

WALK THIS WAY

*El Camino de Santiago, the Way of St James, les chemins de Saint-Jacques de Compostelle ... For twelve centuries, all roads have led towards the sacred site of Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Whatever your religion, the epic journey is a test for body, mind and soul, as **Tamara Thiessen** discovers.*

On the way – the pilgrim's path crossing from Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port over the Pyrénées to Roncesvalles.





BRODAN

778 1967



All roads lead to Santiago de Compostela – St James Church in Asquins, Burgundy is on one of the French routes. Left, pilgrim Tamara Thiessen all set for the challenge.



It's mid-afternoon and after a very hard slog, we are standing on a plateau, straddling France and Spain, looking out over pleated valleys of mountain tops and mist. The alpine meadows and beech forests look like they have barely changed since medieval times, when thousands of pilgrims started coming this way.

The first 25-kilometre day of what will be a 30-day trek is for me among the most difficult and most memorable. A shin-challenging crossing over the 1,250-metre high Pyrénées passageway on the **Route Napoleon**, then down 540 metres through green velvet upholstered hills to **Roncesvalles**, where a road sign reminds us that we still have 790 kilometres to go to our destination.

In Holy Years – whenever St James's day (July 25) falls on a Sunday – up to 200,000 pilgrims pass through this town. In the 12th century its lovely cloistered monastery was already serving up to half a million meals a year to hungry pilgrims. According

to a 12th-century Latin poem it gave shelter to everyone, not only Christians, but “pagans too, Jews, heretics, idlers, vagabonds ... to good and bad, sacred and profane”. The sense of being part of a privileged and inter-connected throng is powerful and pushes pilgrims – myself included – to keep on plodding.

The **Camino de Santiago** is one of those journeys which grows slowly inside you, then takes a firm and unrelenting grip. Eventually, there is no choice but to liberate that desire and set yourself free, on foot or, as some prefer, by bike or saddle.

I started reading about the ancient pilgrim routes to Santiago de Compostela back in 1997, all starting in France, which a decade

Long, long ago ...

After the discovery of the tomb of the apostle St James in a field of **Galicja**, northwest Spain, in AD813, Christians started flocking to his shrine. Its fame as a place of medieval pilgrimage escalated with the AD951 visit by Godescalc, Bishop of Le Puy, and in the Middle Ages it rivalled Rome as a holy destination.

The four main routes – starting from the French towns of **Tours**, **Vézelay**, **Arles** and **Le Puy-en-Velay** – were congregation points for pilgrims from all over Europe, including Britain and Ireland. They were popularised with the 12th-century pilgrim's guide, *Liber Peregrinationis*, described as the first European guidebook. In northern Spain they merged into the 780-kilometre *Camino Francés* – the “French road” – the most trodden pathway for pilgrims old and new.

“Walking pilgrim” Peter Robbins, a member of the famed London-based charity, the Confraternity of St James (csj.org.uk), says there are about 100 modern Caminos de Santiago starting points. The Irish Society of the Friends of St James (stjamesirl.com) says historic local kick-off points for the walk included the ports of **Waterford**, **New Ross**, **Kinsale**, **Galway** and **Dublin**. Pilgrim passports can still be acquired prior to departure at the visitor's centre of the Guinness brewery at **St James's Gate** in Dublin.

before became the first of a network of European Cultural Routes. For a peripatetic soul like myself, there is something inherently seductive about a centuries-old journey, which enticed adventurous soul-searchers from all over Europe. That rich historic brew, as well as the insanely cosmopolitan nature of the walks, sparked an irrepressible desire to follow in the medieval pilgrim's path.

There is no denying the feel-good factor of embarking on such a walk. But it does take well over a decade for my initial yearning to be consummated, after three French friends woo me to join them during a late spring trek in 2011.

