

CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT Cover of the journal; Villa Franca del Bierzo town scene; corner of Casa de los Botines by Antoni Gaudi in Leon, Spain; Basilica de San Isidoro, Leon, Spain; the Santiago Cathedral, ending point of the Camino, seen from outside with a beer under a patio umbrella; unknown travelers, outside of Castrojeriz, a historic town where I stayed along the way; and the Pilgrims' Monument, Alto del Peron, on the side of the single track trail at the mountain pass near Pamplona.

# Walk This Way

## Jogging and journaling through Spain's Camino de Santiago

WORDS AND ART BY MEGHAN HANSON

My goal was *sort of* simple: spend twenty-one days running eight hundred kilometers, or nearly five hundred miles, along Spain's famed Camino de Santiago. Years earlier, I read about a crazy guy who attempted about eighty kilometers per day, but he ended up straining something, halting his journey. It sounded intriguing. Then I saw a poster of a gravel road lined by trees with the words, 'I will, just watch me.' For whatever reason, that was all I needed.

I have traveled a lot internationally, but I had never traveled by myself. As part of my 'I can do anything on my own' mantra, this bothered me—and I wouldn't let it hold me back. I started researching the Camino.

The history of this path, known in English as "The Way of St. James," is fascinating. Originating as a religious pilgrimage, it now attracts people of all ages for a variety of reasons, from spiritual to physical to social. Starting in the ninth century, thousands traveled to the shrine of St. James in Santiago, a small town on Spain's northwestern coast. The Camino pilgrims were sometimes called "peregrines," a type of bird seen on the trail. It was one of the four great Christian pilgrimages: Jerusalem,

Rome, Canterbury, and Santiago. It's the only one that still exists largely in its original form, with several routes. Although travel on the Camino declined for centuries, and some of its walkways came close to disappearing, its popularity was resurrected in the nineteenth century. Today, thousands of people walk it each year.

The Camino is a hodgepodge of trails, with different routes, starting points, and pass throughs. All that was clear to me was the ending: the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. I ultimately chose the Camino Francés, or French Way, the best known route, used by 60 percent of modern walkers. It starts at the base of France's Pyrenees Mountains and heads west over a mix of

dirt trails, gravel roads, and paved paths.

Back to the eighty kilometers per day: I love trail running—or well, maybe trail shuffling? But as another mantra, 'start slow and taper' hints, I probably wasn't going to do that distance each day. I wanted to achieve a balance of being able to jog along for hours at a time, while also walking when I met someone interesting, sitting or drinking a beer when I felt like it, having a few layover days, and, most important to me, sketching in my journal. I also wanted to travel as lightly as possible. Nothing is more annoying than hauling a bouncing pack for hours on end. While I wasn't traveling the Camino for religious reasons, I wanted time to absorb the experience without feeling weighed down.

I made my way via trains and a bus to the Camino Frances start in the tiny town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. I had spent a lot of time back home fine-tuning my packing system, managing to get all I thought I needed for my three-week journey into a five-and-a-half pound running pack. Showing up on the streets of Saint-Jean, however, had me

fewer people, less waste, and a more tolerant attitude inside. I became more comfortable in my surroundings, able to appreciate the amazing and changing landscapes and incredible human history.

At some points, the trail was six feet below the surrounding forest floor, showing how the constant use of the path over hundreds of years has eroded

huge packs and had started in Paris or in Berlin. Some were walking twice the distance I was undertaking.

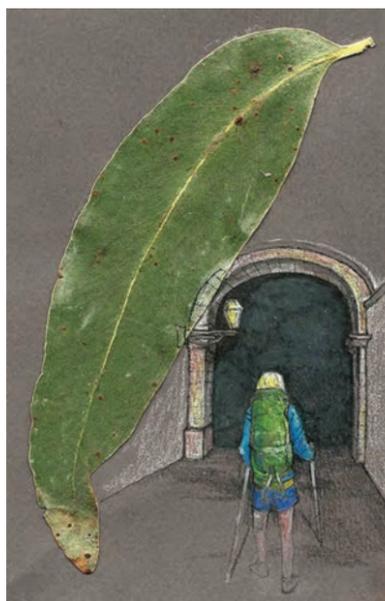
My lightweight pack turned out to be the best thing I could have done. People had me pose for photos, shocked at its relatively tiny size. Of particular interest was the amount of space taken up by journal, pens, pen-



**ABOVE** The Pilgrims Passport. In order to get documentation of having done the Camino you have to have at least one stamp every day from the *Albergue* you stay at (hostels for pilgrims on foot or bike). Additional stamps come from churches and bars.

**RIGHT** A woman from Florida who finished with me, this is the final point that opens on to the Plaza in front of the cathedral.

**Everyone's Camino is different. For mine, packing light, traveling alone, meeting people, and journal sketching every day went a long way toward simplifying life.**



questioning my assumptions. My pack looked more like the top attachment of most folks' much bulkier set-ups.

After spending the night in a house that reeked of cats with a French hostess who told me I would never make it, I set out at daybreak. I guess I'm not really sure what I expected, but the first day brought unanticipated sights and sounds: masses of people, trash and human waste lining the trail, iPhones blaring music. This *definitely* was not what I'd expected.

But, as with most things, time and distance worked their magic. Soon I found

the trail's way into the landscape. In other places, it paralleled busy highways. In Pamplona I missed the celebrated Running of the Bulls, but did manage to get swept up in a Catalan Independence parade. In the Rioja region, there were grape fields and fig trees, and even a wine fountain on the side of the trail. Across the Meseta, a high, dry, and flat plateau in central Spain, my perceptions of distance and time were discombobulated as "The Way" headed straight west. As we neared Santiago, the trail crossed through the autonomous community of Galicia, with many steep rocky paths and wonderful food.

Most people seemed to be going a similar distance per day, keeping pace with fellow travelers. While I began mostly jogging, it made for an unexpectedly lonely start. I thought I would love that speed, but then I started to question it. When I did stop to talk, I met wonderful people from every walk of life.

The common thread seemed to be a real interest in stepping away from the chaos and technology of modern life, to spend time just thinking (or not thinking!) and learning about others along the way.

Over and over I heard people say, "It's your Camino." Some individuals traveled ten kilometers a day, some took a bus part way, and some shipped their backpacks ahead. Some carried

cils, and watercolors. It initiated several conversations about what we *actually* need versus what we *think* we need. One traveler told me, "We pack our fears." I believe that if we can just put trust in our abilities and faith in our surroundings, we can all benefit from paring down, even in our everyday life. Sure, I had a few cold nights, but nothing worse than that!

On the last day, I walked into Santiago with new friends. Mostly a descent and only seventeen kilometers to go, we took our time. The routes converged, and more and more people came together heading into the city. The Way of St. James winds through the city, crossing under a stone archway to terminate in the large plaza in front of the Cathedral.

A journey is always much more than the sum of its parts, and it takes time afterward for it all to sink in. Ultimately, I think trips like this help us to direct our lives toward the person we want to be and the things we want to prioritize. They help us flush out those things that seem so important, until we can step away to realize they really aren't so important after all.

Everyone's Camino *is* different. For mine, packing light, traveling alone, meeting people, and journal sketching every day went a long way toward simplifying life enough to permit me the time to really think. **tv**