



PASHA PATRIKI • istockphoto.com

Helpful souls and good omens line the road to the holy city of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain.



MELANIE RADZICKI MCMANUS • Special to the Star Tribune
A woman led her cows to pasture along the pilgrimage route.

By MELANIE RADZICKI MCMANUS • Special to the Star Tribune

There he was, quietly standing in the gravel road, looking at me with an inscrutable gaze. An enormous shotgun rested in his weathered palms, while three caramel-colored hunting dogs ran in and out of the brush, yipping excitedly. Still, he didn't take his gaze off my face.

"Buenos días," I offered with a little smile. To my relief, he smiled back. Summoning up my rusty Spanish, I asked him what he was hunting. He answered in Galician, a sort of Spanish and Portuguese mix spoken in this hilly, forested region of northwestern Spain. I wasn't sure what he said, so I handed him paper and pen, and he drew what looked like a kangaroo. Seeing my perplexed gaze, the man carefully wrote the word "conejo" next to the drawing, but that didn't help. I wished the man good luck on his hunt, then carried on.

Just a few hundred feet later, I hit a T in the road. I carefully scanned the area for the yellow arrow or scallop shell that would indicate which way to turn, but there was nothing. Another unmarked intersection. I weighed my options: Go right. Go left. Or turn around and once again disturb the kangaroo hunter to see if he knew where to find the famed road to Santiago de Compostela, the final resting place of the apostle St. James the Great. For the past three days, I'd been participating in a centuries-old tradition: following an arduous route to what the Catholic Church considers a holy city, third only to Rome and Jerusalem.



Shells mark the path to Santiago de Compostela. Above: Pilgrims trekked across hilly Spain to honor St. James.

Pilgrims continues on G4 ►

Finding helpful souls, good omens

◀ PILGRIMS FROM G1

According to lore, shortly after Jesus’ death, St. James traveled to Galicia to spread the gospel. Luck wasn’t with him; he converted just two souls, then returned to Jerusalem, where he was promptly beheaded. His disciples shipped his remains to Galicia’s main city, Compostela, but the saint’s body was forgotten, buried in a field, until a fellow named Pelayo discovered it, guided by a bright constellation, in 813 A.D. The remains were reburied in a small chapel in Compostela, which was replaced in the late 11th century with the impressive Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrims have been coming ever since.

Although numerous routes to Santiago were created across Europe, most eventually fed into one of five main paths still used today. The faithful patiently plodded along these challenging routes — which crossed steep mountains, arid plateaus and dusty steppes — for weeks, months, even years, simply for the chance to pray before St. James, whose remains are now resting in a tiny silver coffin beneath the cathedral.

While the pilgrimage was immensely popular during the Middle Ages, traffic along the Camino, as all routes leading into Santiago are called, eventually dwindled. Then, a miracle of sorts occurred. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) dubbed the Camino a World Heritage Site in 1985, and the Council of Europe declared it the first European Cultural Route. Interest in the ancient trek revived.

Last year, more than 100,000 people walked, rode horseback or biked along the Camino — the Catholic Church’s sanctioned methods — and this year at least 200,000 are expected because it’s a Holy Year, any year in which St. James’ July 25 birth date falls on a Sunday. According to the church, those who make a certifiable pilgrimage in Holy Years are granted a Jubilee Indulgence, meaning their sins for the year are forgiven.

A path full of surprises

Although the Camino Francés, the French Way, is the most popular route, I opted for the quieter, sparsely traveled Via de la Plata, or Silver Route.

My starting point was Ourense, a city of 107,000 in the southeastern section of Galicia. Since I had only four days to reach Santiago, 68 miles away, I had to move quickly. This meant I couldn’t carry the 25- to 35-pound backpack most pilgrims shoulder. Instead, I arranged for taxis to take my backpack to my next night’s lodging, then strapped on a small pack filled with water, money and other essentials. I had no map, partly because I couldn’t find one of the Via de la Plata, and partly because everything I’d read said the Camino was so well-marked that it was virtually impossible to get lost. Never believe everything you read.

