

Part 4

The Camino Francés

Santa Domingo
de la Calzada

to

Santiago de Compostela



The Way to Santiago: Journal of a Pilgrimage
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Day 25

Santo Domingo de la Calzada → Santovenia

Thursday, 24 Sept

30mls / 48kms

THE DAY FROM HELL

With our arrival in Santa Domingo, we join the Camino Francés; the most well-known and well-used of all caminos; the one of which everyone thinks when any mention of 'The Camino' is made, that is until one starts planning one's own camino and realises there are many, many caminos coming from all over, Scandinavia, southern and eastern Europe, etc etc. In this section we shall go through the great cities of Burgos and León before arriving at our goal of Santiago de Compostela

Santo Domingo is a lovely medieval town entirely devoted to pilgrims and pilgrimage. The name means St Dominic of the Causeway. In the early 11th century poor Dominic was rejected for monastic training and so dedicated his life to serving pilgrims by building a bridge, hostel and hospital on the pilgrim way. He is also credited with the miracle of the roasted cock and hen which crowed again after the pilgrim parents of a young man interceded on their son's behalf to Santo Domingo.



As a lasting memorial to the reborn cock and hen, a chicken coop has been constructed in the cathedral and a live cock and hen live in it, regularly crowing to the delight of visitors. For those sensitive to the welfare of the fowls, the inhabitants are changed fortnightly and look pretty content, certainly they seem to suffer no more than the average battery chicken.

The hen coop in the cathedral of Santo Domingo de la Calzada.

It is considered lucky if a visitor hears the cock crowing – and we both did!



The cathedral is a truly magnificent monument to Christianity and the superb skills of masons, sculptors, artists and woodcarvers, all the very best of their day in their fields. It would have been crazy not to have visited it but it does mean, once again, that we are not away from Santo Domingo till midday, putting arrival in Burgos for the night in serious doubt.

We are now using John Higginson's (JH) Cicerone guide "The Way of St James". We used his "Way of St Martin" to take us down the Loire and found it excellent, a helpful combination of directions and things to see. JH now suggests using the N120 all the way to Burgos. Readers of previous journals will know that Damian and I don't 'do' N roads in France: they're fast and furious, full of lorries and locals rushing to or from lunch or work. But on this trip we have come to learn that the recommended tracks are slow and very painful for hands. We decide we have no option and get on with it. In this part of Spain, much of the cyclists' route is alongside the walkers' route which now starts to look like a Ramblers' Association outing, so busy is it.



We stop for lunch in Belorado. The outskirts are light industrial, but the central square is pretty and shaded; although there is repair work going on and the pneumatic drills are somewhat intrusive!

Statue of San Roche in the church of San Pedro, Belorado.

San Roche is generally shown pointing to a wound on his thigh accompanied by a dog with a piece of bread in its mouth.

Apart from being a patron saint of pilgrims, San Roche offers patronage to: in alphabetical order, apothecaries, bachelors, diseased cattle, doas, falsely accused people, gravediggers, invalids, Istanbul, surgeons, second-hand dealers and tile-makers, – an eclectic mix indeed!

After lunch the toil begins in earnest; this is going to be our LSA¹ moment. The N120 climbs through the Montes de Oca and is, quite frankly, scary. Despite a relatively broad hard-shoulder for cyclists, lorries are tanking past; we are barely making 4mph and this ascent carries on for 3 miles. This is **not** what we joined up for, words like 'abandon' and 'taxi' start hovering in my mind – we're exhausted from effort and fright, although the lorry drivers have, in the main, been superb, pulling well over to the other side of the road to allow us space where possible.

Having reached the high point at the Puerto de la Pedraja, the good news is that what follows will be 'downhill all the way' the bad news is that we have now added high speed to the other hazards. I'm not sure which is worse, furthermore, at 4.00 pm, arrival in Burgos is looking less and less likely but calls to hostels prove completely unsuccessful. Never mind, in the words of the pilgrim, 'ultreya' – onwards and upwards, or downwards, as it now is but we are rather despondent.



