The Camino de Santiago – An Introduction to the Ways of the Way

By Andy Cohn - c. 2018

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Prologue

The Camino de Santiago is known as "The Way." Paradoxically, the lesson it (supposedly) teaches is that there are many ways, and each person has his own – on the Camino itself, and more grandly, through life itself.

Personally, I only pay lip service to that credo. While there are certainly many possible ways to do the Camino (and life), there is really only one right way: my way.

So, in that spirit, I will tell you the right way to Santiago, if not through life, and that way is the way I did it. But since I want to pay lip service to the credo of the Way, I'll slip in some other ways before we get to my way, in the rare eventuality you care to differ, even though you'd be wrong.

But first, some background information, mostly just factual and not too controversial.

What Is the Way?

Let's start with the easy part – the geography of the Camino.

The Camino de Santiago is simply the route to Santiago de Compostela, today a city of 100,000 people and a UNESCO world heritage site in northwestern Spain. The Camino began as a pilgrimage trail in the 9th century, when the bones of St. James (he's the second dude to Christ's left in The Last Supper) were reportedly discovered on the site of the present-day cathedral in Santiago. Word spread fast of the discovery, and shortly thereafter, credulous Christians began their trek from all over Europe to pay their homage.

But they didn't follow any one route. They just walked out their front doors, whether those were in Spain, France, the Netherlands, or any other place, and started hiking. The original route across northern Spain ran along the Atlantic coast, starting at Irun on the French border, then continuing west past present day San Sebastian and Bilbao, and eventually cutting inland near today's Oviedo to wind up in Santiago. Today, this route is known as the Northern Camino, and it itself has many branches and variations. Other Spanish caminos ran (and run) to Santiago from Sevilla, from Madrid, from Portugal. The Spanish caminos also extend north into France, to Switzerland, and even to Belgium and the Netherlands. And while today hundreds of thousands of people walk the caminos each year, it was equally crowded in the 12th Century when the world was a much smaller place.

The camino most people follow today (and it was our first, too) is the Camino Frances. Due to the popularity of Martin Sheen's "The Way" in English-speaking countries, and mass culture books in Germany and Korea, the Camino de Frances is generally thought of as *the* Camino de Santiago. But it isn't.

Nevertheless, since that's the most popular one, that's the one I'll focus on.

The Camino Frances extends for approximately 500 miles from St. Jean Pied de Port in France, south across the Pyrenees to Pamplona in Spain, then due west to Santiago. Its western extension, the Camino Finisterre, then continues a further 75 miles, reaching the Atlantic near Finisterre (the end of the earth), then heading north along the coast to Muxia. Many guidebooks divide the Camino Frances into 33 stages, which neatly corresponds to the years of Christ's life, and I'll often refer to those stages here, but that division is mostly arbitrary, and each day you can walk as much or as little as you want, since towns, and lodgings, are generally only a few miles apart.

The first thing one learns on the Camino Frances is that it is not a wilderness experience, although it is usually rural and generally scenic. The Frances, like its sister caminos, is a road (sometimes a literal one) to a place – Santiago de Compostela – and the first priority of its creators was to take people to that place, not to expose them to the seven scenic wonders of the medieval world. Thus, it doesn't skirt towns and cities; it passes right through them, usually straight down Main Street because that's where the services were, and are. And to the extent particular towns and cities did not exist 1200 years ago, they sprung up along the route over time to service the many thousands of people who walked the caminos each year. So, every few miles you will pass through a village, where you will find places to stay, to eat, and to buy compeed for your blisters. And every few days you will pass through a large or small city.

For a few stray moments in the Pyrenees, or the Cordillera Cantabrica, or under the Big Sky of the Meseta, you can imagine yourself away from it all, but that passes quickly. The longest stretches we walked on the Frances between settlements were the 16 miles up and over the Pyrenees and an 11 mile stretch in the Meseta (the central high plain), but even in those places, you're rarely out of sight of a habitation of some sort. Many of the villages are no more than hamlets – a few houses, often abandoned, a tiny grocery store, a hostel (called albergue) servicing the pilgrims. Like parts of rural New England and the Midwest, much of northern Spain is more sparsely settled today than it was 50 years ago, and many tiny settlements exist only to serve the pilgrims, with even the albergues and grocery stores staffed by people who live elsewhere.

The second thing you learn about the Frances is that it's impossible to get lost. Besides the fact that there's almost always a pilgrim in sight ahead of you, and another coming up from behind, the route is well marked with yellow arrows at every possible turn. The only place you might go astray is in the larger cities, where you'll veer from the Camino for your

lodgings, but even there, every passerby can, and will, point you the way. And there's always Google Maps.

The third thing to learn is that the Camino Frances, and its sister caminos, are the economic lifeblood of northern Spain. This is comforting, as you will see, because the Spaniards depend almost as much as you do on your having a healthy and meaningful experience on the Camino.

People often ask me what the landscape is like. In response, I tell them to imagine walking from San Francisco to Salt Lake City. Every few miles there's a settlement, but the terrain is as diverse as are the Sierras from the salt flats of western Utah.

The Frances roughly divides in thirds. (See map, Appendix C). The first part, up and over a lower range of the Pyrenees and then through the provinces of Navarre and La Rioja, crosses a landscape of sheep pastures and shepherds, and then vineyards and rolling hills. It runs through Pamplona, then Logrono, and on to Burgos – all sizeable cities. It reminds many of Tuscany. And also features smooth red wine.

Approaching Burgos, and continuing for some 150 miles, the Frances next traverses the provinces of Castile and Leon, crossing the Meseta, Spain's central high plain, which is the main character in the Sergio Leone spaghetti westerns (The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly). The first few days of the Meseta remind you of the Dakota badlands. Afterwards, the landscape flattens out. If you fancy a week's walk across Kansas, this is for you. Wheat, corn, lonely farmhouses, big sky and straight roads. Henry Fonda busting sod.

Part three begins a couple of days past Leon, the Frances' fourth main city, as the prairie gives way to greener fields and a lusher landscape. The Way climbs over the Cordillera Cantabrica mountain range, hitting its high point and then descending into Galicia, Spain's lush western province. Feed crops give way to vegetables; pigs to cattle; and dry cloudless days to humid rainy ones. The Galician landscape extends past Santiago to the sea. It reminds many of Ireland, with its rolling green hills and pastures.

For most people, the Frances is a social experience. While your fellow pilgrims will respect your choice if you choose to walk solo, the experience for many is of constantly meeting and interacting with fellow pilgrims – whether for just a few moments as you pass on the trail, or for hours or days or even weeks of walking and talking together. Pairing up with someone whom you meet your first evening, and continuing with your new Camino buddy for weeks is not unusual. (Somewhere, there must be statistics on Camino marriages, and undoubtedly a sub-section on match.com for Camino singles looking for soulmates).

Typically, people will cover the same stages as you do day after day, so even if you don't encounter a person on the trail, it's highly likely that you'll see him or her at a rest stop, or that evening for dinner, or in your albergue or hotel, because many of the towns on route are mere specks where the places to congregate are few. This can make the Frances feel

like a cruise boat or a traveling tour bus, carrying the same group of people day after day, except that you're walking rather than being transported. Often, you'll get out of synch with someone, but then run into him or her weeks later.

Oddly, your connection with the Spanish people may be limited, even as you admire the architecture, absorb the history, and savor the landscape. Many of the towns you pass through will be dominated by pilgrims and the locals who serve them. The Spanish on the trail don't generally speak English, nor even do many innkeepers, so your social interactions are largely with your fellow pilgrims who speak English. Since English is the lingua franca, this will include not only the English, Australians, and Americans, but also the many northern Europeans on the caminos. Largely excluded from speaking the lingua franca, beyond the Spanish, are the French, Italians, and Scots. The experience will be very different, of course, if you speak Spanish yourself, because the Spanish are invariably friendly and eager to interact. Nothing can help you with the Scots, however.

The walking on the Frances is rarely difficult, so you'll probably walk more than you now think possible. The first stage through the Pyrenees, and then weeks later, a stiff climb to the ridge separating Leon from Galicia, will leave you winded enough, but the remaining miles are fairly flat (especially across the Meseta), or through rolling hills. Occasionally, the trail steepens, but rarely for more than a few hundred yards.

The journey is more like walking through the East Bay Hills, along the Skyline Trail in Tilden and Redwood (or other well-traveled regional park), than along the Pacific Crest Trail in the Sierras. In general, the trail itself more resembles a logging road or a fire trail – smooth and easy-walking -- than a rocky single-track, although there are some stretches of that, too.

Much of it, however, approximately 30%, is paved. Usually, the paved part is over rural back roads, where there is little or no traffic, but there are occasional stretches of a few miles where you're walking along a busy road, and of course, every few hours you pass through a village or town where you walk straight down Main Street.

You won't be alone on the Camino Frances. Even in the most rural areas, you will rarely be out of sight of other people for more than a few minutes. Again, think a Sunday afternoon's hike along the trails of a Bay Area regional park.

Finally, just as many different caminos comprise the Camino de Santiago, even the individual caminos, like the Frances, are comprised of different ways, with detours, scenic alternatives, and short cuts. In this respect as in others, the Way has many ways.

Who walks the Camino?

Lots of people, and more each year.

According to the Pilgrim office in Santiago, the number of people reaching Santiago and receiving the Compostela (the certificate of completion awarded if you walk at least the last 100 kilometers) increased from 55,000 in 2000 to 192,000 in 2012, when we started, to 301,000 in 2017, with 60% of those in 2017 traveling the Camino Frances. These figures do not include anyone who did not finish in Santiago, but walked only other parts of the Frances or the other caminos. If all pilgrims are included, the number walking the caminos each year is much higher. Just during the three year span in which we walked the Camino Frances, the overall increase in pilgrims was 37%.

Interestingly, however, growth on the Frances seems to have slowed, increasing only nominally from 2015 to 2017. In fact, if we exclude the very crowded (and increasingly crowded) final section on the Frances, from Sarria to Santiago, traffic on the Frances actually decreased over the last two years. But while traffic on the Frances has slowed, the number of Pilgrims walking other caminos, notably the Portuguese, continues to rise dramatically.

According to the official statistics, Spaniards comprised 44% of those receiving the Compostela in 2017. My subjective impression was that the Spaniards tended to walk only the last part of the Frances, or walked other caminos altogether, for they seemed less in evidence on most of the Frances than the statistics reflect. Following the Spaniards, in order, were Italians, Germans, Americans (at 5.8%), Portuguese, and French. In our travels, we also ran into plenty of English, Australians, Canadians, Koreans, and other northern Europeans. We encountered no Africans, no Arabs (but two Israelis!), a sprinkling of South and Central Americans, and virtually no Asians except for the Koreans.

The number of American pilgrims has increased dramatically in the last six years, probably because of the popularity of Martin Sheen's "The Way," first distributed in the U.S. in late 2011. In that base year of 2011, only 2.0% (3681) of those receiving the Compostela were Americans. The next year the numbers almost doubled (to 7068 Americans, or 3.7% of the total). By 2017, as noted above, Americans comprised 5.8% of those receiving the Compostela (17,522 in all). In absolute numbers, that's almost a five-fold increase in American pilgrims in the space of six years. Although no figures are available on where those Americans came from, they seemed to us to represent a wide swath of the country rather than the places you might expect, like California or New York. Still, even with the dramatic increase, Americans will represent a small minority of the people you meet.

There's an impressive age span of people on the Camino – kids walking with their parents, octogenarians, or 20 and 30 somethings who treat the Camino as one long and cheap party. Officially, 28% of those receiving the Compostela in 2017 were under 30, 55% were between 30 and 60, and 17% were over 60. The percentage of women on the Camino has

increased dramatically over the last 20 years, with the ratio of men to women now effectively 1:1. Since like tends to attract like, you will undoubtedly meet more people in your cohort than these numbers reflect.

People travel the Camino for different reasons. A lot of people are in transition – taking a gap year after university, or heading into retirement – figuring that a 50 or 500 mile stroll is just the time to figure IT all out. Many still walk for religious, or at least spiritual reasons, but except for a group of Lithuanians bearing a life-sized cross and carrying an effigy of Our Savior, and a random dude counting his rosary beads as he walked, we encountered few people who wore their religion on their sleeves. If you stop in for a mass, though, you may be surprised to see many of your fellow travelers dabbing holy water on their foreheads. The good thing about Catholics, though, is that they're not Protestant. Because they have confession and redemption, they can sin as much as they like.

And then there was us, and perhaps the majority of our fellow travelers, who mostly fancied a long walk, good companionship, cheap red wine and 10 euro pilgrim meals.

What Is So Special About the Camino?

If you're looking only for beautiful landscapes, stunning panoramas, incredible art, and great food --- go to Italy.

So why the Camino? What draws me, and keeps drawing me to it? Why am I obsessed with trying to capture its spirit?

For me, it is the fellowship that comes when you take off on a long journey by yourself or with your partner, and then discover that you're really part of a community that is doing it together. It's a community, first, of your fellow pilgrims, a constantly shifting group of people heading to the same destination, often meeting up at the breaks and in the evenings, sharing stories, adventures, histories, tips on the road ahead, and mostly support, both literal when you break down and more metaphysical, too, helping you on your Way.

Our community on the Frances was a kaleidoscope of people: the hard-partying English group who took over our hotel in Puente La Reina and invited us to share their fun. The Swiss hostel owner who steered us to a great Italian restaurant in Sarria, and kept ordering more bottles of wine. The young German woman who joined us that night, and shared her frustrations about her boy friend who didn't want to have a child. The quiet Italian medical student with whom we shared dinner in a dot of a town on the Meseta. The unassuming, almost bumbling woman walking alone who had one mishap after another and then revealed to us that she was the Deputy Chief of Police of a large Chicago suburb. The new friends we walked with and ate with, day after day, with whom we still keep in touch.

Our community also included the Spanish who live or work on the caminos, who became like our pit crew, fueling us, nourishing us, helping us on your way, almost like they were going on the journey, too. I remember the school kids at the trail-side way-station dispensing free fruit and juice. The old man who came up to us when we looked dazed and confused outside Burgos, and guided us back to the trail. The woman in her house who thrust open her window as we passed, gesticulating broadly to make sure we didn't miss our turn. Or another woman at a crossroad, who steered us away from one path as "peligroso," then ran into her house to fetch us some pears from her tree. There were the staff and the doctors at a medical clinic who treated my wife's blisters as though they were life-threatening injuries, and when we flashed our credit card to pay, waved us off with —– "Buen Camino."

"Buen Camino." It's the universal salute. We wish you a good journey. Every pilgrim you pass – no matter how lost in thought – greets you with it. So, too, it seems, does everyone else. A severe lady dressed in black on a street in Pamplona. A teenager with a nose ring. Very quickly, that "Buen Camino" seeps into your soul so you can't help but use it yourself. And mean it.

And of course, the Camino is also the scenery, and the history, and the architecture, and the art, and the sheer physical pleasure of the walk.

But you can go lots of places for that.

To Plan or Not To Plan

The beauty of the Frances is that you don't have to plan. Anything. Or nearly so. You could literally show up at the train station in Madrid (ok, you need to go to the right station, which we didn't), and take the next train to any of the many places along the Frances that are accessible by train. Once you arrive at your destination, a local will point you to the Camino itself. You don't even have to ask, since you'll be identifiable by your backpack, and the lost look on your face.

