



# Camino royale

With a rucksack on his back, **David Young** set off on one of the Camino de Santiago's routes and was rewarded with ruddy cheeks, pilgrim fellowship and a sense of fulfilment

**I**t was once the domain of those seeking the tomb of the storied apostle St James or a plenary indulgence, but today it's a must for any would-be walker.

El Camino de Santiago de Compostela — the legendary pilgrimage into Spain from all corners of Europe — has been shrouded for centuries in religiosity, but these days it's for the masses, faith or no faith. The quest has passed by word of mouth, from veterans to the uninitiated, since the Middle-Ages.

In truth, the only whispers I'd entertained before embarking on it were of long, beautiful days spent strolling and absorbing the surroundings, coached by the odd beer here and there in the local *cervecerías*, or bars, and little else.

So, to satisfy my curiosity, I put on my walking boots and headed there in late spring. Bathed in mid-20°C sunshine, Santiago appeared a modest place with a hint of 1970s heist-movie charm.

A short taxi-ride from the airport brought me into the heart of the city, where old and new is deftly blended, and the cathedral of St James its spiritual and architectural hub. Non-history buffs can gawk at its glorious detail, step about on the roof or meander through the narrow streets knotted around it.

This corner of the Iberian Peninsula, known as the Seafood Coast, gives you plenty to be chipper about, even if you aren't quite a fish lover. When every second eatery prides itself on having the best *pulpo a la Gallega* (Galician



octopus), you'll have little choice but to succumb to the city's culinary charms.

I began by tucking into a dish of sublime *tortilla patatas* (fried potato omelette) and *chipirones* (baby squid), which set me up for the journey ahead.

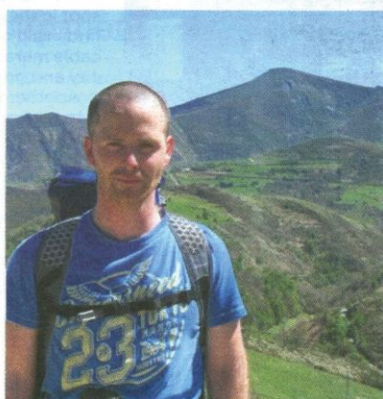
The town of Sarria, 112km away, offered the requisite distance to qualify as a *bona fide* pilgrim, or 'peregrino'. When you get back to Santiago after your journey, the *Oficina del Peregrino* bestows the gift of an indulgence — the famed *compostela* (a certificate of accomplishment) — upon the faithful traveller for the sacrifice of clocking up at least 100km of the Camino.

This also purports a remission of their sins, sweetly leaving walkers a little closer to the pearly gates.

## ➔ NEED TO KNOW



Opposite page: Top, a Galician man and his donkey along the Camino; bottom, the final destination — Catedral de Santiago de Compostela. This page: Above, the World Heritage Site of Las Médulas; right, David enjoys the views. In panel: Top, David with other pilgrims; inset, Triacastela hostel



But instead of taking the easy road, my conscience chose Ponferrada, at 202km, so off I headed for the bus station with a 10kg backpack and little more than a week to play with. It's a five-hour trip and the town itself has little to offer, but it's worth taking a taxi ride to the canyon-like, orange rock formations of Las Médulas, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, which was once the most important gold mine in the Roman Empire.

Back in Ponferrada, with a few hilly miles in my legs, I turned up at my hostel, the Albergue San Nicolas. Equipped with my pilgrim passport, I checked in with a very cheerful Polish volunteer who explained that payment was by way of donation, offered on departure.

True to Camino lore, the lights were out by 10pm and Olympic snoring replaced the evening's gentle guitar playing. After fewer than 40 winks, though, a flurry of activity among my 60 or so dormitory companions roused me from my shallow slumber.

By the time I'd rolled up my brand new micro-sleeping bag, the room was empty. The hardcore pilgrim who'd begun back in St Jean Pied de Port (the real start, lying all of 780km from Santiago on the French side of the Pyrenees) had hot-footed it without me. As I

sheepishly posted a note in the unmanned honesty box, my Camino had at last begun.

Once you walk beyond the Templar castle — Ponferrada's redeeming feature — the remainder of the town blurs as you busy your eyes, searching for the subtle yellow arrows (flechas) painted along the way, to keep you on course. They're daubed on poles, walls and even stones. Within a few kilometres, you pass through allotment-like gardens, where older folk happily potter.

Villages come and go, and by midday the path takes you into loftier vineyard terrain. Temperatures can soar, too. Wear a hat or you'll toast. As the topography undulates, so too does the pace; coupled with the merciless exposure of the wine territory, you'll find the afternoon curbing your morning's naïve enthusiasm.

Villafranca Del Bierzo awaits you in the hills. Here is the final spot along the Camino Francés (the French Way) that can offer grace to pilgrims who can make it no further. I stumbled into a private hostel on the road out of town. Chosen by sheer good fortune, I discovered an open plan set-up, with a mere dozen at most per sleeping area, and a masseuse (the only one on-site until Santiago).

