

Holding Hands With the World

My Journey on the Camino



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Evelyn observing the beauty of the countryside near Riego de Ambros

(Camino Photographs by Evelyn Ennor)



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Introduction

Could I do it? Could I walk 774 kilometres across northern Spain—over mountains, across flat plains and rolling hills—all the way from St. Jean Pied de Port on the French-Spanish border to Santiago de Compostela? The challenge intrigued me and caused an energy to rise within me, and excitement to build at the very thought. I had to plan this pilgrimage route myself, walk it alone and trust that all would be well. I felt a need for a vocational shift in my life and for time to contemplate my next steps away from the demands of my daily life. Walking the Camino for over five weeks could provide this opportunity.

I also had some fears to dispense with. In 1971 I had set out for Europe with a backpack, planning to go wherever the road led. I was only a naïve, twenty-two and unprepared for travelling alone in a foreign country. The trip was quickly aborted. Now I felt I wanted to release the long-held fears and trust that without the protection of a travelling companion, I would be able to walk the Camino and there was nothing to be afraid of.

I have always been a walker and at several points in my life I have dreamt of undertaking an extended trip. When I was about five, I walked a good way up Mount Snowdon, in Wales, with my Dad. In Switzerland, in 1971, I visited the Grundenwald area and was awed by the mountain trails, the enthusiastic walkers, and the cows with their clanging bells. It all seemed so idyllic.

I am fortunate to live opposite a 400-acre park in Toronto and regularly walk over three miles a day, marvelling at the transformation of the flora and fauna as the seasons change. I remember, years ago, reading a National Geographic article about the forty-five mile Milford track in New Zealand--the most scenic walk in the world. I thought, what an adventure it would be to tackle such a long walk in nature. Nature had always had such a balancing effect on my mood and sense of well-being, and was ever my place to escape, find solutions to challenges and open myself up to the possibilities of the moment.

In November 2001, I had read Shirley MacLaine's book, "*The Camino*", and the idea of walking was rekindled in me once again. If Shirley could walk the Camino in her sixties, surely I could do it at fifty-three. I immediately catalogued what equipment I had on hand and what I would need to purchase but for the follow-



ing three months, I only let the idea percolate. It wasn't until my partner, Adrian, questioned me: "what happened to your idea of walking the Camino?" that I resolved, in the moment, to start training immediately and begin my walk in September 2002. I was using him as a block as he was making a major transition and his response was 'don't use me as an excuse!'"

I realized that everything worth doing always involves a risk and I needed to prove to myself that I was willing to face a degree of uncertainty—about my physical limits; my mental and emotional resilience; and what I might encounter along the way. It was time to go.

For six months, I planned and prepared. I had kept a regular practice of walking, swimming, yoga and exercise and I was ready. I had loaded my fitted backpack then whittled it down to a maximum of 6.8 kilos (15 lbs.) and had practiced walking with it. I had researched clothing needs on the internet and purchased quick-dry, lightweight 'everything'. My five-year-old boots were already well worn in and I rounded out my belongings with every toiletry in mini sizes—no moisturizers, no makeup. Finally, I topped up with a compact first aid kit in anticipation of injuries that might occur along the way. My 6.8 kilo pack became my worldly possessions.¹

Once I had decided to go, people, resources and information just seemed to magically appear. I contacted others who had walked the Camino and they were happy to share and revisit their experiences. Marilyn Melville and Austin Repath were a wonderful resource even insisting I take their bamboo walking stick and helping me with building confidence. The internet also provided a wealth of information and tips. I felt I was ready for anything. I was even shown a close-up photograph of a walker's feet, covered in painful blisters, so I had no illusions about the difficulty of what I was about to undertake.

There were moments while I was practice walking that I felt fearful, but the desire to just do it soon dominated. A little self-scolding coupled with the bright, sunny weather, soon reinstated my building eagerness to begin. My increasing level of physical fitness also kept my spirits high and my doubts at a minimum. I was looking forward to the challenge of the pilgrimage.

I had never been to Spain so, to improve my experience, I dusted off my high school Spanish with a few conversational classes, supported by tapes and books from the library. An extended time with nature, away from the hustle and bustle of Toronto's city life seemed an opportunity I couldn't pass up. I was also looking forward to meeting other people from all over the world since the Camino was a popular pilgrimage destination (comparable to Rome and Jerusalem) for people

A full list of my backpack's contents is to be found in Appendix 1.



seeking such a challenge. I felt privileged to have both the time and resources to make this journey

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Chapter 1: Getting to St. Jean Pied de Port

When the day of departure in September arrived, I was calm and composed with not a trace of anxiety about what I was about to embark upon. I flew to London from Toronto and stayed a few days in England visiting my parents and then flew British Airways to Bilbao, Spain. I chose Bilbao as it seemed more manageable size-wise than Madrid.

What a stunning sight from the airport bus as I first caught sight of the world-renowned Guggenheim Museum with its hammered steel look and flowing curves. It was seventy-eight degrees and humid. The city was impressive with massive stone buildings, beautifully decorated with wrought iron balconies, boulevards, fountains and flower-laden plazas with roads radiating outwards from the plazas.

The Spaniards I met were friendly and accommodating and took care to try understanding my broken Spanish and directing me. My pre-booked hotel-like hostel was set on a hill overlooking the town and scenic winding river. I shared clean and convenient accommodation on the seventh floor, with a Zimbabwean girl who, after studying in Cuba, was planning to complete her Ph.D. in Bilbao.

I effortlessly arranged my bus trip for the next morning after an easy, ten-minute walk to the bus station. At a nearby internet café, I sent my first email to the fifty friends and family on my mailing list. I needed cash and didn't really realize what numbers I was pressing on the bank machine until surprisingly, out came three hundred euros. I then had to stash the money all over my body to safeguard it. Finally, I arranged for a picnic breakfast for the next morning and fell asleep peacefully anticipating the days ahead.

The next morning, walking alone by the light of the big dipper, I experienced the magnificence of the rising sun. I was in Spain; my great adventure had really begun. The bus from Bilbao to Bayonne meandered through the never-ending hills and the scenery reminded me of Switzerland with its chalet type houses of white stucco; red tile roofs; balconies laden with flowers; shutters; and stone and Tudor detailing. Closer to the French border and from the top of the rugged and often perpendicular cliffs, we viewed sandy beaches and calm seas. The drive through the wealthy resort town of Biarritz was spectacular with its luxury hotels jutting out from the cliff face. I don't know how the bus managed to manoeuvre through the narrow, winding, town streets but at times I wondered if we would drive right through one of the quaint, old shops.

After three and a half hours we arrived in Bayonne, a beautiful, old town with cobbled streets, sidewalk cafes, quaint shops and a spectacular 12th Century



Gothic cathedral. Only an Australian man remained on the bus with me. As luck would have it...and this was the start of many such 'convenient happenings', he knew Bayonne from a previous trip and offered to show me the way to the train station for my connection to St. Jean Pied de Port.

I had a four-hour wait so I occupied my time by first settling in to a comfortable table at a sidewalk café to people watch. I then ambled through the streets around the cathedral feeling buoyantly alive and fortunate. A bench by the river overlooking the bridge into town and festooned with many flags from all over the world, called to me. I guess the excitement of my first steps had been a little tiring so I dozed a while. Lucky I wasn't picked up for vagrancy.

At the train station I was immediately befriended by sixty-three year old Walter from Bavaria who had walked the route before and was now planning to cycle it. On the train to St. Jean, I met many other excited backpackers all focused on conquering the Camino. Walter offered me advice about pacing myself, breathing properly, taking magnesium to strengthen my muscles, and using pay phones. I also met Rob from Arizona and Michele and Detlef from Germany and when we arrived I just followed the group into town, registered at the Accueil St. Jacques, received my passport credentials and was assigned a room for the night at the hostel Chez Jean, next to the chocolate shop on the main street. How fortunate was that?



Eve and Walter (from Bavaria) in St. Jean Pied de Port



I felt like I was being effortlessly carried along on a wave with no control needed. Was this how life really did work if one let go and saw the possibilities in each moment rather than trying to figure everything out in advance? I dined with Walter who provided me with a phone card so I could assure my parents that all was well, and then we wandered about the village and chatted with other Canadians from Kingston, Ottawa and Montreal about our hopes for the journey ahead.

That night, although the refuge could accommodate seven beds, Anne—a student from Hamburg—and I were the only occupants. We chatted for hours then both fell asleep easily.

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Chapter 2: An Enthusiastic Start

St. Jean Pied de Port to Roncesvalles 27 km

For the first morning of the walk, I indulged in the typical Spanish breakfast of baguette, jam and hot chocolate then packed, ready to leave at 7:30. Anne had left alone half an hour earlier and I thought—darkness or no darkness—so could I. The refuge owner pointed the way from her front door and I realized there were others ahead, and probably close behind me, as I boldly stepped out into the darkness of the early dawn full of confidence peppered with just a bit of trepidation.

At this time of year—mid-September—about sixty walkers leave St. Jean each day so I was hardly alone. This contrasted with the two hundred and fifty walkers in the high season but I had followed the suggestion in my guidebooks to experience the cooler temperatures and reduced number of travellers in the shoulder season. Apparently some fifty to sixty thousand pilgrims walk this ancient route each year and these numbers were on the rise as walkers shared their adventurous experiences with others.



A winding walk from St. Jean over the Pyrenees



I climbed steadily for my first three hours up the winding mountain road following in the energy of those who had walked before me. Again, the magnificent panorama of rolling fields and hills; sheep and cows with clanging bells; quaint chalets; and abundance of flowers, reminded me of Switzerland. I was surrounded by the beauty and vitality of nature. As I walked and paused, I flowed through conversations with walkers from Colombia, Australia, France, Ireland, Mexico and Alaska. The high cloud ceiling and mild temperature were invigorating and just perfect for walking. My enthusiasm and energy felt as high as the Pyrenees that I was scaling and I was pleased with how fit I felt. My training was already paying off. I had at first been wary of taking this higher Napoleonic route over the mountains as guidebooks spoke of bad weather and its dangers. I'm glad I was open to the advice of other walkers and not been fearful as there was no need

After three hours the trail levelled off and the winds picked up. At times it was a challenge even to stand upright. The smile on my face stretched from ear to ear. I felt like an early pioneer discovering the new world. I was ready for any eventuality and the more challenges I was presented with, the stronger my resolve to overcome them. Five kilometres from St. Jean, I bypassed Huntto (a favoured stop for walkers unsure of their stamina) and, full of energy and enthusiasm, I headed for Roncesvalles with no doubt that I could manage the full 27 km trek.

As I climbed, ten minutes of rain caused me to quickly locate my plastic rain poncho and, the cooling temperatures at these higher altitudes made my fleece jacket, nylon shell and a pair of light gloves indispensable. I was well prepared for whatever the weather threw at me. I sang at the top of my voice with such a joyful feeling of excitement and gratitude! When hunger called, I found shelter in the lee of some large boulders and ate a wholesome lunch of French bread, local cheeses and fruit and, of course, drank lots of water.

The walk down the forested mountainside into the village of Roncesvalles placed a little stress on my knees, but my bamboo walking stick provided welcome support as it did throughout the journey. In seven and a half hours, slightly weather-beaten but otherwise unscathed, I had travelled the 27 kilometres from St. Jean to Roncesvalles. I will admit that when I did arrive at 3 pm I was feeling tired, proud of my physical stamina and glad to sit down! I joined other walkers enthusiastically chatting and sharing the day's experiences until the refuge opened at 4 pm. I remained optimistic; now that I had climbed the mountain, that the remaining 747 kilometres to Santiago would fall away easily.

The monastery at Roncesvalles offered spartan accommodation—mostly bunks, cold water for washing and cold stone floors although I did hear a rumour afterwards that some had hot showers. After wandering around the grounds where monks had been welcoming pilgrims since the 12th Century, I attended the traditional pilgrim's church service in the fine, Gothic cathedral. After mass, I joined



40 other walkers in the dining room at Casa Sabina all discussing their trip through the Pyrenees; their reasons for walking the Camino; their anticipation of tomorrow; and sharing the special pilgrim's menu of fish (with eyes still in), fries, soup, ice cream and wine. Then just after nine, comrades all, we were off to bed. I shared an overflow space in a bunk filled room on the main floor with about six others. The space was large enough for forty and we chatted on until slowly we succumbed to sleep. Despite the church bells that seemed to chime every half-hour, I felt I had a good night's sleep with my body enjoying the opportunity to lay quiet.

I felt one with them all in spite of differences in language, culture and socio-economic background. We were all pilgrims, all with the same goal, to reach Santiago. All shared the same desires, fears and doubts. I had a strong feeling of unity already which was only to grow stronger in the days ahead.

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Chapter 3: Flophouse Pilgrims

Roncesvalles to Larrasoana 27 km

The next morning I woke early for a cold shower and a walk on cold stone floors - brhhhh! Needless to say, I moved quickly and didn't linger. Then aided by my tiny flashlight hanging on a lariat around my neck, I set off again at 7:15 a.m. , following a French couple through a dark, forested path. I didn't know them and we didn't speak, but they looked like they knew where they were going and I felt more secure in the dark of the early morning staying in sight of them. Almost always the option when staying in the refuges, was to start off alone or follow and join someone else.

Before long a warm, inviting café came into view and I entered and sat down with other walkers for juice and a baguette sandwich. We needed to build up our strength for the 27-kilometre day ahead. Here I met 51 year old Denis, a Frenchman from Bordeaux with whom I would share many days off and on for the first two weeks. For the rest of the day we travelled together through beautiful, rolling country, under clear, sunny skies and in temperatures hovering around 20° Celsius. Denis and I discussed (he in broken English, I in broken French) our mutual desire to make a vocational shift in our lives. We talked about his interest in gardening and my love of healthy living. We finally stopped for lunch in a sunny spot by a babbling brook and happily took off our hiking boots to air our feet. I realized later it would have been wise to do that several times through the day to avoid or at least minimize blisters. I learned that lesson the hard way.



Eve and Denis at a lunch stop to air our feet

Another eight hours of walking, sometimes up and down craggy slopes, and we arrived at Larrasoana at around 3:00 p.m.. There was a little tenderness in some



toes but I wasn't really noticing. The refuge still had space and I was allocated a mattress on the floor in a row with four others. I chose the bed against the wall rather than one in the middle - that way I would only knock out one pilgrim if I flailed my arms in the night when I turned. The room looked a bit like a flophouse with gear strewn everywhere, but it was comfortable and definitely intimate. I promptly showered, did my laundry, wrote in my journal and headed for the local bar with Denis for a beer (my personal reward for a completed day's walk).

That afternoon I met Linda and Martin from Bavaria, Eric and Maria from Belgium and about eighteen baby chicks scurrying around our feet. We sat on a patio in the sun and shared stories of the day's adventures and challenges. I was still smiling as I returned to my bed by the wall. No one snored, or if they did I didn't hear them, and I was fully relaxed and slept soundly.

I marvelled that after walking 54 kilometres in two days I still had energy to spare. A shower and brief rest were enough to revitalize me and I had rewarded myself with exploring the town and socializing at the end of the day. I had never walked more than 27 kilometres in any one day yet now I had done it two days in a row. Each day would bring new experiences, people and conversations. I looked forward to the surprises and wonders ahead.

Away from the noise, traffic, negative thoughts and stressful situations of everyday life, nature seemed to be acting as my battery charger, revving me up with energy and increasing my stamina and resilience. I was doing something I had dreamt of and sincerely loved doing. I was feeling in sync with myself and the world. How often when I had done things reluctantly, did my energy and enthusiasm slump. Is this why people seem to have boundless energy when they love what they do?

As an unexpected treat that night, Denis made a delicious dinner of pasta, tabouleh, pork tenderloin, tomatoes, bread, butter, peppers and cake for Anne and me. This was the beginning of a camaraderie that would follow me my entire journey. The Camino had a way of creating a friendly, happy atmosphere of caring and sharing.

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Chapter 4: Lightening the Load

Larrasoana to Cizur Menor 20 km

Next stop: Cizur Menor, a small town 20 kilometres away. Denis and I started off from Larrasoana at 6:30 a.m. It was still dark and we made our way once again through the surrounding forest with our flashlights illuminating the way. We enjoyed another dry, sunshine filled day with perfect walking temperatures. Although not onerous, the countryside consisted of rolling hills and I was beginning to feel like a mountain goat. Denis though, was suffering with tendonitis under the weight of his 13.6-kilo (30 lbs) pack so we found a post office and shipped about five kilos back to Bordeaux. We caused quite a stir at the post office with Denis' clothes and supplies strewn on the floor as he asked me to rule on each item—keep or ship. It wasn't long before we had filled up a large box for shipping. Many other walkers were also forced to do the same because it was virtually impossible to comfortably walk with more than 9 kilos (20 lbs), day after day. 10% of your body weight was the suggested load for your pack weight and that was very important advice to adhere to.



Eve with the pilgrim metal sculptures

At midmorning we stopped in Trinidad de Arre for a chocolate Danish and coffee which felt like the most sumptuous meal ever. All the walking served to build up



a voracious appetite and food was becoming a major focus besides the feet of course. After quickly buying a few snacks, we continued on and reached the cobble streets of Pamplona around noon. Ah! The internet café again allowed my connection with friends and family. An increasing number of internet cafés seemed to be springing up along the route, making it easy to communicate and assure friends and family that all was well and that I had not been spirited away by the fairies. Walkers are, in fact, given a list of all the refuges along the way detailing their facilities and highlighting local services and internet accessibility. I found this extremely useful in planning stops for communications, food and rest.

The refuge at Cizur Menor was run by the Knights of St. John of Malta and was bright and spacious. The usual bunk beds, hot showers and washing facilities were provided. Another refuge run by the Roncal family came complete with a garden and its welcoming atmosphere had been recommended so I dropped by to have a peek. Camped in the garden was a young couple with a black labrador retriever. They were camping because dogs were not allowed in the refuges. We chatted about their choice and I noted even the dog had its own pack. Although the dog's pack eased the couple's load, I could not imagine walking with a tent, bedding and camping supplies in addition to all I already carried. I said goodbye to the couple but was to meet them again several times along the way happily trundling along at their own pace.

A young priest from Limerick, Ireland, conducted a church service in English at the Romanesque church in Cizur Menor and Denis and I decided to attend. I found this was a real treat because it allowed me to sense the atmosphere of the church while a service was in progress which is always much better than just touring the building. Then Denis and I visited a local bar and invited other walkers to meet us for dinner.

The restaurants in Cizur Menor were disappointing but, after a long day of walking, even bad food can appear delicious. Also, the camaraderie among the diners at the table more than compensated for any shortcoming. I was happy to have Regina from Switzerland sitting beside me because she spoke four languages and was able to translate for many of us. English seemed to be the common language amid a group of French, Austrian, Swiss, Spanish, German, Flemish and Irish travellers but there was a great deal of translating going on and the Swiss were masters here. Hand and facial gestures were an integral part of our communication. My Camino family was growing daily.

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Chapter 5: Awesome Moonlight

Cizur Menor to Puente La Reina 20 km.

Leaving town at 6:15 the next morning, Denis and I walked in the dark heading for Puente La Reina along a trail lighted by a glimmering full moon. The sheer magic of it filled me with open eyed wonder. It was such a privilege to be enveloped in the beauty of nature and it was equally wondrous as the orange glow of the sun surfaced in the hills behind us. I found myself breathing in contentment from head to toe. My feet were still feeling strong and the tenderness in the toes wasn't noticeable. The trail ran uphill for about the first four hours and I could see the wind turbines along the top of the hills. Blackberry bushes lined the trail and provided a tasty treat that would also help my digestive process. The climb led to a parade of life-sized metal sculptures of pilgrims pointing the way ahead. Then I started downhill with loose stones underfoot and the countryside stretching out for miles in the distance. I constantly was overcome with feelings of gratefulness and awe and just loved the excitement of not knowing what was around the next corner!

Around nine o'clock I walked towards a small hamlet to the raucous sound of a van's horn as it wended its way up and down the narrow streets. I was initially critical of this noisy intrusion on the peaceful slumber of the hamlet until I realized that this was merely an announcement of the arrival of the daily bread truck. The resident locals flooded into the streets, crowding the van as the driver filled baguette orders. He was generous enough to cut a loaf in half for me since a full loaf would have been much more than I could carry.

