



What is a Camino?

The word 'Camino' in Spanish simply means path, road, way, journey. The Camino de Santiago is a network of paths that lead to a cathedral in Santiago de Compostela. Throughout Europe, there are hundreds of these paths that all lead to many different places of worship. It is said to be one of three main pilgrimages that all sins can be forgiven, the other two are Via Francigena ending in Rome and Jerusalem.

The Camino de Santiago or 'The Way of St James' has become the most popular of all paths and has existed since the medieval times, however it is believed to have been a path of significance beforehand with the ancient pagans and even suggested with the Romans who concurred Spain and perhaps Santiago de Compostela was even a Roman shrine.

For Christian pilgrims, the route to Santiago is of importance and is said to be the burial site of St. James when his remains were carried by boat from Jerusalem to the north-west of Spain then buried at the site of the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

Why do people undertake this journey?

Not all pilgrims in these modern times walk necessarily for religious reasons. Some walk for personal spiritual growth, others for the experience, some for the challenge. Whatever the reason, the popularity has grown considerably since the 1980s when the Camino Francés was declared the first European Cultural Route and even more so in recent years as more people become more aware of its existence through movies, such as 'The Way' and 'Walking the Camino: Six Ways to Santiago'. Also, with social media and people sharing their journeys online it also encourages others to walk it.



People complete this pilgrimage for all kinds of personal reasons.

Where to start your pilgrimage

A Camino traditionally begins from your home and many do start from their front door, others choose to start at the beginning of one of the various routes you can take. This is a decision entirely up to you to make.

With a variety of paths to Santiago to choose, many first time walkers take the most popular route - the Camino Francés. This starts in the village of St-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France before crossing the Pyrenees into Spain. It is roughly 790kms long.

The statistics of pilgrims completing their Camino in 2017 was approximately 301,006 with around 180,726 of these having walked the Francés route. Other popular routes include the Caminho Portugés, Camino del Norte and Camino Inglés.

For a pilgrim to qualify for a Compostela certificate they need to at least complete 100km or 200km if on a bike into Santiago. This means for many pilgrims walking they would start in the village of Sarria (110km to Santiago).



There are several paths to choose to begin your pilgrimage.



How long does it take to walk the Camino?

If you are walking the Francés route, the average time one takes is around 35 days. This will have you walking at approximately 25 km per day. I always suggest to people to look at what your body is capable to achieve comfortably and add a few extra days to it, so you can have a rest day every now and then. If you only have 30 days for example, then consider either a shorter route or start closer to the destination point.

Don't push yourself too fast as you won't enjoy it as much, you will also miss out on some great sites, plus you are more at risk of injury which could have you leave the path earlier. This is something I see all the time on my various walking trips.



Consider your physical capabilities when choosing the length of your trip.

When to go

The pilgrimage season starts around April and ends late October with the busiest times being July, August and September.

It is not recommended to walk any of the southern sections of the Via de la Plata, Mozarabe or de Levante during the hottest time of summer as the temperatures can get into the extremely high 30's. Even walking across the Meseta on the Francés Route can be extremely hot as it is very exposed with little shade.

It is also recommended not to walk during the winter months as it can get bitterly cold and on the higher points like the passes over the Pyrenees, the snow makes it quite dangerous with pilgrims each year losing their lives to the elements. Several of the Pilgrim accommodations are not open during the winter months as well.



Choose milder conditions for your journey, so that you don't get yourself into trouble.

How to get there

If you are planning to walk the Francés route of the Camino, you can fly into either Madrid or Barcelona then travel by train or bus out to St-Jean-Pied-de-Port. Or, you can fly into Paris and there are daily trains from Gare Montparnasse with one change over.

For any of the other routes, you can access them by train and bus from Madrid and Barcelona.

Credential or the Pilgrims Passport

This is another item the pilgrims of today carry with great pride, in the middle ages it was considered the pilgrim's safeguard. The passport, also known as their credential, is a very important document that the pilgrim carries with them whilst either walking, cycling, horseback on the Camino. This is a way that the pilgrim is identified and allows them to be able to stay in various 'pilgrim accommodation' along the way.

It is also a way of proving that they are indeed a pilgrim as they collect a stamp, (sello) each day from a place they had stayed and once in the region of Galicia (the last 100km) they are

required to collect 2 stamps per day. It will prove that the pilgrim walked at least the last 100km into Santiago which is the necessary distance to be able to collect one's Compostela certificate. This is the official testament to the pilgrim's journey.

One can collect their stamps from a variety of places including their accommodation, churches, cafes, post offices - almost anywhere. They will receive their final stamp at the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

You can pick up your credential at the start of your journey like at the Albergues, churches or order them online through sites like [The Confraternity of Saint James](#) or the [Australian Friends of the Camino](#).



This is what the credential looks like with all the stamps at the end of your journey.

Way-markers

When walking one of the Caminos, you will find yourself following yellow painted arrows across the country. These can be painted in many different places like on a rock, a road, a fence - anywhere. I always liken it to the 'Where's Wally' game. The yellow arrows in Spanish are called '*flechas*' simply meaning arrows and just point the way.

There are other signs you will find to follow as well, these being a symbol of a '*Concha*', a scallop shell. They can be found often on a tile that is placed on a signpost, in the pavement or even on local houses and fences. Over the years there have been many stories behind the meaning of using the shell symbol. Some are of religious stories, or directional with the lines of the shell representing the different pilgrim routes that all come together in one place, this being Santiago de Compostela.

Some reasons are as simple as it was a tool used by the pilgrim like a plate to eat off or a way of scooping water to drink from a stream whilst on their journey. Today, pilgrims carry the shell on their packs with pride, a symbol to show that they are indeed a pilgrim.



Here's an example of what a trail marker looks like on the Camino paths.

