

Our Journey on the Camino del Norte



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Words by David Steele

Photos by Alison and David Steele

PROLOGUE

Walking the Camino de Santiago had somehow worked it's way it the list of things Alison and I wanted to do in life. It started with Alison's golfing friends Lorna Johnson and Kim Macey talking about the Camino to her. I think we then looked it up on the internet and watched the movie, *The Way*. If we weren't hooked by then, reading books like *Wild* by Cheryl Strayed and guide books on the Camino completed the job and we started thinking seriously about walking 800 kilometres, carrying everything we needed on our backs and stopping where we wanted!

Our first step was to walk the 125km track from Cape Naturaliste to Cape Leeuwin over 7 days in November 2014 and, although we were tired when we finished the walk, from that point on we couldn't stop thinking about the Camino!

We had decided prior to doing the Cape to Cape that I would retire at the end of June 2016 and we started thinking that walking the Camino would be a good way to start retirement, so we started seriously planning to do the walk starting in July 2016.

The first question was which Camino? The Camino Frances is the most popular, however we started focusing on the northern route, the Camino del Norte because of the relative solitude of the walk. In the summer, somewhere around 500 walkers will be on any given section of the Camino Frances whereas this number is more like 50 on the Camino del Norte. The only hitch was all the guide books said how difficult the terrain was, significantly more so than the Frances. It also looked like accommodation was only open from late spring to early Autumn, and when it was open it was difficult to get bookings because this was when the Spanish flocked to the beaches. Would we be up to the difficulty of the trail, and if so could we find places to stay?

I got transferred to Houston in early 2015 and we still had not really decided which route to take, but over a period of reading books and looking at maps the Camino del Norte firmed up as the one we would do. We would make sure we got fit enough to complete the journey while we were in Houston by walking to and around Memorial Park and we would get enough gear so that if necessary we could camp out, reducing the risk of having to keep walking to find accommodation at the next village, or the one after that!

We became regular visitors to the REI store in Houston and bought shoes, sleeping bags, self inflating mattresses and a tent! Socks, shorts, shirts and other gear followed and when we returned to Perth in February 2016 we were fully kitted out and ready for anything!

We booked our airfares in early January to leave Perth on 16 July, just after I retire, and continued to train, walking between 20 and 35 kms in a day around Mandurah most weekends, and kept buying gear from the outdoor stores in Perth. Our plan and preparation was almost complete - we were all set to spend 3 months walking the Camino del Norte, stopping where and when we liked, hoping for hotel accommodation but able use albergues (pilgrim hostels) or even camp if necessary! Or so I thought...

In late May, Alison decided she would prefer to have a fixed itinerary and know where she was going to stay after a long day's walking, and that she had found a company on the internet that could organise accommodation along the whole route - they would even take our packs from hotel to hotel if we wanted them to. At first this made it seem that the whole laissez-faire approach to the trip was being dropped but by June 2nd we were booked all the way to Santiago, although we would still carry our packs ourselves. In retrospect this was a great decision!

For some reason that now escapes me, in late June I decided our boat needed to get serviced before we went away, so on a wet and windy weekend we took the trailer down to Mandurah to pick it up and take it to Boat City. In wind and rain, we pulled the boat up onto the trailer and once I had it on I looked around for Al only to find her laying down on the jetty. She had slipped in the wet conditions and wrenched her ankle severely but hadn't wanted to distract me from getting the boat on the trailer - 6 weeks from starting our Camino, she couldn't even put weight on her ankle, let alone walk! To cut a long story short, she recovered in a few weeks and things were looking good again.

We arranged with Carly, who was living in Alice Springs at the time, to spend a few days there in early July and try our gear out on a short overnight hike on the Larapinta trail. On the first night in Alice Springs, Alison tripped crossing a road walking back to our hotel and twisted her other ankle - seemed that we were destined not to make the walk! Once again, though, she recovered and, as you will see from the pages to follow, enjoyed one of the great experiences of a lifetime.

I kept a blog (steelewalking.wordpress.com) everyday while we were walking, and uploaded pictures for our friends and family to follow the trip. Each day in the book starts with the words from the blog and the pictures are a fairly large subset of the photos from the blog, plus those taken on our rest days which were not posted to the blog.

Alongside the pictures I have added commentary, much of it knowledge gained after the walk but hopefully informative.

Mostly the places names are in Castilian Spanish or English, but some are in the Basque, Cantabrian, Asturian, Galician or Catalunyan language, depending on what language the signs, guide book or maps were using at the time.

Dave

July 13, 2016

WELCOME

Welcome to Alison and Dave Steele's record of our journey along the Camino del Norte. We're just about set to go – flights booked, accommodation all along the way booked (a slight change to the original plans – we decided its better to know we have a roof over our heads rather than spend a couple of hours each day looking for a place to sleep!) and our packs just about organised! Stay tuned for more updates!

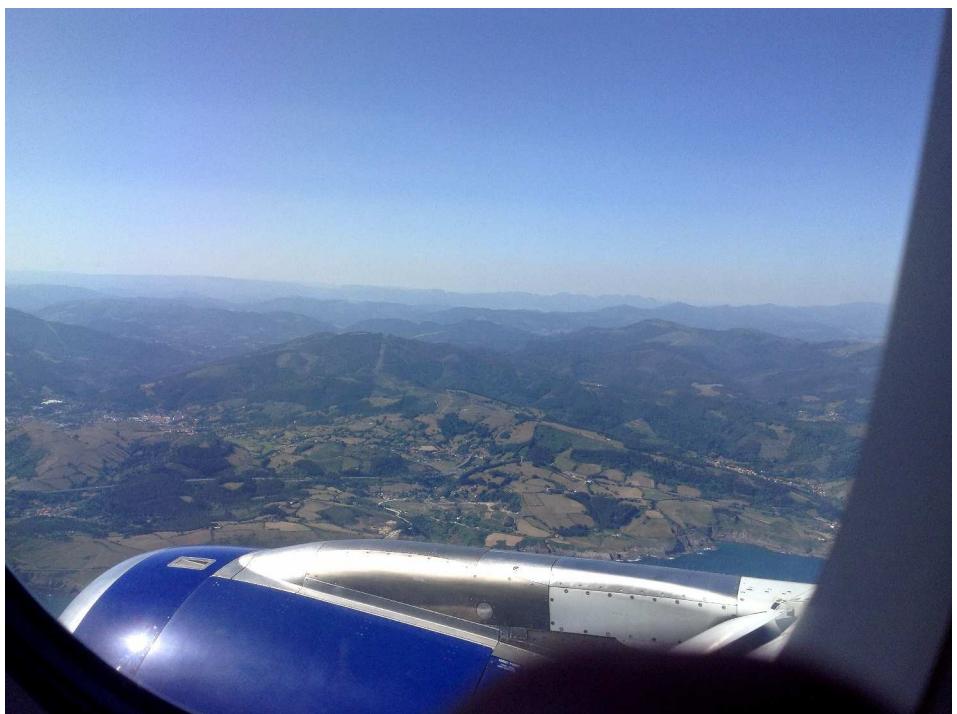
Our trial run with full gear on the Larapinta trail with Carly and Mat



July 18, 2016

PERTH to SAN SEBASTIÁN

We don't normally drink at 4:30 in the morning but after years, months, weeks, days and hours of planning and anticipation, we're finally (or, at least, nearly) on our way! Whatever we've got in our packs now is going to have to last us for the next three months, or until we go shopping, whichever comes first... Next stop Dubai, then London, a short overnight then on to Bilbao and finally a bus to San Sebastián – let's see how all of that goes!



Alison enjoying the lounge, first in Perth at the top left and then in Heathrow above.
Left, the hills behind Bilbao airport, which we returned to a couple of weeks later by foot!

July 19 to 25, 2016

SAN SEBASTIÁN

A very long but relaxing couple of flights to London but a very sticky night – heatwave in London and the hotel A/C was on the blink.

Another early start but very excited to finally get to Spain!

Amazingly, our luggage arrived in both London and then Bilbao at the same time as us, the bus from Bilbao to San Sebastián was where the guide book said it would be and the taxi driver understood my directions to our apartment in the oldest street in the old town of San Sebastian, and conveniently located near about 200 bars!

Had our first try of pinxtos – very nice!

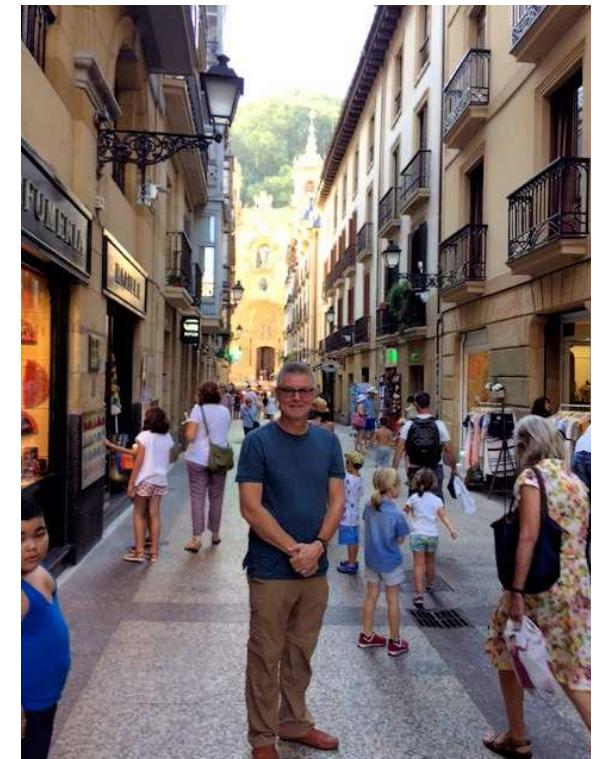


Alison in the old town of San Sebastián, enjoying our first pinxtos.



Left, the Playa de la Concha at San Sebastián on the day we arrived and, right, heading out for dinner in the old town that evening.

Below, views from Monte Urgull: Playa Zurriola, left, and Isla Santa Clara, right.





Above, lining up for pinxtos and, right, lunch with Georgia Campbell. Below, our favourite baked cheesecake and, below right, the plaza which used to be the bull fighting ring in the centre of the old town. We saw these in many other towns as well - the doors lead to apartments to which the owners would invite guests to watch the bull fights.





Some shots from our walking tour of San Sebastián: Georgia and Alison at lunch, the cathedral in the newer part of town and flowers at Gipuzkoa Plaza.



Alison looking back towards Monte Urgull and the old town.

July 21, 2016

DAY 1- IRUN TO SAN SEBASTIÁN

Fantastic day today as we started our Camino. Although we have come to San Sebastián to stay for a few days, the Camino del Norte officially starts in Irun, about 26km to the east of San Sebastián. Actually, before we got the credencial we had a coffee at a coffee shop that mainly seemed to be frequented by old blokes having a moscato to kick the day off!

It was a great walk through all kinds of terrain from suburban streets to goats' tracks, highways, farmers paddocks and promenades – even a ferry. A lot of elevation, rising from sea level at the start to 547m at the highest point and over 700m in total ascent and descent – very glad we didn't have our full packs on!

We got slightly off track at one point, taking the GR-121 along a real goat track along the ridge of the mountain rather than a much easier walk through pine forests – will be more careful in future! Anyway, about 26 km completed!



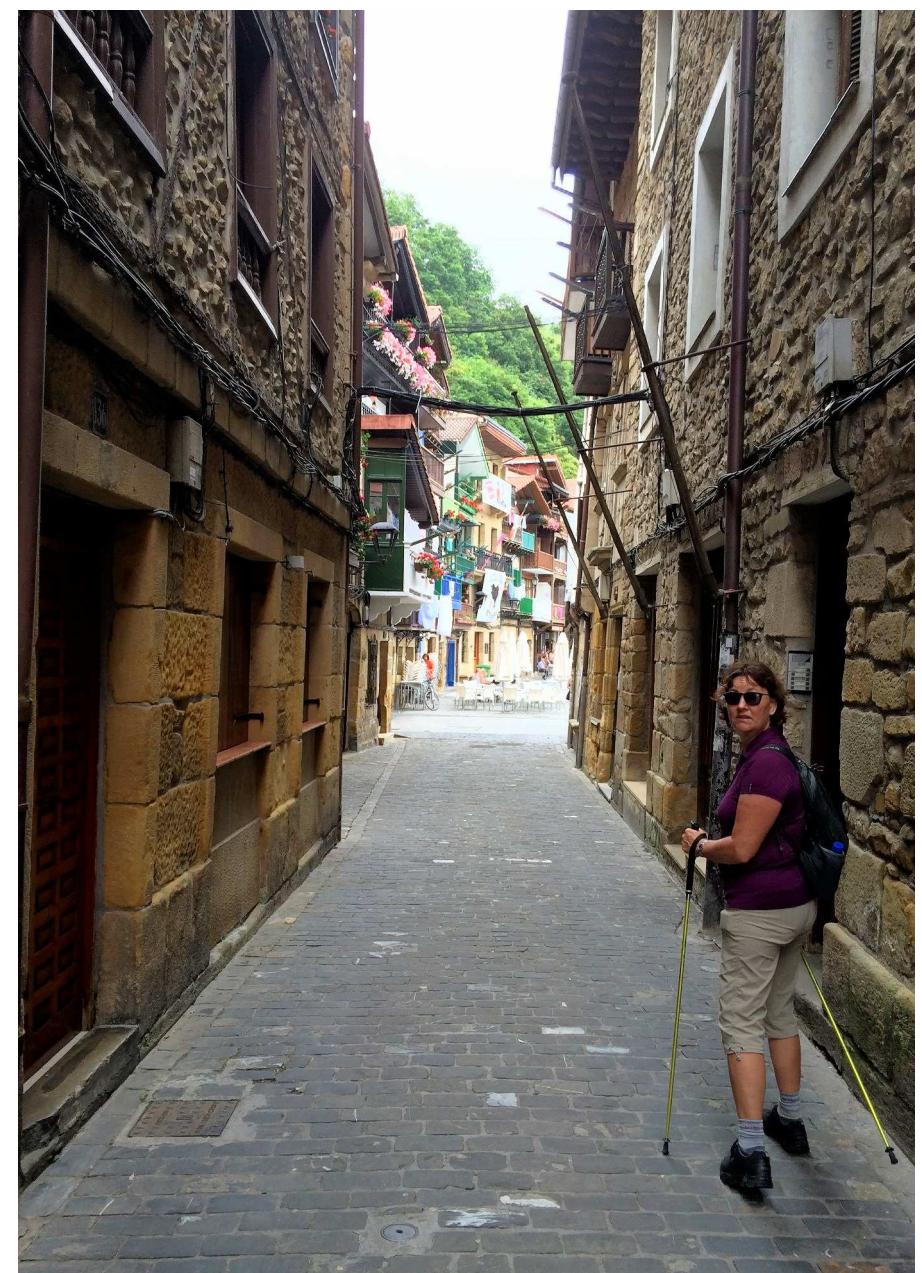


Opposite page, Al and I on a bridge just outside Irún, the start of our Camino (we were so excited to get going we forgot to take a snap at the very start!), and the first of the waymarkers that we would get so used to seeing on our journey.

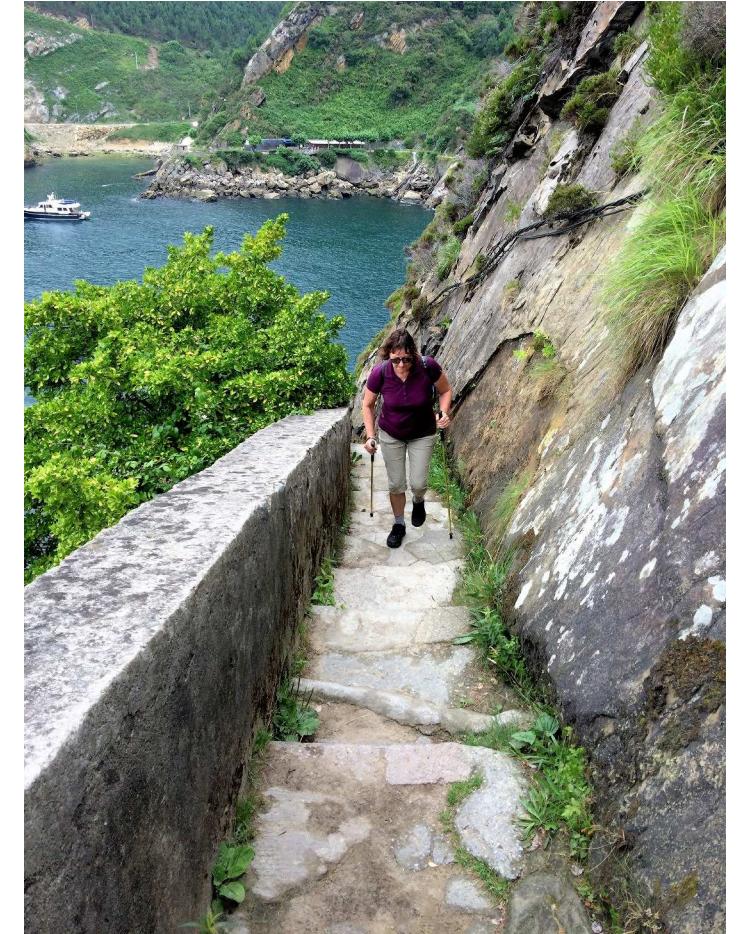
This page, heading off road to start climbing Mount Jaizkibel and then views to the French town of Hendaye, from near the Santuario de Guadalupe.



Two pictures of Al walking up Mount Jaizkibel towards Fort San Enrique, shown above with me standing in the entrance. Our main packs had 2.5L camel-backs in them for water but we only had our day pack on the first walk. We had only taken small bottles of water and by the time we had completed the first climb they were empty! We bought 1L bottles each at a bar/restaurant near the Santuario de Guadalupe, so we had to be careful with our water - rookie mistake!



Left, Al walking back down the mountain (the first of many lengthy sections on roads), and above, in the view over and then walking through the very picturesque village of Pasajes de San Juan.





Opposite page, catching the ferry across the Portua de Pasaia from Pasajes de San Juan to Pasajes San Pedro and then walking back up the hill on the other side.

This page, looking back down at the Portua de Pasaia and the view before the final descent to the Playa Zurriola and San Sebastián.

By very unlikely coincidence, we ran into one of the WorleyParsons directors, John Green, and his wife Jenny coming down the stairs that Alison is shown walking up - small world!

July 23, 2016

DAY 2 – SAN SEBASTIÁN TO ORIO

A lot fewer photos today. We decided to get a head start on our next leg by doing the section from San Sebastián to Orio, with a plan to have lunch there and catch the train home. We started alright in brilliant sunshine but rain set in just after Barrio Igueldo, about a quarter of the way there. Some parts were very beautiful again but in the end we just had our heads down trying to get into Orio with some parts still dry!





Opposite page, starting from San Sebastian in bright sunshine, the rain caught us at Barrio Iguelo after climbing up Monte Iguelo, and the track turns into a brook after we went off road.

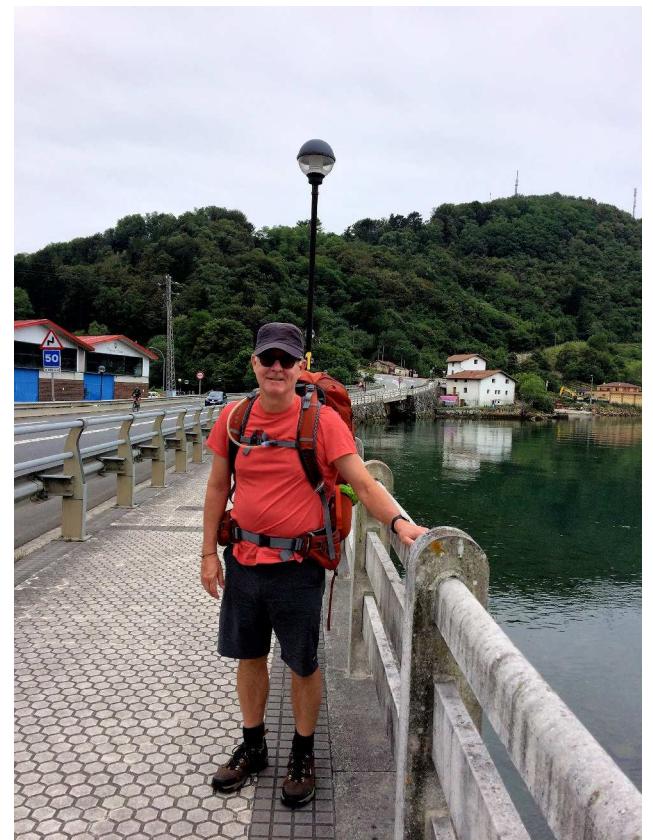
Above, seeing the signs to Santiago got us very excited, but they also made it clear how far we had to go!

July 25, 2016

DAY 3 – ORIO TO GETARIA

Much nicer walk today! We left San Sebastián fully loaded up this time – first walk with everything on our backs and definitely harder on the legs. A short train ride from San Sebastián to pick up our route at Orio train station then a beautiful walk along the Orio river before climbing up over the headland to the village of Zarautz. Plenty of surfers out with waves across the whole bay – we spent about an hour having a couple of coffees watching them before setting off along the coastal path to Getaria (I have to admit we took the low level alternative here, rather than once again climbing over the headland). All sealed pathways today so we made good time and were into Getaria for lunch.

12.4km today for a total of 51.4km!





