



The Way to Santiago de Compostela



Journal of a Pilgrimage

2015

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In joyful thanksgiving
for
44 years of marriage!

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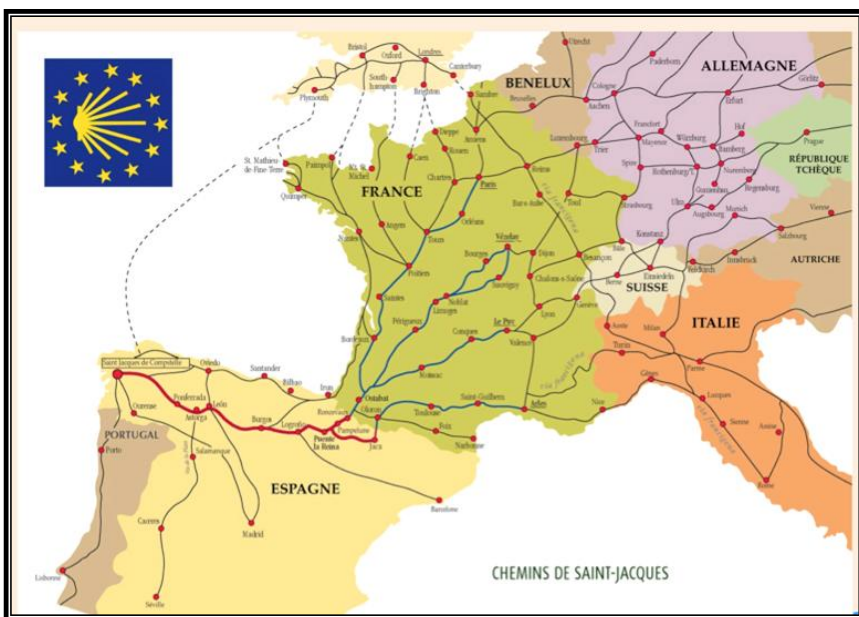
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INTRODUCTION

Santiago de Compostela! Damian and I had for some time thought of this as our 'last great frontier'. At the end of Manche-Med and Seine Sortie, when asked 'what next?' we have always said something like 'well, it would be great to cycle the St James Pilgrimage Way' – The Camino has been a target at the back of my mind for some years.

By February 2015, various events and the unstoppable march of time, confirmed our resolve that we had to do our Camino as soon as possible; in fact, there was not a moment to waste – it had to be September or bust.

A little bit of background. One soon discovers there are many, many ways to Santiago from all over Europe. It was the third holiest



The many Ways to Santiago de Compostela

pilgrimage destination after Jerusalem and Rome: the earliest record of pilgrims to the shrine are from the ninth century, though it was not until the twelfth century that it became truly popular as a way to expiate sins.

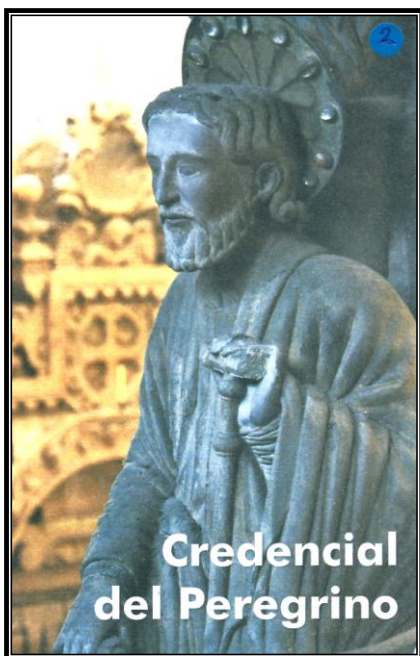
Coming right up to modern times, it became popular again in the '80s when, according to records held by the Confraternity of St James, in 1986, 2,491 pilgrims made the pilgrimage. Numbers have grown steadily year on year and in 2015, 262,459 pilgrims received their compostelas of which we can now count ourselves as two.

In February 2015, we joined the Confraternity of St James (CSJ); an organisation existing to promote the pilgrimage, whose office is in Blackfriars, London. It is also the repository of much information on the pilgrimage, available to members interested in walking the Camino.

We went up to a Practical Pilgrim Day on a chilly day in late February, meeting many who had walked, not just one but several caminos, and cyclists too. It was an opportunity to swap ideas and ask questions. As might be expected, we gained lots of practical tips including that, yes, many hostels do have bed-bugs. Of the many challenges we might expect to encounter, this has always my greatest concern but we comforted ourselves by saying we did not plan to use hostels except 'in extremis'. At our age, and having experienced boarding school, we felt we'd seen, done and got the T-shirt for communal living and dormitory-style sleeping arrangements. With luck we might never have to meet a bed-bug. On that dull February day our Camino, for better or worse, was launched and from then on, the more people we told, the more difficult it became to back out.

