

Day 29
Moratinos → León

Monday, 28 Sept
46mls / 71kms

We have now been four weeks on the road; a good time to take stock. Four weeks ago, I dared not think too much about Santiago 1000 miles distant, it was just too huge to contemplate. Damian estimated arrival in four weeks; I always thought it would be five. I had hoped to be in Santiago for my birthday; that goal is slipping away, although we could make it if we went hell for leather but that is not the idea and we are certainly going to need a morning for León at the very least.

We bid farewell to Patrick and Rebekah, Gill and Robyn and set out for Sahagun. The sun is well up, another fabulous day; we have been so lucky with the weather – thank you St James.

It's a short ride to Sahagun where we plan to visit the convent of La Peregrina – Our Lady of Pilgrims, where we can get our sello. Unfortunately, we are at the convent too early and the custodian of the sello, a joyless woman, is not going to bend the rules for anyone, not even for pilgrims.



Damian meets another Pilgrim

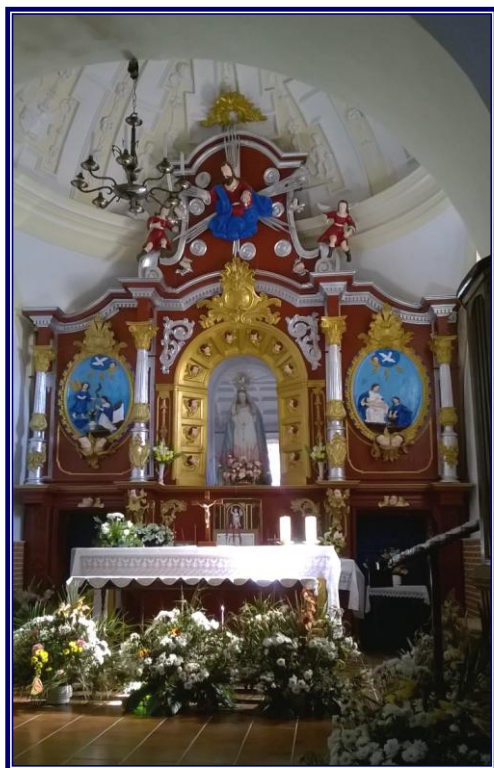


San Benito arch, Sahagun

After changing a dodgy pedal, we're glad to leave Sahagun behind, but it's not until after midday and we have 30 miles to push to León. Thankfully it is soooooo easy. We are bowling along at 17, 18, 19 mph effortlessly – motoring, we are speeding and without realising we find ourselves only 8 miles from León.

At Calzada del Coto our guide books differ substantially; we have a choice of routes. Damian chooses to avoid the N120 and we take the walkers' route to Bercianos del Real Camino, a purpose built, traffic free route for the exclusive use of pilgrims, offering regular benches for resting. Just before Bercianos we find the lovely little chapel of Nuestra Señora de Perales;

set back from the camino, it looks a little weather-beaten but inside is charming and exuberantly catholic!



*Interior of Nuestra Señora de Perales
Our Lady of the Pear Trees*



Once in to León we follow usual procedure, heading for Office de Turismo for town map and list of hotels. Although, it could have been a risky strategy not to book ahead, we have been fortunate and, as yet, NOT come unstuck – happily. El Rincón del Conde is a great hotel – no bath but wifi which now seems standard. How did medieval pilgrims call home? Now into well-rehearsed procedure, we're showered and changed and into León.

We take a short walk around the old quarter of León which this weekend is holding the Fiesta de la Morcilla¹. León is black pudding central but it doesn't really press any buttons for me; we don't need to spend an evening celebrating it.

We find a restaurant, the Las Termas (The Thermal Springs) just off the main square which is superb and worthy of recommendation to all visitors to León. The three- course Pilgrim Menu – for which it is not mandatory to be a pilgrim – is imaginative, sophisticated and delicious and costs €15 (less than £12). I have leeks stuffed with veal, cod with avocado and pimento mayonnaise and ice cream, all beautifully presented with linen napkins and table cloth. To round off this brilliant day, we are joined by a retired US navy officer, a charming, interesting man who had served at the US naval base on the south coast of Spain in the 70s and is now making a return visit to the places and friends made during those 'salad' days. I did not even know that America had a base there, but what a great posting that would have been and would rank up there with the Far East for my family.



***The Camino between Calzada del Coto and Bercianos del Real Camino.
Here a flock of sheep on the move.
This may be the start of the transhumance,
when livestock is moved from the high ground to lower pastures***

¹ Black pudding

Day 30
Leon → Astorga

Tuesday, 29 September
31 miles / 49 kms

Not quite such a fabulous day and Rincón del Conde serves a **very** limited breakfast. We allow ourselves a morning to see León; it would be lovely to spend longer but we can't really afford the time. The 'must-sees' are the cathedral, another gothic masterpiece, Casa de los Botines, a Gaudi building and the Pantheon, before heading to the Plaza San Marcos.

