

Walking from Canterbury to Aosta

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In 2008 we walked from Roncesvalles in Spain to Santiago de Compostela. It was our wedding anniversary present to ourselves, and it was great. No need for a detailed map, we just followed the copious signs and arrows, and when we did inadvertently stray (twice) a local person raced out of the fields to put us right. "El Camino" or "The Way of St James" led us directly to hostel accommodation at the end of each day's walk. If we didn't want to do a full day's walk we could always stop sooner as most towns offered some accommodation. As for food, drink and toilet stops, almost every small town along the route had a bar of some kind, so that four hours was probably the longest we ever went without finding relief. In fact one could almost describe the walk as a "bar-hopping" experience! There were always plenty of people on the track, so companionship and help in case of problems was readily available.

The experience was so exhilarating that we determined to do another long distance walk. We heard about the *Via Francigena* while staying in a small town in northern Italy. We joined the CPR, bought the guidebook for the section from Canterbury to the Great Saint Bernard Pass and set off towards the end of March 2009. We understood that the route was a work in progress with little infrastructure in place, especially in France, and it lacked the government support that made the well-organised *Camino* such an inexpensive proposition. But we were prepared to give it a go and determined to make the most of it.

The first part of the *Via Francigena* differs from its Spanish counterpart in almost every facet. Signage was poor, distances per day often too long for me (I managed 30km one day, but I was exhausted), accommodation difficult to find, and, apart from a few notable exceptions, expensive (especially in comparison to the *Camino*). Food and coffee stops were few and far between, and we found it best to stock up with staples like bread, cheese, sausage, dried fruit etc. as there was no guarantee of finding even the evening meal. We had several occasions to be thankful for the provisions we carried. We were the only two people doing the walk at this time and we found very few of the locals were even aware of the existence of the pilgrim route through their town. Those that were, however, were extremely enthusiastic and helpful. A butcher interrupted serving his customer to come outside and point us in the direction of the café; a family invited us to spend the night with them when we still had 7km to go for viable accommodation one wet afternoon; an elderly lady drove us 30km out of her way (and ours!) when hotels were closed to give staff a holiday for May Day. I have to say this walk has restored our faith in the basic goodness of most people, notwithstanding the constant bombardment of bad news from the media.

Our first day of walking from Canterbury to Shepherdswell was wet. We had to don our rain gear, both jacket and trousers, but we could do nothing to protect our brand new boots from the mud in the ploughed fields we had to cross. My beautiful pale blue boots have never recovered and are now a nondescript greyish colour; though they are probably the most comfortable I have ever worn. We had facetiously told friends back home in Perth, Australia, that we planned to walk across the Channel using a very long snorkel, but in the event we settled for a ferry crossing from Dover. We walked from Calais to Wissant in driving rain with a strong wind along the exposed coastline forcing us to walk bent over sideways. Despite this first day in France we really had good luck with the weather. We only had about six days where we had to wear wet weather gear all day. At one point our friends in Italy were quite concerned for us because they had almost three weeks of continual rain, but we were quite dry. We had planned to meet friends in Gy, and they almost came to fetch us when it stormed in their town about 100km away, but again we had no problem. We were glad to have our wet weather gear against the cold, especially in the evening, and our trousers also served as groundsheets when we stopped for breaks.

We would set off early in the morning and take a break every hour or so. At lunchtime we would spread out our rain trousers, lie down with our heads on our backpacks and rest for from half to three quarters of an hour. Rod, my husband, would actually sleep, but I was quite happy to "rest my eyes" (along with the rest of me!) Finding somewhere suitable to stop was a challenge for Rod. The ground was generally wet and muddy, and though our rain trousers sufficed for the former, the latter proved more troublesome. We sat on abandoned brick palettes, woodpiles, logs, door steps and anything else that provided relief from the damp. The few days that it did rain were particularly difficult, as we could not take our customary breaks unless we were fortunate enough to find a town with a bar.

Much of the first part of the route in France was through agricultural areas and we saw many fields of canola, grain and potatoes. It was very picturesque, especially as the small towns, often with orange tiled housing, always with church spires, came into view. It was particularly beautiful when we walked through areas with cherry trees in full flower. The white blossoms were magnificent. In the region of the Somme and the Marne we came across First World War cemeteries. They varied greatly in size, some with a few graves among the civilian population, to dedicated war cemeteries. The largest we saw was the Cormicy military cemetery in the *Chemin des Dames* area, with at least 7000 crosses and an ossuary containing the bones of almost as many soldiers.

Regardless of the size we always experienced the same overwhelming emotions of sorrow, regret and gratitude. On the 8th April we found a small cemetery close to Trefcon, which had the graves of a dozen or so British soldiers (Hussars), many of them killed in the same action on the 9th April 1917. We found that particularly poignant.

Just before Reims we started to see our first champagne country. (I just have to mention here that our hostess in Hermonville the night before, found for us by helpful locals when we had exhausted our possibilities, had given us her phone number. "If you can't find accommodation in Reims," she'd said, "call me and I'll come and get you. It's only 26km." Another example of good people!) It was an extensive area and we saw many workers amongst the vines. Rod is an engineer and curious about everything, so he kept prodding me, since I can speak French, to ask exactly what they were doing. They were spraying, spreading manure, and tying vines to trellises. I could have lived without knowing this, but I invariably found myself complying.

At Mormont we found a hostess who knew about the *Via Francigena*, in fact was a supporter of it. We had found little awareness of it, apart from a few exceptions, in our travels. Our host in Guînes was developing hostel-type accommodation for it, and the *mairie* of Chateauvillain provided a refuge gratis. The hotels at Corbeny and Cussey sur l'Ognon gave pilgrim rates and menus. Otherwise any help we received came spontaneously from people unfamiliar with the pilgrim walk.

Our first day off was in the beautiful city of Besançon. We decided to take a rest here, before tackling the start of hilly and eventually mountainous terrain, was warranted. Our first sight of snow came as we crossed the frontier into Switzerland not far from Sainte-Croix. This mountainous section was beautiful, but the highlight of our trip had to be walking along Lake Geneva from Lausanne to Villeneuve. The most frightening was walking along the mountain paths from Martigny to Sembrancher. Unfortunately, the Great Saint Bernard Pass was still covered with four metres of snow, so we took a bus from Bourg-Saint-Pierre through the tunnel to Etroubles in Italy.

We have been looking forward to resuming our walk in Aosta on March 19 this year and are now proceeding to Rome. We understand there is more infrastructure and awareness of the walk in Italy, but we will reserve our judgement. We fully expect to enjoy the final stage of our pilgrimage just as we enjoyed walking from Canterbury to Aosta despite, or perhaps because of, the challenges.

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