

Part 3

The Tunnel Route

Irun
to
Santa Domingo
de la Calzada



dessin de H. Holbein - fin XV^e s.

The Way to Santiago: Journal of a Pilgrimage
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Day 19

St Jean de Luz → SPAIN! Irura

Friday, 18 Sept

33mls / 55kms

Today we cross the border into Spain. I am sad to be leaving France and even more fearful about how we will cope in Spain: any Spanish I managed to hammer into my brain seems to have vanished. This, however, is not just Spain but Basque country. The Basques are fiercely proud of their identity, culture and their language which to me, at least, is completely inscrutable it's all 'Js' 'Xs' 'Ks' and 'Zs' – Scrabble would be very interesting.

Hotel de Paris has proved to be very comfortable with an excellent buffet breakfast and Monsieur is agreeable to keeping our panniers while we visit the town. It's market day and I'd love to stop and look at every stall; French markets are so interesting and vibrant, positively exploding with health. As always, I feel I could very easily 'turn veggie' in France. Markets are markets, though, and we want to visit the church, with its stained glass window of St James and galleried balconies, also the town hall with its statue of St James in the council chamber.



Church of St John the Baptist, St Jean de Luz.

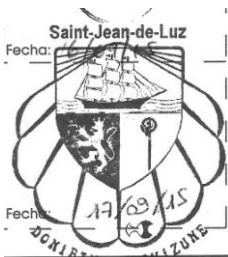
The church of St John the Baptist's undoubted moment of glory happened in 1660 when Louis XIV – the Sun King – married Marie Thérèse of Spain.





Statue of Louis XIV in the courtyard of the Mairie, St Jean de Luz

She makes it very plain that this request is rather beyond her remit but takes us upstairs, under sufferance. We, and probably she, know pilgrims enjoy special status and are not easily to be gainsaid. St James is in a little niche and surveys all the council's deliberations.



Statue of St James in the Council chamber of the Mairie



While walking round the church, the stand-out feature is the galleried balconies reserved for the men, leaving the women to sit down in the body of the church – a neat reversal of Jewish protocol where, in the synagogue, the women sit in the galleried balcony and the men below.

We collect our tampon in the presbytery and high tail it for the Mairie to see the statue of St James in the council chamber. It is a very smart well appointed building, I fancy there is no shortage of money in St Jean de Luz, and explain our mission to a rather brittle woman at reception.

In all the many representations I have seen and, indeed, will see, I like this one the best; he is friendly and jolly, a good companion for a journey.

We would truly like to linger in St Jean de Luz, it is a very charming town made even more delightful by the radiant September sunshine but we have some miles to push and we cannot put off the evil moment any longer; we must leave lovely, comfortable, reassuring France and head for the great unknown.

We cross the old border between France and Spain on the International bridge over the river Bidassoa. It has the look and feel of a location where spies might have been exchanged in cold-war times; it already feels slightly foreign but that's probably just my imagination. Almost immediately the landscape changes, we see the mountains, those would be the Pyrenées, with architecture to suit the weather – goodbye low houses with pantiled roofs, hello mountain chalets with deep eaves and wide balconies, the livestock wear bells round their necks – the hills truly are alive with the sound of music. I want to think tyrolean but actually it is just a mountain landscape.



Old frontier between France and Spain

Our first Spanish town is Irun, with a magnificent church. Like so many churches on the Way, it is closed, strange, really, since we are on a pilgrimage route. From here on in, 'sello' is the watchword for our pilgrim passport.

Tonight we shall be staying in Irura, our third and last Warm Showers stop. Our host, Maitane, speaks good English which is just fantastic and we make contact. Not for the first time, I am thankful for our upgraded mobile capability. Our first trip, the length of the Loire, we had to rely on public payphones and buy phone cards. Maitane suggests she will meet us on her bike in Villabona; a wonderfully kind gesture, gratefully seized on. The journey back to her flat is about 5kms through throngs of folk including the children of all ages. I remark on this but it's Friday evening, no school the next day and everyone is out seeing and being seen; it feels like the Italian equivalent of the passeggiata.

We spend a happy evening with Maitane and Beñat, her boyfriend, all of us reliving past triumphs on bikes. They tell us about their four month trip down the west coast of South America on bikes during which they camped for the most part. I am simply bowled over by this stamina, endurance and endeavour. Once again, it makes our relatively modest expeditions sound like walks in the park. In our defence, they are **much** younger.

Day 20

Irura → Zegama

Saturday, 19 Sept

26mls / 41kms

We are up in good time; Maitane is going to a wedding and we must be on our way too. At breakfast I spread my bread with a jam spoon, dip bread into my coffee and add a handful of cereal to the dregs, with added milk –these are different ways indeed.



