

CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

Practical Preparation and Background

A preparation guide for the Camino
Fully revised and updated in October 2021
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INTRODUCTION

What is the Camino?

The Camino de Santiago, or the Way of Saint James, is a network of pilgrimage routes which brings pilgrims from all corners of Europe, across Spain to the city of Santiago de Compostela, believed by many to be the final resting place of Saint James the Apostle (Saint James the Great).

These routes have existed for about a thousand years and all through those centuries thousands of people each year have set out from their homes to travel to Santiago on foot or on horseback.

The **Camino Francés**, or French Way, from the picturesque French village of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Santiago, was always the busiest of these routes. It's where Caminos from all over Europe converge to cross northern Spain.

In the last thirty years the Camino Francés has once again become very popular with pilgrims due in part of the film *The Way*. It is now walked by thousands of people every year. The full Camino Francés is almost 800km long and most people take about thirty days to walk it. However, many other people chose to just walk the last 100km from Sarria, which usually takes about five days.

Other routes such as the **Vía de la Plata**, from Seville, and the **Camino del Norte**, along the north coast of Spain, have also become more popular, but not to the same degree as the Camino Francés.

Important updates after publication

The situation in Spain and in the world in general can change quickly over the coming months (from November 2021), and in ways which are impossible to predict. If something happens which substantially alters the information and advice in this book we will post it to this website www.caminoguide.net/background

Also please download our free guides to accommodation and services on the Caminos with all the information you'll need while walking (these will be updated early in 2022):

- www.caminoguide.net for the **Camino Francés**
- www.viadelaplataguide.net for the **Vía de la Plata**

References to the Glossary

Wherever you see (G) after a word it means there's an explanatory note about it in the Glossary on page 149. If there are words you're not familiar with, you should find them explained in the Glossary.

A few notes before we begin

This book is intended for people planning to walk a Camino for the first time. It contains detailed, practical, impartial information and advice to help you prepare. It is based on the author's personal experience gained over nearly twenty years walking Caminos and on the experiences of many other pilgrims.

Although much of the information in this book could be useful for any Camino, it was written with the **Camino Francés** in mind and unless otherwise stated, the information given refers specifically to the Camino Francés. The thinking behind this being that most people setting off to walk their first Camino will walk the Camino Francés. For more discussion of this subject see *The Caminos* (page 89).

Rather than trying to reduce Camino preparation to a check-list this book tries to assist you in making informed decisions and to help you avoid common pitfalls. It covers (among others) the following areas:

- **Money:** How much walking the Camino costs
- **Travel:** How to get to your starting point
- **Physical preparation:** Getting to the required level of fitness
- **Packing:** Equipment you need and what you don't need
- **Which section to walk and when:** Weather, accommodation, crowds, etc.
- **What to expect:** The Camino experience

In addition, there's an introduction to both **Spanish and Camino History**, a **Spanish Language Phrasebook** with vocabulary chosen to cover Camino necessities, and background information of all sorts to help you plan and prepare.

This book is a companion to the books *Walking Guide to the Camino de Santiago* and *Walking Guide to the Vía de la Plata* (also available from Amazon), which contain the information you'll need about accommodation and services, etc. while walking the Camino Francés and the Vía de la Plata. However, since this book is all about preparation, it can be used entirely independently of any walking guide.

MEASUREMENT UNITS AND EURO AMOUNTS

All distances are given in the **metric system** (kilometres and metres) and all times are given in the **24 hour clock** (09:00 = 9am, 18:00 = 6pm).

Temperatures are given in Celsius. Celsius temperatures are easy to understand:

0°C = freezing point of water, 10°C = cold, 20°C = warm
30°C = hot, 100°C = boiling point of water

There's a handy converter here www.celsius-to-fahrenheit.com

The format for writing **amounts** reflects the most commonly used format in Spain. eg. One euro = 1€, fifty cents = 0,50€, one thousand euros = 1.000€ (see page 69).

