

The mad Peregrinos, Greg and Emily

Camino de Santiago (French Route)

Greg recalls the challenge:

KIT

Our 45 litre rucksack essentials included 3 sets of underwear for Em, 2 pairs of pants for Greg. (Lost one pair in week one and managed the next week washing and drying the remaining pair each evening while wandering around commando style). Walking socks - 3 pairs each. Short sleeve tops - 1 each. Shorts and lightweight long trousers - 1 pair each. Long sleeve tops - 1 each. Warm layer - thin puffa jackets. Waterproof - big ponchos. Head torches, blister and first aid kit, Ibuprofen, trusty Swiss army penknife. flip flops, lightweight sleeping bags, minimal toiletries, ear plugs. Pilgrim passport (credenciale) each for inked or wax stamps at all the way points. iphones (with charger & extra battery packs), Camino Ninja route app preloaded, travel plug, emergency energy bars. Traditional pilgrim's scallop shell to tie on outside of bag. A small stone (more on that later). WE WERE READY.

DAY ONE

27th August We've flown to Biarritz, had a minibus transfer and reached the very pretty French town of St Jean Pied de Port, about halfway up the Pyrenees mountainside. It's 8pm. Thanks for a nearly two-hour delay, EasyJet. Thankfully the minibus driver waited. Ten bunks in our small hostel dormitory and several loud snorers. Some had evidently celebrated an early arrival in town. OMG please stop!!

DAYS 2 – 5

Morning alarm at 6am and setting off well before daylight; first of many such days. Toast, jam and a coffee really not enough for the day ahead. 24km stage up and over the Pyrenees today. Barely 5 hours sleep. Gradient up to 16%. Our rucksacks weighed about 9kg, including water bottles, energy bars and two bananas each. Lots of anticipation, nerves, but also a massive sense of adventure!

We immediately hit the long, winding 8km road climb to Orrisson. It's about 12 degrees but will hit 26 by 11am. Well under two hours of steady, sweaty, breathless 4.5km/hr pace but feeling very pleased with ourselves. Dozens of awesome, beautiful views as mist lifted through the early morning.

Barely catching our breath at Orrisson during a toilet stop, and with our water bottles refilled at the public fountain we just press on, buzzing. Tarmac roads giving way to trails and then steep grassy passes. Cattle with bells providing a lovely soft clanging soundtrack as we climb. Loads of fellow pilgrims passed on the way up.



Looking back down the mountain to St Jean

Feeling strong on the remaining 11km of scenic ascent before a 5km, mostly forested, drop to the famous former monastery now hosting 90% of pilgrims in Roncevalles. Very efficiently run by Dutch volunteers. Easily 30+ nationalities encountered throughout the day and 'Buen Camino' shouted out hundreds of times. A pretty decent pilgrim meal was laid on, together with half a bottle of wine each. 13 euros. Lively first night conversations. Over 100 bunks in our dorm. Cost of a bunk was just 12 euros. Bargain. I know how to treat a lady!

Lights on at 6am, Gregorian chants over loudspeakers, starting softly, increasing volume. Dozens of snorers overnight and again, not enough sleep. Distance ahead 28km. Rain forecast. Positive vibes nonetheless and up and out without delay. Breakfast at 10km. Coffee and chocolate croissants. Lunch in Zubiri at 18km. Hour and a half spent scoffing multiple toasties, bacon loaded tortillas, chatting to other walkers. We average over 5k m/hr pace for the day. Just 6 bunks in our hostel room in Larrasoaña. Pilgrim meal was salad followed by insipid meatballs and a yoghurt to finish. Bargain at 13 euros. just one snorer in the room. Olympic standard though. Ear plugs just not up to the task.

Emily awake by 5am with 'unsettled tummy'. Breakfast - avoided. Distance to first sign of trouble - 8km. Pace barely 4km/hr. Actual trouble just a dozen more steps. Distance to

Pamplona another 4km. Distance to actual destination - still another 18km, up and over the famous Alto de Perdon. My wife, the Terminator, is unstoppable. Arrival 5pm. Energy reserves zero. One final collapse on the pavement a few yards short of the albergue. People rush over. Fellow pilgrims will always come to your aid.

There's just one private en-suite room in the albergue and luckily we blag it. Emily collapsed and was out cold for 15 hours. Easy decision made for an early rest day tomorrow and a bus to next overnight stop. Lie in until 9am. Bus expected 11.30am with a 2km yomp across fields to the main road. Decision to make all subsequent rooms private, ideally en-suite, and eat better. Basically, we upped the budget. And at this point our Camino experience improved significantly. 😊

DAY FIVE ONWARDS

Fully recovered, our pace resumed to a steady 5km/hr. Typical distances of 25-30kms, taking in the Rioja region and then Castilla Y Leon. Walking through small rural towns and villages about every 5km or so made the days pass very pleasantly, helped by coffee and snacks wherever possible. Even a few half decent rural hotels.



Enjoyable scenery marred only by a couple of days of torrential rain, wet socks and the lovely feeling of squelchy footsteps for hours on end. Changing to dry socks giving only temporary reprieve in the endless downpour.

But as always, we had the most enjoyable chats with fellow pilgrims, sometimes just a moment or two as we passed but sometimes for hours on end if we hit it off with them. We missed turns on the trail several times due to being engrossed in conversation, luckily, we mostly rectified the error with minimal added distance.

