

'My Way' 2015

The way of Saint James - The Portuguese Camino

I set out to walk the Camino to Santiago (or the way of Saint James) in May 2015 and found it an exhilarating experience and to share a bit of my excitement over it I have written an account of my journey.

I will start with some background on what its all about and also my motivation before I 'get going' on the actual walk.

So, starting at the beginning, some 2000 years ago, (this is not a scripture lesson but the catholic church has a lot to do with this). One of the 12 disciples, Saint James was said to have visited north eastern Spain to spread the word there. On his return to the holy land that nasty King Herod got hold of him and chopped off his head. Many years later his body was said to have been miraculously transported to Spain and buried there. The church confirms there is no proof of this story. All went quiet until the year 813 when a hermit dug something up and reported it was the remains of Saint James. This was taken up by the local bishop and catholic church and a chapel to house the remains was built at Santiago in Spanish Galicia. From this beginning Santiago has developed into big city with a large religious centre.

Once the word got around pilgrims started coming to be near the sacred remains or relics which gave points towards a place in heaven but the reasons for doing the pilgrimage of old may be also seeking forgiveness or spiritual enlightenment. The tourist blurb mentions the poor pilgrims who came for these reasons and points out how many would have died on the way due to the harsh conditions. They do not mention that to have built up to the enormous edifice it is today would need more than poor pilgrims offerings and so kings and queens and the well to do also came here and donated the wealth to build it up over many centuries.

The legend of St James was enhanced further when it was said that he was seen riding a horse and driving those darsted Muslim Moors out of this area.

Pilgrims came from many places, France, Spain and Portugal on set routes. The churches or towns en route provided hostels or Albergue to house the pilgrims overnight at a days walk between them. That tradition continues to this day. The pilgrimages almost faded out in the 19th century. Then a few famous people got into the act, Shirley Mclean wrote a book about it and a German comedian Hape Kerkeling did the same and got Germans interested. The American film 'The Way' added to the interest. Now 250,000 people are said to do the walk each year! Luckily for me most do the route from France, so my route from Portugal was a lot quieter.

Incidentally I have just seen a new film 'Walking the Camino' which I found summed up my experience very well.

The church keeps a good record of numbers as just about every walker gets a 'Credencial del Peregrino' or proof of pilgrimage. This is a log book one needs to get stamped each day at hostel or cafe to show that the minimum 100 km has been walked. If ones record is in order one can receive a certificate from the church in Santiago stating in latin one has achieved the status of a pilgrim!

Just to add a little more spice to the original story, back in the 1500s when England's Good Queen Bess's navy sunk a bit of the Spanish Armada, there was a fear that the dreaded pirate Francis Drake was on his way to pinch the relics. The bishop of the time hid the remains, then died, it took more than 100 years to find them again!

So theres some background, why am I joining the procession? Well it seemed like fun, something a bit different, an achievement before I get too old for physical achievements. I had done some cycle touring in the past and recently took up bush walking which I enjoy. To go bush for many days one needs to be self sufficient. On our wild trails like the Bibbulmun track in Western Australia that means carrying a pack of 20kg or more. Me, being pretty skinny and boney this did not appeal. With the Camino because of the regular villages and accommodation stopping points one need not carry as much stuff. As to the spiritual side, I do thank god I am still here and this may help me focus on the blessing of life itself.

There are various routes, a number in Spain, from France and Portugal. My choice was the route from Portugal, I chose that because I believed it was more likely to be warmer than the eastern French route which went through the Pyrenees. The distance from Porto, about 250Km say 3 weeks maximum seemed a good introduction to this sort of walk.

I got my backpack down to 10kg with a litre of water so was reasonably happy. I can give a list of what I took if anyone asks for it.

So! I am on my way:



Porto to Arcos Day 1 Sunday 10 May 2015

My starting point was Porto, a large coastal town in the north of Portugal.

