

LA CONCHA

american pilgrims on the camino magazine

The Ways Less Traveled

BROKEN PATHS, OPEN ROADS, INNER JOURNEYS, ALL POINTS,
SACRED BLISTERS, NO REGRETS

Inside:

- REMEMBERING JOHN BRIERLEY
- NAVARRA EXPERIENCE
- REFLECTIONS ON PILGRIMAGES OFF THE BEATEN PATH

SUMMER 2023

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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.

COVER Photo: Las Ruinas del Hospital del Fonfaraón, April 2022. Photo by Francine Mastini.

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LA CONCHA

Dear Fellow Pilgrims,

As I write this, I'm just home from a two-day walk with the St. Louis Chapter of American Pilgrims on the Camino. A group of us walked a stretch of the Katy Trail State Park in east-central Missouri, overnighted at a bunkhouse, and then walked another stretch of the trail the next day.

Along the way, we sought refuge from sweltering Midwest summer temperatures at a historic general store where locals graced us with their hospitality, while we refreshed ourselves on cool drinks and ice cream treats. We relished the simple pleasures of a shower, fresh clothes, and bare feet after a day of sweaty, dusty walking. In our afternoon lazing, at the behest of two soon-to-embark pilgrims hoping to lighten their load, my fellow chapter coordinator and I performed a "backpack shakedown," eliminating nearly five pounds of unnecessary weight from each of their packs. We shared communal meals at local restaurants amidst a din of pilgrim chatter, reminiscing about Caminos past and anticipating journeys to come. This second annual chapter event offered a way for experienced pilgrims to rekindle the Camino spirit, reassured those about to embark on their first Camino that they are indeed ready, and gave a taste of the pilgrim experience to those just starting to explore the idea.

I'm also several months into a sabbatical sparked by a workforce reduction and fueled by the encouragement of a supportive spouse and access to a modest cushion of personal savings that have granted me time and space to consider this season of life as a pilgrim might. A dear friend, spiritual coach, and wise pilgrim guided me to ask not "why this layoff happened to me" but rather "why it happened *for* me."

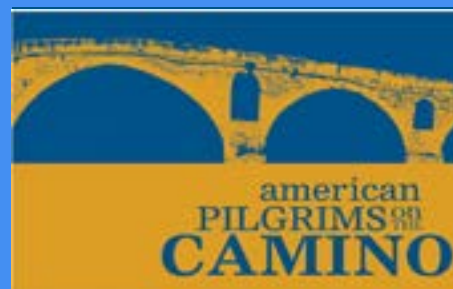
I set a sabbatical intention to shakedown the backpack of my life and discover what I could discard and what I would continue carrying. I canceled a proliferation of streaming services. I unsubscribed from email cluttering my inbox. I'm scrutinizing commitments and time-robbers no longer serving me. I'm sharing my time and talents in ways that nourish my soul, foster creativity, and keep my skills sharp. I'm making cherished memories with friends and family. I'm renewing my relationship with my husband. And I'm reconnecting with myself—discerning what I want to put into and get from my next career and my life.

A two-day Camino simulation and a vocational sabbatical are two ways less traveled. In this issue of *La Concha*, we explore other pilgrimages off the beaten path. We have stories from the Caminos Inglés, de Madrid, Mozárabe, and Sanabrés in Spain; the Célé Valley, Via Podiensis, and Vézelay routes in France; and the Via di Francesco in Italy. Essays on journeys of deep sorrow and healing joy. And perspectives from pilgrims inspired to give back to the Camino through service—just to highlight a few. Enjoy the abundance of reflections shared by those called to pilgrimage in distinctive ways.

May your journey be sacred,

Amy

*Amy Horton,
Editor-in-Chief*



LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



Steve Lytch
Board Chair

Dear Pilgrims,

Many of us who love the Camino de Santiago were introduced to it through the Camino Francés. I first experienced the Camino in 2008. My wife and I were visiting family in Madrid and took a three-day excursion to discover more of Spain. The natural beauty, history, and people we met transformed us into pilgrims who return as often as we can to recalibrate our lives.

Nothing can fully compare to the Camino Francés. Thanks to its prominence as a primary route to Santiago, it is rich with history. It has beloved legends and rituals and iconic landmarks—the chickens in Santo Domingo, the Cruz de Ferro, the Puente la Reina. You're likely to find a fascinating array of pilgrims

from all over the world from which can emerge your Camino family. (And let's not forget all those cafés where you can easily find a café con leche for your second breakfast.)

Nevertheless, the mission of American Pilgrims on the Camino has always been to support the entire Camino de Santiago, which extends throughout Spain, Portugal, and France. In recent years, that commitment has been strengthened by the desire to relieve some of the burden of increasing traffic along the Camino Francés. But mostly we're committed to all the routes because each one of those "ways less traveled" gives its own gifts to the pilgrim. Of the 19 infrastructure grants we made this year, totaling almost \$91,000, 11 were to Camino associations not on the Camino Francés, including one in Portugal.

There are other ways American Pilgrims on the Camino helps pilgrims discover different ways to undertake the pilgrimage to Santiago. This year's Gathering of Pilgrims featured presenters who introduced us to little-known pilgrimage routes, the pleasures of being on the Camino in winter, and advice for cyclists. One of my more unique Caminos was thanks to what I learned from a peregrina while on a chapter hike. Visit [AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG/PILGRIMAGE-PLANNING](https://americanpilgrims.org/pilgrimage-planning) to explore resources on a variety of ways to be a pilgrim.

Your **MEMBERSHIP** in American Pilgrims on the Camino makes it possible for everyone to make the pilgrimage that is best for them. Thanks, as always, for your support.

Buen Camino,

Steve

Steve Lytch
Board Chair, American Pilgrims on the Camino



|| AMERICAN PILGRIMS BOARD REPORT ||

April Board Meeting Report

Prepared by Joseph Curro, Communications Co-Chair, American Pilgrims on the Camino

The board of American Pilgrims on the Camino met in special session via Zoom on April 4, 2023. In attendance were members of the grants team. Following a presentation of grant requests, the board unanimously approved the grants team's recommendations of \$90,775 to support projects along eight Camino routes in Spain and Portugal.

The board also heard an update from the chapters team on an application for the creation of the Central Coast Chapter, centered around San Luis Obispo, CA. The board unanimously approved the establishment of this chapter, bringing the total number of chapters to 59.

On April 16-17, 2023, immediately following the annual Gathering of Pilgrims at Zephyr Cove, Nevada, the board held its quarterly meeting.

Board members were joined by leaders of the Canadian Company of Pilgrims and met with representatives from Spanish associations for an update on the Madrid Welcome Center and albergue project.

The board reviewed administrative tasks, membership and credential trends, and discussed the organization's diversity and retention goals.

The chapters team provided an overview of current issues and developments as well as highlights from the Coordinator Workshop held in conjunction with the Gathering. The board unanimously adopted a motion to allow related individuals to serve as chapter co-coordinators, while encouraging the expansion of leadership in such chapters to include at least one unrelated individual.

The board's hospitalero liaison reported on the training program and presented a motion, which was unanimously adopted, to streamline the execution of contracts with training venues.

During its Monday session, the board reflected on the 2023 Gathering and lessons learned that might enhance both the 2024 Gathering and the 2025 International Gathering. The discussion included an update on preparations already underway for the 2024 Gathering. In a standing ovation, board members expressed their appreciation to Jackie Saxon, 2023 Gathering chair.

The board discussed appropriate and culturally sensitive means of acknowledging grant awards.

The external relations team presented an update on planned activities and talks with other associations, highlighted issues around hospitalero agreements and a proposed academic exchange program, and reviewed the organization's external relations goals.

There was an update on a potential financial sponsorship agreement to benefit American Pilgrims projects.

The communications team reported on changes at *La Concha*, progress on volunteer recruitment during the Gathering, and potential budget authorization needs.

The board discussed an idea for a heritage project to capture the history of American Pilgrims on the Camino, a brief report on executive operations, and a technology team update on website changes.

The nominations team reported its intention to advertise earlier than usual for board candidates.

The treasurer and finance team presented current financials. Although final financial results from the Gathering were still pending at the time of the meeting, the organization is on budget. Membership renewals bear monitoring, as these are an area of focus for 2023.

After discussing logistics around the next quarterly board meeting, the meeting was adjourned.

REMEMBERING

In this special section, pilgrims pay tribute to John Brierley—renowned Camino guidebook author, wise pilgrim, and spiritual sage—who died July 2, 2023.

In sharing the news of his passing, John's daughter Gemma—who had worked with John on his guidebooks and will carry on his work—wrote: "Alongside his family, the Camino was truly the other great love of his life. His passion, his home, and his purpose. It brought him so much joy, and I want to thank the entire pilgrim community for the part you played in this."

"Countless numbers of us have relied on John's guidebooks as we undertook our caminos. He not only advised us on choosing routes, finding albergues, and noticing interesting places. He also guided us inwardly, always reminding us to tend to the inner pilgrimage. I was recently in a Zoom call with John, and I was deeply impressed with his readiness for the next stage in life's pilgrimage. In the spirit of his Camino Guides, he was prepared for what came next and looking forward to whatever the way presented."

— Steve Lytch | Lancaster, PA

"So grateful for his ministry of guidance."
— Allison Kratt | Davidson, NC

"I bought John Brierley's guidebook hoping to find my way; instead I found the Way. John brought us together, inspired us, and by guiding us to find a higher self, helped us to be our best selves. What a precious, irreplaceable gift to the world. Thank you, my pilgrim brother. Shine on and continue to show us the Way. We will continue to follow you with a smile on our faces and a song in our hearts."

— Dan Mullins | Sydney, Australia

"His spirit will now be guiding pilgrims in their quests and in all the caminos; very grateful for his very good and inspirational guides."

— Gabriel Canasmira | Houston, TX

"He was such an inspiration for how he walked the Camino and how he lived life."

— Carol Permar | West Springfield, MA

"Thanks for your help and wisdom. You made a difference in my life."
— Susan Mundy | Cody, WY

"Words cannot fully express my deep gratitude for what John did for the Camino and the worldwide community of pilgrims over the last quarter century. I, personally, haven't walked a step on the Camino without one of his guides in my backpack, and that will never change! John was a wonderful guidebook author, but he was so much more. I will forever carry in my heart all the wisdom John shared in our interviews for *The Camino Cafe* podcast and on the docuseries **THE CAMINO: THE PATH TO AWAKENING - FROM FEAR TO LOVE**, which Patti Silva and I created with him. I long admired John's work and after meeting him in person, I grew to love and admire even more who he was as a person. The wisdom he gained as a pilgrim made him a guide for pilgrims beyond pilgrimage. He modeled how to live a life centered on the most important journey of all: the inner journey. His guidebooks will continue to inspire pilgrims for countless years, but his greatest legacy is who he was as a humble pilgrim, husband, father, and friend. I am a better person by knowing him."

— Leigh Brennan | Santiago de Compostela, Spain

"The Camino was life-changing for me, and John's work was instrumental in my journey."
— Martha Fry | Traphill, NC

"Using his books on my Caminos added insight, information, enlightenment, and deep caring to my journey."

— Joannah Merriman | Fort Collins, CO



|| JOHN BRIERLEY ||

"With the sad news of John Brierley's passing, I felt compelled to share some thoughts that have been on my mind since we learned of his declining health. These pioneers of the Camino are our elders, and they carry with them the wisdom and experience of this sacred journey. As they transition, it is going to be incumbent upon all of us to carry their legacies forward. To ensure that the true spirit of the Camino and its lessons and gifts live on. Community. Fellowship. Support. Love. History. Tradition. Culture. The torch is being passed, and we must reach out to receive it."

– Roni Jackson-Kerr | Tulsa, OK

"I am fortunate John Brierley was my friend. He never once gave me cause to doubt his commitment to the Camino or his sincerity and gentleness in his relationships. He worked until almost the end updating his guidebooks, but with his health failing, he came to Santiago for one last visit before returning home to his family. As the end drew near, he eventually gave me permission to tell the pilgrim world and to ask for messages of thanks and support. Within days, 1,600 emails arrived from all over the world. They came from people who simply wanted to thank him for all he has done for pilgrims. They came from pilgrim associations to which he donated money. They came from people he had encountered on the routes. They came with memories. Above all, they came with messages of love and support. In one of his last emails to me he said simply: "Tell the pilgrims I said thank you and that I love them."

– Johnnie Walker | Santiago de Compostela, Spain



Photo by Patti Silva.



"I carried John's guide with me and read it several times before and during my Camino, to the point where I felt I could hear his suggestions. Once I sent him an email asking the meaning of a term and his response was immediate. I was thrilled. His loss has struck something in me that surprises me. I'm sad, but heartened by his expectation that his next pilgrimage was imminent."

– Susan Stratton | San Diego, CA

"Although I'm pretty new to the Camino, John's guide was so helpful and thoughtful to me and my grandson."

– Susan Prin | Eden Prairie, MN

"John's book was my 'bible' on my Camino. Always in my pocket."

– Emily Zell | Raleigh, NC

"He was a unique treasure here among us."

