

Introduction

Camino de Santiago means Way of St James. It is a network of paths through Europe that all lead to Santiago de Compostella. The legend (abridged) is that in the early 9th century, a hermit by the name of Pelayo saw music and lights at a remote cave in Galicia in northwest Spain. Since illegal raves hadn't been invented yet he figured that it was a divine signal and that the body buried inside was St James the Apostle, the fourth of the twelve disciples recruited by Jesus. Some people were sceptical as to the likelihood that a man who the bible records as being martyred near Jerusalem would have been buried in northwest Spain, but many people wanted to believe that the relics were genuine, in part because of the convenient timing of the discovery.

At the time Christian Spain was being routed by Moorish armies who were motivated by carrying relics of the prophet Mohammed into battle. Before long there were reports of St James appearing alongside the Christian armies as Santiago Matamoros - literally "St James the Moor-killer". This image is reproduced in numerous statues, carvings and paintings along the route:
St James on horseback trampling hoards of swarthy, bearded Moors. The other image of Santiago that is seen on the Camino is that of Santiago Peregrino:
St James dressed as a humble pilgrim, wearing the traditional pilgrim dress of tunic adorned with his emblem of a scallop shell and staff with a butternut squash tied to it (don't ask).

These days the Church no longer explicitly encourages pilgrimage, although many of the refuges we stayed in have been providing free hospitality to pilgrims for centuries. 100,000 people walk the Camino de Santiago each year seeking time to think, membership of a community, rekindling of spiritual or religious feelings, or just a good long walk.

My pilgrimage lasted 28 days, during which I covered some 800 kilometres. This book is a small glimpse of that experience, created en route (I received some raised eyebrows as the only pilgrim carrying a laptop). Like many pilgrimage diaries it is necessarily coloured by my personal tastes and experiences. It is not about the Camino itself so much as the things I saw and experienced on the route. For example it contains not a single photo of a church, although churches were among the most regular sights of the Camino.
The landscape was my church, and the sunrise was the bell that called me to mass.

Any comments and questions are welcome at bernie@berniecode.com





St Jean Pied-de-Port

St Jean "Foot-of-the-Pass" is one of two points at which walkers can cross the Pyrenees from France to Spain. It has long been a stopping point for pilgrims to purchase supplies for the long hike over the mountains. Today it is also a point for coach parties of tourists to purchase pilgrimage themed toys, pilgrim staffs and scallop shells.

Guides explain to excited sightseers that the people with walking boots and back-packs are *real pilgrims!*



Up through the clouds...

We woke up at 5.30, excited and a little nervous as we had been warned that the crossing of the Pyrenees would be the hardest day's walk of the Camino. We had been promised panoramic views from the top of the world. What we received was no less spectacular, but not in the way we were expecting.

We hiked up into the clouds, visibility dropped to a few tens of meters and a thick muffled silence surrounded us. As we trudged along, trees appeared out of the mist as faint shapes that slowly resolved into branches and leaves before silently fading away behind us.



(St Jean)







the border



... and back down again

After crossing the Spanish border we began the descent into Roncesvalles, or "Roland's Valley". A French lady assured us that the steep rocky slopes were formed when the heroic knight Roland sliced through the mountain with his sword to make way for his men. "And this is a completely true story!"

As we climbed down, the cloud melted away under the afternoon sun and dappled light fell on the forest floor.

That night we slept in a gothic stone barn next to a monastery. The hosts - volunteers from the Dutch Confraternity of St James - woke us up by proceeding around the dormitory singing ecclesiastical chants.











Four weeks, it turns out, is a long time. After a few days we settled into a rhythm: get up by six am, walk between twenty and forty kilometres, check into a pilgrim hostel, shower, wash clothes, process the day's photos, eat a communal meal, go to bed by ten.

Every morning we walked through the sunrise, then with the sun on our backs we followed our shadows west. When the sun was strong we stopped at midday. When there was cloud cover or rain we just kept walking. Some days we walked and ate alone, other times we merged with small or large groups. Mostly we walked in silence, listening to the birds and our footsteps.





Along roads, paths and canals; over medieval stone bridges and motorway overpasses; alongside streams, railway lines and irrigation ditches; past mountains, supermarkets and churches; through woods, fields, villages and cities; under concrete tunnels and forest canopies: the path slowly wound its way to Santiago. It stretched out in front of us and behind, marked all the way by yellow arrows and scallop shells.