High point of the Montes de Oca.

The road is an unrelenting stream of lorries.

We feel vulnerable and uncomfortable.

By serendipitous chance and as we are 'creaming' past with heads down, Damian spots a modern hotel set well back from the road. It is huge, has 'hotel' in giant red letters on the roof and stands out in the otherwise barren landscape; how did I miss that one! Hotel Sierra de Atapuerca is a curious place but they have a room, that's good enough for me- we're in.

¹ Lung Searing Ascent - an expression first coined on our Loire trip



Sunset over Atapuerca. Site of fossils of earliest human beings in Europe nearly one million years ago



Sunset over Atapuerca. Village of San Juan de Ortega off to the right of picture

Although, it is all marble and glass, I get the feeling it is really a truckers' stop; the car park being full of lorries. The menu is limited but we both like the idea of calamares and fondly anticipate deep fried squid rings which never fail to please. We are presented with an unappetising sheet of pale blubbery 'plastic' which signally fails to please.

***Not my idea of
crispy deep fried calamares!***



***The choice of puddings
is less than inspiring***



We plan a short day tomorrow, taking a side road to San Juan de Ortega followed by a shortish, downhill run into Burgos for a day's sightseeing. We hit the hay feeling that we have a plan.

Day 26
Santovenia → Burgos

Friday, 25 Sept
18mls / 29kms

Chef d'Equipe is not a happy bunny! This could be caused by not drinking enough water yesterday (keeping hydrated is a major factor in the heat), or an unwelcome effect of last night's calamares, or perhaps the result of the quantity of wine he needed to cope with them! Either way, I am happy that we have planned a short day with flat or downhill riding.

The sun is up, the clouds are high and wispy in a clear blue sky; in short, the day is full of promise. We branch off the N120, over to San Juan de Ortega, a major stop on the Way. The name translates as St John of the Nettles; San Juan was a devoted follower of Santo Domingo, founding a monastery and hostel for pilgrims. He also did much to rid the area of bandits, felons and ne'er-do-wells, for which it had a reputation in medieval times.



***Basilica of San
Juan de Ortega
Restoration in
progress***

***Morning break
at the cafe/
restaurant***

By 10.00 am the cafe next to the refuge is already doing brisk trade; we hear the, sometimes halting, lingua franca of English everywhere. Typically, walkers will be on the road at 6.00 am to benefit from the coolest part of the day. We might also have



usefully benefitted from following their example, but it did not seem quite so critical for us on bikes.



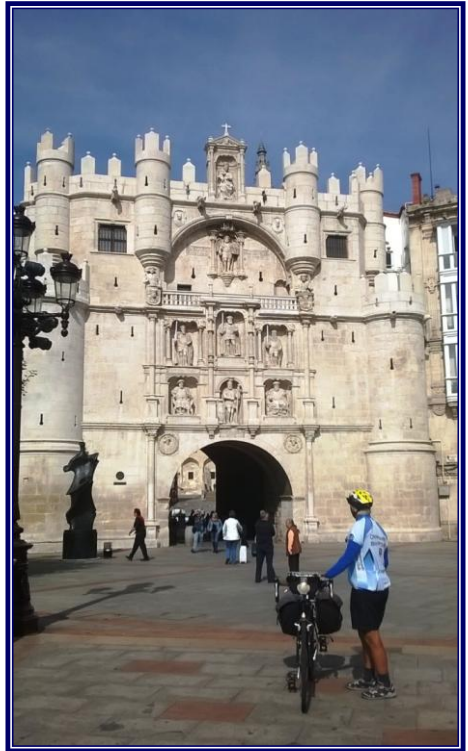
***Statue of San Juan de Ortega:
calipers signify engineering***

To retrace our steps to the N120 for the run into Burgos would be very tedious. We decide to use the N1, it's mostly downhill and leads us right to the centre of the beautiful medieval city of Burgos, in fact, directly up to the Santa Maria gate **and** we're here before midday - bonus!

