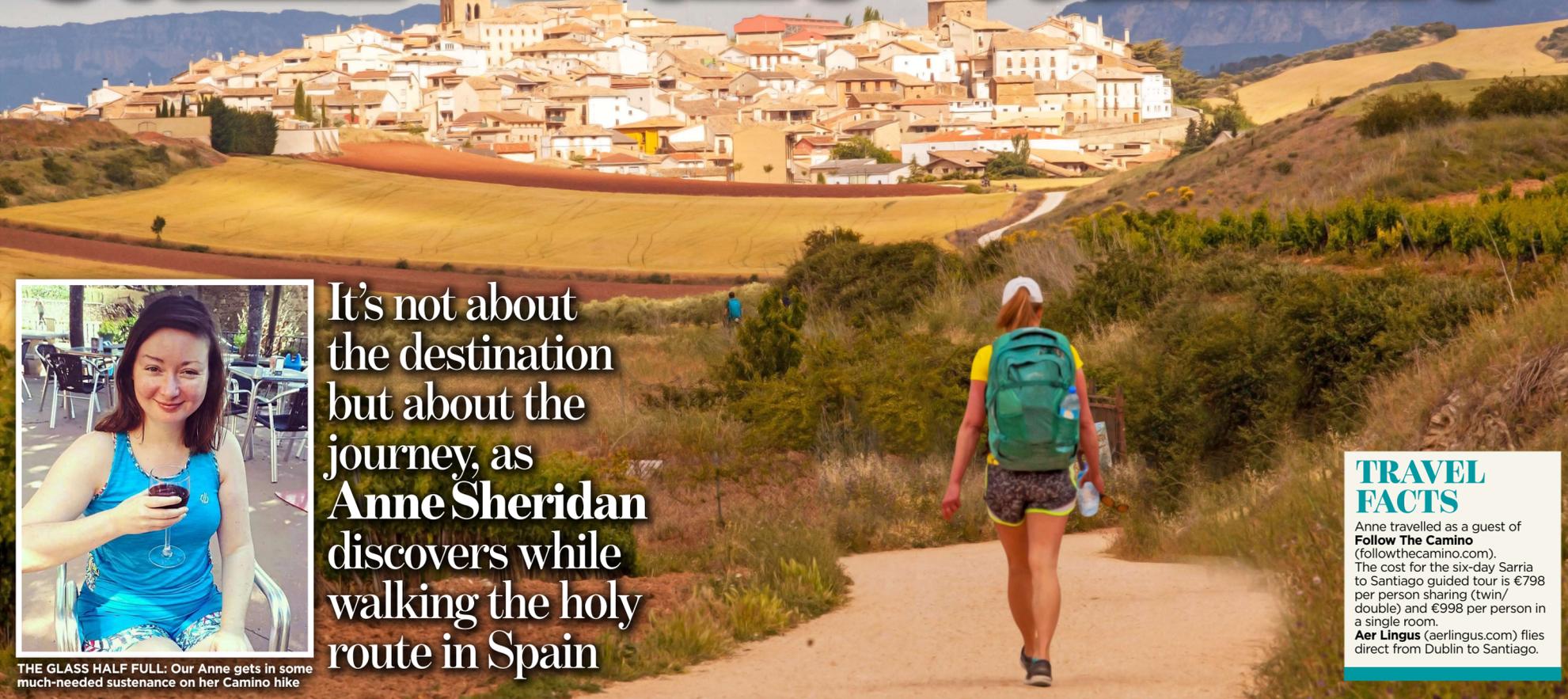


Calm on the Camino



THE GLASS HALF FULL: Our Anne gets in some much-needed sustenance on her Camino hike

It's not about the destination but about the journey, as Anne Sheridan discovers while walking the holy route in Spain

TRAVEL FACTS

Anne travelled as a guest of **Follow The Camino** (followthecamino.com). The cost for the six-day Sarria to Santiago guided tour is €798 per person sharing (twin/double) and €998 per person in a single room. **Aer Lingus** (aerlingus.com) flies direct from Dublin to Santiago.

ONE of the greatest gifts is learning to sit with yourself, a friend once said. But there are times in life when sitting with yourself can be the hardest thing to do. What if it was possible for restless souls with racing minds to be present while being on the move?

