

THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

THE CATHEDRAL OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA

This huge cathedral, dating back to 1075 and now with an area of 247,570 square feet (23,000 square meters), was designed by Master Mateo. It has three naves and is set within the squares of Obradoiro, Platerías, and Quintana. Inside lie the tombs of St. James and his two disciples, Theodore and Athanasius. Such a building has a tremendous impact on pilgrims arriving there after an exhausting journey. It's impossible not to get a little emotional!

THE COMPOSTELA

The Compostela is an official accreditation issued by the cathedral chapter to people who have completed the pilgrimage. The presentation of this accreditation is one of the most special moments for those who arrive in Santiago.

To certify their passage along any stretch of the Camino, pilgrims have to collect stamps on a Credencial del Peregrino (Pilgrim's Accreditation), a document that needs to be stamped twice a day by the hostels, parishes, associations of friends of the Camino, or post offices along the route. To obtain the Compostela, pilgrims have to cover at least 60 miles (100 kilometers) on foot or 120 miles (200 kilometers) by bicycle.

HOSTELS

After walking along trails and roads all day, the sight of a nearby hostel brings relief to weary travelers. They provide a place for pilgrims to rest and meet, where they not only eat and sleep, but also share their dreams and stories.

Thanks to the rise in popularity of the Camino since 1990, hostels have been popping up all along the routes, meaning it's much easier for pilgrims to find a bed for the night now.

People say that the Camino starts from your own home—they say this because the original route would have been taken by pilgrims starting from many different places! In fact, it comprises an extensive network of routes and itineraries scattered throughout Europe. Currently, there are 281 cataloged Caminos with more than 51,000 miles (83,000 kilometers) of routes. Every year, more than 300,000 pilgrims traipse along the stone paths and country trails and through the forests and vineyards that lead to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain.

MANY PATHS, BUT ONLY ONE DESTINATION

There are other routes besides the well-known French Way, and throughout history pilgrims have come from all over Europe, traveling on horseback, on foot, or even by sea. There's the Portuguese Way, which starts from Lisbon and is about 386 miles (620 kilometers) long; the Coastal Portuguese Way, about 174 miles (280 kilometers) long; the Northern Way, used in the Middle Ages—and the longest of all at 509 miles (820 kilometers); the Primitivo Way, which starts from Oviedo and was the original way; and the English Way, where pilgrims used to arrive by boat at Ferrol or A Coruña in Spain and which is about 75 miles (120 kilometers) long.

Whichever route you choose, you will always find helpful signage—yellow arrows, shells or signs blue and yellow all point to a single destination.

- ×TYPE OF ROUTE Pilgrimage
- ×MODE OF TRANSPORTATION On foot or by bicycle
- ×YEAR Since the 9th century
- ×DISTANCE (FRENCH WAY) Around 500 mi (800 km)
- ×STARTING POINT (FRENCH WAY) Roncesvalles
- ×END POINT Santiago de Compostela Cathedral
- ×EST. TIME TO COMPLETE 1 month on foot, 10 to 14 days by bicycle

JAMES THE GREATER

In about 813–20, a hermit swore he had seen lights shining on an uninhabited mountain. It was in Compostela, where the tomb of St. James (also known as James the Greater) and his disciples were then found. King Alfonso II of Asturias ordered the construction of a church on top of the tomb. Pilgrims adopted the scallop shells and the staff associated with the apostle as symbols of the pilgrimage.

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