– Julie Blenn | Keauau, HI

"I had the distinct pleasure of spending a few hours interviewing John Brierley when a global pandemic changed all our plans and lives so drastically. I began hosting a weekly Zoom call to create a community–Pilgrimage in Place–during those strange first days of the pandemic. John graciously accepted my invitation to be one of my first guests and talk about how to be a pilgrim when so many of us couldn't leave our homes, much less our countries. What came to me after spending that time with him was that John was irrepressible. I think we all knew he loved the Camino, but what was so clear in talking with him was how much he loved pilgrims. All of us. You, me, and those pilgrims just setting out. Upon hearing the news of his passing, I felt sadness at our loss, but happiness for the Camino he was embarking on. I can't help but think he was lacing up his shoes with two pilgrims near to my heart: Phil Volker, subject of the film *Phil's Camino*, and Gene McCullough, a key volunteer with American Pilgrims on the Camino. I just know they gave John a warm welcome."

"His guidebooks were always with us on the Camino, and with these books we always felt we would find a place to sleep, find a place to eat, and would not overlook any important and interesting sites along the Way."

– Annie O'Neil | Los Angeles, CA

– Gregory Madsen | Westerville, OH

"Anyone is welcome to remember [John] and send him blessings on his way in whatever way feels most fitting. Be it by raising a glass of his beloved Galician Albariño or Irish Whiskey, by collecting and clearing some rubbish from a path, by supporting one of the many pilgrim associations whose work he so respected, or by helping a fellow pilgrim on their way."

– Gemma Brierley, John Brierley's daughter





Members Giving Back

"For it is in giving that we receive."

~ St. Francis of Assisi



Ribadiso Welcome Service: Stepping Off the Way to Connect with Other Pilgrims

by Jacqueline Molenaar
Lafayette, CO

In May 2023, I volunteered at the Ribadiso municipal albergue for 15 days through a partnership between American Pilgrims on the Camino and the Xunta de Galicia, the provincial government of Galicia. I had walked a Camino in 2022, and after an experience that filled my heart, I returned to serve.

Ribadiso is located along the Camino Francés, approximately 40 kilometers before one reaches Santiago de Compostela. Throughout the centuries, the 800-year-old albergue—most recently renovated in 1993—has been devoted to serving pilgrims. My duties included sweeping the albergue each morning and being available to pilgrims each afternoon. In return, I received accommodations in an onsite apartment and experienced again that distinctive peace found on the Camino.

Spain is not my country, but I feel completely at home there. At times, I am most comfortable with my life when I am the farthest away from it. I desire to fashion a life I don't want to escape from, and I believe distance is necessary in order to view things more clearly. I seek the Camino so that I can connect my feet with the earth, my heart to my soul, and live a simpler life.

The economist E. F. Schumacker says, "Any intelligent fool can make things bigger, more complex, and more violent. It takes a touch of genius—and a lot of courage—to move in the opposite direction."

In serving on the Camino instead of walking, I had the chance to step outside of myself and truly connect with the lives of others. The pilgrims' struggles and joys activated my compassion gene. I listened to those who had lost someone and to those who came looking for themselves. With their release, burdens became lighter. I saw strangers arrive alone and leave the next morning as friends. I comforted a woman crying after a particularly hard day and witnessed her soul lightening over a shared meal and some good laughs. I walked with an especially jovial group of Irishmen who were collecting and carrying prayer requests to St. James, and I took a fair share of photos of those wanting to commit Ribadiso to permanent memory. A common thread was a desire to seek peace instead of chaos and grounding instead of commotion.

I found my peace in the distinctive opportunity to see myself in others. This was my Camino. Fewer steps, but no less heart.



Pilgrimage of the Heart: Finding Joy Through Service to the Albuquerque Chapter

by Paula Steele
Albuquerque, NM

My call to an unusual pilgrimage came about a year ago when I attended a meeting held by Linnea and Luana, co-coordinators of the Albuquerque Chapter of American Pilgrims on the Camino. They were seeking assistance with various chapter needs. Typically, I am not one to jump in and sign on without reservation. I like to dip my toe into the water. Start slow. I thought I was doing just that when I volunteered to edit our chapter newsletter. To me, editing meant someone else was responsible for creating content, and I would simply be correcting grammatical errors and obvious spelling mistakes and perhaps untangling a stylistic knot here or there. So, I agreed to edit the newsletter.

Thrilled to take a break, Linnea happily passed newsletter responsibilities on to me. I decided not to burst her bubble and went along with it. We had a training session, and pretty soon I was on my way to figuring the ins and outs of our email management tool. Once I got over a few hurdles and frustrations and learned some of the more creative ways to play with it, I found I was having a grand time.

The next step on my internal pilgrimage was answering the call to help create a spreadsheet for tracking the volumes in our chapter's portable lending library of Camino-related books. I'd never used Excel. Fortunately, my husband had expertise in that area and set it up for me. Luana and I went through the boxes of books and entered each title. That was easy, and I really enjoyed discovering the many books our chapter has available to lend to fellow pilgrims. But that was only the beginning of the library journey. At one chapter gathering, Luana, keeper of the library, had to leave early. Because my husband and I lived around the corner from her, we agreed to bring the books home with us and return them to Luana. Almost a year later, we still have them. In that time, we have bought plastic bins for storage and a cart to more easily transport them to events. I have also updated the check-in/check-out process.

When I attended the meeting convened by Linnea and Luana about a year ago, I was not seeking to take on responsibilities. I was ready to provide assistance in a minimal way. Dear me, what I found instead was a joy in providing service that was nourishing me, too. My pilgrimage was taking place in my heart and mind as I engaged in taking a more active role in my pilgrim community.

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



My Camino of Service

by Karin Kiser
San Diego, CA

I planned to walk the Camino del Norte in 2018, immediately following my two-week stint as a hospitalera in Galicia. Apparently the Camino had other plans for me. Five years later, I still haven't made it to the northern route. Why not? The trash.

Ever since my first Camino in 2011, I have been bothered by the trash along the Francés route—especially the used tissues and waste around the trees. That trash was calling me back, asking, “Do you want to be part of the problem, noticing the trash, feeling contempt toward those who leave it as you silently walk on? Or do you want to be part of the solution and do something about it?” After my second Camino, I chose the latter.

I started picking up trash on my own, usually in the afternoons when there were fewer pilgrims on the trail. I didn't want anyone to see me. I felt this was between me and the Camino—my private way of giving back. Yet it was impossible to find a time of day when there were no other pilgrims. Some simply stared at me, others made comments among themselves as they walked by, and a few offered thanks. Many who saw me bending over on the side of the road or in the ditch seemed genuinely moved by what I was doing. I was shocked when one pilgrim asked to snap a photo, then dumbfounded when another wanted to take a video. It seemed strange that anyone picking up trash would be photo-worthy.

Then I realized that, yes, a tall woman picking up trash in a country that is obviously not her own might indeed draw attention and have an impact. I might inspire others to dispose of trash properly, and they might, in turn, inspire others to do the same. Perhaps I also would inspire someone else to pick up some litter.



This Camino of Service has evolved beyond my solo quest to pick up trash. It had to. Collecting rubbish day after day can quickly become discouraging. You get a glimpse of what a post office worker might feel, because the trash—much like the daily incoming mail—never seems to end. So, I created the Camino Cleanup project to raise awareness about not littering along the trail and to inspire Camino veterans to join me in Spain to help clean it up. Thus far, we've collected 168 bags of trash. Care to join us?

*Editor's note: Karin Kiser is the author of *Your Inner Camino* and *After the Camino*. Part of the proceeds from her book sales goes toward her efforts to keep the Camino clean. To learn more about her Camino Cleanup project, email Karin at SUPPORT@KARINKISER.COM.*

Left and top right: The author picks up garbage between Astorga and Rabanal on the Camino Francés, May 2023. Photos by Don Gimmy.

Considering Serving as an Hospitalero?

by Emilio Escudero
Berkeley, CA

If you are considering serving as an hospitalero, then you have most likely experienced the transformative power of the Camino and are now wanting to give back. Like many of us who have served as hospitaleros, you probably learned some of the lessons of the Camino and now want to help pilgrims to deepen their self-awareness and compassion, accept the inevitable, let go of those things that cannot be changed or controlled, and help others to heal and to embrace life. Does any of this ring true for you?

When you walked the Camino, you met many hospitaleros and probably treasure the endearing memories you hold for some of those kind souls. They welcomed you when you arrived exhausted at an albergue—providing a safe and secure place for you to rest and encouraging you along your way to Santiago. Their vocation was to support and nurture pilgrims on their journey and to personally embody the spirit of the Camino so that the pilgrim experience is all that it can be for each person passing through their albergue door.

Would you like to do this work? Having gone through the training and volunteered several times myself, I highly recommend the experience. I also recommend that you prepare yourself. Training is important because, while the rewards of being an hospitalero are many and wonderful, the two-week work assignments can be challenging.

American Pilgrims on the Camino trains hospitaleros as part of its mission to support the enduring traditions of the Camino. The training is designed to help you apply your experience, energy, and natural gifts in the service of pilgrims walking the Camino. The three-day training takes place several times a year in locations across the United States and focuses on the practical aspects of managing an albergue, the physical and spiritual needs of pilgrims, and also self-care.



Hospitaleros prepare the evening meal with pilgrims at the donativo albergue in Grañón, Spain, May 2011. Photo by Emilio Escudero.



Would you like to sign up to learn what it takes to do this exceptional and enormously satisfying work? I hope you do. It is my good fortune to be the newest member of the hospitalero training team, and I comfortably speak for the team in saying we look forward to meeting you.

Learn more about hospitalero eligibility requirements and upcoming training opportunities at AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG/HOSPITALERO-TRAINING.

Hospitalero Peter Millington, far left, shares an evening meal with pilgrims at Albergue de Peregrino de Zamora, October 2018. Photo by Emilio Escudero.

MEMBERS GIVING BACK



Hospitalero trainees enjoy a bonfire following the evening's communal meal, June 2023. Photo by Cheryl Grasmoen.

Learning the Ropes to be an Hospitalero

by Tali Walters

Hospitalero Training Class of June 2023

Newton, MA

Who would have thought a bike ride over the Pyrénées into St. Jean Pied de Port would lead to a passion, now enduring a decade, for the Camino? Seeing peregrino heads coming over the rise in the meadow at Ibañeta just before Roncesvalles sparked my curiosity. A two-month sabbatical to celebrate a successful career and a strong, pre-60-year-old body made my first Camino Francés possible. Since then, I have joined hundreds of thousands of pilgrims on many other routes heading into Santiago de Compostela.

Who makes these Camino quests possible—and perhaps a bit more bearable—for the increasing numbers of pilgrims flocking to St. Jean from around the world, or starting in Le Puy, or walking out their front door in Denmark? In medieval times, Charlemagne and the Roman Catholic Church developed an infrastructure of hostels, bars, and monasteries for pilgrims in need of a meal and a bed.

Not so different now! As you approach the town at the end of your day's walk and pray there will be a bed, do you wonder who will greet you at the registration desk and give you that much-needed cup of cold water? Who cleans the showers and readies the rooms so you can freshen up and plop onto the bed for rest upon your arrival?

In June 2023, in the Poconos Mountains of Pennsylvania, I joined 13 other peregrinos to learn the ropes to be an albergue volunteer, or hospitalero/a. It isn't just about registering pilgrims and cleaning toilets and rooms. Being an hospitalero is far more than you might imagine. Through the American Pilgrims on the Camino hospitalero training program, we learned about hospitality traditions, culture, and spirit. We learned how to pronounce hospitalero and albergue. (If you're curious about that, I encourage you to sign up for hospitalero training.)

We learned about community, service, gratitude, and simplicity—values infused in our interactions with each pilgrim arriving at an albergue at the end of a long day's walk. We learned about the simple hospitality of a clean, quiet, safe space to rest, reflect, share, and let go. We learned how to enhance the pilgrim experience by providing them comfort in their weariness and celebrating their joys with them. We learned about flexible, respectful, and communicative hospitalero congeniality and teamwork. And we learned about the practicalities of modern peregrino food, poetry, and first aid.

After 48 hours together, our training group headed home with plans and dreams of our next Camino experience, this time as hospitaleros giving back to the Camino that raised our own lives high.

A hand is shown holding a cork, likely from a wine bottle, on a red tablecloth. In the background, there is a glass of red wine and a plate of food. The scene is set for a meal, possibly a celebration or a special occasion.

Navarra Experience

"A nation's culture is in the heart and soul
of its people."

~Mahatma Gandhi

ESTELL
LIZARRA
NAVARRA

Portals in Spain

by Jo Halverson
Tyrone, GA

"Everyday [sic] we open and close doors, taking a passage from the profane outer space into the sacred inner space, crossing the boundary of public and private, the mysterious and familiar, darkness and light, life and death... Everyday [sic] we walk through a door of some kind; whether it is a door of consciousness or an entrance door of our house, we face symbols and metaphors on a daily basis."

