

Hey Pilgrim!

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1 Hey Pilgrim!

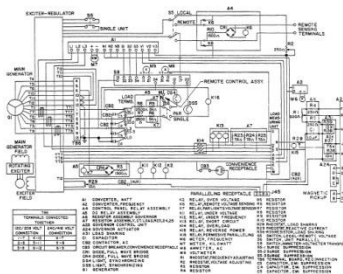
يا حاج

"Ya Hajji!" yelled Abdullah from the other side of the electricity substation. "Fe andek mifta komstasher?"



35 years ago, Abdullah and I were installing a new electricity distribution system in Sanaa, the capital of the Yemen. Abdullah wanted to learn English; I wanted to learn Arabic so we had a deal. On one day we spoke Arabic, on the next, English.

I tossed him the 15 millimetre spanner as requested and returned to my control panel and circuit diagram.



Circuit diagrams, and their close cousin machine code, are a wonderfully austere art form that very few people appreciate. They describe a problem and a solution, written in switches, relays, disembodied contacts and hexadecimal numbers. The best of them can rival a Sherlock Holmes novel.

However good they are at plotting, circuit diagrams are not good at scene setting or character development. So, after a brief period, I got distracted and started to think about the wonderful nicknames I had acquired in the six-months since arriving in Yemen.

First I'd been "*Al Russiah*" the Russian. This was reasonably logical; all non-arab foreigners in the 60's were Russian. Then I'd briefly been "*Nasrani*", the Christian. This was not exactly a compliment as it drew distinctions between me and everyone else. People seemed a little uncomfortable using it. Finally Abdullah had come up with the name "*Hajji*". This was unanimously approved and whenever I was introduced by this name I was always greeted with smiles and laughter.



"*Hajji*" was a bit of a mystery though. I knew what the Haj, the great pilgrimage to Mecca, was of course. I'd seen the pilgrims leave Yemeni villages on the 1000km trek to Mecca. They travelled in Toyota Land cruiser pickup trucks that were jammed with people both inside and out. Every pickup had at least one mattress with an old sick man lying on it. It was extremely touching to see these people ignore their age and illness to make the pilgrimage for the first and last time of their lives.

Roman solved the mystery for me. He was a Swiss/Moroccan White Father, a social worker in Sanaa prison. After many years in the Islamic world he was our expert on everything to do with the culture.



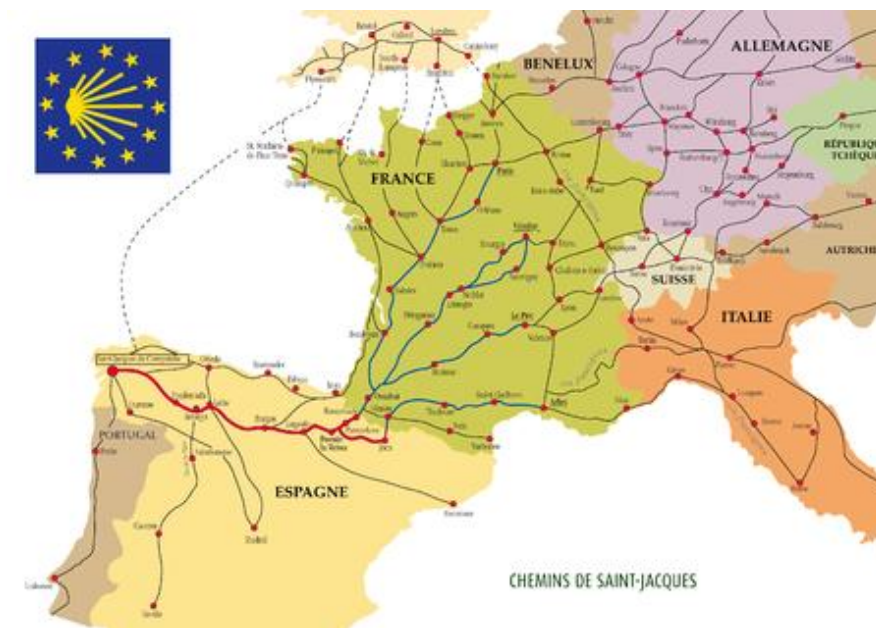
Roman explained that when a man returned from the Haj he acquired the honorific title "*Hajji*". Now he was supposed to be a new and reformed character. This meant no more alcohol

and being a regular attendee at the mosque. To mark this change he grew his beard and dyed it red.

That explained things quite nicely. At that time my beard was a lot bushier and a lot redder than it is now. Hajii was a good name for me!

It's important to remember stories like this while powerful forces are busy creating enmity between Christian and Muslim people. Now I've reached the stage of my life when I've to do my own Haj. In my culture this is the great camino to Santiago de Compostello. I started from Clonmacnoise on 14th April 2015.

2 Pilgrimages are odd, and the camino is odder than most



The Camino de Santiago, or Way of St. James, was one of the most important Christian pilgrimages during the Middle Ages. If you did it or the alternative pilgrimages to Rome or Jerusalem, you could earn a plenary indulgence, remitting punishment in purgatory for all your sins.

Legend holds that St. James's remains were carried by boat from Jerusalem to northern Spain, where he was buried in what is now the city of Santiago de Compostela

The Camino can take one of dozens of pilgrimage routes to Santiago de Compostela. Traditionally, as with most pilgrimages, the Way of Saint James began at one's home and ended at the pilgrimage site. However, a few of the routes are considered main ones. There are traditional pilgrim paths all across Europe, converging on the city of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in north-western Spain.

During the middle ages, the route was highly travelled. However, the Black Death, the Protestant Reformation, and political unrest in 16th century Europe led to its decline. By the 1980s, only a few pilgrims per year arrived in Santiago. Later, the route attracted a growing number of modern-day pilgrims from around the globe.



St James, the son of Zebedee and Salome, did not achieve much in life but really hit the big time when he died! He was one of the twelve apostles of Jesus and the first martyr. He is called James the Great and is the patron saint of Spain. Not to mention being the special patron of veterinarians, equestrians, furriers, tanners and pharmacists.

There is a tradition, not mentioned anywhere in the gospels of course, that he went as a missionary to Galicia after the death of Christ.

Galicia was an odd choice of location for missionary activity. It was sparsely populated; the Romans called it *Finnistere*, the end of the earth. To get there he would have had to bypass the centres of the Roman world, Athens, Carthage and Rome itself. But, on the other hand, Galicia was important in the local pagan religions; it was where the Milky Way descended into the great ocean and was obviously a place of deep significance.

As a missionary, James was a spectacular failure, recruiting only eight converts. After a brief period he returned to Palestine and was martyred by Herod in 44AD.

The angels really went into overdrive at this point. The body was put in a stone boat, sailed all the way across the Mediterranean, through Gibraltar and up the west coast of the Iberian Peninsula to Galicia. This was all done in eight days too, which even nowadays would count as a very speedy passage. Then wild bulls, which suddenly became tame, pulled the saint's body in a cart to what became Santiago de Compostello where it was buried.

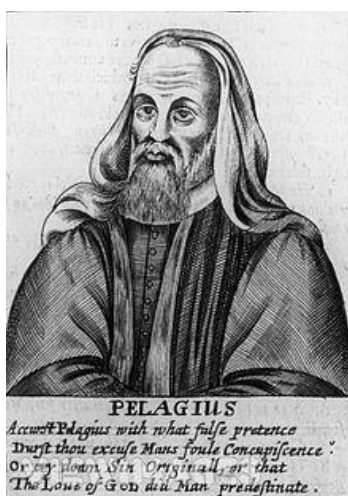
The 'wild bulls' story at least has a ring of psychological truth to it. Is it a reference to Christianity, at least partially, overcoming the local bull-worshipping pagan religion? Why is bullfighting important in Spanish, but no other, European culture?

Then the entire event was forgotten for almost 800 years until serious geopolitics arrived on the scene.



In 711 a Berber raiding party from North Africa crossed over to Spain and unexpectedly defeated the Visigoth king Rodrick at the Battle of Guadalete. The unpopular Visigothic kingdom collapsed and within a few years the Muslim Umayyad Caliphate established the independent emirate of Cordova. The Umayyad expansion was almost unopposed and within a decade the entire peninsula except the tiny Kingdom of Asturias and the mountain-dwelling Basques was under Muslim dominion. A series of Umayyad raids into France eventually led to defeat at the battle of Tours in 732.

A buffer state was needed in northern Spain to insulate the French Christian territories of Gascony and Toulouse from the Muslim Caliphate of Cordoba. A few scattered relic Christian kingdoms remained in Galicia and Astorga but these needed serious reinforcement. Muslim armies had a very powerful relic, the arm of the prophet and the Christians needed something as powerful.



Then the hermit Pelagius had a very convenient vision of a field of stars and the location of Saint James's tomb. Some digging produced some bones, a bishop certified them as the bones of Saint James and a king came to pay his respects. Popes, emperors and kings gave their blessings and the great pilgrimage was on. The first great guidebook, the Codex Calixtinus was written and the roads and tracks of northern Spain became thronged with pilgrims. And, of course, a tax was imposed on pilgrims and pilgrim facilities to finance a great project.



This great project was the Reconquista, the crusade to end the Muslim state of Al Andulus, to unite Spain under a Catholic monarchy. It took almost 800 years and replaced a reasonably civilized society with an absolute monarchy that ordered forced conversions and expulsions. Their most Catholic majesties did not have any problem with plunder, rape and mass murder either in Europe or in the New World.

The Camino has waxed and waned many times over the past thousand years. In the 12th century it was estimated that 10% of the population of Europe were involved in either making or supporting the pilgrimage. The Black Death and the Protestant Reformation cut the numbers back substantially but it never completely stopped.

Most Catholic pilgrimages focus on what you do when you get to the shrine of the saint. You make the rounds of the site and say the specified prayers. The method of getting there, car, bus, trail or airplane, is not considered relevant. Apparently uniquely in Christendom, the camino focuses on the method of travel. A Compostello, a certificate of indulgence, will be given to people who have walked a minimum of 100km or cycled a minimum of 200km ending in Santiago de Compostello.

Nowadays it has experienced an astonishing revival. In 1985 there were only 850 Compostellos issued, in 2015 there were 262,458. And one of them was mine!

3 But c'mon, why you?



The Fool on Pilgrimage

The first great guidebook to the camino, the Codex Calixtinus, compiled sometime between 1138 and 1145 says:

The pilgrim route is a very good thing, but it is narrow.

For the road which leads us to life is narrow; on the other hand, the road which leads to death is broad and spacious.

The pilgrim route is for those who are good: it is the lack of vices, the thwarting of the body, the increase of virtues, pardon for sins, sorrow for the penitent, the road of the righteous, love of the saints, faith in the resurrection and the reward of the blessed, a separation from hell, the protection of the heavens.

It takes us away from luscious foods, it makes gluttonous fatness vanish, it restrains voluptuousness, constrains the appetites of the flesh which attack the fortress of the soul, cleanses the spirit, leads us to contemplation, humbles the haughty, raises up the lowly, loves poverty. It hates the reproach of those fuelled by greed.

It loves, on the other hand, the person who gives to the poor. It rewards those who live simply and do good works;

And, on the other hand, it does not pluck those who are stingy and wicked from the claws of sin.

How could you turn down such an offer?

Modern-day pilgrims walk or cycle the camino for an astonishing range of reasons. These include for exercise, for adventure, for peace, solitude and relaxation, for spiritual reasons, for cultural reasons, for religious reasons, to spend time with friends and family or as a personal challenge.

Well I'm not a believer so religious reasons are ruled out. Cultural reasons are possible even though I've a spectacular ignorance of the basic points. I can tell a mosque from a church but get seriously confused between Romanesque and Gothic architecture. I can cycle, slowly, for a long time but I'm not much of an athlete either. So, it looks to be down to a personal challenge, for exercise and adventure.

That sounds appallingly bourgeois does it not?

Life for me has been an astonishing sequence of lottery wins. I've never been seriously ill, or unemployed or in prison. I've never been driven from home by paramilitaries. I've had caring parents, been loved by a wonderful woman and love and respect my children. I've had peace and bread and work for my entire life; anyone who has them has won in a big way. What on earth have I to complain about?

Now, at the end of fifty years of working life there is only one simple question; "*What now?*" Well maybe two questions, "*What was that all about?*" and "*What now?*" Maybe the camino will help me find answers but I doubt it. Most likely there are no answers.

Paddy Kavanagh wrote:

Ascetic

That in the end I may find

Something not sold for a penny

In the slums of Mind.

That I may break

With these hands

The bread of wisdom that grows

In the other lands.

For this, for this

Do I wear

The rags of hunger and climb

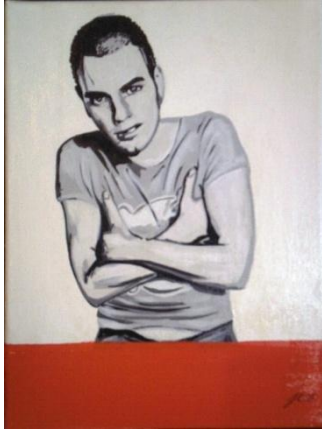
The unending stair.

Do I really think that there are some things '*not sold for a penny in the slums of mind*'? I'm nearly certain that there is no '*bread of wisdom*' either here or in any other lands.

And "What now?"

The average life expectancy for a 65-year-old male in Ireland is 84, healthy life expectancy is 76. That's gives me another twenty years or so. What do I do for that time? One certain way to waste it is by doing the conventional things, watching television and playing golf. I've seen too many people fall into this trap.

Irving Walsh's "Trainspotting" gives fair warning of the danger.



Choose life. Choose a job. Choose a career. Choose a family. Choose a fucking big television, Choose washing machines, cars, compact disc players, and electrical tin can openers. Choose good health, low cholesterol and dental insurance. Choose fixed-interest mortgage repayments. Choose a starter home. Choose your friends. Choose leisure wear and matching luggage. Choose a three piece suite on hire purchase in a range of fucking fabrics. Choose DIY and wondering who the fuck you are on a Sunday morning. Choose sitting on that couch watching mind-numbing spirit-crushing game shows, stuffing fucking junk food into your mouth. Choose rotting away at the end of it all, pishing your last in a miserable home, nothing more than an embarrassment to the selfish, fucked-up brats you have spawned to replace yourself. Choose your future. Choose life . . . But why would I want to do a thing like that? I chose not to choose life: I chose something else. And the reasons? There are no reasons. Who needs reasons when you've got heroin?

I chose the camino.

4 Spain is important

In another world, at another time, there was another pilgrimage. The faithful gathered from all over the island to pay their respects at the grave of their saint and martyr. Families followed bands and banners along a country road to an ancient graveyard. There they picnicked and half-listened to the speeches while their young children played hide and seek behind old gravestones.

This was the annual Wolfe Tone commemoration in Bodentown on a Sunday in early summer. The catholic, republican and socialist faithful gathered to honour their protestant saint.

And, as pilgrims always do, they used it to rededicate their lives and hopes and dreams to a cause that they and their families had suffered for. Old friends quietly spoke of their last meetings in grey prison visiting rooms. Parents, who should have been boasting gently about their children's academic or sporting achievements, instead spoke of death, internment, prison sentences and legal appeals.