Carrying the rucksacks became second nature and our legs got stronger every day. We passed through the beautiful city of Burgos, left the urban landscape behind us and headed out onto the near silent, open expanse of the Meseta. No shade, fewer villages but thankfully almost flat for days and days. We made good time. We each settled in with our Audible books or podcasts and often went many hours without talking to each other, such is the bliss of married life.

At the end of each day it was a shower, get a clothes wash done, often wearing just a towel, changing into whatever wasn't too grubby. Once washing hung out to dry it was find food or sleep, whichever was most pressing.

On three days we hit villages or small towns which were closed. Literally every bar, shop, restaurant was shut. It was the next town along's evening to earn money from pilgrims! One night it was a family bag of Doritos, an apple and a machine vend Snickers ice cream before a hungry night's sleep. Breakfast ASAP next morning. Only if we were lucky was it a treat like bacon and eggs.

DAY 14, HALFWAY

Arrived at Sahagun on 10th September with a stop at the Monasterio de la Virgen Peregrina where on production of our credenciales with the requisite stamps we were given a beautiful certificate recognising we had reached this significant milestone. We cracked on to the beautiful city of Leon where we had two nights and rest day in a small apartment. Finding a smart TV, we loaded up Netflix and binge-watched endlessly, allowing our legs some well needed recovery time between exploring the city and foraging for decent food.

A couple of days of fairly flat terrain followed, to Astorga, a former Roman city, which was our day 19 stop. The wild and rocky Cantabrian mountains became a looming reality. Though the Pyrenees provided a tough start to the Camino the undulations and high passes of the next five days before we entered Galicia were quite brutal.

The climbs to the mountain hamlets of Foncebadon and O'Cebreiro were particularly steep. Those without the stamina needed could take a horse ride up to these peaks if they wished. Shame be upon them...



At Cruz Ferro, just past Foncebadon, stands a huge iron cross surrounded by an ever-growing mound of stones. For centuries pilgrims have brought a stone to this spot, carried from home or somewhere on the trail, to represent their burden. The stone and the burden are left here, leaving the pilgrim lighter (literally and figuratively) for the journey ahead.

For many this is a very emotional, spiritual experience. Some conversations on the Camino often include discussions on what brought a pilgrim to the walk, or what their stone represented. A bereavement, a promise made and kept, trauma, a life or work crisis or other life changing event may be revealed. Tears may be shared, hugs are always exchanged, and a theme of the Camino is that a month or more of reflection can often do so much to bring clarity, even peace.

DAY 24

saw us enter Galicia, the last region of our trip and we had just under 150km to go. We started walking with many more pilgrims each day. This was because a credencial with stamps for a minimum of the last 100km also entitles the bearer to a Compostela, the certificate recognising a pilgrim's commitment. These walkers were chatty, bright eyed and tended to carry daysacks, came in large groups and were often shadowed by minibuses on the roads parallel to the trails. These vans were poised to sweep up the unprepared, injured or plain unfit, or simply whisk them off to their comfy hotels at the end of each day.



Those of us who had started nearly four weeks earlier were a dour lot, recognising each other by our typically unkempt appearance, steadier gait and had we not all become wholly accustomed to it, doubtless a certain pong would have nailed it. The 'Buen Camino' greeting was shared quietly amongst us 'true' pilgrims.

The last 100k or so didn't quite offer the sense of adventure, occasional solitude and pure wilderness that had gone before but we were on the home stretch. We were lifted in spirits every single day by family and friends wishing us well.

DAY 29 – THE END

We entered Santiago just after lunchtime at the end of a 24km yomp, arriving in the pouring rain, our ponchos and the rest of us completely drenched.



Having done this before, in 2022, we were worried it would feel very different but the elation on entering the square in front of the cathedral was just as great. We didn't attend the mass where the huge silver botafumeiro swings from the roof. We were lucky enough to see it in 2022. Traditionally brought out for the usually packed service and its origins are said to relate to the amount of incense required to mask the awful stench of pilgrims.

Time though for a few photos, hugging fellow finishers and then straight to our very nice city centre hotel for a shower, binning of our rank walking tops and as it turned out, useless ponchos. And then a couple of hours of sleep! We woke up at about 5pm and it was still absolutely hammering it down. Our plans to join some good friends we'd made on the walk were stymied by the weather as they were several kms out of the centre and couldn't face

another deluge. The rain was biblical. We dashed out and bought some new clothes, unfortunately having to retrieve the ponchos to try and keep out the rain. We ate and drank well at a nearby bar and called it a night. We slept well. You can only imagine how well.

We had a late flight home and met our friends for breakfast in a large cafe filled with other pilgrims who'd recently completed the Camino. Our sense of achievement was soon put into perspective as we chatted to several on their eighth or ninth Camino. A couple of pilgrims had Compostelas showing walks of well over 2,000 km from their hometowns in Europe. Simon from Vienna had clocked 3,100 kms and gone through three pairs of trail shoes. Our Australian friend Zora was already booked to fly to Portugal for the Portuguese Way and then do the reverse French Way from Santiago back to St Jean. Three months of almost non-stop walking. Evidently this Camino thing can be quite addictive. We didn't have time, but many pilgrims pushed on from Santiago to Finisterre and Muxia on the west coast, regarded as the true finish point. It's a 3 day walk or a bus ride. Perhaps next time...

Hope you've enjoyed some of the highs and lows of our trip. We would genuinely encourage anyone with the time to walk all or part of the Camino (ideally the first, second or third weeks for the exercise and views). It's hard work but people of all ages, from all over the world are always out on the trail. You'll definitely meet some lovely people and have your faith in human nature restored. We'd be very happy to advise anyone on preparing for it.

BUEN CAMINO!