

Coming Soon! This is where you'll find it!

Posted on March 1, 2017

Welcome to my Camino de Santiago Blog chronicling the physical, mental and spiritual adventures and challenges as I sojourn along the Camino Frances. When time and motivation collide, I'll post a 'daily' blog sharing the sights, sounds, foods, history and cultural experiences. Come along with me; enjoy and feel free to comment.

- Darren

The equipment is gathered, the training is peaking and finally the plane ticket to Euro is bought! It's a done deal, there's no backing out now! Barring divine (or spousal) intervention, the Camino de Santiago adventure begins mid next month. This is the site where you can find updates and travel along with me on the sojourn. I'll post locations, pictures of the sights & views and any noteworthy or interesting experiences along the way. Join me on-line and comment if you wish.

- Darren



Camino Journal – Pre Trip Preamble

Posted on [March 16, 2017](#)

The Camino Journal – Pre-Trip Notes

A few months back I decided to walk the breadth of Spain to spend a springtime enjoying the culture, the food and the weather of the Spanish countryside. It seemed like the perfect sojourn for one seeking alternatives to the retiree ‘daily grind’. The prospect that drew me to Spain is the Camino de Santiago – the Way of St James. The Camino has been a popular Pilgrimage route since the Middle Ages and employed as a means to seek remission of temporal punishment for one’s offenses. Although earning a ‘plenary judgment’ draws many to the path, others are enticed by the beauty, the serenity, the opportunity for better introspection and the pure adventure of it – this is why I’m going. This journal is about my sojourn along the way. I hope you enjoy it and find value in its contents.



21 November 2016 – The Camino Adventure is five months away, so it’s time to get serious with the planning and preparation. Every Pilgrim has their own story and they tell it their own way; this is mine. This ‘pre-trip’, or ‘preamble’, portion of the journal will focus on what I did and why I did it to get ready for the trip. If you’re keen to read more about the adventure itself, then skip this section and wait until the daily blogging begins in April – this lengthy section may only appeal to those interested in what it takes to get ready for such a trip.

Why undertake an 850 km walk? There are too many answers to cover now, but the best I can offer is that it seems like the right thing to do and now is the right time to do it. Serendipitous events lead to fascinating lives, if we let them. A collusion of influences introduced the concept of spending the spring walking through northern Spain and events have conspired to make it possible. I’m not sure that it’s ‘now or never’, but the opportunity of ‘now’ presents itself, so, it’s time to make it happen.

The route I plan to take (there are several) is the ‘French Way’ or the Camino Frances from town St Jean-Pied-du-Port (SJPP-France) to city of Santiago de Compostela (769 km). During my research and discussions I’ve learned that the best journey’s end, terminates at Muxia & Finisterre (the ‘end of the world’) and an additional ~90 kms (3-4 days) beyond Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrims often say

that this is where the trip really ends, not in a populous city, but on the coast of death (Costa de Morte) overlooking the ocean. That is where I plan to go.



Camino Frances – the French Route

After walking the Camino my wife may meet up and together we'll train and backpack like kids throughout Spain and enjoy the fascinating culture, foods, beverages, history and sites – another once is a lifetime opportunity. From there – home, back to the lake!

Camino initial Planning and Preparation

Proper preparation for any adventure has many components to it, but on this journey I'll preface it with the aspects of **Physical, Mental and Equipping**

Physical

A trip of 850 Kms may start with the first step, but will rarely be completed unless one can physically endure every step in between that first and the final. Preparing the body for the effort began over the summer and will continue until I hop off the airplane back at Anchorage International. The quickest way to kill off this dream is through injury or mishap leading to injury. My program includes three focuses – weight training, hiking endurance and general health.

Weight

Although I'm two years into retirement, I have not gained the retiree's bulge or immobility that leads to an early death. However, the sedentary lifestyle is leading in that direction, so the first goal is to get my training under control early enough so I'm at the right weight when starting the trip. By the middle of the summer one day I hit an awkward 194 on the scale, not bad for a 6'4" former athletically inclined guy. Unfortunately, I'm only 5'8" and by all standards, that's too much weight to lug around the Spanish countryside when it serves no purpose other than prematurely wearing out my joints. My challenge is that I'm short, wide and compact and have spent a lifetime on the athletic fields and in gyms. Even when I was 'overweight' by Army weight standards, I was always well under by the Body Fat Standards by quite

a few percentages. Two years into retirement, although the weight is high its all pretty solid. I'm loath to step on a scale these days (because I really don't have to!) but I measure my progress by the 'belt loop - hole' method. If I can comfortably use the last hole in my very old belt, I know my waist is 'good to go'! I keep telling myself that my weight is also good because 'muscle is heavier than fat'! I'm not sure that's a very sane understanding of physiology, but it is satisfying. My goal will be to get down to 175, if I can. No sense in carrying around extra weight when I can avoid it. This will call for less food, less beer and less sitting behind a computer. Additionally, this will necessitate a change in the training program, less weight bearing and more cardio. As we live in Alaska and the temps are already averaging in the mid to low 20s F. and will only get colder over the next few months, this will be particularly challenging. Outdoor activities like rucking will be less accessible. But, there are other options!

Endurance

I vividly recall running through forests carrying a 72 pound ruck with weapon, load bearing equipment and an attitude. We Special Forces Assessment and Selection candidates were 'encouraged' to meet the unknown time and distance standard. I was 28 and I was up for it. Although I had graduated from Ranger school only 2 months previously, I'd recovered well enough to hump a ruck and hike. At Ranger school I had lost over 20 pounds rucking and patrolling and generally abusing my body; but, it mentally toughened me up to push beyond the pain and nausea and endure until the mission was done.

I'm now 54 and not nearly as resilient as I used to be. Rebuilding rucking and cardio endurance will be another vital challenge to a complete preparation. The knees, the lower back, the neck and the attitude have all spiraled into middle age. While the mind may be willing, I'll need to slowly build up the body so it's able. Fortunately, my research suggests that one should not endure the Camino with a backpack weighing more than 10% of one's body weight. I figure if I can get the ruck down to less than 20 pounds, I'll be good to go; less, even better. With that in mind, the focus will be on lightweight training and long distance endurance so that I can efficiently and consistently average of 20-25 Kms of hiking a day.

As kids growing up in Bangkok the only time we ever wore shoes was to school. I recall always coming home from a day of play and having to scrape the cooled and dried tar from the bottom of our calloused feet with a Swiss army knife so we didn't leave tar trails throughout the house. These were tough feet! Much has changed since then, and these cushy pink soles will need lots of attention so I'm not sidelined early in walk with blisters.

To prep for that I've been carrying a 20-30 pound ruck 10Ks every few days. I'll work up to heavy short distances to build muscle endurance and feet toughness, and then slowly drop the weight and increase the distance for a sustained long-term endurance. While I don't think it'll be necessary to end up training with 20-30 Km

hikes every day, once or twice a week should suffice. The Camino route itself is not too demanding in the topography, just the distance. I'm keen to remind myself that this is not a military school or deployment, it's not a race, it's a pilgrimage, a period of introspection, discovery and even to some degree, an adventure. Time is not an issue,,,,,but learning to slow down and enjoy the moment is.

General Conditioning

Generally, I'm in great shape, for a middling aging man. Most of my ailments are a function of being 'ridden hard and put away wet.' – prematurely wearing out all the bones and connections and functions from overuse or abuse. If I sustain the muscles that keep the core, the bones and sinews in place, then the pain in the knees, ankles back, neck shoulders should be bearable. If they are unbearable, there's always better living through pharmaceuticals. I'm no stranger to *Ibuprofen* and beer (or wine in Spain). However, proper weight, proper endurance training combined with clean living (for the next 5 months) should keep me fit enough to get to the French-Spanish Boarder town of *St Jean Pied de Port*.

To monitor my progress I'm maintaining a matrix reflecting the training program. In the postscript section of this journal I'll note if this program was sufficient (or overkill) for the trip and attach a copy as a link somewhere in this journal. I also started using a heart monitor to gauge my heart rate against my level of effort. I finally got rid of the chest strap and invested in the waterproof apple watch (2). Although I haven't yet kept detailed heart rate records, I've tracked calories expended for each workout. Now with a combination of activity, heart rate and calories expended I can get a good assessment if I'm making progress. Clearly, the proof will be in the pudding so to speak – will I physically endure to Finnisterre.

Mental

I've always found that the mental preparation for any venture is the half the effort. If one can imagine the journey, the stresses, difficulties and the ultimate outcome, then they are further along to setting conditions to achieve their desired end-state. The mental preparation I speak to is not the metaphysical aspects of joining a pilgrimage, but rather the mental journey necessary to ensure that upon the day of crossing the 'Starting Point' (military vernacular), or, hopping on a jet bound for Spain, that most all arrangements are in order and all contingencies for the trip are prepared. This effort includes: **research, planning and coordination.**

Research

Researching today is so simplified with the support of high speed Internet and the overwhelming desire of people to share their experiences (just like me!). Although I've had several inspirational and informative conversations with former *El Camino Frances* Pilgrims, one is left only with mental images and senses about their journey. The specifics of their trips are usually illusory as they relate stories about

fascinating places, unfortunate circumstances and funny occasions. Thus far, I've found the Internet to be the solution to almost all of my questions, and even some answers to questions I didn't know enough to consider.

The four major areas of concern I've researched provided an overarching view of the necessities of the trip. They include:

- How to get to the beginning – St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, there was no direct route by air or train from Alaska.
- How the pilgrimage hotels (Albergue) work: cost, check-in/out, availability, etiquette. How to find them and other more subdued accommodations.
- Equipment. I find I've spent a good deal of time researching the right equipment. Years of experience in the 'Field' remind me that I always carried too much and always regretted it. For once, I'd like to get this right. Communications is also a key element as I intend to 'Blog' my way through the trip and need to find suitable cell and data coverage.
- Trail planning. Although few plans ever survive beyond the page they're written on, I've found it's always best to have a plan from which to diverge. I'm keen to plot out a general itinerary on days, distances and places to visit along the path.

Fortunately, there's a plethora of answers on the many web-sites, blogs, apps, journals and books available to the inquiring mind. I'll include a list of web-sites that I've studied at the end of this journal. Each offers a unique view into the world of the 'Pellegrino' and shows there are many ways to walk the path and achieve one's aspirations.

Planning

Planning, as it currently stands I'll depart Anchorage on/about 10 April, fly through Frankfurt/Paris/Madrid/Barcelona and rest for a day or two to acclimate, work through the time lag, coordinate for cell-phone and data coverage and then move out to SPJP. I wish to begin walking from SPJP on the 15th. A normal time period is from 30-37 days walking with a few rest / tourism days thrown into the mix. This should put me in Finisterre around the first of June – before the summer crowds deluged the route. From there I plan to take a leisurely tour of Spain and Portugal visiting some of the more exotic places by train (Lisbon, Salamanca,). Finally, if I don't start from Barcelona I'll end up there and train from there to Voralrburg Austria to meet up with Ursula at our apartment (that is if she's unable to join me for the later half of the trip). Depending on the timing of events we'll return together or separately around the end of Jun to make it back to Big Lake's 4th of July celebration.

I've read a good deal of commentary on whether or not to spend the first night on the trail at the Alburge at Orrison (Refugio). As it's only about 8 Kms into the walk, it appears to be dismissively short of an initial effort. However, there are strong

recommendations from previously Pelgrinos that it's worth stopping: first, the initial ascent and descent into Roncesvalles is steep both ways and many walkers injure themselves on the first day. Second, is that they say the social aspects of coming out of this one albergue set the best 'conditions' for the entire Camino. Many claim to have made lifelong friends from the other walkers. If I decide to stay, all sources recommend that reservations be made well in advance, as there are only about 26 beds. Once I determine my travel and start dates I think it would be a good idea to make the reservation, and take it from there.

As no plan ever survives..... It'll be curious to read back to this one in 6 months and compare it to reality.

Coordination

Coordination will occur much later in the preparation cycle, as I'm loath to commit funds until I know this is really going to happen. However, some events take a much longer lead time than others, so we've already coordinated for a Cat / House sitter to move into our home while both Ursula (wife) and I are traveling. Although she'll leave to Europe two weeks after me to meet up with her touring group (She continues to serve as a Tour Guide for American high school students touring Europe during their summer) we'll both be gone from our home over May and into early July.

The other 'mental' activity in which I've engaged is trying to learn Spanish as spoken in Spain. When I joined the service, we spent a lot of time preparing to, or deployed to, Latin America. Spanish was normally heard throughout the barracks and motor pools. But, 'barracks or motor pool talk' is not quite the polite language one should converse with when walking as a Pilgrim. Besides, that was a very long time ago and the Puerto Rican and Mexican slang would not take me too far in Spain. So, I ordered two Fluenz Spanish (Spain) language CDs and am halfway through the first. It's probably a good thing to really learn how to ask for a beer or where the bathroom is. My research suggests that few people along the route speak English; so even a more fluent understanding of the language may be in order.

Equipping

Although more is usually 'More Better', it's not so in this case. Equipment and kit equals weight – weight is bad. All of my research suggests that the kit (weight) you bring along the journey is inversely proportional to the enjoyment of the journey. They stress two points, lighter is better and any item that serves as multi-use is better than one that does not. As the route is not difficult and traverses through civilization (food and shops) and the Albergues will provide lodging, most of the camper's heavy weight items are extraneous to this trip. Key elements are a comfortable and light backpack, two pairs of clothing and socks, a fleece and waterproof jacket, small water container, walking shoes (heavy mountain boots not needed), a *Permethrin* sprayed sleeping bag liner (to keep the bed bugs off) and

limited personal hygiene items are the bare essentials. Clearly this is an austere list, but most on-line gurus suggest this forms the nucleus and diverging too far from its austerity is not a good thing.

I plan to up the list with a few gadgets, which will include an iPhone 7+ and extra battery source. It will serve as the phone, data center for blogging, camera, music, reading books, GPS and Map. I'll add a light head lamp for the midnight walks to the bathroom (even though the iPhone could do that) and my ever handy Swiss Army knife that will work for nail clipping, bread cutting, wine bottle opening and all sorts of other necessities of existence. A hat, glasses and sunglasses will top out the list with a final item to aid my stumbles (bad knees and ankles) – two walking sticks.

After hiking with my old backpack, I learned to love it, but not its weight. At 8.5 pounds empty, it's a modern monster. After much research I settled on Osprey's Altmos 50 AG. It comes in at 4.01 pounds, which is about a pound heavier than some of the other brands. However, I'm a bit rough on my equipment and durability is key with me. The ultra lightweight models just don't leave me with the impression that they'll last much longer than this one trip. As I'm cheap, I want something that will last a while. Again, as I'm cheap, I wanted versatility in a pack that I can use for other trips; hence, I did not get the lighter, but smaller, 35-liter models. After a few short 10 Ks hikes with the Osprey, I really love how comfortable it feels. I started off with 20 pounds and worked up to 30 and though you can feel the pressure on the hips, for the most part it feels like it floats on your back. It's much, much better than my 20 year old, indestructible backpack and lightening years ahead of my old military rucksacks!

