

LA CONCHA

american pilgrims on the camino magazine

Inside:

→ BOOK & FILM REVIEWS

→ POETRY

→ PILGRIM REFLECTIONS



Seasons of the Way

PILGRIM JOURNEYS AT PARTICULAR TIMES OF YEAR & IN SPECIFIC SEASONS OF LIFE

AUTUMN 2023



CONTENTS

- | | |
|---|---|
| <p>3 A Letter from the Editor
 <i>A reflection on this issue's theme: Seasons of the Way.</i></p> <p>4 A Letter from the Chair of American Pilgrims</p> <p>5 American Pilgrims Board Report</p> <p>6 Members Giving Back
 <i>Tom Labuzienski, an American Pilgrims board member, shares about his summer of Camino service.</i></p> <p>8 Arts & Culture
 <i>Poetry from pilgrims. Plus, reviews of books and a film: Buen Camino! Tips From a WINTER Pilgrim, part practical advice and part travelog from a pilgrim who has walked the Camino at a time of year when few others do; A Walk to the End of the Earth, the anguishing memoir of a Catholic priest who reconsiders his vocation while walking the Camino; Seasoned Women, a poetry collection about the Camino of life; and A Way to Forgiveness, a documentary film following a woman on Camino to heal from her divorce and forgive her ex-husband.</i></p> | <p>17 Pilgrims Way
 <i>Reflections of pilgrimages made at particular times of the year or in specific seasons of life.</i></p> <p>34 Final Reflection
 <i>A poem modeled after Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese." The poem's speaker invites readers into the mysterious aliveness, muchness, and oneness of a pilgrim's first Camino.</i></p> <p>36 Call for Submissions to the Winter 2024 issue of La Concha
 <i>Learn more about next issue's theme, The Artist's Way, plus how to submit your creative work for consideration.</i></p> |
|---|---|

COVER Photo: A hospitalera's nighttime view of the Concatedral de Santa María de la Redonda from the rooftop of the Santiago el Real donativo albergue in Logroño, September 2023.

TOP of page: Morning view of the Concatedral de Santa María de la Redonda in Logroño, September 2023.

Both photos by Francine Mastini.

CORRECTION: In the Summer 2023 issue of *La Concha*, on the byline for the reflection titled "Alternate Route" (p. 33), we misspelled author Suzanne Blazier's name. We regret this error.

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

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

BOARD OF DIRECTORS 2023

STEPHENS LYTCH, Chair

RUBEN MENDOZA, Vice-Chair

ALLISON VENUTO, Secretary

BILL ARTZ, Treasurer

TOM COLEMAN

JOSEPH CURRO

DAVE DONSELAR

SARA STEIG GRADWOHL

PAULA JAGER

TOM LABUZIENSKI

JACKIE SAXON

KEY VOLUNTEERS

Sara Steig Gradwohl, Webmaster

Carol Guttery, Web Designer

Zita Macy, Administrator

COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

Joseph Curro, Co-Chair

Sara Steig Gradwohl, Co-Chair

TEAM LA CONCHA EDITORIAL TEAM

Amy Horton, Editor-in-chief

Francine Mastini, Creative Director

EDITORS

Anne Born, Rebecca Balcarcel,
Sara Gradwohl, Kelly Bates, Sherri
Caplan, Julie Gianelloni Connor,
Anna Harris, Stacey Karpp, Pruitt
Layton, Zita Macy, Gigi Oyog, and
Teresa Ramsey

LA CONCHA

Fellow pilgrims,

In late August and early September, my husband and I walked the Camino Inglés from Ferrol to Santiago de Compostela, continuing to Muxía and Finisterre. This was our third Camino, having previously walked portions of the Camino Francés and the Camino Portugués. Life's timing best suited us to walk all three routes in this late-summer period. While this latest walk offered us plenty of the Camino-familiar—the simplicity of a pilgrim's rucksack and routine, dormitory-style sleeping arrangements most nights, and tortilla de patatas and café con leche—it was a journey all its own.

We enjoyed the pleasant daytime temperatures and cool evenings of the area's temperate marine climate. We walked in quiet solitude—encountering few if any other pilgrims until reaching our albergue most days on the Inglés and needing to step aside for a passing cyclist exceedingly rarely. The Camino Finisterre was a bit busier from Santiago until we took its more tranquil fork to Muxía, and only in comparison to the Inglés. We found special sanctuary in walking these already-quiet routes during predawn hours, witnessing a world awakening around us. I delighted in dinner plate-sized hydrangea blooms and backyard citrus trees laden with lemons or oranges (a marvel to this Midwesterner). And we beheld the cycle of the area's dairy industry in this season: fields of green maize, the thrum of harvesters cutting cornstalks for silage, lorries transporting fodder from field to farm, ensilage pits of fermenting matter, its funky sweet aroma permeating the air, and the rhythmic pumping heard as we passed milk barns before daybreak—just us, the cows, their farmer, and an occasional herding dog or barn cat awake at that hour.

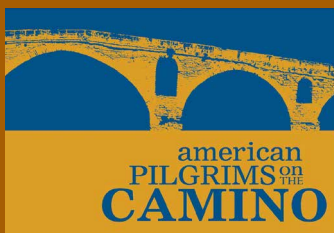
Back home now, we're in another season of pilgrimage. Returning from Camino is its own kind of silage-making process—harvesting and fermenting our walking experiences as we seek ways to preserve the Camino's funky sweet substance to nourish and sustain us through daily life.

This issue of *La Concha* explores many seasons of the Way. We have book and film reviews plus poetry from pilgrims who journeyed at a particular time of year or in a specific season of life. We have stories from those who appreciate the cold and solitude of a winter Camino, one who crossed a desert in the blistering heat of summer, and another who extols the bountiful rewards of an autumnal walk. You'll find reflections from some who made a pilgrimage in their autumn years, including one for whom the Camino nurtured her spring awakening. There's an essay from a man who walked after his wife's death and discovered a new way of life. A reflection from a woman who knew, in one sacred Camino moment, the divine lesson told in Ecclesiastes 3. And another who considers her Caminos with a pinch-of-this, dash-of-that whimsy and wisdom. Enjoy this autumn harvest of reflections on how our fellow wayfarers have delighted in or weathered pilgrimage in any season.

May your journey be sacred,

Amy

Amy Horton
Editor-in-Chief



American Pilgrims on the Camino

120 State Avenue NE #303
Olympia, WA 98501-1131
americanpilgrims.org

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

LETTER FROM THE CHAIR



Steve Lytch
Board Chair

Dear Pilgrims,

This is an exciting season in the life of American Pilgrims on the Camino. The popularity of the Camino continues to grow. By the end of September, the Pilgrim's Office in Santiago had welcomed almost 368,000 pilgrims, including 24,000 from the United States. Some months, Americans have outpaced Italians to claim second place among nationalities receiving Compostelas. That popularity is reflected in the membership of American Pilgrims on the Camino. At the end of July, we had almost 2,800 members, the most in our history.

We are pleased to partner with other associations around the world as we accommodate the growing interest in pilgrimage while staying true to our mission to “foster the enduring tradition of the Camino.” Our grants program helps those who maintain the various routes to keep the donativo albergues and the pathways in good repair. We were invited to be part of a consortium that is working with the Associação de Peregrinos Via Lusitana in Lisbon to fulfill John Brierley's desire to establish an albergue on the newly constructed pathway out of Lisbon. The association in La Rioja has invited us to engage in a cultural exchange like the one we did in May with the association in Estella. In 2025, we will have our second International Gathering in conjunction with the Canadian Company of Pilgrims in Vancouver, British Columbia.

As information about the Camino proliferates, we are keeping up with new opportunities for communication. We are recruiting an intern to enhance our social media presence that will add to our thriving Facebook community of more than 37,000 participants. The *La Concha* team stays on top of the latest technology to make sure this journal keeps up with the ever-changing ways that we access information.

The chapters team is continually improving ways to equip chapters with up-to-date technology for communicating with chapter participants. Chapter coaches bring coordinators together to share best practices and innovative ways to build local pilgrim communities.

While embracing the opportunities of this new season, we want to stay in touch with the rich heritage of our organization and the work of those who have brought us to this point. Tom Coleman is spearheading a Legacy Project that is conducting interviews with our founding members and preserving important documents from our history.

Thanks to your membership and support, American Pilgrims on the Camino inspires all who seek the spirit of the community to connect with the global community of pilgrims in every season.

Buen Camino,

Steve

Steve Lytch
Board Chair, American Pilgrims on the Camino

MEMBERS SAY

“This group contributes to the Camino experience in so many ways—educationally, financially and spiritually. I am happy to help with a small fee each year to keep the spirit of the Camino healthy.”

– **Chuck**, Renewing Member

AMERICAN PILGRIMS BOARD REPORT

July Board Meeting Report

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

The Board of American Pilgrims on the Camino met July 20-22, 2023, in Arlington, MA. The board reviewed its Pilgrim Principles and the minutes from the prior meeting. The group participated in a teambuilding activity where members discussed the current and future combination of board members' gifts, talents, and skills.

The external relations team set up an opportunity for the board to meet with the Dutch Pilgrim Association to learn more about that organization and how to collaborate to support the Camino. The group also met with John Rafferty and Jose Luis of the Associação de Peregrinos Via Lusitana in Lisbon; Rafferty and Luis are leading a collaborative effort to explore the establishment of an albergue in Portugal.

After lunch on the first day, the group discussed updates from members who spent time in Santiago thus far this year. The discussion then moved to external relations, hospitalero, and Ribadiso Welcome Service team updates related to how we can potentially expand our Camino support in Europe. The chapters and membership teams updated the group on ways to engage our chapters and members more fully in supporting the Camino through membership and chapter participation. We will continue to develop ways to reach out in the future.

The board expressed its continued and immense gratitude for the communications team on its work with *La Concha*. The board received an update on the development of the Legacy Project that is in progress to video record the history of American Pilgrims on the Camino. Sara Gradwohl led a technology training session to help the board improve emails, and the board reviewed our positive financial position.

After a break for the evening, the board resumed the meeting Saturday morning, reviewing the past year's accomplishments and discussing future areas of focus. The board adjourned after robust discussions and continues to appreciate the opportunity to serve "all who seek the spirit of the Camino."

