

THE CALL OF THE CAMINO

written by Nicole Bowen
Design by Javeria Ahmed



Each year, the Camino de Santiago draws 400,000 people from around the world, offering an unforgettable journey through the breathtaking landscapes of Spain. There are hundreds of routes crossing almost 30 countries, all ending in one place: the Santiago de Compostela Cathedral.

A historic pilgrimage dating back to the Middle Ages, the Camino has captivated travellers seeking spiritual fulfilment, personal reflection, or simply an adventure.

Initially, I wanted to see how far I could physically push myself. I'm not a particularly religious person, and the most exciting part of the walk was the challenge of completing 270 kilometres in nine days, instead of the standard two weeks. The same was true for my sister, who had flown out to meet me in Portugal. You would imagine this meant we had prepared meticulously. We, in fact, had not. In reality, we were as underprepared physically as we were spiritually.

On a sweltering morning in late August, we set out to explore the Camino Portugués. A small yellow arrow on a stone wall marked the way, a familiar symbol for pilgrims. Sometimes bright and freshly painted, often no more than a faded smudge, these arrows crop up almost every kilometre.

But in true tourist fashion, we became disorientated almost immediately. With google maps as our guide, we rushed to our first Albergue, a Spanish word which translates to hostel. Albergues offer accommodation exclusively to pilgrims undertaking the Camino, typically opening around noon on a first-come first served basis.

The next morning, my sister and I were off to an even worse start and realised we would only arrive at the next albergue past 3 o'clock. This seemed like an impossible challenge given queues for the albergues start forming well before the doors even open. Overhearing our despairing conversation, an American couple told us that most people were booking the hostels in advance. Retrospectively, this advice was plastered on every Camino blog and how to guide but given our naivety, it was nothing short of a lifeline.

Later that day, we met someone who was doing the opposite. He was walking the Camino without music, headphones, and certainly without a phone to call up albergues. Relying only on a traditional map, Marco told us he navigated the Camino each time he was going through a difficult period and needed to reconnect with himself.

This reference to connections would become an inescapable part of the Camino.

Not an hour later, we stopped by a small café near Apulia which was covered with photographs of pilgrims. The woman running it told us she started the café not to make profit but rather to meet the people completing the Camino. She offered advice and a sanctuary for weary travellers, as well as to hear the incredible stories behind each journey.

A few days' travel from the café, we met a young man running an albergue who also sought connection with the many pilgrims undertaking the Camino Portugues.

It turned out we needed this community more than ever. My sister had injured her foot, and with no pharmacy in sight, we had limited options. Whilst our host prepared us an incredible dinner, a fellow pilgrim offered up her antiseptics and first-aid kit.

One of the most unique aspects of the Camino truly is the camaraderie between people. Chance encounters often feel serendipitous – meeting the right person at the right time, receiving encouragement, or exchanging stories that leave a lasting impact.

During our meal that evening, a 70-year-old woman named Rosel told us although she started the Camino decades ago, it never truly left her—the Camino always called her back.

“You can’t control the Camino, she said, illuminated by candlelight. The Camino controls you.”

Another woman was walking to complete the journey her brother had tragically left unfinished.

But whilst she was walking the Camino in memory of a loved one, others wanted to be responsible for creating new ones. Lost in life, Dries had walked thousands of kilometres searching for the right place to settle in the Camino. He began by selling postcards of fellow pilgrims he had photographed along the way, and through sheer luck and the kindness of strangers, Dries founded his own albergue. With just a few euros in his bank account, Dries handcrafted most of the furniture from recycled wood.

Sitting around that table, my sister and I felt it—the undeniable pull of the Camino.

Throughout the rest of our journey, this feeling remained. Despite enduring blisters, sleeping on mouldy mattresses, and one particularly gruelling day of trekking nearly 50 kilometres, the unwavering kindness of strangers was a constant.

“¡Buen Camino!” – meaning “Good Way!”—was a phrase spoken by each pilgrim we passed, wishing us safe travels. Many more meals were cooked, directions given, and stories shared to keep us motivated.

During the final stretch in Spain, my sister and I had the opportunity to give some of this kindness back. We met a middle-aged woman who had recently split with her fiancé and was walking to process the pain. My sister and I offered to carry her bag and provided a much-needed shoulder to cry on.

By the time we arrived at the towering Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, it felt as though we had come to the end of something special. Yet, the Camino doesn’t truly end in Santiago. Some continue walking to Finisterre, once thought to be the end of the world. Witnessing this, we, like many other pilgrims, felt a shift in our perspective on journeys—a newfound appreciation of resilience and the camaraderie between people.

Even for those who are not religious or spiritual, you can feel the history and culture embedded in the paths of the Camino. If you’ve ever thought about walking it, I guarantee that a similar experience is in store.

As Rosel had promised, the Camino has called me back. I’m already planning my next trip.

¡Buen Camino!