



A pilgrimage is a trip to a sacred place—a place that was made holy by a special event or because it held a magical object or both. People have been making pilgrimages for tens of thousands of years—in fact men and women were going off on pilgrimage long before the idea became popular in Christian, Judaic and Islamic cultures.

In the Christian tradition, the earliest pilgrims went to places associated with the life and death of Christ. After a while, the graves of early Christian martyrs were added. People believed that if they saw or touched a sacred relic some of the divine energy in that relic would be transferred to them.

Sacred relics and objects that were promoted as sacred relics were spread out over Europe. A relic was usually some part or all of the body of a holy person or something that was in contact with the holy person. It might be the jaw of Saint Coloman which is a sacred object in the Austrian monastery at Melk, or a piece of the cross on which Christ was crucified. Almost every community suffered from 'relic envy'. Relics brought pilgrims and pilgrims brought money and money brought power and power brought more relics.

Of course, not everyone was convinced. Saint Augustine believed that what was holy could not be localized to a specific place, which meant that a pilgrimage was a waste of time and money, but that was a minority view.

The word was out that when the world came to an end the holy person would return to earth and collect all of his or her



body parts and at the same time decide whose spirit would return with them to heaven.

If you were a believer and rich you tried to get buried near an important relic. You wanted to be in a convenient spot when the saint came back to earth and was deciding who would return with him to heaven.

Rome was the epicenter of the relic trade. You could purchase one of the loaves of bread or a fish from the miracle of the loaves and fishes, a table setting from the Last Supper or a thorn from the crown of thorns.

It's easy to laugh at these things and see many of them as the fakes they were, but their effect on people was real. If your belief in an object's power results in your cure, then by definition, it is a miraculous object.

### ON THE ROAD TO COMPOSTELA

Throughout most of history there were only two reasons for traveling—you were going to war or making a pilgrimage. In either case you gave up the life you were living and went off on a new and usually dangerous journey—a journey that often went on for years.



Every church was required to have a relic even if it was only a local saint. But certain relics were understood to be much more powerful than others and those were the ones you wanted to get to.

Power was based on hierarchy – Christ of course was at the top so visiting Jerusalem would be most effective. But in terms of time and expense

Jerusalem was unreachable for most people. It was also under the control of the Turks which made the journey extremely dangerous. Next came the Apostles Peter and Paul who were buried in Rome, which made Rome first runner up. Rome was easier to get to but often in political turmoil. You could never be sure of what would be going on in Rome when you finally got there.

Peter and Paul were followed by the other Apostles with James the Greater being of particular importance because he had actually been with Christ. Santiago de Compostela in the northwest of Spain, where the great cathedral was said to contain the complete remains of Saint James was your best shot. It was near enough to the great cities of Europe to be reachable, yet far enough away to be exotic and exciting.

Santiago was at the very edge of the known world, yet in the middle of the Middle Ages over half a million people made the trip every year. It offered Christians living in Europe the opportunity to make contact with someone who had actually known Jesus.

Another reason to go on a long pilgrimage was all the powerful relics that you would encounter along the way. Since every church needed to have relics, it would be to a pilgrim's benefit to stop at every church on the road and offer a prayer.

**THE LEGEND**

The legend of Santiago de Compostela deals with James the Greater who was the brother of John the Evangelist. Both were fishermen on the Sea of Galilee. One day Jesus passed by and invited the brothers to join him and they did.



After the death of Jesus, James left Jerusalem with instructions to spread Christianity in Spain. Having very little success with this mission he returned to Jerusalem where he was beheaded by the Roman governor.

His disciples recovered his head and his body and placed them in a stone boat that had neither

a rudder nor sails yet somehow ended up on the northwest coast of Spain.

As the boat came ashore the first miracle associated with Saint James took place. A bridegroom riding along the beach lost control of his horse and was thrown into the surf. Instead of drowning he emerged from the waves covered with scallop shells. The rider's safe return from the deep is credited to the intervention of the Saint. And ever since, the image of the scallop shell has been associated with James.

The followers of Saint James then buried his body in an ancient Roman cemetery where it rested unnoticed for 800 years. At some point during this period the cemetery was abandoned and slipped back to a grass covered field.