A side trip to Eunate allowed us to observe a wedding in a 12th Century Knights Templar structure, seemingly in the middle of nowhere. We then set off for Obaños where we picked up lunch from a small shop and ate in a grassy, shaded parkette alongside a couple of Austrians. The Camino was like a world on its own, filled with happy walkers with basic needs for only food and shelter and just one goal: to get to Santiago one step at a time. I intended to enjoy every minute of this carefree and privileged opportunity through every pore in my body. I felt serene—televisions and radios were nowhere to be found and newspapers held no interest for me.

Denis' energy lagged over the course of the day as the tendonitis in his feet continued and I walked on alone ending the day at Puente La Reina. This was a first major lesson in walking my own walk in life and on the Camino however tempting it was to follow the pace of others. I knew it was important to honour my own needs to headed on confidently. I reflected on how I habitually accommodate myself to the needs of others. I had to be my own person.





Puente La Reina

Puente La Reina was an old, stone town of about 2000. I stayed at the Albergue Apostol Santiago, a newly built refuge on the other side of the medieval pilgrim bridge that was constructed over the Rio Arga in the 11th Century. The refuge housed over a hundred bunks, modern showers, bathrooms, a café and bar, and a soon-to-be-built swimming pool. Until now, I had not seen such modern luxuries. It seemed that more and more private refuges were being built and catering to a clientele seeking a little more comfort and convenience.

After settling in, I strolled off on my own to explore the town and local market. It was Sunday and most shops were closed but I was fascinated by some revolving bins over open fires where peppers were being roasted and the local inhabitants were digging in. I also met a group of Canadians from Vancouver and the Okanagan Valley who were seeking directions to the refuge. I subsequently met them the following day and directed them as they entered Estella. They were sure I was St. James sent to guide them. That night Eric and Maria from Belgium treated me to 'patcharan', an aperitif of Navarre. We spent an evening of rapt conversation with two Germans, Michele and Detlef, over a dinner served right in the refuge—a rarity. Although I had started this walk alone, I now felt very much a part of a growing extended family.

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Chapter 6: Discovering The Garden of Eden

Puerta La Reina to Estella 22 km

The next morning Denis and I met at the medieval bridge at 7:30 a.m. to begin the walk to Estella together. It was a little more challenging with continuous slopes to conquer.² The roadside was laden with fruit trees and bushes—blackberries, grapes, apples, almonds and figs—and I felt like I had discovered the Garden of Eden. Estella is a quaint and inviting town of historic structures, founded in the 10th Century.



Walking to Estella

To while away the hours, Denis and I visited many welcoming plazas that seemed to be around every corner. I explored the narrow, cobble streets and found a bar in one of the many plazas to have a cold beer and gaze at the people around us in rapt conversation. The refuge in Estella was well appointed and welcoming and Denis and I dined at the Café Azzara with a young Irish couple from Dublin and excitedly shared our experiences. The café had the atmosphere of a bistro, frequented by town inhabitants each trying to talk a little louder than the others—very typically Spanish.

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Chapter 7: The Wine Fountain of Irache

Estella to Los Arcos 20 km

At 7:15 the next morning, after breakfast at the refuge, Denis and I headed towards Los Arcos, a twenty-kilometre walk. The paths were either gravel or sand based through rolling hills. It was now day six and I had walked 134 kilometres. Three of my toes were blistered and bandaged and I was beginning to feel a little sorry for myself. I had really thought I would escape having blisters but this was not to be. My self-doctoring began with moleskin, compeed, bandaids and anti-septic, and was to last for the next two weeks. I thought I would focus on the three blister-free toes and ignore the others but it was becoming increasingly difficult to do that.

Denis and I visited the wine fountain at Irache where I watched Denis fill his water bottle with red wine and drink heartily. I am allergic to red wine so I enjoyed watching Denis have a really good time. The constantly changing scene and laughter at such places as the wine fountain, took away the focus from battered feet and more than compensated.



I was awed and a little overwhelmed by the Cathedral in Los Arcos where I attended the evening's pilgrim mass. The interior was exceptionally ornate—a building filled with wood and gold carvings and massive statuary. After mass, the dinner we prepared was a hearty fare of soup and pasta made in the refuge kitchens where about a dozen other pilgrims were also attempting to cook amid much chatter and hilarity. The evening offered another powerful memory of caring and sharing, of joyful friendships and challenges overcome and shared. I ended the evening by treating myself to a foot massage provided by the refuge's resident masseur, a special treat at the refuge in Los Arcos.

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Chapter 8: Rioja Wine Country

Los Arcos to Logrono 28 km.

I started Day 7 early the next morning with another breathtaking view of the moon ahead of me and the rising sun behind me which put me into a very prayerful mood. There were many prayerful moments along the route as the incredible power of the natural world enveloped me in its tender embrace. The weather continued sunny and dry, as it had from the beginning, and temperatures still hovered around 21 degrees Celsius (about 70 degrees Fahrenheit) even though the chill of the early morning made my fleece jacket necessary. I found it all invigorating and by ten o'clock I was removing layers and basking in the sunshine.

The walk today would be to Logrono in the heart of the Rioja wine-growing region, 28 kilometres away. Gently rolling hills with grapevines and wineries everywhere provided an easy walk and another very different scene. I was invigorated wandering through 12th Century villages along cobbled streets and pausing at a bakery or food store to purchase fresh bread, cheese, yoghurt and chocolate for the journey ahead. After 20 kilometres, I opted for my Teva sandals to take the pressure off my blisters and I felt like I was walking on air for the first time in a week. I had not thought of taking off my boots before. It took a fall by the roadside for me to suddenly realize that I had a pair of sandals that would be perfect for the current, narrow, paved roads into Logrono.



Eve picking grapes in Rioja

Sunshine and a light breeze caressed the surroundings as I arrived at the refuge at Logrono. Here I found large kitchens, microwave ovens, washing machines,



free computers and a sunny patio. And, only twenty-eight bunks to a room! What paradise! Four days had passed since my last email so when I discovered that the refuge computers were temporarily 'down', I followed a Frenchman through the busy streets and plazas of Logrono, a city of 120,000 residents, to an internet café. Perhaps I should have dropped breadcrumbs on the way out but I watched for landmarks along the complicated route we took and found my way back without difficulty. The town's annual wine festival was in progress with marquees and entertainers everywhere. The sidewalk cafés were filled with revelers drinking, shouting and singing with abandon. Although I could appreciate the joyous celebrations, the 28 km. walk that day didn't inspire me to join the party and by 10:00 p.m. I was fast asleep and totally oblivious to fireworks, car horns and shrieking locals. I slept like a breathing corpse.

By day eight, I had earned the reputation of being the alarm clock for those around me. I was usually up and about by 5:30, casually sorting myself out, nursing my feet, drinking lots of water and, generally, gearing up for the day. I now also had been assigned the task of waking others. I continued to burn moxa on the acupuncture points below my knee, on the advice of an acupuncturist who had told me it would seem like I had never walked at all. The practice was drawing the attention of others who watched smoke pouring from my legs and wondered if I was incinerating myself. I, however, would do anything I could to ensure my energy level stayed high even if the effectiveness of the treatment turned out to be purely psychological which has a power of its own.

I knew that if I was to complete this walk I had to pay close attention to my physical body. Never before in my life had the body achieved such importance to me and yet I realized that it is a powerful vehicle for personal wellbeing. In recent years I had come to realize this and had tried to pay closer attention to physical signs of distress. I knew that if I didn't, the warning signs would scream louder and create even more difficulties. Sometimes though it seemed so much easier to let my thought processes and goals take charge and override those helpful messages.

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Chapter 9: Foot Weary Inteligencia

Logrono to Najera 30 km

Marguerite and I left Logrono with the celebration of the wine festival still in full swing at 7:00 a.m. Revellers mixed with town staff as empty glasses and garbage lay in the streets, cleaners were sweeping up and water was flowing in the gutters washing away the signs of the previous night's festivities. The Spanish really do know how to party.

Marguerite is a 62-year-old, stained glass artist whom I had met along the way. She lived in Paris but also had a chalet in Azur, a small resort community in the southwest corner of France where she had her studio. She was a little nervous about travelling so early, but I felt all would be well and we continued on our way. We had set our day's target at Najera, 30 kilometres away, even though I felt quite exhausted despite early morning comments that I looked far too fresh. I was discovering that 20 kilometres a day were easy to achieve but that my body started to protest beyond that. After several long days, my body was virtually shouting at me to apply the brakes. Slowing down with so many kilometers ahead of me was difficult and, of course, my excitement and enthusiasm to reach my goal carried me forward despite the silent screams. I learned later that the silent screams are the body's warning lights and are worthy of measured attention.

A full-bearded pilgrim, Marcelino Lobato, who was well known on the route, gave our day a bit of a jump-start. He had set up on the trail just outside Logrono, laden with canvas sacks full of free pears, figs and cookies for the walkers. Since we hadn't eaten breakfast this indeed was a welcome sight. There is no doubt in my mind that we are being 'watched over'. Marguerite and I had our pictures taken with Marcelino after which he kissed me on both cheeks and on my forehead and said "inteligencia". Marguerite was a little jealous that he hadn't said anything to her and hadn't given her the third kiss and I was not sure whether "inteligencia" was a good thing or not but I felt blessed none the less. Perhaps he was referring to my overactive mind!





Bearded Marcelino and Belgium couple with Eve

“So, you’re Eve from Canada. We heard about you and were looking forward to catching up and introducing ourselves,” said some voices behind me. This was how I met two fellow Ontarians—64-year-old Mike from Sault St. Marie and 67-year-old John from Bancroft. They were travelling the Camino rapidly with smiles radiating out about six feet. I managed to keep up with them for a short while as we exchanged notes but they were on a mission and after twenty minutes they accelerated, having expressed a desire to meet for dinner and talk further. They were sticking to their detailed agenda of walking set distances and operating with a clear goal each day. I discovered that they had started the day at about 8 o’clock and regularly stopped every two hours to snack or have a meal and remove their boots to dry and air their socks. This last was a good idea but, I realized it too late—drier footwear lessened the humid environment in which blisters flourished. Mike and John eventually completed the entire 774-kilometre Camino in twenty-eight days with John managing to tough out the whole experience problem free. Mike only suffered some initial blisters. Age seemed to present no barriers.

Chatting with others as I walked often helped to spur me on and make me forget my blisters. That day I enjoyed an animated conversation with Marguerite, which bounced from her battle with cancer to the importance of being aware of the body’s messages; and from telepathy in Australian aborigines and meditation to the phenomena of unresolved and trapped emotions in the body and the havoc this causes. I talked of my experience with Network Care and the amazing emotional releases this holistic therapy, rooted in chiropractic medicine, had facilitated. I was a firm believer in the idea that muscle tension caused by life stresses can lead to serious physical difficulties if ignored. I had experienced an incredi-



ble ‘lightness’ as these longheld memories, mainly absorbed in childhood, were often re-lived and released.

We were so absorbed in conversation that we didn’t realize we had walked off the Camino. We were aware enough that we saw two elderly local Spaniards talking in the middle of the trail ahead and even though they spoke assertively in Spanish as we passed, we thought they were extending greetings of some kind. When we passed, the voices were louder, the arms were flailing and I felt a little nervous. As it turned out, they were merely trying frantically to tell us we were going in the wrong direction. To make us understand they thought if they spoke louder we’d get it! We did eventually and were thankful for the angel guidance.

We walked the 30 kilometres in eight hours and arrived at Najera, a prosperous old town that provided a feast for both the eyes and the stomach. Like most towns along the Camino it had been built between the 10th and 16th Centuries when pilgrimages were at their height. The town’s refuge was an old monastery, warm and welcoming with its solid stonework and wooden beams. That evening Marguerite and I treated ourselves to tapas (Spanish hors d’oeuvres) and toured the 15th/16th Century Franciscan monastery of Santa Maria with its royal tombs, renaissance cloister and ornately carved choir loft.

I was now definitely starting to feel road weary. My friendship and conversation with Marguerite was keeping my attention diverted from my feet and the silent screams of my body. However, when I collapsed on my bunk in silence that night I knew I needed to slow the pace. I had walked 30 km to Najera that day and 28 km the day before and 194 km in total since St. Jean. The message from my body was ‘pay attention and slow down.’

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Chapter 10: Locked Out!

Najera to Santo Domingo del Calzada 21 km

Even though I felt like I should take a day off to rest, day nine saw me heading for Santo Domingo del Calzada at 7:30 a.m. Once again I ignored my aches and pains and enjoyed the sunshine, scenery and conversation with Anne from Alaska. We chatted about her previous business designing outdoor lighting systems in a land with very short daylight hours. I found it fascinating that so many Camino walkers seemed to have reached a crossroads in life and this walk provided a pause to contemplate the next step or perhaps this was a reinforcement of my belief in magnetic attraction that like attracts like. Perhaps I was drawing others to me that were in a similar position and using this time away to decide on the next step.

We arrived in Santo Domingo just after noon and found another pleasant refuge offering single beds around a gym-type structure with a large enough space in the middle to accommodate two hundred dancers. Again Denis and I found a sunny patio, refreshed ourselves with a drink, toured the cathedral and stocked up on light snacks for the following day. The practical always had to be taken care of first. I attended the pilgrim's service that evening in the 11th Century, Gothic cathedral and was amused by the repeated crowing throughout the ceremony of two resident cocks. The priests delivering the service were impressively undisturbed by the noise as this was a regular occurrence. In fact, the two live, caged cocks were part of a local legend about a young German pilgrim and an innkeeper's daughter. Through a miraculous intervention by St. James, the pilgrim's life had been saved, after he had been strung up on the gallows. A supposedly cooked and quite dead hen had come back to life.

I renewed acquaintances with John and Mike, the Canadian pair I'd met, and enjoyed a typical 9:00 p.m. Spanish-style dinner. Three sociable Germans joined us and suddenly I realized it was approaching 10:30. Oh! Oh! My refuge doors are closed at ten! I had to face the prospect of being locked out for the night. All my dinner companions were staying in a small hotel so they were not concerned about their accommodations. John and Mike escorted me back to the refuge to ensure I would be able to get in but the large, wooden drawbridge door was locked up tight and there was no sign of life.

I rammed the door a few times and banged on the knocker, to no avail. Spanish nights can turn pretty cool and the thought of sleeping in the streets held no appeal. I shivered in the darkness. Fortunately, a local woman witnessed my desperate attempts to be heard and lead us to a local bar where she knew the refuge warden was spending an evening with friends. Lucky me! Providence to the res-



cue again! The smiling warden, showing no concern for being disturbed, unlocked the door and I crept into my bed surrounded by forty sleeping bodies, trying to be quiet and unnoticed in the dark. That should teach me! But, I thought, the dinner outing had been worth it.

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Chapter 11: Separation and Tears

Santo Domingo del Calzado to Belorado 22 km

I started day ten in my hiking boots but switched to sandals after three or four kilometres. Those blisters were still pretty tender and didn't want to be trapped in confining boots. I estimated that I had walked one hundred and sixty kilometres in my sandals in considerable comfort. The sun shone brightly and I worked at drinking lots of water to avoid dehydration. I carried about a half litre of water at all times and sipped continuously from an easily accessible bottle tucked into my waist pack. I lunched at the top of a hill overlooking rolling hills and my track ahead while reflecting on what a wonderful 'family' I had adopted so far on the Camino.

This was to be a day of meditation and reflection for me. With tears streaming down my face I revisited my memories of leaving England for Canada when I was seven. At the time, I had waved goodbye, leaving our extended family standing on the shore as we sailed from Southampton to the sound of a slow dirge in the background. I realized I would have to part with my Camino family too and somehow I spontaneously felt a need to grieve for past and future partings. The sadness was profound and my emotions, which had been trapped inside, had needed to be released. My tears provided some welcome relief and I meditatively continued on in the sunshine with a somewhat lighter spring in my step.

The home stretch to Belorado was a gravel track about twenty feet from a noisy highway. Walking beside traffic tended to shatter the feeling of serenity and make the distance seem longer than it actually was. However, after six and a half hours I arrived in Belorado, a lovely old, sleepy town. It was home to an interesting old refuge, converted from a theatre and next-door to Santa Maria Church. I enjoyed exploring the narrow streets and eventually linked up with seven other familiar walkers on a sunny plaza patio where I had not one, but two icy glasses of patcharan. What more could I ask?

I had discovered that all these towns and villages owed their existence to the Camino pilgrimage and were created along the route to service the needs of the millions who had walked by from at least the 10th Century onwards. Pilgrimages were known to have reached their highest point in the 12th Century and here I was 800 years later faithfully following in the same footsteps. That thought regularly crept into my awareness as I walked and somehow spurred me on knowing if they could do it, so surely could I. I often tried to envision the tremendous hardship they must have endured without such comfortable refuges, ergonomic walking boots and lightweight packs and clothing.

That evening as I shared my day's experiences with Denis I became teary-eyed again as I talked of my memories of leaving England. He responded by saying that I came across to him and to others as being strong, capable and competent—a woman who was fearless and confident—and that it was healthy for me to show a softer, more vulnerable side. We talked of the love shown between walkers who had known each other for such short periods and he confessed that he had never been able to tell his mother he loved her. He had every intention of doing so as soon as he returned home and now realized the importance of expressing feelings to truly engage in an intimate relationship with another human being.

The Camino was again showing me my life in technicolor. It was exposing sadness, joy, hopes and dreams and was helping to heal the injured spirit. What an empowering journey this was turning into!

Sharing was fundamental—if anyone needed anything there was always someone with some to spare whether the need was for bandaids, anti-inflammatory cream or a piece of bread. There was a dependency being created. The rigours of the walk required the support of others. If someone fell behind because of injury, word of mouth kept everyone else up to date on that person's location and status. For example, Anne, a German student I had met on my first night, was no longer able to walk with her thirty-pound pack. Other walkers had each taken a few pounds from her so she could continue until she finally shipped some of her gear home.

Many remarked on the feelings of love and caring ever present and expressed the wish that life back home could always be like this. It was almost as though we were relating to each other's soul, totally free from a need to make an impression. Certainly there was no sense of competition.

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Chapter 12: Saved by Bruno

Belorado to Atapuerca 30 km

The home of the oldest remains of *Homo sapiens* in Europe was my day 11 goal. At 7:30 a.m. I started my 30-kilometre walk to Atapuerca. An early morning coffee stop on a sunny patio bar in Espinosa del Camino was certainly welcome, and seemed to be the only activity in the tiny, stone hamlet. As in many of the small settlements the Camino traversed, agriculture seemed to be the mainstay and many of the young people had left the older family members behind. So day after day it was common to walk through sleepy old towns, villages and hamlets where there seemed to be little life. They felt almost frozen in another time as if almost untouched by the modern world. It really did feel like I was enveloped in another era and it was a relief to escape from all consuming materialism. The simplicity and stillness was calming. There were no flashing neon signs, loudspeakers or communication devices of any kind to spoil this other worldly and sheltered lifestyle I was experiencing.



A stop for coffee with Denis

I followed a steady but gentle ascent most of the day past Villafranca Montes de Orca until I reached the ridge across the top. The well marked trail traversed forests of oak and pine with breathtaking views of hills in the distance shrouded in a



mysterious blue haze. I spent most of the day walking alone allowing plenty of time to drink in nature's delights. At a picnic stop another walker who had food to spare after the climb offered me a ham and a tomato sandwich and I certainly enjoyed the bounty. Sun, sun and more sun were the order of the day and a light breeze kissed my cheek as I marvelled at the beauty surrounding me. I experienced many moments like this along the route where I was overcome with a feeling of peace and total well-being. I felt life was good; people were open, understanding and helpful, and everything was happening in perfect order and at the right time. There was no need for stress or strain—the universe would provide if I would only trust.

