

The land rises and falls along the way, only sometimes steep, but never really flat. Sometimes the Camino offers sweeping vistas. The sky was often a pitched battle of sun and rain.



Sometimes the way traverses dark overhanging forests.



Occasionally it shoulders busy roads. Often it winds through tiny villages and a few medium sized towns.

The villages are old, and even the newer buildings take up old stones. Most of our inns and even the hotel in Santiago were built around old walls and under massive scarred wood beams. Unlikely alcoves, blocked stone stairs, and even a 30 ft well in a hotel lobby are not unusual. All of this ancientness endures without comment.



Every village includes a church, many dating from the 10th Century.





Often the churches were locked and dark, but through the front door peephole, the camera sees.



There are fairly frequent cafes and taverns under awnings along the road, except for stretches where you really wish someone would put a snack bar. This was an inn-to-inn tour, so our luggage made the daily trip via speedy comfortable vans. We, on the other hand, walked.



Twelve miles a day, every day – and that, you ask, is a *vacation*? Well, if the goal of a vacation is to *vacate*, the Camino takes you outside of your “real” world quite dramatically. Your choices are few, your daily goal is fixed (unless you want to sleep under a tree), food and drink are (usually) there when you please, and you follow a single well-marked route. (Each marker also tells you how far you still have to go. Only 42 km left!)



There's not much time to do anything except keep moving, and there's plenty of time to think. In the first few days I ruminated over ... well, you know, stuff, but eventually I finished with the list, having thought it through, but more importantly, being unable to do anything about anything – except just get to the next inn. In this way we vacated the world.

But the other vacational exit was from the present. Some vacation destinations are timeless and majestic. The Camino is not timeless: it is *old*. Really old. This is obvious in every town, but those ancient stones remind us that the very path we walked has been walked for over a

thousand years. And it has been walked in the same way for all those centuries. A thousand years is well beyond the shallow end of conceived time. We are good and remembering/imagining our elementary school, have a fairly rich saga about parents and grandparents, a less rich but still substantial image of life in the 19th Century... 18th ... 17th ... 16th even. With each historical rewind we imagine a life overlapping with ours. Brueghel's 16th C. peasants cavort through village life, plowing, dancing, drinking, and eating – we can relate. But somewhere back there imagination teeters over a cliff. You can see this in religious art. (We went to the Prado, excellent warmup for the Camino.) The same stories, generally involving extraordinary violence upon the devout, the innocent, and the incarnate divine, replicate endlessly in Western art, in settings we understand, in clothes that make sense (robes, usually), and with gestures and expressions still in the human

emotional vocabulary. Here's a painting by Lavinia Fontana, c. 1589, which we saw in Madrid. It has various titles but we think it should be "Don't wake the baby!"



But then along the way, maybe in the 13th C., depictions cease to resonate. Flat faces in strange foreshortened spaces enact the some old tales in an alien idiom.



(Don't wake the Apostle!)

But the Camino predates even this by hundreds of years. It's strange to identify with achy feet and walking sticks from the 10th Century. This puts the adventure in an alternate time, alt time for short. Something very old and strange is resonating in my very steps. Weird.

That's a bit abstract, but the collision of deep time with the present pace is evident in another ubiquitous sighting along the route: ruins. A ruin is a unique intermediary across time. Unlike the long vanished 10th Century pilgrims, a ruin is here and now, a present presence on the road. A ruin begins as a human construction, and until it's reduced to dust, it bears traces of its own past. It's an artifact, a collaboration of humanity and entropy. Ruins are fascinating to read backwards, toward the original intentions of their makers.

In most familiar cultural environments, ruins are eradicated in one of three ways: repair, removal, or enshrinement. The last of these is exemplified by museums in which the decay is stalled, the frozen artifact protected, lit dramatically, and explained in multilingual paragraphs. These framings shortcircuit the essential mystery of ruination, pinning them on a timeline which is explicitly not here and now.

The Camino countryside is rich in ruins, and very sparse in explanation: Living ruins in alt time. It's up to the witness to see through time to the life that was, to think with the minds of the builders. Ruined farms are common, stables and corrals haunted by the same animals that moo and cluck today.



But in a few special places we left the Camino, which is to drop all the way into the solitude of alt time. One of these was a six mile side trip down empty lanes not meant for humans: The **Cowmino**.



Along this path in a space between the trees, across the pastures, rises a castle keep.



The Castelo de Cambre, a 14th Century marvel. Its mossy walls are intact, though the wooden floors and roofs are mainly gone. The cultural stewards have provided industrial stairs and catwalks everywhere, not to replace or replicate the ancient site, but to present it. Right up to the crenelations of the keep.



