

Chemin de Saint Jacques - Another Place in Another Time

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Were you ever left stunned by a holiday? I have just returned from walking the first 100 miles of the way of St. James in France and I feel like an apostle overcome with inspiration to spread the good news. I have been to and walked through a truly remarkable place and I want to go back!

The origins of this walk go back to the early 9th century when Pelagius, a hermit living in the north west of Spain, had a vision of a field of stars (Compos Stella), which led to the discovery of a tomb containing the body of St. James the Apostle (St. Iago) and thus began the Camino or Way of St. James. Such was the effect of this discovery that in the 11th and 12th century, it is estimated that a half a million people a year travelled to the tomb on pilgrimage. A great many of these were French and one of the principle gathering points for pilgrims was at the stunning chapel of Saint Michel d'Aiguilhe (The Needle) built by the Bishop of Le Puy in 951AD, when he returned from Santiago. When you climb the 267 steps to this chapel you begin to feel the pain, the joy and the excitement of the many who have walked before you and with you over the last 1,000 years.

I had the great and lasting pleasure of walking the Spanish Camino from the Pyrennes to Santiago in 2008/2009 and in an attempt to recreate that experience I persuaded a group of five friends to join me on the first 100 miles of the route (via Podensis) from Le Puy en Velay to the Pyrennes (Total distance 730 kilometres).

Thanks to Saint Michel O'Leary, we hoped to pack this adventure into a sunny week. Our trip was made all the more easy thanks to Camino Ways, a Dublin-based travel company who booked our accomodation and meals at agreed stops along the way and arranged for our bags to be carried from hotel to hotel – well no point in too much hardship?

We flew to Lyon with Aer Lingus, with a minibus connection to Le Puy and one week later flew out of Rodez, close to where our walk finished, with Ryanair.

In days of old, it was customary to set out in springtime in order to reach Santiago for the Feast of Saint James on July 25th

and return home for the winter. We were hoping that late May would deliver the ideal weather conditions for our mini-camino, warm and dry and that's what it did! Climbing up out of Le Puy on day one of our walk, we were surprised to find an official notice in three languages warning pilgrims to "be careful"! Someone who pretends to want to help you and tries to guide pilgrims off the official footpaths was out there, it warned, but could get you lost in the middle of nowhere! We never did encounter this man of mystery but instead found the Chemin de St. Jacques to be the best and most clearly signposted walk that we have done to date. Indeed, the free guide book provided by Camino Ways was unnecessary and used only to research the history of the lovely towns and villages we passed through.

What can I say of the walk itself? Mountains, valleys, the long long Masgeride plateau and on through the Gevaudan – an area best known for the mysterious wild beast [La Bete] that claimed many lives towards the end of the 12th century. The countryside is alive with the sounds of a million happy birds, the bells of cows, the clatter of crickets, the chimes of distant churches and most of all cuckoos – everywhere...almost in every copse. Nature looks at peace with itself in this place. Individual families of beautiful brown-red cows graze happily in lush fields under the watchful eyes of contented bulls. Farmhouses stand solitary and solidly in stone, carved hundreds of years ago, guarded by drowsy yet vigilant dogs. Never once did we hear the sound of a tv or a radio originating from home or hamlet.

And so we wandered for blissful days covering distances varying from 14 to 19 miles. Each day's journey was punctuated by welcome stops, at enterprising farmhouses or cosy cafés or pubs for liquid refreshment and perhaps some local cheeses. At nights we washed, rested our bones and ate the finest of French food served by friendly hosts to whom our



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poor language skills did not stand in the way of serving excellent food and wine. Until that is, after dinner on night one of our walk, as we stepped outside our hotel, it being only 8.45pm on a beautiful warm evening in the tiny village of St.

Privat d'Aillier. We took up six seats by the door in the cool of the evening. One of our number was dispatched to order 6 of the excellent local beers. He returned pale-faced to tell our astonished group that we had better enjoy them as the bars all close at 9pm! No discussion! As one of our number was told by a proprietor when he enquired on another night, "Where do the over 50's usually go after 9 around here?" he received the blunt reply, "Bed!". Being Irish and used to dealing with adversity, we quickly got used to early morning starts that ensured some longer time for respite each evening!

Walking will bring you to the real heart of a country. One warm Sunday evening passing along dusty lanes, we encountered a large number of Renault vans and other 'modes of transport' abandoned in the road leading to a large farmhouse. Neighbours had gathered to pass the sunny afternoon – the aromas

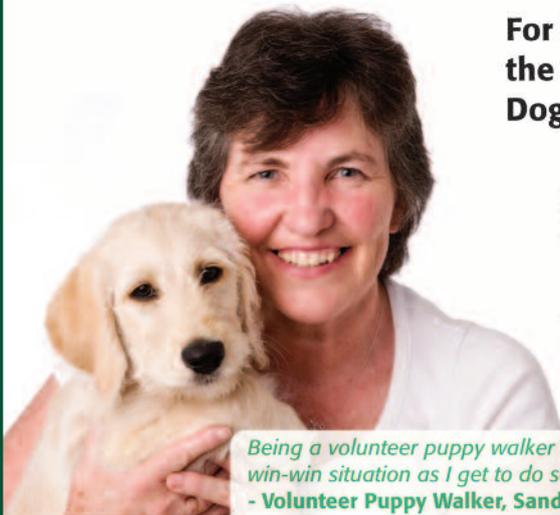
emanating from the kitchen and spilling out to envious passing walkers were truly to die for. On another bright morning, as we climbed up onto the green carpet of the plateau of Aubrac, leaving Nasbinals in a valley below us, we heard the ring of a hundred cow bells as groups of farmers, some on horseback, drove their healthy herds up from the valleys to graze for the summer months in what is called the 'the transhumance'.

Day drifted into day in this land away from time and oh too soon we had to descend to our final and most beautiful village of St Chely d'Aubrac. Home now but I still wake up each morning expecting to hear the songs of a million birds and to breathe the air coming down from the hills, filled with the smells of a countryside that has been left to its own natural ways. Do yourself a favour! Get that walking gear in Aldi or Lidl and follow me to the Chemin de St. Jacques.

Guide Book – *The Way of St. James. Le Puy to the Pyrenees*
By Alisa Raju

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