



LA CONCHA

Newsletter of American Pilgrims on the Camino

www.americanpilgrims.com

January 2010

Gather With Us...

I hope you will join your fellow pilgrims at our March Gathering in Orlando. Whether to renew old friendships, to recall and share your Camino experience, or to find the information you need to undertake your first Camino, a few days attending the Gathering will be nearly as rewarding as a few days on the Camino itself.

You'll find yourself immersed in this fascinating world that blends tradition and history, spiritual reward and physical challenge.

For an American, to travel the Camino - on foot, bicycle, or horseback - is to escape from all that is comfortable and familiar in our culture. Walk across a country? Americans usually don't walk across town. Ride a bicycle over a mountain range? You can't be serious -- bikes are for kids and kids don't do that. Sleep in a huge room with strangers who speak other languages? Surrender a bit of privacy? Me?

Well, yes. You.

The word "unique" is overused, so I'll say that the Camino is a true

once-in-a-lifetime experience.

What better way to recapture a bit of that experience than to attend the Gathering? All this and a late winter break for a modest investment.

Our Gatherings Committee has assembled a program that is a balance of learning, reflecting, and relaxing. There will be how-to



*Attendees at the 2008 Santa Barbara Gathering enjoy a sun-filled afternoon.
Photo by Lin Galea,
San Francisco CA*

sessions: first aid for the pilgrim, and a tour of our wonderful work-in-progress American Pilgrims website, to mention just two. And there will be ample time simply to relax.

*Join us,
Jim Eychaner, Chair*

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2010 – 13th Annual Gathering of Pilgrims

Our 2010 Gathering of Pilgrims is shaping up as another exciting opportunity to share and learn, greet old friends and make new ones – and for those of us recovering from a brutally cold winter – to enjoy a wonderful respite in subtropical Florida.

Our traditional Hospitalero Training begins Tuesday March 16, the Annual Gathering on Friday March 19, and the Spiritual Retreat on Sunday March 20. All events take place within a quiet and secluded 485-acre retreat center.

The [San Pedro Center](#), in warm Winter Park, Florida (Orlando suburb), is this year's venue. Nestled among palmettos and live oaks, with a winding boardwalk to a lake ringed with Spanish moss-laden cypress, the Center is designed especially for retreats.

For our Hospitalero Training, a modern bunkhouse and commercial kitchen await. A beautiful chapel with floor to ceiling windows facing dense woods beckons those staying for the Spiritual Retreat.

The Gathering sessions, the central feature of our several days at San Pedro, take place in modern, well-appointed conference and seminar rooms. Lodging is motel-style with two beds per room (an incentive to share a room and save costs).

The 12 sessions feature an array of topics focusing on our theme of *The Camino Today*. They will inform you, challenge you, and help refresh some of those priceless memories.

A new two-hour workshop on Friday afternoon, *Drawing and Painting Your Pilgrimage*, will stimulate your creative juices. To help you understand the place of labyrinths in pilgrimage, attend *Finding Yourself in a Labyrinth: Ancient and Modern Paths to Personal Experience*, and later, explore the on-site labyrinth.

Hear about the joys of following other Camino routes in *Alternatives to the Camino Francés in Spain*. If you've wondered about whether service as an hospitalero is for you, attend the session on *A Different Kind of Camino: The Hospitalero Experience*.

And give us your thoughts about what kind of Camino service projects American Pilgrims might undertake when you attend *Pilgrims Give Back: A Conversation about Camino Service*.

Dr. Lisa Signori will present the keynote address, *Roads Less Traveled: The Way of St. James in France and its World Heritage Sites*. These and several other sessions are all relevant for both experienced Camino pilgrims and those planning or considering a pilgrimage in the near future. Please join us. ♦

Note: Additional program details and registration information are available at the American Pilgrims website [National Gatherings](#) page. Those with no internet access can receive information by writing to American Pilgrims on the Camino, 1514 Channing Avenue, Palo Alto, CA 94303. Or you can send a fax to 650-989-4057.

Labyrinths for all seasons



*Labyrinth
San Pedro Center
Photo courtesy of San Pedro Center*



*Winter Labyrinth
Photo by Cheryl Grasmoen
North Oaks MN*

7th Annual Hospitalero Training

"Grañón was a wonderful experience, and it was a lot of hard work. Every day the Camino brought us gifts in the people who arrived as pilgrims. So many people pitched in, we never lacked for bread, or wine, or helping hands. We expected to give all that we could to help the pilgrims but they gave us so much more. It was incredibly fulfilling."

With this statement Jeanette Chacon has captured the essence of the volunteer hospitalero experience. The 2010 Holy Year presents a huge need for volunteers to host the many expected pilgrims who will traverse the Camino Francés in the coming months. If you have ever considered giving back to the Camino, this is the way and the time to do so.

