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Episode One: From Saint-Jean to Roncesvalles: A Pilgrim’s Painful Progress

In Roncesvalles I prayed for the first time since childhood. I was not very good at it. The words and gestures had grown rusty with disuse. I made the effort nevertheless, imitating the other worshippers as they crossed themselves and genuflected in front of the High Altar. It was not simply a matter of wanting to be polite and not look out of place. I was, after all, in a Spanish church and engaged in that most Christian of endeavours, a pilgrimage. Despite my awkwardness, I took a pew and knelt on the stone floor and spoke the long unsaid words: "Lord hear my prayer."

I prayed for everyone I could think of: my son and my wife, my mother, my long-dead father, my brother and sisters, friends, past and present. I prayed for myself, too. I prayed that I would complete my pilgrimage, and that it would stop raining so I could enjoy the walking and that my legs would hold out and I would not get too many blisters. Then I started to think of stories I had read about pilgrims breaking their legs along the Camino de Santiago or being attacked by dogs or even being killed by passing trucks. I imagined being attacked by dogs in some remote village and wondered what it would be like to die that way. And all the while I knelt with my arms on the back of the pew in front of me, until I realized I wasn’t really praying anymore and that my knees hurt from the stone floor and the muscles in my legs were cramping. So I stopped and sat back, trying to ignore my wet clothes and my fatigue and waited for the Mass to begin. I dozed.

It was my first day as a pilgrim on the Camino de Santiago. During the next four or five weeks I planned to walk nearly 800 kilometres across northern Spain to the Galician city of Santiago de Compostela. The route is more than 1,000 years old, crossing the Pyrenees, the green valleys of Navarre and Rioja, the plains of Castile and Leon and the lush alpine mountains of Galicia until, finally, it reaches Santiago, where, according to tradition, the bones of St. James the Apostle are encased in a silver reliquary. Even today, in our secular times, the Camino de Santiago remains one of the most sacred pilgrimage journeys in the Christian world.

My walk would take me from the last week of March through to the end of April. It was one of the hardest things I ever did, physically at least. I suffered innumerable blisters, a rash that made my right leg look like an overripe tomato, strained my Achilles tendons so that I limped for months afterward, and spent two days in a hotel bed waiting out a bout of food poisoning. But I also talked to ghosts and sang old songs and thought of things that I had not thought of before and remembered people and places that I had not even known to be in my memory. I saw some of the most beautiful country I had ever seen. I certainly ate the best seafood I had ever tasted and drank a lot of good wine. I met a motley crew of modern-day pilgrims that even Geoffrey Chaucer would appreciate, some of whom became friends. I also became part of a living history, placing myself on the footsteps of the past and, in so doing, attached myself to a community that dates back a thousand years. Along the way, a few strange things happened to me, things that even now, months later, I am not sure how to explain even as they haunt me.
Of course, all of this was unknown to me when I prayed in Roncesvalles. The two-street hamlet, with its 12th-century Augustinian monastery and a collegiate church, is the gateway into Spain for pilgrims who have crossed the Pyrenees from the town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port on the French side of the mountains. My effort at prayer, inadequate though it might have been, was also — and don’t ask me to explain why — a gesture of gratitude that I had made it through my first day.

Only an hour earlier, I was stumbling along a snow-covered mountain path uncertain as to where I was and wondering if I was suffering the early stages of hypothermia. I had walked for nearly 10 hours, enduring a nasty combination of rain and snow and wind as I trekked the 26 kilometres across the mountains from Saint-Jean. By the time I reached Roncesvalles in the early evening, I was wet, cold, exhausted and aching. The sight of the slate-blue roof of the monastery was a blessed relief. It seemed a good idea to offer thanks to whatever powers that be.

The dull gonging of a bell announced Mass. Four priests in white gowns and purple vestments performed the Stations of the Cross. During the next month, I would attend several masses, including the baroque theatre of the noon-hour Pilgrims’ Mass at the cathedral in Santiago. But this first one in Roncesvalles remained special. Perhaps it had to do with my weariness, but I was entranced by the intoning priests who stood in a semi-circle behind the altar, the chanting of the liturgy, the glow of the gold-plated goblets and the play of light on the Virgin of Roncesvalles, a silver-clad wooden statue of Mary holding the infant Christ, dating from the 13th century. Maybe I was light-headed but the Child’s face seemed almost gleeful, while the Virgin’s steady eyes had a far-away look.

I was pulled out of my reverie by an old woman next to me on the pew. She was tugging at my sleeve. The Mass had ended and people were going up to the altar. The woman gestured for me to follow. At first I didn’t understand, then I realized the priests were blessing pilgrims who’d arrived that day.

“Para peregrinos?” I asked.

“Sí sí, una bendición para peregrinos,” she said.

“Gracias, señora.”

I joined five others before the altar. I had not seen any of them on the road. They all looked neat and, well, dry. Maybe they were more efficient pilgrims. I watched the priest stop in front of each person to make the Sign of the Cross and offer a blessing. The ceremony goes back to the 12th century when the monastery and its hospital administered to thousands of pilgrims. They were fed and sheltered, comforted if sick and given the sacraments if they were dying. There is an ossuary on the lower floor of the monastery chapel where pilgrims who had died in the hospital were interred. Even as late as the 17th century, the monks were greeting 25,000 pilgrims a year.

When my turn came, I tried to put on a solemn face. I doubt it worked given my bedraggled appearance. The priest, however, smiled and blessed me. Then he stepped back and led us in the Pilgrims’ Blessing.
“May the Lord direct your steps with His approval, and be your inseparable companion on
the entire Camino.”

“Amen.”

“May the Virgin Mary grant you her maternal protection, defend you in all dangers of soul
and body, and may you merit to arrive safely at the end of your pilgrimage under her
mantle.”

“Amen.”

With my soul taken care of, I hobbled out into the rain and returned to the Hostal Casa
Sabina where I had earlier taken a room. The needs of the body were paramount now. I
wanted a warm room, a hot shower, a good meal and a bed with sheets and blankets. In
my room, I stripped off my wet clothes, draping socks and underwear and pants and shirt
on the steam radiator or on chairs that I had placed as close to the radiator as possible.
This was the daily routine for pilgrims, as I soon discovered. At the end of a day’s
walking, you stripped off your wet clothes, hung them to dry and put on the clothes that
you hoped had dried. It seldom worked. Most of the time my clothes would still be damp
in the morning. Few of the pilgrim hostels, or refugios, as they are called in Spain, are
adequately heated, although most have hot showers. The biggest concern, though, was
your boots. Trying to keep them dry proved almost impossible. I eventually got used to
their constant dampness.

A salve for misery

After the day’s walking, I was famished and took my first meal in Spain in a dining room
with a pretty waitress all to myself. I ordered the menú del día: a thick potato soup, baked
tROUT in lemon with vegetables and, of course, a bottle of vino de la casa. The soup arrived
in a big silver tureen, which I emptied. The trout was so fresh that the flesh peeled away
from the bones with a turn of the fork. The wine removed any lingering shivers.

As I ate and drank — the waitress kept filling my glass; what was I to do? — I thought
about the misery of the day’s walking and wondered, with a kind of what-have-I-got-
myself-into sense of foreboding, how I was going to walk 800 kilometres. And why was I
even on a pilgrimage in the first place? Oh sure, I’d convinced my employer to finance the
trip. But I was not religious, at least in the sense of being a regular churchgoer. I certainly
could not claim to ascribe to a particular faith. So why was I walking to Santiago de
Compostela? With my wine glass filled again, I pondered that question.

The word “pilgrim” comes from the Latin phrase per agrum, or “through the fields.” The
Romans used the word peregrinus in the same way we use “alien” or “stranger.” To be a
peregrinus was to be a fool and leave the security of the community, wandering off across
the cultivated fields into the wilderness. I wondered if that old meaning shouldn’t be
restored. In an age such as ours, when belief in soul-saving relics, penitential suffering and
saintly intercession is regarded as superstitious ignorance, if not madness, it didn’t seem to
make a lot of sense to spend a month or more walking in rain and snow to reach —
assuming I made it — a church containing a bunch of bones that probably did not belong
to St. James anyway. And even if they did, so what? They were just a bunch of bones, long past their expiry date.

I knew I was being deliberately contrary, looking for an excuse to salve my doubts. But I was tired and my feet and legs ached and, if truth be told, I was a little afraid of what lay ahead. If the next month was an endless repetition of this first day, well, I was not sure I would be walking very far. And if I could not walk the route, then it seemed pointless to keep going. To have defeatist thoughts on the very first day of my pilgrimage was depressing. It seemed that not only was I not physically prepared for the pilgrimage, but I was not psychologically prepared either. And that begged the question of why I was on a pilgrimage in the first place.

I thought back to when I had first heard of the Camino de Santiago. Six months earlier, I had only the vaguest knowledge of it. I knew that it was a medieval pilgrimage route, but just assumed that it had been lost to modernity, overgrown by asphalt and automobiles and suburbs. Then, while I was researching an article on Gothic cathedrals that referred to pilgrimages during the Middle Ages, I read that Santiago de Compostela was one of the most popular pilgrimages after Rome and Jerusalem for medieval Christians. I started poking around the library stacks and the Internet, and, to my surprise, discovered that the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela had undergone a startling revival in recent decades.

In the Middle Ages, despite bandits, wolves, rapacious innkeepers and the foulest of conditions, an estimated half-a-million people walked or rode the Camino de Santiago each year, and that was when Europe’s entire population was no more than 75 million. But then in those days, pilgrimages were commonplace. Just as Muslims today are expected to make the journey to Mecca at least once in their lives, so too were medieval Europeans urged to undertake spiritual journeys, if not to Rome or Jerusalem, then to Canterbury or Walsingham or Chartres or, most arduous of all, to the shrine of St. James in Santiago.

Many of the great books of medieval literature — Dante’s Divine Comedy and Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales — are tales of spiritual journeys. But then, why not? For medieval Christians the whole of life was a form of pilgrimage. And, possessed of that sensibility, they regarded certain places and certain objects as bearers of spiritual power that would make you a better person, cleanse you of your sinfulness. Out of this belief was born a passion for relics — the bones of Christian martyrs, a sliver of the Holy Cross, a piece of the shroud in which Christ’s body had been buried — and the places where those relics could be seen.

We might like to mock this nowadays, but we are not much different. We, too, betray a kind of spiritual longing in our passion for relics — ruined Aztec temples, preserved cities beneath the sands of Saudi Arabia, propped up artifacts such as the Parthenon in Athens or the obelisks at Stonehenge. Today we call this spiritual power History; a thousand years ago, they called it God.

For the medieval pilgrim, to enter the cathedral in Santagio de Compostela was worth any hardship because to see the bones of St. James with your own eyes, was to be reborn. Religious scholar Jonathan Sumption writes in his book Pilgrimage: An Image of Medieval Religion, “In an age of religious sensitivity, pilgrimage fulfilled a real spiritual need. By inflicting severe physical hardship on the pilgrim, it satisfied a desire for the
remission of his sins and opened up to him the prospect of second baptism.” Millions of men and women, dressed in little more than a long, coarse tunic, or sclakein, and carrying a small leather pouch, or scrip, and a stout six-foot stave, and wearing a scallop shell, the symbol of St. James the Apostle, undertook the rigours of the pilgrimage. They travelled hundreds of miles on rough, dangerous roads for a peek at eternity.

After the 18th century, the popularity of the Camino waned. By 1840, the British travel writer Richard Ford declared the Camino all but dead: “Pilgrimage, the oriental and medieval form of travelling, is passing away even in Spain. The carcass remains, but the spirit is fled.” Throughout the next century, much of the ancient route disappeared beneath paved roads or became cow paths between isolated villages. Most of the hundreds of pilgrim hostels and hospitals that had been built during the Middle Ages were closed and abandoned. The few pilgrims who remained had to find shelter in barns, on church floors, in monasteries or even in farm fields.

Camino marked

Not any more. In the early 1980s, several pilgrims were killed by vehicles as they walked along a highway. The public outcry prompted scholars to dust off old maps and pilgrim accounts in an effort to restore as much of the original footpath as possible. Spain, as a new member of the European Union, was anxious to help. Various Friends of the Camino associations were founded to maintain the roads and paths and set up directional markers. New refugios were built, providing beds, showers and kitchens. In 1985, the city of Santiago was named a UNESCO World Heritage City. Two years later, the Council of Europe, the cultural arm of the European Union, adopted the Camino as one of premier symbols of Europe’s cultural heritage. Thus, began the Camino’s return from obscurity.

Church authorities in Santiago maintain a register of pilgrims. In 1989, they recorded 5,760 pilgrims travelling on foot, by bicycle and even on horseback. In 1991, there were 7,274. In 1993, a Holy Year, 99,436 pilgrims received their compostelas — pilgrim certificates certifying they had completed at least the last 100 kilometres of the route. By 1998, the number of pilgrims was approaching 40,000 a year. Last year, a Jubilee Year, a record number made the pilgrimage — more than 154,000. This year, which the Pope has declared The Year of the Pilgrim, church officials were predicting between 200,000 and 250,000 pilgrims.

Most of the pilgrims — 70 to 80 per cent — are Spanish. But there are thousands from other European countries, including Britain, Switzerland, Germany, Denmark, France, as well as Brazilians, Americans, Canadians and even the occasional Japanese. And, as in the Middle Ages, they come from all walks of life. Pope John Paul II visited in 1982 and 1989. King Juan Carlos of Spain provided photo ops on a stretch in 1993. In 1994, actress Shirley MacLaine, as she explains in The Camino, her recently published book, was urged to undertake her pilgrimage — and aided on her way — by various otherworldly guides and angels.

Why were all those thousands of people, including myself, trundling down a trail that you would think would have long been forgotten and paved over with parking lots? Too bad, I told myself, you do not have Ms. MacLaine’s heavenly helpers. You’re stuck trying to sort things out on your own, albeit with the aid of some lovely wine, I thought to myself as I
polished off the bottle and signalled the waitress, who was really very pretty, for another. Perhaps another glass would open the doors of perception a little wider.

At the very least, it seemed to me, I could be reasonably sure my decision to walk the Camino was not divinely inspired. I remembered that one night at home, sitting in the living room armchair, drinking a glass of wine and casually flipping through Umberto Eco’s book Travels in Hyper-reality, I came across his essay “The Return to the Middle Ages” in which he argues that modern western culture is hungering for a return to its medieval roots — “we are dreaming the Middle Ages,” as he puts it. One sentence, however, really captured my attention: “The Middle Ages are the root of all our contemporary ‘hot’ problems, and it is not surprising that we go back to that period every time we ask ourselves about our origins.” I was reminded of what I had previously read about Gothic cathedrals: that, to the medieval mind, all the elements of a cathedral — its flying buttresses, ribbed vaulting, stained-glass windows and sculptured façades — were, in the words of St. Thomas Aquinas, “ordered toward God.” Somehow, between Aquinas and Eco, I had this image of myself walking along a dirt road with a staff in my hand, mumbling, “You are ordered toward God.” Naturally, I did not take the notion seriously; Shirley MacLaine may get inspirational messages, not me.

Yet now, several months later, here I was officially a pilgrim — did I not have the credentials to prove it? What could possibly motivate me and other moderns to undertake such a, well, medieval journey? Adventure? Escape? Spirituality? Some of the books I had read by previous pilgrims described it as little more than an exotic adventure, a kind of extreme holiday. Yet other writers saw a pilgrimage as a way to experience the spiritual sensibility of a bygone age. They engaged in “pilgrimage by proxy,” to borrow Pico Iyer’s phrase, in the hope of approximating the faith that once animated millions to make such a sacrificial journey.

Could I claim such a motive? Admittedly, I was attracted by the idea of escaping the rut of ordinary life. At the same time, I liked the idea of doing something as idiosyncratic as a pilgrimage in an age when most travel is devoted to recreation and entertainment. In researching the Camino I had been struck by how many modern-day pilgrims talked of wanting to move backward in time. In an age when most people travel by car or train or plane, the pilgrim who goes on foot carrying his worldly possessions on his back is, in a sense, going back in time. In an age of neon-lit airports and freeways, the pilgrim is a sojourner in a world illuminated by moonlight and church candles. To walk the Camino was to deliberately attempt to slough off the carapace of the modern self, to recover — or imagine — a self we have forgotten or maybe never knew. This, it seemed to me, was what made walking the Camino unique, made it different from, say, hiking in the Scottish highlands or traipsing around the Adirondacks. For a millennium, millions of people had walked through the same villages, climbed the same hills, crossed the same rivers and visited the same chapels, churches and cathedrals to say the same prayers and receive the same benedictions. To join that procession was to walk back in time.

I think it was this sense of being part of an almost overwhelming tradition that finally made me decide to make the pilgrimage to Santiago. I was aware of the spiritual implications of putting myself in the footsteps of the past but I found myself shying away from considering “spirituality” as a motive for my pilgrimage. The idea of finding God, of undergoing some kind of spiritual conversion, seemed pretentious. The Pope and Mother
Teresa could talk about spirituality with understanding and sincerity. Maybe even a celebrity flake like Shirley MacLaine could use the word, albeit without any intellectual coherence. As for myself, the idea of my pilgrimage as a spiritual journey seemed farfetched.

Others, I found, were equally shy of describing my pilgrimage as a spiritual quest. I discovered that you don’t introduce a word like pilgrimage into everyday chatter without stirring up odd apprehensions. The idea of pilgrimage seemed to evoke images of medieval attitudes — the veneration of relics, the heavy yoke of church authority and, perhaps most frightening, the idea of some divine entity to whom we owe obedience. “You don’t believe any of that stuff, do you?” asked one acquaintance. “You know, saints and relics and visions.” Others were concerned I would come back with a soulful smile, a crucifix on my sleeve and evangelical fanaticism burning in my eyes.

Only one friend, a professor, recognized that my uncertainty at my motives was a good reason for doing the pilgrimage. “Sometimes,” he said over lunch a week before I left, “you have to act before you know the meaning of your actions. The knowing is in the doing.” He quoted Thomas Merton: “We do not see first and then act; we act, then see.”

