

Pilgrim's Progress

After walking the Camino de Santiago, the ancient spiritual path in northern Spain, **Stephanie Danler** found answers to questions she didn't know she had. ILLUSTRATION BY TINA BERNING



A GERMAN BOY SLOWED TO WALK BESIDE ME in the sun-dappled woodlands outside of Burguete, Spain. He introduced himself, asked if I was American, asked if I knew how much my backpack weighed. Then he asked, "Why did you come on Camino?"

I looked at him like he was insane. Couldn't he see that I was in pain? More important, isn't that a personal question?

It was the second day of what would become 42 days of walking. I had already been asked that question more times than I could count and I was not in the mood. On the first day I had developed blisters. Now they were open wounds and I was limping badly. Later, I would attempt to peel

my socks off, only to find them stuck to my feet by layers of dried blood and pus. Later, I would begin crying as I soaked my feet in a river at Larrasoaña, population 117.

"I just like walking," I told the boy through gritted teeth.

Of course, nobody comes on the Camino de Santiago because they just like walking. The path, which many embark upon in southwestern France, traverses northern Spain and ends

at the relics of Saint James in Santiago de Compostela. It became famous in the 12th century when the crusaders traveled it as they sought to re-Christianize the Iberian Peninsula. When they finished, they were granted absolution of their sins, even the mortal ones. Most modern-day pilgrims come for secular reasons, but an atmosphere of cleansing and forgiveness persists.

Accordingly, the Camino is a place where confessions come as freely as observations about the weather. From the moment I unloaded myself from the little tram in St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, a French town in the foothills of the Pyrenees, people wanted to tell me why they were there: They had survived cancer. They had just been laid off after 20 years at the company. They had survived their mother's, son's, husband's death. Not everyone

done more research. They expressed concern that I was walking alone. When they left, an American woman sat down and began to speak as if we had known each other for months. She had been walking six weeks, starting more than 300 miles away in Le Puy. She shared her laundry techniques. She asked if I was on an "Eat, Pray, Love," using the phrase as a noun.

"I was a lot like you when I started," she said.

I asked her what that meant.

"Scared," she said. She leaned toward me. "Listen: whatever you ask the Camino, it will answer. You may not like the answer. But it's there for the taking."

These pilgrims gave off the whiff of the fully converted. They walked in an uninterrupted dream. But I had come for solitude, not group therapy. When

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was in crisis, but for most, life had not followed its prescribed track. Something had been broken, and the Camino would fix it. And no matter how blasé I wanted to appear, the fact that I was walking meant that I believed the Camino could fix me, too.

There are many starting points, but St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, a hamlet of cobblestoned streets and cream-colored wooden houses pressed up against blackened medieval walls, is one of the most popular. When I arrived, clueless, all the auberges were full. I was lucky to find a cot in the attic of a hunchbacked Basque woman's home. I was the only guest and the Madame hated me. "Turista!" she screamed in Spanish, as if sounding an alarm. She slapped my overstuffed backpack, "No peregrina. Turista, turista!"

She was right. I was no pilgrim. That night I avoided her by hiding in a bar eating free plates of olives. A group of rowdy British men sat next to me. They expressed concern that I hadn't

she left I ordered a glass of Txakolina and a plate of anchovies, and studied the train schedule to Paris.

That night Madame turned off the water while I was showering. She was livid about something indecipherable, perhaps about my using all the hot water. I stood on the balcony in my towel, soapy and shivering, and looked out over the valley. It was so still—*prescient*, somehow—I couldn't tear myself away to step back inside. If I were a different kind of person I would have admitted to my fellow travelers that my life had fallen apart. That one second I had been whole, safe, and the next I was no longer married, no longer had a home. That I had come because I wanted to believe in something again, check off the boxes until I was healed. But I was not that kind of person yet. I was still wearing my wedding ring. That night I saw the stars when the clouds finally split over the Pyrenees and I thought about the word *holy*.

During the next six luminous weeks, I did not find God. I failed to become a *peregrina*. I did not make lasting friendships. I did not learn humility. Instead of heating cans of lentils in hostel microwaves, I took myself out to dinner. In true *turista* fashion, I took days off, checked in to hotels, got drunk in the bathtub. I listened to music when I should have been meditating on the tender noises of the countryside. I took photos when I should have been meditating on the magnificent views. I did not think pure thoughts while I walked—I thought obsessively about wrinkles I was developing, about when my next coffee would be, about whether I would ever have sex again.

And to everyone who asked, I continued to assert that I just liked walking. I just wanted to walk.

On the final morning, setting out under the stars at 4:30 a.m., my blisters callused over, my legs knots of muscle, I still had no clarity. No plans on how to rebuild my life. I was haunted by the privilege of my crisis. I was walking already when the sun rose each morning. I ate cherries from trees, watched the soil streak and change in the vineyards. I crested mountains, walked in wildflowers, slept dreamlessly. There were prolonged pockets of peace. I had never been so free. But I still couldn't take my ring off. I couldn't send the letters I had written. I threw them all away.

And yet. When I walked into Santiago de Compostela and stood in the shadow of that gorgeous cathedral, I knew that I had done a deeply *good* thing. I have made so many bad decisions in my life, and this was not one of them. The American woman in St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port had been right. I hadn't known my question then but it turned out to be this: Can we heal ourselves? The answer for me was no. There was no forgiveness, just movement, just days unspooling under my feet. In the 12th century the pilgrims would sing, pray, and chant as they walked. *Ultreia, ultreia, ultreia*, they would call out to one another. It means, simply, *onward*. ☘