And then start walking.

Nor need you reserve a hotel room, or a hostel bed – we never met anyone who wound up sleeping outside against his will – so each day you can walk as far or as little as you want. You might stumble upon a charming place at 11 AM, and decide on the spot you want to spend the whole day there. Or else walk until 7 in the evening just because you feel like it.

In other words, unlike any vacation you've ever taken before, you don't have to think about what you're going to do today. Every morning you just get up. And walk. West. Day after day.

Eat, sleep, walk, repeat.

Indeed, your only constraint will be the time you have available, and the plane reservations you make, meaning you need to end up in a place from which you can get back to Madrid, or wherever your plane leaves from. But even that is not hard, since no place on the Frances is more than a local bus ride away from a town or city with train service to Madrid.

Inevitably, you'll do some planning anyway. If you're not going to do the whole route, you're probably not going to show up at the Madrid train station and buy a ticket to the next available town on the Camino. You'll pick a segment in advance. That's almost certain, even if you wind up walking more or less of that segment than you thought you would do. This was true for us on all of our trips to the Frances, and subsequent trips to others.

And some planning, at least, does have its advantages. If you've only got a limited amount of time, for example, you'll probably want to pick a part of the Frances whose terrain appeals to you. Do you want to spend a week walking across Kansas? Probably not, so if you have limited time, you sure as hell don't want to start in Burgos, the gateway to the Meseta, even though Burgos, by itself, might be the most interesting city on the Frances. Similarly, if you hate hot weather, you don't want to walk the Frances in July or August, when temperatures routinely soar into the 90's.

Nor, in all likelihood, do you want to arrive at your starting point, after traveling for 24 hours or more from the Bay Area, and then have to scramble for a place to stay. You'll want to arrange that in advance, especially if your starting point is in the beginning, at St. Jean, where lots of other people start. (For suggestions on starting points and how to reach them, see section, below, on Shorter Stints, starting at p.30).

Later on, you'll also find that some towns are chokepoints, the only place with lodging in a ten mile stretch. And that village only has 40 beds available. No harm in calling the night before to secure yourself a room or a bed. Otherwise, you're in a race with your fellow pilgrims to get there first, or else you risk spending the night on the floor of the local gymnasium, or hailing a cab to the next or previous town.

But no need to get carried away with yourself. Even if you do decide to reserve lodgings in advance, we never found that you needed to do so more than a day in advance. In fact, many places won't even take reservations more than a few days in advance, because the reservations are extremely informal (What's your name? Andy. Ok, Andy, Hasta mañana).

So – a little planning is ok, just don't get carried away with it.

And remember, one of the beautiful things about the caminos is that you don't have to stick with any one way of doing it. You can plan some of the time, wing it at others. There are no rules.

In Case You Ignore My Previous Advice

Most of you reading this are going to ignore my advice about planning. I know it; you know it. After a life spent planning your next bathroom break, you're not about to go off to Spain for a month on a lark. You're going to plan every frigging inch of your journey (or at least try), even though at the end you're going to kick yourself for being such an anal retentive asshole.

After all, if you weren't into obsessive planning, you wouldn't have read so far.

So what follows are some tips on how to plan, and resources for planning.

Number one is Brierley. That's John Brierley's guide to the Camino de Santiago (i.e. Camino Frances), and his separate one on the Camino Finisterre, if you're continuing past Santiago. Brierley also has a further guide that just covers the Sarria – Santiago stretch on the Frances. Brierley is updated every year, and since Camino accommodations are constantly changing, make sure you get the latest one, always available through the Camino Forum, discussed below, which offers fast and cheap shipping. Make sure, also, you get the complete edition, rather than the separately-published maps only edition.

Brierley is terrific on giving you the bigger picture – the Camino's history and significance -- and he also has the most comprehensive lodging listings, with individual town maps to steer you through the urban mazes and show you exactly where the accommodations are. On the route itself, his directions are usually impeccable, he always gives you elevation profiles, and his maps are clear and useful. I especially appreciated his scenic alternatives to the generally accepted main way, which sometimes follows busy roads or passes through industrial wastelands on the outskirts of the larger towns and cities. Brierley only lists phone numbers for accommodations. E-mail addresses can be found in some of the apps or websites mentioned below. A caution: The endpoints for Brierley's stages, which are largely the same as in other guidebooks, can get very crowded with pilgrims, so don't hesitate to break them up if you want more of a taste for the "authentic" Spain (whatever the hell that is).

Second: Join the Camino Forum. https://www.caminodesantiago.me/. That's an English-language web forum, run by a Spaniard, Ivar Renke, who lives in Santiago. (You can also ship your extra luggage to Ivar in Santiago, and he'll hold it until your arrival). Every question anyone has ever had has been asked and answered on the Camino Forum:

"What's the cheapest way to get to Pamplona on public transportation?" or "Where do you pee in the middle of the Meseta?" The great thing about reading it is that you'll discover there's people even more paranoid and more obsessed than you are. With even dumber questions.

You can also get your Pilgrim's Passport from the Camino Forum for a nominal sum, or for free, from the American Friends of the Camino. You'll need that passport for access to albergues (hostels) along the route, and to get your Compostela in Santiago. It also gives you discounts at many other places, even hotels.

Brierley served all my needs on the Frances, as well as on the Caminos Finisterre and Portuguese, which he covers in other guidebooks. But for our later trips to the Caminos Primitivo, Norte and Ingles, I was forced to look further afield, so here are my favorites of the other resources I uncovered. All of the following also cover the Frances, and unlike Brierley, are available in electronic form, either as downloadable apps or pdfs, or over the internet.

Insofar as these other resources cover accommodations, some give e-mail and web addresses, as well as phone numbers, and some provide more detail on accommodations than does Brierley (How big is it? Does it have a lounge, or a garden, or a bar, or washing machines? Etc.). Unfortunately, as you will see, no one source includes everything you might want. But here they are:

The publications of the Confraternity of Saint James in London. (www.csj.org.uk).
Their compact books are like Brierley light. No pictures, few maps or graphics, but precise route information, with practical pointers on what to hit and what to miss, and good terse route and town highlights. Phone numbers only for lodgings.

The Spanish web-site Gronze (www.gronze.com) Although this is in Spanish, it is easily gleaned for specific information, and if you open it in Google Chrome, Google Translate will render it into passable English. Gronze is basically the Bible for the Camino – with route and town information, rough maps, elevation profiles, and probably the most comprehensive listing of all types of lodgings - though with little descriptive information on each one. Websites and email addresses, where known, are also included, and there is a direct link to booking.com. Information is not available offline, but you can easily download specific sections when you have an internet connection. Gronze is constantly updated, and is thus the best source for the latest information on route changes, or new or closed lodgings, etc.

Wise Pilgrim app. Very user-friendly app, especially helpful for its descriptive information on individual places to stay, both albergues and hotels / pensiones. Most content is also available off-line. Includes e-mail addresses, where known, and also a direct link to booking.com, if you're on-line. The Wise Pilgrim guide is now available in a paper edition, too, most easily from the Camino Forum store.

Booking.com. The go-to site for making reservations. Often includes private albergues as well as pensions and hotels. Several caveats, though: First, most places offer only a few rooms on booking.com, so even if a place is listed as "sold out," it often is not, so if you have a hankering after a particular place, contact it separately by e-mail or phone (best). Second, don't try to reserve too far in advance, because most places only list rooms with booking.com a few days or weeks in advance. (I've read lots of panicky posts on the Camino Forum because a hotel supposedly has no availability for next year). Third, you may or may not get a better price on booking.com. I often check the booking.com price first, then call directly. If the place then quotes me a higher price, I tell them I can get it cheaper on booking.com. Inevitably, they'll match the lower price.

Most important booking.com caveat: lots of places, especially the simpler pensions, don't list at all on booking.com, so you'll miss out on a lot of good places if you rely on it exclusively. As discussed below – see p.43 - these places are often best reserved with a phone call. (Another advantage of reserving by phone is the reservation is usually cancellable up to the last minute. Pay careful attention to the booking.com cancellation policy on your particular reservation).

Booking.com (and Tripadvisor) also offer reviews. I trust the booking.com reviews more because they're written by people who actually stayed at the place. Tripadvisor reviews are easily fabricated. In any event, mine reviews for specific information ("I loved the Hotel de Ville because it was right next to a lively bar with great music until 3 AM." Perhaps not the place you're looking for if you're planning to hit the trail at 7).

GPS tracks and online maps: I promise you that you cannot get lost on the Frances. But if you're the kind of person who can't navigate to the mailbox without staring at your phone, you can download maps of Spain onto either Google maps or maps.me, and once downloaded, you can then use them without data. Personally, I find maps.me more useful on the Camino, because if you're really paranoid about getting lost, you can download a track of the Frances or any other camino directly onto it (much harder to do with Google maps). The Dutch Confraternity of St. James has created GPS tracks of all the caminos, which can most easily be found in the Resources section of the Camino Forum. Look for "GPS tracks of all Spanish caminos in one file." With the downloaded map on your phone, you can then safely stumble your way down the Camino, with no need whatsoever to look at your surroundings.

While I never used GPS to navigate on the Frances, I do find it useful to bookmark the location of my lodgings (if I've made a reservation) on maps.me , so I can head directly to them when I reach the town of my destination without wasting time searching around. Insofar as Google maps has an advantage over maps.me, it is for the wealth of auxiliary information found there, such as the location of individual restaurants, or a particular bank, or a pharmacy, so if I need something specific, I'll just talk into my Google app. and ask it for "Pharmacy near me" or "Liberbank near me" (no withdrawal fees).

Turning to transportation planning: the guidebooks and the apps won't help you much on how you get to your starting point, or how to get from place to place on the Camino once you're there – for example, if you want to leap-frog a section, or you need to get back to a major city in order to return to Madrid or Barcelona.

For general trip planning, whether to get from point to point on the Camino, or anywhere else in the world, I typically turn first to www.Rome2rio.com, which will match you up with the itineraries -- often including a combination of buses and trains -- to get you from place to place. It lists prices, too, and has links to the relevant bus or train company.

Rome2rio is not infallible, however, sometimes missing local bus lines, so I often do a separate search on Google, as well – for example, "How do I get from Fromista to Burgos?" Typically, that will take you to the relevant threads on the Camino Forum (which you could also search independently), and often to other sites, too. You might also get lucky with bla bla car, an on-line ride-sharing service, which is kind of like organized hitchhiking.

Major cities are linked by rail, often with super-fast trains, via Renfe, the Spanish national railroad. Its website, also in English, is www.renfe.com/EN/viajeros/. Train information is also available at www.raileurope.com. Spanish trains are modern and reliable.

On the fast trains, reserve in advance, as seats can sell out. And the earlier you reserve, the cheaper the tickets will be. On our third trip to the Frances, we arrived at the train station in Madrid (after first going to the wrong station, as I said before), planning to go to Fromista by way of Palencia, but the fast train to Palencia was sold out. It turned out not to be a problem, as there was another train leaving at much the same time to another intermediate town, Valladolid, where we wound up transferring to the same local train to Fromista that also passed through Palencia. But I was worried for a bit, as I had three days of room reservations lined up.

Yet another reason to not get too obsessive with your planning. Shit happens.

Check out buses as well. The main bus line, equivalent to Greyhound, is ALSA, with comfortable coaches and an easily navigable website (www.alsa.es/en). ALSA buses connect the larger cities, often with schedules and prices better than the trains. Smaller bus lines link the smaller towns. Rome2rio, Google, or the Camino Forum should lead you to the right one. If connecting between larger cities, it doesn't hurt to get your ticket a day in advance through the appropriate web site. For example, when going from Santiago to Oviedo, the start of the Camino Primitivo, we showed up at the bus station an hour before departure and got the last two tickets. The guy in back of us had to wait for the next bus, hours later. This is not a worry on the smaller lines, which often don't offer advance tickets.

Finally, there's the option if you find yourself overwhelmed, or are too lazy to plan, but too chicken to take the plunge without one: pay someone to do it for you. At a cost of only two to five times what you'd spend to make the arrangements yourself, many companies will

arrange a custom-made Camino for you depending on the time you have available, making all hotel arrangements for you and transporting your bags from place to place so you can arrive refreshed at the end of your day. I have no personal experience with any of these companies, but some I've heard mentioned are Sherpa Tours, Caminoways, Macs Adventures, and On Foot Holidays.

Just don't confess that to me if that's what you choose to do.

To Hump or Not To Hump.

There's two ways to walk the Way: you either hump your own bag, or you don't. But like with most things on the Camino, there's variations among these two ways.

Humping your own bag is the simple way. You just throw it on your back and walk. And you don't have to worry about meeting it at the end of the day. Doing it this way, of course, entitles you to maximum smugness points. Which are not to be sneezed at.

The other extreme is the wimp way, where you don't carry it at all. Not that I'm judging you, of course. Everyone has his way. . .

You can do the wimp way in several ways. First, you can contract with one of the companies mentioned above that arranges every inch of your Camino, and which picks up your bags each morning and deposits them at your destination each evening. That way, you can even carry your jewelry and make-up, so you can look chill each evening.

Then there's the modified wimp way – wimp out when you choose. Several companies along the Frances, Jacotrans and Correos being the best known ones, will pick up and deliver your bags on an ad hoc basis. Use them when you want; carry your own bag when you don't. (You can also arrange with them to transport your bags for your entire camino). Jacotrans and Correos pick up at every hotel and albergue along the Frances. If you use them on an ad hoc basis, all you do is fill out an envelope in the morning before you leave, indicating the town you're headed to and a specific hotel or albergue in that town. Then you stick a 5 euro note inside, tie the envelope to your pack or bag, and the bag will be waiting for you when you arrive. For more information: www.jacotrans.es/en or www.elcaminoconcorreos.com. Both companies are extremely reliable, and will communicate with you in English.

A big advantage of the modified wimp way is that it's there when you want it, so you can not be a wimp at least some of the time. And it's a great alternative - and even an acceptable one - when you hurt yourself, and offloading your bag for a few days is the only way you can continue. (These words turned out prophetic in 2018, when my wife, Kate, hurt her back on the Camino del Norte).

Lodging: Sex vs. Communal Living.

There are two certainties about lodging on the Camino Frances: there are only two five-star hotels, and even staying just in hotels or pensions, it's hard to spend much more than 60 euros on any other place to stay.

If you like lots of snoring and farting (beyond that of your partner), have no interest in sex, and don't mind stumbling past strangers in the middle of the night when you need to take a piss, you can stay in the albergues (hostels).

Most people do, from teenagers who can't keep it zipped up to geezers even older than my wife and I.

Most every village has its albergue, and bigger towns have several. They come in all stripes -- charming, ramshackle, clean, less so, modern, and antiquated -- but they always have one thing in common. You will be sharing your room with a stranger. Sometimes only one, generally 4 – 10, but on one occasion at least, more than 100 (the municipal albergue in Roncesvalles, the first town on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees). Bunk beds predominate, so if you typically get up to pee in the middle of the night, just hope that you get in early enough to grab a bottom bunk.