All the time we passed reminders of the hundreds of thousands who walked before us. A field of cairns, each waist high and built one stone at a time. A cross covered with messages, photos, charms and other personal effects. A wire fence decorated with thousands of sticks arranged into crosses. Every few days we would pass a shrine remembering a pilgrim for whom this path was the last they walked on.















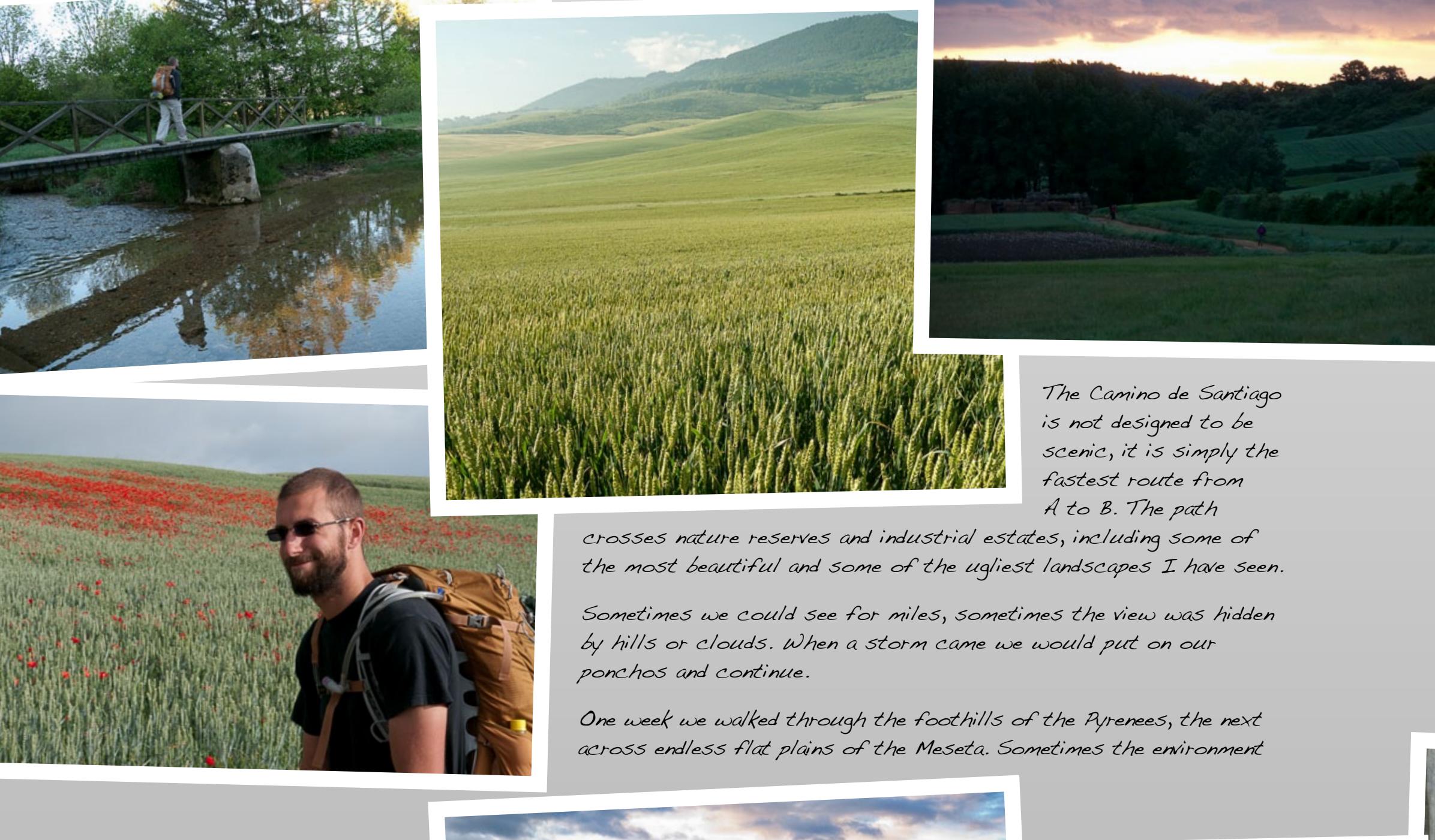












The Camino de Santiago is not designed to be scenic, it is simply the fastest route from A to B. The path

crosses nature reserves and industrial estates, including some of the most beautiful and some of the ugliest landscapes I have seen.

