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A Pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago: To Walk the Way of Saint James

MICHELLE RACUSIN

Blessed are those whose strength is in you, whose hearts are set on pilgrimage. Psalm 84:5 (NIV)

I remember it vividly. Sitting at the dinner table with my husband and four sons, I tentatively suggested that I would like to make a pilgrimage to Europe to walk the Camino de Santiago. Forks clanked down on plates and all eyes turned toward me. “You want to do what?” they chortled. I might as well have said that I wanted to fly to the moon.

I explained that the Camino de Santiago (The Way of St. James) is a network of pilgrim paths from various places in Europe that converge in the city of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, where tradition holds the bones of St. James are buried. The route I had selected was the Camino Francés (The French Way). It is the most popular, historically rich, and best-marked of all of the paths. Pilgrims follow yellow scallop-shell waymarks that are affixed to poles, painted on fences, or embedded in cobblestone streets along the way to insure that they are headed in the right direction. Given my utter lack of an innate sense of direction and propensity for getting lost, this seemed the most prudent choice. This pilgrimage begins in St Jean-Pied-du-Port at the foot of the French Pyrenees, continues over the mountain into Basque country following various Roman trade routes, and makes its way along the Atlantic coast in Galicia before arriving at the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. Those who choose to continue to Cape Finisterre walk nearly 900 kilometers or 560 miles over a four- to five-week period.

The pilgrimage has been made since medieval times for an increase in virtues, pardon for sins, or for respite from vices. Today it is walked as much for personal transformation as it is for recreation or to commune with nature. Unlike the Appalachian Trail in the United States which is a solitary trek, the Camino traverses villages—some of which have long been abandoned—through some bustling urban centers, as well as long stretches of uninhabited mountains, farmlands, and plateaus.

Anticipating that my enthusiasm would be contagious, I invited my sons to make the pilgrimage with me. Their responses varied. My oldest said that if he went, he wouldn't come back. "Not an option," I replied. Two seized this as an opportunity to scope out the end of the pilgrimage on my behalf to determine which bars were the best for an end-of-pilgrimage celebration. They reasoned that the drinking age in Spain was lower than in the United States and that they would make the most of it. After some research, one of my sons determined that this would be an amazing thing and he took me up on it. My poor husband was too shocked to utter anything coherent. He would, in time, become my biggest supporter.

And so the preparations began. The reality was that I was not an athlete, had never donned a backpack, and had never even tried on hiking boots. In fact, when I visited a sporting goods shop to purchase footwear, I sat down, took hiking boots out of the box, slipped off my high heel pumps, and tried to slide my foot into the stiff boot. A sales associate, watching from a distance, came and gently said, "You've never done this before, have you?" Under expert tutelage, I learned the basics of proper boot fit, the adjustment of backpacks, existence of quick-dry clothing, and socks with liners to prevent blisters. Together with their help and hours of research, my pack (which included a sleeping bag and all of the necessities for the pilgrimage) weighed less than ten pounds before food and water.

I needed to prepare physically, too. So I joined a gym and enlisted the help of a personal trainer who walked me through the use of selected equipment and gave me a workout routine. There were so many machines that I finally resorted to asking the men who were using the contraptions if I could take their picture to help me remember which machine was which and how it worked. This request was graciously accommodated in all cases.

Eighteen months later, tickets in hand, my son and I boarded a plane to Paris to begin our adventure. We wore our backpacks on the plane, lest they get lost in transit, and checked hiking poles and a Swiss Army knife (which were not TSA compliant) in a pasteboard box that we planned to dispose of upon our arrival. After a number of hours in flight, we landed safely in Paris. Our checked box was not as fortunate. We went to report the missing item only to discover that the agent did not speak English and my three French words, *bonjour*, *s'il vous plait*, and *merci* were inadequate to effectively file a claim. The agent

showed us a laminated card with pictures of suitcases so that we could point to one resembling ours—but there was no pasteboard box and she had little patience. We figured they were lost forever, which was no big deal. We were very thankful that we had not checked our backpacks. (The box arrived at our home two and one half weeks later!)