Seeing them arrive, so radiant, in the cobblestoned town of **Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port**, near the Spanish border, is encouraging. Over the past five both punishing and rewarding weeks, they have traversed some of France's wildest terrain, dotted with hillside villages, Romanesque churches and rural lodgings or gîtes. For one of them at least, the endeavour has special significance – within months of major heart



surgery, André is giving his new ticker, and life priorities, a serious work out.

Conrad Rudolph, a Californian professor of medieval art and author of *Pilgrimage to the End of the World*, considers the 1,600-kilometre route from Le Puy, in the heart of France's Massif Central, the most beautiful. This is the challenge my friends have taken on. Somewhat of a cheat, I meet them in the foothills of the **French Pyrénées-Atlantiques** for the remaining half of the journey.

What attracted millions of

What to pack ...

The Confraternity of Saint James - its FAQ is particularly helpful - and Spanish Tourism (spain.info) provide excellent information on what to expect.

Carry no more than 8-10 kilo in a 35-litre pack. Tent, sleeping bag and mat, and cooking equipment are optional, but a silk liner is highly advisable. All official pilgrim hostels provide bedding (sometimes at an additional cost); not all provide adequate blankets. For footwear take lightweight boots, trekking shoes or trail runners (Gortex-lined boots will help keep you dry), plus post-trekking sandals or flip flops. Clothing should include a waterproof top or wind jacket, fast-drying shirts, shorts, trousers and socks and a sun-hat. First aid essentials are sun cream, band-aids and blister plasters, first-aid tape, antiseptic, insect repellent and bite treatment, pain killers and possibly antihistamine in case of bed bugs. Finally, sunglasses, water bottle and, although the way is very well marked, a compass may come in handy.

