

# EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

## Walking The Way of St James

**14 days**

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### Day 1 Arrive in Bilbao, Spain

We arrive in Bilbao and transfer to our hotel.

Welcome to the start point of our multi-themed journey on this fascinating route. While El Camino has, of course, for centuries been a sacred pilgrimage route, in the 21st Century the reasons why one might want to experience this fascinating part of Europe can vary greatly among visitors, and many of our past participants had interests that went well beyond matters spiritual -- history, art, politics, architecture, nature, gastronomy, and recreation. While the religious theme will permeate much of what we so and do, our intention is to deliver a broadly-based experience that will highlight all the many special attributes that makes this part of the world so inviting.

Tonight, we gather with fellow travellers for our first evening meal, sharing anticipation for the historic landscapes, medieval towns, and cultural treasures that await us along this legendary route that has drawn visitors for over a millennium.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

### Day 2 Bilbao & The Guggenheim

This morning we explore Bilbao's remarkable renaissance through a guided city tour, culminating at Frank Gehry's titanium-clad Guggenheim Museum. Rising from the Nervión River like a metallic flower caught in perpetual bloom, this architectural marvel sparked a \$1.5 billion urban transformation that redefined an entire city. The building's flowing curves, covered in 33,000 titanium tiles, shift colour throughout the day, while its 50-metre-high atrium dwarfs even New York's famous Guggenheim rotunda.

Inside these gravity-defying spaces, we discover masterworks by Kandinsky, Mondrian, and Picasso alongside contemporary installations that demonstrate how art can reshape not just cultural landscapes, but entire economies.

We then enjoy a gentle riverside walk along the modern promenade, following the Nervión's curves past Santiago Calatrava's elegant Zubizuri bridge. This leisurely 5km stroll on flat, paved surfaces introduces us to the walking rhythm we'll embrace throughout our Spanish adventure, connecting the museum district to the atmospheric Casco Viejo, where medieval streets preserve authentic Basque character.

Walking Summary: 5km (3 miles) on flat, paved riverside paths

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 3 Bilbao - San Sebastian - Pamplona

Our journey into Spain's cultural heartland begins with a visit to San Sebastián, the elegant "Pearl of the Cantabrian Sea." Cradled between Monte Urgull and Monte Igeldo around the perfect crescent of La Concha Bay, this Belle Époque resort has attracted European royalty since Queen Isabella II first established it as Spain's premier seaside destination. Our guided exploration reveals stunning architecture from the city's golden age, when aristocrats from across Europe built palatial villas overlooking waters where Basque whaling fleets once anchored.

The old town's labyrinthine streets harbour some of Spain's finest pintxos bars, where Basque culinary traditions have evolved into sophisticated gastronomy. We then continue inland through dramatically shifting landscapes to reach Pamplona, forever immortalised by Hemingway in "The Sun Also Rises." Founded by Roman general Pompey in 75 BC, this fortress city became Navarre's medieval capital and explodes into worldwide fame each July during the running of the bulls. From the ancient murallas that once defended against Moorish invasions, we survey the Gothic cathedral overlooking the Rio Arga, understanding why this strategic crossroads has welcomed travellers for over two millennia.

Overnight in Pamplona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 Pamplona: Roncesvalles Forest Walk

Today we begin experiencing the historic Camino route, driving to Roncesvalles, one of the legendary starting points nestled in the Pyrenees foothills where medieval travellers first entered Spain. This ancient way station, established by Augustinian canons in the 12th century, became a beacon of hope for exhausted pilgrims who had survived the perilous mountain crossing from France.

Our walk begins at the collegiate church, descending through magnificent beech and oak forests along paths that have welcomed pilgrims for over a thousand years. The route follows gentle switchbacks downhill through Valcarlos valley, where dappled sunlight filters through ancient canopies and mountain streams provide nature's symphony. These forests witnessed Charlemagne's legendary defeat at Basque hands in 778 AD, immortalised in the epic "Song of Roland."

We pause at traditional Basque farmsteads where families still practice centuries-old agricultural traditions. The walking is predominantly downhill on packed earth trails, offering spectacular views across Pyrenean foothills where autumn colours paint the landscape in brilliant golds and reds.

Walking Summary: 7km (4.5 miles) mostly gently downhill on forest paths, packed earth and stone steps

Overnight in Pamplona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 5 Pamplona: Ancient Roman Roads

We explore one of the Camino's most historically significant sections today, walking along remarkably preserved Roman roads that demonstrate ancient engineering genius. Starting from the Knights Templar church of Santa María de Eunate—a striking octagonal Romanesque masterpiece rising from green fields—we follow stone-paved paths through Navarre's agricultural landscape. This mysterious church, built in the late 12th century, may have served as a burial ground for pilgrims, its eight-sided design echoing Jerusalem's Dome of the Rock.

