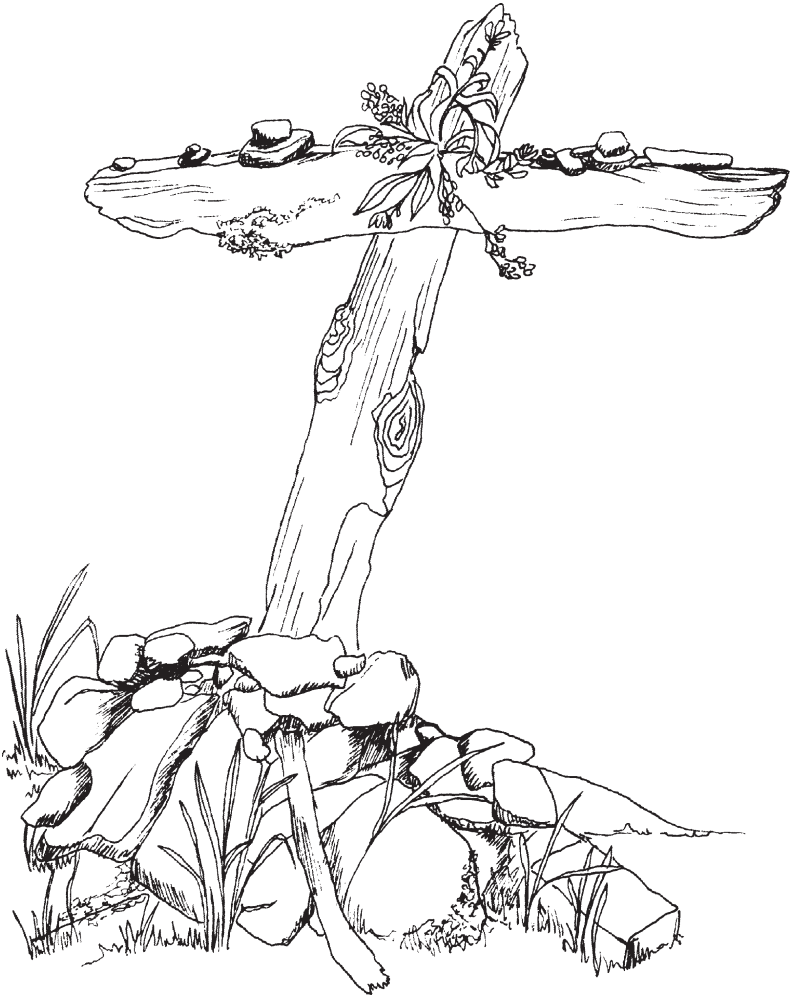
A Pilgrim's Journal



A Pilgrim's Journal

Walking El Camino de Santiago

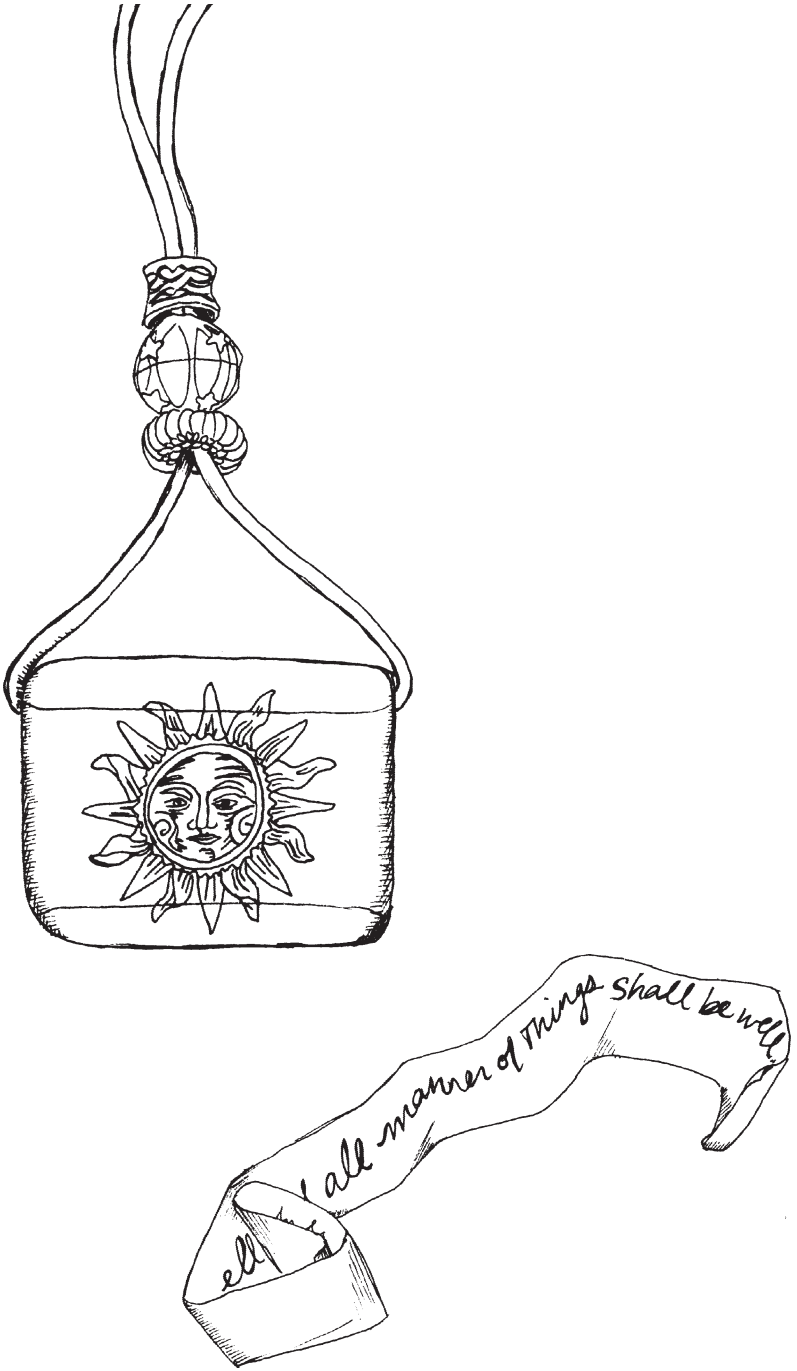
Sophronia Camp

Illustrations by Thyra Héder

Book design by Erica Schultz
Illustrations by Thyra Héder

This account is dedicated with thanks and appreciation to the many people whose prayers and goodwill buoyed my pilgrimage and gave it depth. These prayers, both those I prayed and those you prayed for me, gave me steady strength and made it possible for me to walk as an act of faith and love. My *camino* was filled with joy, wonder, and the pleasure of your company all along the way.

And to the perfect *compañera*, in all her many forms: Rosie, David, La Championne, Old Paint, Camino Babe *extraordinaire.*


all manner of things shall be well

Acknowledgments

Catherine Sengel, Susan Pasternack—editing and proofreading

Thyra Héder—line drawings

Erica Schultz—design and layout

Costanza Eggers—translation

Christine Cleary—production advice

Susan Dowds—providing a great gear list and prodding as to preparatory exercise

Mindy Menschell, Roberta Anderson, Roger Pettee, Dianne Bishop, Eva Sommaripa—inspiration and talismans

Jeff McMahon—holding down the fort and being a wonderful and enthusiastic armchair pilgrim

Nadja Gould—off-*camino* guardian angelhood

Ryan Barnes from REI—expert equipment advice

Janet Eisendrath—introducing the Romanesque world way back when

Preface

El Camino de Santiago, the Way of Saint James, *La Route Saint Jacques,* is a pilgrimage route across the north of Spain, running from the western end of the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela in the northwest corner of Spain, in Galicia. It has been traveled since 800 A.D. European strands from the east meet just outside of Puenta la Reina in Spain to become the most traveled route, *La Ruta Frances*, the French Route, which runs from east to west. A coastal, northern route follows along closer to the Bay of Biscay; still others come from the south through Portugal and southern points in Spain.