Please join us in our 7th Annual Hospitalero Training which will be held this coming March 16-18 at the San Pedro Center in Winter Park, Florida. Highlights of the training will include a

wine and tapas evening, delving into the history of hospitality along the Camino, learning the art of cooking for multitudes, sharing ideas on spiritual caring, first aid for pilgrims, and much more. Completing this hospitalero training course qualifies you to work in the many albergues overseen by the Spanish Federation of Friends of the Camino. These include albergues on the Camino Francés as well as the Vía de la Plata.

The ever-popular Hospitalero Training will once again be led by Daniel De Kay and Lin Galea. We hope to see you there. ¡Buen Camino! ♦

2010 Spiritual Retreat

Keeping Our Feet on the Ground: The Pilgrim's Life on the Camino Today

The 2010 Retreat carries the theme of *The Camino Today* into our personal and individual experience of pilgrimage. As in the Middle Ages, the contemporary Camino is enlivened by many elements that have little if anything to do with pilgrimage. We confront these elements daily on the way to Santiago. Sometimes they challenge our intentions as pilgrims on an interior journey. Other times, they add unexpected insights and pleasures.

What is a spiritually informed response to the Camino of commerce, politics, activism, ecological pressures and tourist development?

Our Retreat, led by Mary Wallis, is a chance to talk, contemplate, write, draw, and walk. We will explore the central acts of pilgrimage – following a trail, observing, and reflecting – as a way of building a bridge between who we are as pilgrims and what we encounter on the roads of Northern Spain.

Although we will have scheduled sessions, the Retreat is yours to create; our hope is that you will

seek whatever means are available – whether in solitude or in conversation and creative expression – to help you find clarity, purpose, and joy in your pilgrimage. Seasoned pilgrims and first-time pilgrims are all welcome.

As always, the Retreat is intended as far as possible to respond to your unique pilgrimage and Camino experiences. Please tell us if there is a topic or theme that you would specifically like to be included in the Retreat program. Send your suggestions to retreats@americanpilgrims.com.

Mary Wallis is a former American Pilgrims Board Member who has traveled to Santiago several times along various routes since 1997. She is the author of *Among the Pilgrims: Journeys to Santiago de Compostela*, and holds degrees in Nursing and Health Sciences, and a Ph.D in Medieval English Literature. When not out walking somewhere, Mary works as a Nurse Specialist in Hospice and Palliative Care in Calgary, Canada, where she is a frequent speaker and guest educator. ♦



*Chapel, San Pedro Center
Photo courtesy of San Pedro Center*

If You Can Read This, You Can Draw and Paint!

A Special Workshop at the Gathering

Visualizing ideas and putting them on paper – you do it every time you read and write.

Committing a creative idea to paper is just like stepping on to the road to Santiago. Anything can, and will, happen. See for yourself how visual ideas, like verbal ones, can be expressed in pencil, pen, and watercolor. Let go of your expectations and trust Saint James to guide you on this journey to the artist within. Results may be surprising and may also be exhibited during the Gathering.

Your other guide on this journey will be educator and illustrator Marlena Lambert, who sketched her way from Le Puy to Muxia in 2006.

Participants should bring along a print of their favorite pilgrimage photo, a small memento (such as a shell), and at least one vivid memory. In

addition, please bring whatever portable art supplies you have at home, including a pencil and eraser, a pen or fine-point marker, some unlined paper or small sketchpad, and a portable watercolor paint set. If you don't already have one, pocket sized Windsor-Newton paint sets can be purchased online or at local art stores for around \$25. All of these materials should amount to no more than you would happily add to your *mochila* next time you embark on pilgrimage. Colored pencils will be provided, as will watercolor paper.

If you have questions about this pre-conference workshop, please contact Marlena at

gatherings@americanpilgrims.com.

To participate in this illuminating workshop, be certain to complete the separate entry on the Gathering registration form. ♦



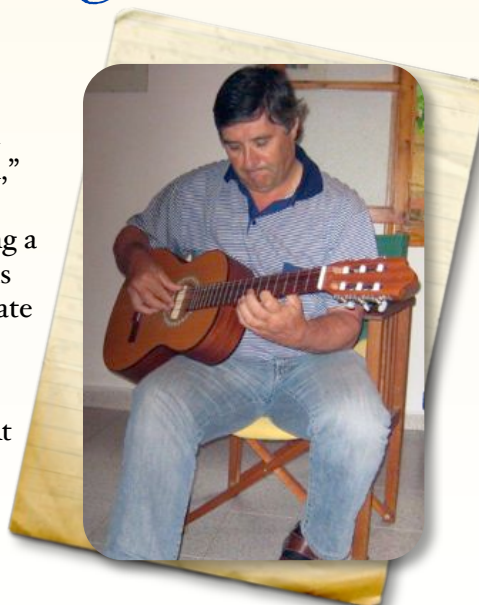
***Livinbac-le-Haut on the Lot River, France.
Mixed media ink & watercolor on paper by
Marlena Lambert.***

2010 Gathering - Camino Cabaret!

Calling all poets, minstrels, and other pilgrims with a passion to perform. On Saturday evening, we invite you to share a pilgrim song, poem, short story, or skit with other pilgrims! If you wish to be “on the bill,” contact M.C. Marlena Lambert at gatherings@americanpilgrims.com, providing a description of your performance. Individuals as well as groups are encouraged to participate in this interactive showcase.

