

# LA CONCHA

american pilgrims on the camino magazine

SPRING 2023

## *Inside:*

- SUSTAINING DONATIVOS,  
PRESERVING THE CAMINO
- 2023 GATHERING HIGHLIGHTS
- INSPIRING STORIES, ART & POETRY

*Go Your Own Way*  
THERE ARE MANY WAYS TO SANTIAGO

Astorga Cathedral 9/25/22

E. Stony



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COVER Photo: Astorga Cathedral  
ORIGINAL ART: Eric Searcy

Walking tall on the Camino (at right)  
June 27, 2022, between Arzúa and O Pino.  
Photo by Nelson E. Roth.

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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

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We are pleased to present the Spring 2023 edition of *La Concha*. The theme of this issue is "Go Your Own Way," which meshes nicely with the theme of our recent annual Gathering.

Throughout these pages, we ask the question, "What makes a pilgrim?" We look at the varied ways in which pilgrimages occur, with a special focus on how those with a disability, health challenge, or mobility issue navigate their Caminos. As ever, we are gratified by the response we have received from you, the American Pilgrims on the Camino community. You rose to the challenge and shared your creativity and personal stories.

Team *La Concha* finds ourselves at a crossroads. We bid a fond farewell to our Editor-in-Chief of the last two years, Megan Muthupandiyam. Meg set a standard for excellence, garnering much praise from our members for the magazine and the team she assembled. We wish Meg the best in her many professional and personal pursuits, and we extend our deepest gratitude for her leadership, her assistance during this transition, and her ongoing role as a member of our team.

More than ever, this issue of *La Concha* was truly a team effort among all of the committed individuals listed on the masthead. It is for this reason we are breaking with our normal practice and including a collective message from our editors.

We take great pride in producing a quality online publication each quarter, in which we highlight the written and artistic contributions of our pilgrims around the country and overseas. Just as peregrinos often rely on "Camino angels," we depend upon the angels among us.

We are currently seeking volunteers to fill the following key roles:

- Editor-in-Chief
- Publication Manager
- Proofreader/Editor

The individuals taking responsibility for these positions will have the opportunity to work with a vibrant editorial and creative team. Could one of these roles be a fit for you?

Learn more about *La Concha* volunteer opportunities at **AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG/VOLUNTEER-OPPORTUNITIES**. If you're interested, let's have a conversation.

Drop us a line at **LACONCHA@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG**.

In service,

*Team La Concha*

## American Pilgrims on the Camino

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Olympia, WA 98501-1131

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

American Pilgrims on the Camino is registered with the Internal Revenue Service as a non-profit, 501(c)(3) organization.





Dear Pilgrims,

American Pilgrims on the Camino plays an essential role in the pilgrim community by strengthening relationships with pilgrims around the world.

Our grants are given to nonprofit associations in Spain, France, and Portugal that foster pilgrimage, maintain the Camino paths, and run donativo albergues. (Learn more about the donativo albergue operating model in Rebekah Scott's essay, "The Donativo Ideal," featured in this issue of *La Concha*.) Through the relationships our grants team has built with those associations, we fulfill our mission of supporting the infrastructure of the Camino.

The Spanish Federation of Associations provided the model for our hospitalero training. Every year Daniel De Kay, chair of our hospitalero team, attends the Federation's conference in Spain to learn about the latest developments affecting donativo albergues.

Our Ribadiso Welcome Service partners with the Xunta de Galicia, the provincial government of Galicia. The Xunta, which operates the historic municipal albergue in Ribadiso, ensures our Ribadiso volunteers serve pilgrims in the best way possible.

American Pilgrims is the only organization in the United States authorized by the Cathedral in Santiago to issue pilgrim credentials. The friendship and trust we have nurtured with the dean of the Cathedral and the directors of the Pilgrim's Reception Office in Santiago allow us to help American pilgrims have a rich Camino experience.

We are working with the Camino Francés Association to develop new ways to foster pilgrimage. This spring 27 American pilgrims will join the association in Estella on an excursion to develop a deeper understanding of the area of Navarra through which the Camino passes. (Participants will only pay costs.) The association in La Rioja has invited us to a similar learning opportunity in 2024.

Several partner associations are working to open an albergue for international pilgrims in Madrid where they can begin to experience the Camino upon their arrival in Spain. Thanks to your generosity, American Pilgrims on the Camino has made a significant commitment of financial support. I will visit the site in Plaza España this spring when I attend a congress of Spanish and international associations.

We also value our relationship with other pilgrim associations outside of Spain. The 2025 Gathering will be held with the Canadian Company of Pilgrims. The association in Chile recently invited our members to participate in their Camino short stories project. Our chapters team has advised the association in Argentina on establishing local chapters. Each month, our board of directors has a Zoom discussion with leaders of a different association. Our external relations team under the leadership of Board Vice-Chair Ruben Mendoza makes sure American Pilgrims on the Camino is a vital member of the global community of pilgrims.

Buen Camino,

*Steve*

Steve Lytch  
Board Chair, American Pilgrims on the Camino

## LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



Steve Lytch  
Board Chair



## January Board Meeting Report

*Prepared by Allison Venuto, Secretary, American Pilgrims on the Camino*

**The Board of American Pilgrims on the Camino met** via Zoom during the weekend of January 27, 2023. In 2022, the Board decided to hold one quarterly meeting per year online in consideration of health concerns and to free up financial resources for other Camino needs. The first portion of the meeting covered updates on 2022 goals and reports from the chapters, membership, grants, hospitalero, Ribadiso Welcome Service, external relations, and communications teams.

The external relations team members presented updates on developing relationships around the world. To that end, Board Chair Steve Lytch plans to attend a conference of the Association of Friends of the Camino in Spain in April 2023. The board also met with the Spanish Federation of Associations to review ways to collaborate. The board heard updates regarding the 2023 Gathering and the work of the chapters team and membership team. For the latter two, the board is exploring ways to support leadership succession and member education, respectively, including an update to the volunteer opportunities page on the website.

Daniel De Kay of the hospitalero team and Annie Argall of the Ribadiso Welcome Service team joined the board via Zoom to provide updates on their respective programs. Both teams have experienced many successes for volunteers in the last few years. Since 2004, the hospitalero team has trained 38 classes with 707 members. The Ribadiso program has 49 current applications and has completed about one-third of the interviews.

The board unanimously passed the 2023 budget and a financial review, which is required for some states. The organization continues to be in a good position and able to support requests from our European partners. American Pilgrims will provide more information as these programs come to fruition. The board continues to consider ways to provide organizational effectiveness through streamlining technology and procedures to expand pilgrim support.

The board remains grateful for the continued support of our members and looks forward to more great things in 2023.



Image provided through the generosity of an American Pilgrims Gathering attendee.

## Why You'll Find the Candid Platinum Transparency Seal at the Bottom of Our Donation Web Page

by Bill Artz  
Whiting, IN

**Candid (formerly GuideStar)** provides common online information about tax-exempt entities to enable donors to make efficient and educated giving decisions. By contributing information about their mission, staff and leadership, programs, and goals, nonprofit entities can earn one of four Transparency Seals: Bronze, Silver, Gold, or Platinum. Each seal level provides deeper insights and assessments of a nonprofit entity with Platinum offering the highest level of transparency. Candid also serves as a timesaving portal for prospective donors and others interested in a nonprofit organization to find answers to questions and information about the entity.



American Pilgrims on the Camino earned a Platinum Seal for the first time in 2023. We held a Gold Seal the past few years. What changed? In addition to providing and updating information about the organization, its mission, values, financial results, leadership/board, and programs, we also provided information about our strategic plans and goals and board-approved key metrics demonstrating our progress and results.

View our Candid profile at [GUIDESTAR.ORG/PROFILE/01-0725409](https://GUIDESTAR.ORG/PROFILE/01-0725409). If you have questions about Candid or our profile, please email [TREASURER@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG](mailto:TREASURER@AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG).

