

CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

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Day 0. Saturday April 4. → St. Jean Pied de Port

A leisurely breakfast in Bayonne.

Bus in the morning to St. Jean. Rainy day, really raining when we get there. It is a little town with a main street that slants sharply upward toward Spain. At the Pilgrim Office I obtain a credential, which will need to be stamped in places along the Camino every day.

The woman who helped me there was happy to be able to talk with me in French, tired of struggling with languages. She told me, blushing a bit, that the man next to her was Dutch, her husband, they had met on the Camino when they were on the pilgrimage.

The municipal albergo would open at 4 she said, so I went to eat lunch, in a creperie. Good -- would this be the last good meal? The albergo turned out to be open, I could leave my backpack at one of the bunk beds there while shopping, though the staff would not be in till 4. The Easter Vigil mass will be at 9 pm.

Dinner on things bought in the supermarket, time to meet others who would start the next day. One young Frenchman tells me that he had walked the Camino already once, starting from Brussels, that had taken three months. He urges me to find a text on the internet, 'Christ Returns and Speaks His Truths', which has nine letters from Christ, and I tell him I will do so when I return home. Another one, Jean-Pierre, young but balding, seems terminally shy.

The most striking is Louis. He is much older, his face with one drooping eye and red nose the face of a heavy drinker. He has walked many caminos, has large unruly grey hair and beard, head covered with a beret, knickerbocker pants ... Maybe I will look like that some day?

Louis and Johan, a Belgian in quite different shape, have come walking all the way from Le Puy, that has so far taken two weeks. Alison is from Canada, she has been working for a Christian non-profit in Azerbaijan, in the Caucasus, and before that in South America. She is quite unselfconscious about saying things like "when I gave my life to Jesus".

That evening I go to the Easter Vigil Mass, it is partly in Basque and partly in French. The Frenchman and Alison come too, but I lose track of them, just see them again briefly on return to the albergo.

Day 1. Sunday April 5. → Roncesvalles

Easter Sunday morning. My 74th birthday, first day of my 75th year ... the walk begins.

We have been told emphatically not to take the Route Napoleon, which goes up to 1450 meters and is covered with snow there. Instead we should (and I do) take the route that was taken by Charlemagne, via Valcarlos. That will still include going up from 700m to 1055 m, the down a little to Roncesvalles at 950 m, a distance of 23 km.



Figure 1 First Village



Figure 2 First picnic lunch

It is exciting to come upon the first village, and then a bit later to a sort of shopping place, the Venta, where I can have a cup of coffee. The trails are mainly in the woods, and I stop for a picnic lunch at a stream where there are some houses. Much of the trek seems uphill, though on this route the main elevation gain is in the last part. Eventually I pass Ibaneta at 1055 m, but there is still some ways to go. Arriving at the top there is someone with a car, who assures me, ‘now you are on top of the mountain.,

I arrive at Roncesvalles about 4pm. It is a touching moment, to turn out of the woods and suddenly see the Monastery of Roncesvalles appear just in front.



Figure 3 Monastery of Roncesvalles

Pilgrims have come to this same spot, and seen this monastery since the 12th century.

All the hospitaleros, the volunteers who help out here, are Dutch. They are overwhelmingly helpful. There is wi fi and I call Isabelle to tell her about this quite arduous first day.

Some Korean women had passed me several times during the day. They congratulate me on reaching the top, I had looked so tired they say. Well, they had sent their packs ahead by transport, I had been carrying 11 kg uphill ... Still, it makes me feel a bit embarrassed.

At dinner, pilgrim's menu at 10 euros, I'm joined by Johan, Alison, and a Spaniard. I've told them it is my birthday and they toast my birthday with a glass of wine -- the wine is free with the meal, as it is will be in all those meals in Spain.

I realize already that there will be a problem with these notes. I can describe the incidentals, so to speak, but I can't really convey the long hours walking along -- the details I'll write down will recall images and feelings to me, but they won't be here on the page.

Day 2. Monday April 6. → Larrasoaña



Figure 4 Leaving Roncesvalles (1)



Figure 5 Leaving Roncesvalles (2)

□ Practically all woodland path till we get to Zubiri (21 km), where several people had said they would stay. But I prefer to go an extra 6 km to the much smaller Larasoana.

Between Zubiri and Larasoana the scenery is industrial rather than rural, but the path is equally narrow and natural for the most part.

In the Municipal Albergo the woman in charge is pleasant and talkative, she is happy to chat with me for a bit. But when I take my pack to the dormitory room, I find it is very crowded, bunk beds close together, only one place free yet -- I am not very happy. Eventually I go talk to her some more, and she relents, and sends me to Room B in a house across the street where they have another dormitory. Great! it is modern and roomy. There are only three other people there, and though I don't know it yet, two of these are Francesco and Sonja, from Sicily, who will become real friends.

Just for an idea of the albergos, here is a photo here that I took much later in the trip:



Figure 6 Bunk beds in an albergo. The red rain jacket hanging up is mine, I have the top bunk.

The large man standing there has the bottom bunk and the whole contraption shakes when gets in or moves around. This photo is of a rather roomy albergo, not one with a hundred beds in the room, nor one with little space between the beds. But Room B in Larasoana was much better still; no wonder my first sight of Francesco was of someone smiling happily to himself.

In the evening everybody ends up in the same bar, only place to go, and we have a very convivial dinner. Johan, who is witty and lively, Louis (Johan and Louis will start traveling fast, and I won't see Johan again after this), Francesco and Sonya, the Spaniard of last night, Alison. Alison too will become real friends with Sonja and Francesco (who are devout, they cross themselves and pray before their meal).

Talk is mostly about the Camino itself, but some personal stuff gets mixed in. By now I've told some people that Isabelle worked in Twente (there are two young Dutchmen here), told Johan about Zoe and showed him some photos on my iPhone. Johan is easy to talk with, I'm sorry that he'll soon be out of sight.



Figure 7 Leaving Larasoña, early morning

Just to note: during the day I always walk alone, except for brief encounters, usually at rest stops. Even people who are doing the Camino together are often walking alone, because they go at different pace. Throughout I will be the slowest walker among all that I know, but my breaks are short so I usually end up in the same places as most of them anyway.