Three elderly men sang the Internationale in Spanish in memory of their fallen comrades. They were the last surviving brigadistas, members of the Connolly column, the Irish contribution to the International brigades during the Spanish civil war.

Then a young man with flaming red hair and a magnificent powerful voice, Luke Kelly, sang 'Peat Bog Soldiers' in English and German.

Peat Bog Soldiers

Far and wide as the eye can wander,

Heath and bog are everywhere.

Not a bird sings out to cheer us.

Oaks are standing gaunt and bare.

We are the peat bog soldiers,

Marching with our spades to the moor.

We are the peat bog soldiers,

Marching with our spades to the moor.

Up and down the guards are marching,

No one, no one can get through.

Flight would mean a sure death facing,

Guns and barbed wire block our view.

We are the peat bog soldiers,

Marching with our spades to the moor.

We are the peat bog soldiers,

Marching with our spades to the moor.

But for us there is no complaining,

Winter will in time be past.

One day we shall rise rejoicing.

Homeland, dear, you're mine at last.

No more the peat bog soldiers

Will march with our spades to the moor.

No more the peat bog soldiers

Will march with our spades to the moor.

"Peat bog soldiers" was written by the first political prisoners of the Nazis in the Emslandlager camps in Saxony in 1933. It's a song of pain, imprisonment, exile, suffering and death, the music of the damned.

It's a sad thought that this song is as relevant now as it was in 1933. What songs are being written now in Lampedusa, Lesbos, Dadaab, Calais and Dunkirk?

5 Pelegrino and Matamoros

A lot of the imagery along the way refers to the reconquesta, the 800-year war that ended in the destruction of the Muslim kingdoms of Al-Andalusia and the expulsion of all Muslims and Jews.

There are two conflicting representations of the saint.



Santiago Pelegrino is a gentle pilgrim to his own shrine, however illogical that may be. Wearing his scallop shell and pilgrim garb he speaks to the tired, hungry and footsore millions who have followed his way for one thousand years. And, by extension, he speaks to all the wretched of the earth, those who look for paradise in the next world because they certainly won't achieve it in this one.



Santiago Matamoros, the Moor killer, is a much more disagreeable representation. On his white horse, he charges at the enemy leaving a trail of Moorish heads littering the ground behind him. He yells “¡Santiago y cierra España!” (Santiago and unify Spain).

Most of the Matamoros sculpture would fit the modern-day definition of torture pornography quite well. And, astonishingly, quite a lot of it is reasonably recent; some created four hundred years after the final success of the reconquista. Nowadays some of the churches are embarrassed and hide the severed heads behind a frieze of flowers but they are still there. Perhaps there are secret storerooms where statues of Matamoros and Francisco Franco gather dust, waiting for their day to come again!

Matamoros is a reference to Santiago's miraculous intervention at the battle of Clavijo. In about 834 the Christian kingdoms of Northern Spain rebelled against the annual “*Tribute of 100 Virgins*” due to be paid to the Muslim emirate of Cordoba. St James, on his white horse, suddenly appeared and led the outnumbered Christian army to victory. He became patron saint of Spain as a result of this intervention.

The appearance of the long-dead saint is probably the least unbelievable bit of this story. The “*Tribute of 100 Virgins*” did not exist and neither did the battle of Clavijo. As the *Diccionario de historia de España* puts it; “*to a serious historian, the existence of the Battle of Clavijo is not even a discussion topic*”.

And, of course, as soon as possible, there was a money-making scam. The *Vota de Santiago* was a tax on corn and oil to be paid in perpetuity to the sanctuary of the cathedral in Santiago de Compostello. This was supposedly promised by Ramiro 1 of Asturias in return for the saint's aid in Clavijo.

Unfortunately, in spite of many requests, the cathedral authorities were unable to produce the original bequest by Ramiro 1. The best they could do was a ‘copy’ of the original bequest dating from the 12th century. The tax was eventually abolished in 1808 after a very profitable 1000 years of operation.

Santiago Matamoros had a much more recent outing too. He was the nationalist saint of the Spanish Civil war and many thousands of people were killed in his name. These were people who came from the wrong side of the political fence, the people who were in the wrong place at the wrong time, the people who had nothing and nobody to protect them.

I've had the great privilege of working with Muslim people in Yemen, Indonesia, Sweden and Ireland. I'll be sure to remember my Muslim friends with affection whenever I see Matamoros.

6 Ireland



Tuesday April 14th 2015

Well, it's that day and I'm off on my Camino. And, of course, I'm petrified. What can go wrong, where am I going and what sort of strange events are going to happen?

If I had enough courage I'd go back home and hide. But, of course I don't have courage, I've already told so many people and done so many interviews that I can't turn back.

It's totally illogical of course. I'm going to two advanced countries where everything works, in many cases a lot better than in Ireland. People have been doing this trip for a thousand years, why can't I?

Still the mental conversation goes:

"I've been in much more difficult places in the past."

"Aah, you were a lot younger then."

"Maybe but I'm a lot less stupid now."

"Are you sure?"

"Dunno!"



Sue left me and Leatherlugs, the bike, to Clonmacnoise. We took a few photographs; I did a quick phone interview for my friends in Athlone Community Radio. Nicola, from the cycling club, who works in the nearby school, came over to give me a tiny Clonmacnoise candle for the road.

A final check of the gear, another blast of air in the tyres, a farewell kiss and I'm off on the great Clonmacnoise Camino.

Buen Camino everyone!



It's a great day for cycling, no rain and very little wind. Spring has definitely arrived and the countryside is covered with golden whins and white blackthorn. Wisps of fog are still in the valleys and I even hear a curlew whistle over the bog. That's a good omen; I remember curlews from working on the bog as a child.

I stopped to admire some bog restoration work done by Bord na Mona. It's cutaway bog and was a wet desert up to a few years ago. The ecology team just blocked the drains and now it's a wildfowl refuge, covered with wildflowers.

I'm still within my normal day-long cycling range here so I don't feel that I'm on a trip at all. Time for soup and coffee in a regular spot in Birr, then on to Roscrea.

I'm deliberately dawdling. I have to be to the ferryport in Ringaskiddy on Saturday and that's easily doable. So for training purposes I'm taking it easy for the time to takes to get to Cork.

In Roscrea I checked out the grounds of Damer house. It's a nice touristy location, a lovely house with museum in the cellar and a beautiful garden.



It's not always been so lovely though. There is a memorial plaque erected on the gates to four republican prisoners executed there during the civil war in January 1923.

It's a story of the intimate brutality and strange politics that characterizes a country at war with itself. By December 1922 the civil war was effectively over, all territory held by the Republicans had been captured by the Free State forces. The republicans were driven back on a guerrilla war of sabotage and assassinations.



On the 23rd of December 1922 Fredrick Bourke, Martin O'Shea and Patrick Russell aged 17 held up and robbed a mail car. They were taken to Templemore and charged with possession of weapons and bomb-making equipment. Rapidly found guilty by a court martial, they were sentenced to death by firing squad.

The bishop of Cashel and Emily, Dr Harty had issued instructions that 'irregulars' were to be denied absolution in confession. The Free State commanding officer could not bring himself to execute them without absolution and so transferred them to Roscrea. Roscrea was in Killaloe diocese where Dr. Harty's rules did not apply and a compliant priest could be found to give absolution.

In the meantime Patrick McNamara and Michael Kennedy were captured with arms near Portroe. They were taken to Roscrea barracks where they were brutally beaten, tried and sentenced to death. Michael Kennedy got a reprieve by the intervention of a Free State officer.

McNamara, Bourke, O'Shea and Russell were executed by firing squad on 15th January 1923.



In the early evening I cycled out to the Cistercian monastery Mount St. Joseph. It seems to be an appropriate place for the first night on the camino.

I got a room in the guest-house, old and a bit worn but, astonishingly, with a bathroom ensuite. Leatherlugs, the bike, got a nice dry corridor for the night.

A simple evening meal is provided, an omelette courtesy of the monastery's resident hens. There were only two other guests, Fr. Joe a priest from Limerick and Sr. Marie Celeste, a Franciscan Poor Clare nun from London.

We fall into conversation, as always in Ireland, first about the weather, then where we were going and where we come from. Sr. Marie belongs to an enclosed order and said that this week in Mount St. Joseph is equivalent to week on the Costa Blanca for her. We discovered a common love for the Ahmadi Muslim people from Pakistan. We talked about their struggles for a while, and then the bells started to ring for compline.

There are only six monks in the congregation of this huge monastery. None are young; one is disabled, needs a care assistant and struggles with a walking frame. The church was dark, the lights on the altar came on and the first hymn began. It's been at least twenty years since I've been at one of these services and I'm far from being a believer yet it's familiar and strangely soothing.

After wards I went for a walk in the woods, telephoned home and retired to an early bed. I had intended to attend all the Liturgy of the Hours while I was there. But, needless to say, I don't make Matins at midnight or Lauds at 3 a.m. I do get to Prime at 6 a.m. and Terce at 9 a.m. so the plan is not a complete failure!

Wednesday April 15th 2015

Then the road calls again.

I'm now outside my usual cycling range so it started to feel like a trip. The countryside was wearing its wedding dress of white blackthorn flowers, golden furze and mist and looked lovely. I cycled on through Templemore, where the guards come from, and stopped for a coffee in the hotel in Horse and Jockey.

The waiter was considerably younger and much fatter than I am. He was suitably impressed when I say I'm cycling to Cork. When I say that I'm doing the Camino I get what has become the universal response. *"You are mad!"* and then, in the same breath *"Oh I wish I could do that!"* I opened my mouth to say that all it takes is to turn the pedals once and then changed my mind and shut up. There is nothing as annoying as an evangelist of any sort!

The last time I was cycling down this country was on the 2010 Malin to Mizen cycle in memory of my dear friend Frank. The road is broad, flat and bypassed by a motorway so it's luxurious cycling. This is the Golden Vale, beautiful fertile land and tidy farmhouses all around. It does not feel like Ireland at all! Heaney's land is much more real to me.

"I come from scraggy farm and moss,

Old patchworks that the pitch and toss

Of history have left dishevelled ..."

I dropped into Cashel and got my pilgrim passport stamped. The Rock of Cashel staff was lost in their facebook newsfeed and not particularly impressed with my trip. Humph! I was positively offended at the lack of response! It's astonishingly easy to get used to even a modest amount of fame.



Cahir has one of the few Norman castles on these islands that had not been converted into a manor house. The road played tag with the M8 motorway, sometimes on the north side of it, sometimes on the south. My first puncture of the trip happened, I fixed it and on to my first warmshowers hosts in Kilbehenny.

Warmshowers.org is an on-line hosting organization for touring cyclists and is a strange and wonderful community. Members open their homes to touring bicyclists. You simply make contact and, if the host can accommodate you, show up. You always get some wonderful conversations, a shower, and a bed or a place to pitch your tent. You frequently get supper and breakfast thrown in.

Bryce, very kindly, came down to the main road in his van to collect me. Just as well, the last kilometer to his house was straight up the Galtee mountains.



I've hosted many warmshowers people in the past but this was the first time I've been a guest. My first warmshowers hosts were truly amazing. Bryce and Deirdre live in two old houses way up the mountain. They make a living catering for various music festivals from a converted London double-decker bus.

They were really kindred spirits; we spend the evening talking about our various cycling adventures. A few years ago they had achieved a really remarkable feat, cycling on two damaged mountain bikes into Everest base camp! Very few people have cycled higher.



The night was spent in a lovely Mongolian yurt.

Thursday April 16th 2015

In the morning there was sunshine on the mountain peaks and mist in the valleys, a beautiful start to the day.

I checked out the farmer's market in Mitchelstown, and had a climb over the hills by Kilworth military camp to Fermoy. Coffee and breakfast roll for elevenses and then on to Waterglasshill.

This was the scene of a particularly dirty trick during our Malin - Mizen cycle in 2010. We were sitting in a pub having a tea break when Joe, who had partied a little too well the night before, fell fast asleep. We, very quietly, made our way out of the pub and hid all the bikes, except Joe's, on the other side of the building. In a minute or two he came tearing out, convinced that we had abandoned him!

Then it was time for a nice run down by the estuary through Glanmire into Cork city.

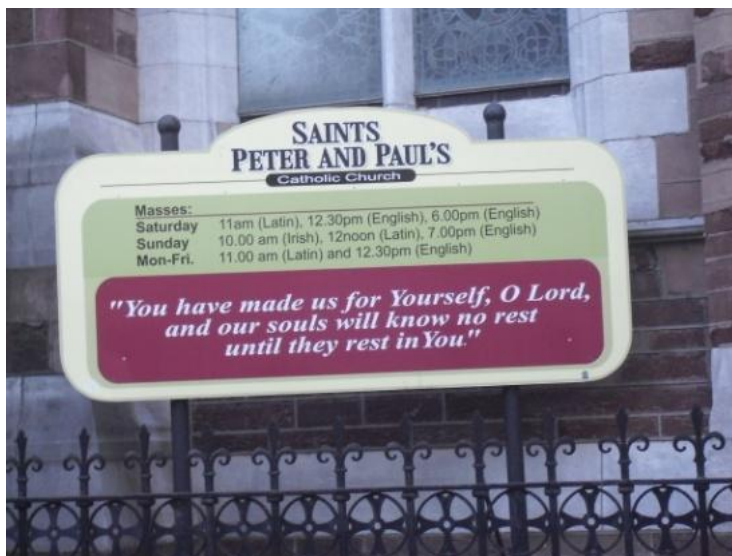


There is a glorious 1950's style Marian grotto by the riverside. It's a representation of the apparition of the blessed virgin in Lourdes in 1858.

It's amazing how well fashions and politics in heaven reflect art and politics on earth. The figure of the virgin is mass produced concrete statuary of the 1880's. The virgin announced, '*I am the Immaculate Conception*'. This was four years after the infallible papal announcement of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception.

No, I am not brave enough to get into the theological complications of the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception. Look up the 1854 papal bull "*Ineffabilis Deus*" for yourself!

Into Cork, a place I barely know. Many people love it but it's always been bit too catholic, too middle class, way too merchant prince territory, and too far away from the north for me to feel comfortable there.



St Peter & Paul's church has some rather odd marketing. It offers mass in Irish, English and Latin. Nothing is offered in Polish in spite of the fact that Polish-speakers comprise possibly 25% of the Catholic community now.

Cyclists are very social animals. I was in McCurtain Street, sitting on a milestone and eating a fruit salad for lunch, when an elderly woman approached me. She had spent some summers in the 1960's on her Raleigh bicycle cycling along the French rivers and having glorious romantic adventures. She highly recommended the Loire valley, I'm not sure if it was for the scenery, the wine or the romance!

Jim, another warm showers contact, came in and took me to his favourite bike shop. I'd been following his cycling adventures in France and Spain this year.