## Congratulations Volunteers!

The Xacobeo of the Xunta of Galicia has issued its award for volunteering to American Pilgrims on the Camino. In addition to our hospitalero program and the Ribadiso Welcome Service, for which we earned this recognition, there are other ways to volunteer in Spain and at home and give back to the Camino.

Visit [AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG/VOLUNTEER-OPPORTUNITIES](https://AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG/VOLUNTEER-OPPORTUNITIES) for a complete list of volunteer opportunities.





# Volunteer Spotlight: How Can We Be Prepared for the Unexpected?

by Becky Rush-Peet  
Enumclaw, WA

**The hospitalero training provided by American Pilgrims** covers many scenarios and eventualities. We've had great fun role-playing what to do with a peregrina who wants to bring a cute stray dog she found on the Camino into the albergue, or how to assist the peregrino who comes in exasperated with bed bug bites. Serving as an hospitalero isn't just checking in pilgrims, handing out glasses of water, and cleaning showers. And some things can't be predicted.

I spent my first volunteer shift as an hospitalera in Viana, Spain, last September in the parish albergue, which can accommodate up to 16 pilgrims. We cooked a communal dinner each night (thank goodness for recipes provided in the hospitalero training) in a tiny kitchen with three gas burners. Propane kept in tanks on the ground floor fed the kitchen burner as well as the water heater for showers.

One Saturday night, the propane ran out just as we were starting to boil water for the pasta for dinner. The hospitaleros who served just before me had provided a phone number for the propane provider. We called the propane company, but could only leave a message as they were closed for the weekend. Plan B: there was a municipal albergue in town with a large kitchen; perhaps we could use their stove? I ran over to their building to ask, and although the desk clerk said yes (after I helped translate a phone call from a French-speaker trying to make a reservation), the supervisor said no; there were too many pilgrims staying there who took priority for their kitchen.

Next was plan C: a local pilgrim angel was out of town and had left his apartment key in case a pilgrim needed a place to stay. I recruited a few pilgrims, and we trooped up three flights of stairs to the apartment. The building's wiring was so old we could only boil one of our two pots of water at a time. We wrapped the pans of cooked pasta in towels and ran them back to the albergue, dashing across the town square where many of the locals were gathered for Saturday night festivities. The other pilgrims at the albergue noshed on salad while they waited for pasta. And we still managed to eat before eight o'clock Mass.

The next morning, the priest from the iglesia came by and hooked up a new tank of propane for the albergue.



Interested in becoming trained to serve as an hospitalero? Upcoming training sessions can be found at [AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG/HOSPITALERO-TRAINING](https://americanpilgrims.org/hospitalero-training).

### Pilgrim House: Welcome and Quiet in Santiago

by Faith Walter  
Santiago, Spain

**The Pilgrim House Welcome Center is open in Santiago de Compostela for the 2023 pilgrim season!**



The Pilgrim House Welcome Center, located at Rua Nova, 19, in Santiago de Compostela. Photo by Pilgrim House.

As always, the team would love to meet you (or see you again!) after your Camino. The Camino can be a joyous, challenging, and profound journey, and Pilgrim House is designed to be a welcoming and comfortable place where you can reflect on your experiences on the trail. We also offer a variety of practical services that newly-arrived pilgrims often need.

The address is **Rua Nova, 19, Santiago de Compostela**, just a couple of blocks “behind” the Cathedral. Please note we’re located under some arches and can be hard to see. On either side of us are the Cervecería Rua Bella and the Teatro Principal.

Whatever you need—and even if you don’t need anything—please stop by and say hello, make yourself at home, and check out the resources offered:

- There is a **living room** area and a **kitchenette** if you need to sit for a bit.
- **Staff** are always available to talk if you need a listening ear.
- Join a **Camino Debrief** at **4:00 p.m.** if you’d like to reflect on your pilgrimage with other pilgrims. A staff member facilitates discussion.
- Take home a **one-page journaling/debriefing guide** or **End of Camino letter**.
- The **back room and patio** are places for solitude, reading, and journaling. If you need time away from the bustle of Santiago, these quiet spaces are for you.
- A curated **library**. Read these books at your leisure in Pilgrim House. If you’ll be in town for a few days, you can borrow a book for a small deposit. There are pilgrimage-related books, classics, and modern classics.
- We provide **laundry services** and **boarding pass printing** on a suggested-donation basis.

We are open during the day (we don’t have beds). We’re closed on Wednesdays and Sundays and a few Spanish holidays. Pilgrim House is a non-profit, non-commercial initiative.

Visit [PILGRIMHOUSESANTIAGO.COM](https://pilgrimhousesantiago.com) for more information.

Buen Camino to all who are walking this year! Blessings on the journey.

Looking for a quiet place in Santiago after the Camino? The patio at Pilgrim House might just be for you. Photo by Pilgrim House.





# 2023 Gathering at Lake Tahoe





# 2023 GATHERING



## ANNUAL GATHERING BY THE NUMBERS

231 total pilgrims!

Attendee breakdown:

- 36 commuters
- 195 on-site
- 64 lifetime members
- 50 hospitaleros
- 36 chapter coordinators
- 87 first-timers
- 35 states represented
- 3 countries represented

Money raised for Grants program:

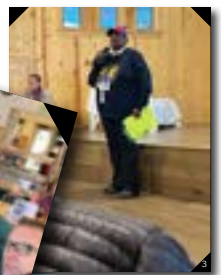
- Silent auction: \$10,412.00
- Raffle: \$4,718.89
- Other donations: \$430



# LAKE TAHOE



Special thanks to all pilgrims who contributed Gathering photos.







"THERE  
IS NO  
OTHER  
WAY,  
AND  
THERE  
NEVER  
WAS"

## Arts & Culture

Finding inspiration at the café after the Abbey near the river before Pamplona. Photo by Mary Zoppi.



by Rebekah Scott  
Moratinos, Spain

Paco de Valladolid is an old-school hospitalero. He provides “Traditional Hospitality of the Camino de Santiago,” a concept now recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity. People living along the Way have hosted pilgrims for centuries, but many practices that make the 21st-century Camino experience unique are relatively new. Things like public albergues where you pay what you want and the volunteer hosts who run them.

Paco was one of the “band of brothers” who opened Refugio San Juan in Castrojeriz in 1989. For years, it was the only albergue in town. (HosVol, the federated corps of hospitaleros dedicated to keeping donativo albergues staffed, formed the following year.)

The people at San Juan embraced the “donativo” principle, an economic model based on cooperation, brotherhood, and generosity that grew up with these pioneering pilgrim refugios. As kindhearted people opened their homes and towns reconditioned derelict buildings into albergues, it seemed a no-brainer that those who received would also give whatever money they could afford to help keep the lights on. The Camino was a charitable network that supported pilgrims on a spiritual journey of austere simplicity.

Refugio San Juan de Castrojeriz was cool and dark inside, filled with 28 military-grade bunks and (until 1999) cold-water showers. Dinner was a dish of lentils, bread, and cheese, plus fruit from the neighbors’ trees. Coins left in the donativo box bought tomorrow’s simple fare. Pilgrims didn’t demand more. Well-off pilgrims gave more money. The poor left what they could, sometimes nothing—and swept the floors to pay their way. For many years, the simple donativo system worked.

Until it didn’t.

More travelers arrived on the Way, many more. They came from other lands, with different outlooks. San Juan couldn’t hold them all. Bars, restaurants, and privately owned albergues sprouted to meet demand, offering pilgrims a more comfortable stay, for a price. The Camino was marketed as a tourism product ideal for budget travelers. Donativo—the cooperative give-and-take that makes Camino hospitality unique—became for a few an opportunity to exploit. To them, “donativo” meant “stay for free.”



Paco de Valladolid is one of the few remaining pioneer hospitaleros providing “Traditional Hospitality of the Camino de Santiago,” a concept now recognized by UNESCO as an Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Photo provided by Rebekah Scott.

The system is meant to accommodate the needy, not freeloaders. Many early donation-based albergues closed, or levied a minimum fee to cover costs. San Juan held firm to its principles.