Got Tattoo?

Also, be prepared to show off your ink! At intermission, there will be a Camino Tattoo Contest, hosted by Daniel De Kay. ♦



***Tino plays for fellow pilgrims
Refugio Gaucelmo at
Rabanal del Camino
Photo by Ed Pagett
Alexandria VA***

The Saint and the Sultan

by Paul Moses

*Reviewed by Annette Argall
Baltimore MD*

Most people familiar with St. Francis of Assisi envision a slender man, clothed in a coarse brown robe, who lived humbly and was kind to animals. In his book, *The Saint and the Sultan*, Paul Moses relates the little-known story of Francis as pilgrim and peacemaker.

Francis walked to Santiago de Compostela in 1213/14. While praying at the tomb of Santiago, Francis experienced a divine revelation that not only should he establish many places for his religious order throughout the world but that God wanted him to “bring the gospel message to the world, as the Apostle James had done.”

In response, Francis dispersed his friars to many lands, including Muslim Morocco. He himself embarked on an even more amazing journey, which brought him face to face with Malik al-Kamil, Sultan of Egypt, nephew of the great warrior Saladin, and commander of the forces engaged in bloody battle with the Crusaders’ army.

Imprisonment and other sufferings as a young man

heightened Francis’s desire for peace over violence. He opposed the Crusades at a time when to do so was considered heresy and could bring about excommunication – or worse.

When he traveled to Egypt with the Crusader army, he tried unsuccessfully to avert a battle that turned into a massacre with heavy Christian casualties. Against all odds, he crossed enemy lines to reach the sultan

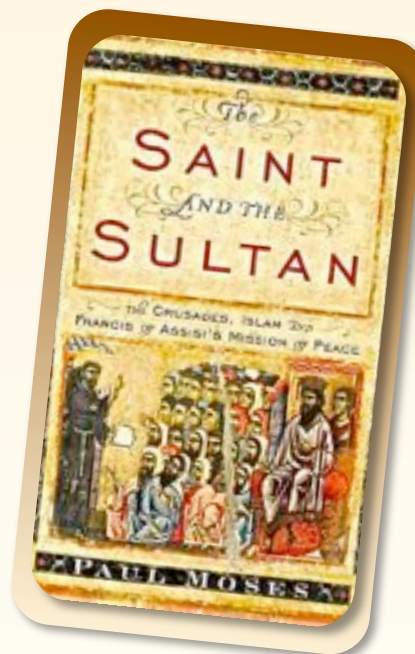
in a mutual respect that could serve as a model in modern times.

This remarkable story was suppressed by Francis’s biographers, who did so to show Francis and the religious order he founded in good light before the authorities in Rome. They excluded Francis’s audience with the sultan and his later writings that Muslims could best be approached with love.

Although Francis lived in the 13th century, his times were no less troubled than ours. Tension between the Muslim and Christian worlds, the conflict of power and money over peace, manipulating the truth to serve political ends – themes then as now.

American Pilgrims member Paul Moses is both journalist and academic, and he has written a fascinating story - well researched, well documented, and a pleasure to read. A map, chronology of events, and listing of major characters are included for easy reference.

In the introduction, Moses explains that he wrote the book because it contains many lessons for our times. The story of Francis - pilgrim and peacemaker - invites reflection on where our own Camino might lead. ♦



to try to convert him to Christianity, believing that this would lead to peace. His meeting with the sultan did not result in a conversion but rather

Outstanding Volunteer & Lifetime Service Awards to Be Presented at Gathering

American Pilgrims is an all-volunteer organization that is fortunate to have many pilgrims involved in so many ways that contribute to the organization’s success. In recognition of extraordinary service, the first annual Volunteer of the Year and Lifetime Service Awards will be presented at this year’s Gathering. Who are the recipients? We can’t tell, but if you come to the Gathering, you will be among the first to know. ♦

Xacobeo 2010 Announces New Website in English



**XACOBEO 2010
Galicia**

Our friends at the Xacobeo in Santiago notified us this month: "Our new site in English went live just last night. Visit www.xacobeo.es/en right away!" There are two main areas, one for pilgrims, including lots of useful info, and one for the many cultural events that will take place in Galicia throughout 2010. Be certain to check both before you head to Spain. We are told that there might be some Holy Year-related events in the U.S., to be posted when confirmed.