***Damian, Penny
and 'The Reader'
in front of
Casa de los Botines***



***Casa de los Botines.
'The
Reader's' bench
is here***

Astonishingly, this Gaudi building took about a year to complete in 1893. Compare and contrast with his Sagrada Familia cathedral in Barcelona, also started in 1893, and still not yet completed.

***The Church of
San Isodoro***



***San
Marcos.
Once a
monastery
now a
luxury
parador
hotel***

***Three
weary
pilgrims in
Plaza San
Marcos***



Day 30
León → Astorga

Tuesday, 29 September
31 miles / 49 kms

Once again we find ourselves setting out at midday but with only 30 miles to push, it's not too bad.

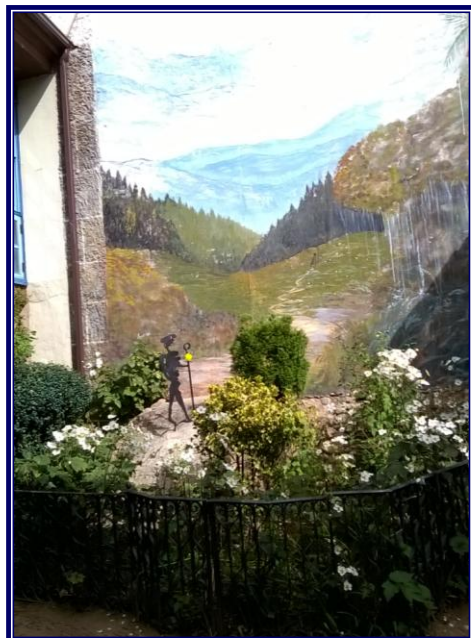
The route out of León leads us back to our old 'friend', the N120 Today the road is not so terrifying although the lorries are still tanking past. When we lived in Germany, 40 years ago, we used to refer to these juggernauts as 'woofers' due to the woofing noise they made as they went past; this noise very quickly becomes exhausting. Happily the hard shoulder/cycle lane is much wider than on that terrible day out of Santo Domingo, when, if anything, it was more necessary.

***Statue of St James Matamoros,
in the church of
St John the Baptist,
Trobajo del Camino
on the outskirts of León.***



***Storks build their nests in the most precarious of situations.
Here on the espadaña (bell gable) of the church between León and Hospital de Orbigo.
The birds will also build on the top of telegraph poles***

In medieval times, towns along the Camino would grow up around hostels, hospitals and river crossing points. Hospital de Orbigo is one such. The bridge spanning the river Orbigo is, apparently, the longest bridge in Spain connecting the village of Puente de Orbigo on one bank of the river and Hospital de Orbigo on the other. The hostel is in the main street and we call in just to see what it is like.



***Mural on the wall of the
hostel at
Hospital de Orbigo***

We finally roll into Astorga about 5.00pm. Over the last half mile of the day I fall into conversation with a woman who has walked from Geneva. She started in July and had given up her job to walk her Camino. I am full of admiration for this purposefulness. I also start to wonder if we may have missed a vital element of the camino which can only be appreciated by walking. Many people, to whom I have spoken, say it is the walking which allows you to empty your mind and to open it to deeper more spiritual matters. I am coming to the understanding that that is true; a cyclist, particularly one on the N120, just does not have this luxury, concentrating on the road and traffic is a very full time occupation.

As we are checking in to the Hotel de la Peseta, a couple of fine strapping lads from Brazil are doing the same. They also have travelled from León; it feels good to have achieved something similar to two young men at the peak of their fitness.

Supper tonight is another great pilgrim menu on the Plaza Mayor. Tomorrow will be the big test of stamina as we climb 840ft in 12.5 miles.



Plaza Mayor, main square, Astorga with town hall

Day 31
Astorga → Molinaseca

Wednesday 30 September
30 miles / 47 kms

A brilliant start for a) weather – sunny/warm and b) hour - 9.05am. This is going to be a humdinger of a day as we climb to the highest point of the Camino at Cruz de Ferro – Iron Cross. The climb will be a long, slow, painful LSA for which we shall need lungs of steel followed by a long steep, exceptionally fast descent requiring nerves of steel.

La Peseta has proved adequate with a rather ‘thin’ breakfast and we are amongst several cyclists setting off. First stop has to be, what else, the cathedral where we shall get our sello. I now have 62 stamps on my ‘credencial’.

*Bishop's Palace
designed by
Anton Gaudi*



Cathedral of Santa Maria



We stop for coffee at Santa Columba de Somoza. The bar/café is unpretentious though it does have wifi. Mine host is preparing a meal for a dozen pilgrims, attacking seriously man-sized chunks of beef with a ferocious cleaver. True to the spirit of offering hospitality to pilgrims, he asks us if we also would like to join the party. This sounds a lovely idea but we might never move after the meal and we hope to be in Ponferrada by evening; we reluctantly decline his invitation.

Santo Columba is a pretty, and I guess, well-heeled village. There are not many neglected properties and several houses are carefully restored. It has a

refurbished ayuntamiento which also doubles as the doctor's surgery.