These are the formats and measurements most commonly used in Spain. You might as well start getting familiar with them now (if you're not already).

A NOTE ON THE WORD *PILGRIM*

As I'm not particularly religious in any conventional sense. It took me years before I came to see myself as a pilgrim, and to use that word unselfconsciously. Now, I call myself a pilgrim when I go on the Camino and I regard all of the other people there as pilgrims too. I no longer see this word as being uniquely associated with organised religion and I use it inclusively in this guide to refer to everybody who wants to walk a Camino.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Gerald Kelly, I discovered the Camino de Santiago on a sunny day in 1999 on a trip to the Basque Country. We were in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port when I saw a group of pilgrims with their backpacks heading out of town in the direction of the mountains. My girlfriend at the time told me that people still walked from there to Santiago 800km away in far-away Galicia.

As I watched them go I wondered why anybody would want to do something as crazy as that. It's more than twenty years and 14,000km of Caminos later, and I still haven't found the answer! But I've had great fun trying!

Along the way I started writing about my experiences and compiling information to help other pilgrims. I first published this book in 2012 and I've updated it every year since then (except 2021). It's based on my own experiences and on countless conversations with other pilgrims. It tries to be an encyclopaedia of everything I've ever learned about walking long distances and Caminos presented in a concise and clear style (with the minimum of grammar mistakes!)

This book, like all my books, is self-published. Please accept my apologies for any mistakes. You can help me by contacting me with corrections and any comments. I greatly appreciate (most) feedback from my readers.

CONTACT

You can contact me at caminoguidecontact@gmail.com.

THANKS / BUÍOCHAS / GRACIAS / DANKE

Roisín Cuddihy, Dalan de Brí, Philip Ó Ceallaigh, Robbie Turner and Dr Hans Weber. As well as everybody who's contributed to www.CaminoGuide.net and www.ViadelaPlataGuide.net.

APPS FOR APPLE AND ANDROID PHONES

Our guides to the Camino Francés is available as an app for Android and Apple phones, for links to the app open this website caminoapp.net on your phone.

COVID-19 AND THE CAMINO

The Camino ground to a halt during the Covid-19 pandemic but by late 2021 it was already well on its way to a full recovery. Things will never be quite the same as before but when the dust settles we'll more than likely find that Covid's main effect on the Camino has been to accelerate changes that were already underway for many years.

The Covid-19 pandemic in Spain

It snuck up on us one weekend. But, in retrospect it shouldn't have been a surprise. Covid had been lurking in the news since January, the deteriorating situation in Wuhan, the Chinese government's *draconian* response. It looked alarming but it was far away and we all sort of believed it wouldn't happen here.

Then, as February dawned the first cases appeared in Europe. By the end of the month the first European lockdown had been declared, covering a number of small towns in Northern Italy.

Then March came and things started to happen quickly. Very quickly. On the 8th the Italian lockdown was enlarged to cover much of the north of the country. The next day it was announced that from the 10th it would be extended again, this time to cover the *whole* country. A few days later on the 13th the Spanish government declared a *State of Emergency (Estado de Alarma)* and on Sunday the 15th, with only a few hours warning, Spain's own national lockdown began.

There followed a period of eerie quiet, the streets were almost completely empty, only essential workers, people going to buy food and dog walkers were allowed out. All the bars and other *non-essential* businesses were closed. Facemasks were introduced, first as a recommendation, then a few weeks later as an obligation. We were encouraged to wash our hands a thousand times a day.

In April the lockdown began to be eased with some non-essential workers returning to work and parents allowed to bring their children outside for exercise.

Then in early May other restrictions slowly began to be lifted in a phased manner, depending on local circumstances. We were allowed out during the day for exercise, and small shops were allowed to open, as were cafés and restaurants for outdoor service only and with strict limits on customer numbers and opening hours.