I finally arrived at the renowned monastery at San Juan de Ortega, which was secluded in a grove of trees away from other activity. A wedding was in progress at the nearby church with guests dressed in very fashionable, sophisticated attire of the finest materials. Quite different from the North American penchant for casual and comfortable wear, I observed that the Spanish enjoyed dressing up on a Sunday or for weddings and other special occasions. I definitely was not dressed to fit in with this grand occasion but somehow it didn't matter in the least. I joined Denis for a beer at the adjacent café-bar—we weren't totally in the middle of nowhere—and contemplated walking the remaining six kilometres to Atapuerca. After walking 24 kilometres, much of it uphill, I was ready to stop but, the drink and rest refreshed me and I was inspired to continue. In a moment of weakness I looked at the San Juan monastery and found a bed but the place was large and cold and my desire to continue was reinforced. In addition, Marguerite and Anne had gone on ahead and I was interested in catching up with them....Mmmm...walk your own walk Eve....listen to your body or you'll be sorry.



San Juan de Ortega Monastery

On arrival at Atapuerca, after an hour and a half through forested paths and along an asphalt roadway, I found the refuge could only accommodate twenty walkers and was quite full. What now? Out of the blue, Bruno to the rescue! His Spanish was immaculate and I followed him down to the local bar (where else?). He spoke to the owner about rooms to rent and we were directed to a lovely, modern house just fifty feet away. It was not quite 4:00 p.m., siesta time, and the bell drew no response. But, Bruno was not to be deterred and he stopped a peasant woman who was pushing a wheelbarrow, to ask if she knew where ‘this lovely lady’—indicating me—could find a bed for the night. The universe was working again and, sure enough, the woman had three spare rooms in her own modest home and happily asked us to follow her. The room was spartan but definitely better than a cold night on the street. After bargaining and agreeing on eight euros for the night, I settled in. It was a treat to have a private room, a bathroom with no one lined up for a shower and a bottle of Nivea milk—my skin could use a little moisturizing after eleven dry days. This wasn’t the Sheraton but it was my idea of luxury. I was truly content.

After a leisurely freshening-up, I headed for the local bar where six other walkers, all friends by now, were sampling the local brew on an outdoor patio. Shortly after my arrival a group of us wandered down to the Restaurant Paloma, which promised a pilgrim’s menu for nine euros. The restaurant started serving the Pilgrim’s Menu around 7:30 and offered us fish, soup, bacalao, fries and melon with rosé wine and water. Usually the Spanish dined at 9 or 10 p.m. but restaurants offering a pilgrim’s menu often catered to our needs to eat early and be in bed by 10.

It was quite dark by 9:30 p.m. when, after a couple hours of rowdy conversation, we split up to return to our rooms. There was very minimal street lighting in the village and things looked quite different from earlier on. Where was that home I had arranged to spend the night? As I walked, I shone my trusty mini flashlight on house after house but nothing registered. There was no one in sight on the street so, after frantically tramping back and forth a few times I calmed myself, relaxed and turned the corner to find the beaded curtain I remembered across the doorway of my home for the night. Thank God for that! I spent a quiet night, alone, a pleasant break from the snorers, sniffers, and steady stream of trippers to the refuge bathroom. What more could I ask for for eight euros?

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Chapter 13: Collapse in Burgos

Atapuerca to Burgos 20 km.

Awaking on the twelfth day in Atapuerca, I realized that I was only 20 kilometres from Burgos, a bustling, prosperous city of 170,000; and 286 kilometres from my starting point in St. Jean. I had been warned that the walk through Burgos involved 7 kilometres of busy roadways and industrial areas before arriving at the refuge, but Marguerite, Denis and I planned to take the local bus and avoid all of this. After thirteen kilometres of walking over hill and dale to the outskirts of Burgos, we found a wonderful patio bar and, assuming that our day's walk was almost over, we leisurely indulged in Spanish coffees and bread slathered with butter and marmalade. However, we soon discovered that on Sundays buses were difficult to find on the outskirts of town. So, rather than wait around, we just kept walking, and walking, and walking.

It was tough walking across a major city, on asphalt, with the sun beating down and cars and trucks buzzing all about us as if racing against the clock. This was a rude return to the real world. I kept looking over my shoulder, thinking I would flag down a bus if it came into view, but to no avail. When we finally reached downtown there seemed no point in thinking of a bus anymore so, one step at a time, Marguerite, Denis and I trudged towards the refuge—ever watchful for the yellow Camino arrows on the sidewalks, poles, sides of buildings, and wherever else they were posted. Eventually we came to a beautifully shaded area along the river, which provided some relief from the hustle and bustle of the day. We found and crossed a bridge to the spacious park where our comfortable, clean, modern, and camp-like refuge was located and gratefully collapsed on our bunks.

Although we had only travelled twenty kilometres that day, it was by far the most tiring and difficult I had yet experienced so it was wonderful to have finally arrived at this oasis in the middle of a bustling city and discover its peace and tranquillity. We were a mere two kilometres from the centre of Burgos now and a twenty-minute walk or a quick bus ride would get us to the centre of this historic city with its towering Gothic cathedral dominating a central plaza.³

By this time, the blisters on my feet covered about seven of my toes and I had already lost one nail. I was concerned about foot infections. Staff at the refuge advised me to be cautious have my feet professionally cared for at the local hospital the following day, and stay an extra night to allow for some healing. Already feeling exhausted and dehydrated and with my emotions close to the surface, I broke into tears as I shared the news with Denis and Marguerite. I didn't want to stay

an extra day and lose my friends who were continuing on. Denis consoled me and said he would stay as well for his feet were causing him problems and had for almost the entire journey. This was the first time on the journey that I had felt both emotionally and physically distraught. I was surprised at the deep emotions I was carrying for my fellow walkers. It felt like a family divorcing.

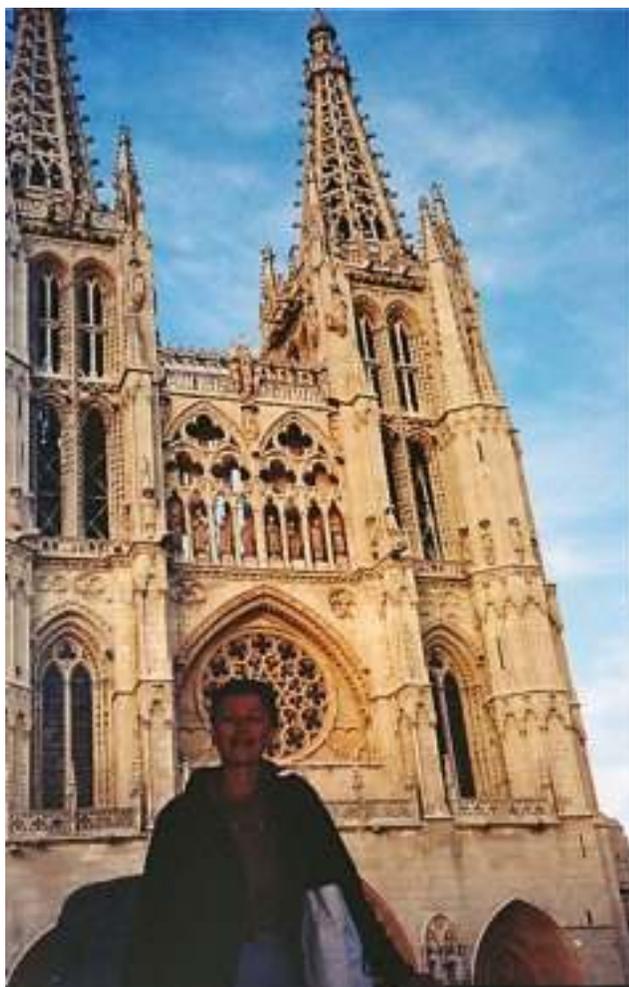
Time heals, and a good night's sleep—with the hundred others around—fortified me physically once again and my 'good' cry had cleansed me emotionally so by morning I had gradually accepted my plight and adjusted to my current situation. As Antonio, Eric, Maria and Marguerite, Mike and John said their goodbyes, our parting was tearful but we all took strength from our wish that we would meet again somewhere along the trail. I really felt that I was saying goodbye to family, the ties were so strong, yet we had only known each other a short time. We exchanged addresses just in case we didn't connect on the trail again.

If I counted my three days at the beginning of my trip and these two days in Burgos, I was enjoying the bright sunshine and pleasant temperatures for the eighteenth day in a row. Denis and I, ever conscious of our blistered feet, took the bus into Burgos the next morning and found a cosy coffee shop in the Plaza el Cid for what was now our mandatory Spanish coffee, then proceeded independently to explore the city. In spite of my damaged feet, I managed to walk for miles over cobbled streets, through and around the magnificent cathedral. I explored the castle and lookout that provided a wondrous view of the entire city and picked up some fruit, nuts, bread and snacks for those hungry moments to come. After several hours I met Denis for lunch in the shadow of the cathedral where we were approached several times by Eastern Europeans begging for money with such forlorn looks of helplessness. I gave the first time but was then informed that these beggars were part of organized gangs which made a small fortune from their pleadings and could be seen smiling merrily as they counted their booty.



Denis and I and another pilgrim in Burgos

The wonder and magnificence of the City of Burgos had somehow allowed me to forget about my blisters and my open sandals certainly did assist. A female doctor at the hospital removed all my makeshift bandages and gave me fresh, breathable coverings that would allow my blisters to dry out. Well-intentioned walkers had given me silicone bandages that had just made my blisters worse so I was glad to finally get some professional advice and felt reassured that now all would be well. Although I had not developed an infection, I was advised to return to a clinic in three days to have my bandages removed and my feet checked again. Although these instructions became clear and now seemed straightforward, there were some challenging moments conversing in Spanish with hospital staff. I am sure we both missed a few facts but the main thing was that I was now 'fixed up' and would be on the road again the following day. There had been no charge for my medical treatment (unless, of course, I had missed something and had walked away none the wiser).



Before dinner that day I found another internet café for my regular update to family and friends. I always felt stronger after receiving messages of support and encouragement from home and it was great to hear that my family and friends were finding my accounts inspiring and exciting. After sending my message, I managed to return to the refuge and frantically retrieve my washing from the line just ahead of a downpour—the first of the trip.

I dispatched about twelve emails along the entire Camino, averaging about one every three days, and enjoyed the time I spent connecting with home and reliving my adventures. About five refuges had provided internet-accessible computers while others I had found in cities and towns nearby. I reflected on how cut off pilgrims must have felt years ago without the benefit of modern technology and before the advent of the telephone. I was lucky to be living in the 21st Century.



That evening Denis and I scampered out between raindrops to a nearby restaurant with warm lighting and old stone walls. We were treated to a delicious vegetable stew, Castilian chicken, crème caramel and wine—all for six euros. I also enjoyed the delightful company of Matt and Grace, a brother and sister from Boston—two of the few Americans I had met walking the Camino. They talked of their disastrous first day when they had arrived jetlagged from America and had set out from St. Jean at 10:30 a.m. They had planned to walk just five kilometres to Huntto so left without food or water. When they realized they had missed the town they continued on and arrived in Roncesvalles around 10:30 p.m. to find the refuge closed. Fortunately, a nearby hostel had provided a room and they had collapsed for the night. Definitely a first day challenge they did not want to repeat for they had found groping in the woods at night searching for Camino arrows to lead the way had been a little scary. That night the heavens seemed to have opened up and the thunder and lightning were continuous.

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Chapter 14: Sinking in Mud

Burgos to Hontanas 30 km.

By morning it was still drizzling but we couldn't complain after eighteen days of clear skies and bright sunshine. Working hard to avoid the puddles in the dark—a challenging feat—Denis, Michele (from Germany) and I set off at seven that morning. The trail and roadways were quite flat as we walked through the tiny settlements of Villabilla, Tardajos and Rabe de las Calzadas and finally reached Hornillos del Camino and our morning's coffee bar. About six other walkers were already at the bar and wet clothes were draped everywhere. Conversation was lively as we discussed the anticipated challenges of the coming day. Denis was still suffering with his feet and urged us to move on without him as he kept a slower pace.

Feeling warm and fortified after about half an hour, Michelle and I set out again to cross the meseta in the pouring rain. We were pilgrims after all. No amount of inclement weather was going to slow our progress. In fact, the thought of more challenging conditions made me even more determined to move on. My feet were now feeling quite comfortable, which was a blessing. With the rain, there was no possibility that I could wear my sandals for the track was very sticky and I was diligently trying to find the patches of grass or stubble in the wheat fields to avoid the gluey mud. This was not to be; my boots became caked with mud and I was constantly trying to clean them off only to have them become muddy again. At some points I felt I was being sucked into the earth which was earnestly trying to slow my pace and hold me back. I was losing the battle and the rain kept coming down but the smile on my face never let up enjoying the challenge of it all.

Finally, in the distance to our left, we saw a white building with a domed roof topped with a bold, red cross. We had read that the Arroyo de San Bol refuge would be closed but we decided to drop by anyway to see if we could at least find a roof overhang to sit under and eat our lunch. This site had housed a leper colony in 1352 and the spring, which was still active, was renowned for its healing waters. As we approached, we saw what appeared to be someone standing in the window looking at us through binoculars and, sure enough, Warden Urdo Maria who had decided to stay a few more days greeted us. We went inside, removed our wet jackets, socks and boots, and downed a welcome cup of coffee and hearty bowl of soup. This was one of those small gestures that assume gargantuan proportions when you're cold, tired and hungry, and we gratefully accepted this temporary respite from the weather.

Michele and I considered staying overnight briefly but as we talked the subject of Victorino came up. Urdo confessed that he was not such a bad character al-

though he could be a little too friendly at times. Victorino had been mentioned in many guidebooks as someone solo female travellers should be wary of because he had been formally charged in the past for being over friendly in some situations. Urdo was expecting a wine delivery from Victorino shortly so Michele and I decided we would not stay for the party. After two hours the rain had stopped so we were on our way again, strengthened and warmed by the stopover. We plodded on across flat fields and through the unending mud to this days final destination, Hontanas.

The refuge at Hontanas was built of stone and pine and was pleasant, welcoming, spacious and modern. For six euros we were served a dinner of lentil soup, salad, a plateful of chicken; a yoghurt dessert; and wine. This was one of those days when I was happy to collapse indoors after working at extracting the mud from my boots and drying my clothes. I had survived 30 kilometres of mud and felt pretty pleased with myself that I had met the challenge. The cosy central dining room became our evening gathering place where we chatted with a group of six Swiss students and their religion teacher and were joined by Michael from England who had just started walking and was full of vim and vigour. That night the refuge looked like a Chinese laundry with clothing draped everywhere: from the rafters, beds and windows. But, our purpose was served and by morning all our belongings were dried out, de-mudded and ready for travel again. My second week on the Camino had ended and I was still intact, smiling and eager to move on.

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Chapter 15: Oasis of Luxury

Hontanas to Boadilla del Camino 30 km.

Day fifteen found Michele and I walking from Hontanas to Boadilla del Camino, another 30 kilometres. Denis was still having foot problems and was a good day behind us but had persuaded us to continue to move on. The skies had cleared and walking was easy but two days in a row of walking 30 kilometres were starting to take their toll. Tendonitis was developing in my right shin—there was some swelling and the area was painful to the touch and protested when I put all my weight on my right foot. Time to slow down!

It sometimes seems that life can't be perfect and there always has to be some sort of adversity. I had 'beaten' the blister challenge and now was presented with another. However, in the morning's half-light, in the middle of the trail, I was surprised to see a rabbit and this appearance of my mascot assured me that my partner Adrian was somehow watching and protecting me and that this latest difficulty would resolve itself.

As I walked on, the ruins of the convent of San Anton loomed across the road ahead. Inside was a small refuge, which was very quaint, yet had the modern conveniences of a shower and flush toilet. This was the most modern ruin I had ever visited. Apparently the monks here had specialized in caring for pilgrims suffering from 'San Anthony's Fire', a gangrenous condition. The arch had been built in the 14th Century and the building had been in use from 1146 to 1791. The new refuge within the ruin, accommodating only twelve, had only been opened in 2002 so history was repeating itself as the caring for pilgrims had begun anew.

Convent of
St. Anton



Our first stop was for coffee and a tortilla in the bar in Castrojeriz, a welcome sight. This was originally a Roman town, believed to have been founded by Julius Caesar. It was built in tiers around a hill and mainly visited by pilgrims today. I met and chatted with other walkers including a woman in her sixties from Quebec who had paused for several days to heal an injury. I was acutely aware of the possibility of debilitating injury for pilgrims walking such distances day after day, and this kept me mindful of my own state of health and well-being. The penalty for not paying attention was too large to contemplate. It was useful to receive these reminders by seeing myself mirrored in others. Beyond Castrojeriz we climbed up a fairly steep, muddy slope that required continual dancing from side to side trying to locate the driest and safest areas to walk. The rain had stopped but Michele, Michael and I were relieved to reach the top and stop for a snack and rest while gazing at the town below and the rolling hills through which we had just walked.

30 km made for a very long day once again and it was made longer as we walked from on end of this small town and back trying to locate the private refuge we had heard about. We were finally rewarded as the private refuge at Boadilla del Camino was the most comfortable and luxurious I had experienced so far. Michele and I walked through an archway into a pleasant, grassy, central courtyard with rose bushes, garden benches, statuary and a beautiful ranch bungalow that was very much like I pictured paradise -a comfortable home, complete with friendly, resident dog. The huge, cherry-coloured living room greeted us as we stepped through the front door. It was furnished with earth tone ceramic floors, a fireplace, comfortable sofas, chairs, round tables with lace tablecloths, and beautiful wall pictures. Was this real for only the equivalent of five dollars a night as well?

The three rooms offered over forty bunks with modern bathrooms and hot showers. Across the garden, and part of the refuge itself, a café restaurant and outdoor patio served food and drinks continuously. What a treat! If I had to slow down somewhere, this would be the place I'd choose. In the oversized dining room with about twenty other diners, Michele and I were served a dinner of green beans, salad, trout, rosé wine and ice cream. I spent the rest of the evening browsing books, sprawled across the sofa in front of the fireplace.

Needless to say, Michele and I were not in a hurry to leave the next morning but enjoyed a leisurely breakfast of toast and marmalade, orange juice and a large coffee before finally departing at around nine-thirty. We were slowing down just a bit and enjoying it.

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Chapter 16: Tendonitis Strikes, Baring All

Boadilla del Camino to Carrion de los Condes 26 km.

Carrion de los Condes to Calzadilla de la Cuerdo 17 km.



Michele posing by the 17th century locks

As Michele and I walked towards Fromista we enjoyed a dry day once again. We toured the well-known, perfectly designed Romanesque church in the town after taking pictures of the beautifully preserved 17th Century locks, a part of the 200 plus kilometre-long Castilla Navigation System. In this area, the Camino was quite flat, offering no physical challenges. We enjoyed a pleasant stroll along the banks of the rivers and through the towns of Poblacion de Campos and Villacazar. I intended to stay the night in Villacazar but we arrived so early we found that the refuge would not be open until 4:00 p.m. We relaxed on some park benches and I stretched out in the sand of a children's playground to rest my weary bones. Energized by the rest and after some discussion with Michele, we decided to press on for the extra five kilometres to Carrion de los Condes. This would mean we would have walked a 26-kilometre day. I still felt the tendonitis in my right leg but was determined to ignore it and move on.

At one time, Carrion de los Condes was a town of 12,000 people but now supported a population of only 2800. It is reputedly the place where the Moorish overlords required Christians to surrender one hundred virgins a year (which



may account for the drastic drop in population!) I am lucky I didn't have to live in those days. By the end of the day, my right foot and ankle were visibly swollen and it had become painful to lift and place my right foot ahead of me. I definitely needed to reduce my daily mileage. "Slow and easy wins the day", as the saying goes.

After a foray to the supermarket, Michele and I made our dinner in the refuge kitchen. We felt too weary to do much more so we treated ourselves to a camomile tea at a local bar to ensure we would sleep soundly that night. We really didn't need the help. On our way back to the refuge we dropped into the Church of Santa Maria, adjacent to the refuge, to listen to the choir practicing, and enjoyed the peace of listening to the strong and angelic voices resonating through the church. I slept soundly as soon as my head hit the pillow even though all the refuge lights were still on and there were still lots of conversation and movement.