Now that I have the bag, it's time to begin collecting the rest.

1 January 2017 – The New Year has arrived with congestion, coughing and headaches, thanks to those little incubators of disease – nephews and their schoolmates (or fellow airplane travelers – it's tough to tell which?). At a recent dinner party I stumbled across a startling (but happy) revelation about this trip – hopefully it's just the beginning of many more insights to come. When traveling on a long pilgrimage, you never travel alone. I don't mean that in the metaphysical sense that the 'Maker's' spirit travels along in your knapsack (although he may?). However, when on a long sojourn many of your friend's dreams and aspirations walk along with you. I was surprised at how many others received inspiration from the fact that I've decided to take on this adventure. Many wish to do so, but for reasons of their own are unable and have decided to invest some of their dreams in my efforts. It's a humbling, motivational and quite unexpected sensation to realize that one's own journey can be the journey for many. I'm advised that my Blog for the trip needs to be well posted and better maintained as they intend to be there in spirit and the Blog is the best way to know how well we're all doing! What Fun!

5 January 2017 – Five days into the New Year and I'm 'backsliding' already. I've attributed my lack of focus on health and exercise to the lingering chest cold, but I

really know it's due to my own laziness. Time to snap out and get it together, only three and half months to get ready! So, my official 2017 weight in weight is just under 190 (189.5!), only 15 pounds to lose, if I can do it. My conditioning has regressed from few, to no workouts over the past few weeks of traveling and merry making....and the seasonal flu. Monday begins the 'Clean' diet, or detox effort, for three weeks. The aim there is to get rid of all the toxins floating around the body so it can easily recover and train. Additionally, I'll need to modify the training program to include quite a bit more aerobic exercise to begin to build rucking stamina while cutting down on muscle mass (and fat).

9 January 2017 – Still lazy, but getting over the doldrums. Today we hiked 'Ice-5' (the scraped ice road on the lake) to get back into walking. With the temps at 0 degrees and the roads and trails frozen with scatterings of snow and ice, the cleared roads on the open frozen lake seems to offer a preferable route on which to exercise. On top of re-energizing the walking program, the "Clean" detox program is helping to purge the system....and begin to loose some of the extra "cargo". The hike was short and cold (4.14 miles @ -2 degs F), icicles were dangling from our eyebrows when we finally hit our switchbacks in the yard. In spite of the short hike we walked for an hour and half and burned about 495 calories. Walking on snow and ice takes quite a bit of effort and energy.



More training!

31 January 2017 – I've finally broken through the doldrums, or laziness, with an increase in the exercise routine; back to 4-6 days a week with either time at the gym or hiking the ice road (6-8 miles). I don't think I'll get the mileage in the I should on the roads (incredibly boring), but the fact that they're covered in ice and snow helps increase the effort level. Finally, we finished the 3 (ok, 2.5) week Clean Diet and it was a success. The first week had little impact, though I did get the cold/flu symptoms (a sure sign that the toxins were coming out). By the second week the boredom of the diet was overwhelming but I finally began to notice a small weight and internal changes. By the third week the acid and bloating were all gone and I dropped about 5-7 pounds. After today's 8.4 mile hike (with 25 pd ruck) I weighed-in at 182.5, about a 7 pound drop from the beginning of the year. If I can maintain progress, I should get down to a consistent 175 (fighting weight!) by the time I depart for SJPP. OK, that was humor, 175 is a dream....but hey, why not dream crazy-like!

By way of equipping, I've purchased lighter kit but still not light enough to get below 20 pounds. I'll leave the details to the end of the "Prep" discussions as the back and forth on what to carry is insane. I'm accustomed to trying to live by the motto 'Travel light, freeze at night' but even though I don't need to sacrifice comfort any more (just weight) I can't seem to get below 20. My guess is that those Pelegrinos who walk with 10—15 pounds don't plan to stay in country for two plus months; suffer a lot; or rely quite a bit on the 'pack mules' along the route for their emergent needs.

Travel Planning: I've learned how to get from Madrid to SJPP. There's no direct route and it requires either flying and bus/taxi or train and bus/taxi. Plenty is written about the option on numerous Camino web-sites but planning ahead is key to minimize unnecessary delays. It's instrumental to note that a single day trip from Big Lake to SJPP is not likely – or desirable. At this stage I plan to fly to Madrid, by way of Frankfurt and rest two days to get over jet lag, tour a little, check out the Prado Museum, and find a suitable in-country telephone card with a good data plan – pay as you go. Then take a train to the city of Pamplona in the morning and catch an afternoon (1430) bus to SJPP. Arriving in SJPP around 1600-1700 is sufficient time for Camino check-in, securing a hotel, touring the village and getting a good night sleep for an early start on the 15th.

10 Mar 2017 – The air tickets are purchased, the initial hotel reservations locked in – the trip is on! The plan outlined above still pretty much stands, but with one major exception. Ursula and I will travel to Frankfurt together then I'll solo the rest of the way as she heads off to Austria.

The training program seems to be coming along well enough with long walks along 'Ice-5' (10-12 miles) with few blisters and minimal back pain. The kit is still around 22 pounds (can't seem to get below 22 now) but I'm good with it as I'm not keen to pare away anything else and to get 'uber' lighter stuff will cost too much. The 'cargo' weight, well it's not down to 175....I guess that was a pipe dream.



My shadow rucking the lake

The WordPress Blog set-up seems to be working so I can blog along the Camino from my cellphone. We'll see how that works. Finally, the Spanish lessons seem to be paying off as I can comfortably order a beer "Je voudrais une biere, s'il vous plait." Oh.....wait....that's not Spanish, is it? Ok, the lessons are coming along.....just ok. As long as I can order a "quiero un sandwich de Jamon y aqua" I'll survive.

26 Mar 17 –

Two weeks until our departure. The training is going fairly well with 3 hikes a week at 6-12 miles each and swimming or other aerobic activity on most of the other days. During my hikes I don't take any breaks (it's still between 0-15 degrees F, stopping for any length is not comfortable!) it's at the 6-7 mile mark when the 'hot spots' begin on my feet. I guess the learning point there is to stop around 6 miles and air the feet out and put on a dry set of socks (where the temps are warmer in the Spanish mountains). This should keep me blister free? (at the end of this 'preamble' section I'll post a copy of my work-out schedule for those of you thinking about taking this trip.)

The closer I get, the heavier my backpack grows. I'm now up to around 24 pounds and not keen to shed any of the kit to make it lighter. I'm so done with shopping and the insanity of trying to find the lightest set of pants or socks or whatever. Much of the weight comes from an abundance of inclement and wet weather gear (5.17 pounds). As I'll be crossing the Pyrenees in spring when the weather is really unpredictable, I'm really hesitant to drop any of this kit. The sleeping kit (poncho liner, silk sleeping bag liner and blow up pillow) comes in 2.06 pounds. I read that this is pretty minimalist (other than the indulgence of a pillow (5 ounces)) and I'm not willing to drop any of it or spend the \$\$\$ to purchase an extreme light sleeping bag to save half a pound. However, once I get out of the mountains I can mail a few of the items ahead and recover them at the Post Office in Santiago. I may end up dropping the number of trousers or socks or shirts and buy some extra ones once

the hike portion of the trip is over. I gather that most of the pilgrims are in really casual gear, but this may not be suitable when traveling and touring on the second half of my trip. Here's a spreadsheet of the items I'll be bringing and their weight. (today's packing list – [Z Packing List ver 26 Mar](#)). Yes, it says that I'll only have 20.74 pounds on my back, but somehow the air in the free space in my pack must also have weight as I can't seem to get it collectively under 23.

Travel insurance is the question of the hour. Is it really necessary and from whom to purchase it. Key for me is to get a medical insurance that I can flash at a treatment facility in the event the unthinkable happens and I hurt myself. I really don't want to try to use Tricare (my insurer) over there and really complicate my life with seeking reimbursement, so a 'primary' travel coverage that's common in Spain seems to be a good idea. More to follow on this issue later.

All of the arrangements that I need to make ahead of time are made with the exception of the flight from Frankfurt to Madrid. I'll lock that in this week. As I get closer I may set up the train ticket and bus or taxi reservation from Madrid to Pamplona and from there to SJPP. This is not 'necessary' as these are easily purchased on site at the time of travel, but possibly a good idea even though I'm not in the 'high' season?

A good friend gave me a St. James Cross hat pin that he picked up in Santiago de Compostela a few years back. I

quickly put it on my hat as I'm hoping to collect the best luck I possibly can to ensure I complete the journey (hmm, maybe that's where all that unaccounted for extra weight is coming from?). I hope to be able to return the favor by picking up a replacement pin for him when I get there myself.



Cross of St James

At this stage, I'm weary of planning and training, it's time to get it started. My focus for the next two weeks is not injuring myself or doing something stupid that makes all this effort for naught.

1 Apr 2007

One Week and a wake up, then the odyssey to get across the sea begins – nothing is close from Alaska.

A few updates on the training plan and equipping drama.

Last week enough snow melted that I was able to hike on my normal loop on the roads. Shoe tragedy hit! My trusty ole walking shoes were suddenly cramped, hard and I developed blisters and hot spots where I had none before; plus, some of the

stitching began to come apart. It was time to do what nobody wants to do before a long hike – buy new shoes! I picked up a pair of Solomon's and I'm not sure how the break-in is coming along because I'm back to hiking on the lake (it snowed again – where's spring?) and I still have the hot-spots and blisters from the other day. This is not a fortuitous omen!

The kit weight obsession won out. I'm cutting what I said I wouldn't to get below 20. I'm now only taking two pairs of pants and shirt (plus 2 teck shirts). I've dropped the poncho and the Frogg Togg jacket and the walking sticks are staying home. I really like them and hate to lose them outside an Alburgues as many will not allow you to bring them inside. This is counterintuitive, but I'll buy a walking cane, or a couple of cheap sticks in SJPP and leave them in Santiago. This will also be helpful getting through the airports. That brought me down to 18 pounds in the pack unless I'm using the jacket and fleece, then I'd be down to 16. Today's walk was 'springy' with such a light load. Also I finally got to hike in temps above freezing (it was just barley at 38 degrees) and I was super warm. After a winter of training in sub-freezing temps, even with the minimal kit that I'm bringing I'm pretty sure that I can survive the 40- 50 degrees that may come along on the initial legs of the trip.

I'll finish this next week off with a few short hikes (6 miles) and rest the feet for the last few days. The only concern with my program thus far is that I haven't been hiking hills and my altitude has been fairly close to sea-level. Even though I feel good, the first day in the Pyrenees may try as a result.

My body weight – we'll the dream of getting down to 175 was just that, a dream – it 'aint happening! Perhaps I'll be there after the trip!

Attached here is a copy of the final kit matrix [Packing List.pdf](#) and training program [Exercise Log](#) (for those needing something to put them to sleep)

9 April 2017

Tomorrow we launch for Euro and by this time next week I should be on the Camino Trail. I thought I ran out of time to make any more last minute equipment/kit changes (fortunately), but I was wrong (fortunately?). I found a few lighter items to swap out with a few of the heavier ones; and of course I added a few last minute items that I guess I should not live without – Will this never END! Yes, tomorrow! The pack weight is about as good as it's going to get (back up to 22 pounds total, including those items I plan to wear while walking (minus the boots); my workout plan is over (I'm too pooped to do more and my feet need the respite), I'm physically as prepared as I'll get (my body weight loss never had a chance in getting to where I wanted). A man can only commit to so much!

In the last weeks I've engaged with the Anchorage Chapter of the American Pilgrims on the Camino and they were kind enough to send me a scalloped shell and Alaska

Chapter patch. Both will go on my backpack. The Scalloped shell is the symbol of the Camino Pilgrim and recognized worldwide.

Tomorrow the journey of mind, body & spirit begins, so does the real blogging. I hope you found something insightful in the pre-trip notes in the event you plan to take the trip yourself.

Buen Camino!

Madrid....half way there?

Posted on [April 12, 2017](#)

Madrid, at last! The third leg to a five-leg beginning: Anchorage to Seattle, Seattle to Frankfurt, Frankfurt to Madrid, Madrid to Pamplona and Pamplona to St Jean (SJPP). 15 hours of flying, countless hours in airports and busses. Only thing left is a 3-hour train ride and 2-hour bus ride. The layover at the Frankfurt airport hotel was key! Even with the 12-hour attempt at hibernation, I'm still a bit smoked as I sit here in the Madrid hotel pub. I couldn't imagine attempting to fly/train/van directly to SJPP and start walking. That's too much of a young man's sport. The two day layover in Madrid is a bit of an indulgence as it would be foolish to pass up the opportunity to visit Spain's majestic



old capita with its incredible architecture (old and modern), food and culture. One can see every color and creed of person walking the boulevards and hear musical notes of many strange languages. Apparently a British soccer team is playing the Madrid team in the Euro quarterfinals and the police are out in droves....I guess the soccer hooligans are still a concern. It was somewhat evident in the Plaza Major with team's colors in abundance as they sang and chanted in unison their club songs.....as the Policia stood in peaceful, but ready overwatch.

But, all in all, the tourist overwhelmed everything and everybody... no issues this day. Here are a few more photos from today. Onward to the Prado Museum tomorrow to learn some 'culture' and refinement!



Plaza Mayor



Soccer in Madrid

Posted on [April 12, 2017](#)

I really enjoy watching the euro cup soccer champion tournament, their talent and professionalism never ceases to amaze me. The two teams I cheer on to win are Bayern-Munchen and Barcelona; they usually do. The team I usually cheer to loose is Real Madrid, they usually don't. So, there I was, in a bar in Madrid watching Bayern play Real Madrid on the big screen and mindful of not yelling out too obnoxiously when the plays favored Bayern.

Speaking of obnoxious, the Leicester City fans were in town to watch their team play Atletico-Madrid the same night. What a mess. I visited the Plaza Major and it was trashed. I'm guessing it was by the Liecester fans (hooligans) before they were chased from the square by the Spanish riot police. It's a pleasure to watch pros at work, I'm referring to the riot police, not the soccer players. As I rounded back by the Plaza I saw a squad of them arresting one of these guy, they performed



[Plaza Mayor, after the mini-riot](#)

admirably by taking care of their detainee while ensuring none of the drunk onlookers joined his dilemma. Sometimes it's refreshing to see good guys unemotionally and professionally take care of assholes. It was a pretty good day in Madrid, but regrettably Bayern lost as did Leicester City. It seems like an expensive trip to come to Madrid to see your team beaten on the pitch while you get beaten in the town square.

Legs four and five complete, ready to start walking

Posted on [April 14, 2017](#)



Today I traveled from Madrid to Pamplona by first class train, it was another indulgence, but only cost ~\$10 more than a cattle car fair. All was very orderly and timely; very neat, and an easy way to get around. From Pamplona I took a taxi rather than endure the craziness of finding a few busses and waiting on their time schedule. I tried to convince a threesome to join me along the way and help save the fare cost. But even though it might have been less than their bus

fares and definitely saved them hours out of their day, they could not imagine altering their long planned out plans. I travelled alone and it was worth it to arrive in SJPdP by 1630, through the Pilgrim Office and into a hostel by 1730, just when their bus was leaving Pamplona.