The advantages of the albergues are numerous. They're cheap, sometimes just a donativo, typically 5 or 10 euros a bed. You get to meet a lot of fellow pilgrims, which is a big part of what the Camino is all about. You also learn to shed your false modesty.

The albergues also cater exclusively to pilgrims, so you'll find amenities you may not find in a hotel, often washing machines and always a place to hang your laundry, sometimes a real computer you can rent for a half-hour for a euro, or a sympathetic ear and helping hand when you or your equipment breaks down. Most albergues also have a lounge area of some sort, often a bar, and sometimes an outside patio where you can kick it with your fellow pilgrims, share stories, tips, and sympathetic murmurings – all while munching a bocadillo and a beer, or two or three.

Many of the albergues, especially in the smaller towns, also offer an evening meal (more about these later), and breakfast the next morning, which can be a big advantage if you're heading out before dawn and nothing else is open. Many also have a kitchen, where you can prepare your own dinner.

In sum, albergues offer a communal experience you won't find elsewhere. (For a more personal glimpse of albergue life, see the notes of our pilgrim friend, Tom Musolf, pasted in below, starting at p.50).

There are two basic types of albergues: municipal, and private. The municipal albergues run around 5 euros a bed, the private albergues are around 10 euros a bed.

Quality doesn't necessarily correspond to type. Some of the nicest albergues are the municipal ones in Galicia, which are run by the province and are spanking modern and clean.

There's one important difference between the municipal and private albergues. You can make reservations in advance at the private ones. If you're reasonably sure of where you're going to stay the next night, this can be a real advantage, as you'll know you won't have to scramble for a bed, or race your fellow pilgrims to arrive first at the day's destination.

On the other hand, even if you have a reservation, don't show up too late, because if you're not at your destination by 3:00 or 4:00 PM and don't call to alert them, you may find that the bed or room has been released to someone else.

But as I said above, no one ever sleeps unwillingly outside. If all the albergues and hotels are full, someone will always find you a place to stay, even if it's just a rude mattress on the floor of the elementary school auditorium. (Remember Rule #3, above: Because the caminos are the economic lifeblood of northern Spain, the Spanish take care of their pilgrims).

The alternative to the albergues is private rooms, either in the albergues themselves or in hotels or pensions. Brierley, Gronze and Wise Pilgrim identify the albergues which have private rooms. These share the advantages of the albergues – the communal spirit of the Camino – while still offering the privacy of hotel rooms. Sometimes, these private rooms are as spare and simple as the dorm rooms, and share a bath with other rooms. In other places, they are indistinguishable from a hotel room, and may even occupy a wing or building separate from the rest of the albergue. Cost of a private room for two in an albergue generally ranges from 25 – 40 euros for the room. This may not be much more than the 20 euros you could pay for two beds in a dorm room.

Then there are actual hotels – confusingly called hostals – and the pensions. Like in the States, these range all over the map, but you can count on two things: your room will be spotlessly clean, and almost without exception, you'll pay less than you pay in the States for the meanest Motel 6.

Prices for a room for two in a hotel or pension generally range from 30 – 55 euros, with the pensions being at the lowest end of the price scale, though not particularly different in quality. (As far as I can tell, the only difference between a hotel and a pension is that the front desk in a pension is likely to be at the counter of the bar or restaurant downstairs). On a few occasions in the larger cities we paid as much as 60 – 65 euros, but there are really only two possibilities for paying more -- the paradors in Leon and Santiago. These are super-luxury hotels carved out of historical palaces and run by the Spanish government. (The one in Leon is featured in Martin Sheen's "The Way"). But even the paradors can be had at a reasonable price; we ran into someone who reserved the Leon parador on booking.com and paid 105 euros.

Hotels and pension sometimes serve meals, often not. But if you stay in one, nothing prevents you from taking your dinner in a nearby albergue and sharing in the communal Camino spirit. And breakfast at the nearby albergue may be your only option before 7 AM, which is when we liked to hit the road.

A sub-set of the hotels / hostals is the Casa Rurales (identified by Brierley as CR). These are not always confined to rural areas, and are typically smaller than hotels. Most often, they have an outdoor space of some sort, and generally serve an evening meal, usually communally, plus breakfast the next morning. Prices are in the upper-middle range for hotels, around 50 – 55 euros. They feel much like b&b's in the states, but with dinner, too. Unsurprisingly, like hotels in general, the CR's cater to the Jacotrans and guided-tour crowd, but even they are people, too.

A final tip on lodging. If you're going the private room / hotel route, but are still trying to be economical, don't automatically avoid the three or four-star hotels. These don't exist at all in the smaller villages and towns, but are plentiful in the bigger towns and cities. We found out that the price difference between a no-star hotel and a three or four-star one was sometimes insubstantial. For example, we went through Logrono twice. The first time, we stayed at a no-star hotel, where our room faced on an air-shaft, the beds resembled camp cots, and the price was 59 euros. Some friends we had made on the trail stumbled into a luxury businessperson three-star hotel, which was perfectly situated, had double-paned windows, plenty of outlets, real soap, king-sized beds, and air-conditioning. They paid one euro more. We didn't make the same mistake when we returned to Logrono the following year. We found the same to be true in Burgos and Astorga, where we stayed in "luxury" hotels which were only a few euros more than pensions. And ask for a pilgrim discount!

Also, if you're reserving in advance, the three and four-star hotels are always bookable through booking.com, or have their own websites, typically in English. Also, these will usually be staffed by someone who speaks English. On the other hand, if you rely entirely on booking.com or hotel web sites, you'll miss out on a whole range of accommodations where reservations are made the old-fashioned way – by phone. See the Idiot's Guide To Making a Reservation, p.43, below.

With respect to hotels and pensions, one day's planning is generally sufficient. Outside of the busy final Sarria – Santiago stretch, few pilgrims are competing for that room, and even there, we had no problems.

Overall, remember again that the beautiful thing on the Camino is you're not locked into any one way – unless you choose to have your entire trip arranged for you. You can stay in albergues some of the time, then switch over to a hotel if you need a night's privacy or tire of your roommates' snoring. Or vice versa, if you feel too isolated in hotels and long for that communal experience of the albergues.

The Camino entertains many ways.

Food: Dried-up pork or overcooked trout?

Lots of people ask me about the food on the Frances, undoubtedly expecting me to wax rhapsodic.

Unfortunately, your two best meals will be on your first day in France, and your last days in Galicia -- in many ways, also a separate country. But if you don't start in France, or end up in Galicia, you're in for a world of hurt.

First of all, don't expect tapas and Sangria. The former's not a northern Spain thing; the latter is a summer drink only.

Don't expect fresh produce either. Northern Spain grows mostly feed crops – wheat and corn – and your fresh garden salad will be iceberg lettuce leaves topped with a dollop of canned tuna. (In Spain, tuna is a vegetable. Don't ask). Don't look for much fresh beef, veal, or lamb either. Except for some sheep in the Pyrenees, and cattle in Galicia, you won't pass any animals that don't have snouts and grunt.

Breakfast ain't so hot either. Usually some toasted bread and coffee at your albergue, or a tortilla (more like a potato and egg pancake than a Mexican tortilla) at a bar.

While the Spanish don't eat dinner until 9 or 10 PM, establishments along the Frances usually cater to pilgrim eating habits, so you'll generally have no trouble finding dinner at 7 or so (again, Spain takes care of its pilgrims).

Typically, you'll eat a pilgrim meal, served not just in the albergues but most restaurants as well. This consists of three courses – a starter, a main course, and dessert. Plus wine, usually a bottle for two people, but in the more chintzy places, only a glass per person. Total cost per person, including wine, tax, and tip: 10 – 13 euros. You'll always have some choice, albeit limited. As a starter, there's generally soup or salad (with the tuna fish), and maybe a few local choices. The main course inevitably includes pork loin, and some fish, like hake (cod) or trout (where the trout comes from I never found out), and again, a few local choices. Desert is dried out cake or ice cream in a plastic container.

Quality ranges from awful to pretty good. If you're not in Galicia or France, don't expect better too often, although we got lucky a few times at Casa Rurales, where proprietors tend to fuss more over their guests, and care about their reputations.

Best thing is the wine, which is smooth and incredibly cheap. In a bar – their equivalent of a café – a glass will set you back one euro. If you want another full bottle with dinner, beyond your normal ration, you'll rarely pay more than four euros. A beer will set you back two euros.

In the small towns, you won't find anything significantly more expensive than what you pay for a pilgrim's meal, although in a proper restaurant, you could also order a la carte. My

wife, Kate, often did, since she doesn't need three courses, and a typical a la carte dish, more substantial than the portion you'll get with a pilgrim's meal, ran 5 – 9 euros.

In the cities, of course, you can escape the pilgrim's meals, but not necessarily the quality. Prices remain reasonable, and you can still find a 10 euro pilgrim meal, or menu del dia. The most we ever paid, on a celebratory splurge with friends when we reached Santiago, was 50 euros for the two of us. Including tax and tip, naturally.

As to lunch, Spain completely shuts down from 1:30 or 2 until 5 or 5:30 in the afternoons. You can, however, generally pick up a bocadillo (sandwich) or some tortilla in bars, which, along the Frances, often stay open through the siestas. An alternative is to pick up some lunch fixings in a mercado. But remember to stop before 1:30, if that's your plan.

Another alternative is to cook for yourself. Most of the municipal albergues, and many of the private ones have cooking facilities, so many pilgrims pick up fixings in the local mercado and cook themselves up a storm.

Just remember: you're not doing it for the food.

Gear: Can I survive without my makeup?

After humping over the Pyrenees on our first day, my wife, Kate, and I happily settled into a bar in Roncesvalles for an evening of drinking. There, we met two 40-something women on sabbatical from their families in Shaker Heights who were just starting out the next day. The conversation turned to gear, and one of the women boasted about how light her pack was – 32 pounds. Since Kate's pack and mine together didn't weigh that much, I gaspingly spit up my beer and asked her what she was carrying: "Well, other than my makeup, hardly anything at all."

Everyone has his way, I tried to tell myself. If you're really wedded to your makeup, bring it by all means. Of course, you'd be fucking crazy. And you won't be carrying it past tomorrow, unless someone is carrying your stuff for you.

For, in fact, there's only one way when it comes to gear: the light way.

At bottom, everyone recognizes that the light way is the right way, but there's a huge psychological barrier that prevents us from embracing it. And that is fear of the unknown, which leads to the "what if's?" What if I need my ankle brace? What if I need a warmer jacket? What if I can't sleep at night? What if I get constipated? What if I finish my book? What if I go into a restaurant and everyone's dressed up?

When the fears, and the "what ifs" hit, remember – again - rule #3 above. The caminos are the lifeblood of northern Spain. Their livelihood depends on keeping you safe, happy, and supplied. Every little village, for example, has its pharmacy, where you can stock up on all

your personal and medical needs. These are run by real pharmacists – not gum-chewing teen-agers – who even dispense drugs that are available here only on prescription. Those pharmacists have dealt with every possible form of trouble that can befall you on the Camino. And they'll help you.

Remember, too: Spain is not a third world country. Every town of any size can supply you with anything you might need if you didn't bring it with you, or if you run out. That goes not only for your medical and personal needs, but clothing, equipment, boots.

The fear of the unknown is normal. But the caminos, especially the Frances, are like a cocoon in which you'll be warm and safe. If you put aside the "what ifs?", and take only what you're absolutely sure you'll need, you'll be infinitely happier.

In fact, I never met a pilgrim who told me, "I wish I had brought . . ." Conversely, I never met anyone who didn't tell me about something he really didn't need. On my third trip, for example, I carried two unnecessary clothespins, an extra stick of suntan lotion, and an unused pair of wool socks.

That list may sound ridiculous -- a surplus clothespin? -- but you need to be ruthless. Every fraction of an ounce counts when you're carrying stuff for days, weeks or a month on end. Get yourself a postal scale. Weigh your different T-shirt options. Count every clothespin. Literally. Albergues generally have clothespins, but if you elect to carry your own, you need five of them, not seven or eight – one for each sock, one for your underpants, two for your shirt.

The oft-quoted rule is carry not more than 10% of your **ideal** body weight – meaning if you're packing too many pounds, you don't get a pass on how much you can carry. The 10% rule doesn't include water or some snacks, which will add a few pounds. And remember, too, when you're on the trail, don't burden yourself with too much water and snacks. I made that mistake myself, starting off sometimes with 2 liters of water -- 4.4 pounds -- plus some apples, cheese, and bread, even though there was a village, and grocery stores, only 5 kilometers down the road. Personally, I think even the 10% rule is excessive, because it can serve as an excuse to overload yourself. Unless you're really lazy, there's no reason you should be carrying more than 15 pounds — no matter how big you are.

Going light is not that hard if you're disciplined about it. (This is the part where I throw out the window everything I said about not planning). Your feet, shoulders, back and hips will thank you, though I'm still waiting for my wife to do so.

Break down your needs into categories: clothing, electronics, personal care / first aid, miscellaneous. Let's start with clothing, since even I can't avoid changing my clothes.

Beyond what you're wearing already, here's the clothing you really need, which you will stuff in your pack: two pairs of socks, two pairs of underpants, two t-shirts, one of which could be long-sleeved if you're traveling in cooler months, a sweater or equivalent light

overgarment, a rain jacket, rain pants, a hat, an extra pair of pants, something for your feet other than the boots or shoes you're walking in, and a bandana as a splurge (to blow your nose, wipe the sweat or rain from your face, or shield the back of your neck from the sun). I've even seen people get away with only one change of underwear, but I don't recommend it because when it's really rainy and humid, even your quick-drying underpants may not dry overnight.

Besides just being extra weight, there's really no point in taking more sets of clothes. You're on the Camino, and everyone you encounter will be, too. In no restaurant and no hotel will anyone be wearing skirts, or anything but hiking pants. In fact, if you do see anyone wearing "real clothes", you and your companions can spend the evening at the bar sneering at them and feeling superior. Even if you venture into one of the two super-luxury parador hotels, the dining room will be full of people – yes, including women -- in hiking boots and pants.

Moreover, you don't want to spend your time, after a long day's walking, tracking down a laundromat (assuming one even exists where you've stopped for the night). No, you'll generally be washing things out by hand each day, and there's no economy of scale in washing more than one set of clothes at the same time. Each item must be washed out, wrung out and hung out individually, so doing two t-shirts in one night doesn't save any time over doing one t-shirt in two successive nights. We found it easiest to wash out our dirty clothes as soon as we arrived at our lodgings and showered, or we washed them in the shower with us. Then we put on a clean set for the evening's lounging, which we then sweated up the next day.

Back to the clothes themselves: it goes without saying, or should, that everything you get is lightweight and quick-drying, especially your bodywear. This means synthetic "tech" t-shirts, underpants and socks (not "smart wool"). REI has synthetic, quick-drying underwear and hiking socks that are perfect.

Your other clothes should be equally lightweight. For an overgarment, I favor merino wool or cashmere sweaters, which are extremely warm and lightweight. Wool also doesn't lose its insulating power when it gets sweaty, like down does. And it looks better than a fleece.

Your lightweight rain jacket also does double duty as a real jacket. Because it is not porous, it traps the heat, so wearing a sweater underneath it, I was warm enough even when pre-dawn temperatures were in the low 40's. (Some people take a rain poncho instead, but I prefer my rain jacket because the poncho can't do double duty. Even I would feel stupid sitting outside at a bar on a cool evening wearing a poncho).