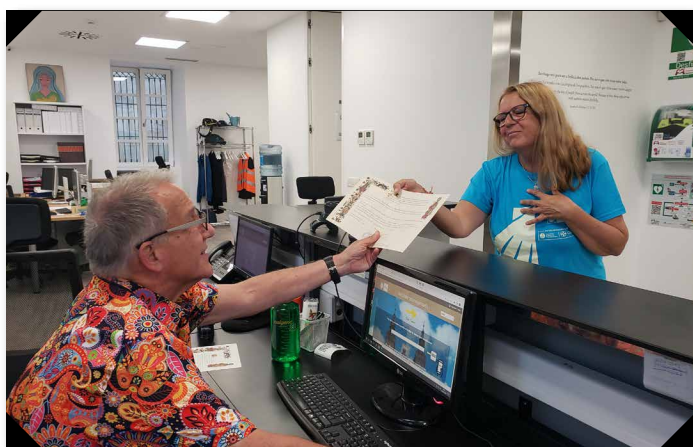


American Pilgrims board members gather at the July 2023 board meeting. Photo by Sara Gradwohl.

A Summer of Camino Service

by Thomas Labuzienski
South Bend, IN

Many pilgrims are familiar with the saying “the Camino provides.” Early this year, I eagerly applied to the American Pilgrims Ribadiso Welcome Service program to be considered to serve as a greeter at the donativo albergue in Ribadiso on the Camino Francés. After completing the application process and Zoom interviews, I was sad when I learned I had not been selected for one of the highly sought-after positions. Within days, though, the Camino provided me with an invitation to apply to volunteer at the Pilgrim’s Reception Office in Santiago de Compostela. I was warmly accepted and assigned to report on May 23 for my weeks of volunteering and Chapter One of my summer of Camino service.



Author Tom Labuzienski presents a Compostela to a pilgrim who expresses her gratitude with a gesture to her heart. Photo by a generous Pilgrim’s Reception Office volunteer.

Montse, the friendly Pilgrim’s Reception Office manager, welcomed about half a dozen volunteers from countries including Spain, Brazil, the Netherlands, and the United States. We were each assigned a private room in San Lazaro, about three to four kilometers from the cathedral. We often walked to the Pilgrim’s Reception Office. As the route to and from our accommodations follows the last few kilometers of the Camino Francés, we had the chance to walk and talk with excited pilgrims as they took their final steps into Santiago. Little did they know, they would meet us again on the other side of a desk as we handed them the official document certifying that they had completed the Camino de Santiago.

While volunteering in the Pilgrim’s Reception Office, it was our privilege to welcome pilgrims, examine their cherished credentials and stamp them with the final sello of the Santiago Cathedral, and then print and present their Compostelas, and, if desired, the distance certificate. Our shifts in the office alternated; one day I would serve pilgrims from 9 a.m. until 2 p.m. and the next day I would serve pilgrims from 2 p.m. to 7 p.m.

The pleasant local pilgrim office staff working alongside of us also arranged for some of us to swing the *Botafumeiro*, the giant thurible or censer that disperses incense at the end of the Pilgrim’s Mass held at the cathedral. It was a humbling experience to wear the iconic maroon robe of the *tiraboleiro* and pull the ropes to propel the *Botafumeiro* in this historic ritual.

I attended Mass in the cathedral daily during my month in Santiago. Having been ordained a Roman Catholic deacon this past January, it was also my honor to regularly serve as a deacon at the altar above St. James’s remains. After a month in Santiago, it felt like a second home. My most memorable Santiago experience, however, was (*cont.*)



Author Tom Labuzienski (fifth from left, stripe on vestment sleeve) stands at the altar of Santiago de Compostela Cathedral on May 25, 2023. Photo taken by Suely, a Pilgrim’s Reception Office volunteer.

MEMBERS GIVING BACK

A Summer of Camino Service (*continued*)



Pilgrim dinner at the Grañón donativo albergue on June 21, 2023. Photo by Tom Labuzienski.

MEMBERS SAY

Over the years, I've walked the Camino del Norte and Camino Francés routes, and I still hope to take a few more Caminos before I put away my boots. I want these routes to be maintained, and so I support those who support that effort.

– **John**, Renewing Member

witnessing the emotions, and often tears, of the pilgrims. Frequently, I would come around the counter to give a pilgrim flowers and a hug. Even after personally greeting 2,000 to 3,000 pilgrims, I never grew tired of it.

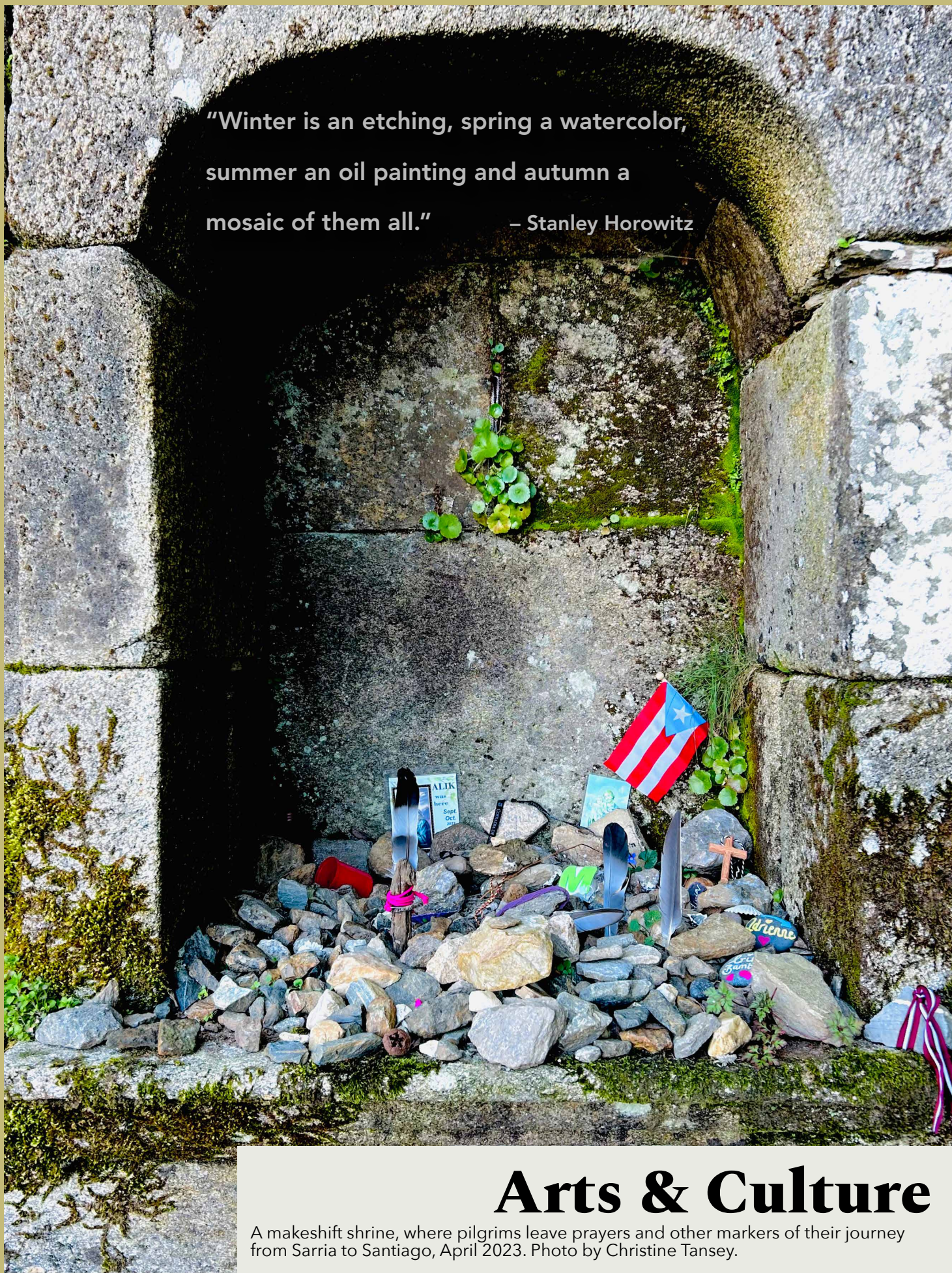
For Chapter Two of my incredible Camino volunteer summer, I was assigned to serve as an hospitalero in Grañón, a village of about 150 residents. At the Parroquial San Juan Bautista, an historic, inspirational, and popular donativo albergue on the Camino Francés, I encountered close to 2,000 pilgrims, welcoming each guest, registering their passport numbers in our journal, explaining the donativo rules, and inviting them to help prepare dinner and to attend daily Mass. Many were surprised when I informed them that “yes, there is no WiFi, try speaking to each other,” “pay what you can and take what you need,” and “there is no official credential stamp here because the stamp from Grañón will be in your heart.”

We invited pilgrims to a special candlelight service each evening after dinner in the church choir loft to share their deepest Camino prayers and intentions. At the conclusion, everyone exchanged hugs, “stamping each other’s hearts with love and peace.” Father Alejandro invited me to serve as a deacon each evening at Mass, read the Gospel in English, and give the special pilgrim blessing at the end of Mass.

I feel so fortunate to have had these exhilarating and meaningful experiences while serving the Camino this summer, and I am forever grateful. I am also grateful to American Pilgrims on the Camino for connecting me with the Pilgrim’s Reception Office in Santiago and training me to serve as an hospitalero. I strongly encourage you to explore ways to give back to the Camino and its many pilgrims. In doing so, you will further enrich and deepen your connection to the Camino.



"Winter is an etching, spring a watercolor,
summer an oil painting and autumn a
mosaic of them all." – Stanley Horowitz



Arts & Culture

A makeshift shrine, where pilgrims leave prayers and other markers of their journey from Sarria to Santiago, April 2023. Photo by Christine Tansey.

A Meseta State of Mind

by Chuck Johnson
Champlin, MN

My Tilley hat and I tussle,
it, wanting to remain on my crown,
a shield from the scorching sun,
me, yearning to mop puddles pooling on my scalp
that breed near as fast as I sponge;
still many miles
from the day's most hellish hours,
but Hades' suburbs extend far
so my two-step with Tilley toils on.