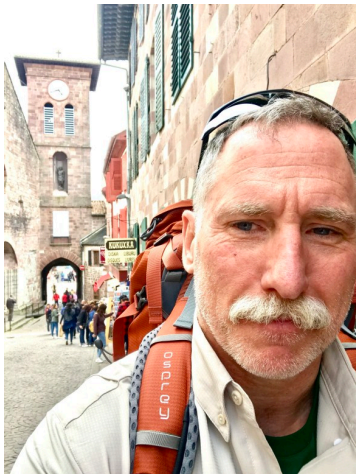
The countryside outside of Madrid is covered with every imaginable shade of brown, interspersed with haphazard plots of cultivated green. Lots of flat and rolling terrain punctuated by rocky hills across the landscape. As we dog-legged left to the north the greenery overtook the browns as the default color as the little dirt brown, rocky hills grew into verdant foothills of the Pyrenees. Every once in a while off in the distance you could see the remains of



an old castle overlooking the valley beneath; who knows what tales and history are locked away in those crumbling walls. The old windmills haven been replaced by the modern wind turbine; they're in abundance on hillcrests as a contemporary salute to the energy needs of a growing country.

Basque Country, which I passed through on my final leg to SJPdP, as many have previously observed, is different from Spain. One understands why they feel separate and always want to cede from the country. It's green and plush and mountainous and beautiful – not much like the southern portion of the country I railed through earlier. The valleys are deep and foreboding and it's easy to see why its occupants would develop their own language and culture and live in their own world. The ride through the region was impressive, but intimidating in realizing that I need to walk back through the same landscape tomorrow. One hears of fatalities along the way, but coming from walking the trails in Alaska, I was not impressednow I am. We'll see how it goes tomorrow. I've picked up my Camino Credentials at the Pilgrim's Office, so now I'm official. - Buen Camino.

This evening I stopped at the local Church a lit a prayer candle. Normally one does this for their hopes and wishes for another, but this time, it was for me – to safely make it to the end of this journey and to make me a better man. We'll see.



15 April – “Gut Check”

Posted on [April 17, 2017](#)



Vanishing Minutes: Monday morning I woke up to a message on my cellphone that my new ‘pay as you go’ account was down to 5 Euros, from 45 the previous day. Forty Euros just vanished as I was about to head into the Pyrenees and could use the safety of reliable communications. After making it across the mountains and arriving in Roncesvalles I inquired where I could top off the account.....Pamplona was the answer – three days away! I looked back to figure out what happened; I knew I turned off my roaming voice before crossing the boarder from Spain into France.....but apparently I left on my data as I was tracking the taxi movement by Google Maps and subsequently burnt up about 40 Euros in 15 mins. There’s an old favorite movie where the lead

actor repeats a common refrain “Stupid is as stupid does.” This was not a propitious beginning to a serious undertaking.

I was up early to get a quick breakfast and head onto the trail before the sun rose – walking in a brisk pre-dawn is incredibly refreshing and rejuvenating. Naturally, the breakfast room was closed and the lights were off – our host apparently was having car problems. Upon arriving she made quick work of our meal preparation, it didn’t take much. When she led us in the room we saw at each place setting a slab of toasted bread, some slices of butter and jam and a medium size soup bowl. I figured the bowl was for cereal and because I wanted to fill up before heading out I accented as she motioned to fill it up. To my surprise, out of the decanter came steaming hot coffee, which she followed up with a healthy dose of milk. I forgot, in France coffee au lait is served in a bowl. It hit the spot; I had another! I’ve since learned that the typical Pilgrim breakfast is a large slab of toast, marmalade and coffee – that’s it. I’ve since also learned to sneak in a slice of supplementary sausage.



Little groups of pilgrims flowed from the various hostels and albergues as they clicked, clicked with their walking sticks up their way in the misty darkened street, all headed for the daunting passage over the Pyrenees. I suspect most, like me, suddenly lost all cares and concerns about late breakfasts and vanished minutes

when we spotted our first yellow scalloped shell and arrow that marked the path of the Camino. There was an overwhelming sense of elation to realize you were finally on the trail after months of preparation. We, like so many former invading armies and eager pilgrims left the protective enclave of the St Jean citadel to cross into an unknown future and into the Spanish frontier. The Camino had begun.



By all accounts the first day is one of the toughest most pilgrims will overcome whether they take the 'Napoleon Route, or the one through 'Carlos' Valley' (Valcarlos). Both take you up over foreboding passages into the Pyrenees. For the most part the trail is not difficult, but it is relentless. After the thirteenth mile when you think you've crested your last peak, you'd be wrong. There seems to be no ends to the next crest.

Finally, when you do begin the decent, you quickly miss the uphill walking as the decent is steep and the trails are strewn with fist sized rocks that with one misstep could twist or roll your ankle and end your Camino before it really begins. The route is well marked with the exception of the mileage (kilometer) markings. You'll read how far you have left to travel but your body knows the sign is a lie. You feel as though you've already covered the seventeen miles and then some. How is possible to still have three to go? When you finally reach that last marker, you stop and restudy the number just to make sure it really says .5 kms rather than 5 kms. But sure enough when you turn the next bend, the magnificent old structures of Roncesvalles stands awaiting your arrival as it has for centuries of previously exhausted pilgrims.



At this point, you've past your first test. In some of the schools I've been to they call this this 'Gut Check'. It's an endurance test to weed out those who truly are not dedicated to the endeavor.



Before beginning, I would read of warnings about the crossing and cautionary tails of fatalities – pure fiction from those who made the trip and wished to make their efforts seem more harrowing to their listeners, or so thought. Along the route you can find crosses and other markings identifying spots where less fortunate pilgrims ended their journey. Perhaps by heart attack, exposure or just bad decision making. But sure enough, they are there and you regain all

respect towards the stories you've heard. Now I try to recall all the other disregarded stories I've heard and read about the trip ahead. Now that the walking is done, the next hard part begins – finding a room for the night.



I previously wrote of the varying countryside as I trained up from Madrid to Pamplona and into SJPdP. The walk through Basque country is magnificent. The country side is like nothing I have seen before with steep craggily valleys and billowing pastures strewn with short fat and feisty, shaggy horses. One doesn't typically think of steep mountains in this part of Europe, but again, they would be wrong. This hills build on top of hills, which build on top of more. There's one section of the pass where it's said that you rise high enough to touch the sky. Again, one might find this to be hyperbolic rhetoric....but you would think differently when you see it yourself. Halfway through the journey you cross through and enchanted forest of gnarly short trees clinging to steep slopes with thick bases and curly

branches that seemingly glide through the misty clouds that enshroud the countryside. It's mesmerizing.

16-17April – Zuburi

Posted on [April 18, 2017](#)

Traveling on the highways with my wife is always a harrowing experience. Neither of us believes the other has any driving skills and we live in terror every time the other takes control at the wheel. I think she follows too closely and pays insufficient attention to everything around her. She thinks I follow too closely, pay insufficient attention, drive too fast, can't stand to be in the right lane, etc. She's actually a pretty good driver but my issue is that I have a hard time following behind another or having others pass me – I feel as though I'm losing the race....even though there is no race. I can't sit idly behind another car, regardless of their speed, and I have to always be in the act of passing, regardless of the speed. The only time I slow down is when her furious eyes burn laser like holes in my forehead. I suspect I have something of a physiological competitive issue.



When I'm on the hiking trail, the same urges propel me to breakneck speeds (at least for my age group and physical skills!). I absolutely can't stand to follow behind another like 'Ducks in a Row.' I've no tolerance for walking in a group and if another sneaks up behind me with the mindset to overcome, I'm urged on to pick up the



pace to the point of self exhaustion. Stopping is a non-starter, it's not happening. I'll stop when I get to my destination or there's a real compelling reason to do so. When walking along and I see something I want to photograph, I'll ready my camera (iPhone) and continue walking with a long, deep step and try to catch the shutter in mid-stride for a steadier, unblurred shot. No stopping. When I have to relive myself on the trail, I do stop, but not for long and not until I've 'readied' myself with zipper down and prepared to perform. As soon as the stream stops, I'm off walking again as I close up for business. At this point your thinking this Boy has got issues. I think you'd be right! Perhaps a lifetime of never wanting to fall behind, always wanting to lead from the front and showing no weakness has taken a strange toll on my driving and hiking. I think this is, perhaps, why I'm on the Camino. To learn to slowdown, experience my surroundings and 'smell the roses'. I'm not there yet, but I still have 31 days of walking ahead of me.

I'm learning that the biggest concern on the Camino is finding a place to sleep/eat after a long exhausting day on the trail. I'd normally plan ahead for every single possible consideration (reservations, etc) but this time I said I was going with the flow and would let the 'Camino Provide' for my education and experience. But secretly I also don't want to call ahead and reserve only to find I selected the dump next to the really nice accommodation. So, wandering around the village like a Camino zombie, limping along with drool seeping down the side of my face and glazed over eyes while trying to find the 'right' place, I guess, will be the new norm. I was in such a state of desolation in Zubiri where I came across another Pilgrim in the same condition. That night neither of us wanted to share a room and bathroom with 20 others so we were looking for a 'habitacion solo' (single room) for a reasonable (cheap) price. The very nice hostel owner explained to us that he had none as I tried in my very broken Spanish to explain our dilemma (which he is undoubtedly familiar with). He did have a double room with two beds and a private bathroom that would go along with it. My fellow zombie was a strikingly attractive Danish woman and in spite of the fear of rejection I asked her the only thing I could. "Do you snore?" She said "no, what about you?" I replied, "Sometimes, would you like to split a room?" I think she was relieved but hesitated momentarily. Apparently the night before an elderly American man the night before seriously proposed to her after only a few hours of meeting – this is the Camino. But she said yes. In many areas of the States this would be scandalous, on the Camino trail, this was quick thinking to solve our daily problem before somebody else got the room and we were relegated to wandering the streets looking for another. All of our burdens were relieved and we unlimbered ourselves of our packs, got a few beers and walked to the river to join others in soaking our feet. We agreed she would be referred to in the blog as the 'Danish Oil Soldier Woman'. Her backpack weighed about the same as mine but she had little clothing and a lot of toiletries. Most of that was made up of various types of oils and lotions; Lavender to ward off the day's smells (boots and body), an olive oil for the skin, another for the face and more for every conceivable purpose. I thought this was cool until she showed me her Duck Tape. Then I began to think this might have been a bad spontaneous move. It wasn't till dinner where we ate with another Danish women and when she found out the Oil Soldier Woman brought Duct Tape, her eyes light up and she exclaimed she did



too! I guess duct tape is the thing in Denmark. Needless to say, the afternoon was really engaging. Pilgrims always manage to find the local pub and hang out and tell each other outrageous lies and intimate secrets they'd never, ever tell their friends. It must be because they feel unburdened knowing this is an artificial and liberating environment as we're all also 'discoverers' and most likely never to be seen again.

She told the truth, she didn't snore. I hope I didn't, but was not around long enough in the morning to really find out. I was up and out early (after finishing my slice of bread), frantically trying to get ahead of the group of very fast Korean walkers, so I'd have enough time to 'stop' and pee. Zubiri was fun.

PS To my little Danish Oil Soldier Woman, I hope you find your answers, the right questions and enjoy your Camino, and stay away from elderly American men! Also, if I got anything wrong here please comment.

18 April – Pamplona

Posted on [April 18, 2017](#)

18 April Arriving in Pamplona to the south, I missed the grand entrance through the protection of the city citadel walls. It made for an interesting experience as I walked through the park along the river with strolling families and sportsmen – not the traditional scene of Peregrinos. I rerouted off the customary course by a few Kms in order to avoid the dreaded finding of a place to stay. A fellow Peregrino who is traveling a week ahead of me recommended this hotel by Facebook. He stayed here to nurse feet and tour the city,,,,the same intent I have. After three days of walking I had already developed the pilgrim mindset and somehow felt out of place in this modern and contemporaneous environment. Thought the Navarians politely ignored me with my heavy backpack, five day beard growth and smell of the road, I definitely felt out of place. Checking into a modern hotel distanced me further from the ‘Camino’. Although this was my typical environment, I quickly showered and left to find the area where the pilgrims hang-out for their accustomed acquaintance. They’re easy to find. Most Spaniards dress conservatively in subdued colors and have a regal, confident stride about them (at least the Basque do). Pilgrims are all dressed colorfully, they limp and they’re eyes are cast up and down and all around trying to capture the architecture, smells and unfamiliar sights. They too speak loudly and confidently, but just differently. And, oh yes, most of them limp by this stage, did I say that already? Oddly enough I missed the Camino even though I was still on the Camino, just in a nice hotel.



The plan was to “smell the roses” and sightsee through Hemingway’s Pamplona for an extra day. The Alburgues kick you out promptly by 0800 and returning for a second night is not possible, so finding a reliable billet seemed logical. Hemingway must have been an astute observer of character as the Navarians are a proud and confident people and believe in their own special place in this world. It’s

obvious from the way their children indulgently play in the streets and plazas without fear or recrimination. Their capital is a splendid city of meandering alleys crenelated with detailed facades, laced with intricate ironworks and balconies. As in Madrid, the tourist come out during the day and the Spaniards (though some of them would disclaim that label) stroll around in the evenings. The architecture is ancient and marvelous, the ‘Tapas’ are delectable, the history and culture is evident. The city is one of means and import and meandering through its alleyways and ‘calles’ is a delight. The town is a wonder, but, by tomorrow morning I’ll be happy to rejoin the trail and privations with my fellow peregrinos.



18-20 Apr Puente and Estella

Posted on [April 20, 2017](#)

Time to catch up on the Blog as I sit here in a cafe in the ancient Camino town of Estella with it's three churches, all representing the separate and distinct interests of its mixed inhabitants. I'm consuming the 'Menu del Dia' of Pallela, Pollo con salsa y cerveza grande. It's all so delicious.

The hike out of Pamplona was welcomed; it was good to be out again in this incredibly beautiful countryside. The terrain is subtly changing from a mountain-influenced climate to a Mediterranean one. The hills are rolling, covered with grains and wine vines. The temperatures have risen, but offset by the terrific winds at the higher points. Even the homes and churches are changing from the French/German influenced styles with stone grays colors to the lighter sandstone variety. This side of Navarre is different from its more eastern regions. Even the weather has changed. In the mountains and foothills we were constantly shrouded in the mists of clouds; here, here, there's not a cloud in the sky, and it's a deep royal blue (azure). Whereas in the west, we were shaded by tall evergreens (even a few redwoods) and the spindly, gnarly trees on the hillsides, here they are much shorter and few in between. Olive trees and palms are starting to pop up among the trails. The walking is easier, much easier with gentle slope of crushed rock trails. A much needed relief from the past three days.



