

Spain

# My pampered pilgrimage through Galicia

**Lizzie Enfield** walks one of the Camino de Santiago pilgrim trails with someone else carrying her bags

After a long day's walk, I sink into a chair outside a café overlooking the Puerte Romano in the Galician town of Caldas de Reis. There is a large wire sculpture on the banks of the river, a Gormley-esque figure of a man filled with discarded mineral water bottles, and its position, in front of the Roman bridge, provides a neat juxtaposition of ancient and modern.

Caldas de Reis is towards the end of the Portuguese Camino de Santiago, a 611km route from Lisbon to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, which has been trodden by pilgrims since the Middle Ages. Yet where the medieval pilgrims stayed in hostels, drank from rivers and bathed their blistered feet in the hot springs for which the town is famous, these days it has cool hotels, en suites and the chilled plastic water bottles.

"Where are you staying?" the waiter asks. "Torre do Rio," I reply as he delivers coffee and a slice of Santiago cake. "It's very pretty," he says. And it is — very pretty indeed. An 18th-century textile factory with ten period rooms looking out across the valley and a pool fed by a stream that cascades through the extensive grounds. Dinner is delicious: thin slices of iberico ham, Galician hake and melt-in-the-mouth *pudin de castaña*, a kind of chestnut panna cotta, all washed down with fine crisp local wine.

This is not the kind of place where you expect one of the thousands of pilgrims, or *peregrinos*, who pass through the town each year to be heading, but I am sampling a new "pampering pilgrimage". I must admit to feeling slightly uncomfortable with this. Yes, I'm walking more than 15 miles a

day, but there's a part of me that thinks that sleeping between 400-thread-count Egyptian cotton sheets and visiting spas is cheating. Pilgrimages are, after all, meant to be all about hair shirts, shrift and suffering. Or they used to be. Pilgrims of old carried few belongings, slept in monasteries and relied on the church or charity of local people for food. The pampering package caters for a new breed of pilgrim who wants to walk and see the sights, but not shoulder a backpack or stay in bunk houses. They want their luggage transported, a decent place to stay, fine food and massages.

The Camino de Santiago itself is something of a misnomer, because there are several routes coming from different directions, all converging on the magnificent Romanesque cathedral in Santiago, where the bones of the eponymous St James the Apostle are interred. Since the early medieval period, people have made their way, by foot, from France, Spain and Portugal, a journey of up to 780km, depending on the route.

I am walking the final section of the Camino Portuguese from Tui, on the banks of the River Miño, which forms the border with Spain. Starting with Tui's 12th-century cathedral, the 120km walk takes in picturesque fishing ports, bustling towns and historic cities such as Pontevedra, where narrow streets lead on to squares fronted by churches, basilicas and, in the centre, the elegant Santuario de La Virgen de La Peregrina, an 18th-century baroque chapel. The route is dotted with pretty churches, ornate *horreos* (raised grain stores), stone monuments and shrines — passing through dense eucalyptus forests, fields of maize and apple orchards.

As a pampered pilgrim, my luggage is transported from hotel to parador — which gives me even more time to enjoy the scenery during my week-long jaunt, even if I do attract a few disapproving looks. This is the way to do it! The days fly by and when I eventually reach Santiago I head straight to Espagat, a spa complex with a series of saunas, steam rooms, Turkish baths and jet pools.

Feeling relaxed, even though my feet are blistered, I check in to Palacio del Carmen, a former convent that is now a five-star hotel, where I collapse in a huge room facing the spires of the cathedral.

There's no getting away from the walking, of course, but you can now take on the Camino . . . without punishing yourself, (too much).



The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Below: Torre do Rio in Caldas de Reis



**Need to know**

Lizzie Enfield was a guest of Camino Ways (caminoways.com). The pampering package, Superior Collection, is available on selected Camino routes only: Camino Frances, Camino Portuguese, Portuguese Coastal Way and Via de la Plata. A seven-night Superior Collection package, walking from Tui to Santiago, starts at €995pp half-board, with luggage transfers and practical route information (including pilgrim passport and route notes). The package also includes a complimentary spa treatment in Santiago de Compostela. Vueling (vueling.com) operates regular flights to Santiago and there is a connecting train service with towns along the route.



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