The Pilgrims’ Ways to Santiago in Galicia

The French Way by bicycle

Xunta de Galicia
The discovery of the tomb of Apostle St. James the Greater (Santiago el Mayor), around the years 820 and 830, in the forest named Libredón and where today the majestic Santiago de Compostela Cathedral stands is one of the most important events of the middle ages in Europe. The news of the appearance of Santiago's remains travelled quickly around the continent and soon the phenomenon of pilgrimages emerged spontaneously.

The objective is to worship one of Jesus’ favourite disciples in his tomb, Santiago, first martyr of Christianity, beheaded in Jerusalem around the year 44. Several documents dating from the 6th century placed the pilgrimage of the Apostle in Hispania between the years 33 and 42. His disciples wanted to bring him to this territory after his death. They decided to bury him near the magic and the mystery of Finis Terrae, the end of the world at his time.

The discovery of this Roman sepulchre, nearly eight centuries later, would mark the beginning of a worship that has made the Route the real backbone of Europe and the city of Santiago de Compostela and its cathedral into one of the three great Christian pilgrimage sites, along with Rome and Jerusalem.

Not only does a stream of people of various nationalities pass through the Camino de Santiago that increases in Holy years - when July 25 falls on a Sunday and it is possible to obtain the Jubilee, a plenary indulgence, or remission of sins, which the Church gives — but it has also been a "highway of knowledge": a diffuser of the great cultural and artistic movements that were emerging in Europe - the Romanesque for example, an architectural style which was born on the road to Santiago de Compostela - and has also been an unparalleled demonstration of human solidarity.
But the route still has more: walk to the West through a route with 1,200 years of history and leave behind the habits and routines of today. Just as at the dawn of the pilgrimage, it is a combination of sacrifice and reward which transforms he who experiences it at least once in their life.

The itinerary begins in different points of Europe. In France the routes proceed from Italy or from the East of the Continent (among many other places in Europe). It enters into Spain by way of the Pyrenees, and from Puente la Reina (Navarra) it is a single road, known as the French Route, which runs through the entire North of the country, finally reaching Santiago de Compostela.

This route -described in the 12th century in the Codex Calixtinus- enters Galicia through peak point of O Cebreiro and is a reference, but it is not the only or the oldest one. In fact, there are ten pilgrimage routes which were created throughout history. The oldest, as we said, is called the Primitive Route; next to it lies the Northern Route -both enter into Galicia through the region of Asturias--; the English Way -with the ports of A Coruña and Ferrol as landmarks--; the Portuguese Way; and its variant along the coast; the Silver Way -or “Via de la Plata”- which starts in South West of Spain-, the Fisterra-Muxía Way -which extends the pilgrimage to Finis terrae; the Mar de Arousa y Ulla Way -which recalls the itinerary by which, according to tradition, the apostles’ remains arrived in a ship-. And, finally, the Winter Way, an alternative to the cold summits of the Lugo mountains of O Cebreiro—.

The goal is Santiago de Compostela, capital of the autonomous region of Galicia. Its historic centre was declared a World Heritage site by UNESCO in 1985. In 1987 the Council of Europe acknowledged the Santiago Route as the first European Cultural itinerary, and in the Holy Year of 1993, the Santiago Route was declared a world heritage area.

In 2011, the Cathedral celebrated the 800th anniversary of its consecration. Across from it, in the plaza de Obradoiro, each traveller understands that “the goal is the route” and records this moment in their mind, before the majestic Portico of Glory, a cry of courage that since medieval times has always helped travellers to carry on: Ultreia!
To understand the quick consolidation of Santiago as an international pilgrimage centre (centuries IX to XII) we must make mention of the Union of forces and interests, in favour of Compostela, carried out by major Western power centres: the Crown (from Alfonso II to Alfonso VII or Sancho Ramírez), the Papacy (Pope Calixtus II or Alexander III) and the Ladakhi orders (the abbeys of Cluny and the Cistercian order). This is how the Route will write its millennial history:

When the remains of the Apostle were discovered (9th century), Alfonso II reigned in the peninsular North-West (known as Kingdom of Asturias). He is the first great protector. He had been raised in the monastery of Samos and received the news from the bishop of Iria, Theodemir, with enthusiasm: that a hermit named Paio had located in the forest, the ruins of a primitive burial. This appearance confirms a longstanding popular tradition that had even been documented by the monks Bede the Venerable and Beato of Liébana. But this proof was missing. Then, King Alfonso II visits the site and orders that a modest church be constructed, later rebuilt by Alfonso III (year 899). We are in the origin of the current Cathedral and city of Santiago. The worship of Santiago became common in the astur-galaico Kingdom and reached beyond the Pyrenees, receiving a rapid popular response.