Yesterday's hike saw me to the ancient town of Puente de Reina (needless to say is that every town along the Camino is 'ancient') most notably known for it's famous six span stone bridge. Legend has it that a popular local queen commissioned it to put the local extortionist ferrymen and bandits out of the 'pilgrim take advantage' program. Before arriving in the town I took an excursion route to see the Eunate Church which is cited as possibly an old Templar church because of its octagonal shape. It was worth the extra two miles, but my feet probably didn't appreciate it by hauling me for 16.6 miles for the day.



Today's hike was much easier with more subtle rolling hills and groomed paths (very little road walking). I left the hotel at 0630 and made good time, even though I did do the unthinkable by taking a 20-minute break for coffee and a tortilla. The

tortillas here are not like we're accustomed to in the US. They're like these monstrous quiches filled with meats, and cheeses and potatoes. Very filling.



What makes this adventure so interesting is not only the sights and sounds and foods, but the characters you meet along the way. Every Caminoite has their own story. Last night I ate with a Dutch gentleman whose wife died of cancer last year at the same time he had a traumatic injury to his knee. He showed me an X-ray that he keeps for airport security and I was amazed at how much metal he's carrying in there, and still walking. He claims it's a miracle or a

testament to modern medicine – he's not sure which. This morning I passed an elderly American woman who was struggling up a hill. I stopped to inquire if she was OK and she said, yes, but I'm just 'old, fat and tired'. I liked her self-assessment; she was an honest woman. I suggested that by the end of the Camino she'd feel like neither and left her to her version of the Camino. Then there was the young man from Northern Italy who was walking with his dog Bombos, or something like that. It was pretty cool. I also came across a Lithuanian man who was on his second trip. I noted he had to stop every few hundred meters to catch his breath, so he encouraged me along. I found out later he suffers from emphysema and finds these trips invigorating for his health. Everybody has his or her story.



The crowds of the first few days seem too have thinned out as there's fewer peregrinos on the path (or I've successfully passed them all?) and the competition for room and bed space doesn't seem to be so energetic. I suspect we saw a glut of walkers who come out over the Easter week and now are back at work. It's nice. There are two common phrases on the Camino, one is Buen Camino which everybody says to everybody else. The other is "shut up and walk already" which is never said, but often thought.....well, at least by me. Five days into the hike I'm more inclined to say Buen Camino than the other as the groups are much smaller and the chatting is down to a bare minimum. Solitude on the path seems to be a common desire. I like that.

Navigating on the Camino. It's easy, just follow the floating backpack in front of you, it's always there. If you think you've passed them all and are in the lead, you're wrong, keep looking. But, if you can't see far enough ahead to find it, look for the omnipresent Camino sign with a blue background and yellow, outlined scallop shell. They are everywhere, and often accompanied with a yellow arrow to help clarify the

direction. If the shell isn't there, look for the yellow arrow. You'll find them painted all over the ground and walls, everywhere. They're incredibly helpful, they'll paint three or four to an intersection just to make sure the peregrinos don't get lost. Finally, if that fails, guess. You'll probably be right. If not, ask somebody. The final worst-case option is to pull out the telephone and fire up the GPS. Works every time! Finding your way on the Camino Frances is no problem.



21 -23 Apr, Estella, Longhorno, Najera

Posted on [April 23, 2017](#)

Quick recap and the previous three days. The terrain is definitely changing from the rolling hills and greenery of the mountains, to more open plains and sharp crested hills. There are even a few dusty mesas on the horizon. The agriculture is now changing from the endless wheat fields of young green stalks which turn the horizon into a verdant waves every time the wind blows, which is often. The constant wind help keep the temperatures down. As we crossed from the Navarre region into Rioja the fields changed from wheat into vineyards with young sprouting. The result is the green vistas have been replaced by brown and the wind is not so present. Bugs and flies are starting to pop up along the path.



But with the gentle rolling hills comes a much easier hike and faster pace. The local governments have done well by building these three-meter wide trails of crushed rock and dirt, which makes the path less impactful on your feet and legs. These trails remind me of the Wizard of Oz's yellow brook road, speckled with floating backpacks and floppy hats. They both can be seen a long way off meandering

across the horizon, leading us to our next bed, bar and church.

Each of the little villages along the way are beginning to look like each other, which is a shame as each has a unique history and story to tell. At this early stage I no longer know which I'm passing through as I only remember my morning's start

point and the place where I have to find a room. Finding rooms has not gotten easier. Yesterday's heard of pilgrims arrived in Nogrono (a bustling city of over 150,000) only to discover it was Saturday (yes, we forget which day it is) and that they were celebrating a holiday. That meant there wasn't a room to be found.....or just barely. After doing the 'camino zombie' walk for 45 mins I finally found an accommodation in what felt like grandma's back room. It was a solo (private) place to sleep, so I quickly took it. Within minutes, there were knocks at the doors with other pilgrims seeking the same. Nogrono is a really cool town. The Pension happened to be on the Pincho and Wine Calle where all the locals and visitors would hop from pub to pub drinking



the local Rioja and eating tapas. What a great place for us perigrinos to link up and chat after a long duty day on the trail.



I met another interesting character yesterday. As I turned the corner around the trail I slipped past this disheveled looking guy sitting and standing on a large rock eating out of a jar of honey. It was tough to tell if he was a perigrino or pan handling. As I walked by he yells out in very passible English "Where are you from?" "Alaska" I answered, getting the usual amazed response. His was, "I'm from the Mountains of Romania, that's why I'm standing on a rock", and "Great, I'll catch up with you later as I want to know more about Alaska." I smiled and wished him Buen Camino, but didn't think I'd see him again as I was moving fast. An hour later he's walking next to me dressed in an old set of Converse High top tennis shoes, cut off jeans, a sweat shirt with a canvas bag draped over one shoulder and a guitar over the other. He turned out to be one of the more fascinating and genuine guys I've met on the Camino. He was a dancer and singer from Romania who spent the last four months walking through Spain. He'd been everywhere and on this Camino (this was his second) he started in Barcelona. He spoke of his walk across from Spain to Rome and to most all major cities in Spain. He survived by taking part time jobs dancing (not flamenco so I'm not sure what type) and singing and playing the guitar. He could speak almost all the Spanish dialects fluently and his English was excellent. His goal was to be beholden to no man and keep his freedom to travel and write his own famous song; but he wasn't sure if it would be blues or rap...but thought the blues were more soulful so was leaning that direction. We must have chatted for an hour and I could tell that although I was walking fast, I was holding him up. By the time we reached the next village the inevitable question came....'Darren, can I ask you a question', this is where I expected the pan handling to come in, and I wasn't



disappointed, but rather pleased. He didn't ask for money, but instead asked for a loaf of bread. We found a pastry shop, but the sweet breads were of no interest to him. Finally, after courting a grandmother with his truly fluent local Spanish, she was enchanted and grabbed him by the arm to personally lead us to the closest Mercado. I bought a large baguette for 1.20 and very happily handed it to him with a handshake as he sauntered down the ally to the next city to sing for money. He truly was an interesting fellow and in retrospect, though we were both peregrinos I wish I would have done more for him. If ever I come across him playing a song, I'll drop a jar of honey into his case. You really do meet the most interesting characters along the Camino.

Kit update:

The Oprey back pack is wonderful, it's very comfortable, great belt system and has good accessories to make carrying sticks hand free a synch. However, I picked the wrong size. I purposely wanted a multipurpose pack that I could use off the Camino. Perhaps that was not a great idea. 55 liters is too big, it's too cumbersome for this style of living/travel. 35 is probably the size to go with. If your carrying more than can fit in a 35, you have too much stuff.

The single walking stick is working out fine. Since getting out of the mountains and foothills, it spends most of its time attached to the pack.

Sunglasses, haven't worn them. Although there has not been a cloud in the sky since leaving the mountains, everyday is walking with the sun, it's to your back most of the day. One should be close to their destination by the time the sun gets in your eyes so perhaps sunglasses are an unnecessary luxury.

Sleeping bag, shipped home when in Pamplona. The Sleeping bag liner has been enough. I was chilled one night and just placed my jacket over my legs, no problems.

Floppy hat – a must. No hat and you'll burn.

Boots / shoes. As I noted before, I had to replace my trusty old walkers a week before the trip. I'm paying the price as I'm still breaking my feet in. In hindsight, thick soled walking shoes are probably preferable to the three quarter high light boots. In the mountains they were great to ensure I didn't roll an ankle, but on the flats (which will be most of the trip), they are overkill.

24 - 26 April St Dom, Belorado, Atapuerca

Posted on [April 26, 2017](#)

Atapuerca, it's where Camino heaven and hell collide. I arrived in this non-descript little village after 18.6 miles of humping through the rain and snow flurries and finally, finally found a place to stay; the previous villages were 'completo' (booked). When I kicked my boots off and melted into the bed....I was in heaven. However, after getting a few ZZZs and a shower, the walk around the village was depressing. Everything was closed - thought I did find a small pub that had beer! Siesta, that's what it's called.



Everybody goes home and does something, but they don't do it in the stores or on the streets. Everything is deserted (except, gratefully, my small bar). I did capture a cafe owner on his way out his place and stupidly asked him if he was closed..... He said 'read the sign' - Open at 1900, for dinner. In some of the larger villages there's always something to be found to do for the recently arrived Peregrino...not in Atapuerca.. The streets are rolled up and everybody has been put away. There is no internet and the cell coverage is poor to non-existent - Peregrino Hell. The only thing left to do is draft today's blog entry.



Naming conventions. The other day I met a guy walking the Camino who is Jewish. It made for an interesting initial conversation, the one all Peregrinos have - "why are you here?" Clearly it wasn't for religious reasons as he had quickly reminded me that Jews often did not fare well in Catholic Spanish history. But, he was still walking for spiritual and adventurous reasons. Many others along the trail evince absolutely

no identification to the Catholic Church or the concept of pilgrimage for penitence sake. My liberal and universal use of the terms Pilgrim, Peligrino or Peregrino are perhaps not appropriate. So, I'm changing my naming convention to those that are on the 'Way' to 'Caminoian' or "Caminoite." I'll use either, interchangeably, as the mood strikes me and offer an early apology to those purists who think the trail is attended by dedicated pilgrims seeking a closer oneness with their maker.



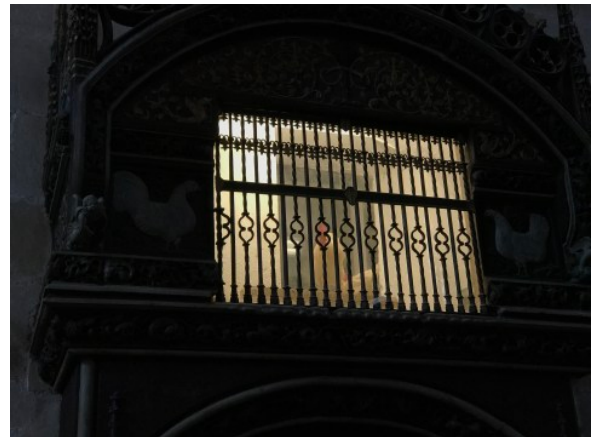
Spot Report. I received a spot sighting of my wandering Romanian friend. He was last seen out in an open field dancing and singing away, high as a kite; beholden to no man. Also, the Caminoite Dog made another appearance with his handler. He's was looking well and happy in a distant town square as he smoothly dodged between and away from all the Caminoians wishing to pet him.

The walking is better but the sights, views and vistas seem less impressive than before. The 'yellow brick road' is, for the most part, very well kept and makes walking at a constant pace very easy. The churches and cathedrals are all beginning to look the same and their history somehow just blends into one story. I should arrive in Burgos tomorrow for much needed rest and respite, and to go look at more nameless cathedrals and gorge on the glorious tappas and cerveza. Life as a caminoian is wonderful, particularly after one has found a quiet bed and open bar with tappas.



(editor's note: My friend and fellow Caminoite, Greg, reminded me of one of the unique stories of one of the cathedrals the breaks the mold of forgetfulness. The Cathedral of Saint Dominique in the village that takes its name after him, has an unusual characteristic. They keep a live rooster and hen in the cathedral in memory of a miracle inspired by St. Dom to save the life of a young pilgrim. The gist of it was that a local official was eating chicken when the parents of a hung boy (falsely accused of stealing) found him alive a day later. When the parents told the official to let him free (he was obviously innocent!) he replied the boy was a dead as the chicken on his plate...at

which time the chicken got up and walked away. The boy was saved, the legend was born and now a rooster and hen will live in the cathedral in perpetuity. So go most legends throughout this countryside.



Rooster and Hen

When I find time in Burgos I'll try to capture some of the interesting aspects of meeting people on the Camino and how they seem to constantly drift in and out of one's days.

Hasta.

28 April – Burgos

Posted on [April 28, 2017](#)

My last posting about all cathedrals blending together was premature. I've met one of the original 'Shock and Awe' religious sites on the Camino tour – the Burgos Cathedral. Words and photos cannot do it justice. Regal, beautiful, ornate are descriptive terms that don't come close. The Catholic Church in Spain must have designed these structures to inspire the awe, power, authority and glory of the church. They succeeded. With their quick riches from the New World, they



invested heavily into these buildings to make them places to humble the individual spirit and leave no doubt that there is something more monumentally powerful than any of us alone. The term 'awesome', awe inspiring, derives from these cathedrals (regardless of one's religious devotions).



The trail continues to get easier, either because the trail is easier or the body is becoming adjusted to the labors....or both. The blisters are less painful but the constant impact of more and more hard-pact and cement paths continue to take their toll. One has to get the feet off the ground for a few hours after the mileage to recover feeling in them. I'm still starting my walks before 0700, some days as early as 0615. It's

serene and quiet and wonderful to have the trail mostly to oneself. I also arrive at my destination in time to get a room....mostly. Some of the small villages really offer nothing by way of accommodation and it's frustrating to have to walk on to the next village to find something. Calling ahead to make reservations is not always productive, but when it is, it makes the day's journey so much more enjoyable.

The after-walk experiences have become pretty enjoyable. As most people generally walk the same daily legs (from the same villages to the next same villages) you develop a layering of 'Camino friends.' At the end of the walk you meet up with many of the same for drinks and dinner and chat. I've joined a group that also uses social media to its best advantage with a group network on 'Whatsapp'.

Throughout the day people contribute to the group posts with places to get coffee along the trail, music selections and at the end of the day, for places to meet up. Whoever happens to be within that village at that time will join in if they're otherwise not committed to something else. It's really comforting to have that sense of a safety and social network as your bubble of cominoites rolls its way along 'The Way.' During the days you can enjoy the solace of silence and introspection along the walk and at night have the camaraderie of a familiar face to eat with. How did Pelgrinos ever survive without social media?



