



A Walking Exploration of the Pilgrimage Route El Camino de Santiago

Andrea K. Crownhart, Spanish Department, University of Wisconsin-River Falls
Dr. Margarita Hendrickson, Professor of Spanish, Advisor

Abstract

During the fall of 2005, I walked the pilgrimage route El Camino de Santiago. I was studying this pilgrimage route as my research project for Semester Abroad: Europe, a study program offered through UW-River Falls. Located in northern Spain, this trail passes through the cities of Pamplona, Logroño, Burgos, Leon, Ponferrada, and Santiago de Compostela. This pilgrimage is approximately 500 miles in length. If a pilgrim wished to continue to Finisterre and Muxia, the total distance would be 550 miles. This pilgrimage began in 813 A.D. and is still being walked today. The last two decades have shown a decisive increase in the number of pilgrims. July and August are traditionally the busiest months, but September and October still sport large numbers of pilgrims.

During my time on the Camino, I met people from every continent except Antarctica. Their reasons for walking ranged from needing a time for personal reflection to giving thanks for something that happened in their lives. The majority of the pilgrims I met were between the ages of eighteen and forty. There was a slightly higher percentage of men than women. The country with the highest number of pilgrims was Germany. The total number of pilgrims that completed El Camino de Santiago in 2005 was 93,924 (Archdiocese of Santiago's Pilgrim Statistics).



Figure 1: Map of the Caminos of northern Spain



Figure 2: Elevation profile of the Camino Frances

Introduction

El Camino de Santiago is a famous pilgrimage route that officially begins in St. Jean-pied-de-port, France, and crosses northern Spain to end in Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Santiago is the alleged burial place of the apostle St. James. Some people believe that St. James was the "first Christian to spread the Gospel in Spain" (Winsberg). Son of Salome and Zebedee, and brother of John the apostle, St. James was beheaded by King Herod at Caesarea in 44 AD (Eppink), making him the first apostle to "suffer a martyr's death" (Lauschway). Legend has it that following his death, his followers placed him in a boat made of stone, which miraculously steered itself, unguided, back to Spain (Winsberg, Lauschway, Stanton). Upon arriving in Spain, St. James' apostles sought out Queen Lupa, and requested permission to bury his body in Spanish soil. After his apostles overcame various obstacles, the queen granted them permission. Santiago's body remained hidden until 813 AD, when the hermit Pelagius was down to the body by a bright star (Winchester). At the time of this discovery, much of Spain was occupied by the Moors. Soon stories began about a vision of St. James riding through battles, cutting down Arabs as he went. This was a vision of hope for many Spaniards. He soon became known as Santiago Matamoros, or St. James the Moor Slayer (Lauschway).

In response to the discovery of St. James' body, the Catholic Church promised absolution to anyone who made a pilgrimage to the saint's final resting place in Galicia (Eppink). This was the start of the great age of pilgrimage. This movement remained popular for several hundred years, then experienced a sharp decline. Then in 1879, the burial site was re-excavated, and the bones were confirmed as authentic in a letter from the Pope of the Catholic Church. This renewed the flow of pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela. In 1937, St. James was officially named the patron saint of Spain, which again spurred a revival of the Way (Lauschway). The last two decades have produced the highest numbers of pilgrims ever making the voyage to Santiago de Compostela.

Methods

Reading about the Camino was one thing, but I wanted to talk to someone who had actually completed this pilgrimage. Utilizing the vastness of the internet, I obtained the email addresses of six people who had completed the Camino during the time of year that I would be in Spain. Of these six, only one replied: Bill Clune, a retired man for New Zealand. Talking with Bill gave the Camino life--it became more than just something in a book. He was extremely willing to discuss his experiences on the Camino. He said, "My Camino brought me so many blessings, that I feel obligated to tell anyone who will listen of the journey and of the many thoughts and experiences along the way."

After talking with Bill, I decided that the aspect of the Camino that I truly wanted to research was how completing a pilgrimage in modern times affects those who participate in such a feat and why people willingly participate in such a grueling test of physical stamina. In order to collect my research, I myself decided to become a pilgrim and evaluate my own experiences while talking with others along the way. Along the route, I interviewed fellow pilgrims that I met. Their tales ranged from comical to tearful and desperate to grateful--but they all shared one thing; they affected me profoundly.