Here heavens hug fields
in an unending, uninterrupted line,
encircling in all directions
as if God flipped His sapphire encrusted chalice
upside down upon this tabletop
we call the Meseta;
treeless, hill-less, streamless;
even the sunflowers suffer
under their namesake's stubborn stare,
stunted sad shadows
of their proud towering cousins
in the lowlands.

The hypnotic crunch
of boots on gravel,
the titch, titch, titch
of walking stick on rock,
over,
and over,
and over,
always the same,
same endless view,
same relentless heat,
same metrical beat.

Like my surroundings,
my mind is set free to extend
outward,
inward,
upward,
uninterrupted.

And time passes.

In the distance the mesmeric monotony is marred
by an outcrop of a solitary tree
girdled by bramble that reaches like toddler to parent
clinging to the lowest branches,
an awning from the sun's unforgiving gaze,
precious real estate upon which two pilgrims sprawl.
I approach, unsnap my pack, lay it to rest
and sit, bathing in the miracle of shade.

More weary pilgrims approach
eyeing our shrinking darkened patch,
so we make room,
some lying, some sitting,
none standing,
none anxious to rise again and resume,
so we close eyes,
and listen
to the breeze dance with the leaves above,
to the grasshoppers bicker with the bees,
to the scrapes and sighs of other pilgrims,
all of us too exhausted to attempt conversation.

I look about,
strangers yet brothers,
from everywhere,
an impromptu gathering of the United Nations,
and I realize
there's nowhere I'd rather be.

Editor's note: This poem is from Johnson's forthcoming collection, So I Walk: Poems, Songs, Legends and Lore of the Camino de Santiago, scheduled for release in November 2023.

A Way to Forgiveness

Film Review

A Way to Forgiveness: Healing on the Camino de Santiago

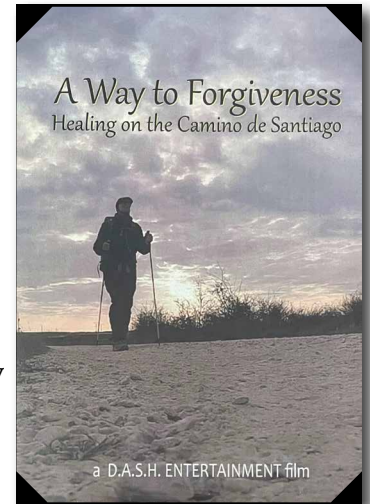
Produced and directed by Erin R. Dooley

D.A.S.H. Entertainment, 2016

Run time: 45 minutes

Reviewed by Amy Horton

Warrenton, MO



A Way to Forgiveness is a documentary film following the pilgrimage of Erin Dooley as she walks the Camino Francés to heal from her divorce and forgive her ex-husband for his betrayals during their marriage of more than a dozen years.

Along the way, Erin discusses betrayal and forgiveness with fellow pilgrims. The hurt we inflict on each other. Stepping into the shoes of the people who have hurt us and understanding what led them to their transgressions. The connection between forgiveness and reconciliation, and if and how to forgive someone who refuses to apologize or accept responsibility for his actions. Whether one must forget to forgive. And understanding what holds us back from forgiving.

Throughout the film, Erin shares raw and vulnerable moments as she processes her emotional pain. She also highlights lessons in forgiveness she discerns along her journey. And we witness milestones marking Erin's progress toward forgiveness.

At Alto de Perdón—the summit of forgiveness—Erin isn't yet emotionally ready to forgive her ex-husband; however, as she buries her 10th-anniversary ring beneath a rock at the base of the iconic sculpture of pilgrims in silhouette, she is ready to forgive herself for her own failings in their marriage.

A bit beyond León, Erin realizes her struggle to forgive her ex-husband is a test in her trust in God. Once she lets go of worrying about her ex-husband's unwillingness to repent and chooses to let God handle that, she begins to clear a path in her heart to forgiveness. Shortly after this epiphany, she comes upon a pile of rocks in the middle of the dirt path and is compelled to spell out *FORGIVE*—a spontaneous and symbolic setting down of stones just days before a more quintessential point on the Camino Francés for that practice.

Upon reaching the Cruz de Ferro, that iron cross where pilgrims symbolically lay down their burdens, Erin has achieved her stated reason for walking the Camino. At the foot of the cross, she leaves a rock from the house she and her husband shared and on which she has written, "Forgive him."

She carries out her final rite of healing upon arrival in Santiago: at the Pilgrim's Mass, she places her wedding band in the collection basket along with a note of explanation. Then, she walks on to Finisterre—the end of the Earth—and the beginning of a new season of life.

Editor's note: Erin's journey of learning and sharing about forgiveness continues beyond her Camino. She has released a series of video reflections called the "Forgiveness Minute" as well as an extension of her documentary in the three-episode series "Walks to Forgive," in which she takes others on long hikes as they share their forgiveness stories. Erin is also available for in-person and virtual film screening events to share her message of forgiveness. The film is available for streaming and on DVD. Learn more at AWAYTOFORGIVENESS.WEBLY.COM.

A Walk to the End of the Earth

Book Review

A Walk to the End of the Earth

by Jeffrey Kendall

Unmuzzled Ox Publishing, 2023

303 pages

Reviewed by Jerald Stroebele

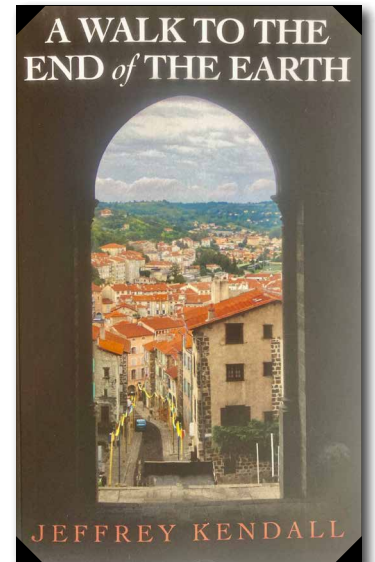
Anchorage, AK

Kendall walked 1,750 kilometers along Le Chemin du Puy and the Camino Francés from Le Puy-en-Velay, France, to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, and then on to Muxía and Finisterre. He carried his backpack and walked every step. He got blisters. The author is very observant of the natural, man-made, and human environment. The stories about meeting other pilgrims in the gîtes, albergues, cafés, and along the way are detailed, engrossing, and beautiful. With the level of detail, this could almost be a Camino guidebook. It is certainly a well-written Camino story. But this is a Camino memoir like no other I've read.

The author recounts a childhood of enduring verbal and emotional abuse by his parents. As a teenager he was sexually abused by a teacher. He converted to Catholicism and was later ordained a priest. His first pastor and then succeeding clergy supervisors verbally abused and grossly mistreated him. His bishop permitted their ill treatment of a priest. The abuses of power and bullying he continually suffered in his diocese throughout his priesthood pushed him into nightmares, depression, and thoughts of suicide. Walking the Camino was his quest to get answers from God about whether he should continue to be a priest. By the time he reached Finisterre, he felt free to make his own decision "after seventeen miserable years as a priest."

This very personal story is told in first person, present. This priest talks to God constantly and sees God's hand in every occurrence, good (Providential) or bad. When asked by fellow pilgrims why he walks, he simply says he and God have a lot to talk about. A lot of flashback dialogue describes his many attempts to help a heroin-addicted prostitute and their subsequent love and sexual relationship. This and other descriptions of sex are graphic. Some readers drawn by the book's title may not expect that in a story about the Camino. Some readers may be disturbed by the revelation of the unchristian treatment of a priest by his clergy superiors and his perceived harsh treatment by God.

This book is an eye-opener to the sad lives of people who have grievously suffered a variety of abuses or the destruction caused by addictions. An alternate title for this book could be: *Cries to God from the Tormented Soul of a Catholic Priest Walking the Camino de Santiago*.



Buen Camino! Tips From a WINTER Pilgrim

Book Review

Buen Camino! Tips From a WINTER Pilgrim

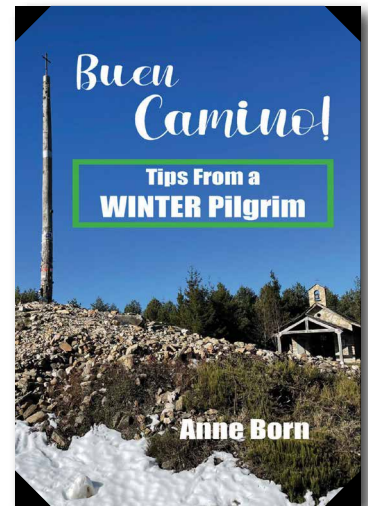
by Anne Born

The Backpack Press, June 2022

259 pages

Reviewed by Joseph A. Curro, Jr.

Arlington, MA



Anne Born is no stranger to the pilgrim community in the United States and beyond. With sharp, concise writing, her book about winter pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago is every bit as inviting as a newly fallen bed of snow.

This book evokes the feeling of breathing meditation. Breathing in, you take in a chapter of practical advice for the winter pilgrim. Breathing out, you enjoy Anne's travelog of the Camino that she undertook in 2021.

This pattern of alternating chapters is persistent and consistent. Despite advertising itself as a book of tips—no doubt following the title structure of her earlier book *Buen Camino! Tips from an American Pilgrim* (reviewed in the Summer 2022 issue of *La Concha*)—this short work is chock full of stories that humanize the experience of walking when the weather is cooler, the days are shorter, the trails are emptier, and much of the Camino's infrastructure is closed.

Anne becomes a believer in the use of dry bags to keep backpack contents organized and to keep them from getting wet, as well as to avoid the annoying crinkling sound of zipper-seal plastic storage bags. One of her must-have backpack items is sticky notes to write reminders for herself and to leave messages for others. She waxes eloquent about the “Oreo trick” of placing one's sleeping bag between two blankets, stacked like the popular sandwich cookie, to keep warm in the often-unheated albergues.

This is a very honest book. Anne admits she does not devote inordinate amounts of training before going on Camino. She is a strong advocate of listening to one's body and mind and taking rest days, using transport, or even stopping if necessary.

While Anne clearly enjoys the company of other people, she cautions that there simply are not enough people on the Camino in winter for bustling, rolling waves of Camino families to form.