A little more 'philosophy' on the Camino. One of the subtle beauties of this kind of undertaking is that it provides opportunities for each too explore their own true character and embrace it, or try to alter it. By way of example, walks on pavement through industrial areas or in climate weather. Both experiences come along sooner or later and the individual caminoites have to decide how to deal with it. For whatever reason they decide, they either take on the pain and boredom of the effort, or find ways to bypass it (bus, taxi, bike, whatever). Many skip these unenjoyably spots on the Camino because of time crunch challenges, health or it does not align with they're their particular threshold for whatever. Other's accept these nasty bits of the trail and walk on because it's part of the Camino. There are services available to deliver your backpack from your current albergues or hotel to the next one so you can walk pack free. One philosophy I heard that the way you confront your Camino challenges may be reflective of the way you face your life's challenges. During tough spots in the road, are you inclined to figure an easy way out, or do you "embrace the suck" and work your way through it? This is not meant as criticism for or against either course of action, but an understanding that the



Camino presents us with challenges that we can chose to embrace to best fit our own unique reasons for being here. Interesting.

Tomorrow I begin walking the miles and miles of open wheat fields known as the Meseta. To some, it's known as a 'suck-fest', and to others, a wondrous trail for reflection. Because the hotels/hostels are very few and far in between, it could be a very, very long day. It'll be interesting to see which of the two my character tells me it is.

Hasta

29 Apr, Hontanas

Posted on [April 30, 2017](#)

Short posting today extracted from my Face Book posting of the same day. I was half delirious from a long, hot day on the trail and was enjoying the moment after a bellyful of beer after finally finding the town and a bed to sleep in.

“Only one pic today. This morning I entered the Meseta, miles and miles and miles of wheat fields. After seeing one pic, you pretty much get the idea. For the first time on the walk I strapped the earbuds on and cranked Janis. Together we embarked into the Meseta singing about carefree freedom! Life can be good, if you let it be so! Ok, second pic is a pic about salvation. After 19.6 miles through the Meseta the town of Hontanas was nowhere on the horizon. Low and behold in a depression, this vision presented itself. My feet and knees were saved! It’s all about the little pleasures!”



A little more amplification. Normally one can see the next town on the distant horizon to help gauge the necessary level of effort to get to your next meal and bed. On the Meseta one can see forever....yet, the town of Hontanas was invisible, it wasn't there. I finally came upon a posting along the road, in the middle of nowhere, advertising a room and meals and it claimed only to be .5 kilometers away. After walking nearly 30 kms, that's not even a skip and a jump away.....except there was no town in sight. Naturally I thought this was part of the Anti-Caminoite psychological warfare plan (which existed only in my head....remember, I was half delirious). So I called for a room and when they asked, when will you arrive, I gave



them my best Spanish interpretation of a shoulder shrug....'huh, I don't know'. As you would expect, it didn't translate very well over the phone. Amazingly, within 200 meters of the sign a slight depression in the horizon became visible and miraculously, nestled in this little, unseen valley was the quaintest and prettiest little town of Hontanas, .5 Kms from the sign, just like

advertised. The delirium, sore feet, mixed with the vision of respite, along with two well pounded beers made for a wonderful ending to a long day.

Hasta



2 May - Ledigos

Posted on [May 3, 2017](#)

Spaniards. The Spaniards I've come to meet are some of the most generous, gracious, distinguished and happy people I've met. I don't know if it's because I travel in a bubble along the Camino and the only ones we meet are those dedicated to the welfare of us caminoites. But I suspect it's a common character amongst the people of this fine country. Everywhere you turn you see basic acts of kindness and consideration, and you hear of many more from other caminoians. One of mine occurred in some non-descript village in the middle of nowhere. I stopped at a cafe for a morning coffee and after sitting at the outside table, promptly knocked the cup over making a mess of everything. I went back into the store and asked the old man for a cloth to clean it up. He looked at me, smiled and followed me out with his rag. He wouldn't let me clean up my mess, even when I insisted. He then brought me a new cup of coffee and would not accept payment. When I bought a chocolate bar and tried to leave a big tip, he forced the change in my hand. That day he earned my gratitude for his simple act of kindness, and I suspect a notch up on the Karma ladder. According to many along the trail, this story is not unique.

When you utterly desecrate their language, they're appreciative that you tried and will somehow communicate well enough to help get you what you need. During your confusing discussion, they don't talk to you like you're an idiot by slowing down and speaking loud with short, simple words, but just continue talking normally, and show you.

When traveling through the larger towns you'll see the streets come alive around seven in the evening as people stroll up and down the tree lined streets and alleys. They're all dressed up in their finery and the older crowd look like they're attending a royal event. But they're not; they believe in looking their best and certainly pull it off with aplomb. You won't see the spandex pants, or ragged jeans and T-shirts; it would be conspicuously out of place. Violence, though I'm sure it's here somewhere isn't a concern when walking the city streets late at night or early morning (as I tend to do). You'll see legions of young Spaniards leaving their nightclubs and collecting in the streets still around 0630. But as you pass the large groupings, there's no sense of fear that you'll be the focus of their attention or the victim of some untoward act.



It's amazing; this is how civilization is supposed to work. How refreshing and insightful.

I don't mean to sound Polly Anna about the whole thing; on occasion you'll come across your typical garden variety Prick and Asshole. But on this trip, they seem to be the rare exception, rather than the rule as in so many other places. Learning the beautiful language and living in Spain for a while could be a wonderful adventure.

3 May - Bercianos del Real Camino

Posted on [May 3, 2017](#)



Last night before turning out the lights I noted my left foot was still swollen. Normally the swelling goes down after a few hours off the road....the fatigue and tightness in the foot doesn't. Naturally, I took some Motrin, shrugged it off and turned out the light. This morning it was still swollen – not a good sign. Clearly I've been pushing this almost 55 year old body too hard...the muscles may feel like a spry 26 year old but all the connections between those muscles feel their age. My body is not so subtly telling me to slow the hell down! The obsession of getting ahead of every floating backpack and floppy hat that's in front of me is stupid....and I know it. But until now, I could not seem to abate the urge. The swollen foot may have done it. Today I stopped twice and had two breakfasts, I cruised at low speed and enjoyed the road (unfortunately on the Meseta there's really not much to see). I still arrived at my hotel by 1230 and the first guy too check-in, but I wasn't smoked. My feet are still sore, my left one is still swollen, but perhaps I'm getting smarter in my old age....maybe just a little. Fortunately the Motrin supply has yet to run out.

I spotted the Milanese Caminoite dog and his tender the other day (Brian). We caught up a bit, his English improves every day as everybody wants to chat with the 'boy and his dog.' Bobble (Bubble in English) is the dog's real name. Named such because he bounces from place to place like a little uncontrolled bubble. Bobble has his own backpack to carry his meals. Brian laughed and commented that when the dog food supplies get low, he loads up the pack up with other sundries just so he can slow the bobble down! After a few minutes of chat, the lure of the floating backpacks overwhelmed my senses and I had to move on to get ahead. I hope to see Bobble later on the trail, and his keeper. I have yet to come across my Romanian friend.



The other day was a local four day holiday weekend and apparently many Spanish families took this as an opportunity to knock out another stage of their Camino. The trail reminded me of the photos you see of refugees sprawling all over the landscape; I had not seen so many floating backpacks on

the trail anytime during this trip. As you can imagine, like a cat chasing a shiny object, the backpacks out in front had their normal effect. This is, where, I believe, I strained my left foot. Fortunately the weekend is over and the trails are lonely and quiet these days. In the mornings I leave before the crowds just so I can get ahead of the glut of Caminoians and have the Camino all to myself. It's glorious.



6 May, Lost in Leon

Posted on [May 6, 2017](#)

Two nights in one of Castile-Leon's biggest cities (Leon) provokes insightful contemplation of a brutally stark contrast between life on the Camino and life. As a Caminoite, one floats through time and space as a mere observer, effected by neither. One's days are complicated only by the soreness of feet, where one will sleep and perhaps how to get something to eat other than a Pilgrims' Meal. When out in barren villages and the empty connecting trails in-between, these concerns are a relief, and they are enough. One is left in splendid isolation, accompanied only by transcendental thoughts that serve no immediate consequence. Perhaps they'll lead to a better understanding of humanity, if that's what your looking for; or just to discover how to more fluidly transition to that next phase of your life, if your lucky.



When sitting in a plaza or cathedral square in a bustling city, surrounded by the cacophony of noises and smells, and sights of humanity, it's difficult to square with those countryside thoughts. It's a challenge to mentally mitigate how they are worth one's while. With the immediacy of living, of responsibilities, of needs and influences beyond your control, the significance of oneself's place in time and space discovered while hiking the trails, seems to diminish. You seem to diminish. The realities of thought and mind and metaphysical constructs of the open skies, seems

irrelevant, insignificant. In the city, when surrounded by so much life, the questioning of how you exist rather than to what aim, assumes a more desperate role due to one's fear of disappearing into the abyss of humanity. The city draws a compulsion for wisdom on how to live; the backroads of the Camino compels thoughts of why to live. It's easy to get drawn to the allures of such a wondrous city and learn to live well; It's irresistible to return to the silent trails of one's mind under the open skies to contemplate on why to live; neither is possible without the other. It is easy to get lost in Leon.



8 May, Leaving the Meseta

Posted on [May 8, 2017](#)

Finally, the trail is leading us out of the Meseta – the miles and miles of wheat fields that turned into roads, city suburbs and industrial parks. What started out as a beautiful and contemplative trail (dirt Yellow Brick Road) turned into asphalt and cement and trucks closely whizzing by at speeds way too fast. I found the first two days in the Meseta to be quite serene, the last three days, not so much. I'm happy to be in the foothills of whatever mountain range is in front of us for some different terrain and cooler temperatures. In the distance one can still see patches of snow. The next few days the trail may be physically more challenging, but at least the Hell of the asphalt is behind.

Here are a couple odds and ends thoughts to clean up the backlog of ideas to blog about.

So, no shit, there I was at 0630 burrowing out of a hotel window. As you've previously read, I leave for the trail early in the morning. Most hotels just ask you to leave the key in the door and show you which door to exit (one that locks behind you). One morning a few days back I found myself locked in the stairwell with no where to go. The door to the hotel restaurant and main entrance was locked. The side exit door was locked. My room key worked on neither. I retraced my route from the room to see if I missed an emergency or fire exit, none was to be found. I was pissed! I had no desire to meditate in the stairwell until the owners showed up to open up. Fortunately, there was a small window that I could open and slide my backpack through. Equally fortunately, it was big enough for me to follow. If they have security cameras and ever review their tapes, I wonder what they'll think when they see me squirming through a window at 0 dark thirty. Sometimes the urge to get back on the trail is irresistible.



Dancing Irish Girl. I was walking a trail and coming up on an Irish father-daughter team that I'd met previously. As I was still quite some distance away and with my glasses off, the image was not quite distinct. But what I saw was a woman dancing and prancing on this isolated trail. My first thought was there's a problem and I should move up quickly for help. But there didn't really seem to be a sense of

urgency about her movements. Then I suspected that she might have to go the bathroom and was prancing away just to stave off the urge for a few more minutes. But as there was a field with trees, this scenario didn't fit. As I got closer, I noted she didn't have earbuds in and figured she either had a song in her heart, or was insane from the heat. Not so, her father was sitting on the ground, previously out of site, changing his socks. After the normal greetings, I asked her why she was dancing, was she so happy? She looked at me like I was a lunatic....then, it all became clear. If you ever walked or ran long distances with a load you know what she was doing. When you stop walking after so much impact on your feet, it hurts; it really hurts. The blood rushes back to your feet and all your nerve endings fire up. After a few minutes it's subsides, but when you put a load back on the feet, it's worse. Your feet feel like a thumb slammed in a door. It takes a few minutes of walking to get over the initial pains and return to your normal blister, hotspot, and ligament pains. For my Irish friend, the pain wasn't worth the break so she just danced away while her father changed out socks. Every time I ran into the team later on the trail, I broke out in a jig, just to mock her, in a friendly way. Her father enjoyed that as she was quite the taskmaster at keeping him moving. I'm an Ass, but we all had a memorable experience. Besides, I got to walk with them the rest of the day (only the second time I've not walked solo) and had a wonderful time chatting about all things under the sun.

In the Army we have the word 'Hua'. It's more of a grunt than a word and it can mean anything you want it to mean. With the word Hua, intonation is everything. With proper enunciation it could mean, good morning, or goodbye or a question, or an affirmative, declarative statement. It's all in the tone. To the adept, whole discussions can be had with the word Hua alone. The utterance of 'Buen Camino' is taking on the same utility in spoken brevity. 'Good morning', 'Buen Camino'. 'Good Bye', 'Buen Camino'. 'Is everything OK?', 'Buen Camino?' And with a simple little modifier it opens up to a new world of meanings – "Buen F***ing Camino". It's turning into a very useful phrase.

Scallop Shells. Symbology is important in all our lives. They serve like brevity codes for all sorts of experiences and emotions. In the Army a set of Parachute Wings or a Ranger Tab evokes all degrees of respect and appreciation because most understand the level of commitment and toil necessary to earn one. There's a brotherhood / sisterhood of pride and respect because of the common experiences. Today on the trail I noticed a similar shift towards the value of the ever-present scalloped shell symbol. In the beginning of the trip, it was just a marking to help us negotiate our way along the path, it pointed us in the right direction. It showed us where the trail was (along with the little yellow arrows) and identified Alburgues and bars & cafes where a



Caminoite could get service. It was helpful and that was it. Today, after about three weeks and Over 500 kilometers along the trail the shell's meaning began to take on a whole new meaning, much like my Master Parachutist Wings and Ranger Tab. There's a growing sense of pride in seeing the shell as I begin to understand much of what it represents. It's interesting how we pick up on these subtleties of change.

The Cruz Ferro. One of the highlights along the Camino is coming across the Cruz Ferro, the Iron Cross. It sits in the mountains near the highest point of the trail. It's been here to welcome Pilgrims and Caminoites for centuries and has served as a monument to relieved burdens. The lore is that one should bring from their home, or the flatlands below, a stone to represent their troubles. When they arrive at the Cross, they place it at its base as a token gesture for leaving one's burdens behind. The burdens represent whatever the walker wishes it to, but it's meant to leave behind a portion of your life that must stay behind before moving on. The other day I had the chance to walk with a gentleman who also served in his nation's military for over three decades, we had much to chat about. When we arrived at the ultimate discussion of 'why are you here', his story froze me in time. A few years back his wife was diagnosed with incurable cancer. The last eighteen months of her life was painful and unbearable for her, her children and her husband. Somewhere along the treatment a gypsy woman gave her a small pebble meant to comfort her. She had it with her, and rubbed it and kissed it until her end. Towards the end, her husband, my walking mate for the afternoon, told her that his plan after her death was to take the stone on the Camino and leave it at the Cruz Ferro. This leg of the journey was for her; the remainder of the trip to Santiago was to learn how to live without her. She smiled, said it was a great idea, kissed it, and never said another word. Tomorrow, which is a year later, we will come accords the Cross. My new Camino friend was with me in the restaurant tonight. It will be a tough day for him tomorrow as he leaves the pebble behind (if he can) and continues on the Santiago, if he can. Such stories humble and ennoble the spirit.



