees, and getting into the flow of the pilgrimage was exhilarating. I loved every minute of my time alone, as well as my time with other pilgrims from so many foreign ports. I was completely drawn into the cultural and historical aspects of the landscape, from the vineyards and olive groves to the stained glass windows of centuries old cathedrals, from albergues to the Paradors in León and Santiago, and from vino tinto to the unique pintxos of the Basque countryside. There was so much to take in it was a little overwhelming. Until I got to the Meseta.

When listening to pilgrims talk about their Camino



The Meseta. Photo by Rick McAllister.

experience, the Meseta seems to sit at the extremes: it was either their least favorite place or the most unique and spiritually rewarding. I left Burgos early and arrived at the start of the Meseta as the sun was rising and the day awakening. The chirping of the insects and birds announced the start of a new experience. As the panoramic vistas overwhelm your eyes, the solitude spiritually speaks to your soul. It cleanses and nourishes at the same time, and it turned my questions into a type of prayer of thanksgiving. When I stopped for the night in Frómista, I found a place of solitude and prayed for my fallen brothers and gave thanks for the life I have lived. Maybe my questions have been carefully wrapped and set aside for a conversation at another Gate.

So, while the Way of Saint James ended for me in Santiago de Compostela, the experience returned home with me and allowed me to counsel other veterans on a spiritual cleansing outside the walls of a church. It completes a circle that remains in constant motion for the true pilgrim.



# PILGRIMAGE AS CIRCULAR JOURNEY

## Circle to Self

by Carol Adams  
Maineville, OH

I have long been fascinated by labyrinths, those concentric physical structures with one way in leading to the center and one way out. The most well-known is in the Chartres Cathedral in France. For Christians they mimic a pilgrim's journey to the Holy Land, the most sacred of all pilgrimages. While walking a labyrinth, people often slip into a contemplative mood, asking themselves who they were as opposed to who they are or who they will be. I think it is best to walk alone, which is how I prefer to walk the Camino. It seems I have often lost my way when I am distracted by others! While a Camino is not exactly circular, one can find himself moving in circles if he loses his way. But he finds his way again and goes forward. An African legend tells of a man hurrying through the wilderness, accompanied by his porters. They quickened their pace through rivers and thick vegetation when suddenly, the porters stopped. When the man admonished them for stopping, the porters explained that they had been moving forward so quickly that they had left their souls behind. Now they had to wait for their souls to catch up with them again. When I walk the Camino, I can stop and let my mind go back to a less complicated time, lose the old me and find a new one.

As I near my life's eighth decade, I know I have been lost, then found my way again many times over. I have reached my "center," finding peace. Faith and perseverance have kept me on a good path but I have no illusions that a time will come when my journey will end, when I leave my "self." My hope is that I will be back at the beginning, where I will take the first step and the rest will be revealed to me.



Unknown Labyrinth. Photo submitted by Carol Adams.

## Returning from the Camino

by Linnea Hendrickson, Albuquerque Chapter Coordinator  
Albuquerque, NM

I am driving a car again: one of those monstrous noisy beasts that were enemies to me as a walker on the Camino. I sometimes walked many extra kilometers just to find a way to cross a highway.

Now at home I notice walkers along the road, and homeless people camped at intersections. I feel guilty for traveling in the protective bubble of my car, for making noise, spewing pollutants, and shutting myself away from those who walk. I no longer look down on them. I look down on myself for my excesses.

On the Camino, I could stop in a small shop and buy one large carrot that I might eat for two days.

At home, I shop at Costco, where carrots come in 10-pound plastic bags.

On the Camino, I could buy half a loaf of bread, and a small piece of butter, and I could point to a chunk of cheese to be cut just so big.

Where can I do this at home?

When the three of us in my "Camino family" found a room for just us, it felt like the greatest luxury. There was even a bathtub. Pure bliss! But I longed for a big fluffy towel.

At home, I have a bedroom and bathroom to myself, as many towels as I want, and a bathtub I seldom use. At home, I love the peace and quiet and my comfortable chair. But there are so many things I ought to do: projects to complete, friends to call, classes to attend, appointments to make. I worry whether I am *(cont.)*

## || PILGRIMS WAY ||

doing what matters most.

When I came home, I organized a chapter of American Pilgrims on the Camino to keep the spirit of the Camino alive and connect with others who understood. Of course, that added to my list of things to do. I wanted to share my belief that walking solves everything. I wanted to share my joy in the simplicity of the Camino, where I dressed each morning without fussing about what to wear and where finding that there was still toilet paper in the bathroom made me happy. I'd put my pack on my back and one foot in front of the other, eager for what the path would hold and what my thoughts and my feet would encounter that day. That is why the Camino keeps calling me back.



### Carrying the Camino Home

by Mary Anne Walser  
Atlanta, GA

Earlier this year, I spent a magical 30 days on the Camino Francés. As time passes and mundane daily tasks consume my hours, my memory of the Camino is fading more quickly than I'd like. On the Camino I was already planning my NEXT Camino, and even though I am back home I still dream about the next Camino, but I think about it less often than I once did. My husband and I are planning other trips. The Camino fades into the background.

The epiphanies I had while walking, seemingly so insightful and revolutionary at the time, are also fading. I was asked to give a presentation to a small group concerning "lessons learned on the Camino" and when I

Mantra time: alone and tired on the Camino outside Villamayor de Monjardin. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

wrote my notes, the words rang hollow, and seemed no more than platitudes from many self-help books. If not put into action on a daily basis, the lessons I'd learned on the Camino get "unlearned."

Indeed, while walking the trails at the park adjoining my neighborhood, I snap at my husband, falling back into old patterns of behavior and moving even farther from the Camino and the person I thought I had become. The Camino was quickly becoming just another trip, not the life-changing experience I had hoped for and believed it was.

I want desperately to carry the Camino lessons in my heart and live them daily. I want that life-changing (cont.)

## PILGRIMAGE AS CIRCULAR JOURNEY

journey to truly change my life. I am overwhelmed trying to remember and capture all I learned, and so I turn back to my daily routine on the Camino. Each day I adopted a mantra, so when I was tired or started to think negative thoughts I could redirect my thinking.

That's it! Each day a mantra. While in my daily life I don't have the luxury of hours of walking, free to get lost in my thoughts, I have decided to adopt a mantra every day and concentrate on it when I can. I will write it on a sticky note and put it on my computer screen if I am in the office, on the dashboard if I am in the car. My mantras on the Camino were a syllable or two for each step. Here at home, I am often sitting when I turn to my daily mantra and that tends to lead more to reflection about the mantra's meaning. I don't have to worry as much about the mantra's rhythm, just its content. My first mantra is from American Pilgrims on the Camino's value's statement: "Community, Service, Gratitude, Simplicity." Wish me Buen "home" Camino!

### A Decade of Camino Shaping My Essence

by Yosmar Martinez  
Miami Beach, FL

Ten years ago, I arrived in St. Jean Pied de Port eager to start walking my very first Camino de Santiago. With minimal prep, I had no idea what would unfold. Despite my cluelessness, my first Camino helped me start making some positive shifts that I couldn't have envisioned prior to that first step.

Before the Camino, I never thought of myself as the most active or adventurous person. Now, I work on expanding my sense of adventure and enjoy activities I didn't think I was physically capable of.

Before the Camino, I would get caught up in my problems and overthink everything. I'm still a work in progress, but now I try to remind myself that I probably won't even remember a situation a few days from now and hence should not devote too much time to it.

Before the Camino, I never thought of myself as a good communicator, particularly in writing. Yet, the Camino encouraged me to live more creatively and I started writing my cookbook. Today, I find writing incredibly

therapeutic and I'm more comfortable with it.