I ran into sign problems the moment I began. It took me 70 minutes to find a Camino marker in Ourense, despite directions. But once I spotted that first bronze scallop shell stamped into the sidewalk, I was off.

The Via de la Plata was a delight, playful and full of surprises. The path wound through small towns and shady forests, zigged up the sides of steep mountains, then zagged back down again. One minute I’d be on a wide, paved road passing homes, cha-



Photos by MELANIE RADZICKI MCMANUS • Special to the Star Tribune
The remains of St. James rest in a tiny silver coffin beneath the hulking, protective Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

pels and fountains in a picturesque hamlet, the next I’d be on a narrow dirt path in the middle of someone’s farm fields. More than once, the trail led right through a farmstead; one morning, I nearly collided with a hefty bovine being led to pasture.

Locals obviously feel great affinity for the Camino and its travelers. In addition to the route’s official signage, many homes sported their own markers. One family spray-painted the word “Compostela” under an arrow on a concrete wall, another hung a dainty scallop shell from their fence. Everyone was happy to lead me back to the path when I’d gone astray. Which was rather often.

Although most intersections sported not just one, but two or more Cami-

no symbols — arrows, shells or yellow rays set on blue backgrounds — occasionally I’d see nothing. Sometimes I’d eventually find a marker inadvertently obscured by a resident’s wood pile, or a bright-yellow arrow that had faded to a whisper. Other times, I’d spot a homemade arrow crudely fashioned from sticks or stones, probably by earlier pilgrims. But there were a few occasions when I couldn’t find any indication of the way to turn, and no one around to ask. That’s when I relied on the power of the Camino to come through.

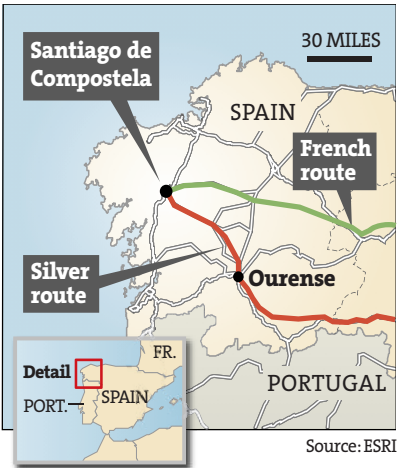
The pull of the Camino

No one walks the Camino on a lark. Some intangible, irresistible force draws you to it. And once you’ve plod-

ded along this well-worn path, your life is never quite the same.

Dr. Michael Krieger, a German youth psychiatrist, was on his third Camino hike when I bumped into him on a rocky stretch of the Silver Route. He was quick to say he wasn’t drawn to the Camino for religious reasons, but then backtracked. “The Camino quiets you and brings you back to yourself,” he said. “It gives you another sense of what life’s about, rather than just, ‘What can I buy next?’ And that’s very religious, actually.”

Faith was the reason Franco Mario Pastrana Martin walked 250 kilometers of the Camino Francés. The 27-year-old Argentinian was out of work and feeling down when a voice told him to go to Santiago. He made a



IF YOU GO

For more information, go to www.turgalicia.es.

If you want to qualify for a Compostela certificate, contact American Pilgrims on the Camino (www.americanpilgrims.com) and request a Credencial. Akin to a passport, this document must be stamped once or twice daily along the route to prove you’ve made the trek. Most restaurants, hotels and businesses have stamps.

During Holy or Jubilee Years, daily noon masses honoring pilgrims are held in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The church’s famous 176-pound *botafumeiro*, or thurible, will be swung at the end of mass. (Popular during the Middle Ages, thuribles spread incense smoke throughout cathedrals to eliminate the pilgrims’ stench.) Arrive by at least 11:30 a.m. if you want to get a seat.

mental note to add it to his bucket list, “but suddenly I was seeing images of Compostela everywhere,” he said. “I couldn’t escape it. I had to see what St. James wanted of me.” I met Martin during the early part of his journey and he told me that, with almost no money for food, he was often hungry. Yet every time his stomach rumbled uncomfortably, he spotted wild fruit along the roadside. When the mountainous terrain began to bedevil his knees, a manager at one of the Camino’s free pilgrim albergues, or hostels, offered him a pair of pricey walking sticks someone had left behind.

