THE REAL DEAL

(PILGRIMAGE IN THE 21ST CENTURY)

"We'll start at Leon and walk to Sarria. Then we get the bus to Santiago as we don't have time to finish it on foot. What are you doing?"

"All on foot. From Carcassonne."

"Where's that?"

"In France."

"What's the distance?"

"A little over 1300 kilometres."

"Wow. You're the Real Deal"

(conversation in "Poppy's" coffee shop, Enniskerry, March 2011)

There is a saying that the Camino has two ways: the first is to search for God and find yourself; the second is to search for yourself and find God.

I believe I'm taking a third way – that of giving thanks for the blessings received in this life. I am able to take this on because I am a retired 64 year old with time on my hands – and a pension. I am aware that many of my peers have not made it to this point in life. I am also acutely aware that many of those with whom I still share this planet do not have the necessary resources of time and money, that I am blessed with, to undertake such a venture. They can only dream of a future possibility, while I can make it real.

Or am I searching for something? I've recently passed the crossroads of retirement, so is this a time to reflect and ponder what comes next? Like Antoine, whom I'll meet later, at 39 recently retired from a French parachute regiment (he trained in Carcassonne); or like Serge in his 40s , the Breton chef who has just sold his restaurant after surviving triple by-pass heart surgery. Both of them are working out what their futures might be as they walk. Maybe we pilgrims are all, to some extent, searchers – casting our flashlights into the future, hoping for some reflection to come back?

At 8.15am on Sunday 10th April 2011, I walk out of the door of our mountain home in the village of Mas Cabardes just north of Carcassonne. A rucksack on my back (it weighs 10 kilos with a full water bottle strapped to it) and a coquille shell around my neck. This is the

symbol worn by those on pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostella, no matter where their starting point. I have a second shell which I attach to the knocker on the door – while I am away, this one will tell the passer-by that somebody from the house is on pilgrimage.

Joyce, my wife, walks the first couple of kilometres with me and we say farewell at the hamlet of Massefans, and then I'm on my own for the next 1300 kilometres – or so I think.

Fifteen minutes later, a white van passes me going the opposite way. The horn honks, the van stops, and out jumps an excited Denis. He's driving up to the village with the bread he will sell in his Epicierie today. He is pleased and delighted to see I am on my way as he knows I've had a troublesome cartilage injury these past two months. He holds out both hands – almost in blessing – and wishes me "Bon Courage". It feels like some sort of Benediction.

My mind goes back to Enniskerry, just two weeks earlier, when I met the group from UCD who were out on a training walk for their own pilgrimage later in the summer. Outside the coffee shop, as the walkers milled around, quietly and unobtrusively, Father John had given me his blessing – noticed only by God. Encouraged by the warmth of both men – one Irish, one French - I wave my second farewell of the morning, and I'm on my way.

The walk to Carcassonne is by road, which winds its way down the valley. Going the other way, it's a climb which dedicated cyclists take on in their numbers every weekend, and this Sunday is no exception. A woman in one group slams on her brakes and pulls in. Pointing to the shell, she asks: "Are you really doing the Chemin de St Jacques?", "All the way?", "On foot?" And for the second time today I get a "Bon Courage".

The walk beside the Canal du Midi and through modern Carcassonne to the walls of the medieval city is uneventful, and by mid afternoon I have reached my destination hard by La Cite's wall: Notre Dame d' Abbey. It's now a retreat house and even offers accommodation to passing tourists, but it has a long-standing tradition of providing shelter to pilgrims on their way to Santiago. Those who come here with cars and cases – the trappings of everyday 21st century travel - pay the going rate for their bed and board. As an accredited pilgrim (I have my Credencial which I surrender to be examined and then given the stamp of this religious house to show that I have passed through) I will pay much less. It's going to be twenty five euro for dinner, bed and breakfast.

After I've checked in at Reception I go to my room to shower and rest, but in spite of tiredness (the knee is doing all right, though) it's hard to settle. I look out of my window and there, across the cloisters, is the old city very much "in my face" and like a set from a Disney movie. Yet I know it is pitted with a history of conflict and pain: the price of not accepting difference. Leaving my room for the showers, I have a grandstand view of the Montagne Noire through the corridor window. It's from where I've walked today, and from where the northern invaders came all those centuries ago.

I fancy a walk within the old city before dinner, but soon return to my room – the bustle of tourists and the garish souvenir shops tarmacking over any trace of the history which haunts this place – I feel ill at ease in a place I've often visited, and crave quietness for a while.

And I don't want to be late for dinner – I'm hungry. As I walk round the cloisters to the refectory, I try not to recall meals eaten in local restaurants as I prepare for my frugal pilgrim repast.

The hospitalier nun meets me at Reception and walks me round the cloisters to the refectory where she shows me to my table and departs. I await the gruel.

Then out of the kitchen bounces the young chef (he doubles as waiter) and puts my starter before me with a flourish. Not for the last time on this pilgrimage, my jaw drops. Here's a huge seafood vol-au-vent accompanied by a shrimp and lettuce salad on the side, and topped with a large unshelled prawn. If this be pilgrim food – cook on. A veal stew follows with haricot beans bound together with a bacon rasher, and then a chocolate brownie with custard AND cream.

The modestly sized quarter litre pichet of wine disappears with the starter, but I'm a pilgrim now so I will be grateful for the little I was given. Then the stew arrives and with it - the offer of a refill of the pichet. The same offer is extended with the dessert, at which point I think it polite to enquire as to the provenance of the pichet's contents. I'm told it's from the Corbiere and, to show I know a thing or two about wine and appreciate it, I comment on how pleasant it is, noting that I prefer the more local Minervois.

"Oh I've got some of that too. Would you like to try it?"

Hesitation in responding to a question from the French is always a mistake (or a good idea, depending on your point of view), and a fourth pichet arrives. If I've done my maths right, I'm drinking a litre of wine here and I have a long walk tomorrow. Perhaps there's a way out of this.

"I'm terribly sorry, but I seem to be keeping you a prisoner here because of my drinking. Perhaps I should leave." It's not elegant wording, but I can say it in the local language and know I will be understood.

"No worries" comes the French reply, "I've got litres more of the stuff out in the kitchen – take your time, have what you want". I think it best to finish what's in my glass and totter off round the cloisters before more wine is pressed on me, or before I break into hymn singing of a decidedly non-religious nature.

Next morning at breakfast, the nun appears with the photocopy of a detailed map of the city and environs with my route clearly marked out. I'll be following the GR 78, or Voie Piedmont Pyrenean de St Jacques, from here to St Jean Pied de Port - but in some urban areas the red and white way markings of the GR have been scratched out by people with

not a lot to do, and the blue and yellow scallops of the Voie Piedmont Pyrenean taken away as souvenirs. The map the nun gives me to take will be invaluable for finding the right way out of town.

I leave Notre Dame somewhat later than I intended at 8.30am and walk beside the city wall down to the Pont Vieux which takes me west across the River Aude. As I walk there is commotion behind me. Then someone bumps into me as he runs past - it's an athletic man in white T-shirt and black shorts. He's followed by many more in the same uniform, their shirts proclaiming they are from Number 3, The Parachute Regiment which is stationed nearby. There are some rather fine looking women among them too, I notice. Too late I reach for my camera to take a picture of these retreating soldiers in front of me – a picture for which I already have the caption:

"Cream of the French Army runs away from determined Pilgrim"

My route turns south beside the river and then through the suburbs by back roads that save me from contact with and noise from morning traffic. A group of workmen watch me pass, I hear the words "Saint Jacques" spoken quietly – then there's a shout of "Bon Courage" after me. I thank them. I do appreciate the encouragement.

My plan is to do 25k today and stay in a Chambre d' Hote at Montreal as there is no monastery before Fanjeaux, the birthplace of the founder of the Dominican order(????) and home to one of the grandest monasteries in the south of France. I'll stop for a lunch break in Arzens, the little village where Joyce and I first stayed when we came house hunting in 2002. I know the place well, so it's into the Patisserie for a treat and lunch on a bench by the Bouledrome where petanque is played in the evenings.

Before leaving Arzens, I go to the phone box beside the pub to make my reservation for the following night – my bed in Montreal for tonight is already booked. A woman comes out of the pub and looks at me as I speak on the phone. Having expertly arranged the booking and come out of the booth, I see she is still looking at me as if I am some kind of sad loser.

"Are you a pilgrim?"

"Of course I am" –and I flash my coquille in her general direction.

"There's nowhere to spend the night between here and Fanjeaux"

"I know". I'm beginning to feel superior. "I checked out the route with the tourist office, Notre Dame, and Gite de France and I have a Chambre D' booked for myself in Montreal."

"That'll cost you €50 or more"

"I know that already, thank you"

"If you're an accredited pilgrim, you can stay here for €10"

“WHAT??”

“This is a Relais St Jacques. I’m closing for the day, so if you want to stay you need to make your mind up now. You’ll be the only one in the dormitory – shower and toilets to yourself – and breakfast in the morning is an extra.”

“Excuse me – I’ll just make one more phone call”, I say. And I cancel my Montreal booking. I don’t offer a prayer, but I think to myself that Saint James must be looking after me already (he has that reputation with pilgrims). A third telephone call invites Joyce down for a meal in the evening – Mas Cabardes is a forty five minute drive away and the money I have saved on this over-night stay will pay for a meal for the two of us. So it’s a good feed for the second night in a row. Correction – it’s the third night, as the night before I left Mas Cabardes, Alban and Helene put on a massive farewell feast to send me on my way. Perhaps I’m going to have to watch my weight on this trip.

At the end of the evening Joyce drops me back to the spookily darkened hostel which I have all to myself. We don’t know it now, as we have vague plans to meet along the way – but this is the last time we will be together for over two months, the longest separation of our more than 35 year marriage.

Next morning I head down to the bar at 7.30am. It’s in full swing – with as many punters as you might expect to see there of an evening, all men. They seem to come and go in relays, stopping for coffee and a general chat with the assembly, and then on their way. Presumably to work. I’m the odd one out in every sense of the phrase, especially given that my table is spread with a breakfast of croissant, baguette, butter, jam and hot chocolate (which costs all of €4). Then I’m on the road again myself, walking through the vineyards.

As the day warms up (it’s only April but the temperature was up to 20 degrees yesterday and a worrying 30 the day before I set out), I’m aware of fragrances wafting up to me from the path. It’s a heady mix of the wild flowers and herbs that are all around, but I don’t know what most of them are. I can sense some mint and sage in there perhaps, but that’s it. I breathe deeply, for this is fresh country air so it’s healthy.

And then I hit a high. OMG – stop! I’m a pilgrim searching for God, not a hippie searching for the 1960s. My footsteps seem to lighten, I feel an increase in energy, and the thought comes to me that I have passed through some kind of perfumed portal – and with this that the pilgrimage has really begun.

In Montreal I need to refill my water bottle. I ask a passing lady where the Eau Potable (public drinking water) is. She doesn’t know, but waves down the dustbin lorry and asks them. Armed with the information, she says she will walk me to the public tap. It’s a slow journey on account of her age. She tells me of the many different nationalities living in the town now, and that her husband, now dead, was German. I’m dying to ask how they met

and married, but return the conversation to the possibly safer ground of my pilgrimage until we reach the water.

At Fanjeaux I could have stayed in the Convent, but opted for the grander, more historic Monastery. My Guide to the Haltes St Jacques is a small booklet which only gives Hospitalier names and mobiles, so I had no way of knowing that booking the monastery means I'm in for an extra walk that will take me three kilometres off track – adding another 3K to tomorrow's walk as well.

As with last night, I'm the only pilgrim staying here, but there are various others on retreat. Board and lodging is given for free, though there is the possibility for guests to offer a donation in thanks for what they have received.

At dinner, Grace is said by a Jesuit from Paris. He sits and, looking round the table, asks:

"Do we all speak English?" There is communal nodding.

"All right, then we will use English during the meal". And they did – the French, the Germans and the Dutch. Even when they were in conversations with each other that did not involve me.

I sat beside Hans, chaplain to the German border police. He tells me:

"I do most of my work outside of Germany. Yes, it's true. For instance, all our trains which are going to Paris have border police working on them until they reach the frontier. After that, the men must sit in a closed compartment away from the passengers as we travel through France. It is an excellent time to talk, and I often ride that train to have that opportunity to be with my men." The words "prophet", "in his own land" and "not" come to mind.

Vespers that evening and Mass the next morning are sung by the nuns in a small chapel. The intimacy of the space reinforces the sense of a real community here. After Mass, Father Hans walks out with me towards the tree-lined avenue back to the road. He raises an arm in farewell – or is it blessing?

"The Way you follow to Santiago is the Way to God", he tells me.

And I'm on my way. Three kilometres later I'm back on track – then I realise: I didn't leave a donation. I'm not going back, but I feel bad after the kindness I have experienced there, and I resolve to visit again at the end of the pilgrimage and put matters right.

I'm going south again, towards the snow-capped Pyrenees. The view is stunning, and I appreciate it the more because I have to work to get it – It doesn't "just arrive" round a bend in the motorway. Irritatingly, when I look back I can still see the Montagne Noire with the Pic de Nore up above our house: I left that place three days ago, and it's still there: it feels like I'm not making any progress. Right enough, the path does zig-zag a good bit, but I

tell myself there's a lesson in this: I must look ahead, keep focussed on what's in front and the future – and not dwell on whatever is behind. That's the past and it's over.

Up ahead is my goal for tonight – the cathedral city of Mirepoix with its medieval timber-covered market square. I think I booked my bed here by phone yesterday – but I'm not sure. As there is no religious house in Mirepoix, the "hospitalier" is a local housewife who arranges for a volunteer family to accommodate any pilgrims who might give her a call. When I called last night, she breezily told me to ring back this afternoon and she'd tell me where to go. But will I be able to understand her directions when she gives them to me?

Nervously, I dial the number again as I see the cathedral spire poking over a hill in front of me. As it turns out, the directions couldn't have been simpler:

"Be at the cathedral door at 6.30pm and Margate will collect you and take you to her home."

And that's exactly how it happens. Margate looks as clapped out as her car, which thinks several times before agreeing to restart when we get into it but eventually it does.

"How was your walk today?" Praise God – she speaks perfect English.

"Oh, it was exhausting – the hills, the heat. Please excuse me but I am very tired tonight."

"Stuff and nonsense! My husband and I are 85 and we do that walk there and back for a day's outing. Look at those mountains – we've climbed every peak in the Pyrenees, and skied down most of them. How old are you?"

Shamefaced, I confess to being more than twenty years younger than my hosts, and then try to salvage something of the situation by telling the story of my knee – injured in Irish Set Dancing, it curtailed my preparations for this walk. As Margate goes on to tell me more about her outdoor activities, I resolve to stop judging people on first appearances – thanks for the lesson, St James.

We drive out of the city and up a hill. Then my heart sinks – because I recognise where we are: I walked through this area two hours ago! Which means I'm going to have to do it all again tomorrow.

In as light a voice as I can muster, I mention this to Margate:

"No, no", she says, "Tomorrow you will turn right at the bottom of the hill. There are two GRs here, and you mustn't take the one that goes through Mirepoix. It is not your Way." Is this another "Thank you" I owe to St James?

Back at the house, I will spend the night in the children's bedroom. The children are long gone, of course - Margate and Jean-Pierre's eldest was 60 last year, and now they have grandchildren and great-grandchildren scattered throughout the south of France.

I take a shower and join my hosts on the terrace for aperos. I choose the orange wine: it's a local white into which Margate had dunked orange peel and then left it in the cellar for the winter. As I sip my drink, I look out at the snow-capped Pyrenees. I almost expect to see Julie Andrews skipping across the garden followed by a line of children singing "Doh – a deer".

Margate points to a hump in the distance, below the mountains. It's the hill of Montsegur with the chateau, which we can't see from here, on top. This was one of the last strongholds of the Cathars – the heretics of this region who were exterminated by a church-inspired, land-grabbing northerner-executed Crusade in the 13th century.

The Cathars preached equality of all peoples, and Jews, Catholics and Cathars lived peacefully in the local communities before the outside interference arrived. They put themselves several hundred years ahead of their time by including women among those who should enjoy equal status in society – history tells us that this idea proved too much for some, er, men.

The Cathars real petard was their belief that the world in which we now live is the creation of the devil, not God, and that we must journey through it as virtuously as we can so that we might be judged worthy of entering the next world – that is, God's world, or Heaven if you prefer - when we pass on. Although this interpretation makes questions like "Why does God let children die?" and "Why does God let wars happen?" redundant, and also allows us understand why the devil was tempting Jesus in the desert with items that were supposedly within the gift of his own Father, since they were part of His creation – it yet again proved too much for some.

But now it's time to move indoors to table and the meal – a pasta starter, because "you will need energy for the walk tomorrow"; followed by veal stew "because it is a speciality of the region".

We fall to talking of pilgrimage and Saint James. I'm still a novice at it, but offer a story from my walking day:

"I took my lunch break in a small hamlet, scattering my bits and pieces in the shade where I ate and then lay to rest on an expanse of thick grass. When I packed to walk on, I scanned the area to make sure I had everything – but discovered (two kilometres later) that I must have missed my green-framed sunglasses in the grass. Retrieval would mean an extra 4K onto the day which had already sprung an extra three kilometre surprise on me, so I walked on – saddened that I was losing gear so early in the expedition."

Then a thought occurred to me, I tell my hosts:

“I wonder if St James is trying to tell me something? Perhaps he wants me to experience his Way without filters; to see the whole thing in glorious Technicolor, as it were”. We all smile and, silently I resolve to walk on without sunglasses, and see what happens.

They tell me of some of the other pilgrims who have stayed with them in recent times, there’s a wide range of ages and nationalities, but soon it’s time for bed. This night, I sleep deeply. It’s the mixture of tiredness and wine that does it; but there is an important third ingredient: the total darkness in this hilltop home when I turn out the light, and the complete quiet – until the dawn chorus provides me with a wakeup call, a gentler one than I am used to with the raucous electronic one I have at home.

When I arrive for breakfast – there’s a pair of sunglasses on the table at my place:

“Please take them,” says Margate, “They’re an old pair and we have others for ourselves.”

Jean-Pierre is pottering in the garden. Margate explains he is in the early stages of Alzheimer’s (Yes! That’s one apostrophe that should be there). She points to a White Board nailed to the wall beside the fridge:

“He asks me the same things over and over again, so I have written all the answers here and now I just to point to the Board when he asks me a question. It’s easier, I was getting so tired saying the same thing over and over. ”

Ready to depart, I return to the bedroom for my rucksack, and leave my “Donativo” in the box so labelled on the dressing table. This is my first encounter with the Spanish for “Donation”, but at all the stops along the French Chemin de St Jacques, it is Spanish rather than French which is used to identify such items in the hostel or home-stay.

After fond farewells, and promises that we will meet again one day, I head out down the drive. There’s a baguette stuffed full of Parma ham sticking out of the rucksack now, so I’ve no need to look for a shop to buy the wherewithal for lunch . And, although I now find myself walking over old ground for the second day in succession, at least I know I’m on the right track!

The terrain is becoming hillier so I’m going up and down, but not as dramatically as the mountains to my left. I’m getting great views as I meander through pasture land. At one point I laugh as I disturb a sun-bathing fox: I didn’t know they did that! Then through a patch of woodland, I send a feeding stag scampering back into the trees, barking his head off – is that in fright, or to warn his family to get moving out of here?

At lunchtime I eat sitting on a rock, making it easy to ensure I have everything when I pack up to leave. It’s good I’ve learned the lesson early on, but my “new” sunglasses are buried deep in my backpack: I really am going to do this thing of not blinkering myself, and I notice that on this hot sunny day I am not troubled by glare.

As I chomp into the baguette, I look down at my legs dangling from the rock.

“Oh dear, this won’t do!”

The left side of both of my thighs and of my calves are developing a healthy looking tan – the right sides are completely white. It’s because I’m walking west. That means I’m going to have to walk all the way back from Santiago if I want to have an even suntan for the beach this summer.

After lunch I dip down into a couple of valleys with farming villages. In one, the church is locked and I have to ring a mobile to get it opened. Who’d be bothered?

In the next valley, the village church is being renovated so the workmen have it open, and I can go in. Here in the middle of nowhere I find a stunning display of stained glass – most of it in the huge rose window which is in the ceiling of the church – not the walls. It casts a spectacular display of coloured light on the floor just in front of the altar. Hmmm, maybe I should bother with these little places of worship off the beaten track.

At 5 o’clock I arrive in Vals where I will stay with Evangelina and Gilbert: he from Belgium and she from Greece. It’s another small village, so I’m off to visit the church before I call to the home where I’ll stay. This is a twelfth century Roman building, the notice tells me, and it’s built into the rock on the side of the hill. I climb the steps to the door and open it, but I’m not in a church. Before me are more stone steps wending their way through a cleft in the rock to another door high above. When I reach this second door I enter the church, much smaller than you’d think from the outside and beautiful in its simplicity.

Back at my night-stop I discover that they can take 11 pilgrims in their huge home (in two dormitory style room), but I’m the only one again tonight – and I’m the first Irish one they’ve ever had. They’re delighted I called to their church to have a look – it does attract some tourists, they tell me.

“Did you visit the church in XXXXX? It’s locked, but if you ring the number given, Alex comes up very quickly to open it. You didn’t call? What a pity! Whenever it’s a pilgrim, Alex asks them to ring the church bells. When there is a lull in conversation, the French say ‘An angel is passing over’; when they hear the church bells in XXXXX, the villagers can say ‘There’s a pilgrim passing’. It’s a nice idea, no?”

Yes! I’m sorry I missed out on that. But let’s move on more important matters: what’s for dinner?

“This is veal stew. It’s a regional speciality, you must try it.” And not for the last time on this trip – it was octopus in Galicia and Garlic soup through Leon – I find myself eating the same meal two days in a row.

We three foreigners in France all sit around the table talking in French – the language we all have in common. Makes a change from the Fanjeaux mealtime experience, and I'm getting to be a dab hand at it. This is because the questions I'm being asked about myself are pretty much the same as last night (where from, what family, what worked at) and I can trot out monologues, which anticipate further questioning and so spare me the need to try and comprehend whatever question I may be asked after a briefer response is made.

I've been hoping for a response to the phone message I left during the day with the hospitalier in Pamiers, seeking a bed for tomorrow night. I did give my mobile number very clearly. Then Evangelina excuses herself to take a call on the house phone. When she returns:

"That was Marie Therese. She says you have a bed for tomorrow night."

"But how did she know I was here with you?"

"Ah! That's what we call the Camino Radio. We who offer hospitality in the Ariege have a support network. We meet together once a month, and at other times we're on the phone about this or that. We let each other know what's happening. In fact, it's helped Gilbert and me get to know people in the area, and we've made some good friends locally by being a Halte St Jacques."

"How is your knee after today's walk, by the way? You know, I love to watch Irish Dancing."

Next morning I leave at 8. There's a bit of a climb ahead and I want to get it over before the sun gets too high. I'm not too hot when I reach the top and start down to the next valley. I am carrying route notes but no map, so I simply follow the GR waymarks and turn left to walk along the side of the valley when I reach the bottom. I accept the right turn which takes me across the valley, but become more and more irritated as I find myself walking back up the valley until I reach the point directly opposite the one where I arrived into the valley.

I'm very happy to zig-zag up steep climbs, but I don't see the need to do this in a completely flat valley. What are they playing at? Extending the walk to keep pilgrims in the area for longer so they'll spend more money here? I give a little "Hurrumph" and trudge up out of the valley. Then, on a left hand bend, I see a path to my right signed for the village I came through on the far side of the valley. With the advantage of height as well as familiarity with the terrain now behind me, I can see that the Way split in two when I first arrived in the valley – the direct route to speed me straight over and on to my next night stop, and the longer one which meandered down the valley to take the pilgrim into St Amidou for a rest in the safety of the village and perhaps to offer a prayer of thanks for the journey so far in the little church there. But this is the twenty first century, so I had found the church is locked when I was passing.

I finish off my climb, thinking it might have been wise to have brought a map along with me. Months later, with the pilgrimage well behind me, I do look at maps of where I have been walking and discover that this whole day between Vals and Pamier has been one huge detour – a giant arc of a walk to the north of the direct modern highway!

As I finish off my day into the largest town since leaving Carcassonne, my annoyance subsides as I'm rewarded with several kilometres of straight and flat walking along the bed of a disused railway line. It takes me through Le Carlaret with its old station, now a private home – and also a Halte St Jacques. It's a lovely looking, spacious property, but I'll be staying somewhere much more classy tonight: the Bishop's Palace beside the Cathedral in Pamiers. Pilgrims do it in style!

I cross the old bridge on the outskirts of the city (photo), the gradient making it accessible only to pedestrians. It's now on a walking track well away from all the comings and goings of present day commerce and usage in the region. Passing through the suburbs, I arrive in the main square at lunchtime, hours ahead of my appointment with Marie-Therese. After a huge breakfast, including two fried eggs from Evangelina's hens, I don't want anything to eat – but a beer would go down well.

Off comes my rucksack as I take a seat outside one of the bars, and before long I'm clutching a cold one. It has a predictable effect, and before long my eyelids droop and my head drops.

"You're a pilgrim, aren't you?"

I sit up smartly. It's been Carcassonne since anyone noticed I'm a pilgrim, and I'm concerned I might be doing the wrong thing. I've hidden my coquille – but I don't think I should be seen drinking beer if I'm somehow advertising the fact I'm a pilgrim.

The young man in front of me is smartly dressed and looks cool and fresh.

"How do you know?" I ask.

"It takes one to know one. You stand out a mile here in the square."

I puff my chest with pride – and then I'm not sure that I should.

"Where have you come from?"

"Le Mas d'Azil"

"How can you - that's up ahead"

Alex is a Basque man, living in Germany, where he works with the United Nations. On a two year sabbatical from his job, he's walked from Mannheim to Santiago and is now en route between Santiago and Rome. I thought I was the Real Deal.

“After Rome I intend to walk on to Jerusalem, if I have the time. If I make it to the Israeli border, I’m not sure I will get any further. It was an incident in a bar in Tel Aviv a few years ago. I expressed some opinions about the situation of the Palestinian people. Not long after I returned to my hotel that evening, some men visited me. I was taken to the airport and put on a plane. I think the guys must have been Mossad. You look ready for another beer – let’s have one – it will be a while before we meet Marie-Therese. You have been in touch with her, haven’t you?”

Alex is the first of many pilgrims I will meet before Santiago who are “walking the wrong Way”. Next up will be a sweet young couple some days later:

“Have you been to Santiago?” I ask.

“No, we’re from Lourdes. We’re walking to Bethlehem.” Good grief, I say to myself. As in life, there are obviously many different directions to choose from on the path of pilgrimage.

Alex and I finish our second beer and go to meet the hospitalier, a nun in plain clothes, who walks us up to the Cathedral. It’s an impressive structure, but the building is closed to the public. While it looks fine on the outside, apparently it’s dilapidated and dangerous inside. As we cross the square, it strikes me the Bishop’s Palace is in the same state – it would have been a good “squat” back in my student days. Once inside, the impression is confirmed by bare floorboards, a repainting job overdue by several decades, and general shabbiness.

But my bedroom is huge – did the bishop sleep in this one? The shower has abundant hot water, and the bed is so comfy. Marie Therese, who must sleep in tonight as she has two pilgrims, will cook for the three of us in what looks like the old garage – and this is where we’ll eat. Alex and I head out to buy some wine to go with the meal. Why not? Everything else we have is for free – or a contribution into the “Donativo” box.

We eat our meal with those garage doors open looking out onto the courtyard, which is in need of a good weeding. We’ll go our separate ways tomorrow never to meet again, so this is what we’ll remember each other by. I describe the village I have walked from in the Montagne Noire.

“Ah, Mas Cabardes”, says Marie Therese, “I remember it well, and I can picture your home opposite the Epicierie. It has a terrace, doesn’t it?”

“Yes, it does.”

Back in the 1960s, before she took orders, she worked for a friend who kept bees in Lastours, just down the road from Mas. We talk about how those mountain communities have changed in the last fifty years from bustling villages to last chance saloons – except there’s not even a saloon anymore.

Salsigne, to the north of Carcassonne, was the site of a gold mine the Romans opened up sometime Before Christ, and it was in continual operation from then till 2004 – how many of our present-day enterprises will be able to claim the same longevity in the centuries ahead. Mas Cabardes contains families with Polish names, and Spanish - those who came to work in the mine, married local and stayed. Each day they would walk the mountain path – it helps if you're a goat - to the mine and back. I've done the walk as a holiday ramble, and was certainly in no state to do a day's work at the end of it.

My knee is doing well, but the legs are tired. This may be a result of my attenuated training during March, owing to that self-same knee problem. I excuse myself, and am the first to head up three flights of stairs to bed.

"Oh, I nearly forgot. I have a message that your bed is ready at Les Hills for tomorrow night. Madame is expecting you", says Marie Therese.

I want to reply with:

"Good Heavens! I'd forgotten all about that too." But the only expression of surprise I know in French is "Merde", so I go with that.

"By the way, Evangelina thinks you speak very good French". That Camino Radio has been broadcasting again.

We're breakfasting early next morning, as we've agreed to go to 9 o'clock Mass with Marie-Therese. She walks us out of Cathedral Square and across town to the smaller parish church.

"Would you like to receive Benediction before you leave? I can arrange it. Pere Antoine is saying Mass and he's very nice". Alex and I agree that would be a really nice thing, though I'm not too sure exactly what is involved.

In the event, Benediction turns out to be something inserted between "The Mass is ended" and "Go in Peace". Father Antoine comes round to the altar steps and announces pilgrims are passing through town. He then calls Alex and me by name, and we walk up to stand before him for the blessing.

It's Saturday morning and the church is quite full. The locals all seem to have taken the trouble to dress up a bit for the service, and I feel a little under dressed before this huge altar in my shorts and walking boots. The loose cloak worn by the pilgrims of old would have been more appropriate – the surprise that I will meet a modern pilgrim so attired in the heat of Spain still awaits me.

The Benediction over, Father Antoine leans down to us and whispers:

"Bon Voyage."

And that's it – we're out of here. Alex going east, and me going west. In my case, it's a stroll back through town to the Cathedral and then down to the river which I must follow before my first real climb of the day. I'm enjoying the sight of a body of water beside me and the flat walk. My energy level feels good, I'm ready for anything – and I break into song. The words come out of nowhere:

He who would valiant be 'gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master.

It's the first two lines of the Pilgrim Hymn, adapted from words written by John Bunyan. I don't think I've heard it since my school days. Damn! I can't remember the rest. But no matter, I'll go on singing those two lines – and it's not long before I have the rest of the verse:

There's no discouragement shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Feeling pleased with myself I sing as lustily as my lungs allow, given I'm setting a brisk enough pace. Mid-verse, I'm overtaken from behind by a mountain biker. What the hell! He's not going to tell anyone who knows me. And I sing louder still after him.

From time to time in the weeks ahead, when I can see I have the path to myself, maybe I'll want to sing again – and if I do, more words might come back to me. But for now, I've got to start climbing.

In this part of France, "hills" seems to mean "woods", and I'm grateful for the shade the trees provide in the heat of the day. Now and again, I stop and attempt to locate the cuckoo or the woodpecker I'm hearing, but I never manage it. Making my first descent of the day, I break for lunch on the valley floor in the shade of a tall hedge bordering a large country home. Lunch is going to be a surprise. I unwrap the tinfoil package Marie-Therese gave me and discover bread, hardboiled eggs, a banana, and (my favourite) a few prunes. How it's been done I don't know, but the dried fruits have an orange flavour which makes them dangerously (I'm in open country, don't forget) "more-ish".

This would be a good time to make contact with my family and let them know how I am doing. I get out the mobile I reluctantly agreed to buy before I left Ireland, and struggle with the business of texting, which seems to come so easily to nine year olds. In doing this, I discover another reason to dislike these devices: every time I press a key, it makes an irritating "beep". I press on with my communication and soon become aware of birdsong right beside me in the hedge.

How lovely! I stop to listen to the natural song, but the bird stops too. I return to texting, and as I do so my companion is, once more, in full flight again. I stop again and so does she. Then we recommence. I'm never going to go anywhere near Twitter, but I think I may be making my first Tweet.

I move on and after another “up the hill and down the hill” – an oft repeated phrase from a children’s story I used to read my kids at bedtime - I reach a farm where I can ask for a refill of my water bottle at the house. One of the two young men takes my bottle indoors, the other asks:

“Would you like anything else?”

I’m puzzled, and it shows.

“A beer, or something like that.”

“No thank you” I say, but more in surprise than refusal. I feel it courteous to explain what I’m doing, and they in their turn make sure I know my directions for the path ahead. After our goodbyes, I move on towards my night stop having had the first of what will turn out to be many offers of hospitality and refreshment as I walk through the lives of these Pyrenean mountain people.

Tonight, I’m going up-market with my accommodation – not because I want to, but because I don’t think I can make the next stage in the same day. I’m staying at Chateau de la Hille, an appropriate name to the ear of an English speaker walking the local terrain. The package is €35, which breaks down to 12 for the bed, 18 for dinner and 5 for breakfast. A regular punter will pay more than twice this amount.

The approach is up a long straight avenue to a building you might expect to find on the banks of the River Loire. Okay – I’m happy to pay for this. At the gate, which opens onto the courtyard in front of the house, I tug the bell rope and what sounds like a call to chapel for the surrounding countryside brings two Dobermann-like hounds to the gate – which is, thankfully, at least two metres high.

The dogs are followed by Madame, telling them to “Shush” and me to “Come on in”, but I prefer to wait for her to open the protective barrier – understanding full well it is me that is being protected by these gates, not the household.

After a cooling peppermint cordial on a bench in the courtyard, Madame offers to show me to my sleeping quarters. I get ready to enter this majestic building to experience something of the life of a pre-Revolution “aristo”. But Madame is heading for the gate again. We go out to the back of the great house and there, in the orchard, is my bed for tonight, a caravan - one which has seen better days. There are several “vans” scattered throughout the orchard so that each pilgrim can have their privacy.

This accommodation is for pilgrims only and once again, I’m the only one here for tonight – the only guest of any description, in fact. The showers and toilets are against castle wall, I’m told, and if come back to the main gate at 7pm I’ll be let in for dinner.

I unpack and go for my shower. The facilities are rudimentary but there's lashings of hot water, and I discover a kitchenette for anyone who wants to save themselves the cost of the house menu – whatever it turns out to be.

I head for the toilet now to save me coming back here from the caravan before I head for my meal. Opening the door, my heart sinks. It's one of those toilets where everything is flush with the floor and you have to squat – a big ask for a 60-something with a dodgy knee. I have one word to say to my bowels, and that word is: "Don't".

And they didn't.

Before long I'm back at the gate and standing stock still, as the dogs obviously haven't realised I'm here for my dinner – not theirs. In the courtyard, a table and chair have been put out on the gravel, set ready for a meal with a half bottle of wine ready standing by. A wonderful mixed salad to start is followed by – oh, no! – veal stew.

"It's a speciality of our region", says Madame. I must check if they have a phone-in programme on the Camino Radio where pilgrims can ring in and "have their say".

As was the case with earlier nights, the main course was delicious. Had it not been, I don't think I would have noticed. Madame drew up a chair and kept me company during the repast. She was keen to tell me the history of the Chateau, and particularly its role during "le deuxieme guerre mondiale" – the second world war – about which, she told me, a book has been written.

During the pre-war persecution of Jews in Germany, a number of children were moved out to Belgium. When hostilities started and Belgium was overrun, the children were smuggled down to the south of France on freight trains. They eventually arrived at a dilapidated La Hille where the boys set to digging wells, building toilets and generally trying to make the place habitable. They washed in the river – normally cold, but freezing in winter – their survival efforts being aided to a degree by the Swiss Red Cross. Life was certainly harsh, and in 1942 became harsher with the order that all those over 15 should be arrested and transported to the German extermination camps (the French are quite direct about this and don't shilly-shally with words like "concentration").

The edict led to the breakup of the community: some children were given refuge by local farmers, others were aided to escape across the border to Spain – sadly some of these died on the way. About twelve of the teenagers joined the Resistance - 16 year old Egon Berlin died in action locally, and he a German of course.

Given the horror of that epoch, it is of some comfort that of the 100 children who sought refuge at La Hille, nearly ninety were still alive when the hostilities ceased. Madame was aware that the survivors, now elderly and scattered across the globe, had held a reunion in 2000.

It's dark when we finish talking and I use my headlamp to find the way back to the caravan. It's an old heap in appearance, but with its wide dimensions, firm mattress, and ample supply of blankets I fancy I have a better night's sleep than I might have done inside the castle.

I've asked for an early breakfast so, having caught the dogs unaware, I'm through the gate and into the house without a sound. The table: three crepes, a croissant, and a baguette big enough to feed a family along with honey from the demesne and three types of homemade jam. Then there's that huge pot of coffee to wash it all down.

Before long, I'm out on the road again, and in my stride for another day of walking. I feel very comfortable being on my own in what is often "the middle of nowhere", and I'm pleased with how I'm handling things by myself in a foreign country. I quickly pull myself up: I'm not doing this on my own! I have the support of the hospitaliers and their Camino radio, as well as people like the men who don't know me from Adam but offered a beer all the same. For the first time, I begin to think about what it is I am really taking on and what sort of world I am moving through. I guess I've avoided it up to this, what with concerns about my knee and having to locate a bed for each night and then reach it.

Right now, all I want to do is go on walking west day after day. In fact I'm not sure I want this experience ever to end. It must do, and it will – in Santiago. That's the end of the journey, but I'm seeing the destination like I do death, at the end of life – and I don't want to get there. I'm someone who has, perhaps too often, focussed on the product and not the process. The words I have heard so often then come back to me: "It is more important to journey than to arrive." I think I've just signed up to that aphorism.

Travelling alone, I recall that I could have had company. Back in the summer of 2008 I had attended the annual fete in Mas Cabardes while on holiday there. Over aperos, and simply for the sake of something to say, I mentioned that one day I wanted to walk the 'chemin' from the village to Santiago. I had expected that I would have to explain what the Camino de Santiago is, but not at all – everyone seemed to know of the Way and its history. Immediately Alban said he would walk with me when I go. Beside him, Christian offered to drive our bags from stop to stop each day. When Christian's wife, Raymonde heard this, she said:

"If he's driving, then I'm walking with the lads."

I was then taken over to another table to be introduced to Regis, the mayor of the next village. He had walked to Santiago from Clermont Ferrand two years previously. He said he'd be happy to give me any advice I might want if I called up to see him sometime. When I did, a few days later, he showed me the credenciale from his pilgrimage and told me how I can obtain mine – there's an office in Toulouse which issues them.

So my pilgrim passport comes from Toulouse, but I could have obtained one very easily in Ireland. Application can be made to the Irish Confraternity of St James centred on St James' church in St James' Street in Dublin. In bygone days this was the departure point for Irish pilgrims who left the city by St James' Gate, before it was Guinness' brewery, for the quays on the River Liffey and the boat that would take them to Spain. In modern times, there was huge puzzlement when a huge quantity of scallop shells were dredged up hereabouts from the river bed, as it is so far from the sea. The explanation, provided by archaeologists, was that returning pilgrims threw their shells into the river as they set foot in their native land once more. This ritual for marking "the ending" bears close resemblance to the custom of burning clothing on reaching Fisterre beyond Santiago in Spain.

But back at the Mas Cabardes fete, I found it wonderfully supportive to have all this local interest in what I planned to do. However, I really wanted to make this journey on my own. Apart from anything else, I suspected I would be struggling with the conversation on such a journey as none of these potential companions speak English and my French will never stretch to forty days and forty nights of chat.

Two years later, when planning and action make clear that I'm going to be taking a long walk out of this village the following year, I make my wish plain to my good French friends. They understand, and may even be a little relieved. Alban asked if, with the experience behind me, I might lead a village pilgrimage in the future.

Now, as I'm walking toward another Mas – the town of Le Mas d'Azil – I think to myself: "No! I'm not going to do that."

It then occurs to me that however you travel in life, you need to pilgrimage on your own. It is a time to create space for yourself, and you must construct that how you will – even if you plan to walk with your life partner or best friend. For me, I walk alone. I rehearse what I will say to the villagers on this when I get back. This is the speech I develop:

"You must do it yourself, to have your own thoughts and make your own discoveries. These will be your jewels and you will be prospecting for them as you walk. You will build a jewellery box as you travel which will always be your own. If I lead you, I will be sure to show you what I saw, what I noticed, and you will look through my eyes with my attention. You are not in this world to do that. Trust yourself, trust your world – and go! All will be well."

I'm pleased and think I have just given a good little talk. Then I realise I've given it for my own benefit, not that of my friends.

"Keep your mind's eye peeled for the nuggets, Mike", and I walk on.

I'm fairly fresh when I reach Le Mas d'Azil at 4pm and well ahead of time for meeting the Pasteur. The obvious thing is to head for a pint, but as I pass the Marie (the main municipal

office occupied by the mayor and his staff), it's not only open on this Sunday but there's music coming from inside.

On reaching the Foyer door, I see a crooner on stage strutting his stuff in front of an amplifier pumping out a backing track. On the floor are several couples of seventy-somethings showing how a Foxtrot is done. An afternoon dance with tea and cake, The Dansant the French call it – and so do we, at least those of us old enough to know. I haven't seen one of these for a long time, if ever.

I don't want to pay €5 for a quick look, so I ask the woman at the table just inside the door if I can take a photo and then be on my way.

"You're welcome to sit and watch if you wish, there's a seat by those women over there. There's no charge for that."

As I sit, giving a shy "Bonjour" since I must look a dreadful sight in shorts with rucksack and sweaty face, one of the women gets up and leaves. She soon comes back with a glass of cider and a plate of éclairs and other sweet delights and places them in front of me. How kind. But where are the cucumber sandwiches, for heaven's sake? Oh well, never mind. This is France, after all.

My 'waitress' is joined at my side by another woman from the group. She excuses herself but wants to ask if I am the pilgrim who's expected around now. Yes, that's me!

"Well, whenever you're ready to go to the hostel just let me know. I have the key to let you in." With those words, I've been spared the hassle of searching for the appointed meeting place. I can have some refreshment here and then go straight for a shower. Thanks again, St James.

This second woman explains that the Pasteur has been called away for the afternoon, and she's been deputised to meet me in the square. I'm going to be ready as soon as I've polished off these cakes – but then I'm further delayed when the music hots up a bit and some of the younger women present get up and give a display of line dancing. Haven't seen this for a long time either.

The hostel, when we get there, turns out not to be a hostel at all but the town's old Protestant church (the new one is next door, alongside the Pasteur's home). Here and there the pews have been stacked up to make room for mattresses on the floor. I choose the one up on the altar beside the pulpit, not for any desire to be closer to God but because it offers the most personal space in this area that has become the dumping ground for every item of redundant parish property.

Le Mas d'Azil was home to the first (and biggest) parish in the south west of France to embrace the Reformation. Uniquely on the Camino, I believe, the guardian for pilgrims here is the Pasteur, the town's protestant clergyman.

PERHAPS SOMETHING MORE ON HISTORY OF PRODS IN THE TOWN

I'm given the key to the building as well as a hastily scrawled note. If I show this at the pizzeria down the street, I'll get my three course dinner for twelve euro. I read it delightedly – and discover I'm signed up for a meal for two. Pourquoi - Why? There's another pilgrim coming in behind me later this evening. For the first time on my pilgrimage, I'll have company in my bedroom.

When he arrives an hour later, Daniel looks as fresh as if he were just starting out, despite the fact that he's walked nearly twice as far as me today. If I allow him the time, he says, he'll take a quick shower and join me for the meal.

In the restaurant, I learn that at 54, Daniel is ten years younger than me. He's an ex-military man who is now Mayor of Formigueres in the Pyrenees Orientale, not far from Perpignan – or the Spanish border. He takes on the work of President of the Ski Station there as well as running a B&B, and I imagine he may find those two activities complement each other at times – to the benefit of both.

For main course we both tuck into the sausage and chips option, it's a large portion which is certainly filling. We talk on: Daniel tells me he needs to finish in Santiago by the beginning of June, while I am free to the end of that month. It's now April 17th, and the suggestion is made that we walk together for a while.

Why not, I think? I'm going to encounter hordes of fellow pilgrims each day as I travel through Spain, so walking with Daniel may help desensitize me to the experience of having other people around me. Then I wonder if St James was in on that earlier conversation I had with myself. Has he got plans for me?