Before the Camino, I emphasized things. Now I value experiences.

Before the Camino, my social circle was very homogeneous—similar upbringing, education, and careers. Now, my social circle is so much more heterogeneous and interesting. Why? Because the Camino is a great equalizer, helping us understand we are all more similar than we think we are yet our differences can open our minds more. And when we apply that to our normal lives, it can be so liberating and rewarding!

Speaking of people, they are the greatest gift of the Camino. Not only those we meet along the way, but those we meet because of the Camino. Today, some of my favorite people are those I met far away from the dusty roads to Santiago. Those who have that shared Camino experience, who embrace the same values, and who understand that as much progress as we each make, we still have further to go and as long as we are moving forward, we will get there eventually.

*iUltreia et Suseia!*

With my mother on my first Camino in 2011. Photo by a generous pilgrim.



All my credenciales to Santiago plus the one for the Kumano Kodo. Photo by author.

## Am I Unpacking the Camino or Is the Camino Unpacking Me?

by Joyce DeToni-Hill  
Lakewood, CO

*"Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards."*

—Søren Kierkegaard

One of my least favorite travel activities is unpacking. It's so easy to grab the totes and other items from the car and just drop them on the floor in my bedroom and call it "good." Unlike my spouse who meticulously unpacks and places medicines in cupboards, toothbrush in the bathroom drawer, clothes in the hamper, and phone on a charger, my bags sit in the corner for a while. My husband's travel clothes are often washed and back in the closet by the time I start to pull out shoes or laundry.

Perhaps I unpack leisurely because some days my lifestyle moves at the speed of light and I've moved on. Other times I think I'm still processing my experience, so I need my stuff and memory to remain open.

Returning from the Camino has been a slow unpacking experience. Yes, in the month of the return my faithful purple and grey Gregory pack was carefully washed and its contents blessed with a "Well done, good and faithful servant" before I began re-storing everything in my designated "Camino drawer." Once I had nearly completed the task, I found myself kneeling before my Camino drawer. Holding my theft-proof waist pack and wool socks, I thought, Wait! Is this all there is? I'm finished?

But I wasn't prepared for what was to come. While I had been unpacking the bags, the Camino was unpacking me.

There is a Camino adage that says that your pilgrimage begins when you return. That is the time you process your life lessons. Natalie Sleeth's 'Hymn of Promise' includes the lines, "In our end is our beginning" and "unrevealed until its season." They speak to me about the gift of journey. Since 2016 and

2018 the Camino is constantly unpacking me with lessons buried deep in my head and body, memories revealed at just the right moments as I continue forward on my life's journey.



## New Perspective on Personal History

by Cynthia Stults  
Eugene, OR

"You can go now." These were my father's words, knowing full well that this "crazy woman" as he called me was not going on her first Camino while he was ill. Nine months after his passing, I struck out from St. Jean on the Camino Francés like many pilgrims did—to make sense of life after losing a loved one.



This photograph of me and my dad was taken a year before he passed away. Photo contributed by Cindy Stults.

I carried my father's picture along with my passport and credential in a pouch next to my chest. We walked together. I talked with him daily. I finally mustered the courage one day to ask why? Why did you love my identical twin sister more? Why did she garner most of your attention growing up? Why, when mom suggested you favored her, didn't you protest? I realized I still carried this hurt at 64 and it was an invisible barrier to intimacy with my twin sister.

On Day 20, walking so slowly that other pilgrims passed and wondered at my snail's pace, I broke down and sobbed. Long held tears fell with sudden understanding: my father didn't love me less. He was only responding to a parental need to support the child he identified with and understood. (cont.)

## || PILGRIMS WAY ||

My father was a competitive athlete and football star whose own father neglected his efforts and never watched him play sports or cheered him on. My sister was also competitive and a star athlete, excelling in every sport she attempted. He wanted to give her all the support he didn't receive from his own father.

In the midst of my sobbing along the trail, I received a phone call. Startled and not expecting a phone call, I was surprised to hear my husband's voice. He was immediately alarmed by my crying. I stammered to let him know I was okay and to tell him my revelation. My father always loved me. It was just time and circumstances during my youth that dictated his focus and attention. It was about him filling his need and not about me.

Dispelling that long held belief about my father and completing the Camino changed me. My history and my future changed. As I told my husband from Santiago, "The Camino lifted the invisible barrier to intimacy with my sister. And I know now, I can do anything except get pregnant and fly."

### Trust the Yellow Arrows

by Gail Ringelberg  
Grand Haven, MI

As a 71-year-old widow in good health with children grown and on their own, I found myself asking "what next?" Oh, I can stay busy but what fills my soul with joy? What is my purpose now? A year ago, the Camino pulled me but didn't happen. Last October 28, I finished the last 104 kilometer of the Portuguese Way. Walking the Camino took me totally out of my comfort zone: I had never backpacked, didn't speak much Portuguese or Spanish, didn't want a daily walking commitment so made no advance reservations, and felt the need to walk it solo.

I grew to trust the yellow arrows. Sometimes they were very prominent, sometimes so obscure that I had to pause and search for them. Sometimes they showed two different directions and thus forced me to make a choice. They were always there.

When I lost sight of them and made a wrong turn, someone always seemed to appear almost out of

nowhere to turn me around and send me in the right direction. Once a woman opened her upstairs window and shouted some instructions.

Isn't life like that? If you are wholeheartedly seeking the right Way for you, there are yellow arrows to guide you if you look for them and heed them. Sometimes the path seems very clear, sometimes we have to pause and look for guidance, sometimes we have to make choices. Each one of us has had a person or two pointing us towards the right direction.

There is no lightning bolt revelation on what's next for my life but the Camino has taught me to look for, trust, and follow the yellow arrows that show up, wherever they take me.



Villamayor de Monjardín, Comunidad Foral de Navarra, España. April 5, 2016. Photo by Thom Rying.



## A Letter to Time

*by Cathay Reta  
Spokane Valley, WA*

Dear Time,

If I could hold you in my hands, I would do so gently. I would caress the curves in which you weave time and space and story and lives. I would trace my finger over each curve, thankful you have been gentle with me and my story.

I would touch the jagged edges that lie at your forefront, pulling and seeking and reaching forward into the morrow; striving to pull me onward. I would watch as you sink each sharp edge as a hook into future space and then pull forward your mass, with me hanging on your back, oblivious to what you give, to what you do.

If I could hold you in my hands, I would lift you to my face and feel your essence brush over me. I would inhale slowly, giving remembrance to the warmth you have given. I would take in the scent of the stillness—the fragrance that stands in its own space, the fragrance that cannot be defined, the fragrance that in its stillness filled me beyond words. There was time for all life.

You, Time, did not push or prod. We existed in stillness and in wholeness. If I could hold you in my hands, I would remember and give thanks for you.

If I could hold you in my hands, I would. I would treasure you and caress you. I would press my fingers over your smooth, silky finish. I would feel you like freshly painted fingernails before they become chipped or scratched. When touch glides across in ease. I would touch you and smile.

I would tell you that you have been good to me, and that I am sorrowful for the days that I pushed at you, screamed at you, and was angry with you for not moving fast enough, far enough, or slow enough. In patience you have stayed with me, loving me, nodding to me, and beckoning me to come and sit in the moment of today. You have been good to me.

If I could hold you in my hands, I would be content to do just that. To breathe you in, touch your silkiness, and smile knowing that you are enough. Perfect time. Perfect timing. Rooted and grounded in now.