Beds were full even when the donation box was empty. Occupancy eventually declined, as travelers headed for hostels with swimming pools and private bedrooms. Pilgrims became consumers, each “doing his own Camino” with little regard for old standards. Some stopped carrying backpacks and wouldn’t tolerate bare-bones bunks or amateur innkeepers like Paco. Some resented having to put a price on the hospitality they were offered, so they went elsewhere.

Four years ago, Albergue San Juan de Castrojeriz closed its doors forever. Castrojeriz has seven other albergues now, but Paco hasn’t returned. He volunteers at donativos in Villalon de Campos, Canfranc, and Grado. He’s one of the few remaining pioneer hospitaleros.

Hospitaleros are the other side of the donativo principle, giving their time and effort. Though pilgrimage groups like American Pilgrims train new hospitaleros each year, the volunteers’ average age is 55+. Albergues in the last three years have suffered unprecedented staff shortages. Perhaps the volunteer hospitalero is also on his way out.

Donativos that remain sometimes feel overrun with tourists and freeloaders, or people who just don’t know. A volunteer in Aragon recently told of a bicycle pilgrim disillusioned that people along his path weren’t offering him free meals and rooms—he’d heard pilgrims had a special status in Spain and travel for free!

The donativo albergue’s future is up to us. Pilgrims need to patronize them and contribute their share of time and money to keep them alive. Paco’s generation has given the world a great gift. It’s our turn to step up and keep the Camino a hospitable place for every pilgrim.



## None Was Born a Pilgrim

by Jim McCaffrey  
Lauderdale, MN

*None was born a pilgrim.*

*We began as tourists*

*In our new boots*

*counting miles, not smiles.*

*Pyrenees sightseers rubbernecking the hills and valleys.*

*Then, if we had an open heart*

*So very slowly something changed.*

*The hills became rest stops to meet others on their journey.*

*The albergues fed us soup and stories.*

*The Brit opened my heart.*

*The Aussies became my friends.*

*Our mochilas felt lighter.*

*Our tired bodies felt strength.*

*Our souls were refreshed*

*And we walked with God.*



Original drawing by Eric Searcy.



## Pilgrimage: A Medieval Cure for Modern Ills

## Book Review

*Pilgrimage: A Medieval Cure for Modern Ills*

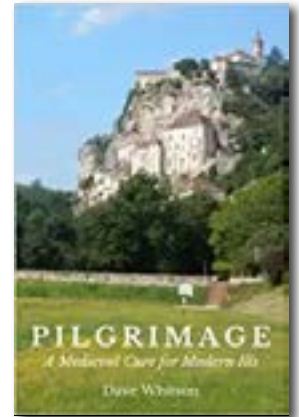
by Dave Whitson

Impatience Press, 2022

125 pages

Reviewed by Allison Venuto

Dallas, TX

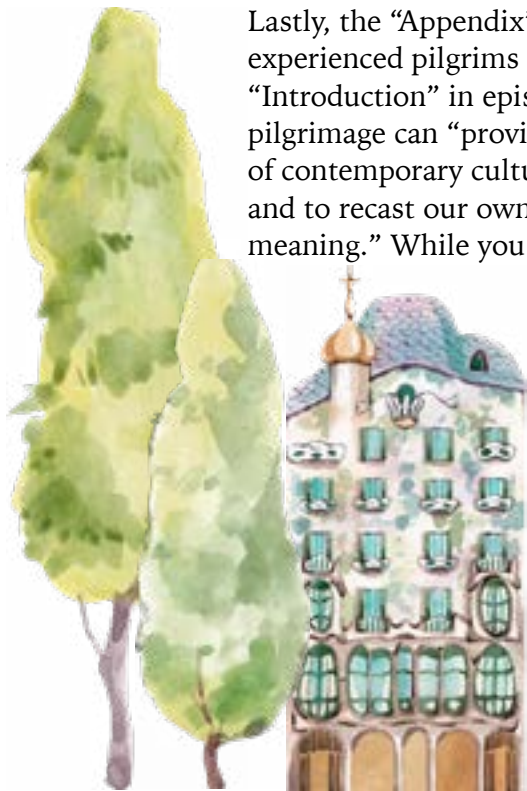


Dave Whitson's *Pilgrimage: A Medieval Cure for Modern Ills* combines features of Camino memoirs and scholarly research to create an accessible discussion of pilgrimage around the world and across time. While Whitson mentions the Camino frequently, he includes many other pilgrimages, too.

The book seeks to clarify the experiences of those who have walked, help loved ones understand pilgrims better, and expand the pilgrimage concept for those who are yet to walk. Retelling an experience familiar to many pilgrims, in the "Introduction" Whitson recounts his memory of the pain of walking with the absolute certainty that he will do this again. Throughout the book, pilgrims share memories of their impetuses for walking and the difference pilgrimage made in their lives as they experienced inner and outer journeys.

Continuing in the book, from "Opening the Door" to "Something Greater" and "Conclusion," the titles of the chapters draw one in as though on a reading pilgrimage. The dollops of research do not overwhelm the lay reader because they come nestled in the powerful stories of personal pilgrimage. Among others, chapters include informational topics such as physical health, mental health, connection to nature, and peace-making as connected to pilgrimage. Whitson's writing style brings the reader along on his learning journey to examine more about one's past pilgrimage and prepare for the next one, integrating pilgrimage into life.

Lastly, the "Appendix" and "Bibliography" contain great information for new and experienced pilgrims seeking to learn. For a sampling of this book, Whitson reads the "Introduction" in episode 59 of his podcast series *The Camino Podcast*. He states that pilgrimage can "provide an opportunity to break away from many of the corrosive aspects of contemporary culture, to immerse ourselves in a healthier and more optimistic setting, and to recast our own personal narratives, enabling us to find a deeper purpose and greater meaning." While you are listening, check out his other podcast episodes, too.



# So I Walk

by Charles Johnson  
Champlin, MN

*I step into the misty dawn,  
a shiver climbs my spine  
I zip my fleece and cinch my pack,  
scan for the scallop sign.*

*First step, a gasp, next step, a groan;  
I lean into my pole.  
My feet are bruised, knees are bandaged;  
but no need to console.*

*The awkward limp I make my badge . . .  
many miles I have climbed.  
The sun begins to poke its head;  
its welcome warmth well-timed.*

*Fellow pilgrims passing me,  
fresh familiar faces.  
My sunrise shadow beckons me,  
tugging at my laces.*

*So I walk.*

*I walk to reflect and reset;  
I walk to unwind.  
To strip away weathered layers,  
and let my heart unbind;*

*To hold the hand of God above;  
I walk the path and pray.  
Lost am I, in search of guidance;  
Lord, thank you for the Way.*

*Shallow shackles of adulthood,  
I pray such bonds be broke.  
I pray on this pilgrim's passage;  
the child in me be woke.*

*So I walk.*

*Ancient roads and mud-packed trails,  
carved by pilgrim choices;  
While sun-bronzed fields and mossy woods,  
whisper their million voices.*

*Feel blessed to join this timeless choir,  
where past and present meet.  
But each of us sing our own song;  
my burdens are my beat.*

*At a cross I lay my troubles,  
cheeks wet with humble tears.  
On a mountain I scream with glee,  
grateful for conquered fears.*

*At dinner, talk of deeds and dreams;  
a glass of red poured chilled.  
Anxious to wake and start again;  
knowing, this path, God willed.*

*So I walk.*

*Several seasons now have passed,  
since the bagpipe's greeting.  
And yet still my soul soars and sings,  
mindful of our meeting.*

*You broke me, then rewrote me;  
you stitched my torn seams.  
You never really left me;  
the Way is in my dreams.*

*Visions of villages and vineyards,  
roads paved with scallop shells;  
Scenes with sunflowers and sunsets,  
cocks crowing and cow bells.*

*The day will come we dance again;  
just listen for my knock.  
'Til then I'll keep your lessons learned;  
mustn't forget . . . so I walk.*