We left the lost luggage claims department to buy a combination of subway and train tickets to St Jean-Pied-du-Port, our starting point. Upon entering the ticket offices, we met utter chaos. France was in the throes of a transportation strike. The ticket machines displayed prices that were escalating before our eyes. We stood in a long line and were able to purchase tickets for the subway. We did not understand where it was going, but reasoned that we would figure it out when we got there and that it was likely closer to our destination than we were at that time. When we arrived, we found as much confusion as there was at the airport. Ticket agents repeatedly told us that nothing would run for days. We kept getting in another line and asking again on the off chance that something would change. Finally, an exhausted agent asked if we had a credit card. Yes, we did! “Great!” he replied, “Go to the platform, find a man in a hat and buy a ticket.” It seemed odd. We wondered what kind of hat this might be. But we were desperate. (As it turned out, the hat was a *képi*, which was part of his uniform.) We did as he said only to find that the ticket price was 210 Euros cash and that I had maxed out my ATM withdrawals with 200 Euros. No credit cards accepted. The train was in its final boarding. We ran and found an ATM, held our breath, and were able to make another withdrawal. We ran back. As I was trying to get the tickets, my son boarded the train as instructed by the “Man-in-the-Hat.” The doors closed and the train began to move. My son had no phone and I didn’t know exactly where the train was headed. Miraculously, the agent was able to open the door and said he would collect the fare later.

Upon arriving at our next stop, we discovered that a bus would run at midnight to our final destination. We didn’t want to arrive in the middle of the night because we would not be able to find a place to stay. We looked for people with backpacks and, when we had located a few fellow pilgrims, hopped into a taxi and spent a small fortune to arrive at St Jean-Pied-du-Port, a small town at the foot of the French Pyrenees.

We began looking for a place to spend the night and as we walked, a car drove up, a woman got out and asked if we wanted to spend the night in her

hostel. She led us through an unlocked door, took us into the kitchen, which had a small wooden table without chairs or appliances, collected our money and took off. We all looked at each other saying, "I hope she actually owns this place!" But such is the Camino, as we would learn. There were two rooms with bunk beds and a small washroom. Our roommates were an interesting combination of people from Sweden, Italy, and Spain. Juan had just graduated from medical school, was good-looking, and extremely cocky and arrogant. He entered into conversation with my son and upon learning that I was his mother, turned and asked me what I did to prepare for the pilgrimage. He was full of advice and kept looking at my son as if to say, "I am really sorry. You poor thing...here with your mother."

We stopped by the Pilgrims' office to obtain a passport (*credencial*), a piece of folded stock paper on which pilgrims received stamps along the way. These passports were required to stay in hostels and would serve as proof that we had walked the route so that when presented at the Pilgrim office at the end we could receive our *compostela*, the coveted certificate of completion. In order to get the *compostela* at the end, a pilgrim must walk at least the last hundred kilometers of The Way. We also got our scallop shell to tie on our backpack—the sign of a pilgrim. We went to Mass for a pilgrims' blessing and prayers for protection. The sound of a multitude of languages filled the cathedral as excited *peregrinos* (pilgrims) connected with someone with whom they could speak. My son was asked to read the Hebrew Scripture lesson (in English). Every village or city that had a church along The Way held a special Pilgrims' Mass and offered pilgrims a blessing at the end of each service. We were bathed in prayer.

The next morning, before departing for the Pyrenees, we stopped by the cathedral, lit a candle, and prayed for safety. From there we crossed an ancient Roman bridge, stepped out of the town, and began our ascent. We opted for the Napoleon Route, a more difficult, but scenic, trek over the mountain. As we began, something happened. I cannot explain it, but as we started our uphill climb, I was suddenly, tangibly filled with the Spirit. It absolutely came upon me in a way that I had never experienced. I left all fear and apprehension behind. I knew I could do it. I knew that God was with us in a new and wonderful way.

The weather in the mountains was strangely unpredictable. One moment it was sunny, the next foggy, the next, windy and cold. The views were amazing and the clanking of bells around the necks of grazing sheep was ever present. About thirteen kilometers in, we came to the Virgen D'Orisson statue. It was erected to offer protection for local shepherds. As we drew close, we saw a nun in full habit and two other women sitting at its base singing the Magnificat in French in multi-part harmony. It was breathtaking. Along the way we crossed into Spain and arrived in Roncesvalles after about eight hours, where we spent the night in an old monastery and received our first passport stamp. Our first day was complete. We washed our clothes by hand and hung them on a clothesline to dry, ate dinner, attended Mass, and went to bed early. At six in the morning the lights came on in the monastery. Gregorian chants were piped in signaling to all that it was time to get up and continue. We filled our water bottles, packed our backpacks, and went on our way.