Later in the year, 25 July, St James feast day, we went up to a celebration mass at St James, Spanish Place, London. It was a great occasion; all the great and the good from the Spanish ex-pat community including the Spanish Ambassador, patron of the Confraternity, were present, along with a bishop and many assisting priests.

At the reception afterwards, a very grand affair, all quails eggs and smoked salmon, with not a limp sausage roll in sight, we fell into conversation with a member of the Archbishop of Santiago's staff who assured us she could obtain for us Pilgrim Passports, signed by the Archbishop. Although we already had passports issued by the Confraternity, these would be even better. In fact, she even managed to get them stamped and signed with a blessing by the Archbishop of Santiago himself, a "first" we were told.



My Pilgrim Passport issued by the Santiago pilgrim authority and signed by the archbishop

The passport is an essential part of the pilgrim's kit. It must be stamped, preferably twice a day, at churches, cathedrals or Mairies/Hôtels de Ville¹. In France the stamp is a 'tampon', not to be confused with a similar sounding English word, and in Spain it's a 'sello'. It is proof that the holder has, indeed, walked, cycled or ridden the Camino and can thus qualify for his Compostela on reaching Santiago. It will rank only second in importance to our national passports, credit cards and health insurance docs.

We set about planning this long journey, which we expect to be over a 1000 miles, in the spring; spending long evenings, poring over routes and maps. As many will know, we are experienced cyclists in France with many, many miles under our belts. We have a reasonable command of the language and well able to extricate ourselves from any problem. Spain would be **very** different! Amongst several concerns, the biggest was that we speak no Spanish. We could not ask for a room or basic foods, never mind tell someone about a major cycling malfunction. This would be testing territory indeed. To try to rectify

¹ Town Halls

the situation we borrowed 'Five Minute Spanish' CDs from the library which did give some basics, nevertheless, we felt truly handicapped.

What was the motive for our journey? In medieval times pilgrimage was considered a fine way to atone for past sins and earn one's way to heaven. Perhaps this is a less powerful motivation these days. Many people spoke of wanting to take time out to think and 'find' themselves. For me, it was simply a thanksgiving for 44 years of happy marriage. We also found ourselves ahead of the curve by some three months, as, in early December, Pope Francis declared a Year of Mercy. He suggested one way of marking such a year would be to undertake a pilgrimage. In truth, we did not know this when we were planning.

Where to start? The Square behind Corpus Christi, Boscombe is named after St James and contains a fine wooden sculpture of a scallop shell, it



***Our route; Bournemouth to Portsmouth; ferry to St Malo ;
Le Mont St Michel route to Royan;
then the Voie Littorale to Irun on the Spanish border***

seemed obvious to set out from there – there was a pleasing symmetry in cycling from St James, Boscombe to Santiago (St James) de Compostela.

Once in France, we planned to cycle to Le Mont St Michel, a popular departure point in medieval times, thence south, south, south on the Mont St Michel Way to Royan at the mouth of the Gironde. This would cover some ground familiar to us from Manche-Med. From Royan, we would cross the Gironde to Pointe de Grave and cycle the Voie Littorale, the coastal route, keeping close to the Atlantic coast through Les Landes, turning right at the bottom of France at St Jean de Luz and crossing into Spain at Irun.

From there we would follow the Tunnel Route, a little-used route via St Adrien's Tunnel. I was very worried about this, stupidly imagining something like the Mont Blanc tunnel. In fact, St Adrien's tunnel is about 200 yards long and only passable by walkers; cyclists must go round a slightly longer way. From there it's about 80 miles before