Then in the year 812, a star appeared above the field accompanied by the sounds of heavenly music. A hermit saw the star, heard the music and followed them to the body of St. James. He reported his discovery to the local bishop who built a chapel over the grave. The site became known as Santiago de Compostela which means "St James of the Field of Stars".

What is important about this story is not what historians have been able to prove or not prove, but how it has affected the hearts of the pilgrims who have made the journey.

**WHO BOOKED FOR SANTIAGO**

During the Middle Ages, most pilgrims made the trip to Santiago hoping to improve their standing with God, which might then result in the miraculous cure of an illness or salvation in the



afterlife. But a pilgrimage had to include some suffering. Suffering echoed the passion of Christ and improved

your chances for a successful trip.

Even today there is a fair amount of suffering on the road, nothing like the Middle Ages but still significant. And some people believed that the kind of physical pain you suffer during your pilgrimage is related to your mental state. Pain in your back or shoulder comes from emotional stress. Leg pains are the result of relationship problems. Lower back pain is thought to come from too much responsibility or too many commitments.

A pilgrimage might be based on the desire for a more spiritual life or it might be in atonement for previous sins. During the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a criminal might be required to make the pilgrimage to Santiago as part of his punishment. Murders were often required to make the pilgrimage to Santiago with the murder weapon hanging from their body so everyone could identify both the criminal and the crime. Today



the head of a corporation that defrauded its shareholders might make the trip dragging his annual reports or the body of his accountant.

### BONUS MILES

The Road to Santiago is actually a series of connecting roads that have been in use since Roman times. The Irish and the English came by boat and arrived at La Coruna just north of Santiago.



The Portuguese walk straight up along the coast. The Silver Road brought pilgrims from central and southern Spain.

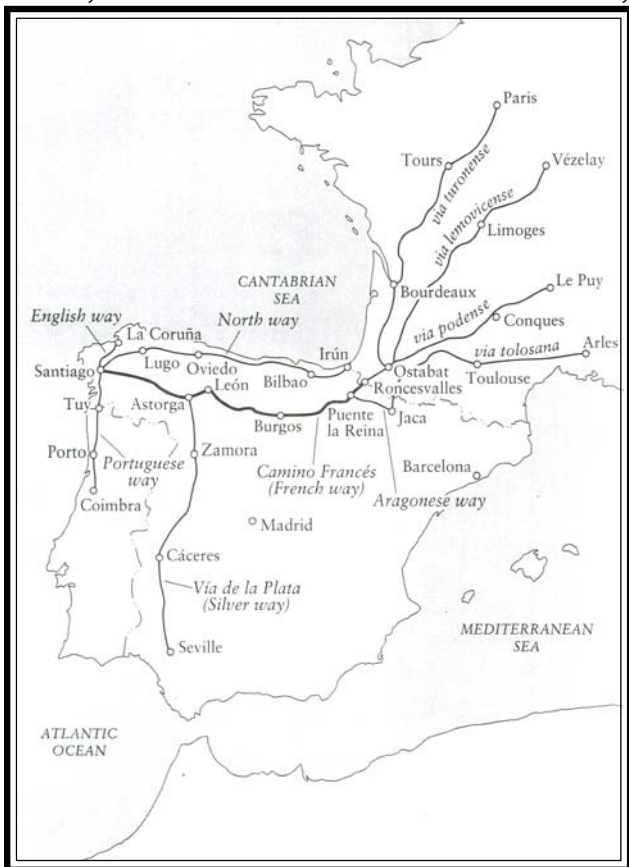
But the busiest route was the French Road. Perhaps the French had more sins that needed to be forgiven. Actually, that's not a fair comment, the French Road also brought pilgrims from Germany, Scandinavia, the Netherlands, even Italy. It was open to all sinners regardless of their race, creed or previous position of servitude.

Each of the four roads that went through France started in big cities like Paris or Arles—then crossed the country until they all came together at the foot of the Pyrenees Mountains that form France's border with Spain. At that point they merged into one road that passed through the mountains and crossed northern Spain until it arrived at Santiago de Compostela.