I arrived in the French resort town of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port in late March, uncertain, curious, hopeful, trepidatious and not a little scared at what the next month would bring. Saint-Jean is a town of brown stone and white-walled houses with red-gabled roofs, nestled in the rolling green fields and rushing creeks at the foot of the Pyrenees mountains. It is the last large town in France before the Spanish border and, by tradition, the place where medieval pilgrims prepared themselves for the arduous trek over the mountain pass into Spain.

I arrived late in the afternoon on a two-coach electric train from Bayonne, where I had stayed overnight after taking the TGV train from Paris. It was a crisp and clear day. The spring sun was warm on my bare arms as I followed the cobblestone streets to the Accueil Saint-Jacques on Rue de la Citadelle.

The hospitalero on duty, Michel Mallet, signed me in and issued my Credencial del Peregrino — or, in French, Carnet de Pelerin, my pilgrim passport. I would need to have it stamped wherever I stopped each day in order to validate my journey. Once I reached Santiago, I was to show it to the church officials. If all was in order, they would register my name in the cathedral’s pilgrim records and issue me with the diploma-like compostela as proof of my pilgrimage.

According to Michel, a trim and tanned 55-year-old, I was the 37th pilgrim to register this year with the Association Les Amis du Chemin de Saint-Jacques Pyrenees-Atlantiques. He told me how in recent years he’d seen more young “retirees” walking the Camino. “They have stopped working at maybe 55 or 60, but they are still young and wondering what to do with the rest of their lives. They hear about the Camino and decide to walk.”

Motives vary with each person, he said. In his experience the motives often change along the way, as though the experience of walking induces a shift in psychology. “The walking changes you. You start off interested in the cultural experience and you end with something spiritual.”
The trek from Saint-Jean to Roncesvalles is the hardest part of the Camino, he said. You climb from an elevation of 180 metres at Saint-Jean to more than 1,200 metres just before Roncesvalles, a total distance of about 26 kilometres. At this time of year, with rain and snow a constant threat, it could take six hours to reach Roncesvalles. I was not thrilled at the description.

After showing me around the refugio and introducing me to Janine, the caretaker, Michel offered a final bit of advice: "The first week is the most difficult part of the Camino, mentally and physically. Take care of your feet." We shook hands and he asked that I send him a postcard when — if, I thought to myself — I reach Santiago. "Buen Camino," he said.

I was the only pilgrim in the refugio. The large bunk room with beds for 30 people was cold but cheerful. The bare stone walls are decorated with a few posters and crucifixes. I laid out my sleeping bag and began rearranging my pack for the morning. I had three pairs of cotton pants, three cotton T-shirts, a sweatshirt, a regular shirt, a sweater, six pairs of socks, including three pairs of thick hiking socks, three pairs of underwear, a light jacket and a pair of gaiters. For the rain I had a calf-length poncho and an oilskin hat. I also had a small medical kit. Then there was my walking stick, a hefty knife and a two-litre water bottle.

Besides note pads and a camera and a dozen rolls of film, I was carrying four books: a guidebook, a book with maps of the Camino and two slim volumes of poetry — T.S. Eliot's Four Quartets and R.S. Thomas's Selected Poems. And, finally, I had two plum-sized stones, a black one from my son's rock collection that I planned to add to a 1,000-year-old cairn, the Cruz de Ferro, that I had heard was about halfway along the Camino; and a white one I had found on a Nova Scotia beach a month earlier and which I planned to throw into the Atlantic Ocean from a Spanish beach. It all weighed too much, but I was sure I needed everything.

I was feeling restless so I walked to the 17th-century citadel that overlooks the town. From the ramparts, the mountains seemed like a looming wall. Heavy grey clouds snagged the higher peaks and snow descended halfway down the mountain slopes. This was where I would head tomorrow. I walked back down into the old town to buy some supplies. At a gift shop I saw a display of scallop shells. The scallop shell — la concha de venera — is the universal symbol of a pilgrim enroute to Santiago. As I was soon to see for myself, pilgrims wear them around their necks or pinned to their hats or draped from their packs. The tradition dates to the 12th century when pilgrims who reached Santiago received the venera as a symbol of their status and the completion of their journey. At first I hesitated to buy one, thinking it was something I should earn. But then I thought why not: I could use it as talisman to prod myself along.

It was dark by the time I returned to the refugio. I had been joined by Gérard, a Belgian pilgrim. Janine introduced us in the kitchen, where Gérard was cooking his evening meal. He was a veteran pilgrim, having walked the Camino several times. A 60-year-old retired Belgian Army officer, he had been on the road since February, walking from Brussels. His face and arms were burned by the weather; his body was almost stringy. "I have walked
for 52 days,” he said between mouthfuls of potato-and-onion soup. “Rain or snow, it doesn’t matter, you just keep walking. That’s the pilgrim way.”

Gérard showed me pictures of his seven children and 10 grandchildren. I could not keep track of their names, but I noticed there was no picture of his wife. Separated many years ago, he explained. He told me about a long-time woman friend who was in a Brussels hospital awaiting a breast-cancer operation. “I’m walking for her. God wants me to do this. I pray for her as I walk. I think of nothing else. Prayer and walking, that is all.”

I didn’t know it at the time, but Gérard would become a kind of ideal pilgrim for me. I admired the purity of his purpose, especially when compared to my own confused and uncertain purposes. After we turned out the lights, I lay in my sleeping bag and thought about what he had said and tried to imagine myself walking for two months across western Europe. Prayer and walking, prayer and walking; I fell asleep with the phrase in my head.

There are two routes through the mountains to Spain from Saint-Jean. The Valcarlos route largely follows the twisting highway to Roncesvalles. The other route — Napoleon’s Way — is the more scenic and more romantic. It partly follows an old Roman road that Napoleon Bonaparte took to invade Spain. On a clear day, it is apparently spectacular. It leads over the Pyrenees through oak forests across the mountains before descending into Roncesvalles. I would not be taking it, though. Michel said it had snowed heavily in the mountains in the past few days and the paths would be impassable.

The Valcarlos route, as it turned out, was bad enough. Well, actually the road was fine; I was the one in bad shape. I had spent a month making half-hearted efforts to prepare myself for the Camino. I should have spent six months in rigorous training. A year. I had not anticipated what was required to walk every day for a month with a heavy pack on my back. Perhaps it was just as well; if I had known what I was in for I might not have done it. The first couple of hours were not too bad. The two-lane road out of Saint-Jean follows a valley bottom, climbing gently to the village of Arnéguy on the French-Spanish border. It is good country: mountain slopes covered with oak and chestnut and pine that rise to snowy peaks; green farms and orchards; caramel-coloured cows with cloning bells; flocks of sheep on the upland meadows and, high overhead, vultures planing on the thermals. Spring flowers — bluebells, violets, buttercups and, here and there, the fragile yellow of cowslips — lined the roadside ditches.

It had rained the night before, and the air was saturated with the smell of damp vegetation. A tincture of cow manure occasionally feathered the wind. The birds were singing, joining the sound of the Petit Nive d’Arnéguy as it rushed alongside the road, providing a choral accompaniment to the scenery. Except for the smoothness of the wet asphalt and the occasional swoosh of a passing car or truck, it was a scene out of time, a landscape I imagined had not changed since pilgrims began coming this way 1,000 years ago. I saw no one else as I walked, although at one point I saw some orange peels on the edge of the road; somebody else, another pilgrim perhaps, had been here before me.

During the medieval pilgrimage, the biggest risk for pilgrims was not the weather, but other people. Robbery, assault and even murder were not uncommon. In fact, during the Middle Ages, much was written about how pilgrims suffered at the hands of greedy innkeepers, dishonest guides, ferrymen and toll collectors and the constant threat of
bandits. One of the worst terrors was crossing the mountain passes between Saint-Jean and Roncesvalles, where, as one chronicler writes, "parties of villainous Basques deliberately lay in wait for their pious victims." I was going to be walking one of those mountain passes myself, although I did not expect to meet any bandits. Others were not so fortunate. The Book of the Miracles of Saint Foi records that Raymond II, count of Rouergue, departed in the late 10th century on a pilgrimage to Compostela and never arrived, having been assassinated on the way.

The only dangerous thing I encountered were car drivers who seemed to delight in hitting puddles just as I walked past. The truckers were more considerate, moving into the middle of the road and waving as they roared by.

After nearly two hours of walking, I passed Arnéguy and its small cluster of white buildings that mark the border between France and Spain. I remembered my first time in Spain in the 1970s, arriving at Bilbao by boat from Southampton, and how the Spanish customs agents had gone through my canvas rucksack with great vigilance. A nuisance, perhaps, but at least you got a stamp on your passport that announced you had actually gone from one place to another. Now, though, with Spain a member of the European Union, there were no border controls and no romantic passport stamp.

So far, so good. My legs were a bit tired, but they did not hurt. No sign of blisters either. I decided to walk for another half-hour before taking a break in Valcarlos, another three kilometres up the road. It started to rain before I got there.

Valcarlos is no great shakes as a tourist town. There are a couple of banks, a few shops and a church with a life-size statue of Santiago Matamoros — Saint James the Moor-slayer, as distinct from the other main depiction of Santiago as a humble pilgrim. But there is the Hotel Maitena with its polished wood bar and a brass espresso machine that gurgles and spits as it gives off little clouds of steam. I sat at the bar facing the picture window that overlooked a mountain valley. I was the only customer. An elderly woman brought me a café con leche and a plate of assorted tapas that I ate along with some cheese and bread from my own supplies. She smiled at my soggy condition.

"Peregrino?"

"Sí, señora."

"Mucha nieve."

I nod gloomily, seeing the clouds low on the mountain slopes. "Sí," too damn much snow. I did not like the idea that I might be walking in snow. When I finished eating — and a second café con leche (fortified with a brandy, I admit) — I shouldered my pack, donned the poncho and, with a final "gracias, señora," walked into the rain.

Halfway between Valcarlos and Roncesvalles, just before the highway begins a series of steep switchbacks, the pilgrim route turns off the road and follows a path that climbs through the forest. The path supposedly trims the distance by a few kilometres. I took it. Big mistake.
According to my maps, I was not far from the highway at any time, but I might as well have been. A hundred metres off the road and I was in another world. The path was covered with a thick layer of wet leaves. With each step, I sank into a foot-shaped puddle of water that soon made its presence felt inside my supposedly waterproof boots. The narrow path pushed through a forest of beech and oak, cutting along the side of a mountain slope. On my right above me, the tree-covered slope ascended steeply. It would have been impossible to climb. On my left, the path fell precipitously to a valley far below. I imagined myself going over the edge to land somewhere below with several broken bones.

To add to my difficulties, an effort had been made to widen the path by clearing bush and saplings to the edges. But instead of hauling the cut brush away, it had been left lying across the path. Every 20 or 30 metres, I was forced to climb over a wet tangle of branches, with a 30-pound pack on my back, a walking stick looped on my right wrist and a calf-length poncho that constantly snagged the branches.

There was also snow now, as well as rain. A sharp wind mixed them together into freezing pellets and then aimed them right at my face. All the time I was climbing. What was supposed to be a shortcut had turned into an endurance course.

I pressed on. The snow came harder and thicker. I had trouble seeing where I was going. I pushed and pulled my way through a thicket of brush; then my feet slipped on a wet tree trunk that lay across the path and I lost my balance. The weight of my pack pulled me backward. I tried to throw myself to the side, away from the edge of the path, flaying the air, trying to grab a branch. Nada.

What saved me from plummeting to the valley far below — a vision of my broke body lying at its bottom flashed before my eyes — was my poncho snagging on some branches. It was a near thing, though. I fell to one side and landed on the path, with my legs hanging in the air over the edge of the drop. I lay on my back like an overturned turtle, the front of my poncho pulled over my face smothering me. Now I knew what it felt like to be strangled by a wet, red, deflated balloon. I grabbed with my hands at the soggy earth to pull myself back from the edge, grateful to feel my feet gain a purchase on the ground instead of kicking uselessly in the air.

I lay on the snow-covered path not knowing whether to curse or offer a prayer of thanks. I wished I had stayed in that bar in Valcarlos. I wished I had stayed in Paris. For the first time, the thought flitted through my mind that I might be in trouble. I struggled out of my poncho, which was not easy considering that I was lying on it with a knapsack on my back. Eventually, though, after my heart slowed to a more moderate gallop, I unclipped all the buckles and uncinched the straps and got to my feet. I was shivering. Adrenaline or hypothermia? How far did I have to go? Was it my imagination or was it getting darker? What time was it? I looked at my watch. The crystal was covered in mud. I wiped the mud away. It was 5 p.m. Christ, where was I? I had left Valcarlos about 1 p.m. Surely, I did not have much farther to go. Then, oddly, I heard Gérard’s voice in my head: “All you have to do is walk. Just walk. Everything else will take care of itself.” Hallucination or not, it seemed to help.

The rain still fell hard and steady and the snow even thicker, but I had gotten my second wind. I got back into my pack and plodded onward, trying to ignore the ache in my back.
and legs. It was getting colder and the icy rain sounded like a shower of pellets as it hit my poncho. I checked my watch again — it was nearly seven o’clock. I had been walking for more than nine hours. I was definitely losing steam and the light was fading.

In the old days, pilgrims often died in these mountains during the winter. Their bones would be found in the spring, gnawed by wolves. I remembered reading about a 12th-century chronicler who, in crossing the Pyrenees, asked: “How many thousands of pilgrims have died (here), some lost in snowstorms, others, more numerous still, devoured by the ferocity of wolves?” I found it difficult to imagine being eaten by a wolf. Surely such things did not happen to pilgrims in this day and age. Besides, I thought as I slogged on, bending into the wind, there were probably no wolves left in Spain, right?

It was a good thing I was hunched over trying to keep the stinging rain out of my face because otherwise I would have missed the orange peels. Four neatly quarter-sectioned orange peels, just like the ones I had seen earlier, just ahead of me at the side of the path, half covered in snow. The sight of them brought me to a halt. I stared at them as the ice pellets thumped on the poncho. Somebody had been here before me. A fellow pilgrim. A fellow sufferer. I wondered if he had fallen on his ass, too. The thought cheered me. If the Orange-Peel Man had made it, so could I. I started walking again, climbing another slope. Then another. And yet another. I stopped worrying about the time and how far I had to go. I ignored the sleet, keeping my head down and my eyes on the ground, refusing to look up to see how far I had to climb. I would get there when I got there.

I don’t know how long it was before I stumbled into my second minor miracle of the day. I heard the tolling of a bell. At first I thought I must be hearing things, starting to hallucinate. Isn’t that a sign of hypothermia? I stopped and listened. Yes, despite the rain and the wind, I could hear the dull bong-bong-bong of a bell coming through the trees. For the first time in what seemed like hours, I looked up, and there above me, beyond the crest of a slope in the trail ahead, I saw a cross. From the top of the rise, I saw the grey slate roof of a modern ermita, or chapel. I followed the path and knew I had arrived at the Puerta de Ibañeta. At 1,087 metres, Puerta de Ibañeta is the summit of the 26-kilometre valley route between Saint-Jean and Roncesvalles. When you reach it, you know you only have a couple of kilometres until Roncesvalles.

As I looked up at the cross against the darkening clouds, my fatigue was replaced by a sense of elation: I had made it. Well, not quite, I still had two kilometres to go. But it was all downhill. Back on the tarmac road, just below the chapel, I noticed a distance marker saying “49 K.” I had turned onto the path at “57 K.” It had taken me more than four hours to cover eight kilometres. Pathetic.

Twenty minutes later, I was checking into the Hostal Casa Sabina and then, after dumping my pack in my room, I walked to the monastery to get my pilgrim credencial stamped and to attend the Pilgrims’ Mass. I had to thank somebody for my deliverance — the Orange-Peel Man, maybe.

Later, as I sat in the hotel’s dining room, well-blessed, well-fed and, if I did not stop with the wine, well on the way to being drunk, I stared out the window beyond my reflection into the drizzly night. Two days ago, I had been sitting in Le Fumaillor brasserie on Place d’Italie in Paris cheerfully watching the world go by. The day before that I had dined at
Capisano's in Bromley outside London, happy to be back in England. Now I was in Spain. As I drained the last glass of wine, I sensed my disorientation. I was feeling the contradictory symptoms of the traveller who has moved too far too fast: anticipation and trepidation. I felt an almost physical desire to be moving, to see what comes next. But I was also feeling hesitant and uncertain about what the next month would bring. My confused restlessness forced me out into the rain for a final walk before sleep.

I did not go far. Besides the medieval monastery, there are only a half-dozen other buildings in Roncesvalles. I walked along the wet road as it curved westward to Pamplona. At the edge of town, I saw the pilgrim path that runs alongside the road between rows of poplars. At the entrance to the path were some wooden signs with the word Ultreya! inscribed on them. Medieval pilgrims greeted each other with this verbal salute. It means "beyond," or "go beyond." Beyond what to what? I wondered. Looking down the path into the dark wood, I remembered something Laurie Dennett, the Canadian woman who is president of the Confraternity of St. James, a British organization that promotes Camino pilgrimages, had said when I met her at her office in London: "The Camino is a process of discovering the things you need and the things you don't need." What was it that I needed? With that question, I returned to the hotel. The last thing I heard before I fell asleep was the monastery bell tolling the turn of the hour.

Next week: From Roncesvalles to Pamplona: Ghosts, legends and blisters
The Road to Santiago — Second of a 9-part series — Published Sunday, Nov. 12, 2000

Episode Two: From Roncesvalles to Pamplona: A Pilgrim’s Painful Progress

The sun was shining when I left Roncesvalles in the morning. I interpreted it as compensation for the misery of the day before. It had been my first day on the Camino and it would remain, throughout my 800-kilometre pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, my hardest, my greatest test. By the end of that day, exhausted and aching, I wondered how I would survive a month or more on the road. Yet despite the exertions, and to my surprise, today I felt fine. My legs were stiff and my shoulder muscles were sore from the straps of my backpack. But I seemed to be restored by the night’s sleep. The bar of the Hostal Casa Sabina was open at 7:30 a.m. Spain, I decided, was the most civilized country in the world. I ordered what would become a standard breakfast during my month-long pilgrimage on the Camino de Santiago, a large café con leche and a chocolate croissant. I imitated another patron by having a shot of anisette, the early-morning starter for Spanish labourers. Muscle lubricant, I figured. Besides, when in Rome, and all that.