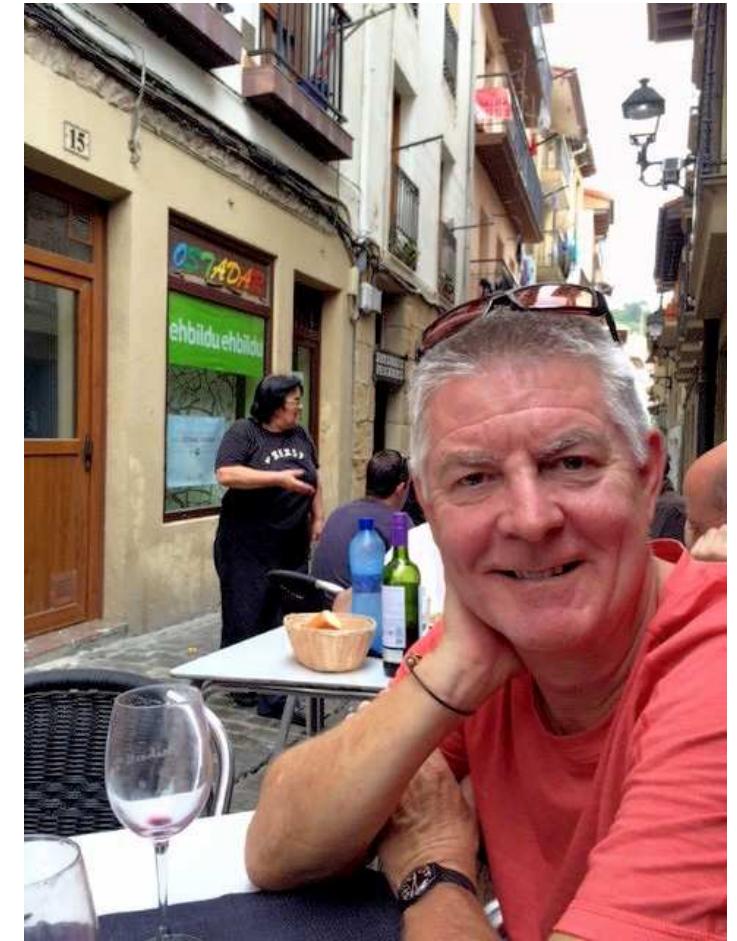
Opposite,looking back into Orio after leaving the train station , the view down river from Orio, and leaving Orio for Zarautz. This page, the view after climbing up the hill from the Orio river, the surf at Zarautz and looking back from the western end of Zarautz.





We could see Getaria from shortly after we left Orio, here are a couple of views as we got closer. It was a beautiful town and really busy when we got there. After lunch (opposite page) and a look around, I had a swim at the beach you can see in the photo at the bottom.





Busy Sunday in Getaria, left, and our first taste of the Menu del Dia - we later discovered two bottles of wine were included in two Menus (pronounced "menoos") but only one today!



Juan Sebastian Elcano, born in Getaria, captained the last ship in Magellan's fleet and, after Magellan died in the Philippines, completed the first circumnavigation of the world.

The harbour and surrounding restaurants at Getaria, right, and, opposite, the view from our hotel after dinner.





July 26, 2016

DAY 4 – GETARIA TO DEBA

Fairly arduous walk today – a lot of up and down on a mixture of paved rural roads and paved and medieval footpaths before a steepish descent into the town of Zumaia. We only passed through but it looked more like a working town complete with a shipyard rather than a holiday town. A very steep rise out of town and then what seemed like a very steady uphill through farmlands into Elorriaga at about 230 m of elevation. We stopped for a beer and txakolina, the sun came out and we pressed on for Itziar where we also stopped for the second round. In between was a real mix of pathways again but continual up and down. Pretty gentle downhill into the beautiful beach town of Deba where we are staying tonight until the last few hundred metres which felt almost vertical. The last 50 were vertical as we caught the elevator someone had kindly put there down into the town. The swim was superb after a hot days hiking! 18kms today and 69.4kms in total – starting to add up!



The steep walk out of Getaria, viewed from the bottom, then near the top.



Although we would see many more, this was our first copse of eucalypts on the walk. As we walked past we saw a person, obviously still asleep, in a hammock slung between two trees - free camping!

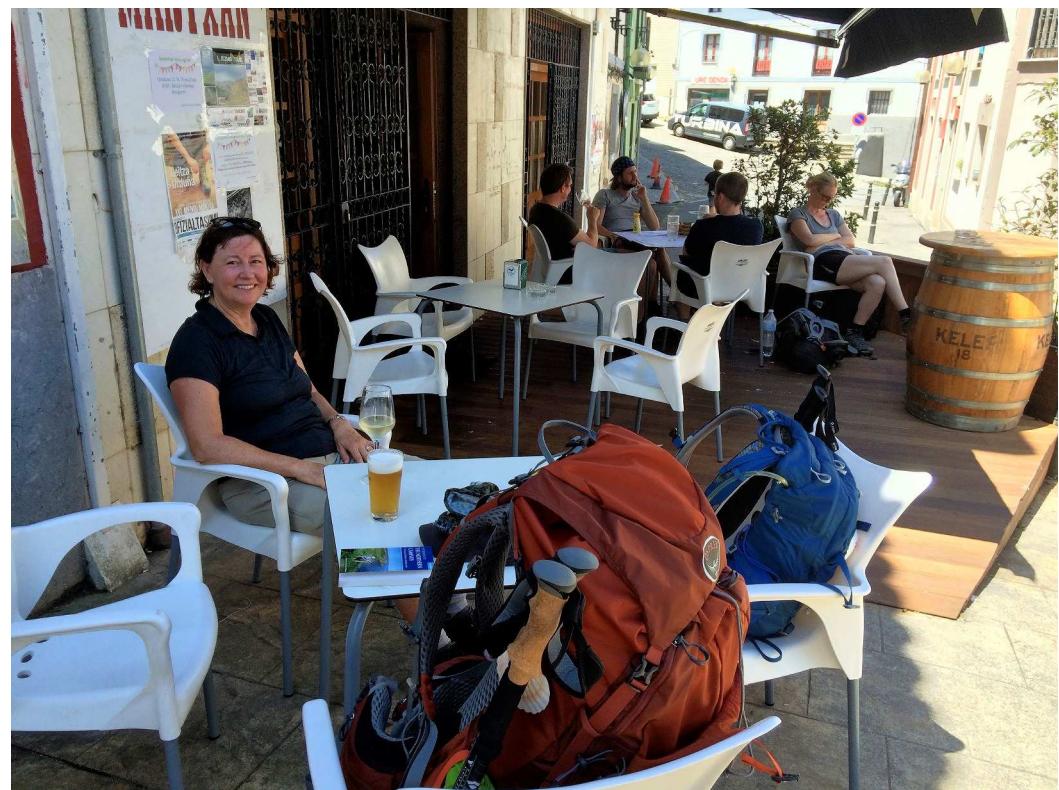
Below, a glimpse of Zumaia from the hills around Azkizu.







Clockwise from the top right opposite, the view into Zumaia from the east, some encouragement from a store owner in Zumaia and Al climbing out of the town heading west. Above, Al on the steep ascent up towards Itziar along a brook and right, a well earned wine and beer at Itziar. Although we didn't know it at the time, the section in the Basque country was the most rural section of the Camino.





Al next to the Deba
River as we head
out of town.

July 27, 2016

DAY 5 – DEBA TO MARKINA – XEMEIN

Very challenging walk today but well worth it. We hiked out of Deba fairly early to get a good start on the day (8am – very early for Spain!) with a nice walk along the river for a km or so before the normal steep ascent out of the town up to Calvario de Maria – a climb of about 200m over 5km. From there we turned inland and left the coast behind us for a few days. From Calvario we continued to climb to over 300m before dropping down again into a beautiful valley and the town of Olatz. Little did we know the fun was just starting – we then climbed up over the coastal mountains out of Gipuzkoa and into Viscaya with a 5km uphill to over 500m (just a bit higher than the Petronas Towers!). The maps shows the elevation then slowly decreasing over 11km but I can assure you there were plenty more steep little testers to give us over 900m total ascent and 830m descent into Markina-Xemein where we rewarded ourselves with a few beers. This is supposed to be one of the toughest stages of the Camino and it felt like it but it was also a wonderful walk with soaring views both inland and over the ocean and villages.

For some reason I don't understand we are booked some 3km out of town tonight so we had a bit of a struggle over the last hour to get in. I'm calling it 27kms today and now 96.4 in total!

We have learned a few things over the early stages of the trip:

We're carrying too much – going to be jettisoning clothes at Bilbao!

What goes down inevitably has to go back up again.

Socks take two days to dry.

We wouldn't have made it this far without the walking poles!

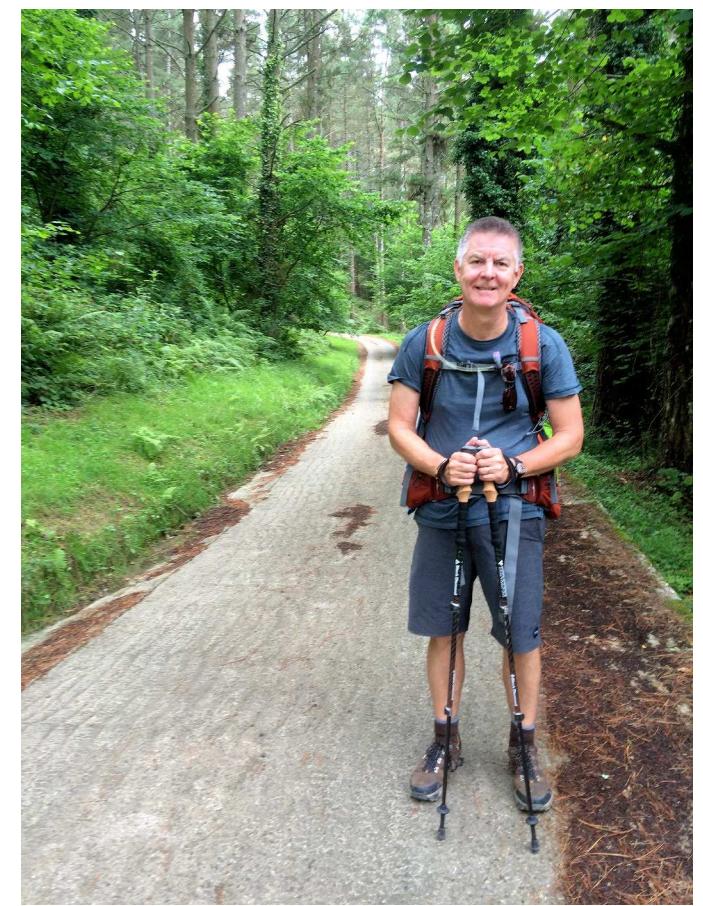


Anticlockwise from left, the last view of the ocean for a few days from the Ermita del Calvario, Alison on the track between the Ermita and Olatz and on a bench where stopped for our packed lunch before the village of Olatz.



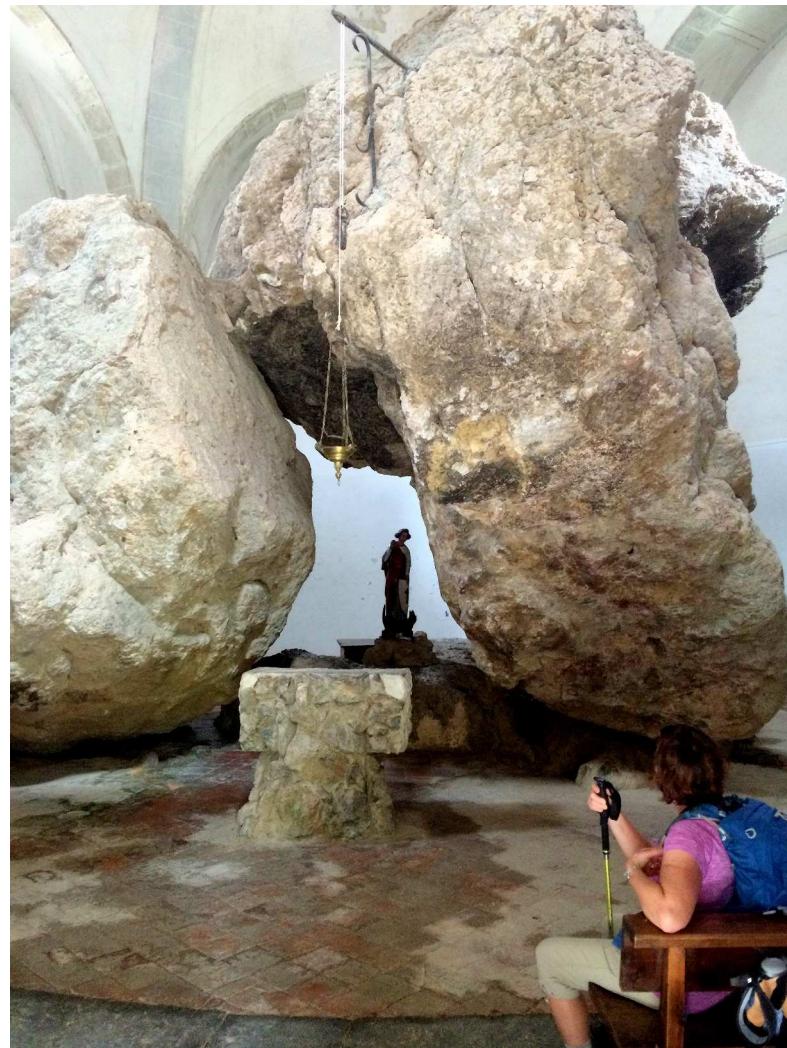


Olatz was a lovely little village in a valley between the first and second ascent of the day. We had packed our lunch and eaten it on the bench on the advice of the guide book. When we walked through the village we found a lovely little taberna but kept walking. We had a very long and steep ascent, which you can see me at the start of.





The top of the ascent from Olatz towards Collado de Arno and the view, about 8 km later, into Markina-Xemein. Opposite, the inside of the Iglesia de Santa Maria de la Asuncion, reached after a very steep and rocky 2 km descent. The church was built around this unbelievable rock formation. A well earned beer (actually two - the keg ran out with the first two glasses only partly filled) in Markina-Xemein before walking a further 3km walk to our lodgings for the night at Casa Ikestei just before Bolibar.



July 28, 2016

DAY 6 MARKINA – XEMEIN TO GERNIKA

A few mistakes today made things harder than perhaps they had to be. Firstly, not enough food and water, particularly proteins, at Casa Ikestei had us behind the curve all day. It was a very nice place in a nice setting but the self serve breakfast was mostly carbs – no eggs and little ham. Secondly, we started too late (9:40 am) and consequently didn't stop enough. As a consequence, we pulled into Gernika pretty well out on our feet!

That said we had a nice walk for most of the day along creeks and in pine (and sometimes blue gum) forests. Just after starting we passed through Bolibar, ancestral home of Simón Bolívar, one of the great colonizers of South America.

As usual, a biggish climb in the morning up to Monasterio de Zenarruza, then even higher again until we descended into Munitibar for an early lunch, beer and wine. The descent was made extremely easy by a wonderful set of stairs that must have been recently added by friends of the Camino.

It seemed like all uphill after Munitibar – another great church/monastery at Elexalde, more uphill and then a fairly easy descent into Gernika. A deceptively long and tedious final walk into Gernika – this is where we should have had a break – before finally arriving at our hotel (Hotel Gernika). 20.6km today for a total of 117km!

Ejected a few superfluous items from the backpack but probably not enough!

The city is the scene of saturation bombing by the German Condor Legion at Franco's request and the inspiration (?) for Picasso's La Guernica which we hope to see later in Madrid.

Beautiful dinner in the relatively modern city centre.



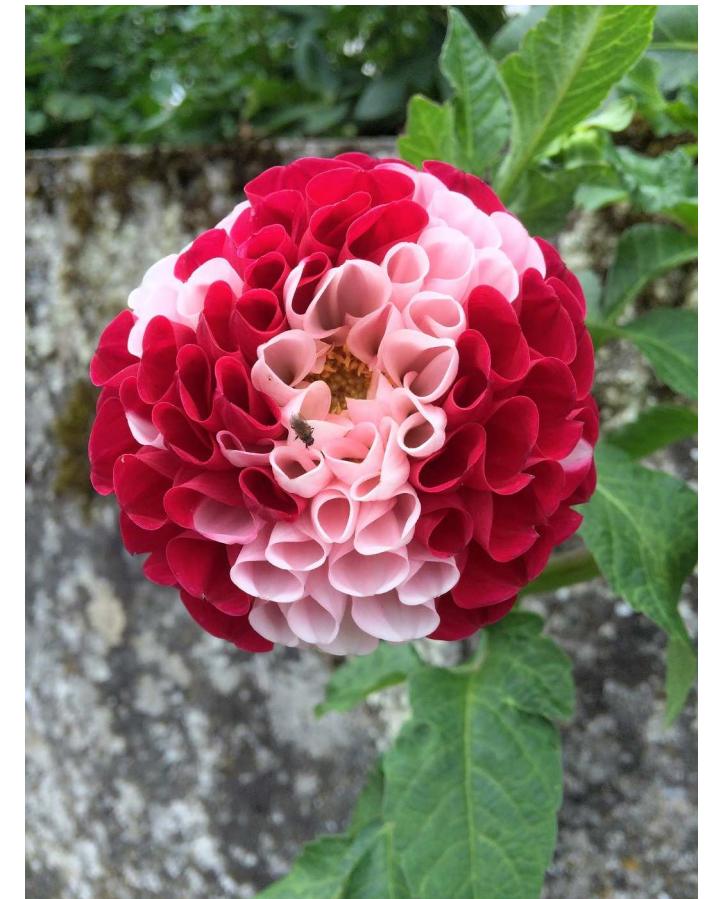
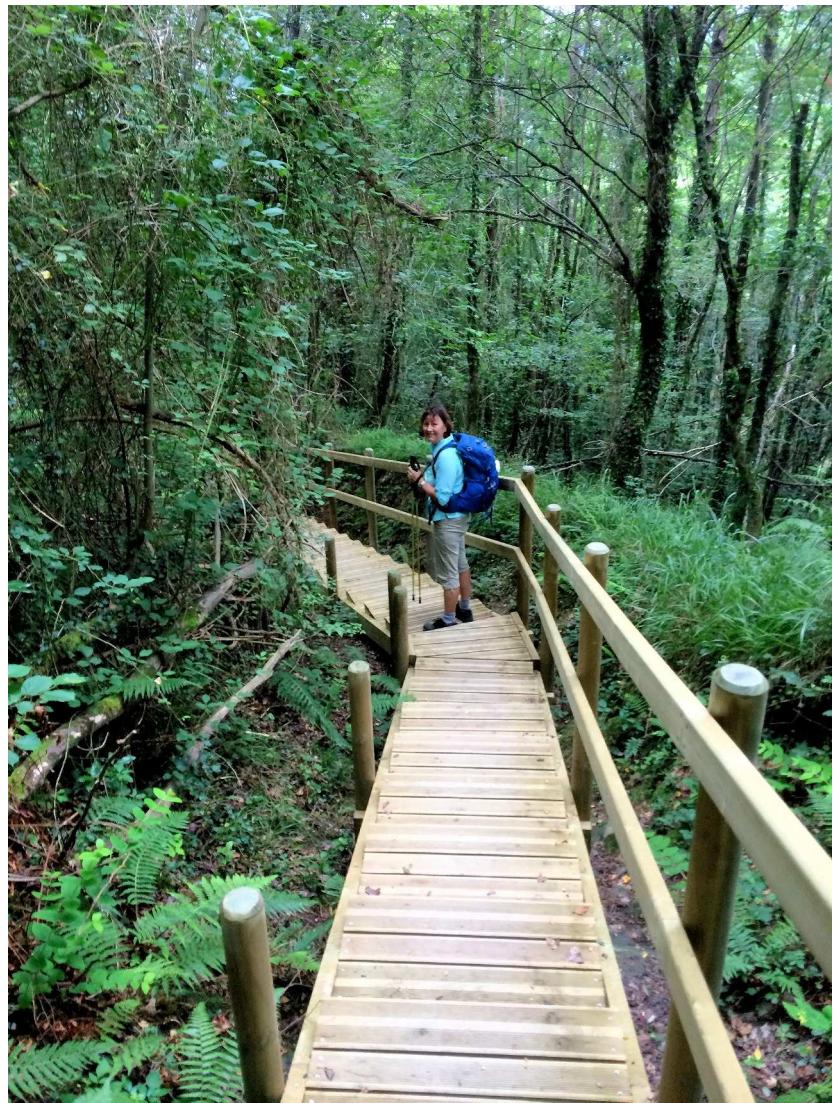


Opposite, Al starting the day at Casa Ikestei and some wildlife on the road to Bolibar.

This page, looking towards and then in Bolibar itself and, below, the road to Bilbao, three days walk away for us!







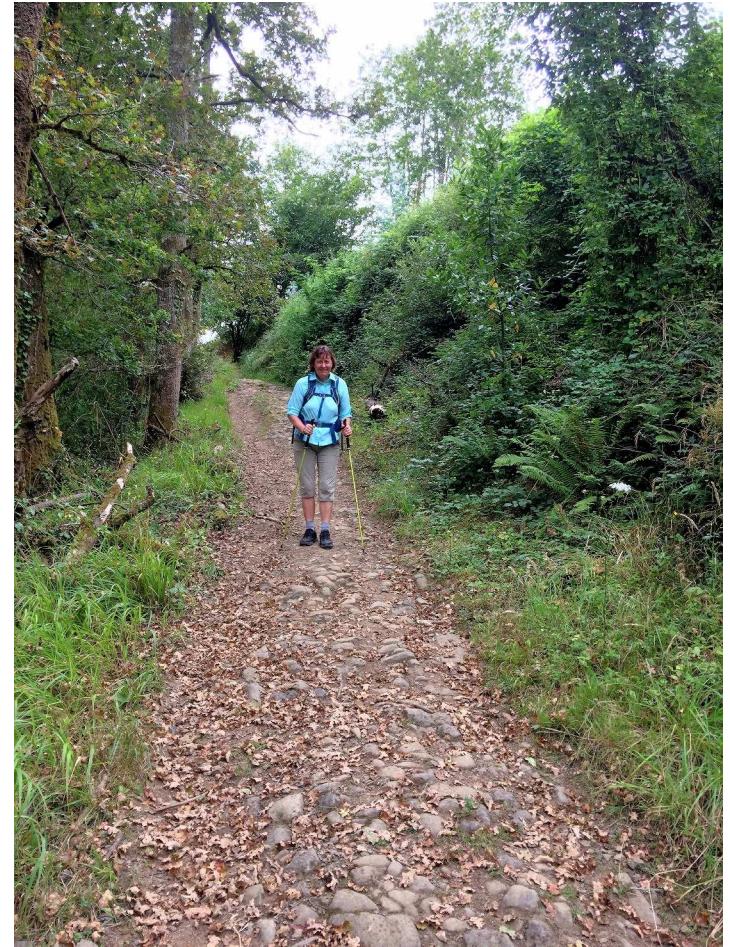
Opposite, some more wildlife on the way to the Monasterio de Zenarruza, the Monasterio in the distance and Al at the Monasterio.