Ready to leave; with Maitane & Beñat

Maitane and Beñat set us on the right road for Tolosa, where the Tourist office is helpful about accommodation but is in no hurry to help us book something – there is nothing for it I must dust off the few words I learnt. I think I have been successful but cannot be sure. One cannot even make an educated guess with basque; Beñat told us that its roots are unknown. It is certainly nothing like any romance language, nor indeed, any European language – completely inscrutable sums it up.

Despite careful instructions from Maitane, we miss the waymarkers for the tunnel route. Several people note our lost look, asking “are you doing the Camino?” and point us in the right direction. With every passing day, we meet more and more pilgrims and residents seem well used to folk looking lost. On the outskirts of Tolosa, the old N1 has been replaced with an autoroute allowing the older road to be reinvented as single carriageway + cycle path – I love it!

The weather is gorgeous, the way flat - this is what it should be like. For the most part, the familiar scallop shell and / or yellow arrow is prominent except on the exit from Tolosa where both of us miss them resulting in a loss of at least 45 minutes.



Fecha: 19/09/15



Monument in Beasain to its citizens executed during the Civil war. It was 2012 before they could come to terms with what they had done. Sunlight projects through a metal sheet on to a stone 'book' below.

We arrive at Zegama about 6.00pm. Happily, and to my relief/surprise we are expected. Ozuarte Pensiona is an interesting place, not exactly hotel, not refuge but it's comfortable, with radiators which we can control; a real bonus, we can rinse our kit in the comforting knowledge it will dry.

We are the only residents and supper can only be described as 'Pythonesque'. The large dining room is empty, bar us, and trays of interesting-looking fare are being carried through to somewhere and someone else; we are offered 'chicken, fish or meat', the fish being mackerel. The pudding choice is even simpler 'pudding or rice'. This must be the pilgrim menu, erring on plain rather than extravagant but it is modestly priced and wholesome; I am mindful I have just damned it with faint praise.

We spend time over supper planning the next day. Damian is keen to visit the St Adrien tunnel after whom the route is named and I agree t it would be perverse to miss it. We are warned, that it is not suitable for cyclists; we must leave the panniers at the restaurant at the start of the route and walk the last part of the way. Relieved of our heavy load, we should manage the track easily enough and walking will make a change. We head off to bed, with not very high hopes of a substantial breakfast.



Day 21

Zegama → Alsasua

Including side trip to St Adrien's Tunnel

Sunday, 20 Sept

18mls / 30kms

Our worst fears are fully confirmed, Ozuarte Pensiona is not even **serving** breakfast; we have coffee and croissant at the only other open establishment we can find.

We've agreed on the tunnel visit and set off on the long, hard grind to Puerte de Ozuarte. I am relieved once again to have the 'granny' gears (so aptly named!) which Damian fitted on the bikes. The watch word here being spin don't grind, i.e., make many, easier and faster revolutions rather than fewer, harder and slower turns on the cranks.

We arrive at the Puerte, top of the col, and assess the situation. The tunnel is apparently 3.8km distant, do-able on a bike. The restaurant is kind enough to keep the panniers allowing us to 'fly' – hah! -. In fact, we have made a bad mistake, it is 3.8km from a point **much** higher up the track. Deep despondency has settled on the crew who maintains she gave up 'adventures' when she had safely got out of the Masca Ravine on Tenerife in February. Now Chef d'Equipe¹ is planning further, unknown adventures and the night's hotel is not even booked. Crew is feeling mutinous but acknowledges the absurdity of coming so far, by way of *The Tunnel Route* not to visit said tunnel. We set out.



¹ Expedition leader

After climbing so high and steeply the land flattens out somewhat into countryside not unlike the New Forest, there are even free roaming horses – I feel quite at home!



***St Adrien's
Tunnel***

When Damian had said, in the planning stages of our ride, that we would use the Tunnel Route, I was very fearful. In my mind's eye, I was imagining something only slightly shorter than that through Mt Blanc and I don't like cycling in any tunnel. In fact, St Adrien's Tunnel turns out to be ridiculously short – only some 200 metres and approached by a short section of roman road, still clearly visible. I laugh at myself, and wonder how many legionnaires had trudged this path – if only stones could talk.

***Chapel inside
the cave
showing the
other tunnel
entrance
behind.***

***Clearly
unsuitable for
cyclists but
adequate for
pilgrims on foot.***



The descent from the tunnel is marvellously quick though our poor hands are crucified by the end; becoming clenched like claws from grasping the brakes for nearly 2 miles. We have a quick cup of tea, collect our panniers and high-tail it for Alsasua, still with no hotel booked. Damian is ever sanguine: I do the fretting.

Sunday night at the end of the season is not the best time to judge a town. Alsasua is unremarkable but I should be careful, for we pitch up at one of the two hotels on the outskirts of town and find a room; not only that, but a room with a bath **and** wi-fi – this is happiness indeed.