Santo Columba de Somoza. We see many of these huge enclosed balconies

The little church in Santo Columba de Somoza



The next village on the camino is Rabanal del Camino. The Confraternity of St James (CSJ) runs two hostels, one at Miraz, on the Camino del Norte and the other at Rabanal, here on the Francés. As we are members of the Confraternity, we think it would be interesting to call in and introduce ourselves. Just as we are joining the parallel road coming in from Astorga, I see Gill and Robyn, last seen when we left the Peaceable Kingdom. This amply demonstrates how one meets up and takes leave of people at many and various points on the way. It is a pleasure to share our progress stories with them. They hope to be staying at the CSJ refuge tonight but have no idea what the bed status is until they get there. It is not generally possible to reserve, in advance, a bed in a refuge.

As we arrive at the refuge a notice on the door tells all-comers that there are 20 beds available for the night and there are already 17 rucksacks neatly lined up, waiting for the refuge to open at 2.00 pm. I hope Gill and Robyn get their packs down quickly to reserve two of the last available.



17 rucksacks waiting to claim a bed for the night



Washing socks after a day's walking

We head off for our picnic lunch; when we return, the refuge is busy registering the new intake of pilgrims, including Gill and Robyn. The Confraternity keep careful records of pilgrims. In 2014 4,900+ pilgrims passed through the doors of Refuge Gualcelmo of whom the vast majority were Spanish, followed by Italian, American, British in that order and, possibly every other country in the world. The two hospitaleros² are an american father and daughter team from New York state. He is an old hand with six years hopitalero experience to his name; it is his daughter's first year.

We bid farewell to Gill and Robyn acknowledging that we may yet see them again on the way or in Santiago. Now starts the long climb to Cruz de Ferro slightly higher than the source of the Loire at Gerbier de Jonc (1495m). It has been exhilarating and tiring by turns and the slalom descent will be a white-knuckle ride. JH warns us that cyclists have lost their lives on this part of the Camino. We descend 15kms in no time at all with hands welded to the brakes like claws.

***Cruz de Ferro
(Cross of Iron)
1504m***



30/9/15



² Hosts at a refuge

IMAGES OF THE (VERY) LONELY MONTES DE LEON

*A warning to
cyclists to
'circulate' with
caution.
This is no
exaggeration!*



The road between Rabanal and



.....part of the descent to Molinaseca



Day 32
Molinaseca → La Herrias

Thursday, 1 October
30 miles / 50 kms

We make rather a poor and extremely cold (gloves!) start from the Casa Rural. Firstly, we must find breakfast, which is 'continental', code for not much, and I feel I could murder the full buffet. Over breakfast we meet a lovely young couple from west coast America. I feel we have an instant 'bond' because Sue had lived in Ripley, the village almost next door to Jo and Tim, before moving to America. She also speaks excellent Spanish having worked for Iberia airlines. She is kind enough to offer her skills if we need help in translation. What wonderful good fortune!

Ponferrada, a Templar town, is only 7 kms distant and we're soon in, however, I feel I have lost some of my momentum. I have no energy to look at anything, which surprises me, and the idea of sitting in the sunny square with coffee and a book seems much more appealing. Self evidently this is not a 'flier' and we reluctantly saddle up, planning to reach Villafranco del Bierzo at least. It will, we fondly believe, be almost the last big climb of the Montes de León. How wrong we were!

Passing through the village of Camponaraya, I can smell the grape harvest being brought in. The chaps are 'paddling' around in the trailer and shifting the precious crop with a spade more suited to mixing concrete but they are kind enough to hand each passing pilgrim a big bunch of grapes.



*I may be drinking this
wine in two or three
years! Will the boots
and the shovel add a
certain 'bouquet'?*



We arrive in Villafranca del Bierzo and feel we are making such good progress we decide to press on to Las Herrias.



Villafranca del Bierzo

Just as I am making heavy weather of booking the casa rural for the night, the west coast Americans come up behind us and Sue steps in to do my talking. In no time we have a cast iron booking of a bed for the night; the camaraderie of the camino has triumphed.

It is late when we arrive in Las Herrias but the welcome is warm and the room comfortable and clean though 'ensuite' is over-optimistic, wardrobe is more like it, and will surely take the prize for smallest of trip, there's wifi **and**, la Señora has put our kit through the wash - what's not to like.

Supper is, at best, sustaining; we fall into conversation with the only other diners, pilgrims, three girls - two Australians and an American; sharing our camino stories.

We fall into bed and truly feel that we are at the 'end-game'; tomorrow is my birthday. On Cycling the Loire, we spent my birthday in Tours; 2015 will be spent somewhere between Las Herrias and who knows.



Day 33
Las Herrias → Sarria

MY BIRTHDAY, Friday, 2 October
36miles / 59 kms

Despite an altitude of 675m, it is not as cold as yesterday. We make a poor start - 10.00 am - not helped by a breakdown on the technology front. The card payment machine has gone into a mega-sulk and we have to resort to paper money – how novel is that? It begs the question, how will we manage when paper money becomes completely passé? We set off near a party of pilgrims on horseback.