This page, the boardwalk into Munitibar, a beautiful flower on the path and me next to a sign to Elexalde and a very big woodpile!





A beautiful little spot near Mendieta, Al on the path to Gernika and the spot we should have rested at during the descent into Gernika.





Although we thought we had walked a long way inland, we were surprisingly close to the Bay of Biscay. Left, the towns of Sukarietta and Mundaka in the distance and the Playa de Laida.

Below, Looking down on Gernika - it's further away than it looks!!





A replica of Pablo Picasso's "La Guernica", which we later saw in Madrid and, below, me in the town square with tomorrow's fruit and sunset over the relatively modern town. We wished we had more time in Gernika to explore some of the town and see the Gernika Peace Museum.



July 29, 2016

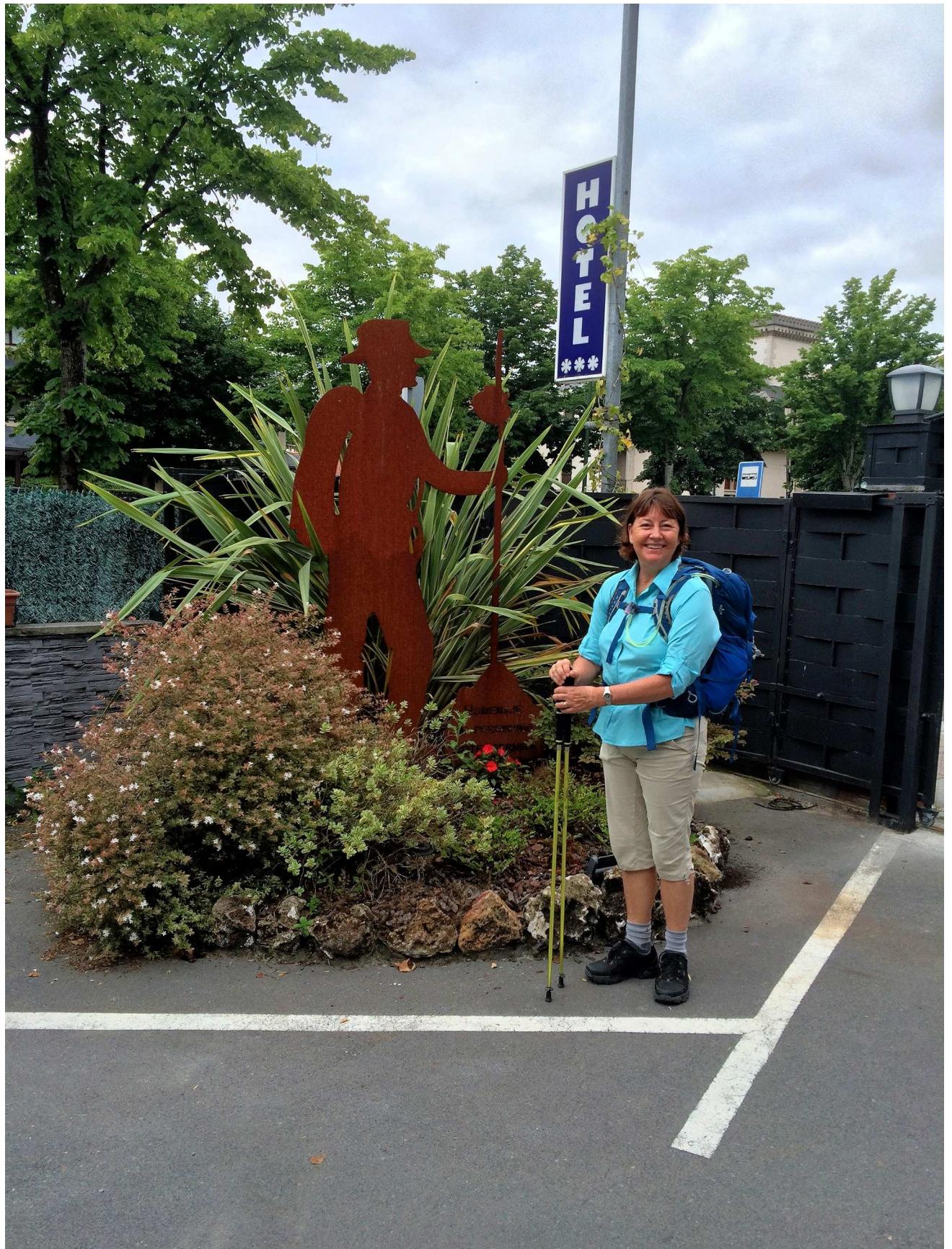
DAY 7 – GERNIKA TO LEZAMA

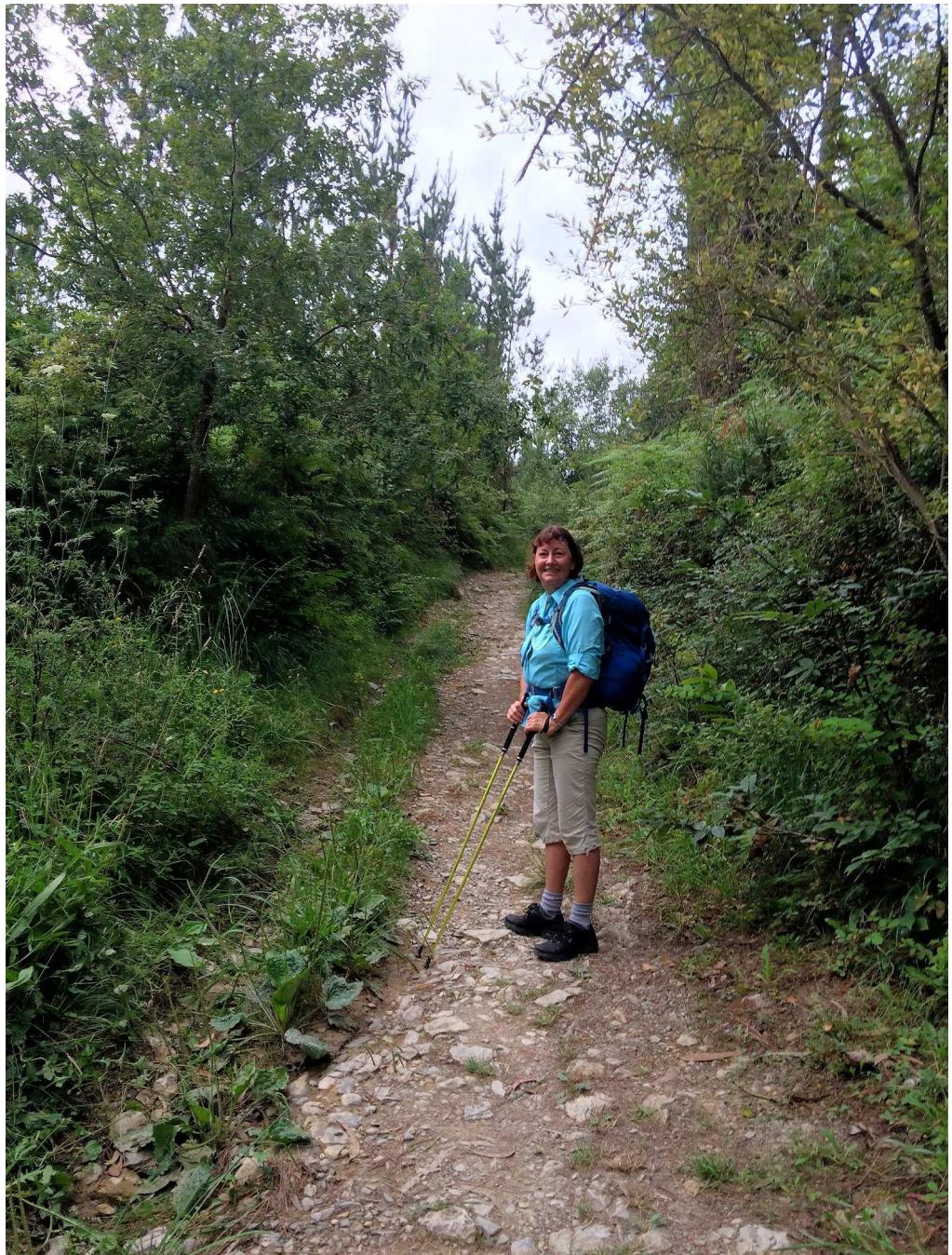
We started today trying to remedy some of yesterday's mistakes – a much more substantial breakfast and an earlier start (8:10am – it is Spain!). Can't say I noticed much difference in the weight of the backpack after last night's clean out but I felt alright considering how bad I felt yesterday afternoon! The guide book described the first part of the walk "a pleasant 4.6km walk along wooded tracks" but as usual, after a couple of kms to get out of town, we headed steeply up! Today's peak was around 350m but the tracks were much better and easier than the previous days – lots of minor country roads or firm tracks – so we made very good time. We were determined to have breaks every 2hrs and we did, which kept us much fresher.

We ran into an Irish bloke who had done the Camino Frances a couple of times – he reckoned it was a walk in the park compared to the Norte – it's nice to know we aren't the only ones finding it tough...

Managed to find a tavern at Larrabetzu for lunch and got into our accommodation at Lezama (an otherwise nice country hotel directly under the Bilbao airport flight path!) by 4pm. The last section was only short but in full afternoon sun so we were happy crash out! 23km today/140km in total.

Leaving our hotel in Gernika - a fellow peregrino!







Opposite, the morning's ascent, a way marker, and the view back towards Gernika. Not sure what happened to the owner of the boots but we saw many more before the end of our walk!

We found it really difficult at times to understand where the waymarkers were telling us to go - we were starting to get our heads around Spanish but half the signs were in Basque.

Near the top of the ascent and before the descent into Giokolexea, we found this enterprising young man selling food and drinks to the peregrinos.





Al at Goikolexea waiting with other walkers for the bar/store to open - it never did so we walked 1.4km further to Larrabetzu. Me as we left the town of Lezama, and our accommodation just out of town.

July 30, 2016

DAY 8 – LEZAMA TO BILBAO

Just a little twelve and a half kilometre walk over Monte Avril (elevation 340m) into Bilbao today – we landed here 12 days ago took an hour and a half to get to San Sebastián and 7 days to walk back! We are staying in a little pension in the old town and have a couple of nights here before another short walk to an outer suburb of Bilbao called Portugalete, so plenty of opportunity to relax! Check out the picture of the goat that decided the grass was a bit greener on the other side of the fence – I’m pretty sure it didn’t think things all the way through when it put its head through the fence! 152km down, 665km to go!



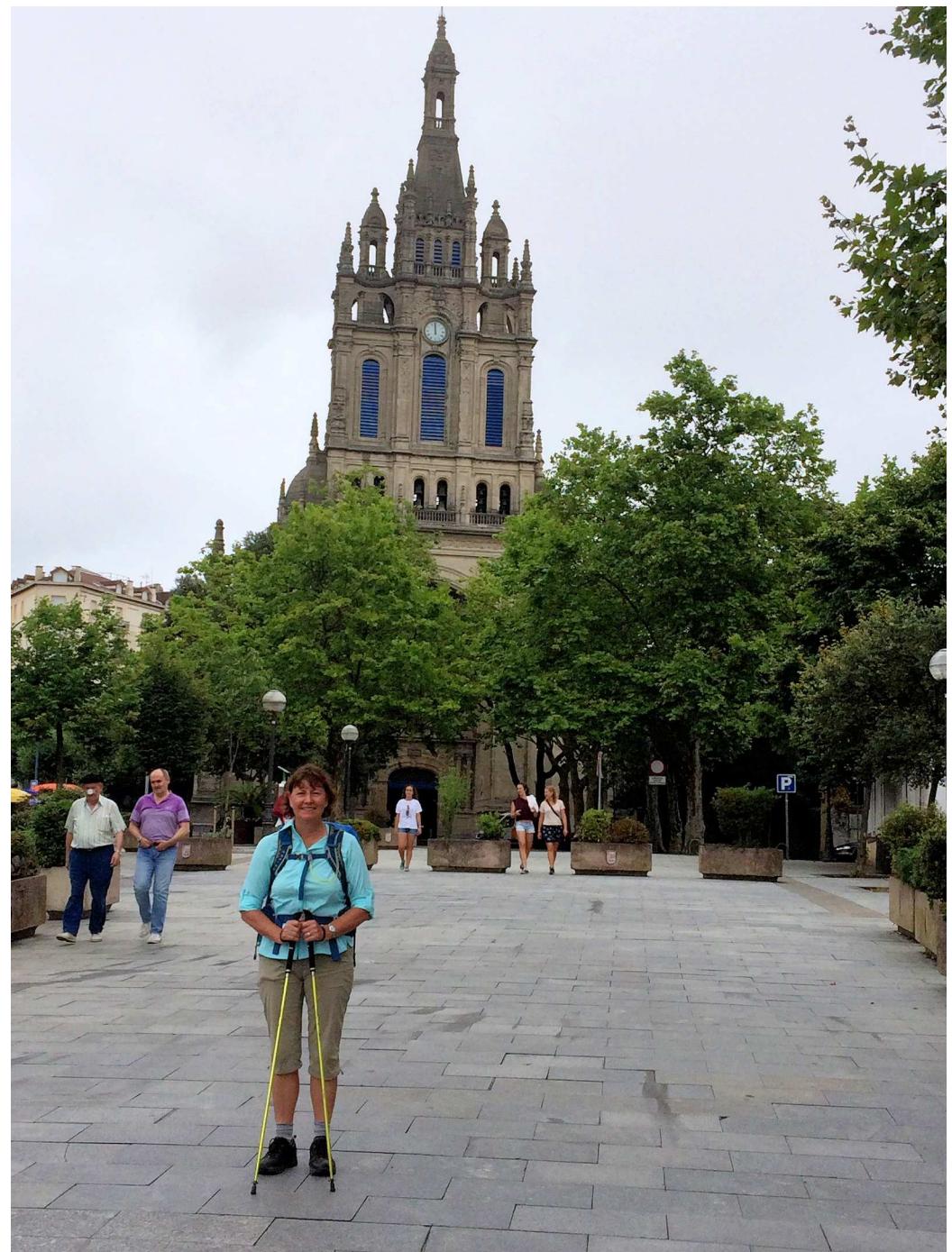
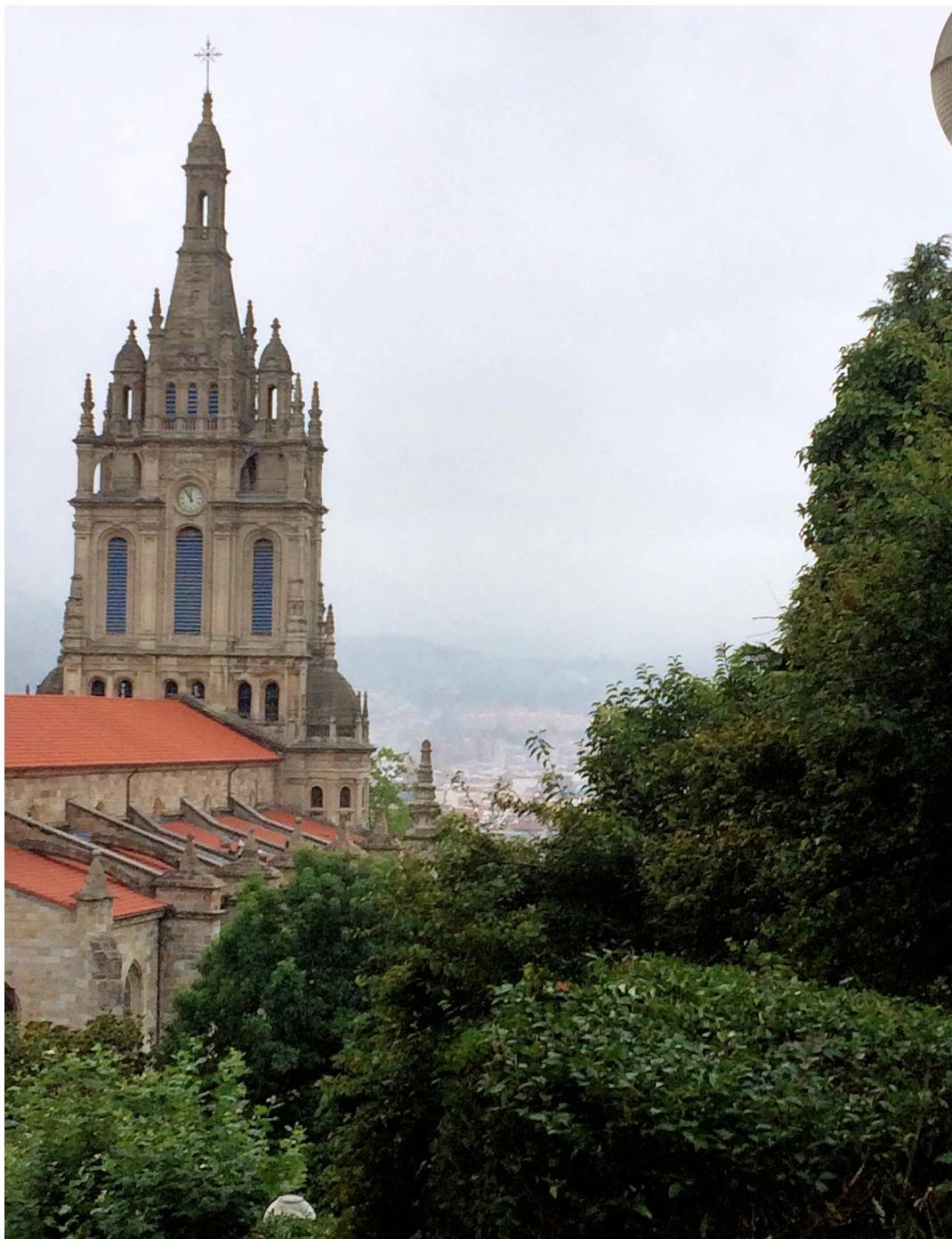
Our lodgings in Lezama, Rural Matsa, and the unfortunate goat in the foothills before Monte Avril.





Opposite, Bilbao Airport, where we had arrived 11 days earlier.

On this page, Al on the short but fairly strenuous walk up Monte Avril, what looks like heather next to the path as we walked through the park at Monte Avril and the view into Bilbao.





Opposite, two views of the Basilica de Nuestro Señora de Begona.

Left, the walk into the old town of Bilbao - the sounds of people enjoying themselves grew louder and louder as we got closer and was a roar by the time we reached these steps!

Above, a well earned couple of drinks and some pimentos de Padron - these are a very mild chilli but occasionally you get a hot one!

July 31, 2016

REST DAY 1 – BILBAO

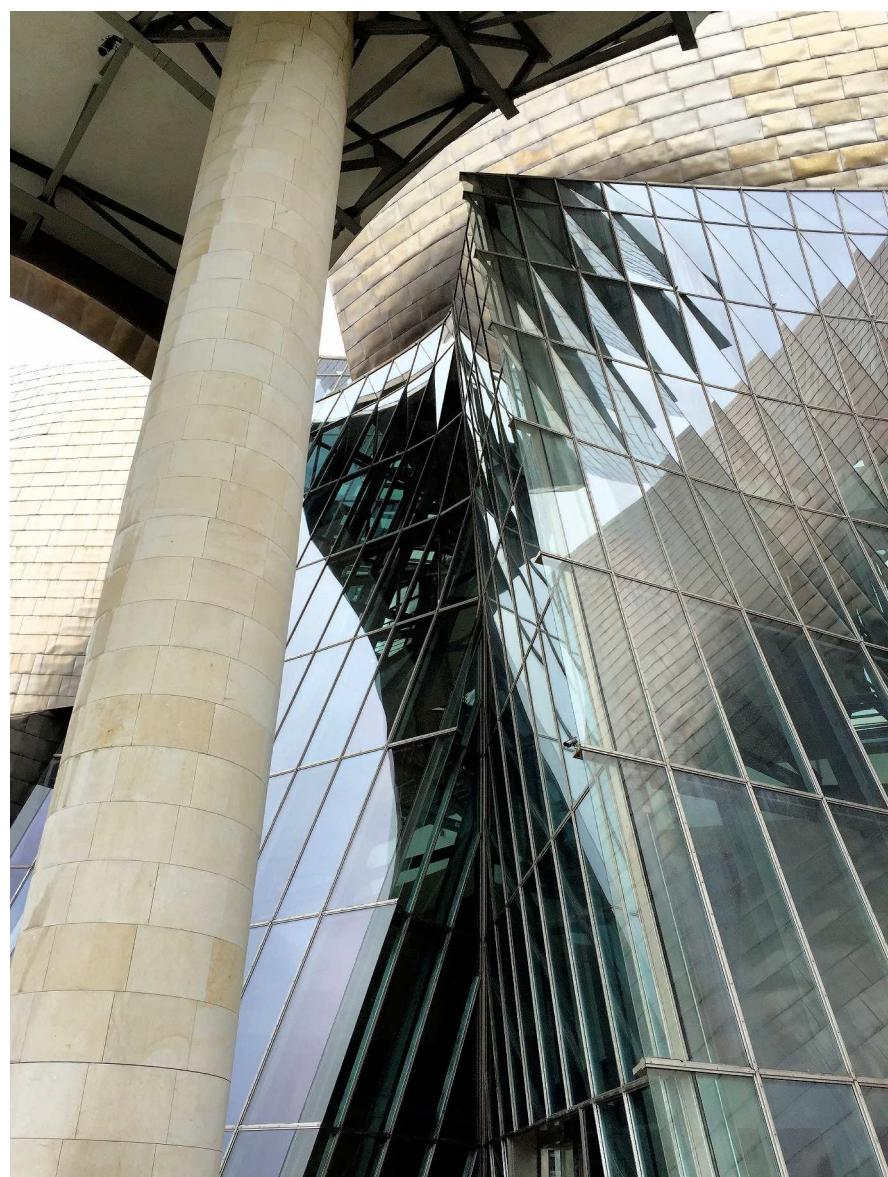


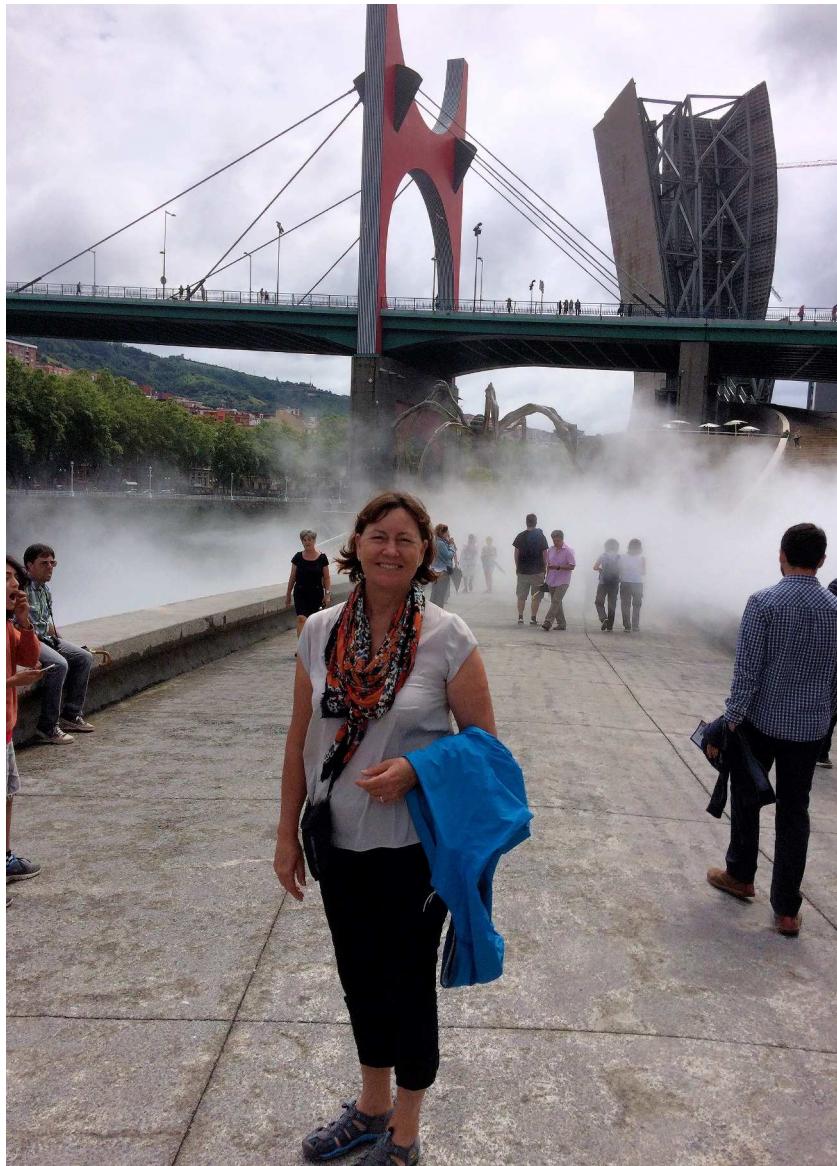


A cold and wet day for our first rest day. We'd been lucky with the rain since our walk from San Sebastian to Orio, so we didn't really mind!