All the same, I'm a little nervous about being able to keep up with a younger and much fitter man, but more information from Daniel allays some of this fear. He tells me that his boots fell apart yesterday and he's walking in new boots he bought in Mirepoix this morning; his feet are sore and he has several blisters which will need attention when we get back to our church for the night. My feet are in impeccable condition, hardened by a winter of walking in the Wicklow hills or else taking a bus into the UCD library at Belfield and then walking back to Bray, so I think this old fox may actually be able to keep up with the injured soldier.

We meet the Pasteur briefly at the end of the evening, but have more time with him next morning over breakfast in his manse, joined by two of his cats. Before we eat, we bow our heads. I expect a Grace but what I hear, spoken softly in French, is the prayer of the Santiago pilgrim:

INSERT PRAYER

The Pasteur looks up and asks will we join him as he says today's prayer from Porte Ouverte. As we start into the grilled baguette and huge mugs of coffee, our host explains that

members of Port Ouverte (Open Door) is a world-wide organisation of religious and lay people who make a commitment to pray each morning for Christians who are being persecuted in a specified country. Today we've just prayed for those in Syria. Tomorrow morning, when Daniel and I are somewhere else, a prayer will be said in this room, and around the world, for Christians who are suffering in Algeria.

Before we get up from table, there is a gift for each of us: an inscribed copy of L'Evangelie du Luc - the Gospel of St Luke. The handwritten words in mine read:

TRANSLATE INSCRIPTION HERE

When we leave the manse, the Pasteur rings the huge church bell, which now shares his home. This is his last word of farewell as I strike out with my new companion.

Daniel's English is better than my French, but we agree it will be good for both of us if I use French and he uses English when we talk. As it turns out, we don't do much of that. Often Daniel is too far ahead of me to allow for comfortable conversation, and when we do walk side by side he likes to focus on the rhythmic 'tap-tap' of his walking poles.

So it is that I find myself walking with someone, but able to be alone in a good way. As I continue to travel through these hills, I become aware of how much of creation I've been walking through that man has failed to upset. I've had sight and sound of so much wild life and I've encountered so few people. The fellow humans I have met have been people walking or working in harmony with the land. This is a blessed place through which to travel.

We left the town through the magnificent Grotte du Le Mas d' Azil, a huge cave through which runs the main road out of town alongside a river far below it. Half way through there's a ticket office and with an entrance to what is promised as a spectacular tour through still more caves – but this one's fine for me, and it's for free.

Even though there are now two of us, the offers of coffee or some kind of refreshment are still made as we pass through farms or hamlets. In one of the latter I take a photo of the name of the owner on the letterbox outside one of the houses. It announces this is the home of Mr Bonzhomme. That has to be an elision of "Bon Homme", the name given to Parfaits (or Perfects) the leaders of the Cathar faith. I see a man, who is quite obviously Monsieur Bonzhomme, has stopped clipping his hedge and is coming toward me. Daniel leaves it to me to explain myself and thus get more language practice. Thanks!

I reveal my interest in the heretics.

"Ah yes", says Mr B, "Equality for all was a central part of the teaching. I'm afraid my wife keeps on having to remind me that this also includes women."

Daniel and I continue our pattern of climbs and descents. At each summit there is elation at the spectacular view, followed all too quickly by despondency at the sight of the next valley far below and the top of our next climb right in front of us.

We take rests about every two hours, and one of these is beside a lake where we can dangle our feet in the water as we lie back in the shade on the pillow of our rucksacks.

Daniel apologises for his lack of conversation during those times when we do walk side by side.

“I am not a woman. I do not multi-task. I cannot walk and talk at the same time.”

Fifteen minutes later when we are back on track, we see a group of about twenty young women coming towards us. They are walking in crocodile and chattering away to each other as they go. Passing us, they’re so deep in conversation that they barely notice the two old men giggling to themselves.

Our night stop is St Lizier, right up against the snow covered peaks to our south. We’re walking on a minor road at the end of the day, so the first clue that we’ve arrived is out from the cluster of buildings - the town’s name board. It tells us that St Lizier is twinned with a Palestinian refugee camp near Bethlehem.

I tell Daniel that my home town also goes in for this business of twinning with other places. Our twins are places in France, Germany and California, nice destinations for the good burghers of Bray when they require a bit of paid R&R. What the good people of St Lizier have done is offer a message to the world while holding out support for an oppressed people at the same time. Isn’t that exactly what was happening two thousand years ago when some Jew was wandering around Palestine? I think I’ll feel at home here.

And I do. We arrive in the town centre and need to find the tourist office. It’s in the main square, so no difficulties there. We each pay a fee for the overnight use of the hostel – ever since Fanjeax its been a ‘donativo’ for me - and then we’re given the key to the house. It turns out to be a mansion just round the corner with a courtyard and an uninterrupted view of the mountain range.

After showers we go for a beer, and discover the bar doesn’t serve food. We’ll have to look for a shop – but it’s too late, the shop is closed for the day. Daniel says “No Problem”. He’s checked out the kitchen in our house, and there’s a range of tinned and packet food left by other pilgrims which we can use. What he’s worried about is the wine situation.

The young barman comes up with a bottle from his stock. Smiles all round, and we walk out of the square and off to a tuna risotto - which more than does the trick for me (I have to leave some on my plate).

Next morning Daniel is moving slowly as we start off.

“There are places I don’t know I have”, he says.

I don’t know if there’s a better way to say it, but I do know exactly what he means. Those new boots and the resulting blisters are affecting his gait and I’m guessing some muscles have been used in a different way what’s normal for them, and are now stiff this morning.

As best we can, then, we hit the road for Buzan. My walking notes tell me we will pass through Castillon on the way. It will be too soon to stop for the day, but I want to pick up a stamp for my credencial there to show continue documenting my progress. Castillon is an Halte St Jacques, so if I can get to the mayor’s office there before midday, I’ll get two stamps in my passport for one day’s walking. When young, I have to confess I was a train spotter, so I’m a bit of an anorak when it comes to collectibles. And a hoarder, as my family know only too well.

Daniel is shaking his head.

“It is not possible. We not going there”

“Don’t talk nonsense. It’s on the Chemin de St Jacques, we’ve got to go there.”

But Daniel has a map, and right now he’s holding it out in front of me.

“Look here. Today we go through Audressein to Buzan. If we go to Castillon, we must turn off at Audressein, walk 2K into town, find the mayor’s office and walk 2K back. And for what? I’m not doing it.”

“All right.” I’m disheartened, and Daniel has heard it in my voice. I let him walk ahead.

What is the Camino? I mean who’s to say this is “The Way”? It’s a question I asked in the Ariege, and came up with my own answer at that time, but was I right? And if we’re modern pilgrims who don’t want to pray in Castillon (the church will be locked anyway) and don’t require sustenance (it’ll be gone 12, and the French will have locked up for lunch) then why not head on in our intended direction? Let’s make our own path – as so many pilgrims in the past 1000 years must have done. There are no rules here. This is our road. It’s my road. We’re going to walk west to Buzan.

Daniel turns round and waits for me to catch up. It becomes clear he has been thinking too.

“I think it is possible to do this visit. At Audrressein, you give me your bag and I will walk on. You hitch a lift to Castillon and get your stamp, and then come after me.”

The Anorak in me immediately resurfaces. I know my delight at this idea is clearly evident, but in an instant I’m despondent once more:

“I could be ages out here, waiting to be lifted.”

“You don’t wait. You stop the first car that comes.”

Now that's not going to happpen! But it does. When we reach the junction, Daniel models the behaviour he wants me to copy when I come back from Castillon. The first car soon approaches, and he stands out in the middle of the road with his hand held aloft. If I didn't believe he was a commander in the army before this, I do now.

When the car halts, Daniel walks smartly to the driver's window, and tells the occupants what's needed. I'm invited to sit into the back seat of the car, and off we go – Daniel shouting that I must do it just like that on my way back.

To my surprise, I do. Having been taken directly to the Mayor's office and gained the precious extra stamp, I'm on the road out of town and holding my credencial aloft at the first car to approach. The driver, a young man in his twenties, stops and then grumpily moves his rucksack off the passenger seat when I explain I need to go up the road to the next junction not the next hospital . Once I'm in the car, I explain all the circumstances, starting with where I'm from and where I'm going. My companion softens immediately: he's a walker and one day when he has the time he too will walk from this place to Santiago. The journey is over just as I realise we could go on chatting all the way to Paris if that's where we both wanted to go.

It's twenty minutes since I jumped in the first car, so now I've got to move smartly to catch up with Daniel and relieve him of my rucksack. I've gone no distance at all before I see my co-walker sitting on a village bench. Of course! It's gone midday and this is France: everything stops for lunch, including walkers. As he lays out our lunch beside him on the bench, he's chatting with two of the village Mayor's staff on the way to their own break. My arrival is barely noticed: the men are in fits of laughter as they talk. Clearly, the repartee is flying and unfortunately I don't understand a word of it.

When lunch is eaten – it's the usual fare of baguette, tinned pate and a camembert (or one of the other three hundred odd cheeses France produces) which we've bought earlier in the day – we walk on up the valley out of Audressein towards our night stop in the distance. When we get there, it's not Buzan but some other village. Happily we can now see our goal: it's not a mirage, but still a good climb up the right hand side of the valley. We cross a bridge out of the village where a man is fishing with his young son. Daniel, with his interest in all things country, stops for a chat about the afternoon's catch and what's in the river. I head for the shade of a porch, glad of a rest before the climb.

When we achieve our objective, hot and thirsty, we find it's Buzan alright but we still have further to go. The Halte St Jacques is another two kilometres, and the signpost which tells us this is pointing – uphill. After a further tramp and just when my aching calves want to call it a day, there's another sign pointing us to a path which follows the contours over a fold in the hill. The path is tree lined and smothered in bluebells, and after it has taken us across a stream and through a vegetable garden we arrive at a small cottage. It's not a mirage.

We are met by two women. Titania is the owner of this Ermitage, which I guess makes her a hermit: getting in and out of here is not something I'd want to do every day of the week for sure. Her friend is Hortense, whose taking a week off from her MSc in Montpellier to visit and maybe try to forget about that wretched write-up she's in the middle of.

They show us our quarters. It's one half of the house comprising one room with a dining table and washing area, and stairs to a mezzanine where the beds are. The women sleep in the other half of the house which is also where the cooking facilities are.

We are then taken out into the garden. I'm not interested in her vegetables, for heaven's sake, I want to know where the shower is – and get into it quick. It seems Titania has read my mind, because as we reach the back of the house we come face to face with a rickety looking structure of poles stuck into the ground all around a wooden pallet which is sitting on the earth. The poles provide support for a roof of sorts, and on two sides of the pallet a canvas cloth is attached to those same poles to give a semblance of walls. The other two sides are open to nature. My only clue that this could possibly be anything to do with personal hygiene is the bar of soap sitting beside a half coconut shell on a small shelf inside the structure.

This is where we can shower, we're told, but we have to bring the wherewithal up for the rain water reservoir lower down the property. Titania tells us to fill a bucket from the glass-covered drum that is part of the reservoir. The sheet of glass is supposed to have heated the water a bit during the day. When I put my hand into the drum to test the temperature, I find sun and glass have done their job admirably.

One bucketful is a miserable amount of water for a shower, but I get to work dousing myself with the coconut shell and hope for the best. I soap up, rinse off, and then enjoy a good few more coconut scoops of the refreshing water. When I've had enough, I see I have used less than half the bucket of water. Drying off in the open air, I'm mindful of what my usual shower is like back home – and how much water I use there. This experience has taught me that it can be just as good with less, something which might apply in other areas of living as well. The phrase "Less is More" comes back to me.

Titania is harvesting produce from the vegetable garden as I walk back round to our room. I must get a photo of that: woman picking beans in the foreground; pasture and some woodland at the back of my picture. Damn! – or a word to that effect. My camera battery is flat.

I'll have to forego the alternative lifestyle picture, but I must have the camera functional for tomorrow. I ask Titania if she has somewhere to plug in my charger, as there is no socket to be seen in the pilgrims' living space. She looks a little dubious.

“All our electricity is stored in batteries fed from the solar panel. We run everything at 20 volts to conserve energy, as we’re not always getting the sun on this hillside. You need 220 volts for that, don’t you?”

She looks over to Hortense for a moment, then makes a decision

“I think we could crank up the batteries to 220 volts for three hours. That may not fully charge your camera, but it will give you something to be going on with. Would that be all right?”

It certainly would, and I’m very grateful. I’m also more than a little embarrassed. For me this is a real life demonstration of how resources required for essential activities can be depleted by the fripperies of modern life – in this case, a tourist making a collection of pictorial moments from his travels. Here, I’m the one to blame.

As I write this, I realise how much I have left recording of the trip to that camera. There are now so many details that I cannot recall, as I didn’t bother to notice them properly once a picture was in the camera. But the camera didn’t see everything. How would it have been if I had given couple of hours that evening to write about it as it was happening? How much richer would my picture of this place have been? But we don’t have time for that, do we?

If that structure I used earlier was a shower, then the one on the other side of the garden must be the toilet. I head over to it, heartened to see that it has all four walls in place. I’m at a loss when I enter, all I see is a timber floor. The timber has been well planed and sanded and the planks dovetail tightly. It’s good woodwork, but fine carpentry does not a toilet make. I could be in the wrong place, but a roll of toilet paper on the floor suggests I’m not. Bizarrely, there’s a pile of wood shavings beside the toilet roll. Then I notice one of the floor boards has a beautifully turned wooden knob attached to it. The obvious thing to do is pull the knob, whereupon the board to which it is attached comes away from its neighbours.

When I gaze into the abyss, it is immediately apparent not only that I have come to the right place but also how matters should proceed. There’s more wood shavings than anything else down below, so the sight isn’t unpleasant and neither is the small. Nevertheless, I have that one small word to say, which I now whisper to my bowels. And they hear me.

Later, when we eat, the meal is vegetarian: soup, followed by vegetables in a rich tomato sauce, cheese and fresh fruit. Apart from the frommage, it’s all come from the garden, and we’re eating the produce that I saw being picked just over an hour ago.

The repast is washed down with a bottle of wine which Daniel and I finish off after the meal while sitting on a bench outside our door. The wood smoke which drifts past us from the other end of the house adds to the atmosphere in what is, for me, a totally different world from any I have encountered before. Just when I think it can’t get any better, there’s music. The two women are sitting by the fire in front of their own door playing cello and flute. The

music is gentle and classical. I suspect the fact that I don't recognise any of the pieces reflects my limited knowledge of such music, rather than any esoteric choices by the musicians.

Daniel suggests we turn in, and I follow his lead. The final climb during the afternoon hurt, and there's going to more of the same tomorrow. This soft music will lull us to sleep, I think, but just as I climb into my sleeping sheet, pull a few blankets over me and turn on my side – it stops. That's life!

A few minutes later, the mountainside silence is broken. Two voices, a soprano and an alto, are harmonising and descanting their way through a range of motets and madrigals. I'm enchanted, and long after the singing has ceased and everyone else in the building is asleep, I am lying on my back wide awake and wondering how bad it would be to live like this all the time.

Having left our 'Donativo's on the breakfast table and hoisted our rucksacks, we're about to go round to say our farewells when the women arrive at our door with walking poles ready to join us.

"No, No", I think, "We may want to stay on with you, but you shouldn't want to join our crazy world."

And they're not going to. They want to show us a short-cut across the meadows. It's not a path but a hop over fences and through bushes taking us from field to field. Crucially, this off piste Camino follows the contours like we did at the end of yesterday, and that will save us going back down into the valley. This will make an invaluable saving in time, energy, and morale. The latter most especially as, having gone down from the homestead we would soon have had to climb back up to the same altitude we had just left – and still ahead would be the ascent to the Col de Portet, which at XXXX feet above sea level is going to be our biggest climb to date.

So in the end, our farewells are said in a field full of cows and we walk our separate ways. Daniel and I get to the village of Portet at the right time to have lunch in a cafe and consume a few bottles of a popular soft drink well known for its caffeine and sugar content.

There's not a lot I want to say about climbing, except that I don't do it for fun. Mountaineers would guffaw at what we were taking on and refuse to write about it for fear of damaging their reputations. I'm standing four square with the mountaineers on this one, but from an opposite point of view. All I will say is that you spend a lot of time looking at the ground just in front of you, not because it's closer to your face than usual, but because you're thoroughly demoralised. When not doing that, you're looking expectantly at the bend up ahead in the hope that the summit is just around the corner. Invariably it's not, and so you return to demoralised head hanging mode.

On the way down the other side, quite unbelievably, there are times when you wish you were still climbing up. You need to pay much more attention to your balance on the descent, and to do so while enduring excruciating pain in your shins, calves, thighs, and betimes everywhere else.

My morale is lifted by Daniel, not for his leadership and support to this soldier, but because he too is clearly having a hard time of it which means I'm not just being a boring old fart who can't hack it.

"I'm going to write a letter on official paper when I get home", he says, "You know, on the letter paper of my Mayor's office. I am going to tell these people what I think."

"What's that Daniel?

"This is not the Chemin de St Jacques. Pilgrims never came this way, it is too steep for them. This is the way for army training or the scouts."

In times ahead, as we meet others, they are all in accord with Daniel on this point. We hear that one pilgrim was stretchered off this descent last year after a fall.

"I am doing a pilgrimage," says Daniel as the gradient decreases, "I am not doing a penance". It's not the last time I'll hear him say that.

We come on off our track and onto a boreen. There's a house up ahead, which tells us we are returning to contact with our fellow mortals and there will be a hamlet or village coming up soon. It's late afternoon, and I'm lagging well behind Daniel when I pass the old home. Three men are working at cutting huge wooden logs. One looks up and eyes me. It's for a second and a half, then he says:

"Hey, you want to come in for a beer."

I have an exhausted, but well advised, moment of hesitation which encourages the man

"Yes, come on, you will. Call your friend to come back. We will all have a beer."

I believe Daniel wants to finish the day, so my call is somewhat muted causing the gentleman beside me to join in to enhance the volume. There's no reaction from the man up ahead, so I'm asked his name.

"Daniel! Daniel!" is shouted until there is a reaction. Daniel returns and comes round to the idea of a beer immediately. We go inside and our host, who has introduced himself as Jean-Pierre, sets three cold beers on the dining room table.

"Sit down, sit down. You are pilgrims I know. It is my dream to walk to Santiago on the Way one day".

He's recently retired, and he's renovating his grandfather's home which he intends to move into when the work is complete. Those logs outside are being transformed into beams for the ceilings by the artisans who are still working as we drink in the cool of the house. These men are older than the three of us and I wonder if there are any younger people who have their skills or are they the last of a dying breed, working with implements that I'm quite sure you'd never find in a builder's providers in the last sixty years.

"Ah! You are Irish. Yes! Brian O'Driscoll. Super. L'Equipe irlandais contra angleterre. Formidable!" At the end of a poor season, the Irish rugby team had had a stupendous win over the English, their style on the day being what the French would call "impecable".

The conversation rolls around our mutual interests and clearly could go on into the early hours of tomorrow. We're offered a meal and, when we demure, a bed for the night. We have a room booked in Juzet d' Izaut (???) and this allows us to make our excuses and leave. Jean-Pierre waves us off like old friends departing to another world. And in a sense, we were.

I follow Daniel down the boreen and onto a tarmac road. There's more pep in my step now, and I pull level with my companion. After a while, I find this pace too slow and pull ahead. I'm not sure, but I think that beer has not only refuelled me but also re-energised me.

"Ah", says the receding voice behind me, "The horse has seen his stable". I haven't, but we're getting there.

Having started walking at 8.10am and, with stops, not arrived at the end of our stage till 6.45pm, I had no problem paying top dollar for a Chambre d'Hote. "Top dollar" turned out to be forty euro for dinner, bed and breakfast with Julie and Midel. On the planet I came from less than two weeks ago, this would be regarded as a 'special offer' to be snapped up. After nights of the "donativo" experience it sounded like we were being asked to pay a fortune. My briefing notes advise a sum of between twenty and thirty euro for a donation in France, in Spain you could knock more than fifty per cent off that figure if you wished.

There are many pluses to this type of accommodation. That we have a room to ourselves isn't one of them, as we've had that in the hostels all along the Way so far. But for me, real sheets and real towels for a night are worth whatever price you care to name.

Our meal is tomato, olive and tuna salad, followed by – Hello! – it's veal stew again. The stew is accompanied by pasta mixed with a very generous portion of lardons, so in a sense I do have a different meat tonight, and chocolate mousse will always help me forgive whatever has gone before. After this great meal, we head straight to bed and I pass out instantly. I'm awoken by something hitting my face. It's pitch dark, and the 'something' turns out to be Daniel's shorts.

"Mike, you are snoring!"

Oh, yes, and another plus of this Chambre d'Hote experience is – as much wine as you care to drink with your meal.

In the morning, I want to lie on in these luxurious surroundings. It would be great to spend an extra day just hanging out here, but Daniel is up and doing and, in the event, we are on the road just after 8am, with my friend taking the lead. I keep up with him, so well in fact that I bump into him when he stops suddenly. He has his camera out in order to take a picture of – his shadow? The sun comes up behind us in the east and he's noticed that at the start of the day we walk with our shadow in front of us, and by the end it is stretching out behind us.

"In the morning, my shadow is pulling me off, and in the evening it is pushing me on".

I may have the body of a 64 year old man, but I have the mind of a 12 year old schoolboy. I bite my lip very hard. I don't want Daniel to ask me what's funny, I don't have the vocabulary and the only method would have to be crude gestures. I don't want to go there.

I realise that if I want to entertain with joke telling, my repertoire forces me to use four letter words and crudity. At lunch break, and quite of the blue, Daniel gives me an object lesson in how to do it with elan – or at least without causing offence.

"Mike, do you want to hear a dark joke?"

I can guess what he means and the answer is "Yes".

"It is a joke about Viagra. It is okay for you?"

"Go ahead, my friend"

"This man, he have a problem in his marriage. He go to the doctor. Doctor, him say: 'I give you these three pills. You take one at night. If it not work, you take two. But do not take three, you must not do that'. Man then go home."

That evening matters come to the point where two pills aren't doing the job, and our hero downs the third one – we all saw that coming.

"Next day he go back to doctor. Doctor, him say: 'How was it', and man him say: 'It was very good. I do it in the bathroom, I do it in the stairs, I do it in the kitchen, I do it in the shed.' Doctor say: 'And your wife, she is happy?' Man say: 'My wife? She was not with me.'

Daniel asks if I can tell him a joke. No, I reply, I can never remember them!

In the days ahead, Daniel regales me with many more "dark" or, in what English-speakers would call "dirty" jokes – except the way this Frenchman tells them, they're not "dirty". A few days later, when I'm wondering if it's right for pilgrims to be engaging in this sort of

behaviour, I ask Daniel if he's heard of Geoffrey Chaucer. He hasn't, but when I say "Canterbury Tales", he knows what I'm talking about.

If I recall correctly from my schooldays, many of those stories were bawdy and laced with more than a few crudities.

"I suppose pilgrims could never be 'holy' all the time on such a long journey as this. They had to have some form of entertainment or light relief on the Way."

"Laughter makes to the world go round!"

"Ah, you have that expression in French also?" There's going to be more of this entertainment up ahead.

Today there are only two ascents, thankfully. We have our lunch at the top of the second one, but we're not enjoying the view here. Dark clouds have come in, and there's the sound of distant thunder. A few spots of rain fall and now I'm eyeing my wet gear, a waterproof anorak and leggings which are tucked in between the main body of my rucksack and the frame that rests directly on my back. These items are exposed to the elements so that they can be retrieved quickly in a situation such as the one we are about to face. Another reason for jamming them in here is that more room is left in the sack for clothing that it is important to keep dry.

In the event, the thunder stays in the distance, the rain stops and the clouds lighten. Daniel suggests we move on now, and he gets up. I eagerly hoist my sack on my back and grab my poles. I'm ready for the "off". But every day I forget that I now have an obligatory five minute wait for Daniel. At first he digs around in his rucksack, then out comes his washing bag which he opens. He takes out what he needs and gets to work brushing his teeth with thoroughness. The first time he did this, I must have shown surprise, for he gave me the explanation:

"I like to eat my lunch, but I do not want to eat it for the rest of the day."

With that job done, it looks like he might be packing up to leave. But, no, he's rootling around in that wash bag again. Out comes his hairbrush, and he gives his scalp a good grooming. These jobs done, we are on our way at last. He's a very "proper" man – the French word "propre" means "clean" – and there's propriety in his self-care as well as in his care of others. Remember, he was careful to ask me if it was all right to tell me a blue joke before he actually did so.

As I judge him and comment on his behaviour now, I wonder how Daniel judges me. This companion of his who is happy to just walk away after a meal – and he can't tell any decent jokes!

At the end of this second descent, we have a mercifully flat walk for the rest of the day, which takes us through several small towns. First up is Barbazan and, quite literally, a walk in the park. Late afternoon strollers are exercising dogs as we march purposely through. In the centre is a structure that looks like a Victorian seaside bandstand, but there's no music here. It's an elaborate drinking fountain, with many outlets around it to service all those who would want to refill water bottles on a hot day.

I quicken my pace towards it, reaching behind for my water bottle and ignoring the signs mounted in front of the structure. Having replenished my bottle, I'm about to quench my thirst when I see poodle-dragging man running towards me waving his hands in a manner that seems to say:

"Don't do that."

He excitedly explains that this is mineral water, and you must only take a half glass from your flask each day.

"Any more than that and you will have big problems."

Then he sticks his buttocks out at me and flaps his hands away from them in a backward motion, clearly suggesting that these problems involve an evacuation of amazing speed. I can't tell what the poodle is making of all this, it's probably too busy recuperating from the neck-wrenching exercise it has just had. But I thank him from the bottom of my heart – as well as somewhere a good deal lower.

Now I see the sign, and read it! A saviour has just been sent to me. Thank you St James.

It's typical of me, of course, I never read the instructions for anything, preferring to attack a problem like a bull – head on and without thinking. That's why Joyce, my long-suffering wife, always ends up completing the DIY home improvements that I start. Wait a minute, is St James doing two blessings for the price of one? Saving me from the dire consequences of the drink *and* pointing up the importance of getting clear information before acting? Surely not?

Outside the park, we stop at the first bar we see. I'll own up and say that it was for the beer, but I could get away with claiming it was for a refill of our water bottles, which the barman willingly gave us. As we down two cold "presssions" (draft from the tap) my companion points to a pharmacy across the road, and tells me that will be our next stop.

Daniel has been walking well each day, but at night he has to engage in a prolonged treatment of his blistered feet. He assures me they are getting better by the day but he needs to continue his nightly ritual and he's out of whatever it is he uses. I ask if it's plasters, because I have them, but he has another method and whatever it is I'm not going to "look and learn".

I myself could do with some more toothpaste, so we both go into the shop. Daniel asks for assistance from one of the women behind the counter and they chat, while I hunt for what I require.

I'm first to the cash desk and pay my money. Daniel comes in behind me, wallet at the ready:

"No, No", says the woman behind the till, "Your requirements are free".

We look at each other, asking "What ???"

"You are a pilgrim, and your needs are about your pilgrimage, they are to do with your feet. There is no charge".

Stunned by such kindness to passing strangers who will never call again and who are unable to recommend the business to locals, we're a bit slow with the "Thank you". Our benefactor continues:

"There are two nice young women about two days ahead of you. Yes, very nice. They are walking slowly, you know. So if you move fast…."

But we never did catch them. You don't. We're all of us moving all the time, so you never meet those ahead - unless they run into problems.

Out of the town, we're on our way down a farm track when the way marking points our way over a style and across a field. But the style is inaccessible, as fallen branches have been incorporated into the style and then the whole wrapped in barbed wire. This wouldn't look out of place in a gallery of modern art but it means we'll have to find another way. No other access to the field is possible without a tank, the hedges are so thick and high. All we can do is take a long detour on the track skirting several field in order to arrive at the other side of the one now barred to us.

"I do not like farmers", says Daniel.

"Well, this is a bit irritating, I must say", I reply.

"No. I do not like farmers. I am never liking farmers, even before today."

He goes on to explain, but what he has to say about the personal hygiene and general level of intellectual functioning of this species does not bear repeating here.

The approach to St Bertrand de Comminges, our night stop, is over slightly undulating land so that it makes a "dramatic entrance" when we first catch sight of it. The cathedral sits on top of a rocky outcrop with a range of hills rising behind it. The small village is gathered around the hem of the church building, and I wonder why such an imposing structure was

built here in the middle of nowhere, when there's a fine town right behind us where it would have been the centre of attention.

The truth is that this site, now a village, existed as a centre of population well before the modern town. A Roman settlement was established here in 72BC, and this may have been related to Rome's military actions in Spain at the time. The village that we see today grew to a town of more than 30,000 inhabitants before it was sacked by Vandals, these particular ones coming with a capital "V" in their name. Little more than 150 years later it was completely razed and left deserted for five centuries.

By 1083 a community had begun to "come together" here: the French appellation for this place, "Comminges", is derived from the Roman name given to the local tribe: "the assembled ones". The knight Bertrand de l'Isle was nominated bishop, and he immediately ordered the construction of a grand ecclesiastical building which became known, as it still is today, as the "cathedral of the Pyrenees". This then became a stop-over for pilgrims on their way to Santiago.

Miracles began to be associated with this prelate and in time, after thirty one of them had been documented, he became a saint. His canonisation may have had something to do with the fact that his successor in the bishopric here went on to become Pope Clement V.

The cathedral, being on a knoll, is located in what is called the 'high village'. We will spend the night in the 'low village' at the base of the outcrop, eating and sleeping in the old but well preserved pilgrim hospital where another saint, who followed after Bertrand, earned his spurs caring for pilgrims. He was St Juste (???? No, the other one).

The hospitalier nun, who lives in, opens what looks like the front door of the building for us, and inside is a self-contained apartment. It's a huge room with a sitting area, dining table and single bed under the window. There's a sizeable kitchenette in one corner, which I eye with a frown – we've forgotten to buy food and there's no shop or restaurant for miles. The nun is quick to correctly interpret my non-verbal behaviour:

"I have your dinner cooking in my kitchen. When it is ready I will bring it round and you can keep it warm in your own oven till you want it."

We've done a ten hour walking day again and it's now getting on for 7pm.

"The cathedral closed to the public at 6pm, and I know you will have to leave before it opens tomorrow. If you like, I'll get the key and call for you at 9pm, and I can give you a guided tour."

Daniel has sauntered off to inspect the rest of the accommodation which comprises shower, toilet – and a separate bedroom.

"Mike, you have it, it's all yours."

Great! I can unpack my rucksack and spread my stuff all around the place! I believe I've been pretty good about keeping my luggage to a fairly confined space while sharing a room with my new friend, but I do love to spread my gear around when I unpack. I'm a little anxious about how I'm going to manage in this regard when I get to the 60-bedded dormitories we will have on the Camino in Spain, however.

Our meal starts with a large pot of vegetable soup. Half way through his first bowlful, Daniel takes the bottle of red wine that has been given with the meal and pours a healthy tot into his potage. That's a pretty sneaky was of getting more than your fair share of wine, I think.

"Have you heard of Chabrot, Mike?"

Okay, every day there's a new word added to my vocabulary. What's this one mean?

"Chabrot is soup with to which you add red wine while you are eating it. The peasants (he's thinking of the French word "paysans" which means "country people", without wanting to suggest any of our negative connotations) do this; try it."

I'm still not sure whether I was motivated by a desire for a new culinary experience, or if I was simply intent on ensuring I got my fair shares of the wine, but I did it. And I'll do it again, though probably not when I'm out to dinner with friends back home.

The main course was duck and sliced potatoes roasted all together, the skin of the duck and the outside of the potatoes crisped by the heat and the fat, depositing some delicious burned bits on the base of the roasting dish, which we scrapped off and shared evenly between us. After cheese came fresh strawberries, and then it was off to the cathedral with our hospitalier driving us up the steep hill. It's my first trip in a car for nearly two weeks – it will be my last for nearly two months.

The light is fading at nine o'clock on Holy Thursday evening in April, but the "wow" factors – and there are a few – are immediately evident on entering this fine building. I have to check a guide book in order to be able to report that there are three different architectural styles presented to the visitor: the Romanesque from the 12th century, the Gothic from the 14th and the Renaissance part from the 16th. The contribution of this last epoch includes the magnificent organ.

What I see is a massive stone edifice, which is the cathedral itself, playing host to a slightly smaller wooden building contained within it. The smaller "building" turns out to be the sixty seven stall Chapter and it's built of oak and walnut, these rich timbers darkened by age. It's a treasure. There are lights here and I'm thinking "electrical fault" when I ask whatever God holds sway to bless and protect this special place.

The Chapter is not simply seating for a religious elite, it's the Bible carved in wood. One entrance to the stalls has intricately carved figures on either side of it: on one side there's Adam and Eve beside the Tree of Knowledge portraying the Old Testament temptation; they

are faced by Jesus and The Devil in the Wilderness, a portrayal of the New Testament temptation.

The sanctuary has representations of the “Song of Roland”. Hello, what’s he doing here?” This is Knight Roland, poet Robert Browning’s “Childe Roland”, who made his name some 500 (???) kilometres further down the Camino after St Jean Pierre de Port. We’ll meet him later, but when and by whom was his story brought to this place. It does seem as though pilgrims and the Camino have had an impact on this special place.

With thanks, I return by car to our “apartment”. I feel humbled and I am quiet, and the visit seems to have a similar effect on Daniel.

“This is more than a church, Mike”, he says.

Wrapped in my own thoughts, I just nod in agreement.

“I have to explain to you, please. I am a Freemason.”

Daniel goes on to say that he noticed some of what must have been part of an older floor of the cathedral exposed in one darkish section that we walked through.

“It was made of black and white triangles, right and wrong. It’s a very significant Freemason symbol.”

I don’t quite understand, but am unsure if my puzzlement is caused by Daniel’s limited knowledge of English or my limited knowledge of Freemasonry. In any event, it’s worth a bit of research.

A number of internet sites refer to the cathedral of St Bertrand de Comminges as “the French Roslyn”, while one asks if it is not in fact “the real Roslyn”. Roslyn, in Scotland, is believed to have close connections to the Knights Templar and also with the founding of Freemasonry. Though this idea has been contested, it is accepted by many to be the case and it was given some promotion in the novel “The Da Vinci Code”.

My research shows that while there is no hard evidence to support the case of the Scottish Roslyn having any relevance, there is something in writing to allow a case to be made for St. B-de-C. Unfortunately this “Rubant” document, as it is called, only dates from the 18th century which is a bit too recent for my liking.

The Rubant papers claim that as the Knights Templar were being arrested, imprisoned and executed by papal decree, actions which effectively annihilated the Order of Knights, three of them were spared by the pope himself. Clement V instructed these Knights Templar to stand guard on a relic associated with the miracles of St Bertrand in the Comminges area. They were further charged with electing and preparing their own successors who would continue the safeguarding after their own death. In return, they had not only their lives, but also their liberty. Oh, and there’s a footnote: back in the day, Pope Clement was bishop of St

Bertrand de Comminges. That would be the bishop that succeeded the good saint himself to the post.

Good Heavens! This sounds like “carte blanche” to set up a new order of knights – or else perpetuate an old one. In any event, given the annihilation of all their comrades, these guys would have had to do whatever they did very secretly. I’ll leave any further research to Dan Brown, and if he follows it up, I’ll pursue him for a share of the royalties. There’s another Dan who’s more important to me right now, and that’s the one I’m going to be walking with tomorrow – so it’s off to bed with me. Ah! My own room.

Good Friday, and it’s a misty morning as we set off for Lortet. The path takes us the long way round the knoll – and it’s well worth the effort for the extra views we get of the haute, or “high” village and its centrepiece. Then it’s a climb up into the mist-shrouded hills which provide the backdrop when approaching the cathedral from the east on the Chemin de St Jacques. Impairment of visibility is a more than acceptable trade for a cool climb, in my view. We’re getting back into the Pyrenees and tree shrouded tracks.

“Look, Mike, those paw prints. It’s a bear”.

I’m too excited to think of the corny response: “A bare what?” If I had, I could have claimed to a first joke on my scoreboard, but it may have been lost in translation for Daniel. Yes, I am excited – no fear. The paw prints indicate travel in the opposite direction to ourselves. In other words, however big it was, we’ve left it behind. But Daniel must have me down already as a non-tooth brushing, non-hair brushing city wuss:

“It’s all right, Mike, bears are afraid of humans and will stay out of our way when they hear us. The only problem is when they cannot escape from you or they have their children with them. In France, they are a protected species, by the way. A farmer cannot shoot one if it is attacking his sheep. That is why the French government gives immediate compensation to any farmer who loses livestock to a bear.”

I have a young English friend, Pat, back in Mas Cabardes with an interest in wolves, and I ask Daniel if we might see any.

“No, they avoid humans even more than bears do. You will only find them in very remote places in these mountains. That means just over the summit from here on the Spanish side. No one lives in that area.”

I’m happy to note he doesn’t mean the summit we’re about to go over. Our one is to the west not the south – we’re still heading, ever so slowly, towards St. Jean Pied de Port and the Camino Frances, the route traditionally taken through Spain by pilgrims from France.

Some while later, I let out a groan.

“What’s the matter, Mike?” asks Daniel.

“I didn’t take a photo of those paw prints.” Of all that happens during my two week progress toward Santiago del Compostella, this will be my greatest regret – in fact, my only regret. Like the fisherman with the one that got away, I have no evidence of having had this experience out in the wilds of the Pyrenees Mountains.

“Never mind, Mike, we might see some more.”

But we didn’t.

Our marked route through the hamlet of ????? inevitably takes us past its church. I say “inevitably” because, although this is a one street settlement, the Camino will always take the pilgrim past the main ecclesiastical buildings in any city, town, village, or one-horse hamlet through which it passes. Given the remoteness of the area (we’re well up in the hills at this point) I think it’s worth trying the door as they may not lock their churches around these parts.

When I press the latch, it turns out that they do. But as I take my thumb off the door latch, I make a fascinating discovery. The piece that I have been pressing in order to lift the latch on the other side is made in the shape of a scallop shell. Who went to the trouble of putting this tiny embellishment, so much a symbol of the Way, into the construction of this out-of-the-way church, and why? After St Bertrand, my questions are: Was this always a small out-of the-way place? Is this a secret sign? But there’s no leaflet – and no Dan Brown.

Later in the afternoon, we cross a field where the meadow grass extends our path across a river and back into forest. Wait a bit ,that was a bridge. I call Daniel back to the spot where I’ve slid down to the riverside to take a look at that path from below. The grass is craftily camouflaging a Roman bridge. Question: How old is this bridge? Question: What sort of road was this field track some centuries back? I’m not going to get the answers to these, or that other big question lurking behind them: How much history are we walking over and how many artefacts of that story are we passing without realising that we are doing so? I don’t fret over finding the answers; I’m a pilgrim, walking west, toward Santiago de Compostella, and if there are answers – to anything, it’s there that I may hope to find them.

Daniel starts to talk of his childhood; he wants to explain to me how a Frenchman comes to have a surname like Gomez. His mother was married to a Spaniard, but the relationship broke up and in time she remarried. This time it was to a Portuguese man working in the coal mines near Albi, the city which was the seedbed of the Cathar heresy.

“We produced all our own food – grew vegetables, raised animals. There was always work to be done after school either working the soil or harvesting the crop; sometimes killing the animals, we learned how to do that at a very young age. There was rabbit, chicken and goose that went into our freezers along with all the potatoes and haricot beans and other vegetables. Do you know? We had three freezers in the house, each with a capacity of 400 cubic metres!”

He was proud of that, and rightly so.

“But my father was a hard man. You know he never did anything with me, it was always work. He was of his generation.”

“Mine was the same”, I respond.

It’s difficult to explain. I had a much more privileged childhood than Dan. I’m calling him Dan now to myself – never to his face. Lessons and teachers like all kids my age, and games after school classes were over - that is if it wasn’t wet. We didn’t have to go out in all weathers to work the land. We were well fed, well clothed, and warm – but we were in boarding school.

My father worked for the British government in the Colony and Protectorate of Kenya and when I was seven years old, believing it to be “to my advantage”, sent me off to get an English education. Budget airlines did not exist in the 1950s, so I had but one visit a year to my parents – a six week summer holiday. In school, Sunday morning was for compulsory letter writing so my parents got a letter from me each week. The regular replies all came from my mother.

When that precious annual holiday did eventually come round only school was out, not the office, so my father continued at work. I’d see him for meals and, if there was nothing on for him in the evening, before I went to bed.

Yes, Dan, he too was of his generation. I guess there are all sorts of different ways of being “untouchable”.

We’ve been talking and we’ve been keeping a good eye on the waymarks. We shouldn’t be too far now from our next Halte in the town of Lortet, and that’s just as well because those dark clouds are beginning to build in front of us. We come out of the forest and walk an ill-defined route across pasture where cattle graze. All looks well until we come to a water trough and the “path” runs out. We’ve missed a turn somewhere.

We retrace our steps while those clouds take up more and more of the sky above us. We walk back into the forest for a total of about two kilometres, and find a waymark sending us off to what is now our right up a very overgrown and indistinct path. That it is a path is clear from this direction, but coming the other way, the turn is a hairpin easily missed in the circumstances. To compound matters I discover that five trees before we should have made the turn, there’s the red and white marker telling us to go straight on. We’ve walked four kilometres more than needed.

“I remember seeing this one Daniel. When we passed it, I thought it would be a while before I needed to keep an eye out for the next one.”

Daniel mutters something in French, and I believe he has just consigned the maintenance men of the GR 78 to the same category as farmers.

Heavy drops begin to fall, so we each choose our tree, and frantically change into wet gear under it. We have it on before the lock keeper in the heavens fully opens the sluice gates, but I may as well not have bothered. I don't know if there are grades of rain gear, but mine wasn't designed for this.

Two kilometres later we walk into Lortet, and the hotel soon comes up on our right. If we hadn't made that mistake in the hills above, we'd have been home and dry before this. I reckon we'll need to undress in the porch otherwise we'll drip all over Reception and the route to our rooms, but we're spared that.

This is a two-star hotel most of whose customers are walkers; the owner himself is well experienced, and later in the evening will give Daniel much helpful advice on our route for the next few days. The same man welcomes us at the door now:

"Come on in. I'll take you straight to your rooms, you can shower and change. We'll do the registration when you're dry."

The décor screamed "two star and old", but it was just what I needed for this night. The rooms looked out across a river to the main part of the town, but I was more interested in the river. It was in spate, making for a fast descent in a canoe with no rocks to worry about, but no breakouts either. This would be fun, provided I didn't capsize, since my roll-up is less than reliable at this stage of life – a capsize means a swim for me, more often than not.

After a shower, I take advantage of having a warm bedroom all to myself, and spread out all my wet stuff over the wardrobe doors, the bathroom door, pegs in the wall, and over a chair. More than my wet gear is wet. It's the entire contents of my rucksack: the rain-resistant fabric provided to cover the whole thing in wet conditions has not done its job.

Then it's down to the dining room for our dinner. We're the only guests, so there's a lack of atmosphere, but the food is filling – and our main course is not veal stew.

Afterwards we move into the bar, which is more intimate, and sit up at it drinking with the owner. He and Daniel are soon pouring over the map and considering the best route for the next few days. I don't follow the conversation very well; after all here are two Frenchmen talking together, so the words flow at normal speed. Daniel wants a route that will follow the contours as much as possible: he's thinking of my knee. It's not giving any trouble, but perhaps the best way to keep things that way is to put as little stress on it as possible. Our host has what he thinks is a better way which will involve quite a climb, but will avoid certain difficulties which will arise with Daniel's plan. I still don't understand but no matter – the only flow I'm interested in just now is the one just outside the window. As darkness falls, I gaze on the rise and fall of lumps of water passing by. As a canoeist I should be interested in the motion of the river, but I find myself "freeze framing" the view and observing a watery range of mountains. There's more of this to come, but it will be a "watery range of mountains" in a very different sense of the phrase.

We stayed at the bar till late! I don't know what the French laws are in relation to Good Friday drinking. If there are any, the French probably flout them in the same way they do the EU regulations on cheese making. But next morning, on waking, the words "skinfull" and "I've had a" came quickly to mind.

All my stuff, the wet gear and the contents of my rucksack had completely dried overnight. When I opened my curtains, there was the river that I loved, and the rain which I didn't. The gear won't be staying dry for long!