It turns out there is a way. For generations, the Camino de Santiago, the path of discovery for mind, body and soul through one simple exercise – walking – has become a rite of passage. Throughout history, it has held religious connotations and the road-less-travelled has become more populated. But that doesn't diminish the importance of this very unique journey, even for the many non-practising Catholics who literally walk among us.

In truth, we were all there for a reason, though sometimes that reason wasn't even fully known to ourselves.

For some, it was the hope of mending a broken heart, of letting a little light in to heal wounds old and new.

There were those caught between two worlds – a past they tried to hang on to and a future they weren't yet sure was theirs.

Some hoped for an epiphany, others merely wanted to lose a few pounds. Actually, we all hoped for a little bit of the latter.

As I arrived at the airport in Santiago, as a lone traveller about to join a group with

“I HAD MANY VISIONS – AND A FEW FEARS – OF WHAT LAY AHEAD

the Irish company, Follow The Camino, I had many visions – and a few fears – of what may lie ahead. The coming week would bring six days of walking – varying from three hours to over six hours a day, or approximately 20km – to complete the famous last 120km of the Camino on the Frances route, or the French Way.

There were imaginings that it would be a great adventure and a cathartic cleanse, similar to the film, *The Way*, in which Martin Sheen walks the Camino in memory of his late son.

There in front of me at the airport were two fabulous blondes, who met more than 30 years ago in the Playboy Mansion in Los Angeles and have been best friends ever since.

Following the first introductions to a largely American group, my new walking buddies, I could only think: 'This is going to be *The Way* meets *Sideways*.'

There was Bridget, an Irish-American nurse, who had spent years looking after others in an intensive care ward in the States and came here to care for herself.

There were nerves, of course, not helped by those who delighted telling you in advance of how all their friend's toenails fell out after walking the Camino. Some had undertaken weeks of training; others simply showed up, hoping their knees wouldn't let them down.

The legend that is the Camino – weighted in history since the Middle Ages – and what it represents, perhaps also played on our mind.

Eventually, all paths spreading out from Portugal, France, Spain lead to the Cathedral in Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain, where tradition has it that the remains of St James are buried.

Along the way, the destination for pilgrims (*pelegrinos*) is marked with a series of simple yellow arrows and the scallop shell, symbolic of the Camino and carrying its

own fabled legends, all centred on survival, rebirth and hope.

The night before we set off from Sarria, words of wisdom, applicable for life itself, unwittingly rolled off the tongue of our guide Francisco, from Barcelona.

'If you find yourself at a fork in the road not knowing which direction to take, don't worry; you will eventually find your way back to the right path,' he soothed.

If anyone was really struggling, there was also the option of a taxi, he advised.

And apparently, it's not uncommon for some walkers to decide they have reached their own limit for that day, jump in a cab and head to a spa before the friends arrive at the hotel for dinner.

Whatever we chose to do, he had one warning: 'If you race to your

destination, you will miss the whole point. It's not about the time it takes you to complete it... It's about the experience. Don't expect the Camino to deliver to you; it's your journey and you will get from it what you put in.'

We set off on day one to walk 22.4km from Sarria to Portomarin, aware that it would be the second-longest day of walking on our trip.

Already, against Franco's advice, we were thinking in numbers, rather than the experience, purely to determine if we'd be able to keep going.

To our surprise, we all found that we were, in fact, physically capable of much more walking than we could have imagined. The days appeared to roll into one, taking in the charming villages of Portomarin, Palas de Rei, Melide, Arzua

and A Rua, before finally arriving at the promised land, the magnetic city of Santiago.

The beauty of the Camino is not just the scenery – the rows and rows of fields of sweetcorn, the lush, green countryside, and vastness of its plains – it's the simplicity of the journey. It's just you, your backpack and the open road.

All you have to do each and every day is walk, and with that simple task comes great freedom.

You may remember the sight and smell of all the pine and eucalyptus forests you walk through, the abbeys and churches in its medieval villages – and the really comfy bed on the day you most need it.

But they will all be overshadowed by the people you meet and the stories you hear on the journey.

Such as the Dundalk man who

lamented Kerry's loss in the All-Ireland with me on the trail (before the replay!) and the couple in their 70s from New Zealand who had found love late in life and decided to walk all the way from Paris.