Carrion de los Condes to Calzadilla de la Cuerza...

After a quick breakfast, Michele and I were off the next morning at eight, ready for the 17-kilometre walk across the flat plains to Calzadilla de la Cuerza. I had decided on a short walk for the day to give my legs a rest and as I walked I admired the beautiful, pink-tinged clouds as the sun came up. I also concentrated solely on putting one foot in front of the other until our arrival at 12:30. The town was small and sleepy and the bar/restaurant/hostel seemed to be the focus of activity. The bright, spacious refuge was both modern and comfortable and there were only twenty-eight bunks in one room—almost intimate—with lots of windows and sunshine streaming through.

I decided to take a hot shower while I could be sure to get hot water and had just enough room to stand and let the hot water flow over me. This was a communal bathroom for both sexes so I was fortunate to be alone and able to dash out and grab my clothes without being caught for indecent exposure. When I dropped by later, the bathroom was crowded and I was quite amused to watch a man backing out, baring his buttocks and trying to appear somewhat polite. He was unsuccessful! The fact was, though, that people were so busy tending to their own needs they were unconcerned about who was showing what.

We headed for the bar for our usual coffee and the added treat of an ice cream. I was developing a particular liking for Spanish ice cream and almost every bar offered a wide selection of ice cream sandwiches and ice cream bars of all kinds. Our early start and stop made for a long day and dinner was not until eight o'clock that evening, but I needed the rest. I had to be satisfied with lazing in the sunshine; touring the small town; and regrouping my energies. In the evening a



group of us shared a large table in the restaurant and created a great hubbub as we shared stories, challenges and the excitement of our odyssey. By ten o'clock I was ready for bed so I walked back to the refuge alone, in the dark, hoping that I wouldn't be spirited away by ghosts and goblins during the five-minute walk. So far, I had not experienced any fear of walking alone as the route felt protected and safe—a special gift.



Our group dinner

For the first time I had selected a bottom bunk, thinking it would be easier to get out of it in the night. But, what a surprise in the morning! I was greeted to the view of men prancing around in their underwear and I didn't know which way to look. It seemed more appropriate to just close my eyes until the parade had passed and concentrate on getting dressed myself with a very large smirk on my face.

Daylight was beginning to arrive later and later and early mornings were increasingly darker for longer periods. I now tended to leave after 8:00 a.m. so I could enjoy more daylight walking hours. I did, however, still try to reach my daily destination by 3:00 p.m. so my laundry would have time to dry and I would have an opportunity to sightsee around whatever town or village I had chosen for the night. The danger I faced was that the later I started, the later I would arrive and I was definitely taking a risk that the hot showers would have turned cold with so many others ahead of me. In addition, my tendonitis was causing me to move a little slower, so I had a few issues to consider each day. After 475 km of walking I was really much more aware now of the physical strain on my body but my optimism kept me buoyant and moving constantly forward.



Chapter 17: Regrouping

Carrion de los Condes to Sahagun (23 km) and train to Leon (50 km)

I set off from Calzadilla at 8:30 for the 23-kilometre trek to Sahagun. The walk was quite uneventful as I slogged across flat meseta country, through a few poor villages, and arrived at 2:30 p.m. The approach to Sahagun was a little disappointing. It was a town of 2700 inhabitants and the buildings were square, modern and uninteresting. At one time the town had been the seat of the largest and most powerful Benedictine monastery in Spain but the huge arch, gateway and belfry were all that was left of the monastery.

I was happy to reach the well-equipped, municipal refuge in the upper levels of Trinity Church in the town centre. What a treat to again enjoy hot showers; bunk bed accommodations offering greater privacy; and two internet-accessible computers which were free of charge. This was also a special day for I reunited with Marguerite who I had last seen four days earlier when she had left Burgos ahead of me. She had been in Sahagun for three days suffering from serious hip pain—after having walked several 40-kilometre days. She admitted to making the mistake of trying to keep up with others and ignoring the messages her body was sending her. She was frustrated that she had had to learn the hard way.

It is very important to walk your own walk on the Camino and this is often a topic of conversation among walkers. As in life, there is a need to blaze my own trail regardless of what others are doing—to set my own pace and timetable. Forcing yourself to hurry along and keep up with others or hanging back when your own pace is much faster, always seemed to lead to problems. The fact is though, I formed friendships that were hard to leave behind. I think we all learned that if we honoured our own bodies, we could always join up with others and find new experiences to share that would make our walk even richer. This lesson was constantly being learned along the Camino but many of us had to learn it through personal experience—the hard way.

I realized I had to be watchful of my own leg pain. With Marguerite's injury and my own tendonitis deteriorating we both decided to take the train the next day - day 19 - for the 50-kilometre trip to Leon. We felt there was a real risk of having to abort our walk if we continued to push ourselves with our current injuries. Peter from Yorkshire accompanied us. He only had ten more days to get to Santiago and felt that it would be impossible to walk the distance in such a short time. So he helped us with our bags as we hobbled to the train for the nine o'clock high-speed trip.



The Talgo train was roomy, spacious and modern. With our snacks in hand, we wished the thirty-minute trip had been longer. For much of the way the train paralleled the Camino, which was lined with trees and stood out clearly as it crossed the flat meseta. We certainly did not miss much for the scenery was quite barren and flat. After coffee and a croissant in the station at Leon, I flagged down a taxi and we were driven to the Santa Maria Convent refuge. The refuge was warm and inviting even though the bunks were packed close together.

The convent was situated in an excellent central location in the old city. The main square and awesome 13th Century Gothic cathedral were only ten minutes on foot down a maze of car-free, cobbled streets lined with small shops and restaurants. Leon's imposing cathedral sported two hundred magnificent, stained glass windows, which covered 130,000 square feet. It would be easy to get a stiff neck from looking up and trying to take them all in as the sun filtered through the coloured glass and created a warm, glowing atmosphere inside the sanctuary.

In spite of my tendonitis I felt compelled to explore and wandered the network of narrow laneways to browse the quaint shops and get my bearings. It was Sunday—another beautiful, sunny day with temperatures hovering at a perfect twenty degrees—and the locals were out in all their finery eating, drinking and taking in numerous organized activities. I wandered through a crowded pottery market-place in the shadow of the cathedral; a flower show in a palace; and a medieval market in one of the many plazas flying coloured flags where vendors were dressed in period costumes. The delicious smell of food cooking was everywhere and delighted the senses. There were sales booths offering homemade leatherwork, jewellery, weaving and woodwork, and others providing tarot card and psychic readings.



The Leon Market was bursting with colour and activity



Leon was literally bursting at the seams with activity and the crowds flowed through the streets—people chatting excitedly and obviously enjoying it all. Except for the bustling activity of Burgos, northern Spain had given me the impression that it consisted of sleepy villages with scarcely a soul in sight. It was exciting to see so much hustle and bustle, laughter and levity, in Leon. Marguerite and I attended the six o'clock mass in the cathedral and later an organ concert by a well-known Portuguese organist. The classical sounds of his touch reverberated through the building creating a magical feeling. We finished the evening in a more mundane way by indulging in a local coffee and croissant in the square then headed back through winding streets, to the monastery and a welcome sleep in a comfortable bed.

A free breakfast of coffee, bread, Danish, cheese and nectarines was served the next morning in the convent to start the day off right. A rule exists that a pilgrim can only stay one night in a refuge unless there are special circumstances. If Marguerite and I were going to stay for several days it was important to find other accommodation and we felt it was important to find a brighter, more comfortable location. I managed to arrange a place for the following two nights in the Pension Sandoval, just down the street, for just twelve euros. The Pension was friendly, clean and bright and our room had a small balcony overlooking the Plaza San Francisco. The floors were of pine and we were provided with real towels and sheets and two full bathrooms. We were ready for a little luxury after 464 kilometres on the road. We deserved it and by this time we were looking forward to the prospects of not having to unroll our sleeping bags; having only two beds in our room; and enjoying a little more privacy.

Later, Marguerite arranged for a taxi and we both headed off to the hospital to seek some medical attention—mainly anti-inflammatories for our stressed muscles. We were treated right away by a doctor who spoke English (fortunately); received free service and medications; and were sent on our way feeling a little more confident that after a few more days of rest we both would be off again. After a relaxing day we ate the traditional six euro pilgrim's meal at a local bar and did a little more sightseeing. Leon has a wealth of historical buildings to explore so it was difficult to sit still in one place for long. Besides, I felt that I was healing merely by not having to walk with a 15-pound pack on my back.

On our third day in Leon I slept in until 9 a.m.—a luxury I hadn't indulged in for twenty-one days. I ate an unhurried breakfast at the pension before heading out for another day of exploration. My first stop was the 12th Century Basilica de San Isidoro with its 11th Century Pantheon. Built into the Roman walls that encircle Leon, this is one of the oldest Romanesque buildings in the city. The vivid 12th Century wall and ceiling frescoes depicting the story of Jesus looked like they were recently done and seemed to come alive. I then returned to continue my earlier tour around Leon Cathedral, as it had been impossible to take in all of its grand magnificence in one visit.





Leon Cathedral with pilgrims on horseback

After examining my boot that afternoon, I discovered a crack right across the sole and I was concerned about what that might mean. Someone suggested I might have to buy new boots but this seemed illogical and impossible at this stage. New boots take a long time to wear in. As luck would have it once again, the owner of the pension referred me to an excellent shoe repair shop where I was assured my boot could easily be fixed—and so it was in a matter of hours by melting and re-welding the sole. I was being looked after once again.

That night, Denis, Marguerite and her friend Katrine and I reunited and headed for La Bocal restaurant where we had a delicious feast of salad, trout and crème caramel. Even though we did have to walk back to the pension in the rain afterwards, we conceded that both the dinner and the outing had been excellent. That same evening, a French woman had told me she felt sad because she couldn't express what she felt towards me (although her eyes said it all). This was one of the challenges I found of not knowing a language well enough to be able to relate beyond a very basic level. We couldn't really express feelings and thoughts and had to rely on gestures and expressive looks. What a gift to be multilingual! I think

that is why I really envied the Swiss who seemed to have four languages at their command.

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Chapter 18: Alone Again

Leon to Hospital de Orbigo 35 km.

After nearly four days in Leon I was starting to feel restless and wanted to move on. Although my leg was still tender, the swelling had subsided. I felt sad at the thought of leaving Marguerite behind as she was obviously not ready to travel, but I had to ‘walk my own walk’. Conveniently, Marguerite’s friend, Katrine, had arrived for a couple days so I decided to be off and Katrine took over my bed in the pension. I walked through Leon, trusty map in hand, making my way to the train station and, after just fifteen minutes waiting, took a thirty-five kilometre bus ride across Leon to the town of Hospital de Orbigo. I was on the road once again, feeling renewed and re-energized. I had prayed that my tendonitis would not abort my walk and had silently asked what I needed to do to ensure that this didn’t happen. The answer was to slow my pace to no more than twenty kilometres a day and continue a leisurely, enjoyable walk staying very present to each moment. At this point, I didn’t feel that this advice would be difficult to follow.

Disembarking from the bus on the main road in the early afternoon, I wandered through the sleepy town of Hospital de Orbigo looking for some signs of life. I soon picked up the trail of yellow arrows which directed me to the refuge. This was an historic parish house, renovated several years earlier by a German group, and now in need of a little maintenance. It was an old building but it was clean and quite adequate. I wandered through the main door into a central courtyard with bold wall paintings and an attractive garden, and was greeted by a very pleasant English couple who had volunteered as wardens for a two week period. They recommended the Los Angeles Restaurant for dinner and mentioned that the bar next door was great for either a drink and quick snack or a more expensive dinner. I decided to claim my bunk first, in one of the many small rooms, then I laid out my sleeping bag and pillow, as was my daily habit on arrival. It looked like I would have nine roommates that night.

I ventured out along the main street and headed for the twenty-arched, Roman bridge called the Paso Honroso or Puente de Orbigo. The bridge was 204 metres long and one of the oldest in Spain. Water flows under only a few arches now but the bridge itself was impressive with its cobbled pathway, and looked sturdy enough to stand there forever. It was a bright, sunny day, but cool, so I sought shelter on a bench tucked in beside a historic church along the river a short distance from the bridge and dug into my snack of dried fruit and nuts. There was scarcely a person in sight as I marvelled at the idyllic pastoral scene around me—the lazy, shallow river; the old town over the other side; and the odd walker or cyclist moving along the bridge.





Puente de Orbigo - 20 arched Roman bridge

I was alone on the road again trusting that life would continue to carry me along if I just paid close attention to the messages that my body was continually giving. I reflected on what a powerful guide the physical body is and yet how easy it is to ignore the signs until serious problems occur. The ever active mind seems to continually take the upper hand and the will takes over. Here away from the bustle of everyday life my clarity was heightened and I could see the challenge I faced. I am so often quick to set goals and focus on them until they're achieved but so often not paying attention to my own health and wellbeing. I realized that goals are necessary to move forward and yet once made, I need to focus on the present and see the opportunities in each moment.

From my sheltered viewpoint I could see that the storks had made a home in three high points of the church behind me and had created intricately designed nests. In fact, storks' nests on the top of church steeples were a common sight on the Camino.

Back to more practical issues - I found my way to the Fonda Alicia and indulged in a café con leche, which was very welcome on this particularly cool day. To keep warmer still I walked back to the refuge to sit around a gas heater and share hot tea and biscuits with the wardens who, after all, were British! I chatted with the other walkers who were filing in continually as the afternoon progressed and soon decided that the evening would be a lot cosier if we headed for a warm restaurant for dinner after having a glass of wine in the bar next door. I took the warden's advice and at the Los Angeles Restaurant soon warmed up with a dinner of soup, grilled trout, flan and rose wine and a shared conversation with Jean and Chantal, two professors of French and German from France. They were reluctant to practice their English and I was a little coy with my high school French but, in the end, we loosened up and had a really pleasant conversation, mistakes and all.



In spite of the cool night air, the room in the refuge with nine others was warm and we were so tired that the German snorers were soon ignored. This was the first night that I had slept in tights and a fleece and I wondered if the temperature had gone down permanently and this might become the norm for the coming days. A couple of trips to the toilet in the night were challenging because I had to go outside and across the cold stone courtyard. It was chilly, though no real hardship to the adventurer I had become.

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Chapter 19: Roman Ruins

Hospital de Orbigo to Astorga 17 km

The next morning I was eagerly up at 7:30; had breakfast in the refuge for an extra 1.30 euros; and by eight was off trailing others in the early morning half-light for the seventeen-kilometre trip to Astorga. I enjoyed walking most of the day alone along clearly marked paths, hillside tracks and trails, and through wide, open fields. I could see the familiar blue haze around the mountains in the distance. I thoroughly enjoyed the energy of nature, which felt comforting and safe and peaceful. Initially it was quite chilly and I wore a silk underwear top under a long sleeved blouse, my fleece and windproof shell, a bandana to keep my ears warm and light leather gloves to keep the chill from my hands. I felt satisfied that I had prepared so well for this trip and had never felt I had forgotten anything.

I arrived in Astorga at one o'clock to find that the Plaza Marqueses refuge wouldn't be open until three so I headed for a local bar. I chatted a while with Harold, an Austrian who was suffering with tendonitis and contemplating aborting his walk- another reminder that the same could happen to me if I pushed it. Then I spent another thirty minutes sending my seventh email message to friends and family at a conveniently located internet café only a few doors away from the bar.

Once the refuge opened I found my bunk, among the one hundred and sixty available, and reconnected with Denis from Bordeaux; Alejandro and Martha from Colombia; Conche and Carlos from San Sebastian, Spain; and Robert from a mountaintop home near Tucson, Arizona. Moments of reconnection after losing other walkers for a few days were always special and felt like a family reunion as we all reported our adventures. After a rest, shower and some laundry I toured the town on my own, first stopping at a local tourist information centre for a map and overview of the local sights.

Astorga is a small but very attractive city of 14,000 inhabitants. Extensive Roman remains include large sections of Roman walls and a 15th to 17th Century cathedral with a beautifully carved portico. The many old Roman walls were fascinating to see as were the Roman ruins right in the centre of the town in the Plaza Major area. A glass roof protected the ruins and from a walkway through its centre I could gaze down on the impressive tiled floors and the layout of the original buildings while dreaming of what life must have been like when this was newly built. I have always enjoyed a fascination with ancient cultures and the Romans in particular with their awesome architecture and craftsmanship. I toured the Pilgrim Museum of the Palacio Episcopal, or the Gaudi Building as it was called.



It looked a bit like a Disney castle with all its turrets and very Gothic façade and I started to feel a bit of a tourist for the first time.



The Gaudi Building in Astorga

The temperature was 15 degrees but I felt chilly so I slipped into the Bar Jamaica for soup, bread and some rosé wine both to warm myself up and to take in the local flavour. This was definitely not a tour bus hangout—there were few tourists about. I loved the opportunity to people watch as I observed locals chatting happily and enjoying a break in the day to catch up. No one seemed in a hurry and those dropping by seemed to know the owner like it was their home away from home. I was an outsider yet on another level I felt one of them. After 23 days walking through the countryside the friendly people and landscape were feeling very familiar.

After some shopping for lunch and snacks for the following day, I returned to the refuge, applied some anti inflammatory cream to my feet which were still aggravated by my tendonitis, and called it a night. I was very conscious of my limitations and realized that if I wanted to walk the rest of the way I had to stop when the pain became too severe. Lying in my bed beside a large expanse of west-facing windows and watching the sun set and the new moon rise, I thought: “what a great day!” The view was all the more appealing for we had removed all our socks and underwear from the lines that had been strung along the windows earlier in the day.

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Chapter 20: Tearful Stop

Astorga to Rabinal del Camino 22 km.

I left Astorga the next morning in the dark, thinking I would follow a couple that looked like they knew the way. They didn't and I ended up directing them to the arrows pointing out of town then boldly marched ahead of them. It was eight o'clock, a time that seemed perfectly safe to be about, but there was scarcely a soul around and, for the first time, I felt a little unnerved. Just then, a cyclist passed by and I asked in Spanish if I was still on the Camino and was assured that I was so I just kept walking. A good twenty minutes through a residential area got me to the edge of town but all was still so quiet. Just as I was beginning to feel unsure again, another cyclist passed by and assured me that I was still on the right track. I was just beginning to recognize the daily rhythm of northern Spain—in general, people take afternoon siestas; dine after 9:30 in the evening and are late morning risers. Although the homes seemed dark and almost uninhabited, at least there were two cyclists to provide reassurance. The Universe was supporting me yet again and I fearlessly walked ahead.

I was now heading towards the mountains after 10 days on the flatlands of the meseta—a welcome relief. It was beautiful open countryside now with mountains and forested hills in the distance. I basked in the sun, which shone brilliantly and brought everything to life with greater vitality. I felt so very fortunate to have been provided with so many days of invigorating walking weather. The increasingly steep slopes were aggravating my tendonitis though and my right leg above my ankle was so painful that I had to stop. Here I was all alone surrounded by what I was told was the most beautiful part of the Camino and I wondered if I'd be able to go on. I just sank to the ground feeling dejected and broke into tears. Would I be able to complete the remaining 240 kilometres or was this the end of my journey on the Camino? I had walked only 10 kilometres in the first two and a half hours of the day and felt I could go no further. I couldn't stay here though and literally hobbled to the small village of Santa Catalina de Somoza to nurse my wounds. Sad and red faced I drank my welcome cafe con leche in the Bar Peregrino feeling totally sorry for myself.

Then as if out of nowhere Annie, another walker, appeared, saw my dejection and asked what was wrong. She held my hand saying she would walk slowly with me and was sure I could make it the remaining ten kilometres to Rabanal del Camino. Amazing what the power of intention will do. We talked the entire way, our conversation allowing me to deflect my thoughts and almost forget my pain. We stopped for regular food breaks, didn't force the pace, but ambled quite



peacefully. Along the way we met 58-year-old Tony and 56-year-old Nancy from Wisconsin who were sleeping in small hotels and were enjoying the Camino in a little more luxury. After a pleasant chat as we walked along, we arrived in Rabanal at 2:30 p.m. and waited for the refuge to open at three. To keep warm while waiting, we huddled beside Denis and some other walkers who had arrived before us.