– Nato Giorgadze, *"The Greater Reality behind Doors: Study on perception of Doors"*

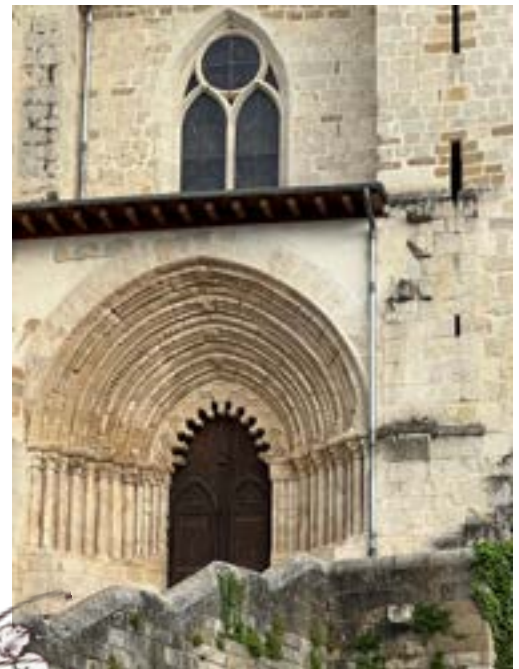
The door as an allegory—a transition from one state of being to the next—rather than just a partition keeping me from whatever is on the other side, became a thrilling adventure as I stepped through both magnificent and humble portals during the first joint cultural program between American Pilgrims on the Camino and Asociación los Amigos del Camino de Santiago de Estella-Lizarra, Spain, in May 2023.

The Iglesia de San Pedro de la Rúa in Estella was built in the 12th century in Romanesque style. It is the oldest church in a town that was founded primarily to protect pilgrims on the Way. The extraordinary portal to this monastic complex is an Arab-influenced lobed archway. Notwithstanding the town's second objective, to prevent Muslim expansion, the entrance is a testament to the complex interactions between Muslim craftsmen and Christian architecture. The portal was enigmatic enough to satisfy my desire to remain outside, with its biblical tales, Celtic knots, mystical keys, plants, and Arab influences. Nonetheless, one should never miss an opportunity to peek inside when given the opportunity!

Truly, of all the doors that are the portals to enter another time and era, this gem, in a town whose name means "star" in Basque, was the crown jewel during my week-long adventure in the Navarra region of Spain. When you walk the trails and hike through medieval towns, will your journey include an entrance to another dimension?

Previous page: Estella place setting, May 2023.
Photo by Jo Halverson.

Right: The Romanesque-style Iglesia de San Pedro de la Rúa in Estella, showing its Arabic influences in the multi-lobed archway on May 24, 2023. Photo by Jo Halverson.



A Week of Amity in Navarra

by Hannah Goldberg
Bremen, ME

In mid-May 2023, 27 American pilgrims embarked on a week of discovery along the Camino. A year in the making, the trip through beautiful and lesser-known Navarra was organized at the suggestion of the Asociación los Amigos del Camino de Santiago de Estella-Lizarra, the oldest Friends of the Camino association in Spain. The association had received an American Pilgrims on the Camino grant to make the town's albergue wheelchair accessible. Later, association president Maxi Ruiz de Larramendi proposed that maybe the two organizations could take a walk together, a walk that would allow American pilgrims a deeper understanding of the rich heritage and gastronomy of Navarra, not only along the Camino Francés, but also along the less-traveled Aragonés and Baztán Camino routes that crisscross the region. Working with a dedicated team of American Pilgrims leaders, the Amigos del Camino in Estella made it happen.

What we experienced that week was remarkable—in the beauty of the churches, monasteries, and palaces we visited; in the excellence of the Navarrase cuisine (at the peak of asparagus season!); and above all in the warmth and enthusiasm of our hosts. With grace and unflagging energy, Maxi, Javier Velaz, and Salvador Garin shepherded us through an itinerary of staggering scope—a private tour of the Pamplona Cathedral, a belt-tightening lunch at a gastronomic society, and a dive into the crypt of Leyre's medieval monastery where Benedictine monks still chant the nightly Mass.

On each of these adventures, we piled into our tour bus alongside Estella association representatives and were welcomed on arrival by members of each local association—St. Jean Pied de Port, Pamplona, Baztán, Puente la Reina, Los Arcos. For American pilgrims, it's all too rare to meet local people in the towns through which we pass, so the chance to



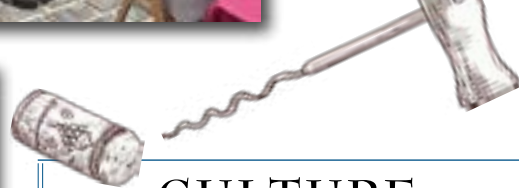
The indefatigable Maxi Ruiz de Larramendi (center) at the feast of the Virgin of Puy at the Plaza de Santiago in Estella-Lizarra on May 25, 2023.
Photo by Hannah Goldberg.

interact with the communities of people living along the Camino and experience their pride and dedication was a unique privilege.

Our hosts arranged the week to culminate with the feast of the Virgin of Puy, one of their biggest celebrations of the year. The town's atmosphere that week was festive—traditional music and dancing, the running of a “bull” that shot a tower of sparks to the delight of the children it chased around the square, even an actual running of the cows right past our hotel. On our final day, tables in the plaza were set for more than 300 people, and we feasted together on suckling pig and lingered late into the afternoon, grateful for this experience on the Camino.

Thanks to those who generously shared their photos from the Navarra trip. We wish we could have included them all. Photos contributed by: Bonnie Benson, Celia Dollmeyer, Maryjane Dunn, Hannah Goldberg, Jo Halverson, Kathy Kehe, Miriam Martinez, Paula McPhaul, Waleska Pierantoni, Kathy Privatsky, and Adam Wells.

|| NAVARRA EXPERIENCE ||



CULTURE,
GASTRONOMY,
HISTORY





Arts & Culture

Detail of crucifix in Santa María Church-Fortress in Ujué, Spain, May 2023. Photo by Kathy Kehe

Tomorrow Santiago

by Charles Johnson
Champlin, MN

*Here I sit on a sturdy bar stool,
My eyes stare back from a glass wine pool,
A weary traveler mocking me,
A pilgrim seeking some clarity;
Tomorrow the end, yet I feel the fool.
Review the road taken (Frost would concur),
Searching for changes (all seems as were);
Santiago just a day away,
What wisdom was winnowed from The Way?
I am not untouched, of that I'm sure.
Weighing the ways The Way left its mark,
I sense an ember, a flame, a spark,
A grain of change to nurture and rise;
A start, not an end, I now realize,
To a better me than who embarked.
Alone on this penultimate eve,
My mood a tangled mess to unweave;
Pleased and proud to have made it here,
But I'll miss this path, on that I'm clear;
Gladdened and grateful, and yet I grieve.
As I sip my wine and release slow sighs,
Twisting tear trails trickle from my eyes;
Tomorrow I dance on cathedral square,
Tonight I cry with a heart laid bare;
My armor is shed...as are my lies.
These words I share hoping they make sense,
To my fellow pilgrims ages hence,
I explained it all as best I could,
I walked a road through village and wood;
And that has made all the difference.*



It was difficult to read this La Concha issue's theme—"The Ways Less Traveled"—and not be reminded of the poet that made the phrase "the road less traveled" part of the American lexicon. Robert Frost's "The Road Not Taken" is one of literature's most recognized poems, and its contemplation of paths taken syncs well with this issue's theme. Whether on the Camino del Norte or the Camino Primitivo, Inglés, Francés, Portugués, or another, most every pilgrim arrives at a point near the end of their journey that is the bittersweet intersection of elation and remorse, and the pilgrim pauses to reflect upon their journey. "Tomorrow Santiago" tips its cap to Frost's famous poem and captures such a moment of examination of the way traveled.

The Way of the Gardener

Book Review

The Way of the Gardener: Lost in the Weeds along the Camino de Santiago

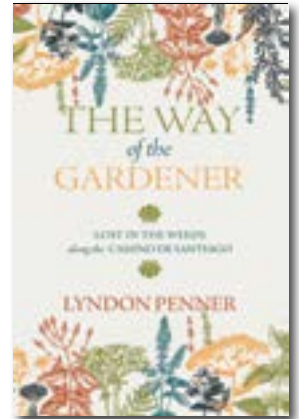
by Lyndon Penner

University of Regina Press, 2021

159 pages

Reviewed by Jerald Stroebele

Anchorage, AK



On my first post-pandemic foray into my local library, I discovered this little gem in the travel section. The author, a professional horticulturist, walked the Camino Francés one September and October from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostela.

This Camino memoir offers a different perspective than most. Yes, the author describes villages, towns, and cities along the Camino and appreciates the albergues, cafés, cathedrals, roads, trails, pilgrims, and locals he encounters during the journey. But above all, this pilgrim loves the plants (and birds) he spots along the Camino, whether potted geraniums adorning a balcony or a moss carpet in the woods.

He describes in botanical and layman's terms each plant he sees and its natural and transplanted range in the world. He discusses plant pollinators and his delight in seeing them. He shares his passion for the plant kingdom with his readers and includes illustrations of some plants. I, too, have enjoyed the natural wonders of the Caminos and took botany courses in college, but this book really educated me about what I had seen—and missed.

The author describes St. James's gourd and how it is pollinated. I didn't know that in Africa it is called a calabash. Those chainsaw-wielding guys wearing bright suits and sawing all the limbs off trees in towns in autumn? They are pollarding the trees so that new branches can grow. Did you know the red carnation is the national flower of Spain? The Japanese word *komorebi* describes the patterns of sunlight on the forest floor as it filters down through the canopy of tree leaves. You can witness this phenomenon in Galicia (when it's not raining).

My wife is a professional botanist and an avid birder. I have ordered a copy of this book for her to carry (7.5 ounces) when we return to the Camino Francés this fall. Penner writes, "the Camino frequently offers small jewels, unexpected moments as bright and encouraging as any flower." His book is one of them.



Sacred Blisters

Book Review

Sacred Blisters

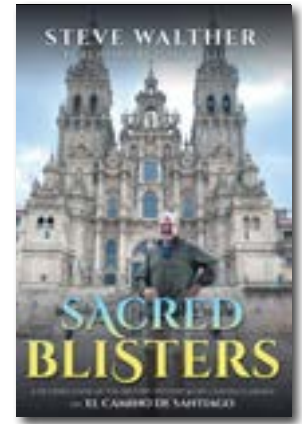
by Steve Walther

Writers Republic LLC, 2023

150 pages

Reviewed by Joseph A. Curro, Jr.

Arlington, MA



This is a joyful book. The author clearly loves interacting with people, and he especially relishes the company of other pilgrims. This joy runs straight through his many Camino tales to the very end, where he includes a photo montage of his various Camino families from his four pilgrimage walks.

Sacred Blisters has no narrative that ties the book together. Instead, it is a collection of short anecdotes and remembrances that seeks to emphasize just what makes the Camino so special.

Camino enthusiasts will particularly appreciate that the foreword to this book is written by the incomparable Dan Mullins, who has interviewed Walther several times on *My Camino - the podcast*. Walther has also been featured on Leigh Brennan's *The Camino Cafe*, and many of the stories in his book will be familiar to listeners of either podcast.

For example, Walther tells of the friendship he struck up with two Spanish pilgrims, who were bragging the whole way about how they had booked places at the San Francisco Spa and Retreat in Santiago. Every day, they talked about how they were “going to get massages, spa treatments, manicures and pedicures, steam baths...” Only after completing their pilgrimages did they learn that they had mistakenly reserved a spa vacation in Santiago, Chile!

In the foreword, Mullins describes his first interview with Walther as feeling more like two men over 50 having a chat at a bar in Spain. This conversational, easy-going manner carries through to Steve Walther's writing.


You just know you are going to love this guy when he impulsively quits his job in the 1990s, hauls off to Spain to live and study, and eventually falls in love with and marries a Spanish woman. They raise their family in Idaho, but the draw of Spain and the Camino remains strong. Their garden brims with toad skin melons grown from seeds purchased in a Spanish village.

This reviewer will admit to feeling an instant connection with the author, as nearly simultaneously we each walked a Camino with a daughter who had recently graduated high school. Father and daughter share inside jokes and funny nicknames for some of the pilgrims they encountered along the way. It all feels so familiar.

Even in the face of sorrow, when Walther's father dies during his Camino, he remains philosophical and fundamentally upbeat.

Sacred Blisters is an enthusiastically optimistic read that exudes the Camino spirit.



A photograph of a rural landscape. In the foreground, a wooden fence with two strands of barbed wire runs across the frame. Behind the fence, a field is covered with white plastic, likely for agricultural purposes. The background shows a green field under a clear blue sky.

A different walk

*by Shoshana D. Kerewsky
Eugene, OR*

*In the light before sunrise,
wheat fields still grey then green,
then red poppies
edge the boundaries,
liminal glow.
I once walked in high summer,
gold and browner,
harvest stubble.
I am surprised in grief.*

Photo by Thom Rying.

Prancing in the Pyrénées, Sloshing Through Galicia

Book Review

Prancing in the Pyrénées, Sloshing Through Galicia: My Way Along the Camino Francés

by Suzanne Blazier

Self-published, 2022

184 pages

Reviewed by Sara Gradwohl

Mooresville, IN



We often hear, “everyone’s Camino is different” and “there’s no right way to walk the Camino.” We expect our experience will be unique. It’s not even necessary to walk, as cycling and horseback riding are options.

The Camino experience Suzanne Blazier describes in her book is anything but the “typical” 35-40 days walking from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago and then on to Finisterre. What makes her journey and this book different? Her self-determination and honesty.

Physically and mentally prepared for the Camino, Blazier set off in September 2019. Unfortunately, she encountered illness and other difficulties along the way. By the time she reached “Stage 26,” Blazier realized she could not complete her Camino as planned. Instead of glossing over the challenges and breezing on to the parts that worked, she frankly describes accepting her reality.

