



Camino de Santiago

HIGHLIGHTS

- Watching the setting sun from the gates of **Roncesvalles** (p334) and thinking about the long road ahead
- Appreciating warm, animated conversation, intriguing walking companions and welcome rest in simple *albergues* after long days of walking
- Revelling in the solitude of **Castilla's** flat plain (p305), with the wind combing endless fields of wheat that roll off into distant nothingness
- Admiring the sun filtering through the countless stained-glass windows in **León's** beautiful cathedral (p332), creating a divine kaleidoscope
- Giving thanks for a safe journey at the altar of **Santiago's** cathedral (p330) after walking 783km in one month

Number of pilgrims completing the Camino: 1985: 2491 1995: 19,821 2005: 93,921

'The door is open to all, to sick and healthy, not only to Catholics but also to pagans, Jews, heretics and vagabonds', so go the words of a 13th-century poem describing the Camino. Eight hundred years later these words still ring true. The Camino de Santiago (Way of St James) originated as a medieval pilgrimage and for more than 1000 years people have taken up the Camino's age-old symbols – the scallop shell and staff – and set off on the adventure of a lifetime. They have risked life and limb to reach the tomb of St James, the apostle, in the Iberian Peninsula's far northwest. Today, this magnificent long-distance walk – spanning 783km of Spain's north from Roncesvalles, on the border with France, to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia – attracts walkers of all backgrounds and ages, from countries around the world. No wonder. Its laundry list of assets (culture, history, nature, infrastructure) is impressive, as are its accolades; for not just is it Europe's Premier Cultural Itinerary and a Unesco World Heritage site, but for pilgrims who complete the mammoth undertaking it's a pilgrimage the equal of one to Jerusalem and by finishing it you're guaranteed a healthy chunk of time off purgatory.

To feel, absorb, smell and taste northern Spain's diversity, for a great physical challenge, for a unique perspective on rural and urban communities, to meet intriguing companions, as well as for the opportunity to immerse yourself in a continuous outdoor museum, this is an incomparable walk. *The door is open to all* – step on in.



CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

Camino de Santiago Maps

1	Roncesvalles to Logroño	p310
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6	Palas do Rei to Santiago de Compostela	p329



HISTORY

In the 9th century a remarkable event occurred in the poor Iberian hinterlands: following a shining star, Pelayo, a religious hermit, unearthed the tomb of the apostle James the Greater (or, in Spanish, Santiago). The news was confirmed by the local bishop, the Asturian king and later the Pope. Its impact is hard to truly imagine today, but it was instant and indelible: first a trickle, then a flood of Christian Europeans began to journey towards the setting sun in search of salvation. Europe and the incipient Spain would never be the same.

In that age, saintly relics were highly valued, traded as commodities and even invented with great vigour to further ecclesiastical and monarchical interests. Relics were believed to have their own will, legally justifying many cases of 'sacred thievery'. To see and, even better, touch a relic was a way to acquire some part of its holiness. The church cultivated the value of relics by offering pilgrims indulgences – a remittance of sins committed in this life. Pilgrimage was by parts devotion, thanks and penance as well as an investment for one's future permanent retirement.

Compostela became the most important destination for Christians after Rome and Jerusalem. Its popularity increased with an 11th-century papal decree granting it Holy

Year (*Año Santo* or *Año Jacobeo* in Spanish, and *Xacobeo* in Galician) status: pilgrims could receive a plenary indulgence – a full remission of one's lifetime's sins – during a Holy Year. These occur when Santiago's feast day (25 July) falls on a Sunday (which happens at intervals of six, five, six and then 11 years): if you want to complete the pilgrimage in one of these Holy years then you'd better get your boots on quick because the next one is the year this book is published – 2010 and the next one isn't until 2021!

An obvious question persists: What were the remains of Santiago – martyred in Jerusalem in 44 AD – doing in northwest Iberia? Here, medieval imagination and masterminding take over. The accepted story suggests that two of Santiago's disciples secreted away his remains in a stone boat; set sail in the Mediterranean, passed through the Straits of Gibraltar and moored at present-day Padrón (see the boxed text *The Scallop Shell*, p311). Continuing inland for 17km, they buried his body in a forest named Libredon (present-day Compostela). All was forgotten until Pelayo saw the star.

The story's veracity is irrelevant. The fact that it was believed led to the mass movement of millions of pilgrims; the Camino's birth; the subsequent taming