*Pilgrims on horseback
'caballeros'
waiting for the off!*

*The new A6
seems to be in
the garden of
these houses.
Whether they
will find new
owners is
anyone's guess*



We have a very hard day ahead of us; 10 kms to O Cebreiro, the gateway to Galicia. It will be another LSA through a region notorious for changeable weather and, true to form, low cloud / mists swirl around the route ahead. My spirits are pretty much at rock bottom and it's meant to be my birthday! Pedrafita will be the last of civilization before O Cebreiro. We must be stocked up with water and at least some emergency rations. Happily, the first shop in town is the most wonderful pastelleria and la señora has cakes TO DIE FOR! Damian buys one bag-ful followed by another: we are in carb overload but it is my birthday and we have a very long climb ahead. We also get this lovely 'sello'.

***Sello from the pastelleria Miguinas.
We indulge in carb overload
but we have a long climb ahead***



Fortified for the fray we saddle up for The Climb. It is hard but there is next to no traffic and the views, with or without the low cloud which hovers, at times menacingly, are fantastic.

***The end of
the long climb***



Sooner than expected, we arrive at O Cebreiro, a tiny settlement with church and a few examples of pallozas, low, thatched, pre-roman dwellings. They are similar to an Iron Age round house dwelling and, amazingly, were in use till the second half of the 20th century. They would not look out of place at the Weald & Downland Museum or Butser Farm in Hampshire.



A 'palloza' 'typical of this part of Spain but definitely lacking in 'mod-cons'

As we are leaving O Cebreiro the west coast Americans arrive, so, of course we compare notes. They plan on being in Sarria tonight as we do. We set off together, meeting them again, at the highest point of the day at Alto de Poyo, where they need to borrow our pump, and stop again to offer assistance to a fellow cycling pilgrim, last seen in Burgos when he had been

looking for a bike shop for some repairs



Statue of the universal pilgrim at Alto San Roque



Once again we swap progress reports and then the west coast Americans catch us up, again. It has taken us four to five hours, an average of five miles per hour to achieve this high point. The descent to Triacastela, also 15 miles, will be about an hour; it is only thanks to a nose wind, acting as a pretty fair brake, that our hands are spared at least some pain. In fact, the descent is exhilarating and much less scary than that from Cruz de Ferro.

We make a booking at the International Albergue in Sarria, where, happily, el señor speaks French; we have full understanding – such a relief. The hostel is at the top of the town, in a lovely old street full of other albergues; I love the way hostels keep their doors wide open: what could be more welcoming to the tired pilgrim, whether on foot or bike, but to see the welcome sight of comfortable sofas, chairs and tables. We are offered a family room at the top of the building including en-suite bathroom. It's comfortable enough rather than luxurious.

The International Albergue, Sarria

It's my birthday and Señor is very happy to make a good restaurant recommendation. Hotel Roma offers an excellent Menu del Dia; we have mushrooms and prawns in scrambled eggs! I know, dear reader, this sounds a weird combo but it

works and is rather good, with, to follow: salmon, followed by chestnuts and cream. Part of hostel life, of which it is wise to be mindful, is that the front door is locked in the evening, sometimes as early as 9.30 pm but here

it's 10.00 pm. This is to ensure pilgrims who want to be up at first light are not disturbed by late-night revellers returning the worse for wear.



Day 34

Sarria → Palais de Rei

Saturday, 3 October

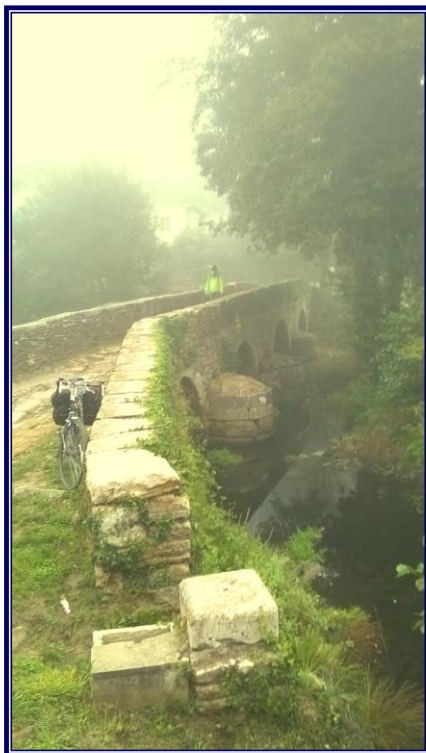
36 miles/ 59km

JH tells us that today is the hardest day of all. Not sure how that can be: surely the LSA to O Cebreiro is the ultimate test of stamina. Whatever, our goal of the great cathedral of Santiago is firmly in our sights.