## PILGRIMAGE AS CIRCULAR JOURNEY

### Always Looking Forward

by Stephanie Derrig  
Arlington, VA

Leaving Biduedo on our first Camino in 2017, Dad and I lost our way. Each of us began asking “did you see a yellow arrow?” and then bantering about whether to turn back or forge ahead. Dad won that debate and as we bushwhacked and crossed fields to a roadway, we made it to our destination. I learned a valuable lesson about my Dad; he doesn’t like to go back and can be singularly focused only on what is ahead. That is how we both have lived life.

The beginning of our Caminos (our third planned for Fall of ’22) started when we both were looking for a way to pray with our feet, grow in God’s love, and challenge our bodies and minds. We were drawn to the Way. Your first is similar to the start of anything new filled with timidity, lots of preparation to minimize risk, and yes a bit of fear and doubt. The next one(s) you forge ahead with much more confidence and even relax with the comfortable routine of sleep, walk, pray, and eat.

Our pilgrimages as father and daughter have been filled with beginnings and endings, successes and failures, and dreams and disappointments, but always have led us back to the same spot where we started—affirmation of our faith, home, family, and love.

Life and time are finite and I’m glad by some grace Dad and I have shared these Caminos and days of walking, talking, and sharing our stories. We have gabbed for hours and yet spent days in silence together, each so very special. It goes by so fast and to have these moments and memories are gifts we cherish.



After a COVID delay our next Camino is planned for September 2022. Dad (and I) will both be older so I am hopeful we can walk again, even if not as far as our first Camino. It will be a new Camino challenge and a beginning for which we have seen the ending two times before. I know this will be our last Camino together. One day I will probably have a new beginning on a Camino on my own or with a new walking partner, and maybe that’s the intent for my growth as a pilgrim on life’s journey. For that, I thank my Dad for his great training of me in life to forge ahead.

*This essay is excerpted from the author’s **Trail Journal**.*

Dad (Stephen Colello) and I (Stephanie Derrig) along the Camino between Castrojeriz and Poblacion de Campos, September 20, 2017. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

## PILGRIMAGE AS CIRCULAR JOURNEY



First stage of the Norte. Photo by Jim King.

### Long Haul Reservations and Pilgrim Freedom

by Frank Rodriguez  
Portland, OR

It is neither right nor wrong to make advance reservations on the Camino. Yet, there are impacts and consequences to our actions. Making reservations for an entire trip, as some pilgrims have chosen to do in the era of COVID, may not support personal wholeness.

An overabundance of reservations limits one's freedom to stop when and where they choose, and freedom is a major gift of the Camino experience. Pilgrims who pre-book their entire trips may be neglecting to consider the unpredictable physical impact of walking twenty to forty kilometers every day for thirty or forty days, and when they need to alter their bookings to accommodate the physical impact they are experiencing, they may inadvertently impact other pilgrims and those operating accommodations. On my most recent pilgrimage, I encountered people who developed blisters or tendonitis after two or three or four days of walking. Rest days are a necessary part of self-care that reservations may not take into consideration.

Another possible loss is the opportunity to spontaneously spend the evening with new Camino friends or in an amazingly beautiful albergue or village at hand. The Camino offers opportunities to experience our wholeness in body, mind, emotions and spirit. It finds each of us where we are, in a place where we can walk our own Camino, at our own pace, and in so doing, to experience our own wholeness.

*Editor's note: This is one of two reflections Frank shared regarding his most recent experience on the Camino. To see more of his thoughts regarding reservation culture on the Camino, please see his related essay, "Fear on the Camino."*



## Letters from the Camino: Atlantic Crossing

by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway  
Spokane, WA

Dear Pilgrims, greetings from Milepost 3,115 on my virtual pilgrimage.

Phase one of my Camino is a long, slow, virtual trek from Spokane, WA, to St. Jean Pied de Port, France. Because it is virtual, it is full of the ordinary tasks of homelife blended with walking and contemplation. Confronted with foot pain and then the pandemic early in my journey, I added Lourdes to my itinerary and let go of a fixed schedule. Phase two of my Camino will be the actual Camino Francés. Phase three, that is a mystery.

Today, virtually, I am writing to you from the North Atlantic Ocean. The darkness and winter storms have begun. What comes to mind when you consider the ocean? Icebergs? The *Titanic*? Whales? The ocean creatures hope we know there is far too much pollution in the water. Humankind seems determined to choke the oceans and its creatures with plastic. There are innovators out there, collecting the ocean trash, turning it into amazing products, and building schools from plastic bricks. Can I decrease my garbage footprint, use less, take better care of Creation?

Weekly, I visit a homeless camp along the Spokane River. Winter is a huge struggle for the residents. Their hands and faces tell a story of hard lives and

exposure. The snow season has begun, including the risk of frostbite and death. Hands are frequently dirty with some missing nails and fingertips. Faces show the stress of constant cold. Children are growing up in the camps. The Spokane-area homeless population is about 10,000 persons. There are not enough shelter beds. Thank you to all who persevere in bringing food and services to these neighbors.

Please pray for homeless friends, for oceans, for all Creation. Prayer leads me into a circle or lemniscate that never ends. Find a beautiful prayer and repeat it daily, memorizing it. With repetition, the meaning and depth expand. A prayer that never ends is such comfort. Daily, I whisper words from the Sisters of Life, "Thank You for uniting Yourself so intimately with me. May I be one in You and You in me. Amen." The Lord waits for us in the lines.

Christmas Peace to you, dear Pilgrims. May the Lord bless your journeys! Love, Leah

*Editor's note: This is the 11th reflection from Leah G. Wilkinson-Brockway about being a pilgrim in her own town as she walks daily to travel the collective distance, as the crow flies, from her home in Spokane, WA, to St. Jean Pied de Port (approximately 5,055 miles). This is her Camino for now. Ultimately, her goal is to walk 500 miles of the Camino Francés from St. Jean Pied de Port, arriving in Santiago to celebrate her 70th birthday in 2022. You will find Leah's previous reflections in the June 2019, September 2019, December 2019, March 2020, June 2020, September 2020, December 2020, March 2021, Summer 2021, and Fall 2021 issues of La Concha.*



Spokane River Camp from the Centennial trail. Photo by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway.

## Once A Pilgrim, Always a Pilgrim

by *Melanie Daniels*  
San Francisco, CA

In 2017 my partner and I walked our first Camino. At 61, overweight, unathletic, yet inspired to walk, I prepared for months. I still dreaded the ascents and descents ahead of me, particularly the initial crossing over the Pyrenees.

My fears materialized in the steep climb from Valcarlos. I didn't believe I actually, finally had made it when told I had reached the top. Tears of amazement, gratitude, and joy flowed out of me. I had reached a height I couldn't imagine.

Although I encountered other peaks and valleys on the way to Santiago, that was my peak Camino experience. The beginning of my Camino was, in a sense, the end of my Camino. I learned that trust in an intention bigger than my fears can transform.

Ends, of course, are beginnings; such is the life of a pilgrim. This year we mounted small folding bicycles, intent on riding across France to the Swiss border. My incorrect assumption that this would be easy and my inadequate preparation resulted in a largely miserable ride. Muscle spasms and other pain, the daily tedium of unpacking and packing, my terror of cycling in traffic, disappointment at our slow progress, constant self-criticism, and resulting fights with my partner left me drained.

I hit absolute bottom as we left

Orléans and my partner told me to turn back—I wasn't capable of the ride. Truthfully, I didn't want to go on; it certainly wasn't the blissful ride in the country I expected. My relationship with my partner was strained to the breaking point. How could I go on with nothing left inside me?

Despite this, I mounted my bike and pedaled east. A week later our evening's destination was Nevers, the completion of the Loire à Vélo. Not the border, but a legitimate achievement in its own right, and I would make it on my own steam!