© 2022 Charles W. Johnson



## *Waybread: Memories of the Camino for the Onward Journey*

## Book Review

*Waybread: Memories of the Camino for the Onward Journey*

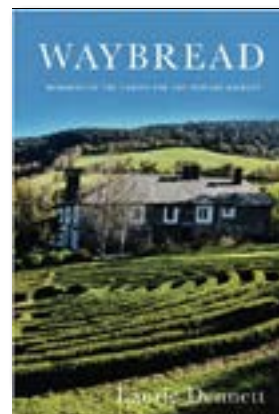
by Laurie Dennett

Peaceable Publishing, 2023

268 pages

*Reviewed by Maryjane Dunn*

*Arkadelphia, AR*



Conference presentations benefit first-hand those present but are invariably lost to those unable to attend. Fortunately for all, Laurie Dennett—early Camino pilgrim, historian, author, speaker, activist—has culled 12 of her presentations into a delightful and informative collection that revives the spirit and recounts recent history of the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

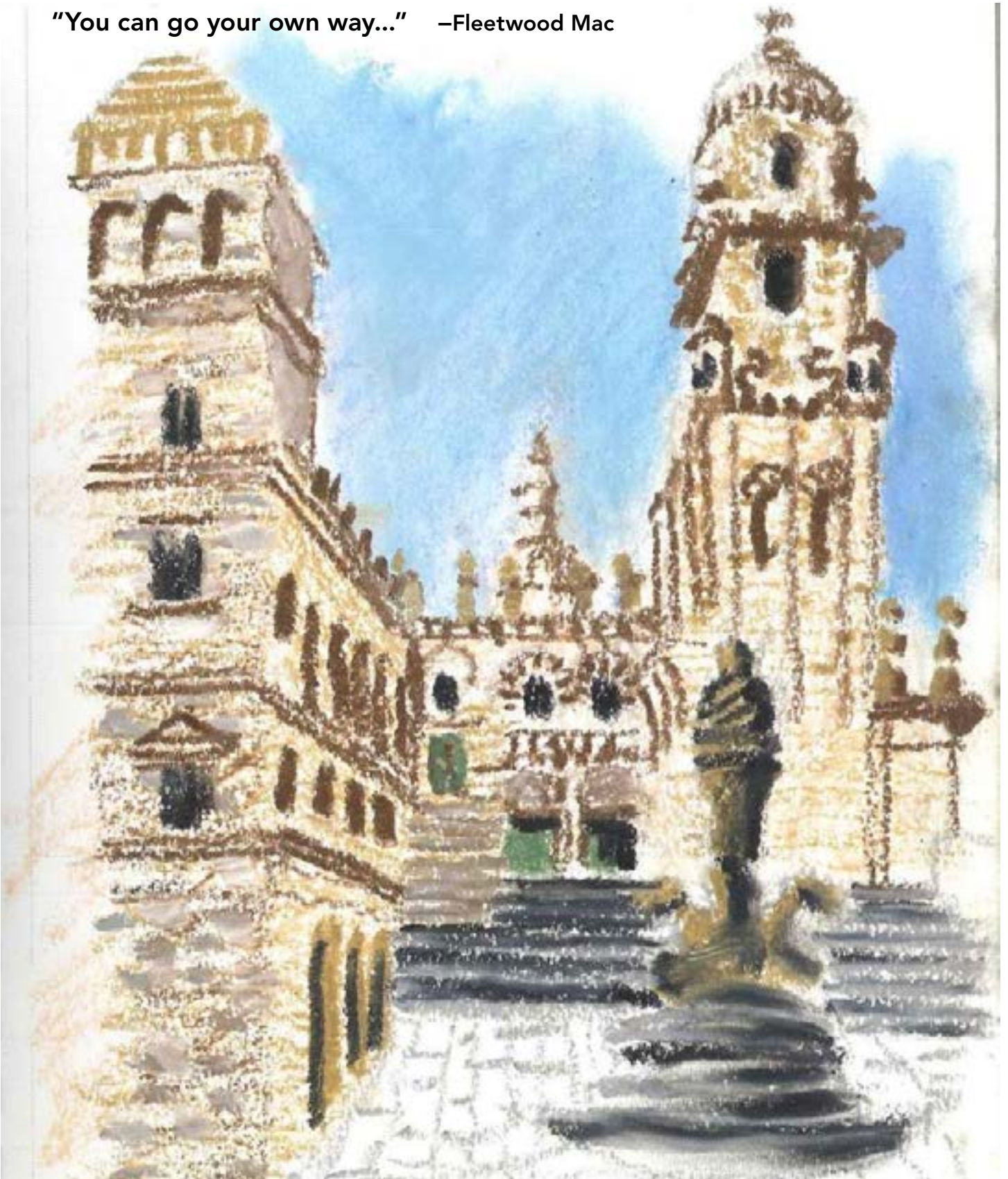
The subtitle, “Memories of the Camino for the Onward Journey,” implies a visit to the past but each chapter has a decidedly contemporary viewpoint. (To understand the reason for “Waybread,” you must read the book’s introduction.) Although the writings, composed between 1997 and 2018, are not arranged in chronological order, they flow seamlessly from one to the next. Eight of the 12 chapters are presentations that Denett delivered while serving as chair of the British Confraternity of Saint James (1995-2003). In the introduction, she acknowledges a thematic organization: “What these writings have in common, however, is that they are grounded in a view of the pilgrimage journey and the experience of traditional hospitality as inwardly transformative. That, to me, is the essential meaning and value of the Camino.”

Twenty-first century walkers are traveling a much different path than pilgrims prior to the 1999 Holy Year. Dennett’s book provides context for differentiating the fundamentals of the earlier pilgrimage experience from the seemingly more touristic adventures today. She recounts the story of Elías Valiña Sampedro, priest of O Cebreiro and originator of the yellow arrows. She charts the growth of European Associations and the proliferation of routes. She illustrates the gratitude of pilgrims giving back to the Camino through building and staffing albergues. She relates Saint James’s relationship to the Iberian Peninsula, the origin of Holy Years, and the Compostela. No matter the topic, themes of generosity, fellowship, hospitality, and connection are painted across the chapter landscapes, weaving them together, inspiring the reader to do better, to slow down, to give back.

An early pilgrim myself (1979), I was smiling and nodding as I read, reminiscing about how the Camino used to be. Her words gave rise to a touch of melancholy—how different the crowded, techno-Camino is today—but also reminded me of the need, in Don Elías’s words, “to keep the Camino, *camino*.”

Dennett’s first foray into Camino writing came in 1987, several years before yellow arrows marked the routes. [A HUG FOR THE APOSTLE](#) recounted her 1986 solo pilgrimage from Chartres, France, to Compostela to raise money for Multiple Sclerosis research. She currently resides near O Cebreiro, where her boxwood labyrinth is open to pilgrims and visitors. Dennett discusses her Camino experiences in a video at the [FUNDACIÓN JACOBEEA](#).

"You can go your own way..." –Fleetwood Mac



# Pilgrims Way

Original drawing by Eric Searcy.



## Breathe Easily and Walk Far

by Joseph A. Curro, Jr.  
Arlington, MA

Cherish every breath.

Four years ago, prior to my first Camino, I had trained myself to a level of fitness that made the journey from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago, Finisterre, and Muxia relatively pain-free.

Others complained of blisters, but I had none to speak of. People talked about how difficult the Pyrenees crossing was, but I experienced no distress from the elevation gain. (I did, however, struggle with an early-June freezing rain that nearly caused me hypothermia.) The toughest part of the entire journey was climbing to O Cebreiro, but I made it.

In preparing for and walking that first Camino, I temporarily emerged victorious from a lifelong battle with obesity. At the same time, I managed to walk without any therapeutic devices for the obstructive sleep apnea with which I had lived for more than a decade.

Fast forward three years. Pandemic lockdowns and a work-from-home regime were not beneficial to me. Many of the good habits I had acquired were undone, and bad habits roared back with a vengeance. With renewed weight gain, I became once again dependent on a continuous positive airway pressure (CPAP) machine to help me cope with sleep apnea.

I love the Camino, but the thought of attempting it again petrified me. A conversation with another active American Pilgrims member at the 2022 Annual Gathering reassured me I was not alone in navigating the Camino with this condition.

