

Spanish Language and Culture: The Camino de Santiago

Sabbatical Report for Fall 2015

by

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My primary objective was to make significant progress toward my goal of learning more about the Spanish language and culture, both by studying the language, and by having a cultural experience walking along the Camino de Santiago in northern Spain. I was successful on both of these goals.

I began studying Spanish daily on the very first day I received word that my sabbatical leave had been approved for the fall of 2015. I studied daily using an online tool called "Duolingo." It is an excellent resource and available to anyone with online or cell phone access. On March 1, 2016, I had a one year, 365 day streak of consecutive study using Duolingo. I have been making it a part of my daily life. My present goal is to continue daily study until I am able to communicate comfortably in the language

Throughout the spring of 2015 and over the summer, I continued studying the Spanish language, and also began preparing for my journey along the Camino. The Camino de Santiago follows an early Roman trade route, and is supported by an extensive system of alberques, or hostels. The route has been traveled for over 1000 years, and annually tens of thousands of individuals make the journey. To prepare for the journey, I studied two different guide books. One was called, "Hiking the Camino de Santiago" and the other was more popular and entitled, "The Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago," by John Brierley. Here are some of his words concerning life as a pilgrimage:

"...It is now topical to talk about downsizing and mid-career breaks. But we need to be careful how we spend this hard won space in our lives if we are not to end back in a life of bored indifference. We can change our work, our religion, our partner, our house, but if we don't change our life orientation away from the mundane and towards the sacred we just end up with more of the same. That is why I find the idea of life as pilgrimage so exciting. What higher purpose could it have than to remind us of our divine origins and our sacred contracts? The busyness of our lives, even those dedicated to service, spins us ever outwards away from our center. Pilgrimage on the other hand slows us down and opens us inwards to the Source. In one direction lies illusion, the other truth. Thank God I stumbled onto a pilgrim path. The route may still have its ups and downs but the overall direction is set, the way-marks clear and the destination assured. The only choice I have left is how long it will take me to arrive."

The Camino has a long and illustrious past, and there was plenty to learn and study about the history of the area. The earliest human remains ever discovered in Europe were found near the Camino in Atapuerca. The remains have been dated to 900,000 years BC. The site was awarded World Heritage status by UNESCO in 1998. I visited the Atapuerca site and found the ancient life and hunting traditions to be quite fascinating.

The history of the area included the Megalithic period nearly 4000 BC, the early Celtic period nearly 1000 BC, the early Roman period at 200 BC, and the early Christian period of 40 AD. At that time, although there is no specific historical record to support this contention, legend has it that St. James the Apostle preached in Galicia near Finisterre, a traditional ending point of the Camino, also called the

“end of the earth” (Finis terre). St. James returned to Jerusalem where he was beheaded by Herod. Legend has it that St. James’ remains were miraculously returned to Spain and buried near what is now called Santiago de Compostela.

Time passed and memories faded, and then during 813 the tomb of St. James was rediscovered. A shepherd was drawn to a field (campos) by a bright light or star (stella). Hence the origins of the name Santiago (St. James) de Compostela (field of stars). The discovery was confirmed and the first written record of pilgrimage to the area was recorded in 950. Between the 12th and the 14 century the Camino grew in importance and surpassed Rome and Jerusalem as the most travelled pilgrim routes.

The preparation:

While studying the Spanish language, and the history of the Camino, I also began the practical preparation for the journey. I researched and bought just the right backpack, and two pairs of shoes. I needed special clothing and equipment, and most of all I needed to begin training physically. The previous semester, I had developed back pain which was partially attributed to having a job where I spend a significant amount of time sitting at my desk. I needed to make sure I was getting exercise. I made sure to walk more and more each day throughout May, June, July, and August to try to build my tolerance. I never did work up to the amount of walking I would do on the Camino, but by the time my flight left on August 30th, I was excited and feeling ready mentally and physically for the task at hand.

I flew out of Grand Rapids, Michigan on August 30th, and arrived in Madrid, Spain on the 31st. I took a bus to Pamplona, and then another to St. Jean Pied de Port, France, a historically traditional starting point for the Camino. My original plan was to begin walking on September 1st, but a couple of factors inspired me to wait one day. First, I needed to acclimate to the area and recover from jet lag. Also, there was a challenge finding a place to sleep that first night. Once it was found, some much needed rest began.

St. Jean has been welcoming pilgrims for hundreds of years. The first leg of the journey left from St. Jean and headed toward Roncevalles, Spain, over the Pyrenees. History buffs will recognize Roncevalles as the place of the battle of Roland. Charlemagne also passed through that area. The first leg also crossed back into Spain. September 1st was a rainy day, and I had feared the weather on the mountain pass, so I delayed and began my Camino on Sept 2nd. Roncevalles is the traditional starting point for most people of Spanish origin.

It was a very beautiful day. It was chilly, wet, and foggy, but the walk included many other people as well as the sounds of wildlife and bells. It was very uphill. Up, up, and up I went. I began to wonder what I had gotten myself into, but I was enjoying myself. The Camino gave me a lot of time to think and to practice mindfulness. By the end of the day I had walked for over 10 hours, I was exhausted and I had very sore feet and legs, especially after going downhill near the end of the day. The lodgings were crowded and uncomfortable. There was a lot of snoring, excitement, and wondering what was next. Roncevalles was an interesting and historical village. It rained throughout the night, and when the next morning was met with no rain, I quickly began my second day’s journey.

At the beginning of my second day I met the first of many Spanish natives who I would continue to walk with throughout the Camino. They all contributed to getting me out my English comfort zone and putting me into the middle of a Spanish cultural experience. The individuals I met during that second day of walking included Ana, Itziar, Carmen, Alberto, and Rocio. All five of them were native to Spain, from various parts of the country. Many Spaniards hike the Camino either in full, or for a few days to a couple of weeks. Over the ensuing weeks, this first group grew and changed, but ultimately influenced my Spanish cultural experience. Some of the people I met included Carlos, Gustavo, Mari Jose, Judith, Jordi, Lourdes, Franco, Roberto, and many others along the way. The second day was a long, hard and beautiful walk. I was lucky to get one last bed, and slept to get ready for Day 3. Day 3 I walked toward Pamplona. I spent most of this day alone with my thoughts. The evening in Pamplona was filled with Spanish speakers and pintxos (bar snacks) which is a local custom. The streets were filled with people meeting up to share some leisure time in the relaxing atmosphere.

In total, I walked 31 days to Santiago. I walked for four days to Finisterre and Muxia. I walked a total of 578 miles in 35 days. That was an average of 16.5 miles per day. It was an exhausting yet exhilarating experience. The countryside was breathtaking. I spent a significant amount of time with Spanish speakers. It was a very beautiful country. The path included a lot of up and down and many rocks. One section was nicknamed the leg breaker. After Pamplona, the first hike was up to Alto del Perdon, or The Mount of Forgiveness. Each stop was set up to help the pilgrims. Historically, the alberques were called hospitals. A typical place to sleep would cost 5-10 euros, while a typical "menu del dia" would cost about 10 euros. The meal included 2 plates of very good food, bread, postre, and either wine or water. There was a lot of wine in the country as the Camino walked by many grape vineyards.

I did develop painful blisters and achy legs. Many people developed injuries which kept them from continuing on with the Camino. Most people felt fortunate they were able to continue. I changed shoes and bought hiking sandals. I was very tired in the evenings, but did continue to walk and explore each individual village which we encountered. There were many old villages, buildings, and even old Roman roads. My traveling partners often would make reservations for hostels ahead of time, so I did not have to worry much about where I was to stay. Overall, it was a fantastic and exciting experience. It was great to get outside and experience such a great amount of exercise all at one time. It was nice to be able to challenge my physical and intellectual abilities along the way.

People walk the Camino for many different reasons. Some are there for the exercise, or just to get away from their daily routine. Others are there for spiritual or psychological reasons. Whatever the reason, there were people from all over the world along the way. Although most were from Spain, there were many people from other countries, as well. It was fun to talk with individuals, to hear their accents, and to learn a little about their lives and their countries. I would highly recommend the Camino to anyone who would like a physical adventure.

All along the way there were very many beautiful churches, palaces, and castles. There were also many old Roman roads, as mentioned previously. The history and beauty along the Camino was amazing. It was an extraordinary experience. A major stopping point was Santiago de Compostela itself. Although there were many cathedrals along the way, Santiago was the primary attraction. It is there where most

pilgrims would finish. It is there where those pilgrims with a religious motive would meet and pray to St. James. Some would ask for and hope to receive a miracle. It is the tomb of Santiago which inspired the Camino from the very beginning.

I returned to America on October 12th. At that time I was recovering physically, but continued to study the Spanish language using Duolingo, as well as the Rosetta Stone. I ultimately went through all five levels of the Rosetta stone. I also volunteered at Roosevelt Park Ministries in Grand Rapids, MI.

There were two different classes I attended at Roosevelt Park ministries in Grand Rapids. I attended a Spanish class for English speakers. The course was very educational and helpful. I also volunteered in an English class for Spanish speakers. There is a large community of Spanish speaking individuals in various communities throughout Grand Rapids. Roosevelt park ministries is a program set up to assist those individuals in acclimating to American culture and to serve some of the needs of the community. It is an excellent program with many great staff members and volunteers.

Overall, my sabbatical was an amazing experience and I will be forever grateful to Ferris State University for the opportunity. I was able to walk the Camino de Santiago from St. Jean Pied de Port, France, all the way across Northern Spain to Santiago de Compostela, and beyond to Finisterre and Muxia, the end of the earth. I was able to meet and learn from many Spanish speaking individuals, and other people from all over the world. I was able to experience a very distinct and different culture, and cultures. I was able to continue and intensify my study of the Spanish language. I have made good progress toward becoming fluent in the language, although I do still have progress which needs to be made along those lines. I was able to study and volunteer at Roosevelt Park Ministries in Grand Rapids, Mi. In conclusion, my sabbatical leave was an amazing and wonderful experience for which I will be forever grateful.

In the future, I would like to continue my studies of the Spanish language, and continue to work toward being a counselor able to serve the Hispanic population here at Ferris State University. I will look for ways to become involved with Hispanic students and the Center for Latin@ studies. As an example, I did attend an outreach presentation at the Center for Latin@ studies. I have also been attending another semester of Hablemos at the center, and hope to attend more in the future. I have presented to a Ferris State University Spanish Culture course taught by Dr. Lucero Flores-Paez, and have recently received a request to share information concerning the Camino de Santiago with members of St. Mary & St. Paul Catholic Parish here in Big Rapids.

This sabbatical will impact my work by increasing my multicultural awareness and improving my ability to serve Hispanic students and others. Students who self-identify with a Hispanic heritage are a growing population, and Ferris State University continues to strive to be a university which is here to serve all students all of the time. Thank you so much for this opportunity.