It was still pretty restrictive but it felt like freedom. At least now you could meet your friends for a beer, even if it was by necessity in the middle of the day and only four of you could be there.

Through the early days of summer things got progressively better. Opening hours were extended, the curfew was shortened and the freedom to travel around the country was restored. This allowed the Camino to reopen and pretty soon a small number of hardy souls were setting off on foot across Spain as their forebearers had done for a thousand years. Infection rates continued at a low level through the summer and in September the schools reopened.

In the autumn infection rates began to climb again and the restrictions were tightened. Through the winter months until March strict crowd-control measures, curfews, limits to opening hours and mask-wearing mandates were in place, plus various restrictions on travel between provinces.

Then in the spring, as the infection rates began to drop again, and the effect of the mass vaccination campaign began to be felt, the process of reopening began again.

On 9 May 2021 the *State of Emergency* law expired and with it went the legal basis for most national restrictions, such as such as curfews and limits to crossing regional borders. From that day on restrictions (with the exception of mask wearing) were decided at a regional level.

WHAT DID THE RESTRICTIONS IN SPAIN LOOK LIKE?

At the height of the restrictions (March to May 2020) all non-essential businesses were closed and people were only allowed to leave their homes to buy food, for medical reasons or for some kind of emergency. From May onwards this one-size-fits-all set of restrictions began to be eased and were replaced with a flexible and often localised set of restrictions.

Under Spain's decentralised system of government most decisions about restrictions were made at the regional level (**by region we mean *Comunidad Autónoma***). This was in part a political decision and in part a recognition of the fact that national lockdowns were too blunt an instrument and restrictions needed to be tailored to suit local circumstances. Under this system each regional government managed its own restrictions within the guidelines established by the national government.

Within regions restrictions were often applied differently to local areas depending on the local rate of infection. That meant that in the same region neighbouring places could have totally different levels of restrictions. So, in one village non-essential services could be closed, while in another village, possibly only a few kilometres away, non-essential services could be open. There could also be restrictions on moving between villages for non-essential reasons.

There were also restrictions on non-essential movement between regions and provinces. **NB.** A *province* in Spain is not necessarily the same as a *region* (*Comunidad Autónoma*). Most, but not all, regions contain several provinces, for example, the region of *Galicia* is made up of four provinces, whereas the region of *La Rioja* only has one.

HOW DID THE RESTRICTIONS AFFECT THE CAMINO?

The lockdown in March 2020 meant a total shutdown of all activity on the Caminos. Any pilgrims who were on a Camino were told to organise their return home as quickly as possible.

The Caminos did not begin to open again in the summer of 2020, when restrictions on movement between provinces were eased. Then in the autumn, as restrictions were reimposed, the Caminos shut down again.

The Caminos didn't begin to come to life again until spring 2021, as restrictions were gradually lifted again. In the early summer the number of people walking on the Camino Francés was still relatively low and many Camino-related businesses remained closed, but by August numbers had increased and most albergues were open and operating within the guidelines, which at the time were 50% occupancy in dormitories (until August this was 30% in Galicia).

2021 was a **Holy Year** (G) (this G means this term is explained in the Appendix

which starts on page 149) so under normal circumstances we would have expected to see about twice the number of pilgrims as in a normal (or *unholy*, if you prefer) year. Apart from their religious significance, Holy Years are extremely important to the Camino economy. The busy season on the Camino starts around Easter and ends around the end of September, the rest of the year Camino businesses don't make much money and many of them choose to close rather than operate at a loss. In 2020 there was no busy season and in 2021 it was August before levels of business got back to something close to normal. This meant that because 2021 was a Holy Year the effect of the pandemic on Camino businesses was far bigger than if it had been a normal year. Add to this the fact that this was the first Holy Year since 2010 (they happen at 5, 6 and 11 year intervals) and you've got all the ingredients of an economic disaster for the Camino.