We will welcome Xacobeo representative, José Suárez Otero, and perhaps others, at our upcoming Gathering as we have in the past. Please take the opportunity to chat with them about the Camino, their website, and their beautiful province of Galicia. ♦

My Mom and I Are Walking to the End of the Earth

*By Sandy Lenthall
Williamsburg VA*

"My mom and I are walking to the end of the earth." I read this in an email which our daughter, Allison, sent to a number of friends. It made me smile, still amazed at the thought; and because the trip was still some months off, I tucked it away in a special place.

The weeks and months went by, and then we did leave for Spain with our packs, hats, and walking sticks. Mother and daughter walking León to Santiago, the same Camino I had made 12 years before as my first journey into this mystical world of pilgrims and Camino life. This was also my first time to share the walk. In the past, it had always been a solo experience.

We were celebrating my 70th birthday. What a way to greet a new stage of life! As we walked, our natural gaits were quite obvious. I was the tortoise, she was the hare. On ascents and round the bends, she would be far ahead, waiting and often giving a call, "You ok?" I would answer, "I'll meet you at the top."

So many experiences, people, foods, stories, and when we arrived in Santiago she surprised me with accommodations at a lovely hotel as a birthday gift. You all know the sheer luxury of clean sheets, a warm shower, and a quiet private room. We even had Miró prints and handsome furniture with a balcony overlooking a main street.

It was in the evening down at the tomb of St. James, where a dozen or so pilgrims gathered and shared thoughts and prayers in many different languages, that I realized the depth of our experience. The roles of mother and daughter had

been reversed many times during the weeks of walking.

She would watch out for me, make sure of my safety, slow down in consideration, help me take my pack off, and because of her linguistic skills, it was often she who communicated easily in Spanish.

What a beautiful way to have a glimpse into my

future and know that the years of holding her hand to cross the street were reflected in the care with which we shared the sometimes rocky paths in northern Spain.

We didn't walk, but took a bus to the end of the earth. Yet this, too, is a treasure for the memory bank. ♦



*Sandy Lenthall & her daughter Allison
at the end of the earth*

Galicia – Rambling in the Rain on the Camino del Norte, October 2009

by *Chris Slater*
Asbville NC

The rain had been falling for three days, persistent but never dominant, like background music. The scattered farmsteads became sparser as I climbed. Fields and stone fences gave way to lichen-encrusted granite boulders and open moorland reminiscent of those other Celtic lands to the north. A wind turbine loomed through the gloom, spinning sadly as if doomed to rotate to death in the service of man, its vanes methodically appearing and disappearing into the cloud. A milestone, always a comfort to know the exact number of kilometers to Santiago, brought me back to earth. Concentrate now; this is no time or place to get lost.

Last night at Miraz we had a great concentration whose collective jollity dispelled the oppression of the day, aided by the hospitaleros - Bob's abundance of energy which seemed to spread through the building and Alison's imperturbable, multilingual dispensing of nuggets of wisdom and knowledge. We were full, even overflowing on to a floor somewhere else, this in dismal October, not hectic July.

Aromas from the kitchen promised succor, diminishing anxieties of those of us who had failed to heed warnings of barren lands ahead, or who had missed the briefly open store in Baamonde on Sunday night. Perhaps we wouldn't be dependent on little peanut packets from Pilar's bar after all.

A glorious cauldron of piping garlic soup emerged. Somehow these most seasoned hospitaleros had concocted enough for all and seconds too, so bellies were filled and warmed simultaneously.

But now that haven of cheer seemed a world removed, as the rain intensified and tilted to the horizontal. I gambled and took a short cut, described in confident detail in a confraternity guide, forgoing the comfort of the milestones in the hope of shaving 2 km off the soul-chilling rain. A few anxious moments but my luck held, the views toward Sobrado emerged as promised. The land became populated again, the milestones reappeared, even a bus shelter to afford the luxury of a dry seat.

At Sobrado the sun put in a cameo appearance only to deceive as we rushed our washing in from the rain. So we endured another steamy, snory night and set off for Arzúa and a conjunction with the unwashed masses of the Camino Francés. ♦

Camino Signs

There is no end to the variety of yellow arrows on the Camino. Whether their maker is well-known or unknown, they have the same purpose: to guide pilgrims.



The artist Oscar Carballo has designed a series of signs that mark the Camino throughout the province of Oursense on the Vía de la Plata. The one pictured above is found just after Lubián. Photo by Nick Hayes, Haverford PA.



Pilgrim feet go where the yellow arrow takes them. Photo by Kathy Kennerly, Fort Worth TX.

An Ephemeral Pond

by John Barrett

Oak Park IL

April 7, 2007, on the road to San Juan de Ortega. I started out in the, now standard, dull and overcast morning, but it did not rain at all today – the first totally rainless day so far. After Villafranca there is a series of small hills, much talked about among the pilgrims as “the mountains.” The trail here wanders up and down among the pine trees and the small bracken-like purple flowered plants that I still have not been able to identify.

