

REFLECTION

The Camino to Santiago

– experience and meaning

The Pilgrim's Reception Office is run by the Cathedral Church of the Archdiocese of Santiago de Compostela. It's where you go to collect the certificate that attests to the fact that you 'officially' completed the Camino pilgrimage, having walked (or cycled or ridden on horse-

back) at least 100km to the magnificent Galician city. The certificate or *compostela* dates back to the mediaeval origins of the pilgrimage and is an impressive document upon which they write your name in Latin.

Pádraic Gilligan shares his recent experience of the popular pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.



Photo: Pádraic Gilligan

While waiting in line for our certificates last Saturday morning we were greeted by the unmistakably Irish Katherine, a religious sister of the Faithful Companions of Jesus. We had a thoroughly engaging conversation, quickly uncovering common links (she was a novice sister in the early 70s in the FCJ convent in Kenilworth in South Dublin where my father worked part time as a gardener). Katherine explained her work in Santiago: 'There are two of us here. We greet people when they arrive, offer tea and a chat, maybe help people make sense of what they've just done. You've had the experience but what about the meaning?'

It's an 'out of the mouths of babes' style question. Simple in its formulation but laser-focused, getting right to the heart of the matter. Our experience on the Camino was beyond our expectations. There were eight of us. Two American couples, two Irish. We didn't all know each other at the start but after seven days together and a 131km walk in the blistering sun, we sure got to know each other very well indeed. An amazing experience but what did it mean?

Camino cadence

The walking itself, overall, was probably easier than anticipated, particularly when we managed to get on the road by 7:30. Often our departure was accompanied by the rising sun and early morning chirpiness, that sense of a new beginning, feet and bones nicely rested, blisters suitable treated with Compeed. During that first two hours we'd find our stride and march to the rhythm of whatever conversation was going on. We'd cover 8-10 km, stop for coffee and then set off again a little wearier now, and slower.

Lunch was always eagerly anticipated as tiredness, hunger and thirst all converged and we'd fall into the open arms of a cold beer, a warm tortilla and a shaded seat. The afternoon was tough with a hotter sun and heavier bones but the conversations sustained us as we immersed ourselves more and more in each other's stories.



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We'd check into our accommodation mid-late afternoon and drag our luggage to our rooms (we were lite-pilgrims and had our bags transported each day!) at which point some of us would sleep while others would rest or read or explore. By 7:30 we were all showered, spruced and ready for the night ahead. Dinner was three courses of great local food, free flowing wine and multi-courses of unbridled laughter.

Landscape

The Galician countryside played a key role in the overall experience. In a way it's full of anomalies and contradictions. One minute you're walking past subsistence farms where pensioners are saving hay with 1960s pitchforks, next minute you're drawn into roadside bars with modern marble counters and big-ass coffee machines. Sometimes there's even a hideous Vegas style poker machine there and Europop blaring in the background.

One minute you're captivated by the beautiful silence of nature punctuated only by birdsong and the sound of crickets only to be awakened rudely from your reverie by the aggressive ringing of a fellow traveller on a fully loaded €5000 mountain bike or by the heavy thud of six horses on parade, their leather booted riders high above you intoning the customary *Buen Camino!*

People

The Camino gives you permission to speak to strangers, something we don't do anymore in cities (although nobody told my Offaly-born and raised father who spent his entire life greeting everyone he met on the road!). And, of course, every stranger has his or her own story to tell. One day, attracted by the Meet in Ireland shirt I was wearing, we were joined by a young Irish girl walking alone. Once the superficial banter subsided, we heard her heart-breaking story – she lost her fiancée to cancer having nursed him through the final months of his life.

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We walked on and off, too, with three American ladies in their mid-fifties whose inspiration to do the Camino came from Martin Sheen's movie, *The Way*. And then there was the square-chinned Adonais, 'Mr Houston', all 6' 7" of him with his adorable daughter who was about ten. Living in Texas but from Madrid the ladies in our party were enthralled by his fascinating fatherly dedication and his astonishing good looks.

We also met lovely Finnish ladies who loved Ireland, two mad lads on the lash from Ireland, a wonderful young man from Bern, Switzerland on his bike but mainly we met each other and we talked, shared, told jokes, sang songs, laughed a lot and eased into a friendship that I think will accompany us for the remaining days of our respective caminos.

What did it all mean?

So if that was the experience, then to return to Sister Katherine's question, what was the meaning? What made this Camino walk so different from a group of friends simply holidaying together or walking together in the Alps?

The big trick that the Camino plays on you is creating the illusion that the destination is Santiago or anywhere else along the road. When you eventually get to Santiago – and it is a truly beautiful city – you realise the destination was, in fact, the journey or, as Sister Katherine said 'the journey doesn't end in Santiago. It begins there'. The same thing applies to the elusive search for meaning on the Camino.

The meaning is the experience and vice versa. It's all about the joy of shared laughter, the pain of blistered feet, the delight of a funny story, the sorrow of a heart-rending one. The meaning of the Camino is wrapped up in every step you take on the road to Santiago and every step you take in your life after that. It's a journey outside yourself and inside yourself that's made possible because it's shared with others who, for hundreds of years, have been taking 'time out' to follow a pilgrim path to a holy place in Spain. 

Photo: Pixabay

