

Valenca to Porrino Sun 17 May

My last days walk in Portugal over and I stopped in a helpful hotel which left some food out to take with me, I left at 6am, the hotels breakfast did not start until at 8.30am. Over the giant road/rail bridge and I was in Spain, it didn't feel or look any different though!

Pleasant walking through woodland and lots of running water. North western Portugal and Spain is a very wet area,with very regular precipitation, everything is green and lush and I was expecting to get wet. Its climate is very similar to Devon and Cornwall, not far north across the sea. But God was with me here as I experienced only a few showers in my 3 weeks in Portugal and Spain.



Walking the Roman road, the vines for shade

Then I met horses, the most beautiful and majestic horses, it quite took over the scene. They trotted past me, manicured tails proudly waving, their golden blacks and browns glistening in the sun. There was a horse show nearby and the riders were out and practicing, other horses grazing in the fields. I found a bar for lunch and outside were tethered more manicured mounts.



I found the people in this area just special, no hint of ripping off the visitor here, I asked for a Bocado with cheese, onion tomato and lettuce. It took a while to arrive and when I asked why it seemed the chef had gone to the market to get the salad just for me!

My next stop Porrino is a big industrial town not much of interest and the path follows a small river to the centre. Here the wise town burgers have built a hostel for the poor Pilgrims. Their aim I believe being to provide the real pilgrim experience, after all pilgrims must have a higher aim than wanting a good nights sleep. The burger committee intention is make the experience as uncomfortable as is humanly possible! I arrived around 3 and had to wait for opening at 4pm. The outlook one side was onto the river and a city park. I did not think much about it but the other side there was a busy elevated freeway about 50 metres from the upstairs windows. I checked in paid my E6 and I found myself upstairs in a medium size room with 24 bunk beds jammed in, and reverberating with the giant trucks flowing on the elevated freeway. There was a kitchen with hotplates and all the usual fixtures, but no kettle, no fridge no cutlery or cups. very frustrating for someone hanging out for a cup of tea!

I went down the road to a restaurant well frequented by pilgrims, had tasteless cold spaghetti bolognese, a memorable town!



The Porino hostel, note the freeway behind!

Lights out time was 10pm and many weary pilgrims had laid down long before that. It had been a warm day probably 27 degrees and the room had only 3 small opening windows, one stuck closed, The reinforced concrete walls and flat roof had absorbed the heat and it must have been 35 degrees in there! Nearer 11pm a crowd came in, nationality not known, who talked in loud voices as though there was no one else there and no one complained! One of them closed one of the windows! All that did not really matter as the roaring of trucks from the freeway and the heat ensured I did not get any sleep!

After that I decided that I would not stay at any more of these large pilgrim hostels. I needed my sleep and the hotels or private hostels are well worth paying a bit extra for, even if I did not meet so many pilgrims.

I met a old couple from Barcelona on the road the next day, who assured me they had slept well in the midst of all that. My prayer for the day was please God help me sleep when I need to!

Porrino to Redonela day 8 Monday 19 May

I got away at 6.30am but it was still dark, as the time had changed an hour from Portugal. My too clever iphone having changed automatically and I had not noticed. It was lovely and cool outside after the sweatbox night. I had a cool Coke which revived me and I walked for 1 ½ hours to find a stone table on which to enjoy my breakfast. this was located on a hillside overlooking a cemetery with multiple rows of crosses on top of small memorial walls, something a bit different!

Stopping a little later I met Dutch couple relaxing at a wayside vending machine provided for pilgrims. We walked together and before I knew it was in Redonela.

I got to Redonela early afternoon, a riverside town with not a lot to commend it the literature said! When one gets back to basics its the little things that really please and here a bought a fantastic Bocado, the crisp, crisp bread must have just been baked and the cheese and salad just superb.

I walked on, surprisingly I still had some energy (must have been the great Bocado!) and there was a couple of private hostels about 4 km on.



The cafes want the pilgrims to stop!

The hostel turned out to have only one customer - me, they provided me with dinner, sheets and breakfast all for E25 and were very helpful. The receptionist was a pretty redhead in her 20s who lived some 20km away, spoke perfect English and a number of other languages. A graduate from the local university she

worked here at the hostel 5 days a week from 4 to 10 pm. She did the same elsewhere on Saturday and Sunday, I asked if she had any social life she said no but was very happy to have a job at all in the current economic situation in Spain!