While there are other *peregrinos* on The Way, one does not typically get involved in too much conversation while walking. The convention is to wish the others *buen camino* (a good journey) and to simply pass others on the path with courtesy. The evenings are a completely different story, however. One of the most wonderful gifts along the route is meeting and talking with people in the evening. Some walk the Camino for a week or so, others have walked the whole thing more than once. Some take several years to complete the entire path, returning year after year to pick up where they left off the prior time. Many have to leave the journey due to injury. We said good bye to a lot of people and ran into familiar faces at various intervals.

People also walk it in different ways. Some enlist a carrier service to take their backpacks to their next destination. Some arrange for taxis because they either don't want to climb mountains or are injured. What I find amazing about this is that people are not judgmental. The saying is that "everybody does their own Camino." What would life be like if we adopted that attitude for much of what causes us to judge others?

Overnight accommodations are also quite varied. *Albergues* or pilgrim hostels are the cheapest and fill up quickly. Some are *donativo* (donation requested), others relatively inexpensive. Depending upon the size of the village or city, there are more expensive places to stay. My son and I stayed in the cheapest places due to our budget. Our standards were very, very low. We experienced

moldy showers, cold water, empty toilet paper holders, and flooded bathroom floors. Washrooms are coed. Sleeping accommodations are coed bunk beds--as many as can fit into a small place, leaving only enough room to walk around sets of four. There are no worries about fire codes or ventilation.

We stayed in an old stone barn one night and almost froze. Fortunately, we got there early enough to secure a bed on the ground level. Others had to climb into a loft. Between the cold, the loud sounds of donkey that brayed all night, and thunderous snoring of the other pilgrims, we couldn't sleep. Finally, we got up, went into the bathroom, climbed out the window and continued on our way by the light of the moon.

We stayed in a convent one night. It was funny because as we entered the town, a priest approached us and enthusiastically inquired of my son about his pilgrimage. He waved his arms and jumped up and down as if to make his Spanish easier to understand. He began to explain how The Way was a pilgrimage and should be walked with religious intention, told my son about the Mass that night, and then off-handedly suggested that we were probably staying at the municipal hostel. When my son told him that we were staying at the convent his whole demeanor changed. He was absolutely delighted! We arrived at the convent and were met with what seemed like the continuation of typical "old world attitudes." Vendors, priests, and hostel managers would often speak to my son and pretend I wasn't there. So the nun asked him if we preferred a single- or double-sized bed. He almost lost it and with astonishment made it very clear that I was his mother.

Sometimes we stayed in places with only eight or so beds in a room. There we made great friends. We also stayed in a brand new municipal hostel one night. It had the typical two-hundred bunk bed arrangement, but was clean and had modern bathrooms with warm water. It even had washing machines.

One time we stayed in a very inexpensive municipal hostel. All hostels require that you leave your boots in cubby holes outside of the dormitory. We met up with someone we had known from a previous stop. We joined him as he walked with sock feet through the whole building to determine which beds had more distance between them. Upon discovering the roomiest path (the difference had to be in centimeters), we put our backpacks down to mark the beds. But "cheaper" is not always cheaper. In the morning we discovered that my son's boots had been taken by some sleepy pilgrim before we got to them our-

selves. Now that was an expensive, not to mention inconvenient, experience! He donned his shower “flip-flops” and we continued on our way. Fortunately, the next town was Leon, and they had a sporting goods shop where he was able to purchase hiking sandals.

Meal times are communal. Depending upon the size of the place one stops, there may be a restaurant that features a discounted Pilgrim Dinner. More often, people pick up pasta or beans at a small grocery market to cook if the hostel has a kitchen. Everybody shares. Typically, we purchased something like fresh fruit and cheese for the next day’s lunch. And no, we did not have refrigeration, and no, we did not get sick or die. We also found out that in addition to the afternoon hours when all shops are closed, everything is closed on Sundays. We learned to plan on that!

Meals are very simple. We learned to make Spanish tortillas, which are thinly sliced potatoes cooked in olive oil on the stovetop in a round pan and then sliced into wedges. We make these now from time to time and share our memories of the Camino.

