

The Camino de Santiago III

The Camino de Santiago is a 1,000-year-old pilgrimage route that begins in the French Pyrenees and makes its way through the northern part of Spain to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, which, after Rome's Vatican and Jerusalem's Holy Mount, is the third most sacred shrine in Christendom. Religious tradition holds that the body of St. James the Apostle is buried in the cathedral built for that purpose.

Throughout the course of the Middle Ages, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, encouraged by the Catholic popes and the offer of plenary indulgences, made this pilgrimage. St. Francis of Assisi is said to have traveled this route in the early part of the 13th century. Indeed, many historians credit the Camino with providing the human interchange and cross-pollination necessary to develop Europe and its culture.

During the latter part of the 20th century, the Camino de Santiago was rediscovered, and by the 1990's, new-age born-again pilgrims from all over the world were undertaking the pilgrimage. During May and June of 2000, I added my footsteps to those of these modern pilgrims and to those of the multitudes who had gone before me.

One of the first comments I hear from those who learn that Spain is the home of the pilgrimage route is "It must have been a beautiful walk." Some used the word "scenic," and others, "pretty." I had to pause and think about this. During my 28 days of walking, did I ever think Spain was "beautiful" or "scenic" or "pretty"? After all, a pilgrimage route is nothing but a highway leading from one place to another. In California, some highways are marked "scenic route," and some parts are and other parts are not. The adjective I prefer to use is "picturesque." I respond to the comments with, "Yes, I would say that 40% was picturesque, and 60% was similar to walking along Highway 99 in the Central Valley of California."

With a few exceptions, the pilgrimage route is never too far from a main highway that sounds like a multi-lane freeway because of the high volume of gear-grinding trucks and speeding automobiles. Sometimes the pilgrimage route is literally adjacent to the highway's wide shoulder, with almost no separation; other times it runs separate and apart but still in tandem, and even

these parts of the pilgrimage route are heavily impacted by the noise of commercial transportation.

In those places where the route veers off and away from the highway, it takes the form of miles and miles of agricultural field service roads along the edges of vineyards, olive orchards, white asparagus and grain fields, and all the other crops that make up Spain's agricultural economy. Or the route is unpaved service roads that border irrigation canals, or the narrow one-lane paved roads through countless rural villages which house and support the area's agricultural industries.

Indeed, there are many miles of pilgrimage that take the walker a great distance from the highway and traverse the rolling foothills and higher elevations, but for the most part these are also related to agricultural uses and/or back roads connecting rural villages. But one thing you can be sure of, the Camino route will come back soon enough and touch the major highway and relate to it once again.

You would not be surprised to learn how many miles of the pilgrimage route are consumed by industrial commercial streets in and out of any city of size. In California, these city gateway roads are often referred to as a "business route." When the mileage associated with walking through city centers and residential areas is added to the business routes, the pilgrimage route averages 10 miles consumed by each city, and there are at least nine cities large enough to fall into this mileage category. Even smaller towns have their own, less urbanized versions of the "business route."

You ask, then, what did I consider the 40% – the picturesque parts? Many days I found myself walking on tractor roads through miles of vineyards looking in the distance at a large town perched on the top of a hill, the church spire higher still. The roads wrapped around the hillside created in effect a walled city high above the agricultural lands below. It took hours of walking before we arrived to begin our upward ascent. Walking through the narrow streets of dozens of villages and hamlets, looking for the church square, the public fountain, and an open bar. A full day's walk through the bread basket area of Spain, sometimes referred to as the *meseta*, which dates back to Roman times. Miles and miles of waving grain fields, sown randomly with brilliant red-colored poppies. Walking for several days in Navarra, the Basque region.

Roncesvalles to Zubiri to Pamplona, and over a mountain of windmills leading to Puente de la Reina. The magnificent old city and cathedral of Leon, the cathedral of Burgos, and the town of Astorga. The walk through the state of Galicia, especially the areas around Cebreiro, Sarria, and Portomarin. I don't know if this equals 40% or not, but I found it picturesque. Four years later, I still remember it as such.