The kindness of strangers endures, though. Bartenders offer food despite the kitchen being closed. Priests take the time to greet the few pilgrims trekking through their villages in the dark months. Refugio operators open their doors to the lone wanderer.

Tired eyes will appreciate the generous margins and line spacing of this book. It is not cluttered with superfluous diagrams and adornments. In a way, the extra whitespace summons the sense of openness that one finds on a winter Camino.

At the end of the day, though, it's the words on the page that hold all power, transporting the reader to the kind of Camino that very few of us have experienced.

Fields of Wheat

by Suzanne Doerge
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada

We met when our hair was wheat
flowing on the plains of Spain—
waves of gold dancing the fields
earth beneath our feet
burst of promise
trust in harvest
the bread we would bake
piles of hay for jumping in.

But late summer, cancer took my hair
fall then winter, earth laid bare.
Until spring, another chance
plough and sow, sprouts
rose across my sunny slopes
until wheat began to blossom
again, renewed.

I didn't see you then—
soulful friend of my youth—
you were gone, living your own life;
yet always my wheat danced with yours.

Until, cancer returned to sweep away
the yield from my fields again—
fallow and seed, fallow and seed.
Then one day, in early winter,
my ploughed earth went utterly barren.
To dust I returned.

You weep since I've been gone—
without us having had the chance
to dance in the wind again—
our hair, our feet on the earth,
we never got to bring the harvest in.

But now I beseech, as you walk by.
Don't look for me in the newly cut fields;
I am no longer there.
Instead, listen to the whispering pines
that sway just beside,

here is our dance and our love—
forever green.

Editor's note: This poem is from Doerge's collection, Footfalls: Poems of the Camino (Shanti Arts Publishing, 2022). Find a review of that collection in the Winter 2023 issue of La Concha. Doerge's poem "Village Square," which is part of that collection, was published in the Summer 2022 issue of La Concha.

"Spring and winter, growth and decay, creativity and fallowness, health and sickness, power and impotence, and life and death all belong within the economy of being."
– Sam Keene



Give and Take. An olive tree in Facha on the Camino Portugués Central Route. A respite filled with snacks, medical supplies, and remembrances on September 22, 2023. Photo by Francine Mastini.

MEMBERS SAY

"I learned of the Camino when I watched *The Way*. A workaholic, alcoholic, and drug addict, I thought about how much I wanted to achieve something like that. I got clean, quit my job, bought shoes, started walking, and booked my flight to Spain—giving myself six months to prepare. Looking for others to hike with, I found American Pilgrims on the Camino, connected with a local chapter, and participated in many events.

Walking 200 miles of the Camino Francés, my addiction relapsed. Unable to continue spiritually or physically, I returned home, disappointed in my 'failure' to complete the Camino. In sharing my story with others in recovery, I recognized the spiritual lesson the Camino had taught me.

I am now more connected and committed to both my recovery and being a pilgrim—walking in the present, one day at a time. I've returned to work, now in a more balanced way. I cherish the friendships and experience of the Camino. Each time I walk with other pilgrims, I'm reminded how grateful I am for the opportunity to change my life for the better. I look forward to finishing the Camino Francés when I'm physically and spiritually fit. Until then, I'll be walking with my fellow American Pilgrims here at home."

– **Eric**, Renewing Member



An hórreo, a typical Galician granary, with a vista view near Zas along the Camino Finisterre on September 5, 2023.
Photo by Amy Horton.

Seasoned Women

Seasoned Women: A Collection of Poems

by Cathy Hollister

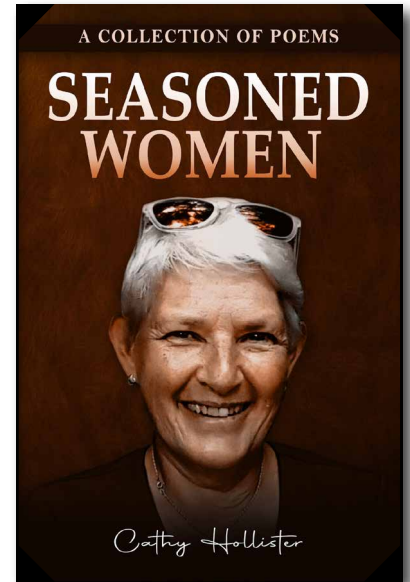
Poets' Choice, 2022

52 pages

Reviewed by Amy Horton

Warrenton, MO

Book Review



In a cover letter accompanying a review copy of this book, Hollister describes her collection of poems as one “that exemplifies the Camino lessons of appreciating lasting friendships, living in the moment, and finding joy in life experiences.”

While this is not a collection of poems specifically about the Camino de Santiago, it does include several poems set on the Camino or with themes that seem to be inspired by the Camino. “Sacred Plains” (pp. 34-35) evokes the emptiness and expansiveness of a pilgrim’s journey across the Meseta. Many a pilgrim will recognize the red poppies, sun-warmed stones, and stiff muscles softening in the dusk in “Evening” (p. 40). “Walking in the Sand” (p. 41) may be describing a tiny beetle scurrying along the beach, but it also was relatable to this pilgrim who has clambered off the Camino Portugués coastal route on weary legs under a backpack’s heavy load to seek the cooling comfort of Atlantic waters on her bare toes.

La Concha readers may already be familiar with Hollister’s work. Her poems “Stepping Stones in the Stream” and “Busco/I Search,” which are not part of this collection, were published in the June 2021 and Summer 2022 issues of *La Concha*, respectively. Readers can find her poem “Step Out,” which is part of this collection, in the March 2021 issue of *La Concha*.

Hollister has arranged this collection by season: *Autumn*, *Winter*, *Spring*, and *Summer*—in that order. Pilgrims will recognize in this arrangement the Camino’s Omega and Alpha lesson: the end is the beginning. The poetry of *Autumn* is reflective, taking a long view of life, the many women who influenced her, and the different women she has been. *Winter* confronts death and depression, with a glimmer of light spotted through the darkness. *Spring* reveals a budding reclamation and renewal of one’s life and conspires with the reader as the poet relishes life’s simple pleasures (“I Always Wash the Dishes Alone,” p. 36). The poetry of *Summer* looks onward, relishing life and preparing for death with an awe of nature.

While this collection isn’t solely about the Camino de Santiago, it undoubtedly is about the *Camino de la Vida*, or the Camino of life, and the toils, joys, and reflective wisdom that come from a decades-long journey of a life well-seasoned.

"Live each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each."

– Henry David Thoreau



Crossing the Río Tambre at Ponte Maceira along the Camino Finisterre on September 4, 2023. Photo by Amy Horton.

Pilgrims Way

Eclesiastés 3

by Beatriz Gómez
Evanston, IL

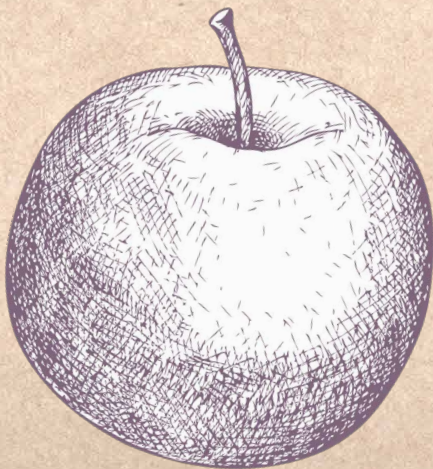
"There is a time for everything,
and a season for every activity under the heavens"
—Ecclesiastes 3:1, New International Version

Original text:

Carol me dió una tizita, curita me dijo llaman en México. Yo le ofrecí una manzana reineta y ella alabó su sabor. Después caminamos. A través del bosque animado, escuchando a jilgueros y mirlos, le hablé del castaño, cuyo humilde fruto fue sustento de campesinos por siglos, del fuerte carballo y, claro, del milenario y mágico tejo. Descansando en la sombra, ensimismada escuchando a un picador que insistente golpeaba la corteza de un nogal, Carol me compartió su diagnóstico. ¡Sería lindo esparcirme aquí y descansar para siempre entre tanta belleza, al borde del Camino!

Translation:

Carol gave me an adhesive bandage. She told me they called them *curitas* in Mexico. I offered her a Pippin apple, and she loved the taste of it. Then we walked through a forest full of life, listening to goldfinches and blackbirds. I told her about the chestnut tree, whose humble fruit was the sustenance of peasants for centuries, about the strong oak, and, of course, about the ancient and magical yew. Resting in the shade, engrossed in listening to a woodpecker insistently tapping on the bark of a walnut tree, Carol shared her diagnosis with me. It would be nice to spread out here and rest forever among so much beauty, on the edge of the Camino!



Summer in the Desierto de los Monegros

by Lawrence O'Heron
Rochester, NY

As I write this, Deb and I arrived 13 days ago in Madrid to through-hike just under 200 miles on the Caminos Catalán and Aragónés. Between cosmopolitan Barcelona and historical Zaragoza lies the Desierto de los Monegros—Spain's least-populated area.

Today we start out from the ancient city of Lleida, which dates back to the Bronze Age. This desert stage is an impossible 22 miles to Fraga. By noon, the sun directly overhead eliminates any shade.

The Desierto de los Monegros receives little rainfall, suffers frequent droughts, and bakes under high temperatures, but thanks to extensive irrigation, the greenery is astonishing. Still, much of the sun-baked earth is barren, brown, and rocky. I cannot imagine how this land was farmed thousands of years ago.

The summer desert's beauty is indescribable. Walking here is a mystical experience. We find life everywhere, with native plants, shrubs, lizards, and rabbits scratching out an existence from the arid land. After nine miles in four hours, we find a bar in Alcarrás, sling off the backpacks, and order lunch: tortilla de patatas, empanadas con pollo, café, carbonated water, and orange juice.

The Desierto de los Monegros is achingly beautiful. Along the trail between a highway and heavily irrigated farms are sandhill after sandhill that look otherworldly.

After another four miles, we end today's walk, ten miles shy of Fraga. Our only option for accommodations is a truckstop motel in an industrial park along the busy N-2 national highway. It's certainly not five-star, but it would be unwise for us to press on today.

After checking in, showering, and eating, Deb and I put on a good face. We take a date night to the gas station mini-mart to buy tomorrow's supplies. Sometimes necessity is more romantic than flowers.

