



## CAMINO DE SANTIAGO – A WALK TOWARDS ROOTS by Matteo Fusella

In a time where eco friendliness is of utter importance and life brings many uncertainties, many people have been going on somewhat unconventional trips for the majority of us - a hike in the mountains, a bike ride, something that

emphasizes nature and our place in it. This year, I decided to go on a pilgrimage, on one of the most famous ones, on the *Camino de Santiago*, which is Spanish for *Saint James' Way*.

Saint James was one of the apostles of Jesus. According to legend, after the death of Jesus, Saint James left the Holy Land and traveled to Galicia, to today's Northern Spain, where he later died, on a field, on a night full of stars. His remains were found in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, and the field became known as Santiago de Compostela, the city of Saint James of the starry field. From this point on, Christian pilgrims from all over the world walk to the beautiful cathedral of Santiago de Compostela to visit the tomb of Saint James and to hug the bust of Saint James in gratitude.

Today, this pilgrimage is open to people of all faiths and walks of life, which creates a very peaceful and pleasant multicultural and multireligious atmosphere along the way.

The characteristic sign of the *Camino de Santiago* is the *concha* or shell, in specific it resembles a scallop shell. Being myself of German and Italian culture, this is a very interesting word for me. In German, a scallop shell is called a *Jakobsmuschel*, as in Saint James' shell. In Italian, we say *capasanta*. *Capa* or *cappa* is archaic and means coat, and *santa* holy, and the words refer to the type of shell that was worn on the coats of pilgrims heading to *Santiago de Compostela*.



Over time, clear paths to *Santiago de Compostela* have been created and marked via *conchas*, and *flechas amarillas*, yellow arrows. These paths can be found from everywhere around the Christian world. You know the saying, "All roads lead to Rome?" Perhaps it should be also said "All roads lead to Santiago de Compostela."

For my particular path, I selected the well-known *Camino Francés*, or "The French Way." Since I planned on undertaking this pilgrimage alone, I wanted to make sure that there were plenty of

accommodations available along the way, and that there were clear signs and good paths available, which is the case with the *Camino Francés*.



Roughly 150,000 people walk the French Way every year, so you are never really alone. The final 100 km of the French Way, from Sarria to Santiago, is especially crowded, because this is the minimum distance a pilgrim can walk and still earn a *Compostela*, a certificate of completion. By the way, pilgrims always have to get a stamp at each of their accommodations to reference their journey. In the village of *Grañón*, our American hostess did not give us an actual stamp, but told the pilgrims that she was stamping our hearts, and I guess, in a way, she

was right. After all, in the end, you undertake the pilgrimage, not for stamps and certificates, but for your heart and soul.

But let me start at the beginning. The French Way begins in the charming French town of *Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port*, located at the base of the Pyrenees mountain chain. I started my journey here on May 19<sup>th</sup>, 2023.

I carried a backpack that weighed roughly 9 kg and included a diary. From the beginning, I had to get used to being told *Buen Camino* by every pilgrim I ran across. This just means, "Have a nice walk," and it is part of pilgrim etiquette.

After my first day on the Camino, I found myself asking, "Did I just walk 25 kilometres across the Pyrenees and cross the French-Spanish border on foot?" I was, at the same time, impressed with what I had done, and terrified at the thought that I had 800 km to go.

But I kept going by setting myself small goals. For example, my first goal was to walk over the Pyrennes on foot. Then, I aimed to reach the city of *Pamplona*, which is well-known for the running of the bulls. Then, I wanted to make sure I would reach *La Rioja*, known for its red wine.

Some nights I would spend in a church, where payment was often on the basis of a donation. Especially these types of accommodation brought me very close to the other pilgrims and caretakers. We cooked and prayed together, and engaged in so-called community rituals. For example, we wrote down our own prayers and concerns. The following day, the incoming pilgrims would read our notes and pray for us, without having ever met us.

Otherwise, the most common types of accommodation were *albergues*, or hostels. Here, sometimes I shared a room with only one person, and other times with 150 people, all of us sleeping in just one room. Other nights, I slept outside in a tent, or on a thin mattress on the floor of an abandoned school. I really experienced a range of sleeping accommodations.

On one occasion, we stayed in a small and modern Benedictine monastery, which was hidden away. I had the best food of the entire *Camino* at this place! According to Benedictine tradition, the head monk has to prepare and serve the food. Everyone remains silent throughout the meal. However, background music is played for entertainment. Before and after the meal, we prayed, while the monks sang Gregorian chants, as per Benedictine tradition. We bowed in front of a cross at the end of the meal and were then free to talk. The most fascinating part was when the monk blessed the



personal stone that we had brought along. I had grabbed some stone at the beginning, in the Pyrenees, and it had now traveled around 500 km with me.

One highlight along the French Way is to reach the iron cross, marking the highest elevation on the Camino. This location has a special ritual attached to it. Upon arrival, you will see the cross or *cruz de hierro* situated atop a small mountain of stones. The custom involves facing *Santiago*, while standing with your back to the cross, throwing your stone backwards towards the cross as a symbolic gesture of shedding the weight of your past, and embarking on your journey with a lighter load. And this is where I had to part with the stone that had travelled with me and had been blessed by the Benedictine monk.



Before entering Galicia, I was curious about a place some pilgrims had talked about. I took a detour to a small, independent social utopia named *Matavenero*. This was the only time I felt completely isolated from the world. The village can only be reached on foot by climbing remote mountains alongside abandoned villages. *Matavenero* itself was once an abandoned village, but has been revived into a utopia with an energetically self-sustained lifestyle and free of the concept of political sovereignty. There are currently roughly 20 people living here. There is no strict authority, only voluntary action is required in all areas. Nevertheless, there is a school, a library, and commonly shared rooms.