The road is dirt, much used by ATV’s with resulting mud pits in the depressions. At one such difficult mud pit, a small side trail seemed to promise a firmer detour around the obstacle. I followed a young girl on this side path, but we soon came to an ephemeral pond that totally blocked the path and our way.

Now faced with the prospect of retracing our steps and plowing through the viscous mud that we had tried so hard to avoid, and thinking to console,

I said “It is not too bad, we can get around it.” She answered, “It is beautiful.”

I looked again at the pond. It was indeed beautiful. What I had seen as an obstacle to our path, she saw as an object of transient beauty. My attention had been focused on the difficulties of the walk, the mud pit, the attempted evasion of the slime, the disappointment of the wetlands blocking our path. I thought that she would view the world as I did, that the pond was an obstacle to be avoided and circumvented, and that she would need

to be encouraged and consoled. But she saw our plight differently. She saw only the beauty in our surroundings. To her there was no mud, no slime, no obstacle, and no time-consuming detour. She saw only the beauty of the pond, the pines, and the plants.

While I was upset at the obstruction of the pond and the lack of a name for the plants, she was enthralled with the natural beauty of her surroundings. It was not she who needed the

encouragement and the consoling; it was I. On the slow

and gentle descent into the town, I realized that while I was on a walk, she was on a pilgrimage. I have so much to learn from everybody. ♦

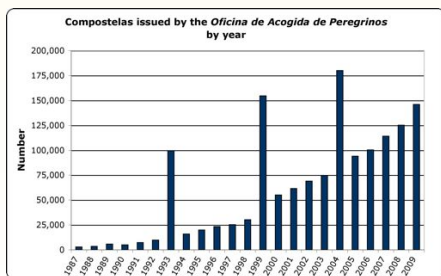


*Girl and the old man
on the road to Bercianos
Photo by John Barrett*

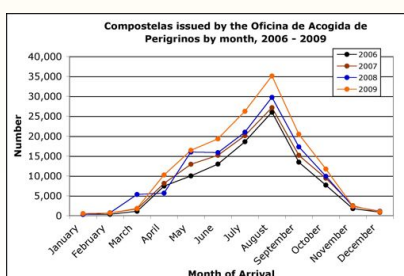
Compostela and Credential Stats

compiled by Gene and Rosann McCullough, Denver CO

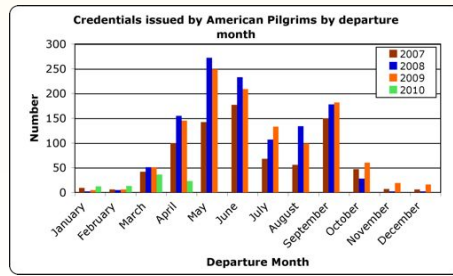
You may find the following information useful as you determine when to make your pilgrimage – both the time of year and even the year. The first two graphs are from the website of the [Archdiocese of Santiago](#). The third graph is based on American Pilgrims credential request records. This year will be our first record of credentials issued during a Holy Year. Will we see a spike comparable to those represented in the Santiago graph? For additional information and full-scale versions of the graphs, go to [American Pilgrims on the Camino Statistics](#), or click on the title below each graph.



Compostelas Issued by Year



*Compostelas issued by
Month & Year*



*Credentials Issued Annually
by American Pilgrims on the Camino*

Traveling the Camino Alone, Together

*Compiled by Richard Baldwin,
Winter Park FL*

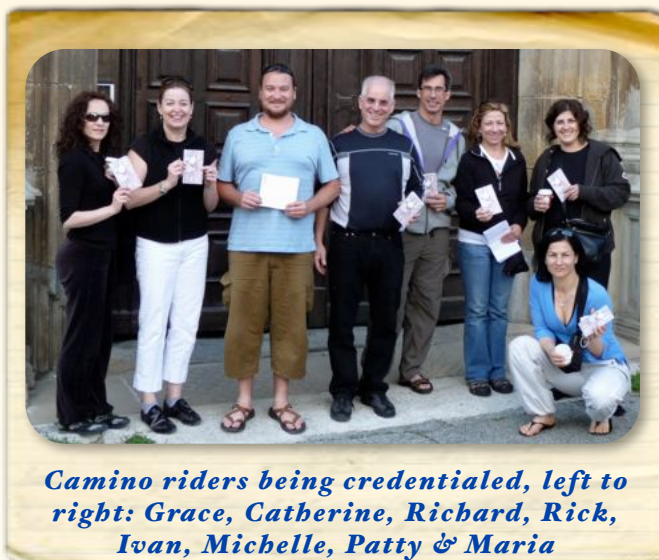
Our group, an informal collection of daily exercisers who in real life called themselves the Downtown Montreal Slothbusters, rode bikes 486 miles from Pamplona to Santiago de Compostela in 12 days during late May 2009. We were three big strong men and five demure ladies, ranging in age from 35 to 62. We rode together but alone. We had dinner together each night to share our thoughts and complain about what had gone wrong. At the end, we were a single unit! Here are our stories:

