

## EL CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

### Walking The Way of St James

**15 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 & Cooking Experience**

The morning reveals Bilbao's extraordinary duality as we explore a city where medieval streets weave between titanium curves. Our guided exploration begins in the atmospheric Casco Viejo, the Seven Streets that formed the original medieval settlement in 1300. We discover the Gothic Cathedral of Santiago, patron saint of our pilgrimage route, and witness how centuries of Basque commerce created this remarkable urban tapestry.

We then proceed to Frank Gehry's revolutionary Guggenheim Museum, where flowing metallic forms mirror the nearby Nervión River. Inside, contemporary masterworks challenge our perceptions while the building itself stands as perhaps the most significant architectural achievement of the late 20th century. The museum's collection spans from modern classics to cutting-edge installations, representing the artistic spirit that permeates our entire Camino journey.

This afternoon we immerse ourselves in Basque culinary traditions through a hands-on cooking experience that reveals the sophisticated techniques behind this internationally acclaimed cuisine. Our private workshop with expert chefs provides intimate access to Basque culinary secrets during a three-hour immersion where we master both traditional and modern pintxos techniques while preparing a complete meal featuring authentic regional flavours. We craft classic offerings alongside contemporary interpretations, learning how this ancient culture continually reinvents itself while honouring its roots.

Overnight in Bilbao.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 3 Bilbao - San Sebastian - Pamplona**

This morning we venture to San Sebastián, the elegant seaside city that has elevated Basque cuisine to international acclaim. Our guided exploration reveals why this coastal gem consistently ranks among the world's finest gastronomic destinations, with more Michelin stars per capita than anywhere except Kyoto.

We immerse ourselves in pintxos culture, learning how these sophisticated small plates evolved from simple tavern snacks into an art form. Through the narrow streets of the Parte Vieja, we discover how the Basque tradition of "txikiteo" - moving from bar to bar sampling different specialities - creates a unique social fabric that binds communities together. The elegant La Concha Bay, framed by mountains and dotted with Belle Époque architecture, provides a stunning backdrop to our cultural exploration.

After a break for lunch, we transfer to Pamplona, the historic city forever linked to Ernest Hemingway's literary legacy and the famous

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Running of the Bulls. Upon arrival, we enjoy a brief orientation tour of this remarkably preserved medieval city, where narrow cobblestone streets lead to the magnificent Gothic cathedral and the atmospheric Plaza del Castillo. Pamplona's well-preserved city walls, built to defend against various invasions, now encircle a vibrant urban center that serves as our base for exploring the Camino's most spiritually significant sections through the Pyrenean foothills.

Overnight in Pamplona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 4 Pamplona: Roncesvalles Forest Walk

Today we experience our first authentic Camino walking as we venture into the legendary Roncesvalles Pass, where Charlemagne's rearguard met its fate in 778 CE and where countless pilgrims have begun their spiritual journeys. This carefully selected 6-8 kilometre forest walk through magnificent beech and oak woodlands captures the essence of the Camino's natural beauty without the demanding 40-kilometre full stage.

Our morning begins at the Collegiate Church of Roncesvalles, a Gothic sanctuary that has welcomed pilgrims since the 12th century. We participate in the traditional pilgrim blessing ceremony, connecting us to the spiritual continuum that has defined this route for over a millennium. The massive silver-plated Virgin of Roncesvalles watches over us as we receive our pilgrim credentials, marking the formal beginning of our Camino experience.

Our walk unfolds through pristine Pyrenean forests where ancient trees create cathedral-like spaces beneath their canopies. These woodlands have witnessed the passage of medieval kings, determined pilgrims, and countless travellers seeking transformation along Santiago's path. The forest's seasonal rhythms - from spring's tender green emergence to autumn's golden transformation - have remained unchanged since the first pilgrims walked these paths.

Following our forest experience, we enjoy a traditional Basque farmstead lunch at a working agricultural operation that demonstrates sustainable farming practices rooted in centuries of experience. We then visit the Orreaga/Roncesvalles Museum, where artifacts and exhibits illuminate the historical significance of this mountain crossing that connects France with Spain.

NOTE: Vehicle support ensures optimal positioning for our walk and comfortable return to Pamplona.