Before I met Martin, I’d heard similar tales of the Camino’s magic. If you need food or water, it appears. If you’re lost, someone arrives to guide you. There were even whispered stories about the ghosts of pilgrims past materializing to offer assistance to those in distress. Although I wasn’t anxious to be in distress, I was hoping to score a few miracles myself.

I wasn’t disappointed.

My first “miracle” came just a few hours into my trip in the tiny village of Viduedo. It was hot, really hot, and I was out of water. Unfortunately, it was siesta time, and Viduedo was locked up tight. Out of the blue, a man appeared. I told him my predicament, and he promptly pulled a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked the town’s sole, dusty store, which contained a huge, refrigerated case of water. Coincidence, or Camino?

Later that day, I toured the grounds of an impressive Cistercian Monastery in the town of Oseira, then began walking to my lodge, an inn 5 miles out of town. My directions led me to an unmarked intersection instead. I’d covered more than 25 miles that day and was exhausted. I hadn’t seen a soul since leaving Oseira an hour earlier. Would I have to walk all the way back for help? Suddenly I heard the rumble of a car engine. I flagged down the driver, who promptly took me straight to the inn’s doorstep — several miles in the opposite direction.

The very next morning, during breakfast, I realized I didn’t have enough money to pay for my backpack’s final taxi ride into Santiago. The Camino passed through only tiny towns, none of which had an ATM. How would I pay for that final trip? In walked the inn’s owner — who had no idea of my predicament — to announce he wanted to personally drive my backpack to the next night’s lodging. Gratis.

From then on, I was hooked. With the Camino, with Galicia, with everyone I met, including my gun-toting friend. Yes, I disturbed him again to ask the way. He silently pointed to a small, dirt path off the gravel road that quickly disappeared into a forest.

When I finally reached the cathedral in Santiago, I joined the swarm of sweaty, dusty pilgrims exulting in their feat. I was the only one celebrating solo, but it hardly mattered. Because the Camino taught me you’re never really alone. And no matter how lost you get, someone will always be there to help you find your way. Even if he has a shotgun in his hands.

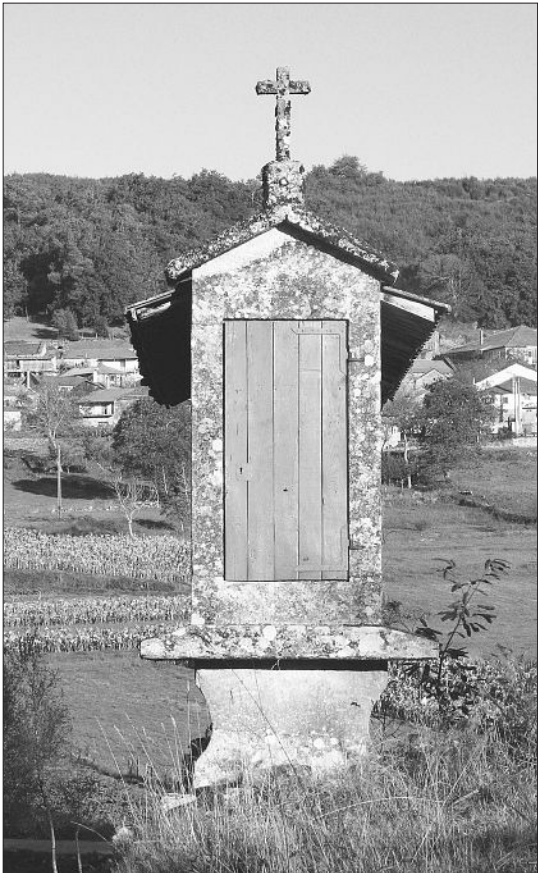
Melanie Radzicki McManus is a freelance writer living in Sun Prairie, Wis.



This hunter helped the author on her way. After consulting her Spanish dictionary, she learned he was hunting rabbits, not kangaroos.



The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela rises above the city of 95,000 residents. The old town, which contains the cathedral, is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Horreos, or decorative granaries, are found mainly in northwestern Spain and are a common sight on the Via de la Plata.