Ani, a beautiful French girl, kindly lent me her house and broadband password even though she was going out roller discoing for the evening. In the morning I woke up to see what I took to be a huge stained iceberg outside the window! In a while, with increasing daylight, I worked out that this was foam sealant that had been applied to the remains of a ruined house across the road.

Friday April 17th 2015

I took the day off and went to visit my sister Frances in Waterford. I had intended to park Leatherlugs the bike in the Garda station but, at the last minute decided that he would be lonely without me and brought him on the bus.

Frances is dubious about the entire venture and offers to let me hide out for a month! On Tuesday I might just have taken her up on her offer but now I've three nice days cycling in my legs and am just getting into gear. We found a Spanish bar and tried out the tapas and vino tinto in honour of the trip.

Saturday April 18th 2015

In the morning I went down to the bus station and asked for a ticket to the ferry. I might as well have asked for a ticket to the moon! The administration can't sell me a ticket from Waterford to Ringaskiddy as it's not in their regional computer database. Waterford to Cork is the best they can do.

I got to Cork by midday. To take the bus to Ringaskiddy there would have meant waiting for an hour so, as it's a nice day, I cycled there. The first bit was not too pleasant on a busy N-route with lots of truck traffic to the industrial estate and ferry port. Then it settled down for the last few bumpy kilometres into Ringaskiddy.

The ferry receptionist insisted on writing good wishes and putting a Brittany Ferries sticker in my pilgrim passport when she heard what I was doing. Then I treated myself to some fish and chips for lunch, on the grounds that it will be a while before I get them again.

7 France



The Pont Avon is big and not very full. I had a cabin to myself, way down in the ship. Judging from the banging of the waves on the hull, I must have been right on the water line. The only problem was a distinct lack of ventilation, having three people in that cabin would be difficult.

Checked out the various facilities, restaurants, bars and gymnasium and retired to my bunk ready for the big adventure.

Sunday April 19th

It's seven on a Sunday morning when we arrived in Roscoff. The ferry breakfast was quite expensive so I settled for coffee and croissants, reckoning that I'll find someplace for a proper breakfast or lunch along the way. I'd forgotten that it's Sunday and on Sundays in Brittany most places are closed!



Just alongside the road, outside the big busy ferryport, I found my very first camino scallop sign. That deserved a photograph!

Along the way I found a service station and treated myself to a coffee. There were maps in a stand here but they had not been priced so the attendant would not sell me one. *'Aah, no problem, Morlaix is quite a big town so I'm sure I'll find someplace to buy one there!'*

I'm not thinking too well this morning. I found myself cycling along a motorway margin for a few km. It was practically empty and I did not notice it until a few motorists beeped to say that I should not be there. I stopped in Morlaix, and found that the only facilities working were the ATMs, so at least I got some money.

In the square I fell into conversation with Alex, a young man in a very battered yellow Citron van. He donated an even more battered map of Brittany to me. Aha, things are looking up!



Then I climbed out of Morlaix and across the hills to the south. Nice hills and woods but I'd have traded them all for an open coffee shop! I eventually managed to find a bar and got coffee but I was 'bonking' pretty badly from lack of food when I rolled into Carhaix-Plouger late in the afternoon.

There were still no restaurants or bars open. I contacted my warmshowers hosts, Rhett and Martine. Rhett came to collect me at the train station (le Gar) with his van. Just as well, that last 15km to Glomel could have been difficult.



Rhett and Martine live in a nice house right on the headwater feed for the Nantes-Brest canal. They are in their 50's, English expatriates in France and I'm their very first warmshowers guest.

We had the usual pleasant evening with food and wine chatting about midlife issues. Rhett had a serious health scare a few years ago so they sold up their gardening supply business and moved to France. Now they have a house, some sheep and a garden. Martine gardens, Rhett does some work as a tree surgeon and does triathlons. And, the perpetual middle-age change-of-life question *'Why did we not do this years ago?'*

Rhett advances the theory that the reason there were no toll roads in Brittany, unlike the rest of France, was in appreciation for the Breton resistance during the German occupation. Somehow I don't see this argument having much traction in an EU finance ministers meeting!

**Monday April 20th 2015**

I had a very comfortable camp bed in Rhett's man-cave surrounded by very odd-looking weight-training machines. In the morning moor hens on the canal and the resident sheep, watched me have breakfast in the sunshine and hit the road again.

I attempted to find the cycle route, the velodesee, in the morning. There was not much success until a signpost pointed to Pointivy. I followed the, blessedly traffic-free, local roads there instead.



Saint Therese is obviously big around these parts!

The citizens of Pontivy suffered from severe name-changing fever for quite a while.

A monk called Ivy built a bridge nearby over the river Blavet in the 7th century, and the town is named after him and his bridge. In 1804, the name was changed to Napoléonville after Bonaparte. After his downfall, it was renamed Pontivy again, then later Bourbonville, and Napoléonville again after Napoléon III came to power.



Pointivy is pretty, with barges on the canal. I hit the supermarket, Carefour, and stocked up with supplies. Lesson one learned on this trip, I won't be caught without food again!

I found the hostel, and the cycle route la velodessee, with the last turn of the pedals for today. I got a simple room with a shower, absolute luxury.

The hostel has the usual collection of interesting people. Claudette, a woman in her late fifties whose partner had recently died, said *"We always wanted to do the camino together. Tell St Jacques I'm on my way"*.

M. Callig reckons that we are related because of the similarity of our surnames. We talk about the only person of our name to have achieved high office, Sunny Jim Callaghan, Labour PM of the UK before Thatcher. He was so successful that he was immediately followed by eighteen years of conservative rule!

Israel, an elderly man, gives me a brochure in French for his commune outside St Jean Pied-de-Port called the 12 tribes and invites me to visit. From the brochure they seem to be Christian Zionists so I'll certainly give them a miss, thanks!

Tuesday April 21st 2015

From Pontivy I'm cycling along the towpath of the Nantes - Brest canal. In total it is 385 km long with 238 locks from coast to coast. The path has a good surface, mostly through woods so it's a very quiet, long and hot day.



The canal was a massive engineering undertaking built to try to defeat the British blockade during the Napoleonic wars.

It was built by prisoner and convict labour so every meter is marked with some poor person's bones. All along the way I'm vividly reminded of my older brothers and cousins, the Irish labourers who built the railways and motorways in England.

I had intended to make it to Redon tonight but by 20:00 I was still 25 km away. I'd failed to make contact with my warmshowers hosts so I decided to cut the losses and stay in a bed & breakfast tonight. The B&B turned out very nice but wildly expensive for my humble budget. There was no pizzeria in the village either so no dinner! In addition I lost the lens from my cycling glasses, this was not the best day ever!

Wednesday April 22nd 2015

I had arranged to stay with Manu and Elo in St Nazaire tonight so I cycled into Redon and took the train from there.



St Nazaire is a big shipping and shipbuilding centre, even Airbus fuselages are assembled there. For many years it was known as '*Liverpool of the West*'.

I'd not eaten yesterday which may have been part of my problems. Today there was time for a leisurely plat-du-jour in a pub across from the station while waiting for Manu.

Cyclists and bicycles are a great conversation starter. In the train station there were lots of conversations, basically "*Where do you come from?*" and "*Where are you going?*" People were ridiculously impressed with the distance I've cycled and the distance I have to go.

Manu picked me up and we went to his and Elo's apartment a few blocks away. They are a lovely young couple. We do the usual bicycle touring talk; they cycled from Sicily to the French border last year.

This year they planned on going to Korea so I gave them my son's contact information in Dagu. They made the local speciality St. Nazaire pancakes from Elo's grandfather's special recipe. I did a little email checking and then went to bed on a futon in the spare room.

Thursday April 23rd 2015

In the morning, Manu brought me to a bike shop where I bought a new pair of cycling glasses. He also gave me a present of the Velodessee handbook. It's in French but I've found that I can read it, slowly!

There was quite a struggle to find the bridge across the Loire even though it's the biggest thing around.



The bridge is really spectacular. Fortunately it was calm; cycling across this in a strong wind would be difficult!

The Vendee is on the other side of the bridge. This is a strange flat land, in many places only 0.25m above sea level. It's very much tourist territory, full of holiday chalets and camp sites.



There are strange fishing platforms, a crane dipping a net into shallow water.

As its mid-term break in the schools of Paris there were a lot of family groups around and accommodation was quite scarce. I could not find a camp site with fixed tents so I ended up in a farm albergue in converted stables.



I had a great conversation with the neighbouring pot-bellied pigs. I'm finding my lack of French a handicap in communicating with people but the pigs seemed to understand me perfectly!



Friday April 24th 2015

And, as I'm beginning to find, the camino provides.



I was getting a little fed up when Fredric approached me in the market place in St. Jean-du-Monts for a chat. He took me home for lunch and to meet his beautifully pregnant partner Ani.



In Olon-sur-Mer I found a lovely cheap grotty pub/hotel, just my sort of place. Henri, in the bar, buys me a beer when he hears of my trip. We talked a little bit about football and then he gave up when my ignorance of the finer points of the great game became obvious to him.



Wifi, wefee in French, was available so I skyped home to report in to the family.

Saturday April 25th 2015

I'd been six days in France and was still only half way down the west coast. Time to get a move on! I decided to push on for Spain and the Camino so I took the train to La Rochelle. Got off at a suburban station and make my way into town. It's a groovy place with arcades, colonnades and a nice harbour. I contacted Loic, another warmshowers host, who picked me up under the great clock.



Sunday April 26th 2015

A large, grey stone tower with battlements, identified as Fort Boyard, stands in the water. A French flag flies from a pole on top. In the foreground, a white boat with 'N°30' and 'NAUTIMMER' is visible. A group of people are walking on a paved area in the foreground. To the right, a small building with a sign that reads 'FORT BOYARD' is visible. The sky is blue with scattered white clouds.

Monday April 27th 2015

My first camino pilgrims, Kees and Sieta from the Netherlands were on the train to Dax. They are cycling the camino from their home in Friesland and last year had got to Bayonne. This year they started again and hoped to make it to Burgos.



I bought a map of southwest France and we sat in the sun outside the rail station, drank coffee and planned our route for the next few days. Finally I dug out my scallop shell and attached it to the saddle; I'm an official pilgrim at last!

Thiery and Sylvie were my hosts in Magesq, about 20 km north of Dax. Their house was in a wonderful location, lost in the deep oak woods. The woods were originally planted by Napoleon in 1800 as a source of warship building material. The oaks are mature now, a little late for their original purpose!



Thiery and Sylvie are in their 50's, she is a teacher and he is a sawmill manager. They have no less than twelve beehives and I have to go say hello to the bees before I do anything else.

Every few weeks they move the hives to different locations in the oak forest. We shared delicious vegetarian food, cauliflower and cheese and, like all cyclists, talked about our various cycle trips. A few years ago they had done a wonderful cycle trip through Australia, Indonesia and Thailand.

We were doing some route planning, looking up directions on the web when Silvie asks "You can read French, why don't you speak it?" Good question!

Tuesday April 28th 2015



It was strange to wake up in a room with a luminous yin-yang symbol on the wall and a Madonna statue on the bedside locker. The yin-yang symbol is invisible when the light is on, it can only be seen in the dark. That seems to be particularly appropriate for a Buddhist symbol.

I left Magesq in the early morning, dropping into the dark village church for a moment along the way. The local road parallels the highway so it's empty but noisy from the trucks whizzing by. It was still flatlands but the foothills of the Pyrenees were just beginning to appear on the horizon.

Soon I'm over the river Adour at the village of Urt, and into Basque country. The foothills started gently but got progressively steeper as the day went on. Suddenly the roads signs changed from French to bilingual French/Basque ones.



Thiery had recommended La Bastide Clairence, as a good place for a lunch stop. Bastides are fortified new towns, built when security was a little uncertain in the 15th century. This one is really nice, with undamaged walls, gates and central marketplace. It was a little early for Plat-du-Jour so I spent a pleasant half-hour admiring the architecture.

Then two stiff climbs and a short descent later and I'm in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port at 16:00.



St-Jean-Pied-de-Port is gorgeous, full of little streets, town walls, cobblestones, odd corners, statues and carvings. There is even a bishop's prison where pilgrims who celebrated too well could be locked up for the night! In the boutique de peregrin you could buy mountain walking gear for the 'real' pilgrims and plastic cloaks, scallop shells and pilgrim hats for the children.

I registered in the pilgrim office and got booked into an albergue down the road. The very first person I spoke to outside the office was Mary, from Cork, via New York. She is getting a head start on the mountain and pushing on to the albergue in Orrisson tonight.

I bought a camera to replace the broken one and had a picnic supper in Plas de Gaulle by the river Nive. Then it was time to retire to an early bed to prepare for the mountains tomorrow.

8 The Pyrenees



Wednesday April 29th 2015

In the early morning, after a breakfast of coffee and toast I was off on the 'real' camino at last. I went down the steep cobbled streets of St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, through Porte d'Espagne, and over the bridge on the river Nive.

The click-click-click of pilgrim walking poles was curiously amplified by the narrow streets and archway. It became the soundtrack for the next few weeks.

About eighty pilgrims were starting the 800 km trek towards Santiago de Compostello this morning. These are 'real' pilgrims undertaking a major trek. We already felt 'superior' to the 'touristginos' who only walk 100 km from Sarria. Of course as a cyclist I'm not in the walkers' league but then, cycling from Ireland gave me a few points too.

Pilgrims seem to be either in their early 20's or early 60's. About 60% are male and 40% female. Here we have mostly northern Europeans; the Spaniards will join us at Roncavalles or Punte de La Rente. So far I've met French and Dutch and Germans and Italians and a surprising number of Koreans.

I crossed the bridge and then it was decision time. Do I go straight on over the Via Napoleon or veer right on the less-steep route through Valcarlos? Valcarlos is a little easier but it's a beautiful sunny day and Via Napoleon promises a lovely walk in the mountains. So Via Napoleon it is!

I only managed to cycle for a few hundred meters and then the real climb began. A few moments of struggle and I realised that I'll be walking across these mountains. The cleated cycling shoes are retired to the panniers, the walking sandals go on and it's onwards and upwards for the day!

It's steep though.



At one point the walker's track tacks off up a sheep track to the left, but the lovely tarmac surface tempts me to remain on the road. About 2km later there is a left hand bend and a long steep climb back to the level of the walking track.



The views get more and more magnificent, all of the Basque country of south western France seems spread before me. The inland peaks of the Pyrenees still gleam with their winter snow.

After two hours we got to the pilgrim hostel and cafe in Orrison. They had lovely coffee and cakes and a balcony over the valley to allow weary pilgrims to appreciate the view.

We are now out of the tree line and into the high mountain meadows. The climb eases a bit and there are even brief moments when it is possible to cycle for a few hundred meters. It's great to overtake the walking pilgrims who have been laughing at me as I push bike and panniers up the hill!

Downhills or levels do not last long though and soon I'm back pushing again, and the walkers are back to making fun of me!



These are lovely green meadows with sheep and horses grazing there. The horses wear cow bells and seem to be all mares and foals. This is the region that produces almost all the horse meat for sale in France.

This must be some tough country in the depths of winter. Range tracking poles on the side of the road keep travellers from wandering off the road into snowdrifts. At the beginning of the trail they are about 0.5 meters; on top of the mountain they are 2 meters tall.

The tarmac roadway goes as far as Cruceiro, and then the track veers off to the right. An enterprising business person has a small white van selling cold drinks, chocolate, fruit and coffee. Lovely stuff, just where it was most needed, I stocked up with a few bananas and had a coffee-au-lait to fuel me to the top. I must remember that it's called cafe-con-leche from here on!



Past the mountain rescue hut and the Col de Bentartea, then there was an actual descent to the Franco-Spanish border. It's not the most elaborate frontier I've ever crossed consisting as it does of a cattle grid and a drinking fountain. However it's Roland's fountain so a certain ancient glory is attached to it!



Camino conversations are really weird and wonderful. I taught some Dutch pilgrims the words to '*In Glendalough lived an Ould Saint*' and we go along the way singing '*Folfolldio, folldiliaddy*' at the top of our voices! Later I teach a South African peligrino the two most useful words in Arabic, '*Alhamdulilah*' and '*Inshallah*'.



There are still patches of snow on the north side of the hills, even some ice patches along the track. It's actually hot, so the Tour de Burren bandanna went into service as a hat. It's not exactly elegant but fashion is not normally considered a high priority on via Napoleon!

At the highest point, at the Col de Lepoeder, the grass track surface takes a sudden turn for the worse. I'm reduced to removing my panniers, pushing the bike to the top of the pass

and returning for the panniers. From the top it's possible to see far into Navarre with the roofs of the monastery in Roncesvalles visible in the valley below.



Sean, a man from the neighbouring parish of Keena in county Longford, shared a banana with me to celebrate. It's bitterly cold when you stop in the mountains; there is still snow on the north side of the hills. The walkers went down through the oak woods. I put on my hoodie and cycling shoes and took the easy way down the, mostly, tarmac road off the mountain. There were a wonderful series of hairpin bends down to Ibaneta and then on the main road to Roncesvalles.

Heh, heh, heh, walkers, who is going faster now?



Roncesvalles consists of an albergue in the monastery and a restaurant. I sign in; pay my 10 Euro for a bed and another 10 euro for a dinner ticket.

The albergue is really great, starting with the sign insisting that this facility is reserved for pilgrims, tourists move on! It provides a welcome for *'All pilgrims, sick and well, Catholics, Jews, Pagans, Heretics and Vagabonds'*. Well I tick at least four of those boxes so I feel right at home!



It's got a lovely big airy dormitory with, wonder of wonders, two single beds in each low-walled cubicle.

I find myself sharing with Nisu from Korea who looks to be 18 years old but is probably a little bit older. Unfortunately we don't have enough common language for a proper conversation; it must take a remarkable amount of courage to do what she is doing. There are many more Korean pilgrims on the camino than I would have expected. They don't speak any Spanish and many seem to have poor enough English. I wonder just how well the culture translates into Korean terms.

They have a laundry here so I did a quick rinse of my cycling clothes. Most albergues have a very handy, old-fashioned spin dryer, which is very useful to get clothes approximately dry. People no longer know how to drive spin dryers so there is a requirement to find a hospitalero to do your spinning for you. Rinse, spin and put your clothes on the line for a few hours. If it does not rain, you have dry clothes for the morning. If it does rain you get to smell like a real pilgrim even earlier!

Judith, one of my singing Dutch girls, was suffering from sore calf muscles after the walk so I lent her my deep heat spray, insisting that she does the spraying outside the albergue door. Deep heat on yourself smells OK but other people tend to object to it!

Then we went to dinner which started with the usual pilgrim conversation. *"Where do you come from? How did you get here? How far are you going?"* Having cycled from Ireland gains quite a few brownie points! The menu peregrino provides a good meal, pasta, fish and chips and a bottle of vino tinto between two people.

Being aware of cultural sensitivities, I made sure I was in bed and facing the wall before Nisu got back from dinner.

9 Into Navarre



Thursday April 30th 2015

At six o'clock the lights came on and everyone prepared for the road. The rustle of plastic bags, the chorus of morning coughs and the click of walking poles meant that sleeping in was not an option.

After a breakfast of coffee and toast, I followed the walker's path through the woods for a while. I was just annoying the walkers so I swapped over onto the almost empty N135 road. Mary from Cork appeared, at the first shop in the first village again. Two days ago we had been talking outside the Pilgrim Office in St Jean. She had taken it easy and walked up to Orisson one day and on to Roncavalles the next one.

I stocked up with what to become my normal cycling supplies, cheese, salami, fresh fruit and delicious warm bread, just delivered by a little white van. Navarre is lovely rolling country with a few minor climbs but nothing to compare with yesterday's marathon sessions. The rio Arga was crossed at Zuberi and I followed the river down into Pamplona.

Pamplona's famous for its bull running at the San Fermin festival in July. Earnest Hemingway spent a lot of time in Burgette in Navarre. I was looking out for relevant memorabilia but, sadly none came to view. His autographed piano is reputed to be available to pianist pilgrims in a bar. Unfortunately I don't know which bar; it would have been cool to toast him there!

Another cycling pilgrim came by who, unlike me, seemed to know what he was doing so I followed him into central Pamplona. We had got through the city centre when he disappeared in the university campus. Confusion resulted and I lost the camino signs totally.



A Filipino priest kindly provided directions back to the shells that mark the camino. Then I followed the markers in the wrong direction and only recovered when I found myself at the citadel in the centre of the city for the second time that day!



Finally I got out of the city, across the river and up the hill to the albergue in Cizur Menor where I had planned to spend the night. The Knights of Malta church beside the albergue has lots of intriguing flags, some nice comfortable pews and some lovely cool air. The albergue did not have a bicycle shed so, as it's only 14:00, I decided to press on to the next one in Zariquiegui.



The walker's path passed the ruined Templar centre at Guendulian and went on to Zariquiegui.



The albergue there proves to be '*Completo*' (full) so now I'm committed to a short mountain climb to Alto de Perdon.

The nice smooth dirt road suddenly turned into very large stones. I was reduced to pushing the bike and portaging the panniers over a very rough stretch. It was not helped by three Spanish mountain bikers blasting along the same track!



Finally I struggled up to the monumento peregrino on top of the mountain. It is a series of steel cutouts representing medieval pilgrims with donkeys, horses and dogs. Most monuments on the camino are ancient but this one is modern, erected by the wind turbine company.

Something was clearly missing though. I added Leatherlugs, the bicycle, to the parade and took a few photos. Medieval pilgrims obviously needed bicycles!

Alto de Perdon gave a lovely view back over Pamplona and forward over La Roja. It's warm, low 20's but snow still gleamed on the distant Pyrenees.

The descent on the walkers' path off the mountain looked even worse than the ascent so I followed the tarmac road off the mountain to the N111.

A sign for the village of Obanos appeared so I turned towards it. The guide book says that there is an albergue with a fireplace here and, if it's full the church has a nice deep, rainproof porch!



Fortunately the albergue has only ten pilgrims tonight in space for a hundred. I had a nice menu pregrino in a local bar with some Dutch and Canadians pilgrims. A standard menu is pasta, pork cutlet and yogurt with a shared bottle of the local vino tinto.

Unfortunately Spanish dinner habits do not fit well with the pilgrim life. Dinner is often not available until 9pm and albergues generally close at 10pm so it's a bit of a rush to get back before the door is locked.

Friday May 1st 2015

It rained a little during the night and today was a day of lovely Irish summer temperatures. There was even a little drizzle to keep the dust down. The legs have learned how to do six or seven hour days without complaining. I can climb hills too!



I crossed the Río Arga again at Punte la Reina on the wonderful medieval bridge. Doña Mayor, wife of King Sancho built it for pilgrims in about 1030. Unusually, the six-arched bridge has windows. These have the nice effect of lowering the overall weight of the bridge.



In Estele I ducked into a coffee shop to avoid a shower. There I had coffee and ham sandwich, bocadello, with Dave, Dave and Greg, three workmates, from Yorkshire. A super fit friend of theirs had talked them into doing a section of the camino. When it came to long-distance walking the friend had proved to be a wimp and was now 20km behind. They were having great fun planning the multitude of ways they were going to tease him about it for the next year!

We talked about my trip to see the Tour de France start in Leeds last year and discussed the wonderful lyrics of the Yorkshire National Anthem "*On Ickley Moor ba' aat*".

10 La Rioja

Then cycle through rich rolling wine-producing countryside of Los Arcos into the big town of Logroño. This is the capital of the smallest Spanish province, La Rioja. The tourist office gave me a pilgrim passport stamp, sello and sent me to the municipal albergue. *“Turn right at the building with all the EU flags on it”*.

The albergue is modern and very full. I find myself, a little nervously in a top bunk. At this stage of life I need a midnight trip to the toilet and top bunks can be a bit awkward to negotiate!

Logroño is the first big city I've stayed in since St. Nazaire in France. It's suddenly become strange to be in a place where perigrinos are in a minority. I wandered around the city streets, had lamb kebabs for dinner and watched a giant chess game in the cathedral plaza.



Logroño has a lovely surrealistic cockle shell logo for everything camino-related in the town.



The cathedral, Concatedral de Santa María de la Redonda, has Matamoros on a gigantic stallion surrounded by severed Moorish heads.

Saturday May 2nd 2015

It's always best to start by walking in the morning. City streets are very busy visually and it's easy to lose the camino arrows or scallop shells if you are on the bike.

The walker's path led me as far as Navarette and then I switched over to the N120. The impact of EU regional development funds are as visible here as in Ireland. Most of northern Spain N-routes have been bypassed by motorways and are very quiet. This makes for luxurious cycling. There is always a good surface, a wide margin and usually a totally empty lane for yourself and your bike.



Santo Domnico del la Calza (St. Domnic of the Way) appeared in the early afternoon. I had intended to go a bit further today but the streets were blocked by people celebrating the saint's day. Obviously this was a sign from the saint to stay so who am I to argue?

This albergue is run by Cistercian nuns and is old and interesting with odd rooms opening off other odd rooms.

Santo Domnico de la Calza is the scene of one of the stranger legends of the Camino. It's got everything you need in a legend, spurned love, stolen treasure, unfair execution, grieving parents, miraculous intervention by Santo Domnico and roast chickens coming to life again!

The story tells of a young German pilgrim called Hugonell who was walking to Santiago with his parents, when they decided to rest at an inn in Santo Dominco de la Calzada. He must have been a fine thing because the innkeeper's daughter immediately fell in love with him.

Unfortunately her feelings were not reciprocated, so the girl, in a huff, placed a silver cup into his luggage and accused Hugonell of theft. This was before the introduction of the probation act so poor Hugonell was pursued, captured and hung from the town gibbet as a warning to other would-be thieves.

His saddened parents continued the pilgrimage and, upon arriving in Santiago de Compostela, put the case in prayers to Saint James and Santo Dominco.

They then began their return journey to visit the grave of their dead son. When they arrived in Santo Dominco, they found their son still hanging in the gallows but, miraculously still alive. Hugonell, understandably excited, said to them: *"Santo Dominco brought back me to life, please go to the Mayor's house and ask him to take me down"*.

The parents dashed to the Mayor's house and told him of the miracle. The incredulous Mayor, who was preparing to have dinner with friends, responded: *"That boy is as alive as these two roast chickens we are about to eat."* Suddenly, the chickens came to life, sprouted feathers and beaks and began to crow. To this day there is a saying about the town: *"Santo Domingo of the Way, where the roosters crow after being roasted"*.

You don't believe it? What sort of a heathen are you at all? I saw the descendants of the chickens' concerned picking corn at the foot of the statue of Santo Dominco. With evidence like that who could possibly doubt it?



In the albergue garden four young people were following an ancient and honourable tradition, that of performing religious rites for romantic reasons. They were in their late teens or early 20's, the females from Canada and Germany, the males from Poland and Ireland.

Right now they were in the early stages of the great game. They were having great fun teaching each other yoga and martial arts; anything at all really as long as it provided an excuse to touch each other!

Young people on the Camino are truly wonderful; they are even kind and helpful to wrinklies like me. Anyone who chooses to walk 800km as part of their vacation is, by definition, way out of the ordinary. Pedro, a 50-year-old pelgrino from Barcelona, told me that many Spanish parents encourage their teenage children to do the Camino. They think, quite correctly in my opinion, that the quality of possible romantic partners is much higher here than in the dance clubs of Benidorm.

When Pope John Paul II came to Ireland in 1979 the Catholic Church organised large marquees for penniless teenage pilgrims to sleep in. For Irish teenagers this was much too good of an opportunity to waste. A friend, now a very respectable mother of three, is very proud of the fact that she first shared a sleeping bag with her boyfriend in the Galway marquee!



Subverting pilgrimages for romantic purposes is a very ancient tradition. Chaucer's wife of Bath was apparently a serial pilgrim.

*And thries hadde she been at Jerusalem;
She hadde passed many a straunge strem;
At Rome she hadde been, and at Boloigne,
In Galice at Seint-Jame, and at Coloigne.
She koude muchel of wandrynge by the weye.*

I suspect that quite a number of the older pilgrims are driven by similar motives. They are just more subtle about it!



That evening was spent pleasantly drinking beer with Siobhan from Dublin and George from Wicklow.

A drummer led the citizens of the town on a parade all around the various churches and monuments for the saint's day. The streets were packed with people, all intent on having a good time. This involved paella, wine and lots and lots of noise.

Siobhan was a bit sad because it was her last day on the camino for this year. She is taking the bus to Burgos and the flight back to Dublin in the morning.

She explained that she does not have a partner, children, a house or a car. She works as a self-employed financial actuary. This earns her enough money to take three months off each year to walk trails. Her last trek was in Nepal, she had previously walked in New Zealand and Arizona.

George was very quiet and reserved but finally revealed that he was walking to get over his partner's death last year. Siobhan gently kissed him and the busy, noisy street went silent for a moment for us all.

11 Castile and Leon

Sunday May 3rd 2015

In the morning occasional drops of rain spattered the dust on the pilgrim road.



I now crossed the province boundary into Castile and Leon; from the smallest Spanish province into the largest. It is now over 400 km to the next provincial border crossing into Galicia.

This is Montes de Oca (Goose Mountains). These are not really mountains, being a series of small hills and valleys. With Irish levels of rain it would be like the Rosses in Donegal.

It's May so there are masses of wild flowers everywhere, some places are spectacularly beautiful.



Yet, in spite of its beauty, this stretch of road is seriously, seriously haunted. During and after the Spanish Civil war it was the dumping ground for the Falange death squads from Burgos.

Burgos was nationalist from the very beginning of the war and there was no fighting in this area. However the Francoist repression was particularly bad and the bodies of the denounced were dumped in these mountains. 'Red Terror' killings took place over a short time at the beginning of the war when control broke down in the towns and villages. The 'White Terror' was a planned, coordinated and long-term nationalist initiative that did not end until after 1945.



The Pogues song 'The Sickbed of Cuchulainn' played in my head all day today. It's about an old brigadista and his descent into alcoholism and illness.