Window seats are everywhere, paired facing each other, angling through the 8 ft thick walls to windows, or to slots for archers to shoot from. These windows frame the rolling countryside. They could be the borderline between the public halls and private life, a place for talking or quiet.



Stone plinths, where floors would have rested, line the walls and define the big chambers. Precarious stone stair fragments rise. A giant hearth hangs next to a kitchen drain through the wall, from which the slops simple fell to the ground, 30 feet below.



There are a few carved stone ornaments, but really it's all art, as every colossal brick is hand carved, each a uniquely fitted puzzle piece good for 600 years maintenance free. Each block is signed with the crafters mark, a sideways S, a tilted T, and other shapes. These 14th C. marks, we are told, afforded each mason evidence of work accomplished, and payment due. The walls thus tell a story of a team of experts, their cooperation and success read from the ground up.



But on this adventure, the deepest time radiated from a site last occupied two thousand years ago: Castro de Castromaior, a village hill fort (the meaning of “castro”) settled in the 4th C. BCE and only abandoned four hundred years later, after the Romans arrive. It was just off the Camino at its highest point on the second day. We approached it through a strangely lumpy landscape, as the access path cut through gaps in concentric earthen walls, three of them, at least 20 feet high, circling a site about 800 feet in diameter.



Cheryl and I explored the site until gray thunderheads rolled up. We had seven miles still to go that day, so she moved on, along with a handful of others, and I was alone.



The Castro is a village of stone dwellings, packed close to each other with only corridors, not streets, between them. Generally the chambers mixed straight and curved walls. All were about the size of a medium bedroom. A few had interior connections, but most were neolithic studio apartments. The walls were made of flat stacked slate, around 2 feet thick, and now stand about 3 feet high. Inside most rooms there was a single vertical slate slab, embedded in the floor parallel to the wall, which I guessed might protect a hearth. (Once heated, the slate might retain and radiate heat for a long while?) Some rooms had a paved circle slightly raised from the dirt floor, and a few had a stone circle in addition to the vertical slate. The rooms repeated throughout, in this regular irregularity.

How did these people live? The entry gate was a narrow passage lined with stone, with steep steps on both sides – a gatehouse that evidently stood two stories tall.



A detail like that, and the overwhelming defensive walls and moats, imply energetic and capable builders. Nothing primitive about this. A few chambers had drainage holes at the base of a wall. One of these emptied into a ditch that had been covered in flat stones: a sewer!

A plaque told me that the site had been occupied for centuries, expanding into other rings (suburbs), but otherwise with little change. The part I explored might house a few hundred people. I had an image of a maze of chambers, each with its fireplace. This would have been enough to get by; yet I felt I wasn't getting it.



Something about the place didn't add up. Eventually I began to suspect that it wasn't what was present that made it mysterious, but what was *not*. I realized that every other place we saw integrated a variety of different spaces, structures, and functions. The castle with its window seats and banqueting halls, the villages with their distinct taverns, shops, churches, farms, and houses. The components differed according to their function, and all were organized to work together, at least organized around a central intersection. This universal recipe followed the functional needs of groups, and also spoke of hierarchies of wealth, power, and authority. This is all apparent and very familiar, all the way back to the 10th Century.

In the Castro, *none* of this appeared. In that place, there were no specialists and their shops or workshops, no meeting halls, no temples, no schools, no distinctions of wealth. I'm reluctant to give this a name – “egalitarian”? “democratic”? “communist”? We understand those terms as contrasts. They're meaningful to us only in relation to their opposites. The Castrians may have known nothing like this. They might never have thought about it, and perhaps could not even frame such thoughts. But then, what *were* they thinking?

A fierce cold wind arose and rain blasted sideways, sending me back from this deepest well of time, back onto the Camino, already in progress.



(Time to move on!)

All the Camino routes end with the bones of St. James, in the cathedral in the center of the city bearing his name, Santiago. It's a spectacular building, including interior stone carving which we were asked not to photograph.





(entering the cathedral)

(from a banqueting hall in the cathedral)





At the end of all roads, up under that golden altar, we meet the rather small gold casket holding the bones of Santiago, who is either very short or a bit scrunched up.



Anybody can walk the Camino, but to be able to say you've walked the Camino, you need certification. And to get this, you need to demonstrate that you really walked it. So, at every inn and most shops and restaurants along the way, you could get a stamp in your special Camino passport book:



The best of these are raised wax, as on the rightmost page. Take this and three Euros to an office near cathedral square, and you can get this:



Been there, done that!

