

Pilgrims' progress

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Pilgrimage has been an aspect of people's spiritual lives for millenia. But today, walking pilgrimage trails, such as the Camino de Santiago in Spain, also attracts a more secular crowd



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Little could King Alfonso II of Asturias have imagined back in the 9th century that his long, arduous trek would, more than a millennium later, inspire a global movement. The king was told of the discovery of an apostle's tomb; off he went to what we know today as Santiago de Compostela, and now hundreds of thousands of pilgrims follow in his contemplative footsteps.

Pilgrimage is a medieval concept enjoying a 21st-century resurgence. Walking the Camino de Santiago is back in fashion and a steady stream of pilgrims grace the roadsides of northern Spain,

reminiscent of the Camino's mediaeval heyday. They walk alone, in pairs or in small groups, and they're instantly recognisable with their hiking boots, walking poles and massive backpacks.

A network of pilgrimage routes converging on Santiago has evolved. As well as the Camino Primitivo (the Original Way), these include the Camino del Norte (the Northern Way) and two routes through Portugal. But the most popular journey is the Camino Francés (the French Way), first used in the 10th century because the terrain wasn't as challenging. In 1993 UNESCO added the Camino Francés to its



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- 1. Medieval pilgrimage is undergoing a resurgence. *Image: Shutterstock*
- 2. Iconic yellow arrows show pilgrims the way. *Image: AdobeStock*
- 3. Pilgrims cross Lugo's Roman bridge bound for Santiago de Compostela.
- 4. The Fountain of Eternal Youth, Santa Irene.
- 5. Lugo is surrounded by two kilometres of Roman walls. *Imagery: Lydia Monin*

World Heritage List. Early pilgrims needed churches, hospitals, monasteries, hostels and bridges, and the result is a vast collection of built heritage from the Romanesque to the Baroque architectural eras scattered throughout the Camino's towns and villages.

An industry has grown up around the Camino and the line between tourist and pilgrim is blurred. There are places to stay, eat and buy walking gear. Tour companies offer to organise the entire journey. Souvenir stalls and shops follow the pilgrims through each town to the steps of Santiago Cathedral and all the way to the city's airport departure lounge.

John Hornblow, a retired All Saints Parish priest from Palmerston North, and his wife Jenny Boyack walked 150 kilometres of the Camino Francés six years ago. Jenny recalls the feeling of walking through remote villages and leaving technology behind.

"You're thinking about the practical needs of your life: something to eat, something to drink, a place

to lay your head, whether your feet are hurting, the joy of a hot shower when you arrive – wherever you arrive – and a cold drink. I think it's a reminder of some of those essential elements that can get so overlooked, particularly in city life and the hustle and bustle of people's careers."

Since 2008 John and Jenny have led pilgrimages both overseas and in New Zealand, beginning with a visit to Te Rangimarie Marae at Rangiotū during the 150th anniversary celebrations of the Anglican Diocese of Wellington. They've written about the way in which pilgrimage can unify Māori and Pākehā by generating dialogue and a deeper understanding of past injustices, and they've compiled a pilgrimage guidebook.

The pair have visited around 100 New Zealand places they see as pilgrimage sites, including the Category 1 historic place Kotahitanga Church at Moeraki. Built in 1862, it's the oldest surviving Māori mission church in the South Island.



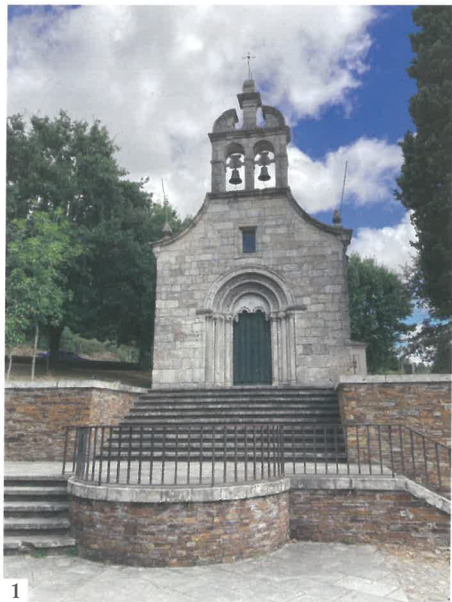
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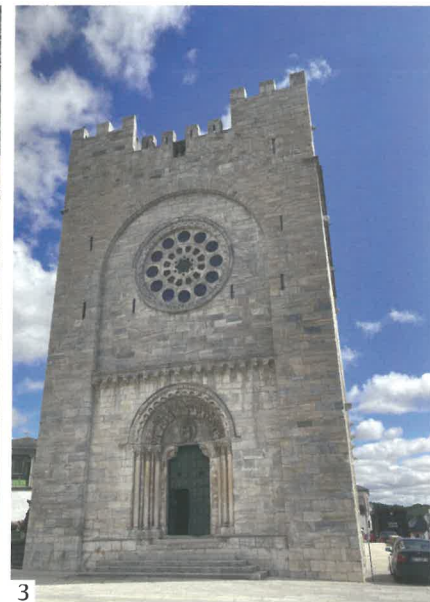
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“Pilgrimage is more than just a tourist trip. It’s where you can ... experience something at whatever level of a transformation within yourself that you can take back with you”

One of its stained-glass windows commemorates Ngāi Tahu leader and land protestor Matiaha Tiramōrehu, who made the first formal statement of Ngāi Tahu grievances against the Crown in 1849.