That realization was a thunderbolt! I had no idea how I made it through the last week of riding, but here I was. All I knew was that I knew nothing. The miracle was one mindless pedal stroke after another. I was humbled and insignificant in the face of this truth. "This was supposed to happen on the Camino!" I sobbed. "Not here!"

But it had.

I have so much to learn on this pilgrimage of life. Today the end of my journey is another beginning.



## Circular Pilgrimage

by *Ron Wiley*  
Pueblo, CO

We walked the Camino Francés in the spring of 2019 while on sabbatical. The sabbatical was helping me and my wife, Jeanine, to ease into a new chapter in our lives. After nine years of service at our NGO's headquarters, we would be returning to international life and work in Central Asia for the same organization following our pilgrimage. The physical, psychological and spiritual challenges we went through while walking 500 miles in 40 days on the Camino drew from us a perseverance and stamina we hardly knew we possessed.

November of that same year we were back in Almaty, Kazakhstan where we had previously lived for 16 years as a family. From the pieces of that earlier period, we were going to rebuild what we anticipated to be a new life together, this time, however, as empty-nesters.

We couldn't have anticipated the onset of the pandemic or the closing of borders, which forced us back to the States after less than five months, followed by a ten-month hiatus due to quarantine, lockdown, isolation, and travel restrictions. Finally, the doors to our new life re-opened with a new university teaching assignment at the beginning of 2021. Although many restrictions were still in effect, we left for our long awaited new beginning in Central Asia. (cont.)

## PILGRIMAGE AS CIRCULAR JOURNEY

But again, our much-anticipated journey was cut short after only five months. We both contracted COVID-19 and due to complications, had to be medically evacuated to Europe. Our lowest point came during the eight-hour evacuation flight. We were suffering from pneumonia and the cytokine storm, unsure of what lay ahead. But mid-flight, Jeanine's mantra of survival became, "I survived the Camino; I can survive this." Mine, which I often chanted to myself on tougher stretches of the Camino and when hiking our Colorado mountain trails, was either simply "Yah-weh" (breathe in—breathe out), or a modified Jesus prayer: "Lord Jesus, have mercy on me, have mercy on me." After 40 days, 19 of which were spent in the hospital, we arrived back in the U.S., this time bearing "long COVID" issues we are still working through with our doctors.

Although we've both recently turned 65, we aren't retiring, and we're not giving up on our plans to return to Central Asia. The same lessons learned while on the pilgrimage to Compostela and relearned through the pandemic and our continuing struggle with the lingering and long-term effects of COVID-19, are equipping us for the rest of our journey as pilgrims in this life.



Ron & Jeanine Wiley near Melide, Spain. Photo by Catherine Cleveland

### El Final Es el Principio

by Melanie Thomas  
Raleigh, NC

In a passage from the journal I kept during my walk on the Camino Primitivo and on to Muxía and Finisterre in October of this year, I ask: *Why is the Camino such a profound experience?*

It begins with having only the basics: your body, the clothes on your back, the shoes on your feet, the few supplies in your pack. During the many hours of walking, you breathe in the surroundings with all your senses. The many sensations fill you with the beauty and simplicity of everyday life and remind you that we are all equal and all face struggles.

The noise of modern life is silent. There is time and space to go inward and to allow thoughts, feelings, memories, fears, regrets, and hopes, to work their way to the surface, where you can examine them.

There is space to reflect on one's life, allow a presence greater than us to enter, and to make room

for your inner voice to be your advocate. How have I lived my life so far? What can I change going forward? Who do I love most and have I told them that?

Every day on the Camino is filled with challenges large and small, and you must rise to meet them. The Camino is filled with opportunities to be kind and helpful to others and to allow yourself to accept help.

As my journey drew closer to the turnaround place in Finisterre, thoughts bubbled up of what *el principio* would look like. I decided that my goals have shifted from "doing" to being. The person I want to be is always kind, compassionate, thoughtful, honest, and of service to others.

In the days after arriving home, I placed printed copies of *The Spirit of the Camino* where I could read it many times a day. I also pledged to myself that each day of "real life," I would walk as I walked the Camino: greet each day with a smile, welcome all the lessons the day has to teach me, and reflect on two questions at the end of the day: *What happened? What did I do with the gifts from today?*



Melanie Thomas turns around in Finisterre on October 15, 2021. Photo by a kind stranger.

## Community

by Christopher Sullivan  
Olympia, WA

I read a great quote about travel on the American Pilgrims on the Camino Facebook group. The person who posted it had in turn found it on another site, which seems to be how the world goes round.

The gist of the quote was that once we've walked the Camino, our heart will never be fully in one place again because we know so many people who we've made a connection with and care about, and so many places the same.

This gave me some pause having now walked across Spain four times in three years, but it made me think of another way of considering our hearts and our sense of community.

A woman conducting a study for United Way a number of years ago explored how people defined their community and what sorts of things might cause them to expand their sense of what that was. I don't think those of us who have walked the Camino or done other transformative travel are not fully at home in any one place, so much as our sense of home and community has gotten larger, and the people we embrace as part of our lives and that we care about extend further than before.

We invest in places that we personally identify with and care about. Paid employees, volunteers, and those who give money and other resources that are shared forward do so at least partly because they identify with the needs, concerns, and people beyond those they see every day.

I think travel expands and extends our sense of community. Even if and perhaps because we are challenged and uncomfortable at times finding out what all this stuff means. Travel also means learning that we are the other until we make a connection with wherever we are and whomever we meet.

We choose whether to open the door, but we can't control what kind of light gets in.



Stunning morning light on the Tanyard Creek Nature Trail, where the Okies on Camino Chapter recently enjoyed a lovely fall hike. Photo contributed by Roni Jackson-Kerr.

## The Camino of Song

by Tom Friesen  
London, ON

As a traveler, cyclist, canoeist, hiker, family chauffeur, and finally pilgrim and hospitalero, I sing for many reasons. “How Can I Keep From Singing?” is a question I often ask myself.

In my family circle, I have sung to engage our babies and to comfort my dying mother. Music seems to be the first and last thing we respond to, as we know that “You’ve Got a Friend.” I sing to facilitate learning when “If You’re Happy and You Know It” and in dozens of other songs.

As a pilgrim on the Camino, I sing for joy to express my gratitude for “The Joy of Living.” In Spanish, “Gracias a la Vida” expresses my appreciation for life’s gifts. When the weather turns against me, I sing to express my determination to endure with “One More River to Cross” as “I’m Just a Poor Wayfaring Stranger.” With “Sunshine on my Shoulders” or “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head,” song is my companion. I sing to reach out to people across ages and cultures as we “Sing, Sing a Song.”

As an hospitalero in the albergue, I sing to welcome and send off “Les Pèlerins” when it is “Time to Say Goodbye.” I sing as part of the oración or vespers service in the albergue as we reach out to “Ave Maria” with “Amazing Grace.” I sing for peace when I “Imagine” a better world. I sing “Hallelujah” to inspire singing from pilgrims’ own countries. I sing to wake up the pilgrims in the morning as “Morning Has Broken” in “What a Wonderful World” as they set off “Tous les Matins.”

In the albergue after the pilgrims have left, I have cleansed, swept, and mopped to music, often with a vigorous beat. We have played music in the background and provided instruments for musical pilgrims to play, and invited pilgrims and hospitaleros to experience music in the local community.

In the pilgrim shelters, I have watched with joy when pilgrims harmonized in Finnish, sang opera in Italian, yodeled (although he was Korean), surprised their fellow pilgrims with sweet songs, and sang along in chorus. Some pilgrims sang songs in languages they did not understand. Meeting pilgrims I have been able to host after their Camino, they tell me that the music created the best night they experienced on their pilgrimage.

Pilgrims and their host singing together while waiting for the communal meal at the donativo albergue in Grañón, La Rioja, España. April 9, 2016. Photo by Thom Rynge.