I stayed at a backpackers hostel, called the 'Yes' hostel and shared a room with 8 beds. 2 French lads and a lady from London were booked in my room so only 4 beds occupied. I got to bed around 10.30 pm. at around 12.30 the lady arrived back and got on top of me (the bunk of top of me that is) and the first French lad around 3 am and the other at 5am. They were reasonably quiet and not too inebriated so I did not lose much sleep. It seems cheap flights come here from many places and people come from the colder climates for a drunken weekend on the cheap booze. I met a number of pilgrims at the hostel, an old fellow from Belfast who would not stop talking, he had such a strong accent I could not understand him so the non English speakers were looking a bit dazed trying to! Then a Londoner who just talked about the stock market, Richard from Washington, had just walked from Lisbon and was off again the next day as he had to be back at work in 10 days. As I did not have a warm sleeping bag I was

concerned there may not be blankets at some hostels. One man just returned from doing the walk and professing to be knowledgeable convinced me that the hostels did not provide blankets so I needed to carry a warm bag. On this advice I bought a warm bag and gave away my new sheet bag, complete with its anti bedbug treatment. This added more than 1 kg to my bag so I was over the magic 10kg. Later I found out most hostels did have blankets so was carrying that extra weight for nothing!

Incidentally there was also a Dutchman with his son just returned from the walk, he said it had been 10 degrees and raining most of the way, my spirits sunk a bit!

Nellie, a Dutch lady from Tasmania, was leaving the next day so we set off together at 6 am. As we walked the centre of Porto's streets were not dead quiet as anticipated because the drunken tourists were returning to their accommodation! We had decided not to walk out of the big city but to take the train from the main station to the outer suburbs. This was to avoid walking the dangerous suburban roads.

So my adventure started by taking the train to Villa de Pinheiro. Nellie had got off a stop before me (to do a longer walk) and we arranged to meet up at the first hostel. My aim was to do around 20km to a town called Rates where the first hostel was situated. I was very apprehensive, could I carry all this load, would I get lost. would I have enough food or water, will my boots fall apart, would I get soaked and freeze to death? Why the hell was I here? Life was pretty good back in Perth why stuff it up now!!

I had a good guide book, by an Englishman, John Breirley, called 'Camino Portugues' and it told me I needed to walk some 2 km from the railway station to get onto the Camino proper. I found my way and at the point stated I saw my first yellow arrow and scallop shell marker. I knew then I was on the right road and having survived the first 2 km it was going to be OK! Walking on ones own had a meditative and calming effect for me and I soon started to relax into it. Much bag adjustment was needed to get the hang of my new backpack with its 'balance bags' at the front. I had most of the weight on my hips which was comfortable but found it impossible to get enough weight off my shoulders, which got pretty sore. Walking along small busy roads built long before cars and trucks, with no pavements and stone walls either side was madness, sometimes I waited for a lull in the traffic and ran along the obstacle as fast as I could with over 11kg on my back! luckily as the day went on the villages got smaller the traffic less and more the quieter streets allowed for easier walking.



MY FIRST 'WAY MARKER'

The 'Way' is well marked mostly by yellow arrows painted on power poles in this area. My guide book gave ideas where there was a cafe, where I could stock up with a Bocado (deliciously crispy bread roll sandwich) and cold drink. By midday I was exhausted but relaxed. Lunch, a lie on a bench for 20 mins and I was raring to go again. This part of the route was mostly on roads, roads of cobble stones of various sizes, sometimes as small as 30mm square and sometimes much larger, These were rough on the feet and ankles. I had been regularly bush walking for the last year and the hard ground did not concern me. I found my two walking poles a great help, a slight pressure with the hands and arms added to my speed and took some load off my knees and feet.



This one did not cross the road! But where do I go when big trucks fill the high walls!

It was 3pm and I was getting exhausted, my guide book told me it was 4 km to the pilgrim hostel, another hour at least, when, there ahead on top of a hill was the most beautiful old mansion now turned into a hotel. As I approached it looked more and more tempting, a swimming pool, a bright green lawn and an ornate gate surround next to an ancient onion dome church on the top of the hill. My will was severely tested and I stopped. Called Quinta San Miguel It was well worth it, my own immaculate room, and a deep, deep bath. If there is a heaven it has a deep bath to lie in after a long walk! I soaked up the warm water, my muscles eased and I relaxed totally immersed until the water started to cool. Wow! it was worth walking all day to experience the luxury! The country hotels I stayed in all had a proud history, This one had been built by a wealthy family from Lisbon whose Lisbon

home was destroyed in the devastating 18th century earthquake. They were afraid there were more earthquakes coming so had moved here a long way from the epicentre. The current owners father purchased the house in the 1940s and the son had now turned it into a luxury hotel and function centre. He was very proud of his estate and showed me and other guests, 3 German Camino cyclists, around.



