



WHERE Northern Spain (starting in France if desired)
START Pamplona **FINISH** Santiago de Compostela
DISTANCE 500 miles (or more) **WORDS** Rob Ainsley
PICTURES Rob Ainsley



GO YOUR OWN WAY

'You can do this on a bike? Why the hell are we walking?!' says a hiker on the Camino de Santiago in the 2011 film *The Way*. Exactly, thinks **Rob Ainsley**

The 200,000 people who 'do the Camino' each year are all searching for something. Life-changing spiritual redemption, perhaps, or simply a gap-year tick-box. Or maybe a book deal: Waterstone's shelves bulge with travelogues on the 500-mile pilgrimage across northern Spain. Everyone you meet en route seems to have been inspired by their own national bestseller, often a slightly bonkers diary of self-discovery. British authors, however, specialise in the half-joking adventure-dare: on horseback; with a donkey; playing a trombone.

Not me. I just wanted a good bike ride. The Way of St James (as it translates) looked like it would offer some landscape thrills, free self-reliance, an ancient-history vibe, and cultural exploration – the sort that involves sharing a bottle of wine over dinner in someone's second language. Cycling is the best way to do it.

The Camino is a kind of Iberian End to End, or rather Side to Side. You can do it all on tarmac on your road

- 1) Just one of the reasons why the Camino is more fun by bike!
- 2) The entire walker's Way is cyclable. No gates or stiles either
- 3) The route is well signed
- 4) Maragatos village, Castrillo
- 5) Puente de la Reina sculptures

bike in one intense week or dawdle over a fortnight on a full-sus mountain bike using the mostly parallel walker's track, which cyclists are allowed to use.

Surprisingly, the tarmac option essentially is the historic route, now all paved over, much as Chaucer's Canterbury pilgrims would now find themselves bewildered on the A2. The walker's route is a mix of shale, farm track and paved path – to me, strikingly similar to the Trans-Pennine Trail from Southport to Hornsea, but minus the gates.

I wanted a middle way, taking roads through the many dull stretches (pity the walkers treading weary hours alongside dual carriageways), but the most scenic or atmospheric off-road tracks, such as the magnificent ridge west of Pamplona, or the remote villages of Hornillos and Hontanas.

My hybrid – with rack, panniers, mudguards – would have been perfect, but I had to get it from Yorkshire to the Pyrenees. I was too early in the season for the European Bike Express (bike-express.co.uk). Eurostar was too expensive. The train-ferry-train combination (sailing Portsmouth/Plymouth to Santander/Bilbao) was cumbersome. And I don't trust airline baggage handlers. In the end, budget flights and one-way bike rental proved an affordable, handy alternative.

BIKE VERSUS BOOTS

One sunburnt day, when I cashed in on a tailwind that jettied me across the ironing-board plains west of Burgos, I did 100 miles. Others I did just 40 – enjoying the views on the long strenuous climb up to O Cebreiro and its ancient thatched village huts, for instance, or the

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shady tranquillity of wooded walker's tracks.

I was always relieved to be biking. Around a quarter of the walkers I met were injured, usually through overambitious schedules, having to take buses and revise timetables downwards. And unlike them, I could relish the handful of major downhill on the route, such as the long joyful road swoop down to the strange moved-and-rebuilt reservoir town of Porto Marin.

And I still got all the history, the psychogeography, the delightful towns and villages. The scallop-shell inlays in the paving stones guided me right through their centres and main streets, past vibrant little markets, grand baroque churches and town hall facades. In Basque villages in the east, I picnicked watching locals practising pelota, their national sport, a sort of gloveless Eton Fives played in half of an aircraft hangar.

In between all the postcard villages, though, much of the Camino felt surprisingly non-Spanish. Out west you could be in Pennines farmland, or the Lake District. Especially when it starts raining.

It's green out here for a reason, and a touch Celtic: they drink cider and play the bagpipes.

Indeed, in Ligonde, a one-horse village where I gratefully squelched from a day's downpour into a modern refuge with disposable paper bedding, the owner of the restaurant-bar opposite entertained me and other cyclists with folksy bagpipe melodies in non-standard tuning.

ST JAMES'S LARK

Accommodation's plentiful, although in the hot and high season (May to September) the most convenient hostels fill up by lunchtime with walkers who set out before dawn, and a few hard-line refuges are said to begrudge or even turn away cyclists. But on a bike you can always find somewhere beyond the reach of aching walkers' feet. In late March and early April, I had no trouble finding a bed, and mostly excellent weather; it's a good time to do it, as is October. Outside those times, many places close, and in between they're often full. Pilgrim hostels are basic – often just a mattress and blanket amid crowded bunks full of pig-farm snorers, plus a kitchen and bike store – but inexpensive.