Annie walking to Rabanal del Camino

Rabanal del Camino lies 1149 metres above sea level and is a small stone village with only about twenty-eight inhabitants. There was no supply shop open this late in the year in the village. The Refugio Gaucelmo where we stayed, next to the Romanesque church of Santa Maria, was formerly the home of the parish priest and was later converted to a refuge in 1991 by the Confraternity of St. James. It was a very pleasant L-shaped maragata house with full facilities, a fully equipped kitchen, generous hot showers, salon, library and fireplace, and a patio, garden and barn outside. We crowded around the fireplace reading and writing our journals, as it was still quite cool inside. I ate dinner with Doris, Lise and Tony in one of the two local restaurants. Doris and Lise were from Switzerland and were doing the Camino over a six-year period, one week at a time. Tony was from Wisconsin and was dining alone because his wife had caught a cold and was nursing it so it wouldn't become worse. The challenge of the daily walk is enough without the extra burden of feeling ill.

The rain had started as evening fell and this seemed the best place to dry out and stay cosy and warm. When I finally returned from dinner after ten o'clock, Annie



had generously left a dish of stewed pears on my bunk—which she had prepared that evening from fallen pears on the refuge property. Mmmm... What a thoughtful gesture! This was a nurturing and very soothing treat before bed. Toast and jam, coffee and hot chocolate were provided by our English hosts the next morning and Annie and I were on our way again at eight with the sun rising and both of us feeling fully revitalized.

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Chapter 21: A Pleasant Respite

Rabinal del Camino to Riego de Ambros 21 km

Already at 1495 metres above sea level as we made our way through the former ghost town of Foncebadon, the track continued to rise steadily. The town felt haunted and many of the stone buildings were in ruins. However, a new restaurant/hotel had been built and offered comfortable surroundings and a welcoming air. The owner was interested in knowing where we had come from and encouraged us to sign his guest book. Guest books were common at refuges, bars and restaurants and made for interesting reading. I saw the names of travellers from around the world and comments on their experiences. These included familiar names of those who had walked ahead of me at a faster pace and provided another point of reconnection that made me feel even more a part of a large confraternity of humanity all headed for Santiago, with similar goals, ambitions and intent. Foncebadon was also a town that I had been warned was inhabited by wild dogs. In fact at no point in the walk had I experienced any difficulty or even anxiety about dogs or any other animal for that matter. I definitely heard a lot of barking by dogs tied up in yards but that was all.



Eve and Annie at the Cruz de Ferro

Despite a few low, damp clouds in the early morning hours, the sun broke through and I was embraced by a light breeze gently steering me upwards to-



wards the next stop, Cruz de Ferro, at 1504 metres—a famous landmark on the Camino originally built to help pilgrims find their way across the mountains. Following the tradition, I had brought a stone from my home in Toronto, Canada, to add to the huge cairn below the cross, which is said to rise three storeys high. I had paid special attention to the selection of my stone before leaving home and had opted to take it from the shores of Lake Ontario, a twenty-minute walk from my home. It had been kissed by the lake and retained a water washed smoothness. I threw it over my shoulder and left it where it fell to mark my presence, as many others had before me, then continued on through the mountains to Manjarin, a high, desolate spot. Here Thomas cared for pilgrims in his private refuge, and was known to be eccentric in interesting ways.

Annie and I ate our lunch on a high, open, grassy area on the mountain and marvelled at the beauty around us. My tendonitis was easing fortunately since I had slowed my pace. Slowing down was not difficult to do at this point for I wanted to just gaze at the beauty, absorb the sights around me and make them last forever. I was proud of myself for finally paying attention to those very clear body messages that warned me to slow down. It had always been difficult to do this but out in the wide open spaces life seemed clearer. Now if I could just take this home with me and get in touch with feelings and warning signs rather than allowing myself to be so distracted by the busyness of diversions that life offers.

El Acebo was our next destination, a very small town with balconies overhanging the road and a central gutter in the road through which cows wandered freely and water drained. The bar in El Acebo was packed and ringing with the sounds of conversation from walkers and locals alike. We paused here for yet another coffee and freshly squeezed orange juice while many locals seemed to be enjoying a large midday meal amid constant conversation.



El Acebo



From Cruz de Ferro the route began to descend again and we decided to stay in the small village of Riego de Ambros that night. This was not a major stop along the route but I had covered 21 kilometres already and didn't want to push it further. Moreover, I had read about a small, private refuge that catered to a maximum of twenty walkers and was delighted to find it. It was a bright, modern and homey structure with garden and patio, small living room area and bunks in rooms for two or four. It also had modern bathrooms and a fully equipped kitchen with microwave and toaster. Only three other walkers were booked for the night. Lise and Doris, two Swiss walkers, were there and they knew the owners from their walk the year before so thanks to them, we were treated to a few extras.

After settling in, cleaning up and having a pleasant chat in the sunshine in the refuge garden, we all headed for the local restaurant and treated ourselves to ice creams while lounging outside on the patio. The sun was slowly setting as we passed the time in casual conversation, watched the three resident kittens cavorting, and just soaked up the sun's fading rays. It was another one of those magical times that evoked a warm feeling of thankfulness within me with peaceful surroundings, pleasant animated conversation and church bells softly chiming just below us.

At about seven we were lead into the dining room, just in time for the pilgrim's menu. The owners shared our meal and treated us to a local herbal liqueur, which had to be gulped down quickly. In the after-dinner darkness, flashlights in hand, we returned to our refuge unsure of the way since many of these small towns had no street lighting. Walking arm in arm for support we finally did arrive safely after several wrong turns and among bouts of laughter at our misses.

That night we slept soundly and didn't waken til 8:30 a.m. I'm sure the wine and liqueurs helped a great deal. Sleeping in was unheard of in the larger refuges for there would be activity from 6:30 as the early starters packed and zipped up. As I was dressing that morning a piercing scream echoed through the house and I rushed to see what was going on as it sounded as if someone was being murdered. I chuckled when I discovered that Doris had lifted her backpack cover to find a giant frog comfortably lounging in the darkness behind it. Her scream had startled the frog and it had hopped away but was now trapped in the corner, not sure of which way to go with five sets of eyes observing it in the half-light. No harm was done but you can imagine that the frog was as scared as we were.

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Chapter 22: Stuffed Stomach Anyone?

Riego de Ambros to Cacabelos 22 km.

It was now Sunday, October 13th, twenty-six days from the start of my walk, and Annie and I were off again at the unusually late hour of ten after a filling breakfast of coffee, toast, marmalade, butter and a chocolate donut generously provided by the refuge owners. I felt well fortified and ready for the day ahead. After a brief hike through the village, trail markers directed us to a rocky cut through the hills where we jumped from one big stone to another to get to the bottom. The path then became a winding track through the forest, passing through the mountains until we emerged under sunny skies once again. We strolled through the town of Molinaseca, a very beautiful village at 595 metres. We admired its quaint shops and homes lining the main street and its balconies extending over the narrow roadway. Our morning break was in an attractive bar by the river where I observed a woman with a Canadian flag rushing through. I was to meet her later at another coffee shop and discover that she and her husband were from Calgary.

The next major town was Ponferrada, a community of 50,000 inhabitants with a well-known Knights Templar Castle described as being the size of ten football fields. Like most large cities, Ponferrada had a newer industrial area which wasn't overly attractive and walking through this area became a little tedious until we came to its older, unspoilt and picturesque section. We had made a late start that day and were eager to press on so we stopped only for some cash from a bank machine. I was pleased that I was no longer feeling the pain of my tendonitis but was intent on maintaining my pace at about twenty kilometres a day to ensure I stayed pain free. The trip out of Ponferrada was equally dreary as we strode past slag heaps and an extensive residential area. Somehow walking seemed so much easier and less tiring when we were out on the open trails with lots of greenery and fresh air around.

At the end of the nine kilometres from Ponferrada to Camponaraya where my guidebook said there was a refuge in the Church of San Idelfonso, we were told that there was no village accommodation. We had completed twenty-two kilometres so far that day and I was exhausted and conscious of needing to care for my feet. So, Annie and I took our first and only taxi the seven kilometres to Cacabelos. Located in the heart of the fruit and wine growing region of El Bierzo, this historic village offered a new, motel-style refuge built around an old church. Luxury, once again, came in the form of regular single beds—only two to a room—modern showers and bathroom facilities. I wasn't averse to a little luxury at this point as I didn't feel a need to play the martyr and do things just like the early



pilgrims of the 10th century. I am a camper so I'm used to 'roughing it' but I did enjoy this opportunity for greater privacy.

Annie was exhausted so retired to bed but I felt renewed after a refreshing shower and hooked up with Lise and Doris again for dinner at one of the recommended local restaurants. They adventurously ordered Bodilla Medieval, offered as local fare. The dish looked to me like someone's stomach stuffed with a reddish-tinged meat with all kinds of gristle and bone, and a number of other body parts in disguise. I tasted just a little to say I had tried it but opted for the safer chocolate crepes and veal chops with salad and wine. In this instance I preferred the known to the mysterious.

When we emerged from dinner at about ten, it was raining steadily so we were glad to return to the dry safety and warmth of our motel-type room. The phone nearby was begging for someone to use it so I took the opportunity and called my partner, Adrian, in Canada, to update him on my latest adventures. Public phones aren't available in great profusion and sometimes it took some effort to find one. I had been told that mobile phones were the norm and proliferated in Spain but I was pleased that I had not invested in one because Spanish phone cards offered a better bargain allowing me to make a two-hour call anywhere in the world for nine Canadian dollars. At times there were difficulties with the cards because some did not work in all public phones. The Telefonica cards (the official Spanish phone company card) were the most reliable although they were more expensive than other private company cards. Next time I will make sure I purchase only very well known cards.

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Chapter 23: Picturesque Mountain Village

Cacabelos to Villafranca del Bierzo 7 km.

On day 27 the overnight rain ended and the skies cleared bringing perfect weather for the day's walk. Annie, Lise, Doris and I walked to the local bar for our 'start-the-day-right' mandatory coffee and Danish pastry. I had planned to walk only seven kilometres that day to the picturesque, mountainside village of Villafranca del Bierzo. Many pilgrims traditionally stopped here before starting the steady climb to O Cebreiro, so Annie and I decided to do likewise and conserve our energy. The path ran beside a two lane, paved roadway with light traffic and we did have to watch out for cars. As we walked we gathered grapes and pears, which seemed ripe for the picking, and found sheltered spots for the necessary calls of nature. Life was simple; stress was absent; and my body felt strong, healthy, peaceful and centred. I suddenly understood why others talked of "doing the Camino" again and again. The feelings of contentment were just so strong that I felt they would always stay with me to be called upon in anxious moments.

Before I had left home and while planning for this trip, I had tried to enquire about bathroom facilities along the way but could find nothing in writing on this subject. For me, this was very important. I was actually pleasantly surprised at the cleanliness and privacy of Spanish flush toilets and how often they were quite pleasantly decorated with carved doorways and attractive ceramics on dividing walls that reached to the floor in most cases. Of course, when walking 774 kilometres, well appointed toilets are not always available when needed so spots behind bushes, buildings and fences needed to be targeted at critical moments to avoid some potentially embarrassing accidents. There were certainly moments when this was a challenge and sometimes I had to risk cars appearing on the horizon as I answered the call of nature; do the necessary in the pouring rain while still wearing a fifteen pound pack and a rain poncho; or maintain my balance in precarious circumstances. I certainly had moments when I lost my balance but luckily I was able to recover with my reputation intact.

After a pleasant amble through the rolling countryside, we arrived at Villafranca del Bierzo at noon and decided to compare the two refuges to decide where we wanted to stay. The first refuge was a private one clearly under construction and run by Don Jesus Jato and his family who devotedly cared for pilgrims. Although Don Jesus welcomed us warmly and offered accommodation at his refuge, it was officially closed for construction and did look in disarray. He suggested that we might be more comfortable at the municipal refuge just down the road and he was right. As we turned to leave and Annie started down the stairway, Don Jesus



did some energy healing by moving his hands above her body and saying that she was in need of a boost. Annie exclaimed that she immediately felt much better. This made me curious about Jesus for I had read about his *queimada* evenings where an alcoholic drink is shared, tales are told and spells are incanted. However, my curiosity was to go unsatisfied because this did not look like a good time for questions. We walked the few steps to the modern, seventy-four bunk municipal refuge near the outskirts of the old town. It offered quite a different atmosphere for, although warm and welcoming, it was perhaps not quite as 'interesting'. It contained eight-bunk rooms with balconies, large, fully equipped kitchen and a dining room panelled in pine, quite a contrast to Don Jesus' construction zone.

It was always easy to find a town map so, after the usual settling in, we went into town to get our bearings. The town was focused around a central garden square surrounded by quaint shops and at least four historic churches. They were all open so I toured them all then Annie and I shopped for that night's dinner, which we planned to share with three others in the refuge. We picked up the usual bread, cheese, yoghurt, tuna, chocolate, etc., and snacks for our climb the following day. We found the only phone in the central square but because of the line-up I never did make a phone call. I was also too busy touring churches to get to the local internet café.

Later Annie cooked spaghetti, flan and stewed pears and two French women prepared a salad and provided the bread. We all enjoyed a healthy meal and energetic conversation. After dinner Alejandro and Martha (from Colombia) and Michele and Carsten (from Germany) arrived looking quite exhausted so there was more catching-up to be done. A pleasant day and evening overall!

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Chapter 24: Bump in the Night

Villafranca del Bierzo to Ruitelan 18 km.

The next morning I started out in the dark again at 8:30, following behind some other walkers. Mornings were still quite dark until around nine o'clock for it was now October 15th, so I routinely set out at about 8:30. This was quite different from the seven or seven-thirty starts I had been making when I started my walk in mid-September. Of course, if I had been walking in the summer a late start would not have been an issue but I wanted to limit my walking to twenty kilometres a day. If I left at nine I could almost assuredly reach my destination by three in the afternoon while there was still daylight. I was again feeling quite energetic after my short walk and rest of the day before so was quite happy to pick up my pace and get back to my normal walking speed, which I was told was quite fast compared to that of most other walkers. As a result, I left Annie far behind and stayed true to my own pace throughout the day. This meant I was walking alone most of the time lost in my own thoughts.

Most walkers at this stage of the journey, including myself, want to walk alone in the day and socialize in the evening. The end was in sight and most of us were looking at the walk as a time of reflection, which became more of a challenge if we were in constant contact with others and drawn into conversation. After a short distance the rain began, gently at first, and I was thankful for my wide brimmed Tilley hat, which kept the raindrops from dripping down my nose for the next two hours. I had chosen to walk the road route as an alternative to the upper, high route that I had been told to avoid in bad weather. I felt fortunate as my chosen-route had reportedly been extremely busy and dangerous but scarcely a car passed me by. A new motorway had recently been completed and had redirected traffic away from my route. The motorway itself proved useful as it soared high above me and provided shelter from the rain when I needed to take a break.

I stopped in a warm and friendly restaurant in Trabadelo for my morning coffee and before long Nancy and Tony from Wisconsin and Annie caught up with me. When I set out again I passed a weirdly decorated shop which seemed to have an empty pop can on each fence post outside and an interior full of dusty shelves, empty bottles, containers and a few other items for sale. I didn't quite know what to make of this but the five-foot tall owner came over begging me to enter and enthusiastically offered me a cup of what I found out later were crushed chestnuts. He then filled a mug with rosé wine and asked that I say a prayer for him when I arrived in Santiago and offered to pray for me. I had my picture taken with him and he asked me to send him a copy when I arrived home, drawing out a very weird envelope for me to use. I accepted his hospitality warmly and continued on



with my feet a little lighter and my grin a little broader for the interesting diversion.

Another six kilometres up the road was the village of Vega de Valcarce. I had accompanied and chatted with Tony and Nancy since Trabadelo, but they had agreed on fixed times for stops. I didn't think I could last another hour and gave in to my hunger pangs and settled down on a bench overlooking the street to eat my lunch. This was a good spot to observe the local activity which in this case was a donkey ambling down the road with its owner.

Eating was a constant activity on most days. I guess this was because my metabolic rate had been raised with the walking and the energy I needed to go on had to be constantly fed. It was a real treat to eat and not need to be conscious of weight gains for I was certainly burning the calories off at a rapid rate. The day had turned a little cool and before leaving Vega de Valcarce, I welcomed a visit to the local bar for some heart-warming, hot chocolate with the locals to round off my midday meal.

Another two kilometres in the rain and I arrived at the private refuge in Ruitelan, a village with two bars, a church, a refuge and not much else. The steepest part of my climb was just ahead of me—ten kilometres uphill to O'Cebreiro. I didn't think I had it in me to go much farther after 18 kilometres of steady climbing so decided to stop. I wanted to make this experience last as long as possible and I had already learned the lesson of not forcing my body when it signalled its tiredness. I was becoming much more effective at listening - thank God for that.

The Ruitelan refuge accommodated only eighteen walkers in two rooms so it was quite intimate. This was very appealing and as a bonus, our host spoke English. Should road weary travellers need them, the refuge offered Shiatsu massage and homeopathy as well as providing meals for a few extra euros. Now, this seemed the type of place I could be very comfortable in and it looked like a private home with a group dining room. After settling in and relaxing on my bunk for a while, I gazed out a window to see Annie arriving. She had had no way of knowing I would be stopping here and yet she had caught up with me yet again. This was not the first or the last time this would happen. I felt my association with Annie, which had lasted for the last five days, was meant to continue a while longer.

Annie and I had started walking together back in Santa Catalina de Somoza, about eighty kilometres ago. Then she had helped me forget my painful foot and I had carried on for another ten kilometres. I was grateful for that. Annie was fifty-six and after thirty-four years of marriage had divorced her husband when he ran off with his secretary with whom he had had a relationship for seven years. The familiar story repeats itself over and over again. Annie loved to talk and spoke of the traumatic emotions associated with parting from a man she still loved and her attempts to adjust to the separation. She had spoken to psychics



and prayed for a change of heart on her husband's part but nothing had worked. In addition, he was no longer living with his secretary, although the relationship was continuing, and often came to visit Annie, upsetting and confusing her further. To avoid further contact, she had moved from Normandy to Toulouse (from north to south France) to start a new life. Our conversations were pretty intense and Annie was walking to 'see' the situation a little more clearly and move forward more confidently.

Annie was a very generous person and was loaded down with personal belongings—makeup, satin pyjamas, a full-length dress—in addition to lots of food for herself and everyone else, it seemed. Whenever we stopped she offered chocolate, bread or cheese, or whatever she had on hand. In the evenings she often cooked dinner for a group. She was an excellent French cook and I found out later that she had been a sous-chef at Club Med so her expertise had come from lots of serious practice. She loved the company of others and seemed unhappy when walking alone. I was challenged by her generous nature and her need because I didn't want to seem ungrateful but believed I had to walk my own walk on the Camino and I enjoyed the experience of being alone with my own thoughts and making decisions about my own life. Annie seemed a test of this belief—it was so easy to have an intellectual sense of what was right yet not be able to actually carry it out in a practical way.

The one thing I had learned in life was to be blatantly honest with my own feelings. Whenever I have done this I have felt energized and strong. When I ignored my intuitive sense of the best course of action, I have felt weary or lacking in energy and ideas. This didn't mean that I had become totally selfish and inconsiderate of the needs of others, but there had been so many times when I had not needed to take on the role of saviour of somebody else's needs and yet I had. I now realized that being a saviour had filled a need to boost my own sense of self worth. As the years have passed, I have come to understand that there are others who are waiting to assist or, perhaps the individual needs time to be alone to fend for himself and learn whatever lesson has been presented by the situation. In some cases, by interfering, I have short-circuited both their learning and mine. I was discovering that my Camino journey reflected my life. The way I was walking and the people and situations I was experiencing showed me very clearly my own strengths and shortcomings. What an incredible gift and opportunity for greater self understanding.

