

Buen Camino!

MANY of you will have seen the recent BBC travel documentary featuring eight 'stars' who embarked on two weeks of walking on the legendary 'Camino' in Northern Spain.

It was an entertaining watch. Some of those featured came across well (Ed Byrne and Heather Small) while some would have been difficult companions to live with, cheek by jowl for 14 long days.

I didn't have any TV celebrities or comedians or singers with me on my recent jaunt to the Camino, I had all three rolled into one – Sammy Moore! Sammy is also a famous wildlife expert/cyclist/hill walker/raconteur so what could possibly go wrong?! The universal greeting to your fellow walkers was the famous "Buen Camino!" (which means 'Have a great walk').

The Camino De Frances is 776 kilometres long and it is a 'way marked' path, starting in South East France, crossing the Pyrenees into Spain and ending in the Galician capital of Santiago. Some people go the whole nine yards and walk the 33 stages non-stop (about 23km a day over varied terrain). We, on the other hand, didn't have a month free so we decided to do

five stages in four days to get our money's worth!

Our Aer Lingus flight (less than €100.00 return) was 40 minutes late but apparently, pilgrims have to make a virtue out of patience. I must confess, patience is something I haven't yet learnt but maybe, this was my lesson in 'going with the flow'.

Santiago Airport is a provincial airport with limited travel links, so we waited for another 90 minutes (patience, Peter, patience) before boarding a bus (€10-00) to Lugo before hopefully getting the last bus of the day to our selected starting point, the town of Sarria (just slightly bigger than Limavady).

This was Sammy's first trip to the Camino (but he has already booked to go back next month for another five stages!) and my second. I had a ball last year on a tour organised by Limavady's 'Senor Camino' himself, namely Brian McNulty. There were 12 old people on that trip like me and one very long suffering 24 year old, my son Patrick, and we were royally looked after. Brian had arranged for our main rucksacks to be ferried ahead to that night's port of call and our accommodation was booked for us in comfy hotels.

The true pilgrim, however, doesn't have all that laid on for



Sammy Moore on the trail. NCL17-102s

her/him - he or she carries everything that they need on their back, then he lays his weary head in an 'albergue' that has a space in its crowded dormitories. We were doing the same walk that millions of pilgrims (250,000 each year) have done over many centuries, without assistance, without wheels, but on our own two feet.

GRAMMED

I was aware that these six days away from my beloved Triangle Triathlon Club would mean no swimming, biking or running for nearly a week. So I crammed in three swims, two runs, two turbo sessions and a gym session into the five days before Sammy picked me up at 7.00am.

I am (supposedly) training for an ultra marathon at the end of June and then my last/ultimate/final (honest) Ironman in September and long sessions are key to those goals. But, I thought that four or five days of pleasant hiking would be good for the heart – and the soul.

Many of the so-called pilgrims embark on the trek to embrace their spiritual side, some do it just to 'get closer to nature', and some visit all the churches on route. Some do it to unwind and to get away from their relentless 24/7 media combination of fake news and bad news. Some just do it see if they can and to meet other people from all over the world. Others do it to eat lots of fantastic tapas and drink quality Rioja (Moi? Guilty!).

John Brierley, who has written lots of guide books on the Camino, (and who was featured in the recent BBC documentary) tells us that it is really important to speak some of the local lingo (Spanish with a Galician twist). How I envied the language skills of my daughter Hannah (who teaches French and Spanish) and my son Patrick who learned Spanish when he was working in Columbia, Mandarin when was working in China, Japanese and Sanskrit when he was working in Japan and India respectively.

So far, however, I have been

able to make myself understood in 59 different countries, while barely being able to speak English, but I thought I would cope.

There are five different Caminos (starting in Portugal, other parts of Spain, etc). I am convinced there is scope for a 'Camino De St Patrick' on the North Coast from Derry round to Larne via Ballycastle before setting sail for Northern Spain. Just think of the boost that would give the tourist industry!

We, however, where in the oldest and most established Camino of the whole lot – The Way of St James. James was a bloke who, more than a thousand years ago, laid waste to everybody with whom he disagreed and there are various depictions of him on top of a horse beheading people. He then saw the error of his ways and became a humble patron Saint of the Camino and began to treat people in the way that he would like to be treated by them.