They were particularly moved by the story of St Michael’s Church, built as a symbol of peace on the site of the Battle of Ōhaeawai, fought during the Northern War in 1845. British forces were heavily defeated by local Māori and their dead were buried initially in a nearby forest. However, Ngāpuhi Chief Heta Te Haara gained permission to exhume the remains of the British soldiers and rebury them in the churchyard alongside their former enemies.

“There were a lot of people who were really keen to explore the foundations of our country and our faith in some of the actual places and sites where they happened,” says John, “to get a broader view of what Christianity means, rather than just sitting in the pews being preached at.”

Committed believers and those exploring their faith or spirituality have all walked with John and Jenny.

The revival of the medieval pilgrimage began in the 1980s, helped by two men: John Paul II, who became the first pilgrim pope to undertake the journey, and parish priest Don Elías Valiña Sampedro, who rescued the overgrown, hidden paths of the Camino Francés. He promoted the history of the pilgrimage and painted the now iconic yellow arrows along the route, showing pilgrims where to go. Now, all over northern Spain, there are towns and villages where pilgrims gather.

High on a hill overlooking Sarria stands the Monastery of the Magdalena, where pilgrims can sleep before the next day’s trek to Portomarín. Here, historic buildings were moved, stone by stone, to higher ground in the 1960s before the old town



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1. The 10th-century Church of San Pedro in Portomarín.

2. Pilgrims passed through the Porta Mina gate on their way out of Lugo.

3. Unusually, the Church of San Nicolás in Portomarín is both a church and a fortress. Imagery: Lydia Monin

4. Steps lead pilgrims to their final destination, the Cathedral of Santiago.

5. The golden altar inside the Cathedral of Santiago.

6. The Cathedral of Santiago’s three spires are a welcome sight for weary pilgrims. Imagery: Shutterstock

was flooded to create a hydroelectric dam. The Romanesque Chapel of San Pedro and the Church of San Xoán, crowned with battlements because it doubled as a castle, are among the painstakingly reassembled buildings.

In the village of Santa Irene stands the Fountain of Eternal Youth where, legend has it, the water would cure the ills of passing pilgrims before they embarked on the final couple of days on the road.

Today, more than half of those who complete the Camino aren’t religious; they’re looking for a physical challenge, an adventure, to work through personal issues or to immerse themselves in nature, history, art and architecture. To qualify for the Compostela, or pilgrim’s certificate, they need to have undertaken the journey “for religious or spiritual reasons, or at least an attitude of search”. (In addition to the Compostela, the Pilgrim’s Reception Office now offers pilgrims the Certificate of Distance, which certifies the number of kilometres they have travelled, whatever the starting point of their pilgrimage.)

Pilgrimages can take many forms. Since the 1950s, for example, generations of young New Zealanders have been embarking on a different type of secular pilgrimage in the Northern Hemisphere. In 2002 University of Auckland lecturer Dr Claudia Bell described the Kiwi OE, or Overseas Experience, as a “secular pilgrimage to ‘see the world’”. It’s a rite of passage, usually centred on Britain, with rituals of departure, arrival and return. Thatched cottages from storybooks and London’s famous streets from the Monopoly board become real.

“Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace and Great-Grandad’s house were all sacred architecture: all equally sites of worship to the Antipodean visitor,” writes Claudia. Visiting historic sites, bringing home tales of adventure and finding oneself are all part of the OE pilgrimage.

Walking the last 100 kilometres of any route is the minimum distance required to get an official Compostela, which makes Lugo a great starting point. The town is a World Heritage site described by UNESCO as “the most complete and best preserved example of Roman military architecture in the Western Roman Empire”. The historic centre of Lugo is encircled by more than two kilometres of Roman walls containing 85 towers and 10 gates.

The oldest and best preserved gate is the Porta Miñá, through which pilgrims left the city for Santiago de Compostela, crossing the Roman bridge that still stands over the River Minho. Near the entrance to the ancient bridge is a very shiny, 21st-century sculpture of a Roman soldier. Next to him is the Camino sign with the bright yellow arrow, and across the road is a pizza restaurant.

“Pilgrimage is more than just a tourist trip,” says John. “It’s where you can take time to be reflective, to engage with the site and with the people at the site and where you can experience something at whatever level of a transformation within yourself that you can take back with you.”

The destination isn’t clear, he says. “You might know that you’re going to end up in Santiago de Compostela – but that’s a geographic reality. Where will you end up in terms of your inner self?”



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