

Buen Camino

In 2016, I commenced my leadership in Catholic Education South Australia as the Acting Deputy Principal at St Joseph's School Murray Bridge. At the end of this appointment, I completed my first multi-day hike. Since then, each year I have taken some time during a term break to "escape". I have found the constant decision making as a school leader exhausting – hiking has been instrumental to my wellbeing. I have done some wonderful walks in many states in Australia. What I love most about these treks is the lack of decision making – you can only wear what you carry, you can only eat what you carry, and you sleep in the tent and on the mat that you carry! All the Australian hikes have all been planned by my sister – I don't even make the decisions before the adventure begins. The other benefit of remote hiking in Australia is the lack of connectivity.

Over the last few years, I have thought about doing the Camino and shared this idea with friends and family. I have read novels, been gifted guidebooks and maps and have also watched a couple of movies. At the end of last year, I applied for Renewal Leave to walk the Camino and also explore some Dominican history - I'll write about the visits to Dominican sites in the next newsletter.

There are many Camino routes in Spain that all lead to Santiago's Praza Obradoiro and Cathedral. I, along with Mathew (my husband) and Andrea (my sister) walked "The Way of St James". The ancient pilgrim path, also known as Camino Frances.

The Accommodation

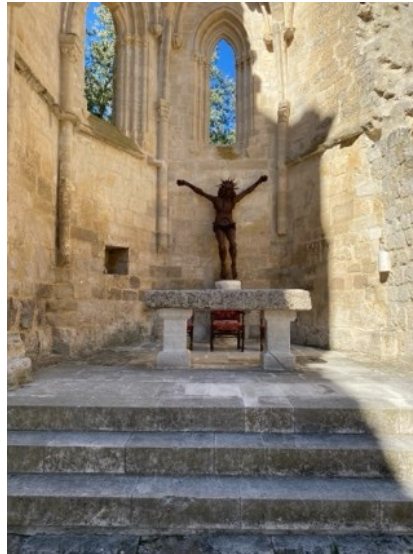
In preparation for the hike, my sister booked the first two night's accommodation. There are many different types of accommodation options for pilgrims. Municipal albergues, private albergues (some being people's homes), hostels, paradores (closer to 5 star) and donativos. We stayed in many places but never booked a paradore!

On the first night we slept in a municipal Albergue, two large rooms with over 200 beds. On night two we were in a private albergue in a room with three beds and our own bathroom. So different! At the end of each day's walk we chatted about where we would walk to the following day and then booked somewhere to stay. I wanted to stay away from the decision making so Andrea and Mathew generally chose the accommodation. As the days went on, I got a little fussier and suggested that we try to book private rooms when possible and if not possible the minimum requirement was that the bathroom was on the same level as my bedroom!



There were a few nights that stand out as highlights.

One of these was a donativo – accommodation run by volunteers. A donativo is free and donations are accepted from those who are able to contribute. The ancient convent de San Anton has 12 beds, no electricity and no hot water. The toilet stored the hard hats just in case there was movement in the ruin. The pilgrim dinner, prepared by the two volunteers, was simple, vegetarian and eaten in the middle of the ruin, under the stars. This was the most basic and the most beautiful place to rest overnight.



Another memorable night was in a private albergue where a rural Spanish family welcomed us into one of the many rooms in their home for pilgrims. The home was old, dark, large and musty. The taxidermy fox that watched me eat had been punished for eating the chickens! The food provided was all home-made and sourced from their farm – the family had no English, but their hospitality and welcome was extraordinary.

On night 22 we stopped at La Portela de Valcarce. We booked into an albergue with four beds. David took our booking reluctantly – if we didn't make it to the accommodation, he would lose $\frac{3}{4}$ of his potential income. David was an American man who walked the Camino and decided to move to Spain. Leaving his family and rock star friends behind he established an albergue that serves "rock and roll" pizza. A beautiful intimate dinner with David, his partner and Peter the other pilgrim. The salads were fantastic.



The Walk

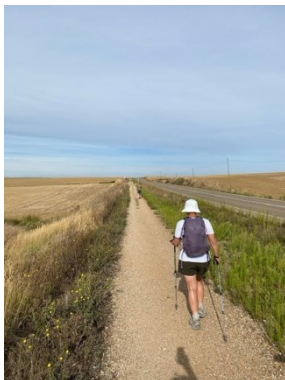
The walk is about 800 km – we commenced on 29th August and completed it on 25th September. We averaged around 28km each day and walking time was generally around 5½ hours. I carried a change of clothes, a warm top, some toiletries and medical supplies – so unlike lots of others, my pack was very light. In life we really don't need much stuff!

