



A pilgrimage to a lesson in life

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THE middle-aged Irish woman looks into my eyes, congratulates me as she rolls up my certificate of achievement and asks: "How did you do it?" I meet her gaze and reply: "I just kept on keeping on." It's an epiphanic moment.

Accompanied by my 25-year-old daughter Natasha, I've just completed a stage of the Camino de Santiago de Compostela — in five days of rain, snow and sunshine we've walked 115km through hollow land and hilly land. I'm elated, proud, overwhelmed and, yes, a tad tired.

The Way of St James started in the 9th Century when the discovery of the Apostle James's tomb on this north westerly tip of the Iberian peninsula became a place of worship. The faithful started travelling from all over Europe to Santiago and 12 routes were established.

We chose the classic French way — the Camino Frances — which starts in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, the ancient capital of the Basque region of Basse-Navarre and winds its way through Roncesvalles, Pamplona, Burgos and Leon to our point of embarkation — Sarria, once a major medieval centre for pilgrims and still a popular starting point for their modern counterparts who want to complete one stage of the Camino.

It was a crisp Sunday morning as we left the comfort of our hotel and walked through a small old quarter past the convent of Magdalena. It was nearly May in northern Spain and while we had shorts and factor 50 in our luggage, there was, in fact, snow on the ditches.

We were going to cover 23km on our walk to Portomarin. Total disaster struck at our very first stop for coffee. No coffee. But one of the many lessons the Camino teaches you is acceptance. As we were deep in Galicia, a quiet rural corner of somnolent hamlets, where gentle oxen and thin cats were sometimes the only

signs of life, I accepted the lack of caffeine and bought a shell instead — the symbol of the walk.

Through forests and woodlands we seemed to march forever till finally a long flight of steps took us past the Chapel of Clouds to reach the central square of Portomarin, where alongside a fortress and church was our billet for the night — a noisy pension with pizza the only dinner option.

Serendipity led us to O Mirador, a nearby bar with a lively buzz supplied by walkers and locals, where we had a terrific meal of tapas, steak and chips, creme caramel and a bottle of wine for €20.

The second day is known to be tough. And so it proved. We were aching from the previous day's exertions and our morning involved a lengthy climb. My mood was only lightened by a lovely woman from Clondalkin who thought my daughter and I were sisters.

Indeed one of the joys of the Camino is the people you meet. Pilgrims came from everywhere — California and Churchtown, Finland and Florida. There were Asians, Mexicans and Germans — and all were keen to chat.

I knew the third day would be Dante-esque. Our itinerary had shown this was a 30km walk. (We declined the option of splitting it in two as completing it in one fell swoop would ensure an extra day in Santiago.)

Naturally it was the wettest day of the entire trip — a relentless grey drizzle heightening my Stygian gloom, but inspiring a spirit of camaraderie among the pilgrims as we trudged through muddy riverbeds, up and down dirt tracks, to Melide — our halfway stop where we wolfed down steaming bowls of pasta and milky coffees.

For the last gruelling 5km, barely able to speak, I whispered the word taxi, but my principled daughter was having none of it and we ploughed on, finally arriving in Arzua at Casa Teodora. A photo on the wall showed a previous guest, a smiling Mary McAleese. There we bumped into some of our 'compadres' who told us they took a taxi for the second half of the day.

The woman explained: "I'm on my holidays," completely missing the point. The Camino is emphatically not a holiday — it is a pilgrimage — it is meant to be arduous and uncomfortable and tiring. We were so pleased that we hadn't cheated. As Natasha pointed out, to have taken a taxi even for a couple of miles would have tainted every step of our Camino.

And the end was in sight. Through banks of eucalyptus silhouetted against a vivid cerulean sky in which the previous night's half moon still hung, on and on we walked, my lovely girl and I. Past suburbs and parks, roundabouts and malls, shops and cafes, and there finally it was. The cathedral — our Ithaca.

Later we toasted our epic achievement with a glass of cava in the old bar of the fabulous parador: the Hostal dos Reis Catolicos, it was founded in 1492 by monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella as a pilgrims' hospice.

Then we walked down the cobbled streets of this enchanting city for tapas of pimientos de padron and gambas in garlic — Magdalen and Natalis (our certificates carried our Latin names), still pilgrims at heart.

The Camino was one of the most profound experiences of my life.

Apart from spending quality time with my eldest child, getting sun and fresh air and exercise, raising money for charity and discovering an exquisite new city, my Camino reminded me how blessed I am and reinforced my belief that, with courage and humility and faith, we can make it through the challenging and difficult but rewarding and joyous terrain that is life.

GETTING THERE

CaminoWays.com offers walking and cycling, self-guided and guided tours on the different routes of the Camino de Santiago, including the most famous trail: the French Way.

A classic seven-day Camino de Santiago experience covers the last 100km of the French Way to Santiago de Compostela, starting in the town of Sarria, in Galicia.

Prices for this trip start at €589 per person sharing (high season). Self-guided packages include accommodation, half-board meals and luggage transfers. Additional nights and hotel upgrades can also be arranged.

See www.caminoways.com or contact the CaminoWays.com team by phone 01 525 2886 or email info@caminoways.com



ARRIVAL: Madeleine Keane at the cathedral steps after 115km trek with daughter Natasha



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DESTINATION: The cathedral of Santiago de Compostela is the final stop for pilgrims on the Way of St James and walkers are rewarded for their epic achievement with an enchanting city of cobbled streets and tapas bars