Thankfully the Vatican (ostensibly for spiritual reasons but also no doubt with a keen eye to the bottom line) decided that they would extend Holy Year 2021 to include 2022. This means that from a religious point-of-view 2022 is also a Holy Year. Whether this had any effect on the number of people walking remains to be seen.

Despite the economic hardship, the vast majority of Camino businesses, be they albergues, cafés, shops, etc., seem to have weathered the storm and are back functioning normally. How much of this is thanks to debt repayment holidays and other government initiatives designed to help business is unclear, but if the Camino returns to normal levels of activity in 2022 there are reasons to be optimistic for the continued survival of these businesses.

WALKING THE CAMINO FRANCÉS IN SUMMER 2021

I walked the Camino Francés in August / September 2021 from Pamplona to Santiago. After I arrived home I posted about my experiences on Ivar's Camino Forum, here's what I said:

This isn't quite live from the Camino. I arrived in Santiago on Sunday 12 September. So it's "liveish".

I've walked the Camino Francés in July / August several times in the last six years. Of course due to the pandemic this year was different. The main difference from a practical point-of-view was booking ahead. I've never booked ahead before but this year I started walking from Pamplona with a group of four friends and we generally booked one day in advance as a group. Another reason to book ahead was that just about everybody else was doing it.

We started off walking fairly short stages (about 15 to 20km) and stayed in a mix of small villages and bigger "end of stage" towns. This worked fine for us and we didn't experience any problems finding accommodation. We continued like this up until Burgos.

After Burgos we lost a few members of our group due to people heading home and others taking rest days, so from there on I was walking 20 to 25km and organising my own accommodation. Generally what I did was call once I'd decided what my destination was for the day, this would usually be about noon on the same day. If I was going to an albergue that didn't take reservations I just relied on showing up. This always worked fine for me and I continued like that all the way to Santiago, staying in small places, booking on the day if possible.

Once I got to Galicia it got a bit busier, especially after Sarria. I was in Sarria on a

Wednesday so I think I missed most of the crowds who are usually there at the weekend, but nevertheless there was a noticeable difference after Sarria with more people walking, most of them young and Spanish (20s and 30s mostly, this was September so the schools were already back), mostly walking in small groups.

I had mostly given up booking ahead by the time I got to Galicia. I hadn't had any problems up until then so I didn't see the point. A couple of times my first choice was full and I had to walk a bit further but since I was walking fairly short stages it wasn't an issue.

In Galicia I stayed in a couple of Xunta (G) albergues, which were quiet because they don't take bookings, Other times I showed up at private one and always got a bed. I was walking on my own, if I'd still been with a group it would have been more difficult to manage without booking.

Bars, restaurants and shops were nearly all open and operating within the restrictions which varied from place to place. I didn't have any problems getting food and after the first couple of weeks I gave up carrying food with me just because it was easy to get food almost anywhere. I've been in the habit of doing picnics, on harder Caminos you have to.

Tortilla has become ubiquitous on the Camino, it varied a lot in quality, and occasionally it was the supermarket kind, but mostly it was good. Sometimes the portions were too big (and the price). This I haven't experienced before.

Pilgrim menus now mostly cost 12€. This has increased a bit but I remember back to 2007 when they were mostly 9€ or 10€, so really it's still extremely good value. The quality varies a lot (as it always has!) but I'm glad to report I cleared every plate that was put in front of me and sometimes ones that were put in front of other people too. So I can't really complain. I did notice that some places are serving up factory made meals, especially meatballs and paella. I had them a couple of times and it was always edible, and the paella is actually quite nice.

Prices in private albergues are now also mostly around the 12€ mark. Which isn't really a big increase either. The quality of accommodation has improved enormously, as has the variety. There are so many swimming pools now I think you could plan your Camino to have a swim every day.

The general feel on the Camino was different from other summers. There were fewer people walking and there were very few groups (by which I mean groups of people who had come to the Camino as a group and who didn't really interact with other pilgrims). There were also fewer people doing the package tour thing.