She pondered the question, “In 10 years, what will your heart regret about the Camino if you don’t do it now?” Her answer came quickly: “Walking to the coast.” To her, the two most important parts of the Camino Francés are walking in the French Pyrénées and out to the Atlantic Coast. Blazier took the bus from Sarria to Santiago, skipping the last 100 kilometers.

Pilgrims find their true Camino in different places. Blazier found hers when she walked from Santiago to Finisterre, finishing her Camino with no regrets. The Compostela and distance certificate were not important. She knows how far she walked.

Her Camino memoir is practical and non-religious, ideal for those wanting to walk a more athletic and spiritual path and for those who need encouragement to have no regrets. She doesn’t disdain religion; she just states it isn’t for her. During her time in France and Spain, she stepped inside only three churches, and her reasons for visiting those are interesting.

Throughout her book she includes advice for pilgrims: a packing list, a description of the albergue experience, useful Camino Spanish, daily itinerary, and the admonition to make your Camino one of no regrets.

In addition to this memoir, Blazier has also published a basic paperback *Camino Journal* for pilgrims wanting a lightweight, old-school journal to log their day’s experiences in short form: date, distance, temperature/weather, people met, meals, and more. As someone who keeps a regular travel journal, I’d need more pages, but for those who want a practical place for notes, this might be a helpful, lightweight addition to your backpack.

ARTS & CULTURE

Walking with Sam

Book Review

Walking with Sam: A Father, a Son, and Five Hundred Miles Across Spain

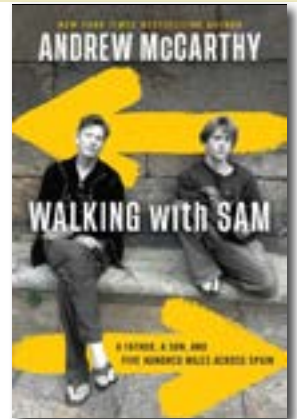
by Andrew McCarthy

Grand Central Press, 2023

241 pages

Reviewed by Allison Venuto

Dallas, TX



Actor, travel writer, and television director Andrew McCarthy's fourth book describes the inner and outer journey experienced on his second Camino. Having walked the Francés route alone more than two decades ago, his latest memoir recounts the more recent journey he shared with his son, Sam. In *Walking with Sam: A Father, a Son, and Five Hundred Miles Across Spain*, McCarthy expertly weaves stories from the walk with reflections on their relational growth and memories stirred during their month-long walk together. These shifts in time give the book an ethereal quality that instantly transports the reader to the timelessness many pilgrims have experienced on the Camino.

Displaying his decades-long experience in travel writing, McCarthy deftly interposes comments on Spanish culture, Camino history, and fatherhood. *Walking with Sam* offers a glimpse into a world not often written about in Camino memoirs—that of walking with teens. While divided into days, the memoir diverges from many books in that the author often focuses on a couple of details or interactions rather than recounting an entire day. McCarthy’s honesty about their open conversations, coupled with frustrations that arise when Sam wants to sleep until noon on a Camino walked under an August sun, brings the journey alive for the audience.

Three important questions frame this father-son journey. The first comes with McCarthy's initial invitation to his son to walk, resulting in only a week to prepare. The second comes shortly after starting the walk in St. Jean Pied de Port, when Sam, who is processing a breakup, asks whether there is an airport in Pamplona. Days later, Sam asks whether McCarthy has heard of Finisterre.

Given the book's title—and that the book exists at all—the resolutions to those first two pivotal questions seem fairly obvious. As for whether this father-son journey leads to Finisterre, read the book (or listen to the audio version) to find out. What we will tell you is that despite Sam's early inclinations to quit, upon arrival in Santiago, he expresses to his dad what many other pilgrims have also come to know: "Dad, that's the only ten-out-of-ten thing I've ever done in my life."



New York Times bestselling author Andrew McCarthy tells pilgrims about his Camino memoir during an American Pilgrims national event held on May 6, 2023. Photo by Rachel Ganzon.

Find a recording of that event on the
AMERICAN PILGRIMS YOUTUBE CHANNEL

"Be fearless. Have the courage to take risks.

Go where there are no guarantees."

—Katie Couric

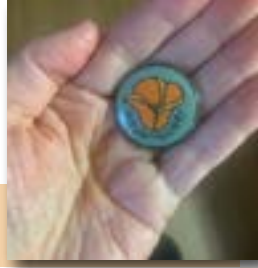


Pilgrims Way

Wild ponies along the Hospitales route of the
Camino Primitivo, May 2022
Photo by Francine Mastini.

Setting an Intention for Interaction Along the Way

by Robyn Dean
Oakland, CA



My “way less traveled” was not a specific Camino; it was the intention I set before leaving home.

One of the California poppy pins the author gave out along the Camino Portugués, May 2023. Photo by Robyn Dean.

I think most pilgrims look forward to encountering people from all over the world on the Camino. It is, indeed, a big part of the allure of the Camino. Meeting people from other countries, finding out what brings them to the Way, and hearing different perspectives are all important parts of what makes the Camino such a rich experience. But some of the interactions that have most touched me are those from the local people who bless me with their “Buen Camino,” who serve me dinner, who expertly go right to the needed foot remedy in the pharmacy, or who lean out their high-rise window to point me in the right direction when they see I have wandered off course.

So, on this Camino, I set the intention to make my interactions more meaningful with the local folk who assist me. I did it in two ways. One was to pause before asking for what I needed and sincerely inquiring, “How are you today?” Simple, but with eye contact and clarity that before we set about to solve my problem, I wanted to know how their day was going. The pharmacist or waitress would pause, realize I really wanted to know, then take a breath, smile, and answer. This often led to an engaging dialogue full of laughter and often a few tidbits about the town or their lives.

The second way I showed my gratitude was to give out California poppy pins I had brought along. It was a little gift, really, but it was tangible. As each person realized I was giving them a token, they would smile and give a sincere thank you. Once, as I pinned a button to a man’s shirt

pocket, his arms flew open, and the biggest grin reaching all the way to his eyes emerged.

As I was recounting my recent journey to my brother, he asked about the highlight of this pilgrimage. Never before had my brother expressed interest in walking the Camino, but when I told him about the man who accepted my gift with such joy, he responded, “Maybe I’ll go with you next time.” You never know what will draw someone to the Camino, and you never know what will touch you most deeply.

70 Days Across the USA

by Ann Brooks
San Francisco, CA

Have you ever looked at a book cover and seen your future? I have.

Last November, one week after returning home from a yoga retreat in Peru’s Sacred Valley and a four-day trek up the Inca Trail to Machu Picchu, I came across Jessica Dunham’s *The Open Road: 50 Best Road Trips in the US*. Gazing at the book’s cover photo of Highway 1 winding along (cont.)



The author crossing puddles on Hadlock Ponds Loop in Acadia National Park on June 18, 2023. Photo by Steven Brooks.

|| PILGRIMS WAY ||

the California coast, I thought *This is it! This is my next adventure—my 70th birthday gift to myself.* The longer I stared at the serpentine road snaking between mountain cliffs and the vast Pacific Ocean, I was more committed. I knew I would be taking a 70-day road trip, one day for every year of my life, driving through all 48 contiguous states, hiking a minimum of three miles every day, rain or shine, and treading the ground in every state.

Each year since 2011, when I hiked my first Camino from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago, I have hiked somewhere around the world. Five of those years included various Camino pilgrimages. To celebrate my 70th, I had considered circumnavigating Prince Edward Island on the recently created 435-mile Island Walk. No fireworks went off when I thought about that trail—certainly nothing like the explosion of happiness that blasted my mind and heart as soon as Dunham’s book rested in my hands.

For six months, I planned the itinerary, reserved accommodations, poured over the AllTrails app for the best hikes, researched facts and history about parks, cities, and cultural sites, and honed my packing list. On May 5, 2023, my husband and I packed my Prius and set out on this 15,000+ mile adventure.

As of this writing, on day 53 of the trip, my waterproof Altra hiking boots have clocked over 282 miles and my Prius almost 11,100 miles. Soil from California to Utah to Louisiana to Maine and now the Midwest clings to my boot ridges. Just as grapes take on the *terroir* of the ground in which they are grown, I am being changed by and infused with the soil on

which I have tread. My “flavor” is being altered and will continue to be as I explore the mountain states and the upper West Coast states that are yet to be explored on this trip.

Editor’s note: If you’d like to read more about Ann’s 70-day journey exploring the United States, check out her blog at [MEDIUM.COM/@ANNLOAR](https://medium.com/@ANNLOAR).

Camino de Madrid: A Pilgrimage Embraced by Villagers

by Jim Larocco
Alexandria, VA

After walking the Caminos Francés, Primitivo, Aragonés, de San Salvador, and del Ebro, we sought an even lesser walked Camino. We found this in the Camino de Madrid. We started with the pilgrim Mass, blessing, and credencial issued and stamped at the Iglesia de Santiago Apóstol in the heart of the old city in Madrid. We were the only ones at the altar and later hosted in the sacristy. The following day, we set out, taking a bus to the suburbs to avoid walking for hours on the streets in Madrid. After a pleasant walk in the foothills of the Guadarrama, we were welcomed by Ray and Rosa, hosts well known for picking up pilgrims in the center of Manzanares El Real and taking them to their home. Their hospitality was legendary, and they did not disappoint.

The following days, we walked higher and higher until we reached a Roman road taking us to the top of the Guadarrama, with a scenic two-hours-long walk downhill to Segovia, one of Spain’s most historic cities. After two nights there, we began a walk from village to village where we were embraced with the spirit of the Camino unlike anything we had experienced.

The standout was Peñaflor de Hornija. As we walked up to the top of the mesa to the town, we were greeted by a streetside parrot that kept saying, “Buen Camino!” When we arrived in the plaza, the town seemed deserted. We sat down on a bench, and a gentleman came up to us and asked, “Peregrinos?” We nodded, and he led us through side streets shouting, “Peregrinos!” with shutters opening and residents looking out. It felt like we were in a (cont.)



Never seen a sign like this before! Camino de Madrid near Ceredilla, September 2019. Photo by Janet Larocco.



Entering the Nevada desert, 2011. Photo provided by Brian Heron.

Disney movie. When we got to the one bar in town, the barista phoned Señora Dolores who came with a key to the town's albergue. As she led us, other women joined her until we were overwhelmed with smiles and helpful hands. In the evening, we joined the villagers for songs in the plaza.

In Medina de Rioseco, we again were welcomed at a convent, then went to the main church to see one of the most spectacular retablos devoted to the life of Santiago anywhere in Spain. In Villeguillo, Kiki, barista of the town's only bar, was the most entertaining host we ever encountered. In the albergue, we were joined by Robert and Jeanine, two French Basque pilgrims. My wife treated Jeanine's blistered foot and served as her medical aide as we saw each other the rest of the Camino. In Valladolid, which is situated off the Camino, a resident spotted us at a bus stop, signaled for us to come over and jump in his Mercedes convertible, and then he drove us to Simancas, back to the Camino.

In Grajal de Campos, our last stop before Sahagún, the barista took pity on us starving peregrinos and phoned his mom to cook us a homemade meal. In Sahagún, we went directly to the Shrine of the Virgen Peregrina, where we received their version of a compostela. This is a brief summary of a Camino

that we will always remember for the villagers and townspeople who embraced us as no others have done before or since. The spirit of the Camino lives on for those who walk the Camino de Madrid.

A Personal Pedaling Pilgrimage

by Brian Heron
Gladstone, OR

Pilgrimages most often are centered around a journey to a sacred or holy site, such as Santiago, Mecca, Mt. Kailash, and dozens of other locations. In 2011, I designed my own pilgrimage route around the places that were sacred in my own life.

In the years leading up to 2011, a growing weight of grief descended on me. My marriage of 25 years unraveled, two immediate family members died, and I was leading a church through a closure/legacy process. In other words, I was breathing, eating, and dreaming of grief 24 hours a day.

As the church was nearing its final days, I increasingly felt adrift. I have always been a person called to serve, but I couldn't figure out where the world needed me most. My children were grown, (*cont.*)

and I had no appetite to guide another congregation through closure. I needed to rediscover who I was, where I belonged, and what my gifts were for the world.

In what I began calling a “Pedal Pilgrimage,” I crafted a route through the western United States that connected me once again to the land, to the people, and to the places that had shaped me. I returned to the ten most “sacred” sites of my own life, all special places in terms of my development and history.

I began and ended the 4,000-mile circular route in Portland, OR. I returned to my birthplace, Bozeman, MT, as well as to Loveland, CO, where I spent most of my childhood. I returned to the towns where I went to college and seminary and towns where I served churches. This personal pedaling pilgrimage helped me remember my deeper identity underneath the grief that had permeated my body and soul.

I embarked on the pilgrimage expecting some monumental breakthrough—like a new calling dropped from the heavens or followers suddenly anointing me as their leader. I did have a deep breakthrough, but it was much more subtle. After ten weeks and 4,000 miles I returned more content with my life just as it was. I returned ready to let go of the grief that had defined me and to embrace the gifts that had been there, hiding, all along.