We're quickly booked into a great hotel, all art deco, with the Camino at the front door, in the



Burgos Cathedral,



Santa Maria gate, Burgos

centre of bustling Burgos. We stow the bikes, dump the panniers in our room and head out, there is so much to see. Without doubt, we must see the cathedral, this is a pilgrimage after all, and get our sellos. The cathedral, the first gothic cathedral in Spain, is breathtaking: another fabulous testimony and triumph to the craftsmen's skill and knowledge in praise of Christianity. It would be a very stubborn non-believer who could not fail to be bowled over by the power and beauty of it all.

There seem to be churches on every corner but the old adage ABC - Another Bloody Cathedral (Château/Castle) - is pertinent here, and we decide one is fun, more is a chore. Perhaps we shall come back to Burgos in the future.

We take a land train tour of the city and finish the afternoon with refreshments in the blissful shade of plane trees, doing a spot of people-watching. This is my idea of heaven.

After a relatively relaxing day, Damian is

Two 'holy hen's hurrying about their business

feeling quite recovered, much to the relief of the crew. Hotel Norte y Londres gives us a restaurant recommendation and we head off for a lovely evening on the edge of the main square. Sadly, it is not now warm enough to eat outside, which is always my preferred option, but we have a lovely meal, as far removed from last night as might be imagined. I have cod in pimiento sauce and Damian lamb on the bone – 'spécialité de la région' – it does also come with its kidney which is not greatly to Damian's taste but, hey, when in Rome



We think about tomorrow when we will start the long ride across the plain of the Meseta, where, according to the My Fair Lady song, 'the rain falls mainly' let us hope it does not for us. It will be a long day, 45 miles at least, over inhospitable terrain with little shelter. We must make an early start and be fully equipped with food and plenty of water.

Images of Burgos



El Cid. aka Rodrigo Diaz de Vivar



*St James Matamoros (Moorslayer)
How un-PC is that!*



*The author, Damian and
some 'friendly' Burgolesa*

Day 27
Burgos → Frómista

Saturday, 26 Sept
51mls / 82kms

By super-human effort we are out of Norte y Londres by 8.15am. This will probably turn out to be a personal best for the trip! Unfortunately, breakfast is somewhat limited. At 8.15 on a Saturday morning Burgos is deliciously quiet, just the odd dog-walker about. Note to self: try to get out early more often!

There is a fresh feel to the day necessitating fleeces and legs but otherwise all feels right in the world of these two pilgrims. Several other pilgrims have checked out and we become part of the pilgrim exodus from Burgos. There are many knots of walkers as well as single walkers. We must join the N120 again but this will be nothing like that of Thursday. Now it is quiet, almost deserted and the hard shoulder/cycle lane is wider, altogether a much more agreeable experience. The John Higginson guide is useful for details such as 'Tardajos is the last real refuelling stop before Castrojeriz', some 26 miles on – we are warned. We do, however, manage a coffee stop at Villanueva de Argaño. I marvel that this tiny settlement can support a bar in such a sparsely populated region of Spain.



*Just beyond
Olmillos de Sasamon.
We're getting there!*

*A few yards further on,
we pick almonds from
the tree*

We now start the long, slow, hard ascent to the Plain of the Meseta, a desolate, barren, even savage landscape much of it uncultivated. I find it hostile and uncomfortable; there is no shade and foolish are the pilgrims who do not have adequate supplies. I don't even want to think about punctures or worse - and JH tells us, reassuringly, that we can expect three more days of the same.



The village of Hontanas is the high point of the plain; it makes a good lunch time stop and is full of pilgrims sitting out in the sunshine, clustered round the café/bar resting tired feet.