Those six weeks on the Camino changed me as a person. Before striking out on this journey, I tried to imagine what it would hold in store for me. Not in my wildest dreams did I ever come close to the reality of the Camino.

Prior to leaving for Europe, I compiled a list of questions that I wished to ask pilgrims. I had also bought a digital voice recorder on which to record my interviews. However, once I started my research, I quickly realized that my original plan for doing interviews was not the best way to go about it. The experiences that the Camino gives you can be very personal. For me, openly asking about these experiences violated the sanctity of this pilgrimage. However, oftentimes people openly shared their stories without being openly questioned. So, rather than following my script of questions, I simply had conversations with fellow pilgrims. Invariably, most of the questions from my original list would come up naturally during the course of the conversation. I also did not record the conversations as I had originally planned. Use of a recorder made it much less personal and didn't allow the conversation to flow naturally. Rather, I transcribed the conversation immediately into my journal, or made a vocal note on my recorder, which I would transcribe at a later time.

Total Number of Pilgrims per Year (1989-2005)

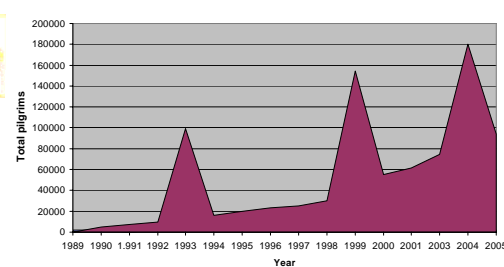


Figure 3: Graphical representation of total number of pilgrims over the past sixteen years. The spikes occur during Holy Years.

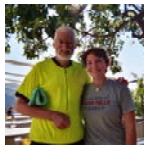


Figure 4: Indy (Canada)



Figure 5: August (France)



Figure 6: Mark (Ireland)



Figure 7: Josephina (Germany)



Figure 8: Chris and Trisha (Australia)



Figure 9: The final destination of El Camino de Santiago: the Cathedral of Santiago.

Results

The following are synopses of conversations I had with six people from the Camino--their stories affected me greatly. Each person has a different story and a different history, and that's what makes them each so special. For me, the most important part of pilgrimage is not churches or paths, but rather the people of the Camino.

Indy is my new friend from Canada. He was a teacher for thirty-two years, then retired because he had colon cancer. His chance of survival was five percent. That was five years ago, and today he is biking the Camino. After his cancer went into remission, he decided to teach in a missionary school in Bolivia. He and his wife moved and he taught art and industrial education at this missionary school for three years. Now he has several grandchildren, so he decided to retire for the second time.

August's story is one of the most incredible that I've heard. He's from France and was working as an engineer for a transportation company. He worked there for eight years and could feel his humanity slipping away from him. Everyday he gave orders to his employees and was always worrying about profits and schedules. Soon he forgot how to enjoy life. This summer it got to a point where he realized he had to do something. He told his boss that he was taking off work for a year to walk to the three Christian holy cities: Santiago de Compostela, Rome, and Jerusalem. He sold everything: his belongings, his car, and his house. Then he started walking. He walked through France, then did Camino Norte through Spain. Now he's currently walking the Camino Frances backwards. After he finishes the Camino, he's headed to Rome and Jerusalem--all on foot. It will take him a year.

Another amazing person I met on the Camino was Mark from Ireland. For him, the Camino is truly about the spirituality of the journey. He's trying to figure out many things in his life right now. He worked as an engineer for a company in Austria for twelve years, but didn't feel fulfilled. He quit his job to come to the Camino to find out what was missing from his life. When I first met Mark, he seemed rather quiet and reserved. However, as I talked with him, he opened up. He's really the most sincere person I have met on the Camino.

Josephina is a seventy-two year old woman from Germany for whom this is her seventh Camino! The first time she walked the Camino was seven years ago. She had just retired and didn't know what she wanted to do with the rest of her life. She decided to talk the Camino to find herself. She says when she walks she can see her soul and her destiny. She has returned each year since to walk again. She said this walk will be her last because her knees are getting very weak. The mountains are exceptionally difficult now. Josephina also said that since she first walked the Camino, numbers of pilgrims have increased exponentially. She said she is happy that so many people were walking the Camino, but she also said that it really affects the experience of the Camino. She enjoys talking and meeting pilgrims but she said for her the most important part of pilgrimage is the solitude.

