

Date: 21/08/2011 Place:Home Kms walked: 3122 to Meryemana + 274 to Muxia = 3396

The long journey home Part 2!

After 28 hours on the bus I duly arrived on the Camino and after a fairly short period of wandering around managed to find the pilgrim hostel/refuge. There were still plenty of beds and to my relief I was able to get a Pilgrim Credential at the hostel. The Credential is a document which is used to show 'pilgrim status' and contains a record of one's journey by means of stamps obtained daily from places such as hostels/Churches/Town Halls etc. It is mandatory if you wish to use hostel accommodation and on arrival at Santiago is used to show that you qualify for the Compostele.

And it was also my birthday so I decided to celebrate by eating out that evening. Next day I set out for Santiago/Muxia aware that it had been about six weeks since I had last walked. I anticipated some protest from my muscles and indeed I was not wrong! But it was so good to be out walking again. The weather was pleasant, a little chilly first thing but the sun soon warmed the air. The route was wonderful. Rolling countryside, fresh air, no traffic and no barking dogs.



Birthday celebration



Walking bliss – off-road, no traffic, no mad dogs, just peaceful countryside

I knew there were many pilgrims 'on the road' – July and August are the peak times as so many countries have holidays then. But I seemed to have accidentally timed my start to be such that the early risers staying in the same town as me were long gone and those from the previous town had not yet caught up. So I had the Camino to myself. As a gentle re-introduction to the concept of walking I decided to stop after just over 9kms.

Next day I was again woken at 5:30 by those keen enthusiasts determined to be first on the Camino. I did not share their enthusiasm. Indeed it was still dark at this time and cold. There was no need to 'race the heat of the sun'. I had hoped that the previous morning was atypical but I was soon to discover that it was not. Every morning I was woken at around 5:30. This was quite different from when I had walked the route in 2006 where the early risers were up at 6:30 or 7:00 and I was more than a little disappointed at the change.

Sometimes I walked for hours without seeing another pilgrim, other times the Camino was like Oxford Street in the run up to Christmas. After a few days I happened to stop at a refuge run by the local Church and to my surprise, on registering, the hospitalero told me there would be a meal available that evening if I wanted. He had asked one of the other pilgrims to cook for us and had given him the ingredients.

It was a very enjoyable evening where we all sat round and chatted and then afterwards those who had not helped with the cooking did the clearing up. For me this was one of the highlights of the walk – there is something very special about a shared pilgrim meal.



Wildlife en route



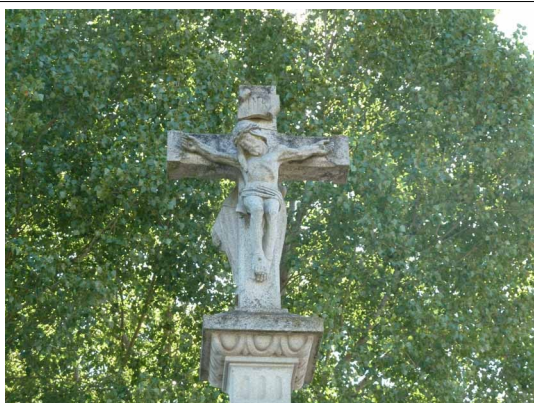
The community spirit generated by a shared pilgrim meal

Days passed and I formed a friendship with Christine from France and Elisabet from Germany.. Although I walked faster than either of them, we often met at 'coffee stops' on the road and we all seemed to end up at the same refuge, swapping notes about that day's walk. This was quite a novel experience. I mentioned that I had walked this route in 2006, but I was doing it 'backwards', walking from Santiago to Rome. It meant of course that I would never meet anyone again as they were travelling in the opposite direction to me.

Meanwhile I seemed to be getting further and further behind with my planned itinerary. When one meets likeable pilgrims who seem to be walking approximately the same distances per day, it becomes very tempting to fall in with their rhythm and plans. This seemed to be happening to me and I was determined not to let it. So one day I decided I really must start walking longer distances, even if it meant parting company with Christine and Elisabet. Off I went, as usual one of the last to leave the refuge. After a hour or so I came to a small village where I had intended to stop for some prayers. Very pleased to find the Church open, I went in. I was even more pleased to find several people in there and the altar candles lit. It meant Mass was about to start. I knew though that staying for Mass meant I would not be able to cover the distance I had planned for that day. So it was at that point that I mentally tore up the schedule and just decided to walk til it felt right to stop. I did end up again in the same refuge as the other 2 that evening and there met another German girl, Frieda, to whom I introduced Elisabet. Ironically we parted company the next day but Elisabet & Frieda struck up a friendship and often ended up at the same refuge.

My journey continued, I had several more fairly short days and my pre-occupation now was to select a destination for 25th July, the Feast of St James. It needed to be a town large enough that would enable me to get to Mass – one could not miss Mass in Spain on such an important day. Fortunately after arriving at the town I discovered there was Mass in 15mins. I could not have timed it better.

My itinerary had now completely departed from that of my previous companions but I felt sure I could do a couple of long days and catch up with them. I left the town of Samos on a misty morning but soon the sunshine penetrated and drove away the mist. It was developing into a beautiful day.

Pause for prayer at a '*cruceiro*'

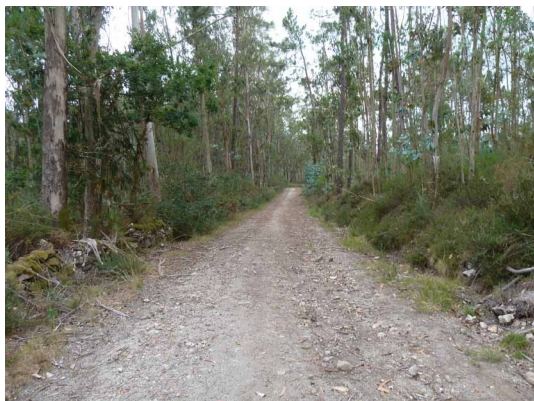
The hills of Galicia

Although the Camino left the main road I decided for expediency to stay on the road. In fact I stayed on the road for the whole of that day. Sort of by mistake I ended up in a town that was not actually on the Camino and where I thought I might stop but there was no accommodation. This was not a problem – I was still carrying my tent. It was by now about 16:30 and I had walked 25kms but felt OK to push on. And I went on and on and on. The route had been climbing steadily and now it was going gently downhill and was very easy walking. In the end I kept going for another 9kms making the days total 34kms. “No doubt I will pay for this tomorrow and no way will I find a bed in the municipal refuge at this time” I thought to myself as I reached the town coming up to 19:45.

But I did get a bed in the overflow municipal accommodation and then went out to get food and have a rest over a beer. I had sent a txt to Elisabet to find out where she was and where she would be tomorrow as I thought I could probably catch up next day. As I sat there telling my feet what a marvellous job they had done that day, who should I see but Elisabet & Frieda. We were delighted to meet again and arranged to meet up in Santiago.

By now I realised I could either walk all the way to Santiago or all the way from Santiago to Muxia but not both. My objective had been to walk to Muxia so with some regret, about 65kms from Santiago I boarded the bus. I had pre-booked the luxury of single room accommodation in Santiago. It was not en-suite but I relished the idea of having a room to myself with no snorers and no early risers after so many nights in dorms. In fact the thing I found that I most appreciated was that there was no-one to tell me to turn the light off. I could have sat up all night if I wanted. It was great!

Next day after Mass I headed off for Muxia a bit later than I would have preferred. It was a lovely walk and I was very fortunate with the weather. That area of Spain, Galicia is rather greener than most because it is wetter than most! At one point it did look as though the weather was changing, clouds were gathering in the distance but the seemingly promised rain decided to fall somewhere else and I stayed dry. Terrain was hilly but not too demanding. Much of the path lay through forests and I was grateful for the smells of the earth and sounds of the birds. Finally, on the last day I reached the coast. As I came over the brow of a hill and saw the sea I wondered what it must have been like for those in bygone days who travelled from central Europe who perhaps had never seen the sea before.



Walking thru forests

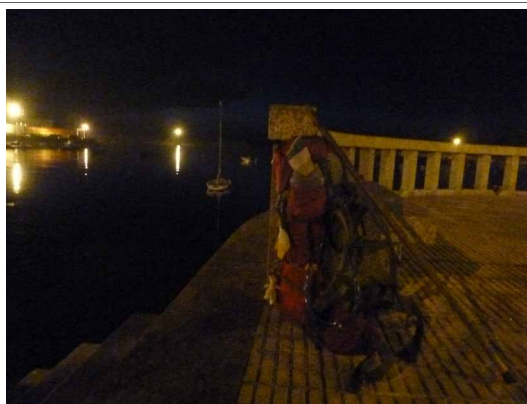


... and suddenly there's the sea

At Muxia I had two final pilgrim acts to perform. I was still carrying bits of paper on which were prayer requests, written by members of my parish in the UK. It had not felt appropriate to place them in the Western Wall in Jerusalem & I knew that they needed to be taken to Muxia, a major pilgrimage place for Galicia. So I went to the Sanctuary of Santa Maria de Barca, a beautiful Church built on the rocks by the sea and dedicated to the Patron Saint of Galicia. There on the rocks with the sea crashing around me I prayed the requests for the last time, then tore the paper into little pieces and cast them into the water. Then I went back up to the Church and in it put the bunch of artificial flowers which had decorated my rucksack since Italy last year. If you who are reading this can remember, I had found them in a 'Euro' store and when I explained my journey to the assistant there, she refused to let me pay for them, but asked me to pray for her – she had cancer.



Prayer requests being carried out to sea



Walking's end

And so next day I returned by bus to Santiago and met up with Elisabet & Frieda as planned and we had a celebratory meal. The following day we were all leaving Santiago, Elisabet to return home by bus, Frieda to start walking to Finisterre and me to go to Brittany to meet up with friends I had known since my school days. Elisabet & I met at the bus station as our bus was at the same time and who else should we be re-united with but Christine who was also catching the same bus as me at least for part of the way. It was a good end to my 'post pilgrimage' pilgrimage!



..... and return to Santiago



.... for a celebratory meal

So I nearly walked to Jerusalem and I nearly walked to Santiago, but I did walk to Muxia!



Credential stamp from Jerusalem



Certificate of arrival at Muxia

And next? Well actually having had a 'pre-pilgrimage' retreat, and a 'mid-pilgrimage' retreat, I have decided to have a 'post-pilgrimage' retreat. It will be for 30 days and in silence so I will be completely incommunicado until the beginning of October. After that? I have no idea.

Yet again I want to thank all of you who have emailed letters of encouragement and support, and those who have prayed and thought good thoughts for me and God for his protection and strength.

What I wrote in the Pilgrim Register in 2006 on my arrival at Rome still holds true – paraphrased slightly:

I did not complete this pilgrimage through my own strength, I was carried by the strength of God and all the people who prayed for me and wished me well.

Take care and God Bless

Ann, an Irish pilgrim