

SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

The Camino Frances

WHAT could be better craic than walking for a week, in a beautiful part of the world, with great company? That's what I was up to last week as 11 of us took on a section of the world famous "Camino Frances."

The route in total is 776km (nearly 800km by road) from the south west tip of France to the North West tip of Spain ending in a place called Santiago near the Atlantic Ocean.

The old name of the route is the way of St James.

The numbers now attempting it, or even part of it, are colossal. Over a quarter of a million souls from all over the world tackled it last year.

This year their numbers were swollen by 10 from Limavady and one from Magherafelt. We were being led from Limavady by Brian McNulty who along with John McCloskey and a few others had done sections of the route before.

The flights were cheap from Dublin to Biarritz and the return would be from Bilbao by which stage we hoped to have experienced some of the life of a Camino traveller.

When John Bunyan wrote "Pilgrim's Progress," I don't think he envisaged luxury hotel accommodation and three course meals for 12 Euros and great local wine, but hey, if that's what it takes to be a pilgrim these days, then I would happily give it a lash!

Although we would be walking from the red, white and blue of France to the red and yellow of Spain, the predominant colours

along the way were the red, green and white of the Basque country.

We were in the Catalan region, a fiercely proud area which is searching for independence from Paris and Madrid. The signs were in French - and Catalan - when we arrived.

Although our flight was delayed for two hours our driver was still there, thanks to Brian, to take us on the windy road through the valley past a crashing river to the picturesque town of San Jan Pied de Port close to a cathedral, river, ramparts, castle etc.

It is no wonder that France has more tourists than anywhere else in the world.

Despite its popularity as the gateway to the Camino, prices were very reasonable. Lots of shops even sold walking sticks and wet weather gear - we hoped we wouldn't need either.

We all trotted along eagerly to the Office de Pelerin for our Pilgrims passport. This is a document which would get stamped at least twice a day on your route.

We showed our own passports and we received a carte d'identite which we proudly put in our rucksacks.

We also picked up some shells which we would attach to the back of our rucksacks to denote the journey upon which we were embarking.

The symbol of the

shell - or scallop - (conche in French) was on t-shirts, fridge magnets etc.

St James, way back in the day, was a moor slayer but he now has a softer image but, he had probably no idea that a thousand years later, hundreds of thousands of Pilgrims would be following his footsteps.

He became a much more benign figure and it is said that he finished his own Pilgrimage in Santiago and that is why millions of people have followed in his footsteps ever since.

What would make the trip even more special for me would be the presence of my son, Patrick.

After working in Australia, then a year in Beijing and a year in Tokyo and 6 months in India and six months in Columbia the young man was coming "home" and for once he didn't have to do any research for this trip.

He has plotted and planned his hikes all over the world but thank fully all he had to do for a change was to rock on with a rucksack. In the meantime there was a lot of hills to conquer - all we had to do was put one foot in front of the other.

Day 1 - San Jean a Pied de Porte to Troncalles (27K)

"A journey of 1,000 miles starts with a single step" (LAO TZU). We had two possible routes today and we plumped for the route Napoleon and his armies took to invade Spain to start the Peninsular War.

We had no intention of starting a war, just our journey. At breakfast, we met an 86 year old lady from Melbourne who was about to embark on her own Pilgrimage.

She was a sole traveller, but she had lost all offer her money in the taxi. I saw John McCloskey slip over to her and give her some money to help her on her way. This would be typical of John - and typical of the generosity of the people on this trail.

Before we left our first town, I found a boulangerie to grab a baguette, some croissants and some pain au chocolat for lunch.

As soon as we left town, the road went up - and kept going up. We had had substantial thunder and lightning and heavy rain during the night, not as bad however as the dreadful flooding which was happening at exactly the same time back in Eglinton.

The road only had a few vehicles which lessened as it weaved its way up hill and changed from a 'B' road to a 'C' road.

You would spot your fellow travellers and you would pass them and they would pass you if you took a breather. As it was very warm, it was important to keep drinking from the fountains of "Eau Potable" that were at the road side.

Our first stop was at a cafe in the middle of nowhere which appeared out of the mist where we recognised quite a few

from our flight the day before.

I even spotted some intrepid cyclists who obviously relished hills. One guy however did pass us on an electric bike! I just wish that I had an engine to help power my legs as we struggled up from an altitude of 200 metres to 1,400 metres.

The path was very easy to spot, ie a scalloped shell and yellow direction signs were everywhere. Before we knew it, we were above the clouds. There was a carpet of white on either side of us and above us only sky - and some birds.

Patrick has been lucky enough to walk under the condors of the Andes of South America and I have done the same for the Himalayan eagles of Nepal but now both of us craned our necks to see a flock of hawks wheeling above us - we thought we would keep on walking in case they thought we were prey!

An enterprising bloke drove his lorry somehow up here stuffed with food to the top of the pass and never had been so welcome. I took the chance to lie down and stretch my back.

By this stage, the mist and fog had been burnt off as sun reappeared and drips of sweat off my chin now turned into a steady flow and still the path which had now turned rocky, weaved ever remorselessly upwards.

There were flocks of sheep and horses with bells on their necks similar to the pastoral scenes I had encountered while hiking in the Bulgarian mountains a few weeks ago with my other son Mark.

Now, I was at the West of Europe and we crossed the border from France to Spain without any border checks - I thought I would enjoy it while I can before Brexit!

Earlier, we had seen two massive pigs wandering about the quiet roads as well as the odd cross to remind us of some people who had died up here during their Pilgrimage.

There was also a memorial to two locals who had been tortured by the Nazis during the war.

Quite a few on the route were there because of the movie, "The Way," starring Martin Sheen and our very own James Nesbitt - I can confirm that the movie was shot on location as it showed a lot of the trail which we encountered.

Day 2 - Roncevalles to Zubiri (21.9K)

We left our luggage down in the foyer at 8.30 and by some miracle it was all transported for us to our next port of call. Brian organised this through his contact, Victoria, who runs a Pilgrims' Travel Company.

Victoria booked us in an amazing array of hostels hotels, and B & B's where all the hard work was done for us - all we had to do was walk from A to B every day.

After posing beside the road sign (Camino de Santiago 790K) we set off on a path beside the main road.

Our route today took us on quiet country roads and forest paths that only occasionally criss-crossed the main arterial route. We had a coffee stop in a cafe which was full of people like us.

We would pass and re-pass the two girls from Cork, the couple from Slovenia, the bloke from California, Mark from Australia, Conor from Dublin, the Japanese and Korean four etc.

We would always wish them "Buen Camino" ie have a good walk, have a safe journey, have a good trip. The Camino has been a boom to the tourist industry in this part of Spain and the authorities realise that to.

The signage is superb. You really could not get lost and you really do not need a guide.

Wouldn't it be great if we could have a "Camino de St Patrick," say on the North Coast? It would start in Derry and make its way over to Ballycastle and then down to Larne.

That would take a good week ie seven bed nights for tourists. You would obviously need a path and we could use parts of the Ulster Way (a route that has been scandalously allowed to fall in to disrepair ever since Central Government handed over responsibility to local Councils).

I once organised a race which involved 39 teams of two running a half marathon along the Ulster Way every two hours and we finished in just under 80 hours.

The Ulster Way is an

amazing trail just waiting to be reborn. For those seeking the spiritual side of things there would be short Church services at night along the route.

The cafes and shops and restaurants and bars and B & B's would all get a turn out of it because folks, there isn't anywhere nicer than our own North Coast and the Glens of Antrim.

While that remains a pipe dream, meanwhile back on the Camino Santiago, you would drift in and out of conversations as you moved up and down the path.

We emerged on to a main road where an enterprising local bloke was selling cokes and chorizo sandwiches, which fuelled the machine enough to reach Zubiri by 2.30, again, ahead of schedule.

Patrick and I took off our hiking boots gratefully and investigated the local outdoor swimming pool, where a few lengths were swum and a bit of quiet reading was done in the shade.

Our team of eleven met up in one of the only cafes in town for the Pilgrims' menu, eleven Euros for bread, water wine and three courses.

I don't think the Pilgrims of medieval times could frolic in swimming pools and drink wine, but we had suffered six hours walking in 30 degrees to get there!

A journey like this gives you a chance to catch up - and slow down. At home everybody seems in a rush and we confuse motion with progress.

Here, time is measured in days not minutes, distances are measured in kilometres not hundreds of miles. We had travelled just over 20K today on our feet by ourselves and it was hard earned.

We saw the countryside, we appreciated the lizards by the side of the path or the black-currants in the hedge or the songs of the birds above us. I am not saying this is for everyone, but it can't do us any harm to slow down once in a while.

Join me next week for the last three days on the journey of the "Camino Frances."



Wild horses in the Pyrenees. NCL36-12s



The eleven pilgrims setting off. NCL36-11s



Peter in the Basque country. NCL36-13s