I found a brochure which said 'Transfer of backpacks in the Portuguese way E5'. What it meant was they would carry my backpack to the next destination while I walked all for five Euros! This sounded just what I needed! I would have to book my accommodation ahead which I had not done before and the very helpful receptionist booked a hotel she knew in the centre of the next town, Pontevedra, for me. Then she rang the removalist and I was assured they would pick up my bag. Now I prayed to God again, this time that all my worldly goods would arrive at its correct destination for me and arrive the same day. This Camino really focuses one on the basics!



Cemetery views for breakfast!

Redondela to Pontevedra day 9 Tuesday 19

The walking was now generally very pleasant lots of ups and downs and hillside views, extensive cultivation and vines, woodland with more Eucalyptus, some very old and bigger gum trees than I had even seen in Aus! Lots of water fountains, which I am told one could drink from but was reluctant to try.



Some interesting wildlife on this road!

My backpack arrived at my hotel before me, so it worked as planned! I used the service for the next few days, which made walking that bit easier and relived my aching shoulders.



A Pilgrims fountain (and a local surfer!)

Pontevedra day 10 rest day Wed 20 May

Pontevedra is another attractive ancient city with a walking prescient in its narrow streeted centre.

The very lively centre seems to work well without the car. In the early morning the delivery trucks come in but are out by 10am when the shops open and people start walking around. Lots of small thriving shops, small groceries and hardware and some modern phone and computer shops but most of all bars and cafes of all shapes and sizes. I noticed there were underground car parks on the periphery. There are large supermarkets but they are well outside the old city.

I decided to stay 2 nights to relax and explore. Come 6 pm and I was hungry after my walk and looking for a meal. Nowhere but nowhere served meals before 8pm so I had to go to the place of last resort 'Burger King' situated right in the centre of the old city and happy to serve meals 24 hours per day.

Macdonalds is here too but are decent enough to stay outside the old city! So it was burger chips and salad, it was all rather delicious to my hungry body, the salad being particularly good!

Walking around these old cities always seems to bring some unusual sights. Here the Post Office must be 19th Century and on its wall the enormous posting boxes, were large shiny brass castings in the shape of Lions heads the mail going in its mouth! I assume someone cleans the brass regularly, as it really shone, interesting that someone is paid to do that today!



Guess what?

The pilgrim route has been moved in many places to make the walking better and get off the busy roads but here in the old town walking prescient its still the same medieval road. The symbol of the Camino is the scallop shell and here an 18th century church was built in the shape of a scallop shell in honour of the pilgrims.



I took a photo of my face (a selfie) each morning as I set out. Most mornings I look pretty exhausted! Interesting to note that I felt both exhausted and exhilarated. The exhaustion must be counterbalanced by the good feelings from the endorphins or other good stuff produced by the exercise. incidentally endorphins are described as morphine like substances created in the body which can mask pain. I have not tried the other type of morphine but going on this experience I can see why it can be addictive!

The scallop church

Pontevedra to Caldas De Reis day 11 Thursday 21 st May

Up and off at first light, on leaving the city I was met by a beautiful forest, further on and the farmers were up early too, lots of mini tractors, 2 wheeled noisy devices pulling a trailer on the road and ploughing the fields, it must be the planting season.

The breakfast cafe was notable as I had the biggest croissant ever seen in captivity. It must have been a foot long!

Either I have slowed down or today's walkers are all in a hurry as I spoke to hardly anyone, they just rush past, some without a word. As I have stopped a few days and most people just seem to plod on each day it's interesting to note that one day I meet a large diverse crowd all ages and individual walkers, other days there are groups, walking together and all young or older people.



The grain store

I was intrigued by the little houses on stilts I had seen regularly in gardens the whole way. A Spanish pilgrim enlightened me. They are grain and food stores, all the same end dimensions but of differing lengths. They are built on stilts with flat stone discs on top to stop the rats and mice getting in. They were also a status symbol. If you were affluent they were built in stone. Less affluent and they were wood. If you were not at all wealthy they were built in concrete. Strangely they are all the same dimension in width and height but if you were wealthy enough they could be a lot longer than the average! They do not look as though they are used much today as many were rather dilapidated.

Caldas De Reis, day 12 Friday 22 May

Noting this is a spa town with hot mineral baths I tried to get into the baths, it seemed I must book for the next day, which meant another stop, pity, I don't want to stop! Then I saw a massage/physiotherapist around the corner from my hotel and as it was 4pm, just after siesta, it could be open, I went round to enquire if I can get massaged right then. I definitely could I found! I did not know what to expect but sure it will relax my sore legs and shoulder muscles. Its stinking hot in the massage room and I lie on a bit of paper laid over the plastic massage table, rather uncomfortable, not to worry I can feel my leg muscles getting a good workout. Then an infrared lamp on my back and my therapist disappeared. It got rather uncomfortable after about 5 minutes and then some smelly stuff was rubbed into my legs. I felt pretty dazed on leaving. That night my back was on fire and I felt quite sick in the morning. Not sure what the rub on stuff was?