Later, we sit on the patio, enjoying the sunset and breeze. We ignore the highway a few hundred feet away. Nearby, feral cats help themselves to the pickings in the truckstop trash cans. They jump from the ground to the lip of the can, managing to balance there while scrounging for scraps. One of the cats has a gorgeous white coat and the cutest face, but won't come close to us.

It's dark now and time for bed. We must get up early tomorrow to beat the sun and heat of the Desierto de los Monegros as we walk to Fraga.



View of the Desierto de los Monegros near the Cataluña-Aragon border on June 5, 2023. Photo by Larry O'Heron.



Savoring My Caminos

After a storm on the Via de la Plata, September 2022.
Photo by Carol Adams.

*by Carol Adams
Maineville, OH*

Seasonings added flavor to my journey. A rainbow in the clouds at the crest of a hill. Seeds with a cross shape. Being rescued by a taxi driver named Jesus!

These experiences and more have brought flavor and richness to my three short Caminos, which in turn have brought a sense of fullness to my life.

Seasonings rarely satisfy when they are used alone. Salt by itself enhances food, but add a little pepper and the dish comes alive! Walking as a solitary pilgrim pleases me, setting my own pace, finding joy in the silence. Walking and talking with another, however, adds the zest of companionship and often a pinch of cultural exchange. Sharing a meal with strangers, who become friends, could include a spicy paella or a tangy Galician Albariño.

The seasons of our lives are sprinkled with bitter and sweet, salty and savory, but there is always room at the table. Each of my Caminos was different. Each had its own challenges and graces. I can't say that any of them was a perfect meal. Flexibility was a must and adjustments had to be made. Yet each of them left my mind open, my heart full, and my soul well-seasoned.



Sliding Into Fall

by Robert Deming
Fredericksburg, TX

I arrived in Le Puy-en-Velay in central France in mid-September, just in time for the Festival of the King of Birds. Summer was ending, and the weather was perfect for walking. By the time I left the trail at Moissac four weeks later, France had slipped into fall.

I first noted the change in season when I saw the path covered in leaves. Some mornings it was cool, and I wore a jacket. The gîtes d'étape (hostels) were beginning to close as the season wound down. I didn't know it then, but I was also sliding into a different season in my life.

On Day One of my walk, I'd taken a photo of the pilgrim blessing at the Cathédrale Notre-Dame du Puy. Smack dab in the center of the pilgrims captured in that photo is a silver-haired, French-speaking, Belgian mademoiselle in a red t-shirt. I don't know how I missed her then; perhaps I was dazed by the long journey from Texas and a bit lost because I didn't speak French. I would encounter her again a few days later at Domaine du Sauvage.

She came out into the garden where I was relaxing with a beer, and I introduced myself. When she told me her name, Josette, my heart skipped a beat. That's not metaphorical; it really did skip a beat. I thought to myself, "Oh no! I don't need this."

Five years later, I am 71 years old, in Belgium, speaking French. Josette and I have walked many miles of trail together and have had many adventures.

Whatever stage of life this is, I like it.



Pilgrim blessing at Cathédrale Notre-Dame du Puy, September 2018. Little did the author know when he snapped this photo that he was later meant to meet the silver-haired mademoiselle in the red t-shirt, front and center. Photo by Robert Deming.

Musings of an Older Pilgrim

by Pamela Paine
Watkins Glen, NY

As I rocket through my 60s, I can't help but reflect on missed opportunities. Discovering the Camino as I did, at age 62, resulted in great joy, but also in a sense of lost time. Why had I not realized my love of long-distance walking while I still had the young body to fully support the journey?

Now I have become resigned to completing only sections of this and other walks, reducing miles traveled to avoid a recurrence of shin splints, paying for baggage transport as I can no longer carry a fully loaded pack, and avoiding communal sleeping arrangements due to chronic problems with insomnia. It's not a pretty picture, and one blurred by a struggle to see the significance of my efforts when compared to the more extensive and seemingly more physically demanding treks of others. These thoughts only reflect part of the story, of course, and there is more to a journey than the extent of one's physical prowess.

Part of the lesson of these journeys is to move beyond social comparisons, focusing on individual questions and intentions. Here the Camino has given with overflowing hands. In truth, the degree of hardship endured affects the learning experience for all of us. Too little hardship, and there is no sense of gain, no impetus for growth. (cont.)

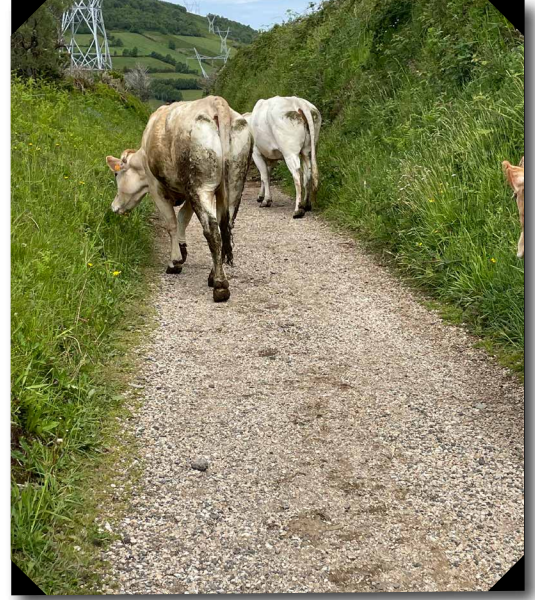


Robert and Josette's adventure continues. Wind River Range, Wyoming, August 2023. Photo by Robert Deming.

Too much hardship, and one can be overwhelmed, even injured, by the experience, and deterred from future efforts. So, even in later seasons of life, one can find the right amount of challenge even on shorter-distance Caminos, as 100 kilometers is not inconsiderable.

The Way, indeed, offers something for everyone. For some, these attainments are physical in nature, a type of validation of what one can (still) do. For others, the challenge involves addressing inner states, such as religious or spiritual needs, that energize and inform one's walk. Age does not negate the effort or the reward.

My Caminos have given me time and space for reflection, meaningful social contacts, increased physical fitness, and a greater degree of confidence in my ability to overcome obstacles to meet a goal. They have given me many months of eager and energetic preparation (often the best part of any journey!), as well as post-walk memories and connections. They have exposed me to heart-stopping beauty and have provided a sense of purpose. What more do I need?



Cows along the Camino Francés. Photo by Sirie Blankenship.

A Camino for All Seasons

by Ruben Barron
Yorba Linda, CA

Ten years ago, my 41-year-old single son and I, his 67-year-old dad, both walking novices, were excitedly preparing to walk the Camino Francés from St. Jean Pied de Port. It would be an awakening journey undertaken with our friend and priest, Father Mike Hanifin, who inspired a small group to make a pilgrimage with him. This was our initial Camino, experienced with eyes wide open, taking in everything new and nothing for granted.

After climbing the stunning Pyrénées from France into Spain, surrounded by lively voices from around the world, we witnessed a joyful September wedding in Pamplona and were simultaneously alarmed to hear about a Camino pilgrim being robbed in the city. Soon after, one of our members lost her cell phone. These early misfortunes raised our collective antennae, but the remainder of our Camino was filled with welcome adventure as we befriended walkers from various countries and interacted with helpful local residents and friendly business proprietors.

La Rioja rewarded our arduous journey, greeting us with its world-renowned red wine; by good fortune, we rested in Belorado on a weekend of bullfighting with throngs of enthusiastic fans. A local reveler, who had evidently started celebrating quite early, bumped into me asking for directions.

In Sarria, we tasted the most delicious grilled octopus and steak, prepared outdoors and served with bread and wine in the warm merriment of a cheerful swap meet. It was an apt opportunity to share a meal with our Spanish hosts and toast to their generous hospitality.

My favorite sights, sounds, and smells emanated from small villages, resurrecting childhood memories long forgotten. A local farmer asked about my origins. I told him I was born in a tiny Mexican village and raised in big American cities. "We are half-brothers," I said. He smiled as I continued, "We're both descendants of Hernán Cortés." (cont.)

In the spring of 2024, I will attempt the peaceful Via de la Plata. Pilgrims who walk this lengthy route, free of human congestion, account for approximately 2% of those who have completed a Camino so far this year. At over 600 miles, with multiple long stages and minimal resources, I am counting on the route's fresh air, colorful flora, and many surprises to fill me with the Camino enchantment that I've come to know and also long for. I will not be walking alone. My son, now a father of two beautiful girls, will again join me, now a grandfather and seasoned walker in the winter of my life.

Beauties & Wonders of the Camino Francés

by Sirie Blankenship
San Antonio, TX

Last spring, my friend Linda and I walked from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostela. We went by foot every step of the way, suffering no blisters, but our sore feet and tired muscles screamed at us by each day's end.

Our first day, we crossed the Pyrénées at the Napoleon Pass—one of the hardest climbs and with a steep descent. Gradually, our bodies adjusted to the time change and breathing at a high altitude. Our first three days were sunny but cool, then a north front came and we walked in early-morning temperatures of 39 degrees Celsius (102 degrees Fahrenheit). Winds blew steadily at 18 miles per hour with gusts of 25 to 30 miles per hour. We felt like we had to walk sideways just to stand up. All around us, lightning struck and thunder clapped.

Yet, the journey was beautiful and wondrous.

Wildflowers lined the trail and poppies in full bloom blanketed the fields in red. Vineyards and olive orchards gave way to wine and olives at day's end. There were historic churches and cathedrals, some ornate and some quite simple.

Farm animals (and their manure) were abundant. We heard bells ringing and passed by cows, sheep, goats, or horses grazing the fields. One Sunday, which I now refer to as "Cow Day," as villagers moved their herd through the village, a bull decided to chase me. Maybe he didn't like my red shirt. Yikes! Luckily, the herding dog got him back in line. I also didn't realize until then that cows pee and poop straight backward as they walk. Yikes again!

I fell in love with the storks that build huge wooden nests perched high atop church steeples. As I was doing laundry in Los Arcos, I saw the first family of storks on a hotel rooftop and caught sight of another flying back to feed their young. They flew with such grace, their wings enormous.

I met fantastic pilgrims from around the world and cherish their friendship today. It was also amazing to feel the plane touchdown on American soil and know I was home again. *(cont.)*



Poppies in bloom along the Camino Francés. Photo by Sirie Blankenship.

Would I walk the Camino Francés again? No, but I plan to walk other routes, especially now that pilgrims who complete the Camino de San Antonio Mission Trail in Texas can receive 30 kilometers of credit toward the Camino Inglés, allowing those who then walk the 75 kilometers from A Coruña to Santiago to qualify for a Compostela. Learn more: CAMINOSANANTONIO.ORG

Spring Flowering on the Camino

by Deborah Weltman
St. Louis, MO

I love spring. It's the season of growth and my birthday.

The Camino Francés in the spring of 2011 was glorious—green, damp, and cool. By day, the rains mostly held off. By night, the cloud-filled skies released their moisture while we slept in our albergue bunk beds.

Advantage: I rarely needed to dig out my poncho or scrape mud off my boots.

Disadvantage: Not once did I see the Via Lactea from the Camino. The Milky Way remained hidden by clouds.

Those spring days of big puffy clouds above the Meseta, clear blue skies behind, the horizon far off in the distance, the wildflowers, the roses—glorious!

My only Camino was that one in 2011. As I have not walked multiple Caminos, I cannot compare the earthly seasons of one Camino to another, nor the distinctions of making a pilgrimage at different ages or stages of life.

In hindsight, I walked that Camino to make a point to myself about aging. I turned 60 years old on the Camino. I've heard 60 is a common age for women to decide to walk. That makes sense to me. At 60, we are women past our reproductive years, past active parenting, and we may no longer worry about looking youthfully attractive. We are attractive in other ways: our collected life wisdom, our internal comfort with who we are becoming, our ability to show love and express caring. At 60, we step onto

a life-path of self-exploration, of focus on our spiritual nature, of exploring the meaning of life. We are interesting people! We are attractive, yes, but not necessarily in the same fecund way.

My age-60 Camino was a special life stage. It was a personal "spring flowering" that showed me I was



Wildflower along the Camino Francés, Spring 2011. Photo by Deborah Terra Weltman.

courageous, able, and ready to accelerate my spiritual growth. My age-60 Camino offered me divine encouragement and personal lessons and wisdom I needed to fund the next stage of my growth.

My spring flowering has now born fruit. At 72, I know better than to believe others who say, "That's not how it's done," or "You can't do that," or "You'll appear foolish" (or "unfeminine" or "bitchy"). I determine what's right for me.

I wear my "Pilgrim Wise Woman" mantle proudly. I am old enough and learned enough to share my unique ways of seeing and understanding. I proudly offer up my life experiences to help others. I am a Camino Elder. I get to make my positive difference in the world.

40 Days of Marvelous Cold & Solitude on the Camino

by Melanie Mowinski
Williamstown, MA

I walked the Camino Francés across northern Spain this past winter from St. Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostela, and then to Finisterre.

I set out February 11, arriving in Santiago March 17, and then continued to the coast. Why that time of year? I was already on that side of the ocean, having spent January at an (cont.)



SEASONS OF THE WAY

artist residency in Morocco, and I didn't want to cross the ocean two more times. Moreover, being a gardener, I didn't want to miss the gardening season back home.

Everything I had heard about a winter pilgrimage was true. Lots of establishments are closed. Sometimes you have to walk longer than you want to find a place to sleep. Services are limited.

The flip side? Fewer choices to make. I am eternally grateful for the list of winter albergues I found here: [APRINCA.COM/ALBERGUESINVIerno](https://www.aprinca.com/alberguesinvierno). This was my lifeline. (Editor's note: Watch for a new list to be posted for the November 2023 to February 2024 winter Camino season.)



Melanie Mowinski at the Camino Francés halfway mark in Sahagún. It was 25 degrees Fahrenheit there on February 28, 2023. Photo by Amadeo Martin.

Over 40 days, I experienced only four days of rain, and just one day of sleet, snow, and cold (which I took as a rest day). Otherwise, the weather was marvelous. There was a stretch when daytime temps were in the high 20s or low 30s Fahrenheit, which some might consider cold, but not this Midwesterner who lives in New England. And, as any outdoorsy person will tell you, there's no such thing as bad weather, only bad equipment. My gear was excellent. I was comfortable and warm. My favorite days were those cold days crossing the Meseta. I was prepared for this section to challenge my spirit. Instead, I relished the quiet, snowy solitude.

Walk the Camino Francés in winter if you like solitude. You'll meet who you are meant to meet. I encountered only a handful of people, often walking for hours by myself, and meeting a fellow pilgrim or two at the only albergue open that stage. I met very few Americans on my winter Camino. This surprised me. My companions were mostly Spaniards, South Koreans, and Italians. And mostly men, also a surprise. I was delighted whenever I encountered an American. My favorites were a father and a son I met on the descent from O Cebreiro. We kept crossing paths up until Santiago and enjoyed conversations about contemplation, solitude, and centering.

Winter on the Camino is a quiet time, and worth it if you embrace the limitations.



Melanie Mowinski and fellow winter pilgrims Oliver, Amadeo Martin, and Javier get ready to walk 17 kilometers without services. Outside of Carrión de los Condes on February 27, 2023. Photo by Melanie Mowinski.

A Camino Way of Life

by Peter Tremain
Formerly of Louisville, KY

Three years had passed since my wife's death. We had been together for 45 years, and I had retired to care for her the last two. Our children and grandchildren were doing well, fully fledged from the nest. My career was over and my wife was gone. What had been home felt very different. I was in a new season of life, a time of self-discovery.

Six months after I celebrated my 70th birthday, I crossed the Pyrénées from St. Jean Pied de Port to Roncesvalles during the dry fall. Fields of sunflowers were ready to be harvested, some of the seed heads now faces created when passing pilgrims plucked seeds. Grapevines were laden with grapes, ripe and ready for feet to release their sweet nectar. (cont.)



I walked for 40 days, including the time I got lost for 24 hours between Estella and Los Arcos. I bonded with people who became like family to me. Every day on the Way, I was fully present with the places and the people I encountered. I focused completely on Camino life. Sitting on the rocks at the edge of Finisterre's turbulent waters, I realized that my Camino was just beginning. Re-entry would be challenging.

After arriving home, it felt as if I had left the planet and had lived an entire lifetime in those 40 days. I decided to downsize, moving from a house in the suburbs to a loft in the city. I continued to travel outside the United States. For eight weeks a year I traveled alone, writing posts for my blog and staying in hostels. The Camino was never done with me, shaping my life in innumerable ways.

As my 80th birthday approached, I decided to act on a Camino discovery: For 40 days, I had carried everything I needed on my back; I needed nothing more.

I sold or gave away my belongings, including my car, and did not renew the lease on my loft. I left the United States on January 3, 2023, with my backpack and a laptop computer to work on writing a book. I have no permanent residence, staying instead in short-term rentals, hostels, and occasionally with friends. My Camino is not over yet. It will not be over until I leave the planet. And who knows where it will lead me after that?

Tick Tock!

by Kurt Fauser
Keller, TX

A pilgrim must consider many factors when choosing when to walk the Camino. On two occasions, I have chosen to walk in autumn, once school is in session and European vacationers have returned home. Autumn is cooler than summer, drier than spring, and unlike winter, autumn days are long enough to finish each stage before dusk.

Now in my autumn years, I don't have the luxury of knowing what a Camino experience in an earlier season of life would have been like. Had I known of the

Camino when I was younger, I may have had more calendar options, but would I have felt the call then as strongly as I do now? Had I walked as a younger man, perhaps I would have learned more about myself and how to relate to others sooner. Regardless what season of the year I might have walked, I'm certain it would have been a positive experience.

In autumn months on the Camino, most crops have been harvested, the fields are golden, and equipment has either been stored or is scheduled for maintenance. The leaves are turning colors and dropping. The days are growing shorter. Activities are moving indoors. Albergues and businesses are preparing for less traffic.

Similarly, in the autumn years of life, the better part of one's timeline has been spent. Hair has grayed. Productivity wanes. The body becomes weaker and begins to show its mileage.

The Camino teaches lessons of patience, empathy, humility, understanding, and flexibility. We deal with setbacks like aches, pains, and medical issues. Our community of family and friends shrinks, too. We spend time reflecting on our blessings.

While reflecting, one's mind can wonder. What could we have done better in life? How many pilgrims have preceded us? Who were they? Were they sinners or saints? Did they find what they were looking for? Did they experience Camino magic? Did they feel challenged? So many questions, *(cont.)*



Kathy Fauser and Kurt Fauser experience the daylight hours growing shorter near Palas de Rei along the Camino Francés on September 23, 2022. Photo by Kathy Fauser.

and also ample time to find answers. The Camino provides.

As a pilgrim, I appreciate the similarity between the Camino and life. The Camino teaches us everything we need to know. If only we could apply those lessons daily. Autumn is a great time to walk a Camino and to be alive. The clock is ticking. Have you planned your next adventure?

A Pilgrim's View at 80

by Frank Rodriguez
Portland, OR

"I'll have what he's having." No, thank you, not today. Today I'm experiencing a deeply personal sense of "me" in all the challenges and the beauty of this journey. As I walk my sixth Camino, I'm celebrating my 80th year, and I know my life force is peaking.

I indeed have expended myself. The first days of hill walking were beyond demanding. Alto de Perdón required all the adrenaline I could muster. I was as tired as I've ever felt by day's end. The next day's walk was also up and down and up and down, as was the following day, though that one was a bit easier mentally.

The acrostic PIES is a great way for me to consider my Camino experience:

Physically, I was less prepared than I had hoped and today, Day Six, I am beginning to find my pace.

Intellectually, I have been too tired to care, except for stopping at some churches for a quiet sit.

Emotionally, I am joyful, although experiencing some fear about lodging. I am cleanly accessing my emotions in response to my experiences.

Spiritually, I'm connected with my life force beyond thought or emotion. I walk experiencing agape, journeying with complete spiritual connection.

It is 4 a.m. I am awake and happy in bed in a pension in Logroño, Spain. I'm hungry, though unsure what to eat. I'm tired, though having difficulty sleeping. And, I'm as deeply alive as I can know.

I am extended beyond my comfort zone. I'm in an altered state, and I feel tears of joy at experiencing

the depths of who I am. I push for another step when all I want is to rest. I refuse to eat when the food, though interesting or even beautiful, does not fit my energetic intuition. I find my ability to connect with so many with whom I share this planet. I drop into profound tears of love and joy as I walk into a church and experience a depth of spiritual connection beyond religious and political limitations. This is just the beginning of Day Six on my sixth Camino. Again, tears of joy well as I experience agape. Blessings to you, my fellow pilgrims, as I carry you with me in my singing, in my prayers, and in my being.

Autumn Walking Along the Ebro: Vineyards, Orchards, Harvest Festivals

by James Larocco
Alexandria, VA

We've just finished walking the Via Podiensis. As with our previous nine Caminos, we started this Camino in September on the cusp of autumn. Rain is less frequent then, but more important, it's harvest time. Of all our Caminos, the most memorable in this respect has been the Camino del Ebro in Spain. Since we have been enamored with walking in Rioja, we knew that the Ebro promised a much bigger slice of this lovely province.



Alcanadre pears spotted along the Camino del Ebro, 2016. Photo by Janet Larocco.

Instead of starting in Barcelona, we chose to set off from Logroño on the feast of San Matteo when Logroño comes alive with its annual wine festival. The festival made for a wonderful start. We set out the next day, and it wasn't long before we were passing vineyard after vineyard, with ripe grapes ready to be picked. At one point, we paused for a photo. Suddenly a man approached us and said some of the workers didn't show up. Would we help him pick grapes, at least for a few hours? It was an offer we couldn't refuse, and it was an unforgettable experience, especially chatting with the other pickers as we were served lunch in the vineyard. (cont.)



The next day we were surrounded by pear orchards. As we passed by, a farmer shouted to us: “You’re going the wrong way. Santiago is the other way.” We smiled, saying we chose to walk this way. He called us over and tossed us some ripe pears, the most luscious and juiciest we have ever tasted.

As we were approaching Gallur, we passed by a long line of almond trees. Some pickers called us over and asked if we knew how to eat raw almonds. When we replied “no,” they showed us how to hit the fruit against a small rock to release the almond seed, and then they invited us to take as many as we wished. We did, and one of our favorite breaks was walking along the canal high above the valley, stopping to break open some almonds on a stone. A pilgrim from Ireland came by, and we shared some with her.

Spring on the Camino boasts its flowers and greenery, showing off nature’s beauty, exciting our senses of sight and smell. Autumn provides nature’s bounty, exciting our senses of sight, smell, *and* taste. We will always savor our autumn along the river Ebro.

My First Winter Camino

by Anne Born
Niles, MI



Ponferrada in the fog on the author's most recent winter Camino, December 2021. Photo by Anne Born.

It was 2010, a Holy Year. I read in the *New York Times* about some door, currently open and soon closing. Something about pilgrims needing to walk through it to receive indulgences. I mentioned this to an undergrad working in my office at Columbia University at the time, and he blurted out, “You have to do this! You HAVE to do this!”

Never one to doubt the global or spiritual awareness of a Columbia undergrad, I started searching for flights to Spain. It was late October. The door would be closing on New Year’s Eve. I booked my flights and bought a copy of John Brierley’s guide to the Camino Francés. With just a week’s vacation available to me, I picked the period between Christmas and New Year’s, planning to arrive in Santiago on New Year’s Eve to see the closing of this door. Then I bought a sleeping bag.

I hadn’t intentionally planned for my first Camino to be a winter pilgrimage. It just happened to be the timeframe I picked to go. I grew up in Michigan where winter was just any other day, not a named season really.

From Madrid, I took a cab to the bus station, then headed northwest to Sarria where I would begin walking the next day, December 27. I spent the first night at a lovely hotel. In the morning, I walked out the door, immediately got lost, but kept going. I arrived at the Cathedral in Santiago on December 31, an hour and a half before the Holy Door closed.

I walked that short route from Sarria again in January 2020. I also walked in the wintertime from León to Santiago (December 2012–January 2013), Roncesvalles to Burgos (December 2014), and, most recently, Pamplona to Villafranca del Bierzo (November–December 2021). The idea of walking with hordes of singing school kids in the heat of summer stops me cold. I crave solitude; shorter days; crisp, cold mornings; and second cups of coffee, waiting for the sun to rise. I like to sleep in; am not afraid of snow, sleet, or ice; and do not need constant company to keep me focused and walking. I know how to dress for the cold; have all the best guides and maps; and best of all, if I need anything, I have good friends in Spain who would come to help me.

They say winter pilgrims gain special indulgences. I like that. My friends say we’re “the real McCoy.” Will I walk the Camino in the winter again? Definitely, yes. Maybe the Camino Inglés next time.

Seasons of Gratitude

by Zebulun Mattos
Miami, FL

When is the best time to walk a Camino? Sure, there's the temperature-related response: when it's neither too hot nor too cold. But ultimately, the season in which one walks is not as important as the lesson in learning gratitude along the way.

For many centuries, pilgrims have walked throughout all four annual seasons, as well as throughout all seasons of life.

And I have found that no matter what may pass, it is always the season to be grateful.

I am reminded of a piece I wrote about pilgrims of antiquity and their own seasons of gratitude:

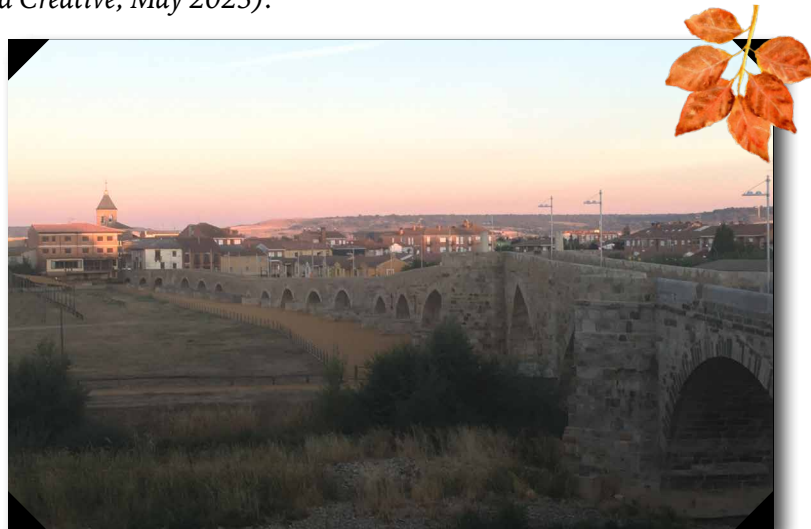
Emerging from San Martín, pilgrims enter the town of Hospital de Órbigo. Approaching the quaint town of only a thousand residents, they cross over an impressive thirteenth century Gothic-style bridge with 19 arches—one of the most iconic Roman bridges. Due to flooding and wars, some portions of the bridge have been rebuilt as recently as the 19th century.

This is no ordinary bridge, however. It's a portal to both the future and the past. The bridge, nicknamed the "passage of honor," is tied to a quixotic story from 1434. As the world transitioned from the Middle Ages into the Renaissance, chivalry and honor had not yet faded.

A knight, smitten by a fair maiden whose heart he could not win, resolved to prove his love by fighting for it in the best way he knew how: by holding a jousting tournament. For a few weeks during that Jacobean Holy Year, challengers from all over crossed the 19 arches of the Passo Honroso to duel the fiery knight in shining armor.

After 300 lances from his opponents had been shattered, he declared himself the reigning champion, capturing the fair maiden's heart—or perhaps he let go of his desire and moved on; history remains unclear. Either way, in honor of his victory, he became another pilgrim and journeyed to Santiago de Compostela to give thanks.

Editor's note: This excerpt is from the author's book Walking with Saint James: 31 Meditations for Pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (Nomad Creative, May 2023).



The bridge at Hospital de Órbigo, August 2016. Photo by Amy Horton.

Walking in the Indian Summer of Life

by Russ Eanes
Harrisonburg, VA

I have taken to pilgrimage in the Indian summer of life.

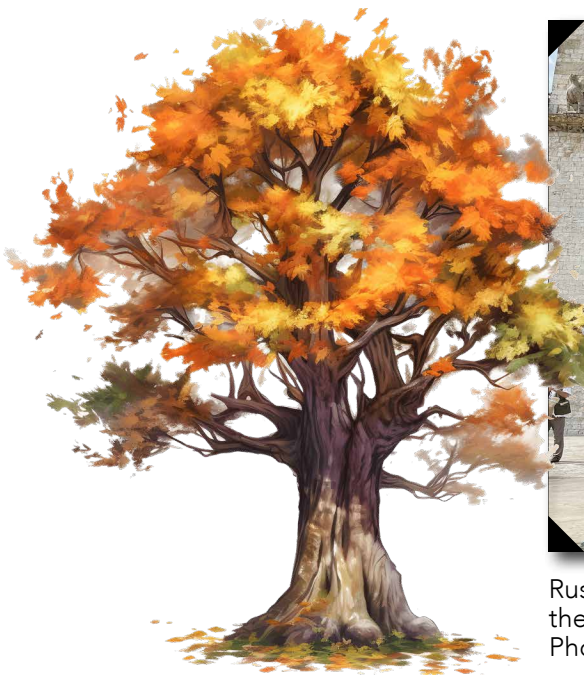
I'm not exactly sure what season of life our 60s are supposed to be. Late summer? Fall? What if it still feels like spring? At this point, age is just a number. How you feel is more important than how many birthdays you've had. I count myself fortunate to have energy and health. The freedom of this time of life is like Indian summer—those pleasantly surprising autumn days when summer's warm breezes return for an encore before winter arrives.

I walked my first pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago at age 61. The six-week adventure changed the course of my life. Five years later, I still walk pilgrimage paths in Italy once or twice per year. While others might head to the poolside or the recliner, I grab a pack and take to my feet, sometimes gathering others to walk with me.

When I first planned to walk the Camino, I thought it would mark a transition point to my post-career life. I had no idea it would become a passion and a new vocation. Pilgrimage has come to me as a great gift, and I feel compelled to share it.

I've taught online classes and delivered numerous public presentations about walking the Camino. I've written and published two books about my experiences. I've co-founded a local chapter of American Pilgrims on the Camino and lead monthly hikes in the mountains. I offer advice over a cup of coffee or via Zoom. The gift of pilgrimage came to me freely, and I give it away in the same spirit.

Encouraging people—especially older adults who have time to take life and experiences more slowly and reflectively—to choose active travel is my new purpose. My previous career, like the hot summer, has passed. Now I look forward to what I hope will be a long, refreshing stretch of Indian summer to share the life-enhancing gift of pilgrimage with others.



Russ Eanes (sixth from left) and fellow pilgrims upon arrival at the Basilica di San Francesco d'Assisi.
Photo by a generous pilgrim.

Letters from the Camino: Falling

by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway
Spokane, WA

Dear Pilgrims,

Greetings from Milepost 4,414 of my virtual Camino from Spokane, WA. The trees in Spokane are turning red and gold. We truly fell into a September chill. Farewell to 90- to 100-degree Fahrenheit temperatures; we barely had 80s in September. My tomato plant is not ready for this! And rain, we have rain. That's the thing about Spokane; when it's cloudy, it's cold, maybe wet. Yes, when we walk, we LIVE the seasons. How can you stay dry in a drenching rain?

There is no escaping the progression of the years or the light. Spokane's allotment of sunlight is shrinking at the moment, 12 hours per day at the equinox. In the chill of fall, I walk briskly or wait until the sun has a chance to warm things up. The brilliant colors are more intense under gray skies, but the rain is colder now. Winter snow tends to be kinder and drier than fall rain. I am starting to dream about powdery white snow. Occasionally, I opt for a grocery walk, or rarely, a mall walk. From the treadmill at the gym, I can gaze comfortably north over the Spokane River Gorge, through wildfire smoke or any storm. It's my final retreat from the outdoors.

Nevertheless, wind and trees beckon me. Clouds hover in the evergreens, below the ridgeline. I whisper words to the trees and shiver. My comfort is increased by a warm scarf with layers, a prayer, and a pair of dry socks nestled deep in my pack. The dry socks were a lesson many years ago from a National Outdoor Leadership School instructor who said he rarely used them but carried them for the confidence of having them. Taped to my kitchen cabinet is the Camino advice, "Do not pack your fears." The dry socks are an exception in my mind. They embody confidence.

My virtual route from Spokane, still on the ocean, is now approaching the village of Plogoff, on the coast of Brittany in northwest France. The people of the town successfully resisted the building of a nuclear power plant in the 1970s. Thankfully, it's still a fishing village. Squeezing a French class into my weekly schedule, I keep walking, praying, and waiting for my season to actually hike the Camino Francés. Our Lady and St. James, pray for us. Happy Falling!

Love,

Leah

Editor's note: This is Leah G. Wilkinson-Brockway's 17th 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 fall morning in a field along Lower Mosquito Creek Road, in Clark Fork, ID, on October 1, 2023.
Photo by Leah Wilkinson-Brockway.

A Summer Walk in the Autumn of My Life

by Barney Gorin
Gaithersburg, MD

I walked the Camino del Norte in four segments, and each segment of my Camino journey took place in the same two seasons: the summer of the year and the autumn of my life. Combined, those seasons have given me something wonderful that words are inadequate to describe, but I will attempt to do so here.

My Camino has definitely been about the journey, not the destination. Arriving in Santiago was not even a focus for me until, perhaps, six months before I departed for Spain in July 2023 to begin the fourth segment of my journey. A planned rendezvous in Santiago, with only a short span of time for my arrival, taught me that focusing on the journey—not the destination nor a schedule—is an important, even critical part of the joy and wonder of my Camino experience.

My “el Camino, no el destino” intention let me revel in the sights, smells, and sounds of summer along Spain’s northern coast. Seeing how humans have learned over millennia to use rugged terrain for vineyards, villages, recreation, defense, and small farms was fascinating. Seeing it all “up close” while traveling at two to two-and-a-half miles per hour was inspirational. Cities with their pavement, buildings, and abundant gifts of museums, art, and industry provided occasional diversions from my experiences across the countryside.



One of many fascinating old stone walls along the Camino del Norte nearing Santiago de Compostela, on July 29, 2023. Photo taken by Barney Gorin.

The local people, from Irún to Santiago, helped turn a challenging physical struggle into a spiritual experience. I had never before experienced that in my 77 years. Their seemingly unending willingness to help in ways small and great, made my journey far easier than it would have been without them. Perhaps they are all that made it possible.

In Asturias, where the Camino del Norte turns in a more southerly direction, the old stone walls lining the road became a recurring feature. Some were made of flat stones standing on end, while others were carefully laid structures; some were well maintained, while others were in disrepair. Those walls fascinated me. Each one a unique commentary on the seasons of life, telling stories of human works, this earth, and even, perhaps, the universe—from creation to destruction.



SEASONS OF THE WAY



Katherine Schott of San Jose, CA, celebrates reaching the summit at 3,681 feet on the Camino Primitivo, September 2017. Photo by Betsey Jay.

MEMBERS SAY

"I walked my first Camino, the Primitivo, alone, with the goal of better understanding who I was as I entered a new phase of life at age 60. By the time I reached Santiago, I knew. I was able to plan my future goals based on a knowledge of who I was at that point, and what I could and could not do physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually. I've continued walking Caminos because it's such a great adventure and learning experience. Since my first Cami-on, I've taken friends and family, sharing this amazing adventure of discovery with them."

- **Alan**, Renewing Member

FINAL REFLECTION

First Camino

*by Irene Calvo
Seattle, WA*

After Mary Oliver's "Wild Geese"

You cannot be prepared.
You have to walk on your two feet,
Your ten toes,
Your legs,
Their muscles and joints
And everything stacked upon them
For five hundred miles
Along paths and roads,
Past poppies and thistles,
Immature sunflowers, acres of wheat,
On gravel, pavement, hard packed dirt,
Under expansive skies and expressive clouds
With the shield off your heart
and your unlidded mind raised skyward.

You have only love, presence,
No other place or time.
Peering over your shoulder,
You see only the Way nestled in the landscape.
Gazing ahead, there is only the path forward
Straight toward the horizon or curved like the
shadow of a breast,
Marked by yellow arrows, scallop shells.

You told me your sorrow, your dreams –
I listened, heard.
I told you my wonderings, my fears –
You listened, understood
As we tipped our heads up toward the parent storks
With their fledglings cresting the closed crumbling
church
And walked down to the café-bar
Like lovers who just met.

At the Abode of the Gods,
The oasis for pilgrims, rotation and revolution cease.
The whole world rests on the wide wooden wheel
Along with the weight of bananas,
The bright shock of oranges, cut kiwis, watermelon
slices,
The fullness of cheeses, breads, nuts, cookies,
Where in the shade poles are laid down, shoes are
removed,
While we refresh and refuel ourselves
amidst greetings and wishes of Buen Camino.

Despite the map, despite the history,
Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port is not the beginning.
Santiago de Compostela is not the end.
Today I am right here on my Camino
And you are right there, also here, on yours.

Ever beautiful wood storks along the Camino Francés. Photo by Sirie Blankenship.



NEXT ISSUE

Submissions to our Winter 2024 issue close on January 1, 2024.

We would love to receive your reflections!

The Winter theme is **THE ARTIST'S WAY**.

How did visual arts, music, song, poetry, prose, or other art forms help you prepare for, experience, document, or process your pilgrimage?

Please consider this theme for the Winter 2024 issue, sharing stories, reflections, poetry, lyrics, photography, artwork, or other original creative works that capture the way of the artist-pilgrim.

We invite pilgrims to explore the relationship between art and creativity on pilgrimage. Consider how you used an artform to outwardly express your inward transformation. How did your pilgrimage help you unearth a buried artistic talent? How has your creative output or artistic style changed since your Camino? How do you experience pilgrimage with an artist's eye, ear, or voice? How do you carry yourself as a pilgrim as you create?

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.

We look forward to hearing from you.

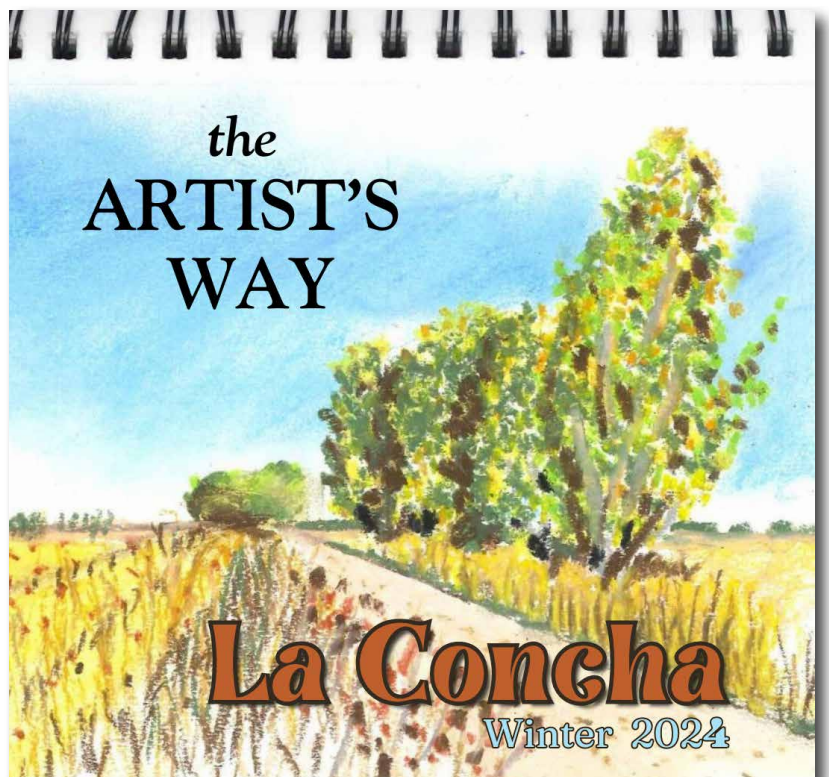
Team *La Concha*
American Pilgrims on the Camino
AMERICANPILGRIMS.ORG

Help Us Shape the Future of La Concha

We're exploring updates to the *La Concha* publication model to ensure we continue to best serve the vision, mission, and values of American Pilgrims on the Camino.

Please help us by responding to a brief 10-question survey.

ACCESS READER SURVEY HERE



Original artwork provided by Eric Searcy.