## || PILGRIMS WAY ||

### Recovery Pilgrims

by Mark Lane-Holbert  
Tampa, FL

To move along a path of recovery is very much akin to pilgrimage. That's why this past July, I joined a group of about a dozen folks from all different backgrounds and ages with a common cause: to walk the Camino as a journey in recovery! Recovery took many forms, mostly from addiction, loss, and trauma. A veteran pilgrim and logotherapist served as guides. All of us had something we were healing from, and all of us had a common bond of being pilgrims in recovery. We also committed to something bigger than ourselves, walking each day with the 12 spiritual principles: acceptance, hope, faith, courage, honesty, patience, humility, willingness, unconditional love, integrity, self-discipline, and service. Easily said, but much harder to live out! Of course, we didn't spontaneously flower into enlightened pilgrims, but an awakening for each of us emerged uniquely over the course of ten weeks together, only two of those walking along the Camino Francés.



Ultreia! Photo contributed by Mark Lane-Holbert.

Many have equated the 12 steps to a path of spiritual seeking that results in coming to terms with the past and finding a higher purpose, including acclaimed Harvard researcher Dr. George Valliant, author of *Spiritual Evolution*. This is just one of the countless resources we employed in our book club/workshop to prepare for a Recovery Camino. The likes of Viktor Frankl, Richard Rohr, and many wise veteran pilgrim guest speakers also graced this time.

Our physical Camino commenced mid-stream along the Camino Francés, ending a long COVID hiatus for most, and was the first Camino for all but two. We started our journey in Miami, Florida to be precise, then began walking to Santiago from Ponferrada.

It may not surprise you to read: we also

picked up several pilgrims along the way in various stages of recovery themselves, who shared in our powerful evening reflections and morning meditations. We helped one another, we laughed, we awed, we learned. Perhaps the greatest tool we employed was a haphazard one (as most are), brought up by a friend and Camino guide: If you are truly seeking a purpose beyond-the-self (11th and 12th step), why not carry the intentions of others from home who are still suffering? This precipitated a waterfall of connection and needs we knew little about before asking, by which each of us had two or three beautiful souls' intentions that we carried and meditated/prayed over each day! One word sums it all up: transformed.

## End of One World, Beginning of Another

by Joseph Curro  
Arlington, MA

“Cousins!”

My daughter and I hear the familiar greeting from around a bend in the path, and suddenly we see the unmistakable neon pink hiking gear of our peregrina friend, Dalila. She is one of several Italian pilgrims we have gotten to know late in our pilgrimage along the Camino Francés.

Dalila provided the most memorable moment of our first day on the Meseta, when she was sitting exhausted on a curbstone and suddenly exclaimed in loud, accented English, “Why? Camino beautiful, but WHYYYYYY?”

On that day, we thought she was walking with a boyfriend, an Italian guy who promptly disappeared at the next stage. Later, when eating with her in Foncebadón, we assumed that the older man and woman singing “Volare!” at the table with her were her parents. Wrong again! They were a Catalanian pilgrim who spoke—as far as I could tell—impeccable Italian and an “undercover” nun who carried her habit in an enormous backpack.

Dalila was just plain friendly, and people gravitated to her, even as we so very often saw her walking alone in silent contemplation.

As the grandson of Italian immigrants, I was always excited to meet pilgrims from the “Old Country.” My grandmother emigrated from the Southern Italian region of Foggia as a young girl, and my grandfather escaped the aftermath of volcanic eruptions and subsequent fires in Sicily. After sharing this with



“Cousins” Joe Curro, Dalila Daluiso, Savannah Curro, and Sister Ivana Bolzon. Photo by a generous pilgrim at the Cruz de Ferro.

Dalila and learning that her parents were from the same two regions, we were “cousins” ever after.

This was an important milestone along a Camino that I didn’t even realize I had been on for so many years: completing a return to my Mediterranean roots.

We lost track of Dalila until she magically appeared during the Pilgrim Mass in Santiago. My daughter and I embraced her, glad for one more meeting.

The last time we saw Dalila was in Finisterre, where we shared spaghetti aglio e olio with her and a group of Italian pilgrims and then walked to the lighthouse to watch the sunset.

As I gazed out over the Atlantic ocean, I thought about how wrong the Romans were to dub this the “end of the world.” In fact, it was just another stop along the way to a new life and a new world across the waves . . . and the many lives and loves and traumas and steps that had carried me to these European shores.



## A Wedding at Fernanda's

by Paul Christian Gordon  
Seattle, WA

I met Werner upon arriving at Casa da Fernanda along the Camino Portugués in the brilliant Minho region of northern Portugal. He sat nervously in the shade of the grapevines, shirtless, wearing just a pair of frayed shorts and a cap, and clutching an unlit cigar in his teeth. Fernanda's invitation to a wedding at the albergue that afternoon surprised us all. In our brief introductory conversation, Werner hadn't mentioned he was the groom. We scrambled to get cleaned up and made as presentable as possible. Of all the things one might prepare for on the Way, attending a wedding was not a consideration.

Visiting from her native Austria, Margit met Werner at Casa da Fernanda four years ago to the day, first noticing the charming cap which he apparently always wore. She was walking the Camino Portugués to ritually mark the end of her marriage. Werner was traveling from the Netherlands with his daughter Sanne, who was accompanying him on his third pilgrimage on the Way.

They met again several times along the Way and would reconnect in Santiago de Compostela before continuing to Finisterre where this stage of their journey would end. It was there, from a distance, Werner watched Margit burn her wedding veil and where he soon confessed his love for her.

It was intensely sunny the day of the wedding. The ceremony was about what one would expect along the Way with dogs, cats, and even ducks running about, damp laundry flapping in the breeze and a small contingent of curious locals in attendance. The dozen or so pilgrims representing six countries—some barefoot and half asleep—were elated to have stumbled upon such a day.

The officiants navigated several peculiar and lengthy proclamations required by Portuguese law during the ceremony, and Fernanda's daughter Mariana read Margit and Werner's story to the guests. That evening, conversations over the celebratory meal diverged from the usual pilgrim topics of foot care and navigational challenges to stories of love and hope in an erratic blend of English, German, and Portuguese.

Fernanda is quite famous for her hospitality and history of giving refuge to pilgrims in her family's home for 20 years. Their kindness knows no bounds, nor does Fernanda's penchant for singing American rock & roll songs and dancing well into the night. I only lasted until 11:30 p.m. long after most pilgrims' bedtime with the party still roaring. It was fortuitous that Margit and Werner returned to this very special place to affirm their connection to each other, with Fernanda, and all of us on the Way.

Top to bottom: Hospitalera Fernanda Rodrigues makes cod fritters at the wedding of Werner Weemaes and Margit Unterberger at Albergue De Peregrinos Casa Da Fernanda on August 31, 2021. Pilgrims attend the wedding of Werner Weemaes and Margit Unterberger at Albergue De Peregrinos Casa Da Fernanda on August 31, 2021. Werner Weemaes and Margit Unterberger say their vows at Albergue De Peregrinos Casa Da Fernanda on August 31, 2021. Photos by Paul Christian Gordon.



## My New Way After Villeguillo

by Jim Larocco, Coordinator Mid-Atlantic Chapter  
Alexandria, VA

The day started like so many others on the Camino de Madrid. Saying farewell to villagers who had become instant friends, we took a pleasant walk through the countryside and stopped at Coca, a village rich in history. After a café and some pastry, we left Coca for our destination that evening: Villeguillo. The Camino “internet,” that word of mouth that passes among pilgrims, led us there. This tiny village was reputed to have the most outgoing, charming, wackiest albergue host/barista/village gossip on any Camino.