I, on the other hand, was more concerned with getting a comfortable night's sleep and making sure I was well fed and watered! Could I cope with the uncertainty of not knowing where I was going to lay by head every night? Our lives are dominated by clocks and watches, by stuff that has to be done by deadlines, by certainty. Some of my days are mapped out to the minute. There is no time for spontaneity or heading off the beaten track. These four or five days would be full of opportunities to reconnect with nature and the unexpected surprised – bring it on!

When we arrived in Lugo, we had exactly four minutes to scramble off one bus and to find the bus that we needed. We made it to Sarria where we headed for the first hostel that we could find. This cost us a massive €9.00. It was nearly 10.00pm and before we were allowed to enter the dorm, which we would share with six others, the proprietor insisted that we have a shot of Grappa (the local brandy)! As Sammy doesn't drink, I had to have his shot as well!

What horrors lay on the other

side of the dormitory door?! We threw in our rucksacks and we headed ten metres down the street to the first tapas bar we saw to have a fantastic three course meal (calamari, pork and chips and a big whack of Galician cake and three glasses of local red – for €9.00!) We then climbed up, rather unsteadily, unto our top bunks with lights out by 10.30pm – so this is what boarding school would have been like!

Tomorrow would see the start of the walk - hopefully my snoring would quickly drown out seven other snorers...

DAY 1

I was awake at 6.50am local time (5.50am UK time) and we were on the road after a great €4.00 breakfast at 7.55am. After all the planning and plotting, it was great to be back on the Camino, following the familiar blue and yellow scallop shell signs and the ubiquitous kilometre markers.

The trail took us up and out of Sarria, past the monastery of Magdalena. We would start at about 400 metres above sea level, rise to 650 metres and then back down to 350 metres to the river town of Porto Marin.

We covered the first 12 kilometres full of vim and vigour despite the soft Spanish mist/rain and we found a much needed café for a 'café con leche' and cake at Morgade.

Five kilometres later, we passed the hamlet of Mercadoro (official population – 1!) and before we knew it, were in Porto Marin with a river so wide it reminded me of the Rhone. That was 23 kilometres done and normally, that's the end of a stage where weary pilgrims would seek shelter. However, these two pilgrims from Limavady had five stages to do and only four days to do them in. So we set off for our new destination of Gonzar which was nearly 8 kilometres away. We thought we were on the wrong route and we walked back to Porto Marin before realising that we had been on the right route, so we did an extra 40 minutes – even better value!

There are three 'albergues' in Gonzar but the second and third options never stood a chance as we slumped into the first one which was by the roadside. Some 43,000 steps were taken according to my Fitbit and nearly 21 miles after we set out, we were ensconced for the night.

This time we had to pay the outrageous sum of €6.00 for our bunk bed – and we even got to lie in a downstairs bunk – luxury! Our fellow pilgrims were from all over the world and it was great to say "Ola" and "Buen Camino" to them.

The time flew in quickly, especially with Sammy's extensive knowledge of the local flora and fauna (even knowing the Latin names). For all we knew in the real world, Donald Trump might have started World War III with Russia in the killing fields of Syria but all we could think of was the need was put one foot in front of the other. It was mind over matter, I didn't mind and my feet didn't matter.

Because we were planning on doing more than the usual daily stage, we would probably be staying in smaller, out of the way places but it all added to the charm of the walk. Walking and talking, talking and walking, ticking off the miles with smiles.

This was a unique opportunity to walk in the footsteps of people who has been doing this for over a millennia. We were surrounded by history and blessed by the local geography. We had a chance to unwind, to concentrate on the important things in life and whatever your religion – be it Christian, Hindu, Jew, Muslim, or none – everybody was here to find out a little about themselves. What makes you tick? What's your passion? What's important to you? This trek is as good a chance you will get to reconnect your soul with nature in the frenetic world we live in.

Here, you have a chance to slow down and even if your only philosophy is just to 'live/laugh/love', then there would be room for you too.

Join me next week to see if Sammy and I can make it to the end of our trek.



The traditional Camino scallop shell in different national colours. NCL17-101s