Day 3. Tuesday April 7. → Pamplona



Figure 8 Friendly faces on the way to Pamplona



Figure 9 Way marker Day 3

Only a five hour walk, thought I would take a half day for rest and sightseeing.

I walk some kilometers before breakfast: in a bar that I spot just across a bridge I ask them if I can have eggs, and they fry some for me.



Figure 10 Entering Pamplona, Punta de Magdalena

In Pamplona I stay at an albergo run by a German confraternity, Casa Paderhorn. The people are cheerful, helpful -- sometimes the display of hospitality feels a little forced -- it is cheap at 8 euros with breakfast included (unique?).

I go into Pamplona to see the Cathedral, where I thought I 'd light a candle. Well, they are electric candles, but they light four at a time ... and I stay out walking, looking, buying food in a supermarket, eventually eating a Plato Combinado in a restaurant on a main street.

But by next day, perhaps already that evening, I become convinced that this is not the sort of thing I want to do on the Camino. I have been confused in my thinking about it, I don't want it to become touristy or a history tour or a city visiting tour, I want it to be a walk, and will value walking in the country side and through little villages, avoiding cities as best as I can.

There is no one I know staying in this albergo, others must be either in the municipal or have gone on a few km to Cizur Menor.

Day 4. Wednesday April 8. → Puente la Reina

In Roncesvalles we woke up to peaceful recordings of Gregorian chant; in Casa Paderhorn it is Abba and then some more raucous selections, we have to get up efficiently and have our breakfast.

The high point, in both senses of the walk, is the Hill of Forgiveness, the Alto del Perdon.

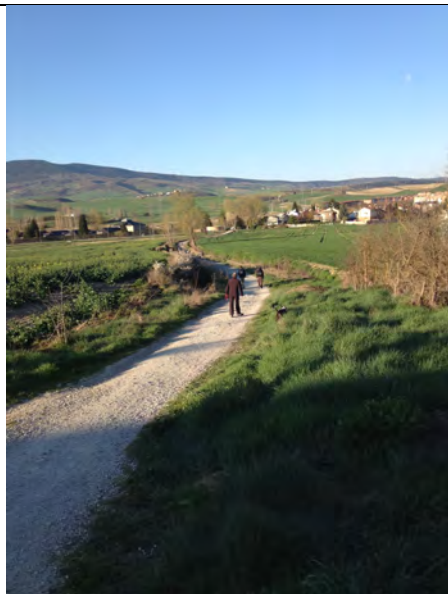


Figure 11 Finally well out of Pamplona



Figure 12 Alto del Perdon

The wind at this height, almost 800 m, is fierce, gale force. There is a food wagon stationed there, but I have to take my coffee around back to drink it out of the wind.

I make a mistake in choosing the albergo Santiago Apostel just beyond the town: new, modern, impersonal, with no one I know there. Reason? mainly I think that it would give me a head start on the walk the next day, of a few km; not a good reason.

Day 5. Thursday April 9. → Ayegui (just beyond Estella)

Food is pretty cheap here. Lunch was a cheese and potato tortilla bread and large coffee 3 euros But halfway along about five little girls had a lemonade stand. They offered a little glass of lemonade for 1 euro. Exorbitant ! But I could not resist.

Later, in Estella, I find a patisserie, and indulge there before continuing.

Despite the disappointment in last night's albergo, I decide again to take the first one beyond the town, rather than in Estella itself. It is part of the sports complex in Ayegui, very sort of sport locker room situation.

But luckily some interesting people show up. First a Canadian mother and son, Karen and Trevor, who join me along the way to find this albergo. Trevor is in his 20s, appears a bit simple Or is that just his public persona? Then a Belgian, Dirk, arrives and somewhat later Alison, Francesco, and Sonja (whom I don't know yet very well at this stage). Dirk and Alison go to look at the famous wine fountain; I walk out in that direction but it looks too far and I decide to leave that till the next day.

I talk and eat with Dirk -- he has limited English, and understanding his Dutch is almost more difficult because of his broad Flemish accent. He has worked for 32 years in a slaughter house, in a town near Brugge, and he tells me about various family of his who had emigrated to Canada.

Day 6. Friday April 10. → Torres del Rio (a bit past Los Arcos)

Well, the wine fountain first of all! Kept functioning by the local winery. It is early in the morning when I get to it, and I decide to just have a taste. Trevor, however, is standing there with a whole coffee cup full of wine and a big smile.

Somewhat farther up the path I find his mother, Karen, standing there and looking a bit concerned. I tell her Trevor is enjoying the wine, and she decides to head back to find

him, saying ‘well, there have been some substance abuse issues before’. Later that day, though, I see both of them happy, sober, laughing together.

Today there are long stretches without bars, but as usual there are water fountains, the *Fuente*, which I have decided to trust.

The photos I take today are of rural life:



Figure 13 Farmyard April 10



Figure 14 Goats April 10

Lunch was interesting about 6 km before Los Arcos, quite in the middle of nowhere, there was a food wagon with tables -- a surprising, and welcome sight!



Figure 15 Lunch on the 6th day

Day 7. Saturday April 11. → Logroño

This is a wonderful day.

It begins with a steep uphill section in the woods beyond Torres del Rio, and although we follow the road more or less the path is practically always a ways away from it.

Eventually I enter Logroño, again over an old stone bridge, but I have some difficulty following the map to find the albergo. Suddenly there is Alison in a side street, waving me over to the entrance to the albergo. Practically everyone I recognize from before is there in the courtyard. There are tables and chairs there and a little fountain with a pool where several people are cooling their feet in the water.

In the afternoon I wonder around the town with Francesco and Sonja, we have a Campari soda in the square. Later we go to mass in the Cathedral, and then join some others for dinner in another square. I am very happy to be with Francesco, Sonja, and Alison for the mass, they are genuinely spiritual, religious, and in their company it is easier to think of being on the Camino as a pilgrimage.