Also doing double duty are your extra pair of socks, which function fine as gloves.

Jeans, cotton chinos, flannel shirts or cotton sweatshirts are an absolute no-no. Besides being heavy, cotton sucks up moisture, so cotton clothes are useless when wet and take days to dry out. The last thing you want to be wearing is wet cotton underpants.

Specialized lightweight hiking pants are a must. My first pair, which I wear for the actual hiking, has zip-off leggings, so they can double as shorts. My other pair, which is more expensive and better tailored, I reserve for the evenings. Hiking pants also wick off moisture, and dry out almost instantaneously, so if you don't like rain pants, you can wear them through most rainstorms. Instead of a second pair of hiking pants, Kate took a pair of running tights. It's the principle that counts -- light-weight, quick-drying – not the particulars.

The shoes or boots you wear on the trail are your own choice, but there are some things to bear in mind. First, there's no really rugged walking, and many people do fine in sneakers, or trail runners (Kate), or even hiking sandals. Personally, I prefer light hiking boots. Secondly, unless you're only walking a week or so, you're almost certain to hit rain, and maybe lots of it if you're walking in Galicia, or anywhere outside of high summer. So be prepared, or at least be prepared not to be prepared. Third, in inverse relation to your tennis rating, your shoe size will go up as you grow older, so if you haven't bought new hiking shoes for two years, better make sure they still fit. Kate didn't, and paid the price.

The equally important choice with footwear is what second pair goes into your pack. Here, again, you make up your mind, but the choice is always weight vs. comfort and utility. You can do without a second pair, as I did on my first Camino, but then you'll spend the evening of your first rainy day walking around in wet shoes, or else barefoot. One option for a second pair is sturdy sandals, like Tevas. You can actually wear these on the trail, if you get blisters for example, but they do weigh a ton. As for me, I first tried flip-flops, which made my feet dry up and crack because I couldn't wear socks under them. Ultimately, I settled on a pair of knock-off Tevas that I could wear with socks, and although they were much flimsier than the real things, they were less than 1/2 the weight, and they only set me back $20 at Target. (I also greased the bottoms of my feet with Vaseline, which helped immensely). As a second pair of footwear, Kate took rubber "post workout" sandals.

A hat is the last more or less mandatory item of clothes. It warms you, and protects you from the sun and the rain. There are two schools of thought here, too – the baseball hat or the floppy hat. Since you'll always be walking west, the sun will either be behind you (solar noon is not until past 2PM in Spain), or on your left, and the floppy hat will protect you better from the sun to the left. On my first three trips, however, I opted for the baseball cap, because it works better in the rain. You can wear it under your rain hood, and the baseball cap's visor keeps the hood, as well as the rain itself, off your face. Worn backwards, it also protects your neck against the morning sun. On subsequent trips, though, after my dermatologist had cut out half my face and read me the riot act about the sun, I did buy a wide-brimmed hat, which actually worked better than I anticipated under my rain hood.

My wife, who is rich, got the best of both worlds by splurging $40 at REI on a baseball cap with a snap-off front and side flap. However, since she hates looking geeky even more than she hates sun on her neck, she never wore it.

That's all you need for clothes. If something unexpected happens, you can buy it there.

Once you get all your clothes together, stuff them in your pack and weigh it. Take 10% of your body weight, and then subtract the weight of your now-loaded pack. Convince yourself that that's all you have left for everything else. It helps if you limit your pack size to 30 or 35 cubic liters. That way, you can't stuff in too much extra junk, plus a small pack itself weighs less than a bigger one.

Now we're ready for electronics. Here's where you can really load yourself down. I'm not going to convince you to leave behind your smart-phone, so may as well throw it in. But don't take a heavy reserve battery, because it's not going to be on that much. After that, what do you really need? You may be a fanatic photographer, but is it really worth a pound or three to carry your super-duper SLR instead of relying on your phone camera? Ditto with a tablet. Nowadays, there's virtually nothing you can do on a tablet that you can't do on a smart-phone. Plus, if you need to do something complicated, like write a long travelogue to your friends back home, a large number of the albergues and hotels have desktops for rent at a euro for a ½ hour. The smart-phone can also contain all your guidebooks – though not Brierley, which doesn't come in electronic format. (More specifics on phones and adaptors below, at p.41).

Personal care and first aid is another trap. Remember - yet again - that the commerce on the Camino revolves around servicing the pilgrims. This means that you will pass five pharmacies every day whose principal business is treating pilgrims' blisters. The pharmacists who personally staff them are more like doctors than pharmacists in the States, and they know blisters like Dr. Christian Bernard knew hearts. So why would you want to take 30 days' worth of moleskin? Take enough to protect you until you get to the next pharmacy, rarely more than a few hours ahead. There, you'll find a remedy – Compeed -- that's twice as good as the moleskin you're carrying. And you don't even need to speak Spanish to the pharmacist. Just point down to your feet. She'll know.

Ditto with all first aid supplies – bandages, ointments, sleeping pills, ibuprofen, etc. Take only what you need to cover you to the next pharmacy. Don't take anything at all if it's not something you use all the time, unless it's something you're almost certain to use on the Camino, like that bit of tape or a few bandages, or some ibuprofen for the first days' aches. For example, I take a small jar of Vaseline because I use it several times a day on my dry hands and feet, but don't bother with anti-fungal cream which I use occasionally if I contract athlete's foot.

Remember: shit will happen, but since you can't predict its form, don't obsess about being prepared for every possible eventuality. If you do, you'll be too loaded down to walk, and then are almost sure to develop blisters, the #1 form of shit happening on the Camino.

Personal items follow the same rule. Take the smallest possible quantity of toothpaste, deodorant, dental floss, sun screen. Buy more when you run out. You could consider letting your beard grow, but if you don't, carry a couple of super-flimsy throw-away plastic razors. Those metal Gillette Fusions weigh a ton, even if you take the battery out. And even the travel size shaving cream weighs a few ounces. Take shaving oil instead (Somerset's, available on-line and sometimes at Walgreens). In a month, I used less than half of a tiny ½ ounce bottle.

But don't forget some toilet paper! Ain't no portapotties on the Frances. Nowhere.

When you've packed everything above, you're ready to go, but inevitably, there will be things you just can't leave behind. First, figure out again how much more weight is left in your 10% quota. Then just line up all that extra stuff you think you need and cram it into your pack. And weigh it again.

Then start eliminating.

Everyone will have his own sense of what "extras" he or she might want, so I won't spell out all the possible things that might be useful. Here, by way of example only, is the "extra" stuff I carried on one or more of our three longer caminos, which ranged between 25 and 42 days of walking.

But please don't use this list of "extras" as a guide to what you should carry. I offer it only to show you all the extra stuff you could carry if you are ruthless about otherwise keeping the weight down. Except for plastic baggies, none of the items listed below accompanied me on all our trips, so I could, and did, survive fine without everything mentioned.

And even though I hit my 10% quota on our first long camino, I continued to be ruthless, eventually shrinking my pack weight down from 6 kilograms, or 13.2 pounds, to just under 10 pounds (4.5 kg) on our last and longest camino of 42 days walking. Here's the list:

Head lamp, and one set of extra batteries. I took this only on the one trip which stretched well into October, when the sun wasn't rising until after 8:00 and even 8:30. A head lamp is heavy, so think long and hard before taking one. You'll be able to see well enough ½ hour before dawn, so check the sunrise tables, and if you're not going to be an early bird, and traveling in October, leave it home. If you do find you need one, you can buy it there.

Kindle. For supplementary guidebooks and reading material. Kate didn't bother, and used the kindle app on her phone. I can't go to the bathroom without a book, so I thought this was a necessity for me. Ultimately, I re-thought.

Pack fly. Keeps the rain off.

Quart and larger plastic baggies to keep things separate and also dry. Kitchen-sized garbage bag to keep clothes dry.

Gloves. Depends on the season and how cold your fingers get.

Compass. Not for navigating on the trail, but in the maze of Spanish cities.

Clothes pins for hanging laundry, and safety pins to fly them off the back of my pack.

String for a clothesline.

Very tiny journal to make notes, plus two pens.

Two handkerchiefs. My nose runs like a faucet in cold weather.

Oakland A's rally towel, which was succeeded on later trips by a microfiber camping towel that REI sold me for about the same price as a night in a Spanish hotel. This was the smallest possible towel I could use to dry myself, when our lodgings didn't provide towels. A towel is a must in the albergues.

Super-flimsy mini day pack. Mine was just a thin nylon thing that was six inches deep, zipped up and weighed no more than an ounce or two. Useful for walking around town to carry a water bottle, my guidebook, a bit of a snack, and my kindle. Lots of equivalents, like a string shoulder bag.

Tiny scissors.

Silk sleeping bag liner. Not necessary if you're staying exclusively in hotels or private rooms in albergues, which come with sheets (sometimes disposable paper ones). A necessity if you're staying in dorm rooms in albergues, because usually you'll get blankets only. Also called a sleep sheet. Silk is the lightest.

Hydration system - fancy name for a plastic water pouch with a straw so you don't have to take off your pack to reach your water bottle. Kate's pack had this as a built-in.

Flashlight – keychain size. Useful for stumbling to the bathroom in the middle of the night.

Two hotel-sized bars of soap. Even many hotels have only liquid soap, and albergues typically don't provide soap at all.

And that's it. (See Appendix B for complete packing list).

Note that we did not carry hiking poles on the Frances. While many, maybe even a majority of people did, we did fine without them. We felt that there simply weren't enough significant uphills or downhills to justify the extra weight and the hassle of carrying them around. You also can't take hiking poles as carry-on baggage, and we have a deathly fear of checked baggage not arriving with us. But each to his own.

Three final tips on gear:

First: If you're thinking of shipping some of your gear ahead from time to time, pack a large, lightweight sleeping bag stuff sack or a couple of heavy-duty garbage bags, and use that to ship your extra gear. That way you'll have your empty pack available to carry the few things you'll still need to carry, like water, your valuables, maybe a snack, and a sweater and your rain gear, if the weather is not promising. An added benefit of doing this is that your fellow travelers, not knowing your pack is empty, will never realize that you're really a wimp.

Second: If you're carrying a paper guidebook, such as Brierley, tear out the pages you don't need. Paper is heavy! I actually carried Brierley in my pants pocket, because I referred to him often, not so much for directions but for information on the passing countryside and on route alternatives.

Third: If, overall, you find that you're carrying too much, you can ship stuff ahead to Ivar Renke, the guy who runs the Camino Forum, or to any Spanish post office, which will hold packages for a month. There are instructions for how to do this on the Camino Forum. (See p.44, below, for what to do with your gear if your Camino is part of a longer vacation).

Two things I can guarantee you about gear. You won't listen to me, and you'll tell me later, "I should have listened to you."

But try first to leave your fears behind, and banish the "what if's?"

Our Camino

By now, you've probably grocked to the fact that I'm not as dogmatic as I pretend to be. Only 90%. And in fact, after five trips, we're still groping for the right way to do the Way.

My wife, Kate, and I did the Caminos Frances and Finisterre (the Frances' western extension) over the course of three progressively longer trips: five days walking in 2012, 11 days the next year, then 25 days in 2015. All these trips started in September, with the last one finishing late in October. In May, 2017, we returned to the caminos and in the course of 26 days, we walked the Caminos Portuguese and Primitivo. The next year, we tackled the Norte, even longer than the Frances, and then tacked on a few days on the Ingles, because we couldn't stop walking. (More on these latter trips in 2017 and 2018 Updates, below) In the course of our five trips, we covered more than 1400 miles in 107 days of walking.

On the Frances itself, we typically walked 14 - 15 miles a day, spread out over 6 hours of walking and 30 minutes or so of breaks. Since we did the Frances over the course of three trips, we never felt the need for rest days, though then and later, we often gave ourselves a break by breaking up the longer stages.

Throughout our trips on the Frances, we always packed our own gear, but we did ship our packs ahead on one particularly strenuous stage on the Camino Primitivo. (We saw some 30-somethings do it, and we figured if they could do it, we could, too). By necessity on the Norte, when Kate's back gave out, we also had to ship her pack then.

Our first trip on the Frances, from Pamplona to Navarrete, just beyond Logrono, was absolutely spur of the moment and unplanned. (You really can do it!) Kate was going to Barcelona on business and I tagged along. Neither of us had ever been to Spain, or knew a word of Spanish, but after our kids finally fled the nest (more or less) we discovered the pleasure of walking vacations, where you walk all or much of the day, then settle into a country inn for a relaxed evening of eating, drinking, and socializing with the locals. In previous years, we had taken week long trips like this to Tuscany, and through the Cotswolds in England.

So before leaving for Spain, I googled "walking in Spain," and of course, the first two million hits featured the Camino de Santiago.

We had no religious mission, and knew little about the Camino's historical role. We just liked to walk. Planning-wise, I did nothing more than figure out a logical stretch for a five day walk, with a starting point reachable from Barcelona. That turned out to be the 60 mile segment on the Frances from Pamplona to Logrono. We didn't even have a guidebook devoted to the Camino. I stuffed into my pocket a ten page section on the Camino ripped out of a guidebook to all Spain that I found in our hotel in Barcelona.

On that trip, we simply showed up at the train station in Barcelona, bought a round trip ticket to Pamplona and took off. (It didn't even occur to me to buy a ticket to Pamplona, and then a return from Logrono. That's how little I researched things. Later, in Logrono, we were able to make the exchange).

In Pamplona, we stopped first at the tourist office, got a list of hotels, and took a room at the first one on the list. The next morning, our host steered us to the Camino and we started walking.

We never consulted a map, never made a reservation. We just walked for 5 – 7 hours each day, following the yellow arrows and our fellow pilgrims, and then plopped down in a town with a hotel. There was no hassle ever finding a room, but I often obsessed over the process – wasting a lot of time walking from lodging to lodging to find the "best" one.

We figured we would require five days to get to Logrono, taking it easy at 12 miles a day. In fact, the walking was easier than we anticipated and we reached Logrono in only four days. On our fifth day, we did a half-day's walk without gear to Navarrete, and returned by local bus to Logrono for the last night, where there was a harvest festival in progress. (Actually, I returned by local bus to Logrono. Kate, who's a marathon runner, handed her fanny pack off to me and ran back. I beat her, but not by much).

In many ways, that first year, we were clueless. We never hit the trail before 9:00, for example, and wound up walking in the heat of the day. Had we been staying in albergues, lodging might have been problematic as well, because, as we later learned, they can fill up by mid-afternoon.

But with hotels, there was never a problem.

Even after five days, we were hooked on the Camino. It was everything I described above: the fellowship, the friends we made, the easy rhythm of the trail, the long relaxed evenings, and especially, the "Buen Caminos." We were seduced, too, by the history, the art, the idea of the journey.

So the next year, 2013, we came back for more, a further 11 days of walking. We were both still working, and two weeks' vacation was all we could spare. This time, we started at the Frances' beginning, in St. Jean in France. To reach St. Jean, we flew to Paris from San Francisco, transferred planes (and airports) for a flight to Biarritz, then took the Bourricot Pilgrim's shuttle to St. Jean.