The name Santiago de Compostela is partly derived from a shooting star (*stela*) and it is full of shooting-star moments if you are open to receiving them. It isn't just a physical test, but a mental one. It's about

“ALL THE ROUTES ARE DOTTED WITH CAFES AND BARS

learning to listen to our body – stopping to take breaks and enjoying whatever replenishment your heart may desire.

Thankfully, all the routes on our trail are dotted with little bars and cafes every couple of kilometres, so there was never a danger of going hungry, thirsty or weary for too long. It's about switching off your phone and purely enjoying the silence of walking under nature's canopy.

There is a comfort to be found in the solitude, and on occasion, the only sound you will hear is the rustle of the wind through the leaves.

Should you choose, the only two words you may hear each day are 'Buen Camino' – a wish of a good journey from fellow walkers as they pass by.

Then, when you have had enough

of your own company, you can catch up with the others, and invariably discuss how the blisters and backs are holding up over plates of fried, salty padron peppers, creamy croquettes and plates of prawns.

Apart from invigorating the mind and body, the Camino can also pack an emotional punch.

Before we set off, Franco advised us to pick up a stone, carry it in our backpack and leave it in Santiago, as a symbol of whatever crosses in life we may be able to leave behind. The journey also teaches you to learn what you really need to carry in life to survive.

Backpacks are often filled with seemingly essential items on the off-chance they might be needed.

At the end of each day, I made a habit of removing another item, lightening the load for the day

ahead and learning what really was essential and what was not.

As the journey neared an end, we didn't look at the road markings highlighting how few kilometres we had left to go with joy, but with amazement of how far we had travelled.

There was also a degree of sadness. The wine-filled evenings of getting to know a group of admirable women and their life stories had drawn to a close.

After the trip, our fellow pilgrim Bridget would write: 'I took a chance and went out on my own for the first time in my life. It was really hard for me to make this decision since for most of my life I was used to always having my husband by my side.'

'Eighteen months ago, at 59, he died a very tragic and unexpected death. Meeting you guys and laughing for the first time in a long time was awesome. It gave me the confidence to go out there and enjoy my life again.'

The blisters never came, my toenails did not fall out and save for a few bloody socks, we had all made it in one piece.

I looked at my dusty boots in the hotel the final morning, wishing there were many more miles left to traverse, that the journey was not an end.

The evening before, I placed the small rock I had carried in the main square, Plaza del Obradoiro, in front of the cathedral.

The elusive epiphany may not strike at the precise moment you hope, but I left feeling immeasurably lighter in ways I did not expect.

THE WALK OF LIFE... THE CAMINO AND THE WAYS TO DO IT



TAKE A HIKE: Walkers on the Camino

THE CAMINO?

The Camino de Santiago, known as the Way of Saint James, is a network of walkways leading to the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Galicia in northwestern Spain, where tradition has it that the remains of the Saint James are buried.

HOW LONG IS IT?

The whole Camino on the Frances way (leading from France) is 772km and lasts

some 35 days, but how far you walk is up to you and there are a whole host of different routes taking in different landscapes to explore.

HAVE I TO BE FIT?

Not at all, but a reasonable degree of fitness is a help. Many of the packages are in the region of 100km over six days, averaging about 16km a day.

But the company Follow The Camino develop packages to suit all needs and shorter distances at a leisurely pace can

be accommodated. They organise bespoke trips from three days up to 30 days, and also set packages.

THE BEST ROUTE?

The possibilities are nearly endless. The most popular, however, is the last 120km from Sarria in Galicia, northwest Spain, to the city of Santiago de Compostela. Foodies can enjoy the best tapas and great beaches on the Camino del Norte (the Northern Way) from Bilbao to Santander. For those wishing to take in the

beauty of Portugal there is also the Camino Portuguese Coastal Route, from Oia to Santiago, a journey of 150km.

