

Walking the Ancient Pilgrim Trail

Camino de Santiago

by Leigh Parker

Napier City Councillor and medical practice manager Faye White returned from walking the Camino de Santiago in Spain last year a revitalised woman. It wasn't just that she had had an amazing travel experience, walking the route that millions of pilgrims have trod over the past thousand years; she believes the trip resulted in a profound spiritual awareness.

"It gave me a fresh outlook on life, including a desire to live more simply and an absolute belief that there is more to life than just material things. I felt happy, and for the first time in many years, at peace.

"It gave me a greater appreciation of nature and provided me with the strength to cut the chains of the past. It made me fitter – physically, mentally and, somewhat to my surprise as I hadn't expected it, spiritually stronger to deal with the future."

The Camino de Santiago, also known as The Way of St James, is a collection of old pilgrimage routes which cover all of Europe. They all have Santiago de Compostela in North West Spain as their final destination.

According to 9th century folklore, a lone shepherd discovered the bones of the Apostle Saint James by following a falling star to what would become Santiago de Compostela. This ancient road became one of the main pilgrimage routes of medieval times, rivalled only by Jerusalem and Rome.

"Once on the Camino trail, you have this awareness that it is a path where simply millions of pilgrims have gone before, and that is amazing in itself," says Faye.

"But the trail never seemed crowded. Although we saw and talked to fellow walkers, we had the opportunity and time to listen to our inner thoughts and immerse ourselves in the beauty of the amazing places to view along the route.

"I found that on some days I would start walking with people and then gradually break away and continue on my own, so it was a great time to just reflect on life and on where I was going, what I was doing and when I got to the end of it, where did I want to go?"

Faye (60) had never heard of the Camino, until a close friend was planning to include the walk in a trip to Europe. Faye thought it sounded like fun so decided to go with her.

"I read a couple of books on the area and got my walking fitness up, but went into the trip expecting nothing more than some beautiful scenery and a great experience with my friend.



On arrival in Santiago
(Faye White on the far right).

"What I ended up experiencing – the letting go of some past issues and the change in my outlook on life – caught me off-guard. It wasn't anything I ever thought could happen simply by doing a walking tour.

"On the trail, it simply crept up on me. I found that I started to notice the little things like the monarch butterflies that were always following me. I had left behind a sick mother at home and I felt like she was walking along with me.

"And as we reached the cathedral at the end of the trail, I found I just wanted to cry, and I did. I had no idea what I was crying about, but I couldn't stop crying for two days on and off. I found things from my past were coming up which I felt sad or guilty about, and all of a sudden I could put them to one side and move on.

"The fascinating thing is I wasn't alone. I think everyone in the tour group was changed by the trip in their own way. We all came back different in some way."

Faye's Camino experience started in Sarria and was a distance of 110 km to Santiago. Each day she walked about 20 kilometres, "which sounds a lot, but was actually really comfortable and easy.

"There was just so much to take in along the way – forests with trees over 500 years old, rural hamlets in which life seems to have

changed very little in the last couple of centuries, old 9th and 12th century monastery churches and the wonderful local food.

“Every night we bedded down thinking it couldn’t get any better, but it did.”

Faye says she has two absolute highlights from the trip – the first was washing her face and hands in the stream at Lavacolla where pilgrims would traditionally wash themselves before entering Santiago.

“It seemed quite incredible that although we were totally alone when we washed, that literally millions of others had done the same thing in the same place before us.

“The second highlight for me was at Monte de Gozo or the Mount of Joy, so called because pilgrims could see the spires of the cathedral and would drop to their knees and cry for joy. There is no doubt that seeing the spires gives you a wonderful sense that you are about to complete a very special journey.

“It is hard to explain what it’s like to be in the square outside the cathedral with hundreds of other pilgrims of all different nationalities and to feel the emotion, to see people singing or dropping to their knees in prayer or crying for joy. It was an incredibly powerful experience.”

Faye has done other walking tours in beautiful places, but says she’s never experienced anything like the Camino.

“There’s certainly something about the place that goes beyond its incredible beauty. Northern Spain is largely unspoiled and you feel like you are stepping back in time.

“We traversed forests, lush valley meadows, stretched our legs along craggy cliffs which led us from time to time down to beaches on the Atlantic coast where we dipped our toes.

“We visited quaint fishing villages where the boats are painted in the same pastel colours as the houses. We walked through picturesque traditional hamlets past wheat fields, vegetable gardens, poppies, cows grazing in sheds, peasant ladies in pinafores, old men sitting together and passing the time of the day.

“And with all of that came a feeling that there is something unique and special about this life and that the past can be left behind.”

Faye says many special moments have stayed with her since her return, “like the gorgeous little girl who woke me one day while I was lying on a remote beach, kissed me, smiled, said hola and ran off. I was quite blown away and couldn’t understand why she had chosen me. I often wonder who she was?”



Faye White (left) with Spanish guide and another tour participant.

“And while people around me wouldn’t consider I’ve made huge changes to my life since I got back, they are significant to me. I now enjoy the simple things in life more and I’ve got a deeper spiritual belief.

“Walking the Camino de Santiago shifted the direction I was going in. Not everyone who walks the trail will have the same experience, but whether you go for the scenery or the challenge or whatever, it can be truly life-changing depending how far you wish to go.”

Faye walked the Camino with Lifestyle Journeys, a Wellington-based travel company that offers travellers the chance of personal development while they explore some of the world’s most fascinating places of ancient wisdom with indigenous guides. For more information on walking the Camino and other Lifestyle Journeys tours and retreats – Website: www.lifestylejourneys.co.nz

