

Camino de Santiago – September / October 2012

Greetings!

Please see below for updates and posts on a father and son on-foot journey across Northern Spain on a 490 mile pilgrimage known as the [Way of St. James or el Camino de Santiago](#). We left our home in Denver, CO on Friday, August 31 to embark on one of the world's most prized pilgrimage destinations. Our path carries over a thousand years of history, deep medieval roots and over 120,000 pilgrims a year.

Heard of the Camino de Santiago? If not, please check out the link above or rent the film '[The Way](#)' with Martin Sheen.

I have finally been able upload photos to Facebook. This is a public photo album so it should be visible to everyone regardless whether you have an account or not. Please click [Camino de Santiago Photos](#) to see them!

Day 29 – 31 (Portomarin, Palas de Rei, Arzua)

I'm walking down another steep Roman road with it's jagged and rocky surface. I know there is only 1km (less than a mile) left until I reach our destination for today, Portomarin. In our handy guidebook it mentions that the town was submerged in a large flood in the 1960's and was rebuilt higher on the hill. I didn't have a clue the magnitude of this until I turned the corner and saw the greatness of this river valley and the incredible bridge leading pilgrims, locals and wayfarers to the city centre.

The bridge felt unnecessarily tall as the river was very low and the guard rail was at your hip. It felt like everything was swaying and with a simple breeze you could be blown over it's very steep edge. There were ruins of the old town in the distance and there were small dirt roads and trails running next to the river. Nobody was down there. I couldn't believe it. The minute I saw an old staircase leading to the river valley I was determined to spend the rest of my afternoon in its presence.

I signed up at the first albergue in the town. Took a bed and a quick cold shower and off I went to walk, nap and write in this magical valley. Look it up – Portomarin River Valley / Spain – so beautiful. My father came into town several hours later. I saw his faint silhouette from below and yelled up to him as he too was carefully watching his balance. He eventually joined me in the valley. We were one of the only people walking there. We practically had it to ourselves.

He decided to walk to the other side of the river on-foot. He handed me all of his things and started to slowly take on the great crossing. As I was watching I started to see blots of brown and white poke through the grasses behind me. In about five minutes I was being barked at – somewhat aggressively – to be careful from the lead shepherd dog. A herd of 100 + goats, one horse and their 8 shepherds (all dogs / no human) surrounded me on the Southern edge of the river. This was such a blessing to see these powerful dogs calmly and oh so confidently lead and protect their vulnerable group. They had a job to do. I slowly turned and walked with them. It

took the dogs awhile to stop barking, but I wanted them to trust me. In about 10 minutes I was walking in the middle of this herd and the biggest dog of them all (seriously huge / paws as big as a lion) walked up to me and allowed me to pet him. He remained at my side for several minutes. Yup, I cried.

I am so blessed to be here. We only have two more days of walking left. My hope is for more and more people to experience life this way – at this pace – for this amount of time. It's truly cleansing.

Off to have another glass of zidre (cold apple cider)...

Buen Camino!

Day 23 – 28 (Foncebadon, Ponferrada, Villafranca del Bierzo, Vega de Valcarce / O´Cebreiro, Triacastela, Sarria)

Rolling green and yellow hills.
Old and weathered chestnut trees.
Hard working farmers.
The thick and musty smell of fresh cow dung.
9th and 10th century monuments, walls, monasteries, huts and Churches.
Hundreds of German shepherds asleep on the trail.

Our yellow waymarkers have guided us into some of the most beautiful countryside I've ever seen as we've made our way into the great Galacia region of Spain. This is one of the most prized places across all of Spain. It's known for holding much of what's called the Spanish rainforest and the medieval and Celtic history seeps through every step. We have sweated some steep climbs and spent many moments resting on mountain peaks to relish their striking views – miles of pastures, villages and rich green landscapes.

