

Date: 16/07/2011 Place: Camino de Santiago, Spain

Kms walked: 9

If I was going to put a title on this Postcard it would be

The Long Journey Home – Part 1.

The last time I wrote I was in Croatia, on the island of Pag, having started out on my journey back to the UK. I am now in Spain. "But that's not on the way from Croatia to England" I hear you say! See later for explanation.

Leaving Israel I retraced not so much my steps but my journey back towards Turkey. I had left my pilgrim staff there in safekeeping at the place I had stayed with my friends.

And by the way, I would not normally 'plug' a commercial establishment but I feel that the Kiwi Hostel in Selcuk really deserves it. If you are ever thinking of visiting that area of Turkey I can highly recommend the town of Selcuk. It is very pretty, is very close to the ruins of Ephesus and indeed was also formally named Ephesus. Anyway re the establishment, the title 'Hostel' is a bit of a misnomer. They do indeed have dorm type accommodation but they also have private en suite rooms (at very reasonable prices) for those who prefer their own space (and a bit of luxury!). Breakfast is included in the price and is by far and away the best breaky I have had, lovely fresh bread, fresh fruit, fresh salad, freshly cooked egg and lashings of coffee. You can cook your own food (not breaky) and you don't get chucked out for several hours while they clean as you do in many Youth Hostels. It has a very laid back atmosphere and Alison, the proprietress speaks fluent English, well she is English so I suppose that figures. OK, plug finished. (and I'm not being paid to do this!)

So to continue. I arrived at Larnaca airport, Cyprus and spent the night there. Next day I headed for Paphos. I had 2 days to kill before my next flight and had decided to go to Paphos because of its connections with St Paul and because my research had shown me there was a campsite there. I found the campsite OK and pitched my tent. Then in the middle of the night I woke up. My inflatable mattress was flat. Alas there were little seed type things with very sharp spines strewn over the pitch and they were sharp enough to penetrate the tent groundsheet and pierce the mattress. Next day a very kind lady in a caravan lent me a plastic bowl which I used to find the leak so I repaired it with some waterproof glue I carried in my 'emergency kit'.



Water feature in Paphos



Church of Agia Kyriaki, built over the ruins of the largest early Christian Basilica in Cyprus

After that I continued to Turkey and retrieved my staff. I have explained before that I do not now trust my staff with airlines so my journey had to continue overland. I took a night bus from Selcuk all the way to Kesan on the Via Egnatia. Having a few hours to spare before catching the next bus I was able to see a couple of people who worked in the hotel I had stayed in previously. On my last day there one of them had put a little bunch of flowers in a vase on the table where I usually ate breakfast. It had been such a kind thought, but I had left too early that morning to see them and thank them.

Having spent 10 hrs on a bus overnight to travel what had taken me 27 days on foot, I then boarded another bus to get to Greece, arriving at 19:30 at Kavala. It was Saturday night. I knew there would be Mass tomorrow in the Catholic Church I had visited before and there were people there I wanted to see again. That is why I had not continued to Thessaloniki as I could have done. I also knew there was a promising place on the outskirts, just the other side of the hills where I could put my tent. So that's what I did. It was quite high up and I could see the lights of the village below. I sat and admired the view. It was now dark. Going back to my tent I saw lights. "Drat" I thought to myself. "I am about to be discovered." But the lights were too small to be torches. Then I realised they were fireflies. It was amazing. In all the places I have been, in all the places I have camped, I have never before seen fireflies. They were like little magic fairies darting to and fro. I felt so blessed to have been there, to have seen them. I tried to take a picture but their light was not strong enough to register.

Next day I returned to the town and went to Mass and was able to talk in length to the friendly person who had invited me to have coffee with them the last time I was there. An added bonus was that I also met the Priest who had welcomed me at Xanthi.



View over the valley behind Kavala



The Church at Kavala provides another opportunity to pause for prayers and light a candle

Then it was on to Vrasna Beach by bus to meet someone that I only knew by her 1st name, not where she lived, but who had said to me that when I get to Jerusalem I must get something for her and then come back and give it to her. Well I had got something for her and we had exchanged email addresses and I had said I was on my way back but I hadn't had a "great, see you at the bus stop" type of reply. So I walked towards the café where we had met, and when I got there the woman at the café recognised me. She made a phone call and all was well. I met her and was able to deliver my gift. We chatted long into the night and I drank too much wine!

After Greece the next place I wanted to stop at was Montenegro. So again I took buses. From Vrasna to Thessaloniki, then another night bus from Thessaloniki to Shoder in Albania, then a bus to Ulej in Montenegro, then on to Budva. This time it was to see someone whose only contact details I had were her name and “when you come back, visit the Irish bar, they know me there”. I was not even sure I could remember what she looked like. She had written a prayer on a paper napkin and given it to me and asked me to put it in the Western Wall in Jerusalem. I carried it and placed it there for her and said a prayer. I had photo'ed where I had put it and finding a place that printed photos, printed off the photo of the Basilica at Gethsemane where I had also prayed for her, and the candle I had lit and the photo of her prayer in the Western Wall. I found the bar OK but alas she was away during the week studying. But the girl serving behind the bar remembered me and promised to deliver the photos with a note to her.