Hasta

10 May, just north of Ponferrada

Posted on [May 10, 2017](#)

Today I finally saw an honest to god Templar Castle. Not the ones you see on TV or the movies or one of those ancient places that everybody claims was one....but doesn't really know. It was basic, not much to it. Just like a modern day military installation on the outskirts of a town designed to house soldiers to go out into the countryside and protect people. However, the town has grown and the castle is virtually now at it's center. The crenelated towers and walls are impressive. If one were a soldier back a thousand years ago, it would have been a nice assignment, perhaps. The Castle at Ponferrada was just one of many Templar facilities along the Camino designed to protect Pilgrims....and serve as a reliable banking/credit system for the more affluent ones. I guess being a Templar was a pretty good gig, back in the day; part soldier, part priest and part banker. They did it all, until that fateful day in 1314 when their boss Jacques and his lieutenants were burnt at the stake. Still, the castle is impressive.



We're defiantly out of the Meseta now, "Death to the Meseta, long live the mountains!" I'm back in my comfort zone with winding, rocky paths that constantly undulate up and down and along the ridges. The sights are spectacular. They remind me of trails in both Alaska and the Austrian Alps. We're still in spring and the sprouting, colorful flora of purples and yellows amongst all that greenery is a sight for sore eyes. Unfortunately, there are still many trails outside the villages and cities



where the hardened paths follow roads and fast moving trucks. The highlands are glorious but coming down from them is not so enjoyable. But, it's not the Meseta. Tomorrow will be 25 kilometers of following more roads, then, finally, back up into the mountain paths and away from civilization, for a while.

Feet. It's all about the feet. The second most common greeting amongst Camino friends, other than 'Buen Camino', is, 'how's your feet?' It's kind of a strange salutation until you've walked a while and realize that it's all about the feet. They set your morale level, your enjoyment and pain levels and even determine how far and fast you'll journey through this adventure. I have baby feet. They hurt, constantly. Even with incessant attention, they're covered with old, dried up blisters and plasters over the new ones. The boots and sandals always feel like vice clamps, no matter how tight or loose they are. I just have baby feet and there's not much I can do about it but carry on. Complaining does no good because complaining about a common issue (almost everybody's feet hurt) never finds a really sympathetic audience. I've decided to get philosophical about it. Pain is a part of life. You can try to ignore it, but if you're truly aware, you'll see it everywhere. My feet hurt and will until a few days after I get off this trail. It's just part of the journey, one has to learn to absorb it and not let it influence your outlook.



My iPhone, it's the lynchpin to everything. It's my means of communication with Ursula and the rest of the world. It's my camera. It's my music. It's my blog computer. It's my map and GPS and serves as my source guidebook for all things on the Camino. I'm an Idiot. I've dropped it so many times that the screen is cracked in many places. I did buy the ultimate protective case, but it was too big and heavy; I left it at home. I settled for a leather case that covers both sides. A good option, except during the day when I walk, I take it out and place the naked phone in my pocket. I don't think it likes it in there because whenever I sit down, it jumps out and splays itself all the rocky ground. The old movie saying truly applies, "Stupid is as Stupid does." I hope I can stave off further stupidity until the end of this trip. Waking the Camino without this one little device would take on a whole new character I wish not to live through. I don't understand how they did it a thousand years ago before the advent of Apple.

Hasta



Cruz de Ferro, part deux

Posted on [May 10, 2017](#)

I made it up to the Iron Cross. Of its own physical accord, it's not too impressive, just a very tall pole supporting a small Iron Cross on top a rubble of stones. However, its simplicity can be disarming. The pole is wrapped with paper prayers, flags and all sorts of impedimenta of good will. Many of the stones at the base have name and quotes printed on them (burdens?). The surrounding abutment is covered with more stones, letters and left behind crucifixes. The elegance of the cross and its surroundings slowly seeps into your consciousness. It's not a subdued, reverent experience as all around are flooded with smiles of relief for having made it. Selfies and 'wefies'. {new word} are taken by all. Everybody wants their moment on the pile of rocks. An Italian biking club (or just friends) climbed all over the rocks shouting and joking and screaming and playing around like children; they are ecstatic. There were park benches surrounding the cross and numerous other sites (ancient sun dial) to check out. Groups of walkers and bikers took the occasion to rest their feet and eat. I didn't see my friend with the pebble. I'm kind of glad not to have, as the scene was incongruent with the solemnity of his journey there. I hope the experience lived up to his expectations. As for my leaving behind my burdens, I decided against it. Mine are not too onerous and I'm kind of attached to them, I think I'll keep them.

Hasta

12 May, O Cebreiro

Posted on [May 13, 2017](#)

This is a tough day to recap in writing; it was so magical it defies my ability to capture it in words. But, I'll give it shot so I can share the experience.

Today I glided through a mystical place of closely knitted mountainous valley's shrouded in mist, and rain and clouds and bubbly brooks that fed ferocious streams, speckled with all varieties of flowers in bloom. The paths were clear and the vegetation was consumed with a phosphorous green moss that tinted the undersides of the hovering clouds. If ever there were such fantastical creatures as

ferries and gnomes, this is where they would choose to live. Walking though this unique landscape was mesmerizing and thoroughly distracting from the toils and pains of the hike. The rain was non-stop and though the paths were wide open below, the upper elevations steeply inclined with trails covered in fist sized rocks and mud. I'm back in the mountains and it's vales; I could not be happier. The transition from the Leon region to the Galician could not be more dramatic.



Earlier, I was advised that this would be the most difficult day of the Camino because of the distance (~18+ miles), the incline and the in-climate weather. My feet are better and I was up for it.... After leaving the cement trails that shuttled up against the old main road, we came upon the slog-fest of mud and rocks in an uphill climb. It was elevation over distance. But this proved not to be a problem. For years I've been visiting my beloved mountains of the Austrian Alps and climbing similar rocky paths to find the perfect beer with the more perfect view from the mountaintop Huttas. Who knew that years later my long weekends and holidays in the Alps would have proven to be training grounds for today's Camino climb; I was right at home and invigorated by the effort and rain. You have to love it when a



hidden plan comes together; you have to be awed when you possess sufficient wits and the cognition to recognize that a master plan is in effect and you're the beneficiary. Today was, bar none, the most glorious day on the Camino. That's saying a lot.

The hump ended well, but a little surreal. The upward trail traverses a few aging and derelict villages, the otherworldly feel is prominent. But upon cresting the final hill from out of isolation your cast into a beautiful little stone village swarming with well-dressed and polite tourists. Drenched, exhausted and covered in mud you could not feel more out of place. Some of them were curious and pointed out the way that you had just come and a few others asked in their halting English about the hike. I really couldn't tell if we Caminoites were oddities or admired for our grit and determination in such trying conditions. It didn't matter; I quickly found my room, a shower and a beer. To top it off, the hostel had a laundry service that washed and dried my nasty cloths and save me the time and energy. I also directed Mr Motrin and Mrs Vino de Tinto to do their best work on my aching muscles. It was a very good day.

In moments of passion, indecisiveness and fury my wife often exclaims that I'm slow witted. I usually respond that I'm a deliberative thinker and like to play thoughts out in my mind before committing so I can fully understand all options. Secretly, I'm not convinced that one is not an apt description of the other. So, now I've been walking for over three weeks and have constantly bitched that my feet hurt. I've accepted it as the Camino thing, everybody's feet hurt. However, I also hear of Caminoians who walk and amazing 35-40 kms a day; I bet their feet don't hurt like mine! Sometimes you have to relearn lessons already learned and for the slow witted of us, it takes a while. Those of you that read my preparation notes know that I left my walking sticks back home. My reason was because I like them and did not want loose them on the trip; and the reduced weight of leaving them home was appealing. Some of you may conclude that leaving behind a key set of hiking kit for the most demanding hike of one's life is lunacy. In retrospect, you'd be right. I've been walking with a cheap single pole for the past few weeks that I only use during serious ascents or descents. Most of the time it stays strapped to my pack. Last night I finally broke down and bought a second pole. Today I walked like the dorky fool, with mismatched poles, who clicked along the trail slapping my poles into the cement with each irritating step. I learned to love it. With the right technique, the impact on the soles of my feet was reduced considerably. I was able to maintain an impressive pace without a limp and the pain of spikes being driven into the soles of my feet at every step. It was mesmerizing. I don't know why I haven't invested in a proper set of walking sticks rather than a hiking pole in the past. But, once I get home, I'm buying a real set. It makes a difference. My wife, she already has a proper set: I wonder if this is validation of her special view of me. There's always much introspection on the Camino.



Music on the Camino. Normally I don't walk with my ear buds strapped on with my music cranked. I'd usually prefer to hear the noises around me (while in the country) and left to my own thoughts rather than someone else's screamed into my skull. Sometimes I'll put them in just as a signal to other caminoites that I'm not interested in talking to them. I'm usually not - being a curmudgeon does that to one. Sometimes some of the Caminoians don't pick up on the universal walker's signal and I actually have to turn the tunes on just to ignore them; I normally like walking alone. Today, because the trail abutted an old road, I had buds in and the music on. It was a nice reprieve from car noises and the clickity clicking of the pole walkers nearby (and on this day, I was one of them). If you can get into the mode with the right trail and the right pace then the right music can do wonders for your stamina, speed and morale. While still in the valley, Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody came across the buds and I totally lost presence with my surroundings. I was in my own head, enjoying the 'scatamooch, scatamoche' or what ever the hell Freddy was shouting. I have no idea how I was moving, but I found I was moving fast and enjoying this miniature 'out of body experience.' Later when Puff Daddy rapped to Led Zepplin's Cashmere (from the Godzilla soundtrack album), I was flying. My heart wasn't pumping too hard but my pace was on fire. My body was moving totally disconnected from my mind. I'm not sure if I achieved Nirvana....or just a great adrenaline fix. But when Godzilla shrieked his final wail, I was nowhere to be found. Later, in the hills, 'Ferry and Gnome' Country, with Stanley Myer's Cavatina strumming through my noggen', self actualization was just within reach, I was floating; drenched, exhausted and covered in mud, but floating. Finally, as I was crossing into Galicia a chilled out version of Ave Maria (Schubert's version) from Cafe Del Mar consumed my head. I wasn't on the planet, I don't know where, but I was elsewhere. The only thing that brought me back was as soon as I passed into the frontiers of Galicia, the sky opened up and the sun shined and a ray of light highlighted the trail to my front....for about two minutes. I kid you not, one could not make this shit up - It really happened. I'm sure all of this is related to an endorphin high, when the body is smoked, but in-tune with the challenge and the mind is no longer needed for the mechanics of humping a pack to do it's work. Or, perhaps it's a signal that I actually 'experienced' that I was exactly in the right place, at the right time doing precisely the right thing. Sometimes you just have to listen to the music to see what it has to say you. As I repeatedly wrote earlier, it was a very good day.

Hasta



13 May, Triacastila

Posted on [May 13, 2017](#)

My Camino ends tomorrow, our Camino begins tomorrow. Today's walk through the frontiers of Galicia was pretty cool. The pictures I've posted on the countryside shows it all. It truly is one of the more beautiful regions on the earth and it's been a pleasure trekking through the well groomed and maintained trails this morning. The rains held off and the clouds kept the sun at bay to keep the temperatures just right. Some of the more interesting sights along the way were the dogs and cats. Being a pet lover, I'm always interested to see how others treat their animals and how they react to others. The dogs here are different, just different. The ones I saw today (and they are everywhere) are huge; they must be an in-bred breed of big dog and German Shepard. On top of that they are the gentlest, happiest and most amicable dogs I've ever seen. Some of them couldn't care less that you're there. They lay astride the trail and would barely pay you any attention as you worked your way around them. No barking, no growling, no threatening or curious looks, they couldn't care less that your walking through their territory. Others are a bit friendlier, they'll walk up to you and lean hard into your legs and demand that you pet and rub them. They won't get the hell out of the way until they had enough affection. Some of them are so big that if they weren't gentle, it could be a very intimidating experience. One gargantuan beast was lying in front of



a Cafe/bar door munching away on a bone. You damned near had to step over him to get inside for a cup of coffee. He shared his space with a pesky and noisy cat who kept rubbing up against him and a chicken that was curious to what he was eating. He was happy to be in the center of all activity and the myriad of strange Caminoites

was only of interest if they'd pet him. I think it tells a lot about a people on how they treat their pets and how they train them to treat others. This speaks wonders about the people of Galatia.



The regional ever-present kilometer markers tell us we're under the 100-mile mark. I read somewhere that the local government wanted to change out the markers for a more modern version but the residents, and Pilgrim groups, fought against it because the old ones were so beloved, even though many of them were wrong. Personally, I'd love to see them pulled up as I hate the reminder of my distance and how slow I'm moving every kilometer or so. I'd just rather walk and get there when I get there. However, I can see the allure to many as the passions grow the closer we get.



Tomorrow I arrive in Sarria, which is the closest town that one can start the Camino and qualify for the Compestella, it's a little over 100 kilometers walking distance from Santiago. Ursula will meet me there and we'll walk the last 100ks together. My Camino alone will come to an end and our Camino together will begin. Two Caminos for the effort of one, how is it possible to get any better than that? Its taken three weeks, but I think now I'm ready to share the experience, and have the patience to do it as two. Today marked a turning point, perhaps the most significant event so far. A few kilometers out from my overnight village, I stopped at a beautiful spot overlooking this magnificent countryside, sat on a rock, pulled off my shoes and socks and aired my feet out in the breeze. I could not do that three weeks ago - the delay would have killed me. Had I tried it, some poor Caminoite would have found my splayed out body along the trail dead of an aneurism due to a self imposed, impatient, conniption fit. But today, while sitting there, a few Caminoites passed me by bidding me a 'Buen Camino' and I smiled back and with a 'Hola'. The overwhelming urge to beat them into town wasn't there. When I felt ready, I suited back up and strolled into village only beating the rain. I think I'm ready to take a leisurely stroll into Santiago with my incredibly cool bride and best girl by my side.



Post Script

I'm curious to see if Ursula would recognize me with out the much-hated beard? I've lost so much weight that my clothing drapes off me like they're casts off from a bigger person. Walking over 600 kilometers in three weeks is a wonderful weight control program. I wonder how fast I'll put it back on.