*McCormack and Richard Tauber are singing by the bed
There's a glass of punch below your feet and an angel at your head
There's devils on each side of you with bottles in their hands
You need one more drop of poison and you'll dream of foreign lands*

*When you pissed yourself in Frankfurt and got syph down in Cologne
And you heard the rattling death trains as you lay there all alone
Frank Ryan brought you whiskey in a brothel in Madrid
And you decked some fucking blackshirt who was cursing all the yids
At the sick bed of Cuchulainn we'll kneel and say a prayer
And the ghosts are rattling at the door and the devil's in the chair*

That evening was spent in the albergue in the monastery of St Juan Ortega (of the thistles). He was Santa Dominico's apprentice and worked to improve the pilgrim road over the montes.

There is no village here, only the church, the albergue and the bar.



It's a lovely ancient building, complete with remarkable red stone cloisters.



Reconstruction work was ongoing but apparently is at a halt right now. The wealth of architectural wonders in churches and monasteries must make a big problem for cash-short local authorities. What do you let fall down and what do you restore?

Magnificat (canon)

Ma-gni-fi-cat, ma-gni-fi-cat, ma-gni-fi-cat a-ni-ma me-a Do-mi-num.

Ma-gni-fi-cat, ma-gni-fi-cat, ma-gni-fi-cat a-ni-ma me - oi

Sing out my soul. Sing out my soul. Sing out and glo-ri-fy the Lord who sets us free. Sing out my soul. Sing out my soul. Sing out and glo-ri-fy the Lord God!

Music: J. Berthier
© Ateliers et Presses de Taizé, F-71250 Taizé-Communauté

I sat for an hour on the floor of the church and listened to the Taizé chants that were playing on a CD. A tradition of the place is the garlic soup served to all pilgrims every evening.

Ghosts of the Republic



In the monastery of St Juan Ortega, Christie, an American pelgrina, asked about the civil war memorial that she had passed earlier in the day.

Christie was in her 60's and wearing a tee-shirt that proudly proclaimed "*Harvard HR class of 1971, the worst class ever! (Harvard president)*".

She wondered about the strange inscription on the memorial, "*No fue inútil su muerte, fue inútil su fusilamiento*" "*Their deaths were not in vain, only their executions by firing squads*". It also had suffered one of its regular graffiti attacks, the Spanish republican flag being over painted with the flag of Spain.

I don't speak Spanish well enough or know enough about the politics of '*la Transition*' to make sense of the inscription but suddenly I found myself telling the story of Irish involvement in the Spanish civil war. And, in particular, the strange story of Michael Lehané, a brigadista from Kerry.



Lehane was working as a builder in Dublin in 1936 when he joined the Connolly column, the Irish unit of the International Brigades, led by Frank Ryan. He was in the battle of the Cordoba front and later in the Battle of Las Rozas de Madrid.

Back in Ireland in 1937 he worked until the builders strike in April shut down all the building sites in Dublin. Then he re-volunteered, evaded British and French authorities and crossed the Pyrenees again to take part in the battle of Brunette.

He was badly wounded, saved by an American medical team and returned to Ireland about September 1937. After recovering he worked on building the Adelphi cinema in Dublin in 1938 and then, incredibly, returned to Spain for the third time.

He participated in the last great Republican offensive, the crossing of the Ebro, and was badly wounded again. Lehane was finally evacuated from Spain in December 1938 in the withdrawal of the International Brigades. He was among the first to arrive and the last to leave of the Irish brigadistas.

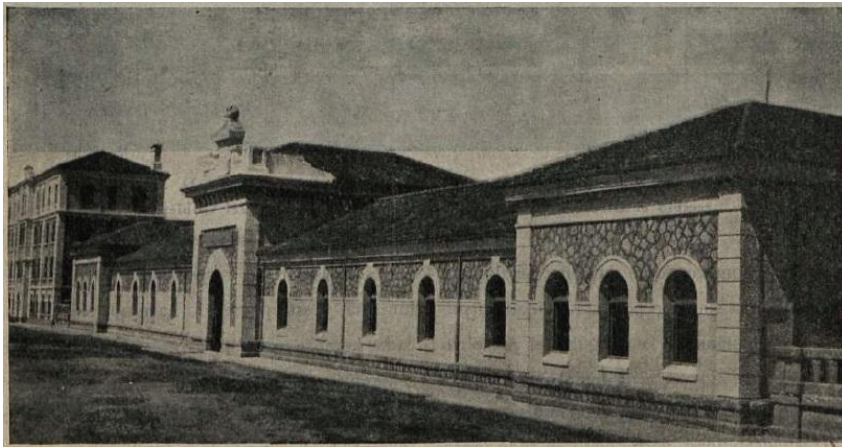
When he recovered, he emigrated to his brother in Birmingham and returned to building work.

During the war he had a serious problem. Lehane knew that the Nazis had to be stopped and that the only way to stop them was with the blood and sweat of people like him. However his Irish republican principles made it impossible to put on a British uniform.

He came up with a remarkable solution; he joined the Norwegian Merchant Marine in exile. When the Germans occupied Norway the Quisling government ordered the merchant marine, 90% of whom were outside Norwegian waters, to sail for German or neutral ports. No ship complied and they went on to become a very important part of the allied war effort.

Lehane became a stoker on the "*Brant County*" and worked on the Atlantic convoy runs. On the 10th March 1943 it was torpedoed in mid-Atlantic. Lehane probably died in the terrible way stokers died, burned to death by superheated steam from the breached boilers.

11.1 Burgos



Monday May 4th 2015

After last night's conversation and memories I was quite reluctant to go into Burgos. Very many people were killed in the prison here during and after the war. By the 1970's conditions had improved but it was still in use as a political prison. The older generations of Spanish socialist politicians described it as '*the university*' because that was where they learned their trade.

I went down from the hills and followed the busy N1 into Burgos. The outskirts are like the outskirts of all European cities, full of car showrooms and furniture warehouses.

Then in the old city I was brought up short by the statue of El Cid.



Rodrigo Díaz de Vivar (c. 1043 – 1099), was a Castilian nobleman and military leader in medieval Spain. He became Castile's celebrated national hero and the protagonist of the most significant medieval Spanish epic poem, *El Cantar de Mio Cid*.

For a great hero of the Reconquesta he spent an awful lot of time changing sides. First he fought for king Sancho of Castile and achieved great victories against Moorish kingdoms and, just incidentally, Sancho's brother Alfonso. Sancho was assassinated in 1072 and his surviving brothers then forced el Cid into exile.

He then went to fight for the Muslim rulers of Zaragoza achieving significant victories against both Christian and Moorish opponents. Then Castile suffered a major defeat and Alfonso made El Cid an offer that he could not refuse. So El Cid, changed sides once again.



I stood outside the great monstrosity that is the Cathedral, that monument to the rich and powerful created by the rich and powerful.



For me, the ghosts of the civil war were strong here. I remembered Maria's story in Hemmingway's *"For Whom the Bell Tolls"*.

"My mother standing against the same wall said, 'Viva my husband who was the Mayor of this village,' and I hoped they would shoot me too and I was going to say 'Viva la Republica y vivan mis padres' but instead there was no shooting but instead the doing of the things."

I quietly sang *"Peat Bog Soldiers"* in memory of all the people who have left no name and for all those innocents dying on the doorstep of Europe right now. Then I got out of Burgos as fast as I could, I could no more sight see there than I could in Auschwitz.

Yet, when I was on the wrong road out of Burgos a bus driver stopped and shouted directions through the open bus door. Maybe I'm being unfair to people from Burgos!

11.2 On the Meseta

There was a short climb to the Meseta Alta, the high plains of Castile. This has a reputation as the sun's anvil and was the only section of the camino I had worried about. Today it was slightly windy with a few drops of rain. But it's not hot and I know how to live with wind and rain.



Vast fields of corn filled the landscape, wheat on the fertile lowlands, oats and barley on the higher ground. There are huge irrigation machines, each one at least 500m long.

The mountains are covered with wind turbines. It's astonishingly difficult to count them; I got a different number every time I tried. In 2010 Spain had over 20 GW of installed wind turbine capacity. Castille and Leon are the Spanish leaders, with 4.8 GW installed.

The population in the Meseta is much sparser than in La Rioja. In La Rioja there is a village of some sort every 2 or 3 km, on the Meseta it's at least 10km between villages.

The walkers' path is dusty and today is showing signs of converting itself to sticky mud. The N120 is nice, fairly flat and fast so I followed that for most of the day. In the afternoon a sign for Castrojeriz caught my eye and I turned for there.



Castrojeriz is the classic long and straggling camino village, it's about 2km from end to end. The ruins of an ancient castle dominate the hill; the village has narrow stone paved streets with gullies in the middle. There are the usual two or three churches and a nice colonnaded central plaza mayor.



St Esteban is a rather luxurious albergue over the tourist office. There are even spaces between bunks and a nice lounge area overlooking the plaza. The usual pizza and wine and conversations with other peregrinos, makes a good evening on the camino.

Tonight I'm experiencing a strange feeling of relief, I'd actually been afraid of Burgos.

Tuesday May 5th 2015



It had rained during the night and the walkers' path over the alto Mostelares showed signs of becoming very sticky mud. I took a local road to the left, intending to swing back to the camino walking path after a few km. I should have taken the next right to cross the rio Pisuerga at Itero de la Vega but got distracted and continued. Eventually a sign for Fromista appeared and I found myself back on the camino there.

In the small villages shops are surprisingly difficult to find. Many villages don't even have one and the few that do exist are frequently closed. I was pleased to find a Dia supermarket and stocked up again with food supplies.

From Fromista it's totally flat and the walker's trail has a good surface so I followed that for the rest of the day.



In Carion de Los Condes I met Hans, a German perigrino walking with Theo; a rather handsome brown donkey. Donkeys can carry your gear but are notoriously slow and stubborn. Theo would occasionally take exception to a line on the road and the route would have to be altered to accommodate him. Hans and Theo had started from St Jean Pied de Port over a month ago and are still only half way to Santiago de Compostello.

The camino was full of Spanish transition year students walking in school groups as part of a school break. They are bright, colourful and loud! Irish teenagers are noisy but these groups can be heard from miles away!

I passed one group on the path; the next village had a nice plaza so I stopped for a picnic lunch there. The students caught up and stopped for a rest too. This particular group was still at an age when they break into male and female gangs and giggle at each other. I quickly decided that it was time to move on again!

The municipal albergue in Calazdilla was my destination for the night. The albergue has some nice open-air washbasins in the garden and an undercover clothes line so I did my washing. The competition for clothes pegs in the albergues can be intense! Some people bring their own, labelled, ones. I'll have to remember this for the next time!

Joe, a cyclist from Emmyvale, Co. Monaghan was there too. For a cyclist, he had a rather sketchy idea of geography. He claimed to have cycled from Bilbao today. This is about 350km away and, while barely possible, was a bit unlikely. It took a while to work out that he had actually come from Burgos. This was a respectable cycle but more like 100km than 350km!

I had the normal *menu peregrino*, pork chops, spaghetti and vino tinto, with him and Tom, a walker from Louisburg, Co. Mayo. As always with Irish people we discovered common acquaintances. Theresa, the woman who runs the holiday village beside his home in Louisburg lived next door to me when I was a child!

Wednesday May 6th 2015

It was actually chilly this morning, so cold that I had to stop to put on some more clothes. Back on the N120 again and made my way to Sahagun where the camino Frances was joined by the Camino de Madrid.



I'm still on the meseta, the high Castelian plains. It's flat or even slightly downhill and the scenery has now become fairly boring so I blasted along the road towards Leon.



There is a rather interesting modern cross in Mansilla. It's the standard medieval-style cross with two modern-day pilgrims in shorts and boots sitting on the base.

11 . 3 Leon

I got to Leon, clocking up a creditable 90 km by end of the day and got myself a place in an albergue run by Benedictine sisters in a very ancient convent.

The dormitories here were gender segregated. This was a little unusual and the only experience I've had of it in the entire camino. However it's the sisters' home and they are kind enough to welcome perigrinos/peregrinas to share it. If that's what they want, that's what they get.

Leon is a beautiful city of honey-coloured stone. I explored the town, viewed the cathedral and the outside of the Gaudi palace.



The plaza outside the albergue has cobblestones and a statue of cherubs, a perfect place to sit with a beer and contemplate the world.



I shared a pilgrim meal and vino tinto with Tony from Wales. Tony had found himself with a month free while changing jobs so he decided to do the camino on a Friday and started on the following Sunday. He lent me his phone charger and I got my phone charge topped up, I'd been conserving charge by leaving the phone switched off for a few days.



Thursday May 7th 2015

This morning I left Leon passing the wonderful Gaudi Palace. I'm slowly climbing into the mountains that have finally appeared at the edge of the apparently endless meseta.



I cycled on the walkers' path, a nice dirt road and passed through many tiny villages whose only industry was selling coffee to pilgrims.



The guidebook explains that they are Maragato villages. The Maragatos were the traditional mule-drivers and form a small ethnic and cultural community with distinctive customs and architecture. They may be descended from Muslim ancestors abandoned in this remote area after the reconquista.



The villages themselves are in pretty bad shape with abandoned houses falling down in the middle of them. The few good houses seem to be summer retreats for middle-class Madridinos.



El Ganso has a wonderful cowboy bar with even more wonderful Texan mementos, Stetson hats and six-guns, scattered all over the walls. It was almost empty when I stopped for coffee and bocadillo, just the standard elderly man nursing his vino tinto.

The Cowboy bar has achieved a reputation among pilgrims as a hot spot of the Meseta. If you come at the correct time there are country and western songs and line dancing. Pilgrim life can be both subtle and exciting!



The Gaucelmo albergue in Rabanal is one of the famous albergues of the camino. Run by the London-based confraternity of St. James it has British hospitteleros. It's a beautifully restored medieval priest's house in the centre of the village, right beside the monastery. Best of all, afternoon tea, properly made with real tea, was served in the garden. I'd been dying for a proper cup of tea all through France and Spain!

There were a lovely group of pilgrims here. One peregrina offered yoga classes in the garden but instead I opted to fix up a bike that had been abandoned there. It will make it easier for James, the hospilero, to go to the shops.

We were invited by the Bavarian monks who live next door to attend vespers in the partially-restored St Maria church. Somehow I found myself nominated to do the English-language reading so I found myself reading a particularly disjointed and nearly meaningless lesson from St. Paul.

Afterward we went across the road for dinner where everyone got a full jug of the local vino tinto. That made for some interesting conversations, which for some strange reason I can't quite recall! Strangely, a Christy Moore CD was playing for most of the night. I startled when I heard the familiar sound of "*La Quincita Brigada*" wafting out from the speakers.

11 . 4 The Highest Point

Friday May 8th 2015



It was hard to leave the lovely, welcoming Gaucelmo albergue this morning. I started to climb into the mountains, on towards the highest point on the camino. This is Cruz de Ferro which is 1500m above sea level. That's higher than any point in Ireland or the UK.



All along the way I'd been reading political graffiti with interest. The Basque country had some pro-ETA slogans and there was a sprinkling of communist, republican and Podemos slogans all through Castile and Leon. On an abandoned house in Foncebadon was the undoubted winner of the separatist slogan contest. A gable wall proclaimed "*Leon Solo*". Leon has been united with Castile since 1230 and they still want to break away!



Cycling on a mountain above the cloud level is always a strange and wonderful experience. The valleys are filled with torn and ragged cloud and it's impossible to stop looking at them.



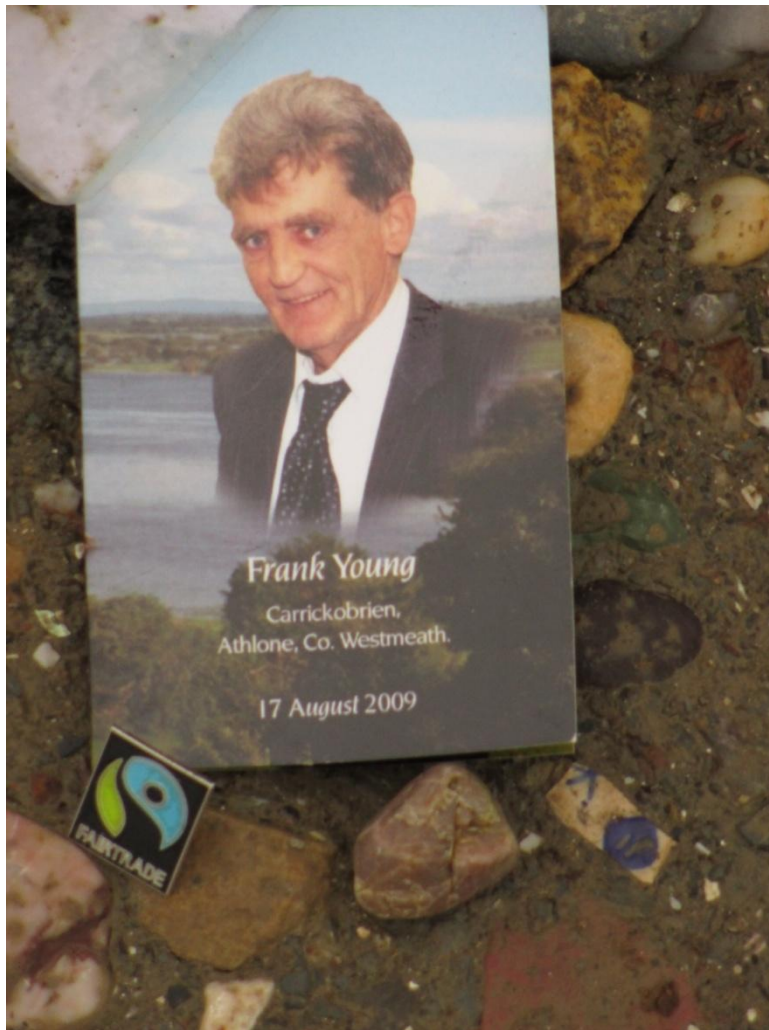
There was a little rain and the clouds descended close to my head as I climbed up to the pass. A musician stood on the path and played the blues, beautifully, on a saxophone to no human or living audience. When he finished there were tears streaming down his face. I was careful not to intrude on his sacred moment.



The Cruz de Ferro is a rather humble monument for such a wonderful location; just a cairn of stones and a wooden pole surmounted with a cross. Yet it's the place where pilgrims leave mementos of their past lives, loves and losses. There are stones and photographs, boots, rags, flags and, weirdly, underwear from all around the world left there.

I carefully and gently leave two stones from my parents' garden in loving memory of Peter Callaghan and Kathleen Taylor and think for a moment of how much I owe them.

I took a moment to remember all the wonderful, courageous people I had grown up among. And I remember Charles and Doris who eventually forgave me for taking their beloved daughter across the world.



To honour Frank I left his memorial card and his fair-trade badge. We shared some great and terrible struggles in the past.

An Italian couple asked me for help fixing a puncture, just on the peak. We changed the tube and I got a cold burn on my hand from the carbon dioxide (CO₂) canister used to inflate it. I've never been a fan of CO₂ canisters and this has confirmed why. Pumps are slower but much more reliable!



I stopped for a coffee by the side of the road and spent some more time cloud watching. There is a strange little albergue there run by a strange little man who considers himself a modern knight templar.

It was tempting to stay another little while but it started to get very cold. That's a lesson for life, mountaintops, no matter how beautiful, are not places where people can live. Soon it was time for a steep descent to Acebo (500 m) and then another 400 m descent to Molinseca.

11.5 Bierzo



After the mountains and the town of Ponsferrada it was back into lovely rolling vineyard country to Villafranca del Bierzo. Bierzo is a valley sandwiched between two mountain ranges and has its own microclimate, not as hot as Leon, not as wet as Galicia. Their wines are famous as a result. Someday, when I'm old, I'll go back and sample them and let a bus driver worry about the hills!



I could have gone further today but that would have started me climbing into the mountains again. Besides I wanted to stay in Ave Fenix, another of the classic albergues of the camino.



In the early afternoon I was booked in by the legendary Jesus Jato, one of the great characters of the camino. He decided that a top bunk was not suitable for a person of my advanced years, dragged out a mattress and installed me in a loft overlooking the dormitory. The camino teaches joyful acceptance of things and I'm more pleased with this mattress on the floor that I would have been with a suite in the 5-star Parador hotel!



It's a gloriously hippish albergue full of driftwood carvings and wind chimes. The showers were a bit basic, powered by solar panels and liable to run cold late in the afternoon when everyone had arrived. There is a courtyard and a bar and a washing line, and a coke vending machine, everything that a pilgrim could possibly need.



I went exploring the town, which is basically a river and a colonnade, and came back for a pilgrim meal in the albergue bar. There is a strange rule at dinner, take your own share of soup but don't serve anyone else. Bob, a British pilgrim got told off for doing this.



A group of pilgrims sat in the glowing dusk and sang for an hour. Pablo, a young man with a single gold earring, spoke briefly about flamenco among gypsies in the prisons. At the base of the family tree of flamenco styles are the *martinetes* (blacksmith songs), *deblas* (goddess songs) and *carcelera* (prison songs). He then played an amazing flamenco on guitar while a young woman, in tee shirt, jeans and hiking boots, did a dance that set the world on fire.



An elderly preigrina took the guitar and softly sang "*Bread and Roses*". Her voice broke on the line "*Hearts starve as well as bodies*".

Everyone fell into a silence more eloquent than any applause, and another magic day on the camino ended.

11.6 Galicia



Saturday May 9th 2015

It's nice to see Santiago de Compostello appearing on local signposts now. There is only 177 km to go now, a mere nothing.



I went up the mountains again on a road under the stepping stones for the highway. Up there people are busy, speeding from one place to another and worrying about being on time. Down here the river gurgles and the birds sing and all I have to do is cycle up a mountain.

Life is so wonderfully simple on the camino. Get up at dawn, have some coffee and toast. Cycle for the day; look at mountains and churches and stones and flowers. In the afternoon find a place to sleep and something to eat. Listen to a few stories, tell a few stories, have a shower and sleep in another bunk in another village. Why did I not do this trip 40 years ago?

But, of course, the camino is not divorced from that road. The reason I can do this is because I spent so much of my life on the equivalent of that road. I've the health, the time and the small amount of money required to do the camino, all as a result of my work. Even now my food, clothes and beloved bicycle all come along these roads.

And, if I had discovered and followed the camino 40 years ago, I'd now be an aged hippie, sitting penniless in some cheap tropical beach bar, unwilling to stay and unable to return home.

The valley is steep and sun does not get into it until well into the morning. I stopped in a bar for a coffee and chatted to Maria the barmaid who has good English having worked in Dublin for a summer.

I'm getting better on the bike, I gained over 800m in elevation without having to get off and walk at all.



At the top in O'Cebrerio is the border between Castile/Leon and Galicia. This is the last provincial border of my trip. It's been 400km since I crossed into Castile.



Almost immediately the landscape changes from dry land to lands with plentiful rain. Suddenly there are whins and heather, very like Connemara. It feels incredibly like home.



At the top of the mountain there is a statue of St Roche struggling against the wind. Fortunately there was no wind today; I'd imagine that that is a rare occurrence!

I got off to stretch the legs, turned the bike around, took a few photographs and then could not remember which way to go! I had to wait for a few minutes until some walking pilgrims, all the way from Brazil, arrived. Then I went the way they were heading.



The descent to Tricastella was brake-block-melting! I had to pull in several times to allow them to cool down. As the name implies there once were three castles here but the only thing that remains of them now are carved representations on the church tower.



One albergue had a classic 1970's racing bike mounted on the wall so I had to stop in that one. Unfortunately the hospitalera could not tell me anything about it; maybe the Galician Sean Kelly came from there!

The albergue is old, nice and uncrowded with an unused cowshed for Leatherlugs.



I checked out the church and admired the multi-story vaults in the graveyard. Land for graves is scarce in Galicia, your family hires a vault for you. If they forget to pay after a few years your bones are unceremoniously re-interred in the public communal plot.

Hans, a teacher from Friesland, and I retired for a nice pilgrim menu and a glass of beer. Fresh fish was on the menu for the first time in quite a while. I was getting tired of the never-ending

pork of Castile. Hans explained that the emphasis on pork is yet another relic of the reconquisida.



Eating pork meant that you were a true Catholic and not a secret Muslim or Jew. Don Quixote's lady was described as *"This Dulcinea del Toboso so often mentioned in this history, had, they say, the best hand of any woman in all La Mancha for salting pigs."* This probably meant that she was from a forcibly-converted Muslim or Jewish family that proved their Catholic faith by doing this work.

Sunday May 10th 2015

In the morning, I suddenly realised that the camino was almost over for me. I could make Santiago de Compostello in two moderate or three easy days. I could even do it in one day but I certainly don't want to do that. The camino is so wonderful that I don't want it to end.

My cycling glasses casually split in two this morning. I can't complain, I've been wearing them all day, every day, ever since St Nazairre, an incredible distance away on the west coast of France.



I sped down through a river valley to Sarria, where I found a bike shop as I entered the town. Aha, the perfect place to get new glasses. The sign says open at 10:00 and I hung around until then. When no one showed up after another fifteen minutes the church bells finally gave me a clue, it's Sunday and the shop won't be opening!

Sarria is the place where people doing the minimum 100km pilgrimage necessary for a compostello start. Suddenly the path is full of suspiciously clean pilgrims carrying suspiciously tiny backpacks and worrying about the incredible 100 km they have to walk. Some of them actually send their packs by taxi from albergue to albergue!

The travel-stained pilgrims who have come from SJPdeP are relaxing, *"Oh we only have 100 km to go now"*.



Portmarin feels very odd indeed. The entire town was removed and rebuilt when its original site was flooded by a dam in the 1960's. It's very strange, with ancient stones held together with modern concrete and long stone staircases going nowhere.

On a little further to a location called Gonzar. It does not qualify as a village as all it consists of is an albergue, a bar and a few farm sheds. The camino wanders casually between houses and sheds without it bothering anyone.



I found a most wonderful Sacred Heart icon nailed to the door of a cowhouse. The exact same icon, with English text, hung on the kitchen wall at home when I was a child.



Galician farm dogs are big and ferocious-looking but are the most wonderfully laid-back animals I have ever met. They sleep on a step or in the path and only open an eye when another strange-looking and strange-smelling pilgrim comes by. Sometimes they check out if the pilgrim has tidbits for them but usually they just close their eyes again.

Dogs have a strange, ambiguous reputation on the camino. Some stories are told about big and ferocious animals endangering pilgrims. Maybe it's just a reflection of fear of the unknown on to an external object.

Pilgrims also tell magical stories about 'pilgrim' dogs. These were old, lonely and uncared for dogs that joined a particular pilgrim and walked with him or her, sometimes for hundreds of kilometers, to Santiago. You sometimes met them, with bandaged paws, in albergues with their pilgrim 'owners'. The 'owners', especially the nonbelievers, always speak about their camino being blessed by having the dog join them. There is a very deep and understandable superstition that they are carrying the souls of pilgrims who died on the camino.

I checked in to the Gonzar albergue as it was rapidly filling up with pilgrims. The large dormitory was packed with as many bunk beds as will fit. When bunks are shoved next to each other, they become effectively a double bed.

The pilgrim protocol for dealing with this situation is interesting. Unusually for the camino you don't get into conversation. You merely nod politely to your bunkmate, exactly as if you were meeting in a railway station. Then zip yourself into a sleeping bag and carefully ignore each other for the rest of the night!

Monday May 11th 2015

The camino now has lots of pilgrims on the road. Back in Navarre you could go for hours without seeing another pilgrim, here one is never out of sight. The albergue had been hot and noisy so I found myself on the road very early. It was a glorious morning when the sun came up and cleared the wisps of mist from the landscape.

I managed to misread a signpost and went down the wrong road for a km or two. A kind motorist flashed lights and waved to indicate that I was off the road to Santiago de Compostello. I suppose it's a pretty good bet that anyone lost here is a peregrino!



Palas de Rei and Melide are in nice rolling countryside. They are making hay in Galicia today and the smell takes me back to my childhood in Gurteen.

I stopped for a coffee and bocadillo at a bar on the roadside when two elderly Irish Mercy nuns spotted my Shannonside cycling jersey and approached me for a chat. Their teaching year was over; they were having their annual walk on the camino.



Later I passed a group of young people who called "*Go n-eirigh an bothar leath!*" when they saw my jersey. It's amazing how keen Irish people become on speaking Irish when they are abroad!

I could make Santiago de Compostello easily today but simply don't want to. I'm actually walking up hills that I could easily cycle just to be a little longer on the camino.



A nice afternoon's cycle takes me to Pedrouzo; a dormitory town for people working in Santiago de Compostello. I find a very modern albergue with plenty of space. It even has electricity sockets for every bunk.

I had dinner with some British pilgrims, Helen and Graham. At the beginning of the camino conversations started with *'Where are you from?'*, *'Why are you doing this?'* and *'Have you any cure for blisters?'* Now the conversation has become *'Where did you start?'* and *'Did you stay in ...?'*

Every pilgrim seems affected by the camino. Some desperately want to talk; others look off into the distance and smile. I'm one of those who smile.

I don't believe that it's the last night on the camino. Only 19km to Santiago de Compostello, I can do that in my sleep.

11.7 End of Camino Frances

Tuesday May 12th 2015

All the walkers were up early, pushing to make the 12:00 pilgrim mass in the cathedral. I went with them even though I can go at twice or three times their speed.

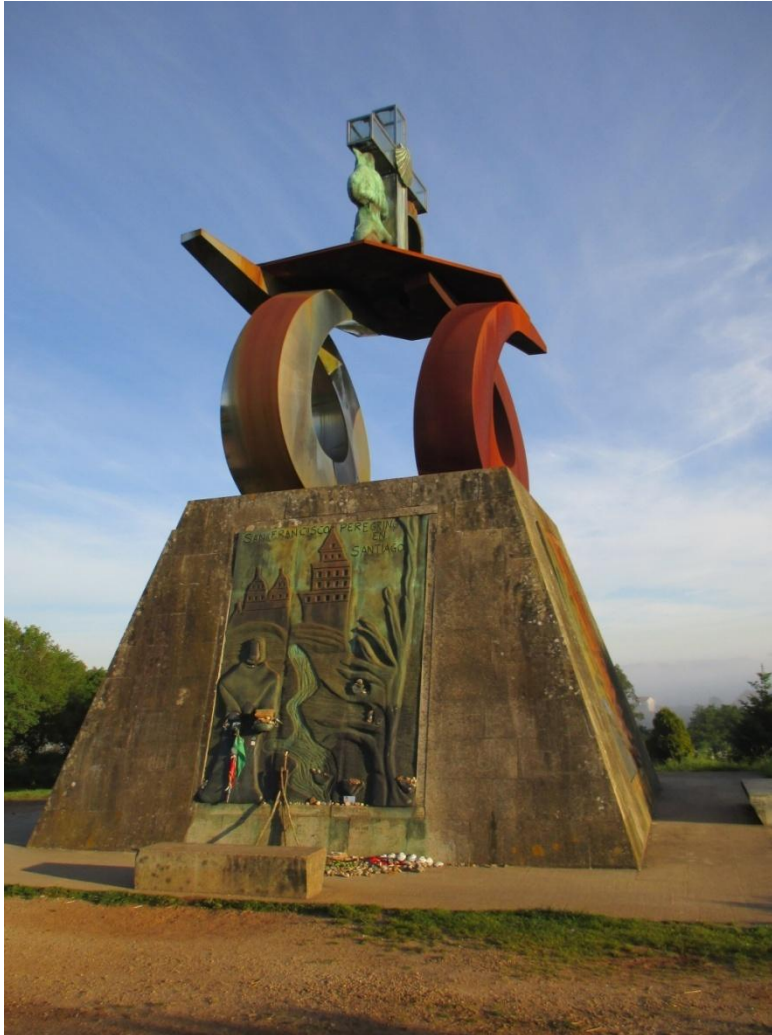


I started in the dark along the walker's path; the bicycle headlight lighting the trunks of the eucalyptus trees. As the pale glow of dawn creeps across the eastern sky I suddenly realise that I've done it.

Medieval pilgrims reported that the last 20km into Santiago de Compostello was lined with ladies of the night selling their favours. They apparently did a very good trade, after all absolution from all your sins and a plenary indulgence was waiting just down the road. It was a bit like asking the District Justice to take other offences into account when being sentenced in court.

At Lavacolla pilgrims traditionally washed their genitals in the mountain stream before entering the city. At that time Christians, unlike their neighbouring Muslims and Jews, did not wash much and pilgrims did not wash at all so this was a big deal!

Nowadays Lavacolla is the site of the airport. We skirted the runways and got a first glimpse of the city from Monte del Gozo, the hill of joy.



Monte del Gozo is a strange modern pilgrim complex. Built in 1993 it's got beds for 400 pilgrims, restaurant and canteen and has been accurately described as "soul-crushingly awful". A remarkably ugly sculpture commemorates the visit by Pope John Paul II in 1989. Its pure distilled awfulness reminds me strongly of the basilica in Knock.

Then down into the city, through the modern suburbs. Writing, in several languages, set into the roadway repeats Goethe's claim that "*Europe was created on the Way of St James*". It's a bold claim and yet probably true.



Finally I passed through the Porta do Camino into the old city of Santiago de Compostello.



I went through the ancient streets of the town; past the statue of one of my heros, Miguel de Crevantes; down the steps through the archway, where a Galician piper is tuning up and finally into the great Plaza de Obridoaro.



It's 9:00 on 12th May 2015 and I was the first one to get my compostella from the pilgrim office today.

It's a very strange feeling, I don't know whether to laugh or cry. There is exhilaration about having successfully achieved a difficult task and sincere regret that my camino is over. I sat in the warming sun and telephoned family and friends to say I'd made it.

The early morning mist disappeared as the sun rose. Galician pipes echoed across the plaza from the archway, hawkers of tacky religious paraphernalia set up their stands and a tiny yellow tourist train awaited customers.

The plaza rapidly filled with pilgrims and tourists. Many of the pilgrims are hugging and kissing each other, celebrating the end of their camino. An elderly couple were lost in each other arms, both in tears. A young man pushed an older woman in a dusty wheelchair decorated with a scallop shell into the cathedral. A young woman took off her boots and threw them, as hard as she could, into a rubbish bin. Then she produced a very fashionable pair of red high heels and put them on!

I parked Leatherlugs in the post office left luggage office and went off to explore.



The western face of the cathedral is covered with scaffolding, in turn covered with netting showing the facade. Keeping it maintained must be a huge job, the wet weather here causes plants to grow on every ledge and there are a lot of ledges!



After a coffee, much more expensive than out in the villages, I went to the 12:00 pilgrim mass. The huge building rapidly filled with pilgrims. Sister Maria Asuncion, who could make a good living as an opera singer, ran through some of the classic hymns. Then the altar filled with bishops and priests in golden and white vestments decorated with the cross of Saint James.

A group of burly men took control of the ropes that control the botafumero, the great incense burner. This is about 2m tall and weighs 70kg. In the middle ages its main purpose was to kill the smell that came off the assembled pilgrims!



Mass was musical and colourful with mention of the nationalities of pilgrims who had arrived the previous day. Then the botafumero swung, slowly at first and then almost up to the ceiling of the huge church.



After mass the church emptied and I sat and looked at it. The building is truly astonishing. Anything that can be carved has been carved, anything that can't has been gilded. I do all the pilgrim rituals, visit St James's bones under the altar and hug his reliquary.

Back in Pontivy in France, Claudette had asked me to tell St. James that she was coming soon. I took care to tell the saint this.

I spent time thinking of the people I grew up with who would have given so much to be there.



We have a suitably gruesome Matamoros. The authorities are at least a little ashamed and attempt to hide the severed heads and bodies behind some shrubbery. They don't succeed but it's an effort.



The Roots and Boots albergue provided a bed and a lovely view of the west facade of the cathedral. After a brief siesta I went exploring.

The medieval city is astonishing with streets, colonnades, churches, cathedral and a university quadrangle. It was way too easy to get lost and I spent most of the afternoon going around in spirals and circles.

Wednesday May 13th 2015



A confessional box in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostella had a notice saying that confessions are available in Spanish, Irish and English. An elderly priest sat in the open box and chatted benignly to anyone who passed.

I'm always happy to meet a fellow Irish person so I stopped and greeted him in Irish. He responded in English with a "*Now what county man might you be?*" question.

It's not really polite to change the language in the second sentence of a conversation. However many people are uncomfortable with anything other than the most superficial conversation in Irish so I switched to English.

We chatted for a while; I told him of my cycle trip from Clonmacnoise and gave him a tiny candle and candlestick from there.

Then he produced a small purple stole and put it on. This is a sign that Holy Mother Church is sad to see one of its children in sin and an invitation to confession and absolution.

Old mental barriers slammed shut with a bang that must have shaken the huge building. Suddenly I found myself talking to a representative of the enemy!

My father once cycled 30 miles to confess to a bishop. He had committed a 'reserved' sin that could not be forgiven by an ordinary priest. What was his sin? He had attended a protestant church service to carry the coffin of a boyhood friend.

The history of the Catholic Church in Ireland is a horrific catalogue of physical, mental and sexual abuse of the powerless. Children, women and the poor were all fair game, the powerless were routinely sacrificed to protect the more powerful. But, at least in Ireland, they did not actively encourage murder squads.

Catholic Spain was much worse. During this Franco years the Church routinely broke one of its own most sacred rules, the sanctity of confession. Many people were picked up and murdered by the Falange immediately after their yearly confession.

Besides, what am I if I am not my sins? Sorry father, I gave up playing that game when I was fifteen years old and I'm dammed if I start it again now!

I stormed out of the cathedral, metaphorically shaking the dust from my sandals. But second thoughts started outside.

Maybe I'm doing the man an injustice. He seemed to be in his 70's which meant that he entered a seminary in the late 1950's or early 1960's at the age of 17.

In the farming world only one son could inherit the farm and, on average, only one daughter could marry a farmer. The other children had a choice between a ticket to the United States, an unpaid role as 'relatives assisting' on the farm, or a 'vocation' to the religious life.

It's very doubtful if he had any choice about the vocation. The distinguishing marks for a 'strong farmer' in Ireland were to have a bull in the yard and a son in Maynooth.

Going to the seminary in Maynooth was a really big deal, bringing glory to the entire family. An amenable young man could get modest local glory and achieve 'salvation' without having to worry about messy, complicated things like sexual attraction.

Maynooth was the perfect place to explore the great 1500-year-old theatre of Catholicism. It was an isolated world and a perfect incubator for extreme group-think. For a few years it was even possible to think that 'liberation theology' would actually change the world.

Once you got there it was hard to leave. If you did you became a 'spoiled priest' and the family glory rapidly turned to shame. Seminary life did not do much to provide you with the practical skills necessary to hold down another job.

It was much easier to continue than to leave so eventually the day of ordination arrived. The lucky ones got to Africa or South America where they could learn something about the world. The orthodox, political, ones marked out for leadership went to Rome, and the remainder went as curates to remote parishes in Ireland.

Life in the rural parishes must have been agonizing. The priest was outwardly honoured but, in practice, isolated and more than slightly mistrusted. It was impossible to have particular friends and any intellectual life was severely limited through lack of books and conversations.

When they reached their 30's many priests looked at their lives and found them wanting. If they continued as a priest, they would never wake up beside a woman they loved or have a family of their own. If they left, the church organisation did very, very little to help them. After ten years work they left with £50 in their pocket and the suit of clothes they were wearing.

Remaining in ministry was, in many cases, an even worse decision. Alcohol and charismatic renewal became the drugs of choice to deaden the terrible pain of loneliness.

Then, as the years went by and the stories of abuse mounted, priests found themselves isolated and betrayed by their own church. Once children and communities were sacrificed to protect priests, now priests were sacrificed to protect bishops.

Perhaps he was as much a victim as any resident of an institution.



The albergue had a nice lounge and had good wifi (weefee in Spanish) so I spent a lot of the morning contacting people at home. Dear wife, Sue, had been planning on joining me for a weekend in Santander but now can't make it. I changed my ferry ticket to return to England on 20th rather than 28th.

Then the world suddenly remembered me and where I was. A contract that I had been working on in January suddenly came through and I spent some time arranging details while sitting on the ground in Plaza de Obridoaro.

Then I went walking to see the sights and to find the bus station. The bus station is on the east side of the city and my albergue is on the west. I got rightly lost, all these streets and plazas look pretty similar and streets have a strange habit of changing direction when you are not looking! I found myself walking in all sorts of directions until I finally went back to first principles. I looked at the clock and the sun and decided that walking east was not a brilliant idea if the old city was to the west.

Suddenly I was very tired and feeling down. I've been cycling all day, every day since Dax in France and my body had had enough. The never-ending parade of historic sites had started to grate too.

Then the Camino provided, yet again. I was sitting, feeling lost and lonely on the cathedral steps when I got a text message from Peggy, Mary and Pam, all former workmates. They had walked in on the Camino Ingles the previous day and were wondering where I was. I was sitting on the steps on the east side of the cathedral; they were sitting on the steps on the west!

We met, checked out the university and arranged to meet for dinner that evening.



The quadrangle had the stature of a founder in it. He looked remarkably like Star Wars Yoda!

They had found a rather nice restaurant in Rua Villar the previous night so we went back to that. It was nice to get some better quality food than the standard menu perigrino that I've been living on for a few weeks.

We had good fun and conversation for the night; I've been missing that too.

I decided to go to Finistère, and then take the bus back to SdeC and on to Santander and the ferry home.

12 Camino Finnistere

Thursday May 14th 2015

On yet another misty morning I left Santiago de Compostello and headed west; strangely glad to leave. The final 100km on camino Frances had been very packed with pilgrims and the industrial-strength pilgrim support facilities in the city did nothing for me.



But now I was on the road again and suddenly the real camino is back! There are only a few walkers and the path is not as well marked as Camino Frances. However that's no problem; or so I thought until later in the afternoon.

In the town of Negreira a bar supplied nice coffee and bocadillos along with a sello.



Negreira is the scene of yet another camino miracle. The cart containing St. James's body, pulled by the newly tamed bulls, was being pursued by soldiers of the pagan queen Lugo. When they passed the bridge it suddenly collapsed, leaving the pursuers stranded on the other side. It's commemorated by a broken bridge in the town seal.

A nasty suspicious person might possibly come up with a different reason for the bridge breaking.

I followed a local road running parallel to the pilgrim track. This was a lovely road through a eucalyptus forest and up to a ridge covered with wind turbines, going whump, whump, whump.



At an unsigned tee junction the overgrown walkers' path went straight on over the fields. I took the road left when I should have gone right. I could have recovered 5km later by turning right towards the LC-403 but missed that turn too!

Whee! Down at high speed off the mountain and eventually realised that I was lost. Plod on until I find a town with a signpost saying Outes and realise that I've come down on the wrong side of the mountain.

Because of my improved fitness this is not the disaster it would have been a month ago, it's just mildly annoying. I climbed the mountain again to Pino de Val and on to Ponte Olivera. It's only cost me two hours!

A modern house at the village entrance has a sign indicating that it's an albergue. The lady in charge has absolutely no English and, I suspect, doubtful Spanish. She speaks Galego, the language of Galicia, a cross between Castillian and Portugese. I've very poor Spanish but we make ourselves understood eventually.

This is a family house being used as an albergue for the summer. There are two German girls in the other room and I have a bedroom with three single beds all to myself. There are even bedclothes and a pumped shower in the bathroom; this is really unusual and luxurious for an albergue!

The restaurant in the village provided a nice pilgrim menu with free refills of vino tinto. The camino chose to throw in one of its stranger moments here. I found myself watching a Swedish soap opera subtitled in Spanish on the wide-screen TV in the bar. Even twenty years after living there the sound of Swedish remains familiar.



There are Horros, stone granaries, outside many of the older houses. They were used for drying and storing corn and have interesting features, like ventilation slots and being mounted on large stone bases to prevent rodents getting in. The crosses give the impression that they are tombs.

Thursday May 14th 2015

In the morning, the route went through Olveiro and on towards the west. After passing the asbestos factory I turned over the high, very desolate and very beautiful moors with the Atlantic gleaming on the horizon. It was lovely to see the sea again; I've not seen it since La Rochelle in France.



There is a strong Celtic influence here, they even have celtic crosses. A steep drop off the mountains led me to the port of Cee.

Then along the coast through Corcubion, a last climb, hardly worth mentioning, at St. Roque and along the beach, Praia de Langosteira, into Fisterra.



I had to take a photograph of Leatherlugs, my bike, at the last town sign. If you ever want to take over the world I can recommend the Koga Randoneur for the job. It's taken everything I could throw at it for the past four weeks without a single problem.



Fisterra is astonishingly familiar; it's a very close cousin to Killybegs. There is even an emigrant memorial; Galicia has suffered from emigration even more than Ireland.

The sun shone and a westerly breeze blew as I sat on a pier wall beside a man gutting fish and enjoyed my lunch of fresh bread and cheese.

The hospitelara in the municipal albergue insisted that cyclists are not admitted until 17:00 so I left the panniers there and headed for the lighthouse. I had forgotten how great it is to be unloaded; I can now accelerate up hills!



Then there was the last climb to the lighthouse and camino marker zero. A lighthouse is a wonderful and appropriate end to the camino for me, much more satisfactory than any cathedral!

There were spectacular sea views, a peace pole and a fire pit where pilgrims' burned symbols of their past lives.



There are both tourists and pilgrims at Finnistere. The tourists spill out of the buses and camper vans, admire the view, take a few photographs, buy a few souvenirs and then get back into their transport.

The travel-scarred pilgrims stand stunned and amazed. Then they go about their own long-planned and intensely personal rituals. A young woman solemnly lays her sister's tee shirt in the fire pit and sets it alight. An elderly man pours gray ashes from a box into the air and sea. A young man stumbles over the chords as he plays his guitar.



I thought of my loves and left some memories there.

Then it was time to cycle back to Fisterra and charm my way into the albergue. The hospitelara had forgotten that I'd already booked my place but eventually relented and gave me the last cyclist's place.

Friday May 15th 2015



This morning I started to come back to real life again, whatever real life is!

The bus to Santiago de Compostallo left from outside the albergue. My wonderful bike Leatherlugs did not take kindly to the indignity of being put in a bus luggage compartment. It put up quite a struggle when I was taking off the front wheel!

The bus went back on a different route to the one I'd used in cycling here. This was along the costa del morte, the coast of death. It's a well-deserved name, full of rocks, shoals and reefs, perfect for ripping the bottom from a ship.



In 2002 this was the scene of one of the world's worst oil spills.

In November 2002 the poorly-maintained single-hull oil tanker Prestige developed serious structural faults off the coast of Galicia. In a classic example of nationalism triumphing

over ecology the Prestige was successively ordered out of French, Spanish and Portuguese waters when it was showing clear signs of breaking up.

If it had been taken into sheltered waters and surrounded by floating barrages then it might have survived long enough to be unloaded. If it had sunk there then, at the worst, the pollution would have been confined to one specific area.

The Prestige split in half on November 19, in the worst possible place, in international waters about 250 km from the Galician coast. It sank, releasing over 76,000 m³ of oil into the sea. After the sinking, the wreck continued leaking approximately 125 tons of oil a day, polluting the seabed and contaminating the coastline.

The affected area was a very important ecological region, supporting coral reefs and many species of sharks and birds. It was also the base for the large Galician fishing industry. The heavy coastal pollution forced the Galician government to suspend offshore fishing for six months.

I got into Santiago de Compostello in the afternoon and booked myself back into the Roots & Boots albergue.

Saturday May 16th 2015

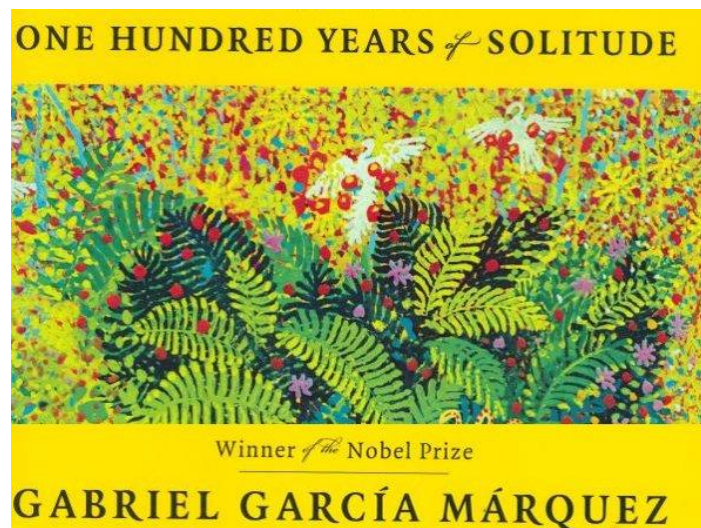
This was my last full day in Santiago de Compostello. I had to catch an early morning bus tomorrow and getting lost on the way to the bus station might not be the best idea. I took the bike and made a practice run to the bus station. There were more than a few diversions; the steps that are included in all self-respecting Santiago de Compostello streets are not marked on the map. This was not a problem today, tomorrow with the panniers they would be a big one.



After a few false steps I made it. The secret is to go out by the east side of the cathedral, by Crevantes left shoulder, through the Porta del Camino, out rua Conceheros (the shell bearers street) and there, just as the modern buildings start, is the bus station. I bought a ticket to Santander and a bike bag for the next morning. Then it was off for the day to be a tourist.



There were shops selling religious tat of all descriptions. There were snow globes of the cathedral, shells, and St James crosses, badges and medals of all sorts. It must be a Catholic thing; Knock and Rome are polluted with exactly the same stuff. I eventually settled on the least offensive, and lightest, stuff available, Santiago fridge magnets for everyone! Mary and Pamela, two special cycling buddies, got two blue camino bandannas.



The plaza had a wonderful outdoor book market, mostly in Spanish with a lot of Latin American magic realism books on display. I looked longingly at Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude* and was sorry I could not read it in the original.

In the plaza there was the familiar sound of Angolan Portuguese and I was suddenly surrounded by a group of elderly Angolan pilgrims. I beamed; I'm among friends and tag along behind them around the cathedral. I try to talk with some but unfortunately neither their English nor my mash up of Portuguese and Spanish is up to the job of communicating.

Fifteen years ago I had the great privilege of working with an Angolan refugee family. They taught me how to laugh and live in the face of death and despair and for that I'll be forever grateful. Beatriz and Olivia, *Buen Camino* and *obligado*!

I managed to take a photo of my foot and decided to delete it. The camera, which I'd bought in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, gave prompts in French; I'd been too lazy to change it. I misread the confirmation prompt and managed to delete my entire set of Spanish photographs! Say nice things about myself, and then realise that the photos can be recovered if nothing more is written on the SD card. I swapped it for another card and hoped that I can recover when I get home.

Another afternoon wandering around churches, another menu de peregrino, another walk back to the albergue, another "Where do you come from?" conversation and I suddenly realise that my camino is over and it's time to go home.

Sunday May 17th 2015

An early start got me to the bus station in plenty of time. For some obscure reason bikes are banned from the lift so I've to carry it down the stairs to the bus platform. I removed the front wheel, turned the handlebars and put it into the bag. Leatherlugs was not happy. Oh the indignity of it for a bike that's come 2000km under pedal power alone!

This was an entire day on the bus. I'd originally planned on taking a week to cycle this. However as I'd done no real research on Camino del Norte I don't think that I was serious about it.



There were spectacular mountains and mist, the motorway jumps over lots of steep valleys that would be fun to cycle. We stopped for coffee in one little town where I met with British pilgrims Helen and Graham again. We had shared a meal in Pedorosa on the last night of camino Frances. They are going on to Bilbao to see the Gluggenheim and will be on the same ferry back to Plymouth.

We stopped at a bus station, an announcement was made in Spanish and everyone got off. Then I looked out and saw the bus, with my beloved bike, pulling off! There was a brief moment of panic and then I remembered that the Camino provides. It's just going for fuel and a change of driver. We had time for a meal, a beer and a chat before the bus came back, ready for the last hour to Santander.

It was evening when I got to Santander after travelling for the entire day. I reassembled Leatherlugs and pushed him out the door of the station. And there, wonder of wonders, was an albergue! Unfortunately it turned out to be closed, so it was time for plan B, whatever that was. The tourist office could not tell me of another albergue so I wandered off down the street looking for inspiration.

Two lovely Italian girls spotted my camino shell on the bike, called out a cheery "*Buen Camino*" and wandered over to talk. They had just finished Camino del Norte and were staying

in a small hostel San Gregiro just up the road. Found it, got a nice cupboard for the bike and a room for myself. It was astonishing luxury, I had a bed, and a bathroom and did not have to share with anyone. You could have put at least five pelegrinos in it!



Monday May 18th 2015

In the morning, after breakfast in a bar across the road, I went exploring Santander. There were a few shells indicating the Camino del Norte but I did not have the heart to follow them. That's for, Inshallah, next year. Instead I went out by the seaside, checking out some nice parks and beaches. After three weeks of beautiful weather it started to rain.



Leatherlugs decided that enough was enough. He had been imprisoned in a bus hold for a day with only suitcases to talk to. This did not agree with him so as a protest he got a puncture on a perfectly clean city street. I told him how wonderful he was and took him to a nice park to change the tube and, as I've plenty of time, fix the puncture. A British cyclist, Darren from Warrington, stopped to chat and looked for a camp site. He had come on the ferry from Plymouth and spent the last two weeks cycling in the Picos de Europa mountains.

We shared coffee and I gave him my map of Santander. So many people have given me maps that I must return the favour whenever possible. Then it was time for another pizza, another beer and an early night.

In the morning I booked out and left the bags in the hotel as the ferry does not leave until 20:00. I did touristy things for the day while avoiding frequent showers.



Santander is keen on its public sculpture; there is an interesting group in the central park.

Darren showed up again and we spent a while having coffee while the rain rattled down outside. He is from the UK industrial heartland, Warrington, and we spent some time heaping curses on the late and profoundly unlamented Margaret Thatcher!



Then it was time to do some shopping for supplies for the 18-hour ferry crossing to Plymouth. I won't be cycling for a day so I added a carton of white wine to the normal supplies of fruit, bread and cheese.

The first serious bug of the entire trip hits at the check in hut. I'm booked in but there is no mention of Leatherlugs. I explain that I'd come from Cork to Roscoff on this very ship and after some phoning they agreed to waive the ticket change fee. I had to pay the fare for Leatherlugs though!

Darren and I were waiting to board in a group of motorcyclists when Emerald shows up. She is from Exeter and celebrated the end of her first year in university by cycling from Bayonne to Santander. We were in the foot passengers' lounge, which is actually more comfortable than the cabin I had from Cork.

The ferry was late and it was midnight before it pulled out. Emerald, Darren and I had a pleasant chat, fuelled by white wine in disposable cups, for an hour. Then it was time to roll the sleeping bags out on the, astonishingly comfortable, floor.

Tuesday May 19th 2015

The morning on the Bay of Biscay was misty. After a leisurely breakfast we went exploring the ship. We asked Emerald if she had had any wonderful romantic adventures on her trip and she says that, apart from being propositioned via a language translation app, nothing at all. She sounded slightly sorry for this! The day was spent reading and writing and chatting. There was a dolphin watch presentation but unfortunately the dolphins themselves failed to show up.



We had a fairly good view of a lighthouse in Brittany but apart from that the voyage was totally uneventful.

We got into Plymouth at 18:00 and looked for beds. Emerald and I cycled up the road chanting "*Cycle on the Left, Cycle on the left*" to remind ourselves that we were no longer in Spain. Emerald had a hostel name but that turned out to be full. She phoned her mum in Exeter who came to collect her and I found a bed & breakfast a bit further down the road.

The B&B was full so I got slotted into the travelling workman's accommodation across the garden. The central heating unit for the house is installed in the room cupboard. This makes the room hot but it's fine.



I went downtown, found an ATM and got some sterling and had a pizza and beer. Phoned family and tell them where I was. Definitely the camino is over and it's time to get home to my family as soon as possible. And, as trains and buses are boring compared to bicycles this account ends here.

13 And Now?

Well, did I find *the bread of wisdom that grows in the other lands*? Not really but I certainly found some interesting things about myself and the culture I come from.

There is an astonishing amount of rubbish written about the Camino and I've no desire to add to it. One of the nearly meaningless platitudes you come across on blogs is "Look for yourself and find God, look for God and find yourself!" As I've managed to do neither then the only thing to do is repeat the camino! (Nice rationalisation Gerry!)

It is extraordinarily unlikely that the bones of St. James are in Santiago de Compostello. After all they were lost for 800 years until it became politically necessary to rediscover them. Then they were lost for a further hundred years when they were hidden from the British pirate Frances Drake. And even if they are there and are genuine, they are just some old bones.

I'm no more of a believer now than when I started. Still I've my compostello framed in a place of honour over my desk and I spend pleasant hours planning my next camino.

The Camino is full of 'miracles' like roast chickens coming to life that are, to put it mildly, unlikely. These events obviously did not occur in any realistic sense. However we can be sure that they met some political or social need when the legends were created.

The medieval pilgrimage was driven by political, economic, personal and religious needs. There was geopolitics, the drive against Al Andalus, and Church politics, the conversion of the Spanish religious experience to a Cluniac French model.

There was the desire for adventure in the great world outside the village gates and the prospect of becoming an important person if you survived the pilgrimage. At its worst, pilgrims could count on a meal and an occasional pair of shoes on the camino.

And, in a way that is totally impossible for modern people to understand, you could achieve salvation by hugging the bones of Santiago.

Every tiny village along the Camino has its two or three magnificent churches and an occasional abbey. How could such great ecclesiastic buildings be constructed in such tiny, poverty-stricken, villages? The Marxist view of it as being savage repression of the local population and colonial loot from the Spanish empire makes a persuasive case!

And the modern Camino meets political, economic, personal and religious needs just as much as did its medieval ancestor.

What are the driving forces for the camino revival? The economic forces are the development of a prosperous European middle class since the 1950's. Cheap airfares led to the development of mass tourism and people started to go to Spain from wetter and colder places on the continent.

And a certain number of these people were looking for something more personal than a week on the Costas. They searched for meaning in the terrible vacuum that is modern life.

The Catholic church has found itself losing power and influence in Europe for almost fifty continuous years. The heartlands, Italy and France, are barely Catholic any more. Even Spain, since the death of Franco and National Catholicism, was drifting out of the fold. So the Church supports the Camino as a new (or an old) method of evangelisation.

The political strands of the modern Camino are multifaceted and fascinating. At the highest level there is the desire to create a common European identity as a counterbalance to the competing nationalisms. The Spanish government wants consolidate democracy and defuse regional tensions by putting money into rural Spain. Local governments are even keener on Camino development as it is seen as a good channel to funnel European Development funds to their constituencies.

What's missing on the camino? Pilgrims are very white, quite wealthy and middleclass. The only black pilgrims I saw were my Angolan friends.

Religious influences are extremely muted among pilgrims, talking about religion is positively frowned upon. Catholics, Protestants and atheists are common on the Camino but Muslims are conspicuous by their absence. Is the Camino looking back to an idealised white Christendom that, of course, never existed?

In 2014 it was announced that the descendants of Sephardic Jews who were expelled from Spain by the Alhambra Decree of 1492 would be offered Spanish citizenship, without being required to move to Spain or renounce any other citizenship they may have. This privilege has not been extended to the descendants of the Mosisco people expelled at the same time.

What am I going to do now? Go back to my first love, refugee support. I'll cycle more and write more.

So I'll end this account as I began it with Abdullah's words "Ya Hajji – Hey Pilgrim"

يا حاج