I started my pilgrimage at the base of the Pyrenees on the French side at St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, a common jumping-off spot. I walked five hundred miles in exactly forty days. I met people who had started in the south of France, some who began in Holland, others who took off somewhere between Paris and St-Jean, and still others who were walking it in stages, getting on and off the *camino* during their vacations and taking four years to walk it in ten-day or two-week stints.

A pilgrimage is not a hike. There may be many similarities, but there is an element of active spiritual seeking that is part of a pilgrimage that need not be part of a hike. I was on a spiritual quest or adventure, wanting to meet God in my journeying. So it was natural that when I returned home, the most common questions were, "What lessons did you learn?" and "How were you transformed?" I felt beleaguered by these and responded grumpily, if silently, "Damned if I know!" as I struggled to come up with quick answers for my interlocutors. I felt a kind of pressure in the questions, as if I *should* have been transformed into a font of wisdom for others who couldn't imagine embarking on such a trip themselves but were hoping for some nuggets of truth and understanding that I could offer them. Well . . . I went, I walked, I returned. I didn't lose one pound in all that walking which, because it may have been the single expectation I had of the *camino*, was

also the single disappointment of the *camino*. At home again I returned to the same life I had temporarily left behind, and felt instantly that I was the same person I had been before I left. I came back to softball playoffs and a championship series; to news about the junior prom; to a son who returned from a semester in Vietnam the day after I returned from Spain—in short, to a busy family life. Did I feel transformed? Do I now feel transformed months after the walk? Did I learn anything? Yes, to a degree, but I think the messages and lessons learned on the *camino* are all small, internal shifts that will play out over time. In five years I may be able to say, "This change really had its roots on the *camino,*" or "I'm living a life now that is different from the one I expected, because I went on the *camino* and it made me feel differently." I can't see it yet. There are a few things I did feel at the time, very strongly. Will they stay with me and be part of my life in my ordinary circumstances? Or were they fleeting insights that are now part of the tale, but not part of my own inner fabric? I can't yet say.

Some pilgrimages involve a destination, have a particular point or desired outcome, and a guiding spirit in the form of a saint. The *camino*, for me, was all about the traveling—the experience of walking twelve miles a day with all its surprises. It was never about the destination itself—the cathedral in Santiago, containing the relics of Saint James—or about the five-hundred-mile distance, an impressive, tidy figure that was fun to bandy about on my return. The apostle James, Santiago, did not hold any special allure for me. I'm Episcopalian, so saints aren't part of my worship tradition, and James is a complicated saint, anyway. In one of his guises he is known as "*Matamoros*" or "Moor-slayer," as he supposedly led the Christians safely and successfully into battle against Moorish invaders. It was hard for me to muster much enthusiasm for that. In his other guise, *peregrino* or pilgrim, he had become the patron saint of himself, of his own route. He was appealing to me as the pilgrim, depicted with an absurdly wide-brimmed, floppy hat, a long cape, a gourd for water and a bag to carry donated food, a walking staff, and a scallop shell affixed somewhere. (One of his miracles involved scallops, and so the shell became his symbol—thus, *Coquilles Saint Jacques.*)

My own interest in the *camino* started in the nineteen-sixties when I was still in high school and developed an interest in French Romanesque architecture. I learned that one reason there are so many churches in France from the same period, strung together a day's walk apart, was because they had been built along an ancient pilgrimage route to Spain. On trips to France I saw a number of these churches, unaware that the route was still walked, though sparsely. Some years later I was staying with friends near

Bordeaux and learned that their teenage son was planning a two-week horseback ride along the *camino*. It piqued my interest, something I might want to do myself one day.

Thirty years later, I decided, quite hastily, that the time had come to realize this faded dream. My interest in the *camino* now centered on being a pilgrim, not an art lover, and I wanted to walk in Spain rather than in France. I wanted and needed a change of scene and a look at my life from a new perspective. I wanted to be selfish without feeling guilty, and I wanted to be pulled in a direction of my own choosing (and perhaps God's). Not forever. Just for a time. But to do that, I needed to be in a different space both physically and mentally.

It was the perfect time in my life to walk the *camino*. I was fifty-one years old. I had a husband and five children at home ranging in age from fourteen to twenty. I had recently left demanding work among urban homeless people and needed to renew my energy. What the *camino* offered me was the opportunity to reconnect with a younger, more independent self. I was glad to get to know her along the way, and to realize that she still existed under my own skin.

Here are two accounts from pilgrim friends of what the *camino* meant to them. The first is from Hanna, a fifty-four-year-old German woman:

Everybody here asked me, if I didn't miss home—but honestly, as much as I like my children and (husband), the home and friends, it was such an experience to deal only with myself and I was forced to learn, to do things in a way that my body could cope with the hardship of the *camino*, instead of trying to fulfill the expectations of other people. This in the beginning made me feel something like guilty but I saw that most *companeros* found it quite natural to look in first place for their needs. Nevertheless they were at the same time helpful and nice towards their fellow pilgrims. This unforced loving companionship is one of the reasons, why everybody on the *camino* felt so accepted, relaxed, happy and well cared for and then was able to love the others. It seems to be very true that one can love others only when we love ourselves. We all behaved on the *camino* exactly according to our natural self (except for a few slips).

The second is from Zoe, a sixty-six-year-old Aussie:

I feel the most significant nature of the *camino* for me was the respect, the space, the time, the understanding and the love between pilgrims to enable one to live

each day as one chose. The available opportunity and freedom to live life fully, happily and humanly each day—a sort of healthy selfishness and yet the connectedness and caring remained as an affirmation of the abundance of goodness in people from all around this global village. The connection with you and Rosie was at centre, at my very essence. How very clearly I could see the sacred in the sanctuary of your heart. How joyful were those prayer times and blessings we shared.

I didn't really decide to go to Spain until sometime in March, leaving me with six weeks to prepare. My husband, Jeff, found an excellent book on the *camino*, *The Pilgrimage Road to Santiago: The Complete Cultural Handbook,* by David M. Gitlitz and Linda Kay Davidson, not a guidebook with particulars of travel, but a compendium of information about the culture, history, and geography of the *camino*. It had been recently published, and the authors were giving a talk in Cambridge, so one day I had the book in my hand and the next I was listening to David and Linda's lively and seductive presentation. As I sat and looked around the packed church hall, I wondered, "How many of these people will actually do this, and will I be one of them?"

I started to let a few people know what I planned, in hopes that I might garner a walking companion for a few days here and there along the way. I didn't imagine anyone doing the whole walk with me. I was secretly glad when Jeff said he wasn't interested. I didn't really want to go as one half of a married couple, thinking it would be too confining in some way. He fully supported my going, but wasn't crazy about the thought of my going alone.

When my friend Rosie responded to my query about coming on the *camino* with immediate enthusiasm, I couldn't believe my luck. We'd traveled on a trip to Belize four years earlier, under very difficult circumstances. She'd been widowed only a few weeks before, and I urged her to come along with a group of us. It was an interesting trip, but very hard—there were elements of *Heart of Darkness* in the jungle and in the cast of characters we met there. Rosie had weathered it all bravely and with good humor. Her husband had been half Spanish, and she knew all about the *camino* (most people didn't). She had wanted to do it herself one day, and it turned out our timing was in sync.

In the six weeks before we left I studied a teach-yourself Spanish book with some skepticism and was amazed at how much I learned and how useful it proved to be. I went to physical therapy for tendinitis and a sore rotator cuff, stepped up exercises, swam, and lost ten pounds. I started to walk with a pack and weights, but not too vigorously, as I didn't really want to know in advance how difficult it might be.