From St. Jean, we made it to Pamplona in three days, then leap-frogged by bus over the segment we had done the previous year -- Pamplona to Navarrete, just beyond Logrono. From Navarrete we continued another eight days to Fromista, three days past Burgos in the Meseta, and from there we took a train back to Madrid.

Doing a longer stretch only doubled the pleasure. We made more friends, drank more wine, relaxed more and more into the Way.

With experience and knowledge, we changed some things. Principally, we got up earlier, hitting the trail most days by 7:00, before first light, which comes very late in Spain. Typically, we'd take a half-hour break after three hours or so of walking, have a second breakfast or early lunch, then hit the trail for another three hours, usually arriving at our destination between 1:00 and 2:00. Getting up early ensured that we'd beat the worst of the afternoon heat. It also meant that we would get somewhere before the stores closed for siesta, and that there would be a bed waiting for us at an albergue or hotel if we didn't make a reservation. Arriving early, we also had the leisure to explore the local towns, and to while away the late afternoons and evenings in the bars with our new friends.

We stayed in private rooms the whole time again. This time, though, we discovered that the private albergues often offered private rooms, and when we could, we stayed in them rather than hotels. This enabled us to share the communal aspect of the albergues while still having privacy. Even when we stayed in hotels, we sometimes wandered over to an albergue for dinner.

The other major change we made was to make reservations in advance. I didn't particularly do this because we had to (although it certainly saved us some hassles at the choke points described above). Rather, for us, it was simpler and less stressful. We had Brierley's

guidebook this time, so we always had a pretty good idea of where we would end up the next day, plus a list of accommodations. On our first trip we had wasted a lot of time and energy wandering around a new town until we found a place to stay. This time, just by calling ahead, we knew where we would be staying and so just headed there upon arrival. Making reservations was especially useful in the cities and larger towns, where the choices are numerous and one could waste hours wandering around for the "perfect" lodging. By and large the places we wound up in were as good as any choices we would have made had we waited until we arrived. (See p.43, below, on the mechanics of making a reservation).

By the end of the second trip, we knew we had to come back one more time to complete the Frances. On the spot, we made the decision that in 2015, when we would both be past 65 and eligible for Medicare, we would retire and take as much time as we needed to finish. And we did. I closed down my law office in August, 2015; Kate quit her job at ACT, San Francisco's theater company, several weeks later.

This time, we chose late September to start. We hoped to beat the heat and the summer crowds. We succeeded in the first goal, but there was still no shortage of people on the trail, at least for the first few weeks. (I later read that while July and August are the busiest months for arrivals in Santiago, May and September are the biggest months for departures from St. Jean).

On this third trip, we flew to Madrid, and from there took a train the next afternoon to Fromista, where we had left off two years before. As reported above, the train trip was our first adventure, since we went to the wrong train station first, and then, after scrambling crosstown to the right one, we found that the train we wanted was sold out.

Once we did make it to Fromista, and started walking, it felt like we had never been away, and we immediately fell into the rhythm of the trail. Overall, we repeated the patterns from our second trip. We were on the trail by 7:00, and after six hours walking, plus breaks, we typically arrived at our destination between 1:00 and 2:00 – which again allowed for a lot of time to relax, explore, and socialize. Towards the end of this third trip, on the Camino Finisterre after Santiago, where dawn did not arrive until 8:30 or even 9:00, we did ease up on this early reveille, not getting on the trail until 7:30 or past 8:00 at the very end.

We also learned to break up the standard stages found in Brierley and most other guidebooks. This enabled us to discover some charming Spanish towns less touched by the hordes of pilgrims.

If we made one mistake this time, however, it was planning too much and not allowing ourselves to deviate from the plan. For two years, we knew we were heading back to the Camino, and this gave me too much time to obsess on arrangements. I became a fanatic for making reservations days in advance. This was simply stupid. I also spent way too much time figuring out the "best" place to stay in the towns up ahead. (TripAdvisor is a trap).

This often led us to get caught up in the drive of pushing on to the next destination, rather than slowing down to smell the flowers. For example, we arrived one afternoon in the tiny and charming village of O'Cebreiro in a driving rainstorm. O'Cebreiro sits at the top of the ridge that separates Leon from Galicia. The next day promised 15 kilometers (9+ miles) of ridge walking, affording perhaps the most spectacular sustained panorama along the entire length of the Frances. The forecast was for more heavy rain in the morning, and clearing after noon.

Programmed as we were, however, it never even occurred to us to sleep in, enjoy the comforts of our cozy inn in the morning, then set out the next day around noon. And sure enough, we set out before dawn as usual, spent the morning getting drenched, and saw nothing of the lovely valleys which stretched below the ridge.

But we did get to our next stop "on time." For what that was worth.

At least we learned a lesson from that. As we approached Santiago, we discovered that there was really no pressure for lodgings, so we reserved only a day in advance at most, and even cancelled reservations when we arrived at a place that seemed less than promising. The ease of finding accommodations surprised us, as the Camino became extremely crowded with "newbies" who joined the Camino at Sarria – just outside the 100 km. point -- so they could get their Compostela, the certificate of completion, in Santiago. After having walked from St. Jean, we resented them. The Germans became a particular fixation for us. A group of 500 of them arrived in monstrous tour buses, then moved in packs, with the tour buses trailing them on nearby roads, in case someone needed some r&r.

Here is where my allegiance to "everyone has his way" broke down – everyone but THEM.

But we were determined to be mellow, so we ignored the newbies as much as possible on these last stages before Santiago. (Though, of course, we found that even the newbies were people – when we condescended to talk with them).

Towards the end, we also took more "long cuts" -- for example, to see the incredible 9th century monastery in Samos or our way to Sarria.

Some good did also come from always "pushing on" in the first weeks, in that we didn't use up the extra days we had built in as rest days or emergency stops. This gave us plenty of time to really savor the Camino Finisterre, the stretch past Santiago to Finisterre and Muxia on the Atlantic Ocean. For us, this was both the prettiest and the most tranquil stretch we covered on this third trip, and we took a leisurely six days to cover Brierley's four stages.

On the Camino Finisterre, we also went back to our original modus vivendi of not making reservations at all.

In another nice way, we found that our end was in the beginning. On the first morning of this third trip, we met an American couple from nearby Sunnyvale in a bar in Fromista

where we stopped for coffee at 6:30 AM. We hit it off with them, but only crossed paths once or twice thereafter. But almost a month later, at the very end of our journey, we ran into them waiting for the bus that would take us from Muxia back to Santiago.

We journeyed together to Santiago. When we arrived, we parted with – what else – "Buen Camino."

And it was.

Shorter Stints on the Camino and How to Reach Your Starting Point

Most of us Americans, with our two week vacations, will not choose to walk the entire Camino Frances in one stretch, since it takes a minimum of a month.

So what stretch to do in a limited amount of time? (As you read here, the map on the last page might be helpful).

Many people with only a week or less available choose to start near the end, in Sarria, which is 110 kilometers (68 miles) from Santiago. Completing that stretch entitles you to the Compostela, that coveted merit badge to hang up next to your law school diploma.

But be warned. This is not a serene walk in the park. In September, 2017, for example, more than 30,000 people walked this stretch. That's more than 1000 people a day walking with you – way busier than the rest of the Frances.

And although the Galician countryside through which you'll pass is scenic, civilization does crowd in more heavily than on most of the rest of the Frances, with numerous towns and busy roads nearby, especially on the last three stages. Also, many of the popular stopping points on this stretch – Sarria itself, Melide, Arzua, and Pedrouzo – are downright ugly. And, it rains a lot all year long in Galicia.

On the other hand, YOU'LL never know this, because you won't have anything to compare it to. And this stage can be fun, especially if you're new to the Camino and haven't learned that real fun comes only from enduring weeks of crappy pilgrims' meals, bloody feet, and bedbugs. In reality, all the newbies like you bring fresh energy to the Camino, creating a parade-like atmosphere on the last march into Santiago. (Of course, in my self-righteous disdain of newbies, I only make this admission reluctantly).

However ---- if you are looking for more tranquility, and have transcended the need for further merit badges (easy for me to say, since I already have four Compostelas hanging next to my law school diploma), there are many other pleasant stretches on the Frances to do in a limited amount of time.

Beginning in the beginning, in St. Jean, has its many advantages – the principal one being that it sets you up nicely for when you get hooked on the Frances and want to return. The stretch over the Pyrenees is gorgeous, and the succeeding stages through the Basque country and Navarre thereafter, are wonderfully pleasant. St. Jean to Pamplona is three stages, and it's four more stages on to Logrono. Both Pamplona and Logrono are major cities, easily reached from either Madrid or Barcelona, and are well worth exploring. (See Top Recommendations, p.33, for how to break up the first, arduous stage over the Pyrenees).

Or for a good, short introduction to the Frances, just cut out the first three stages, and walk the 60 mile, four stage stretch from Pamplona to Logrono. This was our first Camino. Besides the charms of Pamplona and Logrono, the countryside in between these cities, through the province of Navarre, will remind you of Tuscany. The larger intermediate towns are all also attractive stop-overs.

You can, of course, extend this stretch in either direction, two stages back to Roncesvalles on the Spanish side of the Pyrenees, for example, or a few stages beyond Logrono. Local buses run from Pamplona to Roncesvalles, and back to Logrono from the succeeding towns.

The five stages (76 miles) from Logrono to Burgos form another attractive stretch to be done in less than a week, again through Tuscan-like countryside, which gets a bit more severe as you approach Burgos and the beginning of the Meseta. To us, Burgos was the most attractive city on the Camino, outside maybe Santiago itself.

You could easily tack on another three stages past Burgos, to Fromista, from which you can return directly to Madrid. This will give you a taste of the Meseta. This stretch from Burgos to Fromista is more rugged (and to me, more interesting), than the Meseta's succeeding stretch, reminding me of the Arizona or South Dakota badlands more than Kansas.

If you're into big sky and prairie, the Meseta does have its severe beauty, and the dawns are spectacular. Overall, it stretches eight stages from Burgos to Leon, and then another two stages to Astorga.

But if you want to give the Meseta a miss entirely, start in Astorga (or two days back, in Leon, for a small taste of the Meseta). Astorga is a gem of a small city, with a fantastic central square for relaxing and a Gaudi palace that looks like it belongs in Disneyland. After Astorga, the countryside becomes greener and wetter as we near the Cordillera Cantabrica mountains that separate the provinces of Castile and Leon from Galicia. From Astorga, it is six stages to Sarria (we stretched it to seven), and then another five to Santiago.

Many think that this stretch after Astorga, especially between Astorga and Sarria, is the loveliest. Two days past Astorga, the Camino climbs to its highest point, just beyond Rabenal (not a difficult climb, however). Two days beyond that, there's a steeper climb of several hours to O'Cebreiro, with spectacular views all around – if it's not socked in –

followed by the descent into Galicia proper. Here, the countryside is like Ireland, lush pasture-land and gentle rolling hills with a climate as wet as Ireland's but with much better food -- lots of fish, and finally, fresh beef and vegetables.

If you want to avoid the crowds on the Sarria – Santiago section, but are intrigued by the attractions of Galicia, you could cut it out entirely, and walk from Leon or Astorga just to Sarria (adding in the wonderful detour to Samos). Or do the Camino Finisterre instead. Or do both stretches, leap-frogging from Sarria to Santiago.

The Camino Finisterre starts in Santiago and heads westward to Finisterre on the Atlantic, then north along the coast to Muxia. It's kind of a triangle route, so you could also walk Santiago to Muxia, then south to Finisterre. And / or back from one of these two endpoints to Santiago. It's about 75 miles in all, one way. (Buses link Muxia and Finisterre to Santiago).

Brierley divides the Camino Finisterre into four stages, but we had lots of time left over, and took a leisurely six days to walk Santiago – Finisterre – Muxia. The countryside is gorgeous – green and rolling – the walking is easy over good paths, and the first glimpse of the sea, especially after having walked many miles, is breathtaking. It also has an unhurried and uncrowded tranquility that is sometimes missing on the rest of the Camino Frances, especially that last, crowded stretch from Sarria to Santiago. And, If you really crave that Compostella, you can walk the Camino Finisterre backwards from Muxia to Finisterre (or Finisterre to Muxia), then on to Santiago.

In terms of getting to these starting points, St. Jean, the beginning of the Frances, is best reached by train or plane from Paris to the adjoining cities of Biarritz and Bayonne in southwestern France, from where you pick up local transportation to St. Jean. If you fly, the airport is in Biarritz, from which the Bourricot pilgrim shuttle will transport you directly to St. Jean. If coming by train, get off in Bayonne, and connect to the local train to St. Jean.

If you insist on reaching St. Jean from the Spanish side (because you flew into Madrid or Barcelona), you can go from either of those cities by rail or bus to Pamplona, and from there pick up a bus run by ALSA or Conda to St. Jean. But the service from Pamplona to St. Jean is only seasonal, so be sure to check out the schedule before booking a flight to Spain.

If you're starting other than in St. Jean, most Camino places will be best accessed from Spanish cities. From east to west, at least 11 other destinations on the Frances have direct train (and usually bus) service to Madrid. They are: Pamplona, Logrono, Burgos, Fromista, Sahagun, Villadangos, Villavante, Astorga, Ponferrada, Sarria, and Santiago. On the eastern part of the Frances, Pamplona and Logrono can also be easily reached from Barcelona. If you're doing only the Sarria – Santiago stretch, however, check out going first to London or Paris, to which there are far more non-stops from the U.S. than to Madrid, and then connecting to Santiago via plentiful and cheap flights on EasyJet, Vueling, or Ryanair. From Santiago, there are frequent buses to Sarria, via Lugo, or you could even take a cab.

As noted above, specific train information can be found on Renfe's web site, www.renfe.com or at www.raileurope.com. For ALSA, Spain's equivalent of Greyhound, consult www.alsa.es. If ALSA doesn't turn up an itinerary, especially for links involving the smaller towns, do a Google search, or an inquiry on the Camino Forum, which will quickly lead you to the many other bus lines operating on the Frances.

Our Top Recommendations

Inevitably, you'll make your own decisions, starting with how much of the Frances you're going to do, and how much of it you walk every day. All I can do is point out the alternatives as I see them – planning or hanging loose, albergues vs. hotels, carrying your own gear or not.

So here I'll share with you the absolute best choices that we made, which turned out to be absolutely right for us -- and maybe for you, too. I give only a few, and they're random, as you will see. Further "Suggestions" are in the next section.

1. Get Brierley. I explained this above, so won't further sing his praises, other than to particularly recommend his scenic alternatives. See recommendation #3, below, for example. But, as I said before, don't hesitate to break up his stages, and take only the parts you need. Paper is heavy!