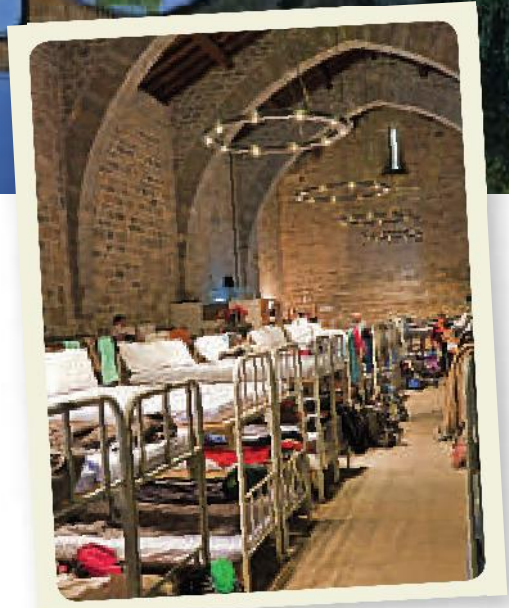
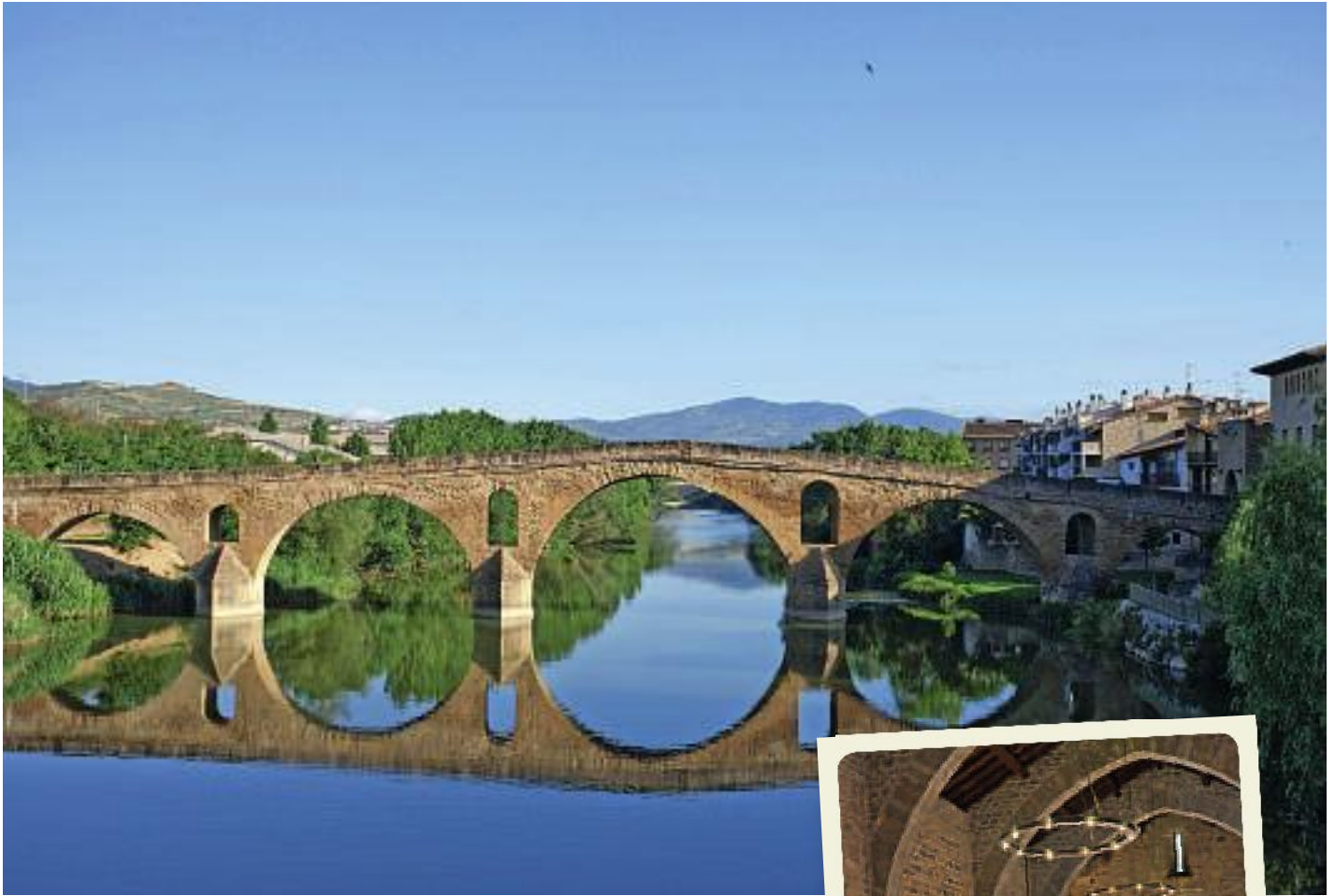
Below, last provisioning stop on the French side of the Pyrénées - the cobblestoned town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

medievalists to make a solo pilgrimage, today woos many more to do it in groups. The camaraderie is a double-edged sword. It's what gets me involved and proves to be a vital sustenance; but the idea of a pilgrim mob is also a major deterrent. I have heard so much about the congested lodgings – the municipal *refugios* and *albergues*, and school halls turned into extra walkers' accommodation to cope with the summer crowds. I have also heard rumours of bed-bugs and dirty sheets.

The thought of finding myself in a room full of snoring, sweaty bodies for 30 nights on end, almost keeps me at home. To assuage these concerns, we set out in late April-May, ahead of pilgrim peak. I also opt to carry a tent and sleeping bag as optional shelter. Sure I am lugging an extra couple of kilogrammes, but my mind is a whole lot lighter at the thought of a decent night's sleep, far from the snoring crowds.

Having picked up a *credencial* – a kind of pilgrim passport – the priory office in Roncesvalles directs us to its **Albergue de Peregrinos Itzandegia**, located inside a 12th-century church. What at any other time might be a Gothic dream is more my personal vision of hell,





with some 100 beds packed in a co-sex dorm under its cathedral roof. For €10 instead of €6, we wind up at the monastery's **Albergue de Peregrinos de Roncesvalles**, the newly revamped youth hostel – its modern dormitories divided into four-bed alcoves.