Sometimes we could see for miles, sometimes the view was hidden by hills or clouds. When a storm came we would put on our ponchos and continue.

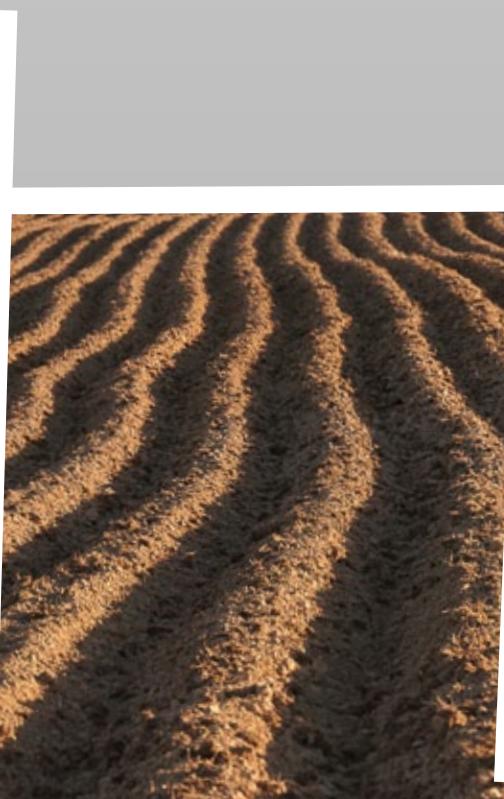
One week we walked through the foothills of the Pyrenees, the next across endless flat plains of the Meseta. Sometimes the environment





would change dramatically. One day we climbed five hundred meters before sunrise and when the daylight came saw a wholly different landscape from the previous evening.

We saw the land in all conditions, from menacing dark clouds to the fresh dappled light of clearing storms, from the soft glow of sunrise to the stark glare of the afternoon sun. I learned that there is a limit to the photographer's maxim that the best light for photos comes at the very start and end of the day: there is beauty at all hours, if you wait long enough for it to present itself to you.









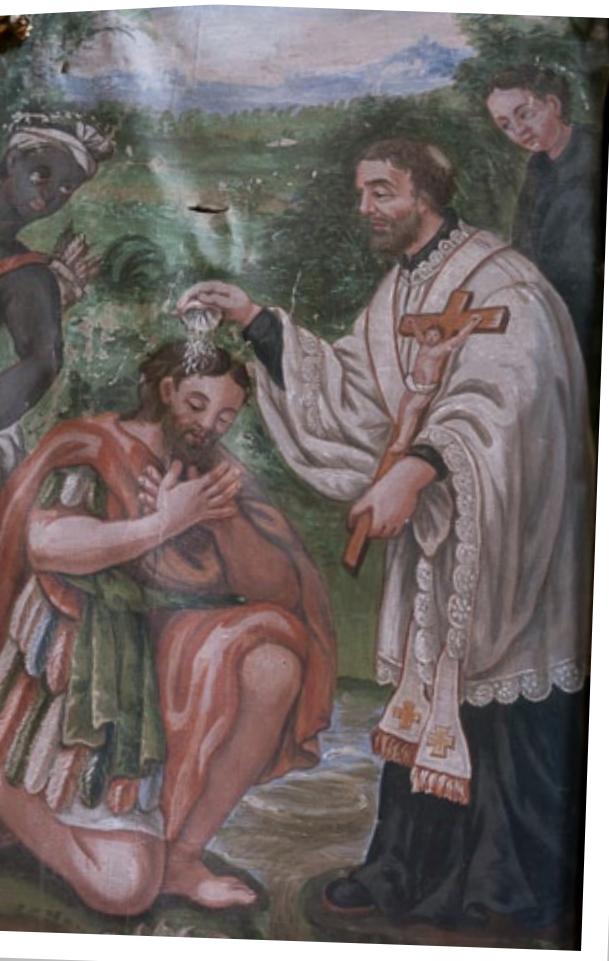












There is a camaraderie between pilgrims. We all walk to Santiago and most of us walk at the same speed - when we say goodbye it is never for long. When I walk through the villages and towns on the Camino I pass more familiar faces than in my home city.