The routes in France and across Spain were highly developed. They offered pilgrims places to rest, and recover. And all along the roads monasteries and churches promoted the journey.

The pilgrimage to Santiago was a major commercial enterprise. Important churches along the route would travel their relics throughout Europe to advertise the trip and raise money for the maintenance and expansion of their buildings.

There were abuses but the majority of clerics



involved respected the religious devotion of the pilgrims and spent enormous amounts of money feeding and housing the poorer travelers.

In addition, many townspeople along the roads helped the pilgrims in exchange for the pilgrims offering prayers on their behalf in Santiago.

Wealthy pilgrims were expected to pave the road with donations. During the Middle Ages a team of laborers worked through the day gathering up the gold and silver offerings that had been left by the altar along with the donations of cows, sheep, pigs and horses.

**PROTECTOR OF THE FAITH**

In the year 711, Islamic Moors from North Africa invaded the Iberian Peninsula and occupied parts of it until the end of the 1400, a period that lasted over 700 years. Christians in other parts of Europe were determined to take Spain back and their first successful battle in the



Reconquest took place in 844.

Just prior to the battle King Ramiro I had a dream in which Saint James appeared and announced that he would join the battle carrying a white flag, riding a white horse and brandishing a great shining sword and that he would help Ramiro win the battle.

Ramiro did win the battle and Saint James took on the roll of the slayer of Moors. The belief that Saint James was present at each of the important battles was an essential element in the Reconquest of Spain. Saint James ended up with three images—

St. James as the Apostle, St. James as a pilgrim heading to his own shrine, and St. James on horseback as the slayer of Moors.

And these days, he is returning in his role as an



agent of reunification.

In Europe, World War II was a demonstration on a mass scale of man’s inhumanity to man and it left the continent broken and fractured. The late 1940s marked the beginning of a search for a politically united Europe through its shared past. The Road to Santiago, with its historic roots throughout Europe provided an ideal way to overcome political differences. It was also a time where middle-class Europeans began to travel. The pilgrimage was no longer solely for the religious traveler, it became a more general journey for people in search of personal and social goals.



The Spanish government saw the light and began promoting the road as an alternative to mass tourism and the apparent superficiality of sitting on a crowded beach. Once again Santiago became a symbol for enlightenment and reunification.

**WHAT’S HAPPENING NOW**

Towards the end of the middle Ages the number of pilgrims traveling to Santiago began to decline but it never stopped, and these days it is definitely “back live”. During 2004, over 190,000 pilgrims walked or cycled some part of the road. However, it is no longer just the religious pilgrimage it once was.



The pilgrimage to Santiago is based on Catholic doctrine regarding sin, its remission and salvation. But today those religious elements share the stage with transcendental meditation, a physical stress test, a place to grieve, a journey of spiritual awakening, and a unique vacation.

Each day’s journey is like a field trip through a continuous museum. You cross two-thousand-year-old bridges that were built by the Romans. You sit down to lunch in the reconstruction of a

five-thousand-year-old Iron Age hut. You are in constant contact with the great art and architecture of the Middle Ages.

For many people making the pilgrimage to Santiago is one of the most important undertakings of their lives. It gives them a sense of community in a society that goes back for thousands of years and includes everyone from Saint Francis of Assisi to Shirley MacLaine.

You may be alone when you start your trip but you will always be with someone at the end. Friendships are formed that cut across normal boundaries of age, class, and nationality. Becoming part of a larger community is an essential aspect of the pilgrimage. And working together to get through the challenges of the trip gives everyone a heightened sense of generosity.

The road is also unusual because it is so direct. Everything—the road, the setting



sun, the stars—all appear to be going in the same direction. The pilgrim is literally “shown the way.”

Pilgrims experience a powerful feeling of being guided toward a goal, of having a sense of direction, and of knowing where one is going that is not so clear in daily life. Each day is an act of accomplishment toward a stated goal in which everything seems to be going the pilgrim’s way.

Most of the pilgrims are urban, well-educated members of the middle-class and they follow routes that are well marked with yellow arrows or scallop shells. In addition, there are signs that explain the importance of various historical sites.