But on August 10th of the year 997 the Arab warlord Al-Mansur, Prime Minister of the Caliphate of Cordoba, sweeps the city, stealing the bells of the Basilica and only respects the "holy place", with the remains of Santiago. Upon them, Compostela is to be reborn. The symbol of Santiago is already too strong to succumb: representing a unit identity and a common force (spiritual and military) for combating the Islamic invasion: the Reconquest.

The golden age for the pilgrimages was from the 11th to the 13th centuries: France,
Italy, central and Eastern Europe, England, Germany, even Iceland, and, of course, all of Hispania. They arrived on foot, horseback, and boat.... and were assisted mainly by a network of hospitals of the Cluny and the Cistercian order which has been the true support of the Jacobean spirit.

The first Jubilee year or Holy year (when the feast of St. James, July 25th, coincides with Sunday) arrived, around the year 1428 (since then it has been held, as dictated by the calendar, every 6, 5, 6 and 11 years).

But upon arriving at the 16th century, things changed. Luther concludes the religious unity of the West; the route was threatened by the presence of criminals and the wars plaguing Europe force borders to be closed, the worst of obstacles for this human river of pilgrims. France - a Jacobean country par excellence - undergoes their revolution in 1789, and in Spain the Church begins to lose its power and influence. It is a new world.

However in the 19th century, two facts will rekindle the Jacobean spirit. English romanticism discovers a world of beauty and mystery in the Cathedral and its Portico of Glory. On the other hand, a fundamental fact: in 1879 the remains of the Apostle were rediscovered. As it turns out three hundred years earlier (1589) Archbishop Sanclemente had hidden them due to threats from the English privateer Francis Drake, and it was such their zeal that nobody would find them again until the end of the 19th century. Some archaeological excavations brought them to light, and behind them, the return - although modest at first - of the pilgrimages. But another century would have to pass until the resurgence of the Route, after the first third of the 20th century marked in Spain by a bloody civil war and 40 years of dictatorship.

In 1982 Pope John Paul II visited Santiago de Compostela, dressed as a pilgrim. In 1993 (another Holy year) the Galician Government launches the Jacobean Plan, followed by the 1999, 2004 and 2010. Today, as in medieval times, millions of pilgrims now journey to Compostela. It is a different type of pilgrimage, but it does not deny its traditional aspects; it simply adds the desires and motivations of contemporary societies.
Santiago de Compostela was born from the Libredón forest, where the appearance of the Apostle’s remains occurred. Today, the city is an international pilgrimage center, the capital of the autonomous region of Galicia and home of a prestigious University with over five centuries of history. Compostela is also, with a registered population of 93,000 inhabitants, the granite stone forest on which the medieval city was laid out, and a green forest, of centuries-old oak groves like those of Santa Susana, raised in the centre of the forest.

Its stone has made Santiago a world heritage site since 1985; due to its green areas it is one of Spain’s cities with the most square metres of parks and gardens per capita, surrounded by the poetry of the Sar and Sarela rivers.

Its core is the Praza do Obradoiro. Here is where all of the Routes converge. And from it, in front of the Cathedral, emanates the strength and beauty of more than a thousand years of history and tradition. The Obradoiro is a harmony of styles, periods and sublimated stone: in the front, the Baroque façade of the Basilica and the Romanesque Xelmírez Palace to the left, the Hostal de los Reyes Católicos (old pilgrims Hospital) Renaissance; to the right, the medieval portico of the San Xerome College (today, Rectorate Building of University of Santiago) and, behind the neoclassicism of the...
Palace of Raxoi, current site of the City Hall and of the presidency of the Regional Government of Galicia. A landscape built over eight centuries, closed to the West by Mount Pedroso, which is basically a collection of Western art.