By 8 a.m. I was on the pilgrim path and walking off the lingering stiffness in my legs, heading for the town of Zubiri, which is about halfway between Roncesvalles and Pamplona. I passed the pilgrim cross with its relief of the Virgin on a weather-worn stone column. The path was lined by trees. In summer, the trees provided pilgrims with much-needed shade. But now, in late March, with only the first vestiges of spring green starting to show, the sun came through the branches, dappling the pathway in shifting patterns of light and shadow. It was a flat, easy-walking gravel path, damp from the rain. The air was clean and crisp and bracing.

In Spain the path, el Camino, is marked every few hundred metres or so with painted yellow arrows or, sometimes, a slash of yellow paint on a tree trunk or a stone or a fence post. These yellow markers — flechas amarillas — have been painted the entire length of the Camino between Roncesvalles and Santiago as guides. Pilgrims become very fond of them, taking comfort at their presence. When you don’t see one for a while, you get a little anxious.

The yellow arrows took me through Burguete, a small white-walled town where Ernest Hemingway stayed when he came to fish or to see the bullfights in Pamplona. The water from the previous night’s rain ran down channels on each side of the road. The houses with their green-shuttered windows shone in the sun. Occasionally, through an open door, I caught a glimpse of polished wooden floors and cool, dim interiors. In Basque villages, many homes had armorial devices on their exterior walls attesting to occupancy going back centuries.

Walking past one house I was struck by the sharp tang of dill from behind a garden hedge and suddenly I was remembering my grandparents’ house in Hanna, Alta. My grandmother kept a large garden, one corner of which was thick with dill that she would use to flavour her borscht. The flare of memory surprised me. I had not thought of my grandparents for years. They had died when I was still a boy. But walking through Burguete in the cool morning air, I remembered one of the best summers of my childhood. I had pottered around my grandfather’s tool shed that was pungent with the acrid
sweetness of the curled wood shavings covering the dirt floor, or sat in the big stuffed chairs on the enclosed porch reading Huckleberry Finn and Tom Sawyer, half listening to the voices of my mother and grandmother in the kitchen. It felt strange, almost disorienting, to have such a sharp memory of childhood as I walked through a Spanish village.

The Camino led to Espinal — another of those picture-perfect villages that make rural Spain seem like a place out of time — and then into woodlands that climbed up and down until I reached the Alto de Mezquiriz summit and passed a stone stela that urged prayers to Our Lady of Roncesvalles. On the ground beside the stone pillar — waiting it seemed just for me — were four neatly sectioned orange peels. Once more I had evidence of a fellow pilgrim ahead of me. The day before as I stumbled in the rain and snow along a mountain path, the sight of similarly sliced orange peels had cheered me and even gave me a kind of second wind that saw me through to Roncesvalles. I wondered if I would meet the Orange-Peel Man, sitting by the edge of the Camino slicing up an orange. I walked on, keeping my eyes peeled.

Canadians welcome

Near midday, I stopped for lunch at the Bar Juan, a clean and pleasant café in Viscarret that also doubled as a grocery store. I was the only customer and I was not sure meals were being served. “Por favor, señora. Tiene una sopa?” I asked the middle-aged woman behind the bar in my clumsy Spanish.

The woman spoke so fast I wasn’t sure if she was speaking Spanish or Basque.

“Perdón,” I said. “No comprendo. Hablo español un poco.”

The woman smiled. “Peregrino?” Yes, I said, I was a pilgrim.

“Inglés?” she asked.

That I understood. “No, soy del Canadá.”

“Oh, Canada. Me gusta mucho el Canadá,” she said.

She kept talking, but I did not understand what it was about Canada that she liked so much; perhaps it had something to do with Canadians still being a rarity on the Camino. She went into the kitchen and returned with a large bowl of leek-and-onion soup and half a baguette. As I ate, I recalled a medieval legend about a French woman who denied a hungry pilgrim’s request for bread. “May your bread turn to stone,” he cursed as he walked away. When the woman returned to her kitchen and opened the oven, her loaf of bread had turned to stone. The woman chased after the pilgrim, desperate to beg his forgiveness. From such stories, it seemed, have pilgrims come to think of themselves as special.

This Basque woman deserved no curses. Her soup was delicious. I ate two bowls as the woman watched me with an indulgent smile. May your loaves always rise and your soup never boil over, I thought to myself. The woman’s friendliness was something I would encounter throughout Spain, particularly in the countryside.
Not every pilgrim has seen the Spanish, much less the Basques, in this light. One of the most famous books about the Camino is the Codex Calixtinus, a 12th-century guidebook that is attributed to a French cleric, Aimery Picaud. Picaud’s reviews of the towns and the food are spleenful. Naturally enough, being French, Picaud describes everything in France as très elegant. As soon as he crosses the Pyrenees things go decidedly downhill. Spain, Picaud writes, is a land of dreadful food, poisoned rivers and poisonous people. However, he reserves his worst invective for the Basques. Their language is that of barking dogs. Basque toll collectors are cruel, often beating pilgrims and robbing them of their clothes. Basques eat with their hands. They have sex with animals.”

“This is a barbarous people unlike all other peoples in customs and in character, full of malice, swarthy in colour, ill-favoured of face, misshapen, perverse, perfidious, empty of faith and corrupt, libidinous, drunken, experienced in all violence, ferocious and wild, dishonest and reprobate, impious and harsh, cruel and contentious, unversed in anything good, well-trained in all vices and iniquities, like the Geats and Saracens in malice, in everything inimical to our French people.”

Things had obviously improved over the centuries. Either that or Picaud, being French, naturally assumed everyone else to be inferior. The landscape through which I was walking was the crucible of Europe, the terrain where the West had its bloody birth. In the eighth century, the area around Roncesvalles was a killing ground where Christianity went sword to sword with the armies of Islam who were intent on conquering Europe. The Moors had invaded Spain in 711 and soon possessed or controlled most of the Iberian peninsula, with the exception of a mountainous northern strip through which ran a Roman trade route that would become the pilgrim road.

On Christmas Day, 800 AD, Charlemagne was crowned by the Pope as the first Holy Roman Emperor. Earlier, in one of his empire-building campaigns, he had led his army across the Pyrenees into Spain to liberate Christians suffering under the Muslim infidels — although he was by no means adverse to expanding his earthly empire. Nor was his army adverse to a little rapine and pillage. In the march across Spain, Charlemagne’s armies sacked the Basque town of Pamplona.

The Basques took their revenge in the late afternoon of Aug. 15, 778. In the forests near Roncesvalles, Basque partisans swooped down on the rearguard of Charlemagne’s army, led by Charlemagne’s nephew, Roland, as it returned to France. The slaughter spread westward into the valley as far as Viscarret and Linzóain, where, with his final dying breath, Roland sounded his horn Oliphant to summon help, blowing so hard that the veins in his temples burst. The horn was heard clear across the mountains by Charlemagne, who charged back. But it was too late.

According to legend, Charlemagne sank to his knees and prayed. God was so moved that he stopped the late afternoon sun from setting to allow Charlemagne to pursue the enemy. Roland and his men were buried at Roncesvalles beneath the beech trees where a chapel would be built to mark the spot.

Some 300 years later, the battle at Roncesvalles was immortalized in the Chanson de Roland, the epic poem regarded as the cornerstone of French national literature. The Song
of Roland could be considered the founding document of the Christian West in the same way that Homer’s Iliad provided the bedrock myths and symbols of ancient Greek civilization. With its emphasis on martial and religious virtues, including the ideal of noble self-sacrifice, the Song of Roland gave Christendom a much needed moral self-image in the effort to unite Europe.

Aimery Picaud suggests in his colourful account of the battle in Book IV of his Codex Calixtinus that Charlemagne was the first pilgrim to Santiago. Charlemagne, it seems, had a vision of a knight who identified himself as James, the apostle of Jesus Christ, and told the emperor to follow the Milky Way to Galicia to worship at James’s tomb.

But nothing associated with the Camino is as straightforward as it seems. The shrine of Santiago might itself be a fraud. Biblical historians generally agree James was beheaded by Herod Agrippa in 44 AD, the first apostle to be martyred. His death is historical fact, but what followed is legend. Tradition says James’s disciples were told in a dream to take his body, along with the severed head, to Galicia where he had spent many years trying to convert the pagans. They sailed in a stone boat to the Galician coast of northwest Spain. (The skeptics mock the “stone boat.” I’m not sure why. Boats carrying quarried stone around the Mediterranean were quite common. It seems conceivable the “stone boat” was actually a boat that carried marble or some other stone.) Oxen then hauled the apostle’s stone sarcophagus inland to a field where it was buried.

Eight centuries later, in 810 AD, a hermit named Pelayo saw the light of the stars shining on a particular spot in a field (hence, in Latin, campus stellae, or the field of stars). As he approached, he heard angels singing. He told the local bishop, Theodomir, who promptly ordered a hole dug in the illuminated area. Lo and behold, a cave was unearthed and found to hold the sepulchre and papers attesting it contained the body of James the Apostle, brother of John the Beloved and son of Mary Salome, sister of Mary, the mother of Jesus Christ. Theodomir told the Pope, who declared the spot a pilgrimage site and a church was built. Devout Christians, along with the usual ragbag of rogues and scoundrels, were soon on the road, and the city of Sant’ Iago grew up around the site.

In time, the road leading to Santiago would become one of the most popular pilgrimage routes in medieval Europe and the city of Santiago, with its relic bones of St. James, the third holiest pilgrim destination after Jerusalem and Rome. For medieval Christians, certain places and certain objects became sources of spiritual power. To come near them was to be bathed in God’s grace and, thus, to be cleansed of sinfulness. This belief gave birth to an obsession with relics — the bones of martyrs, fragments of the True Cross — and the places where those relics could be seen. We might mock this nowadays, but we, too, reveal our spiritual longings in our fondness for collecting trinkets from the booths at Graceland or Princess Diana’s gravesite.

Symbol that delivered

The discovery of St. James’s body and the resulting pilgrimage did not happen a moment too soon for Christendom. Christian Spain, in particular, badly needed a miracle. After Charlemagne’s retreat, Spain was left in the grip of the Moors, who constantly threatened the Christian north. The relics in the shrine at Compostela stiffened Christian backbones against the Muslims. By means of the pilgrimage’s popularity, the Church was able to lure
people, money and arms to northern Spain, allowing it to establish a frontier from which Christian Europe could begin the Reconquista of Spain and drive the Moors back to Africa.

This history is not without ironic humour. It seems the first effort to associate James with Spain was made by a man known as St. Beatus, writing about 50 years before the discovery of the Santiago tomb. St. Beatus used an old list of apostles and the places where they had proselytized as the source his contention that James had been in Spain. The problem, as scholars later determined, was that the list had been copied from an even older list compiled by some anonymous scribe who mistakenly wrote that James's territory was, in the Latin, Hispaniam, or Spain, rather than Hierosolyman, or Jerusalem. In other words, the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela — credited with forging Spain as a nation, giving Christianity some breathing space and, perhaps, fostering western identity — might just be based on a misprint.

The fact remains that as a symbol James delivered. The early images and statues always cast him as a humble pilgrim wearing a cloak and hat and staff. This image changed in 845 at the battle of Clavijo, when, according to legend, St. James appeared at the head of the Christian army, a giant on a white horse with a blood-red cross on his shield and swinging a huge sword that killed 60,000 Moors in a single afternoon. The legend of Santiago Matamoros — St. James the Moor-slayer — was born, providing Spain with its patron saint and a rallying cry for the Reconquista. In churches and gift shops all along the Camino you see statues big and small of Santiago Matamoros, a warrior on horseback, trampling the corpses of swarthy infidels.

The Way of St. James not only attracted the money and manpower to restore Spain to Christianity, but also gave Spain the wherewithal to branch out on its own conquests. It was under the banner of St. James, for example, that the conquistadores and explorers marched through the New World. It could be argued that St. James is the patron saint of the West, the spirit behind what we now call globalization.

In the wake of the Reconquista, Santiago's reputation for intercession spread far and wide. Legend has it William the Conqueror rode to the Battle of Hastings in 1066 on a charger that had been sanctified on a pilgrimage to Santiago. A 12th-century chanson commemorating the Battle of Hastings links it to Roland's battle at Roncesvalles:

"Tallifer who was famed for song  
Mounted on a charger strong,  
Rode on before the Duke and sang  
Of Roland and Charlemagne,  
Of Oliver and the vassals all  
Who fell in fight at Roncesvalles."

During the next several centuries, the Camino de Santiago engendered an intensity of devotion that was maintained from the 10th century to the 18th-century Enlightenment. Those who walked the Way of St. James were as varied as the pilgrims in Geoffrey Chaucer's Canterbury Tales: penitent princes travelling incognito, crusading knights, wayfaring ladies, relic mongers, bishops, bootmakers and barefoot peasants. Among them were: St. Francis of Assisi, King Louis VII of France, William X, Duke of Aquitaine, Catherine of Aragon, on her way to marry Henry VIII of England. Her parents, Ferdinand
and Isabella, the first monarchs of a united Spain, made the pilgrimage in 1496. Even literary figures made their way to Santiago: Chaucer’s Wife of Bath bragged to her companions about travelling to Santiago.

Some scholars argue that this centuries-long mix of people from all over the continent gave birth to European self-consciousness and, ultimately, to the identity of the West. As the pilgrims trekked across Europe, converging on the Road of Stars, they exchanged ideas about architecture, fashion, science, politics, food and philosophy. There are references to the pilgrimage to Santiago everywhere in European culture. In the Vita Nova, Dante defines a pilgrim as one “who is journeying toward the sanctuary of St. James at Compostela.” Shakespeare’s Hamlet pays homage to St. James, invoking the universal symbol of the Santiago pilgrimage — the scallop shell and staff:

“How should I your true love
know from another one?
By his cockle hat and staff
And his sandal shoon.”

The image of the pilgrim with his long black cape, a broad-brimmed hat to shield against the Iberian sun, a long staff in hand and a scallop shell around his neck found its way into centuries of European painting. El Greco, Bosch, Rubens, Ribera, Murillo and Velazquez — they all used the figure of the wayfaring pilgrim in their work. Velazquez, for example, painted the blood-red cross of the military order of the Knights of St. James on his own cloak in Las Meninas. As Goethe, the German poet and philosopher, succinctly stated: “Santiago built Europe.”

As I finished my lunch in Viscarret with a glass of wine — and a café con leche, of course — I felt the first stirrings of a sense of identity with the millions who had come this way before. The medieval pilgrim dressed in his long tunic, or sclavein, and a broad-brimmed hat; I had my knee-length poncho and a wide-brimmed oilskin hat. The medieval pilgrim had his stout six-foot stave; I had my extendable Hillmaster walking stick. And, like my medieval predecessor, I, too, wore a scallop shell, the universal symbol of the Santiago pilgrimage. Mine was tied to the back of my knapsack. I leaned down from the table to where I had set my pack against the wall and turned the scallop shell with my fingers. I had bought it in a gift shop in Saint-Jean. It was smooth and shiny and, strangely, warm to the touch. I wondered whether at some point in the next month of walking I would come to feel some attachment to it, feel I had earned it. Clothes-wise, I had the trappings of a pilgrim; symbol-wise, I was not so sure.

At the very least, I thought to myself, I was in good, if ghostly, company. I was walking with history, sojourning along the phantom road of western civilization. Such an attitude is not uncommon among pilgrims. One of the things I would come to appreciate — and hear others talk about — was the historical resonance of the Camino; how in walking the route you feel a deepening awareness of the past, a feeling that you have stumbled into some kink in time. As a pilgrim you make a kind of two-fold journey as you walk the Camino — a backward journey in time and a forward journey through space. Walter Starkie, a scholar who walked the Camino several times from the 1930s to the 1950s, put it this way: “Every step the pilgrim makes today along the road through France and northern Spain evokes memories of those who passed that way century after century.”
My first slip into time’s kink came after leaving Viscarret and climbing up a path through an oak forest and along a wooded ridge over the Alto de Erro toward Zubiri, where I planned to spend the night. About a kilometre beyond the Alto de Erro are the ruins of the Venta del Caminante. Hundreds of years ago, it was a posada del peregrino, a pilgrim inn, where weary pilgrims could get a room for the night and a modest meal. Now it was a crumbling ruin half sunk into the forest floor.

The climb from Viscarret had left me hot and sweaty and tired. My legs were starting to feel the strain of the day’s walking, and I could feel a hotspot on my left foot. I was an hour or so out of Zubiri. An afternoon siesta was in order. I dropped my pack and found a place to lie down inside the ruins. I fell asleep listening to the wind in the trees and trying to imagine myself as a medieval pilgrim coming upon this forest inn and the relief I might have felt after a day worrying about bandits and wolves.

I woke 10 or 15 minutes later convinced I was not alone. I sensed something at the periphery of my vision and felt if I could just turn my head fast enough I would see it. I stood up, shivering in my sweaty clothes, and belted the pack on my back. There is nothing there, except, perhaps, an imagination stimulated by too much mountain oxygen.

I would have similar experiences in the weeks ahead. I certainly don’t attribute them to encounters of an angelic kind à la Shirley MacLaine, but I cannot deny that walking the Camino opens you to ancient ghosts: roads built by the Romans, hump-backed bridges built half-a-millennium ago, village fountains where generations of pilgrims have quenched their thirst, churches where the stone floors have been worn hollow by the knees of millions of long-dead pilgrims, graveyards where thousands who did not make it to Santiago were buried.