In preparing to walk the Camino Portugués in the fall of 2022, I researched travel-sized machines, battery packs, and airline regulations for transportation and use on overnight flights. I jettisoned items I had brought on my first Camino to make room for the extra space and weight of my medical equipment.

It worked! Only once was I so far from an electrical outlet that I needed to use the supplemental battery. And most nights, my sleep score was a perfect 100, leaving me refreshed for another day of walking.

In the municipal albergue in Pontevedra, the beds were particularly close together. Knowing a full face mask and air hose can give one a bit of a Darth Vader look, I fought my embarrassment, and—trying to avoid a midnight fright—warned the young Polish woman next to me. This interaction led her to state that I was a “kind man,” the highest compliment in my book.

I slept easily, and I’m sure my fellow peregrinos appreciated that I did not join the symphony of snorers!

## No-pill Stress Relief

by David Jennings  
Kings Beach, CA

How does your week go? Does it entail email, text messages, social media, clients, paper shuffling, meetings, schedules, events, housework, shopping, deadlines, and no time to make dessert? For many, it is a frenzy of much-ado-about-nothing, and our minds drift off to ideas of “someday.”

Meanwhile, our total agenda for a day on the Camino is to navigate a pair of hiking shoes from where we are to a town a little further down the Way. As the song goes, “I wave my hand to all I meet, and they wave back to me”—they are my fellow pilgrims from around the world. I stop occasionally for a coffee, take a photo, visit a cathedral, or just stand in awe, before finally arriving at my destination for that night. For tomorrow and the days that follow, the plan is to navigate a pair of hiking shoes to a town a little further down the Way.

By the time you reach Santiago de Compostela, you may have learned the lessons that the Camino can provide.



Camino Transporters.  
Photo by David Jennings.

## A Family's Camino Gift to Each Other

by Amy Horton with Kathy Early  
Warrenton, MO, and Tucson, AZ



Members of the Early family celebrate their arrival in Santiago.  
Photo provided by Kathy Early.

Several years after Kathy Early walked her first Camino—the Camino Portugués—in 2015, the mother of 11 children conceived the idea of walking another Camino with family. Using money she gained from the sale of her home, she invited them to join her on pilgrimage. In 2022, she would celebrate her 81st birthday along the Camino Francés with several of her children and grandchildren.

Many pilgrims know making the journey is not without its challenges—such is the nature of pilgrimage. Adding to the challenges for the Early family's group of 16 pilgrims were that Kathy's son Ray, a cancer survivor and amputee, would make his Camino on one leg aided by crutches. Kathy says he frequently experienced phantom pains from his amputated leg and continued walking without complaint. Kathy's son Frank, who has cerebral palsy, would make his Camino in a wheelchair aided by his brothers Paul, Roger, Roy, Patrick, and Jerry, and Kathy's grandchildren Katie and Jacob, who would help push and pull the wheelchair up inclines and on particularly rough terrain. A brother or two also frequently carried Frank up the stairs in less-accessible albergues and hotels.

Kathy's family had experience enduring challenges prior to the Camino. When the Early home was destroyed by a fire, they relocated and rebuilt. Seven months later, Kathy's husband died. The family also suffered other unthinkable tragedies, having buried one daughter/sister and facing the disappearance of another daughter/sister. Roy told Kathy the highlight of his Camino was "walking the Way with family, sealing the bond that was always present." Ray also says his fondest memories from their Camino are of the brothers bonding. Michael, Paul, Roger, and Frank, too, have told Kathy their best memories from the Camino were made with their brothers—sharing exhaustion and a beer, celebrating each day's accomplishments, taking care of each other, feeling admiration for each other, and walking with their mother.

Patrick says he's grateful for the opportunity to spend that time "with the people I hold so close to my heart. We worked together,

laughed together, and cried together, all for the love of the journey."

"My gift to my family was to plant the seeds of the Camino," Kathy says. "Their gift to me was to do the Camino for me. The seeds are flourishing."



## Frank's Tips for a Camino by Wheelchair

by Amy Horton with Frank Early  
Warrenton, MO, and Tucson, AZ

Frank Early, who made his Camino by wheelchair, shared these insights for fellow pilgrims considering the same.

### YOUR RIDE & ACCESSORIES

*Whatever ride you choose, be prepared to make a financial investment and adapt the chair to fit your physical needs and to handle the Camino's varied terrain and inclines.*

**All-terrain wheelchair:** Frank chose the GRIT Freedom Chair, a manual all-terrain wheelchair built to explore the outdoors.

**Adjustable trail handles** with mountain bike grips are a must-have for assisting pilgrims pushing from behind.

**Utility clamp rope mount** is a must-have for assisting pilgrims to attach a rope/strap and pull from the front.

**Pulling rope:** Rock-climbing ropes ideally handle stress and load, but are heavy and bulky. Alternatively, rock-climbing harness webbing costs less and is more compact. A 20-foot piece allows two assisting pilgrims to wrap it around themselves or create hand holds for better gripping. Whether using rope or webbing, use a quality carabiner for quick, reliable hooking and unhooking.

**Footrest:** Frank adapted a set of footrests that attached to utility clamps, allowing him to extend his legs and feet outward. He added foot straps to keep his legs in place regardless of terrain.

**Solid tires:** Flat tires interrupted Frank's initial training rides, so he changed out tube tires for solid tires.

**Extra tire rims:** Frank was fortunate his tire rims didn't bend on the Camino's rocky terrain, but for peace of mind, he'd take an extra pair of rims next time.

**Tool kit:** While pilgrims can generally find essentials along the way, this may not be the case for wheelchairs. Frank brought his own tools and hard-to-find parts.

**Foldable crutches:** As Frank can walk some with the aid of crutches, he brought a pair of foldable crutches that attached to the back of his chair so he could walk when necessary.

### TRAINING

*Frank says you can't train enough for a wheelchair Camino. After his first day, Frank realized he should've trained more.*

**Upper body training:** Frank's regimen included triceps press, row machine, Hammer Strength row machine, chest press machine, and incline press machine. With each workout, add reps and weight/resistance to build strength and endurance.

**Chair training:** There is no substitute to training with the wheelchair you plan to use on Camino to test how the chair feels and give the rider and assisting pilgrims experience managing varied terrain.

### GETTING YOUR WHEELCHAIR THERE

*While most airlines are accustomed to handling standard wheelchairs and other mobility devices, they may not be used to handling the larger, heavier all-terrain wheelchair.*

**Avoiding fees:** Because the all-terrain wheelchair doesn't look like a standard wheelchair, airlines may try to charge extra fees to check it. Frank learned the words he used to describe it to airline personnel mattered. Example: "It is a wheelchair designed for outdoor use."

**Disassembly required:** Airlines are more likely to accept the wheelchair without added fees if you disassemble and package it within their guidelines. Frank used a pack-and-ship store to package his.

**Insurance:** Given Frank's wheelchair was valuable, essential equipment for his Camino, he wanted to insure it against loss or damage, but found most travel insurance and baggage rules don't cover wheelchairs/mobility devices. For peace of mind, Frank put a Bluetooth tracking device in the box containing his wheelchair components. When his wheelchair didn't show up in baggage claim, he connected to the tracking device from his phone to help airline personnel locate it, saving his Camino. *(continued)*

## || PILGRIMS WAY ||



Frank Early makes his Camino in an all-terrain wheelchair, aided by family members who help push and pull him on inclines and rough terrain. Photo provided by Kathy Early.

### ACCESSIBILITY CONSIDERATIONS

*Accessibility varies from place to place.*

**Airport:** The Madrid airport had separate access points for wheelchairs. Frank approached uniformed personnel pushing wheelchairs for navigational assistance; however, language barriers made it difficult for him to express his needs and understand their directions.