Similarly, I read, but not too much. The book that I loved on the *camino* was Nancy Louise Frey's *Pilgrim Stories: On and Off the Road to Santiago, Journeys Along an Ancient Way in Modern Spain*. I had read another pilgrim's account that was quite interesting but in the end irritating. The author was someone with too much of a personal "agenda," and he seemed awfully judgmental and finicky in his observations. Nancy Frey's book was fresh and open. An anthropologist, she spotlighted the enormous variety in the pilgrim endeavor and its meaning. Her book was full of great stories and made the whole experience seem completely inviting and fascinating.

I never bought a guidebook. I didn't want to feel dependent on plans and guides and maps—that smacked too much of "travel" or "vacation"—this was going to be a "pilgrimage," a journey into the unknown. I learned from my reading that the *camino* is well marked with yellow painted arrows, and that one can simply get to a place on the *camino*, find an arrow, and start walking. A system of *refugios* or *albergues* (refuges or hostels; the words are interchangeable) had grown up over the centuries along the way. One can stay for free, for a small donation, or occasionally for a small fee (around four dollars). They can be state- or municipally owned, church-owned, or private. They are run by *hospitaleros* (hostelers), often volunteers who work for a month or so at a time. Some are paid by the local government.

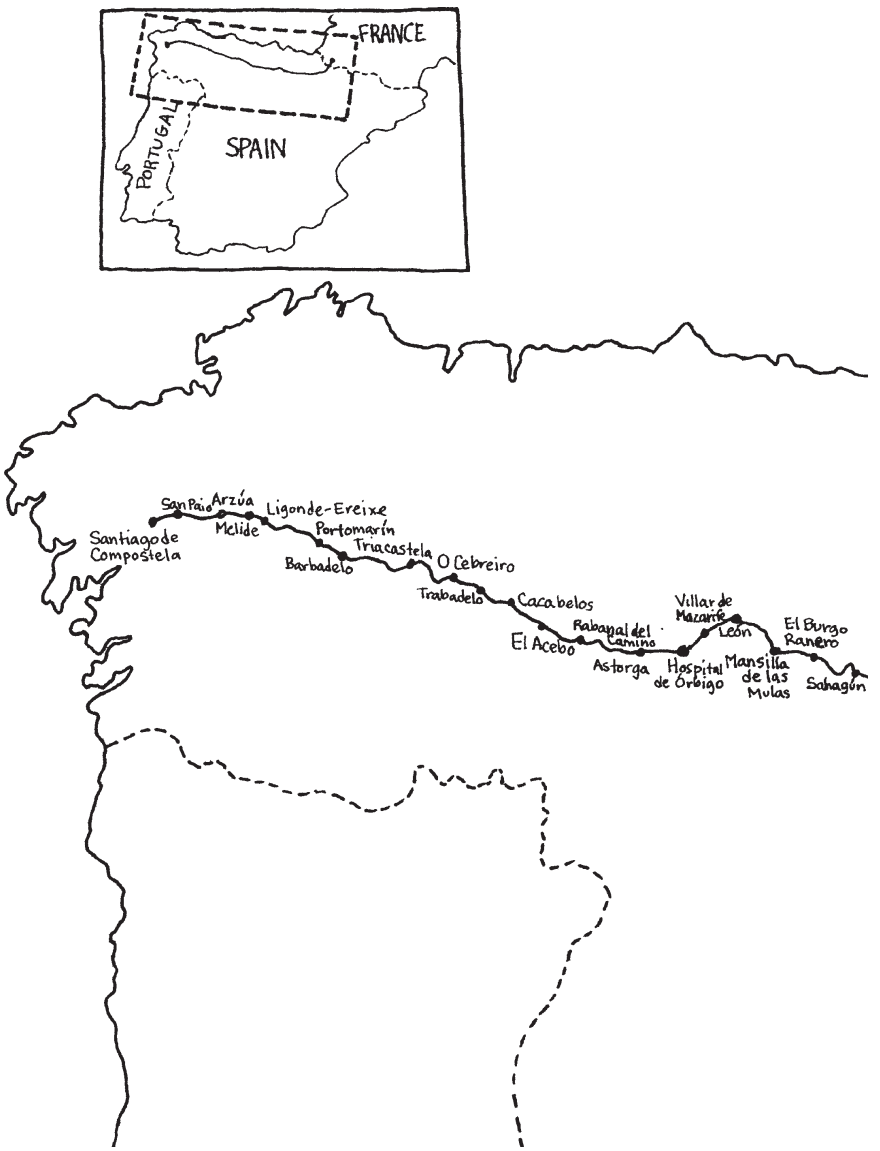
The *hospitalero* is responsible for keeping the *refugio* clean, getting pilgrims out by eight in the morning, keeping a log of visitors, stamping pilgrim passports *(credentials)*, and offering help as needed. Pilgrims can pick up a *credential* in various starting places, and it is proof that one is traveling on foot, by bicycle, or with a horse or mule. Mine came from an organization called The Friends of the Road to Santiago. Rosie picked hers up in Roncesvalles, the first stopping point on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees. (I coveted her Spanish *credential* the whole way, as it was much more detailed and interesting than my American one.) Each *refugio* has its own stamp, and others are often to be found in churches, cafés, museums, mayor's offices, so one comes home with quite a colorful and interesting record of one's travels. Some of the designs are ancient, others modern, and many hosts took great pride in the beauty of their stamp, as did some pilgrims in collecting as many as possible. Pilgrims present the stamped *credential* at journey's end in Santiago. If one attests to walking the route for religious or spiritual purposes, one then receives a *compostela*—a piece of paper with a declaration and one's name written in Latin, a kind of proof from the Roman Catholic Church of having completed a pilgrimage. In many places, there are also *hostals* (boardinghouses, mostly very plain and simple hotels).

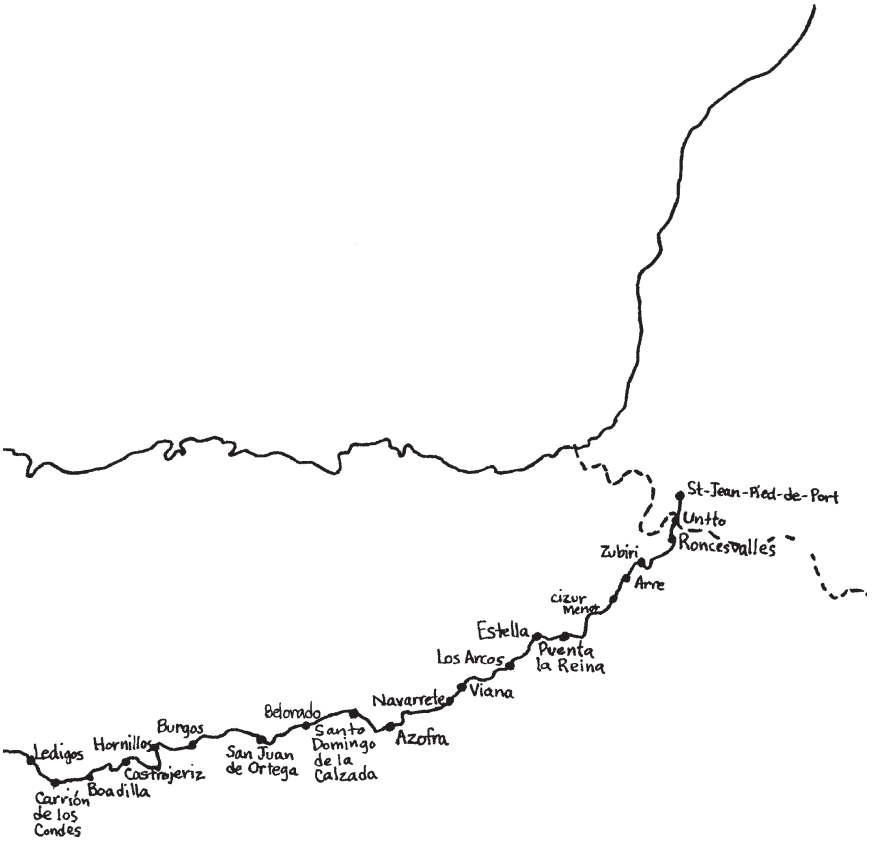
Habitaciónes (rooms) and *camas* (beds) are also advertised. The local barman always seems to know the places to stay, so that if the *refugio* is full, there isn't much difficulty or expense in finding other accommodations. We traveled without a tent because we didn't want to carry the extra weight, but in the summer I think it would be a must. We were surprised by the number of people on the *camino* in May, and we often arrived to find the *refugio* filled by mid-afternoon.

