

TRAVEL TALK ~ CAMINO FRANCÉS

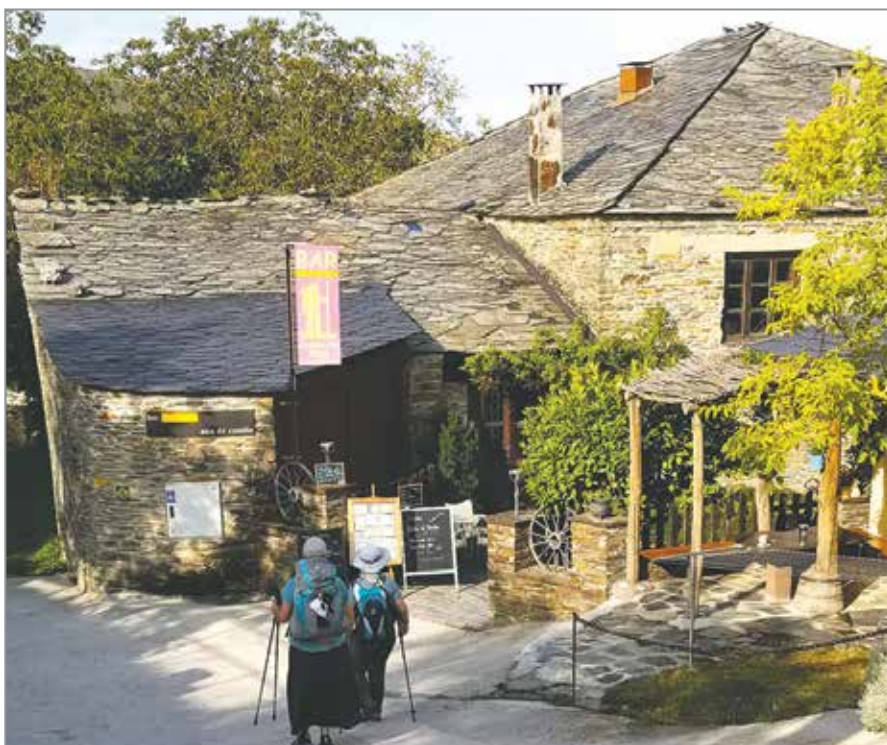
Written and photographed by Judy Goodnow



We started our pilgrimage in O'Cebrerio, Spain. Like most villages along the route, it hasn't changed in many centuries.

Walking any of the several-hundred-mile long Camino pilgrimage routes is spiritually rewarding, but also physically challenging and a test of patience and perseverance. In 2011 my sister Portia, a retired Episcopal priest, and I completed the "Camino Portuguese" route from Porto, Portugal, to Santiago de Compostela in Spain where the remains of St. James are buried. I said I would not do another one; slogging up and down steep rocky paths, stepping around cow droppings and getting up before 6 AM to beat the hot sun was taxing. Staying in hostels at our age tested our ability to deal with minimal comforts, clothes that hadn't quite dried and the odors and smells that accompany the exertions of so many walkers.

But there was also the camaraderie of accomplishing a difficult task with others going through the same experience. Memories of the challenges had faded, and eight years later Portia and I decided to return and do a section of the most famous route, the "Camino Frances". It starts in St Jean de Piet-de-Port, France, and is about 500 miles in length, crossing over part of the Alps and northern Spain to Santiago. We walked the last 120 miles, from O'Cebrerio, Spain to Santiago.

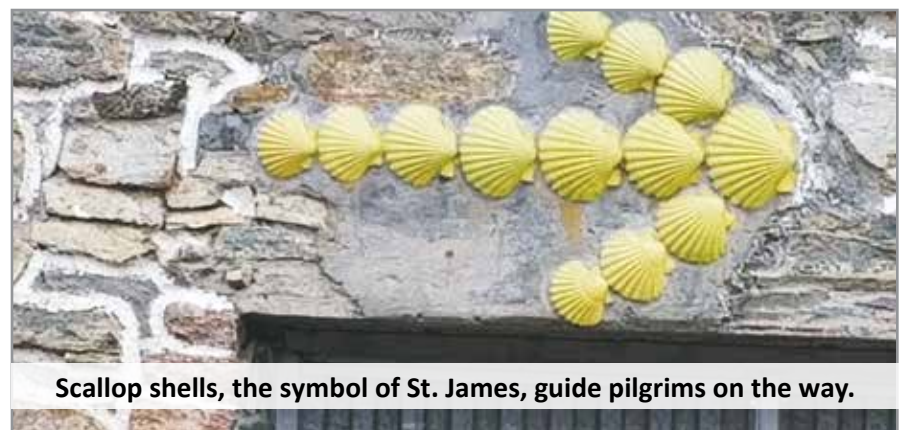


Local bars and restaurants are popular rest points along the way.

