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When I was 15 in the IB Program, Mr. Norton assigned us a book called *The Pilgrimage* by Paulo Coelho. Now, originally I wasn't a fan of the book as I made fun of a bunch of the scenes and exercises Coelho speaks about in it, but it made me wonder 'who is crazy enough to spend 30 days walking through Spain?'. Well, Mr. Norton was that type of crazy and spoke of it fondly and somehow, walking the Camino de Santiago made it onto my bucket list.

Now I'm pretty lucky in that as someone who works in video game design, I can take large chunks of time off. I have a travel fund and I had a large chunk of change set aside to complete something on my bucket list. And then my dog got sick. And my travel fund went to him. And then my dog died in a freak accident that was mostly my fault. And the guild stayed, and suddenly I had a reason to walk to Santiago. Many people don't walk to Santiago for religious reasons, and until then I wasn't walking for any particular reason. But the Compostela (the certificate you receive in SdC) is an indulgence of sort, a way of forgiving a sin. I looked at it as a way to atone for the death of much beloved dog.

I started my pilgrimage on the 20th of September in Roncevalles. I wanted to start in SJPDP but the weather was horrible and there have been a few accidents over the years of pilgrims walking off of the mountains or cliffs because they couldn't see their way in the rain/fog. The monastery that serves as the albergue is beautiful, and the pilgrims' mass even more so. The same mass has been going on for the past 600 years and you can feel it as the priest's words reverberate off the stone walls and into your body.





I made it as far as Zubiri. Not as far as I wanted, but in that first day I learned my first new Spanish word 'ampolla' which means, blister. Oh the blisters. A doctor from Mexico used a needle to pop them and thread them with string to drain them. I spent that day (and well into the night) with the doctor and two Catalans from Barcelona. I had just come from Barcelona (and am a huge FC Barcelona fan) so we had a lot of futbol to discuss. It was at the albergue that night (in an old municipal school house), that I took my first group shower (not a lot of private showers along the way, but they are gender divided so that's nice), and I met a woman named Desiree.

Desiree is from a tiny coastal town only accessible by boat on the eastern side of Donostia/San Sebastian in Pais Vasco. My grandmother's first husband was Basque, an exile/refugee from Donostia during the Spanish Civil War. My cousins who share his blood always repeat they are not Spanish, they are Basque. This still rings true in the Basque parts of Spain today. Desiree (or Des as I called her), was not Spanish despite living in what is now Spain, and her Basque pride was untouchable. I walked with her on the second day from Zubiri to Villana, on the outskirts of Pamplona. If you had said to me before I left for Spain that I would be in the shade of an abandoned, centuries old church in the middle of Basque Navarre while a Basque woman old enough to be my mother drained horrible blisters for me with sewing needles and iodine, I would have laughed. Alas, that was what day two was like.

In Villana we stayed in a monastery built in 1051. It was dark when we arrived and I was unable to take pictures to my dismay. But as I was gross from walking and my feet were burning from all the blisters, I didn't mind just going to bed. I did get free dinner that night though- Des got to talking basque freedom with the men who ran the pilgrim restaurant and as they were basque too, they gave us free dinner ^_~

On day three I only walked 7 miles before my knee gave out. My blisters were causing me to walk funny and I think it causes the problem (many shots, xrays, and pain killers later revealed one of the ligaments had essentially collapsed and I still have problems with it. It's my permanent pilgrimage souvenir). I stopped at Cizur Menor and after a tearful lunch with Des, she continued on. Cizur Menor ended up being one of those nights where you think fate intervenes. I wear my Seattle Sounders jersey to sleep and when I had changed into it after getting out of my hiking clothes, the guy on the bunk next to me turned out to be from Portland (The Sounders and the Timbers have a HUGE rivalry). But he was AMAZING and gave me a knee brace and some arnica that 'he swore by' (yes it worked, yes I'm hooked for life). That night I also met a Brazilian named Rafael who was a stereotypical starving artist/hippie who said 'the camino will provide' as he hadn't brought a lot of money with him, and a Dutch woman named Anka who literally had been walking since July and had started her pilgrimage out her front door in the Netherlands. That night we pooled the food we had and had a smorgasbord of sorts (and among those there were two Austrian women who had walked from Pamplona to SdC and now were walking in reverse and it was their last day!), and a Slovenian man stayed up playing his guitar for us. It was my favorite night

On day 4 I 'cheated' and sent my backpack ahead. Now there's this big argument on the trail these days as some people have tour companies that transport their bags to their hotels/albergues for them during the day and have buses pick them up after a few miles of walking. The 'hardcore' pilgrims call them 'tour-egrinos' and I will say, they did annoy me when they'd appear all chipper and refreshed and ask how my walk was (I just walked 10 miles and you walked 2, how do you think my walk is???). I felt bad sending my bag ahead but as my knee was all sorts of screwed up, I decided it was okay because that day I would be climbing to the Alto de Perdon. I ended up being lucky as Rafael refused to let me carry anything and carried my day back for me the entire way.



You see those mountains in the back? I started on the other side of those. The Alto de Perdon is 'the mountain of forgiveness' and the climb up is pretty unforgiving. The climb down is even more so as it's made of shifting rock and when you have a bum knee, it's not easy. It's also not easy to keep your thoughts pure when an attractive man from Brazil is carrying your water, wearing tiny spandex shorts, and asks if he can stop for a yoga break at the top of the mountain. I swear the entire walk up I was staring at the ground saying 'Don't look at his butt, don't look at his butt, omg you looked at his butt, that's a nice butt, Jesus Christ, omg no, I'm on a pilgrimage I can't say that, I'm going to hell'. I'm also going to confess to listening to Shakira and Ke\$ha a lot as motivation to get to the top of the Alto de Perdon.... probably not the best pilgrimage music.

Despite being almost October, it was unbearably hot. I stopped at Puente la Reina and parted ways with Rafael (and his sin-inducing spandex shorts), but I was in for a surprise. Dis was there and I cried so hard when I saw her and I'm not sure if I've ever hugged anyone so tight. I also was reunited with the man from Portland and an Australian woman I had met a few days earlier. Poor Dis. She was walking with a hobble and her feet were bandaged. She had walked too long and the bottoms were completely blistered. She had to go home. But luckily, we were allowed two nights in Puente la Reina as we were injured.

I parted ways with Dis again (and an amazing woman named Marie who gave me THE BEST ADVICE anyone has ever given me, which I'll say at the end of this long rambling diatribe of mine), and I won't lie, I cried. Like a baby. But as facebook is a thing, I still talk to her whenever I want and feel like it was just yesterday that I saw her.

This was day 6.... maybe? And I walked to Villatuerta. I walked like an old woman as my knee was screwed up, but I was so stubborn I refused to give up. Along the way I walked through a town called Ciriqui which was absolutely charming, but my camera had died and I didn't have pictures ;-; In Villatuerta I met up with an older Canadian couple who I had bumped into on and off again who wouldn't let me get up to do anything and babied me. I won't lie, it was nice to be babied (though I wouldn't let them do my laundry). I later found out their son had died two months before and he was the one who was supposed to be walking right now. They took up walking for him and it was hard not to cry when they told me. He was the same age as me. I met a couple a day earlier who had lost an infant daughter. The Camino isn't always religious, but there is something spiritual and healing about it that connects people (even if they don't want to admit it)





Day Seven was my last official day of walking. I made it 2 miles and it took me three hours to walk because of my knee. I found a doctor but at 8 am in Spain, nothing is open. I sat on his doorstep with my leg propped up and tears on my face for how bad my knee hurt. The doctor lives across the street though and saw me sitting there and came out. His English was non-existent and my Spanish medical jargon aside from 'tengo dolor en mi rodilla' is basic. He gave me a shot of something in my knee (almost as painful as the knee injury itself), and refused to take money from me. There are some in Spain who see the Camino and the Pilgrims as a money grab (and I don't blame them as Spain is suffering a terrible economic crisis and has unemployment at 24% right now) but there are some who still treat pilgrims with a sort of wonder and care I didn't think existed. I asked him if he had ever walked to Santiago and he told me once, when he was young and foolish enough for it.

I was in a small town named Estella, and it was market day. I was lucky to see the farmers come in and set up their stalls in the square, but it was painful to watch pilgrims wander through and keep walking when I knew with my knee I wouldn't be able to do so. I got a small hotel room, took a shower, and wandered into another square for coffee and to watch how the locals live their lives.



The next morning I took a bus to Pamplona and then another to Bilbao and then on to Santander. I lingered in Santander for a week hoping my knee would magically heal, but it didn't. I am a member of a few SdC message boards and I wrote about my disappointment with my knee on one of them. A woman (Rebekah) who runs an albergue in Moratinos offered me a place to stay while I recuperated. So after my week in Santander (which is BY FAR my favorite city in Spain), I hopped on a bus to Oviedo and then onto a train to Leon and Sahagun. Sahagun and Moratinos are farming communities on the meseta and yes it is as flat and dry and endless as you can imagine (basically New Mexico or Kansas). Rebekah is something of a legend on the Camino. She's completed the Camino Frances numerous times and has written guides for many of the other ways (el Camino Norte, Camino Portuguese, Camino invierno etc etc etc). She helps stranded and injured pilgrims as well as runs a pseudo albergue when the one in Moratinos overflows. And in Moratinos I cleaned, I swept, I gardened, I went to the farmer markets, I learned how to make tiramisu from the italians who ran the official albergue, I played with the resident dogs and cats, and somehow overcame my fear of spiders (they were huge and with my gimpy knee, I couldn't move fast enough to avoid them).

And it was here in Moratinos, speaking with Rebekah and others who passed by during the days I was there, that I discovered something- your camino starts the minute your heart tells you to go and you are never finished with it. You can walk to Santiago de Compostela, you can walk to Finisterre, but once you are a peregrino you are always a peregrino and the road will keep beckoning you. I am not disappointed I did not finish; I am proud I walked a hundred miles and determined to return to walk 400 more. There were lessons I learned along the way and I saw a side of humanity rarely exposed these days (strength, compassion, family, charity, the goodness of the human spirit). I learned perseverance and dedication, how to face and overcome fear, and most important I learned I could rely on people who quickly went from strangers to family.

As for the advice Marie gave me, when she asked why I was walking and I explained one of my goals was to not be so judgmental, she (a white, 50 year old woman with gray dreadlocks from Minnesota) said 'F%#\$ that- you go on ahead being as judgmental as you want or else someone else will make those judgement for you'. Words to live by, words to live by.







PS Yes, I did take a train to Santiago de Compostela, yes I saw I the Cathedral, but no, I did not go inside. Ask me again in 400 miles and I'll tell you otherwise