## FIVE GREAT THINGS TO DO IN SANTIAGO

■ Marvel at the medieval cathedral and scale its inner chambers to spy the whole city from an elaborate rooftop (€10 for a guided tour).

■ Visit the Pilgrim Museum: even if you haven't made a single step of the journey, you'll learn a little about Europe's most fascinating pilgrimage.

■ Tuck in to the local seafood. Classic dishes include pulpo a feira (boiled octopus with cayenne pepper), nécoras (spider crabs) and zamburinas (baby scallops). The less adventurous should try caldo Gallego (Galician soup), followed by lacón con grelos (ham hock with greens), all to be washed down with Galicia's fine wines.

■ Indulge your sweet tooth with homemade chocolate con churros — doughnuts resembling rhubarb stalks served with hot chocolate.

■ Lose yourself in the winding streets of the old town — the many watering holes will be your saving grace.

## GETTING THERE

Aer Lingus (0818 365 000; aerlingus.com) flies directly from Dublin to Santiago three times weekly until



September 28, 2010, when it ceases for the winter schedule.

## STAYING THERE

This is a Jubilee (or Holy) Year, when the feast of St James lands on a Sunday. It won't happen again until 2021, which means Santiago will be in birthday party mood on July 25. Make sure you book accommodation well in advance.

Hotels are reasonably priced — you can budget on €100 for most three-star establishments. Food-wise, backpackers could live forever on the tapas served by most bars.

## ESSENTIALS

■ Beware the sun. Although north-western Spain has a



very Irish climate, walkers will find the months of June, July and August very hot as they traverse the Meseta. November, December and January are only for the die-hards. Otherwise, you may as well be walking in west Cork.

See [stjamesiri.com](http://stjamesiri.com); [santiago-compostela.net](http://santiago-compostela.net); [caminodesantiago.me.uk](http://caminodesantiago.me.uk); or read *Spanish Steps* by Tim Moore, published by Vintage Books (2005).

Without a reprise of the Ponferrada Philharmonic, the distant sounds of the river hushed me to sleep.

An endearing spot with misshapen storybook buildings and cobbled streets, Villafranca entreats its visitors to stay longer. Your buoyancy only serves to usher you onwards, though. Luckily I availed of the all-you-can-eat breakfast for €2, as I hadn't fully appreciated how steep and unforgiving this leg of the trek was going to be.

Within a couple of hours you begin the leafy ascent. Hours fritter away as you spy your path snaking up into the hills, then, suddenly, La Faba — no more than a cluster of farm buildings — appears.

An afternoon gathering of pilgrims in the hamlet confirms that O Cebreiro, the next stop and also the highest point at 4,240 feet, is but a couple of hours away. One very tall and hirsute American gent of multiple Camino campaigns swore it could be no further.

Trusting his judgement, I marched on. The day had given way to evening by the time I found myself standing, starved, in the middle of a collection of low-size stone buildings, with heavenly zephyrs cooling me.

The menu del peregrino is a dream for the ravenous. For less

than €10 you're served three courses. While you'll mostly encounter the same starters, main courses and desserts along the way, it's hard to argue with the value. Soup or a mixed salad followed by tortilla, fish, chicken or ham, all neatly rounded off with yoghurt, an orange or cheese and an apple marmalade.

The exuberance of the day invariably pushes your Spanish vocabulary towards sufficient pidgin fluency to cajole your server and keep the wine coming. But it's best to just shuffle away to bed, as slipping into the bar afterwards for one or two is pilgrim hari-kari. Doors are locked by 10pm.

By day three you'll pack your gear without really opening your eyes and barely linger over breakfast coffee, anxious to get some road behind you. You begin to enjoy the pattern of the day: snatches of conversation with fellow walkers framing your thoughts, while the idyllic countryside and uneven terrain punctuate the hours.

Soon Triacastela, a place once renowned for its three castles, emerges from the leafy lowlands. Sadly there are none to be seen today and the little town is being dug up to within a yard of its existence. However, the hostel on the outskirts boasts a grassy sweep in

front of its almost hidden buildings. The unmown grass will melt your heart as you set yourself down. Here it's only four to a room, all of which are bizarrely hinged with saloon doors.

From Sarria, you need two sellos, or stamps, a day on your credencial. Regardless of your level of Spanish, the ruddy cheeks of your trekking face are sufficient to secure these imprimaturs, with a few carefully placed nods and a 'muchas gracias'. The second half of your journey has much less demanding terrain and is therefore less visually arresting. Portomarin (90km) and Ribadiso (41km) are the most charming spots as you approach Santiago.

With 25km to go, keep your eyes peeled for Casa Verde — a cosy café bar just on the side of the road, where candles burn and music plays through the day. The lady draws your stamp while you sip on the complimentary shot of hiqueur that accompanies your coffee and empanada, or stuffed bread.

From there, Santiago really begins to beckon.

As you enter the city limits, the Galicians start to congratulate you. You feel less touristy and more like the real deal, and, before leaving, you already want to go back.

"Buen Camino, peregrino!" ☘