While most of our meals were spent with others, often times my son and I would spend time together, eating brie with fresh tomatoes and bread, and drinking local Spanish wine. We had such deep and meaningful conversations. There was never a cross word between us. It was pure gift. We told ourselves that when we got home we would continue this practice of leisurely meals. I am sad to say that while we have done so on occasion, it is not nearly as often as it should be. We also became (well, almost) addicted to green olives stuffed with anchovies.

On one occasion, my son and I met up with a military officer from Italy. We went to the market together where he was in search of dinner ingredients and good olive oil. He did not speak Spanish, so I translated for him. Well, I translated at least part of what he said. He was absolutely baffled at how Spaniards could survive on what they believed to be olive oil. I thought it best to keep that opinion between us. He suffered loudly during dinner due to the scourge of the bad olive oil until he had enough wine to let it go. We met up with him again at the top of O Cebreiro, a challenging climb near the end of the pilgrimage. He had injured his back and could barely stand in church. He left the next day. That was a hard good-bye.

We kept running into an interesting young man from Sweden. He dreamed of writing and producing movies “like they do in Hollywood.” He did not share any of his ideas because he was afraid we would steal them. He was relatively short but walked faster than any human being I have ever seen. He boasted that he walked forty kilometers each day on the Camino, a statement that we found curious because, although we rarely walked that far in a day, we kept meeting up with him.

We met a high school Spanish teacher from San Diego who helped my son conjugate verbs. She was really sweet and translated for us at a local café. There was a mother and son from South Africa, but they took buses and taxis so we only saw them once. We spoke with a woman from Ireland who sent me a recipe for her famous soda bread. There were nursing students who had just graduated and were nervous about finding work when they returned home. We met a priest from New Zealand who knew the bishop in my diocese. Such a small world! People were amazingly helpful and friendly along the way.

The local people were very kind and helpful as well. They kept watch over us, especially in the smaller villages. One time we came to a water fountain which did not have a sign to indicate that the water was potable (pilgrims fill their water bottles along the way with water which is plentiful and clean). We were standing at the fountain, thirsty, but ready to leave rather than chance it. A woman yelled out of her window in Spanish. “The water is good! You can drink it! *¡Buen Camino!*” We were also called back to the path a couple of times by watchful guardian angels. “*Peregrinos, peregrinos...the road is this way!*” Of course, others did make fake waymarkers to lead unsuspecting pilgrims to their bar or café and off of the path—even if ever so slightly—or post signs saying that their café was only a few meters away when, in reality, it was much further. But it was all part of the adventure. At one hostel, the innkeeper insisted on washing our clothes for us. And we did go into a pharmacy one time to get medicine for blisters that my son had gotten. The pharmacist asked to see his foot. Now that was one brave woman, I tell you. Anyway, she gave us something to treat it with and sent us on our way.

We saw amazing sites along the way. We hobbled into Leon as my son was wearing his shower “flip-flops” due to the boot mix-up mentioned earlier. We declared a rest and sprung for a really nice hotel room with a balcony and warm water. We toured the beautiful cathedral, browsed in shops, and ate in a restau-

rant. Later the following afternoon, we were relaxing at a café on the plaza and simply enjoying life when we heard a familiar voice. My son and I exchanged glances and sure enough—it was Juan, the young medical school graduate who felt sorry for my son because he was walking with his mother. He was headed into the city center, red-faced, exhausted, and dirty. I was never so delighted. Yep, this mother whom he mocked had beaten him into town by a whole day. Now I know that the pilgrimage is not a competition, and I know that everybody does his own Camino. But a day? Seriously? Ha! Inward delight. He sees my son, plops down on a chair at our table, and begins to talk to him. After what seems like a few minutes, he glances in my direction and, recognizing me, exclaims in Spanish: “Oh my God! Your mother! She is alive? Did you guys take the bus or something?” “No,” my son said with great composure, “We arrived yesterday.” “Morning,” I added and smiled. He gave my son the “I am so sorry you are with your mother look” and went on his way. We ran into him a few more times at hostels along the way, and at each juncture he would give my son the same lamentful look.