Central to pilgrimage are the concepts of sin and the weight of one’s soul at death, eternal salvation and damnation. In order to save your soul from the tortures of hell, the Church suggested things that would lighten a soul weighed down by sin and making a pilgrimage was always on the list.

### **PASSPORT PLEASE**

Pilgrims on the road to Santiago are easily recognized. Almost every pilgrim can be identified by the scallop shell around his or her neck or

attached to their backpack. The backpack itself is also a signal and so is their walking stick.

For some pilgrims the backpack is a symbol of the baggage one carries through life—the lighter your pack the more unnecessary mental and physical baggage you have been able to discard.

The scallop shell is associated with Saint James, but also with the legend of Venus and rebirth. It is meant to remind pilgrims of their spiritual reawakening.

On a gastronomic note, it appears that pilgrims returning from Santiago to France brought with them the inspiration for coquilles Saint-Jacques—a dish of scallops in a cream sauce that is served in a scallop shell.

Pilgrims also carry a credential—a passport that is stamped each day. The stamp indicates a pilgrim’s progress or in some cases the lack thereof.



As part of man’s desire to make life as annoying



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### ***PILGRIM STORIES: ON AND OFF THE ROAD TO SANTIAGO***

BY NANCY LOUISE FREY

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA PRESS, 1998

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### **ON FOOT IN SPAIN**

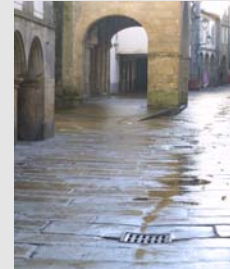
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## WEATHER OR NOT TO TRAVEL

The vast majority of people pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela in the more pleasant months from May through September. But pilgrims travel the road throughout the year. In the fall and winter a pilgrims daily companion in Santiago is rain. There is a local saying that “in Santiago the rain is an art form”.

The Convento de Santa Clara is a convent of Franciscan nuns that was established in 1260. Residents of the city believe that bringing a gift of fresh eggs to the convent will insure good weather for an upcoming event—like a confirmation or a wedding or the taping of a television program.



as possible travelers on the road have developed their own totally unofficial criteria for authenticity. To make the trip on foot is the most ‘authentic’—the real stuff.

To make it on a bike is “semi-authentic.” Spanish walkers call people who use bicycles “decaffeinated pilgrims”.

To walk but have a support vehicle is not ‘authentic’ but might still be accepted—depending on the circumstances.

Make the trip in a bus or a car and you’re off the team. Many pilgrims also believe that ‘authenticity’ requires at least a month on the road. Of course, none of these standards existed in the Middle Ages—you made the trip and that was it.

### UP AT THE PASS

At 3,500 feet above sea level, the hill town of Cebreiro is the last great physical challenge for most pilgrims on their way to Santiago. For hundreds of years a Roman way station at the top guarded this mountain pass. And until the 16<sup>th</sup> century Cebreiro was one of the only passages into the Northwest of Spain.



In the year 836, a Benedictine monastery was established and it cared for pilgrims for over a

thousand years. During the 11<sup>th</sup> century a rest stop for pilgrims on their way to Santiago was set up here and it is still in use.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century the church of Santa Maria was built nearby. It contains a sacred chalice that commemorates a 15<sup>th</sup> century Eucharistic miracle.

The legend states that the Holy Grail from which Christ drank wine during the Last Supper was hidden in Cebreiro. A priest who had his doubts about the validity of the story was using the cup for the Eucharist.

A massive snowstorm had been raging outside and only a single peasant had climbed the mountain to hear the mass. The priest began to criticize the man for coming through the storm when suddenly the bread and wine turned to flesh and blood. The priest saw the error of his ways.

The remnants of the miracle were placed in a silver container that was donated by Queen Isabel—the same Isabel who had the foresight to put up the money for the voyages of Christopher Columbus.

Cebreiro also has a reconstructed *palloza* — a type of oval stone house with a thatched roof that was used by the Iron Age tribes who occupied the area before the Romans arrived.

Santiago is less than a hundred miles from Cebreiro—a distance that will be covered in less than a week. The end of the physical trip is near, but for many the spiritual journey is just about to begin.