The next day I spent recovering, did not walk and missed the spa as I felt so lousy! Unknown massage therapists are perhaps not such a good idea! I should have learnt from my experience in Bali where I ended up with a painful twisted muscle from one so called 'massage therapist'!

The graffiti here was of a high standard, an election was due and this one was particularly related I think,



Sophisticated Graffiti

I found my Dutch friends I had met on the road, for dinner, Alfred a retired diplomat and my age had visited many places in Africa where I had been so we did a lot of reminiscing.

Caldas de Reis to Padron, day 13 Saturday

Off before sunrise, strange things moved on the path, magic leaves? no sparrows in the dark, darting away. In general I had not seen many birds (except chickens), do they shoot them all like the French I wonder? Plenty of cafes for breakfast on the map, come 8am and I walked some 200m off track to one. They all have signs on the track to attract the pilgrim. This sign said open at 7am, damn! its closed. another half kilometre and there is another sign, off track again and its also closed and then another it was all very frustrating. Then its 9am and I still could not find one open. The day before was a public holiday, must have kept them up last night, hence the failure to open! Forth time lucky I found one open at 9.15 on a main road, urea

The cafes can be in the quaintest villages, the 'peasants' working in the fields outside, a long way from the big city and the high life it seems, however once inside the TV screen is blaring away and the local youngsters are on their smart phones taking advantage of the cafes WiFi! Today there is no escape from the modern world it seems, we all seem to wear the same clothes, blue jeans being the norm for all ages, hair fashions the same, even the trendy young cyclists are riding 'fixies' (thats the push bikes with no freewheel, no gears, no brakes! Help!).

Finally fortified from my cafe experience I was fit for my days walk.

I was disappointed I had not met anyone with a spiritual reason for walking the Camino so far, but today was different, I walked with Kurt, a fit looking 63 year old German from Munich. He had suffered from cancer and showed me various scars where it had been cut out of his body. To celebrate his survival and thank the Lord he walked from Munich to Santiago 5 years ago. It took him 5 months!

Since then he has done a shorter Camino each year. Later I met Richard a 42 year old from Genena, he was a devout catholic and was taking 3 weeks off work to thank god for his blessings, that is a job, wife and 2 children.

I was not getting lost anymore but was seeing yellow arrows everywhere! without them I felt rather anxious, sometimes they turn out to be leaves or a fold in a tree! I wondered if our fore father pilgrims, got lost? Was there just one road between towns in those days, did they just follow the roman roads, were there signs? Or maybe the locals had respect or pity for them and put them on the right way as happened to me in the big cities a couple of times. My thoughts are still focused on material things most of the time, how will I spend my time productively if I turn off that damn iPhone for example!



Not far to go!

Approaching Padron the winding river and hillside scene is overwhelmed by a giant chemical plant with shiny silver pipes and chimneys. However once down to river level it disappears and I found an attractive and thriving food market which gave me a good idea of the local produce. Enormous hams, large round brown loaves, and unusual greens. Kumquats are in season and they are larger, tastier and seem to travel better than those we grow in Aus. Maybe its the different climate or they have been cultivated more here. I bought a tray of fresh raspberries, wow! I ate the lot all at once.



As I was more than half way, getting nearer to Santiago and the magic 100km one needs to get ones pilgrims 'certificate' the 'way' started to look crowded, some large groups, no bags at all, many holding or playing with their smartphones, quite different to people I had met so far, everything organised for them and continuous support, It seems a group bonding exercise rather than a pilgrimage! One group were all deaf youngsters, around 20 of them they made an unusual sight with arms and hands waving around.

My thoughts were elsewhere though, One part of me was tired and wanted to get somewhere to relax and put my feet up! The other side of me was absorbing the simplicity, the continuity of life. here the result of many generations toil were below my feet, the roman road, its simplicity and permanence. The houses some derelict and some many centuries old and well maintained, the regular graveyards where the generations look over their toil. For me the goal became less important, the journey itself representing the beauty of life. So maybe my learning from the walk would be just that, the beauty in life is this very moment?

Padron to Santiago day 14 Sunday

It suddenly occurred to me this is my last days walking! I set off with a lot of excitement what is life going to be like when I get there, no longer getting up to the toil of the day, the journey, the scenery and the exhaustion!