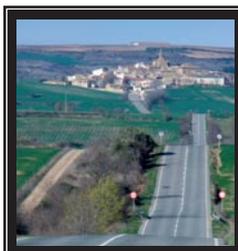
By day the Camino is traditionally a quiet business, one of meditation and introspection. Conversation extends little further than a cheery *ibuen camino!* from a leathery-skinned villager, or swapped with power-walking retired Germans. That suited me fine; cycling is me-time, thinking-space, anyway. But in the evening, at your hostel or in the village bars, it's all sociable and lively. With new Facebook friends, I traded hearsay tales over a supermarket dinner and glass of local plonk. The dog that bites everyone going to Finisterre; that crazy American woman walking 60km a day, the Korean guy with a finger-sized hole in his foot...

There was plenty of slog, such as the final irritatingly hilly miles before Santiago. But there are many priceless images in the mental photo album too. The stork colony, clacking away in stunning red sandstone cliffs in Najera. Traditional old villages of the Maragatos

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DO IT YOURSELF

» For 250 euros, I hired a trekking bike with rack, panniers and tools (from tournride.com) for two weeks. It was delivered to my hostel in Pamplona and I dropped it off at Santiago. Flights were £80. With cheap hostels etc. everything else came to £180.



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people, unsettlingly empty. Foncebadón, a fogbound, abandoned mountain top hamlet, now repopulated with a hostel whose guests appeared to be misty spirits. Ubiquitous local bars with good coffee and cake. The famous free wine fountain at Estella, where local winery Irache kindly provides house red on tap, with an invitation to pilgrims to help themselves, in moderation, which I did, in moderation. (Webcam: www.irache.com) Arriving at Santiago de Compostela on the most miserable morning imaginable, sodden but happy.

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Santiago's majestic cathedral façade could use a spring-clean, but it's an inspiring way to end. The pomp and ritual of the daily pilgrim services is thrilling even for non-Catholics. A day's further undulating ride gets you to Finisterre, a Land's-Endish peninsula supposedly considered the end of the medieval world. Local buses go there and back, and can take bikes.

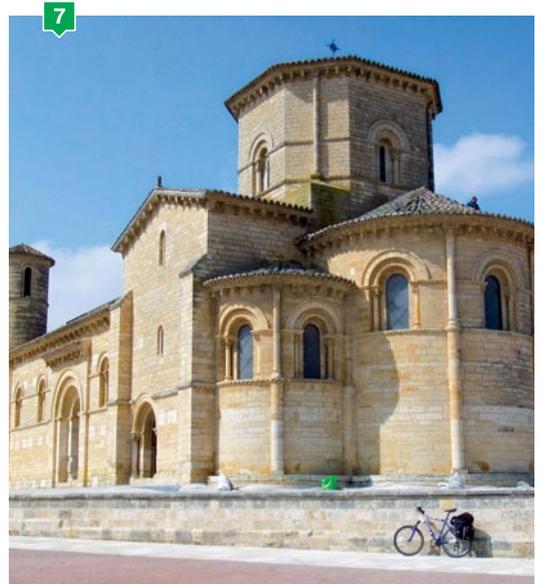
The Camino can be genuinely awe-inspiring, most notably the stay in the ancient monastery of Roncesvalles, having vaulted the Pyrenees. The ghostly millions who'd passed this way were present too, when I passed in a previous trip; the hairs on the back of my neck bristled like a spooked cat. Often, though, it's about as mystic and transcendental as Leicestershire. In fact, in itself, the Camino isn't so remarkable: judged purely in terms of scenery or adventure, it rates only B+.

Of course, it's more than the sum of its parts: it's the package, the self-reinforcing total experience. The global friends you make en route. The cumulative sense of achievement that adds your name to history's roll. The whole pilgrim thing, the refuges and signage and set menus and stamped record-card, and the certificate in Latin issued to you at Santiago where they look up the translation of your name in a book. You feel special.

And what did I find? Not myself – nobody answered the description – but I did gain some self-knowledge. That next time, I'll start from my front door, like those medieval pilgrims. Except I'll do it on my tourer. ☺

6) As you go west, the Camino gets more and more like the Lake District. Including rain-wise.

7) Romanesque church in Fromista. A reminder that the Camino is a pilgrim's route



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FACT FILE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

Distance: 500 miles (800km)

Time taken: 9 days

Route: 'Camino Francés' (most popular of several route options). West across northern Spain: Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela via Pamplona, Burgos, León

Conditions: Mostly fine, some torrential rain; mix of roads (some busy) and shale/farm track/bridlepath; mix of mountains, plains, undulations

Accommodation: Pilgrim refuges and hostels, 5–10 euros per night

Maps/guides: Best accomm/guide info from Confraternity of St James (csj.org.uk, 020

7928 9988). For walker's-route maps, try Brierley: Camino de Santiago Maps (Findhorn). Only English-language cycling guide is Higginson: Way of St James – A Cyclist's Guidebook (Cicerone). Route is very well signed
Bike: MTB (with rack, panniers) can mix road with nicest off-road sections

I'm glad I had...

Netbook, to utilise frequent free wi-fi; some Spanish; good rainproofs

Next time: I would take: a tourer; a sheet sleeping bag; more time; more Spanish lessons

Further info:

caminodesantiago.me.uk; my links, info, podcast/audio diary are at bike99.com/camino.html

