

# Pilgrimage or just a very long walk?



Liz Inman (second from left), pausing for a rest with fellow travellers.

I've been wanting to walk the Camino de Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage for many years. This year, my 70th, I decided to *do it*. I'd been gradually building up my long-distance walking strength and felt it was now or never. I booked a flight and the first three nights' accommodation. I was going on my own and wanted to play most of it by ear. The Camino Francés, or French Way, is a more than 1000 year old pilgrimage to the shrine of the apostle St James the Great. It has become increasingly popular in the last 20 years, having been declared a UNESCO cultural heritage site. More than 300,000 'pilgrims' complete the route each year.

I walked the 500 miles from St Jean-Pied-de-Port in the northern foothills of the Pyrenees to Santiago in 33 days, which was considerably less than I'd anticipated – the route itself is not difficult. I was able to do extensive sightseeing in Burgos, Leon and Santiago itself. It was in no way a rush. I deliberately avoided putting pressure on myself by not booking a home-ward flight until a few days before I needed it. I also did not book any accommodation more than a day or so ahead. I'd chosen the tail end of the season (October) and, although there were plenty of people around, it was not overly busy. I always found somewhere to stay even if I just turned up. The way is exceptionally well signposted, the tracks are wide and unmissable, for the most part, and there is almost always

someone in front of or behind you, which is reassuring. The number of solo women walkers is on the increase and it did feel very safe.

I started out intending to have my baggage carried for me as I didn't think I could manage my 6kg backpack. However, after the first seven days I found I could carry it. I also started out in hotel/pension accommodation thinking I was too old for the dormitories in the 'albergues' (hostels). But, about half way through, I was staying in albergues and sleeping just as well (or badly) as I would do in a private room. Not only did I save a vast amount of money but, more importantly, I was doing it the 'pilgrims' way and so met many more people and was completely flexible. I loved the feeling of setting off in the morning and not knowing where I'd end up in the evening.

There are many tedious stretches alongside major roads and motorways; routes into and out of cities seemed especially unending. The landscape and architecture, however, are varied: from the Pyrenees to the rolling wooded hills of Navarre with limestone villages; the extensive vineyards in Rioja; the endless wheat fields on the high central plain of Northern Spain, with wonderful yellow adobe villages; the dark granite villages in Galicia, which reminded me of central Wales.

The religious architecture and art were truly spectacular. From the cathedral-like churches soaring up in villages like Los

Arcos or Navarete with their baroque or medieval altar pieces to the real cathedrals in Burgos, Leon, Astorga or Santiago. All the styles were represented: romanesque, gothic, plateresque, renaissance and baroque. There were treasure houses of religious art and artefacts everywhere, and even the most modest looking little village had a chapel that might hold a surprise.

In the end, however, it was the people who were the highlight of the trip. You are never alone on the Camino unless you choose to be. But no one is intrusive – the convention seems to be: respect other pilgrims' privacy and choices, but be friendly and approachable. The greeting 'Buen Camino' rang out all the time: often from locals who would gently point an erring pilgrim in the right direction. People were exceptionally kind and helpful and when you consider how many thousands pour through the small villages in summer, it's amazing how warm the greetings are, especially from the remaining elderly inhabitants. I was able to use my French and German which greatly enhanced the encounters. I also speak a little Spanish, but as elsewhere in the world English is the lingua franca.

Pilgrims have the same general goal and this is a great unifying factor, but everyone has their own story and motivation. As they say 'everyone walks their own Camino'. I met a huge variety of people of all ages and nationalities: Europeans, North and South Americans, Koreans, Chinese, Japanese. I met people recovering from cancer or bereavement, people fighting old age, or trying to reset their lives at the beginning of retirement; these were mostly people in their 50 and 60s or even 70s. Younger people were variously treating it as a physical

challenge, looking for a change in direction, or taking time off from a no longer satisfactory job and there was indeed an element of 'finding oneself' coupled with 'new age' preoccupations. And, of course, there were many real pilgrims walking the Camino out of a sense of religious conviction. The frequent pilgrim masses held along the route attested to this.