Figure 16 Dinner with Francesco, Sonja, and Alison

Day 8. Sunday April 12. → Najera

After a rather confusing exit from Logroño, with Dirk who quickly went on ahead, the walk continued almost idyllically, with a path around a lake:

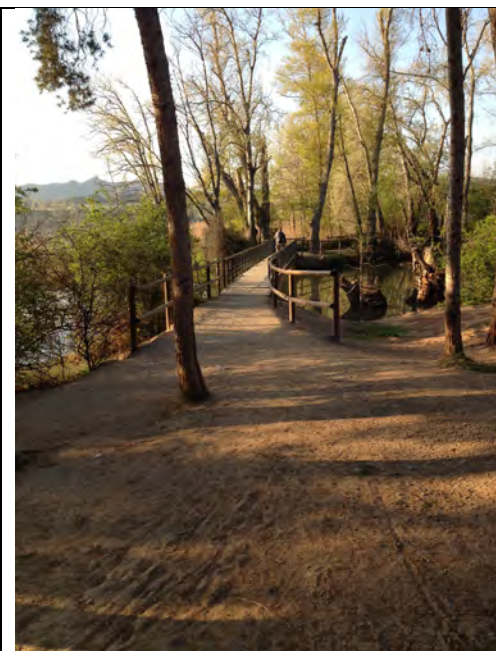


Figure 17 April 12 early (1)

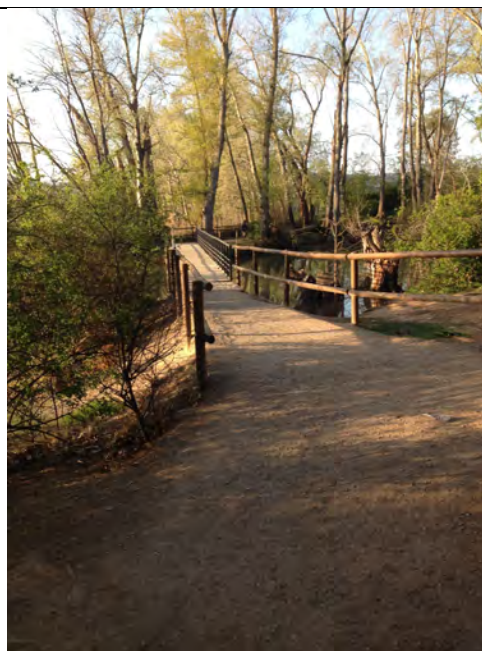


Figure 18 April 12 early (2)

But a later path led eventually to Ventosa, a detour but along what was listed as *el camino original*. From there I went on to Najera, where I found the albergo where Francesco and Sonja were staying. They told me that Alison's blisters had opened, and she had had to get a taxi from Ventosa. Anyway we met her a bit later when we had gone out to find some candy and ice cream. She had to go home the next day, starting with a bus back to Logroño.

Day 9. Monday April 13. → Grañon

I had saved an orange to eat at highest point of walk. But as you can see I could have coffee too:



Figure 19 Roadside stand. No prices, 'donativo' only

Along the way, stopping at a bar, I meet Miles, a young American from the Bay area. He asks me whether I am a professor, and I say yes, of philosophy. He has a degree in philosophy from a college (I don't recognize it, but it is one of the Great Books colleges).

I arrive in Grañon, 6 km past Santa Domingo. Just a practical but important note: at the local pharmacy I get my Compuspeed band-aids to take care of blisters. The pharmacist explains it, and yes, they work like a miracle. I get more of them later in Sahagun, they are a treasure never to be forgotten. For you just put them on a blister (in any stage of development), leave them on till they fall off weeks later, forget about the whole thing for the blister is simply no longer a problem.

The parochial albergo is part of the church, it has no beds but mats, and is run by volunteers, two German women and a man who I think is Spanish. Everything is very communal, and we all go to an oratorio, a Vespers service, at 7, in the convent. There the nuns give us small medals on twine; I put mine around my neck and it becomes quickly thoroughly entangled with my chain.

Miles and Francesco take charge of making dinner for everyone. Miles makes a leek and potato soup, Francesco a pasta dish, both taste wonderful. Jean Paul is there, a warm-hearted black Dutchman, who had gotten to know Spain well as an executive in a Scandinavian company with subsidiaries all over Europe. Hannes is a bicyclist, just joining us for that one night. Christoph and Aniko are German, Jean François French of course, Angela German-Swiss.

Then I missed out on something. A ‘discussion session’ was announced for after dinner; I had no great hopes for what it could be, so went to bed. Later I was told it had included a candlelight ritual and had been very inspiring.

Day 10. Tuesday April 14. → Villafranca Montes de Oca

Looking ahead at the maps I can see that there is going to be a good deal of uphill hiking. From Grañon to Belorado it will be up and down 100 m at a time, then overall 200m to Villafranca, and beyond that it will get really steep. So Villafranca, 27 km ahead, will be a good place to stop for the night.

There are two albergos there, the Municipal and one that is part of an expensive hotel, the San Antonio Abad. I am the first of our Grañon group to get there and choose the one in the hotel. Several of the others follow me there quickly, but Francesco and Sonja stay in the municipal; they join us for dinner in the hotel though. Excellent dinner, though the pilgrim menu is no more expensive than elsewhere. Also for 6 euros I have my washing done -- what luxury!

The hotel courtyard, which separates the hotel from the attached albergo dormitory, has a garden with sculptures and a tame peacock who struts proudly around the place:



Figure 20 Villafranca M de O Albergo courtyard



Figure 21 Villafranca M de O the peacock

Day 11. Wednesday April 15. → Cardeñuela Riopico

I will end up about 12 km before Burgos, but there is quite a journey before. To begin I have to go about 12 km before breakfast, in San Juan de Ortega, a truly scenic but quite arduous hike. For from Villafranca at 800m the path goes up to Alto Mojapan at 1100m, then steeply down a ravine for 100m, then up to Alto Pedraja at 1100 again, then still 5km to San Juan.

I get there at about 11am, and the bar has just some packaged croissants to eat with the coffee.