After the usual excitement of connecting with Annie again, I indulged in a gloriously, hot shower in the most modern of bathrooms and, I am sure you will understand why what was becoming a permanent smile was firmly pasted across my face. I was content with the warm, cosy accommodation and friendly walkers inside, and unconcerned about the rain outside. Our host served hot coffee and we anticipated the dinner of soup, salad, spaghetti and pesto, and crème caramel dessert to be served later—paradise again. That evening I also met Laurent a 74-



year old pilgrim who had practiced yoga for thirty-one years. We were joined by a Danish couple—a professor of classical music at the University of Copenhagen and his partner who taught classical drawing and music and had just published a book of funny stories about buying and selling antiques.

We chatted until well past 10:30 when I crept quietly back to my bunk. Unfortunately there was no ladder for me to reach my top bunk and, in leaping from a stool I fell backwards with a loud thump. Ouch! I was splayed across the floor looking somewhat dumbfounded, as my seven roommates had been rudely awakened wondering if the roof had caved in. So much for my desire to retire quietly! Sheepishly, I clambered into bed a second time and fell asleep quickly.

On my 4:00 a.m. trip to the bathroom, I passed the dining room to find 64-year-old Robert from Arizona crunching loudly on some carrots. I had first met Robert on the train into St. Jean Pied de Port. He was a tall, almost gangly sort with a rough beard and lived in an isolated spot in the hills near Tucson, Arizona. He certainly looked the part of a recluse. He was probably one of the healthiest walkers on the Camino unlike the rest of us who ate Spanish fare—meat, meat, meat, lots of French fries, chocolate, cookies and coffee—not exactly a heart friendly diet for the long term anyway. Robert carried an extremely large pack as well as fruits and vegetables of all kinds in a canvas covered shopping cart, which he pulled along beside him. He was a vegetarian and often prepared his own meals and had quite a ritual: preparing a cloth mat and chopping his carrots, green peppers, apples and the like and merrily crunching them quite noisily. I was always amazed at his provisions.

Robert was his own man and I respected him for it and enjoyed a pleasant chat on a number of occasions when we reconnected on the trek. Some said he was unfriendly but I discovered that he was actually hard of hearing. I am convinced they misinterpreted his lack of response with disinterest. I am sure it was not. He had walked the Camino once before so knew what to expect and had certainly become one of the many ‘characters’ I had met and enjoyed.

The refuge at Ruitelan provided breakfast choices of coffee, hot chocolate, fruit, toast and jam, and cakes and by nine o’clock I was off again.

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Chapter 25: Cold Toilet Seats

Ruitelan to Hospital de la Condesa 20 km.

I battled wind and rain as I started my 29th day on the road, recognizing that I was now definitely in ‘rain country’ as I walked towards Galicia. I had been warned and was prepared with my plastic poncho and some rain pants I had purchased before leaving Leon knowing that the combination of wet and cold would not be a pleasurable experience. The lush, green hills and mountains were spectacular even in the rain and, a full rainbow over the patchwork of green fields and hues of red, orange and brown in the hills delighted my senses. I was literally walking in the clouds a lot of the time as gusts of wind and rain swirled through the mountains. I had to gather my rain gear tightly around me so I wouldn’t become airborne with the wind billowing under my poncho. I was alone in the wind and rain for most of the 12 kilometres to O’Cebreiro, one of the highest points of the trek.



Rainbow over O’Cebreiro

With my head down in my white plastic poncho, sometimes feeling like a bag lady and at others like a new bride, I trudged along the road, smiling throughout. About halfway to O’Cebreiro I found a coffee bar and removed my rain pants to discover that I had perspired so much that my walking pants were soaked. Because they were lightweight, I decided I would leave the rain pants off for the remaining six kilometres—after all how wet could I get? I was soon to discover that I could get very wet and my walking pants were drenched as I climbed higher and



higher. Another lesson learned the hard way! The more adversity I faced though, the more uplifted I felt. My backpack certainly seemed weightless after 29 days and I felt like a brave and courageous adventurer.

Finally, at 1300 metres, I reached O’Cebreiro, a tiny village of only nine stone houses with a refuge, church, shops and bars. Particular features of this village were the 7th Century houses called “pallozas” which were round stone structures with thatched roofs—a leftover from Celtic times. It is believed that even in Ireland there are no pallozas of this age. As I entered the village I met Laurent again and a French couple in their sixties. We ate a lunch that would easily have served ten and I was more than satisfied when I was finished eating. I had received reports that the refuge in O’ Cebreiro was large and cold (I was to learn differently later) so, with Laurent close behind, I thought I would plod on to Hospital de la Condesa just four kilometres farther down the road. I was not thrilled to continue in the rain but thoughts of a warm, cosy refuge magnetically pulled me forward.



Pallozas at O’Cebreiro

The refuge at Hospital de la Condesa was typically Galician—painted white with green doors and windows and a blue telephone box nearby. Laurent and I were relieved to get in anywhere dry at this point and we quickly took off our rain gear and sighed with relief and optimism. Unfortunately, my dreams of warmth and cosiness were to be disappointed. There was not another soul in sight inside the refuge. The place was clean and provided the basics but the air was definitely unheated. Many of the expected amenities were missing: the modern bathrooms had no toilet paper and the large kitchen lacked many utensils and dishes. But, the bunks were clean. Hoping to find some signs of life, we climbed the stairs to



find Annie buried in her sleeping bag, sniffing, coughing, and trying to recover from her cold symptoms. She was thrilled at the company.

We took advantage of the facilities by cooking up a pot of soup and adding some bread and whatever leftovers we pulled from our packs. A posted phone number allowed us to call the warden who promptly arrived with toilet rolls and blankets for our use. He advised that the heat would only be turned on at eleven at night and was under the floors of the bedrooms only. It was going to be a cool evening if we didn't get creative. I suggested that the only way of boosting the air temperature a few degrees would be to close off the kitchen, turn on all four stove elements and boil a large pot of water. Although these actions did not contribute to any power saving campaigns, it did take the chill from the air and we were willing to make the environmental sacrifice for one night. The three of us were the only guests that night and we enjoyed a pleasant evening huddled around the kitchen table, chatting about the purpose of life—a topic that could easily occupy a whole evening.

Bedtime came at about nine that night as a sleeping bag seemed the warmest place to be and I snuggled into my tights, socks and fleece and pulled my sleeping bag and blanket over my head in an attempt to get warm. It didn't take long for me to nod off to sleep and when I awoke at just after midnight the floor was as warm as toast and the room definitely was a lot more comfortable. Unfortunately the heating did not extend to the bathroom and the Spanish do love their ceramic floors and walls. BRR..., they were cold so I definitely appreciated my sandals as I crossed the floor although they could not do much to warm the toilet seat! Oh well, I was a pioneer/adventuress and ready to conquer all adversity. If I couldn't handle a cold toilet seat then what was I made of?

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Chapter 26: A Sound of Music Day

Hospital de la Condesa to Triacastela 17 km.

Up at 7:30 and on our way by 9:00 a.m., Annie, Laurent and I began our seventeen-kilometre walk to Triacastela. It was not raining *per se*, but a wet mist pervaded the morning air. We were above 1300 metres and walking in the clouds and we were still climbing. I had kept my raingear on just in case, since I didn't want to repeat the previous day's experience of getting sopping wet and having to cope with wet pants stuck to my legs. That day I felt like I was leading the walking wounded. Annie was still suffering from a cold and a flare up of hemorrhoids and Laurent was nursing a painful shoulder injury he had sustained in a fall a few days earlier. I, on the other hand, was feeling just great and bounded ahead energetically. Fortunately for us we discovered a roadside bar just three kilometres from the refuge at Alto de Poio (37 metres higher than O'Cebreiro), and tucked into a breakfast of coffee, toast and jam. These bars always seemed to appear at just the right time.



Annie and Eve walking down from Hospital de la Condesa on the cattle track

With the sun now shining brilliantly, we turned downhill towards Triacastela, which at 665 metres was 672 metres below our present location. The track veered away from the road across lush fields and through forested pathways with



wonderful views across mountains and green, patchwork hills. I felt like I was in the movie *“The Sound of Music”*, only there was no Julie Andrews and no music. But this didn't matter, I made my own. I knew the others were close behind and I loved charging ahead, full of vim and vigour, inspired by the natural beauty that surrounded me. I felt so joyful and privileged to be in this magical place, this peaceful, idyllic Galician countryside. I could see small stone villages huddled in valleys in the distance and just a stone's throw away there were fallen chestnuts lying beneath towering trees. The walkway was at times a right-of-way for cows and in more than one instance I had to make way for the cow herder and her herd and watch carefully so I didn't step in a freshly dropped and steaming patty. How I loved the challenge of being an adventuress and walking in the natural world!



I saw and heard many dogs on my walk that day and even ventured to stroke a few, as was my custom at home. Spaniards seem to love their dogs and throughout the walk I had seen dogs wandering loose or leashed in yards. Dogs were mentioned in many of the write-ups about the Camino but I was told that walkers carrying sticks often intimidated them. Although I was never fearful of them, I am sure my six-foot bamboo stick ensured my protection. I did hear of one pilgrim who had been nipped on the leg but it turned out that she had been afraid of dogs in the first place and I am sure the dogs can sense the fear and are drawn to it.

We arrived in Triacastela just in time for lunch and Annie, Laurent and I commandeered a sunny table by the restaurant window overlooking green, open fields and a refuge in the distance. The 17-kilometre walk that day was effortless and the sights and sounds of the countryside had revitalized me. Galicia was



known for its delectable foods and this day was no exception. We treated ourselves to paella, meatballs, fries and an almond tart and I was lucky enough to have an entire bottle of white wine to myself. I didn't drink it all mind you, as I wanted to reach the refuge on two legs and not on all fours. This was my first taste of what I discovered was the famous Santiago Almond Tart with a cross signifying the Camino inscribed over the surface. It was made largely of crushed almonds, butter and sugar and was the first of several tastings that I would take advantage of on the way to Santiago—still another 132 kilometres away.



Part of the trail to Triacastela

After lunch we headed for the refuge, which was modern and bright and had four- and six-bunk rooms accommodating nearly seventy guests with lots of personal storage space and modern, spacious bathrooms and showers. The two-building refuge was surrounded by extensive green fields and hills and was just on the edge of the built-up area of town—a very peaceful setting. In each building there was a communal living room surrounded by windows and swing type saloon doors at the entrance to each room. Laurent, Annie and I were content to take over one living room with a large window overlooking the fields. As usual, I left to explore the old stone town of Triacastela. This took all of an hour as I browsed a couple of grocery stores for snacks for that night and the following day. I also called my parents then peeked through the windows into the homes, bars and other shops in this sleepy village.

I returned to the local restaurant where we had lunched to find Elizabeth seated outside, drink in hand, watching the sun set and caress all in its path with a warm, golden light. Elizabeth was a German who lived in France and who had started her walk with an acquaintance but, to honour their individual walking paces, had parted company along the way. I had not seen her since Villafranca



del Bierzo when we had shared a communal dinner at the refuge there. I quickly grabbed a chair and joined her and we were soon absorbed in conversation. Elizabeth was feeling exhilarated, safe and happy on her own and seemed to be more open to expanding her contact with other walkers and being more reflective about her own life and the direction it was taking.

It was a treat to be in a warm refuge that night and to be sharing a room with just two others. However, it seemed that every situation, as in life, has to have at least one challenge or it just isn't real. In the case of the refuge at Triacastela it was those oh-so-attractive saloon doors. All night long they squeaked and whined as we took turns making trips to the bathroom. I made my contribution by making three trips that night. Oh dear! And I had thought church bells ringing every half hour were a problem back at the start of the trip in Roncesvalles. In spite of all this, I was geared up in the morning and eager to meet whatever challenges the day would bring. Some days, with my cheerful optimism, I could understand why I might be considered a Pollyanna.

I never felt like a tourist in any of the towns or villages I travelled through with the exception of large cities like Leon and Burgos, which obviously catered to the tourist traffic. The atmosphere in many of these small rural towns and stone villages was decidedly not commercial. There were no big signs or neon lights beckoning me to come in and buy. Of course, as pilgrims carrying our possessions on our backs, we weren't looking to pick up souvenirs along the way. More weight was just not welcomed by most. And just because walkers passed through frequently looking for food and drink did not mean that services would be open when they arrived. Shops closed at 2:00 p.m. for the most part and often didn't reopen until 5:00 or even later. We all had to plan and get accustomed to that. Once I understood the rhythm, it was no longer a problem and I respected the locals for tending to their own lifestyles and family needs and not succumbing to the lure of money and profit. Pilgrims could depend on the bars being open at almost any time so if we were dying of thirst or starving there was always the bar option to turn to for revival.

That night, from the windows of the refuge in Triacastela, I gazed out to see stars, larger than life, twinkling in the night sky. The Camino is believed to be located directly under the Milky Way and to possess stronger earth energies because of it. I was overcome by the feeling of being surrounded by great power and beauty. Living in Toronto, Canada, I rarely see a sky full of stars. They are dimmed and overshadowed by reflected city lights. But here, with a cloudless sky and so many stars, I was almost brought to my knees in awe. Perhaps this is why I seemed to receive such an energy boost each day. It felt like I was continually plugged into a battery charger.

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Chapter 27: The Beauty of Galicia

Triacastela to Sarria 20 km

By 8:30 a.m. Annie, Laurent and I were crossing a grass track kissed by frost where the heavens had touched the ground and left a silver mantle. We stopped at a local bar for coffee and toast then were off through beautifully rolling countryside with stone fences surrounding a patchwork of green fields and winding forest tracks covered in chestnuts. As the morning progressed the warmth of the sun penetrated and with my brisk pace I was warm and content.



The beauty of Galicia

I chose to walk the old Camino route through the villages of A Balsa, San Xil, Furela and Calvor instead of making the seven-kilometre diversion to the Benedictine monastery at Samos. I can't imagine what the alternative route was like but this one was paradise. I bounded ahead on my own to immerse myself in the beauty of it all—literally dancing along the trails. I was drawn to a local home in Furela—with overhang, tables and a makeshift bar set up outside—where I treated myself to a steaming hot chocolate and conversation with the hospitable owner. I succumbed to the Santiago Almond Tart again and just to send me on my way fully warmed up, I was given a local herbal liqueur, which definitely warmed my insides as it went down, all in one shot.



I felt grateful for every sunny day since this was Galicia and I knew that if it was not raining I was really lucky. The peace and tranquillity of the countryside made me wish I could just capture the moment in time and carry it with me always. In fact, I do feel as if it is frozen in my memory and I will do my best to resurrect it when I feel a need to be still, and calm the ever-active mind that works hard to take control and carry me forward in a frenzy of activity. I passed herders with their sheep and cows; many dogs and cats; and it seemed that every morning I had heard a rooster crow proudly to announce the new day. I ate lunch perched on an old stone fence overlooking a broad panorama of green hills, the odd stone house and pastures of sheep—all drenched in sunshine. Annie and Laurent caught up with me here and a Norwegian group of four stopped to chat. I found it fascinating that although there were times when it was possible to feel all alone in the middle of nowhere, the feeling was fleeting. Within five minutes or so another pilgrim or group of pilgrims would come into view and I was part of a group again. We could depend on this occurring more frequently along the route as it became more and more popular.



Following behind the shepherd

After yet another twenty-kilometre day I reached the old, larger town of Sarria and a pleasant refuge offering good, hot showers, a washer and dryer—such luxury—and a kitchen minus utensils and dishes. This proved to be a bit of a chal-



lenge. Most walkers carried a spoon and knife but few carried mess kits with pots but we certainly did not want to complain because refuges in Galicia were even more open than in other areas and we weren't even asked for a donation for our stay, even though there was always a box somewhere to receive them. It was easy to see why the area was popular with groups of young people on restricted budgets in the summer.

I chatted with Sabrina from Switzerland and then headed for the nearby internet café to send my eighth email of the walk. With a mailing list of fifty, I usually received between ten and sixteen letters of response and encouragement. This always boosted my energy but this time, my partner Adrian in Toronto, had sent me a lovely letter saying he would meet me at the airport when I returned; greet me with a pre-prepared, light dinner; and clean the house so all I had to do was relax and come down to earth. I felt very lucky. I had been away from Adrian now for six weeks and was feeling especially grateful for this wonderful, loving man in my life, even after more than fourteen years of being together.

That night, Annie pleaded exhaustion so Laurent and I headed for the Taberna Lopez in old Sarria for the pilgrim's menu. At 5.5 euros, this was to be our cheapest meal yet and included vegetable soup, turkey and fries, and rosé wine. Annie, yet another walker with that name whom I had not met previously, joined us and we passed a pleasant evening together. As we parted, I finally introduced myself and the new Annie exclaimed: "So, you're Eve!" I had not realized I was so well known but further conversation revealed that she had talked with Marguerite the night before in Ponferrada and they had discussed me. This was only another example of how well word of mouth works on the Camino. I had been wondering if Marguerite had recovered from her hip injury and where she was now. Here was the messenger giving me an update to my unasked questions. Miracles seemed to happen all the time on the Camino and this was just another such incident. This made me wonder if miracles aren't around me all the time but I just 'miss' them while I am bombarded with all the other input of modern life. Food for thought!

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Chapter 28: Drowned Village

Sarria to Portomarin 22 km.

It was now countdown time all the way to Santiago as the kilometres literally melted away. I was now one hundred and fourteen kilometres from Santiago and, since anyone could obtain a Compostela at Santiago simply by walking the last hundred kilometres, the numbers of walkers were increasing dramatically. It was 8:30 a.m. and a clear, sunny day as I started off on the well-marked track through the hills and fields of Galicia. I was once again in high spirits, enjoying another “Sound of Music” day.

The Camino in Galicia was particularly well marked. The track is largely hard-packed, fine stone with odd areas of crazy paving and natural stone. There is absolutely no effort needed in deciding where to go. UNESCO maintains the signage all along the Camino but the frequency of signs in Galicia made it difficult to stray from the path or lose your way. On a rock, a tree or concrete mileage monument I could easily spot the yellow arrows which were now spaced every 500 metres apart.



Groves of chestnut and oak lined the track and stone fences marked the fields of grazing cattle, goats and sheep. In places, since the walkway was a shared path for animals and humans, I found myself jumping great and small piles of animal droppings that certainly kept me on the alert. Apples and blackberry bushes also lined the way and my bamboo stick came in handy once again for bashing down a quince from a particularly high branch. I was spotted by a farmer who approached in his truck and yelled something in Spanish, which sounded “not very



nice”, and I was happy not to have understood. However, I was probably stealing from his tree so I will have to ask St. James for forgiveness when I get to the altar in Santiago. Recovering from the initial shock of being caught, I continued on my way merrily with a warm wind picking up behind me.



On the outdoor patio of a restaurant seemingly isolated but overlooking expansive fields and hills, I treated myself to a chocolate croissant (a weakness) and coffee while chatting with Guy and Honore. They were a French couple in their sixties I had run into several times. Annie and Laurent had again caught up with me here. Guy leaned back, surveyed the scene with a broad smile, and asked in long, slow tones: “Is there anything else you could possibly want than this?” I had to agree that this was paradise, if there ever was such a “state of being”. Guy and Honore had started their walk in France and were walking in memory of their twenty-three year old son who had died in a car accident. They were ambling slowly and enjoying the walk with all their senses. They stopped in quaint old inns if the mood struck and looked like they were on a second honeymoon. They obviously adored each other even after more than thirty years of marriage. What a pleasure it was to know two such lovely people. Fortunately I was to meet them again before my trip was over.

After our coffee break I continued my 22-kilometre trek through the poor, old, stone villages of Barbadelo, Leiman, Mongarde, Ferreiros and Mirallos before ar-



iving in Portomarin. Along the way I was interested in the four-storey-high, marble graves. I found out they were stacked above ground because the ground was far too rocky for digging graves. In addition, the cemetery gates were usually locked to protect the graves from robbery.

Portomarin itself was a stark contrast to the towns and villages I had just passed through. It was relatively newly built on the shores of a very wide river, which had been dammed to provide electricity. The 'old' town had been flooded by the river reconstruction and the Church of St. Nicolas was the only building that had been saved by dismantling it, stone by stone, and rebuilding it in the new town centre. As I crossed the high bridge spanning the river I felt a little dizzy and sad as, below me in the riverbed, I caught glimpses of the old stone remains of the former town. I visualized the old town with its fine historic structures, thinking they would be much more interesting but realized that here, as anywhere else, it is difficult to halt modernization.

