

THE WAY OF ST JAMES - THE BASICS

According to legend, St James (Santiago in Spanish), one of the 12 apostles, lies buried in Santiago de Compostela. The city came to prominence in the Middle Ages, when it became the destination for one of three Catholic pilgrimages, along with Jerusalem and Rome, through which all sins could be forgiven.

However, after the 13th century, the plague, political unrest and, later, the Reformation and Spanish Civil War meant that the Way of St James became less and less travelled. Since the 1980s, there has been a resurgence of interest in these

three routes as people became fascinated by the combination of heritage, spirituality and landscape, and in 1987 the Camino Francés (French Way) route was declared the first European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe and later named a Unesco World Heritage Centre.

These days, around 150,000 people complete the pilgrimage every year – these numbers almost doubled in 2010, a Holy Year. About 80 per cent of pilgrims arrive by the Camino Francés,



which crosses the hills on the border of Castilla y León then lollops west for the final 96 miles through pea-green countryside. While just under half of pilgrims profess a solely religious purpose in completing the route, the rest view it as a cultural journey.

A web of pilgrimage routes converges in Santiago. To earn the Compostela – a certificate of accomplishment given to pilgrims – you need to walk a minimum of 100km (62 miles); cyclists have to complete 200km (124 miles).

THE WAY OF ST JAMES - THE FACTS

Where should I start?

The most popular route is the 484-mile Camino Francés. The Via de la Plata (the Silver Road) is 621 miles, starting in Seville, and the challenging Northern Way runs along the coast for 513 miles. The Portuguese Road, starting in Porto, is 142 miles.

What level of fitness do I need?

A good level of fitness is advised. The pilgrimage doesn't have to be an endurance test, and many people complete short stretches. For most contemporary pilgrims, the first 15 miles of the Camino Francés, from St-Jean-Pied-de-Port in France to Roncesvalles in Spain, is one of the most extreme and beautiful sections.

How do I get an official certificate of the pilgrimage?

You have to walk or go on horseback for at least the last 62 miles or cycle for at least the last 124 miles of any of the routes, ending up in Santiago. You can obtain a 'credencial' (pilgrim's passport) at your starting point; this has to be certified along the way.

How long will it take?

To complete an entire route, covering 10-15 miles a day is a reasonable aim, but do factor in rest days.

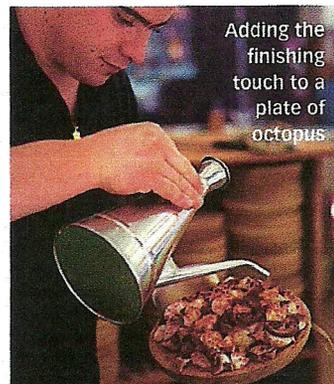
Vital equipment?

- A backpack (40kg maximum).
- Comfortable, broken-in walking boots, plus off-duty shoes.
- A water bottle.

- Sunglasses, sun hat and sunblock.
- First-aid kit.
- Sweat-wicking, anti-blister socks.
- A lightweight raincoat.

The best place for information?

The Confraternity of St James (csj.org.uk) is useful, as is the Peregrination to Santiago site (peregrinosantiago.es). Online forums include caminodesantiago.me.uk. John Brierly's guides include *Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino De Santiago* (£16.99; Findhorn Press). *Walking the Camino De Santiago: From St-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago De Compostela and on to Finisterre* by Benjamin Cole and Bethan Davis (£14; Pili Pala Press) is also excellent.



Adding the finishing touch to a plate of octopus

3 OF THE BEST TOUR OPERATORS

WALKS IN SPAIN offers a luxurious approach, with accommodation ranging from a boutique hotel dating back to the 18th century to Galician palaces and a converted 13th-century monastery in Santiago, with stops to sample cuisine such as Galician speciality pulpo a la gallega – octopus cooked in large copper kettles. Eight-day tours include airport transfers, accommodation, guides, most meals, and minibuses in case you don't feel like walking (from £995; walksinspain.com).



Mountain cows by one of the Lakes of Covadonga in Asturias