We make a very poor start, wearing as many clothes as I can lay my hands on to combat the real autumnal feel to the day, misty, moisty and cool. Señor has told us of a good short cut but omits to say that it is through the woods along steep and stony and rutted tracks – fine for walkers, but absolutely useless for cyclists.

*An old pack-horse bridge,
part of the walkers' Camino:
pretty awful for cyclists -
and it gets worse*

As always, the great joy of doing the camino is meeting and talking to other pilgrims. Along this arduous section where we also have, of necessity, to become walkers, we fall into conversation with a father / son duo from America; Alaska, and Kansas respectively. The son is very proud to tell me his dad is a cancer survivor, overweight, diabetic and uses a colostomy bag. It was apparently dad's idea to walk the camino and by starting at Sarria, he will qualify for his compostela, Sarria being the last point from which to walk the necessary 100 kms, the minimum qualifying distance for a walker (200 kms for a cyclist). I marvel at dad's fortitude; as I pass I wish him 'buen camino' and can hear him muttering his prayers quietly. I am confident he will make it – eventually. For our part we need to get off this walkers' route and get back to a proper road – the 'short cut' has cost us two hours. The route is now very testing with long uphill grinds. The weather is cool and full legs and fleeces are essential, as afterwards we fly down hills through the chilly air.



Suddenly our lovely trip has turned into a severe endurance test, and all in the space of 24 hours. I feel sad at this turn of events which will not be improved by tomorrow's weather – wall-to-wall rain. There is a very real chance that it will rain for our big day in Santiago.



An 'horreo' or grain store, found throughout Galicia. This is a particularly smart one.

In his guide, JH gives a ringing endorsement to Casa Curro in Palais de Rei, serving, according to him, some of the best and cheapest meals on the camino. After our long tiring day I feel this is no less than we deserve.

The reality is very different! The main street, onto which our window looks, is doubling up tonight as a rally car track with souped-up saloon cars racing up and down: restful it is not. Supper at Casa Curro in Palais de Rei is a poor apology of a meal; I think Casa Curro will oust le Gâvre from its 'worst of trip' accolade.

Palais de Rei – Palace of the King – I don't think so. More like Palais of The Pits.

A disappointment of our pilgrimage has been that so many churches have been locked except at designated mass times. We do, however, catch mass in Palais de Rei, at the end of which the priest blesses the pilgrims at length in four languages, Spanish, French, German and Italian. Curiously, the English are given a rather perfunctory 'Good Way'. I feel seriously short-changed.





*Lunch stop at the picnic site
between Paradelá and Fixón*



*We really are
getting there!*



Fecha: 03 OCT. 2015

Day 35
Palais de Rei → Pedrouzo

Sunday 4 October
31 miles / 50kms

RAIN! It has been forecast for some time and here it is. We exit this lacklustre town in full waterproofs, more than happy to shake the dust of Palais de Rei off our feet. Given the weather, it is extremely unlikely that we shall make Santiago today. It's only 36 miles further, but up and down steep long hills. Factoring in the weather makes such an ambition just that and in any case we don't want to arrive at the end of the day needing to find a bed; better to arrive at 10.00 am or thereabouts, visit the Pilgrim office and catch the Pilgrim Mass at midday. Having resigned ourselves to this plan, there is now no urgency, but we need to plod on.

We make Melide for coffee, heading straight for the first café, there to be served the first really hot tea in 35 days. We would feel in heaven, were it not for the curious perfumed aftertaste. Ah well, patently you can't have it all and we **are** hitched up to wi-fi! It is seriously tempting to hunker down in this cosy establishment especially as Señora has started roasting chickens on a rotisserie – can there be any better smell approaching midday on a wet Sunday than roast chicken? Regrettably, that is not an option. We press on and after a few more hard miles reach Boente, where there is an albergue opposite the church.

*Statue of St James in the little
roadside church at Boente.*

*We are more than happy to take
shelter here from the swirling rain
and savage blustery wind.*

*It is full of pilgrims in ponchos
with the same idea!*



We warm up and dry out a little and set out again, but within a short distance it all becomes too much and we 'hole' up in a bus shelter – exhausted.



Every picture tells a story!

I now start to fantasise about what I can be doing next Sunday: breakfast with the Sunday Telegraph, roast lamb, roast potatoes, a lazy afternoon. In all our planning the scene described above had never been envisaged.

We know there will be a refuge in a couple of miles and saddle up again; I am even too despondent to start singing the pilgrims' hymn, 'He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster' – I am definitely fresh out of valour. So it goes on rain, lunch, rain, stop. Hard relentless ups, long sweeping downs but we can never make full use of the downs because the blustery wind might sweep us off the road. Can't have that so close to journey's end.

At one stage, we meet a chap on a bike walking towards us on our side, apparently in difficulty. We cannot whoosh past him; that would be most un-pilgrim like behavior. He tells us his bank card has been 'swallowed' by the machine; he only needs a few euros till tomorrow when he can get to a bank. His story sounds genuine, he looks like a fully paid up cyclist; I want to give him some money: who knows but I too may be in that position one day. Damian is made of sterner stuff saying 'No' and we press on. I worry that we shall be struck down by some divine intervention on the next uphill climb or suffer a blow-out at high speed. Neither of the above happens and we limp into Pedrouzo and find a great hotel for the night.

Pedrouzo is but 13 miles from Santiago. Surely we can be in front of that Cathedral by 11.00 am tomorrow – things are looking up.

Pedrouzo is as bustling and well-served as Palais de Rei was the antithesis. We find a great and agreeably busy restaurant, close by, for supper – all around pilgrims are reliving their day and anticipating the ‘final push’. I have a wonderful dish of sizzling garlic prawns followed by monkfish – this is my idea of heaven on a plate.

It is time to reflect. Five weeks ago we were in Bournemouth, panniers packed, full of anticipation for this great journey for which we had planned over so many months. Barring disaster, we shall arrive in Santiago exactly five weeks to the day that we left Bournemouth – and probably on another moist day. However, for the first time in all our long distance rides, I am relieved to see the end in sight: whereas on past adventures, I have (almost) not wanted to arrive at the destination, this time I do. We are tired and yesterday was difficult, we are also mindful that the forecast for tomorrow is a repeat of today, if not worse – not good! But tomorrow is THE DAY!



While I haunt another handy bus shelter, Damian visits this unprepossessing establishment.

It is, surprisingly, a fully functioning bar and shop: we stock up energy food, aka chocolate.



Day 36 – The last day of our Pilgrimage Monday, 5 October
Pedrouzo → SANTIAGO de COMPOSTELA 13 miles/ 21 kms

Today should be our triumphal entry into Santiago. I look back on other 'journeys' ends'; St Nazaire at the end of the Loire, Valras Plage after Manche-Med, both exhilarating; our achievement sealed with pastries, peaches and sparkling something or other, all enjoyed in the sun. NB. I have carried, all the way from Bournemouth, two plastic wine glasses for Cava or similar. The end of our camino is, I fear, going to be VERY different.

It is pouring with rain when we wake, though not unexpected, and our hotel receptionist suggests we should not venture out at all. I still hope some miracle will happen and the sun will shine. Our full waterproofs are tested to the full and found completely wanting, the rain is hurling down and it's blowing a hooley. I'm almost blown off my bike in a particularly strong gust, rain is dripping off my helmet, I must wipe my glasses frequently and we still have some long ascents and fast descents but we are now in the suburbs of Santiago, with all the domestic and commercial traffic of a major city. All in all it's not ideal but I am managing, more or less, to hold it together until, at the top of a hill I catch a flash of lightning out of the corner of my eye and the rain is coming down as a deluge. I COMPLETELY lose it and fully expect that I will never complete my pilgrimage. Why on earth am I doing this?

The lightning moment, literally, is at Lavacolla, within spitting distance of Santiago beside Santiago airport. In medieval times, it is believed, pilgrims would stop here to wash and ready themselves for their arrival. Well, you could say we are thoroughly 'washed'. Unfortunately, my pilgrim passport is also 'washed'; the ink of the many lovely stamps is running and in danger of being completely illegible. Will this invalidate 1200 miles cycling and be bar to obtaining my compostela? We fall into a café where for at least an hour I dry out my passports and myself under the hand dryer.

Finally and completely NON-triumphally, we limp into the Plaza del Obradoiro at 1.07 pm, completely soaked through to our underwear feeling neither victorious nor exhilarated. Damian's waterproof trousers gave up and were thrown in to a bin, he was chilled through. We have not bought Cava, so the glasses carried so carefully across three countries will not be used. Our only thought is to find a hotel, to get warm and to bath and change. It is a terrible and sad anticlimax. To add insult to injury the whole Obradoiro façade is shrouded in scaffolding and every pedestrian is swathed in a poncho or other waterproof.

My only thought is to grab someone, anyone, to take a picture of us in front of this cathedral, towards which we have been striving for five weeks and then to find a hotel.

Two very weary pilgrims arrive at the cathedral at 1.07 pm absolutely soaked!



I know just how this chap feels!

We check into a great ‘boutique’ style hotel in the old quarter, change into ‘plain’ clothes and hurry out to the Pilgrim Office to present our credenciales and obtain our compostela. The queue is not too long; we are, after all coming to the end of the season. I imagine the queue in July / August is very different. For the height of the season there are eight desks to cope with the numbers, today there are four people working to check passports, ascertain the reason for one’s pilgrimage, whether it be religious, spiritual, cultural or for the physical challenge. The buzz of conversation is all about how long / where did you start / which hostels did you use, etc etc. We fall into conversation easily, with such a great, shared experience, there is much to talk about and then we see the American west coasters also in the queue. It is like meeting old friends; they had arrived the day before but are only now collecting their compostelas: we make a date to share supper after the 7.00 pm pilgrim mass.



The author's compostela, gained on presentation of the authenticated pilgrim passport /credencial. I have 77 stamps in my passport

Translation at Appendix 1

The Pilgrim Office adds the final stamp (below) to mark an end to the pilgrimage



The cathedral is absolutely packed for the Pilgrim Mass with several priests officiating, followed by the swinging of the ‘botafumeiro’, the immense censer suspended from the roof at the altar crossing. This ritual is pure

theatre, which Damian manages to video on his phone, I wish I could reproduce the film and capture the smell of the incense in this journal. After the trials of the last 1200 miles, we do feel triumphant, and also somewhat emotional; it is a fitting closure to five weeks of toil and amazing adventure.



The botafumeiro is set in motion by eight tiraboleiros, dressed in red velvet robes. Over 5kilos of charcoal and incense, is shovelled into the censer, which, at the height of its travel achieves 35 mph and approximately 70'.



We meet up with Sue and Rick for supper and spend a most happy evening reliving our caminos. They too had been accosted by the chap whose bank card had been 'swallowed'; Sue was more generous than we!

Day 36 REST DAY IN SANTIAGO

Tuesday, 5 October

It's a better day, not raining and somewhat brighter, for which we are grateful. It is, nevertheless, hard to put behind us the disappointment of our arrival yesterday.



What a shame that this fabulous façade is shrouded in scaffolding.

We have a few admin tasks to complete. We have decided we cannot face the ride to Finisterre and take the bikes to Velocipedo³ who, for a fee, will box and despatch them to UK. The next time we see our good and faithful bikes will be on our doorstep in Bournemouth. We have flights booked from A Coruña to Heathrow for tomorrow. We are now free to spend the rest of the day discovering this amazing city focus for millions of pilgrims, Christians, other faiths and none, over the centuries. We go back to the Plaza del Obradoiro for another picture and welcome a Chinese couple just arrived on bikes and, of course, and swap stories.

We also bump into the young mexican and his german chum whom we had met at San Roque, at the statue of the 'universal' pilgrim.

We spend the afternoon walking and dodging the rain in this beautiful old city as pilgrims have been doing since the 9th century. Lots of things would look pretty similar, but they

³www.elvelocipedo.com

would have been astonished by the idea of being able to communicate instantly with family as we have been able to do.

The sides of the Plaza del Obradoiro are dominated by the Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos. Built by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella as a hospital when the pilgrimage was becoming established, it is now a 5* Parador Hotel. Mindful of its origins, it still serves a free meal to the first 10 pilgrims who arrive at its door each day at 9.00 am 12.00 and 7.00 pm. For us, arriving at past 1.00 pm meant we were never going to qualify for that one. I hear that the meal is very basic and taken in the kitchens with the staff, well away from the (handsomely) paying guests.



Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos, now a Parador hotel.

On the other side of the square opposite the Glory Portico is the Town Hall an important building as befits such a city. We spend time in the cathedral and visit the tomb of St James. I love the detail of sculpture round the capitals, in the friezes and corbels; it is in these smaller details that the masons were allowed a little bit of licence and some fun. In an age when most of the population were illiterate, instruction would have to be conveyed visually: note the dire fate awaiting the blasphemer whose tongue would be pulled out with long pincers!

***Woe betide the
blasphemer!***



***St James Matamoros
in Igreja San Martino***

During lunch, I happen to catch sight of the local newspaper, El Correo Gallego. About 25% of the column inches are devoted to 'weather' stories of yesterday showing cars and people battling against the first storms of autumn. What a shame this appalling weather could not have held off just a couple more days

WHAT THE PAPERS SAID

Traffic (circulation) Collapses as Downpour Strikes Town Hall

La tromba de agua coge desprevenido a Raxoi



COLAPSO DE TRÁFICO
Automóviles atrapados en
un enorme charco de agua,
en el periférico santiagués

Cars Stuck In A Huge Puddle Of Water, On The Santiago Ring Road

LUNES 14 DE JULIO (págs. 10, 22, 23, 30 y 31) El primer temporal del otoño, previsto desde el sábado, cogió desprevenido al pazo de

More than 400 incidents in one day throughout Galicia.

Winds up to 120km/hr, (75 mph):

Rainfall of 69 litres per square metre (15 gallons per square metre).

The yellow alert remains in Pontevedra and the coast after yesterday's intense atlantic storm.



A Group of Women face a real Downpour in the Plaza del Obradoiro

Day 37

Wednesday, 7 October

Santiago de Compostela → East Horsley

Back on the road again! We've entrusted our bicycles to a "packer and mover", and take the train from Santiago to A Coruña to catch the shuttle bus to the airport. At Heathrow, Tim is there to meet us, a wonderful bonus: no more struggling with unwieldy panniers! We can become normal travellers once again.

The grandchildren have printed cycling-appropriate bunting for our return but where does one begin to recount an adventure of 36 days away on a bike? Impossible, though we make a fair attempt, and could have gone on into the wee small hours; that is hardly fair, as they have to turn out tomorrow and go to work. We assure them that the journal will be ready in due course.