Hike Summary: 2-3 hours of easy to moderate walking covering 6-8 km (4-5 mi) through beech and oak forest paths. Gentle undulating terrain with approximately 200 metres (656 ft) total elevation change on well-maintained forest trails.

Overnight in Pamplona (dinner on your own this evening).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

#### Day 5 Pamplona: Ancient Roman Roads

Our second Camino walking experience follows ancient Roman engineering through the 8-10 kilometre circuit from Santa María de Eunete to Cirauqui. This carefully selected section showcases the remarkable Roman road construction that still supports modern pilgrims, demonstrating how infrastructure built two millennia ago continues serving contemporary travellers.

We begin at the enigmatic Santa María de Eunete, an octagonal Romanesque church whose unusual design continues puzzling historians and architects. Some scholars connect its geometry to Templar traditions, while others see influences from Holy Land architecture brought back by Crusaders. Our guided exploration reveals the sophisticated engineering and symbolic elements that make this 12th-century structure one of the Camino's most mysterious monuments.

The walking portion follows authentic Roman road segments where original stone paving remains remarkably preserved. These roads, built with typical Roman precision, feature carefully graded surfaces designed to shed water while providing secure footing for heavily laden travellers. We understand how Roman engineering expertise enabled the expansion of empire and later facilitated medieval pilgrimage routes.

Our afternoon in Estella reveals a medieval city that prospered from Camino commerce, developing into what contemporaries called "little Toledo" for its remarkable cultural diversity. The town welcomed Jewish, Muslim, and Christian merchants who created a cosmopolitan

atmosphere rare in medieval Europe. We explore the Palace of the Kings of Navarre, a rare example of Romanesque civil architecture, and understand how Camino towns developed sophisticated urban planning to accommodate international pilgrims.

NOTE: Selected sections of Roman road construction, not the full traditional stage. Vehicle positioning optimizes our walking experience.  
Hike Summary: 3-4 hours of moderate walking covering 8-10 km (5-6 mi) through historic Roman road sections and medieval towns. Mixed terrain with approximately 150 metres (492 ft) total elevation change on ancient stone paths and modern walkways.

Overnight in Pamplona.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 Pamplona - Wine Experience & Santo Domingo de la Calzada - Burgos

The Camino's cultural richness extends far beyond spiritual seeking, encompassing the agricultural traditions that have sustained northern Spain for centuries. This morning we immerse ourselves in Rioja's winemaking heritage through an extended vineyard visit.

We'll understand how seasonal rhythms have governed rural life since Roman times, and participate in barrel tasting sessions that reveal how Rioja's unique terroir - combining Atlantic and Mediterranean influences - produces wines of extraordinary complexity. The viticulture workshop demonstrates sustainable farming practices that preserve soil health while producing premium grapes.

Our traditional lunch with a winemaker family provides intimate insight into rural Spanish culture, where multiple generations continue family traditions while adapting to contemporary challenges. These meals, featuring seasonal ingredients and time-honoured recipes, represent the authentic hospitality that has welcomed Camino pilgrims for centuries.

The afternoon brings us to Santo Domingo de la Calzada, a town literally created to serve pilgrims by an 11th-century hermit-engineer who built bridges, hospitals, and roads to ease the journey to Santiago. The cathedral houses one of the Camino's most beloved legends - live roosters commemorating a miracle involving a wrongly accused pilgrim. This remarkable story, where a roasted chicken supposedly came back to life to prove innocence, demonstrates how Camino culture blends faith, folklore, and community memory.

We conclude with exploration of the historic parador, a former pilgrim hospital that now provides luxury accommodation while maintaining its medieval character.

Overnight in Burgos (dinner on your own this evening).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

## Day 7 Burgos:- Medieval Village Circuit

Today's kilometre walking experience connects remarkable medieval villages through landscape that epitomizes Castile's austere beauty. Our selected route from the Castrojeriz area to Frómista church reveals how Camino communities developed sophisticated support systems for pilgrims while maintaining their agricultural foundations.

We begin exploring Castrojeriz castle ruins, dramatically positioned on a limestone outcrop that has commanded this valley since Roman times. The medieval fortress protected both the Camino route and the fertile agricultural lands that sustained local communities. From these heights, we comprehend how strategic positioning determined medieval settlement patterns and understand the complex relationship between military necessity and economic opportunity.