Day 22

Alsasua → Vitoria

Monday, 21 Sept

33mls / 53kms

The Ur-Bide Hotel, Alsasua could never be described as ‘grande luxe’ but it makes no pretension to be. Breakfast is barely adequate; the wonderful buffet breakfasts of France are a distant memory. Again, we make a poor start, anno domini must be taking its toll and, although the sun is up, it’s cool – autumn is a-coming on.

During planning Damian had been in correspondence with the author of the Tunnel Route, Tony Roberts, who acknowledged that he had not ridden this section, leaving it to the local police to document the way. The author hoped that we would corroborate the route and add any pertinent information. Damian takes copious notes, since parts are completely impassible.



The Way between Alsasua and Zalduondo is rough and will get rougher

All the guides are very good at pointing the pilgrim to any and all representations of St James. Our next is in Zalduondo a modest village with a massive church. We never cease to be surprised that such tiny villages have such huge churches, especially when compared with the average Dorset village church. We find this holds true at least, for France, Italy and Spain. We have become accustomed to churches being firmly locked but in Zalduondo we are lucky enough to meet a pleasant woman leaving the church. By good fortune she is the

custodian of the key and with our limited Spanish and sign language, she willingly opens up for us, switches on the light and points out St James.

Considering that any meaningful conversation with this charming lady is a lost cause, we manage a basic understanding of what each is trying to say and spend a pleasant half hour out of the midday sun.



Church of San Saturnino, Zalduondo

***The staff and gourd
are universally recognised
as the signs of the pilgrim.***



***Bas-relief statue of St James
in the retablo of the church***

The day is hotting up and there is no shade in this wide flat landscape. I am happy **not** to be doing our Camino in August and very happy not to be walking it. To see long straight, often unmade roads, stretching ahead, we both agree, would probably break us.

Much of the Way, in this section, is on tracks surfaced only with loose gravel, couple this with the many stops for photos and our rate of progress has become much slower. In the early part of the day I find no photo 'op' too insignificant not to warrant capturing it; however, by 4.00pm I am single minded, on a mission to find my bed, particularly if it is not even yet booked.

Despite the fact that time is marching on we decide to make the small detour to the little hermitage of Nuestra Señora de Ayala, tucked away up a farm track. It is lovely with the sun shining on the stone but, of course, it's locked.

***Hermitage
of Nuestra
Señora de
Ayala***



Vitoria is our night's stop. A big city, it has recently, and since our guide was written, been hugely enlarged to the east. The new suburb has been landscaped and equipped with excellent cycle paths but finding our way is not easy.

Our hotel in Vitoria is in the centre of the city and of the new, ultra-formulaic variety but the room is large enough for us and the bikes, has a hair-dryer and reliable wi-fi - what's not to like.

We change, and hit the town for supper. We try our first pintxos pronounced pinchos. They are the basque version of tapas, delicious NOT fattening snacks and finger food, all characterised by being pierced and held together with a spike, usually a cocktail stick. They are to die for; we order a selection of deep fried asparagus in tempura batter, octopus, squid, prawns, eggs and more – a feast for the eye and the stomach.



Representations of pilgrims come in many different forms. Damian meets this chap at Argandoña



Day 22

Vitoria → Salinillas de Bouradon

Tuesday, 22 Sept

30mls / 48kms

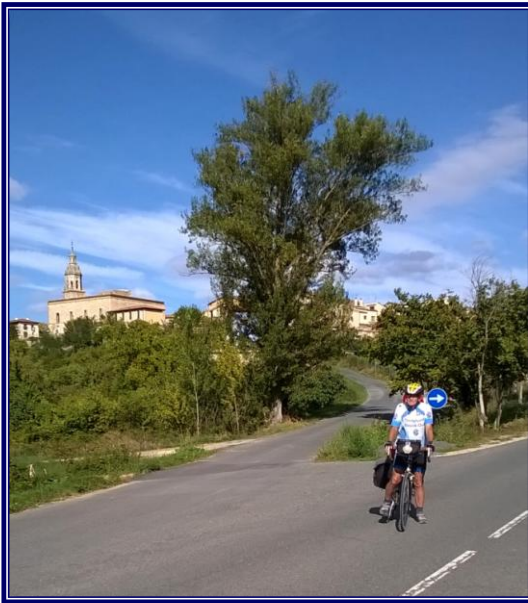
This turns out to be a slow day with terrifying interludes, of which more later. Unfortunately, we cannot visit the cathedral which is undergoing major refurbishment, so we must first find our 'sello' at the cathedral hostel. When we were planning our pilgrimage, we had made a policy decision that hostels, implying communal living and bunk beds, were not for us. The Vitoria hostel, however, seems a cut above all that, with some individual rooms and en suite facilities, perhaps not so bad after all. By the time we are leaving Vitoria it is midday, far too late with 41 miles to push to Santo Domingo de la Calzada and no accommodation booked.