The walk into Zubiri only reinforced the sensation of having slipped into some disorienting place where past and present slosh and slop. After the ruins, the trail started to descend steeply. It was easier than climbing but I was negotiating sharp-edged bedrock that jutted up from the ground at crazy angles. It occurred to me that I was treading in the footsteps of millions of pilgrims who for 1,000 years had worn down the forest floor to bedrock. Somewhere I had read that each one of us leaves thousands of molecules in our wake wherever we go and that even after we die some of those molecules continue to bump and grind along with all the billions of other molecules that had temporarily occupied the same space you had.

By the time I reached Zubiri, I found the refugio in an old school and dropped my pack and myself on the bunk bed, I was staggering, my leg muscles thrumming at the punishment they had taken.

The shower — lukewarm, sadly — helped ease my aches and pains, as well as shed the day’s accumulated sweat. I checked my feet. Still no blisters, although the balls of my feet were red and tender and my heels looked a little raw. That worried me. I had been wearing two pairs of socks — a thin pair of silk socks and a heavy pair of hiking socks. I hoped that combination would keep me free of blisters.
I had read a list of medical supplies that all wise pilgrims should carry. It included medicaments for constipation and diarrhea, sunscreen, liniment for sore muscles, Band-Aids, Aspirin, iodine, a needle and thread. I had it all. I was a walking pharmacy. My most prized kit item, though, was my long roll of moleskin, an adhesive-backed, felt-like material that I had discovered in a chemist’s shop in London. It was marvellous for covering incipient blisters and I decided I would tape strips of moleskin across the balls of my feet the next morning. I did not want blisters.

I left the refugio to find a grocery store and replenish my supplies of water, bread, cheese and oranges. When I returned, I had company — a local woman who looked after the refugio and stamped the pilgrim credentials, and another pilgrim, a retired French businessman by the name of Charles Henri.

He was the first pilgrim I had met on the Camino. For the past two days I had more or less been alone but now I was glad of the company. It was fine to walk alone during the day, but at night it was pleasant to be with others. After Charles settled in, we sat at a table outside the refugio, eating and talking, comparing notes about the trail.

He explained that, at 65, he had just retired and handed over his farm machinery business in Lille to his son. “I am walking for God and my family. That’s what I think about when I walk, my family and my God.”

I wanted to ask what it was about God that he thought about as he walked but I felt too embarrassed. Once it grew dark, we went inside and crawled into our sleeping bags. I fell asleep instantly. When I got up in the morning, Charles had already gone. Strangely, I felt lonely.

Blisters take their toll

My third day — 20 kilometres from Zubiri to Pamplona — was the second worst day I would have on the Camino, although there would be a couple of others that nearly matched it. (The climb to Roncesvalles was always No. 1.) When I awoke at 7, it was raining; not heavily, but a steady gloomy drizzle. Worse, though, I could barely move. When I stood everything groaned and squealed in protest. I hobbled around, bent over like a drooping question mark.

My feet were swollen and tender inside my still-damp boots, and despite the moleskin, I felt stabs and twinges of pain as I walked. Even the morning café con leche, enhanced by a shot of anisette (two shots actually), didn’t put much spring in my step. Nevertheless, by 8, I was back on the Camino and putting Zubiri and the sour, nose-wrinkling smell of its magnesium factory behind me.

For the next three hours, I walked in the rain following a forest trail that cut across the side of thickly wooded hills above the Río Arga. The path was little more than a narrow gap between walls of oak and beech and pine. Most of the time, I could hear the river below, but only occasionally did I glimpse it through a gap in the trees. In the summer, with the trees in leaf, it would have been like walking through a green tunnel. Now, though, with the trees still bare, the rain cut through the branches and turned the path into a muddy soup. On flat stretches, I could step from rock to rock or walk on higher ground at the edge of the
path, but where the ground sloped I waded ankle deep in a shallow, mud-thick creek. It was tricky keeping my footing on the slippery rocks. Every time my boot slipped, pain shot through my feet.

By the time I reached the village of Uroz, I had walked out of the forest and crossed the river to where the path rejoined the highway. I was waddling at slo-mo speed. I had to stop. I crouched against the medieval bridge, setting my pack and walking stick against the stone wall. I shivered as the chill of the stone leached through my damp shirt. I eased myself to the ground and carefully extended my legs, hoping to ease the cramping in my thighs. I was grateful the rain had stopped, at least for a few moments, and the sun could make a fitful appearance. If I had not been so sore and tired I might have appreciated the view more. Still, it was lovely.

It was midday already, and I had walked only 12 kilometres since leaving Zubiri. I was disappointed, or, more accurately, I was disappointed in myself for being so obviously out of condition. I had been advised to go easy the first few days until my body adjusted to the demands of long-distance walking. But even so, I had not expected to find walking 20 kilometres or so a day so demanding, or so painful. I remembered that while a university student I once worked on a geological survey crew in the Ross Mountains of the Yukon. I had spent the better part of a summer walking up and down mountains every day with a load of survey stakes and a hammer. No problems, then. Now, a quarter-century later, I was not pleased to find I was no longer so fit and svelte. It seemed the Camino was demonstrating that my lingering attachments to a more youthful self-image were, well, something of an illusion. I remembered what Laurie Dennett, the woman who is president of the Confraternity of St. James, a British organization that promotes Camino pilgrimages, had said when I met her in London: “The Camino is a process of discovering the things you need and the things you don’t need.” Maybe, I thought, the Camino was going to give me a much needed lesson in humility.

I was certainly feeling humiliated right then. In the past two days I had walked nearly 60 kilometres. I was now eight or so kilometres from Pamplona. Beyond that, I had another 740 kilometres to reach Santiago. My mind skidded away from the idea. Dread at the prospect of failure embedded itself in my mind. Images of a heart attack or breaking my leg on some mountain path flitted through my head. I imagined having to quit and fly home humiliated with a note pinned to my shirt: “He couldn’t cut it on the Camino.” I knew others had been forced to pack it in, victims of torn ligaments, swollen tendons, infected blisters or even broken bones. There were a few references to fatal heart attacks. I recalled what Michel Mallot, the hospitalero at the refugio in Saint-Jean, had told me: “The first week is the most difficult, mentally and physically. You have to be ‘well’ with your feet. You’ll be in trouble otherwise.” Was I going to fail where an aging Hollywood actress succeeded? Maybe I needed the guidance of angels, too.

I had drifted off into a half-doze, and might have drifted further into a long nap had the rain not so rudely interrupted. Only I could not get up. My leg muscles were winched tight. I had to roll on to my side and use my arms to push myself into a kneeling position before I could reach for my walking stick and hoist myself upright. Little stabs of pain fired up and down my legs. I struggled to lift my pack and thread my arms through the straps. Finally, though, I was in gear and in motion. Sort of, anyway. I moved like a lame penguin through the slanting drizzle toward Pamplona, somewhere over the rainbow.
A couple of hours later, I collapsed in a hotel in Pamplona. That may sound as if I was stumbling along like a good little stoic. Not so. I had managed to walk from Uroz to Villava, a suburb about two kilometres from Pamplona, but it was wet and miserable, and I felt sorry for myself. My feet grew increasingly painful and I tried to walk on their sides, leaning heavily on my walking stick. By the time I reached Villava I had no energy to follow the yellow arrows through a suburban maze into downtown Pamplona. I stopped at a hotel and asked a young woman behind the front desk if she would call a taxi, “por favor, señora.”

And so, in short order, I was hobbling across the Plaza de Castillo and through the front door of the Hotel La Perla, where Hemingway had stayed. They gave him Room 217, looking onto the square; I got Room 113 looking over an alley. I did not complain. I soon flopped onto the bed, wet clothes and all. I had, I knew, cheated in taking a taxi and not walking all the way. Authentic pilgrims do not use conveyances of modern transport. Authentic pilgrims walk through the pain. Three days into my pilgrimage and my reputation was already shot, even if only in my own mind. Frankly, right then, I didn’t give a fig.

Finally, though, I knew I had to look at the damage. I did not like what I saw. On my left foot, a large dark patch showed through the two pairs of socks. I pressed against the patch, and my finger came away red and sticky. I peeled off the socks and cringed at the sight of the raw remains of three large, raw, blood blisters across the ball of the foot. The moleskin was bunched up behind my toes. The skin on the blisters had been shredded. The whole ball of my left foot was hot and tender to the touch. There was also an inch-wide and two-inches-long blister on the back of my left heel. The right foot was a little better. The thumb-length blister that looped around the ball of the foot had not burst, and there was also a fat and nasty looking blood blister on my fourth toe.

A sense of failure washed over me. It was my fault, of course. I was simply not prepared for this trek, physically or mentally. And now, looking at the bloody mess of my feet, I knew I was not going to be walking for a while.

Next week: From Pamplona to Logroño: Companions on the Camino
The Road to Santiago — Fourth of a 9-part series — Published Sunday, Nov. 26, 2000

Episode Four: From Logroño to Astorga: Into the Twilight Zone

I walked alone for the next week or so. I met other pilgrims on the road or in refugios when we would come together for an evening meal. But each day’s walking was a solitary venture. I think I went out of my mind.

It was my second week on the Camino de Santiago, the 800-kilometre pilgrimage route to the Galician city of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain, and I had covered 170 kilometres, arriving in the city of Logroño in the company of Anne Knowlan, a 58-year-old pilgrim from Chiliwack, B.C.

Now, the morning after reaching Logroño, I was leaving alone. Anne and I had walked together for three days and I would miss her company. Yet, at the same time, I was glad to be back on the Camino. As I headed for Navarrete, I tried to recall where I had been three days, four days, even a week ago. But it was all a blur; the days and the nights overlapped and melted into one another. It was as though the process of walking, of putting one foot in front of the other for mile after mile, had caused me to lose my ordinary sense of time. My memory seemed tied more to a sense of space than any division of time. In this sense, I was slightly out of my mind walking through Navarrete, Nájera, Azófra, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Belorado, Villafranca Montes de Oca and San Juan de Ortega on the way to Burgos. Each place provided something — the company of other pilgrims, a fine meal, a tidbit of the past, an example of Romanesque or Gothic architecture — but it was the Camino itself that worked its magic. Perhaps the Brazilian author Paul Coelho captures the experience best in his book, The Pilgrimage: ‘After so much time walking the Road to Santiago, the Road to Santiago began to ‘walk me.’”

Not all the time, of course. I was frustrated at the endless rain, had spells of homesickness and, as if I needed reminding, endured the constant soreness of feet and legs (although, thankfully, there were no more major blister outbreaks). And, there was always something to remind me not to take the Camino for granted.

Just as in the Middle Ages, pilgrims still die on the Camino. Occasionally, I saw flowers or small crosses marking a spot beside the pilgrimage route. One morning I sheltered from the rain beneath the 13th-century Romanesque portico of a graveyard outside Navarrete. On the wall was a plaque commemorating a young Belgian woman, Alice de Graemer, who was killed by a car while cycling to Santiago in 1986. Most of the deaths I heard about were those of middle-aged men, such as the German cyclist who suffered a heart attack in the mountains of El Bierzo and is remembered by an iron bicycle sculpture. The saddest story I heard was about a Dutchman who died of a heart attack only a few miles outside Santiago — while his wife awaited him in the city.

Sometimes I came across skeletons or desiccated carcasses of animals. Hares mostly, but now and then, I saw the body of a dog, its eyes obscured by flies. Once I saw a sheep that looked as though it had been ripped apart by other animals. Another time, I stopped to look in a roadside well and saw the pale bellies of frogs floating on the water. Not all were dead. I watched two frogs try repeatedly to get a grip on the slippery stones until, exhausted, they
sank beneath the surface. I thought leaning over the lip of the well and trying to scoop them up in my hat, but I had an image of myself falling into the well and being unable to get out.

The only time I was scared to death, almost literally, was outside Nájera. I was stumbling down a hill past a farm — a sheep farm, judging from the smell — when I suddenly heard loud barking behind me. I swung around to see four large dogs coming straight for me. Dogs are everywhere in Spain. It seems every yard, urban or rural, has a dog that goes into hysterics as you walk past. Usually they are chained, but even when not they generally keep their distance. Nonetheless, pilgrims do not like dogs, and never have. At the museum in Roncesvalles, there is a wooden bas-relief of a pilgrim being devoured by a pack of dogs. One animal lies along the length of the hapless man, pinning him on the ground, paws on the shoulders and snarling teeth about to bite down on the man’s screaming face. Look closely at the face and you see a finely carved portrait of primal terror.

Like most pilgrims, I had anticipated some encounter with the dogs of the Camino, so I don’t think my immediate reaction was one of terror. Sure, my heart went on adrenaline overdrive, but my sphincter stayed shut. In her book The Camino, Shirley MacLaine told of meeting a pack of snarling dogs. She did not try flight or fight. She preferred a mental confrontation, as it were, sending “the largest love-imbued heart image I could muster.” I was not so enlightened or loving.

My saviour was a collapsible high-tech Hillmaster walking stick with a nice sharp tungsten tip. Forget the love messages. I snarled back and slashed the Hillmaster back and forth as I slowly walked backward. The dogs stayed about 10 feet away, barking furiously. For some reason, none of them tried to get behind me. I remembered reading that to a dog a pilgrim beneath a pack and poncho looks like a hump-backed beast. I kept walking backward, waving the Hillmaster, watching each dog, trying to determine which was the leader. I was certainly prepared to spear my walking stick down its throat.

And then, as suddenly as it began, it was over. The dogs stopped and let me go. I must have moved beyond the bounds of their territory. My hands shook; my whole body trembled. I felt the thump of my heart and the beat of blood in my ears. I became aware that my face was set in a snarling rictus. A primordial instinct urged me to step back across the boundary. For the first time in my life, I wanted to kill. I stood there, watching the dogs, they watching me, until my heart slowed and the killer instinct returned to its reptilian lair. I turned and walked away, feeling weak in the knees.

The hills of La Rioja, dotted with roving herds of sheep and goats and the villages of houses built adobe style with red pantile roofs, fell behind me. The days ran one into another, indistinguishable. Long-distance runners refer to a “runner’s high” — a state of euphoria achieved after long effort. Something similar happened to me. The steady rhythm of footsteps and the metronomic tapping of the walking stick lulled my mind, nudging the doors of memory ajar. I talked to old, long-gone friends, shared the phantom embrace of former lovers, walked with a boy whom I knew had once been myself.

And then there were the golden oldies that played in my head — the Beatles and the Beach Boys, Elvis Presley and Roy Orbison. For some reason, though, like a needle skipping on a well-worn record, I was stuck on the songs of my childhood: The Battle of New Orleans,
Tom Dooley, Sink the Bismarck, Moon River. It was as if I had cracked the door on some subconscious radio station where an eternal DJ continued to spin the old 45s. Stepping beside some vineyard whose gnarled vines were thicker than my legs, I sang “from a Jack to a King, from loneliness to old memories, I played my heart and I won a Queen.” Stepping over fresh and pungent sheep dung, I yodelled “the night has a thousand eyes and a thousand eyes can’t but see when you’ve been true me.” One time, I was standing in the backseat of our family’s 1949 Dodge, looking over my father’s shoulder as the farm fields and telephone poles whipped by on our way from Red Deer to Drumheller and Bobby Vinton’s Blue Velvet played on the radio.

I nattered fragments of poetry. Matthew Arnold and T.S. Eliot, R.S. Thomas and Dylan Thomas; all my favourites from forgotten English classes. Eliot emerged as the favourite: “We are the stuffed men, we are the hollow men;” “We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

And so it would go for hours, walking through the countryside, jabbering lyrics and poems and watching my past scroll across the screen of memory. I gathered there was nothing particularly unusual about this. One psychological phenomenon of the pilgrimage is how hours of walking can trigger unexpected recollections. Nancy Frey, an American anthropologist describes the Camino’s “out of time quality” in her book Pilgrim Stories: “While journeying through this different time and place, pilgrims find that long-forgotten memories surface; memories of family members and friends, childhood places, secrets or painful circumstances.”

I came to think of this solitary walking as a hallucinatory holiday, a lifting-of-the-latch on a psychic cellar door where, unbeknownst to my conscious self, I had hoarded all sorts of treasures and keepsakes, along with, it seemed, a lot of pop culture debris. I mentioned this experience to some other pilgrims — two Germans, Peter Ainsler and Meinhoff Schleyer — with whom I had dinner one night in the Bar Seville in Azófra.

“That’s a good sign,” Peter said. “That’s what should happen. The Camino is having an effect on you.”

Peter, 60, and Meinhoff, 63, were brothers-in-law. Both had retired from engineering careers. They were walking the Camino because they felt at loose ends and wanted to test themselves physically and, perhaps, get re-acquainted with their Catholic faith. “The Camino is a simple life,” Meinhoff said. “You walk. You eat. You sleep. You forget about everything, except what’s important.”

I had met them — and a Dane named Henrik Freidiger — in the refugio at Navarrete. In the evening we had taken over the Los Arcos bar for a lengthy and sometimes raucous meal. Inevitably, the talk turned to motivations walking the Camino. “Everybody in my office walks around with a Palm Pilot and goes to endless meetings. I don’t carry a Palm Pilot on the Camino. There’s no stress. That’s why I like it,” said Henrik, who seemed to sum it up for everyone. In the Age of Faith, men walked to Santiago to atone for their sins. In our faithless time, we walk to relieve stress. Perhaps that is why some pilgrims call the Camino la ruta de la terapia, the therapy route.
The religious purpose of the Camino has not been forgotten, however, as I found out a couple of days later in Santo Domingo de la Calzada. Walking through the 11th-century town, I lost sight of the yellow arrows — las amarillas flechas that act as pilgrim guides along the entire route — and got lost. As I walked back and forth along some street, an old man emerged from a shop door, pulled at my sleeve and gestured toward a maze of alleys, “el Camino, el Camino.” I headed in the direction he had indicated and looked back as the old man made the Sign of the Cross. I knew the gesture probably came automatically to him, but it startled me. However skeptically and uncertainly I regarded my motives for being on the Camino, he took me on faith as a penitent pilgrim.

