

Sporting Matters by Peter Jack

It's a long way home!

THOSE of you old enough to remember may recall Supertramp's brilliant song from the 70s, 'It's a long way home'. If you were doing all 776k of the Camino, then it certainly would be!

However, my good friend Sammy Moore and I were only doing the last 117k but we would qualify for the famous certificate issued at journey's end in the shadow of the famous cathedral in Santiago in North West Spain.

We were learning to cope with the demands (and dubious charms) of staying in dorms....

Day 2 - Lights out

When you turn the lights out at 9.00pm, it's no surprise to wake at 4.00am. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that I had no sleeping bag and there were no blankets (what do you expect for €6.00?)

We hit the road at 7.30am, the sun wasn't up yet and it was misty, so the whole thing as a bit surreal. We marched 5k before we stopped for breakfast - we felt, by that stage, we had earned it. It reminded me of my time on the date farm in a kibbutz in Northern Israel where I would start work at 4.00am and certainly be ready to break my fast at 8.00am.

Sammy had the great idea of a big push over the next two days so we would accomplish four stages in three days, thus leaving us the mere bagatelle of a victory 20k stroll into Santiago on day four. The plan was to get to Melide (a town of 7,500) and not stop at the scheduled destination of Palais De Rei.

The mist eventually disappeared and, miracle of miracles, the sun came out, and the birds, including cuckoos, robins, buzzards, wagtails and some specimen that even Sammy didn't recognise, were going mad in the early spring sunshine. There was no rain, no wind and all was well with the world.

Our legs and feet, however, were a different story. Walking 20 miles over seven hours seemed to place a different strain on the body than running 13 miles over two hours! The bottom of my feet felt bruised and the backs of my legs felt as if somebody had whacked them with an iron bar.

We exchanged pleasantries with two guys from Los Angeles (I have no doubt they had been influenced by 'The Way' movie with Martin Sheen and Emilio Estevez), then we talked to two Danish guys who had a similar guide book to us.

A French couple were enjoying walking on the Camino Frances, as was a lone guy dressed in black who was looking mysterious and moody. Everyone was looking forward to the day's torture, sorry walk, being over. I even promised to treat myself to shower gel for the first time in three days. Neither Sammy nor I had packed any as this would add to the weight of our rucksacks.

Sammy told me that, the day before in the dorm, he borrowed the Fairy Liquid from the kitchen - I was only gutted I hadn't thought of it first!

I can't say the route was unbelievably pretty, it had a certain charm ('delightful woodland' according to our guide book) but when you live in such a spectacular and beautiful place as we do, with Binevenagh Mountain as a backdrop and Benone Beach laid out like a carpet of jewels in front of you, then you really do need something special to captivate your senses.

We didn't take a single false step and after 21 miles and 45,000 steps, we booked into the first albergue we saw. Unfortunately, it was on the first floor and we had 20 steps to negotiate first!

For €10, we were able to pick a lower bunk - and there were even blankets and hot water! Talk about being spoilt....

We made it to a bar 50m away (there was another bar but it was 100m away and it might as well have been on another planet, it was certainly too far for our pilgrim feet to make it) and the local 'cervezas' had never tasted so good.

As the hard work was over for the day, we had a Siesta and a three course €10 meal to look forward to, and then we would have a race to see who got to sleep and start the snoring! The simple joys of a pilgrim....

Day 3 - Melide to Pedrouso

Although Melide only has a population of 7,500, it seemed that every single one of them was partying outside our window all night and when we set off at 7.45am, some of the locals were still finishing their last beers. We shook off our tiredness as we tramped through the streets.

At first, it felt as if my legs and feet and hips had been taken over by aliens and they had substituted the legs and feet and hips of a 60 year old. Oh, wait a minute..... we had a bit of a blow out last night and we avoided the usual €10 pilgrim menu and we treated ourselves to octopus (the local speciality), steak, pork chops and desserts -

all fuel to stoke the boiler!

The signage on the Camino was fantastic but occasionally, you came across sign posts pointing in opposite directions - what to do? We stuck with the traditional route that has been used for an age by people who really did suffer for their faith. All we had to complain about were sore legs and shoulders (from the rucksacks). I thought my rucksack was fairly efficiently packed (5 kilos) but Sammy's was half the size of mine and I wondered if I could sneak some of my stuff into his and would he notice!

We couldn't help noticing that Galicia is a fairly poor part of Spain. Rural poverty is as bad as urban poverty, it just doesn't get reported as much. We had done 11k but we had another 23.7k to go. It would be our longest day of the trip.

Somehow, when we got to Pedrouso, we managed to miss the turn-off into the town so we had to double back and do an extra 2k before finding our dorm for the night which, again, cost us €10 and even had a sauna! We treated ourselves to Sweden's best export in the hope that it would make the muscles feel a bit better in the morning. While the sauna might have helped, it didn't do much for the feet. Maybe a new tag line for the Camino could be 'Good for the soul - but not so good for the soles!'

In Sammy, I had the ideal travel companion. He would sing silly songs, tell primary school jokes and lift tired spirits by pointing out nature's wonders. He was also capable of getting the head down and getting the hard yards done when the going got tough.

No one had passed us on the Camino so far and it was a proud record we wanted to keep! I promised to treat myself to a new pair of shorts as I seemed to have lost mine somewhere, but as long as I still had a pair of trousers to wear, hopefully I would avoid being deported.....

Day 4 - Weary traveller

The dorm last night was the best yet - quiet, comfortable and designed for the weary traveller. When I stayed in a hostel a few years ago in London, it was noisy and full of energy. When you step into an Albergue, you think you have entered a morgue!

Everyone is just hammered. Whether you arrive at 4pm or 10pm, the place is littered with bodies all trying to recover from the day's trek - and get ready for the next one.

We met a girl from Latvia and a couple from Sydney (who had walked 600k from Pamplona,



PJ on the outskirts of the final destination. NCL18-32s

where I finished my trek last year). All of them had a story to tell as to why they were embarking on their individual soul searching mission. Pilgrims make great travel companions but we didn't want anyone of them to pass us!

We thought we would take it easy on Day four and 'smell the coffee' but when hardy came to hardy, we really wanted to preserve our record! We met two ladies from Costa Rica carrying back packs that looked as if half of Costa Rica was inside.

We passed through some more woodland, some hamlets and small villages, crossed the, by now, familiar N-547 and we worked our way up a steep incline to a monument which was, of course, dedicated to weary pilgrims.

Then we began our descent into the famous cathedral city of Santiago. There was a biting cold wind so we didn't hang about. Even walking fast didn't warm me up but we were now suffering from the Pilgrim equivalent of 'summit fever' except this was 'cathedral fever' and we didn't want to slow down or stop until we were in that famous square, gazing up in awe and admiration at the venerable building.

About 2k near the end, a Korean couple passed us and I

looked at Sammy and I said: "We're not going to take this lying down!" We added a step to our inch and quickly over took our Asian rivals!

Eventually we stumbled into the square and there it was, the Cathedral of Santiago De Compostela where, literally, millions of people from all over the world have walked to as their goal, be they spiritually inclined or humanist, believer or doubter, faithful or faithless.

Sammy and I exchanged a hand shake and a hug - mission accomplished! Like so often when a goal is accomplished, the feeling can be somewhat underwhelming, especially with the front of the magnificent building wreathed with scaffolding, but the feeling of pleasure and relief when the job was done was immense.

We then headed down to the official Pilgrim Office where we received our special personalised certificates. The blue and yellow signs which we had been following avidly for four days now seemed redundant but we clapped in all our pilgrims who were struggling into Santiago on several of the other Camino routes. They smiled gratefully in recognition.

Whether you had merely walked the 117K from Sarria or done the full 776k, it was a

grateful and weary pilgrim who could finally take off his boots for the last time. Talking of boots, we met a girl outside our albergue that morning desperately trying to glue the sole of her boot back on! Obviously, the Camino had taken its toll on her equipment as well as her!

Now that I have done two legs of the Camino, what advice would I have? Firstly, pack very little. Secondly, make sure you have a very good travel companion and just remember, it's a lot of fun and a bit of a challenge.

We had paid €51 each for five night's accommodation and they were all great. The whole trip was as cheap as chips. The flights are cheap as well and all you need to pay for after, that is, your food and the odd glass of local red.

Would I go back for the third time to the Camino and do some of the 500k in the middle? I am not sure. The world is a big place, especially when you are walking it as opposed or driving it or flying over it!

But if you want to see and do a lot in a short space of time and meet great people from all over the world and challenge yourself physically and emotionally, then a week on the iconic Camino Frances is hard to beat. It toughens your sole and refreshes the soul!



A typical room in an albergue. NCL18-30s



Journey's end! NCL18-31s