*Editor’s note: Brian Heron is the author of *Alone: A 4,000 Mile Search for Belonging, about a pilgrimage he made on bicycle throughout the western United States*. Learn more: PEDALPILGRIM.COM.*



Brian Heron at Yellowstone Falls, Wyoming, 2011. Photo by a generous stranger.

Sensing the Way

*by Ronald Angert
North Port, FL*

The Way engages all of our senses and highlights some we might not have considered—such as the heart and gut—while discovering our journey.

Heart: I recall walking into Villamayor de Monjardín before 10 a.m. and immediately knowing I would be staying there for the night. I was in the right place at the right time. I left my pack in front of the albergue and enjoyed being in the town, exercising my senses until check-in time. The communal meal and evening meditation set my standards for the Camino.

Astorga called my name as I entered. We now live nearby in Castrillo de los Polvazares, a unique pueblo a little off the Camino. I’d like you to meet some of our neighbors, and I invite you to join us here as a different kind of pilgrimage or as an enrichment to your Camino journey.

Taste, Smell, and Gut: Enjoy a meal at Mesón del Arriero with chefs Alfonso and Andrea. Like the other restaurants in our historic town, they serve *cocido maragato*, a multi-course gastronomical experience featuring meat, then vegetables, then soup, and don’t forget the dessert! Their restaurant is unique here because they also offer a vegan menu, if one calls ahead a day or two. We aren’t vegetarians, but we frequently order their delicious vegetarian preparations.

Vision, Touch, and Heart: Gallery 18 with Nuría and José features metal sculptures that might not fit in your backpack but engage the senses, whether gazing at the sculptures or Nuría’s poetry books. If you fall in love with one of their heavy works, I bet we can find a way to get it shipped home!

All the Senses: For a pause along the Way there is Flores del Camino, a magical retreat center lovingly created by Basia and Bertrand. We first encountered the magic of the place through a stone-carving retreat. Participants learn the sacred geometry by visiting historic churches, and then after just five or six days somehow manage—under the skillful guidance of a master sculptor and teacher—to (cont.)



Panamint Dunes at first light, Death Valley National Park, January 2020. Photo by Joe Harris.

carve the design of their choosing. My wife Ann has also participated in stained glass and icon painting classes and writing retreats.

This village, located about a kilometer off the Camino, offers to stimulate all of your senses for an hour, a week, or a lifetime. Google these places. There is a lot more to sense and discover. We hope to see you here one day.

A Pilgrimage to the Sands

by Joe Harris
North Easton, MA

“Access to the trailhead requires a high-clearance vehicle.” I reflected on the sign’s message as I drove past it at the edge of Death Valley’s Panamint Sand Dunes. I was headed east through the Mojave Desert toward the park in search of solitude, enticed by the National Park Service’s explanation that challenges in accessing these dunes contribute to them being among the park’s less-visited wonders. A few miles beyond Panamint Springs, I turned from the gentle pavement of CA-190 onto an unmarked dirt road that slashed hard north for miles across the Panamint Valley floor.

To the east, Panamint Butte stood 6,584 feet above sea level. To the north, the snow-covered summit of Hunter Mountain glistened at 7,454 feet. To the

west and bordering a dry lake bed, Lake Hill rose 2,030 feet, with Darwin Plateau just visible beyond it. Immediately to my south rested the weathered remains of two long-abandoned vehicles, half-full of windblown sand and riddled with bullet holes. Shortly past the vehicle boneyard, the road bent northwest and then swung back northeast. From there, a wide shoulder formed a small parking area marking the trailhead.

The sun would be sinking in about 45 minutes. I collected my overnight gear and ventured out among the mesquite, creosote bush, and desert holly to find a place to sleep. Panamint Butte soon reflected a warm glow as coyotes began yipping in the distance. I pitched camp about three miles from where I had parked my car. Within a few hours, the Milky Way stretched across the sky, reaching both horizons and shining the brightest I had ever seen it.

I awoke before dawn and broke camp. A quick, one-mile descent to the base of the dunes transitioned to a brutal 400-foot ascent. The grains of fine sand slipping beneath my hands and feet made any elevation gain hard-fought. A final, exhausted push brought me to a narrow summit ridge. Minutes later, the sun crested the valley rim, its rays bathing the dunes in the first light of day.

A piercing silence surrounded me, no one else in sight to hear it. I had come to the dunes in search of solitude and had found temples made of sand—guarded by mountains, sculpted by the winds, and illuminated by the stars.

Creating Connections at a Pilgrim’s Pace

by Sandy Bonsib
Bloomington, IN

My husband and I were both 72 years old when we walked the Camino Portugués coastal route last year, from Porto, Portugal, to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. We walked 164 miles in 13 days, averaging just over 12.5 miles a day.

First, understand we are slow walkers. Everyone else walking our route passed us, sometimes (*cont.*)

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more than once. We didn't think of ourselves as slow walkers until then. We reminded ourselves to just put one step in front of the other, and we, like they, would get to Santiago. We could do this, and slow was OK.

To make this more fun and more positive, I counted the people we passed. Understand that this only happened when someone who had passed us stopped for a snack, lunch, or to take a break. My husband pointed this out to me, but I didn't care; I was passing them. That counted!

Second, with only one exception, the walkers we met were younger than us. They were extremely nice and inclusive, though, and we had wonderful conversations with them. Towards the end of our journey, we met an 82-year-old man walking his third Camino. That spurred a conversation between my husband and me, hoping we are healthy enough to walk another Camino when we're in our eighties.

Third, and most importantly, we met people from all over the world on the Camino. People talked to us about their lives, their disappointments, their tragedies, their hopes, and their fears. This was the most profound part of the journey for us and the most surprising. When people walk, they talk. So we listened. And we shared, too. We had read about the Camino, of course, before our journey, but we had not expected this. We came away from the journey with the realization that the best part of our journey was not the 164 miles, not the beautiful coast of Portugal, not the paths through the woods, not the delicious food, but the people we met. People who are now our friends.

Would we do another Camino? Yes! And we look forward to meeting more interesting, amazing people who share our space in this world.

A Walk Without Borders

by Keith Ridgway
Province, FL

What do I have to offer that hasn't already been written about the Camino de Santiago? After all, scholars believe the *Codex Calixtinus* was compiled between 1138 and 1173, and since then books, articles, movies, blogs, vlogs, and a myriad of other information sources have been written.

My own Camino journey was over ten years in the making. Maybe I was like you, working at a desk, sitting behind a computer, content to read about other people's adventures?

But there comes a time to stop reading and start doing. I'm over 60, 100 pounds overweight, and have bad knees. Why would I want to go?

I did what I could to train, and to put additional pressure on myself, I worked with my employer and created a fundraiser for Doctors Without Borders. This ensured I'd be accountable, as I now had a very public reason to go.

At the outset of our Camino, we were IT geeks, a preacher, a teacher, an engineer, a counselor, and a dog sitter. I spent most of my time with a 72-years-young Vietnam veteran and a Type 1-diabetic nurse. We became family. (cont.)



Strangers who became Camino family upon arrival in Santiago de Compostela on June 4, 2023. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

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The Camino reflects what's best in humanity, as there's a sense of community that includes care and compassion for all on the journey.

I did nothing extraordinary. All I did was follow my heart and put one foot in front of another. I also raised close to \$17,000 for Doctors Without Borders.

As I've gotten older, I've come to appreciate that time is more and more a precious commodity, and what we choose to do with time can determine the trajectory of our lives and others'. Use it wisely.

God walks along the Camino. He's in every wildflower you smell, every birdsong you hear, every breeze or raindrop you feel, every mountain or valley you see, and every meal you taste.

As you walk along what's left of the Roman roads, you can almost feel the echoes of former pilgrims' footsteps.

As you enter the tunnel and hear the bagpipes welcoming you to Santiago, you begin to feel the joy of countless others who walked with you and before you.

As you enter the square and gaze up to see the cathedral, you know why you walked, and a sense of peace enters your soul.

Along the Canal du Berry on the Isolated and Contemplative Path of the Vézelay Route

by Johnna Studebaker
Santa Fe, NM

After a simple French breakfast, *le petit déjeuner*, at the hotel, I retrace my steps out of the township of Sancoins. Eventually, I find my way and reach the towpath along the Canal du Berry. I turn left to pick up where I left off yesterday.

Pilgrim Danni had stopped at a *pâtisserie* for *croissants au chocolat*. Because he walks a lot faster than I do, he passes me with a nod as he disappears down the path, despite my best efforts to keep him in sight.

The cool of the fresh morning gives way to a blazing hot sun by early afternoon. My guidebook wisely recommends staying on the side of the canal that offers shade. Yet, I am still sent on bridges back and forth across the canal, sometimes into shade and sometimes, like now, into a stretch of sunshine on the right bank.

The Canal du Berry stretches for what seems like forever, into the wilds. I find myself straining my eyes to make out and focus on what exactly that large, dark object might be ahead of me in the distance. I can go back, or I can go forward. Either way is a long way to walk.

Eventually, I realize I am approaching a lone car parked on the narrow towpath between the canal and the dense underbrush and trees. As I pass by the car, I see a young, muscular man, his shirt off, full of tattoos, sitting there—no fishing poles set out, no acknowledgement as I walk by, no nothing. He had driven up that narrow towpath and is just sitting there in the heat of the day, sweating in his car. I, too, am sweating as I break into a run as soon as I disappear behind a curve in the towpath, praying all the way. (*cont.*)



Along the Canal du Berry on the Vézelay Route.
Oil painting by Johnna Studebaker.

Several more miles, and I am directed left onto the Arno bridge, and then off the canal. Who should I see sitting there resting and adjusting his boots on the left bank but my *nouvel ami*—my new friend—Pilgrim Danni. Together, we walk down a small, paved road toward the Domaine de Bellevue. And so goes my adventures along the old Canal du Berry on the Voie de Vézelay. I live to tell the tale.

Editor's note: This piece is an excerpt from the author's book Walking West on the Camino—on the Vézelay Route (Two Pelerines Press, May 2023).

Alternate Route

by Susan Blazier
Albuquerque, NM

Along the Camino Francés, there are occasional choices of route—some more traditional or heavily traversed, others less-frequented. I chose an alternate route one morning, leaving La Virgen del Camino for my destination of Villar de Mazarife. The way was well-marked as it meandered the countryside.

At the edge of Villar de Mazarife was a nice-looking hostel, Albergue San Antonio de Padua, with green grass, trees, and lounge chairs in front of the building. It appeared so relaxing and inviting that I secured a bed and signed up to eat dinner in the albergue. I rinsed out some clothes and sat on a lounge chair that afternoon writing postcards I had bought in León.

Returning to my bunk, I noticed in a bed near mine an older woman behaving strangely. The men's restroom and shower were nearly across from my bed; her bed was to the right of mine. From where she was situated, she would not have a direct view inside the bathroom door. Nevertheless, the guys seemed to have different standards for privacy, and many would go in to use the toilet or shower and not shut the door behind them. This greatly bothered my bunk neighbor. She would spring up from her bed, and then indignantly stride to the men's bathroom door to pull it shut in a huff. I do wonder how much of a view of the bathroom goings-on she exposed herself to each time she did this—probably 20 to 30 times during our stay. She was obsessed!



A bottle of vino tinto, thoughtfully adorned with a drip cloth, accompanies dinner at Albergue San Antonio de Padua, Villar de Mazarife, Spain, on October 6, 2019. Photo by Suzanne Blazier.

Dinnertime came; the welcome hospitality was evident as I entered the dining area. Each wine bottle was thoughtfully adorned with a red napkin around the neck to catch the drips. The salads at each place setting were made of fresh spring greens, cucumber, tomato, sunflower seeds, and a sweet, mustard-based dressing. Gazpacho and vegetarian paella were served, and dessert was a crêpe that I couldn't eat, but looked delicious. When I said no to the crêpe, the server brought me an apple, which I saved for the next morning.

When I returned to my bunk, the woman was still up and down, shutting the men's bathroom door over and over. I put in my earplugs and slipped on my eye mask to shut her out.

My advice: If communal living will cause you stress, don't stay in an albergue. Also don't hesitate to take this alternate route for a pleasant walk and to experience the wonderful Albergue San Antonio de Padua.



Basque Country Connector: Blazing Our Own Trail

by Dennis Brooke
Tacoma, WA

What do you do when you want to deviate from normal Camino routes onto a road less traveled? You reach out to the pilgrim community for help.

Laurie and I were inspired by Beth Jusino's *Walking to the End of the World: A Thousand Miles on the Camino de Santiago* and decided to walk to Santiago from Le Puy, France, along the Via Podiensis. In 2016, we walked the Camino Francés from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostela and chose to try something different this time. We wanted to combine the Le Puy route with the Camino del Norte—but how to connect the two? Suggestions ranged from public transportation to a strenuous hike north from St. Jean. We decided to try a more direct but not-well-documented route.

We posed the question to a Facebook group called “GR65 Via Podiensis: Walking the Le Puy Route in France.” The group's administrator, Bronwen Perry, responded with a route description, complete with GPX tracks—in Italian that she found on a French-language Camino site. With no guidebook available, we relied on Booking.com and Google Maps to find lodging. Google Translate helped us make some sense of the Italian instructions, and we decided to gamble and try it when we reached the end of the Le Puy leg.