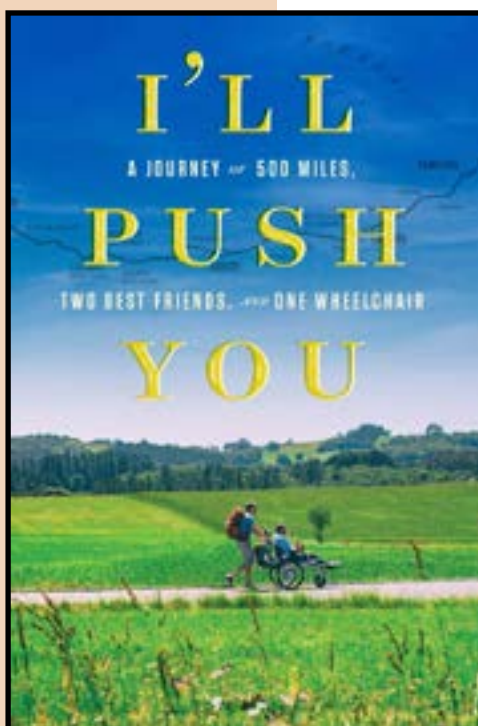
**Taxis:** Rather than calling ahead for a taxi, head to the local taxi stand for a shorter wait and a wider variety of taxis that can accommodate wheelchairs.

**Buses:** While Frank was able to walk with crutches onto buses, he found buses providing service to smaller towns weren't wheelchair accessible and bus drivers offered little assistance. Pre-book a bus ticket to reserve a seat.

**Trains:** While Frank was able to walk with crutches onto trains, he found trains weren't wheelchair accessible, including no area to park a wheelchair.

### Overnight accommodations:

- Most places have at least a few steps. Fortunately, Frank could manage a few on crutches.
- Albergues generally don't have accessible bathroom facilities. With no shower chairs or sits, Frank generally opted out of showering and bathed himself by other means. He was able to use toilet facilities, but they lacked handrails and other aids he is accustomed to back home.
- Hotels were hit and miss. Frank recalls a couple had small elevators. Most had difficult-to-manage stairs, requiring Frank's brothers to carry him to the room.
- Frank's family occasionally rented a small house, offering them greater freedom and flexibility to gather; however, most were off the beaten path with limited accessibility to dining/groceries.



If you found the Early family's story inspiring, you may also be moved by the documentary film *I'll Push You* (Emota Inc., 2017) and a companion book by the same title (Tyndale House Publishers, 2017). They tell the extraordinary story of two best friends, Justin Skeesuck and Patrick Gray, who make a Camino together. Justin has a degenerative illness requiring him to live life from a wheelchair. When he dreams of making a pilgrimage but isn't sure how he'd manage it, his friend Patrick says "I'll push you," inspiring the title. Since the film and book release, Justin and Patrick have continued to inspire audiences by sharing their powerful story through public speaking engagements. They, in partnership with Camino Ways, also guide others with mobility challenges to make accessible Caminos. Learn more about Justin and Patrick's story at [ILLPUSHYOU.COM](http://ILLPUSHYOU.COM).



## We Are All Pilgrims

by Suzanne Blazier  
Albuquerque, NM

One autumn evening, I was seated for a pilgrim meal at the albergue El Puntido in Hontanas. One of my dinner companions was a man walking the Camino Francés for the third time. He said it helps him get in shape for the Scandinavian winter, in addition to the cultural and spiritual journey that it is. He commented, somewhat disdainfully, that nowadays the Camino is more of a tourist walk, and that some people use it less as a pilgrimage and more as a cheap vacation.

Our conversation spurred me to reflect on this endeavor of walking a Camino. Those who walk the Camino are called pilgrims. A pilgrim journeys to a sacred place for religious reasons or is someone who travels on a long journey. A pilgrimage is a journey to a well-known or well-respected place. The Camino de Santiago is such a journey. When I signed in for the night at the Albergue de Peregrinos de Orreaga in Roncesvalles, I was asked to complete a form to indicate my reasons for walking. The choices on the list included spiritual, religious, cultural, fitness, tourism, or other. Clearly, this long walk across northern Spain is no longer only undertaken for religious reasons, and the people I met proved this to be the case.

As for my new friend saying the Camino is a cheap vacation, I disagreed. Staying in albergues and living out of a backpack is work, and it is time-consuming no matter how you do it. Some pilgrims arrange where they'll stay in advance, sending their backpacks ahead, and all of that takes time. Either way, it's not a vacation. You have to really love the walking and the landscape to make all the parts of it that are not-so-fun worthwhile.

There are as many different Caminos as the people who walk them. None of us walks the same route, at the same pace, nor with the same motivations. Whether someone is walking, biking, wheeling along in a wheelchair, riding a donkey, or splitting up the walk with the occasional bus or taxi, they are all on a pilgrimage. Setting one foot in front of the other every day, whether someone makes it to Santiago or not, is a pilgrimage in itself. No matter the reason for walking, all pilgrims deserve respect for their unique journey on the Way.



French Pyrénées. Photo by Suzanne Blazier.



Gerhard Köch, left, and Greg Alexander at Aldea Agrela. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

## Third Time's a Charm

by Gregory Alexander  
Crystal Lake, IL

"If something excites you and scares you at the same time, you should probably do it." I came across this quote somewhere recently as I started training to become a court-appointed special advocate (CASA). It was an appropriate synopsis of my feelings regarding that endeavor. It also stirred my memories of what I felt in the weeks leading up to my pilgrimage.

My friend Gerhard, who resides in Bavaria, Germany, and I had planned our trip for late August 2020. In the spring of that year, my wife said, "I don't think you'll be doing that this year." Of course, she was correct. Gerhard and I agreed to postpone it for a year.

Five weeks before we were to begin our rescheduled trip, I was on a training hike in the Virginia mountains with my son-in-law. Toward the end of the hike, I fell and hurt my leg. After about a week

of limping around, my wife said, "I don't think you are going to Spain on that hike without getting that looked at." An X-ray revealed a broken bone in the leg I was sure was only sprained. Gerhard was very gracious and understanding when I called to tell him the news.

2020: COVID-19. 2021: Broken leg. We agreed we would try again in the spring of 2022.

On Good Friday in 2022, Gerhard and I flew from Munich to Porto and set out the following day to experience the 260-kilometer coastal route of the Camino Portugués. After many blisters, newly-minted private jokes, newfound friends, and one hospital visit for a skin infection later, we arrived in Santiago. Written on a whiteboard at one of the albergues along the Way: "Pain is temporary; memories are forever." With my family history of dementia, I am not sure about the forever part, but the wonderful memories have certainly outlasted the blisters.

## The Camino and Dementia

by Jim Larocco  
Alexandria, VA

There are many reasons to walk a Camino, and I have many of my own. This year, I walked in memory of my second oldest sister, who died of Alzheimer's disease after suffering this scourge for so many years. A mother of five, grandmother of 12, she was a vibrant woman who became unrecognizable as the disease ravaged her mind and body. She told me six years ago that each morning when she awoke she would pray that day would be her last. This pained me and other loved ones deeply within our hearts.

When I first learned my sister was diagnosed with dementia, I had applied for and was accepted into a long-term clinical study of dementia at Johns Hopkins University. I was one of the last to be accepted among 350 participants. We were carefully monitored. Constantly being informed of the results of the research has been disheartening in that there is still no cure. In recent years, greater effort has been put into treatment of the symptoms and prevention of dementia. *(continued)*





Monument to a fallen pilgrim, at Finisterre. Photo by Deborah Weltman.

It was so encouraging to learn that prevention is indeed possible. Exercise ranks at the top, specifically walking new, challenging routes being one of the very best ways. The Camino is ideal. Just think how hard your brain must work as it encounters something new every step of the Camino, minute after minute, hour after hour, day after day. Preventing a fall with every step challenges the brain to the extreme. This produces new brain connections that can bypass amyloid plaques and stroke damage.

So, you ask, has it worked for me? I'm happy to report that the most recent brain scan revealed none of the signs of possible dementia, while my annual test indicates that my short-term memory has in fact improved every year. I'm 74, have walked eight different Camino routes, and look forward to many more.

The Camino provides in so many ways. Besides refreshing the body and soul, it also refreshes the mind and brain. And this is what most of us of a certain age are concerned about.