Entrance to the old, walled town of Budva



Beach at the campsite in Pag

Next stop was the island of Pag, Croatia, where I decided to camp for 3 days and let my body recover from the many hours spent on buses, not to mention all the countries I had sped through! It also seemed like the right time to do the Postcard about my experiences in Jerusalem and Bethlehem. Then it was on to Zadar to visit someone who has been very kind to me and next day to visit the Priest further up the coast who had made me very welcome and given me lovely food when I had walked through there last year. I was now getting very close to Italy where again I was stopping to visit people who had helped me greatly.

It was at this point that my carefully planned travel schedule went a little awry! Reaching Rijeka I expected to catch a bus late afternoon to Trieste where I was expected. Unfortunately the bus company internet site on which I had found the timetable was out of date and there was no bus until 6:00 the following morning. So I was faced with the prospect of spending the night at the bus station. “Oh well” I thought to myself “it makes a change from spending the night **on** a bus or in an airport.” After evening Mass I got a sandwich and checked my email and to my surprise and gratitude the Priest I had visited emailed me to say he had phoned a Monastery to ask them to give me shelter – he told them I had a tent would be quite happy to sleep in the garden. (He knew of my predicament as I had mentioned it with humour when I had sent him a 'Thank You' email earlier.) So I ended up having a proper bed to sleep on instead of my still-leaking mattress. I forgot to mention that I had fixed another 8 leaks but still had not found the last!

Next morning it was on to Trieste.



Trieste has some very beautiful buildings



A quirky egg in Trieste!

After my visit to Trieste which was very enjoyable and where I was introduced to the best ice cream I have ever tasted, my mode of transport was night train, all the way to Germany. Here I was to visit the Friary in which I had spent a few days before the start of my pilgrimage. In addition on my walk I had met a German couple who lived in a town only 30 minutes away by train so I was looking forward to seeing them too.

All went well and I reached the main city as planned. Then I had to get a suburban train to the Friary and here again my careful planning started to unravel. I boarded the train that I thought was correct but after a few stops my ticket was inspected and I could tell from the look on the guard's face that all was not well. He said something to me in German but I didn't know whether he was asking me where I was going to, or where I had boarded he train. So I gave him both bits of information hoping that at least one of them would answer his question. Yes I was on the wrong train. However I could get off at the next stop and catch a train back a couple of stops to connect with the correct line. I duly got off and there was another train going back in just 5 minutes. I jumped on and promptly got off at the next stop. This was not correct – I should have waited a few more stops. The next train was not for another 50 minutes! I waited patiently and eventually it arrived. Getting off at the next stop, I looked at the timetable to see which platform to take. But I could not see my destination listed. In the end I caught the next train back to the main city, arriving there 2 hours after I had left!

I then went to the information office to find out the time & platform for the correct train. “It is in 2 minutes time, but you have missed it, it leaves from platform 4” was the answer to my query. “The next is in 30 minutes from platform 3”. As I made my way to platform 3 something possessed me to run to 4 and as luck would have it the train was still there and I made it! Just as I was arriving at my stop I had a call from the Friar I was visiting. (I had earlier txt'ed him to say I was a little delayed.) “Are you still alive?” he said. “Yes I am just coming to the station. I will walk to the Friary” I replied. “No” was the answer. “Stay at the station. I will pick you up.” He obviously did not trust me to get myself to the Friary. And after me walking across 7 countries – the shame of it! Anyway all was well. He picked me up OK and I spent a day there and then went to visit the German couple I had met in Croatia. After spending a few entertaining days with them I returned to the main city to catch a bus to Spain. Yet again my travel plans went awry. I had not been able to book my journey online and I arrived at the bus station to discover the bus was full. So was the next bus, which left 3 days later. So I booked a place on the next one which was another 2 days later giving me 5 days to kill. I felt absolutely convinced I was destined to return to the Friary so I txt'ed my friend who immediately replied that I was welcome. So back to the Friary I went, but by a direct train this time.

It was odd in a way because being in 1 place gave me the opportunity to sort out something I was planning to do when I returned to the UK. Although I could have made the arrangements while 'on the move' so to speak, it was much easier to do while I had a constant base. After a lovely rest there I left and boarded my bus for the 28 hour journey to Spain.

So why was I going to Spain? I had decided to end my journey with a walk from Santiago to Muxia. It is a beautiful part of Spain and the very first time I walked it, it so reminded me of Ireland (but warmer) that I vowed I would do it each year for as long as my legs would carry me. I kept this promise to myself (with the exception of last year when it just was not possible as I was starting out to Jerusalem). But then I found I had extra time so thought I would walk from before Santiago on the most popular route, the Camino Francese.

So that's it for now. I will probably do another Postcard about my journey in Spain. I am setting off with no guide or map – the route is very well way-marked and there are very many pilgrim refuges along the way but as Baldrick would say “I have a cunning plan”! I do have a planned schedule but I have no idea whether I will follow it. Not for the first time, my feet are in God's Hands.

Take care and God Bless

Ann