But the hike has been great, and the sight of San Juan, a monastery with just a few houses around it, was inspiring. Then after Atapuerca there is a steep path with awkward stones, not very hospitable to hiking, that skirts an old military area, up to a ridge with a huge cross, the Cruz de Matagrande. A little beyond that you can see Burgos in the distance.

In Riopico there is a private albergo, with both dormitory and private rooms. The two young Dutchmen who were also in Grañon take a room by themselves, as do Sonja and Francesco. I am in a room with Jean Paul and some others. We are told that the next morning we can enter the dining room for breakfast at 6:00, the door code is 1111. Well, I go down at 6, a German woman is already there; we try the door code but it does not work. It turns out that it is on a timer, and we can get in a half hour later. Not a great breakfast, but free. (Anyway, that is about the morning of April 16.)

Day 12. Thursday April 16. → Rabé de los Calzados

This is the day to go through the city of Burgos -- some, like Jean Paul and Miles will opt to stay there for a day, but I'm intent on getting well beyond the city, into the countryside again.

The approach is truly unpleasant. There are endless suburbs before the city. To ameliorate this the guide book suggests a diagonal course off to the left, so as to reach the parks along the river Alarizon that skirt the city. But that direction you have to follow in the muddy farm fields around the airport, into an industrial area, and then still go to what seems like an endless suburb before reaching the parks.

I withdraw some money from an ATM, and stop in a practically deserted bar for a pincho tortilla and coffee for my lunch, then continue out of the town with just a glance at the Cathedral as I pass it. It is a truly impressive structure, but I do not enjoy being in the city. Still, on the long suburban way out I come a cross a small, old church that is open, and I go in for a moment of silence and prayer.

Beyond Burgos there starts the Meseta, with large farm fields, the area is rather like the California central valley except that it has ample water. The next couple of days will be among these fields, it is sunny and I hike in my shirt, with floppy hat on against the sun, for most of these days.

The albergo, associated with a bar/hotel a bit farther down the street, gets quite full -- late in the evening some more people arrive, including Dirk. There are no more beds, so Dirk sleeps on a sofa in the entry area.

Day 13. Friday April 17. → Castrojeriz

This is still a day of large farm fields, one after the other, in the Meseta. Unlike the Central Valley, there is no impression of unvarying flatness -- the descent to Hornillos is called the Mule Killer Slope and is pretty steep.

After Hornillos 12 km of the same landscape, to Hontanas and a bar. Then another hour to the ruins of the Convent of San Anton, with an arch that spans the road:



Figure 22 Arco de San Anton

For the municipal albergo I stayed in I'm inserting here a photo from the internet; there is just one single open-plan room with a lot of bunkbeds:



Figure 23 Castrojerez municipal albergue

I find my way down first to a bar, where I have a solitary Martini Rosso vermouth, then to the supermarket where I buy some small mandarins, a package of dried figs, some chocolate cookies.

Day 14. Saturday April 18. → Problacion

The night's stop will be in a small place just beyond the town of Fromista, with its huge locks in the Canal de Castilla.

The path to Fromista follows that canal, it has trees all along it. It seemed a bit like walking in Zeeland. Reeds on the canal banks, sounds of frogs, trees along path But different because the fields are so large and there are no houses for two hours.

Day 15. Sunday April 19. → Calzadilla de la Cueva

The morning began in an all enveloping mist, as if moving through a fairy tale land that is one of the images I will retain in memory. Let' say, a Camino moment

But what an arduous day! 34 km, including a lot of muddy clay early on, and with the last 8 on an ancient Roman road, that has no let-up in monotony. I vowed to myself not to do anything like this again.

But in the evening, dinner with Francesco, Sonja, Angela, and a few others, was good. I had a dish of broad green beans mixed with some potatoes, well flavored. The fish, hake I think, in a sauce, was not something to praise though. But the usual good bread, wine, and rice pudding made up for it.

I have a plan. Tomorrow will be a half-day, ending in the town of Sahagun, where I will take a hotel room. The book lists a three-star hotel, and several two-star ones, as well as the albergo in the center of town. Dreams of ultimate luxury!

Day 16. Monday April 20. → Sahagun

Those dreams of ultimate luxury come to naught, at least as far as the hotel was concerned. The 3-star was an ugly brick building before the start of the old town, and in town the better hotel was closed. So I took the next best in the center, with a back entrance and bar just opposite the albergo.

Still, for the first time this journey I had a room and shower to myself. I was so tired for a while I just lay down could not move.

And then, quite a lot got better. Francesco tipped me off to a wonderful patisserie, with a talkative woman running it -- she and her sister made the full cream pastries (first patisserie since Logroño). And in the albergo, run by the local tourist agency in a converted church, I could do my laundry in coin operated washer and dryer. And I bought more Compuspeed in a pharmacy, and something like moleskin to pad my Achilles tendon.

Day 17. Tuesday April 21. → El Burgo Ranero

Yesterday and today turned out to be a good time after all, looking back now. Apart from lunch break, yesterday I walked 7 hrs and today 5 hrs. All my washing got done and I had some good fresh cream pastries.

In fact, I had my breakfast at the same patisserie, toast but also a cream pastry with the coffee.

The weather as been good and I heard a chorus of frogs as I walked. There were two options: another Roman road and a path along a rather quiet rural highway, listed as the *Real Camion Frances* -- that is what I chose, no more Roman roads for me!

This town is a bit strangely laid out, with a bar and church along the main street but all commercial activity and albergos moved off to the north part of town. I do not stay in the municipal albergo but the private one a bit farther on, which has a large garden with reclining chairs to sit in the sun.

In the afternoon I have lunch in the bar of Manuel and Svetlana, who have many pictures of their own Camino pilgrimages -- an Irishman, Kevin, whom I've met a few times now is also there. He does not carry his pack, he says he is just a caminista, not a pelegrino.

