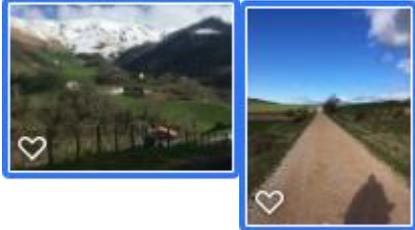


To Be a Pilgrim – update!

Well, I did it – I reached Santiago, mostly under my own steam. Here are a few edited highlights.

I made John Bunyan’s hymn a daily ritual – singing it each morning as I started walking.

The scenery, weather and terrain were tremendously variable. I walked across mountains and plains.....



In sunshine, wind, rain, snow, hail, fog and flood.....



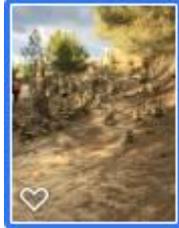
I walked mostly alone, but sometimes with others.....



I was typically on the road for between 7 and 8 hours each day, with my shortest day being 4 hours and my longest more than 10. I covered distances ranging from 10km to 27km, depending on terrain and energy levels. I suffered blisters, a sore knee, aching muscles, sore feet, and a deep, pervasive tiredness, which took several weeks to fully resolve. I still (6 weeks after finishing) have callused skin where the blisters used to be, and dodgy knees – but to be fair, I had those before I started.

After 12 days of walking I developed the knee pain, forcing a taxi ride, a couple of very short days of strapped-up walking followed by a bus ride to catch up (and avoid the next mountain range). In total I skipped 65km (about 40 miles) of the distance, but still walked 725km (450 miles) over the course of 38 days. As well as the clothes and personal items I had brought, my rucksack hosted an ever-increasing range of medical supplies, as I visited local pharmacies and received gifts from other pilgrims.

There were peaceful times of contemplation, and times of pain and frustration.



But although I was forced to conclude I could not complete the whole thing on foot as I had planned, I never once considered that I would give up. I saw someone recently wearing a Tshirt which said: "Everywhere is within walking distance, if you have enough time"

Since I got back, a few people have asked me whether I enjoyed walking the Camino. There is a pause, before I tell them that that is not the most appropriate question to ask, inviting as it does a simple Yes or No. It's definitely not a No, because there were many delightful, interesting and life-giving experiences along the way. But I can't give an unqualified Yes either, because there was also challenge and frustration, and not a little physical pain.

A better question to ask is whether the Camino was worthwhile, or whether I'm glad I've done it. To both of those I can say an enthusiastic Yes. But to be honest, Yes and No questions can't do justice to something like the Camino. Some of you will have seen the BBC2 series *Pilgrimage – the Road to Santiago* which was broadcast in March, just as I was getting underway. My experience had a lot of similarities to that of the people on the programme: a lot of adjusting to a very basic level of accommodation, some interesting conversations, experiences of generosity and grace, with occasional encounters with people who irritated – and, of course, the physical challenge and tiredness. In other ways, it was quite different: I suffered more from cold than heat due to travelling at a different time of year, I walked for longer, and did most of my walking alone rather than in a group.

Camino life is very simple. You get up and pack your things, you set off walking until you arrive somewhere where you can find a bed, you shower, do your laundry, find a meal, rest and sleep. The only decisions you need to make are how far to walk each day, when to take a break and what to order from the limited menu. Ordinary life – well, mine at least – is much more complex than

that, with multiple decisions to be made every hour about how to spend my time and what to prioritise.

It has been good to be freed from that pressure – to have the opportunity to spend almost six weeks walking, and also enjoy reading, relaxing, visiting family and friends, doing sporting and cultural activities. And, do you know what? The Circuit, and more particularly my churches, survived without me. No-one is indispensable.

What I hope I bring back from the Camino is a renewed sense that, even though it is busy and demanding, life is ultimately simple. We are called to love God and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves – and we need to give adequate time and attention to all three parts of that (God, neighbour, self).

Barbara Greenwood, June 2018