Again there is the buzz of many languages. Astonishingly, I meet a pilgrim from Kiev in the Ukraine who started walking in April. Where our pilgrim passports are modest affairs, little more than a leaflet, his is a fully paid-up book; it would be a virtual journey to leaf through his stamps/tampons/sellos. There is a dwarf; he barely reaches my waist and his stride must be half the length of someone of normal height but he is determined and will, I have no doubt, reach Santiago in his own time. Another pilgrim is walking with his very small dog; when the dog tires he puts it in a travelling kennel and carries that. Most pilgrims are either students or gap 'yearers' or our age and older; I see one lady, probably in her late 70s. I guess these are the only people with the time to spare, those in between are busy carving careers or raising families.

We arrive in Frómista at 5.15pm. It's a small town which, were it not for the camino, the canal and railway running through, would probably sink into oblivion. As it is, Frómista has not one church but three immense buildings and a reasonable range of shops. We check into the Hotel San Martin opposite St Martin's church.





***Church of San Martin, Frómista.
There are two other similar sized churches in this modest town.***



***Statue of St James in
Church of St Martin***

As we enjoy our cool drinks under the awning, we fall into conversation with two Belgian pilgrims who tell us that there is a pilgrim mass and blessing at St Peter's church that evening. We have so much for which to be thankful - we will be there.



Church of San Pedro, Frómista

At the end of mass all pilgrims are invited to the altar rail for blessing and a small memento of our visit (see below). We are also invited to list off our nationalities, Korea, Poland, Philippines, Belgium and New Mexico are represented; and those are just what I remember.



Day 28
Frómista → Moratinos

Sunday, 27 Sept
35mls / 56kms

It's Sunday and a radiantly beautiful day, fresh, but with the promise of sun. We don't make a particularly early start but JH promises us an 'easy' day, oh good, and so it proves to be. The roads are immensely long, flat and well-surfaced with little traffic perhaps 10 cars all morning. We have coffee in Villacazar de Sirga, an unremarkable town with a remarkable church.



*Author and 'pilgrim',
Revenge de Campos*



*Church of Santa Maria la Blanca,
Villacazar de Sirga*



We are now making great progress, passing many walkers on their route, although, rather perversely, they seem to catch us up again probably because we spend too much time looking rather than cycling. In fact, we cover 8 miles in half an hour – this is motoring! JH advises us of a roman villa complete with pavement; ‘not to be missed’ are JH’s words, so we don’t and designate Quintanilla de la Cueva our lunch stop. In fact, we find the whole experience rather underwhelming.

Lacking an English description or indeed French; we feel Señor in the entrance kiosk is counting the minutes till he can shut up shop and go home for his siesta but in the spirit of earlier trips we have learnt ‘stay off the rue till half past two’ and it makes a pleasant stop. Before leaving for the day, Señor invites us to help ourselves to the apples on the tree, which are crisp and juicy as only fruit freshly-picked from the tree can be.



Roman pavement at the villa, undoubtedly beautiful and painstakingly restored but some information would have been helpful!

Not far on is the village of Moratinos. Before we left home we introduced ourselves to the church and parish of



St James, Pokesdown. We learned that one of the parishioners had family in Moratinos who were greatly involved in the Camino in all its aspects and offered accommodation, on a 'donativo'² basis. Before leaving I had made contact and we agreed I would ring when we were in the area.

We find the Peaceable Kingdom, home of Patrick and Rebekah with little trouble. Unsurprisingly, they are well known in a village of 22 souls in summer, 16 in winter! Today they are expecting two Australian pilgrims, Robyn and Gill, but have another spare room and extend to us the warmest of welcomes. Rebekah and Gill had met on the camino some years ago and had become friends. This year, Gill is showing Robyn the ropes. It seems once bitten by the 'camino bug', and this has nothing to do with beds or biting creatures, and everything to do with walking long distances in Spain, you just want to go on walking other caminos.

After changing, Patrick and Rebekah take all four of us to visit their 'bodega', a cool room buried deep into the hillside and complete with chimney, now used for a variety of purposes.

We spend a happy evening, sharing a great meal with Rebekah, Robyn and Gill at the bar/restaurant. This is one of the great pleasures of the camino, meeting interesting people along the way.



Rebekah and Patrick's bodega at the top of the village – an excellent place to store wine!



² Donation