Hasta



15 May, Portomarin,
Posted on [May 15, 2017](#)

A room with a balcony and a view. I'm sitting in our three star hotel on the huge balcony overlooking the Galatian countryside with its green fields, greener trees and wind turbines. Magnificent, and of course, the hotel bar helped me out with a Cupa Vino de Tinto. At 0001 hrs, I turn 55. I'm not sure 55 gets much better than this. This morning Ursula and I departed Sarria sharply at 0700, before most of the slumbering Caminoites in our hotel even thought of visiting the rudimentary breakfast bar. I was proud of her as she awoke before I and was eager and ready to go at around close to my normal time. No fuss, no muss- she's a real trooper. The walk from Sarria to Portomarin was like walking through an extended park. The trails were extremely well maintained and well marked with those kilometer markers that remind you how slow your walking. There was one exceptional marker, the one that showed we were at 100 kilometers from Santiago. On this marker, they engraved the distance (rather than the typical brass plaque) so nobody would steal it. That marks a significant turning point, just a few days from finishing thirty some odd days of walking, at nearly 55 years of age. Naturally I had to take a picture of the marker, naturally, I had to stand in line until all the other Caminoites got the out of the way so I could get a clean shot. But all is good.



Sarria to Santiago de Compostela marks a major turn in the Camino. As I previously wrote, the town of Sarria is the closest point from Santiago that one can begin their Camino and get their Compostella. The Compostella is a certificate showing that you completed 'The Way.' I guess in some circles that's a significant document. But what it means in practical terms is that the trail gets more crowded as do the albergues, pensions and bars. Commercialism of all things Camino is not quite rampant in American terms, but it's obviously picking up. This can be a source of major irritation to the Caminoian who started the trail 700 kilometers ago. But, all the guidebooks caution the walker from such feelings and remind us all that 'Everybody's Camino is different.' Clearly, I have mixed feelings because I've humped every step with my own kit and own a sense of proprietary pride in the trail; but, I also get to finish the Camino with Ursula, who started in Sarria. The contrast offers me a convergent view, which is helpful when looking at the overall experience of 'The Camino' and what it can mean to each of us. Bottom line, one should focus on they're own standards and goals and not get emotionally consumed by others'. It's your own Camino.

Walkers. You meet all sorts of walkers along the way. Old, young, fat, fit, feeble and just awesome. It's all here. What I've found fascinating are the differences. I saw two



dudes towing a wheeled backpack. I heard one of them (from Brazil) had back problems and could not carry a pack, so he decided to strap his kit in what looked kind of like a baby stroller and towed it behind him with a harness. I saw a Korean gentleman doing the same thing. This had to be tough because this walk isn't easy and any variance to the way everybody else does it (the path of least resistance) has got to be difficult. What stuck me as most intriguing was the couple I saw holding hands. I've walked in front and behind them over a couple of days and every time I see them, they're holding hands-that's tough to do when humping a ruck and walking stick and climbing some of these single person trails, uphill. There's got to be story there. As I suspect it's personal one, I didn't want to intrude and ask them why

they did it; so like most on the Camino, I made up my own. I'm guessing that one or the other was not entirely true to the relationship and was caught out. But on reflection they realized just how bad they screwed up and in order to keep the relationship together in a moment of desperation they



blurted out 'honestly honey, if you give me one more chance I'll hold your hand throughout the entire Camino.' And now, promises of passion have come to roost. I hesitate to reveal this theory for fear



it'll show just how shallow and insipid I can be. It's entirely possible that they are just so in love with each other that they could not imagine walking any other way. My base story possibly reduces their uplifting, inspired and heartwarming experience to a droll and desperate action. But, when you see this day after day, you got to ask yourself, 'what the hell?'

Hasta

17 May, Arzua.

Posted on [May 17, 2017](#)

A few days back a friend who's a few days behind us asked if the trails were congested from Sarria onward due to the '100Km Caminoites.' I told him there was no significant change that we could see. The next morning we slept in late for my birthday; we had a great room and didn't want to rush out. It's then that we saw the Zombie Camino Hoards on the trails. Oh my word! There were groups of groups streaming up the streets like the refugee masses you see on TV. It took my breath away knowing that I was going to have to pass each one of those floating backpacks with floppy hats. What I did not realize was that on the previous day out of Sarria, Ursula and I were leading the horde because we left much earlier than the rest of the pack. I had to write back to my friend to tell him to beware and begin making reservations for the next few days. Both Ursula and I swore that we'd get back on our normal schedule and beat the horde out the door. Six thirty in the morning on the trail was a wonderful time to have it all to ourselves, again. The horde had arrived, but we were out in front.



This is still early in the season and the crowds aren't even close to peak. Though the trail was not quite filled with a moving circus of bantering and ogling gypsies moving at different paces and in different hoards, it's getting there. We were at the head of the pack and when we came across one of the smaller villages I saw a few of the women inhabitants who were caught unaware while in their street. They wearily eyed us and then scuttled off to their homes to close their doors, shutter their windows and escape from the onslaught of Caminoites that was to follow. I always wondered if anybody every really lived in those shuttered homes, now I know. They're all in hiding. After seeing the droves of people ambling through their little towns, I can't say that I blame

them. After all, how many times a day can you say 'Buen Camino' and still keep a smile?



The fun spot of the day was when we came upon a small creek crossing that was traversed with a stone footbridge. It wasn't very high nor very wide and it was covered with moss so as to make it potentially slippery, but it wasn't. We first sighted a few older American ladies on the footbridge and thought they were in distress; both of them were on their hands and knees with their

more than aged and ample derrières skyward. We thought one had slipped and the other attempting to help the first. First impressions were wrong again! They actually wanted to cross the bridge this way because... who the hell knows; fear of slipping, fear of water, fear of life? We caught up with them halfway across and began rendering verbal encouragement to ensure their safe passage across. We wanted them to know we weren't in a hurry and to take their time, we were more concerned that they made it without falling rather than making it quickly. Besides, we were also enjoying the site! They carried on laughing and assisting each other to the far side without injury neither to body nor ego. Ursula and I cheered and clapped for them and were happy for their safe passage and were silently grateful that we wouldn't have to stick around to fish them out of the creek. It's easy to laugh at the sight but heart warming to realize that two old ladies were on the Camino making their way across a 'danger zone' in the best way they could, and succeeding where others had not even attempted. Today was a fun and easy day along the Way.



We're positioned well for the final push. Today's spurt, ~18 miles leaves us with two short runs in the next two days; 13 tomorrow and 10 into Santiago for a very early afternoon arrival on Friday. The contrast between the first couple of weeks on the Camino and the last two days could not be starker, but it's all part of the Way. I think the excitement of concluding the trip is beginning to overcome the exhaustion and fatigue. Those who started in St Jean or Pamplona will die before not making it the rest of the, one way or the other. They'll simply push-on

through sheer will of force and determination, regardless of whatever ails them. Those that started in Sarria are beginning to feel the pains of the road after three long days of walking. The more their feet and muscles hurt, the less they chat and prance around like curious bees. Tomorrow will be quiet on the trail, but I'm sure that Friday's trail will be jubilant. For good reason.

Hasta.



Camino Food

Posted on [May 22, 2017](#)

It's a subject I've held off on writing about because the flavors of each region that we walked through are slightly different. What was similar was the dreaded 'Pilgrim's Meal.' I've ranted about that enough that the only thing I'll say here is that it was the staple. From there, once you break free from the pilgrim staple, it gets much, much better. At first we discovered that the breakfasts were, well, not really breakfasts...just an appetizer to get one interested in food early in the morning – toasted bread and coffee. So, the typical real breakfast was found later on the trail at the first open bar along the way. There, it was usually, coffee, and a tortilla (kind of like a big potato quiche with eggs and meats and whatever was left over from the night before). That was usually topped off with a Napoleon Pastry, a flakey piece of bread with chocolate in the middle.



Because I usually arrived at the destination between 1130-1300 I held off on lunch until after a shower and change of clothing. Usually, I had whatever they offered at the hostel.

That was a bocadilla, a fresh loaf of bread with thin slices of fatty ham, I tired of these quickly. Some places had hambureisas...a huge hamburger with a sunny side up egg on top of the meat. Eggs were on everything!

Many places had the manufactured, frozen paella or lasagna that rarely ever looked like the pictures on the menu. But, when tired and hungry, it all went down well with beer. Dinner, frustratingly was served at 1900. The Spanish eat late and their guests eat with them. I was told that dinner is normally around 2100 and our 1900 meals were considered the earliest you could eat. By then we were famished and hungered for the typical Pilgrim Meal. Now, having giving the down side, the upside was fantastic. The real food was delicious. The vegetables had genuine flavors, not the kind that is picked before they're ripe so they'll ripen during the two weeklong journey to the grocery store. The meats aren't protein fed and also have real taste. The pastries are light and





airy and to die for. The coffee is magnificent. The olive oil, on everything, is fresh. The house tinto (red) wines are as good as what we buy for big dollars back in our liquor stores. To top this all off, the prices are ridiculously low. It only gets better from there. When in the cities, one gets to enjoy the Pinchos and Tappas, the little appetizers that accompany drinks. Or, you can go to a tapa bar and select any number of options from behind the glass counters. They come in millions of varieties and flavors, from potatoes, to salads to shrimps or pork or vegetable – whatever the culinary imagination can concoct. And they're delicious, absolutely delicious. We often made a meal entirely of these, and washed them down with the local wines. Spain is resplendent in delicious foods and drinks. Although I initially lost a good deal of weight on the trail, towards the end, after I figured out how to tap into the real deal of culinary delights, the 'love handles' and midriff started to return. Part of the Camino was spiritual, part of it cultural. Enjoying the foods and drinks of Spain was both spiritual and cultural.





Paradigms

Posted on [May 23, 2017](#)

We all see the world based on the way we've seen it in the past, plus new experiences. Our new experiences mold our evolving perceptions. A simple experience many, many days previous caused me to reflect just how filtered we are by our paradigms and just how useful it is to see the world differently. After a short, steep climb up a hill overlooking one of the nondescript villages in a valley towards Leon, I stopped at the little chapel sitting on the bluff. I was tired and took the opportunity to sightsee as an excuse for resting.



Standing at the entrance was a wizened, little old "Sister" of some Order or another. She was my tour guide and adeptly perceived that my language was English. She asked 'where are you from?' In perfect English, as she stepped aside for another gentlemen exiting the church. I replied, as I always do, 'America', but it may have sounded like 'Murica to her. She just looked at me and smiled. 'This man', as she pointed to the guy leaving, 'is also from America, he's from Bolivia. So, which America are you from?' She saw the light go off in my head, and smiled again; you could see the mechanics behind her clever eyes working away. I'm not sure if her question was to cause me to question my own little paradigm (a view that unthinkingly held my country as the representative of two entire continents) or, she was genuinely seeking clarification. I suspect it was a little of both. But, she accomplished a lot with her simple little question by causing me to see my world differently. So, now when asked 'where are you from, I say 'Alaska!' as my token and begrudging response to my education by a little 'Sister' from a small church in the Leon Valley.



It's funny though, clearly, many of us need the reeducation. A few days later I was walking along and a young, healthy guy came up from behind and saw my APOC- Alaska Chapter flag on my backpack. He slowed a bit and said he was from Brazil and asked if I was from Alaska. We had a nice but brief conversation of the beauties of the land and he spoke of how he always wanted to visit. With my new found wisdom I closed with, 'isn't this great, we're both Americans.' I got this quizzical

little look, which turned into dismay at the thought that the US was somehow the same as his beautiful country to the south and his attitude got frosty as he picked up his pace, significantly. I haven't seen him since, but I am sure, he could use a little visit to the wizened little sister on the church overlooking the valley leading into Leon.

Paradigms are important and evolving them helps us see the world in a much better (and more helpful) way.



Post Camino Blues

Posted on [May 26, 2017](#)

The walks are done, the camaraderie is now a Facebook/WhatsApp phenomena, and the care-free living is in the past – this is living the ‘Camino Blues.’ Leaving the Camino is no difference than returning from a military deployment. The constant euphoria of living on the edge, in an artificial existence, quickly wanes into mental and physical exhaustion. Describing the daily surreal experiences to those who haven’t walked, fails to translate, there is little sense of satisfaction as there’s no shared basis for understanding. Isolation from your non-Camino friends and family deepens, as your Camino friends are further and further away.

With a typical military deployment, while your deployed, you think of nothing but performing in the here and now and returning home. After a short honeymoon at home you think of nothing but the next deployment. The similarities are startling. This must be why so many Caminoites return for a second and third Camino, to relive that adrenaline high from pure living, honest relationships and extreme physical burdens unfiltered from responsibilities of ‘real’ life back in the ‘real world’.

I suppose the accomplished Pilgrim learns how to apply their Camino experiences to ‘real life’ to achieve a more fulfilling existence, free of the need of the fix as a Camino Junkie. The appeal of simple; minimalistic living with a clear focus and known end state is alluring. I suppose if one learns their lessons well and successfully integrates them, then their Camino adventure truly was a success. Perhaps for the rest of us, the influences of our former realities and commitments are too strong and another Camino, or extreme ‘fix’, or next deployment is what will consume our thoughts until they’re relived, or they too, are clouded out by real life.

I’m still working on my thoughts for the conclusion of my Camino Blog to speak to our entry into Santiago, not continuing on to Finisterre and the ending of a wonderful 35day euphoric experience. More to follow.

Hasta



Toro!

Posted on [May 27, 2017](#)

Tonight I'm in Salamanca, it was a beautiful and ancient university city even before the Roman's decided to visit, and stay. The Romans are long gone, but the tourists remain, and the city and its amazing architecture are even more beautiful. As I haven't closed out my Camino Blog yet, I'm going to include this journal note within, just so it has a place to stay. Besides, I'm still in Spain and on my own little post-Camino Camino.

Tonight I was walking the ring of the city, out and away from where the tourist and partygoers revel. I wanted to spend time away from the crowd, but found even away from the tourist zones, the Spaniards are all out and about enjoying their city. Coincidentally, because I have a place overlooking the Plaza Mayor, it means the partygoers are right outside my window. And because this is a weekend, they're there until 0600!

I came across the typical outdoor bar, cafe splayed all over the promenade zone of the major boulevard. I saw a big screen TV and thought I'd join in the fun to watch, and get a beer. It wasn't soccer that was on display but a Bull Fight, up front and personal. The High Definition screen showed everything. I only stayed for one round – one Bull/Matador combo. Many years back I attended a few 'fights', or are they called 'matches', in Madrid and Jerez dLF. Because of this I flatter myself into thinking I understand the 'sport.' I probably don't, not even close.



This particular 'Matador Team' was pretty impressive, the bull, even more so. Everything went like clockwork, all the team members completed their tasks and the Matador got his glorious moment in the center of the ring with all the conditions set to make a glorious killing. He threw his hat into the center of the ring and skillfully guided the bull to the center to trample on it.