The way takes me on more beautiful and quiet country lanes and tracks. Plenty of cafes and small villages. A bit longer than most days, 25km so it was well into the afternoon when I got to. Santiago. A big city on a hill with things pointing to the sky. Is this the cathedral I am aiming for I wondered? The last few kilometres were on busy roads heavily built up and I lost the yellow arrows so I asked and got pointed up the hill. I was exhausted so went straight to my hotel, quite near the centre, and just flaked out for a while.



My first view of Santiago Cathedral

Then later more relaxed I headed for the enormous square. “Praza do Obradoiro’ in front of the cathedral.



The cathedral square

Each day in the cathedral at 12.00 noon is a mass especially for pilgrims. I was keen to go but my feelings were somewhat subdued when I finally got to go inside the cathedral a day later. What had I expected, a red carpet, a welcoming committee, a finish line with cheering crowds? I really had no idea which added to my confusion!

I had heard that the seats get full at the mass so I arrived 20 minutes early to find the only place to sit was on the base of a pillar. The floor of the cathedral was laid out in the form of a cross the altar and choir being at the top and the congregation filling the other 3 arms. I had chosen one of the shorter ‘arms’ as I was told the spectacular smoke swinger, the Bofumiro’ came this way.



I find it difficult to describe the atmosphere, I could say electric, but it was not like that at a football match or auction, no urgency or uncertainty about it. Sufficient to say that many of the possibly 1000 congregation were people who had just completed a long walk. They were exhausted, elated that they had completed it and happy to share that satisfaction with other like minded people. Perhaps the same satisfaction of having completed a project well and then sitting back and admiring ones handiwork. 1000 people feeling all the same and this situation must be unique in the world. I cannot think of any other circumstance where so many exhausted and elated people gather to celebrate in quite the same way!

Between the congregation and the alter was an official looking lady, sporting a fluorescent jacket marked CATHEDRAL, she had been guarding the front row of seats presumably reserved for special people. As the service commenced she faded away and I found myself with a front seat! It was all in Spanish, which did not seem to matter. To start the mass a nun all in black stood and sung, well amplified and without accompaniment. Her singing was clear, penetrating and hypnotic. She was singing in Spanish so I had no idea of the subject and not familiar with the music, however, I found tears in my eyes, another experience I have trouble putting to words.

After the communion a number of monks came in front of us carrying a smoking pan full of what looked like coals. A rope was attached to the wall one end and looped over a pulley high in the dome of the cathedral and holding a large decorative brass urn the other. The monks undid the rope tied to the wall and lowered the urn. The smoking coals were then put inside, the urn swung slightly and then the other end of the rope split into 7 tails was energetically pulled by the monks. The 'Bofumiro' then swung back and forth rapidly above our heads filling the cathedral with sweet smelling smoke. This was for me another indescribable emotional experience. It was so strange and bizarre having this shining smoke machine racing just above my head. For the church this symbolises the connections of heaven and earth, and some incense vapours are said to have a calming and mediative effect on the mind. For me it added to the mystery and hypnotic effect of the event!

I did not see anyone I knew in the congregation and assume it was because I waited a day before going to the service. The people I walked with would have gone to the mass as soon as possible I think.

Staying a few days in Santiago, I got to know the narrow, car free streets of the old city, found a restaurant I liked and sampled some of the seafood. After the mass I felt very peaceful and privileged to be there and share this unique place.

I caught the Ryanair flight back

Loading the Bofumiro

The Bofumiro swingers



to London and was soon back in the real world of traffic, possessions, and the hustle and bustle of daily life.

As a final comment, back in the days when I spent 16 years as an employee of a government organisation in Australia it was the fashion to send employees on regular training courses, supervisory skills, management skills, working safely for example. Maslows Hierarchy of Needs was a popular topic on these courses and if one was not so privileged enough to spend ones working life at training courses heres the details:

Abraham Maslow, a psychologist of note created a hierarchical triangle of human needs. The idea is that when one had the need below satisfied one could move up to the next. At the bottom were our physical needs of food and shelter, then above that safety, a sense of belonging and if one had all these esteem was possible. On top of the triangle was 'self actualisation'. This mysterious concept is a state where one has achieved all the rest and can reflect and absorb the beauty of the world and life itself. We discussed this somewhat mythical state on our courses without much consensus or conclusion:

It occurred to me, however that Abraham must have been in Santiago completing his Camino when he thought of self actualisation!!

I have added the ultimate 'selfie' to this narrative, I will send it separately to keep the file size down. Each morning I took a self portrait when setting out for the days walk and here it is! Looking at it myself now, I think I felt a lot better than I looked!

Best wishes
Alan Naber