I felt I had just enough information under my belt, but not too much. I looked forward to finding my way, and not knowing anything in advance about outcomes every day, even where I was going to sleep at night. The *camino* unfolded for me as I walked along it. The journal that follows is rather haphazard, and I've left it that way deliberately. The pilgrimage wasn't a linear trip. This account of it reflects the meandering, rambling quality of life, both internal and external, on the *camino*.

On the afternoon that I left for Spain, I was feeling quite anxious about the big adventure that lay before me. My friend Mindy came over to give me a present for the road—a collection of talismans to bring me good fortune. They were little Mexican *milagros:* a guardian angel to protect me on the way, a set of legs and feet for strength in walking, an ear to hear and remember great stories, an eye to see beautiful and hilarious things, a heart to be open to a profound experience, and a cross to deepen my faith. Two other friends had given me a St. Christopher's medal—poor old, demoted-but-still-best-beloved St. Chris! Another had given me a perfect scallop shell, plucked from our favorite beach. I sewed these along the sweatband of my hat and set out for the *camino* with a new sense of confidence.

I can't tally the number of times I reached up in some dusty, hard, dry spot along the *camino*, touched the little legs, and asked God for the needed strength to keep on walking.


FRANCE
SPAIN
PORTUGAL
Santiago de Compostela
San Paio
Arzúa
Ligonde-Ereixe
Melide
Portomarín
Triacastela
Barbadelo
O Cebreiro
Trabadelo
Cacabelos
El Acebo
Rabanal del Camino
Astorga
Hospital de Órbigo
Villar de Mazarife
León
Mansilla de las Mulas
El Burgo Ranero
Sahagún


St-Jean-Pied-de-Port
Untto
Roncesvalles
Zubiri
Arre
cizur Menor
Estella
Puenta la Reina
Los Arcos
Viana
Navarrete
Azofra
Santo Domingo de la Calzada
Belorado
San Juan de Ortega
Burgos
Castrojeriz
Hornillos
Ledigos
Boadilla
Carrión de los Condes

Pilgrim Cast of Characters

Many of the names of people met on the camino *have been changed in this account.*

Jacques and Marie Antoinette—Our first guardian angels. Mid-sixties, very fit, nimble hikers. Met the first day, took us under their wings. Lost them for good at Arre, but picked up a message from them in Santo Domingo de la Calzada.

Claire, Claude, and Petruchio—An amusing threesome we met our first day, but whom we soon lost. Petruchio and Claude seemed to be vying for the affections of Claire.

Judy and Sara—Two British friends, met our first day, and lost after Viana. Sara with her bullwhip and studded baseball cap.

Duncan and Marta—Our diffident Scot, first met in Arre and last seen outside of Frómista. Marta, an East German, and he met in Hornillos and became an item.

Frances—An Episcopal priest met in Cizur Menor, last seen in Azofra.

Ruth, Jim, Anne, and Richard—The Aussie foursome. Ruth completed the *camino* solo. Jim had to go back to work, and Anne and Richard toured Spain after one week of walking. We met up again with Ruth in Santiago, not having seen her since Burgos.

The Flamands—The big, jolly, "picturesque" baby and his dour friend. Last seen in Viana when they had to cut short their travels because of blister woes.

The Trolls—A disagreeable French foursome.

The Frenchies—An agreeable French group. Daniel, traveling with five women friends.

Texas Jack—Met in Puenta la Reina. He dropped out, we heard, with heart trouble. He had a larger-than-life reputation for wealth and success (he was Texan, after all), and reminded me of a beloved uncle.

Guardian Angel—Our grumpy Basque, last seen in Viana.

Ellie—A German woman, traveling solo, who walked with Frances for a few days and then met up with us, until a sore tooth put her on a different schedule.

Ratty and Moley—A French male couple who dressed alike and intersected with us for the first ten days or so. One urbane and smooth, the other nervous and darting-eyed.

The Brazilians—Ogila, and her two friends, whom we met on the first day. A fourth woman joined them, and we met her on our very last day in Santiago.

Paola—Another friendly Brazilian, traveling solo, who kept us apprised of the whereabouts of other pilgrim pals.

Evelyn—A suffering Dutch woman, met in Viana and again in Burgos, where she was in fine form, completely restored.

Betty and Ralph—Met outside of Logroño, they intersected with us all the way to Santiago. Jerseyites, in their sixties. Betty, a delightful flake—Ralph, the perfect foil.

Javi and Co.—A Spanish foursome who snored, got up very early, and fiendishly rattled plastic and flashed headlamps until we were all wide awake.

The Danes—Popeye, his wife, and another couple. They shared a rooftop with us in Los Arcos, and Popeye joined us for a silent and unexplained drink in Azofra.

Timothy—The nineteen-year-old from Milwaukee, traveling solo. Lost him outside of Burgos, found him again outside of Santiago.

Rachel—The prickly, interesting deacon/journalist from the Midwest. Lost after Hornillos, but found in Santiago.

Théa and Martine—Dutch friends, in their fifties. Théa, an artist, Martine, a physical therapist who helped me greatly with foot woes in Hospital de Orbigo. Found them again in Arzua.

Amy—Another guardian angel. The dot-com casualty with the terrible Spanish accent, who always got into town ahead of us and gave us all the necessary scoop.

Henny—A Dutch woman with bad knees, last seen in León.

Marie-Chantal—The detached, watchful Frenchwoman, traveling solo.

Dick the Priest—Young Dutchman, very taken with the *camino*, who found a following in Ron, Remko (two young Dutch friends), and Rachel.

Belgian Jacques—Sixty-something man with a curious history. Seemed to be looking for women, as he attached himself to first one, then the next, along the way.

Pirkko and Tom—The Finns: she bossy, he benign.

The Large Barges—Four semi-disagreeable Frenchwomen who warmed up after one of them, Marie-Lou, helped me find my prayer box.

Zoe and Jeremy—Our Aussie friends with whom we spent two very special days in the Bierzo, and then found again in Arzua. Peter Pan and Wendy.

Tina and the Kids—A Danish runner, pushing her two children along the *camino* in a buggy.

The Katzenjammer Kids—Two grizzled, matching Frenchwomen. Tiny, wiry, all sinew.

The Kiwi Herd—A group of thundering New Zealand women, led by Rataxes.

Hanna and Jakob—German and Dutch; met each other at Burgos and traveled together afterwards. We first met at a swimming hole, lost Jakob at Trabadelo, and then intersected with Hanna all the way to Santiago.

Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee—An intense, male, look-alike twosome. One French, the other Italian, met each other on the *camino.*

Bernard—Rosie's heartthrob, a charming Irishman.

Michele and Jean-Louis—A French couple in their sixties, with whom we dined in Mazerife. Spotted once more in El Acebo.

Cécile and Dani—The Liechtensteiners, friends of Hanna.