Surprise! Dirk the Belgian caught up. He walked almost 40 km today. We went for dinner at the same bar, and there was another Belgian there, Dani Verhaegen. One who has a mobile home; each day he walks to the next stop and back again. Then he drives to the next stop. Hmmm ... But Dani takes a photo of us, and sends it to me by e-mail:



Figure 24 With Dirk, the Belgian, in the bar of Manuel and Svetlana

The church here has large nests of storks at the top -- I tried to catch a sense of this in the photo:



Figure 25 Church of El Burgo Ranero

Day 18. Wednesday April 22. → Mansilla de las Mulas

The walk today was just a track along the road, very flat. Breakfast, scrambled eggs, at the same bar, then 13 km walk before a coffee in Reliegos, and just 6 more km to the town.

At this point I was thinking a lot about what the book said about the endless suburbs before Leon, and thinking about the experience of getting into Burgos I agreed with its suggestion that one might as well look for a bus instead of walking.

I stopped in a bar for coffee and asked about the buses. No problem, they said, it stops here across the street, maybe every half hour or so. So I went across, it was beginning to rain a bit, and was joined after a while by the Polish nun and Dwight, a young American from the Bay area.

Well, the wait began at 2:25, and my conclusion much later was that the bus came every two hours, and I had missed the one that had come by shortly after 2. After one hour Dwight decided to start walking to some spot half way to Leon. (I don't know it yet, but soon I will be meeting Dwight quite often along the route, and we will go climbing together when we are both back home.)

After one and half hours, despite the investment of time, I suddenly decided to just go to the local albergo -- the nun remained steadfast in her bus vigil.

It had felt rather a random impulse, but it was richly rewarded ... Turned out that Jean Paul, Miles, Christoff, Jean François, and some others from Grañon were there, and were already planning to cook dinner. I was very happy to join them, Miles cooked, Jean François did the dishes ...

But the hospitalero had some disturbing news: the next day would be a feast day in the whole province, and the buses would not be running. So, condemned to a trek through the suburbs?

Day 19. Thursday April 23. → Villar de Mazarife

I still feel a little embarrassed about it, but do think it was the right thing to do. The Korean boy with whom I'd shared a room, and I, went to the main square to look for a taxi. None there -- feast day! -- but I asked in the bar where we had some breakfast and the woman there kindly called a taxi for us. For 10 euros each we had a ride into central Leon.

I was not going to spend time in this city, though even walking through it I realized that it is a treasure. I took a picture of the cathedral, and later Sonja sent me a photo taken inside:



Figure 26 Leon, the Cathedral



Figure 27 Leon, inside the Cathedral



Figure 28 Leaving Leon, Parador San Marcos (1).
This was originally a monastery, built in the
Renaissance, now converted to a museum plus hotel.



Figure 29 Leaving Leon, Parador San Marcos (2)

There were still seemingly endless suburbs to traverse outside Leon to Virgen del Camino. Despite the feast day some Chinese stores, with a bit of everything, were open and I bought some socks, thin ones to use as liners. And of course bars, for coffee.

Some strange structures seen on the way out: they look like small houses covered with hills, or perhaps built into the hills. The book says they are wine cellars:



Figure 30 outside Leon (1)



Figure 31 outside Leon (2), hill-covered huts

These days I am seeing mountains to the north, with quite a lot of snow on them. Walking all day alone I find things to occupy my thoughts, things of all sorts I have been thinking most about the gospel how hard it is to understand.

In Mazarife there are two albergos, and I stay in the first, new and modern with a large front yard and a place where I can hang my washing up to dry. They have no kitchen but offer vegetarian dinner -- I decide to go eat in the older one, at the Tio Pepe bar in the center instead. Does not end up feeling like a great choice, but I had a peaceful aperitif in their courtyard beforehand and felt content.

By this evening I have walked 500 km. Hard to even imagine that until I had done it

Day 20. Friday April 24. → San Justo (just before Astorga)

It's a rainy day today, and the forecast for the next few days indicates more chance of rain. But I like my rain jacket, which I had tried out on rainy walks with Zoe around Christmas, and I have a rain cover over my backpack. The frogs are having a great and noisy day, they must love the rain.

Just before lunch I pass over the Puente de Orbigo, a 13th century bridge with many arches, going into Hospital de Orbigo -- “hospital” was the word originally for “hostel”, a pilgrim stop on the Camino.



Figure 32 Puente de Orbigo

The town of Astorga would be the obvious target for today, but after 27 km walk I am not really in the mood to go into it. Instead I stop about 3 km before in little San Justo, in an albergo that is part of a hotel with bar. As it happens I am the only one to stay there that night, for just 6 euros I have my own room (if a bit crowded with bunk beds) and own shower. I have dinner in another bar which felt friendly and bought some pastries in a bakery to eat for breakfast the next morning.

Day 21. Saturday April 25. → Rabanal del Camino

As usual I do not do the town justice, Astorga I just pass through. It is not an easy santer for the town is set on a high ridge, and the pilgrim camino must of course pass through the old center and by the church that was always central to the settlement.

About halfway along, in and around El Ganso, there are some ingressions of hippie-dom. I don't stop to inquire, but do have a sandwich and coffee in the Cowboy Bar. It's probably in all the guide books! I left my backpack outside, as everyone does without worry, but took it in when it looked like it was going to rain again.

The landscape becomes prettier some 10 km before Rabanal, and the village looks ancient, with a very plain church in the middle.



Figure 33 Path before Rabanal



Figure 34 Church of Rabanal

This weekend I want some rest. I take a room in the Parador at the end, the Parador di Caspar, a restored 17th century hostel, very handsome. The room I have is in the attic, with a window in the slanting roof, it reminds me of the room I had in our first house in Edmonton.

I'm going to eat dinner here, I'm not going outside any more today!

Day 22. Sunday April 26. ** Rest day in Rabanal

I am taking a real rest day. It is not easy for I saw the pilgrims passing while I had breakfast and (after rain all night) the sky cleared -- still cold but sunny.

What really convinced me to take a rest day was how my legs felt going up the stairs in the evening. Remembering that in the morning I asked if I could stay an extra day.

All I wanted to do upstairs yesterday evening was to lie down. Same sense again this morning after breakfast. My plan in the morning is to see if I can sleep a few hours this afternoon as well Then set out with new energy tomorrow morning.