2. Hit St. Jean on the fly. The first stage of the Frances, from St. Jean Pied de Port in France to Roncesvalles in Spain, is the toughest. It's 16 miles and climbs over 4000 feet. There are also no intermediate towns. The walking is easy, on country lanes or smooth paths, but still . . . . To avoid doing it in one long day, we took the suggestion of some travelers we met on an earlier trip, and never stopped at St. Jean. Instead, after arriving there late in the afternoon, following a 24 hour journey from the west coast, we immediately started walking. 5.4 kilometers (3.3 miles) up the road is a lovely inn, Auberge Ferme Ithurburia, which has both private and dorm rooms, and serves the best dinner you'll get for the next 450 miles. (Maybe because you're still in France). Reservations are definitely recommended, and can now be made on booking.com. The rooms were as nice as any we had on the Frances, with sliding glass doors onto private balconies and gorgeous views across the Pyrenees. At the communal dinner, you'll have your first taste of your fellow pilgrims. Cost for the room, dinner for two, breakfast the next morning, and a sandwich we got for the journey ahead was 88 euros in 2013. (Because there are no services between St. Jean and Roncesvalles, the end of this stage, you'll need to supply yourself with some lunch or snacks before setting out).

While it may sound crazy to set off like this after traveling for so long, it really helps to rid your head of the accumulated cobwebs, and although it's a steep climb uphill, it won't take

more than 1 ½ hours. After your walk, your shower, and dinner, you'll sleep soundly. And if you arrive earlier in the day in St. Jean, after a shorter journey, it makes even more sense to hit the trail right away.

We also were happy to skip the busyness of St. Jean, which is a charming town but overrun with tourists and pilgrims. For us, the tranquility of Ferme Ithurburia set the right mood for the journey ahead.

The huge advantage of this is that it cuts out about 25% of your climb the following day, turning it from potentially brutal to merely tough.

There are two further possibilities for breaking up the first stage. The first is Orisson, an albergue with dorm rooms only, that is 1.5 miles beyond Ferme Ithurburia. Reservations are a must.

The second is the alternate route to Roncesvalles, which follows the main road, and traverses a lower pass across the Pyrenees. It features a convenient town at the halfway point.

3. Take the park route into Burgos. Some 150 miles beyond St. Jean is Burgos, to us the loveliest city on the Frances outside Santiago. Everyone who approaches Burgos on the standard route describes it as the absolutely worst stretch on the Camino – six or seven miles through an industrial slum and along a traffic-choked highway. This was inexplicable to us as Brierley, and also the other guidebooks, describe a lovely alternative route that follows a ribbon-like park bordering the tranquil river that flows into the heart of Burgos. Nothing but greensward the entire length. Amazingly, we saw no other pilgrims along this route, and never met anyone else one who followed it. Another reason to not get too programmed.

4. Stay at El Molino outside of Hornillos. Hornillos, the next stage past Burgos, is a bit of a choke point, with no alternative stopping points along that stretch of the Camino. Unable to find a private room in town, we elected to stay at El Molino, which is a Casa Rurale about ten miles outside of town. (When you get to Hornillos, you call and the owner will pick you up. He also brings you back to the Camino in the morning). This turned out to be a little piece of paradise, a literal oasis of big trees flanking a tranquil river in the middle of the Meseta, with peacocks strutting around. The owner plied us with a platter of meats and cheeses when we arrived, and dinner that night with our fellow pilgrims was the best we had between St. Jean and Galicia. All the food was home-grown or locally-sourced. Price for two in 2013, including three meals, was 78 euros. If you're looking for a relaxing afternoon, being pampered and just hanging out, this is the place. Lively action there ain't.

Other Suggestions

These don't rise to the level of must-do, or even, should do recommendations. They include a haphazard list of choices made and places stayed that worked out for us, or didn't. After the first two pre-Camino suggestions, the others go in order as you proceed west on the Frances. With respect to our lodging suggestions, these were simply a cut above the rest. But in general, we were happy enough with the places we stayed in.

1. See Martin Sheen's "The Way." Sheen is a devout Catholic, so the movie reeks with a kind of spirituality you might not share. Not to mention it's hokey and contrived. But it's absolutely spot on as to how it actually feels to be on the Camino, the encounters you will have, the landscape through which you pass, and the sheer magnitude of the journey.

2. Get your pilgrim passport before leaving. Most of the albergues require it, and you cannot get a Compostela in Santiago without one. To get the Compostela, you will need to get the passport stamped every day, twice a day over the last 100 km. All hotels and albergues will stamp it for you, as will churches and even many bars. Available from the American Pilgrims on the Camino for free (though they're grateful for your donations), or through the Camino Forum for a modest fee. You can get it also at St. Jean, or some other major cities on the Camino, but it's much easier to get it in advance rather than bucking long lines in St. Jean, or otherwise scrambling to find one. Get one even if you're not going to Santiago or staying in albergues. The stamps are often gorgeous, and it's a great souvenir in the original sense of the word.

3. Take the Bourricot Shuttle from the Biarritz Airport to St. Jean. If you take the train to Bayonne (Biarritz' neighbor) you can connect up with another train that goes right into St. Jean. But if you fly into Biarritz, it doesn't make much sense to take the local bus to the Bayonne train station, and then wait (possibly several hours) for a train to St. Jean. Instead, the Express Bourricot Shuttle meets all the incoming flights. In 2013, we paid 14 euros each, which was within a euro or two of what the combined bus and train would have cost, and was about two hours faster. Reserve in advance. www.expressbourricot.com.

4. St. Jean to Roncesvalles. Take the less steep route down from the summit at Col de Lepoeder. It's a mile longer, but the footing is better and it's a helluva lot easier on the knees (and it's still steep enough!)

5. Logrono – Hotel NH Portales. Good value in up-scale, comfortable hotel, very central and quiet. 60 euros in 2013.

6. San Juan de Ortega (end of Brierley stage 11) – A good place to make a reservation. Classic "choke point" with only the municipal albergue and a casa rurale. We arrived at 12:30, and the albergue was already full, so pushed on a further two miles to Ages.

7. Burgos – Hotel Meson El Cid. Another relatively up-scale comfortable hotel, right by the amazing cathedral. 65 euros in 2013.

8. Castrojeriz – There's an error in Brierley (possibly corrected in later editions). His map places La Taberna, where we stayed, as being in the middle of town. It's not. It's on the approach to town, two kilometers from the center. Bar snacks only, so for a real dinner you're going to have to walk into town, and then back. As a place to stay, it was fine, but not worth an extra four kilometers walking.

9. Stage 16: Fromista to Carrion de los Condes. Brierley's scenic river alternative is pleasant and shaded, and avoids walking by the main road. Worth the extra kilometer.

10. Stage 18: Just past Sahagun, you can choose to go the next 1½ stages either by way of Bercianos, or by way of Calzadilla de los Hermanillos. Since the route via Bercianos borders the road most of the way, we took the option to Calzadilla, which is over a wonderfully remote path straight across the Meseta. Calzadilla itself is also a charming, sleepy little town, almost abandoned. Don't miss the tiny grocery store, where everything found in a Safeway is crammed into a room not 10 feet square.

In Calzadilla, we stayed at Casa el Cura, a very comfortable casa rurale, with a friendly English-speaking hostess and way above average communal dinner. 50 euros (not including dinner). The phone number in the 2015 edition of Brierley is incorrect. Correct phone number is 987 33 7647. Before leaving Calzadilla in the morning, you'll also want something to eat, because the next town – Reliegos – is 11 miles (and if you bypass Reliegos, which is slightly off the route, it's a total of 15 miles to Mansilla). Casa el Cura doesn't serve breakfast until 8:00, so if you're heading out early, take breakfast (a full real breakfast!) at the Via Trajana albergue, which also has private rooms. Breakfast there starts at 7:00.

Note that Calzadilla is another "choke point," with no other towns within six miles on either side. There's approximately 50 beds total at the two albergues and Casa el Cura, so it would be smart to reserve space at either Casa el Cura or Via Trajana. Some French women who hit town around 4:00 wound up sleeping on the floor of the school gymnasium.

11. Stages 20 and 21: Take a local bus into and / or out of Leon, the next major city past Burgos. Having followed Brierley's suggestion to avoid the slog into Burgos through its industrial slums, the approach to Leon from Mansilla became our nightmare. While the first four or five miles is on a dedicated path, it is just to the left of a busy stretch of road, and in the pre-dawn darkness, we faced a continual stream of bright headlights. (We never figured out why all the traffic at 7:00 AM was going out of Leon, a large city, to Mansilla, a much smaller town). The rest of this stage is better, as the path veers from the main road, but the scenery is still grim. Frequent local buses link the two towns. There's no shame in taking one, which will give you more time to explore Leon. (Or at least wait until dawn to start out, so you're not walking into blinding headlights).

Although we didn't follow this suggestion, we did then decide to skip the industrial wasteland that leads out of Leon, and took a local bus for four miles from the center of Leon to the suburb of El Virgen del Camino. From there, the walking becomes much more

tranquil, especially if you then follow Brierley's scenic route via Villar de Mazarife, rather than following the standard route along the road to Villadangos del Paramo (see next suggestion).

Several of our Camino buddies, trailing behind us a day or two, took the bus out of the city, too, and were equally happy they did. Besides leapfrogging a stretch of unattractive urban walking, doing this also makes it easy to push on beyond Brierley's suggested end point for this stage, which then makes the following day's stage, ending in the lovely small city of Astorga, somewhat less than the 18+ miles that it would have been.

Information about the bus is available at the several tourist offices in Leon. They speak English. The last stop on the bus is the intersection with the Camino. Turn right onto the intersecting road and keep on trucking. A few hundred yards down the road you'll come to the option point where you either go straight along the road to Villadangos, or fork off left to Mazarife, as discussed next.

12. Stage 21: After Leon, you have a choice of going to Villadangos del Paramo or to Villar de Mazarife. The route to Mazarife is rural and scenic. The route to Villadangos runs along a busy road. Should be a no-brainer.

If you leapfrog the Leon suburbs going out of town, as suggested above, you can then easily push on past Mazarife, and stay in either Villavante, a very sleepy by-water, or continue a further 2.5 miles to Hospital de Obrigo, a pleasant lively town. Your pick.

13. Astorga. Our favorite small city. Great central plaza and spectacular Gaudi palace. Also a fun chocolate museum. La Paseta was a solid upscale hotel, right off the main plaza. 60 euros in 2015.

14. Stages 25 and 26. These stages, from Molinaseca to Villafranca, and then to O'Cebreiro, total 37 miles, with a steep climb of several hours at the end to reach O'Cebreiro, so we broke the two stages into three. The first night we stayed in Cacabellos, which was more of a "real" working town than many we stayed at. (In the evening we watched the "Giro de Cacabellos", with dozens of kids racing their bikes around the central plaza). Since these stages were relatively short for us, we intended to go the next day to Trabadelo via the Pradela ridgetop alternative suggested by Brierley. But we let ourselves be talked out of this by an old lady at the junction point, who warned us of dangers ahead and "bribed" us to take the standard route by offering her homegrown pears. As it turned out, the standard route was on a blacktop path which ran alongside the main road. Next time . . . . .

15. Stage 28. Triacastella to Sarria. We took the longer route via Samos. I'm not into monasteries in a big way, but this place was special, an enormous sprawling complex dating to the 9th century with amazing (modern) murals. Google the tour times, because they only offer a few each day. Otherwise, you cannot go inside. The walk itself is also wonderfully

tranquil – to us, our first extended taste of the serene beauty of Galicia. (Our first day of sun, too, in a few days).

16. In Sarria, we followed the recommendation of a Swiss pilgrim we met and ate with him and a young German woman at Matias Locanda Italiana, Calle Mayor 4. A wonderful change from pilgrim meals. All local Galician dishes, but served Italian-style. In googling the address, I found out that Tripadvisor rated it number one restaurant in Sarria. So you can blame Tripadvisor, if you don't like it.

17. Avoid Pedrouzo. Pedrouzo is the last of Brierley's stages before Santiago. We found it dreary, with all the albergues and stores strung out along the busy main road. Moreover, it's not even on the Camino, but a short detour away. A Rua, approximately one kilometer before the turn-off to Pedrouzo, is a better bet, with two tranquil pensions / casa rurales – O Acivro and O Pino -- right along the Camino.

18. Santiago. Stay at San Martin Pinario, in the Seminario Mayor, right across the plaza from the cathedral. This is a spectacular 16th century monastery re-purposed as a luxury hotel – for pilgrims! Wonderful lounges and cloisters to relax in, with a 10 euro pilgrim meal served in the former monk's refectory. While the rooms may remind you of your college dormitory, you can't beat the setting and the price - 40 euros for a double room with private bath (2018 price). However, these sharply-discounted pilgrim rates are not available on the hotel's website, or on booking.com. Instead, you must reserve directly with the hotel by phone (34 981 56 02 82), or by e-mail at reservas@sanmartinpinario.eu. English spoken.

19. In Santiago, another great pilgrim meal is to be had at Restaurante Tarara. Calle Carretas 22. Tiny, charming place with all the Galician specialties. Much better than the celebratory "splurge" meal we had on arrival, at 1/3 the cost. In 2018, a three course meal ran 10 euros, including octopus, if you want it, and a full bottle of wine for two people. (From the Cathedral, walk past the parador and make your first right. It's just before the pilgrim office, where you get your Compostela).

20. Finisterre. Take Brierley's scenic route from the center of town to the lighthouse. Otherwise, you're on the road. Be prepared for tourist buses when you arrive. Muxia, 18 miles up the coast, makes for a better end point.

21. Muxia. Another great Galician pilgrim meal at Alvaro, along the harbor.

22. Fly back to the States from London. If you're ending up in Santiago, or nearby, it's just as easy, and cheap, to fly to London, on EasyJet, Ryanair, or Vueling, as it is to fly to Madrid. From London, unlike Madrid, there's lots of cheap non-stop flights to San Francisco or Oakland.

23. Madrid Airport. If, however, you are going home via Madrid, and you have an early morning flight out or don't want to hassle with public transportation or an expensive cab ride from central Madrid, Hotel Don Luis is the place for you. It is a somewhat faded but

well-maintained three star hotel with big, comfortable and quiet rooms. We paid 43 euros when we stayed there in 2015. It's a 15 minute walk to Terminals 1,2,3 (we did it at 4:30 in the morning), and one metro stop from Terminal 4. Or a very short local bus or taxi ride, if you're hauling a bunch of gear. It's actually in Barajas, a working-class neighborhood of Madrid, which happens to border the airport. 100 yards from the hotel is a lively square with lots of restaurant choices. To walk to the airport, ask at the desk how you get to the pedestrian bridge over the freeway.

A Miscellany

The following sections are devoted to a grab-bag of topics. I try to answer the questions I had myself – or should have had, had it ever occurred to me to think about what we were getting into.

<u>How to not kill your spouse</u>.

I do love my wife, but 24/7 for a month?

So here are some crucial coping strategies so you come back together, and in one piece:

1. Walk at different speeds. This, of course, is the best way to not be together 24/7. But there's a technique to it. One spouse can't be faster all the time. Otherwise, you start playing psychological one-up games, and we know where that leads . . .

Nor can you just pretend to be slower or faster. Then you're patronizing your spouse. So you have to find the organic way of separating yourselves. In our case, this was easy, since Kate is descended from mythological Greek creatures who were half mountain goat. Thus, she dominated on the hills with ease, but with her short mountain goat legs, she ceded control to me on the flats.

On the Camino, you will find your own way.

2. Have lots of Facebook friends with whom you must keep in touch. That was Kate's strategy for ignoring me. Mine was to disappear into the hotel or albergue lobby and write long e-mails to my buddies back home on a rent-a-computer.

