

Pilgrimage for softies

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Journey's end ... the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela.

Photo: Lonely Planet Images

Instead of walking the famous route to Santiago de Compostela, Bob Maddams puts his feet up in a narrow-gauge train.

The scallop shell that dangles from her backpack as she stuffs it into the luggage rack above my seat gives her away immediately. It's the symbol of the pilgrim. She slumps into the seat beside me. She's an exchange student from Canada who has just walked the pilgrim route from Bilbao to Santiago de Compostela and is now taking the train back.

"How long did it take you?" I ask. "Four weeks," she replies, "and we met one guy who did it carrying a cross and walking in bare feet."

Santiago de Compostela is one of the most famous places of pilgrimage in the Christian world. But if you don't want to do it on foot, you can let the narrow-gauge railways of the Feve system take the strain. The journey is rich in history, art, spectacular ecclesiastical architecture and stunning landscapes, which the single-track railway links together like pearls on an iron string.

On our first night, our small group meets for pintxo (Basque tapas) at a cafe in Bilbao's Plaza Mayor. Our tour leader, Antonio, explains that during the next 12 days we're free to do as much or as little as a group as we like and the itinerary leaves us plenty of time "to do our own thing". So, taking him at his word, next day I opt out of the tour of the railway museum and spend the day in the Guggenheim museum instead.

Next morning we arrive at the Feve station in Bilbao, a riot of art deco tile work that would make Gaudi blush. Three hours later, the little twin-carriage train has deposited us in Santander, where we spend the afternoon exploring the elegant seafront and wide streets that give it the charm of a Spanish Biarritz.

Days are spent either travelling or exploring. So a walking day is nearly always followed by a relaxing one watching another spectacular vista slip by as the trains take us across contrasting landscapes: mountainous Basque country, coastal Cantabria and green Galicia. The trains are small - they are distinctly of the clackety-clack variety - but they have excellent buffet cars, like tapas bars on rails, where I spend many a happy hour sipping wine and eating jamon bocadillos.

Next stop is Llanes but on the way Antonio takes us on a detour into the massifs of the Picos de Europa for an afternoon's walking. Buzzards ride thermals as we keep our eyes peeled in the hope of spotting the brown bears that inhabit this wilderness. We arrive in Llanes in the early evening to discover a lively seaside town.

In the capital of Asturias, Oviedo, I wander the maze of narrow streets clustered around the magnificent gothic cathedral. It's from here that King Alfonso II, on hearing of the discovery of the tomb of St James the Apostle, left on the first pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, setting in motion a religious rite of passage that has endured for more than a thousand years.

In the Museo Bellas Artes, I stand in front of 12 El Grecos and three stunning Goya portraits. The streets of the town are littered with modern sculptures, including one of Woody Allen. A night's tapas bar-hopping in the old town ends with my joining a large crowd packed into the main square, listening to Spanish divas belt out passionate arias.

In Santiago de Compostela, it isn't the imposing baroque facade of the cathedral that holds my attention; I'm transfixed by the expressions of the pilgrims arriving at the end of their journeys. Tears stream down their faces as they pull out mobile phones and talk to loved ones in faraway places.



It's noon and I step into the cathedral as Mass is being said. I squeeze in next to the ranks of visitors, pilgrims and locals. They huddle together in the wooden pews that face the towering altarpiece that dominates the nave. Underneath it, in a small crypt, lie the remains of St James.

Next day I hire an audio walking tour that guides me all over the old quarter, taking in the university, monasteries, convents and the Museo Das Peregrinacions, which celebrates pilgrimages from all over the world. We sign off in considerably more style, though. Later that night, Antonio pulls off something of a coup by arranging an affordable set-price dinner in the Hostal de los Reyes Catolicos, the magnificent five-star parador hotel that stands next to the cathedral.

On the journey back to Bilbao, the train snakes through the hinterland. We spend a night in Ponferrada, a small town dominated by an imposing castle built by the Knights Templar.

In the afternoon, Antonio takes us to an outlying village in the hills, where we walk a stretch of the camino, the pilgrim's route. A track leads us over green-clad slopes and, in the distance, slowly turning wind turbines trace the outline of a high ridge, looking like modern-day targets for any wandering Don Quixote to take a tilt at.

Our final destination is Leon, yet another city dominated by an imposing cathedral. Inside, a slowly shifting kaleidoscope of shimmering coloured light floods the lofty interior as the lateafternoon sun tracks its way across the cathedral's facade.

The fiesta season is still going strong and that night the bars and restaurants are packed with families. Is there a Spanish word for babysitter, I wonder. Somehow I doubt it - well into the night the streets are full of children.

A pilgrimage, whether you do it on foot or by rail, can be a moving experience. But there is no forgetting that this is Spain, so be prepared to party as well.

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