I just lay in bed till 10. Bodily I felt like nothing else. Then I walked out, I decided to eat more, toast and coffee in the hotel had left me hungry. I went back to a bar at the beginning of the village, some pilgrims that I knew were having coffee, the music playing Johnny Cash.

But I had seen on the church that there would be a mass at 12:30. It seemed the church was in charge of the Benedictine monks who also have a little albergo there. And I went early to mass, to sit quietly in the church for a while. It is very plain, there are two statues only, one of the Virgin and one of a saint.

So I was a bit early and sat down while the priest was still preparing. A very austere small old church, just a crucifix two small statues and some candles The priest came over and asked if I spoke English then he asked me to read the second lesson, from letter of St John, in English.

As the mass began it suddenly seemed to me that I had been meant to stay here this day for this. A special grace. I felt tears coming when this thought appeared but then quickly felt self conscious and the mime passed. But I was very grateful.

Later I went for lunch in that same bar, and one by one half a dozen people appeared that I knew: Amy, Aniko, Dwight, Nicolas, Christoff, Jean François.

After lunch I did nothing , except for short trip to not very satisfactory dinner, but lie around in my room. Drowsy, reading a bit, or just lying down quietly. Even so I was ready early for bed. They had moved me to a new room this morning, not as quaint but larger, with a real bath (!). I check the weather: the forecast is not cheerful.

It has been a lovely day.

Day 23. Monday April 27. → Molinasecca

Today beautiful path in mountains. Bushes of purple flowers up high, then all yellow, and still lower all white.

For this is the day I enter a new mountain range and will actually arrive at the highest point in this entire journey: first the Cruz de Ferro at 1505 m, then the Punto Alto Altar at 1515 m. I reached the Cruz de Ferro at about 9:30 am, in the mist and cold wind ... And later, in the descent, the sight of Molinasecca is surrounded by flowering bushes.



Figure 35 La Cruz de Ferro



Figure 36 First sight of Molinasecca, after arduous but beautiful mountain path

I go all the way to the end of Molinasecca to stay in the municipal albergo San Roque, converted from a chapel, really handsome, and just 5 euros. But ! to find any place to eat I need to go back into town, about a km or so. I do find a nice restaurant, where I begin in the bar with a Martini Rosso. I can't help but join a lonely older German, Karl Heinz, both of us trying hard with bits of each other's language.

As we sit down for dinner a bit later Amy, from Texas, wanders in and joins us. She has leeks with ham; I remember that because it was so unusual to see it on the menu, and because a few days later I'm trying to explain to Aniko what leeks are, when I tell her that Miles had made leek and potato soup, what seems now like so long ago, in Grañon.

Day 24. Tuesday April 28. → Villafranca del Bierzo

Today the weather was very good, the road only had few hills , it was not difficult to do 30 km. But tomorrow there will be two steep climbs, first a 500 m ascent and then one of 600 m. Wonder if I will do the whole stage?

Though each day has its small problems. On Monday my tendon was hurting until mid afternoon; today not at all. But today my knees asked for special care

I met some people on the road that I knew from before Dwight and Anthony from US, they were walking together with Aniko. They told me of a brand new albergo they were going to. I went there too, it is called Casa Leo and is run by a whole family, father, mother, and daughters. They were right, it is exceptional. (My washing is being done, 6 euros).

In turn they were told about a place with a good pilgrim menu, where others are going as well. So I will join the crowd.

This is rather unusual but from time to time there is suddenly something more or less communal. I think those evenings will stand out in my memory and I may forget how often an evening meal was at an arbitrary bar, looking for wi fi or whatever eatable was to be gotten.

So yes, we all went to the main square to eat at the tables outside, moving some of the large parasols because bit by bit more rain was coming -- the desert, finally, we had inside. Some chose the locally famous octopus dish, but I noticed they did not eat all of it. I chose calamari, really good. There were many more pilgrims there, at nearby tables, a Norwegian and his son, also another young American, Patrick, who told me he'd been to university at Notre Dame.

By the way, some of the Korean group showed up, greeting and congratulating me warmly -- acting very surprised that I had made it so far ...

Day 25. Wednesday April 29. → O Cebreiro



Figure 37 On the way to O Cebreiro

As foreseen, the road from Villafranco del Bierzo involves a lot of uphill hiking, but there are pretty villages along the way, and I am feeling good. I was thinking it is really a great privilege to be able to go walking for some 30 days or so through another country.

I don't mind ascent at all when by mountain path. So beautiful here when I came to the path it is as if I just woke up, all the day so far a muffled dream. Any time I stop a great quiet no people no traffic only sound of a bird or distant cowbell.



Figure 38 Picnic lunch on day 25



Figure 39 Just before O Cebreiro -- 152 km to go

There is only one albergue here I am in room w 100 bunk beds is have #76 and practically all beds are full. Oh well, only 6 euro. We have now entered Galicia, and this is one of the series of functional, modern albergos constructed by the government, the Xunta of Galicia.

I go to hang out in the little, touristy, town center, and I have a good dinner: garlic soup, quite spicy, fried trout (three small ones, very good) and a small cake for desert, choosing water this time (wine is always an option, free with dinner, but I am careful about that).

Day 26. Thursday April 30. → Samos (via Triacastela)

A rainy start from O Cebreiro in the morning, with a track that after a little while begins to follow the main road.

But around the dirty, muddy little village of Biduedo I lose my way, making a wrong turn down a farm field track. I think I can cut across the fields, following farmers' tracks, to find the Camino back. With the sky overcast the sun can't tell me which direction is East,

and I get quite lost. Eventually, after about an hour, I find a road, and go in the direction of some houses. Happily a man with a small truck is stopped at the intersection, and I have a halting conversation with him: which direction is the town of Triacastela? I've been going the wrong way, but he is going there, and he kindly gives me a ride into the town.

I take the option to go to Samos, it will add some distance to the overall route, but it is a town built around a Benedictine monastery, some 1400 years old. And the afternoon weather is better.



Figure 40 Monastery of Samos (1)



Figure 41 Monastery of Samos (2)

Those are my trekking poles propped up against the side of the bridge.