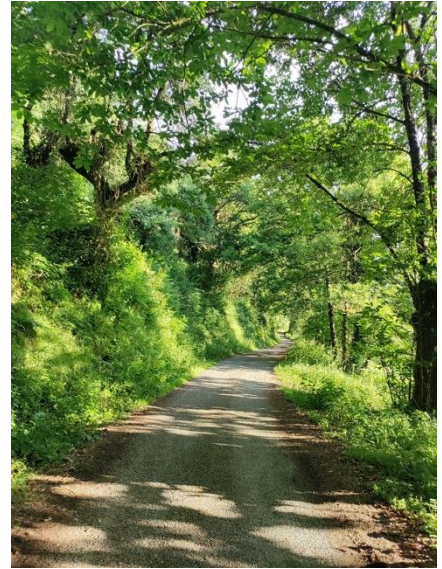
They source their water from a mountain spring, power their electricity with solar panels, and construct their homes on pre-existing foundations of the previous village's homes. They obtain their food at the nearby supermarket, which is around 8 km away. Most inhabitants come from Spain, Germany and Austria. I bought some home-made whole wheat bread and home-made plum jam from one old lady who was living there and could speak German. The village also has accommodations for tourists. Visitors are welcome, as long as they remain respectful of the inhabitants and do not



*objectify* them. The visiting tourists should offer themselves to help the residents with some maintenance tasks, seeing as how they are living in the middle of nowhere, in the mountains, isolated. I slept two nights in *Matavenero*, along with two other Czech tourists.

When I reached Galicia, it didn't feel like Southern Europe, because the landscape was very green and it rained a lot. But it was so beautiful. It felt like being in a fairy tale.

And then, all of the sudden, before I knew it, I was standing in front of the magnificent cathedral on the *Praza do Obrador*, the main square of Santiago de Compostela, after a 30-day journey. I couldn't believe it. We attended the pilgrim's mass and were fortunate enough to witness the *Botafumeiro*, a well-known incense burning ceremony. The most remarkable feature of this cathedral is that it has the largest authentic incense burner, which is 1.6 metres in height and weighs approximately 80 kg. It swings back and forth through the nave of the cathedral, while being tethered to the ceiling with a thick rope. Due to its size and the high cost for maintenance, it is only brought out for special occasions, such as Christmas, or when privately-funded. It costs about 450 euros each time it is used. We were really fortunate to be able to witness it in use, and it was quite moving to complete my pilgrimage to the swinging of the *Botafumeiro*.



The last day of my experience was spent in a small accommodation next to the Atlantic Ocean, with a few but very joyous people. There was music, food, and at the end, they offered *sangria* and some *digestifs*. There was a Dutch woman there, who was sad about having to return home. She had enjoyed the *humanity* present on the trip. She got emotional when speaking about the fact that in industrialized nations, there is a movement away from personal and emotional closeness.

I had decided to go on the *Camino* to process my burnout after interrupting my studies. A lot had happened in my private life, and I wanted a break to process everything. I needed to clear my mind and organize my thoughts. Plus, I wanted to experience new cultures and countries.

Through the *Camino de Santiago*, I became more humble, yet confident. The Camino allowed me to clear my mind, and I no longer felt as overwhelmed. It allowed me to meet people from diverse cultures, occupations, ages, and social backgrounds. The conversations I had or overheard have given me diverse perspectives on various issues. I realize that not even experts can satisfy our desire for thorough explanations. I feel a sense of emptiness, yet in a positive way, as I have come to appreciate the complexities of our world. We don't really know that much, do we? Questioning can be more useful than mere talking. I believe that in life's big questions and small ones, it is always a matter of perspective, and not a matter of what is true or false.

I also realized how important spirituality is. In Western societies, we place too much emphasis on our material and physical health, while ignoring our spiritual wellbeing. You don't have to adhere to a specific religion or believe in the superiority of one religion. But, you should be mindful and humble. As humans, we understand so little about the complexity of our universe. Having beliefs can be beneficial, because they offer a sense of purpose and hope. In my view, faith can alter perspective and provide solutions to some problems, yet we sometimes overlook this.

If I haven't already convinced you to walk the *Camino*, I would recommend watching the Spanish movie "The Way" by Emilio Estevez, or reading "The Pilgrimage" by Brazilian author Paulo Coelho.



Another book I know of, unfortunately only available in Italian, is called *Il silenzio dei miei passi* – "The silence of my steps" by Claudio Pelizzeni. It's about the author, who happens to be diabetic, walking the *Camino* in silence, by himself. Or, why not watch a documentary on the French channel arte.tv, *La Marche*? The documentary features the first *hospitalero* who welcomed me on the *Camino* and shows stunning scenery from *Lourdes*, where I spent my first night.

This type of trip helps you appreciate the little things in life, that we often overlook, and it makes you more grateful. Additionally, it's an eco-friendly trip that can broaden your horizons. It's actually difficult to find time just for yourself when doing the French Way, but it's easy to make friends or talk to strangers without feeling shy. If you travel alone, you won't stay alone for long, unless that's what you want. The last and most important reason to do this trip is the fact that you support the small villages. Without the *Camino*, a lot of villages would have poor infrastructure and a weak economy.

Finally, I would like to share one last goosebump moment I had after walking the *Camino*. When I arrived to the city in Italy, where I am currently studying, I ran into two people who had walked the *Camino* with me. We live in a small world! And we are all interconnected!