On day one, we left St Jean Pied-de-Port early in the morning, knowing that the climb over the Pyrenees into Spain was considered one of the hardest days described in the guide books as a “strenuous uphill climb”. We walked the climb to Roncesvalles in a thunderstorm. The weather inhibited our vision of the beautiful landscape, it also distracted me from the climb. At the summit of the walk the rain stopped. Arriving at our accommodation we chased the sun between buildings and trees to dry out our clothes and shoes.



Sunrise in Spain was around 8am. Most days we began walking as the sun rose. Small towns were littered across the 800 km. We never needed to walk more than about 15km before arriving at somewhere to refuel and rest.

I really enjoyed the moments of silence. My favourite days were when we chose the “scenic route”. A few more kilometres and climbs but off the main highway. The scenic route was not chosen by many of the other pilgrims, so we had many kilometres of quiet.



The weather was mostly good. The last couple of days were very wet. Our final day was much like our first. The rain was relenting. We arrived at Santiago's Praza Obradoiro drenched.



The Pilgrims

Between 2000 and 2500 “pilgrims” arrive in Santiago de Compostela each day over the summer months. There are many Camino routes. Around 200 pilgrims left St Jean Pied-de-Port with us on 29th August to complete the Camino Frances. The opportunities to engage with others are endless. Some of the pilgrims we met had walked a number of Caminos and many had walked the Camino Frances more than once.

People walk for many reasons:

Peter (79) - walked out of his house in Holland and headed towards Santiago after he buried his wife.

Elodie (50) - walked out of her house in Paris after spending the last three years caring for her husband as he died.

Maggie (60ish) – a fellow Australian, walking for her son who died at 32. He was a disabled man who loved to be taken for a walk.

James (32) – walking to work out if he should get divorced.

Herb (83) – walking because he still could. Herb said, “I couldn’t convince anyone to join me – they think I’m mad”. At 83, Herb and his wife volunteer each week, providing food for the homeless. He spoke respectfully about the people he fed saying “life is just tricky for some people”.

Heath (60ish) – has completed many Caminos and is walking because “it keeps me fit”.

Mario (60ish) – walking with his wife because “I just love her”.

People spoke about walking for the human connection.

We met a theologian commencing his retirement, an Australian priest on sabbatical leave and Ellis who were walking as part of the faith story.

The Why

Each day someone would ask you “Why are you walking?” I simply replied that the walk was about creating some quiet in my life.

I was uncomfortable with being called a “pilgrim - a person who journeys to a sacred place as an act of religious devotion”. As I walked, I did wonder whether I would have some sort of spiritual awakening or experience. I met a woman on the walk who spoke of two experiences she had on her Way. On one occasion when visiting a Church, she had been blessed by a priest or volunteer – she was unsure. He spoke in Spanish. She did not understand the words but



recalled being overwhelmed with a feeling of peace. I went into a church most days – no blessings for me.

Arriving in Santiago in the pouring rain wasn't a "magical" moment I'd imagined either.

After completing the walk, Mat and I attended a Pilgrim Mass (in English) at the Chapel in the Pilgrim Office and the Pilgrim Mass in the Cathedral. The mass at the Cathedral was in Spanish, we didn't understand what was being said but understood the structure of the mass. There were 15 priests and standing room only. The Botafumeiro, a giant incense burner originally used to fumigate the sweaty and possibly disease-ridden pilgrims swung after the mass – it was spectacular. More of a tourist event than a "spiritual" moment.

The English mass was simple and beautiful. At the beginning of Mass, we were all invited to introduce ourselves, share our names, where we have come from, and how far we walked.

Fr Manny spoke about the Camino. He spoke about our experiences on "The Way": tired legs, sore feet, blisters, snoring, big climbs, steep descents, timing toilet stops, finding water and food, chatting with strangers, language barriers, different cuisine, towns closed for siesta, securing a bed, being hot, being cold, being wet, living with little, not being in control and enjoying the routine of simply walking. He reflected on how we were on the hike - times when we were generous, when we were tolerant, kind, patient, welcoming, accepting, trusting, caring and compassionate.

Fr Manny spoke about the Camino reflecting the ups and downs of our daily lives and challenged us to be a "pilgrims" in our own life and walk to "a sacred place" or to "holiness" in the place we call home. Fr Manny said walking to 'holiness' simply requires us to be more generous, more tolerant, more compassionate, more kind, more loving and more patient. This was my moment of awakening!

At San Anton, the volunteers spoke of their Camino experiences and whilst language barriers prevented me from completely understanding, they believed that it isn't until you are home that you really understand your Camino.

Whilst my Camino reflection on the experience may change and develop over time, today I feel called to go slower and be more present with those I encounter.