I must take care not to complain about the weather, which is a reflex reaction for anyone living in Ireland. At the end of my two month pilgrimage I could say I had only five days of rain, two of which were my last two days in the north west of Spain – a region as famed as Ireland for its "soft" (and not so soft) days. The previous year, 2010, in Spain itself Camino walkers had experienced fifteen consecutive days of rain in May as well as snow in one area which obscured the waymarks for walkers there. Fortunately I didn't have this information while I was in France in April, but it should be a caution to anyone who imagines the Camino is a pleasant walk in the sun every time.

All I will say about today's walk is that it was a long wet road walk with one big climb and descent. There was hardly any traffic, and the surface was preferable to the forest tracks which were often slippery in these conditions.

But I'll happily go on at length about my gear! Yesterday's comparatively brief exposure to Pyrenean "wet weather" had taught me a lesson which I appeared to have learned on the evidence at the end of today: normal waterproofing doesn't work hereabouts. This morning, in overcast conditions, I put on my swimming togs (I'd bought them for the sea in Spain, but the Atlantic won't be warm enough when I get there in June) then donned my wet gear over them and I was ready to go. The outcome, at the end of the day, was that I was damp and warm not over-heated and soaked.

As a result of other precautions, what I wore was all that got wet. I had bought large plastic bags with me but in the fine weather never used them. Last night everything was sorted into one of five plastic bags for separate packing into the rucksack: washing/bathroom stuff; bedroom stuff; "good" clothes for evening wear; first aid: odds-and-ends, like the third pair of socks that were never worn till after I got home.

With my world compartmentalised and crammed into the backpack, the whole was covered by another of these large bags which I tore off a roll proclaiming they were to be used for garden refuse. This ugly-looking piece of kit was then itself covered by the nice blue tailored "rain resistant - not!" cover provided by the makers of my rucksack. Before setting off, I checked my reflection in the hotel window. I thought I looked so good, that I resolved not to sue the makers of my rucksack for misuse of the words "rain resistant" under Trade

Description legislation. I couldn't have done, of course – the item was manufactured in a country where the first language wasn't English.

The town we've finished in for the day is Bagneres de Bigorre. It's a Roman Spa town, so it has pedigree, though all we know at this stage is that the pilgrim hospital we are heading for is somewhere on the far side of town. A young lad of about fourteen cycles past on the pavement, then stops and waits for us to catch up.

"Wassup?" he asks, though being French, he says it much more politely than that. When we tell him and he understands where we are heading in town, he says he'll stay with us and show us the way. It's a lovely offer from a young teenager with better things to do on a Saturday afternoon than escort two old farts around town, but we decline with grateful thanks. Daniel needs more medications for his feet and there's a pharmacy just a few doors up ahead.

Although the Halte of Notre Dame in Bageres seems to have come into existence as a result of the Chemin de St Jacques passing through the town, this one is no longer exclusively for travellers on the Way. It is now a hostel for whoever is passing and for whatever reason, so while we two are the only pilgrims there are plenty of others staying here tonight. The good news is, it's two to a room and there are not so many staying that Dan and I can't have a room each.

My reward at the end of such a wet day, is a huge tampon (stamp) on my credencial. It shows the front of the Notre Dame building, and I'm delighted because I can point out my bedroom to family and friends right here on my pilgrim passport when I get home. The slight down-side is that for 10 euros all we are getting is our bed, we're going to have to cook for ourselves.

It turns out to be nothing of a downside. While Daniel engages in many community activities back home, his wife runs a Chanbre d' Hote – but she doesn't cook! That task falls to my walking partner, who is phoned at the office each afternoon to be told how many guests there are for that night. He then figures out a menu and does the shopping on the way home. So, given we have full kitchen facilities provided here, it looks like this will be home from home for my friend.

In the time it has taken me to sort out my gear for drying and, with due thanks, unpack a completely dry set of clothes for the evening, Dan has had his shower, got dressed and is heading for the supermarche with a cheery shout round my door:

"Enjoy your shower, Mike".

Nice man! But when I get into the shower I understand the twinkle in his eyes that came with the kind wishes. There is no way to control the temperature, and the water that's flowing is scalding. This will be a not uncommon experience as I move through Spain, but

right now I'm caught between the need to clean myself on the one hand and avoid an unpleasant torture on the other. My subsequent "ooh"s, "aaahh"s and "ouches" suggest I reach some sort of compromise by experiencing a bit of both.

By the time I've finished and dressed, Daniel is working in the kitchen and what results is something I would be prepared to undergo further torture to enjoy, if necessary. To start, there's tomato soup made from first principles, then escallops of pork steak with garlic sautéed potatoes, cheese, and a shop-bought prune flan. This being France, shop bought deserts as good as anything I get back home.

"Look at the wine, Mike, I bought it for you." It's an AOC bottle from the Minervois. Great! But surely the financial contribution I gave to the shopping trip cannot have covered my share of all this, given the wherewithal for breakfast is also in the basket. Daniel assures me everything is covered. Okay, I'll do wash-up – it's an inadequate way to show my appreciation, but all I can do.

When I'm done we head down town. It's Easter Saturday and it seems like a good idea to catch the Pascal Mass at 9pm. When we arrive at the church, there's a large enough crowd already gathered outside the main porch where a brazier has been placed which is blazing away. People are lighting candles from it, and on the dot of nine a couple of priests arrive at the door with their acolytes and a huge Pascal candle. Words are said, the Pascal candle lit and, with hymn singing, the assembled faithful follow the priests in procession into the body of the church. We fall in with them and take seats near the back.

The candles light the church for the first while, but when a group of children walk up to the altar to sing what they have prepared for this ceremony, the electric illuminations take over. With that performance over, a number of couples gather at the altar steps each with a babe in arms. There's going to be a baptism, I mean several baptisms. The longish queue of couples is then added to by a group of older children. What's this? They're lining up to be baptised as well. We're in for a long session, it seems, and this proves to be so when a troop of family photographers also arrive on stage.

At 10.10pm and the baptisms not yet all done, we decide we've had enough so we make a quiet exit and walk back through town to bed. Tomorrow is Easter Sunday, and we want to get to Lourdes as early as possible to have time to experience this holy site – so it's off to bed with us.

In the morning we're on the road before anyone else stirs. It's all blue sky and sun but no heat yet, the best time to be walking. The waymarks quickly take us away from any of the main arteries of the town, and we find ourselves walking through a leafy suburb on the outskirts.

A plaque mounted on the wall of a large house, set back in its own mature grounds, catches my attention. I drop back to read it, I don't know why. Maybe, after the incident with the mineral water spring, I'm keen to gather all the information I can about anything in my Way.

The plaque announces that this house is the birthplace of Field Marshal Alanbrooke. Just to be sure that I don't breach any of the rules of address with which certain English people are obsessed, I'm talking about Field Marshal The Right Honourable Sir Alan Brooke, 1st Viscount Alanbrooke, a very solid Ulsterman.

Good grief! He was my father's hero. I run, as best I can, to catch up with my pace maker and tell him. Daniel, good military man, is familiar with the name.

Alanbrooke distinguished himself in both the First World War and the early years of the second one, earning himself a reputation as an outstanding planner of operations. In 1941 he was appointed Chief of the Imperial General Staff (CIGS), and added Chairman of Chiefs of Staff Committee. In these two roles, he was the foremost military adviser to Winston Churchill. Relations between the two men were often strained but historian Max Hastings believes their partnership "created the most efficient machine for the higher direction of the war possessed by any combatant nation, even if its judgments were sometimes flawed and its ability to enforce its wishes increasingly constrained"

"My father served under him in the Second World War" I say, in order to establish the authenticity of what I'm saying. Then I add, in the interests of reality:

"A good bit under him." Oh, here we go again – father stuff, but my companion seems genuinely interested.

At the outbreak of hostilities in 1939, my father was prospecting for a diamond company on the west coast of Africa. He did what every other British citizen did there, and enlisted with the local option, the Regiment of the West African Rifles. There's no knowing what might have happened to him had he been in England and joined up from there, but his fate – and that of his Regiment – was a posting to the Burmese jungle to fight the Japanese. History tells us that neither the jungle nor the Japanese were pleasant but, like most of his generation, this was not something he talked about.

What I do know is that he fought alongside Hector Munro. That's not Saki, H.H. Munro, the short story writer popular at the beginning of the twentieth century who was killed on the Somme, but someone younger and unknown outside his family, friends and the Dispatches that earned him a Military Cross with Bar. This Hector may not have been the only Munro boy of his generation to be given the forename by an idolising father, but he fell in conflict just like his namesake.

As I am doing now with Daniel, I imagine my father talking with his comrades about family. In his case, this was not one that is now consigned to history but one that would be hoped

for in the future. He asked Hector to stand as Godfather to his first born, whenever that might be.

In the event, Hector fell in battle before he could stand for me. His patrol was ambushed in the Burmese jungle on a bend in a river, and it was my father's patrol which was sent out to find them and bury the remains. In the days before he died, my father and I talked a bit. We didn't achieve closeness, or even closure, but we did trade information and I learned this much of his war, and heard the certainty in his voice when he said:

"If you took me back there today, I could still find the bend in the river where we dug the graves, and I said goodbye".

I was given "Hector" as one of my middle names. It's something I tried to hide when younger and, when unsuccessful, I suffered. Older now, possibly wiser and sadder, I regret that I didn't wear the name with pride.

Daniel! We've talked of fathers. Here's another man I couldn't be close to, though for very different reasons. Walk on!

We climb into the hills, nothing too strenuous, as the day warms up. I smile as I appreciate that quite by chance (or the vagaries of my walking schedule) I will be arriving in Lourdes, our destination for tonight, on Easter Sunday. Lourdes must be the main centre of pilgrimage for Christians in Europe. In 1858, a local 14 year old called Bernadette claimed a beautiful lady had appeared to her just outside the town. Christians believe that this apparition was the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Today the town has a population of some 16,000 people, but this is more or less permanently swelled by some of the five million visitors who come each year to see, pray, or heal. Miracles have been associated with this site, which gives it still more appeal to the faithful. Daniel and I will add to the number of visitors for just one night.

I recall that this was the first point of contact Joyce and I had planned on my Way – but she wasn't going to be there to welcome me into this town with such a holy shrine. The reason was that flights into Lourdes were expensive and not worth the money for what was going to be only a brief visit. I'm in two minds – sad I won't be having her company for a while longer but also glad, because it means I can keep moving with Daniel. For the price of a couple of nights with Joyce, I will have a walking companion for as long as we can stick each other. Strange as it may sound, I'm thinking this is a good deal and I'm glad to take it. In times of difficulty, two heads are better than one, and Dan and I have helped each other along the Way at different times in this last week we have had together.

As we follow the contours round some hills, I wonder what my first sight of Lourdes will be. A dramatic cathedral, light shining all around it, trumpet fanfares from angels in the

heavens? Perhaps a roll of thunder and a deep voice speaking to us from above? I thought it had to be dramatic.

In the event, it wasn't. Just like coming into any other conurbation, there were the few houses on the outskirts, becoming greater in number as we moved in the direction of the centre. Then the mix of that housing with service enterprises, morphing to businesses and then offices with restaurants and pubs. We badly needed one of the latter, and at four o'clock in the afternoon we were at a table on the pavement outside a bar near the centre of town. A couple of beers later we were ready to face the little road for pilgrims down to the grotto.

When we arrived at the turn down to the holy place, my heart sank. On either side, and one after the other without break - postcard and souvenir shops, their wares also laid out on tables on the street. There was no escaping them, the gauntlet had to be run – or, at least walked, at a very brisk pace. The words "temple", "money", and "lenders" came to mind and, not long after these ones "throw them out" as well.

At the bottom of Money Lenders Lane, a bridge takes us across the river into the park where the basilica and all-important grotto are located. A man in native American clothing stands to one side playing pan pipes, a cloth with some coins at his feet. Bodies sit on the bridge, one with hand outstretched – the other looking hopefully at passers-by, a cardboard box at his side. Yup – this has to be the way to the temple.

In the park, groups of visitors mill around, the members of each wearing the same coloured rabbits ears on their head. A proportion in each party are learning disabled, and everyone is here for a good time it seems. That sounds like a plan: if you were coming for a miracle and didn't get one, at least you could tell the folks back home that you had a good time and, sure, isn't that what it's all about at the end of the day?

I think of the trip many of the others in this park would have had to get here: out to a soulless airport, the checks, the wait, the flight, the transfer, the hotel all in the company of familiar faces – and now? A lark in the park with, again, those familiar faces.

I then review my own journey: two weeks walking in a strange land with a strange language and strange people for company. Nothing familiar in any of this. I count my blessings. I'm not expecting miracles in this place; and then I think to look back for miracles along my way so far. I fancy I've experienced a few. Daniel suggests we head off and try to find the hostel, they're expecting us about now.

I'm not sorry to get to the far end of Money Lenders and back into what I now think of as the 'normal' part of town, in other words, where the locals go for what they need. We climb up to the left and, following directions that were dictated to him when he phoned our reservation the day before, Daniel quickly locates the hostel door. It's exactly as on the website photo.

Jean-Louis is our host, and he gives us a warm welcome as he leads us across the small courtyard to the front door. At the far end of the garden lawn, I can see the basilica - now down below us across the other side of the river. This is quite the best view of the holy site that is to be had, and I reckon they could charge admission for people to come in, look and take photos.

We are shown to our room, which we two will have to ourselves it turns out, and the view from the window is the same as from the courtyard: the religious centre of Lourdes looks up at us without the intervening Lane of Tat, and it takes on a different identity for me. I think it's the distance that is bringing me closer to whatever this place is about.

There are three young people from central France staying here for the weekend as well as us two 'day-trippers'. They're adults involved in a youth group, and they organised to come here on their own home-made retreat for the Easter holiday. Dinner conversation is all French and rapid fire and I'm tired so I give up any effort (or indeed pretence, which I can be quite good at) to follow the conversation and drift into my own thoughts.

This isn't the first time I have encountered people on retreats of their own making. Two years earlier, I had walked part of the Arles route (another Chemin de St. Jacques) to Santiago which passes between Castres and Toulouse as preparation for what I was doing now. I stayed at the Benedictine Abbey of En Calcat near Dourgne. Here I found families, single people and small same-age groups using the Abbey to rest, pray and meditate. The monks provided hospitality, as it was being provided in Lourdes, for a donation – or not! There was no compulsion to give anything, and when I was leaving the Benedictines I had to go on a fifteen minute prowl to find a monk to give my donation to (they were all back at Mass at 9am, having done a 6am Laudes before breakfast which I had attended).

At En Calcat, I was visiting as a single man so I was given a cell in the monastery on the same floor as the monks. The guest rooms, at one end of the corridor, were partitioned off from those of the monks by a huge glass wall so that we could see them as we came and went from our rooms, but couldn't hear them. Not that there was anything to hear – we were all living a silent life in this place. My room was bare and simple, but gave everything I needed. I took my meals in the refectory, also with the monks: the five guests seated at a table in the middle, surrounded on all sides by monks. We asked for and gave the bowls, dishes – and carafes of wine – with nods and gestures. After a delicious four course vegetarian meal, we guests helped the monks clearing tables and doing the wash-up out in the kitchen. This was not because we were told to, but because one just followed what everyone else was doing. It felt to me like we were a colony of ants for we had no language to use and our communication was all by movement within the nest. Here I felt so at home with these Frenchmen, so much 'one of them' because 'communication' was at this primitive level. And here I saw a reason for silent communities and a value in silence.

Back in Lourdes, there's a lull in dinner table conversation. Softly, singing voices come into the room. Jean-Louis is on his feet and inviting us to follow him to the window, which looks across the river to the basilica. It is dark now, and what we see is a candlelight procession down in the park beside the grotto. Once a year on Easter Sunday, I'm told, this event takes place. Pilgrims to Lourdes (or "religious tourists", as the academics call them) join with locals to produce "a cast of thousands" to participate in this ceremony. From where I stand, it could be an ancient Druidic ritual that I'm witnessing, and I find that an interesting thought, for how much has Christianity drawn on older religions in order to impact on converting communnities. What I do is take out my mobile phone, call my daughter, and – pointlessly no doubt – hold the phone out at arm's length toward the distant singing. She enjoys it, as I do.

After a while, my companions drift back to the table and their coffee. I haven't had any because any caffeine in the evening seems to make sleep difficult, and I notice that sleep is just what I need right now. I say my 'Good Night's and head off to our room.

In the calm darkness before sleep, I wonder if I am not being a little smug over my status as a pilgrim. I've walked for three weeks to get here and I'm not overly impressed - I'd rather be in a place like St Bertrand de Comminges, for instance – the other pilgrims have flown in and are travelling and living with all the creature comforts a twenty first century town has to offer. There is a difference between "us" (Dan and me) and "them", and it is pointed up in Michael York's (2002) essay in "From Medieval Pilgrimage to Religious Tourism: the social and cultural economics of piety" (edited by William Swatos and Luigi Tomasi). York notes: *"By contrast* (with the pilgrims of old) *the modern religious tourist, like virtually all tourists, is reluctant to tolerate discomfort and inconvenience. This and the lack of devout intent are what distinguish the twentieth century spiritual tourist from the pilgrim……In general, the tourist is not as willing to risk personal peril as is the pilgrim. The religious tourist's visit to spiritual places is part of a fuller agenda of sightseeing. It is more casual and superficial. There is no deliberate intent for transformation and no framework in which to rationalise whatever hardships arise."* (pg 152)

These words tell me I'm not "better than", just "different from". Funny that! I've spent the latter part of my working life teaching the principals of equality, teaching my students to understand the difference between "integration" (which means you have to change if you want to play with us) and "inclusion" (which means we have to change to enable you to play with us) – and I have to come to some religious grotto to learn the lesson for myself. A miracle? Well, it's a little bit of transformation in myself – and I'll call that a miracle for me. Would that be "pride" done and dusted?

Next morning, Dan and I are first in for breakfast. People doing retreats obviously take things a bit more leisurely. Jean-Louis ushers me to a place at the large communal table we used last night, and I am getting offered everything ahead of Daniel. Perhaps this treatment is because I am the foreigner here – the most guestly of the guests. I'm delighted to see

Corn Flakes on the table for the first time since I started walking, and I eagerly pour them into the large bowl in front of me. I'm aware of a couple of puzzled looks on either side, but I reach for the milk and sugar and then eat.

Jean Louis breaks the silence by offering Daniel a coffee and then pouring from the pot into Daniel's cereal bowl. Strange people these French. Stranger still, Dan takes the Corn Flakes packet and pours some cereal in on top of his coffee. I've seen him dip his croissant into the coffee mug each morning, but this is a new one on me. I realise I've never taken breakfast with French people before – apart from Daniel, and up till now he and I have only had croissants and coffee. So, this is what they do; and if I want a cup of coffee to set me up for the day then there's nothing for it only to finish this huge bowl of cereal as quickly as I can and hope there's still room for the energising drink.

Others wander in for their breakfast, but Dan and I excuse ourselves and go to pack and tidy our room. By the time we return to the dining space to sign the Visitor's Book (the French call it the Book of Gold), the table has been cleared of everything and our host is calling everyone to come down to the courtyard.

It turns out we are going to be given a send-off. A circle is formed, we all hold hands and Jean-Louis starts to sing. Everyone else joins in bar the Anglophone, who doesn't know the words. It must be a pilgrim hymn because the chorus frequently repeats the word "Ulterya". This is a Spanish word meaning "Onward", which can be shouted as encouragement to pilgrims walking through Spain by those encountering them in towns, villages or out on the road; like "Buen Camino", it's a bit of a battle cry .

The hymn now sung, we walk to the gate surrounded by our companions of the night, and they stand and wave us off until we go out of sight round a corner. It was a heartfelt farewell, and I felt it in my heart.

No sooner have we lost sight of the hostel, than a patisserie comes into view. We need to buy supplies for lunch, and Daniel leads the way into the shop. At this early enough hour in the day it's giving off the deliciously familiar smell of baking, and immediately I know I'm going to be buying all the wrong things – by which I mean a selection of cheese and meat pastries with, possibly, a small Quiche Lorraine.

Our walk west takes us beside the river on which Lourdes is sited for much of the morning. There's a good flow on it, and I'm thinking of mentioning it to my fellow paddlers back home. My canoeing friends in Ireland are an ageing bunch, not one of us under 55 years of age – and a rock-free run such as the one I'm walking beside wouldn't tax our skills and would provide a gentle wander through some pleasant countryside. We pass a dam, perhaps 30 feet high, and I'm both delighted and impressed to see a kayak run has been constructed beside the fish ladder. No portage necessary here. Nice one!

The ground is quite wet underfoot and, after some time, I get that unpleasant feel of a wet sock on my right foot. Not a problem in or of itself, but I now see the stitching on that boot has burst. This causes some anxiety: if my boots are about to go and I have to buy new ones, I'm sure to be into the blister problems that Daniel had after he bought new ones in Mirepoix. Not being a military man like him, I'm certain I will perform like a complete "wuss" if I have to walk with blisters in the times ahead. Continuing with leaky boots is not an option as walking with damp feet will bring up those blisters as well. Daniel thinks we'll find somewhere to get them repaired. I doubt it, not if we are to keep moving each day from morning to night.

In time, we turn away from the riverside track and onto a minor road which runs beside some woodland. The trees rise up on quite a steep hill to our left. A cyclist is coming towards us.

Then there is the crash. We stop dead in our tracks. The cyclist dismounts. No, he's quite all right. We all look into the woods rising to our left. A tree has fallen down above us. The noise was terrifying, and as I look at the other two I suspect I'm showing as much shock on my face as they are. We couldn't see anything, and that was because of all the other trees in the way – the ones that had protected us from the fallen one rolling down the hill on top of us. When old trees die and fall, new ones will have sprung up to hold and contain the elderly. I think there's a metaphor in there somewhere, but I don't pursue it. We need to quicken our pace to our planned lunch stop. Betheram is an Halte St Jacques, and we pass the drab and rather sorry looking hostel – if it's not us, then it won't have any customers today. And we want to head on to the Abbey at Asson.

A picnic lunch beside a weir is my idea of heaven – made even more agreeable by the fact that I'm not sitting there in wet canoeing gear. If the river is on our right, then we've still got the steep hill to our left and, it turns out, we have to climb it on a (reasonably) full stomach. The job is made easier by the fact that our route is a "stations of the cross". This one is quite elaborate, with a gated chapel-like building for each station. Inside the wrought iron gates, there is always an altar and a dedication to the event being remembered at that point. Stopping to reflect at each one – it is Easter Monday after all – makes the whole climb a gentle and untiring venture.

At the top of the hill is a Calvary – here it's three crosses and three bodies. Behind the crucifixes, a cemetery. The path turns us to the left and a level walk past the last two stations and towards a chapel which, while small, is bigger than the buildings that have represented the stations on the way up. Way marking takes to one side of this chapel and then we leave it behind, walking out west towards our night stop.

At Asson, we find we are staying in a modern building in the grounds of the Abbey. It provides self-contained accommodation for pilgrims who must do their own cooking and housekeeping. The contact person is a woman of the village who we've phoned in advance;

my little booklet of names and phone numbers for each Halte must continue to be guarded carefully.

This is not a thriving religious community, the only resident seems to be the Abbot himself who is elderly and looks like the grounds man. He's dressed like one anyway – so he probably fills that role and many others. A man who multi-tasks, but never more than one at a time (like all men). Our walking notes tell us there is no restaurant in the village. But there is a shop where we can buy something to cook, and it has a bar attached to it. Daniel decides we'll have pasta and, as he's the chef, I'm not saying anything. It would be unwise to do so, as any conversation is going to delay access to that glass of beer which is morphing in my mind to something much larger as I become more aware of my thirst.

When we get to the shop, I find the check-out is the bar. I wonder if the proprietor ever considers his entire food stock a "loss leader" to get pilgrims in to drink. When I see the prices on the foods, I understand that he does not think this way at all!

Then the surprise. As well as everything else on offer, there is a reasonably priced set menu for dinner which can be taken at the bar. Now I think I understand. If people come in and take a meal, they don't buy the food on the shelves, then there is a low turn-over with high wastage and so – high prices. I mention this to Daniel, pointing out that it's going to cost us as much to buy food to cook as to sit in and have a meal prepared for us. But Daniel is not seeing sense today. He's impressed by the Abbot, feels the good man has a story or two to tell, and wants to invite him to dinner with us.

It's a great idea, but when we pass his apartment on the way to our rooms, the Abbot tells us he already has an invitation for the night. As a result, we two eat a huge meal and, after a long day, go to our beds at 8.30pm.

Tired but full of food, I am slow to sleep. I reflect on my journey and find a change in my thinking. Before Lourdes I wanted this pilgrimage to go on and on, tonight I want to get to the end. This is not because I am tired, fed up, low on energy or bored. It is because I have a sense that there is some kind of prize at the end, not a "reward" but something intangible earned or gained. I haven't a clue what this might be, but I wonder if such thinking has been influenced in any way by being among the visitors to Lourdes. They had arrived at their destination, achieved their goal and were – who knows – exuding some sort of calm contentment that I was picking up on. Strange thought – but isn't the "peace which passeth all understanding" the goal of us all, those with some religion – and those with none? Those on a journey - and those who have arrived?

Next morning, we are on the road at an early hour and in our wet gear too, for it is raining. The Abbot has been up even earlier than us and has unlocked the church so that we can have a look around. Even in this quiet country village, there are security concerns for the safety of a building that offers a welcome to all.

After a brief time of reflection in the one of the pews, we strike out just after 8am in the misty rain for our next stopover in Arudy. We hit the small town of Bruges in time for a mid-morning coffee. The waymarks take us through the centre of town so that we emerge into the central square at one of its corners. The Way goes across this square diagonally to the far corner, but we stop because we've spotted a coffee shop to our right about half way up that side of the square.

We walk towards it, and a woman on the far side, near where we are supposed to exit the square shouts a "Cuckoo" to us and then waves animatedly towards the laneway beside her. She's spotted two men with rucksacks and can probably see the scallop shell around my neck. She is one of the many strangers I will encounter on this journey who is determined to keep us on the right track.

But she becomes quite distressed when we wave at back at her and then continue merrily on our way up the right of the square. She both hoots and points even more furiously now, and it is only when it occurs to me to point at the coffee shop and then mime drinking from a cup that she relaxes, waves us a farewell and takes off down our laneway herself.

We bought the wherewithal for lunch yesterday – the usual pate and cheese, so we only need bread and, revived by the coffee, we take to the hills again where I will have the opportunity to learn more about the French before too long.

When I walk with Joyce, my wife, in Ireland she usually takes charge of the outing – prepares the picnic, says who's going to carry what, and makes sure we have the dog's lead. So it is natural that she's the one who decides when and where the picnic will be, though she has a quasi consultational approach which goes something like this:

"It's quarter to one, I think we should be looking to stop for lunch sometime in the next half hour. Let's keep a lookout for a nice spot."

The French, or at least the one I'm walking with, don't operate in the same manner at all. With Daniel, if it's twelve midday, then it's lunchtime and we stop in our tracks to eat. Normally this is well and good, but today we are half way up a steep hill when the eating hour strikes.

"It's lunchtime, Mike. Let's sit over there".

He indicates a giant log which lies on the line of ascent, a good positioning since, if rotated through 90 degrees it would roll down the hill. But what the log then gained in stability, it completely lost in the 'level playing field' department. Daniel sat at the lower end of the log and spread out the food. I sat above him and tried to compose a sandwich. Daniel pushed cheese or pate towards me, but before I could put down the one I was using, the other that was offered slid off the log or, worse still remained on our wooden table but travelled resolutely towards his crotch.

My appetite abated without consuming my normal intake, and I decided to take a photo of our picnic site with Dan in situ and the still uneaten food extending in a line up the log towards where I had been sitting. Next day, I came to realise that this move was perhaps a bit tactless, but for now the tooth and hair brushing routine was quickly completed and we were on our way to Arudy, our night stop.

Towards the end of the afternoon, we came down from the hills and walked towards the town that was to be our destination via tarmacked country lanes. As we walked, I noticed Daniel was scouring the hedgerows on either side of us. He saw me watching him:

“Printemps, Mike. It’s Springtime, and in this part of France you can find Respounchous in the hedgerows for about three weeks in April or early May. Look there – you can try it”.

Daniel clambers up the bank beside the road and reaches into the brambly green hedge which is sprouting greenery in a variety of hues. He pulls a long green stragely creeper from the shrubs and brambles and offers me the end piece to eat. It looks like asparagus and is, apparently, a gourmet delight. Daniel tells me that the motor vehicles of the prosperous can be seen parked at jaunty angles along the roadside at this time of the year as those who value it in salads or as a starter for dinner come out from the urban centres to gather it. My companion notes that it is not well known as a food among the peasantry (I think he includes the two of us in this category) which is a pity because it is free and also “tres bonne pour la santé”. As the nephew of a woman who used to prepare all sorts of potions from herbs and plants growing wild, this latter point persuades me to give it a try. I do manage to chew and swallow, but tell Daniel I think I would rather eat grass. As we walk, Daniel continues to forage and eat.

For tonight, we have booked a bed in a Chambre d’Hote in the town. When we get to the central square, we must ring the owners and someone will come into town and fetch us. The phone call made, we have a beer and keep our eyes peeled for a car driver paying more attention to the pavements than the road. Eventually such a one arrives in the person of Gerard, and we jump up and indicate our whereabouts. Our host takes us to his home on the outskirts of the town *and* on the road we want to take in the morning. We are met by Gerard’s wife Patricia, who is carrying a tray with glasses of homemade lemonade, ice cold.

Having dropped our sacks, we explore this home, drinking glasses in hand. The pilgrims are on the ground floor while the owners live on the first floor where all the reception rooms are also located. We can put on a machine wash here and have it all through the dryer before bed – true luxury for the weary walker.

Gerard is keen to show us his garden – flowers and vegetables are all grown from seed dried after last year’s harvest. When we phoned, Gerard was potting out this year’s tomato plants. He was proud to show us his method: each plant was put in a pot the bottom of which was lined with nettles. When the earth was bedded down around the plant it was

watered with a liquid which was a maceration of garden weeds from last year including a selection of nettles. I'm told there are no greenfly or other bugs in the garden during the summer using this system, so I file this information in my pilgrim notes – not for the spiritual enlightenment it may offer but for the practical use it may be in our own garden when I get home.

Daniel sees his chance to remount his hobby horse of the day, and asks if our hosts have come across Respounchous. They haven't, so the suggestion is we get out into the country and try and find some. It's a new experience for our hosts, so they are up for it. Knowing what the product of our labours tastes like already – I'm not so keen. But when we return after about an hour and a half of hunting, with success – I hear I am about to have the opportunity to taste the cooked version of this plant. Daniel insists on doing the cooking: he melts a generous amount of butter, adds garlic and a sprinkle of any herbs in sight and then throws in the weed, tossing it until tender and ready to eat. Prepared this way, I find it more edible but think I will stick with the grass option and decline any future offers of weed. For me the 'healthy option' will be vitamin supplements and avoid walking in this part of France at this time of year.

I know the rest of the meal was good but cannot recall the details and did not note them in my diary. I'd like to have done, if only to know what it was that took away the taste of the Respounchous – because the garlic it was cooked in certainly didn't! My memory failure was aided by Patricia's offer, enthusiastically accepted by both of us, to give our feet a session of reflexology. Oils were produced and incense candles lit. I do recall the warmth and gentle massage of her hands, and of me asking to be excused if I went to bed early – but after that, there's a blank until morning when I awoke after one of the best night's sleep for a long time feeling very well refreshed and ready for, well, anything.

We sit to a huge and healthy breakfast – apart from the croissants that is. There's a range of cereals and fruit and fruit juices and yoghurts. Combined with the good sleep, I should be walking on air for the day. Gerard hands a piece of paper to Daniel saying:

"He is like us", that's my translation anyway, and then he gives me another piece from the same notepad. My note has the name and address of a cordonnier (a shoe repairer) in Oleron St. Marie, the town we are heading for today. Gerard thinks it will be possible to have my boot repaired overnight.

We pay the going rate for a chambre d' hote, but it's worth every penny as far as I'm concerned. Then, with fond embraces, we hit the road out of town, turning back several times to wave to these people who are obviously going to stay by their gate till we are out of sight.

New habits die as hard as old ones – obviously, or else they wouldn't be habits. At the first village we come to, we make the now obligatory stop at the boulangerie for a "pain au

chocolate". Except this one is sold out of them already and we opt for a "pain au raisin" instead. Mine is both warm and fruity, but anything else I might say about it would indicate I am over-ingesting calories and upping my cholesterol readings.

After the healthy, upbeat start to the day we are prepared to let things slip. And God must be watching us because he sends in immediate retribution. As we stand in the street, biting through the crunchy crusty exterior to sink into the delicious doughy centre, we see two women coming toward us – one in her fifties, the other in her twenties. They carry pamphlets in their hands. They are Jehovah's Witnesses.

I move back a step, but don't actually tuck myself in behind Daniel. As is now normal practice between us, I'm going to leave dealing with the natives to him. But he turns to me, with a flourish, and introduces me as his Irish friend. The devil – he's going to land me in it! I can't do God stuff in French.

But it turns out we're not going to hell, rather to Dublin – which is a heaven for some, including the younger Witness. She lights on me: do I know Brian O'Driscoll? Have I been in the Aviva stadium? How do you get tickets for an international when you arrive in Dublin twenty four hours before a match? She went to Dublin for the most recent France-Ireland encounter there, and ended up watching the match in a pub. The atmosphere was "magnifique, bien sur" (wonderful to be sure), but she was very disappointed not to be in the ground.

Not half as disappointed as her older companion though who could, at a stretch, be the younger woman's mother. It looks like Junior will be in for a bit of hellfire and brimstone when she gets back home for taking the conversation in such an ungodly direction. Clearly, two potential converts have been lost to the Lord: thanks be to Brian O'Driscoll. The senior witness thrusts a pamphlet at Dan, but now it seems quite wrong and out of place. My friend puts up his hand, this time to halt the traffic of paper, not of vehicles.

"Chacun sa route", he says. "To each one, his own road". We walk on a little before Dan says:

"We don't work like that". He's referring to the Freemasons. "Gerard is very senior in the brotherhood". Ah, so we were staying with a fellow Mason last night. I didn't see anything, nor did I fully follow the conversation at dinner (and my companions would have known this) but obviously some sign or signal was passed early on in our initial encounter with our hosts of last evening. It turns out Patricia is somehow involved with the Society, and I'm surprised at this as I had thought it was an all-male preserve.

"Freemasons help each other. Look!" Daniel taps his breast pocket. "I have the address of a Mason in St Jean Pierre de Port who runs a hostel. We will be well looked after when we go there."

“That’s brilliant”, I say – I’m delighted. St Jean Pierre de Port is coming up in a couple of days and it will be our first encounter with mass pilgrimage. Instead of two of us leaving the town or village each day, there will be hundreds of us heading out – and the same number coming in the night before looking for bed and board. It’s nice to know we can reserve beds with someone who gives a damn.

We tramp on. Come midday, Dan announces:

“Today, you choose where we will eat Mike”.

The fact that I had, for the first time on this walk, photographed our picnic stop yesterday had hit a nerve. Nothing had been said, but Daniel knew there was something not quite right about his choice – the left-over food told him as much. Now I’ve been given the task of modelling appropriate “selecting picnic site locations” behaviour. Oh God! I wish Joyce was here now, she’d know what to do.

I so desperately want to get it right, to show Daniel that it’s worth holding out for a good spot - that I dither at every possibility and simply walk on. After fifteen minutes of this, the military commander can take no more – you’re not a soldier if you can’t make snap decisions (but I always knew I wasn’t cut out for such a life).

“We’ll stop here”, I’m told. We sit into the grass beside the track, with our feet extended onto the path itself and have our lunch. Not a location that Joyce would choose – but at least it’s on the level.

It’s a warm day and the sun is at its highest now. We are sheltered by a canopy of tall deciduous trees which, with the thick grass does make for a comfortable place to be. We’ve walked together during the morning, Daniel not striding up ahead, and so at lunchtime we’ve come to that place where we don’t have much to say to each other – and happily we are now that comfortable with each other that we don’t feel we have to make conversation. Silence is okay!

I think about Daniel’s leadership and wonder how you go about learning to make snap decisions. I wish I could claim that at this point the heavens opened and a voice boomed the answer. But in the event, the response came from inside me – and it was a “still small voice of calm”. I realised that all the important decisions in my life had been made “on the hop”, very much in the way the General sitting beside me had made his in relation to the recent lunch stops – and some of the other things along our Way.

When it was time for me to go to boarding school at seven and a half years of age, I went with my parents to look at the options. Having toured various buildings in the south of England and met potential teachers for my future, my father – very uncharacteristically – asked me which of two possibilities I would prefer. I was then sent to the one I nominated. I still don’t know if my voice was heard or if I simply gave the response (50% chance of being

right) in line with what my father had already decided, but my decision was a “snap” one – it was made without any analysis of information, it was made on the basis of an emotional feeling: a “sense” this was “right” which I couldn’t understand then, and certainly don’t understand now.

Another snap decision in my life was my application to Trinity College in Dublin to pursue my university studies. It had been my Irish step-mother who tentatively suggested I might think of applying. This was the woman who had been a great friend of my mother’s and who, even though Matron of the entire hospital, had given great care and attention to my mother in her final hospitalisation – the final three months of her life. Peggy made the suggestion while I was on a Gap year in 1960s California. I made the decision in an instant: “Having a great year here; four years in yet another foreign country must be a good experience – so off I go”. And I went – never to leave the east coast of Ireland again.

This particular snap decision shaped my life. As I write, I have lived in Ireland for over 45 years, and never paid a penny of income tax to the British government. I’m married to an Irish woman and we have Irish children – and I’m an Irish citizen.

And only by coming to Ireland do I learn more of my heritage, my family’s past. After qualifying at Trinity, I go to work in Mental Health services in Dublin. I register for an MSc in Trinity, meet a very helpful secretary who does loads of typing for me on my thesis, get a permanent job, and show signs of “settling down” (that would be by proposing to the helpful secretary). Then the bombshell arrives – an elderly aunt, my mother’s sister, tells me she’s fascinated that I’ve settled in Ireland: the family loved the country and its people very much. In fact, my mother was born there! I hear this information eleven years after her death.

My mother’s father fought with what seems to have been some distinction in the Boer War – he was awarded a medal for bravery. At some later date, he was stripped of this honour and we have no information as to why, but it must have been for some form of misconduct. He seems to have been cashiered out of the army itself, but continued his career in the civilian Pay Corps. In this role, he was posted to Ireland in the early 1900s and was based in the British army barracks in Cork on the Old Youghal Road. My mother, the youngest of seven, was born at No 10 St Luke’s Terrace not far away. In time she would have attended the Barracks School like her siblings before her. At ten years old, in 1922, she left Ireland by boat along with all the occupying forces of the Crown and their retinue to return to England.

By living in Ireland, I have come to a better understanding of my past – and have been able to visit the area in Cork, and the home, where my family lived. Surviving elderly relatives were deeply touched when, in 1989, I was able to send them photos of a place from their childhoods they had not seen in 67 years.

The “snap” decision to go to Ireland wasn’t based on any coherent life-plan developed after an analysis of information; it was a quick and emotions-grounded action on my part. It led to my “falling in love” with the country, the people I came to know at that time, and the Irish “Sixties” lifestyle. It was completely different to what I had experienced in California and to the Ireland of today, but the love was emotional and from the heart.

Looking up at the canopy of branches above me and the heavens overarching everything I can see, I now wonder to myself if those quick ‘heart decisions’ might not be the best ones: the ones that take us closer to our destiny or what it is we need to do. Come to think of it, there was a lack of any thought process in the decision to do this pilgrimage. When I heard of the long walk, I wanted to do it without knowing why. Truth to tell, the “reasons” emerged only after the commitment to walk was made. I wanted to talk to the military commander about this and about his own snap decisions, but I think we may not find ourselves on the same wavelength - so I content myself with another mouthful of pate.

The afternoon stretch on the Way includes some climbing and descending, steep enough for Dan to sigh out another:

“We are Pilgrims not Penitents”.

But we are into Oleran before five o’clock, and God is with us! We emerge from a lane onto the street that will take us to the central “Place” or Square, and there right in front of us, at the end of the lane, is the cobblers shop. It owned by a Monsieur Leys, which makes me smile – many Christian pilgrimage roads follow “ley lines” or earth based energy lines which were betimes the routes of pre-Christian pilgrimages. Indeed, walking to Santiago, we are on a ley line that ancients followed to Fisterre (the end of the earth) to marvel at the sun falling off the end of the world. At that time, Santiago was simply a resting place on the route, though an important one as it was associated with healing and therefore what Christians came to call “miracles”.

The cobbler is well occupied to judge by the equipment and broken leather objects surrounding him. I ask, with little hope of a positive result, if it might be possible to have my boot repaired by sometime tomorrow.

“No”, says the artisan, his eyes dropping to the scallop shell around my neck, “We close at 7pm tonight – come back then and it will be ready for you”. Miraculous!

It’s a short walk from the cobbler’s shop to the square, and our hostel for the night is a modern building at one corner. Management here takes a bit of a ‘do it yourself’ approach in that when you make a booking you’re given a code for the keypad at the door. On arrival you let yourself in and choose a room. Ours was two bedroomed, some are for four people. The Hospitalier arrives for about an hour in the evening for the purpose of collecting money from the guests, otherwise he is out of the way and you look after yourself – even to the extent of stamping your own passport.

If you haven't brought your *credencial* along when you come to pay it doesn't matter. The tampon, or stamp, will be left at reception and you can once more 'do it yourself'. After our visit, this may no longer be the case. I am so keen to get a good clear mark that I press down a little too enthusiastically and the plastic mechanism falls apart. Several people try to help me as I struggle to repair, but our combined talents just can't do the job. I leave the broken piece with some money in an envelope, hoping this will cover the cost of replacement.

We put on a wash and head for beer at a bar in the square. Here we recognise other pilgrims by their shells, and sit at a table next to them. We learn they are walking the Arles route so they've come down from Toulouse; they're not joining our way but crossing it. Tomorrow they will head directly south and make their route into Spain via the long slow climb over the Col de Somport. Once in Spain they will make a turn to the west and join we who are on the Camino Frances at Puenta La Reina.

As we talk with these fellow pilgrims, I'm interested that we are not swapping stories of past adventures – how we have braved the elements and come through a downpour or how (because we're not all French) we've managed our way through this French-speaking land. The answer to the latter emerged later and would be that the other foreigners had good French, while my answer was simply "Daniel".

No. We didn't talk about the past, we talked about the future: what we were going to do, how we were going to pace ourselves over the next few sections, what we'd do at Santiago, and then what we might do when we got home. For many the answer to the last question was: "Go back to work", but that was their answer then – it may have been different when the time came.

Like it was for Clovis, the young Brazilian man I slept with in Cacabellos. I say that with a degree of mischievousness, but it's true: we shared the same two bedded room, were forced to interact with each other and then happily said farewell forever the next day. When we met at the end of the world (Fisterre) two weeks later, we greeted each other like long lost friends. At the real end of our journey, Clovis told me he was now going to cycle a Camino the wrong way – from Santiago to Madrid. We vowed to stay in touch, and back home – weeks later – I heard he had completed the cycle and was now riding a motorbike round the entire coast of the Iberian Peninsula. Later still, he wrote he was looking to buy a house in Spain near the Camino – he was not going home to Brazil, he was going home-home. A different place from the one he planned to go to when we, forgive the repetition – slept together. This lark changes people!

But – Back to the Future – or rather, talking about it over a beer. We're focussed on the different challenges we face ahead: the long slow slog of a climb up to the Col de Somport or the dramatic trek over the Napoleon route after St. Jean Pierre de Port during which Daniel and I will be crossing the border into Spain.

I feel a lightness as we chat. This conversation has a sense of purpose about it. Much of my thinking when out on the road has taken me to the past: to losses in my life or inadequacies in my behaviour: in a word – to regrets. This is really not a very nice place to be, and the words of Mike Dooley, one of my gurus, come to me later in the evening as I ponder this time with my first group of fellow pilgrims:

Freedom from the past always comes in the instant that you stop thinking about it.