Vivi—A Danish lawyer turned artist.

Patricia—A tiny Aussie woman in her sixties, traveling solo after her brother had to drop out. Met again with a broken foot in Santiago.

Greta—An overbearing German woman, met in El Acebo, last seen in O Cebreiro.

Maritte—A German woman traveling solo, struggling, not happy with her time on the *camino*. Trying too hard to make it "mean" something.

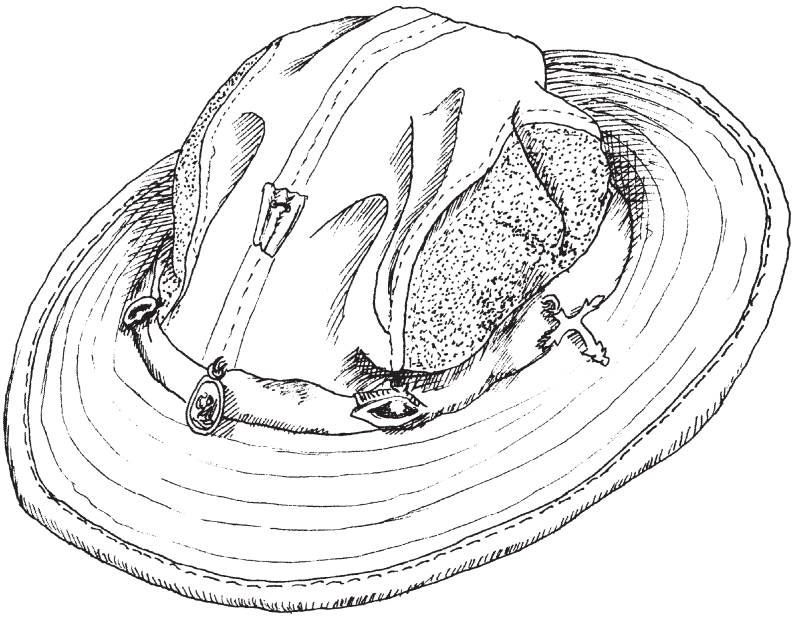
Michael—A singing German Adonis.

Swiss Carl and English Charles—Carl a bit of a boor, and Charles a bit of a bore. He was very taken with Arielle, the Hispanic-American woman who assisted at Mass in Triacastela, and who preferred time alone on the *camino.*

Zipporah—An Israeli woman, traveling solo.

Annelise and Alfredo—A big, overbearing Danish woman on her fourth *camino* venture, with a fawning Spanish friend, Alfredo.

Adrian—A young Danish boy traveling with his parents and doing all the translating for them with great confidence and skill.



Friday, May 4

St-Jean-Pied-de-Port
(Maison E Bernat 20 Rue de la Citadelle)

Rosie and I flew out of Logan Airport in Boston on Thursday, May 3, 2001, in over 90° Fahrenheit heat. While we were alternately taxiing and waiting on the runway, we heard a terrible metallic clanking, repeated with alarming regularity about every two minutes. A passenger eventually spoke to a cabin steward about it. "No problem" was the word from the cockpit, and off we flew. We arrived in dense fog in Brussels, came in for the landing, with more hideous grinding coming from the belly of the plane, and swooped up again to the strains of "A Whiter Shade of Pale" on the Muzak in an otherwise silent cabin. We circled for several minutes, and came in again. Over the radio the pilot calmly informed us that there "*might* have been an obstruction" on the runway and that he had just done a "passby," a perfectly normal maneuver and nothing to worry about. However, when we walked off the plane, the corridor was lined with firemen rather than the usual airport personnel.

It was a long day—two planes, a bus to Bordeaux Centre, two trains, with a three-hour sit in between in the Bayonne train station. In Bordeaux there were no lines to buy tickets. We picked a number, as at a deli counter in American supermarkets, and waited—a nerve-wracking process because the customers and sellers all chitchatted casually with each transaction. We watched the numbers slowly tick up to ours, got our tickets for Bayonne, and then had five minutes to spare. We flew down a tunnel and up to our platform and, forgetting that backpacks change one's shape and bulk, almost knocked down an old lady on the way, got on the wrong train, and then the right one with about a minute to go. Our nerves were shot, but

we were on our final train. I felt capable and adventurous. We'd made all the flights and buses and trains and I had gabbled away in terrible French without a care, was understood, and so far no one had replied in English with that withering, disdainful French look of distaste at my accent.

The Bayonne station was bustling with students leaving on a long weekend. We spotted our first fellow pilgrims—four grim-looking French folk discussing their backpacks intently. Several drunken men came in out of the cold rain and sat directly across from Rosie and me. One came right over to ask for cigarette money. I couldn't believe it. Burned-out from working in a street ministry among Boston's homeless, I'd come all this way to set out on a five-hundred-mile pilgrimage of renewal and was immediately reminded of my days on the streets. Train stations are good gathering places for people needing to get out of the weather and warm up for a while, and South Station in Boston is a major hangout for homeless people. I had spent parts of my days in the station passing out sandwiches, tea, new socks and underwear, gloves, hats, and sitting and talking to any of the homeless denizens who welcomed the contact. Now my backpack was filled with my own supplies for the road rather than emergency clothing and food for others, but I wondered if I had some sort of sonar system that made these men cluster around and home in, looking for a handout, from me in particular. I felt confused—both sorry not to have the usual supplies on hand, and a kind of detached relief that I didn't have to engage with these fellows. They were just a passing part of the adventure I was heading into, rather than a source of consuming interest and concern, as they would have been at home. Then I felt uncomfortable with my desire to tune them out—a kind of "now you care, now you don't" that didn't sit well. I watched their interactions and wondered what French social services are like for men such as these.

A walk outside for fresh air revealed a plaque in the *place* in front of the train station commemorating Bayonne's hospitality to pilgrims on "the coastal route."

There was heavy rain on the last dinky train to St-Jean, so we missed what must be fabulous scenery. What we did see was reminiscent of New Hampshire and Vermont—lush green, woods, fields, wooden barns. The farms were stucco and wood, and looked a little like chalets. There were plenty of sheep on a hillside seen from the train to St-Jean, so foot-and-mouth disease had not come this far, I guessed.

It was pouring in St-Jean and dark. We wrestled with ponchos, hoods, and fogged-up eyeglasses, wandering lost on the streets of this beautiful

little town. We walked up toward the citadel, and a fellow waved and yelled from his balcony trying to show us the way to the pilgrim hostel, or *refugio*. Then a man in a car stopped to help show us the way, indicating a path through the walls and up along the ramparts. Next a walker came by and led us to our hotel because we were stumbling blindly around the moss-covered, slick stones of the ramparts. We might as well have stepped right back into the thirteenth or fourteenth century.

Finally we were tucked into a lovely old house, booked in advance, with very amiable hosts. We had tisane and bread and jam and cheese, and talked with the female half of the proprietors—Mireille. Then I sent an e-mail to my husband, Jeff, and found one from him already in the inbox. A first for me—e-mail on the road. Slightly confused by the fact that French keyboards don't use Qwerty, I had a moment or two when I thought that jet lag was causing aphasia as I tapped meaningless gobbledygook back to Jeff.

DAY ONE

Saturday, May 5

St-Jean to Untto (Ferme Ithurburia)

5 kms (plus extra on up and down!)

"Vous êtes des championnes! des championnes!"

Mireille woke me at eight-thirty, saying it was pouring, and did we want to stay over, to which I said "Yes" without consulting a still-sleeping Rosie. I got up for breakfast and found myself eager to be on the road in spite of the rain, and woke Rosie for a consult. We cased St-Jean, which I now remembered from a visit almost thirty years earlier. It is a beautiful medieval walled town, now fairly upscale, with tiny cobbled streets. The river Nive runs beside the walled town, with the more modern town spread along the far bank.

We stopped in for a look and a prayer at a church, then walked through an archway across the river in search of a rain sack for my pack, as it was clear from our walk from the station last night that my poncho was useless in any wind. We found one handily, then had a powwow about whether to go or stay—both of us eager to be off despite the rain. The forecast was bad for the next several days, so we decided on leaving. We stopped for fruit, water, and veggies, having already pocketed the rest of our breakfast cake, bread, and cheese. This was the one and only time we bought bottled water, as we soon discovered that fountain and tap water were fresh. I got compliments on my French and had friendly little encounters in St-Jean in the shops. I loved feeling comfortable chatting with folks in my ancient and rusty French, and wondered how I would feel in Spain by contrast, not knowing the language at all.

We thought we saw several pilgrims, which encouraged us in our desire to start out so late in the day. In retrospect, they were likely local day hikers, as pilgrims are definitely early risers.

At the hotel we did Rosie's back exercises, and my tendon exercises. (We did these warm-ups for about one more day and that was it, until I learned some foot exercises weeks down the road from Martine, a fellow pilgrim, in Hospital de Orbigo.) I toured the hotel with Mireille, who had moved to St-Jean two years earlier to set up shop with her husband, Eric, giving up careers in PR and engineering in Paris. The house was seventeenth century, stone and stucco, with very high wood ceilings. There was a little courtyard outside for eating, and plans for a deck to see the Pyrenees (invisible on a day like this). Eric had built a couple of attractive, modern attic rooms, but I was glad we had been given our older one on the *premier étage*.

Mireille repeated at least four times that the first day on the *camino* is the toughest. She called us *championnes* when we left, and it became our rallying cry along the *camino*, as in: "Don't forget, Rosie, *'Nous sommes des championnes!'* We have a reputation to uphold here." We got off on the spot of noon, again crossing over the Nive and out of town up a steep, narrow road. I was reminded of Yorkshire, the Swiss Alps, Vermont—deep greens, barbed-wire fences, sheep, goats, lots of cows—as we walked along and up, always up. We stopped to rest, and looked out over the misty valleys, silent but for birds, cowbells, and rushing water from roadside streams. My head was full of the heavy smells of wet grass and earth, then the pungent addition of manure on the road. Lots of wildflowers—yellow, lavender—daisies, calla lilies in gardens, corn already nearly three feet high.

The *camino* is marked by yellow arrows all along the route—hand-painted on trees, stones, the sides of houses, telephone poles. Each province has its own formal *camino* symbol as well: a blue tile with a yellow scallop, some of them old and faded, others more modern, set in walls or in stone markers; metal road signs with a scallop shell; in Galicia, a horrible little pilgrim figure who looks like the goofy mascots we now design for the Olympics.

We were watching out for arrows and signs and seeing as well white, red, and green stripes marking other hiking routes in the Pyrenees. We stopped at a small crossroad, a decision point, to consider which yellow arrows to follow, since they went in two directions. We struggled with rain gear and pack, trying to get out a book that might have some pointers, when another pilgrim, Jacques, stopped to offer help. We walked together for a few minutes, but he was speedy compared to us, and walked on. He

was wearing a poncho over shorts and didn't seem at all troubled by getting wet. Jacques had walked segments of the route before, and this year had started from Pau four days ago and was headed as far as Burgos on this particular leg. I took note not only of his shorts but of his muscled calves, and realized that our first pilgrim was in marvelous shape—was a real hiker, in fact.

[I got a letter from Jacques the following October in response to a letter and photos from me. Here is what he had to say on learning that we actually made it to Santiago (translated from the French): "I am happy to know that you arrived at St Jacques and I must offer my congratulations to both of you because on seeing you climbing a certain day, a little after St-Jean-Pied-de-Port at a turn to be precise, I would never have believed that you would arrive one day at Santiago. Bravo again."]

We did a lot of fiddling with straps, getting out the camera, peeling off layers under our rain gear, hats on and off. I realized this was going to be a real walk, hard and slow, and that we'd have stinky weather and have to keep going, and I was grinning from ear to ear. I couldn't believe we were actually here and walking. I thought of all the things that we tell ourselves we'll do "some day" and how many of them don't happen. I was thrilled to feel the reality of this journey—all the physical affirmation that I was on a real road rather than in one of my dreams, where I wouldn't feel the rain and smell the grass.

We passed a *gîte d'étape* (hostel)—a little fancier than average, with an evening meal advertised. To the left of the road were two long buildings clinging to the hillside and facing back toward St-Jean. It must afford a great view on a clear day. On the right, across the street, was a dormitory. We stopped for a rest on a fence outside the entrance, and then pressed on.

Soon we were off-road and onto a track—everything from mud to stones with water running alongside, to grassy path. Higher and higher, I was now glad of the fog, as I thought the heights might have been troublesome had I been able to see where we were. Now it was cold and windy, and the fog was thick and swirling. Rosie was going very slowly. We came to a spot with a map of the mountains and the towns spread out below—not that we could see anything of this in the fog. The altitude was affecting Rosie, who was feeling sick and faint, and we decided to turn back (or rather, I decided, as Rosie wasn't thinking too clearly) and we descended to Untto, the place where we had rested, about a half an hour below and behind us.

We were put in a bunk room with our crossroads friend, Jacques, who was resting on his bed. He said he had told the innkeeper to expect two

American women because he knew the route would be too long for us. How right he was! We installed ourselves—Rosie in a bottom bunk, me in a single, next to Jacques. There were two bunkbeds and two single beds and a bathroom just for us. This was the height of luxury, only we didn't know that yet!

Rosie rested while I headed out to the common room with my books and journal. There was a kitchenette and dining area at one end, another dining table near the bunk rooms, and a corner with sofa and chairs in front of a fireplace. Rosie and Jacques appeared. Rosie and I ate lunch and claimed a radiator to dry our clothes. Then a mini-onslaught of pilgrims showed up—two English, two French, three Brazilians—instantly creating a little social world—Who are you? Where are you from? some of it gleaned from conversation, the rest through shameless eavesdropping and gawking.

Jacques seemed a little aloof to me, so I was careful not to ask him too many questions, not wanting to be intrusive. What I didn't yet know was that he was being a typical pilgrim—regrouping after his day's walk. We all tended to arrive exhausted and pulled into ourselves. We flopped, cleaned up, only slowly coming to life and eventually becoming more sociable by evening. Jacques turned out to be wonderfully gregarious, fun-loving, a real flirt, just sort of a sparkly guy. He was the only one who had actually walked a real *étape* today, from Ostabat; the rest of us had walked only from St-Jean, so were not tired. (I was delighted to learn that the word *étape*, a day's march, is actually used, and is not just a definition in the *New York Times* crossword puzzle.)

Rosie was feeling much better now that she had rested and we were lower down. We tried to plan our next day: would we go two separate routes and end up in Roncesvalles at day's end, or stick together during the day? There was a lower and easier route if altitude was a problem. I was a faster walker it seemed, apart from the altitude, but it didn't feel as if that would matter. We were happy to walk singly, and I stopped every now and again to wait for Rosie, thereby getting a rest myself. [As it turned out, this observation did not hold true. My first day's enthusiasm and Rosie's altitude difficulty made me seem speedy, when, in fact, Rosie was routinely faster than I, except on hills. I tended to chuff up these quickly to get them over with, while Rosie tackled them slowly. It remained true, though, that throughout the trip we didn't care about each other's pace. At times, we walked separately at our individual speeds; at others we walked together for long stretches by choice. I needed to rest much more often than Rosie, and felt quite free about stopping whenever I liked. Sometimes she stopped

with me, sometimes she went on. In any case, we were together at the end of the day.]