The city emerged around the Cathedral’s mayor centrifugal force. Firstly, the other three squares that surround the monument: Praterías (Preferred by musicians and artists), Quintana (old cemetery) and the Inmaculada Place, with the spectacular monastery of San Martiño Pinario, also the manor houses (pazos) that flank the rúas do Vilar and rúa Nova streets, or the Mazarelos gate (the only one left standing from the old wall) completes the first glance. Outside of the walls, we find the convent of San Francisco (with a tribute to the Saint of Assisi by the sculptor Asorey), the Palace de San Lorenzo (along with another oak forest), or the Romanesque Collegiate Church of Sar, with it’s incredible inclined columns and the remains of the 12th century cloister. In addition to them, are the new cultural infrastructures born under the provisions of the new pilgrimage and of Santiago as the regional capital. Amongst them is the: Galician Centre of contemporary art (work of Siza), next to the Museo do Pobo Gallego (where Domingo de Andrade built his triple spiral staircase); the great Auditorium of Galicia or the Cidade da Cultura, stunning architecture designed by Peter Eisenman and built at the top of Gaiás Mountain.

Stone, forest, history, art... and, finally, gastronomy. The entire city, especially near the rúa do Franco and its surroundings, is a temple to good eating. From great restaurants to genuine taverns, Santiago can satisfy- in this area as well - all of our expectations.
The Cathedral of Santiago is the result of over seven hundred years of construction, successions in styles and expansions, and continual reforms. As part of the monument's protohistory the two pre-Romanesque churches, built in the 9th century must be mentioned. The Basilica that gave rise to the Cathedral that we now know would begin in 1075, in the time of Diego Peláez, with a team of fifty Masons led by master Bernaldo o Vello.

However, the great impulse to the work would arrive sometime later, with Diego Xelmírez as Archbishop, a cultured, cosmopolitan person, prominent cultural and spiritual promoter of Compostela. At the time of his death (1139-1140) the basic structure of the monument (header, main altar, arms of the transept, and Romanesque radiating chapels) was already raised.

The Cathedral will be inspired by the large churches of France and in it the most advanced architectural and sculptural techniques of the West will be implemented.

For example, it is the first European Romanesque church to have a monumental sculp-
ture in the three facades: Obradoiro, Praterías and Paraíso (today, Acibechería).

It would then be the Portico of Glory that closes the monument’s Western Front which would place the Compostela Basilica at the zenith of European Romanesque art: the closure to the West of the monument. Its author was Maestro Mateo (architect who was most likely from Santiago) and his team. They worked for over forty years from 1168 to 1211. They left for history the great poem in stone that summarizes not only all of the medieval art but also the conception of man and the universe of his time for history, presented in an architectural structure of three superposed floors.

The last major renovation of the Cathedral was carried out in the middle of the 18th century. It was meant to protect the Portico of Mateo and at the time, provided the Basilica with a closure to the West in accordance with the scale of the temple: thus arose the Baroque facade. It was designed by Fernando de Casas Novoa, and completed in 1750. The prevailing Baroque taste gives the Cathedral a dramatic sense of verticality, of elevation, playing with glass and stone in a way that had not been done until then. The Holy Year of 1784 marks the end of the works, with the inauguration of the Communion chapel.

The current Basilica will likewise seduces us, with its clock tower also known as “Berenguela” and, of course, the Porta Santa entry (only in the Holy year) is unavoidable. And in the interior, the embrace of the Apostle, the descent to the crypt that holds his remains, Wich visit to the royal Pantheon, the pilgrims that culminates with the spectacle of the botafumeiro or incense holder, and its chapels, from the largest (in the header) to Corticela (pure Romanesque) to the el Salvador (the oldest of all). Even pleasant surprises like the archaeological excavations that were opened to the public at the beginning of 2011, that allow us to go down to the Cathedral subsoil, where pre-Roman and medieval cemeteries emerge, as well as the settlement that gave rise to the monument and the city of Santiago.
Can you keep my secret?

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