For the second time this journey I take a hotel room: 20 euros in the hotel Victoria, just behind the monastery, where I can also have an aperitif.

The Polish nun is there, eating an early dinner, joined by a truly boring American from Kansas City, and we talk about going to the mass at 7.

That is what we do: the mass is in what is called the Chapel, in the monastery, but is not like any chapel I imagined. It is like the interior of a major cathedral, in overdone baroque style -- I guess in the monastery's richest heyday during the Counterreformation. But the Gregorian chant was good and the mass ended with a blessing for the pilgrims.

Day 27. Friday May 1. → Ferrerios (beyond Sarria)

From Samos there is a 10 km stretch with only hamlets, no bars, through wet tracks in the woodland and farm fields, sometimes skirting or crossing minor roads. Very quiet, as usual farms and fields are entirely devoid of any human presence.

I'm caught up by Claudia, a German woman who was in Grañon and has been showing up from time to time along the way. She walks very fast, so passes rapidly, but says that we clearly made the best choice by going via Samos -- she likes this path very much.

Then comes the main road into and through Sarria. The town rises up against the hills and my heart sinks a little to think that I may have to go all the way up through it.

Yes, that is just what happens, on a street that begins with the ominous sounding Escalinata Maior.

But I get through the town, eating lunch in a bar along the way, and pretty soon find myself again in Galician farm country. In this weather the guidebook's "delightful woodland path" does not really apply -- especially in the small village roads covered with cow shit and mud.

I have begun to see some strange structures, by every farm house, and also in gardens of some ordinary houses, and cannot really understand their function:



Figure 42 In Galicia

Later I am told that these were used to store corn, but are now kept more as decorative antiques (though some look newly constructed)

The photo I included earlier of bunk beds in an albergue I took here, in Ferrerios. Not so large, each room has only eight bunk beds.

Day 28. Saturday May 2. → Ventas de Narron

It is a good thing I stopped early today (and here I take a single room, though with shared bathroom in the Casa Molar).

Yesterday I had become overly tired. I think I underestimated effect of rain. Today the weather is better: dark clouds and high wind but no rain. This morning beautiful walk from Ferreiros to Portomarin.

Just as before Sarria, on seeing Portomarin rising up on a high hill I rather wondered whether I'd have to climb that. By the time I reached the highway roundabout before it I



had seen on the map that the Camino would actually bend to the left at the beginning of town. But then what I saw before me was a steep staircase up to the city gate. Fine, I went up!

However, in the bar where I had lunch near there, together with another two pilgrims that I did not know, they told us how to get to the second bridge and continue around the town.

The weather got better in the afternoon, as I continued toward Ventas.



I could even have picnic lunch by edge of pine woods. Notice though that I keep my pack encased in its rain cover.

After lunch I was again feeling unusually tired, I think fatigue caught up with me. Though it was sunny now, the wind was sometimes so strong in open country it was like being in a boat at sea. In its way, very exciting!

Since I stopped at 3 I am having a good rest today. When I arrive there are only some middle aged German women in the courtyard but soon people I know show up. Nicolas first, but he leans out of the window to shout to Anthony that this is a really good place, and he should stop too; then Dwight does as well. We have a pleasant dinner together, I have trout again, it's becoming my favorite and this past week it has been on the menu.

Day 29. Sunday May 3. → Melide

Leaving Ventas the path follows the road quite a ways, but then it goes into woods again for a while before the town of Palas de Rei.

Yesterday I felt lucky because forecast rain did not come. This morning the outlook was not good. But actually the wind died down completely. No rain to speak of, pretty landscape So, lucky again.

Nicolas, Anthony, and Dwight are now walking together. I caught up with them again for lunch today near Palas de Rei.

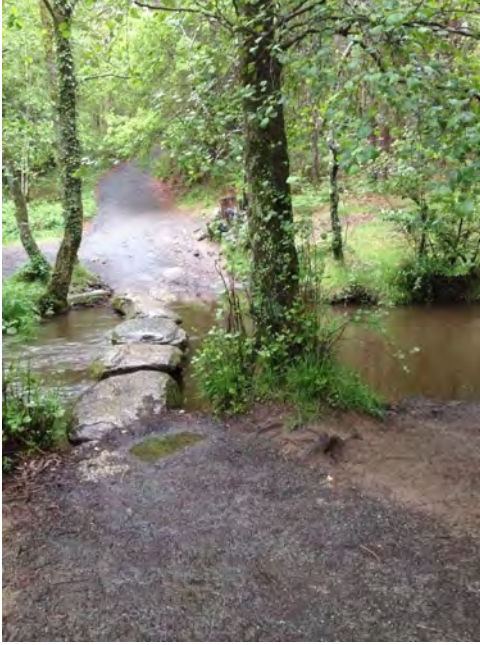
I arrive in Melide rather late because I had started an hour late this morning. The town seems almost dead except around the edges, I had to walk a ways back to find even a bar with wi fi. Much of Spain looks like 3rd world country, at least here in Galicia.

In the bar I begin with a Martini Rosso, almost habit now, and later I use the bar menu to order some dinner -- with a new dish called Pimientos de Patron, small fried green peppers.

The albergo I went to here is one of the Xunta, basic and functional, just 6 euros. But I am not lucky with my bunk partner. I have the upper bunk, the lower has a hefty young woman who snores loudly. From time to time the snores are interrupted by hard kicking that shakes the bunk -- is she kicking in her sleep, or is her neighbor kicking the bed to make her quiet? I am too sleepy to do more than speculate ...

Day 30. Monday May 4. → A Rua (before Pedrouzo)

The day begins idyllically if muddy:



and most of the day the weather is pretty good. Several times Nicolas and friends catch up with me, or I with them (as usual I am the slowest walker, but take the shortest breaks)

But the threatening rain begins to materialize later in the day.

After the Melida albergo sleeping experience, and feeling that the last few days of the journey can be a bit less ascetic, I start looking for a hotel room.

I finally find it in the small village of A Rua, a hotel with a separate restaurant, when the rain has become serious.

In the evening I am at the dinner table in the restaurant and start writing a note to Isabelle, imagining her on a cold and windy beach with Charley and Leo. But probably she has nice weather there!

Here by the scene outside the window is quite different as I am waiting for my dinner dishes. Intermittently calm, driving rain and high winds return, shaking the tree where I saw two little birds take shelter. The two hens who had been exploring the road edge have been chased inside.

There are about 60 paces between the restaurant and the rooms. I am glad I walked over in my raincoat, just now the rain is hammering the ground. The raindrops are hitting so hard they are jumping back up. It is true I find something very exciting in rain and high wind (I remember a poem I think by Langston Hughes, with the line "whoring with the wind") but I do hope it will not continue into tomorrow morning. To hear it during the night I find oddly comforting.

Day 31. Tuesday May 5. → Santiago

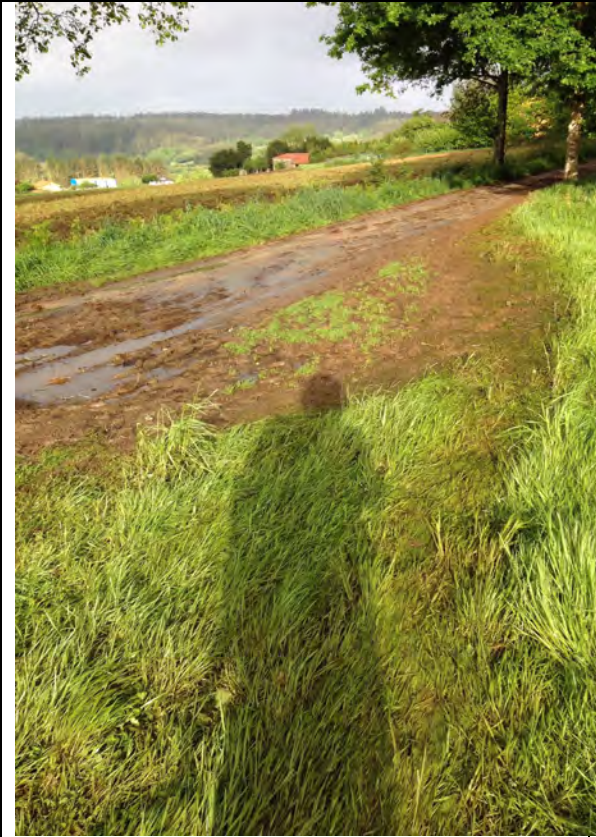


Figure 43 Beginning the last day. It was raining during breakfast but soon after there was a blessed interval of sunshine



Figure 44 At Porta di Santiago

I had meant to go only as far as Monte de Gozo, just before Santiago, but it was not so late and I continued into the town. So, end of journey!

The walk into town, to get to the old center is quite long -- much longer than the "10 minutes" which a young woman tells when she sees my backpack. But surprise -- standing outside a bar, smoking a cigarette, I find Louis. Looking as much like a homeless drunk as ever, he tells me he got to Santiago several days earlier.

It is early enough to get my credential stamped for the last time and to receive my *compostela*, which certifies that I have completed the pilgrimage. But much too late of course for the special pilgrim mass at noon; that I will attend tomorrow.

Well, the last night! So I treat myself to a hotel, just opposite the pilgrim office, where they give me an attic room, with window in the roof, again. The people in this hotel and in its bar/restaurant are really nice, pleasant, friendly.

On the street, as I am going to a travel agency, I meet Aniko, who tells me Dwight, Anthony, John Paul, and more have arrived as well.



I want to see if at the travel agency they can change my Lufthansa ticket. No, they can't deal with Lufthansa, which has no presence here, but sell me a ticket to Barcelona for the next evening. I'll fix my return from there.

There is enough time for me to go have a quiet Martini Rosso in a bar before I go to dinner. The barman brings me some tapas to go with it.

Day 32. Wednesday May 6. ** In Santiago

In the morning after breakfast the hotel staff spontaneously offered to keep my pack, and said I should feel free to use the upstairs lounge later in the day. So I left my pack, but had two things still with me that cannot come on an airplane: my trekking poles and my (quick release, spring-assisted) folding knife.

The poles I just propped up in the square, I figure someone going on to Finisterre or Portugal may pick them up. But the knife I wanted to send home. So I went to a place that does all sorts of things for pilgrims and tourists, and asked about it. The woman called their courier agency and the answer was 'no way': they won't convey anything that could possibly be construed as a weapon. So in the end I gave the knife to her as a

present -- I showed her how to use it and explained that in California an 'assisted opening' knife is legal, even if it isn't everywhere.

I went early to the mass and even before I went in people I knew appeared ; still more coming by when I was sitting down.

I went in an hour early but even so could not be in the front section. A nun was teaching us some of the chants to join during the mass. A voice first in Spanish then in German said that the mass would begin and asked all tourists to leave and return later. That did not really work, but those not sitting were all moved to the sides and were signaled to be quiet.

The nun led all the chanting with a beautiful voice and sometimes the organ would join in. It was quite a beautiful mass. Only at the end did the famous giant incense burner come in play. Suspended from the ceiling it was handled by six men in red clothing. They made it swing almost to the ceiling , billowing incense smoke.

Figure 45 Cathedral of Santiago

The giant incense burner *Botafumiero* is hanging up in the right quarter of this photo





Figure 46 In Praza das Praterias, in front of the Cathedral

Afterward I talked with quite a few people I had met. Jean Paul went around hugging everyone, and I was amazed to see so many that I had met all end up at the same mass on the same day.

Then I had lunch with two young guys from America, Dwight from the Bay Area and Anthony from Colorado. It was good to walk around afterward, looking at everything, sunny now but quite cold still.

As I was writing these notes I am really rather tired. I am sitting in the hotel lounge. Fairly soon I will go to the airport, early but just to change scene, stay awake. I have not felt any sense of anticlimax, the people met are all so sympathetic -- disappearing now from my life with a little wave, but it feels OK. I feel content. I am content now, I look forward to being home and to our time to come.