

Gente del Camino

By Jippe Witteveen, August 23, 2024

In March this year I went to walk the Camino de Santiago, from Porto to Santiago de Compostela. As it was a last-minute plan and train connections were unavailable or expensive, I took a Flixbus to get there. It took 36 hours. (Call me crazy, but how can you take yourself seriously advocating climate action while not making an effort to fly less?) The adventure started on the bus already.



Meeting people along the way

Going south from The Netherlands over land, as a rule you always have to change in Paris. If you go by train you have to change train stations - Gare du Nord to Gare de Lyon - if you go by bus you have to change at Bercy-Seine. It always comes across as the same old dodgy place. It's smelly and many homeless people seem to actually call the place home. Right when you walk out the door you have to turn, because there is an outdoor gym right in front of it. There are always some jacked-up boys and girls doing pull ups to loud music.

In Paris I got myself some strong beers to get me through the night on the bus. I sat next to a man who seemed to be in his sixties. I was trying to figure out how to drink my beer very subtly, but was relieved to see the man open a can himself. We started talking. The man was from Belgium. He had been home to see some family, but was now going back to his sailing boat which was docked in Bilbao. He told me he was first going to sail it to Cape Verde, and from there on to the Caribbean. It was going to be the second time sailing across the Atlantic by himself.

When the Belgian man left the bus the next morning in Bilbao, someone else boarded the bus who had the seat next to me assigned to him. His name was Kan, he was from Hong Kong. We immediately hit it off really well. Kan had a foldable bicycle with him, which he took wherever he travelled. He had also taken it on long-distance bike trips, which of course struck a chord with me. We spent hours and hours discussing history, politics and life. Kan had lived in the US for 10 years (he was in his fifties although I would've guessed him in his thirties). He told me he had been to a Michael Jackson concert in New York, on September 10, 2001. He had driven past the World Trade Center, and had been in awe of the sheer size of the Twin Towers... He had also been to Woodstock '99. The attempt to recreate the legendary edition of 30 years earlier was not genuine but profit-based. Discontent ended in the total destruction of the festival-site. Kan also explained to me how the car industry in the US had prevented the development of a decent public transport system.

I was meeting my friend Maria at the Camino, and we spent about half the time walking together and the other half doing our own thing. In the albergue at the end of the first day, we met the first inspiring couple. They were a South African man and woman in their seventies. I thought it was amazing that they were doing this together at that age. They seemed genuinely happy, still fooling around with each other. One can only wish for such a happy marriage. Maria was having a sore throat and was coughing during the night. The next morning, the South African lady apologised to everyone in the room. She was embarrassed that her husband had been keeping everyone awake with his coughs. The man, meanwhile, did not remember being awake and coughing. But hey, what can you do if your wife says that you did? Maria was rather happy she had not received the blame.

There was another South African woman that I met one evening. It was at a beautiful little albergue on a hill outside Vila Nova de Cerveira, on the Portuguese side of the Miño river. There were only four people there, including the hostess. We were having dinner together at the table in the garden, and could see the Spanish hills on the other side of the river while the sun was setting. The South African lady was funny as, a total joker. She reminded me of a friend back home. She was the aunt of Twiggy Baker, a big wave surfer who had won the championship at Nazaré, Portugal, in 2019. That's the largest wave on earth. I had watched him win it live on my laptop in my student room at the time, so I was quite in awe. Between the jokes we were having an interesting conversation. She was saying how she just absolutely loved

Portugal. Not only for the incredible waves, but also for how peacefully the people live. People might not always realise it. In a European context Portugal might be seen as economically less well-to-do. But in South Africa, she told me, in some places you risk a car jacking if you stop for a red traffic light. Her daughter, who lives in the United States, had recently bought her son a bullet-proof schoolbag. In Portugal, the grandma walking up the hill with a fresh loaf of bread should mainly be careful not to accidentally drop the bread when the neighbour's dog unexpectedly starts barking.

One of the people that I found most interesting was a Dutch man in his thirties, Gerome. For Gerome, the Camino was just a little piece of a much larger path that he was walking, literally and figuratively. For him, walking had become a way of life. He was on a spiritual journey to gain a deeper understanding of life. He had started walking in The Netherlands, and had no specific plan on where to go. He had no phone, and was totally disconnected. Once in a while he would go to a library to send an email to his parents. He had sold all his belongings in The Netherlands, and now all his stuff fit in his backpack. It didn't weigh half as much as mine. Maria and I met him in the albergue in Aguçadoura. The next day we saw him again in Esposende, which was not too far, and he told us he would stay there. As we kept going quite a bit further, I thought we would not meet him again. But about a week later, when Maria and I had separated for some time, I met Gerome again in Armenteira in Spain. He called my name from his bed as I returned to the room after attending the mass at the

1000-year old monastery. At first I didn't hear him; his voice was soft as he was low on energy. He hadn't eaten for a day or two, because he had decided to fast for the last four days or so until Santiago. I could hardly believe it: not eating for four days and still walking 20 - 30 kilometres each day? Gerome was doing just that. Two days later we met again on a boat ride which is part of the alternative route we were taking (ironically called *variante espiritual*, or spiritual variant), and were able to have long conversations and really connect. Gerome is someone I would like to meet again in life. But with no way to contact him, it is up to life itself whether this will happen. Gerome trusts that he will meet the people he's meant to meet. I will follow him in this.

In a hostel in Vila Praia de Âncora I met a girl whom I immediately wanted to talk to when I recognised her Kiwi accent. She was from Christchurch, which is still scarred from the earthquake more than a decade ago but is slowly getting some of its soul back. (Only to be totally shocked by a mass shooting in a mosque a few years ago. Though the way in which prime minister Jacinda Ardern stood up as a uniter and not a divider in its aftermath I think deserves a lot of praise.) The Kiwi girl told me she was walking the Camino with her baby. Err, baby? In what sense? Well, one of those in the literal sense. A four month old human being. She had no contact with the father, and was happy he was not around. She figured she might use the remaining time of her maternity leave to do some travelling, and saw no problem in doing this with a baby.

In that same hostel there was also an older Polish lady, and we could converse in

German. She made me think when she asked me the question of why the young people nowadays walk the Camino. She was catholic herself, and was walking the Camino for her religious belief. The Camino de Santiago is indeed a pilgrimage, and since the middle ages people have been walking it to redeem their sins. She noticed, however, that the Camino nowadays was immensely popular among youngsters like me, but that most did not seem to do it for the original reasons. So why were we doing it? The question of whether walking a pilgrimage for reasons other than the original religious one was unethical or disrespectful, was something that had been going through my mind before. I had concluded it was not, because there are certainly other good reasons, but still I felt that I had to tread carefully in answering the lady's question. 'Just for fun' or 'I don't know' would not suffice, I think that would make us silly intruders on something profound. However, the Camino had become something profound for me too. I had come in search of something. Through a reconnection with the self and with nature I had perhaps been looking for some form of spiritual awakening. I told her this, but also that some might just see it as a hike or a fun challenge. In the end, though, whatever the reasons, everyone seems to grow through the experience.

Although for me personally religion was not the reasoning behind walking the Camino, it inevitably became a part of the experience. Along the way you'll find many little chapels, small churches and big cathedrals, crosses and saints. In the churches you could usually find a stamp for your stamp-card. This, together with the beauty of some of them, was a good

reason to go inside. Being at a holy site, or at any place that is dear to people for that matter, it is always important to treat it with respect. I personally often try to feel a little bit of what the people who adhere to it feel. A few times I prayed. I've rarely done that since puberty, but noticed how it can have a positive effect on your soul. Just like being in nature, breathing techniques, meditation, yoga and physical exercise can. When I joined another friend on a part of the Camino two years earlier, an old lady blessed us on the street as we were walking out of León. This time, I received a blessing from a nun at the monastery of Armenteira. This was not a show, it was genuine. You can feel that, and it is a profound experience.

There was one man, however, who's reason for walking the Camino was something deeply tragic. This was Julio, a Spanish man in his sixties. He had lost his son, who had passed away due to a brain tumour. The Camino for him was part of a process of coming to terms with this terrible loss. He wanted to arrive in Santiago on March 29, because that day it would be exactly one year since his son's passing.

Julio shared the story with us in a restaurant in Castelo do Neiva. Maria and I had gone to the restaurant with Gosia and Damian, a Polish couple that we had met that day. Julio was sitting by himself and Maria, always attentive, invited him to come sit with us. Especially Damian was deeply touched by what Julio told us. Julio's son would've turned 40 this year. Damian had his 40th birthday during the Camino. It could've been him. And of course it could've been all of us. Julio's story is a reminder of how fragile life is.

We cannot take it for granted. All we can do is be thankful to be here at this moment, and make the most of life while we can.

Meeting Gosia and Damian was really fun. Maria and I had lost the way for some time and were following a busy road, which was a bit stressful. When we finally saw a yellow arrow again, an indication that we were back on the route, we soon found two people lying on their backpacks in the middle of the street, taking some sun. They were a little bit done for, and Maria and I could use a little boost as well. With the four of us we were able to energise each other again. We laughed a lot. Soon the route went into the hills, and we found a river to have a swim. The next morning Maria and I left earlier than them. We thought that surely we would meet them at some point along the way again. But days went by, and then more than a week. I didn't think we would meet again. But on the last day, when I had already seen Santiago in the distance (I had reached the top of a hill and when I saw the city, a rainbow was coming down on it), two people came walking down the hill as I was readjusting my shoe. I could hear them speak Polish. It was really nice to reconnect at this moment, and we walked into Santiago together. Maria had not taken the *variante espiritual* and was already there. Recently during my current bicycle trip, I visited Damian and Gosia in Poland.

One last person I wanted to write about is Dries, a man from Belgium. I think one can say that Dries lived for the Camino. He had walked all the major routes in one go. As soon as he finished one route he would start another. He started to dream about running an albergue. He bought

some land in Galicia, Spain, along the route coming from Portugal. There he built a little house, which is now an albergue. Dinner is always included in the price. Dries sees this as a way to connect pilgrims with each other.

Gente del Camino, Spanish for 'people of the way / journey,' for me not only refers to the people you meet along the Camino de Santiago, but also the people you meet in life. I think all people can teach you something. Different people have different perspectives on the world, have lived different experiences and have different interests and different areas of expertise. I think we should all be students of the people around us. In this way we can grow. This also means that at the same time we are teachers to others. Everything in life has a balance. To me this has become very clear during my current bicycle trip. I think that as people get older and more experienced they naturally tend to lean more to the teacher side. But I think both the student and the teacher should always coexist within us.