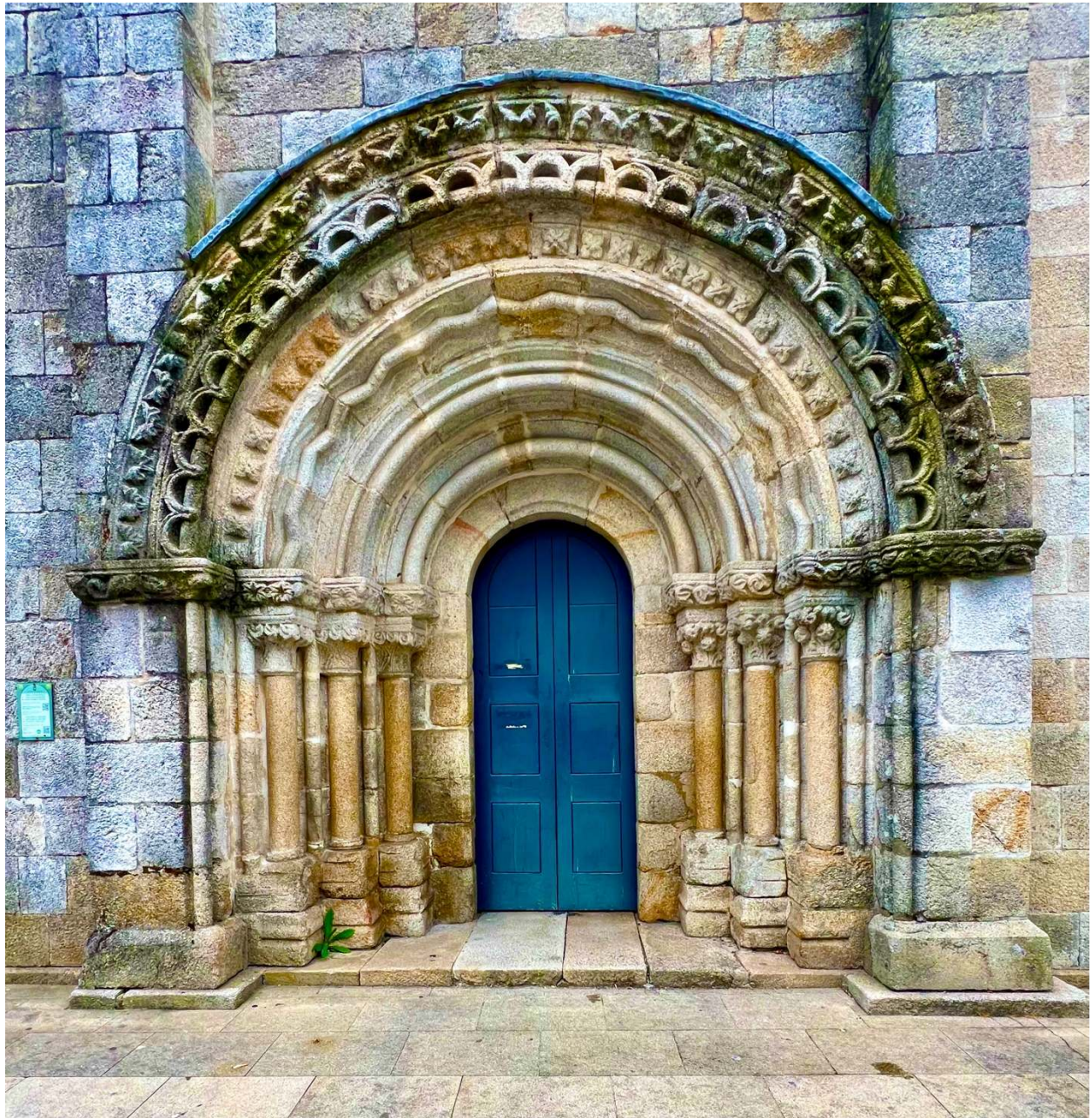


Santiago de Compostela, a great dinner, and the prospect of a few days without 12 mile hikes made for a spectacular finish to the adventure. But it was the end, for us and for all pilgrims. Some roads don't go ever on and on.

The Camino de Santiago, ultimately, is *time*. Not the time of clocks, schedules, appointments, and deadlines, but the undertime of stones and bones: felt time. You feel it living in the stones underfoot and you feel it in your bones – especially at the end of every day. Even...now.



A few bonus images:



(Big town Romanesque, Melide)



(Church wall fresco, on the way.)



(Castle ruin, Sarria)



(Family crypt, Sarria)
(and a stairway to heaven)





(Paella, and Sangria, in Madrid)



