

# Travel

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## PLAIN SAILING FOR PIERCE

PIERCE McConnell, aged 8, from Newtownabbey, helps P&O Ferries kick off the summer season in style with a 'Kids Go Free' offer that will please the whole family. From today and throughout this year, children aged 15 years and younger can travel free on sailings between Larne to Cairnryan and Troon. Visit [www.POf ferries.com](http://www.POf ferries.com).



By Tom Sweeney

**M**OST people who follow the Camino de Santiago walk it, while many others cycle. A few do it on horseback and fewer still set out in wheelchairs with the help of friends.

Whatever their means of getting to Santiago de Compostela, everyone has the same goal – to visit the tomb of St James. Santiago is the capital of Galicia, the bit of Spain that sits on top of Portugal like an umbrella and gets more rain than Northern Ireland in the spring.

However, when the sun shines it's hot to trot – or pedal or walk.

The 13th century cathedral in which the saint's remains reside in a silver sarcophagus in the crypt attracts pilgrims of all religions and none.

### POPULAR

People 'do' the Camino for reasons of faith, fitness or friendship or to raise funds for worthy causes.

A dozen recognised routes lead to Santiago. The three most popular are:

- ★ The French Way, from St Jean Pied-de-Port via Pamplona, Logroño, Burgos and Leon (475 miles).

- ★ The Portuguese Way, from Lisbon via Porto and Pontevedra (380 miles).

- ★ The Northern Way, from Irun via Bilbao, Santander and Oviedo (510 miles).

There's also an Irish Way that dates from the Middle Ages when pilgrims set out from St James's Gate in Dublin, which is now part of the Guinness brewery.

In those days they sailed to Ferrol in northwest Galicia and joined the English Way (74 miles).

That sea voyage took a couple of weeks, but Aer Lingus has regular flights from



GIANT INCENSE BURNER: The botafumeiro in the cathedral, the Abastos market in Santiago and the cheeky bishop's backside gargoyle on the cathedral roof



## It's high time you made a pilgrimage to Spain's sensational Santiago

Dublin to Santiago that take only a couple of hours.

For walkers who don't have a month to spare, the last 63 miles of the French Way are enough to earn a certificate of completion.

### EATING

Simply fly to Santiago, take the bus to Sarria and walk back over the course of three or four days, sleeping and eating in hostels along the way.

You'd think that having completed their journey, pilgrims would be content to sit outside the cathedral nursing

their blisters before visiting the crypt.

However, a trek up the 110 steep steps to the roof will prove rewarding, especially for fans of Father Ted, because hidden among the gargoyles is a medieval version of Kicking Bishop Brennan up the you-know-what.

During construction, the churchman in charge was notoriously slow at paying the stonemasons' wages. So they wreaked a rascally revenge by carving an effigy of the bishop's backside beneath a gutter and took great delight in slapping it each time they passed.

It didn't put food on their tables,

but it did put a smirk on their faces.

Many pilgrims and long-weekenders (Santiago is an increasingly popular city break destination) time their visit to the city to coincide with a remarkable spectacle.

In 1851, goldsmith Jose Losada, who made the saint's sarcophagus, crafted the cathedral's botafumeiro, one of the world's biggest incense burners at five feet tall and weighing 12 stone.

Shovels are used to fill it with six stone of burning charcoal and incense and then it's attached to a rope hanging from a pulley high up in the dome.

sardines plus a huge selection of shellfish, crabs and lobsters.

Octopus is the region's favourite dish, and every restaurant in Santiago serves it. Try it boiled, sprinkled with cayenne pepper and olive oil.

Locals say foot-weary pilgrims catch their first whiff of burning incense about two miles out of Santiago and quicken their step, knowing the journey is almost over.

The ritual on arrival is to visit the tomb, collect a certificate proving you've completed the Camino, then change, shower and head out to dinner.

Most meals are washed down with a bottle of the locally produced Ribeiro wine.

It's surprising how many people get too close to the clay pot and suddenly realise that the whiff they caught on the outskirts of town wasn't the scent of burning incense at all – it was the smell of singed eyebrows.

Avoid naked flames and you'll find Santiago is not to be sniffed at.



WALKERS: Pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela



SPECIALITY: Octopus



AWARD: The Hillgrove Hotel, Leisure and Spa in Monaghan

## Hillgrove is the best for weddings

THE four star Hillgrove Hotel, Leisure and Spa in Monaghan has just been awarded winner of the Best Wedding Venue in Ulster.

The award was presented in recognition of quality and customer service excellence by Mrs2Be.ie. "Weddings are what we do best," says Audri Herron, Proprietor of the Hillgrove Hotel.

"We always get excellent comments from our brides and grooms and guests, so it is fantastic to be recognised with this award.

"Our wedding team work so very hard, so this award is certainly for them."

And that is not all; the Hillgrove Hotel has now been inducted into 'Hall of Fame' of Five-time Certificate of Excellence Winners by TripAdvisor.



JOURNEY: Pilgrim at the cathedral

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remarkable Opera houses with Topflight. This year marks the 93rd Verona Opera Festival which kicks off on June 19 and runs until September 6, 2015.

The magnificent Verona Opera takes place in the beautifully restored 1st Century AD Roman amphitheatre right in the heart of Verona.

Opera ticket prices start at €78 per person for un-numbered stone seating. So, why not head to Lake Garda this June with holidays for one week

from £374pp and add some extra magic to your trip with a visit to the opera.

For more information call Topflight on 028 9752 1168 or



visit the Topflight website at [www.topflightholidays.co.uk](http://www.topflightholidays.co.uk)

# GO THE EXTRA MILES



MAGNIFICENT HISTORY: The view from the roof of the Santiago Cathedral (also pictured above)



## Travel FACTFILE

### GETTING THERE

★ Specialist operator CaminoWays organises a variety of walking and cycling holidays with accommodation en route and in Santiago. See [www.caminoways.com](http://www.caminoways.com)

★ Aer Lingus operates direct flights from Dublin to Santiago de Compostela on Tuesday, Thursday and Saturday from April to October. There's an extra flight on Wednesday in July and August. Check out [www.aerlingus.com](http://www.aerlingus.com)

### FURTHER INFORMATION

★ Santiago Tourist Board: See [www.santiagoturismo.com](http://www.santiagoturismo.com) for information on what to see and do in Santiago de Compostela.

Spanish Tourist Board: See [www.spain.info](http://www.spain.info)

★ The Irish Society of the Friends of St James: The society issues pilgrims' passports (€10) in which to collect official stamps along the Camino. A stamped passport is needed to get a certificate of completion from the pilgrims' office in Santiago. Check out [www.caminosociety.ie](http://www.caminosociety.ie)

## TREAT DAD WITH CASTLE BBQ

THIS year Lough Eske Castle, a Solis hotel and spa in Donegal, is helping sons and daughters to treat their dads to a Father's Day lunch with a difference.

On Sunday June 21 the luxurious Irish castle is hosting a BBQ on the patio of its Cedars Grill restaurant, overlooking the spectacular castle grounds.

The BBQ is available for €39 per adult / €15 for children and can be booked by calling 0035374 9725100.

Those looking for an extra special father's day present this year can take advantage of the historic venue's 'three nights for the price of two' offer which includes; 3 nights'

accommodation for two people, full Irish breakfast every morning and full access to the castle's swimming pool, fitness room and thermal suite at Spa Solis, all for only €460. (Offer available for Sunday-Thursday and is based on two sharing a room).

Check out [www.solishotels.com/lougheskecastle](http://www.solishotels.com/lougheskecastle)



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