3. Buy into your spouse's plans. That way, no one needs to feel guilty when the "delightful, waterside inn" one of you has reserved turns out to be a mold-infested dump by the effluent pipe of the sewage plant.

4. Find some amazing characteristic of your spouse so you can brag about him or her to all the new people you meet. For me, this was easy, since Kate is a champion marathon runner. Kate, however, faced insurmountable obstacles.

Should I learn Spanish?

Of course you should. That way you can actually talk to the people you meet. As you'll discover, the Spaniards who walk the Camino don't generally speak English. Nor do many of the albergue proprietors and hotel staff, or the waiters in restaurants and bars. Even the doctor who treated Kate's blisters didn't speak English. An added bonus is that you'll more easily be able to make a reservation for an albergue or hotel by phone, which will give you a lot more options than booking.com.

Nevertheless, even if you don't follow my advice (as you won't), you will survive, just as we did, not speaking a word of Spanish on our first two trips. Remember, again, the Spaniards depend on you for their economic well-being. They will figure out a way to communicate with you. And since you, of course, will depend on them to supply you with your basic needs, you will find a way, too.

You should, however, download a Spanish – English dictionary onto your smartphone, so you don't buy ex-lax instead of Ibuprofen, or unwittingly eat pig's intestines if you're fastidious about such things. (Actually, ignorance is bliss in these matters, but someone might tell you later). Wordreference is a great language app, if you have data available, and Google Translate gets better and better. Reverso Context is another good app, especially for phrases and idioms.

You can also dip your toes into the water. In preparation for our last trip on the Frances, I took Spanish 1 at Berkeley City College, and then followed it up with Spanish 2 before our subsequent trip in 2017. (I also took a class at Berkeley Adult School, but this was less than useless). After even the first semester, I could actually communicate my basis wants: Where's the bathroom? What's for dinner? Gotta room? Of course, I could never understand the torrent of Spanish they came back with. However, in most situations, this didn't matter, since there are only two possible responses to "Gotta room?" And you go from there.

Even after two semesters of Spanish, however, I was never able to communicate my distaste for tuna fish on a salad. There are limits, and one must accept them.

Money on the Camino

The 3 and 4 star hotels will take credit cards. But most other places won't. Thus, always make sure you're carrying enough euros in cash to carry you for a few days. And stock up in

the larger towns, because you won't find an ATM machine in the smaller villages. Your ATM card will work fine in the ATM machines in Spain (you should have a four digit PIN, though). Avoid the banks that charge fees, and don't ask the ATM to convert the withdrawal into dollars. They'll charge you a conversion fee that's stiffer than your bank will charge.

Cost of the Camino

As you've figured out by now, life on the Camino is ridiculously cheap. A bed in an albergue runs 5 – 10 euros per night. Hotels and pensiones are generally in the range of 35 – 55 euros for a room for two. Pilgrims' dinners run 10 – 13 euros, with wine, tax, and tip included. A glass of wine in a bar will set you back one euro, or you can splurge two euros for a beer.

In fact, if you live in a high-priced area like Berkeley, you could rent out your home for a month on Air BNB, and easily make a profit by spending that month on the Camino.

We did the Camino in relative luxury style, staying only in private rooms, and eating out at least breakfast and dinner every day. Occasionally, we got lunch fixings at a grocery, although this wasn't significantly cheaper than a bocadillo at a bar. Nor did we stint on snacks or apertivos -- drinks before dinner.

For a week on our third trip in 2015, I kept a running tab on what the two of us spent. Every dime. In that time, we only exceeded 100 euros once in a day, and that was the day we had our 50 euro dinner splurge and spent 108 euros in all.

And if you stay in albergues at all, you can cut even that expense by 20-30 euros a day.

On that third trip, we spent a total of 31 days in Spain. Excluding the airfare from the States to Madrid, the total cost for the trip, including hotels for two nights in Madrid, internal transportation like our train to Fromista and our airplane flight back to Madrid from Santiago (only slightly more than the train), souvenirs, and anything else you can think of, was less than $3700.

Almost pays to move there forever.

Your smartphone on the Camino.

Nowadays, almost all US smartphones work in Europe, and rural Spain is wired a lot better than rural America.

If you want to use your smartphone for anything other than a camera and a mini-computer hooked up to wi-fi, there are two ways to go. First, and maybe simplest, is to set up a plan with your carrier here. With Verizon, for example, that gets you a bunch of free texts and calls, either within Spain or to / from the States, and a very limited amount of data, like 100

mb. Cost for a month in 2018 was $40. You also get to retain your US phone number, which is an advantage if you need to stay in touch with someone at home. The disadvantage is the limited amount of data; you will need to rely on wi-fi connections to do anything more than send occasional e-mails.

The other way is to buy a SIM card there, which slips easily into your phone and gives you a Spanish phone number. In Madrid, for example, I got a SIM card for 15 euros (good for a month and easily rechargeable online or at outlets everywhere) at the Vodaphone store in the Playa del Sol in Central Madrid, where they also speak English. For that, I got as much calling and texting as I needed, plus a few gb of data, which covered everything other than daily streaming of the A's games. Like here, there's no shortage of cell phone suppliers, who will have equivalent deals. If you need to call to / from the States, you can also pick up a cheap calling card for a few euros.

If you do go the SIM card route, Apple phones are simpler because the SIM card will connect automatically to the data network. Non-Apple phones may need to be manually connected to the network, so make sure they do that for you in the store. And check that they have done so before leaving. Note that the phone and the wi-fi will still work even if the phone is not connected to the data network, so specifically check (with your wi-fi turned off) that you're connecting to the internet.

Kate and I split the difference on this. Her phone, with the Verizon plan, remained an easy link to home; my phone, with a Vodafone SIM card, was more useful for local calling, and accessing the internet on the go.

Adaptors

Your American plug on your phone or any other electronic device won't plug into an outlet in Europe. While European outlets are also two-pronged, the prongs are round instead of flat. You'll need a little connector for your plug, which will accept American prongs on the female end, and have European prongs on the male end. These are available at REI or an electronics store for a few dollars, or on-line through Amazon.

Note that you don't need a bulky voltage converter. Your phones, tablets, and kindles work on European 220 volt currency as well as they do on American 110 volt currency. You also don't need a big universal adaptor. Just that little connector thingy

One trick for when you get the connector: tape it to the American plug. That way, you won't inadvertently pull out the American plug and leave the connector behind in the wall.

Another easy solution is to buy a European adaptor here or in Spain. It will be identical to the adaptor you now use for your phone, with the same USB input on the female end, but the male end will have European prongs instead of American ones. Available on-line and at

most Apple or cell phone stores. Tip: If you buy a European adaptor, look for one with two usb inputs. This lessens the number of adaptors you have to carry, plus Spanish albergues / hotel rooms are often short on outlets.

The Idiot's Guide To Making a Reservation

While more and more places do business through websites or e-mail, or make their rooms available on booking.com, many still don't, and you'll be limiting your choices dramatically if that's the only way you try and make a reservation.

For sure, check if a place is available on booking.com, or has an e-mail address, but the old-fashioned way – making a phone call – will give you far more options. Often, even places which were sold-out on booking.com had availability when I called. Plus, everyone uses booking.com or e-mail because it's easy. So, by making a phone call, you alone will have access to the many places that are still stuck in the 20th century. A further advantage of reserving by phone is that they rarely ask for a credit card, so you're not locked in, as you are if you reserve via booking.com. If your plans change at the last minute, you can always call again to cancel. (But make sure you do so).

Don't be intimidated! We did it; so can you. When you call, ask first, of course, if they speak English. But if they don't, there's really only one phrase you need to know: Tienen una habitacion (dos camas) para manana para dos personas? Do you have a room for two (two beds) for tomorrow? (Type the phrase into Google translate for pronunciation).

Seriously. On our second trip, when we started making reservations, that's all the Spanish I learned. (You can, of course, exchange "manana" for any day of the week, like "lunes" - Monday - by looking it up on Google translate or wordreference). There are only two responses possible to your inquiry. "Completo," which means "full," in which case you say "Gracias" and hang up, or "Nombre", which means "name". If they say "nombre", that means you got the room or the beds, and then you mumble your name. Almost invariably, they only need your first name; it's that informal. Seriously. It works. Once you give them your name, you can safely ignore the torrent of Spanish that will follow. If you're really feeling cocky, you can end the conversation with a cheery "Hasta manana", and hang up. (It did take me a week, however, before I realized that "nombre" meant "name" and not "number." I undoubtedly pissed away a lot of possibilities that first week).

Crazy as this sounds, they never failed to have the reservation when we showed up. Trust the force.

Shipping or Storing Your Extra Gear

Many people will combine their Camino with a longer vacation or trip elsewhere in Europe, as we did on our first Camino. If you do so, you'll probably be carrying stuff you don't need or want on the Camino.

If you're coming back to the same hotel in Madrid (or elsewhere), the solution is simple. Just leave your extra stuff there. Most hotels will store a bag for you. Check in advance, of course.

If you're finishing your Camino in Santiago, and not returning to your original hotel, you can ship your stuff to Ivar Renke, the guy who runs the Camino Forum. Instructions are on the Camino Forum website. You can ship to Ivar both from inside Spain and from abroad.

If you're not finishing in Santiago (or even if you are), the Spanish post office – Correos – is a further option, with their special Pac Peregrino. They will ship your bag to any place on the camino, and then store it for 14 days for free, and for 1 euro a day thereafter. However, you can ship only from a post office in Spain. English-language instructions at http://www.caminoconcorreos.com/en/envio-maletas.php.

Shipping to Ivar, or through the post office, also works if you find yourself with too gear while on the Camino.

A final option is Express Bourricot, the same company that will transport you from the Biarritz Airport to St. Jean. If you're doing the whole of the Frances, Express Bourricot will pick up your bag at any lodgings in St. Jean, and then transport it directly to your lodgings in Santiago. www.expressbourricot.com.

2017 Update: Caminos Portuguese and Primitivo

Even after we finished the Frances in 2015, we couldn't get the Camino out of our blood. So, in May, 2017 we returned to tackle the Caminos Portuguese and Primitivo.

We started with the Portuguese. This runs from Porto, in northern Portugal, due north some 240 kilometers (150 miles) to Santiago. Half is in Portugal and the remainder through Galicia, in Spain. While you can start further south, in Lisbon, the Lisbon – Porto segment is less well-marked and involves a lot of busy road walking. Few people do it.

The Portuguese has two variants. The more-travelled central route runs about 15 miles inland from the Atlantic; a second route runs right along the coast itself, hooking up with the central route near the Spanish border. We waited until we hit Portugal before deciding, opting for the coastal route based on the balmy weather forecast for the days ahead.

We were disappointed. The coast was nowhere near as spectacular as the California coast to which we were accustomed, and we saw no other pilgrims en route with whom to socialize. The coastal towns were dreary, and even the ocean scenery became monotonous.

So, after two days we jumped ship, taking a local bus inland to where we joined the central route. (It pays to be flexible!) Of course, later on, we met people who stuck with the coastal route and loved it for its solitude, and all the things we didn't like about it. (Admittedly, we also jumped ship while still within spitting distance of Porto, so the more remote it got, the more interesting it undoubtedly was).

Each to his own. We preferred the inland route. It was green and fertile, like the latter part of the Frances, was reasonably tranquil, and had plenty – but not too many – other pilgrims with whom to share our journey. Germans and Dutch seemed to predominate, with a crowd that seemed older than on the Frances. We met only two Americans along its entire length, but made lots of new foreign friends.

Accommodations – both albergues and pensiones / hotels – were numerous, and easily reserved only a day in advance, or on a walk-up basis. The Portuguese also speak more English than do the Spanish. Highlight: Casa de Fernanda, wonderfully welcoming albergue, with one private room, halfway between Barcelos and Ponte de Lima. Fernanda speaks English, and she's the mother you always wished for, even though she's young enough to be my daughter. 14 of us at dinner, speaking a babble of 8 different languages, greased along by lots of Fernanda's fire-water.

The walking on the Portuguese was very easy – almost entirely flat in Portugal, and then rolling, like the Frances in Galicia, in the Spanish part. Still, we dawdled, breaking up the longer stages, and taking a leisurely 12 days to cover the 150 miles.

Prices – astonishingly – were even cheaper than Spain. And if you love fish and seafood, you'll be in heaven.

On the down side, there was more pavement walking than on the Frances, though usually on rural byways, and the region in general was more heavily populated than much of the Frances, so you never felt entirely away from civilization.

Our overall reaction was that it was a great beginner's camino – easily traversed over its entire length, well-marked, friendly, with very doable stages, good food and interesting, lively places to stay. Plus, you can get a Compostela without traveling the horribly-crowded Sarria – Santiago stretch on the Frances.

While the Portuguese didn't blow us away, it was the perfect warm-up for what lay ahead – the Camino Primitivo. Primitivo not because it is primitive (although it is relatively so), but because it was the original camino.

The Primitivo branches off from the Northern Camino in Oviedo, near the northern coast of Spain, then cuts down west southwest, traversing the Cantabrica Cordillera mountain range, and meeting up with the Camino Frances in Melide, some 53 kilometers east of Santiago. Its overall length, including the stretch shared with the Frances from Melide to Santiago, is 334 kilometers, or 207 miles.

Several things distinguish it from the Frances. On a day by day basis, there's nearly twice as much climbing, but less than one-tenth the number of people. (Of those earning a Compostela in June, 2017, when we finished the Primitivo, 26205 people walked the Frances, 7428 walked the Portuguese, and 1927 walked the Primitivo).

It's also almost unendingly beautiful. Like the Frances in Galicia, much of the landscape is green and rolling, but the settlements are spaced further apart so it's far more of an uninterrupted rural experience. The hill walking is strenuous, often 2500 – 3000 feet of climbing each day – flattening out only as it nears the last, shared portion with the Frances. But the rewards are great. Even though the mountains top out at only 4000 feet, some parts feel almost Alpine, with only low vegetation and spectacular panoramas on all sides.

We loved it. Because the stages were relatively difficult to break up, most people tended to stop at the same place every night, so we soon felt like we knew everyone walking with us. It helped, too, that only some 30 – 50 people follow a given stage each day, rather than the many hundreds on each stage of the Frances every day.

Even with few people, it didn't feel lonely on the trail, since everyone tends to start around 7:00 AM. The feeling of lots of company can be illusory, however, as we found out one morning when we started after 8:00, and didn't meet a soul for hours.

In general, our fellow travelers were younger, and fitter than on the other caminos. Still, there was no shortage of geezers like us to share aches and pains. Overall, there was less accommodation than on the Frances or Portuguese, but plenty enough, and the only people who scrambled for lodgings occasionally were those who arrived very late in the afternoon. We never had problems making a reservation the day before.

With one exception, we stayed in private rooms, either in albergues or pensiones. The exception came when I screwed up a reservation (my Spanish failed me), and we arrived to find that only dorm rooms were available. But that was hardly a big deal, since the dorm room only had three beds, and our roommate was a young American woman with whom we had become close.

With the exception of Lugo, a city so beautiful that we lingered an extra day to take it all in, most of the stopping points are small, sometimes only dots of towns like on the Meseta on the Frances. This reinforced the feeling of intimacy, since places to drink and dine were few in each town and were invariably full of our fellow pilgrims, who weren't shy about sitting down with us, and vice versa.

