

Journeys of the Spirit

Spain & the Camino

May 2012

14 days / 13 night itinerary

DAY 1: ARRIVE IN BARCELONA, THE CULTURAL HEART OF CATALUÑA

Welcome to Spain! After arriving at Barcelona's El Prat airport, transfer to your city hotel. After settling in, a local art historian will meet you in the lobby to commence a fascinating 3-hour walking tour of the historic quarter, the *Barrio Gotico*. You'll explore Barcelona's medieval nucleus, built originally on the Roman City of Barcino. There are many landmark buildings in this historic neighbourhood, including the Gothic Cathedral, the church of Santa Maria del Mar and the Picasso Museum.

Alongside your local guide, you'll also discover the secrets of "Las Ramblas", a mile-long pedestrian street that offers up the carnival of urban Barcelona. Dotted with flower stalls, news-stands and pet stalls, Las Ramblas also features a constant parade of street performers. Just off the Ramblas your guide will take you to visit the Mercat de la Boquería, the main city market where the bright colours of fruits and vegetables, spices, fresh seafood and meat - not to mention about a hundred different types of cheese - vie for space in the market stalls. Your tour will conclude with lunch at one of Barcelona's most traditional restaurants.

After a well-earned *siesta* back at the hotel to replenish your energy, we head out to dinner and dine as the locals do; on the delicious miniature cuisine known as "tapas" This is a culinary experience like no other. Tapas range from traditional grilled wild mushrooms, spicy stuffed peppers, homemade croquettes and *bellota* ham to elaborate creations by young chefs who have trained with the greats.

Hotel x two nights.

DAY 2: DISCOVERING GAUDI

Immerse yourself this morning in the life and art of Barcelona's most famous son: Antoni Gaudí. A local art historian will first take you to visit "La Sagrada Familia" (Church of the Holy Family), the half-finished church complex that became the obsession of the famously eccentric architectural genius. The Sagrada Familia is also the most recognizable symbol of Barcelona. Gaudi worked on the church for over 40 years, and because of the complexity of the design, it is not expected to be completed until 2020 (or beyond!)

Continue to Parc Güell; Gaudi's most colourful and playful work. The entire park is made of stone, ceramic, and natural elements. For the mosaics, Gaudi used broken ceramic tiles, plates, and cups. Originally intended as part of a residential garden community, this never came to pass, and the park was eventually sold to the city of Barcelona. Today Parc Güell remains a public park and an UNESCO World Heritage monument. This is a wonderful place to lose yourself for a few hours.....and appreciate the whimsical nature of Gaudi's architectural style.

After lunch, enjoy a free afternoon for more sightseeing or perhaps shopping; the city boasts excellent shopping, including top quality shoes, clothes, leather, perfumes, artisan ceramics and glassware, olive wood, and the best gourmet products that Spain has to offer (virgin olive oils, wine vinegars, saffron, smoked paprikas, etc).

DAY 3: BARCELONA – SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA – O CEBREIRO

Farewell Barcelona and take the short flight to Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. This lovely region in north-west Spain is a dreamy, spiritual land featuring rolling emerald green hills covered in mist, medieval castles, "pazos" (beautiful, historic manor houses, many converted into small, charming hotels), stunning coastline with romantic coves and sandy white beaches spotted with quaint fishing villages and the belief in *meigas* (witches). The Galicians have their own language distinct from Spanish, called "Gallego" which resembles a mix of Portuguese and Spanish.

Upon arrival, a coach will meet you to transfer to O Cebreiro, a beautiful village located on the top of a mountain, and on the Galician side of the León-Galicia border. Surrounded by heather and forests of oak and boasting wonderful views, the village is famous for its primitive, circular thatched-roofed huts called *pallozas* (pre-Celtic in origin) and a tiny chapel where one of the famous legends on the Camino is said to have taken place.

The history of O'Cebreiro has always been closely tied to the Way of St. James. O'Cebreiro was the birthplace of Don Elias Valina San Pedro, a dedicated priest and scholar who devoted his life to the Camino de Santiago, in both academic and practical ways (he was responsible for painting many of the ubiquitous yellow arrows on rocks and trees that mark the Camino de Santiago for pilgrims).

There's time to leisurely explore the village before driving to the Rectoral de Goian, a tranquil guest house located 8 km outside of Sarria. Relax and enjoy the rural surroundings, not to mention the delicious home-cooked meal tonight.

Overnight: Rectoral de Goian, Goian (Sarria), Rural Guest House

This unique 18th century country inn has been beautifully restored. Formerly the rectory of the Goian parish church, the house is situated 8 kms from the Camino de Santiago. Breakfast features wonderful home-made jams and conserves.