I felt wonderful and weird all at once about this adventure, full of a strange sort of nervousness, anxiety and adrenaline combined. When I was walking I felt great, but once stopped, I was edgy and had a nervous stomach—a familiar condition. I veered from feeling perfectly fine to feeling swept over with the queasies. I had had big anxiety problems on the plane, lasting well into the second flight of the day, but then they had disappeared. Then wham! in the middle of the night I woke up and they were back, and again in the morning. They were gone once we were out and doing. I think I was fearful of all the unknowns. How would it all work in the *refugios* with my fear of feeling trapped? What would I do with anxiety in the middle of the night if I was sharing a room with six strangers?

It felt as if Rosie and I would be easy travelers together—our different walking paces, or what to do with my anxiety attacks and her altitude problems, would work themselves out as we went along.

DAY TWO

Sunday, May 6

Untto to Roncesvalles
20 kms

Six o'clock—I got up in a lather of excitement after what felt like a sleepless night, thinking I couldn't possibly record this adventure, hold onto any of it, and that I might as well toss out the idea of keeping a daily journal.

By last evening we were three Brazilian women; four French—Marie Antoinette and Claire, Jacques and Claude; two English women—Sara and Judy; a young Spanish couple; a mystery Belgian; Rosie and I. What unbelievably wonderful byplay, banter, drama, and language glitches resolved. Rosie and I were playing gin in the common room, and explaining it to Jacques in French and also to the two Spaniards, who didn't speak French. We struggled in "Spanglish" to explain our cards, as Spanish decks are quite different from ours. The Brazilians thought I was the proprietor for some reason, and when they found out that I was just another pilgrim and therefore couldn't tell them the night's cost, their "leader," Ogila, rushed around the table and kissed both Rosie and me in some sort of camaraderie or a sense of victory over figuring out in Portuguese/French/Spanish/English what was what.

At some point the real proprietor showed up with an attractive Belgian fellow in his late forties, looking rather like Petruchio from *The Taming of the Shrew*, a big, confident, blustery man. There was a lot of brouhaha about where the Frenchwomen were, who they were, etc. We knew nothing and suggested they look in the bunk rooms, but the ladies were nowhere to be

found. There was a lot of bustle and noise around this search and unexplained mystery. Later, however, Petruchio returned with a bottle of wine and found Claire—an attractive blonde woman from Bordeaux in her late thirties who was with an older (sixties) Parisienne, Marie Antoinette, whom she had met on the train to St-Jean this morning.

Still unexplained: Was Petruchio an old boyfriend? A relative? Was there some problem, given the seeming urgency of his search? He opened the wine, offered it to the assembled folk, and eight of us gathered to drink *un coup.* There was lots of talk among us about the wine because it was from St-Jean. The Spaniards and Brazilians were preparing their own dinners and hanging out.

The rest of us headed off for dinner across the road. We started with the weather report, standing in the kitchen watching the TV over the old farmer's shoulder (the forecast was not good, but clearing in the afternoon). We trooped into the dining room—a long, glassed-in porch—where we were seventeen at the table, some guests who were not over in our dormitory, as well as the old farmer, his wife and son, the proprietor. These three leapt up and down to serve the meal. First we were offered a choice of muscat or port to drink, then came a thick veggie and bean soup, then a prosciutto-like ham with cornichons, then duck and zucchini, lots of bread, and, of course, lots of red wine. Then cheese, poached pears—all this with the overnight and breakfast for $25!

Rosie and I were at one end next to the two Englishwomen, across from Jacques, and on my left the mystery couple, with Petruchio at my elbow and Claire across the table. Jacques was from Lyons, a retired manager of a textile firm, with two kids and seven grandchildren. This was his fourth and penultimate segment of the *camino*. When he's completed his serial walk, he wants to walk the whole in one go. He doesn't eat during the day, just sucks on sugar cubes pocketed from his morning coffee, and said he loses about six kilos every time he does a segment.

The Englishwomen, Sara and Judy, were from the north of England. Judy (forty-nine) had five kids ranging in age from fifteen to thirty-three, and Sara (forty-two) had two—one twelve and the other twenty-two. Their connection was that the father of three of Judy's kids was also the father of Sara's twenty-two-year-old! They had lived in a quasi-religious, communal situation years earlier, with a guru figure running the show, had since freed themselves from him and managed to remain fast friends.

There were lots of jokes about Jacques and his "harem," since Sara and Judy were in our room as well. Claude, a garrulous, friendly Frenchman

who seemed partial to Claire (in spite of Petruchio's attendance on her), had only two women in his room, so the men had obviously already compared notes as to sleeping arrangements. Jacques was at least thirty years older than Claude and seemed extra pleased to have lucked into a roomful of women to enhance his image of virility.

Finally I had to ask Claire and Petruchio about the scene of the afternoon—she blushed, he blustered. Claire and Marie Antoinette had met earlier in the day on the train, met Petruchio later in St-Jean, and the three had lunched together. Claire mentioned where she was going, and he showed up hours later, unexpectedly and in hot pursuit, in his camper, and with his bottle of St-Jean wine. He had had no plans to go on the *camino* but was simply touring solo in the Pyrenees. A *camino* romance already! He had lived in Minnesota for three years, an engineer working for 3M, and, to his credit, he never once tried a word of English on me. I was getting all sorts of strokes in this crowd for my French, so I felt very full of myself.

This whole dinner scene was just incredible—tureens of soup, platters of food—two solid hours around the table chattering, eating, and drinking. What a total delight, and already such a different pace of life.

Not a wink of sleep. I was way too keyed up. A hot sleeping bag, maybe the wine—perhaps I'd try beer, instead. (This was an idle threat not lived out on the *camino*, except maybe for one or two nights when the lack of wine made no difference whatsoever to my sleep pattern, which was poor throughout.) The Spanish table wine served to pilgrims tasted very light and not especially potent. It seemed to me we drank however much we liked without ever feeling the worse for it the next day.

I was happy as a clam, if sleepless. What I realized in the wee hours was that the affability and excitement was due to the fact that *everyone* had chosen to be here and was pumped up for the route. In that respect it was like being at Disneyland, where families look a lot better than they do in supermarket aisles conducting their day-to-day business. Everyone here was flashing guidebooks, comparing notes, cooking, hogging the radiators to dry out clothing, sharing stories. I wondered if after several weeks, maybe on the *meseta*—a bleaker spot—we'd have turned more inward and silent, and also how many of these first folk we would keep encountering night after night. (Very few as it turned out.) As to the former, I don't think we ever did turn more inward and silent. Perhaps the pitch of excitement was lower in light of the heat and fatigue, but there always remained an interest in other pilgrims, the desire to connect and find out a bit about each other—to engage.

It felt as if every minute was an assault, in a positive sense, on my awareness—the sheer physicality of the hiking, of the environment, of the need to keep one's eyes on the trail for safety's sake, then all the social interaction and the how-to's of sharing a dorm with four others (or thirty). All of it was brand-new, immediate.

Based on this first day, my idea of solitude and contemplation seemed unlikely—however, one must settle down eventually and get used to things and then it might be a calmer, less intense, experience. Also, the route itself must make a difference. On a mountainous route, with a changing trail, one has to pay attention to the physical walk itself. As the days wore on, we did settle in and were calmer, and while there was plenty of solitude it wasn't particularly contemplative for me—I really did watch the trail all the time, never losing my awareness of the physical reality of it all, and of our vulnerability to injury. My best moments for contemplation were when I was completely stopped, alone, sitting by a stream with my feet soaking, or just resting in a nice spot by the *camino* gathering energy.