Accommodation

There are various places for a pilgrim to stay on their journey along the way. The most common and popular is to stay in the Albergues or Refugio's, these are pilgrim hostels and one is only allowed to stay if they carry a pilgrim's passport. These places offer a bed for the weary pilgrim and it can be in a dormitory style hostel, a church, an old renovated barn, or a schoolhouse. The rooms may sleep just a few pilgrims or up to hundred - they are all different.

The cost can be from a donation or €5-€15 as an average, sometimes a little higher. With the pilgrim's passport, you can occasionally get '*Pilgrim discount*' at other forms of accommodation like hotels and B&Bs.

What would you expect to find in an Albergue?

These are places that are run by volunteers (*hospitalero/hospitalera*) and offer the very

basics for the pilgrim. You will find a bed in most (though sometimes you will need a mat for the floor), a shower and a communal kitchen. Staying at an Albergue isn't for everyone, but it certainly does add to the whole of the Camino experience. This can be very rewarding for some to share their journey with other pilgrims over a meal at night.

Here's an example of what you can expect an Albergue to look like.

Do I need to book ahead for an Albergue?

Not always, though through the busy season it can be helpful. Do be aware that not all places take bookings and it comes as a first-in, first-served basis. For some of the lesser used routes, like the Via de la Plata, it's not needed.

What to take

Less is always best. Many pilgrims find along the way they have too much gear. Do remember you are walking from town to town, so there are shops along the way. When choosing what gear to pack, go for the lightest options, as your body will thank you for it.

Stopping to take a photo with the famous pilgrim statue.

The basic packing list for the Camino

- Boots or shoes you plan to walk in
- A backpack – size depends on your personal needs. I recommend 35L- 50L.
- Hiking poles
- Spare lightweight shoes for the evening
- 2 quick drying hiking shirts
- 2 zip-off hiking pants. These are not only quick-drying, having the zip-offs allows you the flexibility to wear shorts if the weather warms up or long pants if the temperature drops – without carrying extra clothes.
- 2 sets of socks. Also, wear liners as they are good to wear under your thicker socks. This can help prevent blisters and easier to wash more regularly as they dry quicker.
- 3 pairs of underwear. I don't recommend cotton as once it gets wet it will take longer to dry. You also want a fabric that will help wick away sweat, keeping you comfortable.
- Jacket for warmth
- Poncho or rain jacket. Rain pants are a personal choice.
- Buff
- Hat
- Maps and guidebooks

- [Lightweight sleeping bag](#)
- [Silk liner](#)
- [Water bottle](#) or hydration pack
- Sarong or Shemagh. I recommend this as a must-have item as it can be used for many things, like a scarf, a wrap for after the shower, a towel, a blanket to sit on, make a bag for the evenings, many different outfits like a jacket, skirt or top – just to name a few.
- Something to sleep in, especially when in shared accommodation.
- Credential
- [First aid kit](#) – especially for blister care. For more on blister prevention, check out this [guide here](#).
- Toiletries
- [Earplugs](#) – you will need them if staying in Albergues.

 *You'll need to carry most of your gear, so go for lightweight options.*

Extra gear if going to camp along the way

- Tent
- Cooker
- Food utensils
- Head torch
- Sleeping mat and pillow

Extra gear if going in the cooler months

- [Thermal top and pants](#) (optional)
- Gloves to keep the hands warm
- Beanie to keep your head warm
- Warmer sleeping bag

 *Choose a pack between 35-50L, depending on your frame and how much you can carry.*

Maps and guidebooks

There are so many to choose from with the most popular being the Camino Guides by John Briery. Don't forget online information such as the Camino forum which you can check out [here](#). There is also some helpful information at the Confraternity of Saint James, which you can look at [here](#).

Pack service

If you want the experience of walking the Camino but not carrying a pack, there are many companies that offer this daily service for as little as €7.

You have the option for a pack carrying service if that's your preference.

Do I need to speak Spanish?

I always feel that when visiting another country, it's respectful to try and speak their language if possible. But, if you're like me and are terrible at languages then don't fear as you can get by with a few words of English.

I'd recommend learning some of the basics though, such as:

- *Hola* - Hello
- *Buenos días* - Good morning
- *Buenas Noches* - Good evening
- *Adiós* - Goodbye
- *Por favour* - Please
- *Gracias* - Thank you
- *Da nada* - You're welcome
- *Perdone* - Sorry/excuse me
- *Donde está....?* - Where is....?
- *Cuanto cuesta....?* - How much is....?
- *Quisiera* - I'd like to...

It's always nice to learn a few phrases to make it easier to talk to the locals.

Arriving in Santiago de Compostela

Each pilgrim arrives in Santiago full of many emotions. For some it's been a journey of self-discovery, a challenge achieved or a spiritual journey. Whatever the reason for one to walk a Camino, they all end with a sense of change within themselves. For some, the journey is not over as they may choose to continue along for the extra few days walking out to Finisterre (considered the end of the world) or onto Muxia. Some will just simply turn around and walk back or chose another path.

On arrival in Santiago, pilgrims gather in the main arena in front of the Cathedral celebrating their achievements with fellow pilgrims. Within the cathedral, many will pay respect to St. James and stay for the 'pilgrims' service where they are blessed and cleansed by the swinging of a large Botafumeiro filled with burning incense. This is considered a cleansing for the pilgrims.



Pilgrims present their credential to the pilgrim's office where they can collect their final stamp and receive their Compostela (a certificate of completion).



The culmination of the Camino de Santiago route - the Santiago de Compostela.

My Thoughts

I have walked many different pilgrimages throughout the world and consider them to be a walk like no other. If you ever get the chance to experience a pilgrimage or Camino, then do it! You won't regret it.

Would you consider walking a pilgrimage?