I find Bull Fights to be a conflictingly fascinating undertaking. In today's antiseptic world the daily advent of death is hidden in sterile buildings, managed by practitioners who have developed blasé terminology to mask the brutality of the finality of death. Death and dominance and pain are hidden from us, except in movies and the Bull Ring, where it is glorified. Watching a bullfight is like watching a train wreck, you can't stand it, but you can't pull your eyes away. The mastery of the young Matador over this deadly beast was sublime. Towards the end he could get the bleeding and dying animal to just about dance around him. Everything went on cue and as the young man was about to earn his bull tail with the final Coup de Gras, until everything went wrong. He made the eloquent stab the first time, but it didn't penetrate deep enough. The second time it penetrated fully, but missed the heart, by only centimeters. The bull didn't drop, the Matador over reached, the bull

got his horn between the young man's legs and because the neck cuts weren't severe enough, he lifted his head and threw the boy into the air, like a rag. Then he went for the second 'pay-back'. Fortunately, the horns did not penetrate, but when the would be slayer hit the ground, he was out, cold. The Bull won.... but he didn't. I guess because the cuts were deadly enough, his moments were numbered and the decision was not made to send him off to the stud farm. After the colorful little men (six of them) carried away the unconscious matador, they cornered the victorious bull, and worked him until he bled out. He was tenacious to the end, even the short stab behind the skull still left him kicking.

I guess sometimes life is not fair. The Matador had a masterfully, domineering event. He was on his way to fame and glory, until he missed by centimeters. Now he's in a hospital and when he wakes, his managers may be talking to him about a new profession. The bull, he was still standing as the Matador was carried out of the ring, but it didn't matter. This is why I find Bull Fighting fascinating. It's a stark reminder that real life is not antiseptic; that one bad instant can lead to disaster and that a great performance can still lead to death. Life is not fair and there is still one country that proudly retains one of its old customs reminding us that we should live each day to the fullest while we can.

Salamanca is truly a beautiful city, I'm very happy I had it on the bucket list. Off to Toledo on Monday to spend more than an afternoon investigating its Byzantine alleyways, like I did 20 years ago. This should be fun.

Hasta.



Alburge vs Hotel

Posted on [May 29, 2017](#)

Alburge vs hotel (group rooms vs individual rooms). You'll find many purists on the Camino who come with a prescribed vision of what it is to be on a 'real Camino'. In their view, any variance from the way it was done hundreds of years ago is not the genuine experience. Some of these guys keep their views to themselves; others freely share their zeal and views with anyone who'll listen. Other than one guy who I saw wearing what looked like an old Jesuit robe, leather sandals and a cross & shell around his neck with a burlap sack over one shoulder, (I really did see a guy like that, with an awesome beard) I don't think there's anybody replicating conditions of a hundred years ago. Just in the shoe options alone the differences are significant. Besides, I suspect if pilgrims of old could have gotten their hands on a modern Osprey backpack, all the others would have beat feet to the nearest outfitter for one of their own.

The usual discussions center around walking vs. taxi; carrying everything vs. shipping ahead, a St Jean vs. Sarria Pilgrim and the biggest; alburgues living or hostel/hotel. I heard it exclaimed that the communal living of the alburgue, the constant interaction with your fellow caminoites is the real deal, missing out is marginalizing the experience. After now having completed the Camino and living in alburgues, hostels, pensions and hotels, I'd have to call BS on that idea. I would have to concede that living in a three star hotel far off the trail and away from the Camino crowd does pull one out of the artificial bubble of existence of being a Peligrino (I did write of that in the past). But, on occasion it's a good idea to change up just so you realize there is a difference. However, sleeping in an individual room rather than sharing a room with 4-18 others, for me, enhanced the experience. Often I shared a bathroom, but what was important was a room that I alone slept in. No snoring to compete with, no drunks coming in late a night to disturb everybody's sleep, no habitual midnight pee-er climbing up and down off the top bunk, it wasn't an issue. I had over 30 years of communal living with sharing open fields to tents to connex containers or barracks or into the 'Qs.' My life is no longer enhanced by lack of sleep or the frustration gained from inconsiderate room mates. In fact, I think the opposite is true. Particularly when you consider that I'm the snorer and the midnight pee-er. I would have had many enemies and fewer friends. People would have scouted out which alburgue I checked into, just so they could find another.

Admittedly, there is much to be gained from the social interaction you get from the communal scene. Best restaurant and bar advice is never far off. Which of the various routes to walk and their benefits is always welcome. Commiserating over the days challenges or philosophizing the evening away is relaxing. But in the end it's about relationships and the walk the next day and walking irritated and tired with a group of people who are angry and tired at you because you snore too loud is never a good way to enjoy the Camino experience. In olden days with Pilgrims that could afford to stay out of the alburgues, I bet they did. The purists are not wrong, just very adept at the art of self-deception. Everybody's Camino is differently and

it's theirs entirely.



19 May – Santiago.

Posted on [May 31, 2017](#)

These closing notes have been quite a few days in the making. The Camino was a challenging thing to do, physically. Reflecting on the experience and trying to capture its value is important and equally difficult. The difficulty in writing about it is to not make this melodramatic, self-indulgent or extraneously philosophical. In some ways, after all, it was only just a hike through the Spanish countryside, 'verdad?'

Sometimes a coincidence is just a coincidence and not a miracle or divine act of nature. Sometimes a long journey is just a means to get somewhere. But sometimes the innate attraction of an experience that's drawn hundreds of thousands of people (millions?) for over a thousand years really has greater intrinsic meaning to it. Failing to understand that value undercuts the effort and experience and may even negate it.

Taking off from where I left off on the last dated journal entry.

Yesterday's push (18 May) was 21 kms, but fatiguing non-the-less. We departed much earlier in the morning to avoid the hordes and had the trails to ourselves; just like old times. This set us up well for an easy 16 km morning stroll into Santiago. Others pushed on for another 6-8 kms so they'd only have a 10 km skip into town, but we were content with 16. The last day would still be the shortest day of the previous 31. Six months ago I never would of thought of a ten-mile hike as a simple stroll? With the end in sight, reflections of the trip was on everybody's minds and many of us were asking ourselves 'was it worth it' and were we changed people? Although there had been euphoric days filled with endorphin, adrenaline induced highs, thus far I'd had no real epiphanies, no sudden sparks of hidden wisdom nor any ethereal spot-lights shining on me from above producing a radiant glow of ecstasy (although that sudden burst of sun as I crossed into Galicia seemed pretty close to it). I had great expectations, and was finding it all a little disappointing; but I always had tomorrow.



On Friday morning we sat in our hotel bar self indulging with a 0630 coffee before hitting the trail. I could see a stream of caminoites passing the window on their way to Santiago. They clearly had the same idea as I, to get out early and beat the crowds to avoid the long lines for the compestella (the Pilgrim's completion certificate). My competitive stress levels began to rise. I wanted to leave at 0600 but acceded to my wife's wish of a coffee 0630 delay (when the bar opened) as this was the last day, it wouldn't hurt. Bad move on my part. I started the day's hike off with a sense of urgency to get there as quickly and early as possible, while Ursula's goal was to enjoy our last walk along the way. We had two different ideas of how the day would play out and we did not discuss it ahead of time. Naturally, it created friction points and the stress and frustration levels began to climb. One of her concerns about joining me at the end of the hike was that I'd be in a different place physically and mentally than her after 30+ days on the trail. The differences, manifested by competing agendas would inevitably lead to discord. Up to this point, we'd both been on our best behavior and deflected any friction pretty well. On our last day, the differences assumed extreme proportions and both of our fears came true. We each found the other to be an obstacle to our selfish, egocentric desires. The day did not go well.



The details of our differences are trivial but the result was that neither of us enjoyed our trip into Santiago, it may have been the worst day of the journey. However, in the end, the critical point is that we both overcame our foolishness and ended up walking into Santiago as a couple. Without going into much of the 'dramatic' or overly indulgent details, at a certain point in the morning I had asked for 'wisdom' and received a pretty clear message that walking into Santiago with Ursula was much better than without. That's kind of obvious preference but in the heat of the



moment during self-induced, personal crises, obvious choices aren't always so obvious. We queued up in the Pilgrim Office with seventy or so other Caminoites to await our turn for the compestella. As we were still fairly early the line was only about 30 minutes long and the wait was fairly jovial as we stood with many that we'd travelled with in the past. Collectively we regaled in our mutual completion.

With Compestella in hand, we were off to our hotel room to relieve ourselves of that life sucking tick attached to our backs. Up to this point it had been a very anticlimactic conclusion to a long journey. There were no bands playing at our arrival (although there was a dude with a bagpipe in one of the alleyways), no ticker tape parades and no public exclamations of pride or fireworks. We didn't really expect any of that, but we did wish it were more than just another day in Santiago as the Caminoian Zombie Horde invaded the city, just like every other day for the past thousand years. And again, there were no epiphany, no heavenly spotlights filled with harp like tunes; just a warm shower and clean underwear.



So, that was the antiseptic, undramatic conclusion to our journey. The more thoughtful and 'meaningful' conclusions of the trip follow.

The real joy of completion came later in the evening when we gathered with a few of the friends that had traveled together we spoke of 'was it worth it', what did we get out of it, etc. With the beer and wine flowing and the elation of completion, the answers started sprouting. The only reason I wrote of our petty fighting during the last day, as common and blasé as are similar scenes within most relationships, is because it highlights one of the revelations of the journey. When you're prepared to receive it, the message you need will come through. Whether that be as basic as your body telling you to slow down, or that your ready for a quicker pace. Or, whether that be in a moment of self induced crises and in need of an answer or guidance; if you're open to receive it, it'll be there. You just have to be prepared to understand it.



For my Camino I think the best word to use to describe it would be serendipitous (a fortunate happenstance or pleasant surprise). Little events happened all the time that in normal days, filled with responsibility and stress and all sorts of other distractions, one would not notice; I certainly would not have. But on my Camino, they were plentiful and evident as never before. I'd constantly run into the same people, time and time again in various villages and trails and cities. Yes, a common destination can explain the coincidence, but it is a big country and the cities are filled with lots of people, it doesn't explain the frequency with a selected few very well. When I had a need, or a question, or strong desire, the resolution would present itself at my fingertips either through this small group of people or other serendipitous circumstances. You constantly hear on the Camino



the phrase that 'The Camino provides.' It does. Not overtly and not if you sit back on you heals waiting for service. But, in your time of need, the solution is there. It's often as if the problem only presented itself so the solution could be used. I don't think this is unique to the Camino, I think this is common in life. But, our normal lives are filled with so many filtering distractions that we just can't perceive what's happening and available around us all the time.



Although there were no epiphanies for me on the trail, I did learn, or relearn a few of the basics. In this instance I learned to slow down long enough and read and understand what is right in front of me. Coincidences aren't miracles, because coincidences often happen for a purpose, all the time. Read them and understand the purpose.

I started my Camino alone, and completed it with Ursula; in essence I had two Caminos. For the first part it was a solitary journey where I broke from my solo walks only on a few wonderful occasions. The second part we walked together, and only separately for a few short periods. With Ursula I enjoyed seeing a whole new Camino through the eyes and experiences of another. For me, it was important to complete the one, before I could truly appreciate the other.

Through both experiences I learned that the walk through the countryside was pretty cool. But what made it truly memorable were both the thoughts resulting from contemplation in splendid isolation and the experiences with other people. As an anti-social guy, this is hard to admit that my normal tendencies limited one of the true values of the journey; that is building relationships. Experiencing the journey alone produces many remarkable opportunities, sharing it with others, brings along more. Doing both, walking alone and walking with others is the way to get the most out of the Camino. Alone, you get the unfiltered insights of your own heart and mind; walking together, you get the benefit of others'. Alone, your imagination can take you to the extreme edges of your mind; together, both imaginations can take you further. Alone, one can develop a deeper understanding of self; together, develop a deeper understanding of us all. Spending the evening in the company of others over dinner and drinks, chatting about the day's sights and events is one of the highlights of the day. Because the Camino is populated with adventurous people who have the desire to explore and feast on the marrow of life, they



form a fascinating group of people. Each has an intriguing story to tell, if your willing to listen.



Different people come into and out of the journey when you needed each other. For the moment, they're the right person to fulfill whatever needs you're both confronted with. The connection is genuine and pure as there is no need for pretense. As I noted previously, people on the Camino will tell you the most intimate details of their lives and dreams that they wouldn't reveal to their closet friends at home. They realize that you too are

transcendental and will soon pass on as an experience or memory. Speaking truth to you allows them to hear their thoughts out loud without fear of recrimination or shattering the image they've worked so hard to cultivate at home. But it's also sad that once the circumstances pass, and we later reconnect, sometimes the same attraction and magnetism may be absent. If your lucky both of you may recognize the moment for what it was, temporary. If not so lucky, one of you may try to rekindle the magic of that moment, and not understand why it's not working, making the new experience awkward and tarnishing the magic of the past. At the

end of our journeys, many of us make heartfelt promises to stay in touch and see each other in the future. Few will probably be kept, sadly. But, having had those friendships during the Camino, though few may last beyond, is what made the Camino the quintessential, special experience. I hope to see many of my Camino friends in the future because, quite frankly, they're cool people. At least they were while on the Camino. I'd be saddened to discover that with the filters of daily life at home, they are not who they were on the Camino. But, I'd hope that because of the Camino, they are now closer to who they were then who they were at home before they left. I hope the same applies to me.



I was going to write about how the Camino is not really a unique experience, but it serves as a micro-experience of life itself. But, at this point I think the journal would verge into being overly dramatic and philosophically self-indulgent. I think there's a good deal of truth to the idea, but I don't seem to be able to capture it in words that make it worth reading. So, I'll leave it there.

At the end of the day, was the experience worth it – absolutely, and I would recommend it to anybody. As I noted, the trip ended anticlimactically, there were no epiphanies on life and I don't know that I'm more than a marginally different person than before I started. I'm still an impatient ass who doesn't relax well and is consumed with 'target fixation', when I have one. While I have no intuition that I'm now burden free of any sins I may have committed previously, I also had no expectation of relief – besides, I suspect my sins are so boring and unimaginative that the all-mighty has better things to consider. Although I have developed a new found respect for the awe and power of the Catholic Church (even though I'm not Catholic). But that respect has to do with its historical, temporal, earthly powers. It's hard not to travel along the Camino and not be impressed. In spite of all that, and because I think that when we die we are all the sum of all our experiences, the Camino experience is one that I'm profoundly grateful for having in my kit-bag when that time comes.



Editorial note: Thanks to all of you who waded through all my typos, misspelling and poor use of grammar on this Journal. I experimented with writing this through an iPhone and small portable keyboard. The experiment worked in that physically, one is able to put words on paper (a server, actually). Where it doesn't work is doing it well with style and interest. The challenges lie in writing after a long day of walking and viewing what you write through a small phone screen while sitting in some darkened bar or out in a cafe table. It always looks great when you press the 'post' button; it rarely looks good when you get the chance later to review it. But, it's been a fun experiment, one I'll try to replicate in the future with other trips.

Tomorrow I'm leaving Spain and headed for our little mountain top place in Austria to spend a week with Ursula before she goes on tour. Eventually when I get back to my full sized iMac in Alaska, I plan to actually edit the journal for grammar and style and make it more readable, in addition to adding more photos (hostel Wifis are somewhat limiting). I'll also add a post-trip section with statistics, equipment and training review, etc. If you're interested in rereading, or have friends who may be interested in the Camino, check back later in the summer. We plan to return to AK in early July and I plan to finally close this out shortly after.

Buen Camino to you all.

Hasta