Opposite, Alison on the bridge from the old town of Bilbao over the Rio Nervion into the new town and, on this page, different views of the Guggenheim Museum. The guide book says the building itself exceeds in quality anything displayed within it and after our visit we were inclined to agree.







More of the Guggenheim and the Rio Nervion as the day cleared up.



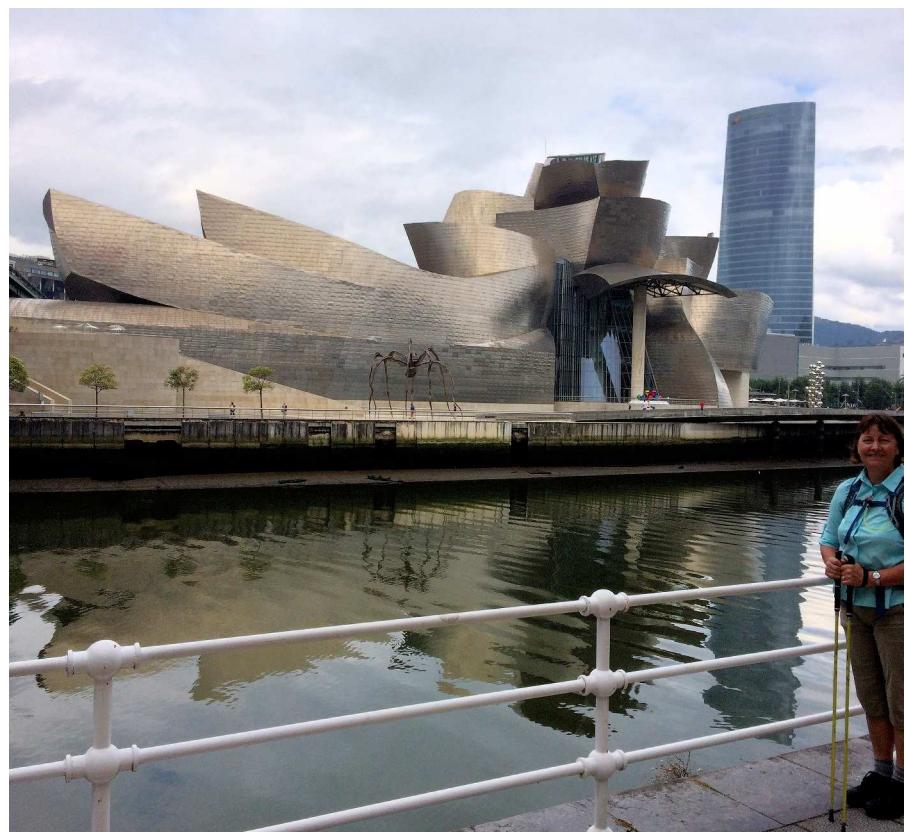
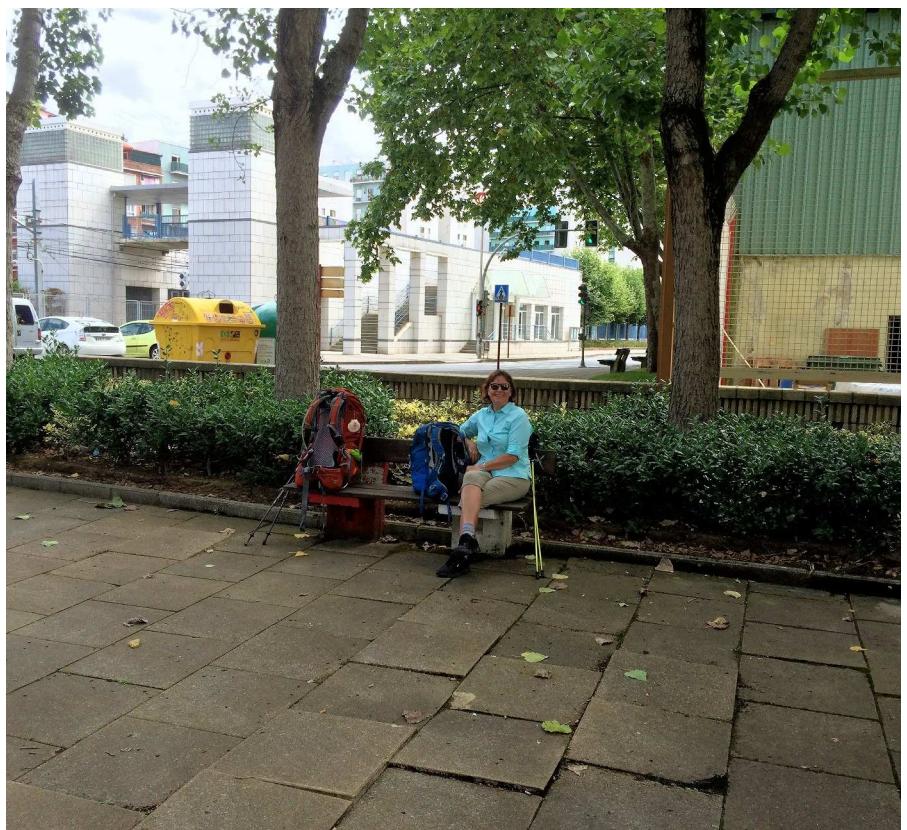
August 1, 2016

DAY 9 – BILBAO TO PORTUGALETE

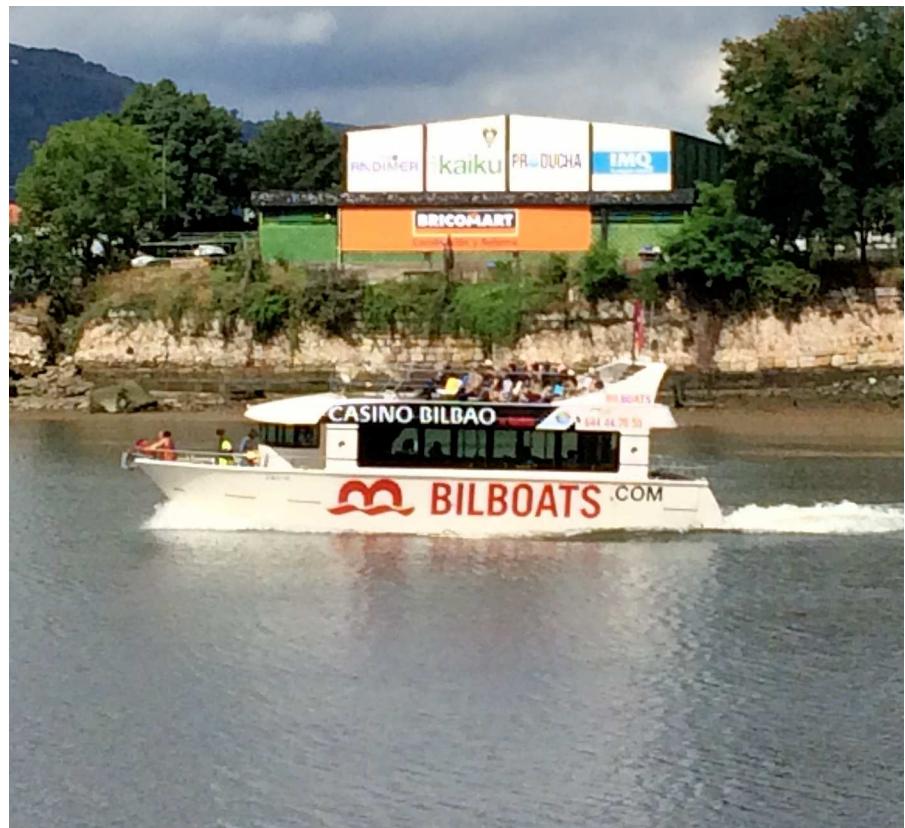
We set off at about 9:30am today for a very short work to Portugalete on the outskirts of Bilbao. We followed the eastern bank of the Rio Nervion – some nice sections early but mostly through industrial and shipping areas. As the book says this stage is " best finished quickly and put behind you."

Portugalete, though, is a lovely little village and is the site of the Puente Colgante – a bridge with a sort of aerial ferry to allow large boats to pass underneath. Apparently the first of its kind in the early 1900s and copied a few times around the world. Only 10kms today for a cumulative total of 162km, however a couple of long stages coming up so no doubt the feet will appreciate the afternoon of rest!





Opposite, leaving our hotel in old Bilbao and clockwise on this page, AI having an early break along Rio Nervion, the Guggenheim again, an easier way to travel between the two towns and looking back towards Bilbao.





In retrospect, and apart from a short section in the middle of the walk, this was a nicer walk than the book suggested. The walk beside the river at both Bilbao and Portugalete was really nice and both lunch and dinner there were really nice, as was the extra half day of rest!

Clockwise from top left, approaching, getting ready to board and looking back on the Puente Colgante on the way to lunch.

Opposite, looking across the river mouth towards Las Arenas after dinner.



August 2, 2016

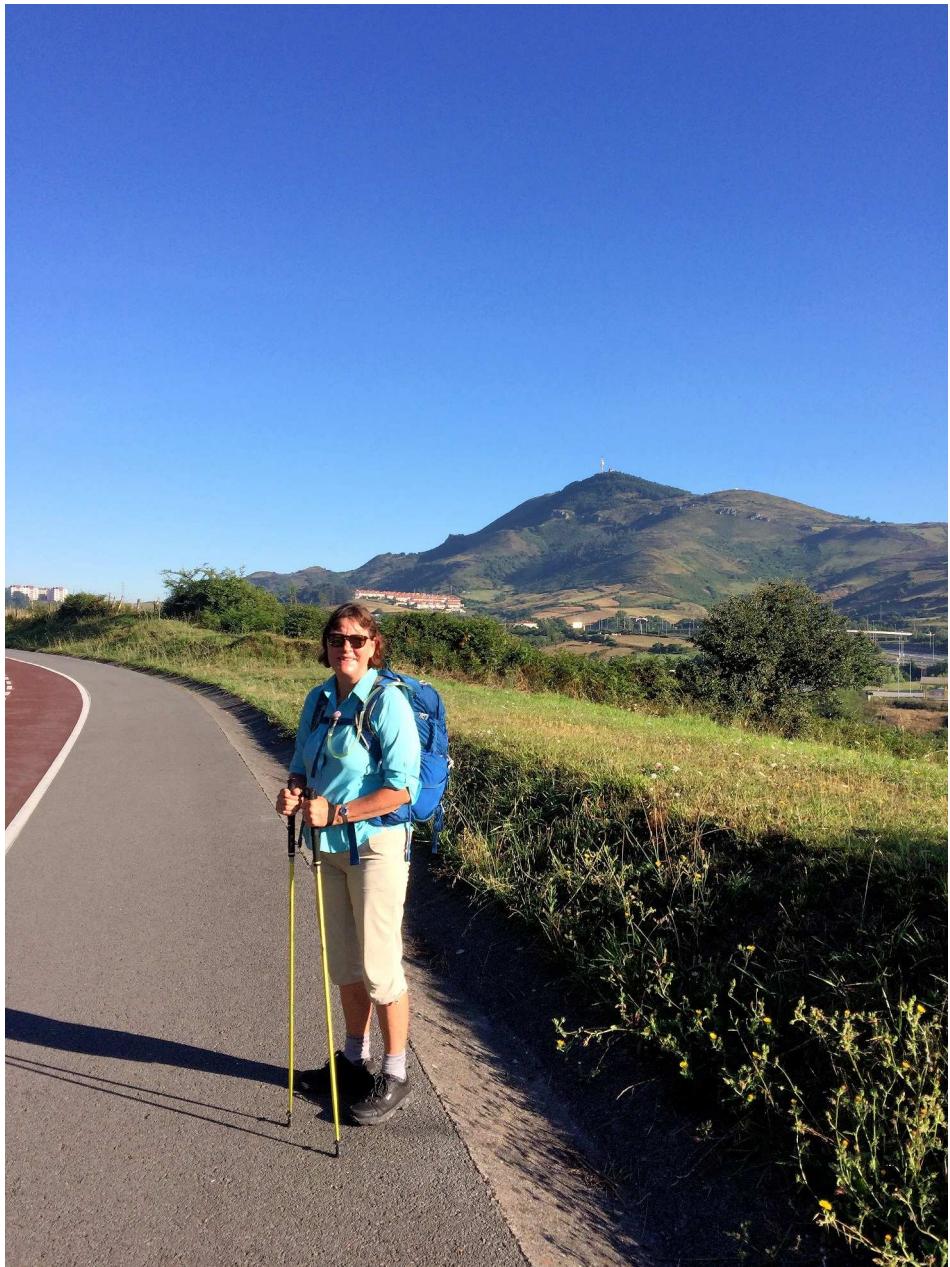
DAY 10 – PORTUGALETE TO ISLARES

Very big day today! We set off quite early from Portugalete, about 8am but unfortunately we had not done our homework and struggled for 20 minutes to find the route (we did, however, have a very nice walk last night when we should have been looking!) headed for Castro-Urdiales or possibly Islares. For the first time, we woke up to a beautiful sunny day, cool in the morning but stunning all day. The section of trail out of Portugalete was once again a bit commercial and industrial but we made quite good time to Playa de la Arena, where we had a coffee and tortilla (a sort of Spanish omelette). The walk from Playa de la Arena through Pobeña to Onton was just stunning – we were along the coast for the whole way watching this boat that was going about our speed and we kept thinking how good it would be to have Rambler there and pull in to one of the bays for a bbq and swim!

Up until Onton, it was as though the lights had gone on and the folk who started the track suddenly decided to use coastal paths instead of going from peak to peak but unfortunately it all changed at Onton and it was a steep descent followed by big ascent up to Saltacaballos before once again descending into Mioño where we had a light lunch at about 2pm. At this stage we had walked about 22km, most of it in sight of Castro-Urdiales: although our itinerary said the stage was from Portugalete to Castro-Urdiales, our accommodation was actually a further 8km along the Camino at a place called Islares – we were supposed to get to C-U and call the local taxi, then return in the morning (or not) to walk this part of the route. I’m sure you can guess what we did!

We struggled the 7.4km into C-U – Alison had a slightly bung knee from an earlier incident involving one of my poles and her legs and poles and I had picked up a bit of the old Wally Grout from eating a pineapple two days earlier (yes, pineapple!) so we were really struggling. It was a beautiful town with sensational beaches full of people that we just walked straight through and headed for Islares – still got some work to do on the “stop and smell the roses” concept!

I’m sure Islares was a beautiful town too but it was all we could do to limp in after 37km and a bit over 11 hours on the road – 1km short of the 200km milestone but I don’t think we could have walked another inch!



On the highway out of Portugalete towards the town of Ortuella, and walking through Ortuella - there were a number of sculptures on the hillside, one of them a bicycle.





The beautiful Playa de la Arena. We've kicked ourselves since for not stopping later in the day but we could have taken four days to get from Portugalete to Islares, there were so many nice places to stop. We stayed here for a couple of coffees enjoying the view and then walked much of the way along the beach.



Left, looking from Playa de la Arena to Pobeña. Perhaps it would have been nice to stay in Pobeña instead of Portugalete but there was little accommodation there and it looked expensive!

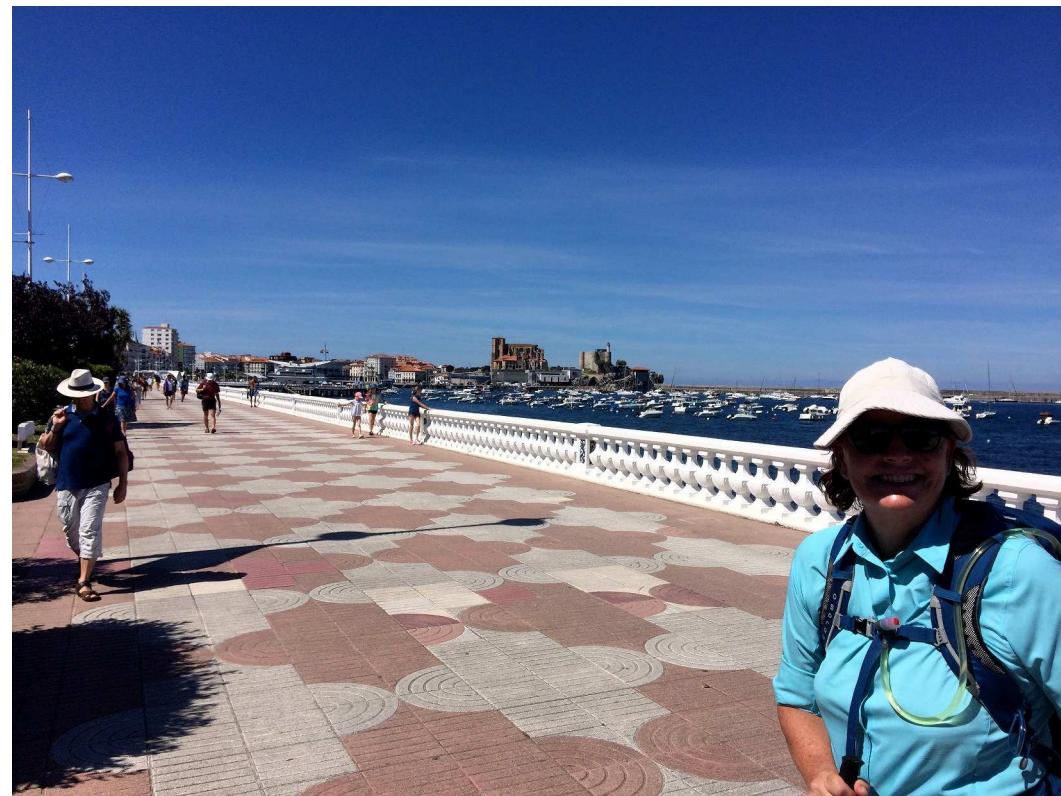
Below, above the playa after the climb up from Pobeña and the start of the track along the Atlantic ocean between Pobeña and Onton.





Still on the track to Onton, and looking down into Onton itself. Below left, some trees that look like they could have been in Greenough - obviously the wind blows hard here at times too!





Al starting to look a little bit frazzled on the N-634 after Mioño and before Castro-Urdiales, the pretty rough track down from Punta Cotolino into Castro-Urdiales and, finally, the promenade. We saw people selling ice-creams, kids playing in the water and people eating, drinking and swimming but we just kept on walking! To make matters worse, Alison had left her hat in a pharmacy where she was trying to buy some rock tape for her knee and had to walk back several hundred metres for it!



At last, Islares! Our hotel was on the other side of town, so we still had a kilometre or so to go from here. Even then, we missed the turn-off to our hotel and had to back track a bit! Some lovely walking today but some better decisions would have made it so much better ...

August 3, 2016

DAY 11 – ISLARES TO LAREDO

Bit of a struggle to get out of bed this morning! My gout hadn't got much better overnight and I hobbled into breakfast thinking I'd be lucky to get anywhere today – Alison was feeling much the same! It turns out Islares is a nice town with a beautiful beach with a little point break and little breaks across the bay. We followed the Rio Agüera along its valley to the town of La Magdalena (where we had some fruit we had bought a bit earlier) and then we were at it again, climbing about 300m (surprisingly through a forest of blue gums – obviously planted to replace the pine forest that had been felled) before dropping down again into Liendo and then, you guessed it, climbing up over another mountain to descend into Laredo. We had a little bit of a cheat and took the guide book suggestion to follow the road down into Laredo rather than the "official" Camino, which doubled back on itself a bit and again, descended only to ascend a km or so later.

It sounds like a bit of a grind and, because of the strenuous walk yesterday, to some extent it was, however it is really stunning scenery and beautiful, rustic countryside out of a postcard.

We were both happy to make the final descent into Laredo for a late lunch at about 4pm before finding our hotel.

For once we got a room with a view and a balcony overlooking the beach! We ducked over for one of the best swims of my life. 23kms today for a total of 222kms...



Happy again after a good rest! Al overlooking the western outskirts of Islares and me with the playa at Oriñon and the N-634 in the background.



Alison just after La Magdalena, both of us on the track between La Magdalena and Liendo, and looking down into Liendo, where we stopped for a second round of the fruit we bought earlier in the day in Rioseco.

The walk to Guriezo from Rioseco was very poorly marked and we ran into a young guy who had convinced himself we were all heading in the wrong direction and had turned back towards Rioseco. Thankfully he was wrong!

The picture above was taken by a young Spanish guy on his first day of his Camino, having started I think in Castro-Urdiales.

From Liendo we had to take on the foothills of the Sierra La Vida, which you can see in the background. We never ceased to be amazed at how far you get by just putting one foot in front of the other!



Clockwise from the top left, the view into Laredo after skirting around the Sierra La Vida, showing the long beach we would swim at this evening and walk the following day. Above, Al next to a tribute to the ancient peregrinos and, left, the view down into Laredo from the monument.

August 4, 2016

DAY 12 – LAREDO TO BARRIO DE CASTILLO

We departed Laredo about 9:15 this morning for a fairly short walk along the coast to Barrio de Castillo. Actually that's not quite correct – we left our hotel at 9:15 and left Laredo at about 10:30, that town has one of the longest beaches I'd ever seen! Short ferry ride across the estuary to Santona – breakfast there (2nd breakfast, actually), then on to Playa de Berria. This beach was also amazing – not much swell but breaks everywhere as well as tons of surf camps – might have to come back with my longboard!

We couldn't have a day without at least one climb up and down – so up and over the hill on a track that would have looked the part on the Cape to Cape and onto the Playa de Noja (which immediately pushed the Playa de Laredo into second place for the longest beach I've ever seen!).

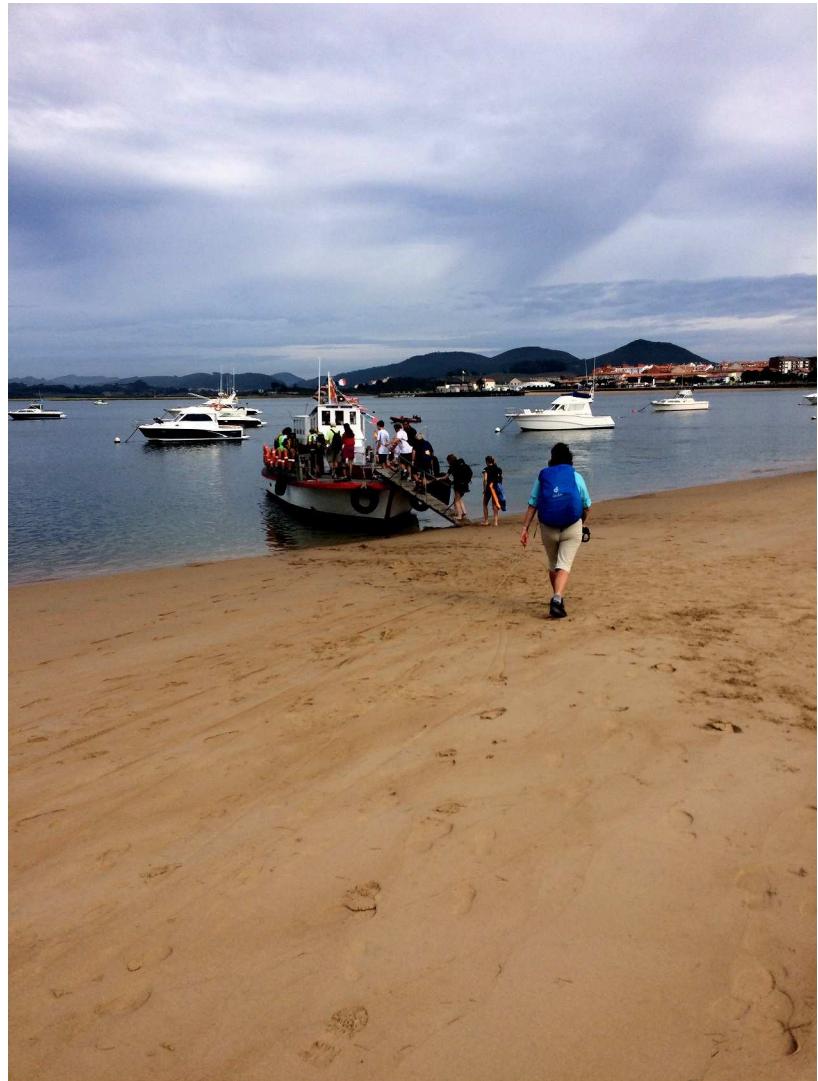
We pushed on a short distance to Barrio de Castillo.

Our accommodation is 4km back along an inland variant of the trail (I have no idea why anyone would take the inland alternative over the beaches we got to walk along), so I managed to order a cab (in Spanish!) to get us to our "Posada" in a nice little village called Escalante.

17kms today/239 in total. Last leg of our second section tomorrow – rest day the day after!



Picking up some waymarkers near our hotel in Laredo, and about 5 kilometres later near the end of the Playa de Laredo o de Salve.



The second of our three ferry rides, this time across the Ría de Santoña. Clockwise from above, Al striding for the ferry, on the ferry with some German students and back on land at Santoña.



Santoña across the Ria de Santoña from Laredo, where we had a second breakfast. We didn't know it when we took these pictures, but Santoña is home to a very large sardine factory, which makes the walk out to Playa de Berria a bit on the nose.

Across the page, me on the Playa de Berria, Alison climbing the hill that separates Playa de Berria from Playa de Noja and the view from the top across the playa to the town of Noja.







The view inland from the hill between Playa de Berria and Playa de Noja . We didn't know it at the time but the town you can just see in the distance on the right of the photo is Escalante, were we would be staying the night.

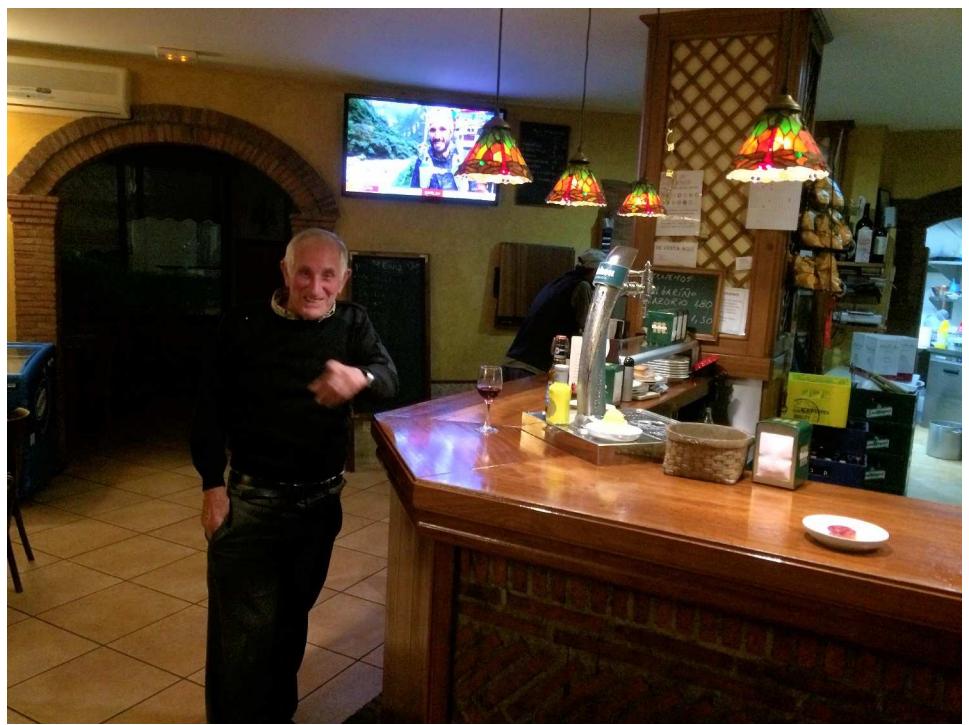
Alison on Playa de Noja and, across the page, eating lunch in Noja.

The morning walk was the best part of the day, with the walk from Noja to Barrio Castillo mostly suburban, as you can see from the waymarker across the page.

We had to order a taxi from Barrio to Escalante, which was interesting since no English was spoken by the taxi company. When we arrived at Escalante it had begun to rain so we needed to be a bit imaginative to get enough air through our clothes to dry them!







Alison and another couple looking pretty unhappy at dinner in Escalante. We had been waiting over an hour for our meals - the group of 26 or so adults and 26 or so kids had booked the place out and ordered before the restaurant opened (at 9:30pm!) so we were at the end of a long queue. After the meal we went for a walk and found the Ria de Escalante and this bar. Our Spanish was limited but this guy had no English at all. We still managed to have a great time and established he had been the local shooting champion!

Across the page, Alison near San Miguel de Meruelo after catching a taxi back to Barrio to start afresh the next day.

August 5, 2016

DAY 13 – BARRIO DE CASTILLO TO SANTANDER

Today's walk had two completely different feels: very rural in the morning as we walked from Barrio de Castillo, past San Miguel de Meruelo then a modest ascent before dropping into a valley, where reputedly the best albergue on the Camino is located in Guemes.

From there to Galizano where we had a very nice lunch – menu de dia with 3 courses and a bottle of wine!

From Galizano the walk changed altogether as the sun came out and we passed some of the most beautiful surf beaches I've seen and some great coastal scenery before walking along the Playa de los Tranquilos into Somo, then a ferry ride into Santander, our destination.

Second section of the Camino complete – 30kms today and now 269km in total: about a third of the way!



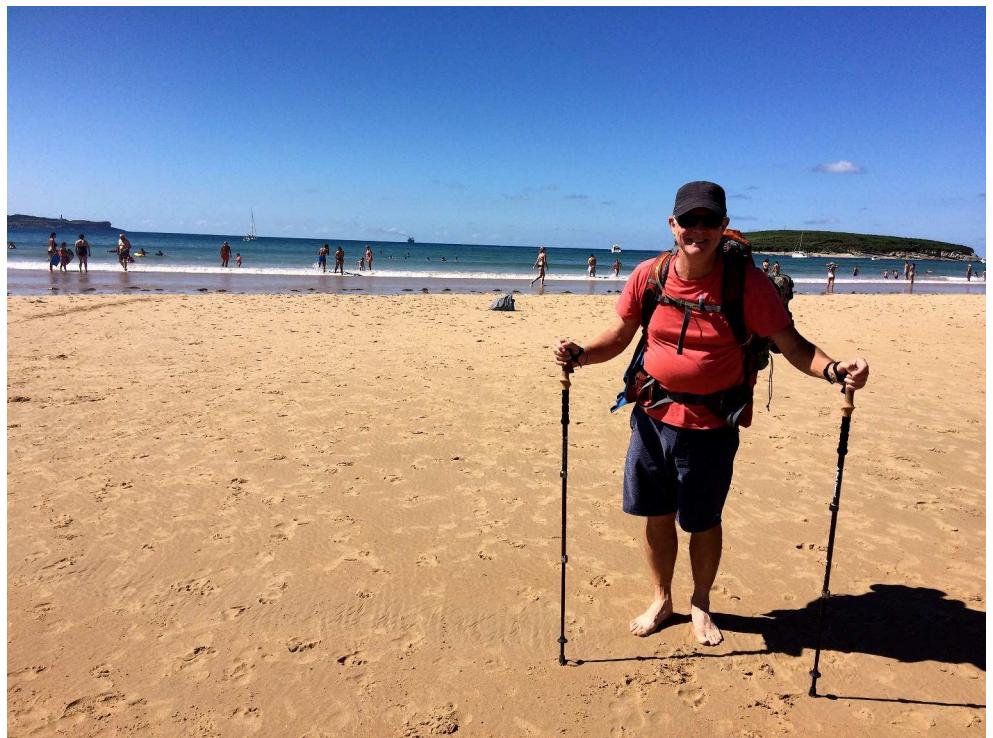


Clockwise from left, the park next to the Guemes Albergue, looking down towards Galizano, where we had lunch and Playa de Galizano where we rejoined the coast. My note book says "... this is the best lot of views on the Camino so far..." and they may well have been the best of the whole walk.

Across the page, Alison at Punto Rodico, between Playa Galizano and Playa de Langre, and Playa de Langre looking first from the east and then from the centre.









More great views! Across the page and anti-clockwise, Alison at the west end of Playa de Langre, me overlooking the reef and pools after Punta Langre, with Isla de Santa Marina in the background and two views of Playa de los Tranquilos.

On this page, the playa from the west and Alison on our third and final ferry to Santander.

By the time we'd reached the west end of the playa, we were pretty well stuffed - it was a 12 km walk to Somo after lunch and as you can see, in the full sun. Al's smiling in the picture but we'd become a little bit lost in Somo (well, I'd become lost really!) and so it was bit tense until we got onto the ferry.



August 6, 2016

REST DAY 2 – SANTANDER





In contrast to our first rest day in Bilbao, our day in Santander was a cracker, one consequence of which was we probably walked too much!

Opposite and on this page, Playa de la Magdalena and a tribute to the great Seve! Apparently Spanish royalty summered in Santander, and you can just make out the Palacio de la Magdalena on the point in the picture opposite.







Opposite, Alison and me at Playa de la Magdalena, Playa de la Concha from the Parque de la Magdalena and the Museo del Hombre y el Mar: copies of Columbus's ships and a log raft that crossed the Pacific with 4 sailors.

This page, looking out over Isla de la Torre towards the coastline we had walked the previous day, and a couple of happy campers at lunch at Playa de la Magdalena.

Next page, looking out from Playa de la Magdalena with the restaurant top left, El Puntal Arenal and Somo in the middle and Punta de San Martin on the right.







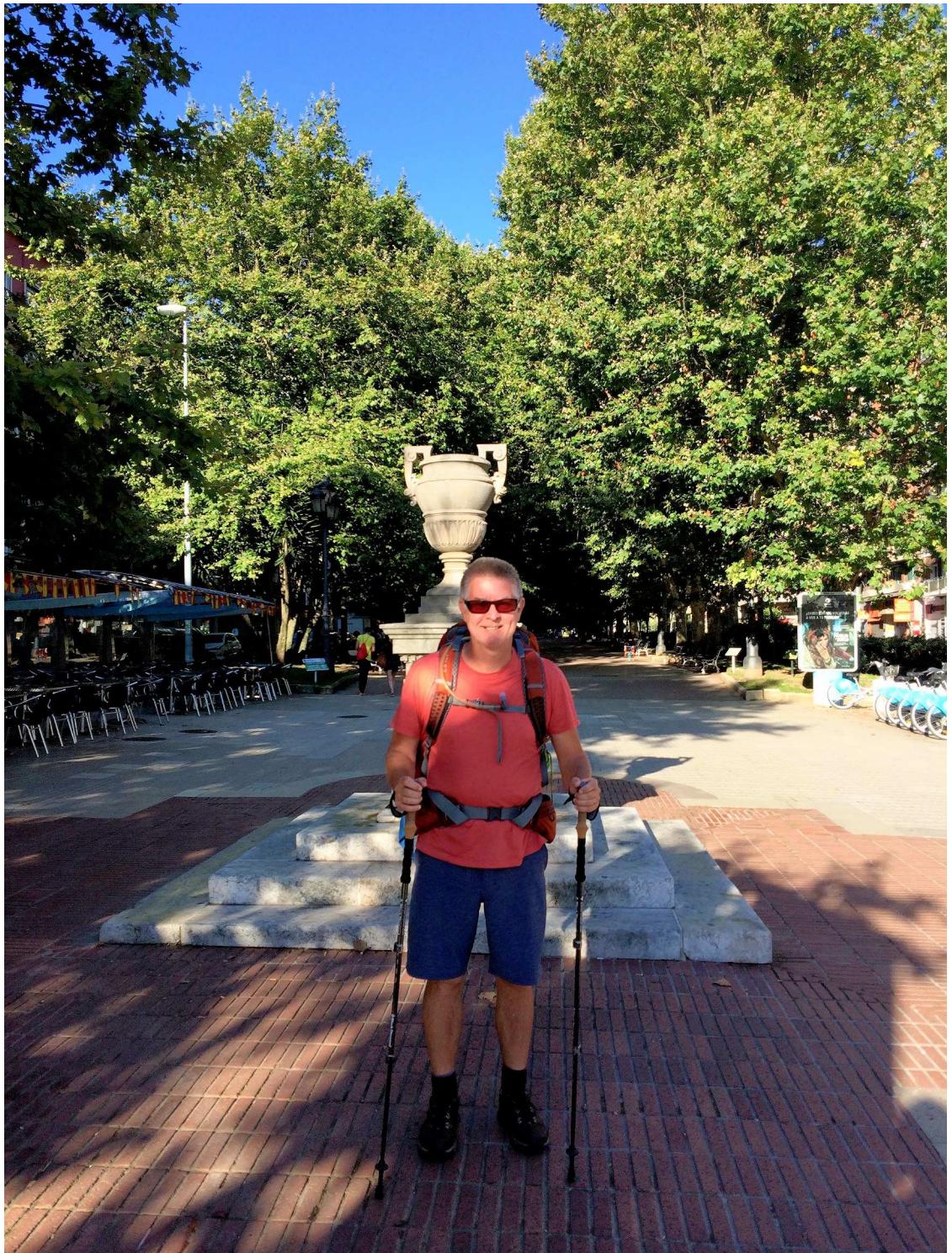
August 7, 2016

DAY 14 – SANTANDER TO PEDROA

We had a great walk today, despite the guide book describing it as “one of the drearier legs of the Camino”. About an hour to walk out of Santander then through increasingly rural surroundings through Santa Cruz de Bezana then Boo de Piélagos, which we arrived at at around 12:30pm. We hadn’t spotted much open, being a Sunday, and we’re starting to wonder where we might find lunch.

At this point the Camino wanders for about 9kms to get about 1.7km as the crow flies. To take shorter route you have to follow a trail beside the railway line and then scamper across the railway bridge, hoping to avoid a train in doing so. As you can see from the photos we took the shorter route and were rewarded with a beautiful little restaurant – “el Estacion” – just after the Mogro train station!

After lunch we continued along the recommended shorter route for a further 6km, serendipitously coming across a sign to our hotel for the evening “Posada Lunada”. Our itinerary says its in Arce but it’s really in a little village a couple of km off the Camino called Pedroa. All in all a good days walk of 22kms for a total now of 291km!





Opposite, walking out of Santander city centre towards the suburbs. It took quite a while to get out of Santander's suburbs and just as we reached the outskirts we came across these free-rangers!



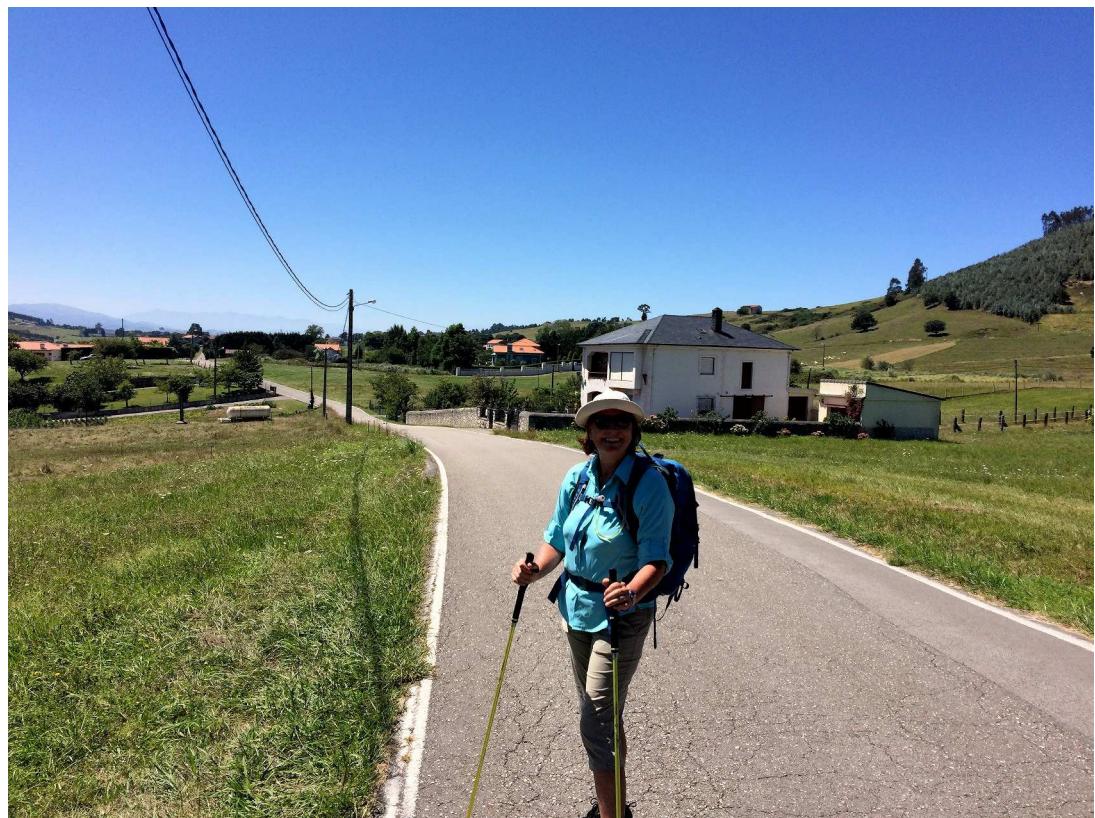


The train line between Boo de Pielagos and Mogro over the Rio Pas, and lunch at el Estacion.

Across the page, Al just outside of Barcena de Cudon, a lovely church inside the town and me on the way out of town looking out over the countryside where we would overnight.

The Picos de Europa are in the background - we would pass them several days later on the way out of Llanes.







Al resting at our accommodation for the evening, Posada Lunada, and after dinner that night - still 551kms to Santiago!

Opposite, another view of the Picos and, over the page, the valley we would walk through the next day towards Requejada.

We had dinner at a small bar in Pedroa that night. We were the only customers for dinner but there were plenty of drinkers with whom we spent the about an hour watching Australia and Spain play each other in the women's basketball at the Olympics!









August 8, 2016

DAY 15 – PEDROA TO SANTILLANA DEL MAR

A few pictures from last night as we made our way back from the local bar/restaurant to our lodgings. The peaks in the distance are the Picos de Europa and still have snow on them in places. I think we reach them in 3 days time but skirt by them on the coast.

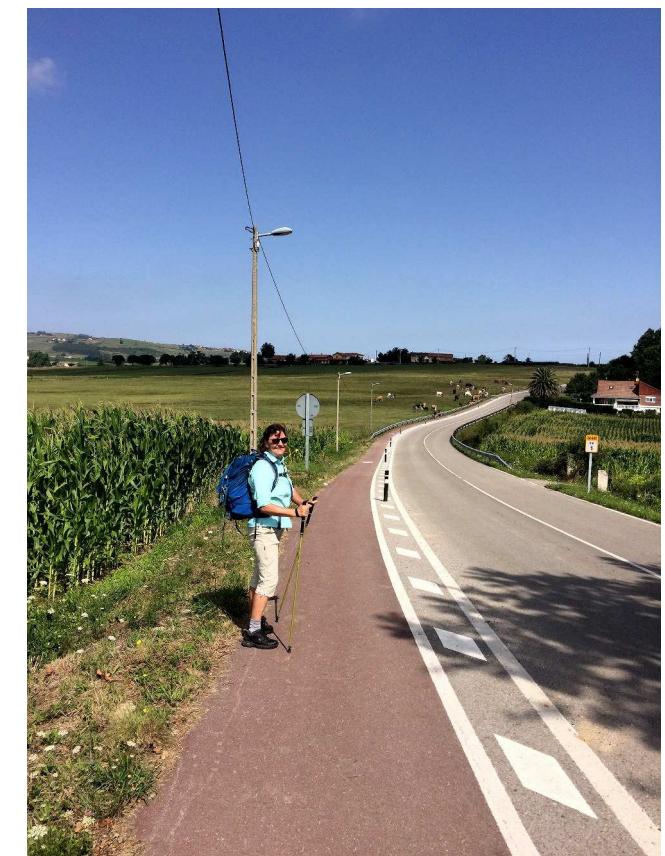
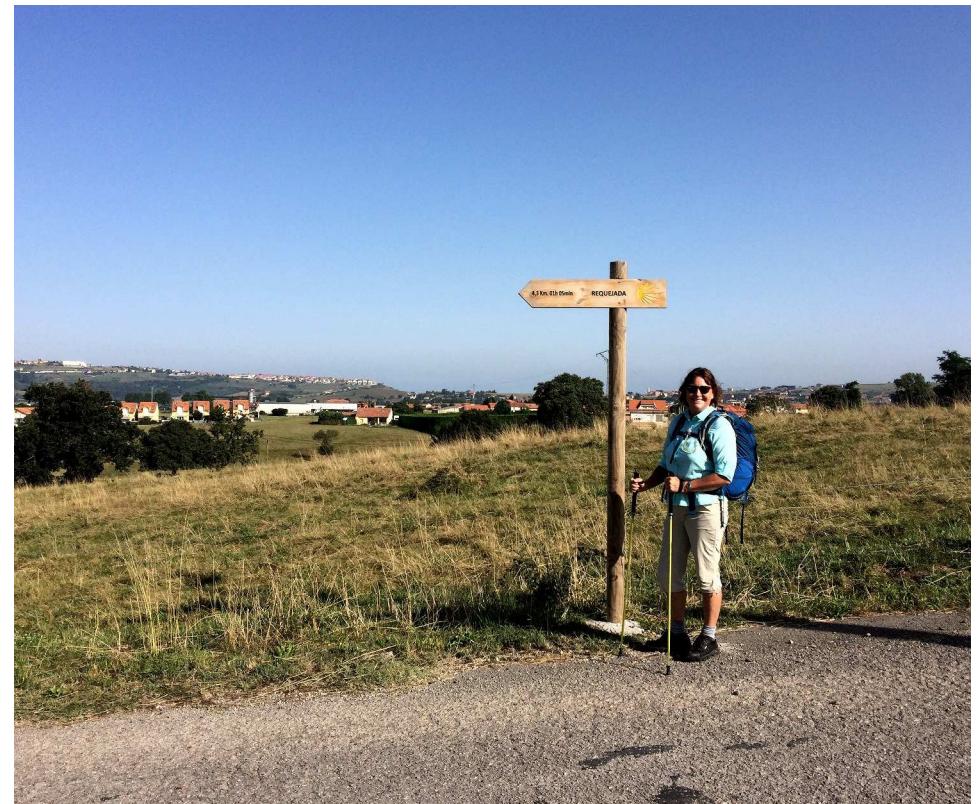
Today's walk was relatively short but not particularly interesting – mainly semi rural, some light industrial areas through Requejada and then around a great big Solvay soap refinery/factory in Barreda before finally hitting the countryside again.

The highlight today was the destination – Santillana del Mar, which is nowhere near the ocean but is a very well preserved medieval village full of tourists. I'm sure it's different if you come by car but approaching by foot it just sort of pops up from nowhere – one minute you're walking past cows in a paddock, next thing you're in a bustling village! A slight glitch with the hotel – Alison is standing in front of the hotel we were booked into but apparently they had overbooked and we are now in a private albergue in the middle of town! 16kms today, 307 in total...



The view as we started, looking out over Polanca, Requejada and Barreda.

Clockwise opposite, breakfast at Posada Lunada, Al near Mar heading toward Requejada, again on the CA- 340 after crossing the Rio Saja Besaya at Barreda and finally just outside of Santillana del Mar.





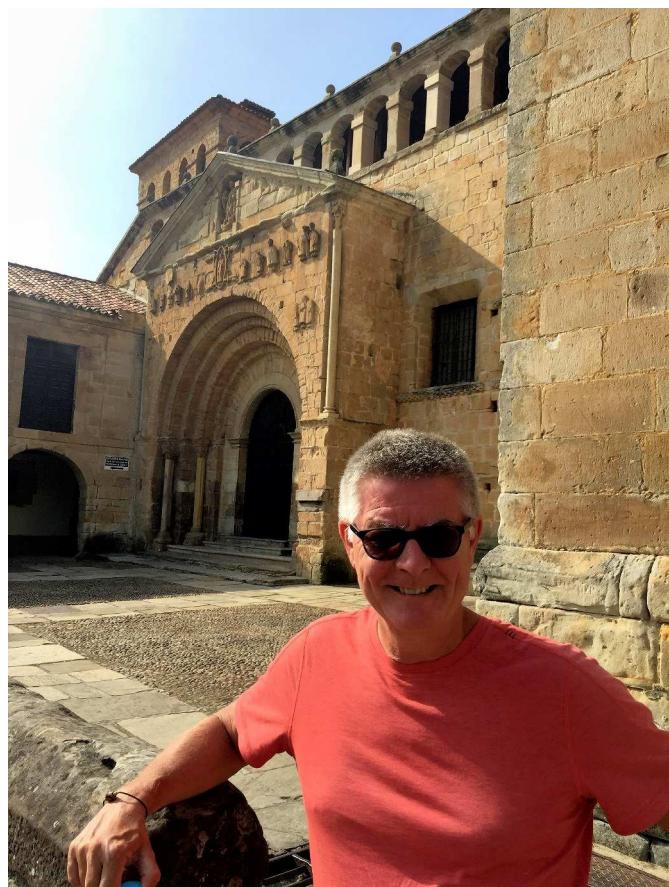
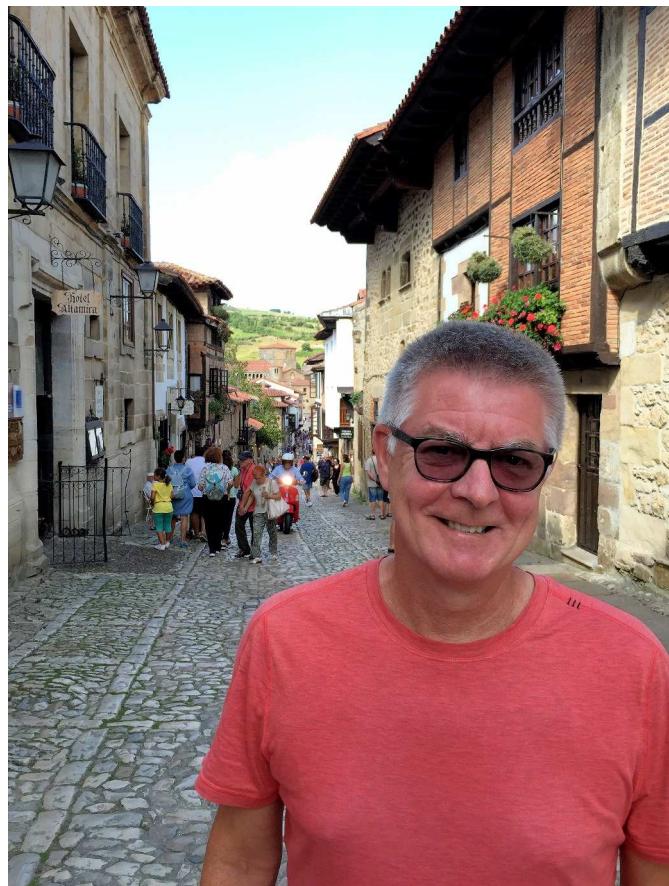


Opposite, Alison walking into Santillana, lunch at a beer garden just inside the town and Al outside the hotel we didn't stay at!. This page, the Albergue we did stay at from both inside and outside.

On the following page, some snaps of the bustling and historic town of Santillana Del Mar.

Santillana was a really beautiful town but our experience was not as good as it could have been. The room looks nice but it was incredibly dusty - we just couldn't wait to get out the next day!







August 9, 2016

DAY 16 – SANTILLANA DEL MAR TO COMILLAS

Santillana del Mar was the first real screw up from the company doing our bookings – not only did we have to shift hotels, the restaurant we were sent to also had no idea who we were! Our hotel room was very authentic, old school pilgrim type accommodation but also very dusty so we were quite happy to get back on the road.

To help clear our lungs out we had (as has been said in these pages before!) a steep climb out of town but we were rewarded with great views back over Santillana and then the rural countryside. A short stop for a proper breakfast at Caborredondo about an hour and a half after leaving Santillana (along with about 8 other peregrinos – we had seen no one the last few days and suddenly it's like Hay St!), then onwards. Rain set in just after San Martin de Cigüenza and continued for about an hour all the way to Cobreces. There were many alternative routes through this particular town which was quite confusing and we ended up on one that took us past the beach at Playa de Lúaña where we were able to get under cover and dry off. Another very big climb and then descent before arriving into another medieval town called La Iglesias for lunch at a place called Meson Ocho. The joint was deserted when we arrived at about 1:30km but absolutely full by the time we left an hour later!

The bottle of wine we had for lunch kept us going the remaining 4.5km into Comillas, our destination for the night. Another picture postcard town but, after going to bed reasonably early (and reasonably well lubricated) we got woken up by the crowd from the two nearby pubs at about 4am – apparently that happens every night!

23kms today and 330km in total!



Previous page, the area surrounding Santillana, which cannot be seen because it is at the bottom of a steep valley. This page, me after the climb out of Santillana, which this time can be seen in the background, and more views of the hinterland around Santillana. Below, Al outside San Martin de Cigüenza and some furry friends nearby. Opposite, the rain sets in just past San Martin, Playa de Luña, drying out at the coffee shop there and the sun popping back out after the steep climb up from the Playa.







The church at Barrio de la Iglesia, me between la Iglesia and Comillas and Al approaching Comillas.





Above, ruins of a palace and the Capricho de Gaudí. Apparently the Marquis de Comillas was quite a patron of Gaudi and there are a number of buildings by Gaudi in the town.

Below, pre-dinner drinks in another lovely Spanish coastal town full of people on their summer holidays.



August 10, 2016

DAY 17 – COMILLAS TO UNQUERA

Up bright and early this morning – a slightly longer day ahead of us today. Al got some photos of some the amazing buildings on the way out of town. We missed the first turn off today but back tracked and found it (only about 150m) to head inland from the town. Today's walk took us through the Santa Martin golf course – we actually walked across the 18th fairway and up past the clubhouse and putting green before using the road into the club. You should be able to see a photo with Al and the 18th green – plus 3 German peregrinos who were having a picnic on the fairway. It looked like they were in a blind spot – not where I'd pick to picnic!

After the climb out of the golf club, with no bar/cafe in sight, we stopped for an break and an energy bar. One of the immutable laws of trekking (we have discovered) is that if you stop to have a break, there's a bar just around the corner, so we had two 15 minute breaks within 15 minutes of each other and then charged into San Vicente de la Barquera, which looked like a lovely town, however the track completely bypassed the town after we crossed the bridge.

Going out of town we bumped into this old bloke who had no English but was determined to tell us he knew a better track to the next town, Serdio, just follow him. We've had a few people give us really bad directions over the walk so we walked with him for a bit and then sort of flicked him off by stopping for a drink (of water!). A couple of kilometers further on he'd found another couple and was going through the same process with them, which they understood, being Spanish themselves. Long story short we took a fairly nice short cut and met five lovely Spaniards who we had lunch with in Serdio!

The remainder of our walk was fairly uninteresting barring a lovely river crossing and we are now in a bit of a nothing town (Unquera) but the room isn't dusty and doesn't appear to be near a nightclub so hoping for a good nights rest! Claiming 26kms today for a total of 356 (I'm sure this no longer of interest but it's my way of keeping tally of the total distance we end up travelling – every sign seems to have wildly fluctuating estimate of the distance to go!)

Alison on the bridge over Ría de la Rabia a couple of kilometres out of Comillas.





On the way out of Comillas there are a number of magnificent buildings and houses. Here is one of them and, below, the Palacio de Sobrellano.





Me and some cows at the Ría de la Rabia. Right after these photos were taken we missed the turn off into the countryside and had to back track a few hundred metres.

Across the page, Al just after we got back on track and at the Campo de Golf Santa Marina, where you can see the group of German peregrinos having a picnic on the fairway!





A tree growing out of the roof of on old building on the golf course, views into San Vicente de la Barquera and the group we joined up with on the road to Serdio.

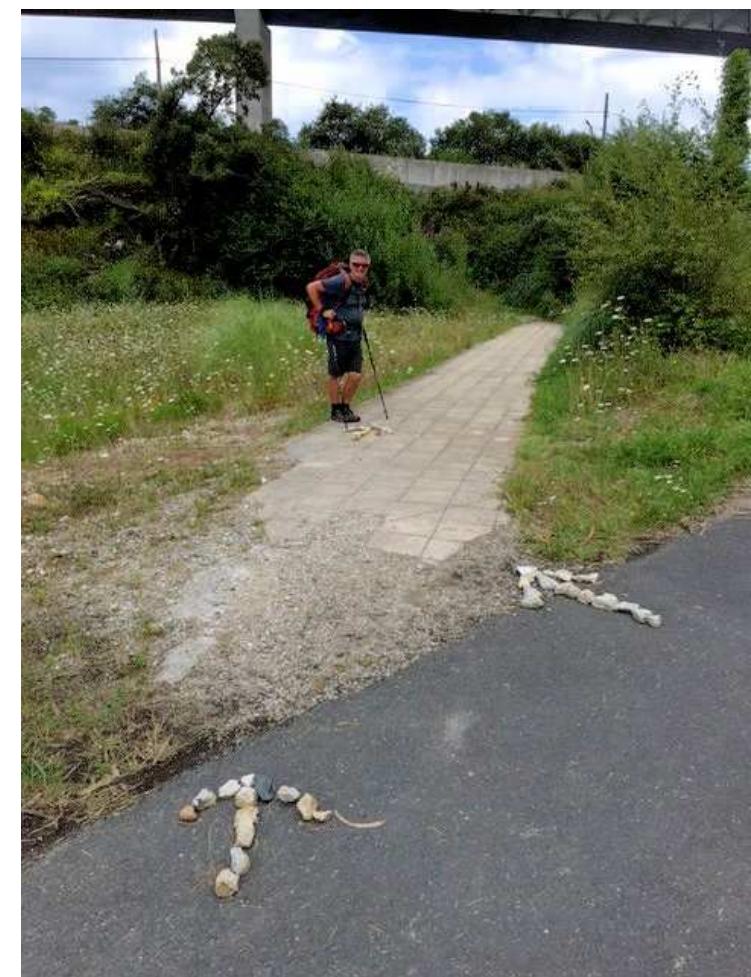




Me on top of the hill we were climbing on the previous page and a critter we saw on the road from Serdio to Pesués.

We had been walking on a minor road from Serdio and, although the guide book did not mention it, had to switch to a path just before Pesues - I guess people had missed it in the past and someone had decided to highlight the transition!.

Below, the Ría de Tina Menor just after Pesues.





It was a long walk from Serdio to Unquera, and the section from Pesues to Serdio was mostly on a pretty rough track alongside railway line, so we were happy to get to the end. The rural railway is called the FEVE and at the Unquera station we found this map of the whole Camino del Norte, the only one I've found with the whole journey on a single page.

August 11, 2016

DAY 18 – UNQUERA TO LLANES

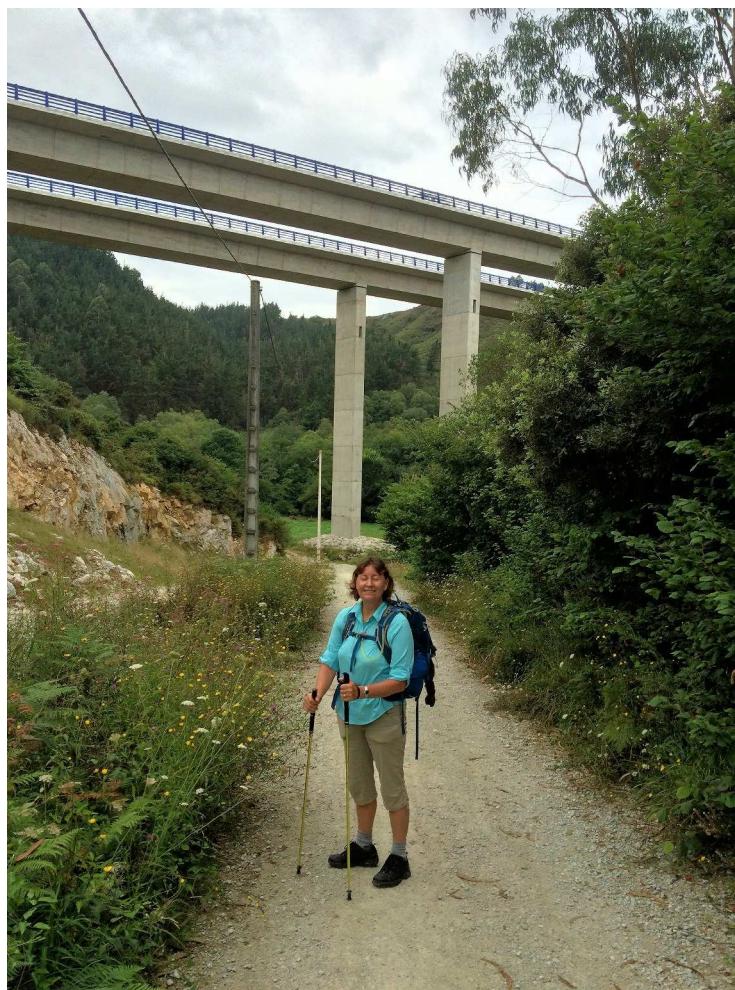
Very long walk today! We got away to a bit of a late start (about 10 to 9) and crossed the Rio Deva into Asturias, the 3rd autonomous region of Spain that we will travel through (we've already travelled through the Basque Country and Cantabria and will finish in Galicia). As usual we climbed up out of the river valley into Colombres and then had a mixture of countryside and stunning coastal walking into Buelna for morning tea after about 9 or 10 kms.

After a short walk to Pendueles we turned off the Camino onto the GR E9 as suggested by our guidebook. The book calls it a "... more pleasant option..." than the more inland Camino but although we were close to the coast we barely saw it: the path was a dusty dirt track with lots of people, cyclists and even cars and was the longest 8.5 kms we've walked – after a brief break at the Rio Purdón we finally arrived at Andrín for a two beer lunch at about 2:30pm. After Andrín we once again took the guide book's advice to take the GR E 9 which was very scenic but again was a hot dusty track alongside a golf course that seemed to veer away from our destination, Llanes, before taking a sharp right and heading into town. We arrived pretty knackered just before 6pm after a walk that seemed a lot longer than the advertised 26kms. We fell into some of the previously mentioned traps – not enough protein for breakfast and too few stops – but we have a rest day tomorrow to recover!

382kms in total now and getting close in days and kms to half way (I have not mentioned before but despite the occasional gripes we are really enjoying the walk and have booked 5 additional days and 111kms to go to Finisterre and Muxía!)



AI next to a map that, strangely, shows where we had walked through Cantabria, which we were about to leave, with the Rio Deva in the background.





Opposite and in clockwise order, looking back towards Unquera across the Rio Deva, looking back at the Rio Deva from partway up the climb out of the river valley towards Colombres, an example of Indianos architecture on the outskirts of Colombres and crossing under the A8 and over the Ria Santiuste after passing through La Franca.

This page, clockwise from above, the pretty rugged path before turning in to Buelna after climbing back up from the Ria Santiuste, the Monastery of St Asciscio in Pendueles and Camping la Paz on the GR E9 past Pendueles.





Looking along the GR E9 towards the Bufones de Arenillas, which are blowholes formed in the rock cliffs and a very popular local attraction, the beautiful Rio Purdón a few kilometres before Andrín and, finally, lunch in Andrín. We had covered 20 kms by this stage and just over 15 km since our stop for morning tea so we were ready to eat (and drink)!



The beach after climbing over the hill from Andrín towards the ocean and two views of beautiful Llanes. In the first, the golf course is to the left and had plenty of people on it. The second looks like Llanes is quite close but still a couple of kilometres away.



August 12, 2016

REST DAY 3 – LLANES





Llanes is a very popular tourist town and very busy. As we are coming to expect, the party continued well into the night/early morning and we were up way earlier than the locals to a very empty town until about noon when people started stirring.

On the opposite page, the beautiful marina in the Puerta de Llanes, the western breakwater of the puerta and the Playa del Sablón, Above, my new hat and me at the playa and my lunch - delicious sardines!

August 13, 2016

DAY 19 – LLANES TO RIBADESELLA

Got away a lot earlier today – necessary because we have 30kms to walk today! As seems to be becoming normal, the hotel breakfast is just bread and pastries which just doesn't keep us going, so we had a couple of nectarines we had bought and hit the road at 7:50am. Stopped at Poo (yes, that's really the name of the town) for a better breakfast of tortillas and cafe con leche with what seemed like every other walker on the track.

We passed some nice beach towns and nice beaches, including Celorio and Barro before heading inland for lunch at a town called Nueva. We struggled to find somewhere that opened before 2pm but finally found one at the end of town – it's like the first watch anybody had in Spain ran 2 1/2 hrs late and they've never changed!

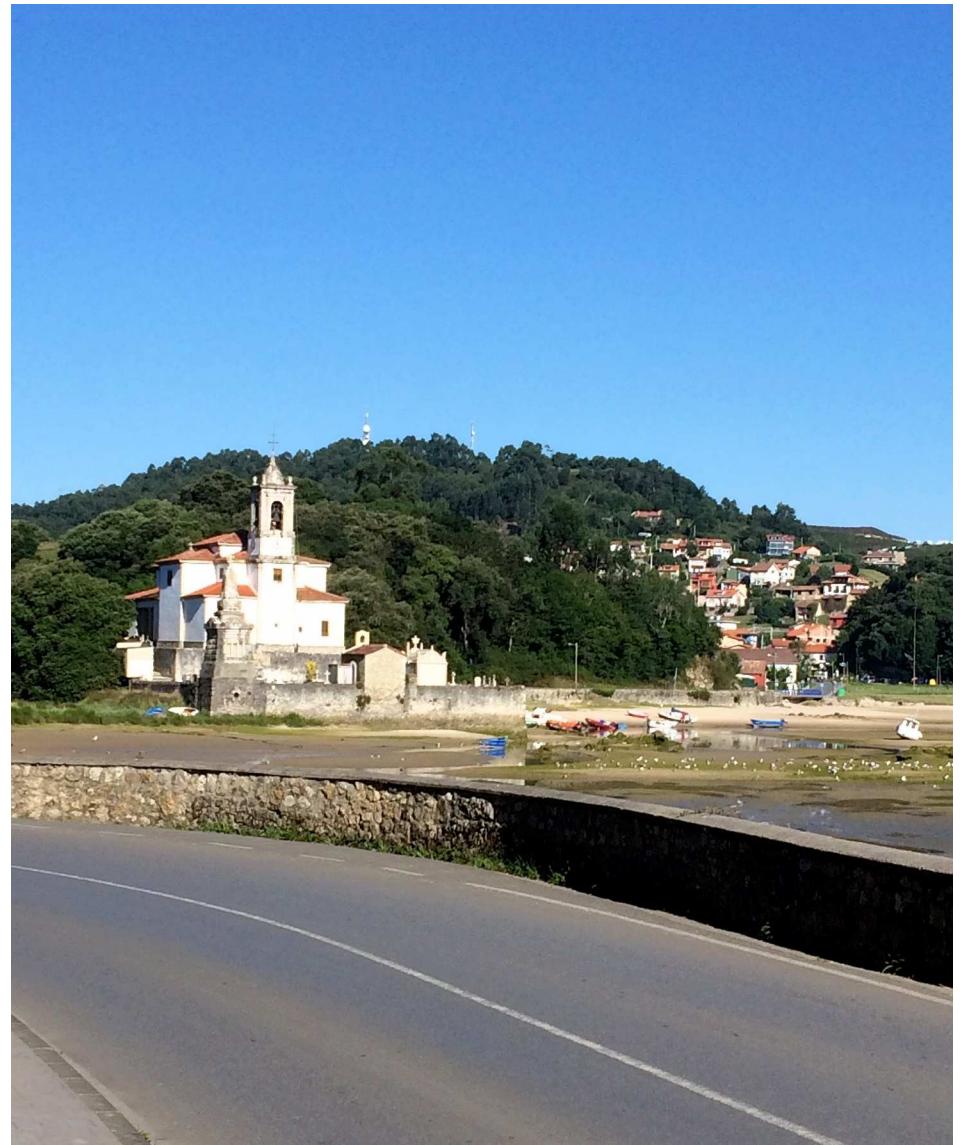
On the way out of town we passed a little village and church and a guy was letting off fireworks in the middle of the day for what seemed to be a local festival – perhaps there's some money to be made by introducing the idea of fireworks at night!

The last stop before Ribadesella with any drinks was Pineres de Pría so we stopped for a couple of coffees then set out after the 9kms into town. Passed the 400km mark – 412kms in total after today and thankfully a shorter walk tomorrow.





Opposite and above left, Alison in the countryside outside of Llanes with the Picos de Europa in the background. We first saw them 4 walking days ago at Posada Lunada and would put them behind us today. Also on this page, the railway station at Poo, where we had a second breakfast, and the beach at Celorio.

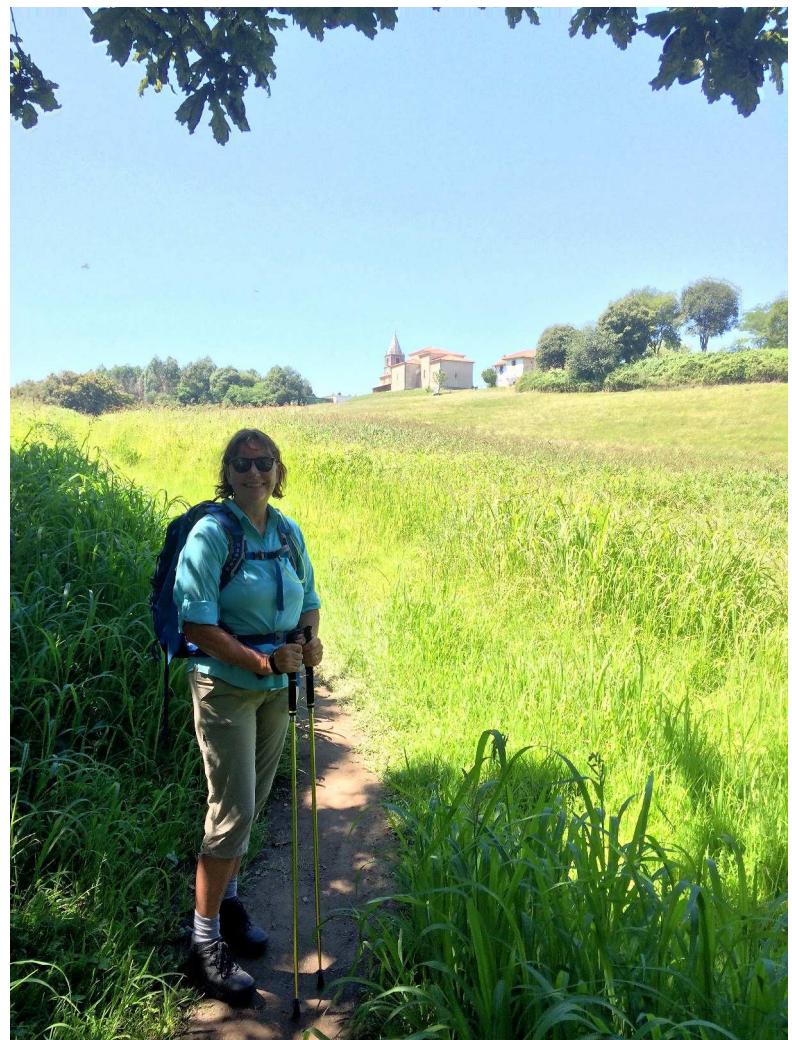


Clockwise, a hot air balloon over the Picos, the Iglesia de Nuestra de los Dolores and the Playa de San Antolin de Bedon just over the Rio Bedon.

We had a coffee at the playa and met a German bloke who was doing the camino, sleeping rough every night. We saw him again in Gijon at the end of this section but lost him after that.

Across the page, a little friend on the climb towards Naves, and Alison after lunch looking up at and then next to the Iglesia de Pría.

The structure on the top right is an *hórreo* - a grain store built above the ground to protect against rats. This was the first one we saw but after this we saw tons of them throughout Asturias and Galicia.





Sunset in Ribadesella looking over the river. Not for the last time, our room faced directly west and was stifling hot all night. The fog rolling in was with us for the start of the next day making the walk out of Ribadesella a bit eerie!

August 14, 2016

DAY 20 – RIBADESELLA TO COLUNGA

A very strange day today. Our room last night faced into the setting sun and so was very hot all night, despite having the window completely open. So, after a hot night we woke to a real pea soup fog that stayed with us across the river, along the playa at Ribadesella and inland through San Esteban de Leces. The pictures in the photographs were painted on the doors of a house on the village of La Vega, which was another very pretty medieval village but, being close to a surf beach had a bit of an early Margaret River feel to it. We followed the beach on and off all morning and had lunch at Playa Espana, still in fog. About 3pm we finally emerged from it as we walked into Colunga, a town slightly inland from the beach – if you look at the last of the pictures you can see the fog trying to push into the valley.

It was hot all day even with the fog and it certainly didn't diminish the enthusiasm of the locals to spend the day at the beach!





Clockwise from above, our hotel in Ribadesella, the Playa de Ribadesella o de Berquiz, the sign post for the Albergue at San Esteban de Leces and our route down through the fog to La Vega.





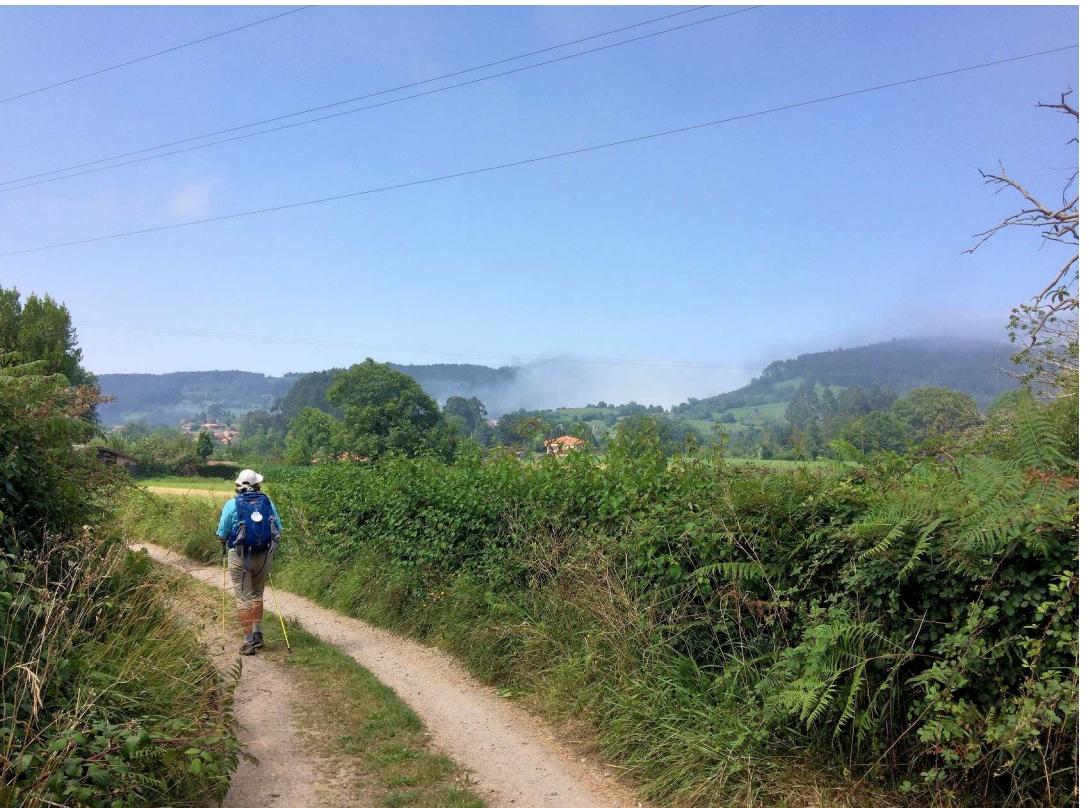
The painted house and garage doors on the way out of La Vega, where we stopped for morning tea, another *hórreo* (we were getting quite excited about seeing these - we didn't know at this stage what they were for and only found out later on when it was mentioned in the guide book!), and looking down towards the Playa de Vega o Berbes, which was absolutely packed despite the fog.





The playa at La Isla about 9km from the Playa de Vega, where we had lunch. We were a bit early by Spanish standards which was lucky because, by the time we left, the place was packed.

Below, right, Al walking towards Colunga as the fog retreated to leave a beautiful blue sky!



August 15, 2016

DAY 21 – COLUNGA TO VILAVICIOSA

Not a lot of photos today – sorry but I'm struggling to find shots that aren't what has been seen before – breathtaking views of rural valleys or stunning beaches with either me or Al standing with our poles!

The guidebook said that there was no food or drink between Colunga and Vilaviciosa and it was right! Lucky for us we stocked up this morning with a baguette, cheese and a couple of meats and headed out for a relatively short stage. The walk took us mostly through a couple of rural valleys – our first stop was at the church at Pernús where Al managed to lacerate her middle finger making our sandwiches. I gave her chapter and verse on knife safety between there and our next stop, Priesca, where I did exactly the same thing!!!

Very hot walk from there over the next 9km into Villaviciosa which, it turns out, is the apple capital of Spain – might have some cider tonight!

Half way mark in days today – number 21 of 42 walking days and 450kms in total now...



A monastery or albergue on the hills leaving Colunga.



Top left, looking back towards Colunga. Although we were often on what felt like very isolated tracks, the reality was that civilization was never far away. We criss-crossed the A8 many, many times on our journey to Santiago. Above, a roadside dedication, one of many we saw, and, left, looking down towards Villaviciosa after leaving Sebrayo, where we had a drink (of water!) before pressing on for our destination for the night.



Alison on a bridge not far from Sebrayo and looking towards the mouth of the Ría de Villaviciosa - the view was mouthwatering after a long hot walk but the town is a long way up river still!

Finally, the town square or Plaza Ayuntamiento where our restaurant for dinner was located.

August 16, 2016

DAY 22 – VILLAVICIOSA TO GIJON

A lovely walk today, again mostly in fog, albeit not completely accurately described by the guidebook! The walk out of Villaviciosa was really nice, along a river gently uphill towards a town called Casquita, where the Camino Primitivo splits from the Norte to head towards Oviedo and ultimately Santiago. From there we had a little cheat, walking along the road rather than the Camino, which does a big loop at that point, taking 1.6km off today's journey.

For the first time since before Bilbao we had a big climb, the path gradually steepening until we neared the peak, the Alto de la Cruz, at 450m! Around this area we also picked up some yellow arrows pointing in the opposite direction – there is a local pilgrimage to a place called Covadonga, which got a bit confusing! Anyway, we stopped for bread, cheese and chorizo at the peak, even though we could see nothing due to the fog! A nice steady walk down to Peón, where we had a coffee at Casa Pepito, before the surprise package of the day, another vertical scramble up 270m (described in the book as "...a mix of footpaths and single lane roads 2.4km through peaceful countryside..."!). Another long descent into Cabuenes where we had a late lunch before walking the remaining 5 or so kms into Gijon, varying slightly from the official route to walk along the river and then the beach towards our hotel in the old part of town. 28kms today and 478km in total!

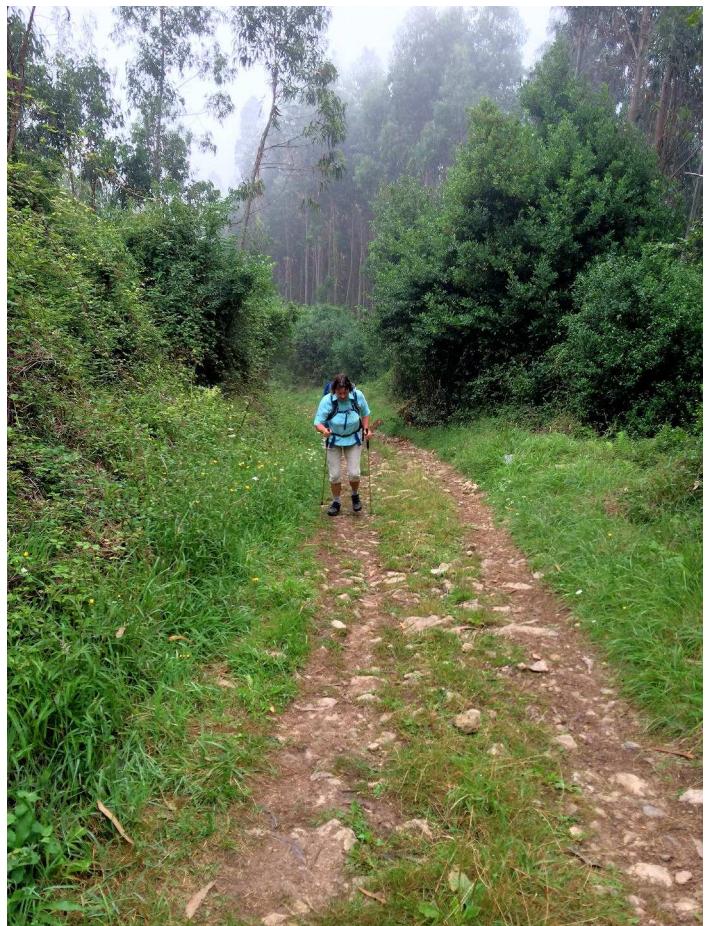


Alison outside the hotel we stayed at in Villaviciosa and some campers on the way out of town. This might have been us if Alison hadn't discovered the company that booked our accommodation!



Since Irun, we had been walking on the Camino del Norte which is an older path than the more popular Camino Frances. However the oldest Camino is the Camino Primitivo, which starts in Oviedo and joins the Camino Frances in Arzua (as does the del Norte). The top two photos show the waymarker marking the split of the Primitivo from the del Norte just past the town of Casquita, and the fork in the road. We felt like it was important because it meant we were getting closer to Santiago de Compostela, I suppose. Just past the split, another hórreo.



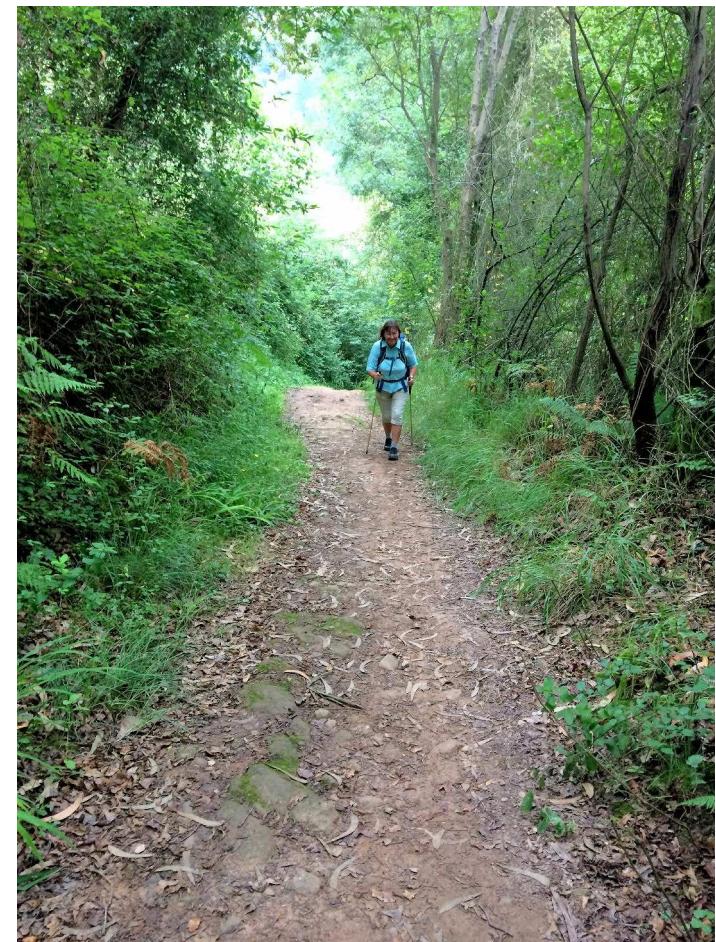


Just after the split, the Camino goes sharply uphill to the Alto de la Cruz at 450m above sea level.

Top left, Al on the ascent and left, the road uphill near the peak.

Top right, looking down towards Peón and right, on the descent down to Peón, where we stopped for an hour or so for coffee.