It's first in, first served at the church-run hostels – you cannot book ahead and they charge just a nominal fee, or ask for a donation, for your stay. Walkers who want more comfort and security can book ahead at the multitude of B&Bs, *casas* (rural inns), *paradors* and privately run *hostales* scattered along the way. "There is always somewhere to stay, and if you don't like the beds in one town you can just walk on a bit and find another," says

Franz, a repeat pilgrim from Germany. "Sometimes, I

have been on my own in a hostel."

A strong sense of taking things in your stride develops along the way. Not all the walk is a picture book; parts are muddy, bleak and homogenised. One of the most important lessons, my companions agree, is a sense of serenity and acceptance, as we put one foot in front of the other – and there is an awful lot of that. Even the most trying times are filled with discovery.

On Day 13, we decide, spur of the moment, to add another day to our walk, and wallow a while in the medieval city of **Burgos**. That kind of free-spirited spontaneity would seem to be befitting to the true pilgrim. Instead of going full steam ahead, we get to appreciate fully the historic capital of Castile and local specialities – soused trout and cod stew, swallowed down with Ribera

Above, humble splendour at the medieval monastery of Roncesvalles and, top, Puente la Reina, both Navarra. Left, cockleshell, the symbol of the pilgrim.

del Duero reds, ricotta like *queso de Burgos* and delicious *yemas* pastries, made from egg yolks. Members of the Asociación de Amigos del Camino de Santiago even come and greet us at our *albergue* in the late afternoon, and give us an official tour of the Gothic cathedral, a World Heritage site. In accordance with the rule, we can only stay a night at the large, swimming pool and internet-equipped **Albergue Municipal de Peregrinos**, but bed down the next night in a lovely Baroque church, the **Albergue**



PILGRIM SPEAK Online forums, including urcamino.com and the message board of caminodesantiago.me, provide the best, most up-to-date information on the Camino.



Six highlights on the road ...

1 MENU PEREGRINO
Some hostels provide a simple communal supper, cooked by pilgrims and volunteers; others have basic kitchen facilities or restaurants. Pilgrim's menus and *del día* (daily menu) are widely available at local cafés, bars and restaurants for an average €10. The private **El Palo de Avellano in Zubiri** (elpalodeavellano.com) serves a hearty set menu for €12.

2 THE COMPOSTELA
This is a Latin-inscribed certificate delivered on completion of the walk, to those who have done at least the final 100 kilometres, on presentation of your *credencial*. Pick up a *credencial* from the pilgrim offices in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port or Roncesvalles. Your

stopovers will be stamped by warden *hospitalero* in the hostels, or at churches, bars and town halls along the way.

3 PET PILGRIM'S REFUGE The **Refugio Gaucelmo**, at mountainous Rabanal del Camino between Ponferrada and León, is located in the old parish house – converted in the early 1990s by the Confraternity of St James into the first pilgrim's lodgings in the area.

4 POST-CAMINO PARADOR The splendid, cathedral-nudging **Hostal Dos Reis Catolicos**, commonly known as the **Parador de Santiago de Compostela**, is a 15th-century historic gem of pilgrim hospitality, equally

renowned for its beds and restaurant. Doubles from €186; maptravel.ie.

5 RUSTIC CHARM The **Casa Os Vilares** is a lovely stone inn, five kilometres north of Santiago de Compostela. Doubles from €62; osvilares.com.

6 PILGRIM DEODORISER The call of the Camino originates in the shrine of St James at the Romanesque **Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela**. Consecrated in 1211, its nave is more than 100 metres long, with a Baroque façade added in the 18th century. One of its famous features is the *Botafumeiro*, or incense burner, which swings from a pulley system in the dome and succeeds in perfuming the pongy pilgrim masses.

Parroquial de Peregrinos Emaús, from where we visit the nearby archaeological site of Atapuerca.

Over the next week, we saunter through river- and canal-lined countryside, spruced up with spring flowers, Benedictine monasteries and Roman bridges to **León**. The one-time Roman camp has a mix of Romanesque churches, Renaissance squares, Gothic palaces and flamboyant modernist touches by Gaudí.

It is Day 20, and a group of heavy-booted British walkers feel they have earned a splurge stay in National-Trust-style luxury at the 16th-century monastery, the **Parador de San Marcos**. At €236 a twin room, that is 40 *albergue* nights swallowed down in one gulp.

Some people do the entire Camino by car, or train, staying at one luxury lodging after another. Whether you are posh parador or true pilgrim in style, taking the walking out of the way would seem to rob it of all meaning – and its ability to transport you to some



place you have never been.

As we head for the home strait, we have another particularly gorgeous, green and rather wet region to lap up, passing by the mountain-swept towns of **Ponferrada** and **Villafranca del Bierzo** into the Galician hills. From **O Cebreiro** to **Portomarin**, with the Portuguese border looming in the south, we are hemmed in by cabbage patches, which nourish hearty local soups and pork dishes.

The rural hospitality and rustic provincial furnishings of the **Casa**

Clockwise from top left, the route leads through river- and canal-lined countryside, Benedictine monasteries and Roman bridges to León; a cut above the usual hostel, the Parador de San Marcos; crosses and churches mark the way; pilgrims make their journey through the cobblestoned streets of Castrojeriz.

ILLUSTRATION BY FATTI BURKE FATTIBURKE.COM



Below, the end of the road – the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

Getting there ...

It is a four-hour train trip from Bordeaux – six hours by train or bus from Bilbao – to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, popular starting point for the Camino Francés.

GO Anytime from March to November; March-May and September-October are less crowded and hot.

ORGANISED TRIP Ireland's Camino Ways (caminoways.com) can take a load off your back and mind – they also organise cycling tours. Follow the Camino (followthecamino.com) also does horse tours.

CYCLE THE CAMINO Many sections of the pathway can be used by cyclists; you can easily deviate from unsuitable parts and follow rural roads going in the same direction. Read *The Way of St James: A Cyclist's Guide*, by John Higginson (Cicerone Guides).

ESSENTIAL READING The Camino is not suitable for armchair travel or a "virtual pilgrimage", but *A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago* by John Brierley, or *Walking the Camino de Santiago* by Bethan Davies and Ben Cole, will help you prepare.



Brandariz in Arzúa are our last small indulgence, ahead of an early start and the final assault. With a room and breakfast for two costing €50-60 – double for *pensión completa* with lunch and evening meal – rural inns like this can connect you more closely with the landscape and people, than staying amongst a sea of walking foreigners.

The remaining 39 kilometres to **Santiago de Compostela** – “St James of the Field of Stars” – is one of fuchsias, forests and country roads and lanes. A stunning, purple-tinted sky setting over the cathedral welcomes us into the stony, pilgrim-filled streets of its *ciudad histórica* – a hive of Celtic bars and blister-inflicted backpackers.

Among them is Katherine, who started out on the 2,600-kilometre walk from Ghent in Belgium in early March, and Edgar, a Dutchman from the southern Netherlands. It's an emotional climax, he says, to be suddenly standing in the large cathedral square, **Plaza del Obradoiro**, after 105 days on the road. Rather than

fly, he plans to travel the slow way home, on a bus full of returning pilgrims and adventurers.

The pilgrimage is known to have profound effects on a person's outlook; it teaches you another sense of time, and solidarity. Like the skies full of stars, it's the shared discoveries, and mystical moments, which lure diehard pilgrims back year on year. 🍀

AER LINGUS FLIES FROM DUBLIN TO BORDEAUX, MON, WED, THUR, FRI AND SUN; TO BILBAO, TUE, THUR AND SAT; AND TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, TUE, THUR AND SAT.