Grace from Montreal: In hindsight, the Camino was the boot camp that would get me through things to come. Shortly after our journey, I lost my job of 18 years and close friends were diagnosed with cancer. In my anger I would reflect back to the brutal hills we climbed, recalling how we pushed our limits and healed our wounds (inside and out). The Camino gave me new-found strength. It also revealed my soul. I now ask myself daily, "What hill have you climbed today?"

Catherine from New Orleans: I had my life turned upside down in 2005 when the levees broke. My family was stripped of everything tangible. When I finished the Camino I found I had released much of the pain, I realized my inner candle was relighting, and I felt that I could dream once again.

Richard from San Francisco: Experiences like this can be done alone but are amazing when shared. They become bigger than you and bigger than the group. I learned again that I can lead. At the end of our journey I felt the pull to make my way to the top of my personal mountain, and to bring others along. I felt renewed and unstoppable.

Rick from Winter Park: I have spent my life as a business man. I have battle scars. I have



experienced personal failures. Along the trail I was given a scallop shell with the words "letting go." Thinking about that phrase, I realized I had lots of accumulated "stuff." I decided to let go of much of it. I felt liberated.

Ivan from Winter Park: I am from Venezuela but moved to the U.S. in my youth. Family stories taught me that my ancestral past began in Spain. When I crested a mountain just outside León I could taste my roots for the first time in my life! I felt at peace.

Michelle from Montreal: My original reason for biking the

Camino was simply to see Spain and have fun with friends. But after reading about the Camino, I decided to use the experience as a way to come to terms with parts of my past. Although symbolic, the leaving behind of my sorrow stones was very powerful. Combining the physical and mental challenges of the strenuous journey to Compostela, I discovered an inner strength I hadn't known was there.

Patty from Montreal: The Camino started out as a cycling trip. Who could have known it would change my outlook on life? It made me realize that the most important things are a loving family, good friends and most of all, good health. The Camino was like life; some moments were serene, at times we struggled, but it always left us feeling stronger, wiser, and closer.

Maria from Montreal: I always have the urge to move on to the next project, the next adventure, the next discovery...always thinking it must be better around the next corner. I always have difficulty staying in the moment. The Camino taught me the patience to stop, open my eyes, and to see that there is no better place than right here, no better time than right now! I felt contentment and joy!

In Santiago, our group of eight attended the Pilgrims' Mass together. As we sat in the solemn majesty of the magnificent cathedral, other pilgrims there, each of us knew in our hearts that we had come much further than the mere miles on the map. ♦

When in Asturias Try the Fabada

by *Emilio Escudero*
Berkeley CA

Asturias is known for its hearty fabada, a savory white fava bean stew generously flavored with lacón (pork shoulder), tocino (bacon), chorizo, and morcilla (black pudding). My most memorable encounter with this legendary dish was on

dance a bit in the plaza, and enjoy the festivities. Taking a break like this meant I could allow myself a bigger than usual lunch, enjoy a midday glass of wine, and perhaps even take a siesta. My good fortune, already quite good, was about to get better.

When the waiter announced that the menú del día included fabada asturiana, I didn't have to think. Days before in Oviedo, then in Tineo, and



Emilio's best fabada – so far
Grandas de Salime
Photo by Emilio Escudero

the Camino Primitivo in Grandas de Salime, where one afternoon I arrived tired and hungry and just in time for lunch. Across from the restaurant, a dance band had started playing for the town's fiesta which promised to be in full swing later that evening.

Needing the rest and a warm meal and sensing the building excitement, I decided to stay the night,

later in Pola de Allande, I thought the fabadas I had ordered had each eclipsed the earlier.

What would this one be like? Perhaps it was my positive state of mind, my being tired, the music coming from the plaza, the flavorful complement of a rich red wine—whatever it was, I can still taste that afternoon and the best fabada of my life, that is, so far. ♦

!Buen Provecho!

Fabada Asturiana

José Andrés, renowned Spanish chef from Asturias, is best-known in the U.S. for his restaurants in the Washington, D.C. area and his successful PBS cooking series. His recipe for fabada asturiana serves six.