We were not disappointed.

The bar itself, where we knew we would get the key to our room, was a site to behold. It was festooned with flags and photos welcoming pilgrims. Kiki, the host/barista, embraced us, insisting we have a beer. We obliged, as the 27 kilometer journey had left us tired and thirsty. After that we took the key, walked to the nearby albergue, settled in, and performed the usual routine of showering and washing our clothes. As we were finishing, a couple entered. She was clearly hurting and my wife dressed her blistered and bleeding foot. We talked for a long time with this delightful French Basque pair and then went back to the albergue to see if we could have some kind of a meal.

It was late afternoon, and Kiki was resting. Initially he said we could come back in a few hours, but when he saw that we were not play-acting exhausted, starving peregrinos, he prepared course after course until we had to tell him to stop or we would burst.

When we got back to the albergue, while my wife was attending to the lady's foot, I checked emails, and I learned that longtime colleague and friend had unexpectedly died of a heart attack. I was devastated. He was too young, just retired, and had high hopes for what he was going to do with the rest of his life. I went back to the bar and told Kiki. He said we should celebrate my friend's life, not lament his passing. It's all part of the grand Camino we all walk. Just another etapa.

We did celebrate ... in grand fashion. That evening I reflected on my friend's life, my own life, the Camino and our new friends, and decided that when I returned, I would spread the word about the camino to all who would listen. I am now a chapter coordinator and feel I must take the lesson Kiki taught me, pass it on and live it myself. Our life indeed is a series of etapas, and the Camino teaches us to embrace them all with friendship, love, and good cheer.

Celebrating my friend's life at the Villeguillo Bar with Kiki (in green shirt).  
Photo by Jim Larocco.



-20  
IT'S THE BEGINNING,  
NOT THE ENDING



AYOS - polina  
2018

**Arts & Culture**

## Fear on the Camino

by Frank Rodriguez  
Portland, OR

Fear is not a word commonly associated with the Camino de Santiago. Certainly, there are downhill sections where caution abounds; however, the Camino fear I write of is the fear of COVID-era bed availability.

During my pilgrimage this year, I experienced a highly contagious Camino fear, rooted in a snowballing belief that there would be a shortage of beds for pilgrims. Pilgrim friends and I began experiencing anxiety in Roncesvalles. Some who phoned ahead to make bed reservations were told the quota for reservations had been met and there were no more beds available. Yet when I arrived, 60 beds were available for walk-ins. Throughout the day's journey, there was much talk about reservations, altering the pilgrims' focus from walking the Camino toward booking concerns.

It is true that some albergues, especially municipals, have closed, and those that remain open have been operating at 50 percent capacity. It is also true that pilgrims, anticipating difficulty finding a bed, are booking reservations days in advance. This compounds the issue of availability; albergues are navigating a tsunami of double bookings and people making "just in case" bed reservations.

How does this affect them? I asked a Dutch couple, who are the new owners of a sweet little albergue. Due to COVID, their albergue has been limited to 50 percent capacity, which is eight people. They said they have had a number of people make reservations for beds or rooms, which include dinner and breakfast. Far too often, people have been canceling or not showing up to claim their reservations. The beds remain empty, awaiting the arrival of the next day's pilgrims. Their main concern is with the cost of food purchasing, preparation, and waste due to people canceling or not showing up.

Albergues similar to this one have had to turn away pilgrims because they have been honoring reservations from others who may not show up. This happened to me and my Camino friends more than once. It is hard to describe the pain and sometimes the beauty in finding the strength for another five to 20 kilometers.

I do not have nor do I propose a solution to the issue. My intention is to bring awareness. It is my experience that most pilgrims are friendly, loving, peaceful people who share, gift, and serve each other in our common goal to walk our own Camino.

*Editor's note: This is one of two reflections Frank shared regarding his most recent experience on the Camino. To see more of his thoughts regarding the emergence of a heightened reservation culture on the Camino, please see his related essay, "Long Haul Reservations and Pilgrim Freedom" in Pilgrims Way section*

### I INVITE EACH OF US TO ASK OURSELVES THESE QUESTIONS:

- What experience do I want for myself and others on the Camino?
- What can I do to create that for myself and others?
- What impact and consequences intended and unintended do I create for myself and others when pre-booking, booking, not booking, or "ghosting" accommodations where I've pre-booked space?
- What can I do to create a Camino experience where we can each walk our Camino?
- How can I support the Camino experience for those who walk, those who are going to walk, and those who may not be able to walk and who still want to experience the gifts available for all related to the Camino?



Chapel of San Nicolas.  
Photo submitted by Joe Curro.

## Vigil

By Joe Curro  
Arlington, MA

I am gently whispered awake,  
By stealthy, blue moonlight,  
Which fills the stony silence of the sanctuary,  
And kisses me in my itinerant bed.

Arising, I open the thick, ancient door,  
And rush toward communion with the glowing sentinel,  
Who watches over us as we sleep away,  
Each step of another long day.

The waters of the Pisuerga sanctify our union,  
Then—cutting through the pilgrims' path—find their own way,  
And pass the cup of blessing for feet marked by scars and blisters,  
New milestones on the map of the ages.

## American Pilgrims' Facebook Group Reaches 25,000 Members!

In order to thank our 25,000 (and counting!) Facebook group members for being part of American Pilgrims' amazing online community, the Facebook moderator team invited members to reflect on how our Facebook community has been meaningful to them. Here are just a few of the many responses that make us smile:

*Planning for a first Camino in April and I just joined the group. I'm already impressed by how members share information and experiences. Glad to be here! (Terry Botros)*

*I find this group invaluable for their trail knowledge, i.e., what to bring, how to cope, and most importantly what not to bring. (Jeffrey Nemecek)*

*Such a great inspiration—so many great stories and so much advice! (Jayme Barrett)*

As part of the conversation, the moderators used a random number generator to select one lucky recipient of a bundle of three books, each authored by one of the moderators.

The winner was Nancy Curran from the Hoosier Chapter, who is a three-year member of American Pilgrims on the Camino. She has added the books to the chapter library and offered to lend them to other chapter participants. That's the spirit of the Camino!

# The Camino Search

*Submitted by Jan Runkel*

*Indio, CA*

If you have walked the Camino lately, you know that many of the bars along the Way are closed. During my most recent pilgrimage during September and October 2021, I met Karin Sondrebo and her husband Hampus on the Camino Francés. Pilgrims from Sweden, they accompanied us as we desperately sought our first café con leche of the day. And Karin made the search fun with a poem that captured our longing to get that jolt of caffeine. She's given me permission to share it below. *Read it to the tune of "Every Breath You Take" by the Police.*

## The Camino Search

Poem by Karin Sondrebo

Every breath I take  
Every move I make  
Searching every break  
To stop my yearning ache  
I'm here for coffee's sake

Every single day  
All parts of the Way  
In every place I stay  
Every albergue  
I will search for you

Oh, can't you serve?  
It's getting on my nerve  
How my poor feet ache  
With every step I take

A bar in the shade  
Beers and lemonade  
Still I feel betrayed  
This is not OK  
I'm here for coffee's sake

Cafés closed, I've been lost without a trace  
I dream at night I can only see your haze  
Vending machines, but it's you I can't replace  
I feel so cold and I long for your tongue-burning taste  
I keep crying coffee, coffee please

Oh, can't you serve?  
It's getting on my nerves  
Por favor, I ache  
With every step I take

Every etapa I make  
Every route I break  
Every Spanish I fake  
Every Euro I stake  
It's all for coffee's sake

Produced and directed by Fergus Grady and Noel Smyth

Camino Skies Productions

2019

Run time: 80 minutes

*Reviewed by Amy Horton*

*Warrenton, MO*

*Camino Skies* is a documentary film that follows the journeys of six pilgrims who started walking the Camino Francés in April 2018. The film's website describes it as "a film about life, love, and loss on the Camino de Santiago."