The trail meanders through vineyards heavy with September's harvest and wheat fields, crossing Roman bridges still in daily use after two millennia. We visit the medieval hilltop village of Cirauqui, where narrow streets wind between houses displaying noble coats of arms, testament to this region's importance during the reconquest. The walking surface alternates between ancient cobblestones worn smooth by millions of footsteps and gravel paths through orchards where apple and pear trees bend under autumn's abundance.

Walking Summary: 6km (3.7 miles) on Roman cobblestones and gravel paths, gently undulating terrain

Overnight in Pamplona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 6 Pamplona - Burgos

We journey today across Spain's dramatic landscape transitions, travelling from green Navarre through the renowned Rioja wine region to reach Burgos, birthplace of the Castilian language spoken by 500 million people worldwide. En route, we stop at a traditional Rioja bodega where harvest season is in full swing—the perfect time to witness centuries-old winemaking traditions that have sustained Camino pilgrims since medieval times.

Our winery visit reveals how this region's unique terroir of chalky clay soils and Atlantic-Mediterranean climate creates wines that have been celebrated since Roman times. During harvest season, we may witness grape picking and the initial stages of fermentation, understanding how monastic communities first perfected these techniques to provide sustenance and income for pilgrim hospitalisers. The tasting includes

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traditional Tempranillo wines alongside local varieties, paired with regional specialties that demonstrate the deep connection between Rioja's agricultural heritage and Camino culture.

We then continue to Burgos, set along the Arlanzón River where ancient trade routes converged. This magnificent city carries profound historical weight—from El Cid's legendary exploits to its role as birthplace of the Kingdom of Castile in 884 AD. The soaring Gothic cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage site begun in 1221, represents one of Christianity's architectural masterpieces, housing El Cid's tomb and the ornate Escalera Dorada (Golden Staircase). We explore the cathedral's intricate facade and perhaps climb to the castle ruins above town, gaining perspective on the vast Meseta plains that stretch endlessly toward Portugal.

Non-walking day

Overnight in Burgos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 7 Burgos:- Medieval Village Circuit

Today we experience timeless Castilian village life through a circular walk connecting perfectly preserved medieval settlements where time seems suspended. Starting from Castrojeriz, dominated by dramatic hilltop castle ruins that once controlled this strategic Meseta crossing, we walk through landscapes unchanged since knights and pilgrims first established these communities as safe havens.

Our route follows ancient drovers' paths between villages, crossing gently rolling terrain dotted with traditional dovecotes—ornate stone towers built to house messenger pigeons that carried news across this vast landscape. We explore the remarkable Romanesque church of San Martín in Frómista, its golden sandstone facade decorated with extraordinary medieval carvings depicting biblical scenes and mythological creatures. Built around 1100 AD, this church represents Romanesque architecture at its purest. Traditional red-tiled villages appear like mirages across the plains, their church bells marking time's passage as they have for centuries.

Walking Summary: 8km (5 miles) on farm tracks and village cobblestones, gently rolling terrain with one moderate climb

Overnight in Burgos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 8 Burgos - León

We travel today to León, a city that encapsulates Spanish civilisation's evolution from Roman military outpost to medieval Christian stronghold. Founded as Legio VII Gemina by Roman legions around 68 AD, León served as headquarters for 40,000 soldiers who controlled the empire's northwestern frontier. The city's strategic importance continued through the Middle Ages when it became capital of the Kingdom of León, leading the reconquest of Muslim territories.

León's crown jewel is its ethereal Gothic cathedral, whose soaring walls seem built entirely of light and colour thanks to over 1,800 square metres of stunning stained glass windows—among Europe's finest medieval glazing. These 13th and 14th-century windows transform sunlight into celestial radiance that changes throughout the day, creating transcendent beauty that has moved visitors for seven centuries.

We explore the magnificent Collegiate Church of San Isidoro, housing the extraordinary Panteón Real with its Romanesque frescoes so vivid they're called the "Sistine Chapel of Romanesque art." The afternoon offers time to wander León's charming Barrio Húmedo, where traditional tapas bars cluster around Plaza Mayor, continuing social traditions that began when Roman soldiers gathered to share wine and stories.

Non-walking day

Overnight in León.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 9 LeÃ³n: Meseta Plains Experience

Today we experience the profound solitude and stark beauty of Spain's Meseta—the vast central plateau that forms the country's geographic and spiritual heart. Our walk across this seemingly endless landscape offers meditation on space, silence, and human persistence across terrain that shaped the Spanish character itself.

Starting from Hospital de Órbigo, famous for its medieval bridge where knight Suero de Quiñones held his legendary "Tournament of Honour" in 1434, we follow ancient paths across wheat fields stretching to every horizon. This 19-arched bridge witnessed one of medieval Europe's most famous displays of chivalric devotion. The terrain is predominantly flat on packed earth paths used by local farmers whose ancestors have worked this demanding soil since Roman times. Traditional mud-brick villages appear like islands in this golden sea, their simple churches and grain silos representing centuries of adaptation to harsh conditions. We conclude with a visit to Astorga, renowned for its cathedral designed partially by Antoni Gaudí.