We are easily recognisable, dressed in our walking boots and backpacks, and carrying a scallop shell marked with the cross of St James. Many towns along the route exist because of the Camino. Perhaps this is why so many locals are so supportive towards pilgrims, many crying "Buen Camino" as we pass, and some even offering food.

Some pilgrims follow the old tradition of starting from their front doors - this seems to be particularly popular with the Dutch, many of whom were already over a thousand kilometres into their pilgrimage when we met them. Others travel to popular starting points like St Jean Pied-de-Port, 800 kilometres from Santiago. Very few make the return journey on foot as all pilgrims would have done in the middle ages.

Walking the Camino provides a sense of community, both with the people that we meet on the path and with those that walked it before us. When we traverse a narrow pass trodden two feet into the ground by the millions of pilgrims that went before us, the sense of continuity is palpable.





Pepe and me. Pepe passes his time sitting by the path distributing sweets to hungry pilgrims



Andrea & Katerina, who walked with us for two days talking of stew and French cinema, among other topics

SAN
SEBASTIAN
(DONOSTI)



Niko, the only one of us who picked the right dish in the game of food-poisoning roulette



Eamonn, Damian, Chris & I. Eamonn was a former French Foreign Legionnaire who marched with great speed and enthusiasm



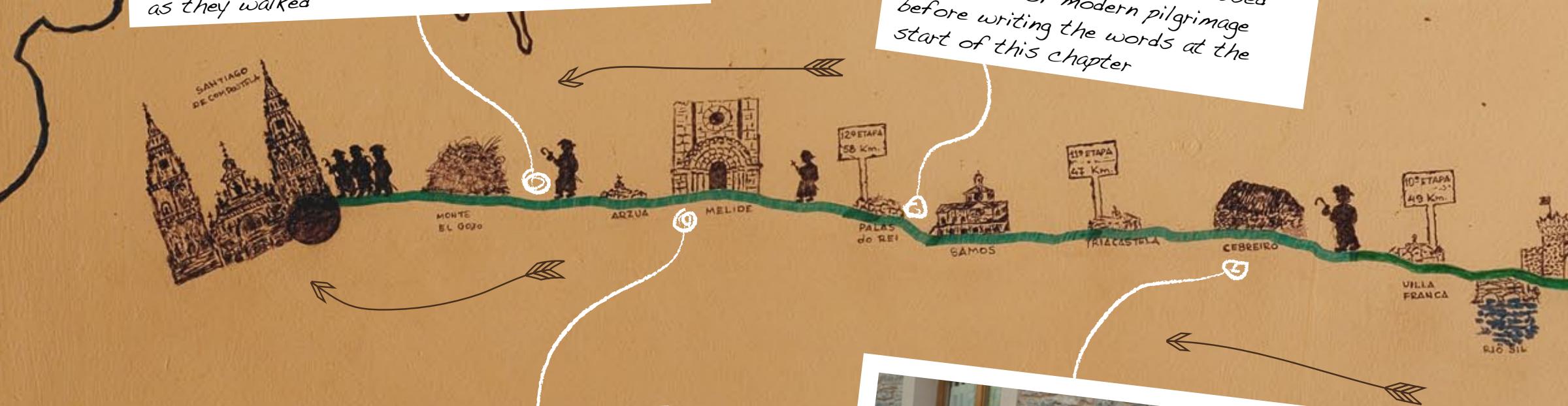
Piere & Bernadette, who didn't let the fact that Chris doesn't speak French get in the way of a good conversation



Me with Vincent, Drago, Cvetka & Ana, the Singing Slovenians. They were in a church choir and would sing beautiful music together as they walked



Hedwig, with whom I discussed the nature of modern pilgrimage before writing the words at the start of this chapter



Florence, Lindsey & Michelle, sitting down to a nice place of boiled octopus tentacles