Age profile was a big mix but I got the impression there were fewer people over sixty. More men than women (normally it's about 50 / 50). Nationality-wise there were more Spanish than usual (both before and after Sarria), besides that the Germans and the French were the most common nationalities, followed by a mix of other Europeans. Very few people from outside the EU. Also very few Italians.

The lack of groups was the big difference from any Holy Year I've walked and the fact that it was a lot quieter.

Generally I found people more friendly and open than during recent summer Caminos. This is probably explained by the fact that a higher percentage than normal had come on their own. After Burgos I walked on my own but met up with different people in the evening, sometimes several evenings in a row. I can't remember a single time I ate on my own.

Also, I noticed fewer people rushing this year, everybody seemed to be taking their time. I don't know if that was something to do with the mix of nationalities, or the fact that there were fewer groups (which have a tendency to move at the pace of their faster walkers).

And, with one notable exception I didn't experience people getting up ridiculously early. The 50% capacity in dorms partially explains this but also the fact that booking ahead has become normalised. You don't need to get up at 4am if you've got a reservation.

One thing I noticed that I haven't seen before is groups of young people who form a "family" which seems to become a bit cliquey and exclusive. I suppose this can be a good or a bad thing depending on the individuals involved. I think WhatsApp is partially responsible for this because it tends to tie people together in a way that wasn't possible in the past.

There was less litter than usual, this would be partially the fewer people (and fewer groups) but several times I met people in uniform riding tricycles and picking up litter and chatting to pilgrims.

The Guardia Civil is now routinely patrolling the Camino. One hot day they stopped and gave us water and told us to install the AlertCops app in case we needed the emergency services.

Charity scammers, people claiming to be artists because they can put one stone on top of another, informal food stands with loud music, all of these things were mostly missing.

The only negative behaviour I noticed was graffiti, especially the lowlife excuse for a human being who's sprayed MICHAEL JACKSON all over the place. Sometimes even on private houses.

That and the flies. I remember feeling annoyed by the flies for the first time about three years ago and this year it was worse. There were several days when they bugged me for large parts of the day buzzing around my face. Am I the only one who's noticed this?

Oh yeah, and after Sarria the whole "Buen Camino" thing was a bit much. I think people have been told that you have to say it to everything with a face otherwise people will be offended. It felt a bit forced to me and often I only waved in acknowledgement and occasionally ignored people who were wishing me "Buen Camino" for the third or fourth time that day.

Anyway, generally I had a great time and I'm really glad I went.

Highlights for me were:

- The view from the Alto del Perdón (without the food stand with its petrol generator).
- The countryside in Navarra and La Rioja.
- Tosantos, still in my opinion the embodiment of the Camino spirit.
- Casa Susi in Trabadelo, great company and food.
- Albergue San Bruno in Moratinos, this was my first time staying there, there were just two pilgrims so we got to eat lovely spaghetti carbonara (with no cream!) with out hosts.
- The meseta after Burgos.
- Forgetting about the bloody Covid.

Disappointments:

- *My favourite restaurant in Santiago, Bierzo Enxebre, has closed.*
- *Albergue Amanecer in Villarmentero de Campos, the lovely couple who used to run it and who took such good care of the animals have left.*

The current situation in Spain

Anywhere current situation is mentioned it means October 2021.

The only national restriction that remains in place in most of Spain which would affect you when walking a Camino is the obligation to wear a face mask in enclosed public spaces and when you cannot maintain a distance of 1.5m from the people around you in any public space, and limits to the number of people who can sleep together in a dormitory.

Spain's fully vaccinated rate is 79.8% (compared to the USA 56.8%, UK 67%, Australia 64.1%, Ireland 75.2%). The 7-day average of confirmed deaths is 0.56 per 100,000 population (USA 3.9, UK 2.3, Australia 0.5, Ireland 1.9). Confirmed cases peaked in late July and has been falling ever since, it is currently 39.2 per 100,000 of population (USA 223, UK 585, Australia 57, Ireland 523).