Camino takes its due

Two days after the old man’s blessing, I was in Burgos. I was staggering with fatigue. The 25-kilometre stretch between Villafranca Montes de Oca and San Juan de Ortega had cut through a long stretch of unpopulated hilly woodland where snow still lay on the ground and the wind blew cold and wet through the trees. My right leg, which until then, had offered the odd twinge of protest, issued a serious complaint. Every few steps jolts of pain would rocket up from the back of my right heel to my knee. By the time I reached Castañares, a suburb of Burgos, I was limping badly. My right leg throbbed.

I surrendered and took a bus into the old city of Burgos to the Hostal Conde Miranda. That night as I sat at a table in the Bar Goano and polished off plates of tapas with a couple glasses of chilled Rioja red, I made some calculations: I had walked nearly 300 kilometres, averaging between 22 and 25 kilometres a day. Not marathon standards, but I was getting to where I was going. Maybe I was learning the Zen poet Basho’s injunction: Just walk. Nevertheless, I decided to take a day of rest.

It was a good decision. I woke that night with my right leg throbbing. By the light of the bedside lamp, I saw a mottled rash encircled my calf to just below the knee. The calf was swollen and hot; my heel was sore to touch. In the afternoon, I wrapped my ankle in a bandage and limped along the Pasco del Esplón to admire its pollarded trees and topiary hedges. The croaking frogs on the banks of the Río Arlanzón were almost loud enough to drown out the traffic. I found a few bars — no point in putting too much strain on the legs — where I wrote postcards and indulged in the occasional vino tinto.

Burgos is the city of El Cid Campeador, Moor-slayer during the Reconquista, second only to Santiago himself as a Spanish national hero. During the Spanish Civil War, Generalissimo Franco el Caudillo adopted the city as his temporary capital. It is a lovely town with clean, wide boulevards and handsome people.

I spent a couple of hours in the cathedral. With its forest of spires, elaborate carvings depicting myths and Bible stories, star-vaulted domes and a gilded double staircase known as the Golden Steps, it is one of Spain’s great Gothic structures, dating to the early 13th century. There was too much to absorb — 19 chapels, 38 altars, 58 pillars on which the naves rest, 38 interior arches. I stood for a long time behind the apse looking at the five, almost life-like, medallions with their stone carvings of scenes from Calvary. You could almost see the muscles in Christ’s face go slack as death claimed His body. My favourite artifact was the monumental metal brazier in the main sacristy, which has burned without pause since the 17th century. I could feel its heat even from a distance.
I admired, maybe even envied, the faith that produced something as beautiful as this cathedral. With its flying buttresses, ribbed vaulting, stained-glass windows and sculptured façades, the Gothic cathedral was a dream of wholeness, of completeness. Before I left, I lit a candle and sat to enjoy the cool echoing quiet. Afterward, feeling calm and strangely light-headed, I walked — actually I limped — through the big doors into the rain. I ate dinner in the Bar Miranda, watched a bullfight on television and then returned to my room for an early night. Despite my leg, I was anxious to return to the Camino.

Beyond Burgos, the Camino headed straight for Castrojeriz, crossing the dustiest, flattest, most windswept and, for some, the most monotonous landscape in Spain. This was the beginning of the meseta, the Tierra de Campos, grainlands, that stretch across the middle of Spain. The Spanish call the meseta the “roof of the world.” In the summer it is unbaked and parched, but in the early spring, it was a lush undulating expanse of green.

I picked up the Camino in Radé de las Calzados, where it follows a path through the countryside. It was drizzling, naturally. Two hours later, I was hobbling as fast as I could through the tiny village of Hornillos del Camino to reach the cloister of a church and escape the pouring rain. The church was once an important pilgrimage halt with a hospital and a Benedictine monastery. The monks are long gone, and so, it seemed, is everybody else. The windows of the houses were shuttered and the streets empty. I sat on a stone bench and watched the rain sluice away in fast-moving streams down the sloping street.

The pilgrim’s stare

I might have been sitting there for about 15 or 20 minutes when to my utter surprise, around the corner came Gérard, the 60-year-old Belgian pilgrim whom I had met, what, nearly three weeks earlier in the French town of Saint-John-Pied-de-Port, where I began my pilgrimage. Seeing him now, I was reminded of how his advice had become a mantra that inspired me in moments of weariness: “Rain or snow, it doesn’t matter, you just keep walking. That’s the pilgrim way.”

As we shared an orange, Gérard was polite and chatted amicably but when I looked into his eyes I knew he wasn’t really there. Soldiers say you can tell a man who has been in combat by the faraway look in his eyes. They call it the 1,000-yard stare. Gérard had the pilgrim’s version of that mesmerized look and eventually we ran out of words and just sat watching the rain. I was sheltering from the weather; he was simply taking a rest. I sensed he wanted to get moving, rain or no rain, and was merely being companionable in lingering with me.

Just then I heard again the echo of footsteps and Henrik the Dane rounded the corner. If Gerard’s sudden appearance had pleased me, then the sight of Henrik was even more cheering. Henrik seemed equally glad to see me. I introduced him to Gérard and they talked but Henrik’s arrival was a signal for Gérard to leave. We shook hands and said “Buen Camino” and then Gérard walked into the rain. I never saw him again, but I never forgot him.

Henrik and I caught up on Camino gossip. He had seen Peter and Meinhoff outside Burgos. He spent a day in Burgos and, like myself, had taken a taxi to Radé de las
Calzadas to pick up the Camino. It became obvious each of us was waiting for the other to suggest we hit the road even though the rain was coming down hard. I said inquiringly, "Ultreya?" And so, sheltered beneath our ponchos, we stepped into the rain.

It was hard walking, uphill all the way. When the rain eased, the wind picked up, coming directly at us out of the west. The ochre mud clung to our boots. I was the slower walker, but Henrik stayed with me until I urged him to go ahead. We would meet in Hontanos for lunch.

Sometimes, along the meseta, from a rise on the road, you can see the Camino ribboning out for miles ahead, with pilgrims, alone or in groups of two or three, strung out like beads on a thread. I kept seeing Henrik ahead of me. He would drop out of sight behind a roll in the land and then return to view as I crested the slope. Occasionally, I saw he had stopped and looked back to see how I was doing. We waved and then he would walk on. Like the yellow arrows, his presence was reassuring.

Eventually, though, Henrik disappeared and I walked in solitude across the rolling land with the greybellied clouds low overhead. The Castilians have a saying, El Camino es una droga, The Way is a drug. The scenery changed with each step. I saw different species of flowers, different mixtures of rock and pebble, the varying textures of mud. The variegated surfaces — hard or soft, bumpy or smooth — meant that the Camino itself was always changing. No surface was exactly the same. Walking on asphalt was different from walking on dirt or gravel. On asphalt, as your feet pound the unyielding hardness, the walking is monotonous. On the earthen pathways, there were constant surprises even in this flat land: a stream that required leaping from stone to stone, a lonely copse of stunted trees, an unexpected cluster of boulders covered with sun-blackened lichen, a sudden bright strip of poppies or wild lupins.

I stopped at a crossroads a few kilometres outside Hontanos, just before the Garbanzuelo River. I stood at the edge of the path and leaned on my walking stick, taking the strain off my legs. Gradually, I became aware of how quiet it was. Normally, the crunch of my boots, the flapping of my poncho or the rasp of my backpack on my jacket filled my ears. Now, standing still, the wind had died to almost nothing and I was aware of the absence of sound. It was eerie, almost spooky. Some lines in a poem by R.S. Thomas rose in my mind:

"Moments of great calm,
Kneeling before an altar
Of wood in a stone church
In summer, waiting for the God
To speak; the air a staircase
For silence...
The meaning is in the waiting."
the sounds of silence

I waited, listening to the silence, watching the land. At first, I could not remember another time when I had felt so much a part of a place. But then I remembered a summer long ago when I was a boy. I was walking along a prairie road outside Hanna, Alta. The sun was hot on my shoulders. I heard the buzz and chirp of grasshoppers and cicadas in the roadside
ditches. High overhead, like some colossal inverted bowl, an endless sky seemed to hum in the heat of the sun. And now, four decades later, standing in the silence of the meseta, I had this sensation that all I needed was to move my eyes quickly enough and I would penetrate a hazy barrier at the edge of my vision and leap across the years. I could be that boy again, standing on the prairie beneath the sun-blanced bowl of the sky.

And then what almost was, disappeared in a burst of birdsong. A flock of warblers, like a collection of question marks, descended and formed a cheerful choir. They reminded me that I had miles to go and a luncheon date to keep.

As planned, I found Henrik in a bar in Hontanos. It looked more junkshop than bar. The long wooden table was hemmed in by boxes of canned goods, bags of grain, farming implements, pieces of machinery and, here and there, the occasional tire. It was run by Vitorino Diez, a short, bald man, who, as Henrik explained, was a jack-of-all-trades, serving pilgrims and driving the local taxi. Henrik was working through a tureen of soup and a large jug of wine. I gathered it was communal fare, and dug in, after checking to see there was nothing thriving in the bowl and the cup that Vittorino handed me.

Henrik had arranged with Vittorino to deliver our packs to the refugio in Castrojeriz, where we planned to stay overnight at the local refugio. Without the weight of the pack, the strain on my legs lessened. The Camino followed a narrow tarmac road lined by tall lombardy poplars. The air smelled clean from the morning’s rain. There was little traffic and we could walk side by side and talk.

Henrik’s first pilgrimage was in 1992 when he walked and bused 470 kilometres from Burgos to Santiago de Compostela. In 1994, he and his son, then 12, walked all the way from Roncesvalles to Santiago in 32 days. Two years later, he and his wife completed a highlights-of-the-Camino tramp through Galicia. He covered the whole route himself again in 1998, walking and taking trains and buses. This year, he took his four-week holiday to walk from Pamplona to Santiago.

Henrik is a 54-year-old senior bureaucrat in Denmark’s Ministry of Education, primarily engaged in forming educational policy. “My job has a lot of stress. Every day I have to juggle five or six balls in the air at once. Here, on the Camino, I only have to juggle one ball — walking — and if I drop it once in awhile, no problem, who cares.

“When I’m here,” he said. “I forget about the work. It all disappears. There’s only the villages and the land and the walking.”

At Castrojeriz, the hospitalero at the refugio turned out to be an officious jerk. The ground floor was already full, but he refused to allow anyone upstairs. The lower section was cramped and damp; the bunk beds were set back in tiny jail-like alcoves off a passageway. It was packed with Germans, Belgians, Spaniards, French. Socks and underwear and wet towels hung on every protrusion. The smell reminded me of some of the barnyards I’d passed. Worse, there was only one shower, and no hot water. Had there been room I wouldn’t have stayed. We retreated to a bar, where Henrik suggested we find a taxi and proceed to Itero de la Vega.
Half an hour later we unfolded our sleeping bags in a dry and all-but empty refugio. There were only two other pilgrims, one of whom I recognized immediately: Charles Henri, the retired businessman whom I had met in Zubiri on my second day on the Camino. We greeted each other like long-lost relatives. Charles’ companion was Jamey Austin, a blond-haired, bearded 30-year-old from near San Francisco.

“Boy, am I glad to see you,” Jamey said. He was sitting on his bunk and applying ice to one of his ankles. “I haven’t spoken English to anyone for days.”

His legs were swollen and sore looking. He’d been travelling around Spain for the past two months and had heard about the Camino only a few days earlier. “I knew I had to do it. It’s been a great experience. I love it. Except, I’ve been doing 40, 45 kilometres a day for the past few days, just motoring, you know, and I think I’ve done some damage to my tendons.”

We all had dinner in a tasca across from the refugio. Oddly, none of us were very talkative. “The spirit is changing, c’est tout,” Charles said. When we returned to the refugio, we were joined by another pilgrim who Jamey recognized as a novice priest walking to Santiago. His feet were wrapped completely in cloth and only the toes showed. They were taped. There were blood stains on the cloth, and yet he didn’t limp. I fell asleep wondering if there’s a relation between faith and feeling no pain.

I never saw Jamey again. He was gone by the time the rest of us awoke. Henrik and I walked together for two more days. We crossed the irrigation channels to Boadilla del Camino where we drank from a roullo, or water fountain, that supposedly dated to Roman times. There, I discovered more blisters on my feet. In Frómista, we admired the 11th-century Romanesque church of San Martín with its hundreds of carved figures of animals, monsters and humans — some performing sexual acts that would give modern-day pornographers pause. In the fields beyond Población de Campos, we saw three dogs chase down a hare in a snarl of dust. In Villálcazar de Sirga, joined once again by Charles, we stayed in the refugio and persuaded the parish priest to give us a tour of the church of Santa María la Blanca with its tomb of a Templar Knight and the statue of St. James.

Walking with Henrik inspired me. He was fond of black spirituals, and sometimes we’d walk singing “nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen,” or “go tell in on a mountain, over the hill and everywhere.” I tried to teach him Tom Dooley and Moon River.

With his experience of the Camino, Henrik knew where to stay, what to see and what to avoid. We compared Denmark’s social welfare system to Canada’s; the ruinous weight of taxation in both countries — all things that are supposedly important. Except on the Camino, they didn’t seem important. I realized I hadn’t thought about the mortgage, the stock market or even the job for days. “It just all drops away,” said Henrik. “We’re just two over-taxed, footsore, middle-aged conservatives on a pilgrimage.” Somehow, his droll tone seemed hilarious and we had to stop walking until our laughter subsided.

The next day we reached Carrión de los Condes. My rash was fading but my heels and ankles grew increasingly sore. I could walk for maybe two or three hours before each step became a series of painful jolts that shot through to my hip sockets. I still had 400
kilometres to go and only three weeks in which to do it, with little time to spare if, as I intended, I stayed a few days in Santiago and perhaps went on to Finisterre.

In Carrión, we found a bar where, at Henrik’s suggestion, I bought a ticket to León. The ride, especially if I carried on to Astorga, would cut four or five days walking. We walked past the Iglesia Santa María del Camino to find a tasca that Henrik knew from other trips, where we sat with our café con leches and made our goodbyes. “You want to look after that leg,” Henrik said. “There are many ways to travel the Camino. Everybody does it in the way that suits them.”

“Look,” I said, “if we don’t hook up again in Santiago, stay in touch.” I liked Henrik, and was sorry to lose his company. We scribbled e-mail addresses in each other’s notebooks.

The ‘bombshell’ returns

Outside, he gave me a hug, a gesture I couldn’t remember from another man except my father. We shook hands and then he returned to the meseta, while I waited for the bus. I felt depressed, and disappointed in myself. The sun was shining and it would have been a good day for walking. Instead, I sat sipping another café con leche — I was becoming addicted — and watching the man behind the bar stack saucers and cups and packets of sugar. Then the door swung open and I looked up to see the Brazilian Bombshell, Andréa Líbia Lopôs, her blond hair aflutter. She was wearing shorts. Every man in the bar turned to stare. “Roberto,” she cried, striding across the room and giving me a kiss on both cheeks and a hug.

“Andréa, mia amore,” I responded, planting my own kisses — and firing off a psychic missive to inform my wife it was only the companionship of the Camino.

Of course, Andréa was not alone. A thin-haired man whom I guessed to be in his 50s followed her, carrying their backpacks. We brought each other up to date, communicating despite her lack of English and my utter lack of Portuguese. She hadn’t seen Anne, but she had seen Elizabeth and Denise in Logroño. Elizabeth had packed it in, her feet were so bad. José-Luis? Yes, just the other day in Castrojeriz. He seemed fine. And she and her companion, whatever his name — it never did register — were taking the bus to Shagún.

And so it went until it was time to catch the bus. As we waited, I noticed a husky man in a blue rainjacket and introduced myself to Ron Chanda, a retired bank executive from Princeton, New Jersey. I also introduced him to Andréa, who promptly gave him a hug and kissed his cheeks. He was most impressed and had me take a picture of him with his arms around her shoulders.

Aboard the bus, Ron told me this was his second time on the Camino. Last October, he walked from St. Jean-Pied-de-Port to Burgos. This year he was going from Burgos to Santiago. “It’s the solitude I like,” he said. “When I’m walking I start thinking of things that I don’t think about in my regular life, things that, I don’t know, seem more important.” By the time the bus pulled into Shagún, about 40 kilometres from León, I had learned about his family, the daughter he worried about, the son who was an accountant and of whom he was so proud. On the Camino, you’d meet someone for the first time and, within minutes have a précis of his life. Ron and Andréa got off the bus in Shagún.
“Maybe we’ll meet again,” I said.

“In Santiago,” he said.

Many of the people you meet on the Camino you probably would never associate with in everyday life. Friendships cut across the barriers of sex, age, class and even nationality. Nancy Frey, in her book Pilgrim Stories, offers a neat summary of the phenomenon: “For many, the Camino exists outside of normal time in neutral and inspiring places, where stress is reduced to a minimum. In this environment pilgrims open up internally and externally to those around them.”

Two hours later, I hauled my pack off the bus in León. I originally thought I would stay overnight in León and set out for Astorga the next day. But when the bus arrived it was, naturally, raining again. “Mal tiempo,” I thought, “mucha lluvia. Mierda.” I decided to take the bus another 25 kilometres to Hospital de Órbigo and as penance for my sloth I would walk the 20-odd kilometres to Astorga, come rain, sleet or snow.

When I arrived at Hospital de Órbigo, the rain was pouring relentlessly, of course, but I kept my promise, walking out of town across the long bridge spanning the Río Órbigo. This bridge with its 20 arches is known as the Bridge of the Paso Honrosa in commemoration of a month-long jousting tournament in 1434 that ended in 300 broken lances and one dead knight. The tournament started when Don Suero de Quiñones of León challenged to a joust every passer-by who refused to declare his lady to be Leonor de Tover. After a month, Don Suero, who is thought to be the prototype for Cervantes’ Don Quixote, was undefeated.