Although the walking was far more difficult than on the Portuguese, we actually walked further each day, averaging almost 16 miles a day on the 11 days before we hit the junction with the Frances, when we slowed down and took 3 days to do the last 33 miles. In part, this was due to the length of the stages and our desire to stay in private rooms, but also because it was so exhilarating.

Perhaps the highlight was the so-called Hospitales stage, a spectacular, remote walk to the ridge of the Cordilleras, and as grueling as anything we did on the caminos – 18 miles with 3500 feet of climbing. When we finally hit the first bar that marked the return to civilization, some 15 or 20 of our fellow pilgrims were waiting for us, and cheered us in over the last 100 yards.

Nothing topped that fellowship – and the beer that followed.

2018 Update: Caminos del Norte and Ingles

After 2017's adventures, we thought we were done with the Camino. Other walks beckoned: the Via Francigena in Italy, the Coast-to-Coast in England.

But as winter gave way to spring, we faced up to the fact that we were hooked – incurable Caminoholics.

So this time we plunged in with both feet – El Norte, longer even than the Frances and reputedly twice as hard, with ups and downs to rival the Primitivo. (Gronze.com, the bible of information for the caminos, rates 18 of the Norte's 33 stages as level 3 or harder – moderate to extreme difficulty – while only 5 of the Frances' 33 stages earn such a designation).

And up and down it was – both literally and metaphorically. The climbing was as advertised, although the worst of it was in the first week, through the Basque country to Bilbao, and once we got past that, the challenges were less daunting.

Another "up" was the route's unending beauty. Starting at the French border, the Norte's first 650 kilometers follow Spain's north coast, where green-carpeted mountains descend down to pristine white sand beaches. For an hour or two or three, you're walking on a cliff high above the beach, then you cut upward and inland, through lush pastures, past cows and horses as you climb into the hills, descending eventually to a new beach or town. While the climbs moderate after the first week, the beaches and the countryside never stop to amaze.

Weeks later, at the start of Galicia, the Camino veers inland for the final 150 kilometers to Santiago. The beaches are left behind, but in compensation, the countryside becomes wonderfully remote and takes on a special, serene beauty.

But the Norte had its down moments as well as its ups. Along the coast, in particular, the towns lacked interest. They were tourist towns, plain and simple, whose existence depended on the hordes of beachgoers – Spanish, French, German – who descend upon them in July and August. Even Bilbao was drearier than I expected. Often, there were interesting museums or things to see – I leaned about cave art at Altamira, and elsewhere, about the Indianos, the Spanish who went to Latin America in the 19th and 20th centuries to earn their fortunes – but I rarely felt I was interacting with Spaniards just leading "normal" lives.

In Galicia, it was better, as there was little tourist presence and the pilgrims were not so numerous that they dominated the stopping points, as on the Frances.

There was also a ton of road walking, even though we tried to follow many of the off-road alternatives that have developed in the last few years. Much of the road-walking was on untrafficked rural lanes, which were often preferable to the mud-soaked trails (we had 40 days of gray sky and rain), but too often, especially in the long middle section through Cantabrica and Asturias provinces, the roads hosted real traffic, and even those charming rural lanes seemed often within earshot of an autovia or busy highway.

But the downs never outweighed the ups. The busy roads never lasted long, and the first and last weeks were as beautiful and tranquil as any we had experienced on the caminos. Above all, there was the Pilgrim fellowship – all those friends we made from all over the world. Sadly, many of them split off where the Norte meets the Primitivo, but then we got to make a whole new crop of friends. And an unexpected benefit of walking through tourist towns in the off-season (May) was that accommodations, especially hotels and pensions, were plentiful and heavily discounted. Indeed, while we often stayed in albergues, it was not always the economical option. Plus, the restaurants catered to a more demanding crowd, meaning that the food, while still incredibly cheap, was way better than it had been on the Frances.

As ever, there were unexpected highlights: Gaudi's "El Capricho" house in Comillas, and nextdoor, a Casa Indiano mansion turned museum; the spectacular monasteries where we stayed in Mondonedo and Sobrado dos Monxes; the wonderful solitary walks above the treeline and along the ridge on the way to San Sebastian (rain and all!), and later, between Mondonedo and Gontan; the "Buen Camino" scratched in giant letters on a beach far below us, which appeared suddenly, like a sign from above, at a lull in a driving rainstorm; the proud nationalism in the Basque country; and always, the kindness of strangers.

And unanticipated low points. Two days into the trip, Kate's back gave out entirely, and the only way she could continue was to ship her pack ahead every day. This cut down some on

the spontaneity, as we had to let the courier service know by 8:30 every evening where we were heading the next day (Correos – they were fantastic). But when we made it to Santiago, it only added to the sense of accomplishment. When life gives you lemons . . .

Overall, we took it easy. With no kids, dogs, or jobs to return to, we didn't make a return reservation until a week before we finished, so there was no pressure to be anywhere at any particular time. While we eschewed days off after Bilbao – it was hard to stay still, and the crappy weather didn't encourage lounging outside -- we gave ourselves breaks by throwing in short stages, maybe 15 kilometers instead of 25, and any stage approaching 30 we routinely broke up.

We took 39 days to reach Santiago, and with such a leisurely schedule, we didn't feel worn out at all, so after a day to again soak up the richness of Santiago, we bussed up to Ferrol to explore the first three stages of the Camino Ingles, which stretches 110 kilometers in all. Given that the Ingles affords a good way to get a Compostela without braving the last, crowded 100 kilometers of the Frances, we were surprised at how uncrowded it was, even more so than the Norte. But it was surprisingly hilly, especially in the second and third stages, so perhaps that was the answer. Overall, we found it pleasant, if a bit anodyne.

For us, the Ingles' highlights were actually the towns we stayed in, Pontedeume and Betanzos, which were not overrun with tourists or with pilgrims, so we felt, however accurately, that we were finally observing Spaniards leading "normal" lives, hospitable and friendly but not overly preoccupied with catering to outsiders to gain a livelihood. In Betanzos, in particular, we were totally taken with O Pasatiempo, a kind of Victorian theme park, with crazy grottos, giant stone animals, and cartoon-like drawings depicting the Spanish imperium. It felt like it was designed by Gaudi on acid (though, to me, it always seems like Gaudi's on acid).

Ironically, our last day on the Ingles was the only completely sunny one of all our travels, and in a further bit of irony, the bus stop where we waited for the bus back to Santiago was at a gas station – a fitting climax to 800 kilometers of walking. God's final pranks, perhaps?

And then, barely 12 hours after we returned to Santiago, we were on the airport bus to start the long journey home. No time to decompress, but perhaps that was best.

And next year? Who knows.

Appendix A - Further Notes on Albergue Life

What follows are Tom Musolf's notes on Albergue life. He and his wife, Gwen Smith, are the couple we met on the very first and last days of our final trip to the Frances, and only once in between. They stayed in albergues far more than we did, and offer a vivid portrait of albergue life.

Here's Tom:

Albergue life is interesting and the quality and experience in the albergues is all over the map. One place we stayed had small cubicle rooms with two single beds. Other places had 20 bunk beds in one room. Six-Ten bunks was the norm. Some places were purpose built to be albergues and were well thought out, plenty of bathrooms, private place to store your bag, charge your phone and with a reading light. Others were repurposed and were lacking in one way or another. Some had lots of character and others were a bit institutional.

You could do the camino and stay in hotels and more B&B kinds of places. Your choices of stopping towns would be more limited and of course your costs would go up. A good number of albergues also had private rooms for a bit extra. Sometimes with private bath, but most often it was a private room using the same shared baths as everybody else.

You quickly develop an albergue routine. As in any group living situation you need to figure out how to do things with minimal impact on your neighbors.

Gwen & I would check in, leave our boots outside in the place most albergues have set aside for boots (they stink and are dirty so they usually aren't allowed in the rooms). We'd find our beds and get our sleep sheets out, put our sleeping clothes inside the sleep sheet, flash light ready, etc. That way if we were out later and people were already in bed and lights were out we could quickly and quietly come in and get ready for bed.

We'd do laundry, take a shower, maybe walk the town, write in our journals, talk to new friends. Dinner either in the albergue or at a restaurant in town. Most towns had outside restaurants/bars. I'm a big fan of getting out of the albergue where possible and exploring the town. There were a surprising number of hikers that just crashed at the albergue at the end of the day and never left.

Most albergues lock their doors at 10pm. If you're not inside by then, you're not getting in. This is a good thing. All it takes is one person coming back drunk at 1:00 am to wake up the entire place. We never had a problem with this. Everybody is tired enough and starts hiking early enough that you're in bed early. In general albergues want you out the door by 8:00 am or 9:00 at the latest. They need to clean up and get ready for the next batch of hikers. Some don't open their doors to the new crowd until noon-2:00. Some are open all day. Just depends.

Usually before dinner and after our chores Gwen & I would make sure our bed was set up and all of our gear was stuffed in our pack. The idea was if people were sleeping when we got back from dinner we'd could quickly grab our sleep stuff walk out to the bathroom, change and get ready. Come back into the room and either put the clothes we were wearing in the sleep sheet with us or quickly and quietly stuff them in our pack. We tried to do this w/o a flashlight. It's super annoying when people are shining their flashlights around at night or in the morning. Cell phone flashlights are the worst because it's a wide bright beam.

Don't talk, don't whisper. Whispers carry in a quiet room. Save your talking till you get outside the room.

Gwen used ear plugs every night. I used them a couple of times. There is always lots of snoring and misc. night noises, people getting up to use the bathroom, etc.

We never set an alarm. There are always people getting up early and we never had to be someplace at an exact time.

Remember to put your cell phone on mute, please. We don't need to know when every email and text message comes into your phone. If you're typing on your phone turn off the click and haptic feedback so we don't have to hear you type.

In the morning we'd wake up, slip out of bed, bundle up our sleepsheet which had our clothes from last night inside, grab our pack and shoes and walk out of the bunk room, never to return. We'd then change and pack our bag out in the common area, not in the bunk room. It's really noisy when people are whispering, using flashlights and crinkling plastic bags when they are changing, using the bathroom and packing. In and out of the room they go. Grab your stuff and go, especially if you're an early riser. Don't be a bag crinklier.

Some places had an early breakfast or coffee, some not. We'd often buy a yogurt and fruit in town the night before and have that as a first breakfast before we'd start hiking in the morning. First open cafe we'd walk by we'd stop and get a coffee and have second breakfast.

We only heard a couple of stories about people having stuff stolen - cash in both cases. We never left stuff strewn about our bunk. Valuables (cash, passport, cell phones, camera) we had with us. The one exception to that was charging cell phones. I was nervous about it at first, but we never had an issue and we never heard about anybody having their phone stolen while it was charging.

We did a combination of hand washing stuff, using machines in the albergues or having the albergue do the laundry. We did less hand washing as the trip progressed. There is almost always a clothes line in an albergue to dry clothes. Not always a clothes dryer which is why

you want quick dry stuff. You can use your pack towel to wring out your clothes and suck wash water out of them. Makes them dry much quicker.

Bunk rooms are usually warm. Lots of sleeping bodies and not always an open window. I often just needed my sleepsheet. A few places it got cold at night. There were always blankets. I always made sure I got a blanket and had it at the foot of my bed ready in case I got cold. Near the end of the trip we bought Gwen a small fleece blanket. She was sometimes getting cold at night and if she only had one albergue blanket it wasn't always enough.

We did carry sleep sheets, the kind with an attached pillow pocket. We used them most every night, even in places that supplied sheets. We found that on the latter half of the camino they seemed to supply sheets more often than not. We never had towels supplied.

Appendix B
10 Pound Packing List

This is my complete packing list for 42 days on the Camino in 2018. Total weight in the pack, including the pack itself, was just under 10 pounds, or 4.5 kilograms. This does not include water or snacks, typically some nuts and raisins. Stuff "on the back" was what I always wore, or carried separately from the pack, so it is not included in the 10 pound total.

<u>In the pack:</u>

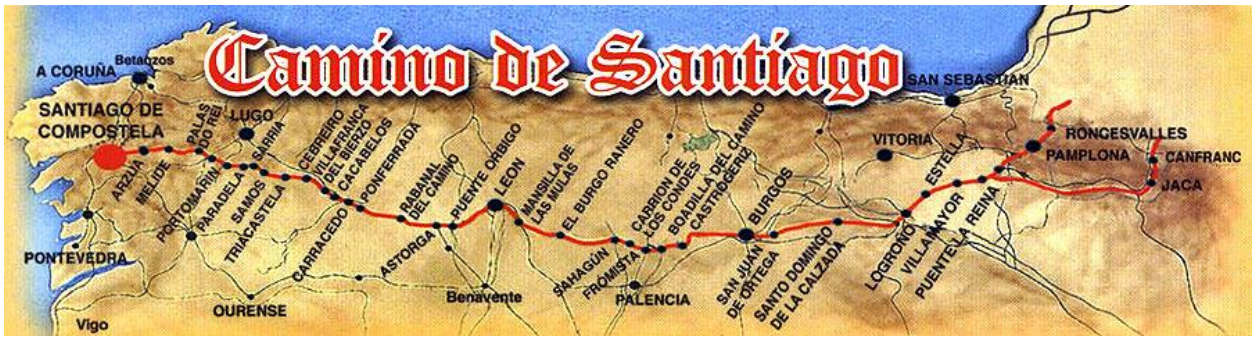
Osprey Talon 33 liter pack
2 pairs underpants
2 T-shirts (one long-sleeved)
2 pairs of socks
1 pair hiking pants
1 merino wool sweater
1 pair of gloves
Rain jacket
Rain pants
Teva knock-off sandals
1 handkerchief
1 bandana
Floppy hat
Pack fly
Small stuff sack
Assorted quart and larger plastic baggies
1 kitchen-sized garbage bag
Compass
5 clothes pins
String for a clothesline
5 small safety pins
Tiny journal to make notes
Two pens
Camping towel
Super-flimsy mini day pack
Tiny scissors
Silk sleeping bag liner
Platypus hydration system (water bladder)
Extra water bottle
Keychain size flashlight
Two hotel-sized bars of soap

Hotel size bottle of shampoo
Toothbrush
Toothpaste
4 throwaway plastic razors
Shaving oil
Deodorant
Dental floss
Comb
Sunscreen (sample size)
Butt end of a roll of cloth tape
Three compeed bandages
Approx. 20 ibuprofen
Dozen sleeping pills
Pill bottles
Earplugs
Prescription eye drops
Vaseline
Hearing aid paraphernalia (extra batteries, alcohol wipes)
Extra credit card
Passports (pilgrim and the real kind)
Ear buds
Phone charger & 2 cords
Sun glasses
Real glasses
House key
Toilet paper!!!!!

<u>On the back</u> (Stuff I always wore or carried. Not counted in pack weight total)

T-shirt
Hiking pants
Underpants
Socks
Handkerchief
Wallet
Cell phone
Guidebook in pocket
1 hiking pole

Appendix C – Map of Camino Frances



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January, 2016
Revised June, 2017 and June, 2018

Historical information culled largely from John Brierley, Camino de Santiago
Pilgrim statistics courtesy of Pilgrim's Office, Santiago
https://oficinadelperegrino.com/en/statistics/