One of the most meaningful sites on the pilgrimage for us was the *Cruz de Ferro* or “Iron Cross.” Situated on one of the highest elevations of the Camino, it is a tall wooden pole topped with an iron cross. Originally, the site was home to an ancient Celtic monument, and later a Roman shrine to the god Mercury. It was converted to a Christian site in the ninth century. Pilgrims traditionally carry a stone or other memento from home and, upon their arrival to the site, place the stone at the foot of the cross with a prayer or some intention. There are stones with messages written on them, pictures of loved ones who have died, and various notes affixed to the stones with rubber bands. My son placed his with a prayer. I had carried one that was engraved with the Latin word “CREDO” (“I believe”). It was a holy moment.

The most difficult day for me was probably the ascent to O Cebreiro. The road was steep and my feet were riddled with blisters. It was so rocky and every step made me grit my teeth in pain. My face was red, I was sweaty, and out of breath. And what did I hear coming up the path behind me? Lord have mercy, it was Juan. Juan was striding up the path like a gazelle. He was wearing shorts and had a colored bandana knotted neatly around his neck. I could only pray, “please don’t recognize me.” He came upon my son and, turning, began a quick conversation. Then looking at me he put his thumb up and then down as

if asking me if I was surviving. I quickly put my thumb up and smiled as best I could. He gave my son the “I am so sorry you are with your mother” look and continued on his way. Totally humiliated, I looked at him as he passed. Then I looked at my son and he at me. We both smiled as the realization struck us. Juan was not carrying his backpack! He had hired someone to carry it for him. “Really? What kind of pilgrim is that?” I thought. “Dr. Stud. Uh huh.” Okay, I later felt guilty about being judgmental. But it is a true story that I share as penance for my delight in his red-faced arrival in Leon.

Upon reaching the summit at O Cebreiro, we were delighted upon seeing quaint stone huts with thatched roofs that local residents had lived in from Celtic times 1,500 years ago until the 1960s. The view was absolutely amazing. It was very cold and I was quite happy because this site marked the near end of our journey and I had not yet worn my down jacket. It was the only thing in my backpack that I had not used, and I was glad that I hadn’t packed something that was not needed. We ate the most amazing soup, Caldo Galego, a soup of left-over Sunday broth, cabbage, potatoes and lots of garlic. It was served with this great bread. We went to Mass and I looked at the arch over the altar and was shocked to see that it was not symmetrical. I thought about how many people had worshiped in this modest church with such flawed architecture—and my observation brought a smile to my face that such a thing should even have been a reflection worth having.

Juan stayed in the same hostel as we did and continued with his sorry apologetic looks to my son. What a funny guy. In the morning we headed out. The valley below was covered in cloud and we were standing above it. Amazing! We would finish in less than a week. It had gone by so quickly. My son and I had become a bit of an item. More than once, a hostel manager would come and greet us as we walked by, since they had heard about the mother-son team. The pilgrimage was a triumph physically, emotionally, and spiritually.

We walked into Santiago de Compostela thirty-one days after we left St Jean-Pied-du-Port and received our signed *compostela* with our name written in Latin. As we attended Mass, they elevated the giant incense thurible called the Botafumeiro to the sound of a screechy nun’s chanting. But at that point, none of that mattered—screechy chanting, blisters, lost poles, or missing boots. We had arrived safely by the Grace of God. We spent several days in Santiago de Compostela before going to Finesterre, (derived from the Latin for “the end/

edge of the world”), a cape on the Atlantic. Two days into our stay, we returned to the Pilgrim office to check on something. And whom did we see? Juan. He had just arrived. We met up in church that day. He came and said hello, but didn’t give my son the “look.” I asked him about his Camino. He said that it was his mother’s birthday. He had called her to wish her a happy day. Her gift? She asked him to take her on the Camino. His answer? You bet!

The Camino is about transformation. Juan had experienced it. My son had, too. But that is his story to tell. And as for me? I had begun the Camino believing that God was calling me away from parish ministry. I serve a lovely congregation in Fresno, California. But I had questioned whether I had the temperament to continue and felt that, when my Camino ended, I would know what my next call would be. When we landed at the airport in Fresno, my son and I were warmly greeted by members of our congregation who were excited to see us return safely. They had missed us and we had missed them. Do you know where I am now? In the same lovely congregation in Fresno where we are doing amazing things. The transformation? This is where I believe God wants me to serve right now. And I couldn’t be happier.