Spain has also begun giving a booster shot to vulnerable people and health care professionals.

All statistics from ourworldindata.org/explorers/coronavirus-data-explorer

Acceptable types of facemasks

Scarves, buffs, t-shirt pulled up over your nose, etc., etc. In Spain you **will not** get away with the kind of messing you might get away with in your home country. If you're not wearing a real facemask someplace where you're supposed to, it won't be long before you get told to do so.

The most commonly used type of facemask in Spain is the **standard surgical** one which you can buy just about anywhere. The second most common type is the **N95 standard**, it's generally available from pharmacies. Many people use reusable facemasks and these are also acceptable everywhere and commonly available.

The outlook for 2022

It's impossible to say with any certainty what the situation will be in a few months time (or even in a few weeks). However, based on what's happened since January 2020 and the way the Spanish government has dealt with it, it is possible to make some guesses.

(For more detail about the *EU Digital Covid Certificate* see page 13. It is generally referred to in the text as the *Covid Certificate*.)

THE OPTIMISTIC SCENARIO

The infection rate and the death rate both continue at a low level, there are no new variants which are immune to the vaccines, and the rate of vaccination around the world continues to accelerate.

In this scenario over the course of 2022 we should see a return to almost complete normality. However, it is probable that even under this most optimistic scenario some restrictions will remain. These would probably include a facemask mandate in enclosed spaces, limits to how many people can sleep in a dorm and increasing use of Covid Certificates.

What this would mean on the Camino would be that you'd have to wear a facemask in the communal areas of albergues and hotels and in bars when ordering or when going to the toilets. It would mean that accommodation would be tighter than usual. It may also mean that albergue kitchens will remain closed (as they have been since the beginning of the pandemic).

Another possibility is that it may be necessary to show a Covid Certificate to sleep in an albergue. Already now albergues in Galicia can return to 75% occupancy in dorms (currently it's 50%) if they only admit pilgrims with a Covid Certificate. However you may feel about this it is a relatively low-risk way of getting the number of available beds back to pre-Covid levels quickly. Many albergues have suffered financially during the pandemic and this would be a big help to them.

It may also be necessary to show a Covid Certificate to dine indoors, this is already the case in several EU countries such as Germany and France.

France also requires a Certificate for access to some public transport.

As far as international travel restrictions are concerned, they should be mostly gone for vaccinated people.

THE PESSIMISTIC SCENARIO

New variants continue to cause high death rates prompting the need for another round of vaccination and undermining progress towards herd immunity around the world.

In this scenario we could see a return to some of the restrictions which were in place during the worst of the pandemic. As well as the things mentioned in the Optimistic Scenario above there could be temporary, localised lockdowns, non-essential businesses operating with shorter hours, limits on the number of people allowed to gather, restrictions on movement between local areas and between provinces and regions.

Walking a Camino would be possible but would be complicated by the need to work around local restrictions and by the lack of beds caused by occupancy limits in albergues.

Restrictions on international travel would also probably be tightened.

(A more pessimistic scenario than this is also possible in which a more deadly variant emerges which can bypass the vaccines. This would put us back to where we were in March 2020 and you could forget about walking the Camino for at least another year. But let's hope that doesn't happen!)

THE MOST LIKELY SCENARIO

The most likely scenario is somewhere between these two extremes and, in my opinion based on the current situation in Spain and around Europe, verging more towards the optimistic scenario described above.

What the long-term consequences of the last year and a half will be remains to be seen. There are other factors at play than purely economic ones, there's travel restrictions and possibly the extra hassle and expense involved in travelling, there's the way that the pandemic will change people's attitude to sharing a confined space with complete strangers, there are the long-term effects of Covid continuing to circulate despite vaccination and continuing to cause deaths (albeit at a lower level than up until now), especially the elderly and the ill.