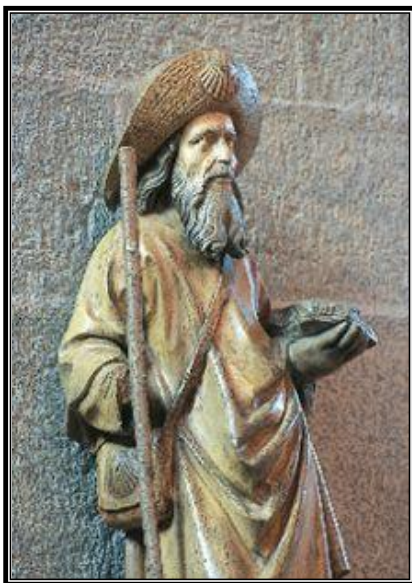


***The Tunnel Route from Irun to Santa Domingo de la Calzada.
joining The Camino Francés from St Jean-Pied-de-Port***

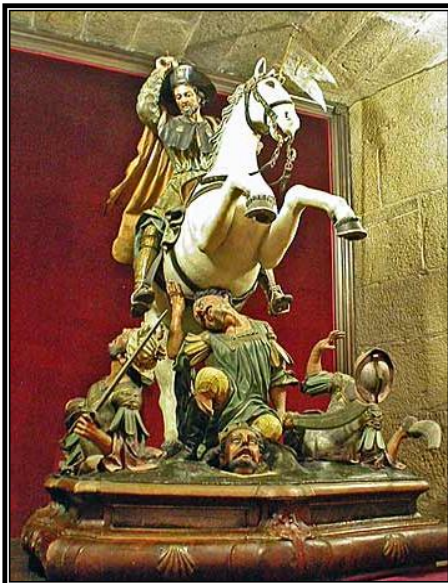
joining the Camino Francés at Santo Domingo de la Calzada and then a reasonably straight, westerly run into Santiago de Compostela.

As on previous expeditions, we used the excellent IGN² maps of France, similar to our own Ordnance Survey maps. These have always served us well, though our family could not understand why we did not use a GPS. Spain proved more awkward: as we couldn't find a stockist, Damian spent many evenings studying Peter Robins³ maps and comparing them with detailed narrative directions in the guide, written by Tony Roberts⁴. By printing the relevant maps from both sources, a long and painstaking process and, with the 'street view' facility of Google maps, did feel he had travelled enough of this section 'virtually', to tackle it with confidence.

Over the many centuries more and more representations of St James have appeared and been installed along the route. The Saint is presented in two very different guises sometimes as the gentle, non-threatening pilgrim, shown with his staff, scrip and scallop shell or as



St James, the Pilgrim



St James Matamoros

² Institut Géographique National

³ Website - maps.peterrobins.co.uk/e/overview/tunel.html

⁴ 'The Tunnel Route' by Tony Roberts, from CSJ; see <http://sigpac.mapa.es/fega/visor/>

St James Matamoros, the moor-slaying warrior fighting on behalf of Christians to rid Spain of the Moors – deeply un-PC these days. It is now generally accepted that the Battle of Clavijo, where St James appeared, riding to inspire the outnumbered Christian army to victory is a fiction.

The guides were excellent at pointing out where we would find pictures and statues and we became excellent at spotting them quickly.

We made a conscious decision not to book accommodation, bar the night on the ferry and the first night in France. This way we would not have to keep to deadlines if we wanted to linger in some places. The downside of this strategy would be that we could arrive in locations and find accommodation fully booked. The plan served us well, only once did we almost come unstuck. We used hotels and chambres d'hôtes and, on three nights, Warm Showers⁵; Warm Showers could best be described as 'airbnb' for cyclists.

As anyone who has heard our talks will know, we are completely

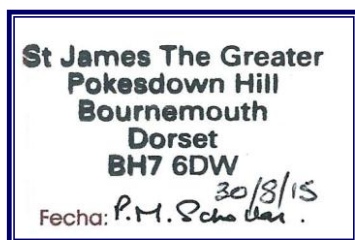


Our kit for a month on the road: with scallop shells on bar-bag and pannier, plus hair curling wand, we were hot to trot!

⁵ www.warmshowers.org

unsupported, carrying all we need in two panniers each, a bar-bag / map-holder for Damian, a back-sack for me. Each pannier weighs about 11lbs. Since our original Loire trip, we have upgraded our mobile capability; we now have internet on our phones **IF** there is wi-fi access, which is not always a given.

We had previously introduced ourselves to the local Anglican church at Pokesdown, dedicated to St James, and attended sung Eucharist there on the Sunday before departure. We were invited to the lectern to tell the congregation what we were doing and it's fair to say some thought we were 'crazy'. We received the first stamps in our passports here; by the end of the pilgrimage I had 77 stamps.



After five weeks on the road and over 2050 kms, or 1276 miles after leaving St James Square, Boscombe on that less-than-auspicious Bank Holiday Monday, we arrived in the Plaza del Obradoiro, Santiago, soaking wet in the first and worst of the autumn storms.

It had been a long and, on a few occasions, very testing ride, but also an amazing adventure. We had fun and laughter and met great kindness and incredulity in equal measure. I am happy to have achieved it but, perhaps for now, of long distance cycling we may be cured!

Finally, we would like to thank all those many people who helped and encouraged us in our endeavour. Without you, we'd still be wondering if we could/should attempt it.

Penny & Damian Buckley

March 2016