

Pilgrim's progress (Part 2)

DAY 3 - ZUBIRI TO PAMPLOMA (21km)

LAST week, you may recall that I was trekking on the famous Camino in the north of Spain. We pick up the threads again at Day three.

During the night, I was able to tell the time without looking at my watch!

Why? - because our hotel room was directly beneath a clock tower whose massive bell boomed on the hour every hour and just for good measure, it reminded you five minutes later with exactly the same sound!

A few hours later and after several café con leche, we walked over the medieval bridge out of the town which straddled a river and we were on our way.

We passed a huge "Welcome to the Basque country" sign and after three hours of walking in the sun, we had our lunch in a shaded café where a group of horsemen and women dismounted to enjoy a cold beer while their steeds took a much deserved drink from a nearby river.

The temperature gauge had hit 30 degrees earlier and stubbornly stayed there and eventually nudged 35.

That is the weather for lying down in an air conditioned room but we were Pilgrims so it was onwards and upwards. We met two lovely Aussie ladies from New South Wales who were walking the entire Camino in five weeks and carrying their gear as well.

We were only walking five days and we weren't even carrying our own gear - talk about feeling like wimps!

The path today was very much like the Country Park and mercifully most of it out of the sun.

As we approached Pamploma however, we had to walk on City pavements where the heat just bounced back at us in the windless streets.

The signs however for the Pilgrims were spot on, you simply couldn't get lost. It was however, strange to pass people who weren't saying "Buen Camino to us."

We were now in the minority. Pamploma is the only major city (200,000 inhabitants) on the whole route. So most of the time it's just you and your fellow Pilgrims.

Patrick and I were the advance guard and we checked in gratefully to our hotel room which was only 100 metres off the route.

I felt sorry for any restaurants or cafes who were more than about 100 metres off the route because when you are doing the Camino you simply don't have the energy to go another step further!

Six hours of hot hard walking per day was making us leaner, hopefully not meaner, but certainly keener

to make it to our finish line every night.

We left our hotel room to go and find the famous statue which was inspired by the annual Pamploma Bull Run when 6 bulls are released on to the streets every July and thousands of people "run the bulls."

E r n e s t Hemmingway immortalised it in a book in 1926 ("The Sun Also Rises") and he has a statue - and a pub named after him! We also saw the outside of the bull ring which would have witnessed many a grizzly tale...

I took the opportunity of sussing out the local Tarazonera Park where peacocks strutted around and deer ambled, nibbling on the short grass. Later I was able to watch a Spanish disaster movie being shot with 100 extras.

Then I enjoyed a live three piece band playing in the Park in the sweltering evening air - just another night in downtown Pamploma!

My fit bit told me I had done another 36,000 steps done and a lot of gravy had been lost which had to be replaced with tapas (or as we were in the Basque Country, they are called Pintxos) and a glass of the local rose obviously!

We retired early to our 5th floor which overlooked the ramparts of the famous walled city as we had an even longer day tomorrow.

Day 4 - Pamploma to Puente La Reina

The local rooster at Pamploma needs a new clock because he thought it was dawn at 3.30.... and 4.00 and 4.30 etc.

Eventually, it was time to get up for real and as usual we met up for breakfast, left our rucksacks at reception for onward transportation and started our march for the day.

We sauntered through the park, past the citadel and the university and then started the climb up to the windmills.

We gained 350 metres in Altitude. Our first stop of the day was for another café con leche and a fresh croissant at a Pilgrims halt in Zariquiegi.

We had recognised lots of our fellow walkers, some quicker than others, some slower. The two Aussie ladies were going well.

I spent some time with a young German law student who was carrying an entire tent in the middle of his rucksack but seemed to be spending most nights in a local albergue i.e. a Pilgrims' hostel which usually costs about 10 Euros.

Patrick and I ended up first in Uterga for lunch but we were the last to leave as we found two hammocks in the back garden and it would have been churlish not to try them out for an hour!

We shared a 10 Euros Pilgrim's lunch, which also included a big glass of vino! The temperature was way over 30 and there was going to be no easy way to get to the Finish Line to day but we cracked on, mostly downhill over some scree.

We had witnessed the colourful spectacle of the same horseback riders in the previous town now clattering in to the main square before dis-

mounting for a glass of cold white wine.

I saw guys on mountain bikes doing the same route we were on and by golly did they look hot.

I remember carrying a 15kg rucksack through the forests of Borneo and pleasant it was not. It was such a relief here on the Camino just to be able to carry a day sack with water and a guide book.

Patrick told me that the Man. United Match was starting in a few hours so that gave us an incentive.

We eventually made it to hotel Jakue in Puente la Reina (Queens Bridge) and after a welcome snooze and shower the barman eventually found the right channel to enable several Limavady Man United fans to enjoy our third win on the bounce.

We set off to explore the medieval town in a good mood on the pedestrian only streets and enjoyed a free jazz concert and a paella where the accompanying wine was cheaper than the water.

As forked lightning lit up the outskirts of the town, we headed back, hopefully for a night's repose which would not be interrupted either by a clock bell tower or by a demented rooster....

Day 5 - Puente de la Reina to Estella - 23km

I woke up early and went outside in the dark to do some press ups. Even at 6.30a.m. I saw some Pilgrims with head torches on to illuminate their way.

At breakfast we met a bunch of visiting Americans who were biking the entire route in about 15 days for the 800km. They couldn't do the exact same route as us but they got a flavour of what was involved.

Two triathlete friends of mine from back home, Julie Murphy and Heather Bamford, have also done the entire Camino on bikes in a week.

We set off at our usual time of just after 8.30 a.m. We packed our rain jackets just in case. It was just shirts and shorts only weather though.

It was our last day and we stopped for a photo on the bridge of

the town on the way out. The two Pilgrims who took our photo were from Uruguay and Argentina and lived in Australia - only on the Camino!

We met more Aussies than any other Nationality including a retired foursome from Melbourne. One of them told me that he had been looking forward to this for years ever since he had seen the Martin Sheen film, "The Way."

Their flight was back to Oz on the October 1 and they would have to walk 25k a day between now and then to make it. I wished them well.

It was a Sunday and we popped our heads into a few churches, most of them with fantastic architecture. Our next step was Cirauqui which reminded me of villages in Tuscany, with fields of sunflowers and vineyards.

This was a medieval hilltop village where I had a pain au chocolat which Mary Berry could have spent an entire programme pontificating about. A horse and rider pranced up the cobbled streets and a rider called out to a girl on a first floor balcony to throw him a cigarette.

I was conscious that this was the last day we would all be walking together and nobody seemed to want to hurry.

We ambled through Lorca and found an excuse to have a beer. We spent so long over it that by the time we emerged for our last session of the entire trip it had begun to rain.

At least the rain jackets got an outing. Patrick and I pilgrimed our way into Estella (or Lizari in Basque as every sign was in two languages).

Estella had an impossibly high stone pedestrian bridge which was awesome! All eleven of us emerged from different directions but we all found our way to our goal - Hotel Yerri.

After a shower and a snooze we settled down to our usual afternoon routine - watching the Vuelta on Spanish TV, as Chris Froome extended his lead.

We wandered into town for a glass of vino and something to eat. We spotted the odd fellow pilgrim and gave



Patrick on the outskirts of Pamplona. NCL37-07s

them a nod of approval.