My father is doing very well. His body is healthy and we've both dropped significant weight. He completed 33 km yesterday (about 20 miles) and many of our new friends cheered and clapped with wine in hand as he came stomping through Triacastela's main street. We have become very good travel pals and have really made this work well for us. I seem to set off quickly under the stars at 6am each morning to enjoy a cool morning walk of 5-8 miles. We both find our own spots for a good cafe con leche (coffee & milk) and I sort out our accommodation and wait for him at a cafe near the camino.

I lost my camera in Villafranca – or it was stolen. Many pilgrims have had things stolen along the way and well, I guess it was my turn. I'm honestly not all that upset as I'm happy to still have my journal and passport. We are looking for cameras along the way to document the rest of the trip, but haven't been all that successful. The camino has a way of making you more present. I'm enjoying the simplicity of looking at something for awhile and absorbing it's memory in new ways. I'm hoping to pull out the pen for some sketches tomorrow.

Five more days of walking to go (just 70 miles). We hope to reach the Santiago city centre for the traditional pilgrim service at 12noon on Friday! I´m off to the market to get some bread and juice as everything shuts down on Sunday here.

What a journey...

Buen Camino!

Day 19-22 (Monsilla de los Mulas, Leon, Hospital Orbigo, Astorga)

We have now reached the beautiful medieval town of Astorga – home of Goudi architecture, local chocolatiers and the presence medieval spirits sitting and watching from the large crumbling wall surrounding the high village. Love this place.

One of our best nights: 50-60 pilgrims gathered in the center garden / patio of the historic town centre municipal albergue in Monsilla de los Mulas. This building has been hosting pilgrims traveling the Camino de Santiago for hundreds of years. The mother / daughter duo have given their lives to serving pilgrims. We all gathered around a guitar with the mother who could sing traditional Spanish as if she was the star on center stage. After an incredible performance of local flavor she and her daughter had every country or region share a special song. We had groups and individuals from over 20 countries share a local song. I was the only one from the US and attempted Amazing Grace. Tears, laughter and awe until late in the night.

Day 10-18 (Belorado, Ages, Burgos, Hontanas, Itero de la Vega, Carrion de los Condes, Terradillos and Bercianos de Real Camino)





Our days on this recent stretch have been long, dry and oh so reflective. These are the toughest days for many of the pilgrims. Miles stacked upon miles where you don't have water fountains, towns or cafes. They have been some of my favorite. Feet swell up more than usual and it's here where the inner journey is truly tested. Landscapes like these can break and build the pilgrim.

For someone who is starving to find words and direction with a book, this was a strange kind of heaven. I was forced into some of the tightest places inside and was able to write page after page whenever I could huddle under a bush or small tree for shade. The cold cerveza and warm salty tapa never tastes better after days like these. Many people decided to bus or skip this section. It's not for us, but it's okay. This walking journey is (and should) be unique to everyone.

Many people here have passed along a message that while a main 'the Camino' also has the choice to have you. It's an interesting way of looking at it. Some people aren't ready and sometimes it shows... either in their stress or in their missing toe nails from larger than life blisters...

We have had many special moments these past several days (staying in a small albergue on top of a Church with 15 others, many unique communal dinners, crossing paths with sheep and their shephard, washing feet in a traditional 11th century pilgrim albergue, eating the best spicy meatballs, incredible early morning sunsets and star gazing, an afternoon of story and guitar, and many a nights with dollar glasses of vino with new friends from all over the world – Slovenia, Germany, Italy, Spain, England, Ireland, Japan, S Korea and more).

In reaching our halfway point yesterday I realized – more fully – just how special this place is. It's an on-foot journey into rich Spanish culture - but more than that it's time to take a colorful and unpredictable journey within. I gave myself a true gift in choosing to come out here. My writing has never been more colorful and my contentment and presence is back to a place of feeling grounded and light. *I'm so thankful.*

I turned 30 yesterday and celebrated. I'm excited for what's ahead and I almost dropped to tears when I had 12 new global friends lifting their glasses as they sang Happy Birthday in their language. Amen!

The picture above with the heart and sun is a symbol of a new friend from Holland, Nikki. It's about love and light. She lives to be a bridge builder. There's more to it, but I'll hope to run into her soon and will have her explain... She leaves this symbol in unique places along the way.