After settling into the modern refuge at Portomarin, which had quickly filled up, I wandered about the compact town of predominantly white stucco buildings built around St. Nicolas Church and a central plaza. Shops and services abounded and a conveniently placed overhang jutted out all along the shopping area, no doubt to provide shelter from the elements for pedestrians. I pinpointed a restaurant with a pilgrim's menu for later dining then leisurely spent some time enjoying that delicious Spanish ice cream in a local bar as I enjoyed the street activity.

That evening I shared dinner with Maria, a German living in France who worked for a major car manufacturer and was also developing an energy healing practice. With common interests in energy medicine, we had much to share. We dined on asparagus, tortillas, an almond tart and wine and returned to the refuge renewed and energized. Another wonderful day!

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Chapter 29: Wet and Almost Airborne

Portomarin to Eirexe 17 km

I stepped outside the next morning and couldn't believe the temperature. It must have been twenty degrees Celsius with very strong winds—our warmest day yet. After my early morning coffee in the local Portomarin bar, I was off with Annie and Laurent but my energy level was again high and I soon accelerated ahead of them, crossing the high bridge across the river and heading alone, towards the hard packed track through the woods. For the first couple of hours I skipped along in my short-sleeved blouse allowing the warm winds to embrace me. Then the heavy rains descended. I found a sheltering tree and quickly donned my elegant, plastic poncho and forged ahead with confidence.

By this time I was in open country with very little shelter and the wind gusting forcefully. I had to work hard at keeping my poncho over me. I felt on the verge of becoming airborne if I did not grip my poncho and bamboo stick firmly. I had to smile; again I couldn't decide whether I felt like a bag lady or a bride, with all this white plastic puffing out around me. I guess I hadn't learned a lesson from my climb to O 'Cebreiro when my pants had stuck to me in the rain. Once again my rain pants were still in my pack. The rain had started so abruptly I was actually quite soaked before I could even think of hauling off my pack, taking off my boots, and shimmying into rain pants. Obviously my 'keep dry' strategy needed some reworking.

On this, my 33rd day, I ambled through more chestnut, pine and oak forests; over open tracks; across fields; and along narrow roadways, with very little vehicular activity except for the odd car parked by hunters. Hopefully they would know which way to shoot and I wouldn't become their prey. I was glad the walk was not strenuous for although I had become used to the rain. I was pretty wet through and I felt this was enough of a hardship. Lunchtime was approaching and I wondered where I would stop since there were no bars in sight, only old, stone farmhouses and tiny villages. I quickly dismissed the thought of taking refuge in the nearby barns, feeling that the smell of cows would quickly put an end to any appetite I had developed. At last I spotted a stone farmhouse near the road at the front door of which was a half-dry bench partially sheltered by a narrow roof overhang. I squeezed myself onto the dry end, up close to the house to avoid the drips, and hungrily ate my bread, cheese and can of tuna.

Two kilometres down the road was the village of Eirexe and I had read that the refuge here was small, cosy, well cared for and friendly, with a real fireplace. So, after my seventeen-kilometre day, I succumbed at 1:00 p.m. to the pleasures of



this little oasis. I showered and was served hot coffee by the very friendly, English-speaking warden. My decision to break here was a great one. As I sat in the large upstairs window of a room for ten, watching the walkers on the road below, who should come into view but Annie and Laurent. I waved enthusiastically to them as they carried on another eight kilometres to Palas de Rei. Although I enjoyed all the activity in the larger refuges, I delighted in this small one because I appreciated the cosy, homelike locations between the major towns that offered a more peaceful setting. I was here with only three French walkers—Brigitte, Guy and Honore. Once again we huddled around an open, blazing, wood fire in the living room exchanging stories and enjoying the dry comfort. Clean, modern and very private hot showers were also appreciated—simple but meaningful pleasures.

The warden suggested dinner at the private home next-door where the owner would be glad to offer a meal at any time. I liked the idea so bounded up the steps, knocked on the door and with gestures and broken Spanish, arranged for dinner at 7:30 for Guy, Honore and me. This was perfect for even if the rain continued we only had to dash next door for dinner.

The meal offered lots of choices and I selected the chorizo sausage, peas, cabbage, green beans, fries and the Santiago Almond Tart—again. Here, there was a difference from the previously tasted tarts. This one was doused in the local herbal liqueur, oooh! White wine and the ever-present baguette completed the menu while a second glass of liqueur topped off the meal perfectly and kept us all warm inside and in very good humour.

The owners of the home were a jolly couple with an older son and all participated in preparing and serving the meal and unmistakably enjoying the idea of being hospitable to our happy band of pilgrims. Before we left we had to hug each family member in turn and were given a picture of the crucifixion as a memento of our visit. In moments like these, with the feelings of love and goodwill that they offered, I was filled with a gratitude and joy I knew I would remember forever. I slept well that night in a quiet, warm and spacious room with sparkling stars and a full moon beaming in on me. A three-star hotel couldn't have been any better and the extra liqueur probably contributed to my feeling of well-being.

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Chapter 30: Rabbits Anyone?

Eirexe to Melide km.

The next morning I prepared myself a cappuccino in the refuge kitchen, ate an apple and headed out the door at 8:30 a.m. with Guy and Honore under the light of a full moon. I was moved to utter a silent prayer as the light shimmered across the peaceful landscape ahead, filling me with a feeling of contentment. The rain had let up but I had learned my lesson and had donned rain pants, just in case. Two hours later, after eight kilometres of easy walking, we reached the larger town of Palas de Rei and found a bar where we enjoyed coffee and tostadas with marmalade—Guy’s treat, as was the previous night’s dinner. After buying a few snacks in Palas de Rei, we walked on another ten kilometres through Casanova to Leboreiro where we stopped to dry out.

The rain had been intermittent all day. The sun would come out briefly, then it would rain, thunder a little, then more sun. Nevertheless, it was quite warm so we weren’t really uncomfortable. At the end of walking ten kilometres, though, I was ready for a stop to socialize and sip a hot, fortifying drink. We chose the Casa de Somoza, a small, rural hotel with a marquee and bar outside and a cosy dining room with stone walls within. The owner welcomed us and, after leaving my pack on a chair under the marquee, I entered the bar to find about ten other walkers in rapt conversation, with big smiles, enjoying lunches and hot drinks. My hot chocolate went down smoothly and created a warm glow as I chatted with a Canadian couple from Montreal.



Canadians were well represented on the Camino and as I registered in the refuges, I would notice the name of at least one Canadian. I understood that a well-established association in Quebec publicized the Camino. The route had also been popularised by Shirley MacLaine when she wrote her story of *“The Camino”*, and by Laurie Dennett, daughter of broadcaster Jack Dennett, who had walked from Chartres in France to St. Jean Pied de Port in 1986. On my trip so far I had met Canadian walkers from British Columbia (Vancouver and the Okanagan Valley); Alberta (Calgary); Ontario (Sault Ste. Marie, Bancroft, Peterborough, Kingston and Ottawa); and Quebec (Montreal and other small cities in this province). Interestingly, I never met another walker from Toronto, my home city. This was surprising because Toronto is a city of nearly three million and before I had left home I had certainly talked to Torontonians who had travelled the Camino.

Finishing my hot chocolate, I moved on alone through small stone hamlets that provided considerable shelter from the intermittent bluster of wind and rain, over a track which was seven feet wide and consisted of fine, hard-packed gravel or cinder. A stone, three-foot wall covered in grasses, ferns and blackberry bushes, lined much of today’s track, often interrupted by stands of chestnut and oak trees. In one small town I just couldn’t resist the lure of a dangling rope and, pulled it to set a great bell pealing in the local church. Hopefully I didn’t wake anyone from an afternoon siesta.

My energy was high and I reflected on how each day still felt like it was my first. My feet had toughened long ago, my blisters had dried out and the tendonitis was no longer a concern. So, I felt free to just absorb all that I encountered. I was now only fifty-eight kilometres from Santiago but didn’t want to end this carefree, walking lifestyle—with new people and adventures around every corner; changing scenery moment by moment; and feelings of tremendous peace, well-being and physical vitality. I was revelling in the powerful, healing energies of nature. I thought again of my partner, Adrian, and how very much I loved and cherished him; how we both supported each other’s hope and dreams. I was looking forward to seeing him again and yet I was drawn on by the magnetism of all that the Camino offered.

After twenty-three kilometers, I finally reached Melide, in the steadily pouring rain. I decided to find a hostel for the night. Melide looked a little forlorn in the greyness as I entered its outskirts. The buildings of the newer section looked uninteresting and dreary too, so I was relieved to enter the old town with its narrow, cobbled streets and interesting shops and restaurants. The idea of a private room, my first since Atapuerca, seemed a good idea and I heard that the refuge in Melide, with accommodation for one hundred and sixty, was a little worn and tired so I searched for other lodging.

I found the Hotel Xaneiro 2, recommended by my “Confraternity of St. James” guidebook and, for eighteen euros, I settled into a well-appointed, single room,



complete with two beds, four towels, soap, toilet paper and television. Now, this was luxury! It was private and I was ready for this. After unpacking I enjoyed a very hot shower and basked in the luxury of the water streaming over me for what seemed to be at least fifteen minutes. The day's rain had chilled me and this had been just what I needed to reenergize and recover. I hung my wet socks from the back of the T.V. and left it on to assist and hasten the drying process. I loved the thought that I had just discovered a new use for the T.V.

It was not long before I was ready to venture out again so I headed downstairs to the bar to prepay my room. I had to do a double take for stretched across the marble-topped bar were two rabbits with fluffy, white tails—they were obviously ready to be cooked. A hunter grabbed me by the arm, maybe he had seen my surprised look, and proudly informed me that these two creatures had been shot on the Camino. It was hard to tell whether he was joking or not. Perhaps my earlier concern about hunters had been justified; this sounded a little too close for comfort. I hold a special affinity for 'bunnies' so felt a little sad for these poor helpless creatures. There certainly wasn't anything I could do to save them now so I made my exit, pleased that I had not been invited to join in eating them. I found a local bar for coffee and an internet café for my ninth letter of the trip after which I felt warm, grounded and collected once again.

I had contemplated trying the local octopus dish that evening but I must admit I had difficulty getting my mind around large, swaying tentacles being a tasty dish. Melide offered the traditional pulperia (octopus) in wine on wooden platters at the Casa/Pulperia Ezequiel, so I knew where I could get it. However, I thought I would first call at the refuge to reconnect with other walkers who might like to share dinner with me. I was pleasantly surprised to find Annie and a group of five voraciously consuming a delightfully appetizing dinner. Annie greeted me with a loud yelp of welcome and rushed towards me with outstretched arms for a big hug. Apparently, earlier in the day, she had told those with her that she would be preparing a special dinner for her friend Eve, whom she expected to arrive in the late afternoon. I guess I had almost foiled those plans by opting for the luxury of a hotel but her efforts had not been in vain.

Despite my late arrival, dinner was still hot: there were leftovers; I enthusiastically found my place, which had been set, and devoured my meal of vegetable soup, pasta with chicken, cream and cheeses and a banana yoghurt. As I ate, I shared the adventures of my day with Laurent, Thomas (another Belgian), and two French walkers I had not met before. Somehow foregoing my octopus meal hadn't left me feeling empty. I was still trying to wrap my mind around eating such a meal. After the hot meal and warm companionship, the ten-minute walk back to my hotel in the rain seemed longer than it really was. I slept well and awoke the next morning ready for the next three-day journey and my arrival in Santiago de Compostela.



Chapter 31: Drenched!

Melide to Arzua 15 km.

Day 35 was to be a short day of only 15 kilometres to Arzua and I was glad because it rained almost continuously the entire day. This was Galicia, after all. I was up and ready to go at about 6:30 a.m. and it was a lovely feeling to just dawdle while getting packed, writing a little in my journal, and dropping by a local bar for coffee before meeting Annie and Laurent at the refuge for a 9:00 a.m. start. It was a day of steady, easy walking over rolling hills and through eucalyptus forests. Again, after starting with the others, I quickly pulled ahead on my own, feeling free as a bird and safe in the arms of nature. Unexpectedly, I heard my name called out loud from a large shelter beside the track and stopped to find Thomas who had taken cover ahead of an expected downpour. I was fortunate to have joined him just then for the rain came down in torrents, lasted about twenty minutes, obliterated the view, created great streams of water on the path, but allowed us time for a good chat together while we waited. My boots would never have held up with that degree of intensity of rain, and walking in soggy socks would have been most unpleasant.

I arrived at the refuge in the old part of Arzua just after 1:30 p.m., feeling a little slow and weary from the day's walk. Perhaps these feelings resulted from the constant rain over the past few days, the mixed feelings I was having as I neared the end of my adventure, or the fact that I had been on the road for thirty-five days. The refuge was warm, bright, homey and well cared for. The room I shared held about forty bunks, had a heated floor in a large space with windows, high beamed ceilings, and a kitchen and dining area. Everyone was wet through from the day's walk so clothing was strung across ceiling supports, over windows, from bunks and any other available space. Again I had the feeling of being in a Chinese laundry.

I collapsed on my bunk for about thirty minutes then Annie summoned me to the dining room for lunch. It seems that Thomas and Laurent had been busy and had prepared lunch for themselves and for me, Annie and Maria—three fortunate women. What a treat! They had gone grocery shopping and prepared a pasta and vegetable dish, which we all devoured and which helped to take the chill off the day while building up our strength again. Feeling renewed, I was ready to explore the old town of Arzua with its many shops, bars and restaurants close to the refuge. As a special treat I purchased a Santiago Almond Tart and invited the luncheon group to share it and a cup of tea, when I returned. Since I hadn't had to pay for, prepare, or clean up lunch dishes, I had thought this could be my contribution even though it was deliciously fattening.



Although it was difficult to believe I could still be hungry, Maria and I went out again that evening and had a quick soup at a local bar. Eating was always an enjoyable pastime and it was also a good excuse to socialize, especially on a rainy night in a small town with little else happening. Maria talked about her energy healing work and how she was able to ‘see’ energy blocks in others, especially around their hearts. I talked about my dream the previous night:

In my dream, my mother was driving me in a very fast Mercedes along an open highway. I was concerned she was going to lose control and encouraged her to slow down and move over to the shoulder. Initially, I was apprehensive, but the car just slowed to a stop with very little incident and I was calm and at peace.

I have often enjoyed the challenge of interpreting dreams and tried to understand what this one could mean. Here is what I thought. My mother is always on the go, moving from one challenge to another, catering to the needs of others, almost as if driven. I suspect that I have also taken on these attributes while desperately trying to slow down, focus and reflect. I now realize the importance of ensuring my own needs are met even while I am helping others. I must build up my own strengths rather than ‘giving too much away’ and becoming resentful because of it. Perhaps the dream reflects my conflict and my need to slow down and be at peace. This seemed to be happening slowly and naturally.

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Chapter 32: The Luxury of a Bath

Arzua to San Paio 26 km

Back at the warm, spacious refuge at Arzua, I slept peacefully and was up and ready to go at seven the next morning. Maria and I met again for a morning coffee in a local bar and we easily picked up where we had left our conversation of the night before. She said she had felt my heart opening wider and my face becoming softer as I felt more peaceful within myself. That felt like a good and energizing way to start my day. We walked together for a few kilometres but, my energy restored, I was soon bounding ahead on my own. We had all talked about walking a little farther if we could while the sun was out just in case the rain, which was almost inevitable, started again. The skies had cleared and it was so warm that I was able to walk in shirtsleeves most of the twenty-six kilometres that day. The trail continued over treed paths and through charming hamlets as I passed Calle, Salceda, Empalme and Santa Irene. I continued to pass others, merging into and out of conversations, as we each walked at our own pace.

I arrived in the hilltop hamlet of Empalme around 1:00 p.m. and as I walked through the door of the cosy yet sunny bar I saw Erica. She immediately invited me to join her for lunch so I ordered a fresh salad and baguette and we shared a bottle of wine while catching up. Erica was from Switzerland and was walking on her own. She had been married for thirty-one years and was in charge of adult education for a bible drama program in her church organization. She was contemplating future career options of a more soul-based nature, as was I, and was walking the Camino to prove to herself she could do it on her own. So, we shared at least two goals in common.

Walking the Camino really seemed to create an instant rapport between people and it took little time to delve into personal lives and share dreams with each other. Somehow the experience of walking day after day with its flow of new images was constantly creating new thoughts and I have to agree with author Julia Cameron, that it is a spiritual activity. It is as if “the ground is the being of God, and it speaks to our souls through our soles”, she said. Julia goes on to talk about the energy pathways or ‘ley lines’ that geomancers believe to be energy routes or currents that cause a realignment of our own energies as we walk them. The Camino is known to follow ley lines and the more I walked, the more I felt bal-



anced in body, mind and spirit. It was as if I had been plugged into a battery charger that created an inner surge of heightened awareness, optimism and emotional elevation. I couldn't imagine walking such distances at home in the city, day after day, with its frenzy of cars, people and activity. But here, after clearing myself of all worries and concerns, away from the demands of the world, I could just relax, let go, focus on each beautiful moment and enjoy it fully. Others seemed to be feeling the same way and thus we held nothing back from each other, revealing all that was on our mind in the moment the thoughts surfaced into awareness.

Maria and Laurent soon arrived and after a short chat I was off again, on my own for the remaining eleven kilometres to San Paio. I passed two friendly, young American boys from California, Robert and Manuel, walking together and expressing surprise at the caring and sharing nature of everyone they had met. I had to agree: it was almost as if we were creating a fantasy world that we could transport back home if we really wanted to. We couldn't change others, but we could change ourselves and be an example of what might be.

I did not plan to stay in San Paio, a tiny stone hamlet of just a few houses, a small church and the bar, 'Casa Porta de Santiago'. I had ordered an ice cream sandwich, thinking I would just take a break and then move on, when I spotted a whole, cooked octopus on the bar counter. I moved towards it fascinated by its sprawling form and pinkish tentacles that to me, still didn't look edible. I took a candid photograph thinking that if I wasn't going to eat this creature at least I could have some memory of it from a couple feet away.



Casa Porta de Santiago at San Paio





Luxurious accomodation at San Paio and an octopus!

I was feeling quite comfortable in this recently built, pleasant bar and restaurant so I asked if they offered rooms for the night. As luck would have it they did, and the owner quickly appeared to give me a tour of the accommodations. There was a complete apartment upstairs with four bedrooms, kitchen, living and dining room, and two bathrooms, completed within the past year and quite beautifully furnished. With attractive ceramics in the bathroom, marble topped kitchen counters pine cupboards, glassware, dishes and even crystal vases and bowls, this looked better than the finest hotel chain offering. The cupboards were stocked with ground coffee, sugar, milk, butter, marmalade and cookies. The living and dining room spaces, accessed through glass French doors, offered comfortable sofas and chairs; coffee tables; a television and radio; and a full dining area complete with liqueur in the cupboards. I had found paradise again and all for eighteen euros a night. My bedroom overlooking the Camino was large enough for dance lessons. This was my last night before reaching Santiago and it seemed a fitting time to savour such luxurious surroundings. There was no question of moving on. This was where I would spend the night.

I was the only tenant, so far, and I was going to enjoy it, so I found not one but two packages of the bubble bath provided and proceeded to bask in the first bath of my Camino journey. After a few moments of relaxing in my bath there was some activity outside the door and someone called: "Eveline, Eveline, is that you Eveline?" I was starting to become famous, wasn't I? To my surprise I realized it was Annie's voice. My shadow had found me once again. How was this possible? There were so many places to stop along the way and yet we had both chosen here for the last stop before Santiago. It seems she had asked two American boys if they had seen a Canadian girl, Eveline, and was told that they had seen me walking into this bar, so she immediately followed. I believe that the power of intent is truly magnetic and draws what we seek to us. Here it was being proved again. In the end, Annie and a fellow French walker, Florence, also booked rooms for the night and we became a happy threesome.