We used the fresh-off-the-press *Camino de Santiago - Via Podiensis* guidebook by Dave Whitson (Cicerone, 2022) along with resources from the GR 65 Facebook group for our amazing journey from Le Puy to St. Palais—just a day short of St. Jean.

This path takes one through the heart of Pays Basque—French Basque Country. Because it goes through the foothills on the north side of the Pyrenees, it is a bit more challenging than some Camino routes, but easier than direct connections from St. Jean to the Camino del Norte.

Day One took us to the small village of Hélette, where we stayed in a gîte outside of town. This is where the biggest “disaster” of the route took place. Our hostess made dinner reservations for us in town. We got there early to enjoy time at the local bar; however, when we crossed the square to dine, we found that the restaurant—the only one in town—had closed for an emergency. The only grocery store in town was also closed. Tears were almost shed, but fortunately we had packed energy bars for emergencies like this. The next morning, we got permission to use the gîte's kitchen to whip up omelets, enjoying a heartier-than-normal breakfast before we were sent on our way.

The succeeding three days took us to larger towns with plenty of options for lodging, meals, and interesting sights. Day Two brought us to Espelette, a fun Basque tourist town known for its colorful red Espelette peppers. Day Three took us on a more remote section through the foothills and past ruins of Napoleonic-era military fortifications, before arriving in another good-sized town, Ascain. On Day Four, we entered the coastal town of Hendaye, and then crossed into Spain to the town of Hondarribia on a passenger ferry, a fitting end to our French adventure and the beginning of our Camino del Norte trek.

We saw parts of Basque country experienced by few pilgrims. Having blazed our own trail with the help of the community, we did our best to document it for other pilgrims who would like to go their own way between the Via Podiensis and Camino del Norte. If you'd like to try the Basque Country Connector route for yourself, you can find a more complete description and the GPX files at [WORLDROVERS.COM/BASQUE](https://worldrovers.com/basque).

Editor's note: Dennis and Laurie Brooke are hooked on Caminos and have hiked five already. When they aren't on pilgrimage or other adventures, they live in Tacoma, WA. They document their experiences at [WORLDROVERS.COM](https://worldrovers.com).

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Pays Basque Hotel in Espelette, France, on May 21, 2022.
Photo by Dennis Brooke.

Crossing the Pyrénées Mountains in Espelette, France, on May 21, 2022. Photo by Dennis Brooke.



We Gotta Get Outta This Place

by Peter Lagerwey
Seattle, WA

"Every day on the trail becomes a kind of pilgrimage... Pilgrims are people who journey toward sacred goals, and what lies nearer the sacred than an understanding of how to live and for what?"

—William deBuys, *The Trail to Kanjiroba*

In describing his journey through the Himalayas, deBuys gets to the core of what it means to be a pilgrim and captures the essence of what the pilgrim journey meant for me when I walked the Camino de Santiago in June 2018. His words also capture my longing to make every day a kind of pilgrimage—something I found difficult in the days and weeks following my return home post-Camino. I was no longer journeying toward sacred goals; I was not a pilgrim.

Fast forward to March 2020, when we entered lockdown during the COVID-19 pandemic. My wife Pat and I were suddenly prisoners in our own home. No visiting friends, no in-person church, limited shopping, and cherished writing and book groups moved to Zoom. Fear of the unknown invaded our minds. Horror stories of multiple deaths at local nursing

homes consumed the airwaves. At 67 and 68, we were at elevated risk.

As the days and weeks passed, our sense of isolation and seclusion grew. We talked and reached only one solution: Get out of the house. We took turns taking a picture of the other looking out our front window. The caption: We gotta get out of this place.

We started walking. Four or five blocks quickly turned into four or five miles and then longer. I recorded the miles. By the end of March we had walked 201 miles; by the end of April we had logged 579 miles. It dawned on us: We had walked the distance of a Camino; we were once again pilgrims. Each day was part of a sustained pilgrimage—we did not have a destination, so we never arrived. I had finally realized my aspiration to make every day a pilgrimage.

In February 2021, we received our first vaccines. We had walked 3,613 miles, just over seven 500-mile Caminos. While I have since quit tracking the miles, our Camino has not ended. We continue to walk and experience the “daily Camino” in our lives. This summer, we’ll go to Scotland and walk Hadrian’s Wall, spend a week on the sacred island of Iona, and then walk the Orkney Islands. Our Camino continues.

Camino Mozárabe: A Well-Marked Pilgrim Route in Southern Spain

by Jerald Stroebele
Anchorage, AK

When I returned from the Camino Francés last October, my wife Mary and I discussed our next trip. I suggested walking the Kerry Way in Ireland in April to take her back to her ancestors' roots. She wanted warmer and drier because our home in Anchorage, AK, was already experiencing a near-record winter snowfall. Mary suggested southern Spain. The Camino Vía de la Plata is the favorite of our French son-in-law Julien, who has walked many different Caminos. (He walked the Vía three times!) I had long planned to walk the Vía, but its long, dry stages north of Seville require carrying lots of water. I was vaguely aware of the Camino Mozárabe, with its shorter stages, and Mary quickly agreed to it. We invited Julien to join us.

Christians living under the benign rule of the Moors in Spain made their pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela by following a land trading route used at least since the 1300s from Almería, on the Mediterranean coast, inland 200 kilometers to the fabled city of Granada. From Granada, it is 167 kilometers to the other fabled Moors' city of Cordoba. From Cordoba, the Camino Mozárabe is 266 kilometers to Mérida, where it joins the Camino Vía de la Plata. From Almería to Santiago, you will walk 1,382 kilometers, the longest Camino within Spain.

We had no problems finding the Camino from Almería to Granada; it is the best waymarked



Mary Leykom spots the Alhambra from the Camino as she enters Granada on March 17, 2023.
Photo by Jerald Stroebele.



From left: Julien Guerrero, Mary Leykom, an unidentified pilgrim, Jerry Stroebele, and the gracious hospitalera Nely. March 2023. Photo by Nely.

Camino by far. In La Calahorra at the 100 kilometers from Almería milestone, I read (in Spanish), "In gratitude to the Association American Pilgrims on the Camino that has made this signing project of the Camino Mozárabe de Santiago a reality."

The power behind the Camino Mozárabe is a gracious woman named Nely, an official of the Asociación Jacobea de Almería- Granada Camino Mozárabe, who warmly welcomed us to her albergue in Almería and enthusiastically briefed us on the Camino. The Asociación Jacobea maintains exceptionally nice donativo albergues along the Camino to Granada, cleaned daily by volunteers, and provides excellent information on their website.

Starting March 5, Mary, Julien, and I walked to Granada in two weeks in wonderful weather. The trail was dusty and rough, steep and rocky in a few places, but easy in most. The Andalus people were super friendly.

Encountering Beauty on the Camino de Madrid

by Kurt Fauser
Keller, TX

After walking the Camino Francés, my wife and I knew we would someday return to experience a different route. While a few obstacles, such as a global pandemic and life issues, delayed us, the delay also gave us time to dream and create "our own way" to Santiago. Our trek last fall, walking the Caminos de Madrid, de San Salvador, and Primitivo did (*cont.*)

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just that. Of these routes, the Camino de Madrid is by far the “road less traveled.” This 300-kilometer walk took us two weeks. Being laid back and quiet, it was a good warm up for the mountains ahead. Fluency in Spanish was not necessary; locals know some English or how to use phone translation apps. Smiles, gestures, and charades also helped. On this route, we encountered beauty everywhere—visual, spiritual, and tranquil.

The visual beauty is spectacular, evident as you traverse through sandy pine forests; small villages; and farms of strawberries, grain, cows, and horses. Cast your eyes on majestic castles, churches, art, and Roman artifacts, including a first-century aqueduct in Segovia.

The spiritual beauty occurred through rich interactions with the locals and hospitaleros. In Villeguillo, Anita lovingly prepared a delicious tortilla to go. In Puente Duero, Arturo gave us a jar of homemade tomato sauce after we mentioned we would be making spaghetti for dinner. Locals stopped their cars, gave us directions, and walked us to our albergues. An observant village woman unlocked a church door for us without saying a word. Acts of kindness were abundant: bar tabs paid by strangers, complimentary fruit, even a flamenco dance lesson. As pilgrims, we experienced the generosity of strangers offering support, well wishes, and red-carpet treatment.

The tranquil beauty appeared in the form of solitude, similar to that experienced on the meseta. We only encountered one pilgrim during this stretch. Imagine having the albergue all to yourself! How about a hot shower or use of laundry facilities without having to wait. How beautiful is a night free

from the symphony of snorers or rustling of early risers? If you have done a Camino before, you will appreciate its ability to unwind your mind. Such tranquility can help us find ourselves without the distraction of others.

The Camino de Madrid will test your ability to persevere. You might even want to quit. We sure did at times! But the imagery, the human spirit, and the serenity of this route not only propelled us to finish, it prepared us for our next Camino experience.

Even on Roads Less Traveled, the Camino Still Provides

by Mark LaRocca-Pitts
Atlanta, GA

An often-heard aphorism is, “the Camino provides.” It does indeed. But it seems even more miraculous when you are walking the Vía Tours from Paris to St. Jean Pied de Port where the infrastructure supporting the pilgrim is basically nonexistent. Pilgrims either plan ahead or find themselves with no place to stay and nothing to eat. One day, I found myself with nothing to eat.

The night before, I had stayed in a lovely inn in Prunay-Cassereau. Apparently, the only restaurant in this village did not make it through the pandemic and the inn did not offer dinner. This meant I had to eat the last of what little food I had carried for lunches, leaving me concerned about what I (*cont.*)



Kathy and Kurt Fauser at the Roman Aqueduct of Segovia. Photo by Kathy Fauser.



My Camino angels, north of Château-Renault on the Via Tours on May 3, 2023. We never exchanged names. Photo by Mark LaRocca-Pitts.

would eat the following day. My plan was to cover 18 kilometers by lunchtime—right!—and find something to eat in Château-Renault.

Around 12 p.m., I decided to take a break, make a cup of *café l'blech* (instant coffee dissolved in pack-temperature water), and let my feet air out. You know the routine! No sooner had I gotten my shoes and socks off when a car came up the narrow grassy lane. As they crept by, they asked me if I needed anything, like a coffee or water. At first I said no, but they insisted, so I said that coffee would be nice. The man then carried my pack to their house just down the lane. Before I knew it, they were making me a huge meal with chicken, pasta, fried sausage, salad, and, of course, coffee. He also shared a couple of heavily fermented olives from his private stash that had quite the zing! It was the most filling lunch I ate during my entire Camino. He was a Frenchman, his wife was from Thailand, and both were Buddhists. They said they like to show kindness to the pilgrims who walk by; it makes them feel good. They even gave me six hard-boiled eggs from their own chickens.

I could swear that once during the meal as he handed me a piece of bread, I saw Joost, a character in the film *The Way*, offering a piece of bread to Tom. It is good to know there are others in the world for whom kindness is an instinct. And it is also good to know that even on the roads less traveled, the Camino still provides.



Jeffrey Keefer near an ancient dolmen in Marcilhac-sur-Célé, France, along the Chemin de Saint-Jacques in 2023. Photo by a generous pilgrim.

Finding My Right Path

by Jeffrey Keefer
New York, NY

I first walked the Camino in 2019, among the last to do so before the winter and the COVID-19 pandemic set in. I walked with a tour, as the logistics seemed challenging at the time, and the biggest surprise along the Way was when I arrived in Santiago.

I felt nothing.

Yes, nothing. Having wanted to walk the Camino for 30 years, I was unprepared to feel nothing.

Happiness? Joy? Sense of accomplishment? Item off my bucket list? No, none of these. I viewed the Basilica from the Plaza del Obradoiro and felt... nothing.

This emptiness haunted me, and I spent the COVID-19 lockdown making sense of my Camino, learning the wisdom of the ancient adage *solvitur ambulando* (it is solved by walking). I realized I need both internal as well as external silence to process my experience, and for whatever reason I could not manage that while walking across Spain. I needed to expand my Camino and found my home along the Chemin in France.

In 2022, when the pandemic receded enough to permit travel, I walked the Via Podiensis from Le Puy-en-Velay to Conques. The story of Bishop Godescalc of Le Puy, who, in 951, was the first named pilgrim to cross the Pyrénées, inspired me. Why did I feel drawn to follow those footsteps a thousand years later? Was it my connection to France? The connection to the ancient Gauls with their Gallo-Roman deities? The birds chirping, the sound of the wind through the trees, and silence along the GR 65, the national hiking trail also called the Chemin de Saint-Jacques?

It was all of these.

Upon reaching Conques, I knew I was on the right path. I continued this in the summer of 2023, walking from Figeac to Cahors along the Célé Valley route to visit the prehistoric cave paintings of Pech Merle. (cont.)



The cliff walks in the Parc naturel régional des Causses du Quercy in Brengues in 2023, the second year following the Camino in France. Photo by Jeffrey Keefer.

This now annual week of walking—which I refer to as my pilgrimage, Camino, Chemin, or Spiritual Hike—has taken on a mystical experience of *solvitur ambulando*, each step deeper into silence, allowing me the quiet I need to process a mystical connection to the sacredness of the Earth and the countless beings whose energy is infused in the land on which I walk.

I did not know any of this when I walked in 2019, when I thought the destination was the goal. As in life, the journey is the destination.