Today we walked for eight hours without stopping—nine-fifteen to five-fifteen—because the weather was so bad there was no respite to be found in a break. The rain and fog continued, but now the temperature had dropped to the 30s. We climbed above the tree line, walking along a one-lane road, pelted by the near-freezing rain, sharp on the skin. The wind increased with the altitude. An occasional silent pilgrim loomed out of the fog behind us, strode past, and disappeared quickly. We didn't see more than eight others that day, and no one for the last four hours in the forest above Roncesvalles. We hadn't even had the sense to stock up on food, and I was thankful that as we paid up after breakfast I had asked our *hôtelière* if she could sell us some bread and cheese. This we ate, trudging along in the sleet with our hands turning red, purple, and puce in the cold.

After four hours we had climbed high enough to be in ankle-deep, slushy snow. We came to the ultimate place of desolation, Urkulu, a giant cross standing alone on a high moor, protected by a low iron fence with hundreds of small crosses, stones, and talismans laid at its base. From this place pilgrims get their first clear view west from the Pyrenees and traditionally ask God's blessing on their pilgrimage. The wind was whipping, the sleet was pelting on our rain gear, but there was no way I was going to set off without a prayer at that cross. I struggled out of my pack and flapping poncho, dug around to find two Palm Sunday crosses, and placed them with the others at the foot of the cross. We offered prayers for our safety, for our loved ones, for a good journey. It was a powerful and dramatic moment

in the raging weather. We had to take the view on faith, but we looked west, asked for God's blessing, and were not disappointed.

We plowed on and, beginning to descend at last, entered the woods above Roncesvalles. This proved to be far more treacherous than the barren first half of our day. Now the track was a single-file mountain path, covered in slippery, wet snow. Hidden under the snow were stones, mud, leaves, ruts. We crept along slowly, step by careful step.

We came upon an abandoned car—very spooky! How could anyone have gotten it there? Why did they leave it? Weeks later we heard that another pilgrim had found the registration or written down the plate number and was going to look it up when he got home to see if he could trace the mystery. He poked around enough to determine that the trunk was empty, a question that had crossed quite a few minds, including my own.

I thought about the medieval knight Roland and twenty thousand troops on horseback with heavy armor all milling about and killing each other in these woods. So silent now, peaceful, green and mossy, but also mysterious. It wasn't hard to conjure up a phantom battle in the imagination and hear the ring of sword against armor, the stomping and wheeling of horses among the too-close trees, the cries and whinnies of pain and fear.

I came to the lip of a steep bowl, assessed the situation, sat down, and sledded down it on my rain pants. I stood at the bottom, waiting for Rosie to appear at the lip and admiring the wide swath I had cut with my backpack acting as an extra plow behind me. I called up to Rosie to sit down and follow my example, and she landed safely at my feet a few seconds later.

We were in good spirits throughout, but what a trial the last two hours were. We walked in silence, gathering into ourselves to keep going. The forest was very beautiful, but we were too whipped to appreciate it fully. The sound of the monastery bells at Roncesvalles alerted us to our arrival—we couldn't see it, but we knew we were close. We walked over a stream on a tiny wooden bridge, finally out of the woods, and up to an enormous monastery.

Looking back on this first full day of walking, I'm appalled to realize how foolhardy we were. We never should have taken the pass, but chosen a lower road instead. What we didn't know is that if you start from the *refugio* at St-Jean, instead of from a cozy inn, they register you and contact the people at Roncesvalles so that it's known how many are coming through each day, and they also advise you when not to take the high route. There was one old gent who got frostbite that day, and another got lost and

staggered in even later than we. The beauty of it was that we did feel like Mireille's *championnes*, and realized that if we had survived the trek to Roncesvalles we could likely survive anything on the *camino*. We also knew it would make for great war stories. Down the road, when we named the date we crossed the Pyrenees, people would knowingly nod their heads and add to the mystique by talking about other people who had crossed in the same conditions in the same few days. There was huge validation in our folly.

At the monastery, we followed the drill to sign in, got our *credentials* stamped, and then staggered up three flights to the attic since the lower rooms were full. A total of about sixty can be accommodated in this cavernous stone and stucco building. There was no hot water so, although shaking and freezing, I forewent a shower. Nor was there any heat and not much light, either.

I went to the pilgrim's Mass and benediction. I loved this as the first formal acknowledgment of pilgrimhood. At the end of the Mass, the priest invited all pilgrims to come forward. We shuffled to the foot of the nave, some stiff-legged and cramped up after the day's walk, some shyly, others purposefully, some elated, others sheepish. There's nothing quite like receiving a blessing to renew energy and resolve. I think I crossed over, in that moment of blessing, from interpreting my pilgrimage as a private undertaking to understanding that I was a drop in an almost timeless flow, and that "my" journey was inextricably joined to those of my fellow pilgrims standing with me now—those who had already gone before, and those who would follow.

Rosie had braved the showers, so I picked her up and we headed to one of the two local bars for a warm-up sherry. From the dark, bleak, freezing cold, Bergmanesque monastery, we packed ourselves into a tiny, steamy, smoky bar where all the patrons were glued to a soccer match on the TV—a black-and-white world to Technicolor with one turn of a door handle. We paid for a pilgrim's meal (eight dollars) and got a chit to be handed in later when the dining room opened. Our friends from Untto were all here. The Brazilians had copped a ride from Petruchio, who had taken pity on them in the bad weather. He was still in pursuit of Claire, *évidemment!*

We returned to the monastery before dinner, joined a group sitting in the common room at a long table loaded with guidebooks and maps, and chatted with our neighbors. At one end of the room a group of twenty-something pilgrims started dancing—teaching each other folk dances—

WOW! after all that hiking. (It turned out most of them hadn't walked today, but were starting in the morning. Lots of pilgrims begin at Roncesvalles, getting here by taxi from Pamplona.)

Our first "pilgrim dinner" or *menú del dia,* turned out to be typical of what we ate all along the *camino*—broth with semolina, trout, French fries, ice cream, wine. These meals were offered in lots of restaurants. The dining rooms, *comedors,* in the back of bars would open at eight or eight-thirty for weary pilgrims, and serve a three-course dinner for eight to ten dollars. The first course was a salad (usually with asparagus, tuna, egg) or macaroni or soup, then a second course of meat or fish, always with fries, then yogurt or flan or ice cream in a plastic container, and a bottle of wine or water. The meals were never gastronomic delights, but they filled us up, and the price was right, as was the hour. By the time the Spaniards came out to fill the restaurants, we were asleep in our bunks. Our dinner companions were two young Dutch girls who had been in the folk-dancing crowd. One of them told us she had misgivings about making the pilgrimage as she had a seizure disorder, but was fairly confident she would be able to make it. I wondered at the courage it would take to make such a journey with a threatening medical condition, and at the myriad motivations there must be for being out on the *camino*.

Back in our attic, with eleven bunkbeds and one single, we all got to sleep early. The room was instantly quiet once the last pilgrim turned off the overhead light, probably because we were all so exhausted from the day's walk. (There were no egregious snorers, but at this point in the trip I was too much of a rube to know how rare that was.)

[Today was the day of the annual Walk for Hunger in Boston, and I found out later in an e-mail that this was also the day that Bob Adams died. He was a long-standing member of the ministry I worked for, and had been ailing over a period of years. The news of his death was a blessing, and it made me happy to think of Bob in God's embrace, after his struggles.

This experience of traveling with occasional e-mail access was new and unexpected, and how it changes travel. I felt so plugged into my life at home in some respects, even while I was in such extraordinarily unfamiliar circumstances. I did not expect to be in contact with those from home, except by postcards and occasional phone calls to family, but I found that one of the great joys of the trip was both e-mailing home "dispatches" from the *camino* and hearing from people en route. I felt as if I had an

invisible host of friends and well-wishers with me, and as a result, loneliness was never a part of my *camino* experience, in spite of many days spent in almost complete solitude.

Bob found his way into my thoughts and prayers many times in my walk across Spain.]