I walked through the town until the yellow arrows directed me off the road, across a canal and up a green and muddy lane into open country. I arrived in Astorga after four hours, caked in mud, dripping wet and weary, yet near euphoric. Somewhere the pain in my legs had disappeared.

I had walked for maybe two hours, unthinkingly and even grimly putting one foot in front of the other, stabbing my walking stick into the ground, using it to push forward. I tried to to block out the stabs of pain in my feet and knees and hips. The pain, like the rain, seemed to build like an orchestra approaching a crescendo. At some point — I couldn’t pinpoint exactly where or when — I became aware of the pain subsiding, muting, in retreat, the way the sting of a dentist’s needle fades when it is pulled out of the gum. In amazement, I halted, mentally probing my body. This couldn’t be right. But the pain was well and truly gone. I could still feel the ache in my feet and the tenderness of my tendons and heels, but the pain was effectively gone.

Pilgrim lore has it that pain is how the body somaticizes its psychic problems. I vaguely wondered what problems I might have just solved. Nothing came to mind, so I walked, caught somewhere between laughing and crying, trying to decide between B.J. Thomas and Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head or Gene Kelly and Singing in the Rain. In the end, I sang both.
In Astorga, I checked into a lovely room in the Hotel Gaudi — all blond wood and red-tile flooring. There was a queen-sized bed, wool blankets and an endlessly hot shower. The big double window looked out over the plaza at the small church of Santa María and the big cathedral with storks’ nests on the spires. Across the plaza was the castellated grey-stone Palacio de Gaudi with its pilgrim museum. The building was designed by the eccentric Catalan architect Antonio Gaudi. It reminded me of the castle in the opening credits of the Wonderful World of Disney when Tinker Bell flies around sprinkling pixie dust on the spires. Behind it I could see the Roman walls that circle Astorga’s medieval centre.

After tending to my boots and hanging up wet clothes, I went down to the bar and walked in on a wedding reception. Nobody seemed to object, although among the tuxedos and shimmery dresses, I stuck out like a buzzard among peacocks. Still, I enjoyed being there, leaning on the bar with my vino tinto, watching the handsome men and the women with their long glossy hair. I felt calm and content.

After a dinner of sopa castellana, a spicy morcillo estofado — veal stew — and a half-bottle of Rioja Bordon, it was still raining and I had no desire to explore. Instead I sat in a green leather chair, lolling the vanilla-flavoured wine around my palate, watching other diners and looking out across the square to the mountains, which I could not see in the darkness but I knew were there. The Muzak was ’70s instrumentals — I recognized Roberta Flack’s Killing Me Softly with His Song and Carole King’s I Feel the Earth Move — and it made me think of other places and other times and other people. I finished the last of my wine with a toast to Henrik and Ron, somewhere behind me on the Camino. That night, I like to think, I slept the sleep of a more or less worthy penitent.

Next week: From Astorga to Villafranca: A message for St. James.
Episode Eight: A Penitent in Santiago

In my room in the Hospedaje Santa Cruz, I heard the bells of the Cathedral of Santiago tolling the turn of the hour. Voices and occasional laughter drifted up from the street through my window. Like a siren’s song, the muted wail of bagpipes echoed off the stone walls along the Rúa do Vilar. It was dark and late in the evening. I had arrived in Santiago de Compostela two hours earlier, after a month walking across northern Spain along the Camino de Santiago, The Way of St. James.

The occasion seemed to demand some kind of celebration go with the end-of-the-day rituals of a pilgrim: cleaning boots, hanging wet clothes and taking a long, hot shower. I settled on pouring the remains of my water bottle on my much-loved Hillmaster walking stick and wiping it clean; a thank-you blessing for having fended off the occasional dog and for keeping me upright on more than a few slippery slopes.

The sonorous bonging of the bells accompanied me as I dressed. I counted the tolling; it was 10 p.m. I realized, to my surprise, that I felt ambivalent about having completed my pilgrimage. It was hard to believe I no longer needed to rise in the morning and walk 20 or 30 kilometres in the rain. I would not have to inspect my feet for blisters or swollen tendons. I would not have to wash socks in tiny sinks or clean my boots of mud and manure. I would not have to listen to the snores of other pilgrims in damp refugios. I would not need my walking stick. Yet, oddly, I did not feel so much relieved as homesick. I was already lonely for the Camino. My daily ritual told me I was still a pilgrim, still on the road.

Memories of the Camino flashed through my mind: the pleasant walk out of Roncesvalles to Espinal on my second day, the sunlight on the wet steps of a church in Navarette, the clean white peaks of the mountains in the Bierzo, the quiet green tunnels of Galicia, the fiesta in Portomarin. I tried to think back to where I had been three days ago, a week ago, three weeks ago. Faces of people I had met during the past month — Gérard, Anne, Henrik, Ron, Andrés and Jesús — paraded past. I thought of the farmer who had given me a lift near Hontanas. I recalled standing under the portico of a church — I could not think of the place — as the rain fell in sheets and how contented I had felt. I remembered Chonina, the little girl from Ponferrada to whom I had given my scallop shell. I had met so many people, seen so much country and, indeed, recalled places and people from my past I never would have, had I not walked the Camino. So much had been compressed into such a short time. I suspected I would spend months remembering, trying to understand what it meant to me.

The gurgling in my stomach interrupted my reverie; I had not eaten since leaving Lavacolla some five hours earlier. I had entered Santiago through the Porta del Camino, the pilgrim entrance into the medieval precincts that surround the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, and had wandered the labyrinthine cobbled streets, assuming I would eventually find the cathedral. It did not work that way, of course. I was soon lost. It was getting dark and I was fatigued, but once again the kindness of strangers saved me. A woman in a business suit and carrying a briefcase directed me up the Rúa de Azabacherfa
and 10 minutes later I was walking down the wide steps of the Praza da Quintana with a façade of the cathedral on my right.

I was worn out. I had walked about 40 kilometres on this day — the longest single stretch I had completed on the Camino — and I wobbled with fatigue. Naturally, it was raining, so I was wet as well. I did not relish wandering the streets seeking a place to stay. As I took a break under an arcade on Rúa do Vilar, a woman approached.

"Perdón señor," she said, snapping me out of my weariness. "Are you looking for a room?"

"Sí, señora. ¿Tienen ustedes habitación individual con ducha?"

"Aquí, aquí."

I had not realized that the green doors I was leaning against were the entrance for the Hospedaje Santa Cruz, run by this woman, Maria, who also had a small grocery shop farther up the street. Maria, I later learned, was well known among pilgrims, particularly since she spoke passable English. Following her up two flights of stairs to the room, I thought: Coincidence? Serendipity? Or, perhaps, God takes care of fools and pilgrims. The room was clean and dry and had a big bed, a shower down the hall and a tall window with shutters. It cost $20 a night. I took it for four nights.

Two hours later, my rituals con-cluded, I walked down Rúa do Vilar to the Praza das Platerías, the Square of Silversmiths, with its fountain with the four horse heads, and across the Praza da Quintana between the cathedral and the long wall of the Benedictine Monastery of San Paio de Antealtares. The square had once been a cemetery but is now paved over with flagstones. Walking across it, I imagined the dead beneath my feet. The wide steps that bisected the square took me past the Café Literarios, its tables crowded with students from the local university, and into the Praza da Immaculada and then under an archway tunnel and into the enormous Praza do Obradoiro, the Square of Works.

In the past month I had seen dozens of plazas. They were all rehearsals for the big show in Santiago. Gabriel García Márquez, the Colombian novelist, in his essay "Watching the Rain in Galicia," called it "the most beautiful square" in Spain: "Its poise and its youthful air prohibit you from even thinking about its venerable age; instead, it looks as if it had been built the day before by someone who had lost their sense of time."

The huge square spans the history of western architecture: a Romanesque religious college; the Renaissance Hostal de los Reyes Católicos, built in the early 1500s by King Fernand and Queen Isabella as a pilgrim hospital, but now a five-star parador and one of the grandest hotels in Spain; the 18th-century neoclassical Concejo de Santiago, the local city hall; and the massive, elaborately sculptured Baroque façade of the cathedral with its twin towers climbing into the sky and the sweeping double staircase that mounts to the Pórtico de la Gloria — the Door of Glory — the traditional pilgrim entrance. I did not go inside, deciding to wait until the pilgrim's noon Mass the next day, after a haircut and a shave and, perhaps, some new clothes.
The bells in the cathedral’s twin towers tolled 11 p.m., filling the square with a stentorian boom that vibrated through my chest. Even now it was full of people — buskers playing bagpipes, pilgrims with the backpacks and tourists in loud clothes — but the square is too large to ever feel crowded. I stopped to listen to the bagpipers and watch a mime entertain a group of French tourists.

I came out of the plaza at the top of Rúa do Franco. It was much more crowded, lined with bars and restaurants which all seemed to be doing a brisk business. I followed the jostling crowd, pausing at restaurants to read the menus or look through windows at aquariums teeming with lobster and crab, squid, octopi, eels and oysters. Finally, after walking up and down the street twice, I decided on the El Cayado, mainly because the woman behind the bar smiled at me when I stuck my head in the doorway.

“¿Peregrino?,” she asked.

“Sí.”

“¡Pase! ¡Pase!”

She waved me inside, directed me to a small table and gestured to a waiter to set it. In Spain, those who work in bars and restaurants do not regard what they do as menial, a temporary job before they find their careers. Theirs is an honourable job and they take pride in their service. My waiter, a short, bald man in a black vest and white shirt and black bow tie, seemed pleased when I accepted his recommendations on food and drink.

My stomach growled as he ladled the sopa de meriscoes from a big white tureen, making sure my soup bowl was swimming with clams, shrimp and oysters. I was very hungry. I drained the tureen and had two servings of pulpo con cachelas, paprika-seasoned octopus, and soaked up the juice with the last chunks of bread. I washed it all down with a chilled bottle of Alcorta wine, sharp and tart and cold.

My hunger sated, I watched idly as the waiters put fresh sheets of white paper on vacated tables, making the corners with a sharp crease. Many of the diners were parents with their children or young couples who had eyes only for each other. It was noisy with the clatter of cutlery and conversation, yet I felt as if I were seeing and hearing everything from a distance, enclosed in a cocoon of quiet, the buzz of words and the bark of laughter a distant susurration of waves on a shore. It was pleasant. I remembered another time and another place when I had felt this way: 25 years ago, I had spent several months in Morocco and had taken a boat from El Aaiún in the Western Sahara to the Canary Islands. The boat arrived in Las Palmas early in the morning. I walked along the big curving ocean-front promenade and found a café. My clothes, as I recalled, were scruffy and tattered then, too, and I badly needed a bath and a haircut. But before I found a hotel, I sat at a table on the promenade and looked at the rolling ocean, glad to be out of the craziness that was Morocco then and back in a western city. What has the Camino done to me? I wondered. I felt as though the quarter-century that separated Las Palmas and Santiago was no wider than, say, the Camino itself. It was as if a tissue-thin membrane was all that separated myself now from myself then, and that I only needed to draw back the veil and I would once again see and hear the Atlantic Ocean pounding against the promenade of Las Palmas.
My pilgrimage had uprooted me from my daily life, from all the routines and obligations and habits that made up my normal existence. The Camino had at least temporarily chipped away some of the carapace of my everyday life just as an archeologist strips away the sediments of centuries to reveal the past. I had walked the Camino, yes, but the Camino had also walked me. A mad thought flitted across my mind: I would become a permanent pilgrim. I had heard of people who did just that, people who, after walking the Camino, could not leave and walked back forth along the road, sometimes for years. I imagined myself trekking between Roncesvalles and Santiago, season after season, my hair growing wild and long, my body growing leaner and tougher and more gaunt until, in a kind of resurrection, it had burned off all the sloth and sloppiness of its former self. The dogs would come to recognize me and no longer bark. I could dedicate myself to saving frogs and lizards. I would lose my job and all that, but who knows what I might gain, what another month, another year, another decade of pilgrimage might bring forth. Madness or revelation? Maybe both. Maybe they are the same thing.

A burst of child’s laughter snapped me out of my fantasy. I would lose my job, but I would also lose my family. No, it was not my fate to be a saint, crazy or not. I had promises to keep and bills to pay. Yet, I have to admit to the temptation, the idea that I could, somehow, just keep walking and the world would take care of me.

My meal done, the wine bottle empty, I was suddenly very tired. The families with children were gone, replaced by groups of students who would be up for some time yet. I would probably hear them in the early morning as they staggered up the narrow streets, singing. For myself, though, it was time for bed. I walked back to my room and slipped into bed just as the cathedral’s Tower of Bells bonged the first hour of the new day. As I drifted into sleep, it occurred to me that in the past month I had become fond of hearing church bells at all times of day. I would miss them.

A pilgrim’s pleasure

I did not miss them the next morning, though. They sounded as if they were right outside my window, and unlike an alarm clock, I could not turn them off. After breakfast, I spent the morning restoring myself to post-Camino life. I got a haircut and a shave at a salon on Rúa da Senra. It was sheer sensual pleasure to have a woman shampoo my hair, brush on the hot lather and scrape away a month’s stubble, then drape a hot towel over my face. I almost fell asleep in the chair. I found a men’s store on Rúa da Caldeirería and bought a shirt and pair of trousers. I was surprised at how much weight I had lost. I had to tug my belt back three notches. I certainly looked, well, healthy, my eyes bright and clear and my face browned and hollowed by a month of exposure to the elements.

I had not read anything besides poetry and guidebooks for more than month and I was desperate to read an English novel. In a bookstore near Praza do Touriá, I found a couple of shelves of English-language books. The selection was rather limited. I was about to settle for a Muriel Spark novel when I spotted a faded copy of Michael Dibdin’s Dead Lagoon. Perfect. I decided that after Mass I would treat myself to one of the great pleasures of travelling: sitting in a bar in a foreign city reading a story set in another foreign city — in this case, the adventures of the weariest and most worldly Italian police detective, Aurelio Zen, on the hunt for a murderer along the canals of Venice.
I went to the pilgrims’ office on Rúa do Vilar to show my credencial — my pilgrim passport — and to collect the cathedral’s certificate of pilgrimage, the compostela, that attested to my having completed the Camino. I did not mention the odd bit of hitchhiking, or the occasional taxi or bus, but then you actually only have to walk the last 100 kilometres of the Camino to qualify for pilgrim status. At the office, I read the testimonials of other pilgrims in the cathedral register. One from early March caught my eye. “Twenty-two days walked from Roncevalles to Santiago, an experience of experiencing the Lord in nature, in the pilgrim path, in the people, in the churches, in everything. I experience God everywhere.” It was signed by Hector Pinto from Gujeray, India. I imagined what his Camino might have been like. At that time of year, it would have been hard walking through the constant rain and the snow still heavy in the mountains. And yet he saw God in it all. I was not sure whether I should envy him or not. But I remembered what Sherri Rosevar, the hospitalera at Rabanal del Camino, had said — “I want my name in that book in Santiago, I want to be part of a 1,200-year-old history.” It occurred to me that I, too, had joined all those who came before me, one among millions over the centuries who have walked over the hills and across Spain to Santiago. I wrote my name in the book. Only I could not think of anything to say that was the equal of Pinto’s words. I fell back on quoting R.S. Thomas:

“Prompt me, God;
But not yet. When I speak,
Though it be you who speak
Through me, something is lost.
The meaning is in the waiting.”

I don’t know why that particular fragment came to me, but it seemed appropriate. A young priest handed me my compostela. It was written on heavy pinkish paper the size of an ordinary letter, but decorated with elaborate scrollwork around the edges. The words were all Latin, including my name, Robertum.

“Gracias, padre.”

“¡No hay de qué!” the priest said, smiling at my pleasure. “You have walked the Way of Santiago. You are a peregrino. May God be with you.”

After a café con leche at the Hotel Suso, I walked to the Praza do Obradoiro. It seemed even larger during the day, certainly more crowded. Priests in long robes strolled across the square, hands clasped behind their backs. Mothers pushed carriages. Children ran laughing between the groups of old men who stood talking and gesticulating. Tourists in bright clothes huddled around buses parked at the edge of the square. Here and there, I could pick out pilgrims with their backpacks and walking staffs and dirty clothes. I did not recognize any of them. Above us all, loomed the twin spires of the Cathedral, wet and shiny beneath the arch of the overcast sky.

In the 19th century, an English traveller, Richard Ford, described Santiago de Compostela as “damp, cold, full of arcades, fountains and scallop shells. From the constant rain, this holy city is irreverently called El orinal de España,” the urinal of Spain. Not an inaccurate description. About 30 days of sunshine is all locals see in a year, although they take a stoic pride in that fact, arguing that the city’s beauty comes forth in the rain.
That, too, is right enough. I saw moss-stained walls, chain-link bollards covered with a patina of lichens and micro-gardens sprouting through cracks in the stone. I had heard that during the summer, gardeners climb the walls and the pinnacles of the cathedral to hoe vegetation from the towers and belfries, showering the plaza below with pink valerian and yellow ragwort. In the Middle Ages, hundreds of people camped in the square, pitching tents around huge bonfires. Communal meals were cooked in enormous pots. Women had babies by the light of flames. Men of different nationalities drank and fought. There were stabbings and murders.

Doorsway to glory

The cathedral bells announced the noon-hour Mass, the Misa de Peregrinos. Everyone in the plaza moved as if one toward the cathedral. I followed, climbing the wide staircase, entering the cool dimness of the interior to stand in front of the Pórtico de la Gloria. The Doorway of Glory was sculpted more than 800 years ago by Maestro Matteo. And my guidebook described it as "the single greatest piece of Romanesque sculpture anywhere."

Carved from brown granite between 1168 and 1188, it has five columns that support three symmetrical arches, each elaborately decorated with hundreds of carvings depicting a Who's Who of the Bible from Adam and Eve and Jesus Christ to St. James and the 24 Elders of Zion, musicians who are, according to Revelations, scheduled to play at the Triumph of the Apocalypse. The doorway was, as James Michener wrote, an effective summary of medieval thought, encapsulating the faith of an epoch. Psychologically, it displays a profound understanding of humanity, speaking to both our deepest fears and our greatest longings. At the same time, it is an abidingly human work of art, full of wit and humour. The figures emanate the pulse of life, the throb and thrill of simply being alive. There is laughter in the stone faces, not solemnity or tears.