## Losing Fears

by Deborah Weltman  
St. Louis, MO

Before I became an “official pilgrim”—that is to say, before I walked to Santiago de Compostela—I had a disability of sorts: *fearfulness*. Coupled with a heart-felt desire to walk the Camino came the encouragement (unbeknownst to me at the time) that I was finally ready to work on that personal disability.

I had previously learned to go after what felt important to me. I traveled. I moved forward through relationships, parenthood, entrepreneurship—always pushing myself to find what was right for me, always seeking to feel complete. But with every move forward, I felt huge fears: What if this is a mistake? What if it doesn't work? What if I fail? What if I get hurt? Lost? What if I run out of money?

Before my Camino pilgrimage, my life felt like a continuous struggle. (*continued*)

While on pilgrimage, I also struggled, but my life felt purposeful. On the Camino I learned to look for the joys and the life lessons of each day (much easier to spot lessons there than in “regular life”). As I walked, I received almost daily Camino lessons.

After my Camino, I came to see pilgrimage not as a physical path, but as a format, a template, a vehicle for personal growth, and I saw the pattern in all of my life’s quests:

1. I recognized my heart’s longing.
2. I felt a willingness to set out on an unfamiliar path, to overcome difficulties.
3. I struggled.
4. I learned.
5. I received soul rewards.

In following the “Pilgrimage Pattern,” I learned to pay attention to my intuition, to see myself seeking soul-growth. I learned to flip my fears to excitement (the two emotions are chemically identical in the body).

I found the pilgrimage pattern in everything: keeping up with far-flung Camino friends, writing and publishing a book about my Camino (a nine-year-long slog), entering into a new relationship, giving talks, teaching classes. The pattern reappeared as I made “train pilgrimage” reservations to attend the 2023 Annual Gathering of Pilgrims in Lake Tahoe. My heart hears the call. My intuition says it’s dear-life-important for me. My soul directs me forward in spite of my travel fears (more flipping fears to excitement). On this next “Camino,” I trust the Divine will again instruct my soul. I will lose more fears. I will move into the unknown (the essence of being a “pilgrim”). This is my soul’s path to healing my fearfulness.



Deborah Weltman and the view from the Refuge Orisson patio at sunset. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

## Going My Own Way

by James Harris  
Dallas, TX

I always wanted to walk the Camino Francés from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago. No bikes, boats, buses, taxis, or trains. When I told friends my intention, I didn’t use the word “plan” because I was aware of the verse: “We make our plans, but God has the last word.” Sure enough, the word that disrupted my Camino came in the form of a sharp thorn on a dusty trail between Pamplona and Logroño.

I had retired in Dallas on a Friday and was on a plane to France the next Monday morning. Though walking was more difficult than expected, the experience was unbelievably invigorating. After passing over the steep ascent of the Sierra del Perdón where sculptures depict pilgrims on the Way, I encountered a stick in the middle of the trail. Rather than avoid it, I stepped in its center expecting it to snap.

It did, but it also half-rose like a striking snake and stuck a thorn in my right shin. The thorn had entered my sock on one side, penetrated my skin, and exited my sock on the other side. It didn’t hurt then, but that night my shin began to swell. *(continued)*



## GO YOUR OWN WAY

Leaving Logroño, I knew my intention was in trouble. Falling behind my friends, I hired a taxi to Nájera. Once there, I went to an urgent care clinic where the doctor prescribed an antihistamine, believing I was allergic to something on the thorn. No such luck. By Burgos, my shin was numb and the swelling worse, so I went to the ER. After labs and a sonogram, it was diagnosed as cellulitis, a potentially serious skin infection. Antibiotics were prescribed, and I was advised to discontinue walking until the swelling subsided. Disappointment set in.

On another pilgrim's advice, I took a train to Bilbao where I toured the Guggenheim. Two days later, I

took a bus to San Sebastián, where I enjoyed the beachfront cafés and an e-bike tour that included an overlook of the city (luckily e-bikes don't require much pedaling). After another two days, I took a bus to Santander where I enjoyed a cruise on the bay.

By the seventh day, the swelling was down, so I hopped a bus to León, rejoined my friends, and resumed my Camino. Without that thorn, I would not have taken a bike, bus, boat, taxi, or train, and would not have experienced those unexpected and unforgettable highlights of northern Spain. Go your own way.

## Cancer and the Camino

by Anita Welch  
Muncie, IN

Cancer is not typically considered to be a good thing. This was my second bout with breast cancer, and it was far more aggressive than my first. But I was lucky this time—it was only stage III. The cancer cells had not progressed to other organs, so only my breast and 15 lymph nodes had to be removed. Over the next year, I endured months of chemotherapy, radiation, and multiple surgeries. The treatments were successful, but now I had another demon to conquer.

All throughout treatment, I continued to work out daily, lifting weights, doing yoga, and walking. I even ran a 5K the day after a chemo treatment. My doctors called me a “rockstar” patient, but inside I was fighting another battle. Although my medical team assured me I was in remission, I still needed to prove that to myself. That's when I decided to walk the Camino del Norte, alone.

I traveled to Spain in July to begin the 537-mile journey from Irun to Santiago de Compostela. I knew the Norte is considered one of the most demanding routes of all the Caminos. I knew I would be traversing rocky cliffs, steep climbs, and lots of pavement. I knew my body was prepared, but what about my mind?

The next 44 days challenged me physically and mentally. For the first three weeks, I barely encountered any other pilgrims. For days, I walked alone. During this

solitude, doubts began to form. I began questioning why a 65-year-old woman would be walking northern Spain alone. What was I trying to prove? The answer came one morning when four wild boars came charging after me out of a corn field. One stopped in front of me, stomping its hoofs and snorting. I refused to back down. I raised my arms and ROARED. It was a primal release. I beat cancer. Twice. I was not about to be taken down by a wild boar!

The rest of my journey was filled with the typical aches and pains one gets from walking over 500 miles, but with every step I felt mentally stronger, even if my body was bruised and bandaged. I was stronger than cancer. It was pouring rain when I entered Santiago on Day 44, but the rain only added to my tears as I walked into Praza do Obradoiro. I had conquered my demon.



Day 44, the author celebrates her arrival in Santiago de Compostela. Photo by Anita Welch.



By the time Sandra arrived in Santiago de Compostela, she had learned what worked to nourish herself on the Camino. Photo by Sandra Heinzman.

## Fueling Your Body for the Camino After Bariatric Surgery

by Sandra K. Heinzman  
Midlothian, VA

Last fall at age 70, I walked 61 days on the Camino Francés. It was a wonderful adventure, except for feeling like I was starving. Dietary restrictions from my 2008 bariatric surgery hindered my Camino, as I was often undernourished.

Foods like pasta, rice, quinoa, and some breads are off limits for me because they swell. Protein is the most important part of my diet, but I can only eat tiny portions. I also don't like any kind of fish. So what did I eat?

In the beginning, I ate tortilla española, the Spanish egg-and-potato omelet, every day—although even a slice was too much for me. In hindsight, I should have wrapped my leftover tortilla to carry for a snack later. I eventually grew tired of tortillas, so when I found places that made fried eggs, I ate those.

I learned as I went how to cope to ensure my body got the fuel it needed, and I offer these tips for others walking the Camino following bariatric surgery:

- **Stock up on snacks.** Find a grocery store along the way or as soon as you arrive at your day's destination before shops close. Buy individually portioned containers of yogurt

to carry. Other options include hard-boiled eggs, salami, beef sticks, canned beans, lentil soup, or any nonperishable protein. I often bought crackers and toasted bread, too.