And if I develop a 'future focus' I might be better prepared for what comes up for me and behave with more elegance. Well – there's a thought! But how do I do it? I've been brought up in a Christian tradition. No harm in that, except (perhaps) the eleven years I spent in boarding school where there was a religious gathering morning and night every day. The only reason "noon" didn't feature was that we were at our lessons at that time. Set forms of prayer, like many of those expressed in the "Book of Common Prayer" of my childhood and adolescence, help us to think that we must place the future in God's hands, rather than our own, and spend our time agonising over our wretched past.

I'm not sure I know how to effectively break the cycle. You know what they say – "Blame the parents". In this case, I think it's "Blame the teachers". I believe I need to discover some new ones.

We finish our beers and talk about food. Our new acqaintances have bought theirs and will cook in the hostel. Daniel is up for a meal out, and the two of us stroll away from the centre of the town. Down a commercial street we find a Chinese restaurant, which looks like it may do more business at lunchtime than in the evening – it's very quiet and at this evening hour there's no footfall on the street, no passers-by. We go in, take a table and order more beer. It's a place that invites you to Eat-As Much-As-You-Can – and we do.

Back at the hostel, the clothes we washed are not yet dry, so Daniel takes them down to the tumble driers in the basement. No one else is using them at this late hour (it's 9pm and pilgrims' minds must turn to bed at this time) so the washing goes into one machine – and Daniel's wet boots go into the other.

I'm slow to rouse in the morning – the bigger than usual meal last night gave me indigestion – and when I do come fully to my senses, I see a very forlorn looking Daniel.

"There is a problem, Mike". He waves one of his boots, which he has been examining, at me. The toe of it has curled round and is pointing toward the ankle. The same is true of the other boot, which I am given. The soles are permanently fixed in this position, and it is quite impossible to get a foot (or anything even more sturdy) into the boot.

Daniel glumly acknowledges the only way out of this: he must buy yet another pair of boots. They will be the third ones he has worn since leaving home, and they will have to be broken in on the road with all the attendant blistering that will entail. I look down at my own boots,

so neatly repaired last evening, and am truly thankful that I can keep going in the same pair I started out in.

As we must wait for shops to open at 9am, we can take a leisurely start to the day and dawdle over breakfast – a luxury that causes me to think “Every cloud has a Silver Lining”. I don’t say it out loud - my fellow traveller wants to be on the road ASAP and cannot possibly see anything positive in what’s happened.

A visit is made to the shoe shop we had seen last night – opposite the cobbler, and then we are on the road freshly shod. This day’s walk was long and all on road. As we walked out of town we bumped into a young man we met the previous night – he was lost and looking for the way out toward the Col de Somport. As we had joined that route on our trek in last night, we were able to help him with clear directions. I pointed out to Dan that our delay had had a purpose, while the poor man to whom we had just said “Goodbye” had wandered around aimlessly for more than an hour (he didn’t have good French and was afraid to ask any locals). A further benefit of our delay was that we were able to help this person. Daniel didn’t seem to see it this way, but then he was the one with the diminished bank account this morning.

We have to get in to Mauleon and find the Mairie (mayor’s office) before it closes at 6pm. We make it with five minutes to spare. A staff member gives us the key to the hostel which is a few streets away. It’s an old institution of some kind and we have it to ourselves for the night. A woman of the parish will be along about 7.30 pm to collect our payment for the night, we are told. That’s fine – there’s time for a beer – and this one has been well earned.

We arrive at the hostel door at the same time as the good lady who will collect our payment. She leads us in and shows us around, drawing attention to a pile of leaflets advertising various shops, bars and activities in the region. She’s concerned to know if we’re “All right for everything” and then, job done, she leaves. On the way out, she picks up one of the leaflets and gives it to us:

“This is the best place for you to eat, just round the corner and it does a Pilgrim Menu. Look!”

She leaves us with the hand-out, which includes a map showing exactly how to get there from here. Dan eyes it for a moment, then declares

“We’re going. The Piperade Jambon is a Basque speciality, Mike, you’ve got to try it.”

Memories of Respounchous come to mind, but I can’t argue with a €12 menu that offers a soup followed by three small trout in a marinade with a salad, then the mysterious Piperade and a dessert to end it all. We’re going!

The main dish turns out to be cured ham with peppers and garlic, for sure, but I’m too hungry to ponder what the other ingredients might be and the spicy meal soon disappears

from my plate. It helps the evening that our hostess – it is the owner who waits on us – is both friendly and chatty without being overly so – and also she's interested in our journey and, as we tell our tales, she gives comebacks on the same theme that she's heard from others passing through before. Interesting that we talk about the past with this non-pilgrim and the future with the pilgrims. I wonder is it because the non-pilgrims have no sense of what our future might be.

The portions served are ample but not over filling, and tonight I sleep well. And this is just as well, because on the new day we have some climbing to do as we head for St Just Ibar for the night, knowing that this time in twenty four hours we will be starting the big climb out of St Jean Pied de Port over the Pyrenees and into Spain.

By the time we reached St Just, I was calling this Dog Day Afternoon. During the après midi, we had been joined at different times by two dogs. The first came out as we passed an isolated house. It went from one to the other of us and then trotted out on the metalled road in front of us until we came against some cows being driven towards us by a woman. We paused to allow the cows to traverse the bridge which crossed a river; before crossing the bridge ourselves. The cows came to a halt when they saw the dog, and the herdswoman hurried to the front of her little band and shouted at the dog, which took off through the hedge to our left and disappeared into the woods.

The cattle moved off and we made our crossing of the bridge. Upstream, quite some distance away. I could see our canine friends fording the river. He ran back to join us and then, once more, moved out to walk in front of us. With the dog, we didn't need maps or signs – the animal was leading us along the Camino. When the route veered off the road onto a track, or when the track forked, our new companion was on the right road before we had seen the waymark. Passing a ploughed field on our left, this friend said "Goodbye". We didn't know it at that moment, we simply saw him scamper off into the field and sit down on a furrow. We walked on, and when I looked back he was still sitting there, watching us. And as we went over the brow of a hillock, I looked back one more time – he's still watching, and he sees us out of sight.

What was that about? Some creature guiding us through this short stretch of our journey – which involved a river crossing. That stream wasn't a Rubicon, and we could always quit, or even go back. What could I read into this? Nothing! It was simply that another being of this Universe had spent time with us and seen us on our way as we passed through his territory. Then a thought occurs: was this the spirit of a Knight Templar, one of those medieval men of chivalry who protected pilgrims on their Way? Oh for heaven's sake! Get a grip, Mike! Or – is it sometimes good to let the grip loosen a little?

I'm not going to have too much time to ponder this as, before long, we are joined by another dog. Okay, maybe this guardian angel, Knights Templar thing does have some merit. But Daniel is not impressed, and with good reason. Whatever about the humans he's used

to dealing with – these dogs do not obey his commands! And that's a little strange, because we've met plenty of them in our days together. They are always tethered on a long rope or chain and are restrained on their owner's property. But they bark and bark as we approach, and this is irritating after the quiet of the hills you've been passing through. A sharp "A ta place" ("In your place") from Daniel has always restored the peace.

With the first dog, Dan realised he was wasting his time, for it was out in front of us and wasn't going to turn and pass by us with the Commander roaring his head off at the poor beast. This second companion walked between us, as if he was ready to join any conversation that was going. In this situation, the Boss was free to bark his orders with some hope of result, and he did. Each time, the dog stopped, sat in the road as we moved on and then, as soon as Daniel's attention was turned – he ran to catch up with us again. It must have been frustrating for the human, because the animal was clearly winning this battle of wills.

But as with his predecessor, there came a point where this dog stopped – and watched us go. All right – I won't push it. Not Knights Templar – but Knights of the Road, that's for sure.

As we come closer to our evening rest, we pass through a number of farmsteads. At the last one, there is a van parked outside, its backdoor open to reveal rails of clothes. Daniel explains that in these remote parts, shops come to the people rather than the other way round, and this is a clothes shop. The driver of the van is coming out of the home and she's tidying up the final details of what is obviously a sale of woman's attire with the lady of the house.

I've stopped to inspect the contents of the van. Daniel is eyeing the owner. Oh come on – he's not going to try and get off with her, is he? No! He's been walking in fatigues for days, Spain is up ahead, and he wants to know if she has any shorts.

Yes she has, and what size would he be? Here's a pair, try them on! So here we are, in a farmyard, and Daniel drops his pants and puts on the shorts with the three of us: vendor, farmer's wife and me watching. What else can be done – there's not a fitting room in sight. He declares them a good fit, so Madame cuts off the labels for him as he stands in them, the fatigues go into the rucksack, payment is made, and soon we are on the road once more – with a very satisfactory purchase made.

Before we leave, I take the precaution of asking the woman of the house to refill my water bottle. She takes it and goes inside; when she returns I am at the ready to take a photo of her. I already have one of the shop on wheels and Daniel in his new shorts. But the lady covers her face and protests. No, she doesn't like her photo being taken. I tell her it is for my family back home in Ireland. There is an immediate change in her manner, and she stands ready for the camera.

"Be sure to tell them my name is Marie-Pierre", she says.

What changed her mind? Perhaps she saw the photographer morph from a tourist idly collecting meaningless snapshots to show the folks back home that “he was really there”, to a family man who simply wanted a souvenir of a person met along the way. Something he could use to introduce his kin to a person who had given aid. The photo became a connection not a collectible. I cannot truly know why, but mention of “Family” seemed to change everything.

We arrive at the village of St Just Ibarre in the late afternoon. The hostel is to all appearances a family home, and probably was just that at some time in the past. The hospitalier shows us to our room, which is large and has an ample bathroom next door to it. We go through the ritual of shower and clothes wash, and then head of for a stroll around the village. The church is locked, and the only thing we see capable of ever calling itself “open” is the village bar-restaurant.

This establishment is owned and run by three brothers on the ‘young’ side of middle age. They are ‘sizeable’ men in an obese sort of way. That said, I would not wish to get on the wrong side of any one of them individually. As a team, I think they would represent a killing machine. I’m not wrong in this – these guys are all hunters with a great love of the chasse (the hunt). The trophies hung on the wall represent every kind of beast from the forest that it is possible to use for food.

Between them, they serve at the bar, cook the food and wait at table – rotating the jobs as suits them, it seems. The man who has just served our beers is taking dinner orders from the couple next to us and shouting to his bro. to look after the bar while he goes and cooks whatever has been requested. Overlaying the business operation, there seems to be on-going banter about last weekend’s kill and what the plans are for tomorrow – Saturday. This makes me so aware of the blood, suffering and death which is at the foundation of this enterprise and underpins the meal we are about to enjoy. To my slight surprise I find I am comfortable with it though. It seems to me that this is so much more real than my ‘back-home-experience’ of food which arrives in our home from the supermarket, ready-prepared and neatly packaged – all you have to do is pop it in the oven. It’s a way of cooking that suits me when I’m chef, but what’s happening here seems so much closer to nature and to where we have come from as a species. This is just as well for this is all that is available in the village and it’s a day long hike for us walkers to the next nearest restaurant.

There is only a set menu, and it is a thick vegetable soup, followed by an ample fois gras salad – ample in the sense that there’s an awful lot of foi gras in it. If you are a gourmet and you should ever pass this way, a stop here is essential. The main is an entrecote steak, cooked to perfection (which for me is “bleu”). This is a huge meal and, with dessert and coffee yet to come, I take the final third of my steak and wrap it in my napkin. It will go well in a baguette for lunch tomorrow. Having done that, I tell mine host that I will pass on dessert (because I’m full) and on the coffee (because I won’t sleep). When I do get to bed, I am fortunate to sleep like a lamb.

In the morning we take breakfast in the bar. It's the normal French fare and the coffee is good – so thank heavens I didn't have any last night.

Our walk starts out flat, but during the morning we start to climb. It's a long way to this particular Col, but it's going to be good preparation for tomorrow. At the top Daniel, who is well ahead and in his rhythm, sticks to the road. When I get there later, I see the GR78 veers off to climb another peak. I shout at my friend, but he cannot hear. I'm sure it's not correct practice to do what I'm thinking, I believe that I should stick to the road and stay with my companion for our safety's sake – even if he's wrong. But I've had enough of tarred roads and the track over grassland is a welcome relief even if I do have to pay for it with more climbing.

My efforts are repaid. I have a grandstand view all the way to St Jean Pied de Port, and I can see Daniel meandering along the roadway below, passed by the occasional car, while I am up here, with the wind blowing in my face and an eagle soaring above me. I reach for my camera to capture the majestic bird – and take about twenty pictures, none of them worth looking at. Both the speed and the closeness of this wild creature mean that, by the time the camera has reacted to my pushing of the exposure button, the screen only shows a wing tip or, worse, merely sky and cloud. Perhaps that's how it's meant to be: this bird is free and was never meant to be captured, not even on camera.

By mid afternoon, I'm beginning my descent to the valley below. Quickly I lose sight of the road Daniel is walking because, in true GR fashion, I'm taking the scenic route to make my descent. This is good because it makes the drop more gentle as the path meanders around a couple of small hills providing a constantly changing panorama; it's bad because it's adding considerably to the distance I must walk. At a junction with another path, I meet three Canadians taking a "water and weight-off-your-back" break. They've just come down this other path

It turns out the junction marks the end of the GR 78 which I have been walking ever since Carcassonne from east to west, and I have now joined the GR 65 from Le Puy en Velay, one of the main and most popular French pilgrim routes to the Spanish border. This is my first encounter with a group of pilgrims actually walking and travelling the same way as me, and I'm thinking of these people as something of an intrusion – which means I'm not really prepared for the multitude that I'll meet ahead. After performing the Camino ritual "Where did you start? How long have you taken to get this far? Are you going all the way?" with each other, I make my excuse and leave.

The excuse is Daniel, of course, and as soon as I connect with what is obviously the road we were originally on together, I text him. He replies that he was past the point where this GR joins the main road about twenty minutes earlier, so I say I'll see him in St Jean.

The mobile, or 'portable' as the French call it, really is quite handy: I can keep in touch with Dan during the day, and let my family know I'm 'safe home' (wherever that turns out to be) each night. When I was preparing for the pilgrimage earlier in the year I told my family I wouldn't carry one.(I was even talking about leaving my watch and camera behind) because I wanted to get as close to being a 'real' pilgrim as possible. My daughter insisted that I did have a phone because of its usefulness in emergencies. Thankfully none have arisen so far, but she had an excellent point. What it means to be a 'real' pilgrim changes from age to age and, now I think of it with hindsight, from 'pilgrim' to 'pilgrim'. We travel in our time, and it may even be a distraction from whatever it is one is hoping to achieve on the Way, to take on this other, unfamiliar way of being.

I walked the final few kilometres into town with a third year student from Montpelier University doing History and Politics. We stayed together till we reached the Pilgrim Office. We didn't have to look too hard for it, it is located on the main street through the town, the pilgrim way, and there was (and, it seems always is) a buzzing crowd spilling out from it onto the street. Those of us arriving on foot are in the minority here, most people have come up by train from Bayonne and are starting their pilgrimage from St Jean. If I feel a little pride in having covered 500 kilometres before these newcomers have taken their first step, it is as nothing to the pride they themselves may feel when, another 600kms further on they will come across fresh-faced, pink skinned pilgrims bussing into towns like Sarria, which itself is only just over 100k from the finish line in Santiago.

But is it about finish lines? Well, yes it is, if the goal is the Diploma at the end, the Indulgence that you will receive, written out in Latin, when you show your completed credencial at the Cathedral Office. But can it be all about that – a piece of paper to show the folks back home I did it? To say I survived to the end and didn't give up? Whatever gets me an upgrade to Business Class in the Hereafter, it won't be the piece of paper (the product); it will be the actual walking (the process) and the personal internal – or even external – results that this process yields, whether I reach the physical end or not.

So there's no room for pride. That 'sin' only comes with 'product': my credencial has got more stamps than yours. The real 'result' is to be found in 'process', and to understand who has the best 'result' with that we need to consider a question something like "How long is a piece of string?". Each to his own, it's an individual thing. Pride goes out the window, it doesn't exist from this perspective.

I part company with my companion of less than an hour. In the pilgrim office, we choose to stand in different queues based on our bet on how fast they are moving relative to each other. It turns out I have the longer wait. It doesn't matter, I've got my bed booked for the night – but I do need to meet Daniel in order to access it.

Right on cue, the man himself enters the office, sees me, and comes over. He's walked around the town, located our hostel for the night, and seen the sights – he thinks we should

go and check-in to the hostel straight away. Now we are just two of a whole crowd of people here for the night, so we'd better lay claim to our beds in case they are let go to a casual caller. I do my business at the desk. This is to purchase a new Passport/credencial, as all the space has now been used up in the one with which I started out just three weeks ago.

"I think this will be a good night", says Daniel. I smile. We are, after all, staying at a hostel run by a fellow Mason – surely this has "preferential treatment" written all over it? I couldn't have been more wrong.

When we enter the hostel, the owner/manager hurries past us saying he'll be with us in a minute. It's an action he repeats a number of times at intervals of something more than minute. When we do get to register, it seems the supply of beds is limited and we will have to climb three floors to our dormitory. When we get to our room, all the lower bunks are taken, and we each chose our top bunk. A woman is resting in the bunk below me – she's American.

"Please can I apologise in advance, but I am likely to get up a few times during the night", I say. "I'll try not to disturb you but, having to negotiate this ladder, I can't make any promises". There's a man unpacking his rucksack next to me.

"Here", he says, "You have my bed. I'll go up above". He's Dutch, from Arnhem, and in his early twenties. He is giving me an example of spontaneous care and compassion that often turns out to be closer than you could imagine on this Camino, and I am grateful for this.

Our dormitory companions are all going to eat out around town, and there are many possibilities to choose from, but Daniel and I have opted for the meal in the hostel – mindful of our special connection to the host. We head for a beer in the bar just up the road and then it's back home to a dinner which we expect will be as good as the one with the Masons of Arudy.

We are shown to the guests dining area – a large circular table set out at the back of the building in what, for all the world, appears to be a converted garage, a conversion that is not quite completed. It's open at the rear, and the coolness of the evening is something we become acquainted with. I go up to my room for a sweater.

The food fills a hole but is nothing to write home about, and to emphasise the point – I'm not doing it, so there! The crucial omission on the table is – wine! Most of the other diners are French, and it's hard for them. What holds them back, I don't know – but when one of their number also goes to get his sweater and returns to announce he saw the owner and his family at table indoors with a magnum of wine on the table, the reaction from his compatriots was as it would be if the French rugby team had taken a drubbing from the Italians: blind anger! He who has the hottest head moves first, and Guy is up from his seat and down the corridor towards the kitchen. I didn't hear any shouting, but I can say "a firm conversation took place". Guy returned to tell us some wine would be following him shortly.

When they arrived, the two carafes were eagerly devoured, and they proved plenty for the needs of those of us who were drinking.

After the meal, Daniel was fit to be tied. Clearly this is not how the brotherhood should behave. He had wondered if this was the wrong place, but now knew it was right. I didn't know if that was because he had checked back with Arudy, or because secret signs had been exchanged. In any event, he was going to get in touch with Gerard back up the line and tell him not to recommend this man to others in the future. For me, this was so different from the people on the Camino Radio Trail in the Ariege, but the reality is we are nothing special here. We are 'passing trade', we will not come back however well we are looked after, and it's only for one night. We have another month of one-night-stands, and by the end of the trip we'll have forgotten about this one. As it turned out, neither Daniel nor I do so, but it remains 'just one night'.

Next morning we take a quick breakfast and hit the road at 7am. It's our earliest start, but we're taking the Napoleon route over the top and we want to get as much as possible done in the cool of the morning. Dan gets ahead of me quickly, and I fall in with people going at my own pace. It's a long slow climb, but I reward myself every fifteen minutes with a stop and a turn around. Each time I see a magnificent panorama, including the hills I walked yesterday. St Jean Pierre de Port is receding just a little bit further each time, and more of other valleys are being revealed. Each time I return to walking, I put my head down – not good for the posture, but I don't have to contemplate the unending climb in front of me.

I'm now walking with Ron Perrier. He's a doctor from Canada, and when I tell him that I started out with a knee problem, but that it seems to have resolved - he explains that the three weeks of walking I've already done has strengthened all sections of my leg. Seemingly, the calves will have taken over some of the strain that would normally be taken by the knees if I were a less ambulant person.

It's not too difficult to work out that Ron's ancestors are French. They left France for Canada in the 1600s. I assume he's from Quebec but, no, he has no connection with the French community in that country and doesn't actually speak a word of the language. In fact, he's more than mildly irritated that the people in the country we are about to leave don't speak English. I've met this attitude before in people coming from the New World. Thirty years earlier in Paris, a Texan who was trying to make himself understood in a restaurant was perplexed:
"I don't understand. If we come here to spend our dollars, they should speak English to us".
Neither the Texan nor Ron said: "He who pays the piper calls the tune", but that was obviously their thinking. I'm now quite clear it is not about the 'power' and 'control' that is around having money and barking the orders as a result. I'm up for welcoming difference, and seeing how we can work things out when language, or anything else, is a barrier.

I go back twenty years to the time I was working with Job Placement Officers in Czechoslovakia: I was contracted to help them prepare for accession to the EU in a very small way: that of welcoming and including people with disabilities into their service. All my teaching and our socialisation was done through an interpreter. They were, therefore, very impressed when on a site visit, I started conversing with a man who was deaf, using sign. Irish Sign Language is different to Czech just as the spoken language is, but we got to understand each other – and created a few signs of our own on the way. My colleagues were amazed that this 'handicapped' man could communicate freely with the consultant from Ireland and they couldn't. It's a moment in my life that I hold dear – it teaches well.

Reaching the top of the climb, I think it's all over. So does Ron and he almost skips as he moves ahead. I slow down as I'm quickly reminded by the steepness of the descent that this is the most dangerous part of the day – I'm not as fresh as I was at the start and there's an increased opportunity for slips and falls.

I arrive at Roncesvalles, with its huge monastery providing ample pilgrim accommodation, at 1pm. There on the grass by the main road west (Santiago is signed on it) sits Daniel munching a baguette. He tells me they make huge ones in the bar, and they're cheap. Yes – we've arrived in Spain where our costs will fall dramatically as we walk on.

After all the climbing in the Pyrenees, this day hasn't taken it out of me as much as I had expected. Dan suggests we go on. He reasons: the accommodation here will likely be crowded; it will be pretty basic; there's a lot of day still to fill in; and we can knock off some of tomorrow's mileage. We walk on 5kms to Espinal, and treat ourselves to a B&B which we have to ourselves and where we have an excellent meal and get to share a litre of wine which, on top of some earlier beers, sets me up for a good night's sleep. Too good for Daniel. This time an extra pillow lands on my bed, and in the darkness, I hear the words:

"You are snoring Mike".

The next day, we walked into Pamplona. We were on the road from 8.10am till 5.30pm, but the terrain was fairly level, and after all the hills of recent days, it was easy to stride out. That night I calculated we had covered 71kms in the last two days. This was a pleasing figure, given that in the Pyrenees we had trudged up and down hills for a gain of maybe as little as 20kms for the day.

During the walk, I passed a wayside memorial to a Japanese pilgrim who had died at this spot a few years earlier. I was to encounter several such memorials to pilgrims, including two to Irish people, before I reached my destination. It was a timely reminder of what I had observed in Lourdes: we are not tourists being pampered on a holiday, but pilgrims putting ourselves to the test in the name of whatever it is we walk for, of which we may or may not have a clear understanding. For me there was the added poignancy that this man was the

same age as me when he died. I'm three weeks on the road and not half way there yet: the thought does occur that I might not make it.

Strangely, I find myself contemplating my possible demise without the least bit of anxiety. I feel as I imagine I might feel if I were facing a major but experimental surgical intervention – let's get on with it and see what happens. Death can come at home as easily as it does in some remote field of a foreign country.

I walk on and soon catch up with a young but rather large young Japanese man. He is sweating profusely. I don't mention the memorial back up the path, as I'm intrigued by his clothing. He's wearing rather a lot of it, and it's inappropriate to do so. I discover he lives about 15 minutes' drive away from the only Japanese friend I have in the whole world – Yuriko Ochi who lives in Kamariya close to Yokohama. I want to get on, and wish this slower walker well on his journey – feeling it more tactful to remind him to keep well hydrated than to suggest he take some clothes off.

Dan was up ahead of me as usual, but he held back on the outskirts of the city, and we were able to have a late lunch and a beer together in a bar. Maybe my companion is loosening up a little on his need for lunch at midday – but the more likely reason for abandoning the normal timetable is the fact that he wants to get a bed in the municipal hostel before the "No Vacancies" sign goes up. Now he's close to Pamplona, he can afford to ease up.

The bar we choose has a sign hanging outside it which tells us it's another 714kms to the end of the pilgrimage. Down the road to Santiago I'll encounter more bars with an indication of how far it is to go. With each one, I find a certain satisfaction in contemplating the signboard while I drink my beer: it seems in some way to be a certification of progress made, as well as notice of effort that remains to be put in.

For the last few days I've been talking to Daniel about the idea of taking a rest in Pamplona and becoming the tourist for a while. I know Joyce is not now going to make it out to join me at any point, as it is impossible to predict where I will be this time next week. Easy enough to come up with a destination in the next three or four days, but booking a reunion only a few days in advance means very expensive airfares for Joyce. So it's not going to happen. Dan has said he wants to keep moving as he needs to be back home around the first few days in June and he wants to put in a few long days that will allow him to claw back the time to walk on out to Fisterre – the end of the world in pre-Christian times. So, if I stop in the city, I am going to end up on my own again. I'm easy enough about being on my own, but I will miss the companionship of my French friend if we split now.

In the end, I decide to stop over in Pamplona. When will I pass this way again? Possibly never, and there is plenty to see from what I hear – though no bull run at this time of year. I reveal my final decision over the late lunch.

"All right, Mike, I will take you out for a meal tonight".

Oh! I stumble and stutter and don't know what to say. It should be me giving the treat as a 'thank you' for all the support, but he's insistent:

"You have get this far, and your knee it is okay. You are going to make it to Santiago now, I am sure of this. It is a very good thing. I want us celebrate". And that is what we do.

First we need to get a bed for the night, and we're heading into the old part of the city which is, unsurprisingly, at the centre of Pamplona. It turns out that we are spending our last night together as we spent our first – in a church. This one is considerably bigger than the Protestant church in Le Mas d'Azil. It was built towards the end of the 16th century on the site of old Roman baths, and the area in which it stood was known as "the pilgrim's neighbourhood". When it was deconsecrated in 2007 it became a pilgrim hostel. This means you don't get in unless you have your credencial which shows that you have been on the Way. The church has been stripped of all furnishings but the structure is otherwise well preserved. Within the shell of the building, three floors have been constructed which hold the 600-odd bunk beds. The place will be full by nightfall – we've hit the main artery that feeds Santiago with its pilgrims.

Dan and I perform our evening ritual of shower and clothes wash and then head out to explore town. The centre is not that large, and it doesn't seem long before we've seen everything that is accessible at this hour of day. I won't have much left to see tomorrow, but I fancy I'll enjoy hanging out in a coffee bar during the day. Right now it's time for the meal, and with the late lunch neither of us is too hungry. We go to a bar for tapas and red wine: it seems appropriate fare for a last supper.

Next morning Daniel is up at half six. I think he's eager to be on the move, like everyone else. But it's not that:

"I must get out of here, Mike. I don't sleep in the night. There is man in next cubicle, he snore more bad than you. You are no problem to me". Well, Daniel, it's nice to hear that and I certainly won't be a problem for you from now on.

Although I had been hoping for my first lie on of the journey, most people were packing rucksacks and stripping down beds, further sleep would not be possible in this din. Anyway, I had slept well, and I didn't feel like lazing around. I got dressed and accompanied my friend to the main entrance, where I waved him off as we two had been waved off so many times in our sixteen days together. We wouldn't meet again until I drove down into the Pyrenees Orientale two months after I got home, but we texted each other every few days to report our individual progress. Daniel pulled away from me more and more, and reached Santiago with time in hand to walk on to the Atlantic shore and an impressive sun set. When I arrived home seven weeks later, there was a postcard from him waiting for me. It was posted in Santiago, and it told me what I already knew by this time: he had reached journey's end.

Unlike hotels, where some guests may linger for a few days, the hostels on the Camino have a complete turnover every day. This may not be the case when a pilgrim falls ill, but generally you are expected to keep moving and in most of the municipal albergues this is an overtly stated rule. It has the merit of ensuring that towns and villages don't get clogged up by people simply 'hanging out', and thus there's maximum availability for those who keep moving toward the intended goal. Daniel is now on the way out of town, but I have to move on from this hostel and find another place in Pamplona where I can stay for tonight. I know there is a German-run albergue somewhere on the outskirts of the city, and I think I'll head there later in the day.

For now, I too must pack my things and get out. On the street, breakfast is the first item on the agenda and I head back to the tapas bar of the previous night. It's an unadventurous choice, but wherever I go it will be the same croissant and coffee option.

In fact this is a good choice of place to come because the surroundings are familiar. But they lack the presence of my companion of sixteen days. I'm on my own again, and I'm aware of feelings of isolation and loneliness. I'm well able to combat these, I've had years of training in boarding school. Yet in those years of my youth, there was a clear delineation: you were either at school or you were at home. Here in Pamplona I feel adrift in an alien world – no longer part of the pilgrim community, but not a paid up member of the tourist fraternity either.

After breakfast I wandered round the old city again. I stepped into churches that were open – in two of them a Mass was in progress. I stopped to photograph the Hotel de Ville, which had an ornate exterior, and also visited the Cathedral dedicated to Santa Maria la Real (Royal St Mary) with its two clocks above the main entrance. The clock on the left hand tower is a mechanically operated one with a standard twelve hour clock face. The other, on the right hand tower, is a sundial.

As I stroll around the old city and visit the buildings listed in my guide, I notice other pilgrims striding through the streets. I guess they've spent last night further back on the Camino, and are now passing through without apparently stopping. There's an 'energy' and purpose about them as they go which seems qualitatively different from the other street users. These are the locals going shopping or on an errand from work; they are also the tourists making their comfortable and possibly cosseted visit into what for them is a new environment.

The two types of visitor are clearly marked out: the pilgrim has his scallop shell and the tourist her street map. The tourist is either 'lost' and puzzling over the map, or 'found' and eagerly photographing whatever facade is in front of him, the pilgrim is moving.

I've bought some postcards which I write over a coffee in another bar, but I'm not comfortable in this city world. There is too much activity around me – cars, bikes,

pedestrians – and it feels crazy and fractured: there's no structure to it. Out on the Camino, everyone is going the same way with the same purpose. In a moment, I make a decision: I'm getting out of here. I'm not staying a second night. I'm not going to be the tourist any more.

I consult my route guide and see there is a pilgrim hostel about 5kms outside the city, and I reckon I'll head for that. Six hours after my farewell to Daniel, I follow him down the road. The Camino is well marked through the city, and it would be difficult to get lost – it's just a question of keeping an eye out at junctions for the yellow markers which show the direction.

As I walk through the commercial streets of the city, I overtake and am overtaken by other pilgrims. Each time there's some greeting made – perhaps we walk abreast for a few minutes and check where each other hopes to get to, we may even throw in a word or two on where we've come from; perhaps we just give a cheery "Buen Camino" to each other and continue separately.

I catch up with a Danish woman a bit younger than I but somewhat overweight. She's clearly struggling with the walk. As we talk I discover that she started in Pamplona as the climb from St Jean was judged by her to be a bridge too far.

Denmark is a flat country. The Danes who stay at home don't get to do any climbing if they go out walking, and the muscles required to mount terrain remain underdeveloped. I recall a colleague from Denmark visiting Ireland for a conference and bringing his teenage children with him. I was pleased to be able to take them for a walk in the Wicklow hills south of Dublin, promising a spectacular view if we climbed this one hill. We had to abandon the expedition less than half way up as three pairs of legs were too stiff and tired.

Now this woman was struggling with the slight inclines on the edge of the city, I wondered how she was going to handle the hills ahead. I could see the one we would face the next day, but didn't draw attention to it. Instead I offered to lend her one of my poles. She found this a great help, so I said she could keep it for the rest of the day as we were planning to stay in the same hostel. With those charitable words I realised I was tied to her speed until evening, and I was a little concerned that I might be jeopardising my chances of a bed at the hostel by arriving later than intended. But it felt right to do this and, unusually for me, I had the thought "everything will work out as it is meant to" – and it did! We both got beds at the albergue in Cizar Menor, and we went out to dinner together, where my companion proved a very entertaining conversationalist. At the end of the evening, I explained I wouldn't see her in the morning as I was going to make an early departure and have breakfast on the road. We said our farewells and, as is the way of things, I don't know if she reached her goal of Burgos for this year – or if she even made it over the hill that was looming in front of us the evening before.

Afterwards, I sat out in the garden of the hostel, underneath a lamp and jotted down some thoughts which were coming up in relation to my change of plan this day.

"In the city, my attention is pulled out of me by all that is happening around. I think there was no place for "me" in that, and I had those feelings of isolation. On the Camino I can pull into myself and be open to gifts of the universe – be those gifts the still world I am walking through, or the thoughts and insights that arrive with me. I really have a sense of inhabiting this world and being a part of it."

Later, in bed, I reflect on how things had turned out. I had lost Daniel, but that may be no bad thing. He was a great companion but he wanted to move on at a faster pace, and I wasn't going to be able to keep up. After his comment yesterday, I wondered if he may not have felt responsible for me in some way. If so, then that may be detracting from his own experience of the Camino. For me it seemed no bad thing that I now had to take sole responsibility for myself and how I moved along the Way. Everything I did now would be as a result of my own decisions.

'Ere long I drift off.

Next morning I'm up at 5.45am, not because I had planned it but because with so much movement in the dormitory there was no hope of a return to sleep, and I thought I may as well be up and on the road. Hostel etiquette seems to demand that once you have some clothes on, you leave the sleeping area with your belongings clutched in your arms and you do your packing outside.

The trouble is that outside it is still dark and I must do my packing by touch rather than by sight. All goes well until, as I fumble with clothing I was wearing last night, my mobile phone tumbles out of a pocket and falls onto the tiled patio. The outer plastic casing comes away from the main body and the inner workings of the instrument are exposed. These are probably more familiar to a six year old than to me. I feel around me to make sure I have picked up all the bits, then I check to see if it is still working – and it isn't. The impact of the fall has damaged it. I know my original intention was to travel without one of these contraptions, but I now realise that, having got used to being in touch with my family, I'm going to be at a bit of a loss without one.

I continue with the preparations for departure, and surrender myself to the idea of being without a phone – if not for the rest of my pilgrimage, at least until I get to the city of Burgos where I'll have some chance of buying a new one.

It's getting lighter as I hoist my rucksack on my bag – light enough for me to see the paving stones of this patio are a sort of fake white marble. I pick up my walking poles and then notice on the whiteness below me, a little black square. I don't recognise it, but it could be something of mine so I kneel to pick it up. Even a dinosaur like me recognises this as a piece of technology – and therefore something that just might be essential to the functioning of

my phone. It is, in fact, the battery. I'm able to work out how it fits back into the mobile, and I find I have a line of communication to the rest of the world once more.

Had I hurried away from the hostel before the dawn had crept in, I'd have lost this essential; piece of equipment for all time. As I walk out to the road, the thought occurs: when you're in the dark – just wait for the light. Where there's a problem, I reasoned, there might be merit in sitting with it and waiting for a solution to emerge, waiting for the light to shine, as it were. It doesn't always have to be us that solve the problem – sometimes it might get solved for us, if we can be patient.

The only climb of the day is a reasonably steep 300 metre ascent, and I'm pleased I've made such an early start – it's still cool at 7.15am, yet I am hot and ready to shed layers. The drawback of my early departure is that I left Cizar before any of the bars or cafes were open for breakfast. I hadn't thought of this last night when I carefully scouted the town to locate somewhere for my morning meal. I think I've done the right thing by getting on the road, and just hope I don't keel over before Uterga, which is 12kms from my start and the next possible breakfast stop.

I'll never know if I could have made that distance still fasting. I reach the top, Alto del Perdon with its windmill farm and the wrought iron representation of medieval pilgrims, heads bent, walking west. There ahead of me, parked on the road which winds up from below, is a white van with a board beside it advertising food and drink for sale – coffee, tea, minerals, sandwiches, pizza and sweet things like cakes and buns. The appearance of refreshments is so timely, it occurs to me I might have manifested this in some way. But no; not only is it real, it has been here for two summers now.

I ask the man who jumps out of the driver's seat if he speaks English. He replies that he does and then, using a number of different tongues, tells me some of the other languages he can speak as well: German, French and Italian among them. I buy a coke that slakes my thirst, and then a baguette and a coffee – the latter to maximise the caffeine intake. I must be careful, however, not to get 'high' on these energising drinks: it's a steep descent over loose stones ahead, and care will be needed

I'm happy to have this entrepreneur's company while I eat, especially as he's happy to do the talking. He's spent most of his life in the States and returned eighteen months ago to this, his home area. The refreshments he sells are cheaper than you can buy them in the next village, he says. That seems fair enough, as he doesn't have any of the overheads associated with running a café.

He tells me that his arrival here was not welcomed by those who had businesses in Uterga, the next town, and they may have used their influence with the local police to cause trouble for him. Initially they tried to move him on and when that tactic was stymied, they came in their squad car and loitered with intent – the intent of creating the idea there was

something up here thus encouraging pilgrims to keep going rather than stop for refreshment and rest.

As one might expect, this sort of treatment didn't faze such an entrepreneur, and he used his United States citizenship to enlist the help of the American embassy in Spain in calling off this intimidation of one of their people.

I walk on and pass through Puenta la Reina, where those who come over by the Col de Somport join up with the Camino Frances, and head for Cirauqui. Puenta la Reina is the end of a stage and the next stretch of Camino will take the pilgrim to Estella. I reason that by stopping half way along a stage I will be in a quieter town or village with fewer people, and while I don't know how nightlife is in the "stage" towns – I'm happy with what I've found here in Cirauqui. As I discovered in the big towns and cities like Lourdes and Pamplona, I am becoming more uncomfortable with large numbers of people in proximity to me, and the undirected energy that seems to emerge from that. Increasingly I want to inhabit quiet places without the wish to be totally isolated and alone.

As if to underline this realisation, I see a trail of ants crossing the path during the next morning. It's not the first time I've seen such a trail of busy insects cross my way, but I stop to watch. I've been walking through nature, enjoying the peace and solitude of this morning walk, appreciating that nature is in tune with itself and how wrong these human beings have got it – when I see these busy creatures. They are travelling in a line, but some are going in one direction and others in the other.

"They're just like humans", I think, and I take a photo of them. The still picture shows a group of insects frozen in time. It says nothing about the energy and frenzy of their movement. I realise that our species may not be so out of kilter in our actual actions, after all. The problem may be the 'goal' of our behaviours rather than the actual behaviour itself. In other words our problem is with the 'product' not the 'process'.

As I walk on, guru-like I share with myself the age-old wisdom that every encounter in this life is the offer of a lesson. Then I take a step further and realise that sometimes we don't recognise the offer of the lesson (just to be clear I think I'm using the royal 'we' here) and at other times we may learn the wrong lesson. Though maybe the wrong lesson is the right one, but we just don't recognise it again.

To stop my meanderings before I lose my mind or drop over the edge, the Universe sends an intervention. It is the sight of the next town: Estella. The name is Basque for 'star', which seems to reference the path on which the town sits – with its echo of 'way of the stars to Compostella'. Sometime in the eleventh century it was decreed that the Camino should pass through this town. Artisans were encouraged to come and live here, and there was an inflow of stonemasons and artists that facilitated the creation of the many beautiful buildings in the town. Estella marks the end of another stage on the Camino, and has a

population of 15,000. What stands out for me in my information booklet is that it is "something of a bottleneck for tourists, commercial travellers and pilgrims" and accommodation is at a premium. But I'm not stopping – it's not even lunchtime – and I walk straight through.

Yes, it's true. I only pay attention to the yellow and blue waymarks as I walk on. I pass on the 12th century this and the 12th century that – the palace of the kings of Navarre and the church of San Pedro de la Rua. The 'energy' of the Way keeps me moving, it will tell me when to stop and rest, I guess. All these wonderful buildings have their obligatory quota of tourists shuffling around and the atmosphere is deadened by people taking photos of statues and stonework – artefacts of another age which are themselves, in a sense, photos of a spiritual existence expressed by recorders of that past time. Perhaps that's why I go on. I'm wishing to stay connected to the 'present' of my Camino rather than gawk at the connections made by those who lived at another time.

I wonder if the pilgrims who arrived here eight or nine hundred years ago, having just completed one of their stages, would sit in the pews of San Pedro and contemplate the artwork around them, taking it into their own memory, rather than the memory of a piece of technology, to reproduce in words when they got back home.

I tell myself "I'm into 'process" as I walk out on a country road again. After four kilometres I know I must be approaching the Benedictine monastery at Irache, where pilgrims have been looked after by the monks since the tenth century. Unfortunately for us twenty first century pilgrims, the community closed its doors and moved on in 1985 due to a lack of novitiates. The great monastery and centre of learning from a bygone age is now a museum.

My problem is that what I am walking towards is a large modern rectangular building that looks for all the world like a warehouse. This is Bodegas Irache, which is far more prominent than the ancient monastery above it. Questions like: "How much wine could be stored in that?" replace the more philosophical ones I was asking before Estella . The new questions are undemanding and it's irrelevant whether I get the answers right or wrong.

The venerable monastery building is to the left a little, up the hill and masked by trees. I walk between the two buildings along the perimeter fence of the bodega. I'm not up to date in my guidebook reading, so I get a very pleasant surprise when I see an opening in that fence which leads to a fountain. There are two taps in the wall: one dispenses water and the other – red wine. I can't believe my eyes, but it's true. I take my place in the queue and fill my scallop shell with wine. It's lunchtime and this is delicious. I take another shell-full and receive a tap on the shoulder from a cyclist who has stopped by. With a broad smile, he points upwards, and I see the CCTV camera. Big Brother is watching me – but if he's doling out the free wine at all hours of the day, he's welcome to watch me anytime he likes.

I visit the monastery museum. Here I get another stamp for my credencial. It's not necessary as a validation of my pilgrimage: I had a stamp last night and I'll get one tonight. It's more a souvenir – an aide memoir for me, so that when I get home I can, like pilgrims of old, tell the story of my travels from the marks made on my passport.

What I notice here is the simplicity of everything, in a huge edifice where there is so much opportunity for embellishment and decorative work. Take the stations of the cross: after seeing the stations carved into a hillside in a series of stone chapels or inside small churches as ornate pieces of art, in this fine religious centre from another age the stations are marked by small pieces of stone fixed in order around the nave of the church, each stone stamped (in Roman numerals) with the number identifying which one it is. That's all. Simplicity. What the Camino is all about.

Before long, I am walking west again. I leave Irache with its river running past the church and then past the bodega to the valley. I'm amused by a stray thought that the water passes the church and then turns to wine. It's the influence of my upbringing in a certain tradition. I only have to cover 5kms to the hostel at Villamayor de Monjardin, but I'm not stopping for a picnic lunch on the green outside the museum like many others, including those who won't make a visit to the monastery.

I know I need to press on because there's just one hostel in Villamayor and it has only 25 beds according to the guide book. It turns out to be a good move on my part because when I arrive, there are only three beds left. The last two are gone within minutes of my sitting down and the hostel is full by 2pm. The village is not the end of a stage, but it's perched on a hill and it has been a 200 metre climb to get here so it makes a good place to stop and many do. Those who arrive after me, stand around in dejected looking clumps. Most are linking up with others to share a taxi to the next town, Los Arcos, which is a staging post and has a supply of the whole gamut of accommodation possibilities right up to and including a two star hotel!

The hardy ones stiffen their upper lips and walk on, while the really hardy ones throw down their bags in a corner of the pelota court, which is a feature of every town and village in the area, and make ready to sleep there. Basque pelota is played here, but since this is the Basque region I'd better use the Basque term, Eusko pilota. The game is very like squash or fives – it can be played with a bat or with the hand – but the court is often open to the elements as this one is and it does not offer great protection from the weather. As evening approaches and a wind gets up, I do not envy these younger walkers and wonder what sort of night they'll have. "Not very good" is the unsurprising answer to my question when I ask it the following morning.

Back in the hostel, I'm on iced lemonade which the American hospitalier has offered me. This albergue is owned by a Dutch evangelical group, and run by international volunteers who come out to care for passing pilgrims for the two or three weeks of their annual leave

from work back home. One of the volunteers, Betty, is actually Dutch and she tells me pilgrim traffic is at a peak already this year, with heavy volumes coming through – they're always full around lunchtime, she says.