Our walking continues through landscape that embodies Castile's essential character - vast horizons, golden grain fields, and scattered villages clustered around ancient churches. This terrain has remained largely unchanged since medieval times, allowing us to experience the same sweeping vistas that inspired and challenged countless pilgrims over the centuries.

The afternoon's highlight awaits at Frómista's San Martín church, considered the purest example of Romanesque architecture along the entire Camino route. Built in 1066, this perfectly proportioned structure demonstrates the sophisticated architectural knowledge that medieval builders brought to even modest rural communities. Every carved capital tells a story, from biblical narratives to fantastical creatures that populated medieval imagination.

We also visit the Canal de Castilla interpretation center, which explains how 18th-century engineering ambitions attempted to transform

Castile's transport infrastructure through ambitious waterway construction.

Hike Summary: 3-4 hours of moderate walking covering 8-10 km (5-6 mi) through medieval villages and agricultural countryside. Mostly flat terrain with gentle undulating sections and approximately 100 metres (328 ft) total elevation change on village paths and rural tracks. Scenic village-to-village portions selected for optimal cultural experience, not the demanding full traditional stage.

Overnight in Burgos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 8 Transfer to León via El Cid & Gregorian Chant

Our departure from Burgos begins with exploration of Spain's most legendary hero through an El Cid historical tour that reveals how Rodrigo Díaz became immortalized in literature and legend. Burgos Cathedral, a UNESCO World Heritage masterpiece, houses El Cid's tomb and demonstrates how Gothic architecture reached Spain through Camino cultural exchange. Our enhanced cathedral visit includes the atmospheric crypt, where medieval stonework creates spaces of profound contemplation.

Arriving in León, we encounter one of Spain's most magnificent Gothic cathedrals, famous for its ethereal stained glass windows that earned the nickname "House of Light." Our enhanced tour includes roof access, providing spectacular views across the Meseta plains while understanding medieval construction techniques that created these soaring stone poems.

Non-walking day

Overnight in León.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 9 Meseta Plains Experience & Transfer to Astorga

The Camino's character transforms dramatically as we enter the Meseta, Spain's vast central plateau where pilgrims confront both physical challenges and spiritual opportunities in landscape of profound simplicity. Our 8-10 kilometre plains walk from Hospital de Órbigo bridge captures the essence of this demanding terrain without requiring the full 20-kilometre traditional stage.

Hospital de Órbigo's medieval bridge spans the Órbigo River at a location that has witnessed remarkable historical drama. In 1434, the knight Suero de Quiñones held a famous tournament here, challenging 300 knights to combat in honour of his beloved. This "Paso Honroso" tournament lasted a month and became legendary throughout medieval Europe, demonstrating how Camino towns attracted international attention through spectacular events.

Our Meseta walking experience reveals landscape that challenges and transforms pilgrims through its very austerity. The seemingly endless horizons, punctuated only by occasional villages and distant church towers, create contemplative conditions that have inspired spiritual breakthroughs for centuries. This terrain strips away distractions, forcing pilgrims to confront their inner landscapes while navigating the physical demands of Spain's high plateau.

The afternoon brings us to Astorga, an ancient Roman city that became a crucial Camino crossroads where multiple pilgrimage routes converge. Our cathedral tour reveals magnificent Baroque and Gothic elements, while Antonio Gaudí's Episcopal Palace demonstrates how innovative architecture can honour traditional functions. Gaudí's fantastical creation, with its fairy-tale turrets and innovative structural solutions, represents the creative spirit that continues influencing Spanish art and architecture.

Hike Summary: 3-4 hours of moderate walking covering 8-10 km (5-6 mi) across Meseta plains and rural countryside. Mostly flat terrain with minimal elevation change, approximately 50 metres (164 ft) total, on packed earth paths and traditional Camino routes.

Overnight in Astorga.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 10 Cruz de Ferro Mountain Section & Transfer to Lugo

Today's mountain walking experience leads us to one of the Camino's most emotionally powerful locations, the Cruz de Ferro, where pilgrims have deposited stones for over a millennium in rituals that transcend specific religious traditions. Our 8-10 kilometre forest approach through pristine mountain terrain captures the spiritual essence of this Camino highlight without requiring the demanding full 30-kilometre stage from Astorga.

The morning begins with a cultural presentation exploring Celtic-Christian fusion, the remarkable synthesis that created Galician spiritual traditions. We understand how pre-Roman Celtic beliefs merged with Christian symbolism to produce unique expressions of faith that continue influencing regional culture. This cultural blending, evident in everything from stone crosses to folk music, demonstrates how the Camino facilitated religious dialogue long before modern ecumenical movements.

Our mountain walk unfolds through pristine oak and chestnut forests that have remained essentially unchanged since medieval times. These woodlands provide habitat for countless species while creating cathedral-like spaces beneath their ancient canopies. The gradual ascent reveals how Camino walking becomes meditation in motion, where physical rhythm and natural beauty combine to create conditions for personal reflection.

At Cruz de Ferro, we participate in the ancient stone ceremony where pilgrims deposit rocks carried from home, symbolically releasing burdens while expressing hopes for the future. This massive cairn, accumulated over centuries of pilgrim devotion, represents one of humanity's most enduring collective rituals. The simple iron cross mounted on a wooden pole has witnessed countless personal transformations and continues serving as a powerful focus for contemplation.

Our transfer to Lugo includes scenic route stops that reveal Galicia's distinctive landscape, where green hills and ancient settlements create some of Europe's most beautiful rural scenery.

**Hike Summary:** 3-4 hours of moderate to challenging walking covering 8-10 km (5-6 mi) through mountain forests with steady ascent to Cruz de Ferro. Approximately 400 metres (1,312 ft) total elevation gain on forest paths and mountain trails.

Overnight in Lugo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 11 Lugo & Celtic Galicia

Lugo preserves one of Europe's most complete Roman legacies through its magnificent walls, the only Roman fortifications that completely encircle a living city. Our morning walk along these 2-kilometre ramparts, built in the 3rd century CE, provides spectacular views while demonstrating imperial engineering that has protected this settlement for over 1,700 years. The UNESCO World Heritage walls feature 85 towers and multiple gates, creating an urban fortress that enabled Lugo to survive countless medieval conflicts.

The Cathedral of Santa María reveals how Romanesque, Gothic, and Baroque styles layered onto Roman foundations, creating architectural palimpsests that record centuries of cultural evolution. The cathedral's remarkable retablo and medieval cloister demonstrate how Camino wealth funded artistic achievements in even provincial cities.

Our Celtic plateau walking experience leads us through 6-8 kilometres of elevated terrain around O Cebreiro village, where Celtic culture maintains living traditions despite centuries of cultural change. These rounded hills, scattered with ancient palloza houses, preserve pre-Roman settlement patterns while supporting agricultural practices that date back millennia.

O Cebreiro's 9th-century church houses remarkable treasures, including the Holy Grail of medieval legend and a 12th-century miracle that attracted pilgrims from across Europe. The traditional palloza houses, with their distinctive thatched roofs and circular stone construction, represent building techniques perfectly adapted to mountain weather conditions.

**Hike Summary:** 2-3 hours of easy to moderate walking covering 6-8 km (4-5 mi) through Celtic plateau terrain and Roman wall circuit. Gentle undulating landscape with approximately 150 metres (492 ft) total elevation change on ancient walls and highland paths.

Overnight in Lugo.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 12 Santiago Final Approach

This morning marks our formal preparation for Santiago arrival through a pilgrimage ceremony in Lugo, where we receive final credential stamps and participate in traditional rituals that connect us to centuries of Camino completion. These preparations honour both personal achievement and collective pilgrimage tradition, acknowledging our shared journey with countless previous travellers.

Our authentic 8-kilometre final approach follows the classic route from Monte do Gozo to Santiago Cathedral, the traditional path that has provided pilgrims' first glimpse of their destination for over a thousand years. Monte do Gozo, the "Mount of Joy," earned its name from medieval pilgrims' emotional reactions upon seeing Santiago's cathedral towers after months of walking. This final approach represents the culmination of every Camino journey, where anticipation builds with each step toward the ultimate destination.

The descent toward Santiago reveals the cathedral's twin towers growing larger against the Galician sky, just as countless pilgrims have experienced this moment of triumph and fulfilment. Our first arrival in Plaza del Obradoiro coincides with the traditional ringing of cathedral bells, a ceremony that celebrates each group's successful completion of their pilgrimage journey.

The Plaza del Obradoiro itself represents one of Europe's most magnificent urban spaces, where the Baroque cathedral facade faces the elegant Hostal dos Reis Católicos, originally built as a pilgrim hospital by the Catholic Monarchs. These buildings create a theatrical setting for the emotional climax of Camino completion.

Our celebratory Galician feast features regional specialities while we participate in a traditional queimada ceremony, where flaming aguardiente mixed with coffee beans, lemon peel, and sugar creates both spectacle and symbolic conclusion to our pilgrimage journey.

Hike Summary: 2-3 hours of moderate walking covering 8 km (5 mi) from Monte do Gozo to Santiago Cathedral. Gentle descent with approximately 100 metres (328 ft) total elevation loss on traditional Camino paths and urban walkways.

Overnight in Santiago de Compostela.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 13 Santiago de Compostela Exploration

Santiago Cathedral stands as one of Christianity's most significant pilgrimage destinations, housing the supposed remains of Saint James the Apostle while showcasing nearly a millennium of architectural evolution. Our comprehensive cathedral tour includes the museum and remarkable roof access, providing perspective on both artistic treasures and urban development that made Santiago a medieval metropolis.

The Portico de la Gloria, Master Mateo's 12th-century sculptural masterpiece, represents medieval art at its most sophisticated. These carved figures seem to breathe with life while illustrating complex theological concepts through visual narratives that educated illiterate pilgrims. The opportunity to touch the Tree of Jesse, polished smooth by millions of pilgrim hands, connects us directly to this tactile tradition.

Our cathedral roof access reveals engineering solutions that medieval builders developed to support massive stone vaulting while creating spaces for contemplation and worship. From these heights, we comprehend Santiago's urban development and understand how Camino wealth transformed a remote Galician settlement into an international cultural center.

The afternoon's historic quarter exploration includes the Gelmirez Palace, where medieval archbishop-lords governed both spiritual and temporal affairs with remarkable sophistication. The palace's Romanesque architecture and historical exhibits demonstrate how Camino success enabled provincial cities to achieve artistic and intellectual prominence.

Free time allows personal reflection and market exploration, where contemporary Galician culture continues traditions that developed through centuries of international pilgrimage influence.

Overnight in Santiago.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 14 Finisterre "End of the World" Excursion

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Our journey concludes with the traditional extension to Finisterre, the "End of the World" where medieval Europeans believed the earth terminated in vast Atlantic waters. This excursion completes the full Camino experience by reaching the geographic conclusion that ancient pilgrims considered the spiritual culmination of their journey.

We begin with a drive to Muxía, a fishing village where dramatic coastline meets powerful Atlantic swells in landscape of raw natural beauty. Our 3-4 kilometre coastal walk around the sanctuary reveals how Christian tradition adapted pre-Roman sacred sites, creating syncretistic expressions of spirituality that honour both ancient and medieval beliefs.

The drive to Finisterre lighthouse follows rugged coastline where Celtic culture maintained traditions that predate Roman conquest. These communities developed sophisticated maritime knowledge while creating artistic expressions that influenced European cultural development far beyond their geographic isolation.

Our clifftop walk encompasses 2-3 kilometres of spectacular Atlantic coastal paths where we experience the literal edge of the medieval world. The lighthouse, perched on cliffs that drop dramatically to churning seas, marks the westernmost point of continental Europe and the traditional conclusion of Camino pilgrimage.

Our traditional seafood lunch overlooking the Atlantic Ocean features Galician specialties while we contemplate the achievement of reaching this symbolic world's end. The "End of the World" ceremony provides traditional conclusion to Camino pilgrimage, acknowledging both personal transformation and geographic achievement.

Hike Summary: 2-3 hours of easy to moderate walking covering 5-7 km (3-4 mi) along Atlantic coastal paths. Undulating clifftop terrain with approximately 100 metres (328 ft) total elevation change on well-maintained coastal walkways and clifftop trails.

Overnight in Santiago.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### Day 15 Departure

Our Camino journey concludes with departure from Santiago de Compostela, carrying memories of landscapes that have inspired travellers for over a millennium. We leave having experienced not just Spain's most famous pilgrimage route, but a cultural journey that revealed how historical currents shaped European civilization through centuries of international exchange.

Transfer independently to Santiago de Compostela airport for your onward journey.

Buen Camino! Bon Voyage!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast