

# Galicia:

## Home of the Miracle Cathedral

> By Dominick A Merle  
SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA,  
Spain

What do Ross, a 62-year-old surgeon from Minnesota, Nevio, an 18-year-old drug addict from Italy, and Lillian, a 44-year-old voice teacher from Belgium, have in common? All are "pilgrims" on the trail to the "miracle cathedral" in this Galician city of Santiago De Compostela, at the northwest tip of Spain, once believed to be the very end of the world.

But the millions who flock here each year no longer worry about "falling off," as the ancient Roman legions feared when they reached the end of the Iberian peninsula. They make their way to visit the tomb of St. James, patron of Spain, in the famed Cathedral de Santiago de Compostela, even though many historians argue that the remains of the martyred saint are not in the cathedral at all. Some claim that he never even set foot on Spanish soil. Arguments aside, the

shrine of St. James has become the greatest place of Christian pilgrimage after Rome and Jerusalem, and the faithful, and those who may simply want to believe, continue to arrive from every direction. The "Road to Santiago" has many beginnings, but only one end. Ross (not his real name) came to pay tribute to a recently deceased close relative. Nevio

started out with his girlfriend in Bologna in hopes of curing his addiction to cocaine. In one of those cruel ironies of life, they argued and broke up along the way and he was now walking alone. Lillian said she was simply "searching."

We met each of them individually on various parts of our "motorized pilgrimage" beginning in the Basque capital of Bilbao. A true pilgrim must walk at least the final 100 kilometers to the cathedral to complete the mission. But there are some devout followers who walk twenty ▶



Flower balconies

شرفات مليئة بالورود



Plane Tree Church

كنيسة

times that distance over a period of months, stopping to eat and rest at inexpensive hostels along the way.

St. James, one of the 12 apostles of Christ, was believed beheaded in Jerusalem in 44 AD. According to legend, his remains were returned by boat with his followers to this region where he previously preached the gospel. Sometime between 812 and 814 AD a peasant was attracted to a remote field by the light of a shining star and is said to have rediscovered the tomb. The discovery inspired the Christian "reconquest" which forced the Moors off the Iberian Peninsula.

The cathedral's distinctive twin baroque towers can be seen from miles away. The high altar is dominated by a sumptuously attired statue of St. James. Pilgrims mount the stairs behind the altar to hug and kiss the saint's mantle. Below the altar is the crypt that is believed to hold the remains of the patron.

We were there during a special Mass involving the "botafumeiro," a massive silver-plated brass censer containing incense that weighs more than 200 pounds and hangs from ropes in the ceiling. It takes eight men to swing the huge



Grain bin

مخزن الحبوب

ball pendulum-style through the cathedral and bring it to a halt after the ceremony.

As these special masses are mostly attended by pilgrims who have walked long distances in

the heat of the day, many Galicians good-naturedly refer to the botafumeiro as "the world's largest deodorant."

Ironically, an hour's drive away from this hotbed ▶

of Christianity, there are Galician villages where magic, witches and even an almost pagan belief in the spirit world prevails.

In the central town of Corpino, people who believe themselves possessed can be heard shouting, screaming and blaspheming until they feel they have liberated themselves.

Further south in Nieves, there is a strange ritual known as the "Procession of the Coffins." Here, every July 29, people who believe they have been saved in one way or another, slip on their best funeral clothes, get into coffins and are paraded around the village by their relatives.

And in many villages, the sound of bagpipes is often heard as the Celts ruled here for about 800 years beginning about 1000 BC. In fact, the region's name is derived from the word "Gallaeci," the name by which the Celtic tribes were known.

(A stray bagpiper, kilts and all, strolled into our restaurant in Santiago de Compostela one evening. He was playing a very bad bagpipe, acted as though he had had one too many of something or other, and was quickly ushered out.)

Galicia is also famous, or infamous, for another of its illustrious sons, General Francisco Franco, who was born on the northern coast in the city of El Ferrol. But during his rule Franco actually did very little for Galicia. Believing regional loyalty to be anti-Spanish, Franco went so far as to prohibit the official teaching and use of the Galician language.

While the "Road to Santiago" has no true beginning, there are many routes throughout



Mom & Pop

جدّة و جدّ

Europe-the French Road, the Portuguese Road, the Italian Road, the Sea Routes etc. All of the trails are clearly marked with the emblem of the scallop shell.

Why the shell? You can pick your own legend. One popular theory is that the grooves in the scallop shell come together at one point, just as all the trails meet in Santiago.

We met Lillian the voice teacher in the world famous resort of San Sebastian just a few kilometers from the French border. She wasn't sure just how far she would walk or ride, but vowed to complete the trail to Santiago even if she had to do it in installments over the years.

The sad-eyed Nevio, carrying the double

burden of his drug addiction and lost love, was walking along the streets of Pamplona, where the famed running of the bulls is held each July. There was no turning back for him.

Doctor Ross was staying at our hotel in Leon. He had made arrangements for a taxi to take him to the village of Sarria the next morning where he would begin his 100-kilometer walk to Santiago.

Each pilgrim carries a passport (credencial de pelegrino) which is stamped to prove that he has walked at least the minimum 100 kilometers. But there is even a more foolproof sign. Those who arrive in Santiago during the summer months are visibly more tanned on their left sides, which face the strongest rays of the sun. You don't mess with Mother Nature or the Galicians. ■

*(Dominick Merle is a Montreal-based travel writer and consultant.)*



Guggenheim

متحف غوغنهايم للفنون

**IF YOU GO:**

No visas are required for North Americans, only a valid passport.

We flew Iberia Airlines from New York to Madrid, continuing on Iberia to Bilbao to begin our road trip. Other North American airlines have nonstop services to Madrid as well.

Cool mornings, hot afternoons and a 30 percent chance of rain are common in northern Spain, so pack accordingly. Dress is informal just about everywhere.