



## follow the arrows

On the eve of turning 30 a vaguely dissatisfied woman takes an ancient pilgrimage and learns that with no Spain—or no pain—there can be no gain.

by Paula Worthington



I faced turning 30 years old with hesitation. When I was young (I suppose that's what 30 brings; you start saying things like, "When I was young"), I thought adults pretty much had their lives figured out—a career on the rise, a growing family, a self-assured smile and the ability to always say the right thing at the right time—by the age of 25. At 29, I had a few things sussed: I was much more comfortable in my skin than I'd been at 20, I had a home, job and friends that I loved. But, like anyone, I didn't always say the right thing or make the best decisions. I wanted a family of my own, but I didn't have one yet. I was 29 and holding.

And so, poised at the threshold of 30, I decided to head for the El Camino, and I don't mean I was going to be draped across the hood of a car. The El Camino De Santiago, or St. James Way, is a 1,200-year-old trail that crosses northern Spain to the historic city of Santiago de Compostela. It is there that the remains of James the Apostle, a.k.a. Saint James the Great, were allegedly found in the ninth century by a hermit following a bright star in the sky (the age of the hermit is not known). Since then, thousands of pilgrims a year have made their way to Santiago by foot, bike, horse and donkey. Yellow arrows mark the trail that begins in southwestern France and ends, 775 kilometres later, at the large cathedral in Santiago.

Although the trail is steeped in Catholic history, today's pilgrims walk it for a number of reasons: religious, non-religious, and for the wonderful combination of adventure and quiet spiritual reflection. I fell into the third category and I was attempting to cover the last third of the walk, a 260-kilometre stretch beginning in a small historical city called Astorga.

I arrived in Leon, a three-hour train ride northwest from Madrid, and celebrated my birthday Spanish-style with steak, cake and wine. A good start to my new decade, I thought. The next morning, I embarked on my 12-day, 260-kilometre-long walk. I thought it would be all about coping with 30. As it turned out, it became all about those little yellow arrows. I was travelling with a friend and three strangers. Estuardo, our leader, shared only a few key words with us that first morning as we got off a bus in Astorga. "Follow the little yellow ar-



row," he said. "That is your sole mission in the next 12 days."

I covered 21 kilometres that first day at a pace that allowed me to notice my surroundings: thick blades of emerald-green grass, a bird floating in the wind against a cobalt-blue sky, fields of waist-deep wildflowers and bright red poppies. At regular intervals, a smile would creep across my face when I saw each yellow arrow. It was like a little pat on my shoulder, like someone whispering in my ear, "Good, you're going the right way. Now just keep walking."

If only life had yellow arrows. How wonderful it would be to have such a definitive indicator in my closet, pointing to the perfect work ensemble; or one hanging from the heavens, above the last parking spot at the Safeway. In this wonderful new world of walking that I was experiencing, my daily decisions were made and then rewarded by dozens of yellow arrows. It put my mind at peace.

But the peace ended quickly. I awoke on Day 2 in the hamlet of Rabanal del Camino with aches from my head to my heels. We were

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headed 25 kilometres through the mountains that day, and everything from the sky to the ground looked gray and gloomy. Already, I had reached a challenging mental crossroads. But, I turned on my achy heel, painted a smile over the strain, spotted a yellow arrow, and slowly started to make my way up the mountain.

In the course of the next few days, the walks got longer and hotter. On the third day, we walked almost 35 kilometres in 34 C heat. To pass the time on the trail, my friend and I started making lists of what hurt. “I don’t know what a heel spur is exactly, but I think I’m getting one,” I’d say. “My right knee aches, and come to think of it, my left knee, too,” Lindsay would reply. Eventually, we started making lists of what didn’t hurt. That list was shorter.

But by the fifth day, everything changed. I felt a new confidence and strength take over my body. I could get through the day with less food and water. I could walk 16 kilometres before lunch. I stopped popping ibuprofen before bed. My legs were getting stronger, carrying me up the hills with less effort than ever before. I was shocked at how quickly my body had adapted to the trail.

On the fifth day, something else happened, too. I stopped worrying about being 30. I started to think more about the other people on the trail. We were all feeling our share of aches, pains, peace, joy and frustration. We wished each other a “buen camino” as we passed along the trail. Then, I met two Dutch ladies in their 50s who’d begun walking in Pamplona, some 700 kilometres from Santiago. One told me, “We won’t walk more than about 20 kilometres a day. After that, your body starts to get upset with you. Besides, we want to enjoy ourselves—we call this our Camino de Vino.” She gave me a wink, and saluted me with her coffee cup.

Heading out in early-morning darkness on the 12th day, I made my way through the last stretch of farmland and into the outskirts of Santiago, past the airport and into the old city with its winding cobblestone streets and crowded cafés. I felt disoriented among so many people and, alarmingly, my arrows were becoming less frequent. As we walked beneath a large archway—The Pilgrim’s Gate—and into a huge square, the Cathedral of Santiago turned up almost unexpectedly. Suddenly, the walk was over. I felt wonderful, relieved, but strangely, a little sad, too.

After two days of relaxation in lively Santiago, I spotted the two Dutch ladies window-shopping. “Hello!” I called, ecstatic to see the “Camino de Vino” ladies again. We talked about how our journeys had ended, and where we were headed next. Then, one of the ladies looked me in the eye, gently took my arm and said, “You must be so proud.” I stuttered for a moment, tears nearly coming to my eyes. “You



must be so proud, too,” I stammered. I didn’t know what else to say. I felt humbled by her comment. I was 25 years younger, and she had walked 500 kilometres farther than me.

But then I realized that I would go on these kinds of adventures again and again, and that one day, if I were lucky, I would become just like her: 30 far behind me, my life filled with good walks, laughter, plenty of coffee breaks, a little bit of vino, and a long trail in front of me—marked by yellow arrows or not. ☺

## Insider’s Tip:

**what to eat:** Santiago de Compostela and the entire province of Galicia are known for their seafood, beef, pork, delicious cheeses, empanadas, tapas and Ribeiro wine. (It’s no wonder so many Galicians walk.) Be sure to sample the tarta de Santiago—an almond and butter cake, often topped with a St. James Cross made of powdered sugar. Buen provecho!



  
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