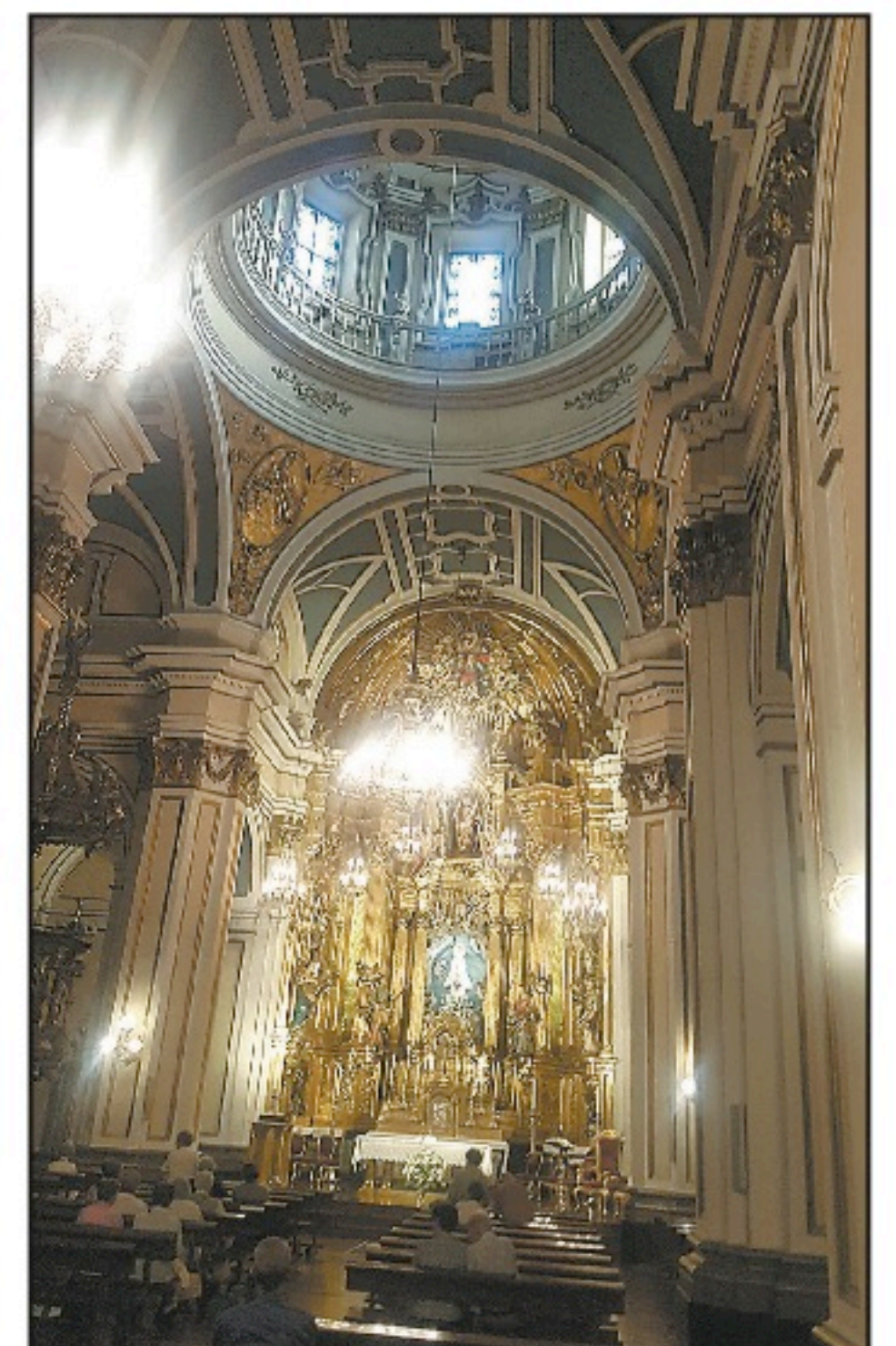
They were probably still on their journey, we were at the end of ours, but we weren't really because Brian had organised a day for us in Bilbao to recover before our return flight.

We might not be getting another 38,000 steps per day done but hey, we could check out the Guggenheim museum, the Athletic Bilbao Football stadium and also have a swim in the Bay of Biscay while planning a return trip to another section of the Camino!

Thanks to Brian

McNulty, who not only serves the best fish and chips in the country but also leads the best tours ever, and to my fellow pilgrims, John, Jane, Kevin, Angela, Noel, Seamus, Pat, and Anne Marie, but most of all to Patrick for spending a week with his Dad.

He has hiked all over China, India, Japan, Colombia and Ecuador and is out of the country again now but I do hope he enjoyed his time in the footsteps of St James. Until the next time on the Camino.....



One of the many beautiful Churches on the Camino. NCL37-08s



It's a hard life being a pilgrim. NCL37-09s

SPORT STORIES

If you have any articles or photographs of your sport...

Send us your pictures & results - Email us at sport@northernconstitution.co.uk