DAY 4: SARRIA TO PORTOMARIN (21 KM)

A short transfer from the Rectoral de Goian will take you to Sarria where you will commence your walk. Today's section of the Camino is one of the most picturesque. Walk through bucolic countryside, traversing enchanted forests and small patches of farmland to the banks of the Miño River. En route to Portomarín you'll pass the 100 km marker (only 100 km until Santiago de Compostela) - a milestone for pilgrims who travel the Camino.

Portomarín is a picturesque village with an interesting history. Most of the old buildings of the town (including the Romanesque Church of San Juan) were moved stone by stone to higher ground in the 1960's when the Miño river was dammed to create the Belesar reservoir.

After exploring the village, transfer to Samos to visit the historic Benedictine monastery (one of only three monasteries still inhabited by monks in Galicia). Here, the friendly (and worldly) monks are happy to take us on a tour though the impressive monastery, featuring two beautiful cloisters, a library and refectory.

Although founded in the 6th century, the remaining buildings date to the 18th century. Time permitting, we'll stay for early evening Vespers.

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DAY 5: PORTOMARIN TO LESTEDO (20 KM)

Passing through small villages decorated with *cruceiros* (carved stone crosses that mark the way to Santiago) and containing only three or four houses, you'll meet other *peregrinos* on the trail. But although you share your quest and a sense of camaraderie with fellow pilgrims from around the world, there are always moments of solitude to contemplate this special journey.

After the walk, we'll visit the Church of Vilar de Donas, very close to our inn. This beautiful Romanesque church houses 14th century frescos and effigies of the Knights of the Order of Santiago (a mystical order whose purpose was to provide safe passageway to pilgrims in medieval times).

Overnight: Rectoral de Lestedo, Lestedo, Rural Inn

This former rectory belonging to the parish church of Lestedo was lovingly restored five years ago. The charming house is situated in hamlet right on the Camino de Santiago.

DAY 6: LESTEDO TO O COTO (13 KM)

Today you'll enjoy a short day of walking. After departing Palas de Rei stop to admire the tiny 12th century church dedicated to St. Julian – one of the many Romanesque treasures along the Camino. The undulating countryside is studded with meadows and forests of eucalyptus and pine as you approach O Coto-Leboreiro, where you'll have lunch in a charming restaurant right on the Camino.

Your host, Mari Puri, is a wonderful cook and although she doesn't speak any English, your trip leader will help translate as you watch her whip up the *tortilla de patata* (potato omlette) that you'll eat later for lunch (along with other delicious regional dishes). Afterwards, enjoy a restful afternoon at your rural inn; the expansive garden is perfect for a session of yoga, meditation or a lazy siesta.

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DAY 7: O COTO TO ARZUA (18 KM)

You'll start walking where you finished the day before. The first town you'll pass through is Melide, featuring a wonderful square and church and a good pilgrims' atmosphere. Here, other pilgrims' trails merge with the "Camino Frances", and you are likely to see more *peregrinos* from here to Santiago de Compostela.

Trace the Camino as it weaves along country lanes and ancient stone pathways called *corredoiras*. Farmers tend their fields and the chimes of cow bells accompany the sounds of your footsteps. In this area of rural Galicia it is not uncommon to see villagers still using scythes to work the land. At lunch, be

sure to try the creamy cows' cheese from Arzúa and *empanada*, a light crusty pastry-pie filled with beef or tuna.

Your hotel tonight, the beautiful and isolated O Muino de Pena is located right next to a gushing stream and mystical forest; perfect for a stroll or swim.

Overnight: O Muino de Pena, Rua, Rural Inn

Housed within a renovated water mill, this rustic hotel enjoys a stunning location surrounded by lush green vegetation, just a short drive from Rua. Highlights include a traditional-style lounge with fireplace and an excellent restaurant.

DAY 8: ARZUA TO RUA (19 KM)

Today's section of the Camino will take you past vegetable patches, meadows, forests and tranquil villages with curious names such as Xen, Ras and Brea. In the village of Santa Irene, you can stop to visit the small Romanesque chapel dedicated to the saint of the same name, St. Irene. Finish walking for the day in Rua (from where there are only 19 kms left until arriving in Santiago). Here, you'll be picked up in Rua, and transferred back to O Muino de Pena.

After dinner tonight Javier, your host, will prepare a very traditional *queimada*, the ancient "fire drink" of the Galicians. This traditional warm drink made with flamed *orujo* (a local liquor made from grapes), lemon, sugar and coffee beans. The brew is lit in a big clay pot and while it is stirred (until the flame turns blue) a traditional incantation or purification spell is read (dating back to Celtic times) once very popular with Galicias *meigas* (witches).

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DAY 9: RUA TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA (19 KM)

A transfer will take you back to Rua to walk the final 19 km into Santiago. Excitement mounts as the trail brings you closer to Santiago de Compostela. Walk through rolling terrain towards Lavacolla, where medieval pilgrims traditionally bathed in the river to purify themselves before arriving in the holy city of Santiago. From here you'll begin to ascend the Monte del Gozo ("Mount of Joy"), the point where pilgrims first catch sight of the spires of the Cathedral of Santiago, these days surrounded by the bustling city of Santiago de Compostela.

Arriving in the Obradoiro square, in front of the immense Cathedral, is an exciting moment, and after performing the traditional pilgrim rituals inside the Cathedral, check in to your hotel for a well-earned rest!

Overnight: Hotel Altair, Santiago de Compostela, 3 * hotel**

Located in the old quarter of Santiago de Compostela, this special hotel offers an oasis in the middle of the bustling city. Friendly and personalized service and the elegant décor combining modern touches with traditional elements make it a perfect base for exploring Santiago

DAY 10: DISCOVER SANTIAGO – THE SPIRITUAL HEART OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

After a leisurely breakfast, enjoy a private tour of the magnificent Cathedral with a local art historian. You'll also explore the narrow streets or *rúas* of the Old Quarter, where the vibrancy, history and magic of Santiago de Compostela come alive. Your historical visit will end in time for pilgrims' mass at noon in the Cathedral (where you might be lucky enough to see the Botafumeiro, the giant incensory swung by the priests high above the nave during Mass).

The rest of the day is free to explore this wonderful UNESCO designated city. Later in the evening, enjoy delicious Galician dishes to celebrate your last night in Santiago. This vibrant university town has a plethora of bars and restaurants serving fresh seafood. If you are lucky, you might also catch a boisterous and spontaneous performance of traditional Galician minstrels called the *Tuna*; university students who dress in medieval garb including doublets, puffy shirts and tights and play the guitar, bandurrias and lutes in the *plazas* of the old quarter.

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DAY 11: SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA TO THE RIAS BAIXAS WINE REGION

After breakfast, a private transfer will take you to the lovely region of Rias Baixas (low rivers) in the province of Pontevedra. In this beautiful and seldom visited region of Galicia, the imprint of different cultures from the era of the Celts right down to the Modern Ages have all left their mark on the Galician culture. From Celtic *Castros* (Hill-forts) to the Dolmens left here by the region's first inhabitants, the ability to work stone with the enviable expertise and craft of the master mason never seems to have been a secret in these parts.

"Rias Baixas" is also the name of the lush and verdant wine region here making some of the best white wines in Spain at the moment. Although Spain is mainly known for its red wine, it is in this cool, maritime region of Rías Baixas that white grapes excel. The signature grape variety from the region of Rías Baixas is Albariño, an elegant varietal that is likened to both Riesling and Viognier; Riesling for its minerally character and Viognier for its bouquet of peaches and apricots.

After a visit and tasting at a renowned winery continue to lunch in the tranquil fishing village of Combarro, where the picturesque medieval streets and historic collection of *horreos* (grain stores) and *cruceiros* (ancient stone crosses) have been dubbed a UNESCO protected site.

The late afternoon is free for a relaxing massage in the hotel's treatment room or perhaps a swim in the pool.

Overnight: Quinta de San Amaro, Salnés, 3 * hotel**

Surrounded by lush vineyards, this lovely family-run hotel is located in the heart of the Rias Baixas wine region. Combining both avant-garde and rustic décor, this ancestral home features a cozy living room with fire-place, several cozy reading corners and a wonderful restaurant serving traditional Galician cuisine with a modern twist

DAY 12: GALICIAN COOKING CLASS

This morning you'll participate in an exclusive Galician cooking class at the Quinta de San Amaro. Your class commences with a visit to the local fish market (*lonja*) to select, alongside your Chef, the freshest ingredients for your recipes. This hands-on class takes place at the Quinta de San Amaro and after your cooking lesson you'll enjoy your creations in the hotel restaurant, accompanied of course, by the best local *albariño* wine.

Rest of the day at leisure.

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DAY 13: SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

Our journey together finishes in Santiago after breakfast. You may want to travel directly home or venture onward.

Ola !!