



St James, Boscombe to Santiago (St James) de Compostela September/October 2015



Penny and I are regular cyclists, about 80 miles per week in Hants, Wilts and Dorset, and have completed a number of long-distance journeys in France. Our travels are holiday rides and our bicycles are tourers; good for sightseeing, but not for racing or serious off-roading; typically we average about 40 miles per day and enjoy the journey as much as the destination. If you'd like to know more, Penny keeps a daily diary of her impressions; these travelogues are linked from our website, www.les2cyclistes.net.

However, having started this cycling lark when we ceased working for a living, about 2003, Penny could see that we weren't getting any younger and that sooner or later we would become less able to undertake long distances. Also, our 44th wedding anniversary was approaching, so, what better time to combine what might become our longest-ever tour with a pilgrimage of thanksgiving for those years of happy marriage. Having taken that decision, all we had to do was get on and do it. But we're not the sort who just get on their bikes and start pedalling. I like to prepare, to look at maps and select by-roads, to read guide books, etc. Penny relies on me to map-read, so I need to get it right!

In February 2015 we joined the Confraternity of St James, a charity which promotes the pilgrimage in UK and, indeed, worldwide. Its website is a fund of knowledge and valuable resource: anyone thinking about doing the Camino should visit. We also attended a Practical Pilgrims' Day at their HQ in Blackfriars, London. From that cold wintery day our Camino was launched; the more people we told, the harder it would become to back out. Eventually, on 31 August, a damp and breezy Bank Holiday Monday, we set out from St James's Square, Boscombe: immediate destination Portsmouth, for the overnight ferry to St Malo. Thence, southwards down the west coast of France to Biarritz. From there, south-westwards, using the "Tunnel" route to join the Camino Francés to Santiago de Compostela.

We cycle completely unsupported and carry all our own luggage. On this occasion we did not book accommodation in advance: this would relieve the pressure of us having to be at a certain place by a certain time; but would also give us a few concerns if hotels told us they were full. Not knowing when we'd reach Santiago we did not even book our return travel – we were completely free agents. We had no fears for the French section, being well used to cycling in France and able to speak French competently. We expected that the Spanish section would be much more difficult, neither of us have more than a few words of Spanish, despite borrowing language CD's from the library.

The no-book-ahead policy worked pretty well, except one night when we were forced to use a pilgrim refuge in a little hill-top village in Spain. Here we had a whole dormitory of 12 beds, bunk style, to ourselves and our bikes. The memory remains of coming back in the dark to the refuge after supper, opening the door and being met by four sets of whites of eyes looking at us from the gloom of the communal living space. These belonged to some of the group of seven Ethiopian grape-pickers who were using the other dormitory. They were all up and away to the vineyards by 7.00am the following morning, whilst we were still in bed, so that was all we saw of them.

Part of the pleasure of the pilgrimage was meeting so many interesting people of all nationalities; we came across our first foot pilgrim in the Charente Maritime, in western France. From then on we gradually met more and more, until, after Santo Domingo de la Calzada on the Camino Francés, the trickle had become a steady stream of pilgrims, all easily identifiable by their rucksacks and scallop shells. At Hontanas, there was the chap who had walked from Kiev; he'd

started in April! Another one was walking with his small dog: when the dog was tired he put it in a travelling kennel and carried it suitcase-style. Another, the american father-and-son duo: the son told us his father was a cancer survivor, diabetic, overweight and using a colostomy bag, but was nevertheless determined to make his camino. By starting in Sarria, over 100km from Santiago, they would both qualify for their compostelas, 100km being the minimum qualifying distance for a foot pilgrim (200km for a cyclist). Another young woman had given up her job to walk from Geneva. One couple were pushing their two little children in pushchairs . . . and so on and so forth: all of life was there on the Way to Compostela.

The cycling ranged from wonderful, long, straight stretches, where we could bowl along at speed through the wide open countryside, to the mountainous terrain of Montes de Oca, before Burgos, and the Montes de León, after León, where we made only 3 mph, possibly less. Whilst we mostly used roads running close alongside their footpath, a fair amount of our route was actually on the foot pilgrims' way, which was bone-jarringly rough in places. Near Sarria the track was so steep that we dismounted and struggled to push one bike at a time .

Sadly, our arrival in the Plaza del Obradoiro in Santiago was something of an anticlimax. The first storms of autumn had arrived overnight, so those last 13 miles were hard cycling and extremely uncomfortable, verging on the dangerous, and took us the whole morning. Once we were into the square and photographed in front of the great Glory Portico of the cathedral, our only thought was to find accommodation and get out of our cold and soggy kit.

Our hotel was situated in the old quarter of the city and, once in dry clothes, things looked considerably better. Top priority was to visit the Pilgrim Office to gain our compostelas, certificates written in latin and obtained by showing our pilgrim passports as proof of our journey; at least two stamps for each day on the road are preferred, to prove that we had truly made it 'under our own steam'.

From Boscombe to Santiago we rode 1225 miles (nearly 2,000 km) in 35 days. We had a couple of days in Santiago at the end; time to attend the evening pilgrim mass in the cathedral and to see the swinging of the great botafumeiro (censer). We gave our bikes to a company in Santiago who prepared and boxed them; the next time we saw them was on our front door step a few days after our return. As for us, we let Spain's low cost airline, Vueling, take the strain and flew home from A Coruña. It was one amazing trip which we are very happy to have done.

Now, how do we feel about spanish long-distance cycling now? **cured!**



But, who knows, the bug might bite again!!

Damian Buckley, 21 December 2015
+ minor amendments 7 Jan 2016 & 13 Jun 2019