



# Nibbles

## The Walk of a Lifetime

Aleta Wege

The question I am asked most frequently is "Why?" All the variations of *the why*. My answer: This is how I recharge my emotional batteries, how I retain my sanity. The response: What an insane choice of a holiday! Walking 799km in 34 days with what you need carried on your back in a 35 litre back pack.

Pilgrims have been walking the Camino de Santiago for more than a 1000 years and that is what I did with four friends earlier this year. The Camino dates back to the Middle Ages and is a Roman Catholic tradition. I am not Catholic. You don't have to be Catholic to do this pilgrimage. People from different cultures and religions walk the Camino. You can walk it for personal reasons, for religious or spiritual reasons or simply see it as an adventure.

Legend holds that the Camino is the route that the apostle James followed to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. Santiago de Compostella is one of three important Christian pilgrim destinations including Rome and Jerusalem. During the middle ages the route was highly travelled but it lost popularity due to political unrest in Spain, the Protestant Reformation and diseases [Black Death]. It was named a UNESCO World Heritage Site and in October 1987 declared as the first European Cultural Route. It has since regained popularity and each year a great number of modern-day pilgrims from all around the globe follow *the Way of St James*.



Aleta Wege

In 2012 I walked a 500km stretch of the Camino with my colleague, Marlene Gilbert. Walking from Burgos to Santiago de Compostella was an amazing experience. It was truly a spiritual journey for me. However, I had this yearning to walk the entire French Camino, all the way from St Jean Pied de Port to Santiago de Compostella, all 799km of it.



The road to Triacastella

My colleague Louisa Barrish asked me about the Camino and I told her I was most definitely walking from St Jean in 2017. Then there were two. Another colleague, Carrie de Beer, said she would love to go with us; I invited my cousin Karin Arnold along. We were finally joined by another friend, Tiwonge Mkandawire, who would join us in León and walk the last 310km with us.

The preparation for the journey was very exciting. The weight of each article you pack is of utmost importance. The aim is to

not carry more than 7kg on your back, excluding your 1 litre of water, which weighs 1 kilogram. We went shopping for the right size and the right colour back packs – we are women, colour matters! We weighed sleeping bags and hiking towels, bought trial size shampoos and moisturisers. We had show-and-tell evenings to share who found what equipment where. We attended information evenings offered by the Confraternity of St James.

I realised that one tends to pack for your fears: What if I get bitten by a giant spider or a meteorite hits the earth or I fall down Alice's rabbit hole? These evenings helped us to each get rid of the *maybe's* and *what if's*.

We also spent a lot of time walking with our boots and backpacks in preparation for the journey. To walk 20 to 25km in a day is doable, but on the Camino you have to do that again tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and the



Kai and Carrie

day thereafter, each day for 34 days! Don't be fooled: it is not a walk in the park; the Camino is physically challenging. Fortunately, as in life, 799km that seems impossible can be conquered one step at a time.

We spent a day in St Jean Pied de Port and too soon Day 1 dawned. It was time to hit the road! Every morning we got up, got dressed, stuffed our sleeping bags into their bags, put our boots on, ate our bananas, and hitched the back packs onto our backs and started walking. The first couple of days we had breakfast at 7am and only started walking closer to 8am, but it was extremely hot and terrible to walk after 2pm. On day 4 we changed our routine: We got up at 5am and started walking by 6am. This was our routine from St Jean Pied de Port on the French side of the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostella in Galicia, Spain.

The Camino winds its way through rural Northern Spain and with the pilgrims comes the only source of income to the villages. You don't carry food for the day as there are Tiendas [shops] and mobile shops, which cater for tired, hungry pilgrims.



*Just follow the yellow arrows*

On average we walked 24km per day. It takes a couple of days for you and your backpack to become *Simunye*. When you're done walking for the day, you find a bed, shower, wash your clothes [as you have to wear it again tomorrow], find something to eat, and then take a nap or explore the village. You sleep in Albergues, which are pilgrims' backpackers and where you have to show your pilgrim's passport to be allowed to sleep there. [These are issued by the Confraternity of St James]. Most places we paid €10 for a bed in a dorm. The size of the dorms varies, so be prepared to spend the night with anything from 8 to 80 strangers.

Eventually you get used to sharing sleeping space with strangers, and with the help of P&P's [plugs and pills] you manage to sleep through the snoring and other noises. Taking a shower in a unisex bathroom is a totally different matter! In Atapuerca I was having a shower and I said out aloud to no one in particular: "I wonder what my daughter would say if she knew I was showering with a man". From behind a curtain on the other side of the bathroom a male voice answered: "Maybe she will phone the pope and ask him why this is happening in the middle of a staunch catholic country!" And then you get the communal showers with no doors, no privacy. At least here male and female facilities were separate. By the way Atapuerca is a UNESCO World Heritage Site [remains from the Pleistocene Age was discovered here].

Along the way you meet pilgrims from all over the world. There was Maureen from Australia, Paula from Houston, Marie [79 years old] from the Netherlands, our two Spanish *Guapos* [Spanish for Handsome] León and Efrén, Kai from Austria and Walter, our Chinese friend, who introduced us as *his four South African wives*, and the youngsters Elisa and Annie from USA. When you have not seen somebody for a couple of days and you meet them again it is a joyous reunion. And the friends you make on the Camino are friends for life.



*(l to r) Louisa Barrish, Walter Wand, Tiwonge Mkandawire and Carrie de Beer*

Efrén and León taught us about Siesta, Spanish Food and *Sobremesa*. I wish we could bring *Sobremesa* to South Africa. It is an "after table" tradition. Nobody just eats their food, gets up and leave. After eating your meal you sit around and talk and enjoy each other's company. And the restaurants don't get fidgety because you don't leave. What a healthy way to spend your lunch and siesta time!

We tend to forget that we have a very stressful job. Pharmacists carry a huge responsibility and we have to be *Eagle Eyed* at all times. We take care of the patients but we forget to take care of ourselves. Walking the Camino was my way of taking care of *me*. Zero stress and my only responsibility was to get up, pick up my back pack and keep walking.

The Camino is also a reflection of real life. We tend to carry too much unnecessary *baggage*, but the lighter your pack the easier the walk, through life and on the Camino. You get to know yourself better, realise you can endure more than you thought and you build resilience.

Will I do it again? Yes, most definitely! In 2020.



*Jumping for joy*

For whatever reason you decide to walk the Camino just know that you will come back a changed person. Don't take too long to decide. Take care of yourself!