My first hotel

Arcos to Barcelos Day 2 Monday 11 May

I wanted to leave at 6am to avoid the afternoon heat and the hotelier, still in bed, left me some breakfast to take with me.

My second day I felt more positive and got going at a fair pace. A large town to walk through but no pinch spots. As I had passed the hostel I intended to stay at last night other pilgrims joined the trail. The weather was ideal, and continued that way, mostly sunny, starting at around 6 degrees it would reach 18 or 20 most days except for a couple of days when it reached 27 but the breeze made it feel less. I found a routine, I left the towns around 6 am and walked alone for a few hours and then when I stopped for breakfast preferably at a cafe the later leavers caught me up. The breakfast stop was usually quite social, a pot of tea and a croissant was my favourite. The tea warmed me up and the croissant provided a bit of energy. The Portuguese and Spanish croissants are not quite up to french standards but are pretty good though! The Portuguese ones often coated in sugar. The locals seem to eat greasy pizza or sweet cakes for breakfast washed down with coffee and port wine (the local speciality).



Early morning. Note the bread delivered to your door handle

This particular morning I walked with a Tasmanian couple (also Dutch) and we chatted on for hours so the morning just whizzed away. They had the same 'Aarn' backpacks as me so were able to assist me with the set up. By around midday I was tiring and found a cafe to stop at, bought a sandwich and CocoCola. I was never a fan of Coke but I found the sugar and caffeine gave me a real boost of energy to get going again after a lunch break,

Incidentally this is the land of the siesta, most things like the small shops, post office and banks close between 1 and 4. My host at a hotel explained it to me saying "he lived for the night" after the midday meal he has an hour or so sleep. In the evening the shops open till 8pm and one cannot get a meal in a restaurant till then. From 8 to 12 midnight is his time for visiting, socialising and letting his hair down. He is up again at 7.30 to 8am. I think I could easily get used to it!

My Tasmanian friends carried on ahead of me at lunch time as they wanted to walk faster.

Back on 'the way', walking got more pleasant, small tracks, lots of running water, sometimes flowing down the track, a little mud but mostly large or small cobbles. Many tracks look as though they could flood if there was much rain. The regular villages with a main street running through which I needed to follow having some pinch points but luckily not much traffic and one is forewarned of cars because driving on the cobbles is so noisy. Pretty fields with stone posts all round up to 3 metres high with rusty steel extensions 2 metres over the fields to provide support for the the grape vines, very pretty and characteristic for the region. Here silage or sewage seems to be the preferred fertiliser and the smell followed me for a fair part of the day.



Life is full of small problems!

I stopped the night in Barcelos a large town, here were 2 pilgrim hostels and I took what looked the older and prettier one by the river. Bed, E5 Dinner E5 (E means euros about \$1.30) In a dormitory with around 30 beds, not full and not much snoring, 3 middle aged Canadian brothers, very entertaining, a young Aussie couple from Brisbane. Over dinner we discussed our ailments, the Aussie girls boots had caused blisters and she was now trying to walk in sandals, one of the brothers was also suffering and patching up his feet in front of us at the dinner table! He took the bus the next day. My feet and boots were fine but the backpack was like a lead weight. I took some drastic steps, gave away my thermos, mailing on my thermal underwear, water immersion heater and other clothes.

Incidentally Barcelos introduced me to the Bombeiros. (Spanish and Portuguese for Firemen). Here they are the local heroes, there are many statues of big fellows with their fireman's helmets on. I did not quite get it as the statues I saw did not have individuals names on, someone told me they do other things than put out fires?

Barcelos to Casas do Rio Day 3 Tuesday 12 May

Up at 5.45 and off at 6.15 nowhere for breakfast (I had forgotten to buy anything the night before). The 3rd day seemed like a sorting out day for those not properly prepared. On the road I met a young German girl, walking in thongs (flip flops) because of all the blisters from her shoes. She was sticking plaster around her toes when I saw her. I did not see her again so not sure if she continued. I saw the Aussie girl struggling in her sandals, I did not meet people with these problems on later days. Scenery was now added to by lots of Eucalyptus trees. Rather surprising for me to find so many of Australia's special trees growing amongst the pine and local trees. I am told they are used for supports in mining, have caused problems, especially fiery ones and one is not allowed to plant them in Portugal any more.

After walking nearly an hour I found a cafe, no croissants or Bocado, so ended up with a buttered stale roll, may have been a language problem! I did spend some time with an App on my phone trying to learn some Portuguese and mastered 'boa tarde' and 'Chow', but had great trouble remembering anything else, maybe I am just getting too old for languages! Many people spoke some English but when they didn't I seemed usually to get what I wanted with smiles and sign language!

The way is well marked with yellow arrows on power poles, walls and sometimes on the road, yours truly daydreaming away missed a couple of turnings and had to go back about 400 metres when I realised that the arrows had disappeared, so 4 times 400 is 1600 so I went some one and a half kilometres more and feeling rather tired, got annoyed with myself. The arrows were generally a 100 metres or so apart. When they were further apart, I would get anxious that I had missed a turning, stopped and debated whether to go back and look or carry on. Other times, I saw and imagined arrows everywhere! Leaves on the ground looked like yellow arrows in the distance! Notably my annoyance about going wrong faded after a few days but the reluctance to go 'off track' and add to the distance walked stayed with me. Incidentally I did not get lost again!

This was the third day and I was again tiring after 18km or so and saw a hotel called Casas do Rio some 600 metre off the track when I was some 4 Km to the next hostel. So I very quickly thought of the bath! I was not disappointed this turned out to be more up market than the last hotel (E40), Originally a pilgrim hostel it was now a luxury hotel with a bath, almost as big as the previous night. The room opened to a vista of Manicured flower beds, silky grass, a small river with swans and ducks and fruit trees. Incidentally none of this is visible from outside. It appeared to be in the middle of a small village with high stone walls and no windows facing the road. When entering the large curved top wooden gates one enters this enchanted world. The wall to the road formed the back wall of the rooms.



The spacious hotel at Casas do Rio

At the hotel was no restaurant but the local restaurateur from 2km away collected me, 2 Canadian ladies, and a french Canadian couple (the lady speaking no English) in his Merc for an early dinner at 7pm.

The restaurant's fare was the usual starter which is light white bread or heavy brown bread, unpitted olives and a small patty made from soaked dried fish. For main I chose the 'steak on stone' which turned out to be a very tough steak on a wooden plate supporting a very hot stone. I cut up the steak and cooked it more on the stone but it did not tenderise it. Accompanied by the usual chips. To finish the local speciality a 'Creme boule' an egg custard with a sugar coating, rather nice.

The hostess had offered to do some washing with the promise to return it to my room and I expected it back nice and dry that evening as had happened at the last hotel. On my return to the room after the restaurant I did not find it, the hostess did not live on the premises and I had to find the washing which was still wet and on the line. As I was off at 6 am I hung bits over the room, 2 bits over a lamp fitting which was a mistake as I soon burnt a neat hole in my underpants and Tshirt! Oh well a bit less to carry!

Casas Do Rio to Ponte do Lima Day 4 Wednesday 13 May

Another good night's sleep, off at 6.45 and took the breakfast left out by our hostess with me. Stopped at 8 for breakfast on the roadside and found a cafe at 9.30, a cold Coke giving me a boost. Walking with an old French couple who spoke good English, (unusual for the French oldies). Next thing I know I have done 18km and we are there in Ponte de Lima. Someone touting rooms by the tourist office E35 and use of a kitchen, decided to stay 2 nights to have a look around.

Day 5 Thursday 14 May, Rest Day

Ponte do Lima



A wise move to stop over, a pretty town, the medieval centre a walking prescient, Lots of quaint small shops, the grocery shops having very limited stock, no yogurt or fresh milk, but loads of dried fish (from Norway) and meat. A very old bridge with decorative street lights across it and each sporting a loudspeaker playing some very relaxing music. It was all rather pleasant and I spent a beautiful day there.