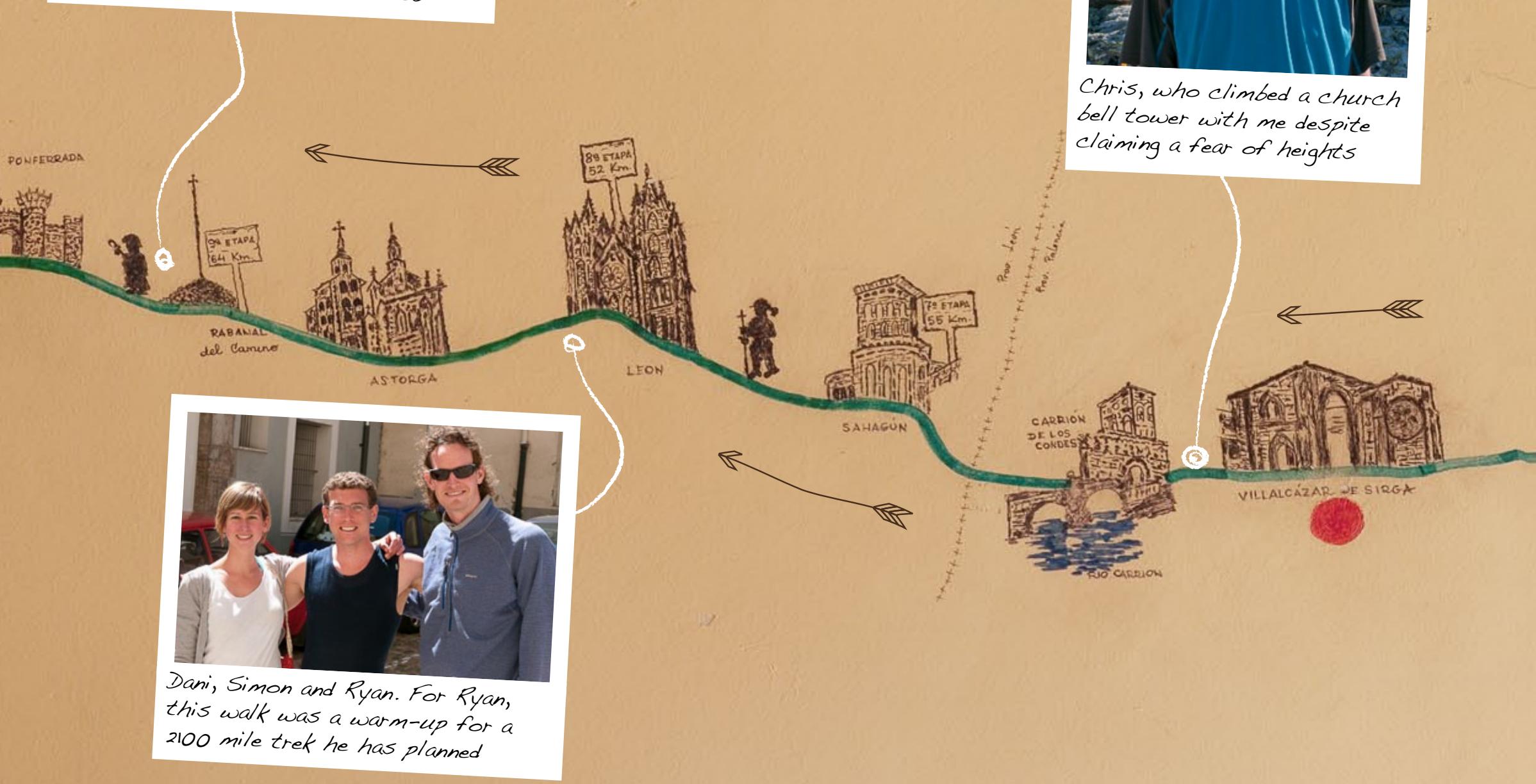
Dan & Elena, my partners in bedbug infestation (misery loves company)



Adrian & Hannes. Adrian walked at the same speed as us, and would reliably reappear every hundred kilometres



Chris, who climbed a church bell tower with me despite claiming a fear of heights







CAPITULUM hujus Almae Apostolicae et Metropolitanae
Ecclesiae Compostellanae sigilli Altaris Beati Jacobi Apostoli
custos, ut omnibus Fidelibus et Peregrinis ex toto terrarum
Orbe, devotionis affectu vel voti causa, ad limina Apostoli
Nostri Hispaniarum Patroni ac Tutelaris **SANCTI JACOBI**
convenientibus, authenticas visitationis litteras expediat, omni-
bus et singulis praesentes inspecturis, notum facit:
Bernardum Sumpchan

hoc sacratissimum Templum pietatis causa devote visitasse.
In quorum fidem praesentes litteras, sigillo ejusdem Sanctae
Ecclesiae munitas, ei consero.

Datum Compostellae die 30 mensis Iunii
anno Dni 2010



Canonius Deputatus pro Peregrinis

*Amos Sanchez
Jenno Febri E*



Ayerbe
1998