Making My Second Camino Unique

by Shoshana D. Kerewsky
Eugene, OR

My first Camino was in 2019 from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostela. I took some photos on my phone and wrote a few notes, but I wanted them more to meditate than to document. My first goal was to understand what my walking was like now—at that age, and after cancer, surgery, and chemotherapy. My second goal was to notice what it was like to be a Jew on a Catholic pilgrimage, to explore that, and to open my relationship with European Christian history. I walked; I was present.

Intentions can change. Early in the pandemic, I had the idea I could write a memoir about my Camino while telling my life story poetically, as collage. I

published this book just before my second Camino on the Francés route. I had told my first Camino story, so now, how could I foster this Camino's identity as its own, not just as a repetition, revisiting the first?

I now knew my own range, pace, and physical capabilities. I knew I was slow. I knew how to Camino. COVID-19 threw a sabot in the works, making me more highly vulnerable due to age and being a diabetic recovering from cancer. Because of that, I decided to stay in private rooms. This was more a necessity than a preference, but it encouraged me to be extra-outgoing with other pilgrims as I walked, rather than rely on nights spent in albergues to foster community. I had walked my first Camino listening to relevant books and meditative music on my iPod. I never listened to it on my second. I was too absorbed in conversations and cuckoo birds. I also decided to walk only from Pamplona to Astorga, having signed up for a sacred art and writing retreat with Beebe Bahrami at Flores del Camino. What a treat!

Heartened by my increased comfort in Christian settings, I visited and meditated in many churches and cathedrals. I lit candles for my family, friends, psychotherapy clients who had died, and others by request. I don't know what to recite in the Catholic tradition, and there are ways that participating in some prayers evoke images of forced conversion and affirm beliefs I do not hold. On this Camino, instead of sitting silently, I quietly recited *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead. Though there are few enough Jews in Spain these days, for reasons that must be remembered, the Iberian Peninsula is our heritage as well. I, too, belong on the Camino.



Magic of the Camino Primitivo

by Melanie B Thomas
Chapel Hill, NC

I walked the Camino Primitivo in September and October 2021. I chose this route because it's known to have mountains and is physically challenging. Throughout 2021 I had been training to do a three-week trek to above 22,000 feet in Nepal but by mid-summer, Nepal was not issuing travel visas, and the Himalayan trek was canceled. My "plan B" was to walk a Camino.

Spain was just reopening, and there was a great deal of uncertainty about what accommodations would be available, particularly on a less commonly traveled route such as the Primitivo. But my body wanted to walk in the mountains.

Just one day from the start in Oviedo, the hills began. Each morning greeted us with mist rising from the valleys. Few pilgrims were walking this route, but we quickly bonded over the pure joy of being outside in such beautiful surroundings. I experienced the Primitivo route through my senses: the stunning landscapes around every turn, the sounds of cowbells and goats calling to each other, the faint but definite smell of salt air drifting onto the Asturian countryside from the Bay of Biscay to the north. Pure Camino magic.



Sunrise after leaving Tineo, beginning of the hills of Camino Primitivo, September 20, 2021. Photo by Melanie Thomas.

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Early morning mist in the Cantabrian Mountains, Asturias, Camino Primitivo, September 28, 2021.
Photo by Melanie Thomas.



My Circle Walk

by Marian Gonsior
Westland, MI

Back home from the Camino, I sigh as I leave my house and walk towards the dusty sidewalk ahead. Ho-hum. No more excitement around the next bend. No more beautiful landscapes to brighten my day. Just the same old circular walk past a collection of crumbling townhouses. I've walked by there hundreds, if not thousands, of times throughout the 30-odd years I lived in my house in suburban Detroit. Could I find Camino inspiration on this path?

Before returning for another Camino this year, I copied some inspirational poems and prose snippets about pilgrimages, labyrinths, and walking, in the journal I took with me. Along the Way, I faithfully read a few pages from the journal before I began each day and before going to sleep. I wanted these inspiring words to become my daily soundtrack, and I repeated them as if saying silent prayers.

One of my readings was from Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook's book *Pilgrimage—The Sacred Art: Journey to the Center of the Heart*. In this excerpt, she asks her readers to look for a “spiral ‘circuit’ pattern found

in a labyrinth in your surroundings” or for “patterns visible in your natural world.” Upon reading this, I immediately thought of my ho-hum circular path back home. This circular pattern in my surroundings formed a not-so-subtle reminder that wherever I was, whatever the weather, whenever the time, I could walk a circular path, and, suddenly, be on the Camino. I was dumbfounded by this concept, but reserved judgment until I returned home.

Thanks to this new vision, my circle walk path has become a daily Camino for me. Before entering the circle, I take a deep calming breath and determine an intention for my walk. I cross over the imagined threshold—at the first stop sign—and begin. As I walk, I remain focused, walking with my breath and the rhythm of my footsteps. As I walk, I imagine how my route might appear to someone walking it for the first time. What sparkles for the beginner? What sparkles for me? The mundane has been transformed, and I find items along my way that I never noticed before: a half-moon garden ornament, a leftover Santa Claus, an old oak's gnarled roots.



A glimpse of the author's circular walk of her neighborhood in Westland, MI, on May 22, 2023.
Photo by Marian Gonsior.

Halfway around the circle, I pause, renew my intention, and commence walking again. I let go of judgments.

Back home, I am full of gratitude.

Our Camino via Wheelchair

by Brenda Jackson
Kailua, HI

“Es ist verrückt!”—It is crazy—said the German woman while her husband, a young Frenchman, an older Spanish man, and my husband, Kurt, carried me in my wheelchair on a steep, narrow, boulder-strewn stretch of the Camino Francés outside of El Ganso. And, guess what? She was right!

We had started our Camino in León, 315 kilometers from Santiago de Compostela, with a lightweight wheelchair modified with mountain bike tires, a third-wheel, pull-push holding straps, and Kurt’s determination. Prior to my physical decline due to multiple sclerosis, my husband and I traveled the world; skied in the Alps; scuba dived in the Marshall Islands; and served on mission trips in Eswatini, Cambodia, and Mexico. We even named our three daughters Sierra, Denali, and Cascade after mountains we had backpacked. The Camino was a pilgrimage we wanted to make, but in my physical condition it seemed impossible.

Despite our outrageous plan, we were blessed by an international hodgepodge of pilgrims who helped just when needed. Our experience affirmed that we are all deeply loved by God, and that He provides. We shared precious and meaningful conversations with fellow pilgrims. One Colombian family was walking the Camino in memory of their young nephew named Santiago. Some pilgrims were recently retired, or contemplating new careers or relationships. Others were friends, like Judi and Meg, who were completing the last 200 kilometers of a Camino they had been doing in segments over the last ten years.

Time and time again, God provided. One afternoon we had been traveling solo for a few hours. Coming out of Ponferrada, we encountered a daunting hill. Suddenly we heard, “Kurt, Brenda!” Lo and behold, Carol and Todd, whom we had met two days prior, came up behind us and helped push me up the hill. On our eighth day, Kurt was feeling concerned about the 29-kilometer journey ahead. Three kilometers in, a young Peruvian priest named Nilton came



Bogdan to the rescue! Kurt, Brenda, and Bogdan near Ribadiso on October 7, 2022.
Photo by a generous pilgrim.

alongside and offered to push my wheelchair. Nilton walked so fast that Kurt had to slow-jog to keep up. We completed 29 kilometers in five hours, giving us time for lunch and a nap! The stories go on and on. God provides.

We did the Camino in a unique, somewhat remarkable way. We received help, encouragement, laughter, friendship, and comfort from fellow pilgrims who hailed from more than 25 countries. God’s light and love shone through each pilgrim we met along our journey.

Serenity of the Camino Sanabrés

by Joseph Barabe
Oak Park, IL

I’d originally decided to walk the Camino Francés in 2016. When my in-laws heard about it, they wanted to walk it as well but couldn’t spend five weeks away from home. We were all open to a 100-kilometer hike, but I didn’t want to walk from Sarria to Santiago de Compostela as I hoped to do the Camino Francés the following year. After some hunting, we decided on the Camino Sanabrés from Ourense to Santiago, 117 kilometers. (cont.)



The author looks back at the Monasterio de Oseira on the pilgrim's path to Castro Dozón, September 2016. Photo by Devon Beckett.

We spent a day in Ourense enjoying the natural steam baths, and then, bright and early, headed over the Miño River and up the steep valley wall. Our destination was Cea, but we'd agreed that if any of us was completely spent, we would pause at the halfway point, take a taxi back to Ourense, and then start the next day in the village where we'd stopped. Upon reaching the lip of the valley, we were all feeling good, so we plodded on to Cea, which was celebrating a festival in the town square. There we had our first experience with pulpo a la gallega, Galician-style octopus. The next day we walked to the Monasterio de Oseira, sharing the bunkroom with about 30 Spanish bicyclists and two serious Russian teenage girls.

We ran into an American sister couple, both artists, and stayed with them at a casa rural one night. After losing our way, we arrived in Lalín, at the wonderful Hostel Camino Santiago, where Giorgina treated us to her marvelous cooking—and laundry service! My most important experience, though, was at Casa Leira, run by a young, intense Italian couple, Andrés and Cristina. Before settling in Leira, they'd walked—literally—around the world. At one point in the conversation (joined by our new American friends who were just passing through), Andrés stated, “You have to walk alone for three weeks before you lose your sense of time.” This surged through me, and I immediately decided—or realized—that I had to return and walk the French Way, alone—which is what I eventually did the following year.

Our final stop before arriving in Santiago was at Pazo de Gallegos, where a 500-year-old vine is still producing wonderful wine!

Reaching Santiago was of course a joy, but more importantly, it planted a pilgrim seed that would bear fruit when I walked the Camino Francés the following September. In short, the Camino Sanabrés is quiet, picturesque, and not overly taxing.

Sharing the Camino With Our Daughter

by Becky Rush-Peet
Enumclaw, WA

In the summer of 2019, my husband and I brought our daughter, Katie, to Spain to walk the Camino Inglés with us. She had just completed a demanding year in her video game arts program at DigiPen Institute of Technology, and she needed a break. We offered her a European vacation, including eight days in Spain, and outfitted her with quick-dry hiking clothes and a 35-liter pack for the journey. Her summer finals were the week before we left; by the time we departed, she was so tired that she slept the duration of the flight to Europe.

The Camino won her over by the end of our first day walking. We had covered 10 kilometers, and she was happy not to go farther since she hadn't trained. (Good thing she is young!) We got as far as Neda, claimed three of the remaining few bunks in the bright orange municipal albergue, had a picnic lunch, and settled in to wash our socks. (cont.)

Sculpture park along the Camino Inglés, August 2019. Photo by Becky Rush-Peet.



THE WAYS LESS TRAVELED

The open kitchen was next to the bunkroom, and Katie wandered in to check it out. A large group of Italian peregrinos had arrived and were preparing their day's main meal of pasta and toppings. As Katie meandered amongst them, she must have looked hungry because the group invited her to join them and passed her a plate. She was floored that total strangers would share a meal with her!

She was completely unprepared for the sense of community we find among our fellow pilgrims. She doesn't speak Italian, so communicating was tricky, but her two years of high-school Spanish helped her navigate the language divide. After that communal meal, she announced she'd like to return to the Camino in the future. I was so pleased she had discovered an appreciation for pilgrim culture without her parents trying to push it on her. There is something about that kind of sharing that is so appealing.

The Camino Inglés was busy when we walked in early August. We covered 10 to 15 kilometers per day and met people who became familiar faces. We saw hydrangea bushes with gigantic blooms that seemed to defy reality. Katie hopes to return to the Camino one day, and I hope I can help her do that.

Supermercado Sacramento

by John Beddingfield
New York, NY

On the night before I began the Camino Inglés, I had an experience that helped set the tone for a fantastic journey.

My husband and I had flown into a rainy A Coruña. It poured even more as we found our way to our little hotel in Ferrol. After sorting our things, we put on our ponchos and went exploring. I hoped to visit a church, enjoy some good caldo gallego or pulpo a la gallega for dinner, and then tuck in for a good night's sleep before stepping out on the Camino the next morning.

I had read of the Concatedral de San Julián, so we headed in that direction. I wanted to say a prayer, perhaps attend a service, and get my first sello to begin the journey. But the church was closed.

We then tried to find the zero-kilometer marker and the Pilgrim and Tourist Office. Navigating construction projects throughout town, we found the marker, but the office had already closed for the day. Onward to dinner.

A rainy Monday night in Ferrol did not offer many open places. As we navigated mud pits and construction barriers, I began to wonder if I should have prepared differently. What could I have done better? How was this Camino going to turn out?

With thoughts of a failed pilgrimage swirling in my head, I heard my husband say something about a supermarket. I doubted we would find much, but I followed him inside.



Empanada gallega procured in Ferrol, Spain. Photo by John Beddingfield.

I looked for the water section and was excited to find a big, chilled bottle of Cabreiroá mineral water—my favorite! Then I heard Erwin call, “John, come over here. You won’t believe this!” I found him holding what would be our dinner: a beautiful, already-baked empanada gallega, the tuna and tomato pie that we both absolutely loved on our previous Camino. (cont.)

|| PILGRIMS WAY ||

My religious tradition defines a sacrament as an “outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace.” Sharing the empanada, fizzy water, and fruit in our room, I felt like we had been given a sacrament. It was a reminder that the Camino will provide, and all will be well.