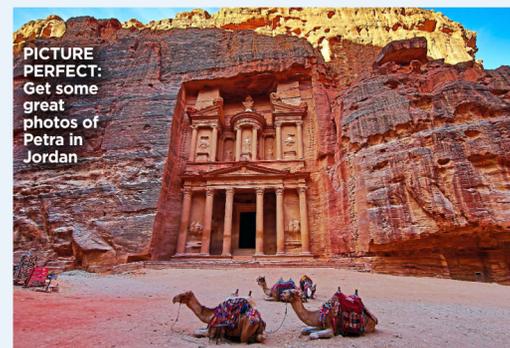
HOW DO I PLAN?

Firstly, Follow The Camino can take some of the heavy lifting out of the organising, as they will book hotels along your desired route, see that your luggage is transported from destination to destination, and the company can advise on the most suitable routes depending on your level of fitness or how

challenging a pilgrimage you wish it to be – or not!

WHEN CAN I GO?

They have announced a host of dates for 2020, so there's plenty of time to build up your walking strength. In general, most trips cost in the region of about €700 for a single traveller sharing a double room, but there are a number of discounts for certain packages now online. Check the website followthecamino.com for full details and prices.



PICTURE PERFECT: Get some great photos of Petra in Jordan

TRAVEL TREATS

By Eddie Coffey and Helen Rogers

A SAVING ON THE SLOPES

Have you kept your powder dry? Then last-minute ski breaks are being offered by Crystal Ski and you can make savings of €100.

The discount is available on ski getaways in selected accommodation in a number of resorts in Andorra, France, Italy and Austria for 7-night holidays between December 21 and February 22, depending on the location. Holidays start at €375 per person (four sharing) and go up to €3,839 for a two adults and two children holiday in 3-star Olympic Apartments, Sestriere, leaving on February 16. All prices include flights from Dublin, 20kg luggage and transfers. Book on 01 653 3501, or crystalski.ie.

Vales. Great places to stay in this area include Longueville House in Mallow, Cork, surrounded by a 450-acre wooded estate, for €97.50pp (bed and breakfast) and €150pp with dinner, or the Glasha Farmhouse in Ballymacarby, Tipperary. They are offering a one night B&B with dinner for €95pp.

Among the main attractions across the vales are Lough Gur in Limerick, and, in Tipperary, the Ormond Castle (pictured) in Carrick-on-Suir. Picturesque Lismore, in Co. Waterford has the Lismore Heritage Centre. You can end your Munster Vales experience at the Café Townhouse in Doneraile. Visit munstervales.com.



DRINK CANADA DRY...

One for the bucket list: Canadian Sky is offering potential savings of over €850 per person across a range of Alaska

GET SNAP HAPPY ALL OVER JORDAN

Fancy the chance to brush up on your photography skills while enjoying the Middle East?

Travel Department's eight-night tour of Jordan – including Petra – is accompanied by Stewart Kenny from Dublin Photography School. This photography holiday will teach you how to capture National Geographic-style images, and is suitable for anyone who wants to develop their digital photography skills, from beginner to advanced.

Departing on March 24, 2020, this holiday includes flights and transfers, eight nights' B&B accommodation, excursions with local guides, and expert photography tuition, with prices starting from €1,979 per person. Call 01-6371633, or see traveldepartment.ie.

Cruises departing from Vancouver... and your drink is included! An epic journey is guaranteed along the vast natural beauty of the largest US state. Book by December 31, 2019. Prices start from €2,299 per person for an 8-night Holland America Alaska Cruise and Vancouver stay staying in an Ocean View cabin; includes flights from Dublin, 7-night Alaska Cruise on a full board basis and one night's hotel accommodation in Vancouver, room only. See canadiansky.ie.

Departing on March 24, 2020, this holiday includes flights and transfers, eight nights' B&B accommodation, excursions with local guides, and expert photography tuition, with prices starting from €1,979 per person. Call 01-6371633, or see traveldepartment.ie.

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START YOUR ENGINES

Enjoy the thrills of Formula 1 at the Spanish Grand Prix in Barcelona. Stay three nights in a central 4-star hotel with 3-day general admission to the Circuit de Barcelona-Catalunya. Package with flight departs Dublin on May 8 from €649pp. See Cassidy Travel.ie for details.

DOING MORE IN MUNSTER

We know there's more to Ireland than the Wild Atlantic Way, and now tourism interests in Munster want us to explore the beauty of the Munster

COOL DOWN: You can save on your ski trips

See details at munstervales.com