My local supermarket Ponte do Rima



Ponte de lima to Rubiaes day 6 Friday 15 May

Off at 6 am I had my breakfast and a Coke to take with me. Cloudy, damp and cold. Damm! I mailed my gloves on so my hands felt it! Walked easily for 2 hours, uphill, all pine forest and farms, a very rocky trail. I was surprised to find how many roman roads I was following. The Romans were here and left lots of small bridges and straight roads. These were later used by pilgrims, so how many, many thousands or millions of people have walked this way over the centuries to seek forgiveness or redemption or escape from a terrible life? What do I share in common with them? No much perhaps, except the satisfaction of the journey itself?

Found a cafe for a welcome hot tea with breakfast. Portugal is very cheap especially in the country, Tea less that \$1 and a sandwich \$2.

Lots of new walkers now overtook me, having stopped a day I have missed all the pilgrims I had got to know! A South African lady joined me for a chat then headed off, then an Irish mortician who worked in London, He told a lot of tales about Brazil where he had spent much time. Lots of German walkers, A Slovenian, who, riddled by arthritic problems was kept moving by drugs but was doing this walk to prove he was still capable! I asked most people I met why they were doing this walk. Most younger people looked at it as another physical challenge, a triathlon or something like that. Many were doing 30km + per day and had a timetable to keep to be back at work in a week or so. The retired pilgrims like me were not in a hurry so tended to go slower but many were also looking for a physical challenge. I was surprised how many had done it before, sometimes 3 or 4 times. The lure of the walk, however, was definitely not just the physical challenge and no one was able to satisfactorily verbalise the appeal to me.



Stone crosses abound, so do the power lines!

Stone crosses are a feature of the landscape here, many cast in concrete and similar to each other with the figure of christ on the front. Some in gardens dwarfing the houses and on hill tops making an interesting addition to a landscape picture.

I stayed at a private hostel 'O Ninho' this had bunk beds in a shared room but provided sheets and breakfast and was just beautiful. Free tea and coffee, and only me in the room a real treat! Down the hill and a restaurant with about 30 pilgrims for dinner (Church hostel nearby as well). a beautiful night for E12 real value!

Rubiases to Valenca. day 7 Sat 16 May.

I set off as it was just getting light around 6:15am. The hostess provided a takeaway cheese roll for breakfast, no charge, really nice people round here! Climbing, another Roman bridge, cobbles and woodland, lots of pine and some eucalyptus. By 8am I was looking for a breakfast spot and found a slope by the roadside with a fine downhill vista. A onion domed church not far away against a blue blue sky completed the panorama. As I relaxed a vision appeared. From the top point of the onion dome a white line appeared, like a vapour trail in the sky, it went on rising for some minutes before petering out way way up in the sky. Just to add to this godly vision and tell me I wasn't dreaming another white line started rising from the same point. No doubt a message from God. Was this the miracle or sign I was looking for? What could the message be, 'Carry on young man, anything is possible to the Camino pilgrim!'

Just in case you are not convinced I am sure something would have told me if there was an airport nearby?



My goal for the day Valenca is another old city with sprawling modern suburbs, its centre is a hill top fortress overlooking the Rio Minho (Rio = river) which forms the border with Spain. I booked in a modern hotel just outside the fortress walls.



The bridge from Portugal to Spain

I had my iphone with me, it told me the weather each day and I got emails from friends, most places had WiFi even in the country. On reflection, I think I would have best been rid of it. The frustration when it did not work properly, could not connect or would do unexplainable things was quite alien to the mediative state of walking. For example I was booked to return to UK from Santiago, with my favourite airline Ryanair and wanted to bring the date forward. Ryanair provided me with an "Ap" for my phone which would allow me to do this and of course take my money for the privilege. I did the right thing and the Ap crashed, then I tried again, something else happened and then 1 hour later I was pulling my hair out in frustration. I finally spoke to the very helpful hotel receptionist who let me use her desktop computer and I finally achieved the change. I should note its quite difficult to telephone strange people like Ryanair as any phone numbers are hard to find on their website or literature.

to be continued