Over 250,000 people walk the Camino Frances each year. Some walk the entire distance, but many begin in Sarria, Spain, and do the last 100 miles. Walking this section still allows you to receive the Compostela, a certification issued by the Pilgrim Office that proves you have completed the walk. As you walk, you obtain "cellos" or stamps on your Pilgrim Passport, at least two per day. These are issued by churches, hostels, cafes and



The routes often make use of roads and bridges built by the Romans.



Scallop shells, the symbol of St. James, guide pilgrims on the way.

sometimes folks along the path who offer fruits, vegetables, baked goods, or painted scallop shells (the scallop is the saint symbol for Saint James) for a "donativo" or contribution. Few stamps are the same, so the Passport is an attractive remembrance of the journey. The Passport is also your entry to the many municipal and private hostels offering low-cost shelter to pilgrims along the Camino.



Fountains provide much need water for pilgrims.

On the Camino Frances, you walk through many medieval towns like O'Cebrerio, where we started. We walked through forests and cities, as well as over many Roman bridges, still standing and functioning as they had when originally built. There are many beautiful churches in this part of Spain, tiny local ones as well as very large cathedrals. Some offer special "pilgrim masses", where you are blessed for undertaking the walk and wished a safe and fulfilling Camino.



Eucalyptus forest provides shade during the heat of the day.

Some walkers choose to walk a portion of the Camino for a few weeks, then return another year for the next portion and so on, rather than attempting the entire walk or the last few hundred miles, as we did. The Camino Forum (www.caminodesantiago.me/community/) will give you a taste of the community of people who want to walk, have walked, and continue to walk the Caminos. The site is run by Ivar, who can also provide you with your Pilgrim Passport, maps and guides. There are hints for when to go, what to take and not take, what to wear, and current as well as older threads of advice, comments and rants. There are many, many different Camino paths, all leading to Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrims are guided by useful yellow arrows and scallop shell markers. Trouble comes when it is pouring rain and you actually have to look up instead of focusing on where you are placing your feet.

There is a certain detachment from the world on the Camino. You aren't likely to pick up a newspaper unless you read Spanish, and you won't see televisions in the hostels. Many now have WiFi or "weefee" as they pronounce it, however, and the newer hostels are including electrical outlets next to nearly every bed, so if one is available, you can plug in cell phones and kindles. You do tend to put the world and its troubles aside, however. After all, you are focusing on not getting lost, trying to navigate the paths safely and without falling, and making certain you haven't lost your passport or anything important when you left in the dark that morning. At the end of the day, after washing out your clothes and having a meal, you are physically tired, and generally fall to sleep by 8:30 or 9 pm.

Food on the Camino is varied. There are small cafes and bars along the way where you can purchase the standard breakfast of toasted bread, cheese and coffee or freshly squeezed orange juice, as well as sandwiches and water throughout the day. Dinner can be prepared at the hostel if it is equipped, or shared with other pilgrims, or found at a local restaurant. Chocolate and oranges are staples everywhere. At one hostel, the host provided a communal dinner for all pilgrims, letting us hear what gave others the incentive to begin the walk and share experiences along the way.

Engaging with others is a significant part of the Camino for most. Some walk to be alone and reflect; this can be a challenge with so many walking each year, but it can be done. The standard greeting as you are walking is "buen Camino", or "good Camino". Some walkers will take this as an opening for conversation; if you don't want to engage, simply smile and nod instead of responding.

Once the Camino has called to you, it can continue to call you back again and again. Buen Camino!



One of many foot bridges built by the Romans.

The Camino de Santiago, or the Way of Saint James, is a network of pilgrimage pathways leading to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain, where the remains of the apostle Saint James the Great are believed to be buried. The various walking routes, many of which are named, have served as spiritual paths or retreats since the Middle Ages, with a resurgence of interest in the past 25 years. Many walk for the spiritual experience, though the treks are now also popular with hikers, cyclists and tour groups.

Bow resident Judy Goodnow did her first pilgrimage in 2011 along the Camino Portuguese, a route from Porto, Portugal, to Santiago de Compostela and just completed her second walk along a section of Camino Frances, a route that begins in France.

If Judy's account inspires you to take up the challenge, search platforms like Netflix and Amazon Prime for several movies and documentaries that detail the journey or visit the official website www.caminosantiagodecompostela.com. ~ Chase Binder