Cathedral of Maria Immaculata, Vitoria

Very quickly we're back on farm tracks – good enough for walking pilgrims but very bad news for cyclists, the surface is loose, with large stones and badly rutted, we are barely making 4mph and it is very painful on the hands. It is plain that, at this rate, we shall never make Santo Domingo. Damian the Navigator, without the wholehearted support of his crew, suggests abandoning the Way and taking the N1 which, due to the proximity of the A1, will be empty of traffic. Crew is not happy but acknowledges this to be a pragmatic, if scary, solution. Happily this proves to be the right call, we find ourselves eating up the miles; hands at ease!

By 5.00pm we are at the end of our tethers and realise we will not make Santo Domingo and consult our accommodation list of refuges and hostels. There is nothing for it but to abandon the Santo Domingo plan and try to find something in Salinillas, a delightful little hilltop town with a pilgrim hostel. Ringing the doorbell elicits no response and I am forced to wheel out my ever-diminishing Spanish on a lovely lady doing her embroidery in the sunny village square. She is kind and agrees to telephone the hostel manager on our behalf while we stand by helplessly.



***Hilltop village of
Salinillas de Bouradon***

Eventually, and with the timely help of a lad of our grandson Alastair's age, acting as interpreter, we understand we can have a bunk in the albergue². May the Lord be praised – prayers answered! It will be the full-on pilgrim experience - a dormitory of six sets of bunks with showers and all facilities which, because we are the only occupants of the dormitory, are all ours. We also have a key to lock the door. The down side of this dormitory arrangement is that there are no sheets, just a pillow and pillowcase and a blanket. I am reminded of Damian's

² hostel

question on our Practical Pilgrim day, way back in February when he asked if it was true that bedbugs might be found in the hostels – ‘oh yes’ we were assured – frequently! And their bite is like sitting on a drawing pin, so one would know all about it.



Our dormitory in the albergue



Communal space in the albergue

The manager explains that he is also expecting a group of seven Ethiopian grape-pickers. They will be in the other dormitory, also self-contained, just as we are. While we felt that hostel accommodation was not for us, I was very mindful that we would miss out by not at least using hostels for some nights – I find myself looking forward to it and hugely relieved that we have found it.

We return from supper and on opening the front door, all I can see in the gloom are the whites of four sets of eyes looking at me from the sofa of the communal space. I scuttle into our dormitory like the proverbial frightened rabbit caught in headlights and lock the door, though I'm not quite sure why. I fall asleep that night lying to attention on my carefully arranged fleece hoping that it will act as some sort of prophylactic against the bedbugs.

Day 24

Wednesday, 23 Sept

Salinillas de Bouradon → Santo Domingo de la Calzada

18mls / 30kms

Buzzards wake us with their mewling calls and to our surprise, we find we have had an excellent night; no bedbugs have bitten and the grapepickers were up and away before 7.00 am without a sound.

We leave at 9.30 am after a life-saving breakfast, the ingredients of which were donated by the lovely barmaid in last night's bar restaurant. This was not part of her brief, but she managed to find bread, butter, jam, plus milk for life-saving tea: who could ask for more.



Crossing the River Ebro between Briñas and Haro

We enjoy exploring the historic little town of Briñas, with its strange chimneys on the bank of the River Ebro. Unfortunately, the murky clouds turn into pouring rain as we arrive in Haro. We find a cosy bar restaurant for a coffeebreak, which easily morphs into lunch and, without any effort on our part, could easily become tea and supper as well. Unfortunately that is not an option but it is a great opportunity to try a selection of Senor's pintxos, which are to die for.



***Some delicious pintxos,
which not only look good,
but hopefully don't add calories
– bonus!***



It is now raining hard and with memories of previous rides, we become the floor show again, doing a reverse striptease as we don waterproofs.

We are now in Rioja country and I can smell the grapes as we ride out into the open landscape. We have only 18 miles to push, but full waterproofs make the riding uncomfortable. By the time we arrive in Santo Domingo it is again raining steadily and we want only to tumble into a hotel from a list provided by the tourist office. The El Corregidor is a smart establishment, where our room has a bath, which goes a long way to make up for the sour 'puss' on reception, for whom most requests just seem to be too much trouble.

As always, we hurry to change and get out in the town. I love that moment of getting into 'plain' clothes. The town is not large and we find a restaurant serving good filling food, lots of bean stews and hearty sausages conjured from nameless parts, just what the pilgrim needs after a hard day trudging or pedalling his/her Camino. The restaurant is packed and full of the buzz of many languages as pilgrims get together to swap experiences. After a surprisingly good supper in a homely way, we head back to the hotel, as always, hoping for an early start and no rain.