

Reflections on Walking the Camino: AUC 30 June 2024

Good morning. Louise and I have been asked to share our reflections of walking the Camino from Leon, Spain to Santiago, Spain – a distance of 300km. Although Louise and I have had many discussions about our walk, we decided to do our own personal reflections. I don't know what Louise has written and she doesn't know what I have written. So, there may be some overlap but we felt that even the same event would be viewed from our own unique perspective. I am going to go first.

“LADIES! These backpacks are too heavy. You will never make it to Santiago carrying this much weight! Just carry what you need for the day.”

And to be honest, between the two of us, Louise and I probably could have performed open heart surgery on the side of a mountain if we needed to. I am exaggerating of course but we were carrying too much.

This was the first but by no means the last of the good advice that Louise and I received on the Camino.

We listened to Lesley, who was enjoying walking with some fellow pilgrims so much that she didn't listen to her knees when they told her to stop. She ended up with bursitis in both knees and had to stop walking for several days in order to heal.

David told us about walking 27km only to find out there 'was no room in the Inn' and so walked another 10km to the next village. He got shin splints and also had to take some time to recover.

I overheard Roberta say to Joel, “I am so cold and tired and wet. Let's take a taxi to our next stop” and Joel replied “There is no judgement on the Camino, so let's do that”

Nikki from Germany said he needed to 'clear his head' and decided to walk the 800km from St. Jean in France to Santiago in Spain to order to do so.

We listened and learned from our encounters. Yes, it took us longer to get to our next stop but we stayed the course by taking breaks, changing our socks and shoes, and staying hydrated. We promised each other we would do everything we could to stay safe and have a successful walk. Because it was so easy to get off course.

We walked. And walked. And walked. We looked for and followed the yellow arrows or shells that were there to guide us. They could be found anywhere – on the sidewalk, on poles, on the road, on the curb, on a wall. One had to have eagle eyes to find them sometimes. Thankfully Louise had those eagle eyes as she usually spotted them first. Sometimes we did get off track though. In one particular case, as we merrily started off, a car slowed down and waved at us. She stopped her car, got out and said “You are going the wrong way....come with me and I’ll show you which way to go” Such was the way of the Camino.....when we were going in the wrong direction, some good Samaritan would stop and set us right. We only had one cranky fellow, who, when we asked for help (as we were lost) came outside and waved his arms and said “Go down there, you can’t miss it” which we obviously hadtwice. That was a long day. It was a good thing we didn’t know how much further it was to Molinaseca at that point.

One of my favourite things was to walk into and through the villages. We would know we were coming to a village when we would catch the glimpse of a roof as we rounded a turn. These villages are many centuries old. There were balconies with flowers everywhere. Streets were only wide enough for one car. So many of these villages have come back to life because of the Camino. You can find albergues here and bars that serve food and drink. We were so grateful for a place to stop and rest, change our socks and have a coffee con leche. Of special joy were the ‘oasis’s’....those spots that we came upon who offered food and drink, a washroom all for a donation. It was humbling how they reached out to help us on our journey. We were strangers and they welcomed us.

Many people walk alone and meet up with others and join them for a while. I can’t tell you the number of times I said to Louise how glad I was that we were walking together. Not from a safety point of view – I never felt unsafe – but there were always things that came up that were nice to talk to her about. And honestly, I would have a thought pop into my head and the next second Louise would say exactly what I was thinking. And sometimes no words were

needed, as we knew exactly what each of us were thinking. And I know I can say to Louise “Remember O Cebreiro?” or even better “Remember Option?” and know that nothing else needs to be said.

One of the things I particularly enjoyed was our prep for the next day. We would go to our room, after our day of walking, exhausted. We would shower, meet for dinner and over dinner, we would plan for the next day. We would look at the mileage, the terrain, the weather and decide on what clothes, what shoes, how many pairs of socks to wear and what time to set the alarm for the next morning, which was usually between 5:30 and 6am.

Because the terrain was so challenging, we had to keep our heads down to make sure we were walking safely. But we made it a rule to always look up and out often and we always took pictures. It was truly beautiful to walk towards the mountains. You could see for so many miles. The flowers were gorgeous. We saw cows, goats, sheep. Dogs. Vegetable gardens. Vineyards.

As we entered Santiago, we walked through the new part and then we entered the old city. The streets are narrow. You can't see the Cathedral because of the buildings so you walk and walk and suddenly you enter a plaza and you are there. It is a shock to be in that space and realize that it is over. You have reached your goal. A flood of emotions came over me and it took some time for me to realize the magnitude of our endeavor. We did it!

Later Louise and I were able to take a tour of the inside of the Cathedral and rest our forehead on the sculpture of St. James. It was so beautiful inside. We were able to sit and take it all in.

Why does one walk the Camino? Many roads lead to the shrine of the Apostle James in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrims have been drawn to walk the Camino for religious or spiritual reasons because of this.

And it is said that the Camino gives you what you need, not what you want. Certainly the walk provided time for contemplation, a time to view the beauty of nature, a time to hear other people's stories. There was time to talk about the mundane. There was a time to share worries. There was a time to support one

another. And sometimes it just about putting one foot in front of the other. You are in a different world when you are walking the Camino.

When people ask me how my trip was I say it was 'amazing' But what I really feel is grateful.

Grateful that I was well and able enough to even contemplate this journey

Grateful that we prepared well

Grateful for the many people both here and on our walk who shared their wisdom with us

Grateful to have had my wonderful friend Louise to share this experience with

I know I have changed. I am not quite sure what those changes are. But I know they are there. One cannot walk the Camino and not be changed.

It was important for me to share this journey with you. We received your blessing and we carried it with us. Communicating each day's experiences was one way of sharing and today is a different way of sharing. I thank you for the opportunity to do both.