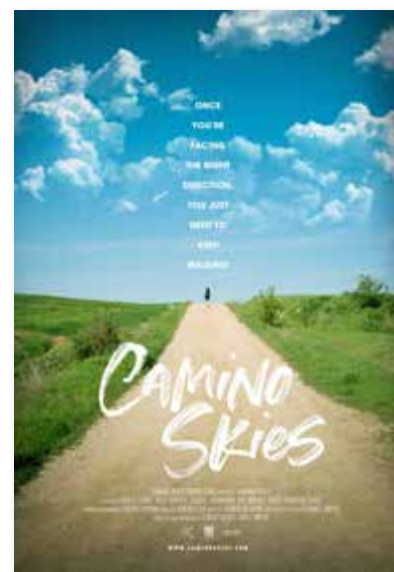
The film opens on the scene of hospitaleros tending an exhausted Sue Morris upon her arrival at an albergue. We then go back 420 kilometers, where 70-year-old Sue explains she is suffering from degenerative arthritis and kyphoscoliosis. "But I don't complain and whinge," Sue says, "cause it's life." Divorced after a 32-year marriage, Sue puts on a brave face, but there are moments when she gives in to her pain for the day and takes a bus or taxi. Once, Sue stopped on the side of the path to rest her weary body. Allowing herself to be vulnerable, she admits through tears, "It's hard getting older, and still wanting to do things that you did before, and now you can't. You're trying to do them, and it's not working."

The next pilgrim we meet is 54-year-old Julie Zarifeh, whose husband of more than 30 years died from cancer in November 2020. However, it is not until about 40 minutes into the film that we learn the full extent of Julie's grief. Just 16 days after her husband, Paul, died, their son, Sam, was killed in a rafting accident. "Nobody's going to possibly believe who doesn't know me, that actually, the situation is unbelievable they both went at once," Julie says. "I still can't believe it. So why would anyone else believe it."

Mark Thomson is the third pilgrim. He is walking the Camino at the urging of his father-in-law Terry Wilson who is also in the film. They are walking in memory of Mark's daughter, Maddy, who died at 17 from cystic fibrosis. Terry, who had previously walked a Camino, wants Mark to experience the Way's healing power. This becomes evident when Terry takes Mark into the Iglesia de la Asunción in Rabanal del Camino. There, members of the Camino Forum had arranged for a mass to be said for Mark's other daughter, who was struggling to survive a bout with pneumonia a year after Maddy had died. "Complete strangers from another country had been praying for my daughters in that very church," Mark says. "It was indescribable."

Two other pilgrims in the film, Cheryl Stone and Claude Tranchant, play supporting roles to Sue, Julie, and Mark's journeys.

This film is about grief. Grief experienced while coping with death, divorce, and degenerative physical conditions. "There are no answers to getting through the grieving process," Julie says. But *Camino Skies* offers glimpses of how pilgrimage can support those grieving.



# Wither it Goes

by Jim King  
Portland, OR

The Road goes ever on and on  
Down from the door where it began.  
Now far ahead the Road has gone,  
And I must follow, if I can,  
Pursuing it with weary feet,  
Until it joins some larger way,  
Where many paths and errands meet.  
And whither then? I cannot say.

—*The Lord of the Rings*, Chapter 1

J.R.R. Tolkien's hobbits sing variations of this refrain on their walking adventures over mountains, plains, and rivers. The author understood, as do Camino pilgrims, that some journeys are intentional. Others are like whirlwinds that sweep us away, but in the end there is only one road onto which all paths merge.

Within the time-space continuum we all age forward at the same rate, but human experiences don't fit neatly into spatial patterns or move at a metronomic pace. Memories swirl together, sometimes in distorted form but constantly rearranging themselves in order and value. Feelings of gratitude and resentment are real, nearly tangible yet often elusive in origin, their intensity varying occasionally with physical time yet more often dependent upon the triggering of a particular context or emotion.

Sometimes we feel like we are staggering ahead, caught in a maze, or chained to a revolving mill post, moving without gaining ground. Habits, themes, and behavioral patterns, good or bad, tend to repeat themselves without purposeful efforts to break free from their constraints.

Many of us have deliberately undertaken the Camino at a major transition point, as a life timeout, marking an end or a beginning, or a search for a new path. Whatever external circumstances are influencing us, the experience of moving forward on the Camino reminds us that each day is another journey in our own boots, living simultaneously on two typically dissonant planes: the objective, measurable constant of time and the subjective, experiential being that, like an impressionist painting, comes into focus only at a distance.

Norman Maclean echoes a sentiment similar to Tolkien's hobbit song in his classic novella that takes its title from the last five words of this sentence: "Eventually, all things merge into one, and a river runs through it." Perhaps one purpose of the Camino is to encourage our conscious and unconscious selves to merge with the one road or river originating from the beginning of time, to share the path and live one step at a time, whither it goes?



Somewhere outside of Burgos. Photo by Thom Rynge

## Is God Only Inside?

*by Nancy Curran  
Indianapolis, IN*

Is God only inside?

My prayers seem to resonate  
within the stained glass,  
gilded ornateness and rock walls—  
solitude frees my thoughts.

Is God only outside?

My prayers seem to float free,  
rise with the sun  
and grow with the earth—  
solitude of the walk frees my soul.



*Is God only Inside?*

Illustration of Nancy Curran's "Is God Only Inside?" which was written during a poetry workshop at the American Pilgrims' St. James Day Celebration in July 2021. Illustration by Meg Muthupandian.

## Book Reviews

*The Day Was Made for Walking*

2013, 2019, 257 pages

*I Guess I'll Just Keep on Walking*

2017, 266 pages

*Keep Pressing On, Brother*

2020, 317 pages

Sid Harta Publishers Pty, Ltd, Victoria, Australia

All by Noel Braun

*Reviewed by Jerald Stroebele*

*Anchorage, Alaska*

How could anyone write three books about the Camino de Santiago and still be interesting? When I finished the third I was wishing there was a fourth. The author began his career as a schoolteacher in Australia. He must have taught English, as his writing is excellent. In 2010, at age 77, he walked the Via Podiensis—Le Chemin de Saint-Jacques-de-Compostelle—from Le Puy-en-Velay, France to St. Jean Pied de Port. The next year he completed this 1521-kilometer Camino, walking from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago. All the while he was still grieving the loss of his wife to suicide 17 years earlier. A devout Catholic, Mr. Braun lit a candle for his deceased wife in every open church he passed. In 2013, at 80, he walked the Via Tolosana from Montpellier, France to Puente la Reina, Spain. At 82 he walked the Camino Portugués from Lisbon to Santiago—and on to Finisterre. Not enough? At 87 he walked the 900-kilometer Voie de Vézelay from just south of Avalon to St. Jean Pied de Port. In the meantime he worked two, two week shifts at albergues in France, one as the only hospitalero.

Although he spoke French, twice in France he enrolled in two-week home study courses to polish his French. He did the same in Pamplona to learn Spanish before walking in Spain. And again, in Lisbon to learn Portuguese. He enjoyed conversation not with just his fellow pilgrims but with his hospitalero hosts and local people he met along the way. He exuded the Camino spirit of humility.

He always carried his backpack. Tired as this old Australian bloke was, every evening he eagerly sought to share the evening meal with pilgrims and hosts. Following that he must have kept a detailed journal because he remembered almost everyone's name, the details about the albergues and French gites, and the twists, turns, missed turns, hills, and churches on the Caminos. His books could and should be used as guides to these Caminos.





