

Camino de Santiago

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The word *'compostela'* comes from either *'campus stellae'* meaning starry field or *'compositium'* meaning burial ground.

Traversing northern Spain to the tomb of James the Greater in Santiago de Compostela, the Camino de Santiago (Way of St James) pilgrimage is considered to be Europe's premier cultural itinerary. In the latter quarter of the 20th century, the Camino experienced a remarkable renaissance as people took to recreating the medieval journey, following the old trails marked by the traditional pilgrimage symbols of scallop, shell and staff on foot and by bicycle (and, more rarely, on horseback). The key to the Camino's immense appeal is its accessibility. A 13th-century poem from a remote Pyrenean monastery says it all: 'The door is open to all, to sick and healthy, not only to Catholics but also to pagans, Jews, heretics and vagabonds.' Not much has changed. Modern pilgrims are not primarily religiously motivated but come from every possible background, age and nationality. The Camino continues to attract all sorts – culture hounds, soul searchers, those longing for a great physical challenge, food and wine enthusiasts, as well as lovers of natural landscapes and back roads. Whether you walk for just one day or for 50 – the Camino is ready to give, if you're ready to receive.

HISTORY

Scallop shells are worn by Santiago pilgrims as the symbol of their journey to Compostela; in the iconography you will recognise St James by the scallop shells on his hat and tunic.

Before people could fly or drive to Santiago, millions of pilgrims from across Europe simply walked out their doors and headed for Santiago de Compostela along a vast network of trade routes, royal roads and trails that eventually came together in Spain. Goethe's comment that 'Europe was born on the pilgrim road to Santiago' thus makes sense. But what originally set Europe's feet moving? Tradition tells us that in AD 813 Pelayo, a religious hermit living in the boondocks of northwestern Iberia, followed a shining star and angelic voices to a Roman mausoleum hidden under briars.

Inside were the remains of the apostle James the Greater (in Spanish, Santiago). Once confirmed by the local bishop Teodomiro and Asturian king Alfonso the Chaste, the earth-shaking discovery spread like wildfire and put the incipient Compostela indelibly on European maps. Today it's hard to imagine the impact of this news, but in that age pilgrimage to holy sites with relics was tantamount to obtaining a ticket to eternal salvation through the system of penance and indulgences. Relics were sacred commodities: the more important the relic, the more important the shrine that held them. Santiago's relics were gold: nearly intact and belonging to one of Jesus' favourite apostles, making them Europe's finest. When word got out, the devoted began the arduous journey to Spain, especially when the Crusades made it too dangerous to reach Jerusalem.



SCALLOP SHELL

Many theories abound as to why the scallop shell is associated with St James. Some say the scallop, already linked with a local pagan Venus cult, was recycled when Christianity made headway in the area. Picture Botticelli's Venus rising out of her shell in *The Birth of Venus*. Similarly, the symbol of rebirth is apt for St James as his pilgrimage ideally offers regeneration of the soul. But the best story goes like this: as the stone boat carrying Santiago's body reached the Galician coast there was a pagan wedding taking place on shore. The groom, mounted on a horse, was racing along the beach. Catching sight of a floating stone boat was so unsettling that he and the horse fell into the crashing waves and began to drown. Santiago, in his first act of postmartyrdom mercy, righted the groom and his horse, and when they emerged out of the waves they were covered in scallop shells.

How Santiago's remains reached present-day Compostela must rank among medieval Europe's greatest legends. Originally a fisherman, James took up Jesus' call and became one of his first apostles. Apocryphal tradition instructs us that James then preached in Iberia before returning to Jerusalem where he met his violent end. The Bible explains that James has the dubious honour of being the first apostle martyred (decapitated) by Herod Agrippa, in AD 44. Debate, however, surrounds the remainder of the story. Apparently, James' followers secreted his body to Jaffa and set sail in a stone boat on a miraculous sea voyage through the Strait of Gibraltar back to Galicia at Padrón. Queen Lupa, the local pagan ruler, set wild bulls onto the disciples when they requested permission to bury their Christian martyr. Not about to be daunted, the disciples prayed to Santiago, who calmed the bulls' ire, allowing them to be peacefully yoked. Santiago was then buried and forgotten until Pelayo followed the star seven centuries later.

While the spiritual rewards of pilgrimage were infinite, the hazards were too. In the 10th century there was no actual 'road' to Compostela; the Camino needed to be built and settled to provide pilgrims with safe trails, bridges, shelter, towns, churches and first aid. To encourage able-bodied souls to the area, monarchs offered enormous privileges to settlers, who soon populated town after town. Northern Spain was additionally plagued by Christian versus Muslim skirmishes, which made the going hazardous. Monarchs and ecclesiasts were no fools and they quickly put the apostle's image to work – he was reborn as the legendary Santiago Matamoros (Moor-slayer), heading up the Christian troops mounted on a white charger at key Reconquista (Reconquest) battles.

Benedictine monks from Cluny in France also recognised the advantage of close ties to the Camino. They founded many monasteries and attendant churches along the trail, which populated the way with Romanesque art forms and helped to spread the order's power. In the 12th century a French cleric compiled the *Liber Sancti Jacobi* (aka the Book of St James). A masterwork on the Santiago pilgrimage, it includes a remarkable guidebook that divides the route from the Pyrenees into 13 stages. This was instrumental in spreading Santiago's fame.

A further boon for Compostela was the Pope's 1189 granting of Holy Year status to the shrine, further increasing its prestige as a pilgrimage destination. Consequently, as a major focus of European traffic, northern Spain was blessed with an abundance of first-rate architecture from Romanesque to baroque styles.

After its 11th-to-13th-century heyday (which rivalled even Rome and Jerusalem), the Camino suffered through the Protestant Reformation,

Years in which 25 July falls on a Sunday are considered 'Holy Years' (Año Santo/Jacobeo). In these years pilgrims can earn plenary indulgences (erasing all one's sins), partly explaining the Camino's popularity. The next occurrences are 2010 and 2021.