Off to share a glass of wine with my father who celebrates his birthday today!

Buen Camino

DAY 6-9 (Estella – Los Arcos, Los Arcos – Logrono, Logrono – Najera, Najera – Santa Domingo)

The stars and the moonlight at 5am in rural Spain have captured me every morning. We have made it a consistent time to get up before the rush of pilgrims to enjoy the coolness of the early early mornings here. We arrive into our destinations in plenty of time for lunch, cafe con leche and with a bed... (many late arrivals are having to sleep outside or on hard floors b/c of the volume of pilgrims this year).

I love this.

Our pace is increasing, our bodies are shedding pounds and our calves are becoming chized rocks... aaaand our feet are getting sore, knees are tweaking out and the occasional blister finds its place.

We have tackled just over 120 miles thus far and have just finished day 9 of this 33 day walking journey. Wow. We are continually in awe of the medieval landmarks, history and architecture. You think you've seen it all until you reach the next town. Sitting on outdoor cafe tables and watching the Spanish culture weave itself around your eyes – everyday – is such a blessing. It's truly amazing how every one of these Spanish towns has accepted and almost 'shares' their unique home with all pilgrims. It's what they've always known and it has sustained so much of their business. We are getting used to big lunches and very late dinner as restaurants close for the daily siesta at around 3pm to then re-open at 7pm for dinner.

We also received a pilgrim's blessing (along with 50 other global pilgrims) from the local parish priest at one of the most beautiful rural cathedral's I've seen yet in Los Arcos 'Santa Maria'.

One evening while staying in a zoo of a hostel/albergue (amongst snoring like lions, screaming phone conversations and crying) my father and I agreed to wake the other up in the early morning to get out for the cool starry start. My dad rubs my shoulder and whispers for us to awake. I agreed and quietly got ready. We started out on the quiet streets of Logrono (one of my favorite cities here). It was quieter than normal. We have sworn off watches and phones for the trip. We were smiling and ready for the day... until we looked up at the bank clock. It was 2:30am. Ha. We were a mess. It was our longest day to walk as well. We slept in parks and bought a watch.

My dad is doing great. He completed his longest daily walk yesterday topping it at just shy of 19 miles!!

Ahh, off to walk the town...

Buen Camino!

DAY 3,4 & 5 (*Zubiri – Pomplona / Pomplona – Puente la Reina / Puente la Reina – Estella*)

We're really doing this. I can't begin to explain the constant euphoria of walking in and through each of these special villages, towns and city centres. These walks are long, but are each so significant in color, in history and in architecture. We stop every 10 minutes to eat trailside black berries, greet fellow pilgrims and absorb the rare time we have here to take – in – everything.

I decided to walk and wait for my father (Dave) on Day 3 to Pamplona. I knew that there were limited beds in Pamplona, but really wanted to share the entire journey into this vibrant city with him. We took things slow as there were many many ups... with many many painful downs... We were constantly (as we are everyday) in awe of the rolling Spanish Navarre landscape and experienced our first day with lots of sun and no shade cover. The hills are tougher than we thought. They aren't advance and are not as tough as Colorado's 14,000ft slopes, but they aren't easy.

We approached Pamplona and crossed another (of many) medieval bridges linking land and making passage easy from kingdom to kingdom – literally. We were soon guided by a large wall that could have easily held back a dragon. The entrance / archway into the city was incredible. Life, color, activity and narrow lively alleys consumed the rest of our evening. That is to say – only after – my father found a nice place to stay. The hostels were all full. When my father is ready to rest he seems to nullify any practical path to jump towards whatever is next... haha.. so a hotel was it. A bit pricey, but oh so nice. This town had magic in the city centre. We watched and watched the people all night. It will be remembered.

I'm writing you now from what seems to be my favorite town thus far, Estrella. It's just too much. The medieval remnants, cathedrals, bridges and fortresses keep you very present while making your way through the tight alleys and corners. This area was founded on the pilgrim path in 1090. Enough said. The unique geography of this area being split on both side of the Rio Ega made for many many wars, mindless massacres and constant disharmony. You can see the destroyed rock and wall all around the city. Complimenting this town is large relaxing park areas on the river sprinkled with many cafes. We enjoyed several 'tapas' or small plates for less than \$2 each after our walk today... uggg... it's just beautiful...

Today's walk was one of the best as well. It was shorter in distant which allowed for more time to see and rest. I had a good start alone in the cooler early morning air and finished walking most of the route with a new and special friend Sabina from Slovenia. She gave me two of her small paintings yesterday... really?

I'm off to enjoy another night of people watching, writing and cafe con leche before retiring for the night at our free pilgrim hostel shared with 34 other pilgrims...

I still can't upload pictures. It's killing me. Ah well, I'll hopefully get to a super computer sometime soon... In the meantime I've asked Google to show you the incredible steps leading up to San Pedro Cathedral.



LoVing tHis!! Buen Camino

DAY TWO – Roncesvalles, Spain to Zubiri, Spain (20 KM or 12 Miles)

Today was great. We stayed in a beautiful and unique hostel (albergue) last night with over 120 beds. There were about 30 people snoring and some pilgrims were getting up to start walking at 4am. It was situated in what looked to be an old Church building. The noise of sharing one room with 100 + pilgrims finally pushed us to get up at 6am to start walking in the dark. We were grateful to reach an open cafe after our first hour's walk to enjoy warm hot chocolates and a staple 'omelette on baguette'. Light breeze, tree canopy shade and the continued warmth of local villagers and pilgrims around every corner. We walked through several small Spanish towns. The history here dates back to the early 700's when Charlemagne rampaged across the Pyrenees. A lot of theft and robbery would take place over the years in these remote lands as medieval pilgrims made their way. Over 125,000 pilgrims walked the Camino in 2011. People on the trail have informed me that this route used to carry twice that number. Our knees and feet are a bit sore today as we had an abundance of steep decline.

Tomorrow we will head into the city of Pamplona (capital of the Navarre region). Our first urban experience of the trip. This historic urban destination is known for its 'San Fermin' festival where the running of the bulls is its main attraction.

Still can't seem to get images updated. Will hope to get some photos up soon!

mas vasos de vino!

DAY ONE – St Jean Pied de Port, France to Roncesvalles, Spain (24 KM or 14 Miles)

I'm sitting in a small Spanish bar where pilgrims from all over the world are speaking there many languages in the distance. Many of them are waiting to get into the first of two pilgrim dinner seatings. Loving this. Please excuse any error or short typing as I have little time to update.

What an amazing couple of days. We SO much enjoyed our day stop in Dublin, IRE on Saturday visiting with good Irish friends (on no sleep). After several pints of Guinness and good laughs we went to bed and awoke to catch our plane to Biarritz, France. We caught a quick bus to Bayonne, France and made our way to our final destination (St. Jean Pied de Port) by train. This train ride was epic. It took us 2 hours through the rolling hills of SW France. After arriving into St Jean Pied de Port at 9PM we rushed over to the registration office. Our eyes were peeled at the sights of this historic gem of a town resting at the base of great Pyrenees mountains. This town is majestic and the narrow well manicured alley ways are truly sight to behold. I will get back to this place.

We walked 24KM today which comes to about 14 miles. This was up, up, up over the Pyrenees in and through rich green valleys, herds of weathered sheep, mystic fog while shifting from conversation to conversation with pilgrims from all over the world. Today I got to know folks from Sweden, Denmark, Hawaii, Belgium, Holland, Canada, Ireland, Spain, South Africa and more. It's so beautiful out here and I'm so thankful to be sharing this with my father. These remote places have so much to teach us...

It's the way of the road.

Open your heart.

Be present.

Those phrases are carried often in the words of these pilgrims. It's only been one day on the trail!

I'm not sure when I'll be able to update again... but for now... buen camino!

- Jonathon & Dave