- **Share meals.** An entire pilgrim meal was too much food for me and a waste of money, and it isn't practical to save leftovers. One good option is to split a meal with another pilgrim.
- **Eat your greens.** I ate lots of salads. Large grocery stores often offered pre-made salads. In restaurants, I'd ask to omit the tuna (which I dislike) and add a hard-boiled egg when possible. Unfortunately, iceberg lettuce is a favorite on the Camino. It has little nutritional value and causes me severe gas pain, so a doctor told me to stop eating it.
- **Eat often.** I discovered I could avoid dry heaves and hunger by nibbling on a piece of fruit, bread, or a protein bar every two to three hours.
- **Treat yourself.** In Burgos and Santiago, I was "saved" by Taco Bell, where I happily indulged in Beef Tacos Supreme!
- **Try tapas.** If you like tapas, these small plates are an ideal serving size for someone who requires smaller portions, though I did not care for or eat any myself.
- **Shake it up.** I carried meal-replacement shake mix packets and had one shake per day.
- **Stay hydrated.** Dehydration caused my dry heaves. After my Camino, my bariatric nurse practitioner said I should have used the water bladder in my backpack to drink constantly."

## Many Types of Pilgrims

by Alejandro Dittmer  
Marseilles, IL

After walking several different routes and after years of seeing this topic discussed, I've come to believe there are many different types of *(continued)*



## || GO YOUR OWN WAY ||

pilgrims. There are pilgrims who walk for religious purposes, social pilgrims who walk because they've heard about creating a Camino family, and hiking pilgrims who walk for the experience. There are pilgrims who walk to ease internal struggles. There are pilgrims who have a specific idea of what they want and expect from the Camino, and pilgrims who believe the Camino provides. There are pilgrims who swear by arbitrary rules that your pack is too heavy or too big. There are pilgrims who claim it's your Camino so you can do it your way. There are pilgrims whose way is to graffiti every stationary element they encounter. There are loud pilgrims and silent pilgrims, tearful pilgrims and pilgrims full of laughter. There are pilgrims who claim there's only one true route. There are pilgrims who carry their packs and pilgrims who transport their packs ahead. There are pilgrims who shun the Compostela as an act of commercial defiance and pilgrims who collect the certificates reverently. There are some who miss seeing the Botafumeiro swing and feel as though they have been deprived of an essential Camino experience, and others who see the gigantic thurible in action and remain uninspired.

One thing we all have in common is our impermanence.

As impactful as our individual Caminos are to ourselves, those who walked before us graced us with a set of routes that will continue long after we shuffle off this mortal coil. While we can vociferously debate all things Camino, let's never lose sight that we are merely the most recent keepers of the Way, its current residents, gatekeepers, and caregivers. We are its most recent definition of pilgrims.

I have my beliefs about what a pilgrim is based on my Catholic faith and upbringing. Does that invalidate your definition? Certainly not. It means we may simply believe different things and have different perspectives. It is not unlike the concept of the color blue: we all have an image formed in our minds when "blue" is mentioned. You might think

sky, ocean, eyes, jeans, or—if you are of a certain age—"clues." These are all sound examples and frames of reference for the color.

The same goes for the concept of "pilgrim."

You are who you are.  
You are a pilgrim!



Above: Castroverde. Photo by Francine Mastini.  
Left: These pilgrims are two of a kind.  
Photo by Alex Dittmer.

## Letters from the Camino: Waiting for Spring

by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway  
Spokane, WA

Dear Pilgrims,

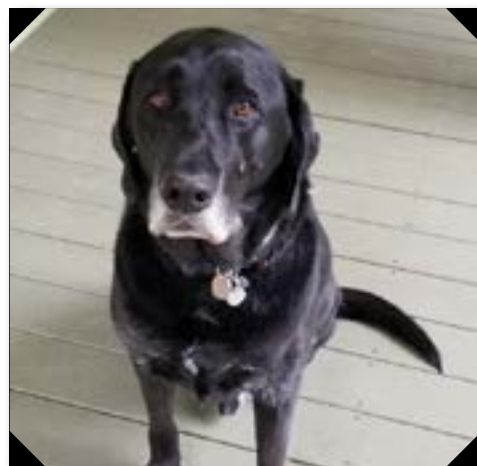
Greetings from Milepost 4,040. The days grow longer, but it is still freezing at night in Spokane. Virtually, I'm approaching Ireland along the great arc that reaches over the globe from Spokane to Lourdes and Santiago. I expect the North Atlantic is full of icebergs at this time of year. In Spokane, icebergs of snow are disappearing from the parking lots, where they were shoved high!

My virtual pilgrimage began four years ago on April 1. Since then, my husband decided not to be married anymore. We divorced. He has another relationship. Last year, the Catholic Church annulled our marriage. It's strange, but after 32 years I do not feel entirely free. My marriage promises are condensed into a small spiritual exercise, a daily prayer for him. That is all I know to do. This drama transpired against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdown. Two of my aunts died, and my sister developed a serious brain disease. Three of my cats died. Yet, amidst great sadness, my cousin had a beautiful baby, Millie. A lot has happened—many tears, many steps, many prayers—across 4,000 miles.

With a small group of Spokane friends, I'm beginning to loosely plan for the actual Camino Francés beginning in 2024. We might come and go at different times. Various aspects of our lives do not give us all the freedom we might wish. I am determined to start from Lourdes, but not all four will do that. Our lives are different, but we belong to the same walking group. We love walking and how it connects us to the world and to each other. Each has her own awareness of the eternal. Other would-be pilgrims may work into my story at different times.

The path continues to unfold, with many miles to go. The day I began this Way, Fr. Kevin Codd gave me the pilgrim blessing. Later I was given a large scallop shell, and my credential was stamped. It seems psalms and canticles have replaced the sadness in my rucksack. There is more simplicity and peace. May it be so for you. Our Lady and St. James, pray for us. ¡Buen Camino siempre! Love, Leah

*Editor's note: This is Leah G. Wilkinson-Brockway's 15th reflection about being a pilgrim in her own town (or wherever she happens to be) as she walks daily to travel the collective distance, as the crow flies, from her home in Spokane, WA, to Lourdes, France (approximately 5,097 miles). This is her Camino for now. Ultimately, her goal is to walk a pilgrimage from Lourdes to Santiago de Compostela. You will find Leah's previous reflections in La Concha from June 2019 to the present.*



My walking buddy Diesel, gone but not forgotten.



Waiting for spring.



Turkey track in snow. A different kind of Camino arrow. All photos on this page provided by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway.





Santiago. Wedding from my apartment window. Photo by Francine Mastini.

# FINAL REFLECTION

## A Curious Thing

*by Donna Mast  
Harrisonburg, VA*

Being a pilgrim on the Camino is a curious thing. You walk with many others, and you also walk alone. You make instant friends and build bonds with pilgrims, yet you seldom learn their last names. You walk day after day with pain, but forget it all while sitting around a table at a café, sipping wine and laughing with other pilgrims while waiting for the kitchen to open at 7 p.m. (or 8 p.m.), so you can EAT! You walk miles in the early morning darkness without breakfast or coffee, and it feels normal. You sleep in bunk beds and share bathrooms with many other people and are grateful to have a hot shower and a place to lay your head at night. Sometimes you cherish the camaraderie of other pilgrims, and sometimes you seek solitude. You walk through indescribable beauty, and also trudge under a merciless sun or through cold rain. You carry fruit or snacks with you at all times, because Spanish shopkeepers decide their own schedule. You eat more bread and pastries and drink more wine or café con leche than you ever imagined, and you don't gain weight. And every day you wonder why you are doing this, and every day you give thanks that you can.







## || NEXT ISSUE ||

**Submissions to our Summer 2023 issue close on July 1, 2023, and we would love to receive your reflections!**

The Summer theme is **THE WAYS LESS TRAVELED**.

What's off your beaten path? This issue will consider the lesser-walked, lesser-explored Caminos.

Please consider this theme for the **Summer 2023** issue by sharing images and reflections from lesser-traveled pilgrim routes—whether in Spain, elsewhere around the world, or inside your pilgrim heart. Tell us about the sights, spots, experiences, and people you encountered on these journeys. No two pilgrims can have the exact same experience, but what made your pilgrimage perhaps less typical than most? Maybe you made a reverse Camino, going against the standard flow of pedestrian traffic. Perhaps you made a Camino with a toddler in tow. Or maybe you've found a unique way to turn daily life into a sacred journey. Where or how have you been called to pilgrimage in a distinctive way? What did you seek on that path? And what did you find?

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

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