Chris and Trisha's story is one that really touched my heart. Chris said they decided to walk the Camino several years ago. They wanted to do it when they were fifty years old, so they took the date in the exact middle of their birthdays as the start date--August 27th. Trisha has endometriosis, a disease that affects her ovaries--it's a very serious disease. She spent the better part of three years in the hospital, from 1998 to 2001. Chris mentioned during one of his visits that he had been reading about this pilgrimage route in Spain and thought they should do it. At this time, Trisha was very ill. She said she couldn't even walk down the hallway, let alone eight hundred kilometers. When Chris arrived home after his visit, the phone rang. It was Trisha, and she said, "Let's do it." She got out of the hospital in 2001 and started training. She had a personal trainer from 2001 to 2005. Finally the time came and they flew to Spain. They walked the entire Camino--no buses, no trains, no taxis, but it wasn't easy. Everyday Trisha took morphine to control the pain. Sometimes the pain would be so great that she would have to lie down in a field and wait for it to subside. Chris was always near her, helping her, loving her. Trisha was extremely strong--she never complained to anyone when she was in pain, and never even mentioned how serious her illness was. So often people complain about the small pains of blisters or sore feet, but this woman was amazing in her strength.

Countries Represented

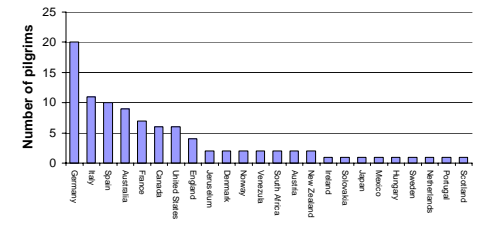


Figure 10: Graphical representation of the number of pilgrims representing each country.

Age Demographics

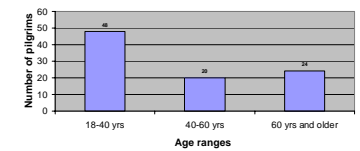


Figure 11: Graphical representation of age distribution.

Gender Distribution

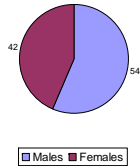


Figure 12: Graphical representation of gender distribution.

Discussion and Conclusions

People from all over the world walk El Camino. I learned about many different countries without even leaving Spain. The types of people who walk El Camino are ones who are good ambassadors for their countries. The diversity of people that I met, the history associated with this pilgrimage, and the sheer length of the Camino were three things that humbled me before I even set foot in Spain.

This experience was a pinnacle point in my education. Firstly, studying abroad in general is one of the most important learning experiences that a person can undertake. Education in a classroom is important, but living in another country and experiencing their culture is an entirely different way of learning. I believe both aspects are essential for a complete college education.

Secondly, my time on the Camino affected me greatly. The combination of having time to look within myself and at my life, in addition to meeting so many incredible people, touched me as nothing else in my life ever has. It opened my eyes to other cultures and to the characteristics that I value in a person. The lessons that I learned from the Camino and my fellow pilgrims will stay with me for a lifetime.

References

- Eppink, Alfons. "Destination Santiago." *U.S. Catholic*. July 2004, Vol. 69 Issue 7, p 47. UW-River Falls EBSCO Host Database
- Lauschway, Ester. "Santiago de Compostela." *Europe*. May 2000 Issue 396, p33. UW-River Falls EBSCO Host Database
- Publication of Pilgrim Statistics. *Archdiocese of Santiago de Compostela* January 2006. <http://www.archdiocese.com/Peregrinos/Inglés/peregrinconcept.htm>
- Stanton, Edward F. *Road of Stars to Santiago*. University Press of Kentucky: Lexington, Kentucky, 1994.
- Winsberg, Morton D. "A walking pilgrimage across Spain to Santiago de Compostela." *Focus*. Fall 1993, Vol. 43 Issue 3, p31. UW-River Falls EBSCO Host Database