A few people stood out for me. A German middle-aged woman, who had had a serious heart operation three years ago and who, afterwards, couldn't move any of her limbs unaided, completed the route pulling a cart on wheels containing her luggage and using a harness made by the British military. An Irish woman in her 70s, a legend on the Camino, and who regularly walks 40 kms a day. She is reported to have been refused her certificate in Santiago because the officials didn't believe she had done 40 kms in one day. So she went back 100 kms and redid the stretch getting a stamp for every 20 kms and was shamefacedly given her certificate. Another German woman of nearly 80 who has done the Camino 17 times and knows every church, albergue and deviation and is full of useful advice. She zipped ahead of the rest of us with her pack. A young Belgian who has been on the Camino from Brussels for four months with no money, earning what he needed by making and selling bracelets. When I asked why he hadn't replaced his worn out shoes he said "these have had so many experiences I don't want to part from them." An American woman and a French woman both in their early 60s who were refusing to follow their husbands into pipe and slipper mode upon retirement were not looking forward to going home after this new and liberating experience. I heard of others who live their lives on the Camino, rarely going home. And the number who come back time and time again to do this or other pilgrimage routes to Santiago is high.

So, a pilgrimage or a very long walk? The latter I think in my case but again, very much more than just a long walk. It was the total experience that was so captivating.

LIZ INMAN

Liz Inman has lived on the Suburb for eight years; she has been involved in various suburb activities: U3A, Suburb library, Proms at St Jude's, Trust Estates Committee, and the Tree survey of the Suburb.

# Fireworks feedback

The lead article in the Winter Issue of Suburb News certainly caused a few sparks to fly! Thank you for your many emails both for and against putting a stop to the annual New Year's Eve fireworks celebrations – we have reprinted two of them to represent both sides.

The Chair of the Residents Association, Emma Howard, was proposing to seek views of RA members at the 30 March AGM so the RA Council could take these views into account in forming a decision on what to do in future regarding the annual New Year's Eve firework display. This event is loved by many but there are clearly also those who are opposed to it.

Unfortunately, Covid 19 measures meant that the AGM

had to be postponed and in light of this, the RA Executive Committee members decided during a 'Zoom' virtual meeting, the fireworks would continue for this New Year's Eve. Emma said: "Whilst the RA is definitely in favour of looking at greener options, we felt that once we get through Covid-19 and with all other Suburb events cancelled for the duration, it was important that there should be something really celebratory to mark the start of 2021. However, undoubtedly there is concern about the noise caused by fireworks and this year we will make arrangements with the pyrotechnic firm we use to include many more low noise fireworks as part of the display. We can then review the matter next year."

*Dear Suburb News I have just read the article in the publication. I have lived in the Suburb for 40 years this year and have never been to see the New Year display. Personally I have no interest in fireworks. I do not have enough information about the effects of fireworks, but I know that many pets are completely terrified. Environmentally I am certain that there must be a price to pay. The display on the Thames is huge and people enjoying this can watch it live on television. I have always been a member of the RA but see this event as a waste of subscriptions. I feel there must be better ways to spend this money rather than just burning it with bright colours, noise and disruption. I understand that young children might get pleasure from this, but as you have asked, I am not in favour. As I said earlier, there must be better things to spend this event money on. Peter*

*As a resident of the Suburb I feel that the fireworks displays are a fantastic opportunity for all to enjoy themselves, old and young (and those in between) alike. They unify our community and have been a source of joy for generations. Why deprive our children of something we enjoyed so much? While not all traditions are appropriate these days, let us not be too quick to discard that which has served us well. We must not become so precious as to become fragile. Let the fireworks go on! Simon*



**Garden Suburb Community Library News** The library sadly had to close at the beginning of the crisis but has been active in trying to keep in touch with its users – we now have an online Sing Song time for its youngsters, the Book Club is looking to meet online and once the strict lock-down measures are eased we have a book collection scheme ready to launch. Keep in touch with all of the above at the library website: <http://gardensuburblibrary.org.uk/gsccl/>

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