My immediate favourite was the smooth-faced statue of Daniel, the Old Testament interpreter of dreams. He stood with other bearded prophets, Moses, Isaiah and Jeremiah, on the crown of one of the pillars. But while the other prophets had properly solemn faces, Daniel bore a big grin, as though he had just discovered that the cosmos, from beginning to end, was supremely funny. The End of Days, it seemed, was a time of joy and mirth.

Christ himself, portrayed in the central tympanum sitting on his throne and displaying his wounds, seemed to stare wide-eyed and wondrous at the world. At his feet was a life-size statue of St. James, his left hand resting on a pilgrim staff. He, too, wore a slight smile, maybe because he didn't have to walk anymore. This was the first time I had seen a statue of Santiago where he was not walking or swinging a sword on horseback. It was as if he were saying, "Good on ya' mate, you made it. Now relax and have a tinnie." (Why I thought St. James would sound like an Australian beer commercial, I had no idea.)

The central column beneath the arch attracted everyone's attention. This was the Tree of Jesse, or, more formally, the Christological Column. It is made of white porphyry and represents the union of the human and divine origins of Christ. As I drew closer, I could clearly see the impress of a hand, as though someone with great strength had pushed a splayed palm into solid stone. Of course, that had not happened. Although, what had happened was, perhaps, more impressive: Hundreds of years ago, some anonymous pilgrim prayed beneath this figure of St. James, placing a hand against the column. Others
imitated him and now, after the touch of millions of beseeching hands, there are deep indentations into which a thumb and four fingers easily fit. When my turn came, I added my hand to all those who had gone before. Strangely, the stone felt warm to the touch.

On the other side of the Tree of Jesse is Santo dos Croques, or the head-banging saint, which is in fact a self-portrait of Maestro Matteo. Tradition requires that visitors knock their heads against the master's to obtain his wisdom. The custom is popular among students at the University of Santiago during exams. I followed, gently tapping my forehead against the stone.

Then I waited to embrace the gaudy, bejewelled and lacquered statue of St. James, which is set in a narrow passage behind the High Altar. I tried to remember the people on whose behalf I had promised to hug the apostle, un abrazo por el apóstol: the elderly man in Santo Domingo de la Calzada who had made the Sign of the Cross as I left on my journey; José, the farmer near Azofra who had given me a lift; Chonina and her mother. Before I had walked the Camino, my normal WASP-ish reserve would have prevented me from hugging a statue, but now I did not hesitate. I knew I was forgetting someone, so before I finished I gave an all-purpose, all-inclusive hug, figuring that a saint would remember those whom I had forgotten.

During Mass, I listened to the priests chant the liturgy and watched as the candlelight danced on the gilded surfaces of the High Altar. I remembered the first Mass a month ago in Roncesvalles and how awkward and uncertain I had been. I did not feel that now. I knelt on the stone floor, the words and gestures coming unself-consciously: “Lord, hear my prayer.”

I prayed for everyone I could think of: my son and my wife, my mother, my father and brother and sisters, friends and colleagues. I did not pray for myself. In a sense, I had done that throughout the past month. Instead, I prayed for those whom I had met on the Camino, their faces appearing like frames on a film reel: Anne and Kerri, Eva and Andrea and Tara Lynn, Michel and Patrice and Fanny, the French woman, Sherri and Anthony in Rabanal, Michel Mallet in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port, Maria, the hospitalera in Azofra, José-Louis, the Brazilian, Henrik and Ron, Charles and Gérard the ideal pilgrim, Jesús Royo, his wife, Assumpta, and Alba, Esperanza Nuñez, who gave me such a lovely room in O Cebreiro, Nemesio and Hescates, who reminded me of grandparents, Chonina and her mother in Ponferrada. I emerged from the prayer as though waking from a dream, certain that I had forgotten someone.

I tried praying again, feeling myself starting to disappear in the prayer, and suddenly remembered Roberto Lado, an economist from Madrid, whom I had met in the Gare du Montparnasse in Paris. How could I have forgotten him? We had shared a meal and several bottles of wine on the Paris-to-Madrid train. Through the first bottle he had insisted that he was an atheist, that the church was only gaudy gimmicks and silly superstition, fit only for peasants, not for hard-nosed existentialists. “I believe in Sartre,” he had said, laughing and banging his fist on the table so hard that the glasses rattled. But by the time we emptied the third bottle he was saying “I have to make my peace with God.” When I stumbled off at Bayonne, he leaned out the window and shouted, “Roberto, por favor, say a prayer for me to the apostle.” And so I did.
During special Masses or on High Feast days, the cathedral authorities sometimes haul out the botafumeiro, a silver-plated iron censer as big as an automobile engine. It is hoisted above the worshippers by eight red-robed men controlling a system of ropes and pulleys. Pulling on the ropes, the men swing the 70-kilogram botafumeiro, or smoke-thrower, back and forth in a long arc across the altar and through the north and south transepts high above the crowd. As it gains momentum, it spews clouds of smoke and the smell of incense. In the Middle Ages, the ritual was intended to purify the cathedral, jammed as it was by pilgrims who did not use deodorant. It is the only ceremony like it in all of Christendom, and I would have liked to have seen it, but there was no botafumeiro swinging on this day.

Coming down the steps to the plaza, blinking in the sudden brightness, I recognized Calvin and Sonsolles, two pilgrims I had met the day before near Lavacolla. We greeted each other like old friends. They had arrived in Santiago that morning. Unfortunately, at least from my point of view, they were catching the afternoon train to Madrid. In the meantime, they planned to mark the end of their pilgrimage by eating a torta de Santiago, the almond tart that is a speciality of the region. I agreed to join them, on condition I would pay for the wine. We adjourned to the Café Literarios. In celebrating the end of their pilgrimage, we also celebrated mine. I was glad of the company, however brief.

After they left, I sat in the café reading how Aurelio Zen coped with the corruption and cynicism of Italian politics. I drank a bottle of cold Estrella and ate plates of tapas. Yet, I felt restless and I knew why. I was no longer on the Camino. Tomorrow, I decided, I would take the bus to Finisterre to see the end of the world. El Camino es una droga.

It was still dark when I took a taxi to the bus station. I was happy to sit in the cafeteria eating freshly baked chocolate croissants and drinking small cups of thick coffee spiked with the local aguardiente, knowing I was on the road again, even if only for a day.

I was travelling to Finisterre, the end-of-the-world — or at least that is how medieval Christendom thought of the small fishing village on the coast of northwestern Spain, about 100 kilometres west of Santiago. Until Christopher Columbus discovered the Americas in 1492, beyond Finisterre lay only a trackless ocean of monsters. Officially, it is not part of the Camino, nonetheless, many pilgrims, upon reaching Santiago, decide to visit Finisterre — a week’s walking there and back, or a day by bus. Finisterre had come to occupy a large place in my imagination, as it has for so many pilgrims who, writes Nancy Frey in Pilgrim Stories, have come to see Finisterre as a dramatic geographic and symbolic end to the Camino.

I rummaged through my pockets to find the second of the two plum-sized stones I had brought from Canada. I had thrown the first, a black stone from my son’s rock collection, on the cairn at Cruz de Ferro. The second, a smooth white oblong piece of granite, had caught my eye as I walked along the beach of Pennants Bay outside Halifax two months earlier. I had picked up the stone as I looked east across the grey Atlantic and decided I would keep it to throw into the water on the other side of the Atlantic if I completed my pilgrimage. I realized that even before I began walking the Camino I had already embarked on my pilgrimage, at least imaginatively. Had the reality of the Camino matched my imaginings?
The question surprised me. I could not remember when I first thought of going on this pilgrimage. It was as though the idea and the decision had always been there, as though I had been waiting for years, maybe decades, for it to emerge from wherever it had been hiding. A memory from my childhood popped into my head: As a young boy living in Inuvik, I had spent hours looking at maps, memorizing the names of countries and capitals in South America or Africa or Europe, imagining myself in those places. Maybe that’s when my pilgrimage began, I thought, looking at the stone in my hand, its smooth surface warm now from rubbing. Somehow, I liked the idea of throwing a stone that nature had spent millions of years getting to one side of the Atlantic into the water on the other side. Somehow, all of it — Santiago, Halifax, Inuvik — seemed connected, at least in my mind. Then, again, maybe the aguardiente was making all the connections. In any case, it was time to go.

On the bus platform I was pleased to see Eva Lerin, the Spanish pilgrim whom I had met in Molinaseca.

“Hola, Eva. ¿Como estás?”

She recognized me. “Roberto. Bien, gracias. ¿Y usted?”

“Muy bien.”

Eva was going to Finisterre for the day, too, although she had to be back in time to catch the evening train to Madrid. Like me, she had walked alone for the last several days on the Camino, reaching Santiago the previous day. We were both glad to have someone to talk to again. There were two other pilgrims on the bus, an elderly German couple, Helmut and Ingrid. Everybody had their Camino tales, a checklist of possible mutual acquaintances, anecdotes of blisters and bad weather.

Helmut and Ingrid had walked the Camino nearly 30 years earlier as newlyweds. Back then, they said, it was much different, there were no refugios and few facilities. They had often slept in fields or, if they were lucky, on the floor of a church. Why had they returned?

“We never forgot it,” said Helmut, gazing at Ingrid. “We wanted to see it again before...” — he paused and took his wife’s hand — “before it was too late.” I left them to sit together, occasionally looking up to see Ingrid asleep with her head against Helmut’s shoulder.

We rolled across the green hills of Galicia through forests of eucalyptus and pine and chestnut and white-walled villages, their red-tile roofs shining in the rain: Santa Catalina, A Costa, Zas, with its arcaded consistorial, or town hall, Víminanzo, Bodoagaz, where a pilgrim statue stands in the plaza, Bustoel and Vilanova, and then Cée, where you catch your first glimpse of the Atlantic, Corcubión, with its curving promenade, Estorde and, finally, as the land suddenly opens up and you see the spread of the ocean, there is Finisterre and its granite houses huddled at the foot of a peninsula.

The World Ends here
I had imagined some gloomy fog-enshrouded escarpment of crumbling stone on the tip of nowhere. Instead, the bus pulled into a pretty fishing port of narrow cobbled streets and whitewashed buildings with flower-bedecked balconies. In the harbour, dozens of brightly coloured fishing boats lay at anchor. Stepping off the bus, I was hit by the pungent smell of seaweed, saltwater and rotting fish. Overhead, the seagulls screamed.

Cape Finisterre, the end of the world, is about two kilometres beyond the town along a thumb of land that juts west into the Atlantic. Helmut and Ingrid wanted to eat before they walked out to the cape. Eva and I decided to walk first, figuring we could get to the cape and back in time for a leisurely lunch before catching the 3 p.m. bus to Santiago. I was glad to be walking again, enjoying the stretch and pull of muscles in my legs and the crunch of gravel beneath my boots. As Eva and I climbed the narrow tarmac road toward Cape Finisterre, we could smell the salty tang of the ocean. It stretched before us, grey and whitecapped, empty except for the fishing boats heading out, their bows sending up spumes of spray as they plunged into the troughs between the waves.

The northwestern coast of Spain is notorious for stormy seas and shipwrecks, and the area around Finisterre is known as Costa da Morte, the Coast of the Dead. Here, it is said, drowned sailors await the resurrection of the body on Judgment Day. Apparently, in centuries past, after a particularly nasty storm, the locals would congregate at the cape to watch for bodies and debris. One legend maintains that the ancient city of Duyo lies beneath these waters, having been inundated by tidal waves at the same time Pompeii was buried beneath the lava of Mount Vesuvius. On some nights, it is said, when the fog is thick and the wind howls off the ocean, you can hear the dead of Duyo crying beneath the dark water.

Cape Finisterre was also a site of worship and, in a way, so it remains. In pre-Christian times, Galicia’s pagans would perform Celtic sun-worshipping rites at the cape. With the advent of Christianity, pilgrims transformed the pagan rites. Finisterre provided “a point of symbolic death and rebirth, or destruction and resurrection,” writes Edward Stanton, an American scholar who walked the Camino in the early 1990s. Sometimes, though, things got a little out of hand. During medieval times, seaside rituals of prayer occasionally turned into bacchanalian orgies. Modern pilgrims, more restrained than their medieval counterparts, often burn their Camino clothes or throw their walking sticks into the ocean. Some, in an act of symbolic purification, go for a swim. I would settle for tossing my white stone.

All there is at the end of the world is a lighthouse and, this being Spain, a restaurant and a café with picture windows. We walked around big rocks at the base of the lighthouse, but the wind was cold and when it started to rain, we went to the café to have a celebratory glass of wine.

“Salud. Here’s to the end of the Camino,” I said, raising my glass.

“Salud.”

“Did you enjoy the Camino?” I asked.

“Yes, more than I expected. It was very peaceful. Just what I needed.”
I asked what she meant and suddenly I was hearing about her recent divorce that had left her depressed, and how her father and her son had urged her to make the pilgrimage. "It is something a lot of Spanish people do," she said. "It's better than going to a psychologist." But did it help? I asked. On the Camino you felt comfortable telling strangers about your private life because, in a way, they weren't strangers, but fellow pilgrims. They had experienced what you had and therefore understood. Even before Eva answered I knew what she was going to say.

"It was being alone for so much time. You walk every day after awhile all the things you thought were important aren't so important anymore." She paused and sipped the wine. "No, that's not right, You realize what's important."

I told Eva the story of a monk studying Zen Buddhism. It may not have been a perfect fit with the Camino, but it came close: "Before I studied Zen, I saw mountains as mountains. When I studied Zen, I no longer saw mountains as mountains. After I was enlightened by Zen, I saw mountains as mountains." Eva smiled, "Something like that."

I showed her the white stone and explained my end-of-the-Camino ritual.

"What a good idea," she said. "I didn't bring anything with me. Next time."

I left Eva and found a path that wound through the boulders beneath the lighthouse, following it to the shore at the cliff's base. I was alone except for the wind, which was suddenly colder. The roar of the sea filled my ears. I looked across to the distant, empty horizon. I could imagine how a medieval pilgrim might think of monsters, somewhere beyond the edge of the world. The wind stung my face with pellets of spray. Why not? I thought. I stooped to take off my boots and socks and roll up my pants. The stones were sharp and chilly on my feet. I waded into the ocean, gasping at the cold of the water. I waded out until the water was splashing my knees. Even this close to shore I could feel the tug of the retreating tide. And I had an image of myself slipping and being pulled out to join the dead sailors and long-gone citizens of Duyo.

A wave surged against my legs, soaking my thighs and causing me to shiver. I took the stone out of my pocket and looked at it for a moment and then threw it as far as I could, watching it disappear in the dark water. Maybe, I fancifully thought, the forces of geology, of shifting tectonic plates and floating continents would someday deposit it again on the shores of North America. Of course, I told myself, you and all that you love will be long dead, reduced to a few forlorn molecules.

I was shivering and thoroughly wet, but I did not want to return to land right away. Perhaps I was expecting something to happen, some revelation, to rise out of the ocean. But there was only wind and water and sky. I felt oddly lonely. I remembered a poem of R.S. Thomas's that I had read repeatedly for the past month. I closed my eyes and let the words come to me, reciting to the empty horizon:

"There are nights that are so still
    that I can hear the small owl calling
far off and a fox barking
miles away. It is then that I lie
in the lean hours awake listening
to the swell born somewhere in the Atlantic
rising and falling, rising and falling
wave on wave on the long shore
by the village, that is without light
and companionless. And the thought comes
of that other being who is awake, too
letting our prayers break on him,
not like this for a few hours,
but for days, years, for eternity.”

When I finished I bent and splashed my face with water, enjoying the sting of salt. I retrieved my boots and sat between the boulders out of the wind to put them on. I took an orange and my knife from a jacket pocket, slicing the fruit so the peel came off in neat quarter sections. I laughed when I realized that I was imitating the slicing style of my phantom Camino companion, the Orange-Peel Man. I remembered how, on that first hard day of my pilgrimage, the sight of quarter-sectioned orange peels on the snow-wet mountain path to Roncesvalles had cheered me, telling me I was not alone. I had seen other neatly quartered orange peels a few times during my month-long walk and they always gave me comfort. I wondered whatever happened to him. Maybe he was a figment of my imagination, but, real or not, God bless him.

A moment of panic

I watched the waves surge up the shingle, break and withdraw only to return in a grating roar, and then retreat again, a ceaseless ebb and flow. I felt tired and must have dozed off because when I opened my eyes there was the briefest of moments when I did not know where I was. I thought I could hear someone call my name and for a second I was back in the dream from Portomarin, expecting to see little Chonina playing on the shore and my father dead now 16 years, walking out of the fog. I felt afraid, and for the slimmest sliver of time, I was close to panic. I could not distinguish between the beating waves and my pounding heart. I could not tell where my body ended and the rest of the world began, what was me and what was not.

I lurched to my feet, the suddenness of movement leaving me dizzy and feeling as if I was going to faint or be sick to my stomach. I pressed my forehead against a cold boulder until the dizziness passed, grateful for the roughness of the granite. Slowly, or so it seemed, I knew where I was and recognized the voice as Eva’s. I was drenched with sweat and feeling disoriented.

“Roberto, where are you?”

“Are you all right?” she asked. “When you didn’t come back I thought something had happened?”

“No, nothing happened. I fell asleep.” I tried to look sheepish, but I don’t think Eva believed me. She gave me a skeptical look, and said nothing.
"I could use a coffee," I said. "Then maybe we should head back."

An hour later, we were back in Finisterre having lunch at the Bar Miramar near the bus station. Afterward, we watched the fishing boats come into the harbour and the fishermen unload their catches. Helmut and Ingrid showed up a few minutes before the bus, their clothes wet from walking in the rain. They sat together on one of the benches, holding hands.