I was still relaxing in my bath though, I was not going to cut short a luxurious bath to leap out and greet new arrivals. I lounged for about twenty minutes more, just enjoying the moment. Life is so rich when each experience is savoured fully without thought to what's to be done next. My Camino travels were helping to reinforce this for me. When I was suitably dressed the three of us reunited on the living room sofa, shared some iced tea and caught up on the day's happenings. I then spent some quiet time writing my journal before we went downstairs for dinner at 7:45. And what a delicious Galician dinner we had: tasty buns, paella, salmon steaks, parslid potatoes and rice pudding topped off with a bottle of white wine and served by a humorous and friendly waiter.

Galicia's reputation for having the most delicious food remains intact. We retired around 9:30 p.m. and were only occasionally awakened by the hilarity from a group of twenty businessmen at dinner below, from ten o'clock until one in the morning. This timing for dinner was typical for the Spanish. As they finally departed, the sound of car horns and goodbyes pierced the stillness of the night and I was thrilled to see their cars disappearing into the night. Peace at last. Nothing in life is perfect, so also in life on the Camino. Every seemingly ideal situation has its challenges. What I was becoming aware of though, was that the challenge is not 'what' is happening, but how much weight I decide to attribute to it; that determines how my experiences are evaluated in the end. In this case, the evening's disturbance had been a very minor challenge.

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Chapter 33: SANTIAGO AT LAST !

San Piao to Santiago 11 km

October 24th had arrived and at 6:30 in the morning so had the heavy rain. My body felt tired from the extra six kilometres I had done the day before. It was only a three and a half hour walk to Santiago. I was sure I could walk that far despite the heavy rain that was forecast to last all day. Breakfast was an enjoyable event as we perked coffee and ate croissants and jam in the kitchen. We donned every piece of waterproof clothing we had and certainly would not have won any fashion contest clothed as we were in plastic bags, plastic ponchos, gloves, hoods and hats. However, we were determined to do our best to stay dry.



Eve and Annie dressed to keep dry on the last day of the walk

Santiago was only eleven kilometres away but first we had to arrive at Lavacolla, which, in earlier times, was the traditional washing and purification place for pilgrims before entering Santiago. Lavacolla is now the site of the Santiago airport and the town itself was not known to be very enticing. Intent on reaching our destination that day, we trudged along roadways and over hills with the rain unceasingly pounding down on us. We made a short, hot chocolate detour after a couple of hours, but found it difficult to put our wet clothes back on after sitting for half an hour in the warmth of a bar. This time however, slipping back into my



sodden rain gear, I bravely braced myself for the next few kilometres. What did I have to complain about? Pilgrims in the 10th Century did not have the luxury of cosy bars, waterproof boots and other protective clothing. In fact, many had died along the way from illnesses, accidents, heart attacks and other health problems. This explained the existence of so many historic hospital buildings along the way. I was certainly happy to be living in the 21st Century.

I picked up my pace for the remaining kilometres for I was bent on arriving at my destination as I had started—walking alone and just allowing my thoughts to surface. Perhaps partially because of the rain, I didn't feel a sense of elation as I trekked through the suburbs of Santiago to the cathedral in the centre of the old city. For me, my trip had been all about people, experiences and my reflections along the way. These formed the highlights of my journey. It was all about my journey, not my destination. I had heard the saying many times but now I truly felt it and didn't just accept it intellectually. There had been no question in my mind that I could complete what I had started, except for a fleeting moment in Leon when I had wondered if my tendonitis would put a halt to my walk.

Now another chapter of my life was coming to an end. Part of me was looking forward to returning home but another part was calling me back to the carefree joy of El Camino—the road. My major achievement was that I had started out on this journey alone and on my own terms. Everything had turned out so perfectly that this would resonate as the most amazing journey I had ever embarked upon. I had trusted that all would be provided where a need existed and this had held true in each and every situation along the way.

I arrived at the Santiago Cathedral soaking wet, for the noon mass for pilgrims. In a trance-like state I gazed around constantly, searching for familiar faces of people I had previously connected to on the way. I felt a little disoriented but soon the faces began to emerge from the crowds. It was wonderful to connect again with Carlos and Conche from San Sebastian, Spain, and, of course, Annie and Laurent were there as were Martha and Alejandro from Colombia and Erica from Switzerland.

The only thing on my mind after the service, though, was a hot bath and getting dry. At that moment Erica approached me to make dinner arrangements but quickly led me to a small bar near the cathedral where I arranged a room for the night for twelve euros—perfect! I was unable to absorb the majesty of the cathedral at this point, but I'd get back to that later. First things first!

The hot bath restored me and I returned to Santiago Cathedral, alone and dry, to soak up the grandeur of it all. Built between 1075 and 1188, it was initially designed in a Romanesque style. However, it was finished in the Baroque style, apparently to create a greater impact. The designers and builders felt that after



walking all the way across the Camino, pilgrims would want something awe inspiring at the end. Santiago Cathedral was certainly that: with its imposing ceilings, the ornate silver and gold used to decorate the magnificent altar area, and “el botafumeiro” (the censer), which was so large that it required eight men to swing it high above the altar during important services.



Santiago Cathedral

As was customary, I prayed at the Gate of Glory; hugged the ornate statue of St. James; viewed the silver casket that was believed to hold his remains; and reflected on the millions who had done this before me. In the mid 800's, a tomb had been found nearby and was claimed to contain the remains of the martyred apostle James. Thus, in the Middle Ages, the pilgrim's walk to honour St. James was known as the most important pilgrimage in Christendom. 'San Tiago' loosely translates into 'St. James the Moorslayer', and recognizes his early attempts to drive the Muslim invaders out of Spain. Here I was where it had all started. So many million people had arrived before me to hug the same statue, walk the same stairs, and gaze at all the Cathedral's craftsmanship and beauty. Somehow I felt 'one' with them all.

I dropped into the Pilgrim's Office, a few steps from the cathedral, and handed in my passport with all the stamps I had collected each day from the refuges at which I had stayed and the bars I had visited. I needed this proof before I could



be awarded the official “Compostela”, a certificate written in Latin that would attest to the fact that I had successfully completed my journey on the Camino.

The rain had subsided by mid-afternoon and I enjoyed touring the city, with trusty street map in hand, to investigate train and bus schedules and buy a train ticket for my return trip to Bilbao in two days time. After wandering about five miles within the city (after all, walking was what I was used to) Erica and I met just before eight o’clock to check out the narrow, cobbled streets of the old city and look for enticing restaurants. As was customary in Santiago, the rain returned but, after a few intermittent downpours, Erica bought an umbrella under which we skipped gaily across the roadways poking our heads into doorways and looking in windows for a comfortable dining location.

When we finally found one, I ordered soup and a salad but Erica, more adventurously, opted for salted peppers and octopus. She couldn’t eat it all so finally, at the end of my journey through Galicia, I bravely tried the tentacled beast. It was cut into small pieces and served with spices and wine sauce so it did look much more tempting than the whole creature I had photographed in the platter on the bar at San Piao. Much to my surprise, I found it delicious. While we ate Erica and I shared our hopes and dreams for the future and we ended the evening just after eleven. When I returned to my room, I found that the bar owners had decided to do me a favour: they had entered my room; taken my rain poncho and underwear and hung them on a line in the stairway to dry; put my backpack in the closet; and removed the carpets. I felt that my privacy had been invaded and decided I would find another room the next day. Besides, I liked variety.

I guess I needed more sleep than I had thought, after all the excitement of arrival and over a month of daily walking, so I was not up until 9:30 the next morning. I walked to the Santa Catalina Hospidaje, about five minutes away, and arranged a clean, modern, single room for only fifteen euros, for my last night. Only then did I feel free to explore. I ventured out once again, found an appealing local café and had a croissant and coffee. I was going to miss this when I got home. I enjoyed the feeling of belonging and felt truly immersed in the Spanish way of life and culture. I was totally at ease wandering through the city on my own. I was still marvelling that not even in Santiago—this tourist centre; this imposing city—did I feel like a tourist. The local bars and restaurants were filled with more locals than walkers it seemed. I was sure that this was so because it was October—decidedly off-season.

I knew I would need an umbrella if I wanted to stay dry through the day so I bought one and energetically continued my explorations. I happened upon a group of veterinarians with an English-speaking guide who did an excellent job of describing the details of the Cathedral’s interior and providing an historical overview. Wasn’t I lucky! I must have been with the tour for nearly one and a half hours – all at no cost.



By the end of the tour, I was feeling a little hungry again so I found a warm, inviting café for a hot bacon and cheese bocadillo (sandwich) and lemonade and then returned to my room to recharge. Feeling refreshed, I started off again for a tour of the Hotel de los Reyes Catolicos, a luxurious parador, which had been built in the 15th Century and had once been a pilgrim hospital. There was a sign clearly stating that the premises were for hotel guests but I ignored it and traipsed through hallways that overlooked a lush garden courtyard. I tried to imagine how it might have looked as a hospital filled with rows of hospital rooms. I was particularly impressed with the intricacy of the hand-carved doors. As a souvenir of my visit, I helped myself to a pen, pencil and candy from the maid's cart then merrily made my way out the exit door.

I found yet another cosy café for coffee and bought groceries for lunch and dinner for my upcoming 11-hour train ride to Bilbao the next day. Since I had not bought souvenirs of the trip, except for a gold scallop shell pin with a cross from Leon, I bought Adrian a leather wallet and myself a pink stone ring symbolizing love and heart opening—emotions and feelings I wanted to remember from the Camino. Apart from this, I had picked up an acorn from the trail to remind me of all the oak trees I had walked through. The acorn I saw as a symbol of new life.

As a continuation of the medieval tradition of hospitality offered to pilgrims, each day, the luxury Parador I had toured offered free meals to ten pilgrims at each of the three major meal times—breakfast, lunch and dinner. I chose to take advantage of one of my free meals and went down to the parking garage to speak with the attendant, as instructed. I was invited to dinner with seven others and was looking forward to the treat. We were escorted through the main lobby, looking considerably grubbier than the \$300-a-night, paying guests, and found ourselves in the kitchen, trays in hand, waiting for the chefs to place our meals on them.

Although the meal wasn't a gourmet one, it was substantial: chickpea soup, beef, boiled potatoes, bread, wine, bottled water and a kiwi fruit.⁴ We were then given our own special pilgrim's dining room. The most enjoyable part of the outing was meeting seven new people and we spent a wonderful two hours laughing and talking about our travels. A few of the group included Derek, from Belgium, who had cycled 1500 kilometres; two women, one from Australia and the other from Spokane, Washington, who, like me, were travelling alone and had started out in St. Jean Pied de Port; and two Spanish men. Derek was staying at the same hostel I was so I was accompanied back feeling well cared for and safe. He even lent me his alarm clock so I wouldn't oversleep and miss my 9 o'clock train the next morning. What a wonderful day in Santiago and what a fitting dinner celebration on my last night!





The Final 'free' Feast at the Parador

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Going Home

Santiago to Bilbao, London and Toronto

As I left around eight the next morning, Saturday, October 26th, I heard the sound of water falling outside. Oh, no! It sounded like torrential rain. But, as I ventured outside I found that the noise only came from the fountain just outside the hostel, and the day was dry and welcoming. I met two French Canadian women also leaving the hostel at the same time. Francine was a psychotherapist from Montreal, Quebec, who had travelled widely, including trips to Bali, and to an ashram (retreat) in Poona, India, and who planned to walk in Ethiopia next. She had sold her house and most of her possessions and had a room in her sister's house in Montreal, which she used as her headquarters between trips. Juliet had never travelled alone before this trip and also came from Quebec from a small town about sixty kilometres north of the Ottawa/Hull area. We exchanged email addresses and separated, for Francine was headed to Alicante on the south coast of Spain on a high-speed train.

Juliet and I boarded the nine o'clock train for Bilbao but after about half an hour, it stopped for mechanical repairs. We were asked to change trains as the fast train to Alicante was coming down the track and would take us to Orense. As luck would have it, I saw Maria (the energy healer) standing at the side of the track and we had a happy reunion. I hadn't seen her since our heart-to-heart talk in Arzua and as we boarded the new train we chatted in our seats, in the dining car then exchanged addresses.

The scenery was magnificent on this very sunny day as we passed mountains, rivers and fiord-like scenery. The trees looked like poplars and were very yellow now that autumn was upon us. As I was dozing in the sunshine in the train car, I felt a very strong voice that said: "Your Mother was here but she has now moved out". This seemed to tie in with the dream of my mother driving me in the Mercedes that went out of control. The feeling was so powerful that I immediately dug out my journal and started reflecting and writing. It seemed to mean that I was now 'free' to make my own choices that were best for me. Interesting!

I had been reluctant to backtrack on the Camino where I would pass cities and towns I had walked through but it was the best thing that could have happened. On one level I think I had reached the end of my walk and felt a bit let down, but with the train ride I was able to see the enormity of the whole experience and re-



alize the feat that I had accomplished. It is often so easy to take things for granted as they happen in small steps. But when I was able to see the entire picture and realize that even after eleven hours on the train I was not yet back where I started, I was awed. In fact, the scenery from the train was very different from what I had seen when I was walking so I was actually seeing the familiar from a different point of view which had an impact both physically and mentally. Life is interesting and I was blessed. Once again, walking the Camino imitated life and reinforced the importance of the journey.

The final thirty kilometres or so into Bilbao were very scenic as the train seemed to circle around high hills with wonderful views of the valleys below and small communities huddled in the shadows as evening approached. We finally arrived at eight that evening, right on time. As I walked around the train station gazing at signs to get my bearings I heard a voice behind me say: “Where are you headed?” It was Angus Massey, a twenty-nine year old sculptor and fellow pilgrim originally from Dublin. He was now living in France where he was developing his artistic talents further after spending some time in Italy. I told him I was heading for the Albergue Bilbao. He had never heard of this refuge so he tagged along and we caught a bus just outside the station for the quick trip. We got a small discount—11.2 euros rather than the 15 euros I had previously paid—since we had walked the Camino, and I ended up getting a room with six bunks but with only one other occupant. It was a spacious sixth floor room and after picking up some tourist information for the next day’s tour of the city, I fell asleep.

I arose the next morning thinking I had missed breakfast but I was early. With the time change, it was only 7:30 here in Bilbao. Other visitors had made the same mistake but I just went back to my room, showered and woke up a little more before joining Angus for breakfast. I had cereal, milk, cake, pear, juice and good coffee—a hearty start to the day.

I was quite happy to spend the day alone but Angus suggested we go together and, like everything else I had experienced, this turned out to be my best possible choice. The streets of Bilbao were quiet on a Sunday morning around nine and in some areas I was happy to have some company. We walked about thirty minutes before reaching the old part of the city called San Anton with its pedestrian alleyways and interesting historic buildings. We sat in the Plaza Nueva, had coffee, browsed the flea market there and seemed to blend in well with the locals. We arrived at Bilbao’s Cathedral de Santiago just in time for the beautiful midday mass and then treated ourselves to chocolate and churros at Angus’ suggestion. The chocolate was like thick, melted chocolate and the churro was a donut-type, long, thin pastry that was designed to be dipped in it. Oh, how decadent! We ate a light lunch of tapas in the mudehar Café Iruna with its intricate decorations and crowds of locals then, after trying an Italian ice cream, set off for an outdoor book fair and a wander along the river to the Guggenheim.



In the Guggenheim we went our separate ways and spent about two hours before becoming over-stimulated and over-awed by the fantastic architecture and exhibits—particularly the Rubens exhibit from the Hermitage. Of course, we were hungry again so we dropped into a popular café in the Plaza Mayor and shared a pizza before heading back to the Albergue on the Number 58 bus. What a day it had been, and not at all tiring. The weather had started off with temperatures over twenty but it had later clouded over and when we were heading home had developed into a misty rain heralding a natural end to the day.



Outside the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao

Angus had been a charming companion and he had talked about his life's ambition of being a sculptor and how he had been encouraged to study architecture, which would be a more marketable skill. At nineteen he had taken a four-year graphic design programme and had eventually trusted himself enough to move into sculpture. He had then apprenticed in Italy and France. His dream was to have his own show in New York so I gave him my card and said I expected to be invited when this occurred in a year's time.

I slept well that night and in the morning took the Bilbao Subway to Plaza Mayor to catch the airport bus for the 9:45 Iberian Airlines flight to Heathrow. What an amazing journey. I glimpsed the Spanish countryside in the sunshine one last time with a strong feeling that I would be back again someday. The Spanish people and their countryside had worked their magic and I was eager to see and experience more in future trips. There was a two-hour delay in London for my Toronto flight on British Airways but I eventually landed around eight o'clock that evening. I was greeted by Adrian's lovely smile and hug; arrived home to flowers,



a clean house, dinner and some Spanish Champagne; and received a gift certificate for a pedicure. What a lucky woman I was! Before my trip, I had experienced many dreams of walking alone and finding my way to the end of the trail. Somehow this felt like a metaphor for my life. Now it feels like a new beginning, as if something else is ready to manifest itself and I am ready for it.



A last look at Spain

I can think of no better way to end than by quoting Julia Cameron in *“Vein of Gold”*:

“We run ourselves ragged, convinced that if we just do more and go faster, we will succeed. Instead, we often lose the pulse of our own lives. We can find it again by walking.”

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In 2002 Evelyn Ennor was between careers. She had been passionate about her work as Director of a University Career Centre for 15 years and was drawn to walking the Camino to stir up her soul and decide on the next step. The career counsellor left to pursue her own dreams!

In 2010 she is a freelance Holistic Health Educator and Certified Reiki Practitioner passionately presenting workshops on healthy living strategies to corporate, government and non profit sectors and pursuing energy healing. Check out www.evelynennor.com The journey continues....



Appendix 1 Backpack Contents

(Khamsin 28 from MEC – 40-litre capacity)

Clothing/Footwear	Miscellaneous
1 Pr. Sierra Designs pant 1 Pr. Columbia combo pant with zip-off leg to convert to shorts 1 Lightweight Polartec 100 fleece from MEC 1 Nylon short sleeved shirt 1 long sleeved shirt, sun resistant from MEC 1 Short sleeved, scoop necked, silky top 2 Pr. Tilley briefs (all items above quick dry and lightweight) 1 sarong 1 light merino wool long sleeved pullover 1 Bra Tights Cotton Nightdress 3 Pr. Hiking socks – merino wool 1 Pr. Coolmax sock liners 1 Pr. Teva sandals 1 Pr. Rockport hiking boots with Vibram sole 1 Lightweight nylon shell Lightweight leather gloves 1 Plastic rain poncho 1 Pr. rain pants 2 Bandanas (for neck, headband, headscarf and wounds) Tilley hat – wide brimmed (for sun and rain protection) 1 Pr. Glasses with clip-ons for sun plus Chums ‘strings’ Money belt around waist for airline tickets, passport, money and travel insurance	Leather waist pack for camera Small purse for money Pen Business cards Matches Comb Mirror Lip balm Safety pins Mini sunscreen tube 1 One-litre water bottle in outside of pack 1 330- ml bottle tucked in waist pack for easy access Lanyard around neck with whistle and micro flashlight Plastic bag with journal, pen and Confraternity of St. James Guidebook Snacks of dried fruit, bread, cheese, tuna, fruit (varied) Lightweight and small Woods sleeping bag Fold-up camp pillow Plastic teaspoon, knife and fork 6 extra Ziploc bags in various sizes A stone to throw o the Cairn at the Cruz de Ferro 6 Rolls of Film canvas carry all bag for ‘everything’
Toiletries, etc...	First Aid Kit
Dry towel Camp suds/Terrapin Antibacterial Gel -(for washing body, clothes, etc. (mini sizes) Shampoo (mini) Deodorant (mini) Hand Cream (mini) Fold-up scissors, nail clipper, nail file Ear plugs Clothes pegs (5) Travel Toothbrush and mini toothpaste and floss	Band-aids Compeed Polysporin Vaseline (mini tube) Homeopathic anti inflammatory cream Vitamin C and Acidolphus tablets (1-A-Day) Trifla (Energizer, laxative, etc.) Antihistamine for wine allergy