*A Lovely
Welcome
Home
from our
Family*



Day 38
East Horsley → Bournemouth

Thursday 8 October

Home at last! Quite frankly, leaving Bournemouth seems to have taken place in another universe, light years away, but our house is still there and our lovely neighbours meet us at Bournemouth, insisting that we cannot possibly be allowed to use a bus for such a homecoming. When we do arrive at home there is more bunting from kind friends.

Just for now it will be a joy to sleep in our own bed, not to wrestle in a foreign language to secure a bed for the night and not have to pack up panniers each day.

Will we ever do another long distance ride?

Watch this space!



TRANSLATION OF THE COMPOSTELA:

In order that the Chapter of this Holy, Apostolic, and Metropolitan Church of Compostela, guardian of the seal of the Altar of St. James, might provide all those Faithful and Pilgrims who come from the whole world to the threshold of our Apostle, Patron and Protector of Spain, whether out of special devotion or in fulfilment of a vow, with an authentic record of their visit, I make known to all those who will see the present document that

.....

has visited this most holy Church with piety and devotion.

In confirmation of which I confer upon him/her the present certificate, authenticated by the seal of that same Holy Church.

Given at Compostela, on the day of the month in the year of the Lord

Secretary of the Chapter

Appendix 2

DAY BY DAY SUMMARY

Day	Date	From - To	Miles	Km
1	31-Aug	Bournemouth - Portsmouth	52	85
2	01-Sep	St Malo - Antrain	45	72
3	02-Sep	Antrain - Rennes	43	68
4	03-Sep	Rennes - Messac	39	63
5	04-Sep	Messac - Le Gavre	31	51
6	05-Sep	Le Gavre - Nantes	40	64
7	06-Sep	Nantes - Clisson	30	48
8	07-Sep	Clisson - St Fulgent	24	38
9	08-Sep	St Fulgent - Fontenay le Comte	40	64
10	09-Sep	Fontenay-le-Comte - Surgères	34	54
11	10-Sep	Surgères - Saintes	40	70
12	11-Sep	Saintes - Royan	30	48
Total Part 1 –UK + Le Mont St Michel Way			448	725
13	12-Sep	Royan - Lacanau Océan	52	76
14	13-Sep	Lacanau Océan - Lanton Taussaut	32	53
15	14-Sep	Lanton Taussaut - Sanguinet	31	49
16	15-Sep	Sanguinet - Moliets Plage	59	93
17	16-Sep	Moliets Plage - Bayonne	39	63
18	17-Sep	Bayonne - St Jean de Luz	18	28
Total Part 2 - La Voie Littorale			231	362

Appendix 2 continued

DAY BY DAY SUMMARY – continued

Day	Date	From - To	Miles	Km
19	18-Sep	St Jean de Luz - Irura	33	55
20	19-Sep	Irura - Zegama	26	41
21	20-Sep	Zegama - Alsasua	18	30
22	21-Sep	Alsasua - Vittoria	33	53
23	22-Sep	Vittoria - Salinillas de Buradon	30	50
24	23-Sep	Salinillas de Buradon - Santo Domingo de la Calzada	19	30
Total Part 3 -The Tunnel Route			159	259
25	24-Sep	Santo Domingo de la Calzada - Santovenia	30	48
26	25-Sep	Santovenia - Burgos	18	29
27	26-Sep	Burgos - Fromista	51	82
28	27-Sep	Fromista - Moratinos	35	56
29	28-Sep	Moratinos - Léon	46	71
30	29-Sep	Léon - Astorga	31	49
31	30-Sep	Astorga - Molinaseca	29	47
32	01-Oct	Molinaseca - Las Herrias	30	50
33	02-Oct	Las Herrias - Sarria	36	59
34	03-Oct	Sarria - Palais de Rei	36	59
35	04-Oct	Palais de Rei - Pedrouzo	31	50
36	05-Oct	Pedrouzo - Santiago de Compostela	13	21
Total Part 4 - el Camino Francés			386	621
GRAND TOTALS			1276	2052

Appendix 3

KIT LIST

Cycle lights & lock	Passport, + pilgrim ones	Picnic plate
Cycle computer	EU medical assistance card (E111)	Spreading & Fruit knives
Helmet	Travel insurance policy	Picnic salt and pepper
Cycling glasses	Credit/debit cards	Sewing kit
Water bottles	Foreign currency	Polythene bags
Pumps	Maps & Guides	Leisure clothes
Puncture repair outfit	Notebook	Socks
Spare inner tubes	Camera	Underwear
Tools	Mobile phone	Sandals
Cable ties	Compass	Sunglasses
Chain “splitter”, Spare spokes	Battery chargers	Washing kit & microfiber towels
Dog dazer	Cycling clothes	Curling wand
Emergency rations	Cycling gloves	Pyjamas
First aid kit	Waterproofs – tops and legs	2 x plastic wine glasses for celebration
Scissors	Overshoes	

EL FINAL DEL VIAJE !



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