We were back in Santiago by early evening. Eva had a train to catch so we said our goodbyes in the taxi on the way to the train station.

"You've been a good companion on the Camino," she said, and gave me a kiss on the cheek. "I'm glad you were here today. It was a nice way to end."

"Thank you. I enjoyed your company, too."

Walking through the old city to my hotel, it occurred to me that it was time for me to go home, too. The walking was complete, the sights seen, the prayers made, the apostle hugged and, after my day in Finisterre, the symbolic rituals concluded. I would, I thought, spend my last day in Santiago exploring, buying souvenirs, writing postcards and, perhaps, making one last visit to the cathedral.

I should have known better. The Camino was not quite finished with me.

Next Week: Waking from the Camino
The Road to Santiago — Ninth of a 9-part series — Published Sunday, Dec. 31, 2000

Episode Nine: Waking from the Camino

I was mildly drunk. I had downed several glasses of vino tinto — small glasses, mind you — at a table by the window in the Hotel Suso on Rúa do Vilar. The bar was smoky and noisy with university students and office workers. Outside it was dark and the lights from the shop windows made the wet cobblestones shine. Everything looked bright and far away.

It was pleasant to sit in a warm and well-lit bar and watch people passing in the rain. But I was restless. I had just returned from a day-trip to the end of the world, Cape Finisterre, the final act of my month-long pilgrimage across northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela. It was time to go home. Only I was not ready to leave the Camino de Santiago. I wanted to be back on the road, walking the Way of St. James. I felt suspended like a branch caught in a backwash of a river current, waiting for something to happen that would pull me back into the current again. I was finished with the Camino, but I did not want the Camino to be finished with me.

The waiter asked if I wanted another glass of wine. His presence broke the loop of my thoughts. I declined the drink, paid the bill and left the bar to walk the streets, thinking that walking would clear my head. It had stopped raining and I could see stars between the scattered clouds. I walked up the street to Rúa de Fonseca and across the Praza de Obradoiro. A small crowd stood in front of a statue near the wall of the cathedral. Or at least I thought it was a statue until I got close enough to see it was a white-faced mime in an ankle-length red cloak standing on a pedestal. I envied his ability to keep still for so long. I dropped 100 pesetas in the hat and my thanks was a wink and a tip of his bowler. The sudden movement startled me and I laughed.

I decided against going into the cathedral. Instead, I walked to the Rúa do Pombal into the park of Carballeira de Santa Susana. I enjoyed the darkness and the quiet, walking along the gravel paths between the rows of arching plane trees. Light from the lampposts came through the branches and made the wet tree trunks shine blackly. Between the trees the rows of statues glowed from the light. The noise of the traffic seemed to come from a long way off. The crunch of my boots on the gravel pathways and the smell of wet grass made me think of the Camino. I sat a bench among the trees and looked up at the stars.

I tried to imagine what it might have been like for those who lived a thousand years ago, long before the modern disenchantment of the world, to see this same Milky Way and be utterly certain that the zodiacs and constellations and planets were beaming down their influences and emanations, confident that the unchanging motion of the stars was evidence of divine order and intelligence.

It started to rain again and I walked back through the park, following the Paseo Santa Susana to where it came out at the Avenida de Xoán Carlos. It was loud with traffic and pedestrians. I passed the jewellery stores and dress shops and hairdressing salons along the Rúa da Senra before turning left up a narrow lane and across the Praza do Toural to the Rúa do Vilar. It was raining harder when I arrived once again at the Hotel Suso. The table
where I had been sitting was occupied by a young couple holding hands. I was about to cross the narrow street to my hotel when I heard my name.

"Hey Robert, where are you going? Come back."

I turned to see Ron Chanda, the American businessman I had met two weeks earlier in Carrión de los Condes, standing in the doorway, waving at me. "Come on, have a drink. Henrik's in Santiago, too. I’m waiting for him."

A sense of letdown

At the end of the Camino, writes the American anthropologist Nancy Frey, pilgrims lose the daily rhythms of walking and begin to make the transition away from the journey. "By taking off the backpack and putting down the staff, walking into the streets of Santiago one is no longer a pilgrim as on the road," she writes in her book Pilgrim Stories. "After growing accustomed to walking or cycling for five to eight hours a day the sudden change produces a shock to the body now inhibited from maintaining its daily rhythm." This shift in sensibilities has psychological symptoms, what she refers to as la gran depresión del Camino, the great depression of the Camino. She describes it as a sense of letdown, fatigue, relief and, paradoxically, restlessness. Perhaps, I thought, that's what I had felt. I was glad to have arrived at my goal, but I still wanted to keep walking. I remembered something else Frey wrote — how this feeling of disorientation can produce extremes of behaviour, particularly lots of eating and drinking and revelry.

Seeing Ron, I forgot about my plan to have a shower and find a restaurant where I could have a nice, if solitary meal, and read my Michael Dibdin mystery and, what the hell, get sentimentally drunk on a couple of bottles of Ribeiro. Once again, I had not counted on the serendipitous nature of the Camino. I would still enjoy the Ribeiro and have a nice meal, but I would do so in the company of friends. I could not have asked for a better way to finish my pilgrimage. The Camino takes care of its own.

"Damn, am I glad to see you," I shouted, laughing as I ran across the street in the rain. "When did you get in?"

"This morning," Ron replied. "With Henrik."

Ron was staying at the same hotel as myself, the Hospedaje Santa Cruz, while Henrik Friediger — or Henrik the Dane, as I called him — my Camino companion for several days beyond Burgos, was at the Hostal Asa Nova. While I had been in Finisterre, they had attended the Pilgrim's Mass and wandered the streets.

Ron and Henrik had met on the Camino before León when Ron, remembering my suggestion to be on the lookout for Henrik, had introduced himself. After that, they had walked together off and on over the past couple of weeks.

"Did you ever see Andréa again?" I asked. I had introduced him to the Brazilian Bombshell outside a bar in Carrión de los Condes.

"No," he said, "but I'd sure like to. She was something else."
The Camino had delivered several synchronistic turns of event during the past month. If I had walked down a different street, gone into another bar, indeed, if I had walked beneath the arcade on the other side of the street, I would not have met Ron again or be looking forward to an evening with him and Henrik. Was this another of the Camino’s little gifts? I let the thought go, happy to sit in the bar and swap stories.

There was a banging on the window. We turned to look, expecting Henrik. But instead, there was Andréa, the Brazilian Bombshell, waving at us. It occurred to me that someone, or something, must have been playing games with my head. Soon, I thought, I would be looking everywhere for omens and portents. I let that thought go, too, as Andréa bounced into the bar to give us kisses on each cheek and a hug that both of us enjoyed more than was good for us.

Andréa introduced us to her companion, who was carrying their bags. I recognized him as the same guy she had been with in Carrión, but I immediately forgot his name. Andréa kept up a running commentary that I couldn’t understand, but it hardly mattered. She really was lovely in her flamboyant way; it was a pleasure just to watch her. More people arrived who recognized Andréa, mostly male. Tables got bunched together. By the time Henrik arrived, accompanied by an Austrian couple, Peter and Angelique, we had a regular pilgrim party going.

Henrik and I greeted each other like long-lost brothers, which was perhaps a bit strange considering that we had only walked together for a few days. But then the Camino does that: You meet by chance, walk together for a few days, treat each others’ blisters if necessary, help each other, take meals together and, somehow, that person becomes a friend.

“I’m glad to see you made it,” Henrik said. “Your feet are better?”

“Much better.” I told him how the pain of walking had suddenly disappeared before I got to Astorga.

“You learned to walk, then. That is good. I wondered if you would.”

His concern touched me, the idea that he had worried about me long after I had left him was strangely gratifying.

At 10, Henrik, Ron, Peter, Angelique and myself left Andréa and her admirers to find a place to eat. Of course, Andréa did not let us go without another hug. We were happy to oblige. We wandered along the Rúa do Franco past the siderías and coffeehouses and the crowded restaurants, admiring the aquariums full of lobsters and squid, arguing over which to chose, in the end settling on the El Cayado, where I had dined my first night in Santiago.

It was a wonderful meal. I had the calamares en su tinta — baby squid cooked in its own ink — and some of the salted tetilla cheese that is a speciality of Galicia and washed it all down with a bottle of icy white Ribeiro. We ended the meal sharing a torta de Santiago and a bottle of almond-flavoured Vina Amaríña Frangelico. As we ate and drank we told our
stories: blisters in the Navarre, joy on the meseta, slogging in the El Bierzo, exhaustion in O Cebreiro, relief in Galicia. We compared refugios: Azofra and Rabanal were among the best, with Najera and Castrogeriz the worst. There was consensus that the French snored the loudest, while the Germans farted the most. The Brazilians were judged the most eccentric. Peter, a businessman from Vienna, told us about one Brazilian who had walked the Camino back and forth more than a dozen times. We remembered Jéssus Jato and his Ritual of the Burning.

Blisters and aches

We talked about blisters and aching legs and how, somewhere along the Camino, the aches and the pains disappeared and “you got lost in walking,” as Ron put it. “Sometimes I would be walking along and then look at my watch and find 30 or 40 minutes had gone by without me remembering anything about where I had been walking. I just zoned out.” Everybody had stories of animal encounters, whether dogs or cows or sheep. I told of the lordly rooster of El Ganso and the dogs of Najera that had scared me half to death and the lizard of Mogarde that I had saved. I was sufficiently garrulous to tell of dreaming about my father and Chonina, the little girl in Ponferrada to whom I had given my scallop shell, that universal symbol of St. James the Pilgrim. Oddly enough, that prompted a rush of dream recollections from the others. Everyone’s dreams were more vivid and memorable after a couple of weeks on the Camino.

“On the Camino,” Henrik said, “you lose the restraints that keep you disconnected from the things you bury inside and try not to think about because you don’t have time to think about them. On the Camino, you have time to remember these things.” He paused. “You even have time to remember your dreams.”

The following day, we would meet in the evening for a final dinner together. We were all leaving the next morning — Henrik was taking a train to Madrid to catch a plane to Copenhagen; Peter and Angelique were driving back to Vienna; Ron and I, as it turned out, would take the same train to France, although he was getting off at Hendaye to meet friends at Biarritz, while I was continuing to Paris. Still, it was as if we knew our pilgrimage had ended but we did not want it to. We had jobs and families to return to, but we were not quite ready to put away the scallop shells and walking sticks. The Camino had cast its spell and we had not yet awakened from it.

For most of my last day I wandered the streets with Henrik and Ron. We browsed through the market in Praza San Félix where the women sat among big wicker baskets loaded with fruits and vegetables and blocks of cheese and bins of bread and buckets of fish and lobster and crabs. It was crowded, chaotic and cheerful and smelled wonderfully alive. In the afternoon, Ron and Henrik went to the pilgrims’ museum near Praza de St-Miguel. I wound through the streets, up steps and down narrow lanes, pausing to look at the shops with their jewellery and pottery and fine linens and everywhere the symbol of the Apostle. I bought some gifts and a few souvenirs, including a medallion with the bas-relief image of St. James seated on his throne in the cathedral. It would be a good luck charm. I decided against buying a scallop shell; my scallop shell was with Chonina.

I walked to the cathedral, thinking I would pray for everyone again and maybe give the Apostle another hug. But the moment had passed. I was, I realized, a tourist now, no
longer a pilgrim. Instead of going to the cathedral, I had a beer at the Café Literarios in Praza da Quintana and then went to meet Ron and Henrik at the Hotel Suso. We planned to go to the Bodegón de Xulio for our final meal.

“It’s like dream,” Peter said as we sat among the empty plates and the drained wine bottles of our last supper. “After walking for so long it’s hard to believe I have another life, my real life, to go back to.”

“I feel I’m still supposed to be walking,” said Ron.

We said goodbye to Peter and Angelique and then walked toward our hotels. It was past 1 a.m. and we all had trains to catch in a few hours but we decided on a farewell drink. We sat at the long bar in the Café de Portugal and drank brandies. We were the only customers but the woman who owned the place did not seem in any hurry to close.

“You know,” said Ron, “it would be a real shame after all the difficulties of the Camino and what we’ve discovered on the Camino if it didn’t affect our daily lives.”

“It’s as close as you’ll get to living in the 13th century,” said Henrik.

“Where’s Andrea when we need her?” I asked.

When we finished our drinks, Henrik and I walked back to his hotel and said our goodbyes in the Praza do Toural.

“You have my address,” he said. “If you’re ever in Copenhagen, give me a call.” I could not think when I might be in Denmark. “I will,” I said.

We hugged each other and then he walked away. He was a good man, a good companion on the road. I wondered if I would ever see him again. When I walked back to my hotel, the café was still open. I decided I needed a nightcap to put me asleep.

I was up at 6 to catch my train. Cinched back into my backpack, I stood in the door of my room for one last look at my home of the past four days. It was not much: bare walls, a bed, a wardrobe, a lamp on a bedside table and the long windows that never completely closed, but I had enjoyed it. I threw the key on the bed, closed the door and walked down the stairs out into the still dark streets toward the train station. I was pleased to find a bar open even at that early hour and I stopped for a café con leche — my last, I presumed.

When I arrived at the train station on Rúa do Hórreo, Ron was already sitting in the station café. And so, too, was Charles Henri, the retired French businessman whom I had first met in Zubiri on the second day of my pilgrimage. I was delighted to see him. It seemed somehow appropriate to end my pilgrimage with someone I had met near the beginning.

“Bonjour, Charles. Ça va?”

“Très content, très content.”
Charles had arrived in Santiago a few days earlier but after visiting the Cathedral had decided he wanted to walk some more and walked to Padrón, a small village about 20 kilometres south of Santiago, where, according to legend, the boat bearing the body of St. James came ashore. The church contains a large stone reputed to be the mooring post. He was taking the same train as Ron and I to France.

"The city is no place to be for a peregrino," Charles said. "You should keep walking." the camino fades

Aboard the train, Charles sensibly slept in his seat, Ron and I adjourned to the bar car. We lost track of the bottle count somewhere around León, but by the time the train crossed the French border we had emptied the bar of its entire stock of half-bottles of Rosadas. We got off the train in Hendaye — Ron was going to Biarritz and I was taking the Palombe Blue night train to Paris — where I said goodbye to Ron and Charles and booked a sleeper. I stood for awhile by the open windows in the passageway, enjoying the warmth of the night air and trying to recount where I had been the previous night and the night before that and even the week before that. When I could not hold anything in my thoughts I adjourned to Berth 102 in Coach 28 (maybe I was not that drunk) and fell asleep to the sway and clack of the train. I woke the next morning to watch the sun rise as the train pulled into Paris.

Looking back, I think I felt a kind of shell shock, a sense of vertigo at the rapidity of my return to the everyday world. It was strange to be on a train watching the land and the sky rather than being an active participant. There was a letdown, a sense of deflation, as the train crossed within one day the same terrain that had taken me more than a month to walk. Sitting in the bar, watching the country roll past, the greenery of Galicia giving way to the mountains and the meseta and the rolling fields of Navarre until we were back in the forests of the Pyrenees, I felt as though I was waking from a long dream, that my month on the Camino was somehow unreal.

In his book Sacred Journeys, E. Alan Mourinas writes that the return to the everyday is, in a sense, part of the pilgrimage. While the sacred place may be the source of spiritual enlightenment, it is at home once again that the effect of that enlightenment and what salvation has been gained is confirmed. "The return journey and the re-incorporation of the pilgrim into social life are the test of the pilgrimage."

In the months since my return, after I had returned to the routines and habits of my quotidian existence, I thought about my experience on the Camino and whether I had learned anything, whether I was in any way changed. Thomas Merton’s statement — "We do not see first and then act; we act, then we see" — served as a touchstone for my reflections. The journey was over, so what had I made of it all? I saw a beautiful country I would not forget. I met people whose companionship was pleasant. I certainly enjoyed the food and the wine. But had I experienced something significant, life altering? Had the Camino been a spiritual experience?

Truth be told, there was no great illumination or awakening, no road-to-Damascus conversion. There had been no sudden assurance that beyond time and space was eternal remembrance. Doubt had not been replaced by faith. But, perhaps that was too much to expect; indeed, it would be a form of spiritual pride to expect more. Besides, after a certain
age we tend to remain what we have become, for better or worse, prisoners of our pasts, hauling the clanking chains of memory and habit that bind us to a particular time and place.

Yet the Camino was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life, and one that I will never forget. I will always remember the solitary conversations with my dead father, the nearly forgotten memories of family and friends and lovers and those singular moments when by the alchemy of solitude and silence and the steady rhythm of walking I felt myself almost disappear. Indeed, I had learned to just walk, and that is a kind of grace in itself.

I have stayed in touch with some of my Camino companions. Ron needed physiotherapy for his Achilles tendons, but he was soon walking the Camino again. “I left on the 16th of October and did and redid several portions of the French Camino and also went down to the Portuguese border at the Spanish town of Tuy and did the Camino Portuguese,” he wrote. “It took me five days to get to Santiago (110 kilometres) and I really enjoyed the city the second time around. Got to Finisterre and enjoyed it very much. The pea soup fog made it quite surreal.”

Henrik, too, is thinking about another pilgrimage. He sent me some pictures from the Camino, and a letter. “I hold this Camino as a jewel in my heart,” he wrote. “It is very difficult for me to live a spiritual life with the everyday stresses, but on the Camino you can allow yourself to feel whole. The Camino is a place where you feel the presence of God. It was good, and I want to do it again.”

Yes, it was. And so do I. Even though the immediacy of the Camino faded during the months after my pilgrimage, there are still times — in the shower, walking to work in the morning, late at night before bed when the house is quiet — when the memory of a green path or the vault of the sky or the dim interior of a church or even a splash of yellow paint on a rock in the middle of nowhere will come sharp into my mind, and, for a moment, I am on the Way. But most of all I keep remembering that moment sitting between the rocks on the beach at Finisterre when it seemed as if I could not tell the difference between my own heart and the pounding of the ocean. I want to know again that feeling of disappearing.