Circle of stones between San Juan de Ortega and Agés. Photo by Thom Ryng.

# Full Circle

by Thom Rying  
Tacoma, WA

Many of the Camino routes in Spain, most especially the Camino Francés, journey from east to west under the stars of the Milky Way. Indeed, there are those who say that the “Compostela” in Santiago de Compostela refers to the “field of stars,” our great galaxy stretched like a starry Camino road shining down upon our earthly Camino road. It is the ultimate waymarking on the Way.

We follow the path of stars “from the rising of the sun to its setting” (Psalm 113). This is a metaphor, not just of pilgrimage on the Camino, but also of the journey of our own life from the sunrise of our birth to our final sunset.

The Christian tradition that gave rise to the medieval Camino explicitly teaches the arc of our lives as a pilgrimage on earth, from our Divine Creator who knows us before He formed us in the womb (cf. Jeremiah 1:5) until we return to Him and to our heavenly homeland at the end of our lives. As Saint Augustine summarized, “let us long for our celestial home, sigh for our celestial homeland, and realize that here on earth we are pilgrims” (*City of God*).

Looked at this way, the pilgrimage of our earthly lives is a circle, with the ultimate cause and ultimate end at exactly the same point. It’s a circle, though, that is so vast—it stretches over our whole life—that we can’t take it all in at once. We can only see it as a straight line.

It is very much like the Milky Way that maps our Camino pilgrimages: a circle, but a circle so vast that we can only see it as a straight line. So too, the Camino de Santiago. Perhaps the purpose of Camino is not to walk the Way to Santiago, rather to return to where we began, wiser and kinder than when we left.

We shall not cease from exploration  
And the end of all our exploring  
Will be to arrive where we started  
And know the place for the first time.

T.S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*



Photo by Thom Rying.

## When the Omega becomes the Alpha: The Camino Never Ends

*by John O'Connor  
Port Monmouth, NJ*

The Camino calls  
The Camino sends  
The Camino provides  
The Camino never ends

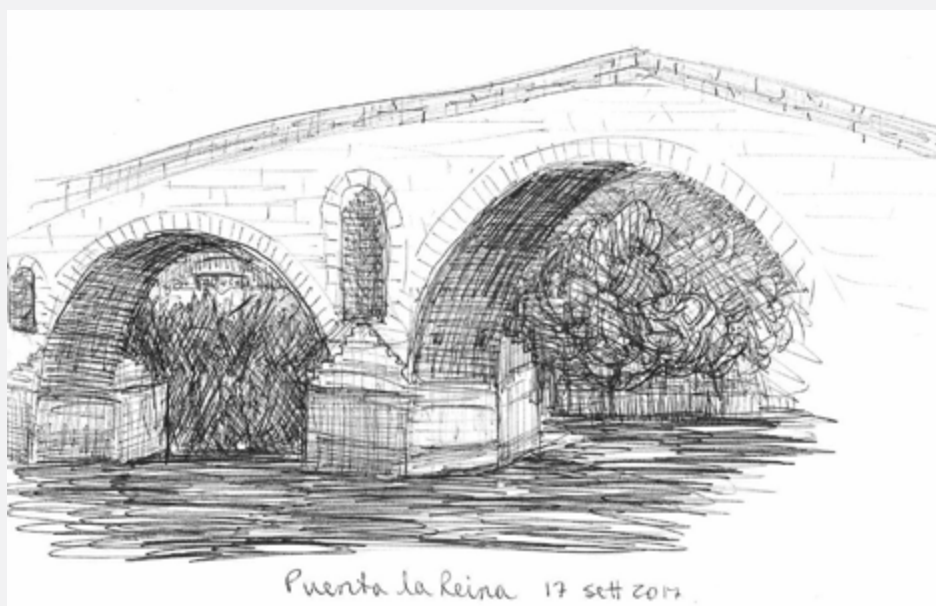
Many individuals are called to walk the Camino  
Starting from St. Jean-Pied-de-Port for different reasons  
Curious about the many challenges along the Way  
Not realizing what awaits over the next 790 K

Prepared for long steep uphill ascents  
Learning downhill can challenge even more  
So much preparation before the Camino  
Not even thinking what is the Camino preparation for?

Making new acquaintances along the Way  
Some will be lifelong friends, some, companions for only a day  
Individuals start the Camino  
Pilgrims make their way to Santiago

The Camino appears on a map to be a one-way journey  
Starting in the East and ending in Santiago in the West  
Pilgrims come to learn that rather than an end  
Santiago is the beginning of the rest of the Camino

The Camino calls  
The Camino sends  
The Camino provides  
The Camino never ends



Drawing by Lisa Graves of Fort Bragg, CA.



Near Mercias de las Mulas. Photo by Joe Barabe.

# FINAL REFLECTION

## Out of Time

*by Stephen Drew  
Morris, CT*

As I sat on the edge of my bed in Rabanal holding a handful of stones, each with a specific identity and intention, I contemplated their fate. They were about to join a thousand-year-old pile of stones at Cruz de Ferro, to be left forever at a mountain pass far from home. Three stones had come out of the earth from the graves of my son and parents. The other was from just outside my front door. Their emotional trajectory was, as one could imagine, a bit less clear. It was here I discovered their mystery, for it occurred as does everything, in a weave of time.

Change is a function of time, its domain and property. All things temporal, all that is known of sense and mind, are subject to it without exception. As to what is best for me to do with time, perhaps becoming lost in it is a good start, especially if it's the mystical experience I desire, the experience that transcends appearances. Time. Everything and nothing.

The change I sought at Cruz de Ferro was a new relationship with living life by releasing ideas that had anchored me to the old ways. Seemed simple enough. Yet from a deep and distant past, from beyond even my very first memory, came something unforeseen; and in its wordless way, the infinite intelligence of the Camino had something new to show me in this place, one of its many portals along the road. Here I had anticipated the closing of some doors. Instead, it seemed some opened, and all out of the fabric of time.

And time, I believe, is the Camino's stock in trade. It plays with it, rearranges it, transcends it, distorts it, all in the service of its higher purpose. Something circular? Maybe linear? How about some right-now? To stand on the bridge at Puente la Reina, to walk the Roman roads of the Meseta, to kneel on the stones of Cruz de Ferro, or walk the unspoiled moors near Finisterre, is to bring time in close, to pull all the intention and movement of every soul who ever walked this pilgrimage into this step, this breath, this moment. And maybe in a flash, a mere glimpse, see absolutely all of it as one thing, happening now. Time. Everything and nothing.

## || NEXT ISSUE ||

**Submissions to our Spring issue close on February 21, 2022 and we would love to receive your reflections!**



The Spring theme is **COLLECTING TINDER**

In this annual resource issue we invite you to share reflections on the mentors, events, music, books, articles, and podcasts that have been “tinder” to your spark as a pilgrim. **What resources have you encountered that might inspire others as they prepare to walk or seek to deepen their pilgrim experience?** What people or events have made an impact on your identity or practice as a pilgrim? Share them with our larger community!

Please explore this theme for the Spring 2022 issue by sharing images and reflections on the resources that you would like other pilgrims to know about. Your contributions can take the form of **book, film, or podcast reviews, personal reflections, or personal interest stories** about the events and people that have provided that spark you needed to deepen your engagement as a pilgrim.

**PLEASE LIMIT ESSAYS TO 400 WORDS MAXIMUM.**

The form for submissions can be found by following this link: [La Concha Article Online Submission Form.](#)

We include as many submissions as possible in each issue. We may defer some items to future issues.

Thanks! We look forward to hearing from you.

Team La Concha

American Pilgrims on the Camino

[www.americanpilgrims.org](http://www.americanpilgrims.org)