How much busier was it last year, I ask. I'm talking about 2010 which was a Holy Year. Holy Years at Santiago de Compostela are declared whenever St James's Day falls on a Sunday, thus these years occur every 6, 5, 6,and 11 years. The next one is due in 2021. At this time, the Puerta Santa, or Holy Door, that gives access to the cathedral from the Plaza de la Quintana is opened on New Year's Eve and then walled up again a year later.

For pilgrims, the main attraction is the plenary indulgence that is given to those fulfilling the requirements in that year, and the Camino tends to be busier. Betty says her records for last year, 2010, tell a different story, and their occupancy was down 30% - because everyone thinks it's going to be crowded so they just don't come.

After the lemonade I pay my dues for the night: it's €5 for the bed with an extra €1 for a blanket. I reckon the latter's going to be a good investment at this height, given that I've only got a bed sheet bag – what the French call a 'sac a viande', a sack of meat (which it is when I get into it). I also say I'll stay for the meal, which is €10.

I go up to my dorm to find that one of the other residents is massaging her knee.

"It looks as if that hurts", I say.

"It does. It's my cartilage" is the reply.

"I have that problem too", I say, and I don't have to prove it: the blue elasticated support for my right knee is in place and remains there each day from when I get up until I have my shower in the evening.

"I have a spare one of these", I say, pointing to me knee bandage. "You can have it if you like".

And she most certainly would like – the reaction in her eyes is instant, but the words are hesitant: am I sure, won't I need it? Yes I am. No I won't. I hand over the bandage to the woman and sense that I am also giving away my problem by giving away the cure. In reality I'm just feeling positive about being a 'giving person', but in my mind I find myself saying to myself:

"This problem is now about to be over, because I am making a statement to the Universal Unseen that I will not now need the spare bandage by giving it away."

At the meal I meet my first Irish person on the Way – Jessica is from Cork, a relatively recent Fine Arts graduate now working in a Dublin museum. We start with Grace before the meal and end with a presentation to each diner of a copy of the Gospel of St John in their own language. We're invited to join the community in a 'Jesus Meditation' later in the evening,

and a few of us do that. With prayers, Gospel readings and Quiet Times it is a restful end to the day and guides me safely to bed rather than to the bar.

As I prepare for bed, I need to look at my credencial one last time. I want to take pride in the number of stamps I have 'earned'. I don't think I'm committing a sin here: a "I've got more stamps that you" stance. It's more that I want to take pride in the ground I've covered so far, as a way of giving myself courage and energy for the next day. I notice that the 'tampon' I have earned from my walk today, The stamp which shows I have stayed in this village hostel, is in the shape of a scallop shell. Printed across it is: "S. Juan 14.6", the reference to a verse in St John's Gospel, which I have in my hand. I look it up:

Jesus said to him: "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

And no one comes to Santiago – I mean really comes to Santiago – except through this Camino. I pack my credencials and other bits and pieces ready for a quick departure in the morning.

Next day I start walking at 6.25am and put in 12kms to Los Arcos before stopping for breakfast. Somewhere in that time I caught up with Jessica and we walked in to have our breakfast together. When we set off again, the younger person showed the greater benefit of the rest and took off ahead of me.

Clouds were beginning to cover the sky, and I thought it time to consider getting out the rain gear. The occasional drop fell, but it looked like it was going to come down in buckets. In the event, I held on to the village of Torres del Rio, where the road took me past the hostel – and there was Jessica sitting outside talking to someone she had met a few days back. The oracle in my head was telling me to stop for the day and, at 11.30am, I did just that and booked my bed for the night. I got a bottom bunk again – but that would be a given at this time of day.

I had plenty of time to write some postcards and then walk around exploring the village. The 12th century Iglesia de Santo Sepulcro was open and I went in for some quiet time. This small church is linked with the Knights Templar and the octagonal church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, but there is no firm evidence of this. It is true, however, that the master builder who designed it and the sculptors who adorned it were Mudejar working in the service of Christian employers. The free leaflet I am given on entering is in English, and it tells me that the design of the dome of this octagonal Romanesque church is of Muslim lineage. It's a building dedicated to a Christian purpose, but I begin to wonder how much of it contains secret nods to another tradition, which were inserted by the people who actually built it. Further on, the guide notes tell me:

The system of lighting of the dome is achieved by means of small windows placed at the base of the ribs and covered with stone lattices carved in the Languedoc tradition with Islamic inspiration.

So I'm walking a Christian Camino which overlays a pagan, or pre-Christian way to a further destination, and now I discover that some of the beacons (churches) on this Way have clear expressions of Muslim influence. "Things" become incorporated in or integrated with other seemingly contradictory "things". The question occurs: "Why fight it?" Let new things come in, and influence, and bring change.

"Don't struggle to stay the same". And then I realise I'm talking to myself, not out loud, but at a quietly deep level. The lesson I want to teach the world is the one I need to learn myself….to be open to change. Hope I learn it before this is all over.

In the cool of the evening, I put on my Ireland Rugby Supporters fleece, and go for a beer in the only bar in town, which was also going to be serving a pilgrim menu. I thought I'd get in early and let the proprietor know of my wish to eat there.

The boss here is in fact the father of the owner of the hostel, so a cheery welcome is given to anyone who looks like staying and giving the family custom in two venues. While I'm wondering how to communicate my wish to book a seat at one of the long tables for later, the boss lights up at the sight of my fleece. With a big smile he says:

"Irlanda". I nod and beam back at him. He puts up both thumbs in delight:

"Bobby Sands", he exclaims.

I've met the female Jehovah's Witness who worships Brian O'Driscoll, Captain of the Irish rugby team. There would be a fair few French fellow walkers who would have spoken to me of rugby and quickly brought up the skill and ability of the Irish captain; but O'Driscoll is very much alive and current in Irish life. The Irishman being mentioned at the counter of this bar in the back of beyond has been dead for thirty years.

Bobby Sands was an active member of the Provisional IRA who was serving a prison term in Northern Ireland.in the early 1980s. He was the first prisoner to go on hunger strike in a republican campaign to gain political status for imprisoned members. He was also the first to die. His death took place in 1981 when he was 27 years of age, and after he had been refusing food for 66 days. The demands of the hunger strikers were never achieved in spite of the deaths, and the resolute stance of the British government was marked by the words of Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher announcing his death to the House of Commons:

"He was a convicted criminal. He chose to take his own life", she said and she was referring to a fellow Member of Parliament. While Sands was in prison, a seat in the British House of Commons fell vacant, and the republican was put up for election. Despite being unable to hit the campaign trail by virtue of his confinement, he won the seat. He was never able to

take that seat and represent the people of Fermanagh and South Tyrone – the MP died in the same place he was when the campaign started: in prison.

I must remember I am in Basque country, and the political separatists who still fight here for independence and self-determination would have had links with, and a great deal of respect and support for the cause of, the Provisional IRA in their struggle for a similar solution. I am sad that, with my lack of language skills, I cannot engage with this old man who must surely have some stories to tell and might even be able to share tales of active service in a bygone day.

The owner of the bar surely must have republican sympathies. I sit and enjoy my beer as he serves other customers, but his eyes keep returning to me and the face, when it arrives, is always filled with a broad smile. Almost before I speak, he has understood that I want a meal here tonight: he points to a seat at one of the tables, points at the clock over the bar, and then puts up seven fingers to indicate the hour at which I should arrive to eat.

My last meal of the day was spent the same way as the first: eating in the company of Jessica. It was a change to converse in English and far less effort was required than when speaking in French. Maybe this is what contributed to such a good night's sleep – or was it the warmth provided by the blanket, for which I had had to pay rental. Worth every cent, too.

By the time the next day's walking comes to an end, I'm at Navarette. And I've walked 33kms. It was not my intention to cover the last 12kms of the day: I had planned to stop at Logrono which, with a population of 130,000, is a lively university town and the capital of La Rioja – where the wine comes from. I had hoped to stay and sample a few different bottles, but it was a wet day, raining from the start, and the only thing to do seemed to be to keep going – which is what I did, putting one foot in front of the other, watching the rain drip down from my hood, and keeping my head down to avoid the spray of rain in my face.

Near the centre of Logrono, I passed the Albergue run by the La Riojan Pilgrim Association. From my walking notes it sounded just the place to stay: sleeping was in cubicles of four in dormitories, there was a large patio, and it was close to the old quarter. But it didn't open 'til 2.30pm and, as I passed by just before that time, a huge queue (there were 98 beds available here) had formed and those in it had no alternative but to stand and take the rainfall if not on the chin, then on a variety of other parts of their anatomy.

So I kept going to the municipal albergue in Navarette. Here they obviously understood walkers, for beside the check-in when I arrived was a huge pile of old newspapers. We could scrunch up sheets and stuff them into our wet boots to soak up the moisture so that there was some hope that we would have at least dry-ish walking gear in the morning. As in all things in relation to living on the Camino it was "first come first served", and I noticed that

the paper had run out within an hour of my arrival and those coming after that would have to hope for the best and the efficiency of the hostels' heating system.

The hostel is at one end of the arcade on this street. Happily, the restaurant which serves a pilgrim menu is at the other end of the arcade, so I am able to walk the pavement from one to the other without getting wet. I'm expecting the standard pilgrim fare which will include either pork or beefsteak and chips for the main. The starter is in line with expectations, it's garlic soup – but the main course is something very out of the ordinary, and it's delicious: pieces of white fish stuffed into red peppers and baked, served on a bed of rice with a black, possibly squid ink, sauce. Again the ignorance of the language prevents me from learning more about what it is I'm experiencing. Dessert is the ubiquitous 'flan', after which I have another glass of wine, and then head back down the arcade in dryness to a warm room and bed.

Next day, a walk of 23kms will take me past Najera, the end of the stage I am on, and into Azofra 6kms further on. Azofra offers the small village environment that I have come to love. It has a population of 500 and owes its existence to the pilgrimage route.

I do stop a while in Najera, not to rest, but to visit the Monasterio Santa Maria de la Real. My guide, John Brierley in his relatively lightweight (I actually refer to weight here and not the content, which borders on the exhaustive) publication: "A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago: Camino Frances" has sold it to me.

First there is the story of its founding. The legend has it that Don Garcia, who was the son of Sancho the Great, followed his hunting falcon into this cave and stumbled on a statue of the Virgin Mary. How did that get there? Was it somehow by miraculous means? It must have been the latter for a monastery to be founded here. But it sounds a bit fanciful and I wonder, now I'm open to the idea of other influences being at work, if the cave might have had associations with pre-Christian travellers in this area, and the Christians came along and took it over – giving it their own raison d'etre, and confirming this by building this edifice. I also want to see the impressive Royal Pantheon which houses the tombs of many of the kings, queens and knights of Navarre.

But it's the choir stalls that are the surprise for me. They are considered a masterpiece of florid Gothic carved by two woodworking brothers in 1493. Not that I'd have recognised that if they got up and did a song and dance routine – but I was fascinated by what was depicted. This was a place set aside for collective prayer by the monks and yet there is a heady mixture of religious and profane motifs, which remind me of aspects of the church in Rennes le Chateau way back in France – it's not on the Camino but is associated with a number of mysteries, not least those tapped in "The Da Vinci Code". There's also plant decoration which echoes what I saw in the cathedral of St Bertrand de Comminges, though no 'green men' here, so I might be being a little fanciful. Also to be found are various

geometrical shapes among the carvings, and I wonder if these owe anything to the Freemasons. My expert on such matters, Daniel, is no longer nearby to consult.

I can only speculate on the influences at work in this construction, but I suspect again that they are many and varied and I move onward. It's a very hot day, as if yesterday's storm had cleared the air. The rain of the previous day had been heralded by thunder and lightning and accompanied by hail. I fancy that had I been out walking alone I would have scurried for shelter and cowered in some undergrowth somewhere. While I had been alone, as in no one by my side, I could see people at some distance in front of me as well as behind. That gave me courage or, more accurately perhaps, prevented me from 'chickening out'. The power of a group when they are all driven by the same purpose: "Onward Christian Soldiers…"; indeed, onward any soldiers into any war. To try and be an individual and advocate for my own dream and what I think of as right. I'm afraid I've followed the herd at many points in my life: I'll have to live with that now.

The municipal hostel at Azorfa is new and purpose built. It has a garden and a large patio and only takes 60 people per night. It looks like a luxury hotel from the outside and, when I get in, it might as well be. Everything looks so new and fresh, but what clinches it for me is the sleeping accommodation: two beds to a room. A night of peace without the snoring chorus lies ahead. I am blessed.

My roommate is Richard, a retired postman from Rochester, New York, who is the same age as me. He used to work for Kodak Eastman, the main employer in that city involved in making film for cameras. When everything went digital in photography, there was no demand for this product and the factory contracted with a loss of jobs that echoes what many places in the world are experiencing as I walk.

The two of us unpack and prepare to go for a shower. Richard sits on his bed examining his feet. He has a number of blisters and they look sore.

"Have you got something for those?", I ask.

"No. I'll try to get something tomorrow. I guess it's not possible in a small place like this". He started his walk only a few days back up the path – does he know that the next town is Santo Domingo, a fifteen kilometre walk further on? Well, he doesn't. He's been walking with an Australian pastor he met two days ago and he's left all planning and direction to the man of God. I think Richard may have needed to do some of his own research and planning.

It doesn't sound like he's made good preparation for this adventure. While no one can be prepared for every eventuality, some basic preparation is necessary. I did mine on the internet, where there are many sites of organisations supporting pilgrims, as well as blogs offering first-hand experience.

Probably the most useful input was a day-long drop-in event run by the Irish Society of the Friends of Saint James. Here you could buy your Irish credencial, peruse detailed maps of the various routes, taste some Spanish cooking, talk to a myriad of people who had 'done it' and, most valuable for me on the day – watch a woman pack and unpack her rucksack and go through what she carried item by item. I took notes on that one, and they served my back well on this walk.

My attention is back with Richard in our room in Azorfa, and I'm looking at him as he gently rubs his tired legs. It would be foolhardy to attempt to walk on those feet the way they are: by the time they reach Santa Domingo there's no medication or application that will solve the problem then and he'll have to take a rest cure.

On impulse I offer him the contents of my first aid kit. I have not had a single blister in four weeks, so I point out my supply of Compeed plasters and invite him to take whatever he needs. I don't know it at this point, but my 'roomie' is going to take the whole lot. When I come to appreciate this I am not horrified; rather I am pleased and happy in the knowledge that he will be able to walk more easily in the morning.

In fact I've been happy from the moment I handed over what was going to bring him comfort and relief – not because I was helping a fellow being in distress, but because I was again making a statement to myself and/or the Universe/Higher Intelligence. I was saying:

"I don't need these things now". And there was also a little bit of: "Whatever my needs are, they will be met by the situation I find myself in when those needs arise". Many kilometres further on, this turned out to be absolutely true. But what I found interesting about this incident in Azorfa was that I had abandoned my life long training, which I had internalised well, to save for a rainy day. In other words, to hoard stuff in case it might come in handy later on.

I could also see the gift of the plasters as a thank offering. It was four weeks ago today that I had left the French village of Mas Cabardes. Now I was well on the way and everything was going smoothly, my feet were holding out – more than holding out: they were showing no sign of distress, and I had had some wonderfully supportive company on the way.

This night in Azofra, I had my worst night's sleep on the whole Camino. Only two of us in the room, but Richard was an elite snorer and he'd probably won Olympic gold for his performance somewhere. Wherever it was, I wish he were there now! This could be divine retribution for what I had inflicted on Daniel for a couple of nights in our time together, but having slept reasonably peacefully in dormitories for more than a week with a soft chorus from a variety of styles - I'm surprised how disruptive and intrusive just one person can be.

Next day I walked through Santa Domingo de la Calzada. I had to visit the cathedral there: not to pray or marvel and meditate at all the religious art – but to see the live cock and hen that are kept there. This also gave me the opportunity to visit the tomb of the saint himself.

Santo Domingo made his name by working tirelessly in this area to improve the way for pilgrims – building roads and bridges, as well as a pilgrim hostel and church (now cathedral) in the town. The saint gave his name to the town, and it translates as Saint Domingo of the Road, acknowledging where his contribution was made.

I take time to meditate at his tomb, as I did with Saint Bertrand in France and as I will do in a couple of days with St. Juan de Ortega. I'm not asking the remains to intercede for me or to do anything to help me in this or the next life, whatever that might be. These tombs are points of focus along the way: they commemorate people who promoted and protected this pilgrim way, and for centuries people like me – most of them more devout than I – have stopped to pray, pay respects or simply think. It's a point of real rest on the ever flowing pilgrim road of people.

Understandably, there is more than passing pilgrims visiting the cathedral, as it is on the tourist trail, so a quiet meditation is not possible while cameras flash and comments are made by those wandering in the aisles. I look around and locate the coop and there, right enough, are a live cock and hen strutting their stuff behind a glass encasement in this holy establishment.

The miracle of the cock and hen is a tale of the Camino going back to a time that none of my guide books will specify. It's a legend, of course, and the story goes that a couple with their son were passing through the town on the way to Santiago. They stopped for the night at an inn, where the innkeeper's daughter fell for the son. He was a devout young man and resisted her advances, so she planted a silver goblet in his belongings and reported the theft. The young man was caught, tried and condemned to hang. There is disagreement about timelines at this point in the tale: one version has his parents departing for Santiago oblivious to his fate – which is a little hard to believe.

It was on their way back from Santiago, that the parents discovered his body still hanging from the gibbet. Miraculously, he was still alive, thanks to the intervention of Santa Domingo. They ran to the sheriff's house, and caught him just as he was about to sit down to dinner. Having heard their tale, he replied that the young man was no more alive than the cock and hen he was about to eat – whereupon, the cock stood up on the plate and crowed. The sheriff was convinced and rushed to the gallows to cut the boy down – giving him a full pardon thereafter. All's well that ends well, I thought – except I realise that the poor young man was looking for a pardon for his own sins to help him to the next life and all he went home with was essentially a pardon for someone else's sins, that earned him no credit at heaven's gate.

I walk another 11kms to Redecilla del Camino and finish my trek early at 1.30pm. Again it's a hot day and continuing will cause each further kilometre to sap double the energy out of me. This is because during the afternoon I will have heat reflecting up off the road as well as

beating down on me from above. Besides, with 26kms up for the day, I've probably done enough.

Shortly before coming into the village where I will stop the night, my eye is caught by paper on the track. I pick it up and find it's a Dublin Aircoach ticket for someone going to the airport a few days earlier. I will dispose of it properly at the end of the day. If I was at home I would have left the paper on the ground, but here where there isn't any other litter – a single piece stands out demanding to be picked up.

The municipal hostel at Redecilla offers dinner, bed and breakfast plus internet access all for a donativo. Already settled in are an Irish couple from West Wicklow who only started their walking today from Santa Domingo. Having done just 11kms, they're feeling the heat and wondering are they going to be able to make it. I think they will: they're only doing seven days and then they're heading for a week in Bilbao. Also in our room are Antoine (he wants to be called Tony) and Serge. These guys have only just met though they have both walked from Brittany. They started ten days before me so I reckon they're going faster. Importantly, they are going all the way. I unpack and follow the others from the dorm who have gone out for a stroll around town.

In the plaza, I see the Irish couple sitting under a tree and Tony sits by the fountain. I go to join Tony, giving a cheery wave to my compatriots. It's a selfish, possibly strategic move. The Irish will be gone in a week – this French bloke will still be on the road I'm on in three weeks' time. He could be a more long-term companion.

Come bed time, I perform my usual ritual of standing up and pulling up my bed sheet around me so it looks like I'm standing in a shroud before I lie down. Tony sees this and stands like a mummy in its tomb. He's telling me what I look like. I respond by shuffling round the dormitory making spooky noises like a ghost. Everyone is amused. The Phantom of the Camino has arrived.

In the foggy morning, I get on the road by myself and walk 12 kilometres in two and a half hours before stopping for breakfast in Belorado. The fog is great, for the Camino is running close to and parallel with a major road. I can hear the incessant traffic noises unfortunately, but at least I can't see it – and the overlay is keeping things cool enough long distance walking.

At one point the path comes so close that I <u>can</u> see the road and traffic. At that moment a bicycle passes. A man is pedalling; a woman sits in front of him – in a wheelchair which is welded to the handlebars and front wheel by the look of it. I'm fascinated by the adaptation which seems to be home-made, but I don't want to stare. I hope they don't come across too many steep hills in their travels – and I wish them a flat road ahead some while after they have disappeared back into the fog. If you want to do something, there's always a way to do

it: every barrier has a gateway. It's just a question of looking and finding: I think those people who passed have already done that.

After breakfast, I walk on. This town hasn't woken to the day properly and businesses are only beginning to open – only the bars are in full swing, serving coffee and croissants (and perhaps something a little stronger). The church is, as yet, closed. On my way out of town I divert off the route and follow the signs for the Convento de Religiosas Clarisas. I'm not a religious freak, I'm a trainspotting anorak: I'm in this sleepy town – the guidebook describes it as having "… a delightful 'down at heel' ambience where the population of 2000 conduct their affairs at a leisurely pace" – I haven't been able to get a stamp for my credencial. I don't want one from the bar where I had breakfast: I want it from a religious house, and I reckon a convent will be alive enough at this hour to entertain my request for one.

The nuns here turn out to be an enclosed order, but it becomes clear to me how interaction will take place when I enter the main door. There is a second door which is locked and, to my right, a carousel built into the wall with a bell beside it. I ring the bell and, after a while footsteps and a voice behind the wall. The voice is asking a question, so I put my passport on the carousel, say "Credencial" and hope for the best. The document disappears, there is a moment of silence and then it reappears, duly stamped. Here is the evidence that I visited the convent at Belorado – but no one saw me do it.

By the time I reach Villafranca Montes de Oca, I've covered 25kms since I left Redecilla at an early hour and it's been more or less a continuing climb since Belorado. This is where I had planned to stop for the night – half way along a stage in a, presumably, quieter location. The approach into Villafranca tells me this is not the case. It's a thumping great trucker's stop, with a large vehicle park on the outskirts. Pilgrims up ahead weave their way between parked juggernauts to get to one of the cafes.

I get into one of the eating establishments for a late lunch - two beers and a pork chop sandwich. I know this diet isn't great, and I'm eating all the 'wrong things', but the weight is coming off and I think this must be good. Certainly, to my mind, it makes it all right to eat what I'm eating. On return home to Ireland later in the year, I'm not so sure: blood tests show my cholesterol levels have rocketed. I do have the excuse that I didn't take any of those long-term medications with me, like the statins I was supposed to be on – but that didn't wash with my GP.

There is too much activity for me to stay here, and I decide to move on to the end of the stage. I've done about half the climb up to the Alto Carnero, which at 1150 metres is the highest I'll go for the next eleven days. The trouble is, there's going to be two descents before I get there – and that means three ascents. It becomes a long hot trek, but I am helped by seeing others in the same boat as myself.

My goal now is the burial place of San Juan who was a disciple of Santa Domingo. He too is known and honoured for his good works to improve the route through the region for pilgrims. This would have been at a time when bandits roamed the area profiting from their attacks on these defenceless travellers.

I know I've made the right move to come on here when I arrive at St Juan de Ortega, for this is not a busy stage end. Apart from a few scattered houses on the way in, St Juan consists of no more than a church, the pilgrim hostel and a bar which serves food as well. I heard it said that this was the longest functioning pilgrim hostel on the Camino today, and I can believe it. Facilities are very basic but they serve their purpose well.

The chapel of San Nicolas de Barri is homage to the man who allegedly saved San Juan from drowning on his way home after pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I come from lands where ancient stone constructions align with sun positions at solstice time and I'm fascinated that this church is constructed in such a way that at each equinox, the rays from the setting sun strike the Virgin Mary in a scene from the annunciation. I've arrived on one of the 363 days in the year when it is not possible to view this event.

I attend the daily 6pm Mass, to sit and think more than anything. When the Mass is ended, the priest invites the pilgrims to follow him to the tomb of the saint, where we sing a hymn and receive Benediction

That this was the right place to stop was confirmed when I walked over to the bar. A great greeting went up from two men having a beer together – Tony and Serge. I join them and before long a taxi arrives in the plaza. Three women get out: Louisa, who is about my own age, and two German women in their 30s who I was aware of in the hostel last night. They all got as far as Belorado, a fair walk, and then took a taxi to be here ready for the walk into Burgos the next day. Tony and Serge have already met and spoken with them, so they join us at our table. We sit outside, drinking, then eating, then drinking some more.

We get to know each other a little better – the German women, Martina and Ute are both single and are social workers involved with troubled youth in Berlin. They're simply 'walking' for their holidays and are enjoying countryside and climate that may be more pleasant than their home city.

Tony is married with a teenage daughter – the apple of his eye by the sound of it. Recently retired from the French Commandos, he did his early training in Carcassonne with the brigade that had run past me on my second day of walking. He wants to consider his future in terms of career options, but I sense he is thinking more widely than this. And then there is Serge, the chef from Plouescat in Brittany, who has recently had a triple by-pass, has sold his restaurant and is considering his options for the future. Louisa has left us for another table with friends that she has met earlier on the Way.

Before we wend our way next door to bed, we've agreed to walk together next day and an excited Serge (it could have been the beers) has offered to cook a meal for us in the days ahead. From the size of him I'd say he knows a thing or two about good cooking.

I had toyed with the idea of resting in the city of Burgos, the long days of rural walking having helped me forget my reaction to Pamplona, but this invitation seals my fate: to be cooked for by a French chef, probably in the middle of nowhere, was too good to be missed. I will stick with these guys.

The next morning I set out for Burgos alone. Promises have been made with the new friends from last night that we will meet in the hostel by the cathedral in the city this evening. I can go at my own speed and live with my own thoughts as I walk.

There's a slight climb in prospect but basically the day is a descent into Burgos. The climb comes early, while it is still cool and misty. Walking through a wood, there's an untethered white horse grazing beside the track. He's completely uninterested in the periodic passer-by. I stop to take a couple of photos, but give up, as the results I'm seeing on my digital screen don't capture what I see with my bare eyes. The world I'm viewing is too deep for the two dimensional technology: the horse seems small on the screen, but his presence is powerful. He's surrounded by trees, with a ghostly mist swirling between the trunks as if stalking the beast, but he's unconcerned. It isn't what you see in the moment of a snap shot, but the continuing unconcern with that which isn't relevant to him. I want to take his lesson home, but I can't bloody do it on a camera. Maybe that's just as well.

At my breakfast stop I had my usual coffee and croissant – in the coolness, I didn't need the Coke – and when I paid I was presented with a lollipop. I'm used to mints with the bill for dinner, but not a child's sweet at breakfast. It's a sweet gesture made in a not-very-prosperous village bar – and the sweetness stays with me as I suck the lollipop walking down towards Burgos.

My stop has allowed Martina and Ute to overtake me, and I soon catch them up. Ute is having trouble with her feet, and I have nothing to offer. Maybe she will have to take a taxi again, I'm told. Aha! It wasn't laziness or the heat yesterday but mobility issues that required the lift into San Juan. I can't slow down to their pace for long, and excuse myself to walk on.

With the wisdom of hindsight which gives the knowledge that in 300kms I'm going to develop my own mobility impairment, I wonder if I wouldn't have been better to slow down a bit and walk with Ute and Martina, take the odd taxi and to hell with saying I've walked it all the way. But then this is my Camino and I'm doing it my way. Maybe the pain in the days ahead will teach me a lesson. Aversion therapy, is what psychologists would call it – but then that didn't always work very well, did it?

A little while further down the road and I catch up with Serge and Tony. I'm the oldest in the quintet and seem to be the fastest: I'm proud when I realise that, but – come to think of it – what's there to be proud of? We're all going to get there, (wherever there is) one way or another.

The lads and I walk in to Burgos by the most direct but least attractive route, through the Industrial Zone. As we near the city centre, I stop to gawp in a shop window – they sell nothing but oranges: oranges in the window, oranges behind the counter and oranges everywhere else in the shop. Oranges to eat, oranges to make juice with (I didn't know there was a difference). I understand – if Spaniards like their oranges as much as I do, there's a call for shops like this.

In Burgos, we check into the albergue just above the cathedral square – this is a city centre hot property and with a very modern interior. You'd think we'd be forking out a fair bit to stay here but, no, it's €4 each. We pay for 'the girls' coming up behind us: that way we can be sure we all have a bed for the night – and in the same room. When we are all reunited, and after showers, we head out on the town: a stroll round the old quarter, beers, a pilgrim menu with wine for €8-50, and, eventually, bed!

Next morning I was happy to find myself tramping a dusty road again and away from acting the tourist on cobbled streets. I was looking at what was straight ahead in the now, rather than craning my neck up to view sculpted images of what is past.

Stopping for breakfast at Rabe de las Calzados, I notice a framed newspaper article on the wall. It's about a local man who walked from this village to Santiago a few years ago. Looking more closely, I see it's the man who has just served me my coffee – the owner. Further down the wall, his credencial is also hanging up, framed.

With only ten words of Spanish in my head – all of them to do with food, drink and a bed – I approach the bar and, with my pilgrim credencial, Irish passport and a lot of gesticulation, I introduce myself, tell him I also am a pilgrim, and say that I admire his achievement. Amid mutual smiles I return to my table to finish the breakfast.

When I pay my bill at the counter, the owner hands me the change and then puts up his hand in a 'wait there' signal. He goes into the back of the shop, and returns with an out held hand. A present for me? Yes. It's a medal of the patron saint of the village – the Virgin Mary.

The medal is cheap, tinny, and suspended on a cotton thread. I will probably lose it somewhere before I get to Santiago. But I'll never lose the warmth of the smile, the firmness of the handshake, and the momentary but inexpressible 'togetherness' of two human beings. You won't capture that on your camera either!

Footnote embedded in main text: Six months later back in Ireland, I have the cheap medal with the cotton thread here beside me – and there are tears in my eyes as I write this, such is

the power of this simple gift. "A stranger's kindness", wrote Yiyun Li "always remembered because a stranger's kindness, like time itself, heals our wounds in the end".

Hornillos del Camino is the end of the stage out of Burgos. It's been a 19 kilometre walk and it's not even lunchtime so I think I'll keep moving. I pass a small convenience store with a mass of young pilgrims outside it, eating and drinking what they've just purchased inside. I recognise most of them from my hostel stop-overs of the last two nights, and I get nods and waves as I pass. One, Joaquim a twenty-something from Brazil, breaks a piece off the cake he is eating and hands it to me. I take and eat. In thanking him I stop, and having stopped – sit down on the bench outside the shop. Joaquim is called away by one of his friends and I'm thinking I could do with a nice juicy orange to go with the substantial piece of saliva-sapping sponge.

In the shop I buy two oranges and coming out, drop one into Joaquim's open rucksack, closing over the flap as I return to my seat. A small repayment which will go unnoticed, I'm sure. But when he returns, instead of hoisting his backpack and being on his way, Joaquim opens it, sees the orange, looks puzzled, shrugs and takes it out to eat. Then he sees me looking at him, and smiles:

"It's you! I didn't understand because I didn't buy one. It's just what I want"

"One good turn deserves another" I reply, but I'm not sure his English is up to that. No matter – we meet again and again over the next week, and always, a big smile is shared. We never say much in words, but a great deal is communicated in those smiles.

I continue my walk. Now I'm up on the Meseta, which is a plateau blanketed in what look like wheat fields and it serves as a bread basket for Spain. I was warned before I left Ireland that I was in for three days of the Meseta, that it was boring, and those who had been here before were interested in how I would handle it mentally. It sounded as if it was going to be one of the Camino challenges, like the Napoleon route over the Pyrenees from St Jean Pierre de Port. In the event, and after all the stimulation I'd had over the last four weeks, I will welcome anything that is going to be boring and monotonous: it would likely rest my mind. I was falling in love with the long straight stretches and the sameness of the countryside. I was reminded of favourite Irish walks alongside sections of the Grand Canal and the Royal as well – those veins on the skin of the country that carried the life blood across it in another age. Unsurprisingly, I didn't have any profound thoughts on this section of the Camino. My mind was happy to switch off and let my legs do the walking.

It's all fields on either side of the white dirt track, and the only break-up in this monotony is when another track passes at right angles making a 'cross roads'. These junctions do stand out when they arrive, so I take a photograph at one of them. The Way is clearly straight ahead, but there are choices to left and right. How many of us pilgrims have been following

a straight path and are now open to a change in direction – in our minds if not in the physical route we follow?

Another 11 kms along the road after my stop for cake and an orange with Joaquim brings me to Hontanas. I will spend the night here, at a point which is roughly mid stage. Serge, who I understand has lost a lot of weight by walking every day since he left Brittany nearly six weeks ago, arrived at the hostel just ahead of me. We are both ahead of the rest of the rest of the pack, and this 64 year old is pleased he's 'in front' of three of the younger walkers in this new group, "Pride" raising its head again.

Over the evening meal, Tony asks me why I wear my scallop shell around my neck. Everyone else wears them over the back of their rucksacks. There are two reasons, I explain: one is that I've been told this is the traditional way to wear them. Wearing them like this, pilgrims from past ages could, when arriving at a watering place, scoop water from the fountain and drink it out of the shell in an instant. I was able to show them a photo Daniel took of me doing just that in the Pyrenees.

But I like my second reason best, one that I've discovered while walking. I tell the group that as the day goes on, and I become more tired with the heat – my head begins to droop towards my chest. I'm looking down at the ground and perhaps feeling demoralised, but what do I see? My shell swinging below me. It reminds me of my purpose, and I lift my head up and look to the west and my goal. Right now it's 'only' about 460kms to go.

Next morning, we are all packing our rucksacks ready to leave. I take the scallop shell from around my neck and tie it to the back of my sack. I'll have to put it on and take it off every time I want to access my things, but that's the price of making the change – or rather, the price of being a conformist. My childhood training is still working well. I need to do something about that!

Today we walked to Boadilla. Martina and Ute stayed together, Martina being held back by Ute's slow progress with her sore feet. They were good friends and they were going to stick together no matter what. We men went at our own pace and rested when we ourselves chose to. This meant that at times we walked together, rested together, or simply passed each other with a brief greeting and comment on the route.

On the way, we walk through the ruined monastery at San Anton – quite literally. We're on a tarmacked minor road used by a few cars, but it winds its way among and through the monastery buildings before heading out to Castrojeriz, with its castle on a hill overlooking the town and countryside.

I pass the church of San Juan in the town, and note several skull and crossbones chiselled into the wall facing the street. Only one of my guidebooks mentions this but it doesn't explain. I also read that the church is built in German Gothic style and the cloister has an "attractive Mudejar coffered ceiling". Those Muslims have been at it again! These particular

ones seem to have made a more lasting mark on Christian edifices, as they practiced their trade, than all the warrior hordes who may have sought a violent impact. Do I need to spell out the lesson? Quietly, do what is needed.

The day ends in Boadilla, and we use a private hostel which charges €6 for the night as opposed to €3 in the municipal hostel, but there seems to be more life in the private one. The outdoor area has tables and chairs and there is a bar: it's possible to sit quietly with a beer rather than morosely without one.

We Five Musketeers are all staying here, but we cannot be in the same dorm, there are not enough beds free in any one of them. I find myself bunked up with a rather large American lady, who turns out to be a secondary school teacher, and two Canadians.

All three are doing what I've come to call an assisted Camino. They've booked everything through a tour operator: using private hostels and the occasional hotel, so they don't have to worry if there will be room at the inn tonight (or any night). They don't even have to carry their bags: a number of Spanish companies offer to pick up bags at each overnight stop and drive them to where the owner is booked in for the next night. These people are using "JacoTrans" which can be found operating all along the route. All you need after that is your water bottle, some money for lunch, and you take a gentle stroll through the day: no worries! Although these people are walking a pilgrim way, they are in essence religious tourists – people who want to do it comfortably, and finish it off with a few days by the sea perhaps. If things aren't quite right, they won't grin and bear it or accept it as karma: they'll complain to management. And, as I discovered as a roommate, to their fellow travellers as well.

"You're not going to be getting up at some ungodly hour in the morning, are you?" I was asked.

"No it will be a godly hour for me", I think, "Godly enough to get me to the next night stop in time to secure a bed for the night".

There's a look of resignation on the teacher's face when I say I'll be up early enough. I can see her saying goodbye to her lie on in the morning. She will be getting up when it suits, walking when it suits and arriving in to her bottom bunk reserved bed in the next private hostel down the road at about 6pm. If I stop there, I will have arrived hours earlier to find only top bunks available for me and my friends. That's the advantage of the municipal hostels: you can't reserve a bed until you show up and the first beds are not allocated until about 2pm.

In the morning I am as quiet as I can be, The American teacher turns in her bed and pulls the covers over her head. I guess I'm not quiet enough: she's been wakened and is irritated.

Putting on my boots, I greet my comrades who are also preparing to leave. We don't wait for one another, but leave on our own when we're ready. We know where we are staying tonight and it's there we will meet.

I walk the 6 kms to Fromista and have breakfast. I see a sign in the town which says I'm halfway along the Camino Frances (meaning half way between St Jean in France and Santiago). I'm tempted to have a second coffee to celebrate, but the arrival of other pilgrims looking for breakfast reminds me that I need to press on to be ahead of the posse in the queue for beds at Carrion de los Condes.

For quite some time after Fromista, I walk close to a canal and I enjoy the presence of water nearby. But I'm still revelling in the flatness of the Meseta, and am enjoying the flatness of the terrain with or without water.

In time the path turns away from the canal and I'm back to the savannah-like conditions. I've been walking well, and I have the path pretty much to myself in the sense that while there are people behind me, I can't see anyone up ahead. Then I do – an army of them, and they're coming towards me. Led by a red van decked with banners which seem to indicate it is marshalling a sponsored walk (though with my lack of Spanish, it may have been a completely different activity) a group of all ages are walking the Camino in the 'wrong' direction.

In the vanguard are a group of noisy boys, running hither and thither. As they get closer, I see they are gathering wild flowers. An unusual activity for eleven and twelve year olds; at that age I would expect them to kick the heads off the plants as they passed. Perhaps they're collecting them for their mothers. Then one notices me and shouts to the others and they all race over to me, holding up their bunches of flowers. I think I'm supposed to inspect them, so I nod approvingly. But no – they are offering them to me as presents.

I'm touched and try to signal them to keep the bouquets for their parents, but they are insistent. I take off my hat and hold it out to them. They understand well enough – I want them to arrange their flowers in my hatband. This they do, and I get out my camera to take a photo of boys with decorative hat.

"No, No, you must wait for him!" I think that is what is said, but I am told this by having my attention, and that of all the other boys, drawn to the one lad who's trying to go to the toilet in peace. In time the picture is taken and the boys run off. I start off in my own direction with a big smile on my face. Then one of the boys is standing in front of me looking up. He points to himself:

"Marco".

"Miguel", I reply, pointing to myself. He throws his arms around my waist, which is as high as he can reach and gives me a big hug. I want to return the warm gesture, but realise that if

I do he will sustain an injury from my walking poles. He runs off to tell his pals the amazing fact that this foreigner has a Spanish name.

Up the path I kick myself, mentally. I wish I had indicated to Marco that I would pray for him, his family and friends when I got to Santiago – it would have been a small pro quid pro. Though not a practiced pray-er, I have to confess that when I reach Santiago, I do pray in front of the tomb of St James for these boys and their families from just outside the little village of Villasirga on the run in to Carrion de los Condes. It was an unseen, unknown act on my part, but the remembering was what was important.

The flowers soon wilted, and at the end of the day I removed them from my hat. But like the medal of the Virgin Mary yesterday and the flowers I will be given by girls beside the road tomorrow, it's not the gift that matters, but the giving – and receiving.

I am the first of our group to arrive at Carrion, so I get to choose the hostel. The albugue here is a parish one, not municipal, and it cost five euro for the night. A little out of town is the Monasterio de Santa Clara: here it is possible to have a single room and the dormitories have no more than six beds each. Sheets and towels are provided and this lovely old building has the added attraction of being the place where it is thought St Francis of Assisi stayed when he was on pilgrimage to Santiago. But it costs €21. Normally, I'd call that a bargain, but I've got used to budgeting for something less and enjoying the company of strangers in large dorms – so I head for the parish option.

It's going to cost five euro for the night here, so four of us will stay for less than the cost for one at the monastery. When I arrive, there's a queue at the door, this is composed of people punctuated by rucksacks: the people are biding their time, the rucksacks represent others who have gone off in search of food and/or drink. I pop my rucksack in line and wander up the street to some public seating, rubbing my shoulders which have become sore with the load I've been carrying.

"Ah, you need rub. Come, lift you shirt."

It's Louisa whom I met at San Juan de Ortega and then passed later on the road. It turns out she had been doing a mixture of walking and taking taxis to keep up to her schedule. I don't know how she arrived here today, but she has the energy to go round asking people if they are all right and offering a massage where needed. I don't get the offer – I'm under instruction. I'm told to lift my T-shirt over my head, and Louisa goes straight to work. I smell eucalyptus and I hear chuckles – someone in the alburgue queue is taking a photo of me. I don't care – this is very relaxing: another gift of the Camino, and from someone who well understands the ache and pain of walking in the Spanish heat.

When the doors open, it is a young nun in habit who registers us, and I realise it has been some time since I stayed in a hostel with a religious connection. Towns and even villages have evening Masses in their churches for the pilgrims passing through, but the

accommodation provided privately or by the municipality is a secular response to the need of pilgrims. Or it may be the response to the need of the town – to attract the passing trade of people who will leave money here every day all year round. The religious communities have closed their doors: starved of vocations they have moved on, and I wonder if this doesn't herald an evolution away from the essence of pilgrimage to something which is more secular, now being controlled by the civic authorities.

The rest of the group arrive during the afternoon, and Serge announces this is the night that he will cook for us. A trip to the small supermarket is arranged and Serge breaks out his Breton flag for the first time. He's announcing his Celtic roots to those Celts through whose country we are now passing. Perhaps he also wants to show he's the leader of the pack, as we wander round the shop watching him commandeer food supplies. Tony and I have been left in charge of wine, and we buy five bottles. If there's any left over, I say I'll carry it tomorrow – but I know I'm safe enough with these people: it will all be drunk tonight (and it is!).

In the kitchen, it's a French take-over with Tony working on the starter of sardines and tomato on toast. These disappear as they are made, and they seem to demand some wine to accompany them. We eat and drink as we watch Serge perform; although he is not as graceful or relaxed as a woman performing a Japanese tea ceremony, his sometimes frenetic activity is entertaining.

We sit down to pork fillet with garlic, tomatoes, onions and herbs and a dollop of spaghetti, and looking round at the other groups cooking for themselves I see I'm definitely with the right team. And team is what we have become. Tony takes a sheet of paper from his pad and with a pen starts to write in large letters, which he goes over again and again to highlight the words he is writing. When he's finished he holds it up.

"We are the Bande de Michael", he announces, and on the paper is written in English:

"Michael's Battlegroup". There are smiles and applause: I'm flattered, honoured – and deeply moved.

Why me? The others have the skills: Tony the military man with leadership, Serge who makes sure the army is able to march on its stomach, and the women who have the knowledge of first aid and can look after sore feet. Fortunately or unfortunately I lose out on their attentions here as my feet are causing no trouble at all.

It must be my age. I've got the job because I am the most senior in the group by twenty years. I'm now referred to as "My Captain", and that continues to this day, long after the pilgrimage is over. I don't understand! I have never given them an order – but maybe that's the secret.

We continue to chat as others finish their meals. Tony mentions that the Phantom of the Camino might appear tonight. As we are scattered over two bedrooms, I realise it will be awkward to achieve this at bedtime so I scamper off to get my bed sheet. Preparing myself outside the dining room door, I make a grand entrance, calling for the blood of two Brazilians in the room, and walk straight into the nun. The poor woman, confronted by a ghost that was anything but holy, clasped her crucifix in shock. Bless her – she quickly saw the funny side.

Next morning, Tony and Serge, who had slept in a six bedded room, were bleary eyed. It wasn't anything to do with overindulgence the night before, it was the three snorers they shared with. Martina, Ute and I had been in a much larger dorm and had slept peacefully all the way through. Memories of my night with Richard the Rochester Roarer came back and I hypothesised that the more people you have in a room, the less snoring occurs. It's an attractive idea, but experiences further down the road cause this hypothesis to be rejected.