Ingredients

- ♦ 1 lb dried fava, cannellini or other large white beans - picked over, rinsed and soaked overnight
- ♦ 1 large onion, peeled
- ♦ 1 head of garlic
- ♦ 1 tbsp pimentón (smoked paprika)
- ♦ 1 large pinch of saffron threads, crushed
- ♦ 1 meaty fresh ham hock (1 pound)
- ♦ 1/2 lb slab bacon, in 1 piece
- ♦ 1/2 lb semi-dry Spanish-style chorizos
- ♦ Salt and freshly ground pepper

Preparation

Drain the beans and transfer them to a large enameled cast-iron casserole. Add the onion, garlic, pimentón, crushed saffron, ham hock, bacon and 12 cups of cold water and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to moderate and simmer the stew, tucking the ham hock under the cooking liquid as necessary, until the beans are almost tender, about 1 hour and 30 minutes.

Add the chorizos to the bean stew and cook until the meat and beans are tender and the cooking liquid is thick and slightly reduced, about 45 minutes longer.

Discard the onion and garlic and transfer the meat to a bowl. Pull the meat from the ham hock and cut it into large pieces. Cut the bacon and chorizos into pieces. Add the meat to the beans and season lightly with salt and pepper. ♦

Re-entry...

by *Martha Stortz*
Oakland CA

"What's it like to be back?" Some people want the three-second response, some want more. The answers depend on who's asking, but I suspect I don't even know them all yet.

First, it's just strange not to be walking. We joked about how hard it would be to shake pilgrim habits. Like zombies, we'd get up, pack up, and hit the road before first light. While the specter of Zombie Pilgrims cracked us up in Santiago, back home, it's close to the truth. Several mornings, I've been up before dawn, in my boots, and first in line at the coffee shop in the village.

I also miss my colleague and hiking buddy. I joked that we'd

talk our way across the top of Spain – and we did just that. We retold plots of our favorite books, replayed all of our favorite movies, and made up one long shaggy dog tale around people we met along the way. Our story was a cross between Jesuit science fiction and Gothic romance. Think Mary Doria Russell meets Barbara Cartland. It was worth about 400 mg of ibuprofen.

Then there was the easy camaraderie of people we met along the way. Some of them had stories of their own, others we came to know only by sight. We found ourselves speaking in tongues, using every language we knew – and a few we didn't.

The Camino taught me the value of encouragement. I remember sitting at an outdoor café in Viana on a "slow" day. Most pilgrims walked through to Logroño. We sat and cheered

them on. On our hard days, people readily returned the favor.

What's it like to be back? I find myself doing more cheerleading – without the pompoms and poles. I shrug things off more easily, especially anything that seems unnecessarily complicated.

Finally, I find myself looking for yellow arrows. On the Camino, they appeared just when I needed them. Not only did arrows mark the way, they signaled that someone else had been there before. The arrows I liked best were the ones that were just there in the middle of a long straightaway, a sign of mute encouragement. It gave me great heart.

What's it like to be back? I'm on the lookout for a yellow arrow – and maybe even trying to be one myself. ♦



It's All About the People

by *Christine Weisser*
Tampa FL

The Camino is many things to many people. To me it is about the camaraderie, the friendships and the support. The sights and the sounds are other factors but the Camino is all about the people.

Some good advice that I received from a returning peregrino was to travel the Camino alone and to say hello to everyone. This encourages you to step out of your box and opens you to new friendships and experiences. It was good advice, and I recommend the same to anyone walking the Camino.

All pilgrims are your friends. Walk into any restaurant or bar along the Camino and where there is a backpack there is a friend to talk to, a peregrino to eat with, a moment or story to share. On a long, strenuous morning walk, looking for the first open bar for breakfast, I turned the corner into a tiny village and there it was – a bar. An encouraging cheer rose up from the peregrinos

already there. Yes, a cheer!

Such is the Camino, always an hola, buenos dias, buen camino, and sometimes even a cheer! You are never alone on the Camino unless you choose to be.

I vividly remember the beauty of the countryside and the daily sounds of the Camino, the songbirds, the church bells, and the distant bells on grazing sheep. The churches range from tiny ermitas that dot the countryside to the huge museum-like cathedral of Burgos. Remarkable cathedrals, featuring the brilliant work of masons, artists, sculptors, and artisans, offer historical commentary on the life and times of a distant past. I love the tiny ermitas but the cathedral in León with its beautiful windows and overwhelming feeling of spirituality is my favorite.

The Camino is forever in my heart. As I prepare for my fourth visit, I know that the way will be unique and different. I go with no expectations and let the Camino carry me along. This year I hope to make the journey with my daughter to share with her the sights, sounds and the people of the Camino and all its beauty. ♦

Hugged by the Saint

by Cedric Gifford, aka El Gordo
Acworth GA

A pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela has been an experience of relative peace in the turbulent history of Europe.

The walk of the pilgrim is peaceful because of an awareness of the presence of God, the same God who was with Saint James when he brought the Word of God to Galicia. This awareness gives patience, and from patience flows the power to complete the journey. Man's natural reaction to the stress of such a journey is fight or flight, desperation or discouragement. The natural man does not realize that because God created him, God dwells in him.

Man can accomplish little without self examination, evaluation, and a redirection of self will. Our natural selves are unsuited to pilgrimage because we are naturally short sighted, impulsive and see things as now or never. This tends to turn each problem into a crisis.

I have come to learn that I cannot handle



multiple crises without God's help and that God's help comes from fully trusting in God's solution as it comes. Look at the world around you and perceive a natural order in it, a rhythm to what happens, a flow.

That was the first thing my son, Nathan, and I felt as we started west from León in the summer of 2009. The flow of the Camino caught us and carried us to Santiago de Compostela. We checked in at the Pilgrim Office at the cathedral on Nathan's 50th birthday. Even though it was a month before my 80th birthday, I took the liberty of likewise celebrating.

To be honest, I could never have walked in the footsteps of the pilgrims of the past except that God carried me. I know this is true because I would walk singing hymns after the most trying ascents. And when I hugged Saint James in the cathedral, Saint James hugged me. It was more like an electric shock than an embrace, but I am sure he comforted me.

Somehow the presence of God has been pounded into the cobblestones and soil of the Camino by pilgrims' feet for 1000 years. There is nothing like the journey. ¡Buen Camino! ♦



The sum of the whole is this: walk and be happy, walk and be healthy. "The best of all ways to lengthen our days" is not, as Mr. Thomas Moore has it, "to steal a few hours from night, my love;" but, with leave be it spoken, to walk steadily and with a purpose. The wandering man knows of certain ancients, far gone in years, who have staved off infirmities and dissolution by earnest walking,--bale fellows close upon eighty and ninety, but brisk as boys. - Charles Dickens



What the Camino Provides

by Tom Friesen,
London, Ontario

I served as hospitalero in Foncebadón in April of 2006, having returned to Spain to walk the Camino with two Mallorcan women I had met in Roncesvalles and walked with the previous year. They had only three weeks of holidays, which was not enough to complete the Camino. We had parted in Ponferrada and reunited a year and a day later at the same bus station.

In 2005 I had felt like a bit of a tag-along as I relied on their knowledge of Spain and things Spanish. Being with two attractive Spanish women often got me special treatment, and I got to improve my very basic Spanish.

The second year, I was more the guide as I was retracing steps I had walked the year before. Despite two weeks of

heavy rain, we arrived to Finisterre. I returned by bus to that same station in Ponferrada and started my time as hospitalero, first in Ponferrada and then at "mi casa" in Foncebadón.

On my second to last night in Foncebadón, a young couple from Madrid came in and registered in Spanish, although I noted that the young woman had a German passport. Later, she told me in English, "I was an hospitalera in Ponferrada last year."

I looked at her more carefully and said, "Yes, you were there on March 15th." She was startled and replied, "That was my first day of work there. How did you know?"

I replied, "I remember coming in that day as a peregrino with my two Mallorcan friends and you registered us. You had almost no Spanish at all and were struggling mightily. I said to myself, if this woman with almost no Spanish can be an

hospitalera, I can do this job. Now you are the peregrina and I am the hospitalero but I am here partly because of you."

After I had completed my time in Foncebadón, I walked down the mountain to Ponferrada. The hospitaleros put me up in the hospitalero wing of the albergue. The same young couple arrived a half hour later, and the young woman told the hospitaleros of her experience working there the year before. She said that she and her companion did not wish to leave by 8:30 the next morning with the rest of the pilgrims, so the hospitaleros assigned them to bunk with me. After they settled in, she announced, "I am going down to help the new German hospitalera. She has three Spanish men all telling her what to do and she doesn't understand a word of it."

She was an example of how the Camino gives you what you need. ♦

Silent Auction Items Needed

Do you have a condo in Cancún, a timeshare or vacation hideaway anywhere? Would you consider making available a week or two to the highest bidding pilgrim at the silent auction during the upcoming Gathering? Let your imagination be your guide.

If you have an auction or raffle item you could offer, please contact gatherings@americanpilgrims.com. All auction/raffle proceeds support the work of American Pilgrims. ♦

Contributors

A special thank you to all the writers, photographers, and artists who contributed to this edition of La Concha. Your talents are much appreciated.

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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,
by gathering pilgrims together, and by providing information
and encouragement to past and future pilgrims.*

Do You Have Camino Stories or Events to Share?

We would be pleased to report on Camino-related activities in your part of the country. Tell us about your plans, and we'll try to announce them in *La Concha*.

In addition to announcements and news, please tell us in 400 words or less about a part of the Camino you would like to share with your fellow pilgrims. Consider a photo, a poem, or a new found understanding of an idea – a pilgrim's perspective. Visit [Newsletter](#) on our website for suggestions and guidelines.

Submission deadline for the next issue is April 5, 2010. We welcome your questions, comments, and submissions at newsletter@americanpilgrims.com. You can also submit to the street address provided below.

iBuen Camino!

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