With each bite of that empanada, I began to let go of my plans, expectations, and hopes. I let go of the experiences of last year’s Camino. I paused any ideas I might have of future journeys. Instead, I began to live more in the moment, with gratitude and acceptance.

Walking the Way of St. Francis

*by Russ Eanes
Harrisonburg, VA*

What comes next if a pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago takes “walk of a lifetime” status?

Go on another walk!

A year and a half after arriving in Santiago, and weeks after the release of my book about walking the Camino, my wife Jane and I set out to explore the Way of St. Francis, between Florence and Rome, in Italy. We had discovered a passion for pilgrimage that we wanted to practice annually.

The Way of St. Francis—Via di Francesco, in Italian—is a more “modern” pilgrimage route, in the sense that the idea of the route, 350 miles from Florence to Rome, was only developed in recent decades. But the paths it follows are ancient, as old as those of the Caminos in Spain. These old pathways link various sites of significance in the life of Francis, which means that the most important destinations of the route are to be found all along it rather than in any single place. Along the way, the pilgrim also experiences many sites of even more ancient history, going backward through the Roman Empire to the ancient Etruscans.

Its newness also means that it is relatively uncrowded.

We started to walk it in the fall of 2019, intending to walk the entire route in two trips, but the pan-



Russ and Jane Eanes arrive in Assisi, April 2022, with the Basilica of St. Francis in the background. Photo by Russ Eanes.

Jane Eanes arrives at Rifugio Asqua, Casentino National Forest, April 2022. Photo by Russ Eanes.



demic interrupted our plans, and it wasn’t until 2022 that we completed it. While Rome is a famous pilgrimage destination, the real jewel of this route is at its midpoint, Assisi. This beautiful, medieval town of Francis’s birth and death holds his remains in the basilica named after him.

The route is physically challenging since it winds through the Apennine mountains. Several guidebooks break up the pilgrimage into about 28 stages, but the would-be pilgrim needs to consider the elevation even more than the distances. The first week is especially difficult, kind of like repeating the crossing of the Pyrenees for six days. However, the challenges and the scenery make it all the more rewarding, as does the opportunity to sample lots of fine Italian cuisine. The mountains, rocks and cliffs, hilltop towns and castles, as well as small villages and country churches, hold a mystical charm that captivates.

This is a pilgrimage to take your time on, to discover the beauty, joys, and simplicity of the land that spawned Francis—arguably history’s most beloved saint.

Letters from the Camino: Full Summer

by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway
Spokane, WA

Dear Pilgrims,

Greetings from Milepost 4,237. As I write this, it is Canada Day! I've spent the longest stretch of my virtual pilgrimage crossing Canada, so I feel a special connection to this day.

Virtually, I'm nearing Crookhaven, County Cork, on the southern coast of Ireland. Here in Spokane, summer is in full bloom. The days are long, with light from the northwest lingering until 11 p.m. The trees are full of leaves that have become a deeper green with silverish tones as they billow in the wind. Walking is best early or late in the day, as mid-day hours are uncomfortably warm. The morning light appears just past 4 a.m., efficiently sweeping away the darkness.

Last week, I journeyed to eastern Washington to visit the Palouse farmland in all its solstice splendor. Thanks to loess deposited by Ice Age floods that transformed this area, the Palouse is one of the best wheat-growing regions in the world. Large rolling hills stretch as far as the eye can see, with the conical Steptoe Butte rising to punctuate the horizon. The area's patchwork hills are covered with fields of dark green wheat, ripening fields of golden wheat, brilliant yellow stretches of canola flowers, brown fallow fields, green soy fields, and white fields of wheat or hay stubble. The June sky is a brilliant blue with great anvil thunderheads forming to the south over the mountains in Oregon.

God willing, I will begin my actual Camino Francés from Lourdes next year. I mentioned in a previous reflection that six women friends want to walk in September 2024. Recently, I met a group of enthusiastic young adults who are planning to walk next year in June to July. They wish to be in Santiago de Compostela for the Feast of St. James on July 25. I think they will have lots of blisters and a very jolly time. Their leader Evan gave me the blessing of a Tau cross, which he had touched to the tomb of St. Francis. The cross's neck cord has three knots. I added a fourth as I tied it around my neck. Evan

kindly asked me to join their pilgrimage; I promised to consider it.

Having been on this virtual pilgrimage for five years, I'm in no rush. In that time, I have grown accustomed to daily Mass, near daily Eucharistic Adoration, and outreach to others. All of these are food for my soul. I trust the Lord to show me the way. Our Lady and St. James, pray for us. *Bon chemin toujours !*

Love, Leah



A Palouse farm and canola field near Colfax, WA, on June 30, 2023. Photo by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway.

Editor's note: This is Leah G. Wilkinson-Brockway's 16th 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.

A Walk with My Inner Child

by Claudia Henao
Delray Beach, FL



My experience on the Camino was nothing short of transformational. Walking the ancient pilgrimage route, I immersed myself in the diverse landscapes and connected with individuals who inspired me. I experienced profound moments of self-discovery. The Camino's beauty, spirituality, and the opportunity for personal growth became a wellspring of inspiration for my art. Each piece I create carries the essence of this transformational journey that had a profound impact on my soul.

I remember that day I didn't want to keep walking, because I didn't want to finish the Camino. I knew I was very close to the end.



My trekking poles were my steadfast companions on the Camino, offering support and stability as I traversed challenging terrains. They were a constant presence, silently guiding me and serving as a reminder of my resilience and determination.

All photos on this page provided by Claudia Henao.

Beauty in the Midst of Pain

by Ellie Witzke

Past President, Canadian Company of Pilgrims
Ontario, Canada

I have been on pilgrimage a number of times in my life, but the one I am currently on is by far my most difficult. In April 2022, I lost my beautiful 30-year-old daughter, Jessie, to suicide. This completely turned my world upside down. Walking with my other children in their sadness and trying to support my aging mom—all while floundering in my own grief—made me reach back to the many Camino lessons I’ve learned to help me walk this particular journey.

We pilgrims know these lessons: Take the journey one day at a time. Step by step gets you through the day. Do the basics: food, rest as needed, body care. And keep looking at the surrounding beauty—even in the midst of pain. These are my daily reminders now.

I also needed to do something else for my sorrow. The Camino was calling, and I wanted to walk in honor of Jessie. This past May and June, I decided to walk 14 “training” days on the Camino Francés, and then walk the Camino de San Salvador and the Camino Primitivo. My rationale was perhaps not like that of other pilgrims. Aside from the incredible beauty I desired, I had an intense need to walk a difficult path, as I imagine my daughter’s last days were incredibly difficult.

The San Salvador and Primitivo routes did not disappoint. I appreciated the isolation, the time for deep reflection, the intensity of the deep valleys and high mountain trails, and working my body hard enough to match the pain I carry inside me. As I walked, I caught glimpses of Jessie. I heard her laughter and saw her twinkling eyes in the young women pilgrims. I witnessed her quiet, supportive nature in a woman from the United

States who I regularly observed looking out for her new pilgrim friends. Jessie also loved the color yellow, and the massive yellow flowers and yellow fields I spotted along the way flooded peace into my soul. She was very close to me when I came across a field of yellow with an inukshuk, or rock cairn, standing high on guard. As my children are Inuit, an inukshuk holds deep personal meaning.

On and off the beloved Camino, I draw strength for the sorrow that I will forever carry. Sorrow and joy coexist in my heart, and this is now my life-long pilgrimage.



Jessie’s Field. Taken between Buiza and Pajares on May 20, 2023. Photo by Ellie Witzke.



Standing Tall. Taken between Buiza and Pajares on May 20, 2023. Photo by Ellie Witzke.

Carrying Him With Me

by Jean H. Comer
Amherst, NY

|| PILGRIMS WAY ||
SORROW & JOY

*"I carry your heart with me
(I carry it in my heart)
I am never without it
(wherever I go, you go, my dear)"*

—e.e.cummings, from "[i carry your heart with me(i carry it in)]"
in *Complete Poems: 1904-1962* (Liveright Publishing Corporation, 1991)

I carried your heart with me. As for mine, it was broken.



Catching the shadow of
self, taken near Villamayor
de Monjardín on
May 6, 2022.
Photo by Jean Comer.

Like many pilgrims, my Camino was personal and required a deep dive that only walking 500 miles on my own could provide. There is a whole world that lies within, and I had been taken far away from that inner belonging into the muck that is grief. My sorrow had paralyzed me at my core, and although it had been nearly five years, I hadn't yet figured out who I was without him.

I knew that with him, I was brave. I was competent. I was beautiful. I was a rock-star mom, and I was steady, carefree, and joyful. We were soulmates, and my soul was grounded, because home was simply where he was. So in losing him suddenly, I, too, was lost. And, like never before, fear had become my constant companion.

I had always believed the best way for a person to care for their heart and soul was to clear their mind and reaffirm their faith. So, I set out and made all the plans every pilgrim makes in preparation. I read, researched, trained, and meticulously acquired the necessary supplies. But as I lay awake half the night listening to the cows low in the distant pastures just outside St. Jean Pied de Port, I wondered what the heck I was doing. Who did I think I was, abandoning all my responsibilities to walk such a long way and alone?! Fear once again came to find me.

I awakened and set out for what was a very grueling start. I had often called upon my bravery as I stood strong for grieving children and stepped into business matters that were clearly out of my league. But it was time to bring courage to my walk. So, I began like we all do, one foot in front of the other, and soon found myself lost in the rhythm of my breathing and the clickety-clack of my walking poles.

As those first days came and went, I began to inhabit and embrace solitude fully. I discovered a bounty of beautiful memories there. And how I ever thought my journey was going to be all mine, I cannot even fathom. I soon found out, as I had always known, that I was not alone. The paths I crossed in communion with other pilgrims were divine. My heart gradually lightened, and fear lost its grip. Even though my sorrow had been dark enough to paralyze me, the Camino allowed the sorrow to move through me. I belonged to it. And I learned that wherever I went, he would indeed come with me. I would find the joy in that—as he would want me to—on the way less traveled.



Ponferrada, Castilla y León, España, 2013. Photo by Thom Rying.

FINAL REFLECTION

Traveling Among the Plateaus

by William Ramsey
Takoma Park, MD

My way is taking me from plateau to plateau. I've reached the mountaintop. Now the journey continues among the clouds, ignited by the mysteries of the Holy. I'm free to be me. The mystical archetypes lightly flow in and out like threads that hold my shirt together; nothing and no one pulling them into knots. Gentleness, compassion, and love cause everything to blend together.

Each Camino helped me let go of my attachments. I stepped off with my mission statement: I use my compassionate voice to inspire others and myself, building connections of trust and hope. I gradually detached from being a dad, granddad, husband, counselor, friend, and even a sober alcoholic. I returned with the same determined mission.

Every step was like climbing a mountain. I always thought I was going somewhere. I thought the burden was due to my looking up, thinking I had arrived with each horizon.

With the breathtaking cathedrals filling all my senses and the infusion of energy from all the saints, I finally began to accept myself. Home is where my heart lives. St. Teresa of Avila and St. Ignatius of Loyola showed me how to turn my pilgrimage inward. As one pilgrim follower put it in Megan Phelps-Roper's *Unfollow*, "If I was going to grow out of the mental and emotional boundaries that had so long characterized my experience—the bounds of my habitation—I would need to forge my own path."

Forging has translated into being. The searching has stopped. The checklist to be loving is being transformed. I am on a journey to be the loving, compassionate voice that is mine to express. The inner journey, the soul journey, the heart journey, and the 12-step journey all lead to the same experience. The Enneagram, St. Teresa's Interior Castle, yoga, the 12 steps, and now the inclusion of my inner family are dissolving walls of separation.

With my newfound inner friends—Little Billy, Teenage Bill, Broken Will, Critical Parent Edward, Loving Parent William—we are emerging as Healing Will.

I went from being a body looking for my soul to being a soul that carries my body. Together we are living among the plateaus with gratitude and wonder. Each day is an adventure, a chance to say yes. Each night is a chance to say thank you.

NEXT ISSUE

Submissions to our Autumn 2023 issue close on September 30, 2023.
We would love to receive your reflections!

The Autumn theme is **SEASONS OF THE WAY**.

How have you encountered a sacred path during a stretch of time or a stage of life? This issue carves out space for pilgrims to reflect on how they have delighted in or weathered pilgrimage in every season.

Please consider this theme for the Autumn 2023 issue by sharing images and reflections that consider pilgrimage from a seasonal perspective.

Consider the flora and fauna you observed, the foods and festivals you enjoyed, or the people and places you encountered as you made your Way in the spring, summer, autumn, or winter. Share about the traditions and experiences of the spiritual traveler during a period in history. Give thought to the liminal space and transformative power of pilgrimage amidst seasons of life—following graduation, a career transition, the end of a relationship, the death of a loved one, following a life-altering event, in the face of illness. How did the experiences of your outward journey connect with your inner quest?

Please limit essays to 400 words maximum.

Access the **LA CONCHA ARTICLE ONLINE SUBMISSION FORM** for complete submission guidelines and to submit your creative work.

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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Arcos, Castroverde, Galicia, May 2022.
Photo by Thom Ryng.