We set off walking at our own pace and in our own time, but not too far apart. Today we will walk 27 kilometres and over that distance pilgrims will climb a little less than one hundred metres - so to all intents and purposes, it's a flat walk. As well as that, it would be called "featureless". During the day I cross five rivers, none of them large, but they are the sum of the topographical interest.

It's open country as well, so there is no shade from the sun. Fortunately there's a wind blowing, and it's cooling things to the extent that I wear my Irish rugby fleece all day. For once, the sun and its heat are not the problem.

Our goal is Terradillos de Templarios. Tony has booked ahead so that we can be sure of beds in what seems to be the only hostel in the village. It's privately run, and booking is possible. Our resting place is called the "Jacques de Molay" albergue. As the village name suggests, there is an association with the Knights Templar; this being one of their strongholds along the Way. Jacques de Morlay, for whom the hostel is named, was the last Grand Master of the Order. And perhaps, remembering the story coming out of St Bertrand de Comminges back in France, I should add: "that we know of…"

During the day Ute's blisters deteriorate, and the 'girls' have to take a taxi again. We are a Band or a Battlegroup, but there is no code of behaviour or etiquette required of members. We each simply do what we must to continue our pilgrimage to completion. Martina sticks with Ute, but for Ute it seems that she is doing a penance rather than a pilgrimage. I recall Daniel's complaints on the steep descents in the Pyrenees and realise that we all have different burdens to bear – I must remember that even if it doesn't look like a burden to me, it is such for the one who carries it.

Although this is the end of a stage, this village has the quiet calm I have come to desire at the end of a walking day. The albergue only has 55 beds and they are spread over 6 rooms

of different sizes. Here we experience the benefit of booking ahead, though Tony only made the phone call this morning. We have a 5-bedded room to ourselves. We can talk, tell jokes, giggle – and have no concern for the reactions of others: we are friends.

We eat and drink in this family run albergue – and then we just drink. I'm tired and leave the others at what I think must be an early hour, but it isn't. I do remember all this: going to our room, getting to bed, snuggling down – and then, yes, it does go blank.

But to be fair, I'm first up in the dim light of day break, getting dressed and packing my rucksack. One by one the others wake, come to, look at me, and smile. How nice – and the smiling continues. I pay a second visit to the bathroom and when I return to our room, the smiles are even broader. Martina can't hold back any longer:

"Mike, you don't look in the mirror in the bathroom?"

No, of course not. I'm not shaving, I couldn't find the light switch and besides - all I need is a quick upper body wash which I can do in the dark.

"Go back and look", commands Ute.

This time I find the light switch and come face to face with myself in the mirror. I see I am a marked man. "Phantom" has been written across my forehead with a marker pen. I return to the bedroom ready to strike with my only weapon – a huge smile.

"Did you see your back?", asks Martina.

Oh, no! Another visit to the bathroom, and there it is in large letters:

"PHANTOM OF THE CAMINO! Ha ha ha!!". My friends are also able to produce photographic evidence of this writing being executed.

I have truly been ambushed. The good news is that I must have slept really well, for the flashes from the cameras didn't cause me to stir; the bad news is that I now have a rather embarrassing collection of photos of myself in Terradillos de los Templarios. Where were my protective knights when I needed them?

They were right beside me, of course. They were these friends who were writing all over my body this night – but keeping an eye out for me at other times on the Way.

"Terradillos is the halfway point between St Jean Pierre de Port and Santiago de Compostela", John Brierley tells me in his guide to the Camino Frances. He continues: "There are now 396.1 kilometres to our destination: St James of the Field of Stars."

This is the second settlement to claim it is the halfway mark on this Camino, and it won't be the last – but John Brierley's maths seems to stand up. And it stands up better than his

"Field of Stars" reference, which accepts the mainstream translation of "Compostella". T.D. Kendrick sees it differently in his excellent book "St James in Spain", published in 1960:

"According to popular belief of a much later age the place (Santiago) was known as Campo de la Estrella *or* Campus Stellae*, the field of the star; but modern philologists tell us that* Compostela*, a name that does not seem to be older than the eleventh century, is derived from the Latin* componere *in its sense of 'to bury' and in the form of '*compositum*' or '*compostum*, a burial or place of burial."* (pg19)

At the risk of raising what will sound like: "Bah! Humbug!" to some, it is worth visiting this book by Thomas Kendrick for his detailed questioning of the beliefs around the saint in Spain. He summarises the Creed of Santiago, which is that:

1. St James the Greater preached Christianity in Spain.
2. During this mission the Virgin Mary, while still a living woman, was miraculously transported to Spain along with angels carrying a marble pillar which she asked St James to incorporate in a church to be built in Zaragoza and dedicated to her.
3. After his execution in Jerusalem, his body was taken to Galicia in north west Spain to be buried in Santiago.
4. In the ninth century St James appeared on earth and helped a Spanish army to win a decisive victory over the Moors
   (Summarised from T.D. Kendrick: "St James in Spain ", pg 13)

And then goes on to examine the controversies surrounding this Creed, the two sides of which he sums up:

"…the controversies about the Santiago creed resolve themselves into a head-on conflict between those who demand early references to events to which it refers and at least some sort of contemporary corroboration of them……and those who are satisfied that such pedantic enquiries are not necessary, believing that the soundness of medieval tradition and the invulnerability of the miracles involved are sufficient to carry the creed safely through all the hazards of the higher criticism." (pg 33)

Simply put, it comes down to faith – and right now, mine is in the strength and determination of my own body and mind coupled with the support of those who walk the Way with me. In other words, it's my faith in that which I am aware of in the here-and-now.

After a good night's sleep in Terradillos de los Templarios, we're heading for El Burgo Ranero and walking through Sahagun on the way. We set off together and the five of us have visual contact with each other all morning.

Soon after leaving, I am overtaken by a man who is dragging his rucksack behind him. It is strapped to a one-wheel trolley which has two handles, each of which is held suspended in a loop tied to the man's belt. This means he can walk with no weight on his back and still have

his hands free. He'll have no sore shoulders or hips at the end of the day: I am envious. I think back to the cyclist and his wheelchair-using companion. It's about thinking outside the box, and I am always so accepting of whatever "the way we do things around here" is: if it's hiking, then it's a rucksack on your back, as far as I'm concerned.

From the very start of this day, Tony and Serge are that little bit up ahead and in the lead, but I catch them in the first village because they're stopped to talk to a compatriot. When I join them, I understand the reason for their delay: we have not yet had our breakfast, but the new Frenchman is offering tots of Eau de Vie to anyone who wants one.

Jean Pierre has done his walking for this summer. He'll reach Sahagun in time for lunch, spend the night there and take the train back home tomorrow. Like myself, he is a retired man, and his plan is to return in September with different friends to the ones he's walking with right now and take the walk on a little further. He's starting to celebrate the completion of this part of his walking project a little early in the day – but he wouldn't be the first person on the planet to do that.

I'm offered a capful of the liquor and, though I know I don't need this, throw it back to show my appreciation of his kindness – or to establish my manliness, I'm not sure which it was now I come to think of it. While the 'after-burn' is definitely in my throat, the observable body reaction is to walk around in a circle rather briskly: I think this may have helped me to stifle a vocal ejaculation. The walking action did give me the chance to take in my surroundings a little more, and I was fascinated by a hillock off to our right which had some chimneys coming out at the top and porches and doorways in its side.

I wandered up the track which led to the man-made entrances in the hillside and when I got there, what I saw persuaded me that not only these porches but the whole hill was man-made. Houses had been built and then all of them covered in earth and grass sown in order to insulate them : they would be warm in winter and cool in summer. There was evidence from attachments like letterboxes, that these had been homes at some time in the past – but now they were store places for tools to work the land or for produce harvested from that land. In a word, garden sheds.

Back home in Ireland at this very time, Joyce was overseeing the installation of improved insulation on our semi-detached home. For some thousands of euro we were have four inches of rock-wool fibre fixed on to the outside of our home to help keep the heat in during cold winter months. It's quite a technical operation by comparison to what I am looking at in a small Spanish village, but I think the locals here had developed a very ecologically friendly and low carbon footprint solution to the problem long before the idea of external insulation even occurred to us. Also, the Spanish method has the added attraction of being a DIY option.

The five of us gathered for lunch in a bar in Sahagun where, for the third time in recent days, I learn that I am at the 'halfway mark' of the Camino. In the middle of a busy town, this was on the way-marked route, so most tables were taken by pilgrims here. We nodded and waved to others whom we recognised from earlier days and nights, and then caught sight of Louisa – she of the back rub. For all her past giving to others, it was she who now needed help: her feet were sick. That meant blisters. Could I repay the favour she had done me? No – I'd given away all my plasters. I asked her to rest and let me go off and locate a pharmacy. But, no, she has come to a decision: it's time to stop and go home. She doesn't say: "This is a pilgrimage, not a penance", but it's what she means. She has a coffee with us as we eat and when we leave, she moves on slowly in search of a bed for tonight. Tomorrow, the train will take her back east.

Thankfully this day is another level walk and I stride out ahead of the others after our midday stop. Once again Tony has made a reservation in a private hostel and, call me "anal retentive" if you will, I want to make sure the beds are secured for us all. We need to be there, or at least one of us does, by 5 o'clock and I make it at 4.15pm.

On the way I pass through Bercianos Real Camino. It doesn't even qualify as a one-horse village, yet when I arrive there's a group of youngsters, full of life, gathered near the first few buildings. These girls are standing round a barrow full of flowers. The eldest is about eleven, and her charges range from five to nine. The big girl hands out flowers one at a time to each of the other girls who then runs up the road to greet and make a presentation to each approaching pilgrim. This time I am prepared and indicate by signs and use of the place name, that I will pray for them all at Santiago. They seem pleased.

The next day we make for Mansilla de las Mulas. It's another flat walk and only about 20 kilometres, so we start with a late breakfast in El Burgo. The walk is not only flat but also dull, and not helped by the fact there is no shade. All day I am able to observe my shadow as it slowly edges round from in front of me to behind. It's the only interesting thing that happens.

The municipal albergue has 70 places. Fifty of them are beds with 20 mattresses on the floor, so I make no complaint when I find that I've got a top bunk. I can't say anything – this is only the fourth time in 18 nights that I've had to climb up to bed. That in itself has never been a problem: it's the getting down in the dark middle of the night that poses the difficulties.

Martina says she'll cook tonight. Obviously she wants to show the French chef a thing or two – and she does, the meal is superb and the enjoyment of it is added to by the setting. Along with many other pilgrims, we sit at a table in the courtyard, which is dominated by a large fig tree.

As we are finishing our meal Laura, the manager of the albergue, moves around the tables with packs of cards. She asks each guest their native language, and then produces a pack of cards in that tongue. Each deck is simply another translation of the same thing: a pack called "The Way of St James". Each card in the pack has a Camino-related picture and underneath the picture is written an adage taken from ancient or modern writings – some even written by the creator of the pack himself, Christian Brandstetter. When my turn comes round I am asked to select a card 'blind'. I take one and turn it up to see what is written. I read:

Every human carries in itself everything he needs for a happy life, many simply forget.(no author attribution)

I know I'm one of those who have forgotten, and I'm thankful for the reminder.

This deck of cards can be bought on the internet, but it is also widely available in the souvenir shops of Santiago. This is where I purchase my full deck at the end of my pilgrimage. I have the idea that I will carry the deck with me and ask those whom I encounter in my life to pick a card and then keep it for themselves. This is what Laura was offering her guests in the albergue at Mansilla, so I determined to do the same. As I write, the pack is slowly diminishing. When I get down to my last card, I will simply hand it out to a passing stranger in the street. Then it will be time to walk back to Santiago and buy another deck of cards.

The first person to pick a card from my deck is Patrick, the young man with an interest in wolves – and bears. Later in the summer back in Mas Cabardes I invite this teenager to pick a card from the deck. His reads:

Life is what happens to you when you're making other plans (John Lennon)

"All right", he says with that cool disinterest that young people have so well-rehearsed. But he looks at it for a long time before putting it in his pocket. Weeks later I bump into him in the Epicierie where he's emptying those same pockets in search of the money to pay for his purchases. Out come old sweet papers, a pen knife, a lighter (his mum won't be too pleased), and a very crumpled card - with the words of John Lennon written on it. He's kept it with him – perhaps it has meaning for him. I ask nothing – it's his business.

After the cards in the courtyard of the albergue, each group does its own washing up and then returns to the tables to finish off, or else start new bottles of, wine. An Italian pilgrim who has been eating with a group of his own countrymen is moved to stand up and launch into an operatic aria. It's familiar, but my knowledge of opera doesn't allow me to identify this or any of what follows. No sooner has Luigi (that's not his name as far as I know) taken his well-deserved applause, than a woman is up on her feet launching into something else. She's obviously Spanish, so I christen her Consuela. Thereafter we're in for a series of duets from the two prima donnas (Luigi is all man, but he is one nonetheless) which I would have paid to listen to.

Laura joins in on the last number and then encourages other pilgrims to do their party piece. She knows I'm Irish from my Registration when I arrived – so I must be able to sing! Caught by stereotyping, and realising I'm the only representative of the Emerald Isle present this night, I launch into a rendition of "Molly Malone". Despite the many faults of pitch, tone and key – it is well received by the audience. I believe that will be the fate of anything offered for the rest of the night, and I am proved right.

There's a bullfight between the Italian tenor and one of his friends, Laura produces someone dressed up as St James. This saint is quite keen to lift his cloak and show his thighs to all the ladies whose tables he passes. I'm not too sure about his credentials.

I race up to the dorm, get my bed sheet, go to the toilet which overlooks the courtyard, pull the bed sheet over my head, and then – having uttered ghostly sounds – break into "Don't Worry, Be Happy". Having delighted the crowd, I find I have created a worry for myself: the toilet door is jammed and I can't get out. When help eventually arrives (I'm too embarrassed to call down to the courtyard), I'm ready for bed after one of the most entertaining evenings you're likely to get on the Camino Frances.

Next day finds us walking into Leon, the first big city since Burgos. We've got 320 kilometres to go so this 18K walk will bring it down to just about 300 kilometres. We reach Leon at 1.30pm. Somewhere in the suburbs we cross a square. It's pedestrianized, covered with paving stones and with a fountain in the middle. Coming in from our right, hands full of shopping bags and moving at a slow pace is a little old lady. She sees Serge and his Breton flag. No longer does she labour under the weight of her shopping, she drops the bags to the ground and totters towards us at a speed which is impressive for someone who must be in her mid-seventies at least. She makes for Serge and throws her arms around him in a huge embrace. None of us can understand her and she can't understand any of us, but Serge is exchanging appreciations with the woman and I think each gets the others 'drift': two Celts in communion.

We move on, after fond farewells and waves from the woman which feel like blessings, and we check into a municipal hostel on the outskirts of the city. It's not the main one near the cathedral in the centre of the city, but it's huge and there should be no problem getting a room where we can all be together.

We certainly do get a room together, but this albergue is not as big as it looks from the outside. The accommodation is modern, much newer than the building itself, but the space is shared with various administrative offices of the city and when we get inside we can look down to the central courtyard and see a fleet of police cars parked there. This should be a safe place for the night, then.

The first thing I do is go to the hospital. For the last four days I've been worried about a couple of blotches which have appeared on my left arm and I want to get them checked out.

I don't know whether it's because I'm a pilgrim but I'm seen very quickly and I don't have to flash my E111 (the card which gives me free medical treatment, up to a point, wherever I go in the European Community). Not only that, but I'm given the all clear.

I'm greatly relieved as I walk back to the agreed meeting place to have a late lunch with the others. On the way, I walk through an area called San Fransisco. It takes a while for the penny to drop, but when I see a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi, I understand how the name was given. The sculpted saint stands on his plinth with arms outstretched, a wolf and a sheep at his feet and - how clever - the sculptor has put a pigeon sitting on St Francis' head. I look more closely at the artwork: no, that pigeon is very much alive. But it has chosen a most appropriate resting place this afternoon.

After lunch with the battlegroup, I get up from the table, and stumble. It's not the beer, it's my right leg which feels very painful. I think it must be stiffness after sitting for a while and that a walk up to the old part of town will fix it. I go up by myself to visit the cathedral as I want to see the fine stained glass windows.

Leon was at one time a Roman garrison town, hence the name which derives from "legion": the eighth legion was based here. But there are many influences in the city architecture as it was occupied variously by Visigoths, Moors and finally Christians over its history.

Even Gaudi's genius has touched this city. His Casa de Botines is located in a square not far from the cathedral. It is interesting in that it is one of the first large buildings to be constructed with private funds: the money of commerce and the middle classes, rather than that of religious institutions.

My guide book tells me if I stay a few days I still "won't see the half of it", but I'm not going to see even a tenth of it: my leg remains sore and I return to the albergue regretting it is not the one in the old part of the city which is really central. After our late lunch, no one wants a big meal and we feed on bread, cheese and salami – pretty much what we had for lunch – in the hostel kitchen area. And, like naughty school kids, get through a few bottles of wine. "Naughty" because management's posters make it clear alcohol is forbidden in the building. Here they take in more than pilgrims and there's a need to ensure no one's behaviour slips "over the top".

Although in a hostel kitchen, the ambience is brought a little closer to that of a lounge bar by some music wafting up from somewhere else in the building. It's pipe and drums, and it's Celtic. In fact, to my untrained ear, it's very Irish – so I stick my head out of the window and scour around the central courtyard. The music is coming from the floor below in a room over to my right. Excusing myself from the others, I head off to find the musicians and, in a break in their playing, knock on the door and enter: eight bagpipes and two drums are standing in a circle, held by their players. As usual – I don't know what to say, but my fleece says it all for me: "I'm from Ireland and I'd like to listen". I'm offered a seat against the wall

and then I sit back to enjoy a concert for one, snapping away with my camera like a fan at a pop concert.

In the morning we see how things can go in this more publicly accessible facility: Tony goes to the bathroom and his towel has gone AWOL. When we arrive in the kitchen we find the same applies to our breakfast, which we left in the communal fridge before bed. So much for sharing the building with a section of the local police. Nothing for it, but to head up to the old city to one of the many cafes – this will put us on our way out of town.

The pain in my right leg seems to have improved with the night of sleep, but the honeymoon doesn't last long and by the time we've had breakfast and are moving out of town, I've slowed right down and am bringing up the rear. There's nothing to see, but the soreness is located in my lower shin just above my ankle. I do the best I can to keep going and after eight kilometres I catch up with the others who are waiting for me in La Virgen del Camino. There's a hostel here and, although I've covered a paltry distance, my mind is turning to the idea of stopping for the day and resting up.

La Virgen sounds like it might be a good place to stay for a while: like Lourdes today, this town has been a place of pilgrimage in bygone days. Its claim to fame is that in the sixteenth century a local shepherd saw visions of the Virgin, and in time miracles were reported in the town. However, today there's no obvious evidence of this history: the town is a suburb of Leon on the road out west, and its architecture and presentation say no more than that.

It is decided that we'll take an early lunch here, though I'm not clear whether I participated in the decision or not. I was too busy rooting through my first aid kit to find my painkillers.

"I don't believe it!" My companions are not familiar with the catch phrase of a certain old fogey from British television sit-com, but I'm saying the words with the same conviction as the actor in that show. This is the first time I have gone to my medical supplies on my own behalf and I find I haven't got the one thing I need. I could have sworn I packed Neurofen, but all the evidence says I didn't.

Martina rummages in her rucksack and comes up with a big pink pill with some German writing on the blister pack in which it is contained. She gives it to me:

"Swallow this, Mike, it will take away the pain."

In the normal course of events, I would be wary of a medicine I didn't know – but the pain, and Martina's Germanic certainty, are such that I thankfully swallow the tablet thinking:

"If it takes away this torture, I don't give a damn about the side-effects". Then I recall a paper I wrote while an academic, castigating the medical profession for talking about drug "side effects".

“These are effects, for God’s sake” I’d written, though my tone had been more measured. Medicines have both unwanted as well as wanted effects, and our language needs to recognise the seriousness of the former for the patient. Calling the unwanted effects “side effects” confers a secondary and lesser status upon them, I had argued – yet they can be as serious, if not more so, than the good effects and (at times) call into question the benefits of taking the drug at all.

But the considered academic stance goes out of the window when the pain kicks in and, by the time we’ve eaten our lunch, my pain has gone in the same direction as that academic stance and I’m ready to take on an afternoon of walking.

As we begin to walk in a more rural setting, we pass the perimeter fence of a military airfield. I’m keeping up with the group now, but have to drop back a bit to answer a call from nature in what is very open territory. I walk in the direction of the security fence and look left and right as well as behind to ensure my privacy. But there was somewhere I didn’t look. As I begin to experience the relief of pressure in my lower abdomen, I hear a rushing of wind. It’s coming from above and, when I look up, I see I am being overflown by twelve commandos paragliding into the airfield.

If these good people had been approaching by land from my right, I would have turned to my left – and vice versa if they came from the left – but I’m not aware of the etiquette when they intrude from above so I can only keep going and hope they are sufficiently focussed on the target landing area ahead.

Later in the afternoon, the pain returns and I hobble the last half hour into Villadangos del Paramo. I’ve reached the planned stopping place with the group; it’s an albergue right beside the main road with trucks thundering past into the night. My mind is focussed on my leg and I don’t really notice the intrusion of the traffic.

In fact, disturbances will be much closer to hand than that road during the night. In the dorm, I’m delighted to meet the Italian tenor once again. He’s sleeping in the bed next to me and, with gesticulations, we reminisce on the entertainment of a couple of nights previously. There was to be no singing on this night but, when the good man went to sleep, he showed us all that his snoring was at least as powerful as his singing. I had one of my bad night’s sleep here! In the morning, his wife spoke to me in Italian. I’m not sure, but I think she was apologising for him. She herself looked tired and worn, and I wondered what it was like to spend a lifetime in the same room as that every night. I hope the compensations were good. In any event, I appreciated that I had no right to say anything when I was discommoded for only one night.

Once again I understood what was good about keeping on the move. However uncomfortable the accommodation I wouldn’t be using it tomorrow night. However disagreeable my companions, I could ditch them in the morning. We were not bound to

each other by family ties or the requirement of the workplace; every day we could decide to continue together - or not. There were no ties to bind, and that gives a tremendous freedom.

After we've found our beds in the Villadangos hostel, we prepare to take showers. Martina is the first to raise the topic of our evening meal and she does it with an offer to cook for us all. I accept her offer, happy to be off the hook in terms of having to demonstrate my negligible skills. However, Breton if not Gallic pride raises its head immediately, and Serge insists he will make the dessert. It'll be crepes, and I'm not going to argue with that.

The two chefs work away beside other cooks in the kitchen and we enjoy a fabulous meal. I'm concerned that Serge has made far too much batter for the crepes and we won't be able to finish it all – I also think it a bad idea if we try. I say this to Serge who smiles and roots in the supermarket bag beside him. Out comes a box of eggs and a pack of ham.

"I will make galettes for the petit dejeuner before we leave tomorrow", he tells us.

He did – and they were delicious. This food was a great foundation for the walk into Astorga. The day was going to end with two climbs and descents, but we had a gentle walk to Hospital de Orbigo, which we approach by crossing one of the longest and oldest medieval bridges in Spain. Like all ancient constructions it requires maintenance from time to time, and when we arrive it is swathed in scaffolding – not an attractive sight.

Crossing the bridge, we walk the Paso Honroso, the Passage of Honour. It's nothing to do with any achievement on our part, however. The story goes that during the fifteenth century, a local knight from Leon was jilted by a beautiful lady of the region. Presumably she went off with another man, for the chivalrous gentleman declared that he would defend the bridge against any knight who dared to try and cross it. Legend has it that they came from all over Europe to take up the challenge. Quite how this might have advantaged all those who took up the challenge is not clear since all of them were vanquished. The challenger, Don Suero de Quinones, really can't be said to have done any better for, after he had broken 300 lances in combat with his foes, he took off for Santiago to give thanks for his 'success' but this triumph did not include regaining the attention of the object of his affections. From the many companions I have and will meet on this Way, I don't think any will have a similar motivation for travelling to Santiago as the good Don Suero.

Stopping for lunch in Hospital gives the battlegroup a chance to catch up with each other. It really is lunchtime, so the pharmacy on the edge of the central square is closed. My leg is sore again, and this time it is Tony who offers me one of his paracetamol tablets. As the rest-stop continues the pain eases, but I decide to wait here till the shops open and buy a supply of pain killers while the others go on. I promise I will be able to continue and, as Captain of the battlegroup, my word is accepted. In my own mind, I'm certain I won't let pain come between me and my comrades 'togetherness'; and not for the first time on this

trip I see the importance of the group and bonding within it for keeping the purpose on track and the individual 'on message'.

With the blessings of modern technology and my family's insistence that I carry a mobile phone, during the afternoon I can keep the others in touch with my progress and let them know I'm close behind. In turn I learn from them that Martina and Ute are about to take a taxi into Astorga; Ute still has her foot problems and Martina is beginning to develop some of her own . Following messages sent between others but circulated to the whole group, I can see that Tony has identified the albergue for the night and the 'girls' will head there and pay for all our beds so that they can then strew their clothes over the five beds, indicating to all-comers that these beds are taken. They will all be bottom bunks tonight – thank God.

Serge and Tony take the main road and a gentle wind around the final hill down into Astorga. I feel obliged to stick to the Camino, just as I feel obliged to 'stick to the rules' with most things in life. The result is a pleasant plateau ramble which ends at the Cruceiro Santo Toribo, a 5th century stone cross which commemorates where Bishop Toribo of Astorga died. It gives a marvellous view over the city and out towards the northwest, but then I'm faced with a steep enough descent into the suburbs of the city. This is not good for someone with leg problems, and I should possibly have taken the tarmac road, but the view was worth any extra pain.

I walk through the suburb of San Justo, knowing I am not too far behind the other men. It's late afternoon on a Friday and the bars are beginning to fill with the TGIF crowd who, this being Spain, may well have been there since lunchtime: I judge by their behaviour that some of them certainly have. My mind has just turned to a beer when I see an oasis in the desert: it's a circular red table on the street outside a bar with two one-litre tankards of beer on it and two very recognisable men sitting behind the beers. I join Tony and Serge, and order up for all of us. We are men after all and, given the women are holding our beds for the night, there's nothing to hurry on for – is there?

When we reach the hostel, what have the women done? Got on with preparing an evening meal: Ute is cooking this time and it's salami and peppers on bread to start with a chicken and mushroom pasta dish for mains. Our thoughtful female companions have purchased beer to go with the meal and this perfectly compliments (or, rather, continues) our earlier beverage consumption. I know Martina and Ute are Social workers, but they are showing far too good an understanding of us men.

After the meal we go out to the square looking for somewhere to continue our drinking. We are definitely not pilgrims at this stage, or if we are then the grail we now seek is not the one that was on our mind earlier in the day. There is some excitement when we discover a bar serving Murphy's Red Beer.

"Is this like Guinness, Mike?"

I assure them it isn't. But, it's Irish – so we must have some. Not my idea I hasten to add, and there is little enthusiasm for the product from the others when it arrives. Perhaps, like some wines, it doesn't travel well. Martina goes to the bar and orders a round. The waiter comes back with Rum and Cokes all round, so now I know the evening is going to deteriorate. Deterioration is a relative concept. This is something I come to appreciate when, later on, the tequilas start to arrive.

Earlier in the evening Ute and Martina went on a shopping spree, now they want to show us the purchases they have made: they've bought presents for all of us! These are tangible mementoes of our bond as walkers of the Way. Serge is given some Camino-related studs to decorate his Breton flag which is now hoisted daily above his rucksack, and Tony receives a bracelet. The bracelet consists of a metal disk fastened to the wrist by interwoven black leather strings. The disk is engraved with a cross. Martina has bought an identical bracelet for herself, though the design on the disk is different. Hers has the scallop shell embossed on it.

The women give me a small compass with a hook which I can clip onto a strap of my rucksack and so have it close at hand to consult. Of course I don't need it to find my way on the Camino, it is so well marked. But I am deeply touched by the gift. I'm still not sure what I'm looking for on this pilgrimage, but I've certainly found plenty to feed my mind as well as my body. The compass hints that I may discover my true direction as I walk on further.

We end the night on the floor. Not literally though, we are looking at our feet. We each kick off our sandals and put our bare feet against the table stand below us as well as against those feet on either side of us. We can all see all the feet: these things have been through so much in recent weeks, suffering to different degrees: but they are what have got us this far. We all take out our cameras and record an image of these heroes.

Arriving back in the albergue, we go straight to our room and bed. We are five and the sixth bed has been filled in our absence. It's a young Italian woman who arrived late in the evening with her boyfriend; there were no rooms with two spare beds, so they have been separated and she is reclining in splendid isolation reading her guide book when the storm troopers arrive. Truth to tell, we are not at all aggressive – just very happy and wanting people to understand this fact.

Not only was it a little late in the night for the Phantom to appear, but he wasn't too sure if he could get into his shroud without a tumble to the floor. Tony rummaged in his rucksack in a corner of the room. When he stood up, we were faced with a reincarnation of the recently assassinated Osama bin Laden. I thought he very much looked the part.

The Italian woman was clearly in agreement. She quickly got up and explained she needed to visit her boyfriend who was in another room. Fair enough, we thought, and prepared for bed. A while later, our dorm mate returns with boyfriend, who scours the room – only to

see five bodies settled down for the night. He whispers a “Goodnight” to his girl and leaves - probably wondering what on earth she could have been fussing about.

The following morning finds the troopers back at the bar in the main square: this time it’s for a solid breakfast rather than a liquid digestif. Another pilgrim, seeing our scallop shells, stops by the bar entrance to ask us if he’s on the right track for getting out of town. He is, of course, but I’m intrigued with his head gear. I think he’s making some sort of fashion statement, until I unpack the apparition in my own mind: it’s an ordinary wide-brimmed hat with a small solar panel mounted on top. He tells me he can keep both his mobile phone and camera charged with the power the sun provides through these cells. The time may come when we will all have to wear one of these as we go about daily our business. It wouldn’t hurt – would it?

As we settle ourselves at a table, a school trip arrives and some twenty-odd teenagers line up at the bar, pointing to this drink and that pastry as the bar staff try to impose some sort of order on proceedings. We’re going to have a long wait, and we sit looking at each other across the empty table.

I’ve already taken a prophylactic pain killer, encouraged to do so by the swelling that is now apparent above my right ankle. I’m not sure about how I am going to fare on the road today and, while I know this sort of thing is supposed to happen at supper, I have a real sense that this is the Last Breakfast.

In time we are served and, when the last dregs are swallowed from the coffee cups, Tony and Serge get up to go. They want to cover a bit more than just one stage today and have set themselves a 26 kilometre walk to Foncebadon with climbs, but no descents, on the way. I’m guessing we’re going to find it cooler tonight than we did last night given we’ll be at a higher elevation.

I’m going to wait till the cathedral opens to make a visit there, and ‘the girls’ want to ramble round the shops – so we three remain at our table and order more coffee. In time I get on the road and find I’m moving with little pain, though not with complete comfort. A couple of kilometres out of town and I pass Ecce Homo, a small restored hermitage with a caretaker in attendance. The interior is a chapel now, the size of a modern bedroom. A rest would be good for my leg, no harm in taking a little time to sit and think.

The caretaker sits at the doorway and I have this holy place all to myself, there are no hurried tourists, toting cameras, who let off flashes in every direction. It’s the peace and quiet I’m appreciating. Instead of thinking, I try to let all thought go. To be as empty and as free as the space I’m sitting in. I doubt a Zen master would certify that I reached the level of emptiness and freedom I was seeking but, aware now of the soreness returning to my leg, I had a sense of having everything I needed at this time. I was amused to find myself including the sore leg in the basket of things I needed, and wondered what that could mean. Would

the problem with my leg cause my plans to change in a way that would open me to something I wasn't expecting - yet something I needed to experience or understand.

As I left the hermitage, the woman offered me a stamp for my credencial. She obviously recognised an anorak when she saw one – even if it was wearing only T-shirt and shorts. In fact there were two stamps to be given here: I wasn't sure if this was because of the 'holiness' of the site, or because it was seen as the way to attract a better donation – donativo – from the passing pilgrim. I signed the visitor book and saw Martina and Ute had been here already.

Coming out into the bright sun, I looked back to Astorga in the distance. There, clearly visible on the skyline, are the towers of the cathedral. In my camera lens, their magnificence is dwarfed by the simplicity of the hermitage in the foreground.

Before continuing, I pack away my credencial with its two large new stamps. Now these really are bigger than some of the cathedral tampons I've gained. The small kid definitely punching above her weight.

At Murias I'm only five kilometres out of town, but I need another rest and I'm walking right past a bar: so it's a no-brainer. I enjoy a mineral in the shade. Along with a huge bag of crisps: other pilgrims who have become aware of my walking problem (it's not too difficult, you can see the limp now) have not been short of advice and several people have emphasised the importance of taking in enough salt in this heat. It's easy for me to take such advice, since I love crisps, peanuts and a well salted plate of food – not the most healthy approach normally, but it might serve me well in my present predicament.

There is different advice from others which recommends taking a day off from walking. I don't "hear" this, which is the fashionable way to say that I ignore these timely words. With hindsight, I should have heeded the help that was being offered by this suggestion. I understand that I didn't because my focus was out in the world around me, not on how I was in myself. The pain was a message, telling me that I was going in a bad direction and something needed to be done. I was reading it as a problem in itself and that it needed to be dealt with. Interestingly, the treatment of choice was a pain killer that masked the problem/message rather than dealt with/heeded it. I know that at this point in the Camino I was being, literally, taught a lesson. As I write, I appreciate I still may have not learned it. I wanted to stay with the battlegroup, and so would march to the group drum (or pace) rather than my own.

I finish my drink and pack away the remainder of the crisps for later. When I walk out, my exit coincides with the passing of a young pilgrim who isn't going to stop here. This is Stephan, recently awarded a post-graduate qualification in psychology and wanting to work in Rehabilitation. I'm happy to share the facts that my own background is in both these areas, and I've taught at post-grad level myself.

Stephan dives right in. This doesn't feel quite right: I thought the old guy was supposed to be the examiner and the young fella the candidate for examination. But the grilling Stephan gives me puts me very much on my toes and takes my attention away from my leg. I think I may have offered him some interesting points to ponder by the time we reach the next village: happily there's a Spanish gentleman on the road who seems to want to engage us in conversation, and I may have a rest from the questions.

Stephan has good Spanish, and the two men fall straight into debate on the previous year's World Cup Football final between, you've guessed it – Spain and the Netherlands. I can sit this one out.

At Santa Catalina, only 10 kilometres into the day, we catch up with Tony and Serge. But they are finishing their rest and I want to start one. It has been a bit of a climb to get here, though I note now that climbing is a little easier than walking on the flat and most certainly easier than going downhill, which causes excruciating pain. For the only time on the pilgrimage, I'm happy to see from the map that the rest of the day is a climb.

The others move off and with them goes Stephan, though he starts to move at a faster pace now and I can see him leaving my friends behind. In time, I too move off.

After a flat stretch, the climb starts towards my destination for the day. On the right of the path as I climb is a fence made of wire formed into squares. Over the years, pilgrims have been unable to pass this without leaving their mark – in the form of a small crucifix woven into the wire squares. There are now very many crosses, mostly made of wood which I guess has been taken from the ground round about. Many of the "markers" that punctuate this pilgrimage route in the cities and towns are highly visible edifices built on hallowed ground by master craftsmen from another age; here is something different. It's more transient perhaps, it's created by the pilgrims themselves and it is something that stays beside you for some time as you walk, rather than something to be passed by.

These crosses each commemorate the same individual who died over two thousand years ago. It strikes me that the tiny crosses were made by people who themselves will die, indeed may have already died in some cases. I come to see them as the visible memorials to the people who have passed by here before me, doing something that is now invisible to the world – walking the Camino.

At Rabanal del Camino, I walk past the first albergue on the outskirts intent on finding a particular hostel in a more central location. I'm hoping for a place in the Gaucelmo Albergue. It is run by the Confraternity of Saint James, so English is spoken there and afternoon tea is served to pilgrims on arrival. The snag is that they only have 46 beds, and I don't think I stand a chance at this late hour of the afternoon. In the event – I'm quite right: not a hope in hell as it turns out.

Continuing up the street, I find Tony and Serge taking another rest. They are planning to go for another 6 kilometres to the hamlet of Foncebadon, and they expect 'the girls' to join them there. For me, Rabanal is the end of the road for today. I wish the lads 'all the best' and hope I might catch them in the times ahead. In my heart, I know this won't be so.

As I watch them out of sight up the road westwards, I go into drama queen mode and imagine myself as Captain Oates in the Antarctic. His last words to his comrades before he walked out of the tent and into the snow to die, leaving his friends less burdened, were:

"I am just going outside and may be some time."

The comparison is ridiculous. Here it's warm, not cold – and I'm going to spend the night indoors not out. And a very comfortable indoors it is. The central hostels are all full and I will have to walk back out of town, possibly to that one I passed a long time ago on the way in to find a bed. My leg hurts, I've done well today – all things considered. I plump for a bit of comfort and go for a hotel. It's the Posada Gaspar at the top of town. Back in the seventeenth century it was a pilgrim hospital, but it's been renovated and gone upmarket a bit. For forty one euro, I get my own room with, once more, the luxury of real sheets and a real towel and my own bathroom. Plus there's a TV, but since I don't speak Spanish I'm not counting that as a bonus. But the bathroom has a bath – and I take one – for an hour, topping up the hot as I notice the cooling taking place.

Before my meal, which I take in the hotel, I visit the bar. Half way through my second beer, I see that sangria is available. Over my three weeks in Spain so far I have never seen this offered. I must have one! And the rest is history – except I don't remember it too well.

They say you can always recognise a tourist in Spain – he's the one drinking sangria. It's a summer drink for the Spanish, but down in the south where most of the tourists go, you'll find it all year round. Up here in the north, it's usually available only during the season. This may explain why I haven't seen it anywhere so far. Here in Rabanal I'm told it has only just come back on the bar menu. I'm thankful that it has – I have a very good night's sleep.

In the morning I leave the hotel at 7.30am. It involves no more than going through the hotel door, turning left and walking straight on. I haven't gone far before I'm caught up by Stephan, and we go on together. He spent the night in the first hostel I passed and he regales me with tales of reunions with people he had met earlier in his walk. I spent the night alone and have nothing to tell – apart from what I can recall of the sangria, which isn't very interesting. I feel a bit guilty – like I'm in confession – when I tell this impecunious student that I stayed in a place where I had my own room and facilities.

We stop for breakfast where the rest of the battlegroup would have spent the night – but they're long gone at this stage. It's the small village of Foncebadon and the albergue is the only building of note and the only place which shows any signs of life when we arrive. The owners are busy cleaning when we arrive but one stops to serve us breakfast for three euro:

loads of toast, butter, jam, salami – and, very special, fresh fruit. It's like an "eat-as-much-as-you-can" place, with as much tea, coffee or hot chocolate as you wish.

The place is very clean but a bit ramshackle in a hippy sort of way. A hand decorated, be-flowered notice announces at the counter that there's a yoga session every morning at 8am. I've never done yoga, but I would have given it a try if I'd stayed here. The bright primary colours on the walls and furnishings tell me this is my kind of place.

Facing me, as I entered the hostel, was the stairway to the beds and beside it a large bucket with a notice reading:

"Deja o Coge". And, helpfully, the translation: "Leave or Take".

In the bucket was an assortment of clothing and walking gear. I had no need of anything, nor did I have anything to leave – but this seemed to me to be an elegant form of recycling as well as a method of usefully disposing of 'lost property'. As I knew from my experience with the sunglasses in France, no one would be coming back looking for things once they had moved on.

Alone again, as Stephan has taken a quicker breakfast and gone on ahead with other friends who were passing through, I continue a further two kilometres up the road to the Cruz de Fero – one of the iconic symbols on the Camino Frances. I don't need any Spanish to know these words translate as "The Cross of Iron".

The cross itself is mounted atop a well weathered pole, around the base of which is a pile of stones left by pilgrims. Each pilgrim arriving here might pick up a stone from the surrounding area and add it to the pile. Some people have brought favours of one sort or another and they cast those onto the pile too.

Here people stand around chatting or else take a seat on the ground and rest. Others search for stones or something else to add to the pile while still more reverently add what they have brought with them at the base of the cross. There is an air of activity about the place which somehow doesn't sit right with me and I simply take a photo and walk on, not stopping to add to the pile.

"I am the stone", I say to myself, "And I'm keeping on the move". I'm a Rolling Stone, I think, and smile at the idea. Then realise – I don't want to gather any moss. If anything, this walk is about scraping the moss off myself after a life of allowing it to gather, by spending time planning and hoping rather than living. As I write I think of Patrick, that young Englishman who has the card from my Camino pack with John Lennon's words on. Do I need to tell him not to let the moss grow, as I believe I have done? Knowing him, I suspect he has the message already. He plays a mean game at second row in his school rugby team, but he's a thinker. At 14 years old, he spotted a photo of my children, whom he knew to be adopted. Without a second thought, he asked:

“Mike, who’s fault was it you didn’t have children – yours or Joyce’s?”

I answered his question with honesty. And then I realised – not a lot of people know that. Patrick gets to the heart of matters very quickly: I think that’s a good thing. “Unlikely to gather moss” is my “school report” on this boy.

I’m now at 1500 metres above sea level and have been climbing steadily with the respite of the odd short plateau since Astorga. But what goes up must come down, and I can see from my guide book that the remaining 18 kilometres that I will walk to my night stop will be all downhill, and some of it very steep. This does not look good from the point of view of my leg, but I can see no other way out of it. Of course, in reality I can – a taxi from the next village being one option, but I am going to walk all of this Camino if it kills me. I know it won’t kill me, and I guess it’s the knowing of this fact that is my undoing. I walk on

At the 10km mark from Rabanal, I pass Manjarin. I’m not going to stop here, but wish I could simply to support the initiative of the hospitalero Tomas. He looks like he could be a knight and, in reality he’s a modern day one, providing a rest stop and accommodation in this lonely spot which sits only one hundred metres below the Cruz de Fero. There are 20 places to sleep; these are mattresses on the floor. The toilet is an outside one – that’s a cold walk for people like me who are inclined to get up in the night - and the water comes from a well across the road. Solar panels provide a little hot water and the guide book says the open fire provides a space heater. The blogs say there’s more smoke than fire, and both you and your kit will be impregnated.

Since the cross I’ve had a gentle descent to Manjarin. Now, after a slight rise, I face into the last ten kilometres into Molinaseca. This stretch is the continuous and steep descent I’ve seen on my map, and it hurts. I could have stopped for the night a little way down at the attractive village of Acebo, but I hold to my choice to continue to the bottom and the end of the stage at Molinaseca.

On the way I caught up with Ute and Martina. Their descent was slower than mine, they were feeling it in the legs, like me – but also in the feet. I slowed my pace to theirs and we walked on together. I was noticing how like the Montagne Noir these hills were. I felt as if I were back in Mas Cabardes and just out for an afternoon walk. The weight of the rucksack and my sore leg reminded me I wasn’t.

Up ahead – except it was “up below” – I could see a small group gathered on the path. When we reached the people, they were all standing round a man lying beside the track with a handkerchief over his head. Someone was pouring the contents of their water bottle over the hankie. A worried woman fretted at his side, she must be his wife. He was older than me, possibly early seventies and he had collapsed with heat stroke.

Unwisely the man had been walking without a hat. It’s easy to be critical in the searing heat of the afternoon and say what an idiot he was, but earlier in the day he would have left in

the morning mists from some place higher up, and no doubt enjoyed the freedom of bearing his scalp to the elements. He simply forgot to cover up as the day wore on, and now he was paying for it. The emergency services had been rung, so there was nothing to do but wait and keep him as comfortable as possible.

Martina suggested I walk on and get my leg to the end of the day as quickly as was comfortable so that I could put it up, and this I did. Continuing the descent, I soon came to a road where a walker was waiting to point the ambulance up the track. Shortly after, the said vehicle passed me travelling in the opposite direction, and then some time later it passed me again – this time travelling in the same direction as me. I subsequently heard that the man was making a good recovery in hospital at Ponferrada, but that was the end of his Camino - for this year at any rate.

While I was determined to continue to the end the sight of this man, living evidence that real problems can occur for pilgrims, unsettled me a little. It was different two days ago when I had spoken to an English woman waiting with me to enter the cathedral in Astorga. She told me how an Italian man and herself had drunk from a fountain in a village before Astorga. They had both become sick and she had had to rest and be close to 'facililties' for three days in a private hostel in order to recover. Her Italian companion had been taken to hospital and she had had to leave him there. He was recovering and she got regular updates on his welfare. The two had only met a few days beforehand. But I had not seen any of the suffering, the woman was simply telling me history. This man collapsed at the side of the path was real and a very different matter.

The first thing I need when I get to Molinaseca is food and drink followed by a shower. The approach to the town involves crossing a bridge and there's a lively bar immediately on the left as I reach the far side. The terrace and then a lawn run down to the river from it. And there on the terrace sits Tony – again I see the inevitable tankard of beer. Of course I join him.

Having satisfied my hunger and thirst, I turn my mind to a bed for the night. I'm using up-market accommodation as a matter of course now, but feel I need to look after myself. I check-in to the luxury of a bedroom ensuite with television for €41 and return to tell Tony.

But he has gone. The day is moving on and I know he wants to get on to Ponferrada which is another 7 kilometres further on. I sit in the bar and wait for the girls – I'll see them easily as they cross the bridge. But they don't arrive and, after some time, I realise they probably passed through while I was looking for my bed and now they, with Tony, have headed on. Serge was already on his way before I arrived here.

I head back to my hotel room and give myself a treat. It may not be the best thing for my leg, but a warm soak in the bath for over an hour did a lot for the rest of my body – and I was certain that I was clean when I eventually got out.

Having dried and dressed, I do something a little strange which I have seen other walkers do in the albergue dorms along the way. I lie on my bed and prop my feet up against the wall above the headboard. I've learned from companions on the way, that this is the preferred method for reducing swelling of the leg, which is a symptom of tendonitis.

If it's going to help, I'll be happy to lie like this for the rest of the evening, but somewhere along the way, the idea of a beer and a light meal occurs, and I ramble out to a nearby restaurant. It's pleasantly quiet except for one table of about eight people who are making enough noise for a full restaurant. They're Italian, so no surprises there. Except one – making the most noise and generally holding court is Luigi, the opera singer. I bow my head – not to avoid recognition but to thank God I have a room to myself this night and I will be granted a peaceful sleep.

"If you want to make God laugh – tell him your plans". I wonder if He mucks about with our prayers in the same manner. I return to my room and settle myself for the restful sleep I expect. Before too long, in the silence of the night and right outside my window, a bell rings eleven times. The church is just across the street and it's going to ring the hour and half hour until I get up in the morning. Closing the window makes a bit of difference, but in this heat I want the cooling air of the night. I don't sleep much, but am not a good enough man to thank God there is no snoring in the room. In fact, I wish there was – mine!

Lying in bed, I feel I'm wasting time listening for the chimes, and I get up at 5.30am. I'm on the road in half an hour and heading to Ponferrada.

Before I reach the metropolis, I pass a simple black cross beside the path. It reads:

Pilgrim
P. Joseph Carty
Born 1927
Died in St James Way
2007
RIP

I had come across memorials to other pilgrims on my way, but this was someone from my homeland. Seeing this on the day after the man with sun stroke was a deep reminder that we are not tourists taking a comfortable route to view religious relics. This is serious stuff. Just how serious becomes evident after the walking is all over and we look at how our lives have changed: Martina, Ute, Tony, Serge and me. But that comes later, we've yet to reach our goal – and there's a bit of "process" still to come.

It's breakfast time when I arrive in the centre of Ponferrada. Walking near the impressive castle, I pass an upmarket coffee shop called "Godiva". It looks too posh for a pilgrim like me, but I'm amused by the name – it brings back the story from my school days of the noblewoman who rode naked through the streets of Coventry. We boys always thought it would have been a wonderful opportunity to cop a "butcher's" at a naked lady ("butcher's

hook" is Cockney slang for "look"). But that would not have been possible: the story goes that the citizenry were commanded to remain indoors and not to spectate while she took her ride. Only one man, by the name of Tom, disobeyed. He cut a hole in one of his shutters, saw Godiva pass by in her pelt, and was struck blind. This poor man has given to the English language the term "Peeping Tom".

I have only gone a few steps past "Godiva", when I hear my name shouted behind me. It's Ute, who has come out of the eponymous café. Along with Martina and Tony, having spent the night just up the street, she's taking breakfast and wants me to join them all. As ever, Serge has gone on ahead to make as much ground as he can before the heat of the day really strikes.

Once inside, I can see from the rucksacks stacked against one of the walls, that the place is in fact full of pilgrims. Ute kindly buys my breakfast for me – a coffee with a huge hot bocadillo (roll, or baguette) of bacon and cheese. This has become a favourite of mine, but I'll have to answer for this to Ernan, my family doctor, when I have a cholesterol test in a few months' time.

Between mouthfuls, I loudly explain how I have already covered 7 kilometres at such an early hour.

"No, it wasn't snoring, it was a bloody bell".

A man two tables away has paid his bill and hoisted his rucksack, but now he advances towards us instead of in the other direction towards the door.

"I couldn't help overhearing you. It's your accent – where are you from?" he asks.

"Ireland"

"Yes, I know, but what part?"

"Bray, County Wicklow"

"Dear God – me too"

"Where abouts?

"Parnell Road"

This is another Tony and he lives no more than a five minute walk from my home in Ireland. We've never met, but it turns out we have several mutual acquaintances. In my life I've had several experiences like this: they all go to prove what a small world we live in. This strange man on the Camino is as near as damn it a neighbour of mine. Come to think of it, so are the others who walk around me. Could I substitute "neighbour" for "brother". What would

Jesus say – or any of the other founders of religious movements which (at their inception at any rate) seek to promote peace and harmony on earth.

In time, those at my table want to get mobile as well, so we go out onto the street. Facing me is that grand castle. It's called Castillo de los Templarios, and not even I need a dictionary to make the translation. If it has a Templar connection, I'd like to see it – so the others walk on while I head up to the castle gate. When I get there, a notice tells me it doesn't open till 11am. That's nearly two hours away and I'm faced with a not infrequent dilemma for real pilgrims who travel by foot: either hang around till opening time, see this interesting monument and risk difficulties with walking in the heat late in the day and locating appropriate accommodation – or getting into the process of walking the Camino. I choose the latter.

Making my way out to the suburbs, I come to a junction of what looks like two important roads. There's a roundabout with an imposing monument in the middle – some sort of metal sculpture. On the approach there is a sign: "Monumento a los Donantes de Sangre". It's a wonderful location in which to glorify some past combat or heroism in wartime, but this space has been used to acknowledge the contribution of blood donors – ordinary people who never became famous, and never will. They are honoured for all time here. And the metal sculpture? Now I look more carefully, it appears to be a giant drop of blood

After 8 kilometres of painful walking where I'm going slower than is the norm for me and being overtaken by other walkers – which is certainly not the norm for me – I catch up with Martina and Ute, and slow my pace even further. We walk into the little hamlet of Fuentas Nueves. On our right there's a stone Camino way mark, yellow shell and arrow pointing the way on a blue background. We see a piece of paper on top, kept in place by pebbles from the rough road. Other people leave such notes, or write in the dust of the path, for friends who are following them – messages to give information or, simply, encouragement to keep going. Some days back I had read one in English:

"If you've found a mobile – it's mine. Please drop it into the municipal hostel in Villadangos tonight" (and it gave the date).

What we're looking at in Fuentas seems to be a message for us. It has a red rose beside the little pile of pebbles, and the note reads:

"Mike, Ute, Martina". Under our names a smiley face is drawn, and then comes

"Life is Good!" It's the legend from the T-shirt I wear every night. This is a message from Tony.

Martina, who by this time it has become obvious, has a fondness for Tony takes the flower and the note. Ute and I each take one of the stones. I don't know why, but I have kept the pebble to this day – it sits beside my compass. Perhaps at some level I knew that on this day

I had seen Tony for the last time on this Camino, and this would be some sort of memory of him for me to hold on to. Like the compass, providing me with a link in to my experience of this Way – a memorial.

Creating memorials to what we value is important. The Blood Donor monument is an example. Eight months later, while I am writing my Camino experience, an email arrives from Tony. He's sent it to members of the battlegroup, and it contains an attachment of photographs. These show his post-pilgrimage creativity: using some form of plaster, he's made a stone the size and the shape of a Camino waymark. Near the top he has embedded the scallop shell he carried on his rucksack. At the base is written, in the traditional yellow on a blue background: "Saint Jacques de Compostelle". Tony has planted this in his garden surrounded by a bed of flowers, and below the writing is an arrow and "1609kms" – pointing the direction and the distance from this spot, his home, to the Spanish destination of pilgrims. This is his memorial

This email is soon followed by one from Martina. Now in a relationship with Tony, conducted necessarily at a distance, she too is expressing what the Camino has done to her. This German woman is learning French – perhaps to help strengthen her relationship with the Frenchman. Both the Little Frog (Tony was the first to call himself by the term) and Martina have good English. Which is just as well, since it was the only language the two could communicate in before the German woman started to learn French. Martina writes her feelings in another foreign language so that we others can understand. I find it powerful stuff:

Bevor i go to sant diago
my heart was lost
it was the beginning,
dont know what i trust..

the first day was over,
i had so much pain,
i want to go home,
do that never again...

but something was calling,
it was deep inside..
i know something will happends,
i feel it inside..

so i dont stop that walking..
go miles after miles,
camino was talking,
and not for a while

i was walking and walking..
day after day...
and than i was talking..
with a woman, she say:

the camino dont give you
what you want, or you will..
the camino still give you,
what you need, by the way..

and i think, what i needed,
was an irish and france,
there gave me my peace,
and one more a chance..

now i never imaging,
a life without you,
i will love you forever,
and this is the truth

we are like a family,
and maybe some more..
its like, semper fi..
you are all, i ask for..

The stone and the poem, like the words on this page, were created as a response to walking the Camino, and they are memorials to that experience.

But at this moment we are in Fuentes Nuevas standing by a waymark, holding a bit of paper, a rose, and some stones. It's a significant place for me. I don't know it yet – but I have seen Serge and Tony for the last time on my way to Santiago, and I am about to say a last farewell to the girls on this pilgrimage.

I have been slowing even more in my walking. Martina and Ute want to get on to Villafranca del Bierzo, because that's where the men will rest tonight. For me, it is a bridge, or rather a town with several bridges, too far. Cacabellos is six kilometres further on, and another six on top of that to this particular Villafranca is impossible for me.

When I get there, I have to walk right through Cacabellos and across the river, a kilometre out of town, in order to reach the municipal albergue. It's located in the grounds of a chapel, Capilla de las Angustia. The chapel is 18th century but built on the grounds of a much older chapel and pilgrim hospice.

An unusual carving over the sacristy door shows the boy Jesus playing cards with St Anthony. There are a number of art works extant which show this saint in the company of Jesus as a baby or child; a little puzzling since Anthony was born more than a thousand years

after Jesus himself. Was he a time traveller? I don't think so, but it's interesting how "the church" transports its heroes around history – we've already seen St James arrive in Spain some centuries after his death to assist in the expulsion of the Moors.

Of more interest to me is the portrayal of Jesus playing cards. I think this carpenter, for all his insights on the human condition and for all his healing skills, was in reality "one of the lads". Sure, he had to be to get twelve other men to follow him around as they did. Men are men, and holy water with the promise of salvation wasn't going to do it all for those guys.

I enter the albergue by a gate off the street and I'm into the courtyard which surrounds all but the façade of the chapel. The sleeping quarters are built into the perimeter wall, and it's two to a room. I think this is wonderful – until I look up at the ceiling. There isn't one. The walls rise to the joists and then stop, after that there's the roof. This means there is no soundproofing between sleeping spaces and anyone snoring anywhere is going to be a disturbance to everyone. No matter, I'll take my shower and hope for the best.

The roof of the shower area is covered with corrugated Perspex and after the day's sun beating down, the room is like a sauna. Here again, I find no temperature controls on the shower and the water is boiling. Some while later, I emerge into open air, sweatier than when I went in. Will I complain to management? The thought never occurs to me. As with every other day, I'm thankful that I'm safely at the end of the day's walk. I text home one word – the name of the town I am in. They'll be able to find it on the map, and they'll know I'm in for the night.

Now I need a meal and would like a beer. That means a walk back into town, but I do it slowly and find a bar with a pilgrim menus. Coming out onto the street later, I bump into Dutch Stephan. He's charmed with himself – he's found a bar further up the road. For fourteen euros, he has his own room there for the night with a shared bathroom and toilet down the corridor. That's only nine euro more than I'm paying, for heaven's sake. Normally that's a world of a difference amounting to two bed nights in some albergues. But back in the real world where I lived up until a few weeks ago, it's a pittance – and well worth it to avoid the one kilometre walk that is now ahead of me if I'm to get to my bed tonight.

On the way, I take a rest at the town's church. Here I find an unusual representation of Christ. Whenever I go into Christian churches and in whatever country, I'm used to seeing the figure of Jesus nailed to the cross. It's a ghastly sight which always brings home to me the horror of execution and the taking of another's life. Somehow, and perhaps strangely, this gets between me and an appreciation of the torture being inflicted on this particular individual. Another mediating influence comes from the childhood thought which is still with me:

“He’s dying for our sins because he wants to save us – so this stuff is okay then”. Clearly someone should have had a word with my Sunday School teacher, as she may not have been quite “on message”.

But in this church, the body of Christ is shown in a glass case. It is dressed in a loincloth and reclining on a crimson pillow and mattress: the blooded body suggesting it has recently been taken from the Cross. In this unusual representation, the awfulness becomes more apparent to me.

Back at the albergue, I get out my camera to take pictures of my surroundings. I now have a roommate. He’s Clovis, a young Brazilian man, who seems intent on organising his bed and then getting into it. He wants an early night. Out in the courtyard I photograph a young Frenchman washing his clothes, in order to show the basic facilities that I used sometime earlier. His companion smiles to me:

“This is a special picture you make. It is the first time Bernard has washed his clothes on the pilgrimage”.

“How long have you been going?” I ask.

“Six weeks”, the reply is grinned back at me. I move away a bit. I guess if you arrive in late at night (which some younger people may do because they start the day later, because they stay in the bars later the previous night) the chances of getting your gear dry in time for the morning are slimmer and you may not want to take a chance. Forward planning may not be a strong point for some young people, but then they do seem to live very comfortably with the consequences - as the two grinning faces testify.

When I awake next morning, it is clear I cannot continue. My leg is now very swollen, it hasn’t come down during the night as it had on previous nights. If I walk on, I don’t think I’ll get far and I suspect I might do some serious damage. Clovis is concerned too:

“You must stop. At least take a few days rest here. Look, you can go down to the river and sit on the bank with your leg in the water. It’s a nice way to spend the day.”

First, I’d better secure my bed for the night. I go and talk to the hospitalero. I tell her I can’t walk on, but she’s having none of it – if I can get out of bed then I can move on. I knew the rules: one night only. So I packed my rucksack and, with a farewell to Clovis, headed back towards town. On the way, Stephan passes going west: another goodbye to someone I won’t see again.

I follow the advice of Clovis and sit with my leg in the river. Dew is still on the grass, so more than my leg gets wet; and the water is icy, I can only stand it for about twenty minutes. But I do feel better, and I walk across the bridge into town. I soon realise the improvement I have experienced has come about through the anaesthesia of cold water rather than actual healing.

When I get into town, I appreciate I'm in a bit of a dilemma. I need help, I'm all on my own and I don't speak the language. This means I can't ask the way to a doctor and if I do, by chance, find one I won't be able to describe the problem. I have a bright idea – I'll go into an internet café, Google a translation of the things I want to say and then hit the street again.

As I enter one of the aforementioned establishments, I notice a flyer on the door:

"Clases de Ingles! Profesora Natiava (IRLANDA)". I said I didn't have any Spanish, and I don't, but you wouldn't need to be a linguist to know what that means. Emma has added her "mov" number underneath and this must be her mobile. I turn and come out onto the street to make a call. I walk across to an open space where I think I might sit down and when I get there, what do I see? A bright white clinic and an open door. I think I may as well give it a try, and walk in. It's some kind of community hospital with a few elderly people waiting their turn to be seen. At Reception, I flash my E111, the card that grants me free medical treatment as a citizen of an EU country, and somehow jump the queue.

Drawing on the skills I had honed playing charades late in the night at drunken parties, I described my problem, and was readily understood. The Spanish people in the room (a doctor and two nurses) were equally skilled and, using a mixture of signs coupled with shouting at me ever louder when I didn't understand (I thought the English were the only ones to do that) I got the message. My leg was going to be strapped and I must keep this on for five days; I should use an ice pack regularly during the day; and I must take prescribed anti-inflammatory medication for eight days. The prescription was written after it had been established that I had no allergies. I don't recall the words used but I know I was paying careful attention when a box of capsules were rattled at me and I picked up the gist of what was being said.

I never got to talk to Emma, but I walked out of the clinic on air, and certain that with a few days of rest I'd be on my way again. I found a pension for the night, with the possibility to extend my stay as needed and, by lunchtime was installed in my room. I spent the rest of the day there with my leg up above the bedhead, and the icepack getting to 'frozen' in the ice cream cabinet beside the bar downstairs.

In the evening I go to Pilgrim Mass in the church. There's no devotion on my part here. I know the priest stamps credenciales for pilgrims afterwards, and the mark and date on my card will account for my movements (or lack of them) when I get to the cathedral office in Santiago.

I finish the day with a meal eaten on the street at a table outside my pension. There is a Plaza across the street: young boys kick football, young men lean against a wall, perhaps discussing the young women on the far side. The young women look everywhere but at the young men, discussing them no doubt. An elderly couple stroll across the plaza hand in hand. All human life is here.

Looking back on this day when I awake the following morning, I realise it was the most inactive day I have spent since leaving home. I must have walked no more than two kilometres and, as I reach for my clothes to dress, I want to get moving again towards my next stop – just as I have done every morning as I dressed for the last forty four days. But when I stand up and put my weight on my feet, my leg tells me this isn't going to happen. Tonight I'll still be here – and that means I'll be spending two consecutive nights in the same bed for the first time in nearly two months.

Another long session is spent with my leg up on the wall, then a late breakfast, and then a walk to the river where I sit on a bench in the sun and read. There's a path that follows the bank downstream which looks more and more tempting the longer I sit. Beside the path at regular intervals are green and white metallic structures: gym equipment which allows the passer-by to exercise the muscles in various limbs. There's the possibility for some chin ups as well as stationary cycling and there are walking machines. Using each machine in turn, one could achieve a full body work-out within a one hundred yard walk beside the relaxing sound of the waters of the Rio Cua tumbling over the town weir.

By lunchtime, the air hasn't really heated up in the normal way and – for me – it's too early to eat. With all the rest and, no doubt the help of the medication, I feel ready for a walk now. I'd love to take off the bandage which covers my leg from toes to just below my knee. I want to see how far the swelling has gone down, but know if I take the thing off I won't be able to get it back on again properly. I get up and follow the path downstream as far as it goes, then turn and wander upstream for about a kilometre.

Returning to town, I find there are no ill effects from the three kilometre walk and I end the day, having skipped lunch, with a very nice fish dish and a few bottles of beer. I can't identify the fish, but it's probably hake as that seems to be a favourite with the Spanish. The beer is "Legado de Yuste" and at 6.5% I find it very pleasant for more reasons than just the taste.

Next morning my leg tells me that, at a pinch, I could move on. But a new problem has emerged overnight: I have an upset stomach and need to be near proper facilities for a while longer. I suspect it's the medication, and this time I do go through the door of the internet café – to check medication "side-effects"! I'm right, and stop taking the pills forthwith. I intended to go back on them if needed after my stomach settled but, in the event, this wasn't necessary – which means the medication did it's intended job within forty eight hours whatever about the unintended bit.

Through the morning, as I rested in my room, I began to feel better. Around midday I received a text on my mobile: the group pilgrimage from University College in Dublin was close to the village and would soon be walking through. These were the people I had met in Enniskerry in March – one member of the group being impressed enough with my plans to dub me "the real deal". I had to meet these people, and all round, I felt well enough to do so.

I walked back up the main street on the road for Ponferrada, and met the first of the group at the town boundary: they were Mary Finlay, the co-ordinator of this annual event for UCD students and staff, and Father John Callanan. I felt a bit of a fraud as I received their commiserations, given that I was moving quite well again – but I guess the bandaged leg did look impressive. I walked back through the town and out the other side to the municipal albergue where I left them to continue their journey to Villafranca del Bierzo. And they left me with an invitation to dine with them that evening. The arrangement was that if my stomach felt strong enough, I would take a taxi up and meet them in the central plaza.

This I was able to do and, arriving a little ahead of time, I sat myself at a table outside a bar in the central plaza. I sent Mary a text to let her know I had arrived and she replied that she, John and some other colleagues were ready to meet me. After a few more puzzled exchanges, Mary called to me from the far end of this Bar's terrace: we had been texting each other about meeting from one and the same location.

I walk with Mary and her companions back to their hostel, the Albergue Ave Fenix – or, as we would say, "Phoenix". And this albergue really did rise from the ashes. The previous one was burnt to the ground and for some time it continued as a tented community. It's run by a family who have dedicated their lives to the welfare of pilgrims passing through and I'll be joining a communal dinner tonight as the guest of UCD.

Before the meal, the UCD pilgrims are gathering for quiet time and reflection at the 12th century Romanesque Church of Santiago. In fact we'll sit around in the open air on the steps of the north door – the Puerta de Perdon, or Door of Pardon. In medieval times, pilgrims who became sick on the Camino and could go no further were able to end their pilgrimage here with a pardon and spiritual healing. The town was referred to as the "alternative Santiago" in those days.

Father John guides our time here. We reflect on how we're doing – on the pilgrimage as well as in life generally. What we're sorry about and what we could do better. The pain we carry as physical walkers – and maybe some other pains here and there too. We look with hope to the morrow and our continuation to our goal. We break bread and share it, in the Christian tradition. Then it's time to go round the corner for a Spanish-style family dinner.

After the meal, I order my taxi back to Cacabellos. As I wait, I see a faded newspaper article about this albergue and the family that run it. The philosophy of the pater familias is expressed within it:

"El Camino es tiempo de meditacion interior, no itinerario turistico."

I don't know if it's possible to 'catch' a language in the same way one catches a virus, but I've got the vocabulary here and I need no help to translate the message, which says it as it is. Back in my Pension, I go straight to bed: I'm going to be walking again in the morning - and in the afternoon. I'm moving on.

But before I leave I spend a great deal of the night 'moving'. I'm going to and from the toilet every half hour and getting no sleep at all. I had an unusually small amount to drink during the evening, but my bladder is filling as if there's a flood somewhere further upstream. It can't be the medication, because I've stopped taking it. I put it down to "nerves" or the heightened excitement about walking again that I'm aware of as I toss and turn in the bed. I feel as if I'm going to be performing in some theatre in the morning, and I've got an attack of stage fright.

Perhaps that's what it is, with me being the audience as well as the actor. I'm going to be judging myself as I get back to a routine I've missed these last three days.

At 5am I give up the unequal struggle for sleep. Having settled my account the night before, I am able to slip out of the pension at 5.40am, and begin my walk in peace and quiet along the lamp-lit street. At least, if anything goes wrong with my leg, I can slip back indoors under the cover of darkness and no one will know a thing.

After passing the albergue where I spent my first night in this town, I am out in the country and total darkness. I strap on my headlamp and light it. I can make out the road alright, but I don't want to miss any waymarks that send me off onto a track, and my map tells me there's one coming up on my right. Well up ahead I see another headlamp come on and when I look behind there's another further back. Three of us on the road, well-spaced – not at all like leaving St Jean Pierre de Port with its army of departing pilgrims. I need not have bothered with my own light: I see the one up ahead take the right turn, and I now know when to veer off.

I reach the hostel where I ate last night at 7.30am, and all's well with the leg. The seven kilometre walk has involved a one hundred metre climb, so the pace hasn't been hectic. I'm not concerned. I'm going all the way to the end, and where I get to each day is where I get to, and that's the end of it.

Three bleary eyed Irish students tumble out of the albergue as I pass. They're the last to leave, the rest of the group all being long gone. These three young people explored the town after last night's meal – this seems to have included several drinking establishments. For a while we walk together, but it's too early to talk. Then, after a while, they seem to wake up – and take off ahead of me, at pace, disappearing into the distance 'ere long.

There's a choice of three routes on this stage. Two involve climbs of different difficulty and length, but the shortest route is along the valley floor following the roadway. I'm not going to be a hero or a masochist, so I go along the bottom of the valley. So do the UCD students. Over dinner tonight I'll hear excited tales from people who did one or other of the high walks and they seem to have been well repaid for their efforts with the views they saw.

Along this road there are several "service areas". That's the word given to them on the bi lingual (Spanish and English) sign board as I approach, but these are for people not vehicles.

The board says I'm at Trabadelo. Pictures tell of the facilities available in this roadside grassy area: there's a water fountain, a picnic table and benches, a shelter (in case of rain) and a barbecue (but bring your own charcoal!). Most helpfully, it gives the distance to the next service area, so one can judge whether to stop here or not.

Trabadelo is a good place to rest and take stock, it's at the start of the long climb to O'Cebeiro – an ascent of 600 metres to our entry into Galicia, the province in which Santiago stands. Everything belonging to me seems to be working well, and I throw my rucksack onto my back and set off at the same time as a young man in his 20s. It's Benedict, a Spanish lad with good English. He's mad excited about the climb. I'm not, so I try and keep up with him in the hope that some of his enthusiasm for this punishment might rub off on me. It doesn't, and maybe that's an age thing – or else the dream that Benedict holds in the front of his mind as he walks purposefully ahead.

He's from Madrid and he's never been out of that city in his life. This is his first trip away from home, which seems strange to me for a young person in this fast moving twenty first century world. But it means he has never seen the sea before and he's dying for his first glimpse. He hopes to get it at O'Cebeiro tonight. I wish him the best as he powers away from me and into the climb. He'll end the day at 1300 metres above sea level but, at some two hundred kilometres from Fisterre and the sea, I think he'll be a little disappointed with the view tonight. I'm not going to say anything to slow his pace however, and soon I'm on my own again.

Benedict must have made the summit, for I didn't see him again. I stopped half way up the hill at La Faba , leaving the rest of the climb for tomorrow. I was well pleased with my progress, having covered 32 kilometres for the day.

The albergue in this tiny hillside hamlet was the parish house adjoining the Iglesia San Andres. It's run in the summer season by a German Confraternity of St James so, as with the Dutch in Villamayor de Monjardin and the English in Rabanal, it is a group of foreigners who welcome pilgrims here. When I check in, I learn that two monks from the monastery above in O'Cebreiro will come down to say Mass after dinner. I think I'll go.

I eat at the bar up in the centre of the hamlet and then drift down hill to be in time for a ceremony that yet again I will not understand – these are Spanish monks after all. As I approach the albergue and the church beside it, I can see a small crowd milling on the gravel between the two buildings. In the midst of the people, two men in monk's robes – the older one, in his sixties I would guess, with a cigarette. As I approach, the younger of the two moves away to the side of things, it seems to take time by himself. After a few moments, he calls us to follow him into the church. He speaks in English and then in German. In the church he introduces himself as Italian and tells us he'll be giving an interpretation during the service.

By my guess what follows is a shortened version of the Mass, but it takes longer than the standard. The older monk, a Spaniard, speaks in his native tongue and then the younger man translates into a variety of languages. The reading of the Gospel takes some time to organise and then an age to actually read. The men in charge have the piece typed out in a number of languages and they want readers. There's a bit of awkward shuffling, but volunteers put their hands up soon enough and the pages are distributed. Then we hear the Gospel read five times, perhaps to make sure we get the message. It's read in Spanish, German, Dutch, French – and, when my hour comes, I read it in English. It has already been established that there are no Italian pilgrims in today, so the younger monk doesn't get his chance to shine – but then he's doing so already.

We are invited to say the Lord 's Prayer together but in our native language: the resulting aural experience is, quite literally, to hear speaking in tongues.

The final marathon is the Sign of Peace. I recall the communal awkwardness when this act of making physical contact with fellow worshippers was first introduced to the liturgy some decades ago. We're totally relaxed about it now and, here in La Faba, it is turned into something of a social event. Everyone wants to give everyone else in the group a handshake or a hug, and inevitably in this pilgrim-community-in-motion there are people who haven't seen each other for several days. Giving the Sign of Peace here is what it's meant to be, it seems to me – an opportunity to catch up with others and make sure all is well with them. The two monks, having given all the peace they can, shift from foot to foot as the rest of us continue in our reunions. I haven't met any long lost friend – those people are all well ahead of me and nearer to Santiago. I'm chatting with a man I've only just met; and he advises me to move nearer the front. Soon the monks will be looking for volunteers to come forward and be cleansed in a washing-of-feet ceremony.

The older monk claps his hands while the younger one makes herding gestures to get us all back into the now empty pews. We had all come out in front of the altar and into the side aisles for a more comfortable place to chat. The invitation for the foot washing was given in Spanish, so guess who was slow off the mark. Seven pilgrims were chosen. They sat in front of the altar facing the rest of us. The first had her feet washed by the older monk while the younger held the bowl of water and a towel. After her feet had been dried, she was invited to take the place of the Spaniard and wash the feet of the next pilgrim. And so it continued, silently, down the line – each one having their feet washed and then offering the gift to the next person. Doing unto another as you have had done unto you, to rewrite the old adage.

The homily was that brief, I almost missed it. The guidance it offered was: "The world won't change unless you change". It hit me that that was what I was doing on this pilgrimage of mine. I didn't smile the smug smile of self-satisfaction, I may even have blanched. "A bit done, a lot more to do" I realised.

Leaving La Faba at 6.40am the next morning, I was glad I had stopped where I did the evening before. I could not have made this climb in the heat of an afternoon. It's hard enough in the cool of the dawn, but the views are ever more stunning and when I get to what looks like the top of the world in this region, I feel on top of the world inside myself. Clear blue sky above and a sea of cloud below me, all the hilltops appear as islands. Looking westward all that can be seen between these islands is the white sea – no blue. Benedict will have been disappointed.

I make my breakfast stop at the first opportunity in O'Cebreiro and meet the UCD stragglers once more. Except these ones are the wounded: Eddy is in extreme pain with his tendons – and I'm well placed to give him all the sympathy he needs, as well as a bit of advice. Gillian, another College chaplain, is tentatively nibbling dry toast. She has a tummy upset from – it could be anything in this part of the world, but was probably something she ate last night. They regret not being able to walk as they await a taxi to take them to tonight's stop. I'm sorry for them, but thank them without actually speaking any words: they've reminded me how fortunate I am that I may continue on foot. I'm in fine form for walking now, my leg feels as good as new, but I have known pain in the last while. It was good old fashioned physical pain and, I suspect, nothing to the mental pain of not being able to go on to one's goal.

I take a leisurely breakfast as I want to visit the Santuario Santa Maria a Real do Cebreiro, and it doesn't open for another half hour. The church dates from the 9th century though little of that building remains. What we see is mostly 12th century, but the earliest surviving part makes this one of the oldest buildings on the Camino. We've had some experience of moving statues in Ireland, and the one of the Virgin Mary in this church moved. Only once and it was a long time ago.

During Mass, the priest of the time was administering communion to his congregation. He came to a humble peasant who had risked his life coming through a snowstorm in these high mountains to attend. As the bread and wine were offered to the man, the priest saw them turn into the body and blood of Christ. This was the miracle of O'Cebreiro, and the statue was said to have inclined her head towards the man on his knees.

When it's time for me to enter the holy place, who do I find minding the door but the Spanish monk from last night in La Faba. This is his home ground and he gives me a warm welcome: I had gone 'temporarily tourist' last evening and had my photo taken standing between the two monks outside the church – now he remembered me. I returned the greeting and produced my credencial with confidence that there will be a sello, or stamp, for me to receive. There is, and it's one of the more impressive ones in terms of size. At its centre is a picture of the sanctuary with, all around it, 'pallozas' – the low level thatched buildings of Celtic origin that are typical in this province of Spain. They remind me just a little of the beehive monk's cells that can be found on islands off the coast of Ireland – except these have a broader base and therefore a much greater floor area.

Having retrieved my credecial, I moved away from the desk at the entrance to explore the building, but that wasn't to be. The monk was keen to talk, and talk he did. Unfortunately his Italian confrere was nowhere to be seen. My confident greeting must have persuaded him I knew the language, but all I could do was nod and smile imagining everything he said was positive and therefore didn't need a frown and a sad shake of the head. Not for the first time on my journey, I wished for a global embrace of Esperanto and the promise of universal communication – and perhaps valuable understanding – that it would bring us. I don't take time to analyses the many barriers that people put up to the idea. At the moment, I'm not changing the world – I'm changing myself; if I ever come here again, I'm going to do some language preparation before I arrive.

But now it's time to think of departure. I've got another 21 kilometres to walk today toward Triacastella and the trend is all downhill, a drop of nearly seven hundred metres. Well, it's going to be a good test for my tendons.

Walking in these hills reminds me of home and the Wicklow Mountains. I'm on my own again here, which is often the way I am when walking in the Wicklows. No profound thoughts occur – it seems I'm walking a Thanksgiving: paying attention to my legs and being continually gratefull that I can't sense any problems emerging. From time to time I overtake or am overtaken by another pilgrim. When I come across a group of fourteen Spaniards, I know they're Day Trippers – it's from the four or five energetic conversations that I hear going on simultaneously. You don't get that with pilgrims, I realise: it's silence or just one person talking, and then perhaps a pause while others consider their response to whatever has been said.

For a while I walk with an Australian couple of my own age. At the hamlet of Biduedo, a very elderly woman totters out with a plate of crepes, asking us to take one as she sprinkles sugar from a canister over the top one. This kindness brings back memories of France, and I get out my camera to record my first experience of such hospitality in Spain over 600 kilometres from when I crossed the border

But – no, no – she doesn't want her photo taken. Fair enough, I think as I finish my mouthful, these are peasant people and she doesn't want her spirit captured and taken away in the magic box this Irishman is holding. Then as I make my last swallow, it becomes evident where this old lady is really coming from. She asks for a "donativo".

She's certainly happy with my fifty cent for one, but remonstrates with the Australians who give twenty cents for two. They hold their ground, and they have enough Spanish to tell her they understood this was a gift before they move off, with me following. Of course, that's why she didn't want the photo – we could have made a complaint to the Guardia Civil and provided evidence for them to take action. Enterprising old woman – and why not?

By mid-afternoon I was in Triacastella and with a place to stay. The town takes its name from the three castles located hereabouts, which are carved on the tower of the parish church. And that's the only place I'm going to see them, for none of the castles survive today, so I duly take myself into the grounds of this church which is dedicated to Sant Iago himself. Interestingly there are quarries nearby, and it was these which provided the limestone used in the building of the cathedral in the city of Santiago: our goal. There is a story that in medieval times, pilgrims would carry what they could in local stone toward their final destination – which would certainly have saved the contractor on transport costs.

I'm sad to find the church is locked, but my spirits soar when I identify the couple studying one of the tombstones: it's Mary Finlay from UCD and Fergus D'Arcy, another Prof of the same institution. They too are disappointed they're unable to get into the church, so we do the only thing that Irish people know to do in such circumstances – head for the pub.

Back on the main street – a narrow road passing through the town – we head into a bar at the same time as a pipe and drum ensemble marches up the road playing away to entertain the crowds. It does a right wheel into our hostelry, and continues the entertainment inside. Beer and music – it must be an Irish pub. Well, Celtic anyway.

Sipping our cold amber drinks in the afternoon heat, the three of us reflect on our journeys. Mary has done this Way many times, but Fergus and I are debutantes and we're both very struck by the experience. We know we want to pilgrimage again, but Fergus has a plan already. He too is retired, and he's going to come back in the autumn and focus on learning the language so that he can then get more out of the experience by communicating with the locals. My day is ending where it began – appreciating the need for a language, a way of talking to others more universally.

This is all very pleasant but I really do need to have a shower before my companions start to make comments – or else move away from me. I drain my glass and excuse myself. In the farewells we discover we're all staying in the same albergue, and I'm invited to join the group for their evening meditation as well as the meal afterwards.

"I'll catch you after my shower", I tell them.

"You can have a bath if you want", says Mary.

Did I hear that right? Apparently I did. Next to the showers is a "Bathroom" that does what it says on the door – have a bath inside. There's no extra charge for using it, I'm a little surprised to learn; and when I get back I can see all the showers are occupied. I dive into the bathroom before anyone else gets the idea – and luxuriate in a hot tub for as long as I think is decent given there may be others waiting.

Refreshed and reinvigorated by the time in water, I join the UCD group under a tree on the grassy area outside the albergue and relax into a time of meditation. Again I hear the

prayers of thanks for the day, which acknowledge the hills we have climbed in our minds as well as the ones we have walked down in our bodies. Then there are prayers of hope for what is ahead. In this, we put our trust in something bigger than ourselves – God, Jesus, Higher Intelligence, the Universe – and yet whatever that "bigger thing" might be, I sense we are each a part of it and contribute to its functioning. My mind is ever so slightly "blown" by this thought and I'm elated but not sorry when the opportunity comes to get up off the grass and turn my attention to food and the rest of the evening.

We go to eat together and again I enjoy the change in experience – being in the middle of a large group. On one side the students are having a go at the atheist among them: he's well able for the numerically uneven battle and this young man (if we listen to him) shows us that the Camino, like life itself, is for Everyone. No exclusions.

On the other side of me the elders of the academic community are being sensible. They're discussing the chances of Man United in tonight's match against Barcelona. The pub is full but we're well placed to view the match on the television. In the last week I've had concerns about my body, and this evening I've already had thoughts swirling round my head; add to these the walk in front of me tomorrow and I decide to forego the match and head to bed.

It was probably a good move. I have sailed for another world by the time the students return from watching the game, and I am undisturbed by their chatter. I hear all about it in the morning.

As I tighten the laces on my boots, I have a decision to make. There's a choice of two routes to Sarria: I can go the shorter, steeper traditional way which will require me to walk more time on asphalt roads; or I can take the longer way via Samos and the Benedictine monastery that dominates that settlement.

I choose the latter because I'd like to see the monastery. I'm happy to note I make the decision without guilt or conflict about not following the "real" Way. I think I've come some "way" in order to be able to do this. But whatever distance I've travelled in my mind, today's walk is a short one and after only 11 kilometres I'm in Samos by 10am with the decision made that this is where I'm stopping for today.

What swung it for me was the view when I crested the hill before Samos. Looking down, it seemed that "Monastery" was all there was there. It was a huge building dominating its surroundings. When I get down to the town, I discover that the hostel, which is part of the monastery, doesn't open its doors till the afternoon. It looks like rain and I want to have somewhere dry to bolt into right now. I also want to get my rucksack off my back and not have to be minding it for the next few hours.

I check into a small hotel right across from the monastery hostel entrance and have a shower. My decision being aided by my guidebook mentor, John Brierley, telling me the monastic option was just that:

“90 beds in one stark dormitory. Basic facilities only with no kitchen or lounge area.”

With the security of a base to return to I set off to explore, and the first thing I do is to walk west out of the town following the Camino. My notes advise to be watchful for an obscured turn off the main road; if this is missed the pilgrim will be walking on asphalt in the company of traffic for all of the fourteen kilometres to Sarria. I want to locate it in daylight, to be sure I won’t miss it on my pre-dawn march tomorrow.

With that job done, I return for a wander round town: I’ve only done a short walk from Triacastella, but add to my mileage for the day by going into tourist mode. It’s a comfortable role to assume: there are no gaudy Lourdes-style souvenir shops or madding crowds – it’s just a quiet town that the main roads by-pass. In the middle of the day, all the other pilgrims are walking through and I have the place pretty much to myself.

I obediently follow the trail to the sites to see: I walk by the river and stand by the 1000 year old yew tree that is a little off-piste. The tree has grown beside the very simple Saviour chapel which dates from the ninth century. Its height alone tells me this tree is very, very old. And so I waste the hours until the monastery opens in the late afternoon. As I walk I notice many scallop shells around: they’re worked into the iron railings at regular intervals and the litter bins that are fastened to walls are also moulded shells – there’s no getting away from them.

When the monastery opens its doors to the public, this anorak is first in to ask the monk at Reception for a “sello” on his credential. Again, I’ve accounted for my day with the stamp of a religious house rather than that of a commercial hotel. It looks better, I think. And I understand what I’m saying about “appearances”, but I’m not going to change my position on this one. It’s something to do with my ideas about “authenticity”, I suspect.

I take the guided tour of this fantastic monastery which was founded in the Visigoth era. The Benedictines took it over in the tenth century and have been here ever since. Again, scallop shells are to found around – even above, in the stonework of the ceilings. The cloisters, the architecture and the many frescoes on the walls are breath-taking – but we’re all missing something.

Quite a lot, it turns out. The monastic community has been ravaged by two great fires: one in 1536. The more recent one in 1951 destroyed the library as well as the refectory. Many of the original frescoes went in this fire too. So much of value has gone up in smoke – including knowledge. I’m reminded of the library at Alexandria, and how we may still be struggling to regain some of what was already known so many centuries ago. This is a good point to stop and back up what I’ve written. They may not be words of wisdom, but there will be one very pissed pilgrim if I lose what’s noted here.

At the end of the tour, I wandered back toward my hotel. I was planning on going to the 7.30pm Vespers, and I thought I'd better get a meal before rather than after. It was a Sunday night and, you know me by now, I was unable to ask how late anything stayed open.

I dropped into the bar a few doors down from the hotel, as it advertised a pilgrim menu. It was fairly lively for the early hour and I guess that as well as locals, many of the people present who would have checked into the monastery albergue across the road and were making this their fireside for the evening. I took a seat at the table next to a face I recognised and ordered a meal. The face nodded and we got talking. We'd 'met' once before: just after I walked out of O'Cebreiro Dan overtook me. Then it had also been a nod and an exchange of "Buen Camino".

Now it was an exchange of names, and from that an exchange of much more. Dan was from Vancouver and about the same age as me. He too was walking alone, so we talked family and then the route we had taken so far, and then we talked our passion. Dan was a canoeist too, he commented on my T-Shirt which had a cartoon character paddling a kayak with the legend underneath "Life is Good".

By now it was quite dark outside even though the hour was early. We ate and we talked – we'd both done white water and sea kayaking and started swapping the canoeing equivalent of fishermen's tales about the one that got away. In our case it was the size of the rapids on the river or the closeness of the dolphins at sea.

It became even darker outside - and then the heavens opened. This was the rain I'd been expecting earlier in the day, and it turned the road into a river. It was good to look out on the moving water as we two talked canoeing, but not at all good to walk through. Vespers was off the agenda: I would be soaked crossing to my hotel to get my rain gear, and then I would look ridiculous and feel uncomfortable in the monastery. So I acted my age and spent the rest of the evening sitting talking about moving water, rather than being out in it.

The great thing about paying for accommodation in advance is that you don't have to wait for Reception to open in the morning. I leave my key in the door as requested and I'm on the road at 6.20am walking down the now-dry road - very clear in my mind on the point at which I have to veer off.

I stopped for breakfast in Sarria. It's a bustling town at this hour of the morning with lots of pilgrim activity. I hear mainly American accents, and they seem to be trying to find the way-marked route. This shouldn't be too difficult – just follow on from where you left off last night! But these Americans turn out to be tourists, although they carry small backpacks with the scallop shell prominently displayed. These Yanks, like many another nationality, are starting their pilgrimage here.

Why start so close to Santiago – it's only a hundred and ten kilometres to go? Answer: this is the furthest town from the tomb of St James where you may start your pilgrimage and still

earn your compostella – the certificate of indulgence which is issued by the pilgrim office in Santiago on presentation of a valid (properly stamped) credencial. Mind you, these late comers will have a little more work to do than the rest of us on this final stretch: they must secure two 'sellos' each day instead of the normal one. Perhaps the Pilgrim Office in Santiago suspects the motivations of these people: the need to find two stamps in the one day makes taking the non-stop bus through a stage impossible.

The poor newcomers will today face into a climb of about two hundred metres. Will they complain at the effort they've had to make when they get to the high point of the day – Alto Paramo? And if they do, will they think of all their fellow pilgrims who started walking nearly seven hundred kilometres further back down the path and faced into their first day with a climb of nearly twelve hundred metres. I try not to be superior about it. The thought that occurs to me is: we all have to start somewhere – the important thing is that we do start. With this, I'm able to see these beings who uncertainly adjust their packs in these unfamiliar surroundings as fellow pilgrims rather than as lesser beings. We're all in it together – again, like life.

During the day, I'm a bit miffed to find myself walking beside a railway line. This is not what the Camino should be, I complain to myself. Then I recall the time I walked on a busy main road with a passing lorry whisking the hat off my head and bowling it down the road early on in the Spanish section; and the time after Villafranca del Bierzo when I walked under huge sections of motorway strung between hills. The Camino wasn't a special path for pilgrims – it was for other users, for everyone. Oops! Another lesson reinforced.

By the time I reach my night stop of Ferrerios, my day has been characterised by people I have met on the way rather than the ones walking the Way, like those Americans and me.

Arriving in Barbadelo, I can hear music in the distance. A tin whistle plays the haunting Irish ballad "Spancill Hill". It tells the story of a man who, having spent many years in America, has a dream of returning home, visiting friends and reuniting with his one true love – only to wake up and find himself still in California. The great thing about this pilgrimage is that, whatever dream you wake from each morning, you certainly have been on the move since the previous morning.

I come across the source of this music as I pass the small (only 18 beds) albergue, which is a former school building. The whistle is being played by a young red-haired woman sitting on the window sill. She's Irish, so I must stop, say "Hi", and thank her for the music. But I've got it wrong – it's Corrine, she's Australian, never been to Ireland in her life, and plays by ear so doesn't know the story the ballad tells. She sits playing to while away the day as she cannot walk – she's got tendonitis. I'm surprised at myself – I'm able to give this woman gifts: the story of Spancill Hill and some timely advice on dealing with a swollen leg.

Further on, an elderly woman walks down the road towards me. She has a mobility impairment and uses two sticks. She stops in front of me and speaks. Then it becomes apparent that I also have an impairment. She points westward and mentions Santiago. With signs, practiced two weeks ago with young children, I indicate I will pray for her at the tomb. She clasps her hands together, and then gives me a kiss on each cheek, reaching out to hold my arms in her hands. When I stand back, I walk on with a wave – before the tears show, again.

Dark clouds are building to the north. Well, they've already built and they are approaching. I keep walking in the hope that they may pass over and ignore me, but it soon becomes clear that they have started dumping their contents and I am in the firing line. Fortunately, I'm approaching a farmyard which is spread over both sides of the road and, with no one in sight, I see an open barn door and duck in. The rain comes and me and my sack stay dry as I stand watching walkers and cyclists pass by, draped in ponchos and looking miserable.

A man comes out of the farmhouse and runs toward me. It's time for me to move obviously and I hoist my rucksack as he enters, but his hand signals indicate I should stay where I am. He collects an empty bucket and runs back to the house – shouting a "Buen Camino" behind him. I'd say I'm not the first to do what I am doing.

As time goes on, the intensity of a certain dilemma begins to increase: do I stay here keeping wonderfully dry, yet risk difficulties finding a bed for the night; or do I strike out and get wet. I decide to do the latter and don my wet gear, knowing that in these conditions the waterproofs are not going to do the job I thought they were designed for.

It's only another six kilometres and I'm in Ferreiros for the night. It's no more than another converted school house with just 22 beds and a bar next door which is run by the hospitalera herself. It's warm and muggy inside the albergue: the warmth allows us all to dry our clothes and from that the mugginess results. Later I go across to the bar and there's the hospitalera again. I tell her I'll have the pilgrim menu of garlic mushrooms followed by veal steak and chips, with the almost inevitable 'flan' rounding off the meal. The mushrooms were in plentiful supply on the dish and after them it didn't really matter what was served: it was going to be all garlic to me. No complaints – as usual on the Camino, tonight I'd be sleeping a very long way away from the woman who might complain.

On my way back to the hostel and bed, I see a public telephone box. Great! I use these for conversations with home rather than the mobile which is much more expensive. But the fixed line is out of order. There was thunder with the downpour earlier and, back in the albergue, I learn all phones in this region are out of order

My body parts are all working well when I get up next morning, and I wouldn't mind pushing on a bit. I've had a text telling me that the battlegroup plan to reach Santiago today. Serge's wife, Michelle has flown down from Brittany and is walking the last stretch. Those two will

go home straight away as they have teenagers possibly running wild at home. The others will go on to Fisterra, the town on Cape Finnisterre, and I'd like to be in Santiago for their return if possible. I'm going to aim for Palas de Rei about thirty five kilometres up ahead, even though there's a 300 metre climb out of Portomarin, which is where I'll have breakfast.

But the fast is broken long before that – just 500 metres down the road after I leave the albergue I come to Mirallos which consists of a bar and an old stone church a bit further on. The bar is open and serving breakfast at 6am. What decides me to make the stop is the woman at the door, peering out into the darkness trying to entice the passing trade. I'm the only passer at this hour, and I feel I should support someone who is prepared to get up and offer sustenance to pilgrims at this ungodly hour. A more pertinent factor was that, with low cloud still above, it was pitch black and I couldn't see clearly even with my headlight. The wise thing was to wait for a bit of daylight.

Once inside, I am quickly served a good strong Spanish coffee and toasted baguette and jam which will cost me all of two euro, the cheapest breakfast going. I also discover that it's possible to stay here over night, and they do an evening meal with a wider choice than was available back up the hill. I wish I'd stayed here – how could I have missed mention of it? I scour my guide book and find the explanation: there *is* no mention of it. Here's a learning point: just because it's called a guide book doesn't mean the author is all-knowing. He may have missed this little place, and such an omission can be expected in any such publication as I found when with Daniel: our respective guides sometimes mentioned completely different places to stay, but didn't indicate there was any choice. Another issue may have been that I was penny-pinching and happy to borrow a four year old guidebook from a friend rather than buy my own up-to-date copy, which may have included this information.

When I pay and go to leave, the proprietor walks me to the door and shakes my hand in farewell. Some while later I pass a home, where the property straddles the road. The main building is on the right but there is a small out-house on the left. It has three stone walls and a slate roof, the fourth side open to the road, and inside I can see two wooden benches and two potted plants. Hanging from the lintel which supports the roof is a sign in Spanish. The English translation is printed underneath:

"Please rest but don't dirty".

Someone has added the handwritten words: "Keep Clean". The owners have put this shelter at the disposal of passing pilgrims. It's just there, no donativo asked.

Nine kilometres after breakfast I reach Portomarin, where other pilgrims are just getting on the road. My old guide shows that I will use a huge bridge to cross a reservoir and enter the town, but when I reach the spot – the reservoir is no more. Far below me a river runs under the tiny old bridge which used to be submerged. Over in the town, a slipway drops half way

down the hill and then stops for no reason. Below the old road into town, and opposite a now defunct boat club. Regress not progress: the bridge I walk across is an anachronism.

When I reach Portos, about six kilometres from the end of my day, I wonder if the sun has affected me. I take a detour to visit Vilar De Donas which adds another 4.6 kilometres to my already long walking day. It's a crazy thing to do, but could be worth it. This was the seat of the Knights of Santiago, their tombs are here in the church of El Salvador – most of which dates from the 14th century. I'm going because I've heard there's some Irish connection with this place.

As I reach the church, it has just opened for the afternoon – any earlier and it would have been a wasted journey for me. It might yet be: I can't get the Irish connection. There's a notice in Spanish which mentions Ireland, the attendant is excited because I'm Irish and she wants to tell me all about it – but I don't have the language and must acknowledge there is a link to Ireland without having a clue as to what it might be. I do enjoy the peace and quiet of the place and meditate a while, with the stone effigies of the buried knights round about me.

Onward to Palas de Rei where I arrive, after walking over 40kms, without any ill effects - apart from a substantial thirst. Coming into the town, I see several pensions, and thinking I deserve a few creature comforts after my long day I call into one of them. It's full and so is the second one I enter. I give up and head for the municipal albergue. The pensions would have been booked in advance, probably by those on the tourist trail pilgrimage – that would be the one for those who start in Sarria. I couldn't imagine those Americans I saw there or their fellow travellers not having everything booked and organised along their route.

"Leave nothing to chance" I can hear them say – and then realise that many of the blessings I have received over the last few weeks have come as surprises and precisely because I wasn't 'organised': the search in my rucksack for pain killers comes to mind again.

The municipal facility has been open for a while so any queue for beds has been dealt with. Nevertheless, as I approach from a distance I can see the odd person or even small group, turn off the road where the hostel should be. As I enter, a young couple are being turned away: there are only two beds left but they are in different locations.

"Thank you very much" I say to myself, "I'll have one of those." When I go up to the dorm, I look around the top bunks for the one with my number on it – the beds are allocated at reception. But they're all taken and I see that , although last in, I'm going to sleep at floor level. Thank heavens for those people who prefer the top – different types to me, their preference enables me to have the bed I want. I unpack and head for the shower.

The young woman smiled at me and waved me out the door. She was naked, washing herself as I opened the door into the bathroom. Good Heavens – what an embarrassing faux pas, I've missed the "Ladies" sign on the door and I've no need of translation – I know what

“Senoras” means. I beat a hasty retreat looking for that sign, there isn’t one. I head of in search of the “Senors”, but there isn’t one of those either – sign or even bathroom itself. Back in the dorm I ask a group of mixed gender young people for directions.

“No. You went to the right place. Men and women share the same room”, I’m told.

So there’s a system that the new arrivals have to work out for themselves each day, especially as there are no curtains on the showers. The rule is that if a woman is having a shower, then only women will enter to use the other facilities at that time and vice versa when it is a man. It was just that nobody had thought to tell the late arrival. And that may have been because nobody seemed to think it that important.

I was glad to have that information quite clear. It meant that when, in time, I took my shower, fully exposed to other bathroom users, I was able to do so without anxiety about exposing myself to the fairer sex.

Later I hover at the hostel door looking up and down the street for some indication of a restaurant.

“Hello, Mike. You want to come for a meal”. It’s Henrietta, a Swedish woman of my own age. I haven’t seen her for weeks, and when we did first meet it was briefly enough over a beer. But we’ve covered so much ground since then, and we have stories we want to swap with each other as if we were long-lost friends. To think: just under two months ago, I didn’t know any of the people I’m hanging out with and feeling close to. Henrietta is staying in the same albergue but a different room, and we take off down the road together chatting away. We eat, and drink, and talk about the bathroom facilities. Then, for the rest of the night and until we’ve had enough and want our beds, we trade stories of other albergues and towns and shrines and countryside – and people.

Next morning I’m ready, at an early hour to take on the 29 kilometres to Arzua which will be the last town before the city of Saint James. With the long walk yesterday successfully completed without ill effect, I can see the end really is in sight, and that’s what’s on my mind as I walk my way through unremarkable countryside.

Somewhere in the morning, I pass through a hamlet with a small “open all hours” shop which deals mainly in fruit and veg but has other requisites. Cherries are a fruit I’m addicted to and here they’re still in season. In the shop, there are boxes full of the dark crimson orbs of my desire and I ask for a big bag full. I don’t do this with words of course, just a bit of pointing and then a lot of shovelling gestures. Back where I began in the Montagne Noir, I know the wild boar will be feasting off the overripe wild cherries which will have fallen from the trees in the forest. I’ve seen plenty of evidence of this on my walks there – cherry pits in the droppings along the path. But I’ve yet to locate the trees the boar know so well

I delight to see the scales my fruit is weighed in. They're the old fashioned ones where you put the weights on one side and the product on the other, adding or subtracting weights until balance is achieved and you can then total the weights and determine the price. I know there are faster ways to do this and I don't want to be the cause of the elderly woman having to do such extra work, but for me there is something profound and warming that I can't quite put my finger on as I watch a fellow human being work to determine the price, rather than have a microchip throw it up instantly. As I walk out of the shop with my purchase, the bag is already getting lighter.

Much later in the day, I sit under a tree and finish them off. Another pilgrim passes me out:

"Ah I have caught you up at last. I have been following your trail since the village before last". He meant the pits I had been spitting out at intervals.

During the afternoon I pass another shop, a very different one. This is a small wooden structure with fruit, bottled water, a coffee flask with paper cups, milk and sugar beside it – and a cash box. But there's not a shopkeeper in sight. A notice pinned to the awning asks, in several languages, that the customer takes whatever is wanted and leaves the price asked for in the cash box. Perhaps I shouldn't mention this for fear that it encourages those with a different motivation to take an interest in the Camino. But, truth to tell, these goods which are a welcome sight to any walker, are not expensive and there is not a huge amount of money in the exposed till.

Trust is a wonderful thing. I wish I had more of it: trust in my fellow beings, trust in the Universe and what it throws at you. Maybe that's why I'm a bit of an introvert: I don't trust so I hang back. My trust in giving away bits of my first aid kit when I might need them for myself still amazes me. The fact that it all worked out for the best amazes me even more.

Then I have a strange thought: if I can give away my medical supplies and have whatever supplies I need provided when I actually need them (as I did with my blister pads and as Daniel found when he went to pay for items in the pharmacy) – would the same thing work with money? If not, why not? That looks like a bridge too far, but I must revisit it sometime.

When I arrive in Arzua, I'm feeling strong physically and, with just 40 kilometres to go I know I'll be there in forty eight hours. I'm pleased but not elated. I'm experiencing pleasure at what I've done, not at reaching the finishing tape. The end is there, but it's not important. I wonder if I'll feel the same when I face the ending that we call death. I rather hope so.

Looking back, I think I felt closer to Saint James, God, or the Universe when I was further away from this focus of pilgrimage - Santiago. Right now I seem to be tidying up a loose end rather than coming to a triumphal finale. In recent times, especially since Astorga, there have been so many churches on the route, big and small. There have been so many reminders that this is all about the way to Santiago – the scallop shaped rubbish bins in Samos come to mind as well as wooden figures of the saint in private gardens as well as

concrete likenesses of him in public places. This is so much so, it's overload, that I feel like I'm back on Moneylenders Street in Lourdes.

I recall the scallop shell door latch back in that small village I passed through in the Pyrenees with Daniel over a month ago. It was like a secret sign – a nod and a wink between me and the church, something we both knew and it was just between us and any other pilgrim who passed. The ordinary families, way back in the Ariege, who gave beds to passing pilgrims for something called a 'donativo' – a code word from these secret agents to we "Resistance People" who were passing through on our "Mission". It was a long way back up the line that I felt closer to my goal than I do now, and the thought occurs: "The further away I am, the closer I am". It's a silly thing to say, really, but I extend it to: "The further away you are from your God, the closer He is to you".

I've sort of heard that before expressed in Christian terms: the Shepherd valuing the lost sheep more than the ninety and nine who were safe home. I guess this is expressed in modern times by the poem which questions the shepherd's presence in a life and which Jesus then answers with:

"During your times of trial and suffering, when you saw only one set of footprints in the sand, it was then that I carried you".

It may be that the further we feel ourselves to be from whatever safe harbour we seek, the closer we are to it: the darkest hour is just before dawn.

I check into Arzua's Municipal hostel for the night, shower and prepare my bed. The fact that I'm on a top bunk doesn't concern me in the least, I'm that close to the end. I have a slight concern that down the line of the dorm, each pair of bunks is pushed up against another one. Thus I can only access my bed from one side, and when I get up there I'm right next to whoever climbs up from the other side into that bed. Whoever it is, I'm going to be sleeping as close to him as I would to my wife back home. Well, I think to myself, it's all part of the Camino experience. I head out for a quiet meal by myself.

I'm happy with my own company but at the same time there is no point in drinking the night away by myself, so I head back for a very early night after I've eaten. I'm one of the earliest to snuggle down but I don't drift off and am aware of my companion when he gets into his bed beside me. I might as well see who it is:

"Mike I have found you again!"

Oh My God! It's Henrietta from Sweden. I'm going to have a blond bombshell sleeping right next to me. I'll remember to write this into my notes in the morning!

We've both had a drink during the evening which makes us congenial, but no more. We chat about our day as others come in and prepare for bed. Soon all these people will want us to

shut up, so we wrap up and I turn over again and try to think of sleep, but find I'm not really ready for it.

Perhaps the Phantom could make one last appearance on the Camino? I wriggle further down into my bed sheet and then sit up, my head covered, right beside Henrietta.

"Woooooo!" I go.

"Mike – go to sleep" is the stern reply. There's much tittering around the dorm. Yes – if that was an attempt to "come on" to Henrietta, I have a lot to learn, I know. This time, when I turn over, I am ready for sleep.

It was a disturbed night for me, so many people seemed to be getting up to go to the toilet. I'm happy I'm not the only one here, but I wonder why. Was everyone on the beer tonight? Or, with Santiago almost in sight, was this like me the night before leaving Cacabellos – an anxiety or an over-awed thing?

I leave at 6.40 in the morning, and I complete the 19 kilometres to the end of the stage at Arco by 11.30am. I drop into a bar for a Coke: I need caffeine and something cold and that particular beverage delivers on both counts. As I enter, Henrietta's on her way out. She tells me she'll go on for a bit. The more she can do today, the earlier she'll be in Santiago tomorrow and the quicker she is likely to get processed by the Pilgrim Office at the cathedral. I tell her I'll be following shortly.

In fact, we never meet again, but I do walk on. And on. It's now only 20 kilometres to Santiago and that does seem doable, especially as I know I can rest for a few days when I get there. In fact, I can rest forever. I never have to do a day's walk ever again. But I know that is not an option. The end of the world is calling. Santiago is the Christian end, but it is not the real end. Exactly what the real end is I'm not quite sure, but for the purposes of this Camino, it's Fisterra and beyond it the Cape that is Land's End. I think I'll be walking there.

Out on the track, I pass a clever piece of advertising for accommodation in the city of the tomb. The painted placard gives the details. But there is some sort of beam across the path which, when broken by a walker, triggers an audio exhortation to stay at this place, listing the luxuries it has to offer.

Later there's a poignant memorial to an Irish pilgrim. Myra Brennan died in her sleep in Santiago just after completing her second pilgrimage on the Camino at the age of 52. Words from the W.B.Yeats poem "The Lake Isle of Innisfree" are inscribed:

"And I shall have some peace there

For peace comes dropping slow"

…as it does on the Camino.

I'm still quite some distance out of town when I come to what I take to be a boundary stone of recent origin. It's bigger than me and announces that this is Santiago. It's embellished with a pilgrim's staff and the ubiquitous scallop shell

Near Lavacolla I'm close to the airport and hear the intermittent roar of aircraft landing and taking off – tourists arriving and pilgrims leaving. These sounds tell me I'm leaving the world of pilgrimage and coming to another centre of population – one that will cosset and care for. I stop at a roadside stall for a Coke. There's no 'honesty box' here because it's manned by an eager proprietor. He's keen to point out other items for sale before he takes the money for what you actually want and, when I stubbornly stick with what I have selected, he unveils his piece de resistance. It's the brown hat, cloak and staff of Saint James: for just one euro you can don the garments over what you're wearing and he will take as many photos as you wish on your camera. I want a photo of me looking like the images I've seen of the saint all along the Way. It's a great souvenir! Hey Presto, I've just become a tourist.

The lack of camera skills on his part allied to the lack of modelling skills on mine lead to a very unsatisfactory result, but he has his money and I have something for the friends to laugh at when I get home. In other words, the usual tourist contract.

Lavacolla is the place where medieval pilgrims washed and purified themselves before entry to the city, but everyone seems to be walking through. Not surprising really, as there's no albergue here - just commercial hotels: this is for those on a pilgrimage for business, not for the soul.

Another five kilometres brings me to Monte Gozo, the first point at which the weary pilgrim can glimpse the city and the object of his long journey: the spires of the cathedral which houses the remains of Saint James. Except that I can't see those spires. Trees have grown to obscure the view. If it had been buildings in the way, I would have cursed town planners and "progress". As it is, I close my eyes and try to visualise how it would have been for a medieval pilgrim who arrived at this point and *could* see the spires. And what did that pilgrim think?

"Thank God I've arrived safely, it's all over. Now I can relax and celebrate". Or:

"Oh My God, this is only the half way mark. How will I ever be able to go over all that ground a second time".

While I feel ready for more walking after today, I am going to take a good rest here, and I'm happy to have abandoned my original plan of walking all the way back to Mas Cabardes. I had wanted to do this in solidarity with my medieval colleagues and experience pilgrimage as they did. But now I'm here I can think of plenty of arguments not to. One of which is that I have a fair idea of the pain and effort that will be involved if I do.

There's a school trip passing through Monte Gozo right now, and a modern monument which is stuck here for all time. The kids shout and play and race around glad to be off the bus. The monument is to commemorate the visit of Pope John Paul II to the Camino and Santiago. Both make me want to move on. From here it's a descent to the city and all the trappings of modernity.

I continue to follow the waymarks into the city and pass the municipal boundary with the standard town sign which are seen everywhere there is habitation in Spain: rectangular in shape, the letters S-A-N-T-I-A-G-O are painted in black on a white background, and the whole has a thin red surround. I'm looking for something a little fancier – but if rules are rules, then I guess formats are formats when it comes to telling travellers where they are.

I walk through the city streets and, having been denied when at a height above Santiago, now catch my first glimpse of the cathedral – two spires popping up over roof tops. It's not what I'd call an impressive sight – a bit of an anti-climax, really. And, shouldn't there be a crack of thunder and the voice of God speaking some profundity. No, it's just another city with the people going about their daily tasks.

However, "the horse has seen his stable" and, although I am not fuelled with a beer as I was when powering ahead of Daniel at the end of a long day in France, I walk strongly in the general direction of those spires. When I arrive at the north side of the cathedral, I see the walls are swathed in scaffolding. Like the bridge back in Hospital de Orbigo, conservation work is needed here and I feel my arrival has been spoiled.

Wait a minute. Wasn't I saying something about process and product; about journeying and arriving? This isn't the end. I'm still on a journey. I have to pass through that covered wall to enter the Cathedral, I have to go to the Pilgrim Office, I have to… No, I don't *have* to do anything. But I am thinking I will go on to Fisterra. For sure, the journey is not over. Like life – I'm just passing through.

With these thoughts I enter the cathedral, have a quick look, and exit it on the far side in the direction of the Pilgrim Office. When I arrive there, the queue is small for mid-afternoon: it only extends down the stairs from the office. It doesn't go through the courtyard and out onto the street as it can do, so I don't have more than a twenty minute wait before I'm standing at the desk, proudly producing my credencial, and having it scrutinised. It's not a casual glance, it is a careful scrutiny, and I have that same feeling of fear I get when I'm stopped at a police check point to have my tax disc, which I know to be in order, checked. I fear I'm going to be found at fault in some way. But – no – I'm asked the reason for my pilgrimage and then a pen is lifted and my name written, in Latin, on the Compostela.

I leave the office walking on air. I've done it! And this bit of paper is of some value – it will get me reduced admission to the city's museums.

It also entitles me to three free meals for three days at the luxurious Hotel de los Reyes Catolicos. The hotel is continuing a very old tradition, but in a modest way: pilgrims eat in the staff dining room below stairs, only 10 pilgrims are accommodated (more than 1000??? can arrive in a day) and the meal times are at unusual hours – because the staff will be looking after guests at normal eating times.

I've made this trip under budget and I'm going to live it up a bit as far as eating is concerned: I'm going to forage a la carte. No more set menus, for a while at any rate. But first I must get a bed for the night, and I go in search of the alburgue that was advertised on the way in. I simply cannot find it! I ring the number, and I 'm told in broken English it's close to where I say I am. But it's not. Of course it's quite possible I am saying I am somewhere other than where I actually am without knowing my error. I call back a little later and the phone rings out. I walk into the next hotel on this street – whatever it is.

I'm now a twenty minute walk back down the Camino from the cathedral. I've got a room for 32 euros for the night and the opportunity to extend my stay. I take a long bath, dress up in my evening wear - it's the usual T-shirt and slacks – and head out onto the still warm street.

I'm not going back into the city centre, so I get my bearings around this area. In the process I discover that if I had walked another one hundred metres, I'd have arrived at my sought-after albergue. Another few steps and I'm sitting on the street outside a bar ordering a drink before I look for a restaurant.

The beer is good, very good. No sooner has the barman delivered the beer than the boss is back with a plate of canapés. It's called tapas, and I think I'll have to pay – but no, these are complimentary. It's all very pleasant. I have another beer and more tapas come. I order a glass of wine, and yet more tapas come, and still more after that. I'm here for the night, which is what management wanted, I suspect. So much for eating a la carte. At some stage later on, I climb into bed. Happy out!

Next morning I head into town. I'm going to the cathedral to do the things that pilgrims have been doing here every day for centuries. I enter the building by its main door, the Portico de Gloria or Entrance of Glory, and am confronted by the inner portico, a masterpiece in stone fashioned by Maestro Mateo way back in the twelfth century. John Brierley describes it in his Guidebook thus:

The Bible and its main characters come alive in this remarkable storybook in stone. The central column has Christ in Glory, flanked by the apostles and, directly underneath, St James sits as intercessor between Christ and the pilgrim. Millions of pilgrims, over the millennia, have worn finger holes in the solid marble as a mark of gratitude for their safe arrival. Proceed to the other side and touch your brow to that of Maestro Mateo, whose kneeling

figure is carved into the back of the central column (facing the altar) and receive some of his artistic genius ……"

But these activities of feeling and making contact are no longer permitted. There is a barrier around this central column and so "you can look but you better not touch". The first ritual for arriving pilgrims is off the list. The stonework will be preserved for all time now but pilgrims, for whom so much of the Camino will have been about "making contact" – with themselves, with others, with the environment, cannot make that very contact here.

So much for the permanence of stone. It reminds me that nothing physical is fixed or permanent when one takes the longest possible perspective, and it gets me to thinking that if I want constancy and stability in my life I may need to put my faith in things unseen and intangible than in what is visible and can be touched. Immediately my mind turns to the current economic crisis and my friends who invested for their future security and stability in pension funds, The value of these has plunged and people are finding that they don't even have the money that they put in. It's the same with property for many younger people at the other end of the life span.

The next task is to "hug the Saint". There's an ornate statue of him above and behind the main altar. St James' effigy is accessed from the side, but first I have to locate the end of the queue and join it. I have a bit of a walk to get to that end. I wait patiently in line by myself, but others are in groups – coach parties or small bands of families or friends. Inevitably they talk and there's quite a hub-bub. Young clerics dressed in blue and yellow (the colours of the Camino) patrol the aisles frequently "Shushing" no one in particular and having no obvious effect.

I believe if I had just entered the cathedral from a coach around the corner with a few companions, I'd want to chatter while I had the boring wait to access the icon. We humans have to fill voids – nature doesn't like a vacuum and humans don't like silence. It's awkward. But silence is what I crave here now, some reverence please. Of course I'm only a pilgrim who has taken two months to come to this place – I didn't arrive yesterday at the start of my vacation, carrying bags full of holiday clothes and invisible bags of stuff I haven't been able to leave behind. I come to feel that I'm blessed in wanting that silence, not cursed in having so much chatter around me.

In time I climb the steps and stand behind the saint. I can look over his shoulder and join his gaze down to the Entrance of Glory. His cape is made of gold, I think, and studded with gemstones. I gently clasp his shoulders and lean to rest my cheek against his upper back. To hell with health and safety – I kiss his cape. And say: "Thank You". I believe this may be the traditional action, thanksgiving for a safe arrival. My thanks go further – they're a "thanks" for the last 64 years. And I believe they go deeper still – they're a "thanks" for everything: the rough and the smooth, the good and the bad. It is the unpleasant and the uncomfortable that have brought me here, just as much as the blessings I've been given.

Having been above the altar, I descend to ground level and then go down still further by steps that take me to the crypt and reliquary chapel under the altar. Here is the tomb of Saint James. I look at the casing that so many believe contains the remains of the saint. Here I have a different job to do: above I thought of myself, now I think of others. I think of those who have supported me, befriended me, and stayed with me in difficult times. I also think of those who have asked for prayers to be said here, and those who have not asked for that. And then I say my prayer.

When I emerge from the crypt, there is over half an hour to go till the midday Mass but already people are taking their places. I take mine in a side aisle. I want a good seat as I've heard they're going to swing the Botafumeiro, the huge incense burner. It takes half a dozen or more priests to swing it, and I've taken a seat where it will be at its highest point just above my head. Originally this piece of ecclesiastical equipment was used to fumigate the arriving pilgrims who would be at least sweaty and possibly even disease-ridden. It's not needed for that purpose now as perfumed tourists crowd in.

The Botafumeiro is not swung every day, and if it's not going to be done on your day there, you can call by to the priests and pay to have it done. It's a hefty bill, so you'll need to be in a large group and have a whip-round.

Is this a performance where he who pays the piper calls the tune? We pilgrims have earned ours, but in another age indulgences could be bought. Everything on this earth has its price, but can the spiritual really be bought with earthly money?

The Mass is impressive – a good number of rich-red robed priests processing up the aisle promises a good performance on the altar. The solo singing by a nun is superb: if she wasn't in holy orders, she'd have been snapped up by a recording studio long ago. The chief celebrant reads out a list of countries – the places of origin of each and every pilgrim who has arrived at the Pilgrim Office in the last twenty four hours. And then the Botafumeiro: lighting the incense, the clank from the metal as the lid is closed, men moving to start the swing, the smoke swirling, the smell: every sense is involved; it's pure theatre.

I'm well positioned, but others further behind are not. They move up, cameras and videos firing, to be closer – closer than me. At the end, the audience (sorry, congregation) are thronged round the altar area like a crowd at a football match – or the circus. The final action performed at this religious ceremony is inevitable. Applause.

After all, it's the end of the ceremony and the end of the pilgrimage, perhaps the end of the visit for the tourists. Why wouldn't you applaud? But I don't. And nor does the man sitting next to me. We get up, move into the aisle and walk away without talking to or even acknowledging each other.

God – help me, if I need help – but I can't applaud, because I can't see this moment, this place as the end – of anything. It is simply a stop, a resting place, on the way. The journey will continue. It just does. I must -

Walk on.

NOTES FROM THE CONTINUING JOURNEY

SANTIAGO

After the Mass, Mike walked out of the cathedral and into the sunshine of a Friday afternoon. It was now seven weeks and five days since he had left Mas Cabardes on 10th April.

He went to a restaurant where he wrote postcards and had an a la Carte meal. He ordered consommé to start and paid extra to have a raw egg dropped into it and a small jug of sherry to add as he wished. This was followed by a monkfish and prawn kebab and then a jam crepe. The food was accompanied by several jugs of sangria – after which he returned to his hotel for a bath and very early bed.

He was awoken at 7pm by a call on his mobile. It was Tony of the Battlegroup. Tony had just arrived in town from Fisterra. Mike got dressed and walked back into the city. He met Tony in a Tapas bar. They talked of experiences since their last meeting. Other patrons of the establishment who were pilgrims joined in. Some beers and some bottles of wines were consumed. They left the bar, drank more beer and said goodnight at 1.30am

Next morning, Mike went to the bus station and gave Tony a surprise. He had arrived to see Tony off on the bus that would take him to Nantes in France. After the final farewell, Mike hung out around the city then took an early night.

This one was not interrupted by a phone call It was just as well. In the morning he was leaving at an early hour for Fisterra.

FISTERRA

Mike walked the ninety kilometres to Fisterre in three days. The only meeting that stood out in his mind on the way was the one he had with a young Korean woman called Kim, whom he overtook on his second day out of Santiago. She was walking very slowly, but without pain. She was very tired. She had left St Jean Pied de Port on May 1st, the same day that Mike himself had. She had walked every single day without fail.

Approaching the town at Fisterra, the terrain reminded him of Counties Kerry and West Cork – the sea and the inlets. This was a Celtic land too.

Arriving in the town, he met Jessica, who was saying goodbye to the Italian companion she had acquired along the way. He bought Mike a Coke. There were other faces from the past:

Fransisco, who was in the dorm at Arzua. He was an Italian documentary maker who had made a film of the Homeless People's World Cup held in the Lebanon. Mike didn't know homeless people had a World Cup to compete in.

Clovis, whom he had shared a room with in the albergue at Cacabellos. Clovis was heading for Santiago to buy a bike and cycle back down the Camino that comes up from Madrid. He subsequently bought a motorbike and toured the Spanish coastline. After this, Clovis bought a small property and settled in Spain. He wasn't going back to Brazil. He said he wanted to write about his pilgrimage – like that other Brazilian, Paulo Coelho.

In the evening he walked, on his own, out to the lighthouse to watch the sun set in the west. Many others were doing the same thing.

Just before the lighthouse building, he passed the final Camino milestone. It showed the familiar yellow shell on a blue background and registered the distance yet to be travelled: "0.00 kms"

On the rocks, closer to the sea, a woman burned some clothing on a fire. When she finished, Mike took her place and burned his socks – they were in holes.

Then he sat on a rock and watched the sun slowly go down to the horizon. A Spanish pilgrim offered Mike some soup from his Thermos. It was already poured in the cup and, in the cooling evening, hard to refuse.

The man offered soup to others sitting around. It wasn't the feeding of the five thousand. It was sharing. This is how the miracle may have happened in reality. In any event – hot soup on a cool evening in the middle of nowhere. That was a miracle.

Walking back from the lighthouse and the real "Camino's End", he could hear voices raised in elation in front and behind.

"If I do this nice and softly" he said, "they won't hear me". And he sang the two verses he believed he had recalled correctly from the Pilgrim Hymn by John Bunyan:

He who would valiant be ’gainst all disaster,
Let him in constancy follow the Master.
There’s no discouragement shall make him once relent
His first avowed intent to be a pilgrim.

Who so beset him round with dismal stories
Do but themselves confound—his strength the more is.
No foes shall stay his might; though he with giants fight,
He will make good his right to be a pilgrim.

Months later, he checked an old hymn book at home. Were the words right? They were.

“Funny how things come back to you”, he said. “Thank you Saint James”.

THE WALK HOME

Next morning Mike intended to return to Santiago by bus, but he met Fransisco who had organised a taxi with some others. For the same fare as the bus, it would be possible to return to Santiago in half the time. Mike took that option.

Back in Santiago, he booked his place on a train for the French border town of Hendaye the next morning.

The train journey took eleven hours, during which Mike looked out of the window and, now and again, saw familiar tracks with people walking along them. Some of the time he slept, other times he texted members of the Battlegroup on his recent progress. A texting conversation took place. Plans were made for the group to have a reunion in Ireland in the autumn.

Mike arrived at Hendaye at 9pm. His train to Toulouse was not until 6am. With other pilgrims in the same situation, he divided the night between walking around town and sleeping against the station wall. It was the first time he had used his bivvy bag, carried for the duration of the pilgrimage in case there was no room in an albergue.

Next day he arrived in Toulouse, changed trains for Pamiers to the south in the direction of the Pyrenees and, when he got there, went in search of a bed in the dilapidated bishop’s palace beside the dilapidated cathedral. Marie Therese was on vacation, but Mike was well cared for by Pierrot, a local man who was himself a regular pilgrim and who stepped in for the hospitalier on such occasions. He had the same love of red wine as Mike.

Next day Mike walked from Pamiers to Mirepoix. The walk had taken two days on the way out, now it was completed in one. Mike moved more swiftly. Though the contents of his rucksack weighed the same as two months earlier, he was carrying ten kilos less than the last time he walked this track. In the early afternoon he called on Evangeline and Gilbert in Vals and showed his now full credencial and compostella. In the late afternoon, he stopped

for a beer in the medieval covered square beside the cathedral in Mirpoix. Then he walked north and uphill to the home of Margat and Jean Pierre.

He showed his hosts the evidence of his journey, and they offered him far too much of their orange wine aperitif.

He understands he ate a meal and went to bed afterwards. He sincerely hopes that sentence represents an accurate report of events.

“This time three days I’ll be getting into my own bed in Mas Cabardes. The one I got out of 65 days before to make this pilgrimage” he said to himself.

The next night Mike slept in the monastery at Fanjeaux: the ‘donativo’ he gave to the hospitalier on 12th June included the amount he meant to leave there on 12th April.

The following night he stayed at Notre Dame d’Abbe in Carcassonne. It was the day of a French public holiday, and the wonderful young chef who was generous with the wine supply two months earlier had the weekend off. The morose receptionist served the meal, reheated by microwave, which had obviously been prepared before the weekend. Mike didn’t have the same gastronomic experience in this place the second time around.

Next day Mike walked back up the hill to his home village of Mas. Walking through Las Tours a big white van passed at speed going in the opposite direction. A long blast on its horn sounded as it came to a halt.

Out jumped Denis from the Epicierie. He had been the last to see Mike after he left the village, he was the first to encounter him making his return to the hills. He raised his arms in the air. In Blessing?

MICHAEL’S BATTLEGROUP LIVES ON

Over the first weekend in November 2011, six months after it had formed and walked the Camino, the battlegroup assembled in Bray County Wicklow for a reunion. Ute was unable to attend, but Martina from Berlin, Tony from Nantes, and Serge with his wife Michelle from Plouescat.

Walking in Wicklow, drinking in Temple Bar, and over meals in Bray an agenda was developed. With people having work commitments and so needing to save annual leave to get away for a longer period of time, it would not be possible to walk every year but the group would aim for:

2013 Camino del Norte to Santiago

2015 Via Francigenci (Canterbury to Rome)

After dinner on the last night, Tony and Martina stood at the table and, using a sheet of words they had typed out back home, sang “Molly Malone”. It was the song Mike had sung for the albergue residents the night the Italian opera singer performed.

I CAN SEE CLEARLY NOW

Three days after resting in Mirepoix, where he returned the sunglasses he had carried for two months (yet never used) to their owner, Mike walked into the sports and outdoor activity store, Decathalon, in Carcassonne. He bought himself a brand new pair of sunglasses. The following day, during a walk in the Montaigne Noir, they were lost. He retraced his steps and looked carefully but he could not find them.

It was a bright sunny day. He looked across the valley to the Pyrenees Mountains and said out loud:

“I hear you, Saint James”.

After walking a few more steps, he said:

“It’s good to know you’re still around.”

He was talking to the Universe.

A STRANGE ENCOUNTER OF THE THIRD DAY

On the morning of 12th April, Mike said farewell to his Mirepoix hosts and left to walk for Fanjeaux. He was armed with a slice of cherry tart and a bag of fresh cherries from the garden of Magat and Jean-Pierre.

He took his lunch break in a small picnic area in the village of Honoux. Others were taking a rest there, including a group of Dutch speaking walkers who commented on the scallop shell attached to his rucksack. The leader spoke, and what he said included the words: “Santiago” and “Camino”. Mike reports subsequent events as follows:

I turned to the group and smiled. The leader spoke in English to me and asked if I was on my way to Spain. I replied that I was coming back from there. We introduced ourselves. Jean-Luc was Belgian and lived in the area. He organised walking holidays for people based around pre-Christian pilgrimage routes. He was delighted to hear that I had gone all the way to Fisterra, thus completing the pre-Christian path in that country.

“Have you ever thought of walking the route in Ireland, Mike?”

“What route?”

“Newgrange to Croagh Patrick, the Holy Mountain. It runs parallel with the path you have just walked”

“Never heard of it”

“You should research it. Try to do it – it includes Slieve na Calliagh, Loughcrew and the Esker Riada”

“Interesting”

THE NEXT STEPS

So I did research it, but found that with motorways and private farmland, it was a very difficult project to realise. From Mas Cabardes, I arranged to return and meet Jean-Luc in Mirepoix to discuss other options.

Arriving back in that town, I parked my car outside some house as the woman occupier (older than me) was coming out. We tut-tutted at a car parked so as to block access to a footbridge for wheelchair users. I told her my business in the town, and we went our way.

Meeting Jean Luc and Jackie, his partner, we went for coffee in the medieval square, and who came along to sit at the table next to us but Margat and Jean Pierre, my hosts in Mirepoix when walking. It turns out everyone knew everyone else.

When we get to business, Jean-Luc acknowledges the difficulties of the Irish walk and suggests an English route. Again it is very roughly parallel to the Camino in Spain: it involves a walk from Canterbury to Tintagel via Stonehenge and other ancient sites. I was immediately interested in this English route as it would take me through territory associated with my childhood.

After the meeting I went back to the car - the woman I had met earlier was preparing lunch at her window and saw me. She was having a dinner party this evening, she told me - would I like to come? Excuse me - did I hear that right? Turns out I did. I said YES, which meant I had to hang around the area for the afternoon. So I went out to Vals to visit the Roman church there again as Jean Luc had told me it was a powerful megalithic site. Went into the museum café there, which was closed when I walked through, and signed the visitor book on leaving. I wrote that I had been a pilgrim and the proprietor, watching me write, asked:

“Did you stay with Evangelina? She was in for coffee here not half an hour ago”.

As I drive back to Mirepoix for dinner, I see a pilgrim with a scallop shell on his Way. It's Jean Pierre Dinoux, who has written four books on the Camino, which he has walked multiple times. This time he left from Oslo on 27th April and went round by Sweden and down

through Switzerland . He still has about seven weeks walking ahead.

I get to a brilliant dinner party, with lots of jokes about where (and with whom) I'm going to spend the night. "We're only joking" said Christine from Villemoustosou. "Oh no - I'm disappointed. I thought I was in with a chance here." I replied - and got the best laugh of the night. As I left, with promises to return next year, my hostess Marie Rose (nickname "Frijuette") revealed she was a descendant of Thomas a Beckett (one time Archbishop of Canterbury). I didn't freak - just accepted it as part of an extraordinary day.

Back in Mas Cabardes, I start to research this walking project on the internet. Again it's difficult, but I locate some pagan pilgrims who live in Dorset. E-mail contact reveals they have done much of this Way and have developed a route (since this is by no means a marked Way in the manner that the Camino was). But by the time I receive this information, my researches have thrown up another English line to walk: It's called St Michael's Way, and honours the archangel after whom I am named. I reckon this is the one for me.

SAINT MICHAEL'S WAY

"The Sun and the Serpent" written by Hamish Miller and Paul Broadhurst and published in 1989 records their investigation into Earth Energies by Miller's tracking of this ley line using his skill as a dowser. The blurb for the book drags me in deeper:

"Running right across southern Britain, from the far west of Cornwall to a point on the east coast of Norfolk, the St Michael Line is a remarkable alignment of ancient sacred sites. The alignment, or ley line, connects legendary places such as St Michael's Mount, Glastonbury, Avebury, Bury St Edmunds and many others whose significance is half-forgotten. Marking special places along the line are a great number of churches, some important, others almost secret, which are often dedicated to St Michael and other dragon-slaying saints, or to St Mary, the Christianised earth goddess.

Even more intriguing are the megalithic monuments and prehistoric sites situated along it, the remnants of a science and philosophy that is obscure to us in the modern world. A further extraordinary property of the alignment is that it coincides with the direction of the rising sun on or near Mayday, one of the most significant days in the ancient calendar and annual solar cycle."

Further research tells me I can buy a set of Ordinance Survey maps specially compiled, which cover the entire route – showing the ley line as well as the dowsed Mary and Michael energy lines which wind around the ley.

These lines do not follow roads or footpaths with any exactitude but ancient thoroughfares such as the Ridgeway and the Icknield Way run parallel and close in the earlier stages of this 800 kilometre Way.

There is also an organisation, The Mary/Michael Pilgrims Way which has been set up to promote this pilgrimage route across England. It has already published a guidebook for one section of the Way between Brentor and Glastonbury – a Tor to Tor route in the West Country.

There's the possibility to camp wild, which means I will be able to sleep on the actual ley line. It also means I will have to upgrade my camping equipment. I start to talk to young friends about the finer points of Duck n' Dive – going in to camp in those places where people would rather you didn't!

I'm going to have do this one on my own!

But as I talk around, I hear words which start to get repeated with some frequency:

"That sounds great, Mike. Could I join you for a few days?"

And the man who always liked to be in control and do things his way without let or hindrance from others said: "YES".

Cian from Farnham will come if he can get away from work and his family are okay with it. I taught him to canoe when he was younger. We rolled up in a capsized sea kayak together once. In his twenties he became a ski instructor in Canada – a man who loves nature.

Charly from Brighton wants in too:

"Mike, it's been more than ten years. A couple of days would be good to catch up with each other."

And then Pat from Harpenden – the one who loves wolves:

"You know that thing you're doing, Mike, walking across England? Could I come for a bit?"

"Errrmmm"

"I've got relations in Plymouth. I could stay with them and come up for a couple of days on Dartmoor."

"That might be possible, Pat. But I'll be camping wild, that means no tents – just survival bags and the open air"

"Cool! And can we drink scrumpy? They've got scrumpy down there – it's like real cider, not like you get in cans."

"We might try that, Pat"

“And - can we light fires?”

“Yes, Pat, we can light fires”.

I think I’ve got one lit already.