

Santiago de Compostela (the Way of St. James)

Ever since watching the film with The Way with Emilio Estevez and Martin Sheen, I've had a great interest in Santiago de Compostela (the Way of St. James) pilgrimage. The large network of ancient pilgrim routes are like a river system of brooks and streams which join together to make a larger body of water or in this case, the Camino Frances where pilgrims set out to the reported tomb of St. James (one of the one of the apostles of Jesus Christ) in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.



Way of St. James Shell

During the middle ages, people walked the “Camino” or “Ways” as a traditional penance and pilgrims received an indulgence to pardon their sin beginning by walking out of their front doors toward Santiago, which was how the network grew up.

Nowadays, people begin their walk all over Europe, hoping to complete at least 100 kilometers (62 miles) of a Camino to earn their Santiago de Compostela (the Way of St. James) certificate when they reach Santiago. The pilgrims carry a passport or *credencial* which is stamped along the Camino.

The Three Main Santiago de Compostela Pilgrimage (the Way of St. James) Routes

1. The French Way (Camino Frances) stretches 780 kilometers

(500 miles) from St. Jean-Pied-du-Port near Biarritz in France to Santiago. It's the most popular route and gets very crowded in mid-summer). The route then continues through Pamplona and Leon to Santiago de Compostela.

2. The Portuguese Way (Camino Portugues) stretches 227 kilometers (141 miles) from Porto in northern Portugal. It's a sister trail that runs beside Portugal's Atlantic coast before passing into Spain. You'll pass along villages and towns along the way, and be able to view many cultural sites just as Queen Isabel of Portugal did when she walked the Camino Portugues.
3. The Northern Way (El Camino Norte) is a very quiet and beautiful route along the northern coast of Spain yet is very hilly and mountainous. This extremely demanding El Camino Norte route is 825 kilometers and since it is situated on the Bay of Biscay, is prone to rain, fog and harsh weather conditions.

The Long Walk to Santiago

I've heard walking the Camino is not really difficult since most of the stages are fairly flat on good paths, but if you plan on completing the entire Camino Frances, from St Jean Pied de Port in France to Santiago de Compostela, you'll need about 30 to 35 days walking between 23 and 27 kilometers (14-16 miles) per day. This means you need to train, train, and be prepared for inclement weather. Along the way, many of the overnight accommodations fill up quickly, so you'll be stuck camping in the woods.

Some people walk the walk but not in its entirety or span the walk sections across years traveling to a point by plane. Others even travel by horse or even bare foot. The receipt of the *credencial* (stamp of authenticity) is rather difficult to come by when reaching the end of the route in Santiago de Compostela, but I just can't help but think God will stamp a passport for you in heaven or your efforts.

On your next vacation across Europe, look for the routes marked with a yellow arrow or monuments with the traditional scallop shell, symbol of the pilgrim or bake a Tarta de Santiago cake at home.