Walking Summary: 7km (4.5 miles) on flat farm tracks and gravel paths across open plains

Overnight in León.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 10 LeÃ³n - Astorga: Cruz de Ferro

Our mountain adventure begins today as we leave the plains for the dramatic Montes de León. We start with a cultural visit to Astorga, famous for Antoni Gaudí's extraordinary Episcopal Palace—a fairy-tale confection of turrets and neo-Gothic fantasy representing the architect's only work in northwestern Spain.

From Astorga, once the major Roman city Asturica Augusta controlling the gold trade, we begin our ascent toward Cruz de Ferro, one of the Camino's most emotionally significant landmarks. Our walk follows ancient paths through oak and chestnut forests, gradually climbing through landscapes where Spanish and Celtic cultures blend. At Cruz de Ferro (1,504m), an ancient iron cross atop a massive stone cairn, we participate in the time-honoured tradition of leaving a small stone—symbolically releasing burdens carried from home. The panoramic views across the Montes de León reveal why this crossing has challenged and inspired travellers for millennia, offering perspectives from the Meseta's golden plains to Galicia's green mountains.

Walking Summary: 6km (3.7 miles) on forest paths and stone steps, gradual but steady uphill gradient

Overnight in Astorga area.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 11 Astorga - Santiago & Celtic Galicia

We enter Spain's most mystical region today, crossing into Galicia where Celtic traditions survive alongside Christian heritage in landscapes of emerald valleys and ancient granite. This is where Spain's Celtic heart beats strongest, where bagpipes echo through misty valleys and megalithic monuments predate Roman roads by thousands of years.

Our first experience of Celtic Spain centres on O Cebreiro, a village seemingly untouched by modernity, where traditional pallozas (stone houses with thatched roofs) cluster around a 9th-century church. These remarkable pallozas represent pre-Roman Celtic architecture that survived through perfect adaptation to harsh mountain weather.

Our walk through this elevated plateau reveals why Galicia is called "Celtic Spain"—granite outcrops weathered into fantastic shapes, misty valleys, and atmosphere more reminiscent of the Scottish Highlands than Mediterranean Iberia. We encounter herds of cattle and sheep with bells creating nature's symphony as they graze meadows scattered with wildflowers, while ancient oak groves provide shade and mystery.

Walking Summary: 5km (3 miles) on grass paths and village cobblestones, gently undulating terrain

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Santiago Final Approach

Today we complete our historic journey with the traditional final approach to Santiago de Compostela, walking the same route that has thrilled countless travellers for over a thousand years. Starting from Monte do Gozo (Mount of Joy), we first glimpse Santiago's cathedral spires rising from the urban landscape—the same view that moved medieval pilgrims to tears of relief after months of dangerous travel.

This hill earned its joyful name because it offered the first sight of journey's end, a moment so emotionally charged that medieval accounts describe pilgrims falling to their knees and singing hymns of thanksgiving. Our descent follows well-maintained paths through modern suburbs that gradually give way to ancient granite streets. As we enter Santiago's old quarter, narrow streets echo with our footsteps, leading inexorably toward the magnificent Plaza del Obradoiro. The cathedral's baroque facade grows larger until we stand before its soaring towers, understanding why this moment has represented journey's end for over a millennium. Cathedral bells ring our arrival as they have for countless arrivals before us.

Walking Summary: 8km (5 miles) on paved paths and stone streets, gentle descent into city

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 13 Santiago de Compostela Exploration

We celebrate our walking achievement with comprehensive exploration of this UNESCO World Heritage city that represents one of Christianity's three great pilgrimage destinations alongside Jerusalem and Rome. Santiago de Compostela, built entirely from golden granite and declared a national monument in its entirety, preserves one of Europe's most perfectly preserved medieval cityscapes. According to legend, the apostle James's remains were discovered here in 813 AD, launching a pilgrimage tradition that shaped European culture for over a millennium.

Our guided tour begins at Plaza del Obradoiro, surrounded by architectural masterpieces spanning eight centuries—the cathedral's soaring baroque facade, the neoclassical Rajoy Palace, the Renaissance Hostal dos Reis Católicos, and the university's historic buildings. Inside the cathedral, we discover extraordinary Romanesque and Gothic artistry, including the famous Pórtico da Gloria with biblical carvings so lifelike that pilgrims traditionally touched them for blessing.

We ascend to the cathedral rooftops through Gelmírez Palace, climbing ancient stairs to survey the red-tiled cityscape—a fitting culmination revealing Santiago's perfect integration of sacred and secular architecture. The afternoon offers time to explore charming streets where university students and travellers continue medieval traditions of cultural exchange.

Non-walking day

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 14 Departure from Santiago

Departure from Santiago de Compostela, carrying memories of Spain's remarkable landscapes, medieval heritage, and cultural treasures. Our journey has revealed why this route continues to captivate visitors—not merely as a walking path, but as a corridor through Spanish history, art, and spirituality that connects past and present in profound ways.

¡Buen viaje! - Bon voyage!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast