

The Camino de Santiago I

I first read about the Camino in *The New York Times*. As I remember it, a stockbroker in his 50's, an Episcopalian, I think, wrote an article for the Travel Section about a Christian pilgrimage he made to celebrate his recovery from cancer.

The Camino de Santiago is a 1,000-year-old pilgrimage route that begins in France and ends at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, where religious tradition, or myth if you prefer, holds that the body of St. James the Apostle is buried. This historical journey is so revered that many believe Francis of Assisi made the pilgrimage in the early 1200's. Historically, there are many routes that pilgrims have taken throughout the centuries, but the most traditional one begins at St. Jean Pied de Port in the French Pyrenees, a distance of almost 500 miles from Santiago de Compostela, located on the northwest tip of Spain.

The notion of making a religious pilgrimage was appealing to me because it came at a time of change in my life. The following year I would turn 65, and I knew it was time to retire from my work with the homeless at Loaves & Fishes and start over again, but doing what? And because it would be a millennium year, I felt the need to acknowledge and mark the year as important and special to my life.

The travel writer sounded a note of caution, probably intended for starry-eyed readers like myself. He was former military, an accomplished hiker, and on occasion had climbed mountains to celebrate certain milestones in his life. The Camino, he wrote, was "no walk in the park." I thought about this and made a mental calculation. My daily hiking exercise for years was, in fact, just that: a one-hour, three-mile walk in Sacramento's William Land Park. On the other hand, I reasoned, if a person had an entire day to devote solely to walking, it seemed likely that up to 20 miles a day could be accomplished without killing off a modern-day pilgrim. Or would it?

I found the idea of walking a 1,000-year-old pilgrimage route fascinating and compelling. My footsteps would be added to the millions of others taken over the centuries. Yes, taken by itself, my participation would be insignificant, but

when joined with so many others over such a sweep of time, I would be counted as a small piece – minuscule, to be sure – of history. What better activity to undertake during a millennium year? My cup of tea, to be sure.

So it came to pass, a year later, I walked the streets of St. Jean Pied de Port in France waiting for tomorrow, D-Day. At first light, we were on the pilgrimage route, which would take us up over the top of the mountains and bring us down to our first stop, a 12th-century monastery at Roncesvalles in Spain. My question about whether a 20-mile walk could kill off a modern pilgrim was soon answered. At the end of the first day, not even 20 miles, I was ready for death. Ten hours of walking, strapped with a 25-pound backpack, left me so depleted and exhausted I could barely focus. I had fallen twice, once on the way up, and once coming down. I was shaken up, a little bruised, but not hurt. This first day did not bode well, and I knew it.

Two small rooms, 20 double bunk beds in each room, 40 born-again pilgrims assigned to each room. Three showers, three toilets, and one sink with a faucet to serve 80 exhausted souls, each one needing to use these very same facilities in the same hour. I didn't sleep, I passed out. The morning was more of the same, a long and impatient line waiting to use the facilities. At one point I counted six men crowded around the small sink using the one faucet to brush their teeth and spit out their saliva waste, while others were crowded around, two or three deep, awaiting their turns. Even though they were written in different languages, all the guide books gave the same advice: get an early start! With this sort of housing arrangement bottleneck, which of our 80 would be the early starters? What a frenzy.

I fared much better the second day. The terrain was level, the villages were picturesque, the weather was mild, and the pace more manageable. Hour after hour we walked, but it seemed always to be yet another hour away from our destination, until finally, on the verge of exhaustion, we arrived at Zubiri, a small Basque town that would redefine my pilgrimage, thereby saving the life of a pilgrim.

The designated hostels in each village that pilgrims were free to use at no charge were called *refugios*. In Zubiri, the *refugio* turned out to be one elementary school classroom with a dozen metal cots, one toilet and shower, and overflow space in the gym to sleep on the floor. The system used to

determine priority was time-honored, and I knew it well – first come, first served. There was no doubt, I was destined to spend the night on the floor of the gym. In a flash of self-revelation, I knew I could not, did not, and would not be able to complete the pilgrimage if I had to abide by these living arrangements. I was too old, too soft, too spoiled, and much too tired. Let's get out of here, I said, and off we went.

Three blocks up the road, I spotted a bar, went inside, and asked the owner if he knew of any overnight accommodations. Yes, he knew someone, come. Three doors down, he rang the bell, and when the door was buzzed open, he pointed upstairs and left. What a paradise awaited us! The cleanest room you could imagine, two beds, a table and two chairs, and a spotless tub/shower and toilet next door, off the hallway. I paid the landlady. Still strapped in my pack, I fell face down onto the bed, barely able to choke back tears of relief. In a foreign tongue, in Zubiri, on the second day, I had learned how to survive and complete this pilgrimage.

And so it went, day after day. Strapping on the pack, getting an early start, walking until near exhaustion, finding a small inn or room to rent, several beers at the bar to quench our thirst, luxurious hot water to wash away the grime of the road, a short rest, and a satisfying dinner consisting of *ensalada mixta* (*con atun* for her, *sin atun* for him) with white asparagus and *pimientos de Padrón* whenever available, and of course, the local *vino tinto*. Even at my advanced age, I was learning how to become a pilgrim.