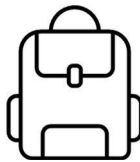




Jutta Hytönen

# Five Songs of Five Caminos

Wanderings on the way to Santiago



*Solvitur ambulando*

—

*It is solved by walking!*

## A (very) brief history of the Camino

The construction of the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia has served as a pilgrimage destination for centuries; it ranks among the most significant sites in the Catholic world, alongside Rome and Jerusalem. The building work commenced in 1075 during the rule of Alfonso VI. According to the Bible, the Apostle James (also known as James the Elder) or James, the son of Zebedee, was one of Jesus' disciples. He undertook missionary work in Jerusalem on several occasions. James engaged in passionate debates with the Jews concerning the scriptures, which led to considerable tension in the city. Herod Agrippa had James beheaded, making him the first apostle to suffer martyrdom.

Legend has it that James' remains were placed on a ship that carried the martyr's relics to the coast of Galicia. In the early 8th century, a hermit monk named Pelagio had a vision of an oak tree and a shooting star. James' tomb was eventually discovered beneath the oak tree. As the transportation of James' remains began, it was determined that the cathedral should be erected at the spot where the ox carrying the remains came to a halt. The cathedral features a separate crypt where the bones of Saint James rest within a silver coffin.

The entrance is dominated by the impressive Portico de Gloria, which depicts figures from the Old and New Testaments. Inside, there are several chapels named after various saints in the Catholic tradition. Behind the altar, there is an area accessible by stairs that houses a large statue of Saint James. Pilgrims embrace this statue upon reaching the cathedral. Guided tours to the cathedral's roof are organized. If the narrow staircase or heights do not cause discomfort, I recommend visiting after having been

there myself.





*1 Santiago de Compostela Cathedral*

The Camino de Santiago itself is a collection of ancient pilgrimage routes in mainland Spain. The most famous one is the Camino Francés, often starting from the French side, from a village called Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port. However, some routes begin even further in France, such as Le Puy. The most northern starting point for these routes is in Hattula, Finland.

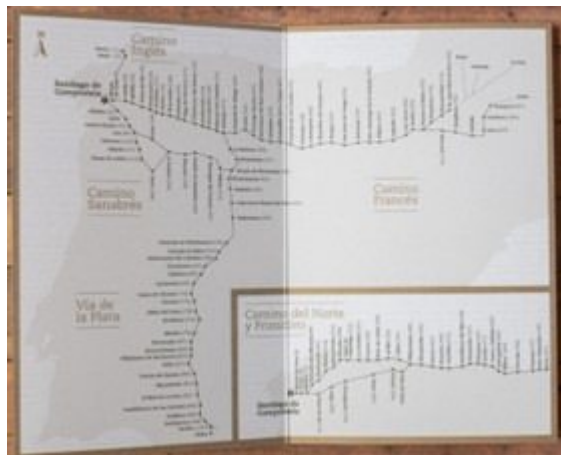
Camino routes were crowded during the medieval period. People from the Nordic countries also set out on the Camino, and those who endured its challenges gained a respectable status for the rest of their lives. For example, Sweden's Saint Bridget journeyed alongside her husband. In the past, walking to Santiago posed more challenges due to practical issues. People took the journey with lots of baggage and had to start from far away. Also you could be sentenced to walk the Camino as a punishment. And if you were rich enough you could pay someone to walk on behalf of

you.

The routes stretch from various parts of Spain, but the French route has been the most popular. Before the pandemic, there were so many pilgrims on the route that walkers began to show more and more interest in other routes like the Primitivo and the Norte. Accommodation was in high demand, and only around the turn of the year, the Francés route was quieter. Increasingly, more people continue their pilgrimage after Santiago, heading to the sea at Finisterre or Muxía, or both.

Under normal circumstances, the number of pilgrims skyrockets during the Holy Year, which occurs when the Feast of Saint James falls on a Sunday. During this time, there are many festivities, and the holy door of the cathedral is opened. During the exceptional times of the Covid-19 pandemic, Pope Francis announced that the Holy Year of 2021 would be extended to 2022.

After walking at least 100 km or cycling 200 km, those who have reached Santiago can apply for a Latin-language Compostela, which is a certificate of pilgrimage, at the Pilgrim's Office. Also due to the number of people coming to Santiago each year the terms for getting the Compostela are changing.



*2 A few of the routes*

## Introduction

I have completed the Camino de Santiago on different routes five times. There are still many paths left to walk, but it seems that in the near future, I won't have the opportunity to embark on this journey again. What is it that captivates me about it? I am not particularly religious; I would describe myself more as spiritual (at least at times). I swear and sometimes behave inappropriately. One could say that I am human. Yet, precisely these routes have fascinated me, even though they are strongly connected to Roman Catholicism, organized religion.

I have been a Catholic since birth, and this has occasionally led to amusing situations in a predominantly Lutheran country, especially when it became apparent for people outside my family. For instance, when I received my First Communion at the age of 10, I came home from the celebration wearing a white gown and a veil, as was the tradition. In the courtyard, rascals, puzzled, asked if I had gotten married. Because at some point, I refused to attend religious education at the English school in Meilahti to receive additional "guidance," a black-robed pastor named Brückeman appeared in the courtyard of a rental building in Hakunila to guide the lost sheep back to the herd.

However, I don't attend the masses, and organized religion itself doesn't play much of a role for me as it is. More than the religious aspect of pilgrimage, what intrigued me about the journey to the holy sites was how one copes with the mental challenges during a hike of hundreds of kilometers, carrying all belongings on one's back and living in a state outside of daily life. How does one's mental strength withstand all the trials of the journey, and how does one manage when most things cannot be prepared for in advance, but rather you have to let go, head into the unknown,

and trust that everything will turn out fine? I'm also interested in how such a journey changes a person.

For some, life-changing transformations have occurred along the Camino. Personally, I have grappled with my struggles at various times, and the Camino has mostly been a journey toward what is currently my reality and my direction. When life simplifies to moving from point A to point B, finding lodging for a night, and fulfilling basic needs, one begins to realize how little is actually needed to get by. Being completely removed from normal routines also has the effect of making you question things that you've taken for granted. The simplicity of life and the trust that shelter will be found for the night and that food (and coffee!) will be available bring an infinitely reassuring feeling. For me, spirituality is a connection with fellow humans, nature, and that mystical force that influences everything. During my journeys, I have encountered such heartwarming kindness and genuine willingness to help that it's hard to ignore. Of course, there are also unpleasant things, but they are really quite rare.

## Travelogue

### 1. 2006 – Camino Francés

Astorga > Santiago de Compostela

*"Tous Les Matins du Monde" - Alain Corneau*



*3 Stone bridge over Rio Catasol*

I had seen a couple of travel shows about the pilgrimage route in Spain, Camino de Santiago, back in the mid-1990s. The idea of going there had been a distant dream until a friend presented her travel plan during a weekend gathering. I got genuinely excited when someone else had finally thought the same thing. The entire trip had already been outlined on paper in broad strokes, and then began the process of acquiring gear and arranging travel tickets. It's always a pleasant part of the journey, the anticipation

and preparation. Throughout the spring, we broke in our hiking shoes, for instance, in Nuuksio National Park, and carried backpacks as a test. It didn't occur to us that you can't really practice walking tens of kilometers a day except by actually walking those kilometers daily. However, in some way, we did at least ensure our physical fitness and more. Then, we researched the history of the route and the legends associated with it. That was interesting as well, considering that over a thousand years had yielded countless stories. People from Finland had also set out on pilgrimage to Galicia. In the past, the journey posed many more challenges than just blisters, exhaustion, or crowded lodgings. Back then, travelers were often targeted by robbers who would rob and sometimes even kill their victims. People had to bring a lot of belongings to survive the months-long journey. Pilgrims used to depart from their doorstep, not like now, flying from the nearest airport or otherwise quickly making their way to the starting point. We even had our gear lists ready well in advance. Much of the equipment had already made its way into our backpacks long before departure because the anticipation was hard to contain!

On the morning of departure, I anxiously awaited my travel companion at the airport. She had worked into the early hours of the morning to get everything ready. She finally arrived, and we even boarded the plane on time. The then-Blue1 airline took us to Madrid at quite a reasonable price, and from Barajas Airport, we took the metro to Chueca. The hostel was located in a slightly bohemian district, so there was plenty to wonder about. But it was okay, a twin room didn't cost much for a few nights. We managed to visit a couple of museums and other attractions before starting the actual pilgrimage.

So, we took a train to Astorga from Madrid. The first stop was León, where we bought tickets for the train to Astorga. On subsequent trips, I've tried to purchase all tickets in advance. It's easier nowadays on the internet. Smoking was prohibited in the Astorga train, but a local guy seemed to be following the rule by sticking his cigarette-holding hand out of the window between puffs, hahaha. Astorga is a nice little town where Antonio Gaudi's designed Gothic cathedral is a sight to behold. The local Catholic cathedral was also quite impressive at comparison to the beautiful Cathedral of St. Henrik in Helsinki, which would be the size of a countryside church in Spanish terms. Of course, the size of congregations varies a lot as well.

From the cathedral, we obtained the "passports" required for the pilgrimage, also known as credentials, where stamps would be collected from lodgings and bars as evidence of walking. In fact, without this passport, you couldn't enter many albergues (pilgrim hostels). Our first place to stay was Albergue San Javier. A really nice and homely place. We got bunks in a 16-person room and then did laundry, which quickly became a daily routine. I bought a slightly shaped wooden stick from the stand in the entrance to use as a walking pole. Then it was time to find a place to eat and explore the town. We discovered a monastery garden and Roman ruins, among other things. We went back to the accommodation relatively early and went to sleep. The balcony door was left open; a good selection of hiking shoes had been placed in front of it, which, um, emitted a bit of an odor. Among our roommates were an Italian man with his daughter. The man apparently snored loudly, so he was soon given the nickname Papa Ronca. This habit of giving people "descriptive" names started immediately. Well, that snoring didn't bother me at all; I slept well.



# 1. 19.6.2006 Astorga – Rabanal del Camino, hiking 20 km

Early in the morning, we had a light breakfast in the hostel's kitchen. I needed to have some coffee at least and also some food. I was eagerly looking forward to get on the road. We walked quietly through the still-sleeping, beautiful city. Astorga is one of my favorite places on this route. The walk wasn't particularly strenuous, and the distance was quite pleasant. Along the way, there was both rain and sunshine, and walking through muddy patches gave my shoes a new reddish hue that never completely disappeared for the rest of the journey. I had a versatile jacket that kept rain and wind out while being breathable, so it didn't make me sweat. My backpack had its own rain cover. There would have been a slightly off-route village called Castrillo de los Polvazares, but we didn't stop there. The village has preserved unique traditions, like a meal that starts with main course; meats and then progresses to other types like salad etc.

While we were sitting in a bar with our coffee, a couple of Finns passed by. Just as we were asking a Brazilian couple about their journey and exchanging some comments in Finnish, the passing couple shouted, "Moi!" Later in the day, the Romans who had also stayed at the same albergue in Astorga stopped by the same house's wall to have their lunch. Papa Ronca already had quite nasty looking blisters on his feet; he was walking in some sneakers that weren't suitable for long-distance walking. Stork nests crammed into the most peculiar places caused amusement (and we ended up taking quite a lot of pictures of them later). Almost up to Rabanal, there was another Roman mine, La Fucarona, but when we asked about it in the village, we got the answer that it was just some kind of hole in the ground, hahaha. So, we didn't bother going to see it separately. Who knows, it might have been an interesting spot. And just before Rabanal, there was also the

"roble de peregrinos," the pilgrims' oak tree. A magnificent, large tree with a sign next to it explaining its history.

Upon arriving in Rabanal, we first had to find a place to stay; there was one right at the beginning of the village, but we wanted to go and look further, and the Romans were not staying there either. Well, luckily we didn't stay there because some distance away was Refugio Gaucelmo, a hostel maintained by volunteers from the Confraternity of St. James, which was really cozy and nice. As soon as we entered, we were warmly welcomed, and they asked us in all possible languages where we were from. The Norwegian didn't guess we were from Finland.

Most of the volunteers were English,/ British at least on that occasion. We stayed in a six-person room in a stone-built dwelling. First, I had to get into the shower right away, and then I washed my clothes. After hanging them to dry along the bunk bed railings, it was time to go to the shop (tienda) and prepare some food. The albergue itself was beautifully covered in rose vines and trees, among other things. There was a comfortable bench in the courtyard where you could sit and chat with anyone who happened to be there. As the evening went on, more people started to arrive, and they were accommodated on mattresses in the hall of a larger building nearby.

A walk around the village indicated that (as is usually the case) in villages that have developed along the route, the main street follows the route, and the village's houses rise on both sides of the road. Although the village was small, it had a splendid chapel and a beautiful old church, where we also attended the evening mass. My feet weren't particularly sore, but there was some tingling sensation on the soles. Because we weren't smart enough to bring sleeping bags but instead had thin sleeping bag liners, I

felt cold despite the beauty of Rabanal. The stone walls of the building seemed to exude coldness. There was also a blanket provided by the house, but it wasn't enough to ward off the moisture and chill that the stone structure collected. The nights were quite chilly. My roommates were an elderly French couple and an old Danish man who had fallen ill and kept running to the bathroom. A German guy (?) had also stayed with us, and he gave us a tip about an albergue in Ponferrada that was supposedly especially good (more about that later, heh). All in all, the first day of hiking was a pleasant experience, not too demanding.

## 2. 20.6.2006 Rabanal de Camino – Ponferrada, hiking day, 32 km

A German man sat with us at the breakfast table, who, to his misfortune, had arrived so late at the accommodation that he was directed to stay among a group of Spanish men; he hadn't slept much because the "Spanish armada" had kept him awake with their snoring.

Typically, albergues require pilgrims to leave around 8:00, but we left before that. The morning was cool and foggy; I had to put on my jacket. There had also been some higher-ranking clergy man staying at the accommodation, and he received a lot of attention. This gentleman briskly passed by early in the morning, wearing shorts (I suspected that he would be panting exhausted around the next bend, but he wasn't). The terrain was quite varied right from the beginning of the journey, and the climbs took a toll on the untrained. There were a few somewhat abandoned-looking villages along the way, but there were always signs that read "Albergue" or "Peregrino menu," etc. Without the significant number of pilgrims who tread the path every year, many villages would probably have died out. Quite early on the route, we encountered Foncebadon and Cruz de Ferro, an iron cross perched on top of a high pile of stones. Over the years, all sorts of miscellaneous items have been taken to the cross, in addition to stones and other beautiful memorabilia. This time, there was even a bikini top hanging there amongst other questionable stuff. I also left a stone there as a sign that my sins were left behind (hmm). The Danish guy from our shared room in Rabanal also arrived, and I took a couple of pictures with his phone as he, in turn, added his sins to the pile. After this, I didn't see the Danish guy anymore; hopefully, he made it to the destination, Santiago. As the day went on, the sun started to come out, and it quickly became hot. I had put on shorts and a t-shirt, which was quite an idiotic choice

overall; the part of my chest that was exposed, as well as my arms and legs, got sunburned. The route alternated between steep ascents and steep descents, and walking, along with the heat, sapped my strength quite severely. Along the way, there were friendly and kind people from different countries, mostly from Spain. At one point, we waited for a couple of old men to pass so we could go into the bushes to pee, and upon hearing where we were from, they started reminiscing about a Finnish woman they had encountered in London a hundred years ago, still completely captivated by the memory. Quite endearing! The journey continued through villages and down from high mountain slopes to Molinaseca, where there was another Roman bridge (impressive). At a cafe by the bridge, I had to have a café con leche along with sparkling water with ice and lemon, but I almost didn't drink it when the waiter placed them in dirty glasses; it wasn't just minor smudges but looked like the tourists had their own glasses under the counter that weren't washed at all, yuck. Well, the journey continued again, and I was already getting quite fed up with the walking and the heat. It felt like it would never end, and I couldn't care much about those "fucking Roman springs" anymore as I was already exhausted. Finally, Ponferrada began to appear on the horizon; I could hardly believe it anymore. There was still quite a bit of walking through the city, and we ended up going to the wrong place while looking for the albergue.

The place was actually quite nice, as our "cellmate" from Rabanal had mentioned. As soon as we entered through the gate (the gate closes at 22:00, and if you're not there by then, you're out of luck; quite a system...), there was a fountain where pilgrims could soak their sore and suffering feet. It felt really good! The accommodation process went like this: since we didn't arrive until around 19:00, we were placed in a large hall filled with bunk beds (so no nice six-person rooms as advertised). My bunk was

Writer was instantly exited to walk the Camino de Santiago after seeing an episode of Lonely Planet depicting the trek. That was around mid 90's. It took time to actually make the first Camino happen. After that she has gained experience of five pilgrimages on different routes. The hikes have been challenging but very rewarding and mishaps have not been avoided either. The best way to start the Camino is to leave with an open mind and let the pilgrimage to unfold by itself. On every journey a specific song has been somehow playing a part and has since been associated to a certain Camino.

BoD