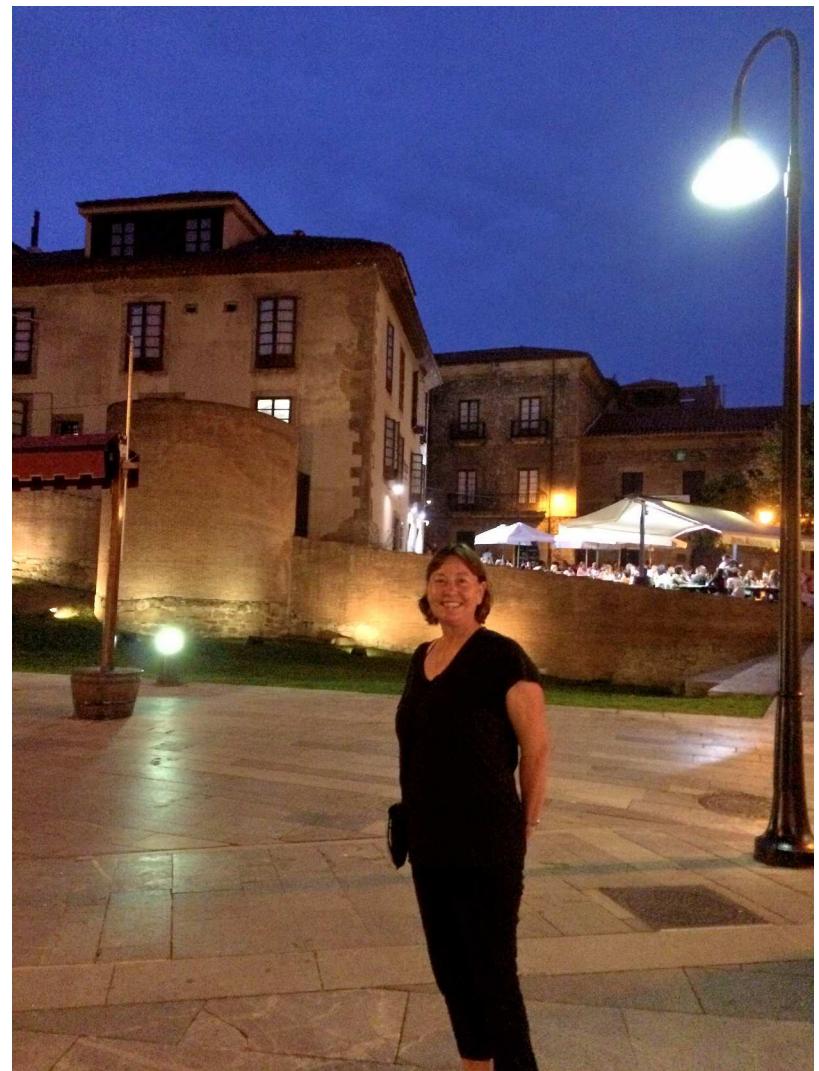
Opposite, the confusing waymarker, showing the local pilgrimage to Covadonga (where, I have now found out, the Spanish halted the spread of the Moors northwards to retain a sliver of Christianity in Spain), cows on the outskirts of Gijón, and Alison and I overlooking the Playa de San Lorenzo in Gijón.







The Plazoleta de Jovellanos and our hotel, the Casona de Jovellanos, sitting down for a quiet drink and Alison back at the hotel after dinner. This was the first time we saw reference to crusaders and/or the Templar Knights but not the last.



August 17, 2016

REST DAY 4 – GIJON





Left, the underground rubbish system that so many Spanish cities have, right, the now standard method of drying our clothes and below right downtown Gijón.

The statue is of Rex Pelagius, who both founded the kingdom of Asturias and defeated the Moors at Covadonga.

Opposite, the marina to the west of the old town.

The plaza outside the hotel really hotted up after midnight and carried on until about 6am, when the street sweepers came out to clear the broken glass and wash down the spilled booze!





August 18, 2016

DAY 23 – GIJÓN TO AVILÉS

It had to happen I suppose but we have had so many great days on the road I thought we might avoid it – today was a completely missable day! We started off fine, nice and early out of Gijon, not spectacular but not as bad as the book indicated today might be. We had a nice coffee just before the end of town and then, just over the hill, was a massive steelworks. Not too bad we thought, we'll get past that and we'll be back in the countryside. We climbed the hill that ran alongside the steelworks and down in to the nice valley on the other side, had a nice early lunch in El Valle and then continued about 4km to a town called Tamón where we had a break for some water.

Then, around the corner, kapow – about 8kms of more steelworks stretching all the way into Avilés (actually, not all the way – there was a fertilizer plant in there as well)! I've worked in and around these sorts of plants for most of my life but spending a day walking past one after another make you realize how much pollution and misery they generate for those nearby! The Ría de Avilés runs black from all the coal dust and other rubbish!

Anyway, our hotel in Avilés is nice, with aircon so we can avoid the fumes. 25kms today/503kms in total (woo hoo!) – looking forward to tomorrow!



Al, in her new shorts, after leaving Gijón and heading towards the steelworks. We couldn't stand the idea of breakfast amongst the swill of the previous nights booze so we stopped at a coffee shop on the main street out of town.



Looking back over the steelworks having finally made it to the countryside at the Monte Areo Park, haystacks in the fields before reaching El Valle, the old community lavanderia just outside El Valle, and the last glimpse of countryside before Avilés just east of Tamón.







Despite the dreary walk into town, the old part of Avilés is really quite nice. Opposite, the Plaza de España, where we had a few pre-dinner drinks, the Iglesia de los Padres Franciscanos, and on the way to and at dinner at Tierra Astur.

This page, after dinner looking in both directions at the almost certainly dead Ria de Avilés, and our hotel for the night, the Palacio Valdés.



August 19, 2016

DAY 24 – AVILÉS TO EL PITO

What a difference a day makes, as they say in the classics! Wonderful walk today, albeit under leaden skies and with ponchos on for most of the day!

Actually, it turned out that Avilés was a very nice little town, at least around the central plaza and we had a great meal there. However, a bit like Newcastle used to be and Wollongong probably still is, it was hard to get the sulphur smell out of your nose.

Anyway, after a great night's sleep and a very good breakfast we headed out of town on the first of six climbs out of different towns today. We got slightly lost but picked up the Camino again on the outskirts of Salinas (I managed to not let Al slip away – apologies to Kris Kristofferson!) – I think we saved about a km, though, and we made good time to Barrio de la Cruz where we had our first break. We had several really nice walks through blue gum forests today, the first one in rain and the second in a bit of drizzle before we once again climbed first into El Castillo de San Martín and then on (further up!) to Soto del Barco for lunch. Unlike yesterday we stopped for the full hour we have come to learn is necessary for all the aches to go away – no doubt contributing to the feeling that it was a much better day today...

One last stop at Muros de Nalon for coffee (for Al, a beer for me) after an interesting bridge crossing and a steep climb. Halfway up we were rewarded with a great view of the river and village at its mouth (not sure of the names of either).

El Pito is a very small town with one bar which we are about to go to for dinner – more tomorrow!

With the little detour, I reckon about 27km today making it 530kms so far!

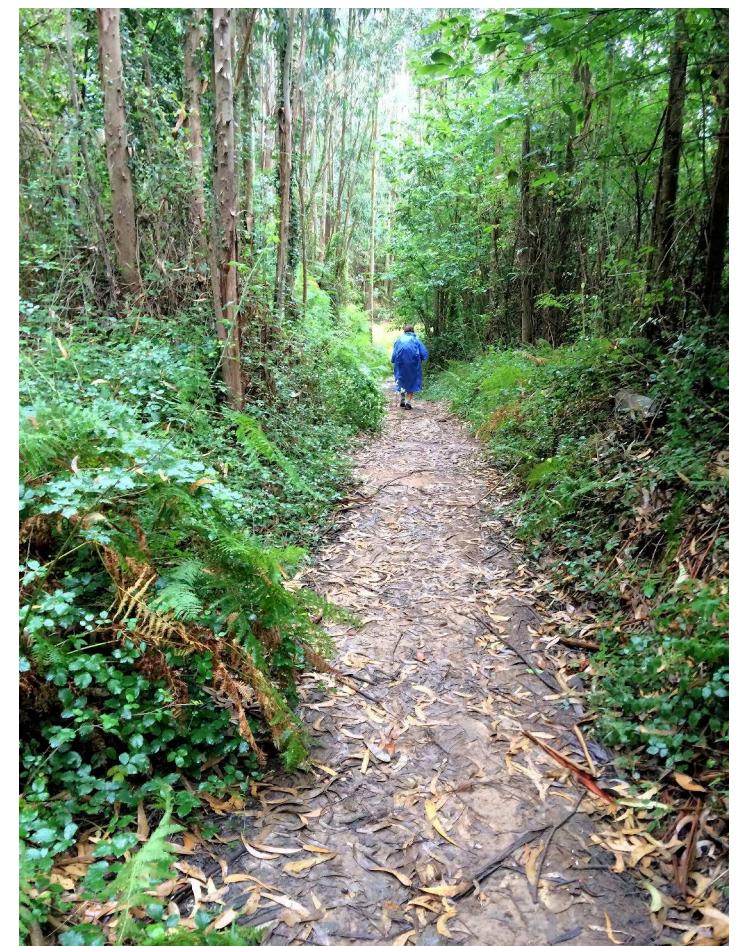
ps – one of the pictures has a glimpse of the Picos de Europa in the distance – they were right alongside us either side of Llanes which gives you an idea of how far we have come!



Left, the view back over Avilés after the usual climb out of town.

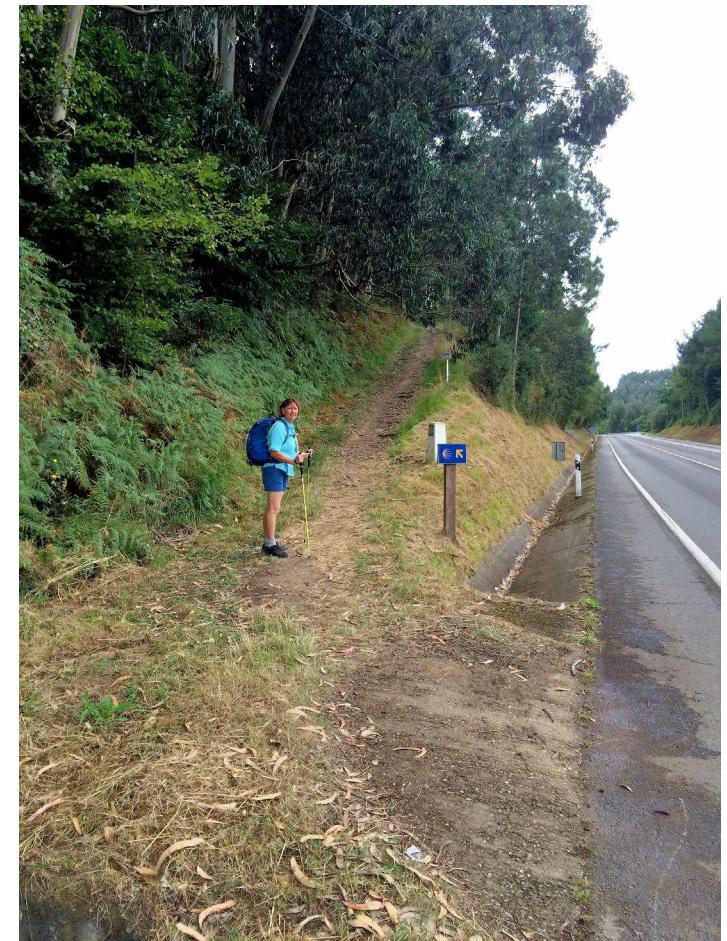
Right top, looking out over Salinas and then, after descending down into the town, climbing out again to Barrio de la Cruz for morning coffee.

Right bottom, a soggy Al between El Castillo de San Martín (where we hoped to have lunch) and Soto del Barco, and me with the Ría San Esteban and Muros de Nalón in the background, before climbing up to Soto del Barco where we did have lunch.





Al, again with the Ría San Esteban in the background, after having lunch and drying out, crossing the Ría San Esteban on the N-632, taking the track off the N-632 to climb up to Muros de Nalón and the view towards the Atlantic Ocean and the town of San Juan de la Arena.



August 20, 2016

DAY 25 – EL PITO TO BALLOTA

Another great day today, this time under clear blue skies! The forecast was for a cool start of 13 c warming up to 20 c with clouds all day so we waited around for breakfast at 8am and got away at about 8:30am with the sun already warm. Because we are walking east to west, we spend most of the day with the sun behind us then slowly coming up on our left. Today the breeze was in our face all day, so the perfect combination of sun on our backs and a cool breeze in our face all day! We wasted no time getting lost today: right from the get go it seemed like, although we were following the shells and arrows, we were on a different track to the one in the guide book. This was especially true of the first 4 hours where we seemed to take forever to get to our first stop, Soto de Luiña. We had planned to stop for a coffee only but we were so late getting there we made it lunch. Bit of a translation error – I ordered a tortilla expecting about an 1/8th which we normally get and ended up with a whole one!

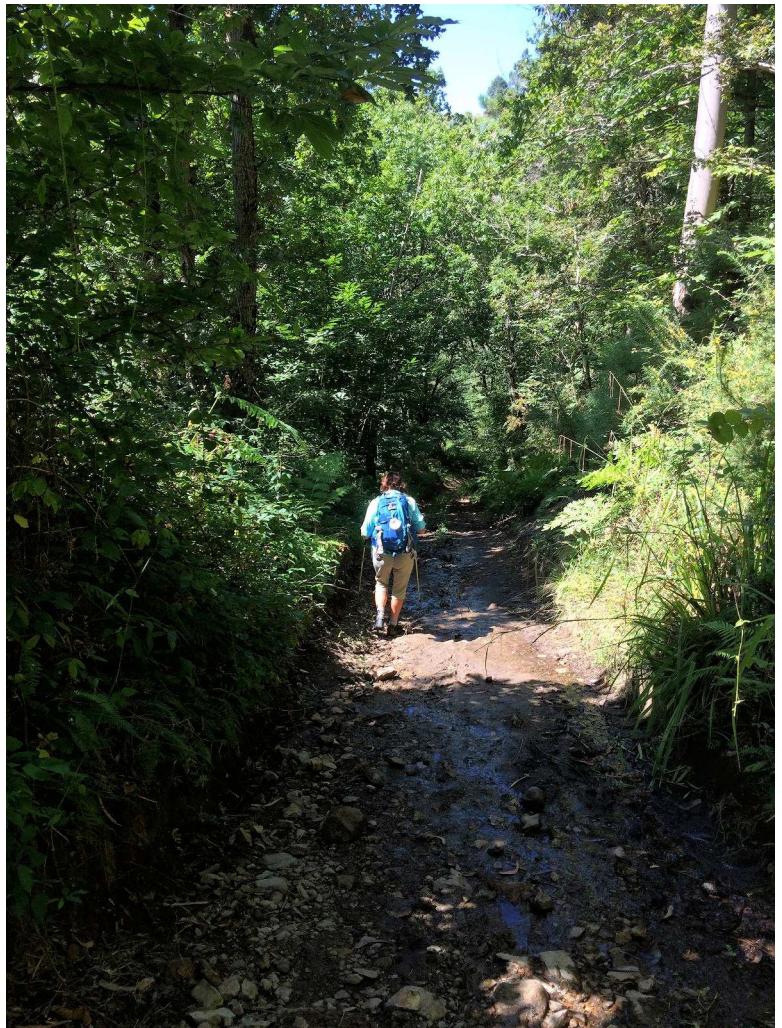
We crossed about 7 rivers or brooks today, all of which involved an descent from the ridge down to the river then back up. One of the photos shows a couple of viaducts going over the second (and largest) river – when we got to the bottom I said to Al, that highway is a bloody long way up: half an hour later we were looking down on it!

A beer at each of Novellana and Santa Martin, then one last river crossing to get to Ballota about 5pm – a great day with a mix of ocean and valley views and lots of dappled paths through forests. 25kms today and 555kms so far...



Heading through El Pito past the bar we had dinner at last night. We walked about another kilometre and got totally lost!





Opposite and clockwise from the top left, the gardens at the Quinta de Selgas palace in the middle of El Pito, me in the countryside outside El Pito, the Concha de Artedo and the Viaducto Concha Artedo carrying the A-8

This page, Alison climbing out of a river crossing just before Novellana and the requisite beer afterwards at the Hotel El Fernón, and a view of what I think is the Playa Calabón. Finally, on the right, the last climb up of the day before reaching Ballota.



August 21, 2016

DAY 26 – BALLOTA TO LUARCA

Another pretty day of walking again today! Our accommodation in Ballota was fantastic but, although it looked like a quiet seaside town when we got in, it's festival time in northern Spain at the moment, so we had music until about 4am last night! A bit of a late start – breakfast at 8:30 and on the road at 9:10am. 3 ravines/river crossings under our belt by morning tea at 11 or so at Cadavedo, just under 7kms away. We can manage about 4 1/2 km/h on the flats but in the hills it's a lot slower going – we were rewarded by views over some beautiful little beaches.

The walk to Queruás for lunch was more rural and a lot flatter but after lunch a big descent down to the Rio Esva and, after a lovely walk along the river, a big ascent followed by a long walk into Luarca, which is a beautiful little port town. It's festival is tonight, so not a lot of sleep coming up!!

22kms today and 577km in total!



The Hotel Casa Fernando, where we had both dinner and breakfast, and heading towards the coast for the first descent of the day just outside Ballota.



Back on higher ground after the first descent with a point near Cadavedo in the background, the Playa de Tablizo and Alison starting the last descent before the climb back up to Cadavedo.



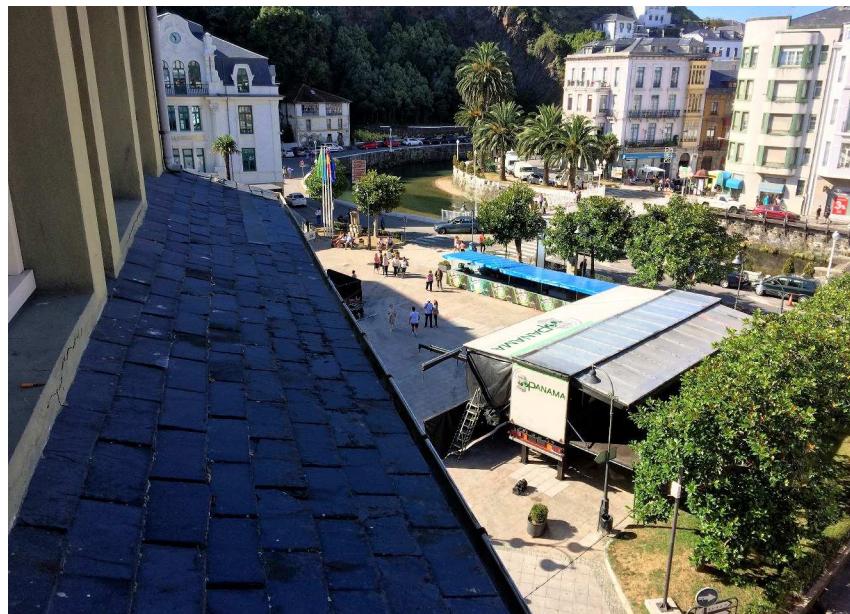
A church just outside of Querás, crossing the A-8 again after a massive climb up from Canero on the Río Esva and, above, the view in towards Luarca.



The view down into Luarca after a beer on the outskirts of town - the last descent of a long 22kms!

Below, the fishing boats in the harbour on the Río Negro and below left, the sound stage setting up for the festival tonight.

We had been warned that there was a "local festival" in Luarca that night before booking but we thought it might be a sort of arty thing with maybe cultural dances and so on. But after 26 or so stops and plenty of "festivals" along the way we now knew what we were in for! Lots to drink at dinner and earplugs saved the day!



August 22, 2016

DAY 27 – LUARCA TO NAVIA

Well, the festival certainly went off! Music started about midnight and continued until about 5:30 or 6:00 am – the stage was a stone's throw away from our room so double glazing didn't really have an impact. They are very organized here: the music stopped and immediately they started emptying the bins and cleaning up everything. The stage was on a semi-trailer and was gone by the time we were up!

Bit tricky to get things organized for today – the forecast was for hot (high twenties) so we wanted to get away early, however breakfast was not until 9am because of the festival. Most of the supermarkets were closed yesterday for the festival but I managed to scurry around and find some yoghurt, cake, bread, cheese and ham, so we had an early breakfast and hit the road by 8am.

After the usual climb out of town, the going was very flat and mostly easy through small villages and farms until we skirted a small hill, Pico Faro, dipped down past the Rio Barayo and up again to Villapedre, where we stopped for a coffee: 12.2 kms in 3 hrs which was pretty good going. Similar countryside and good roads then through Piñera to La Colorada, a bit of a nothing town on the outskirts of Navia, where we had lunch in the shade in an old car yard! Some days there have been parks and shaded seats everywhere, but today nothing until our descent into Navia, 2kms from La Colorada.

Al's been troubled by a big blister on the bottom of her right foot since Gijon – we picked up some better plasters on the way into town so hopefully she can recover soon!

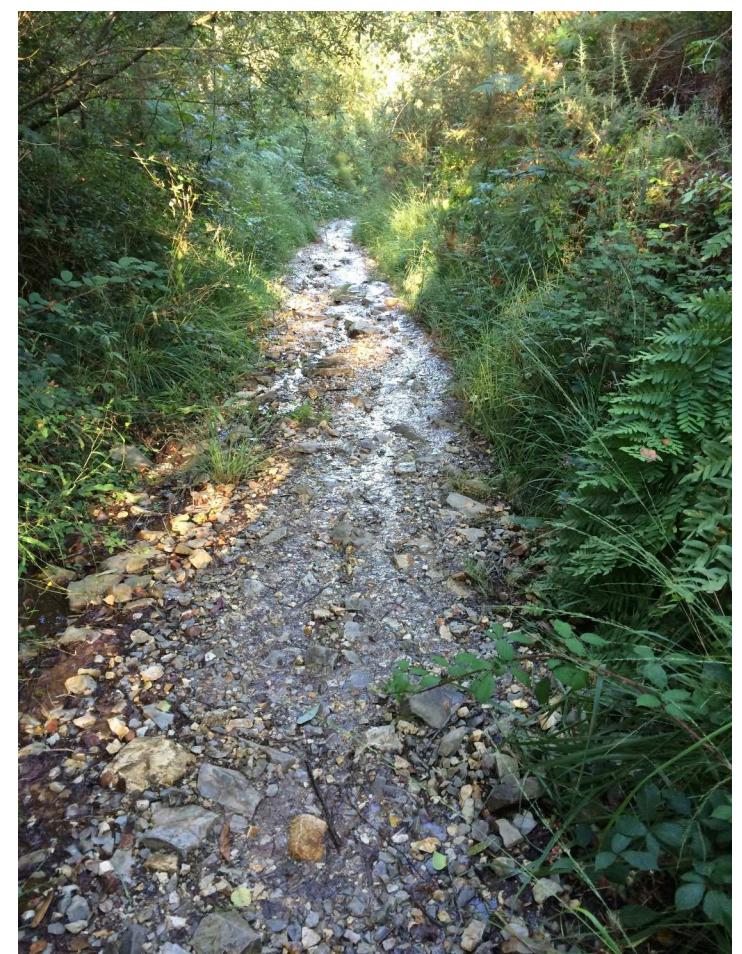
One of the pictures shows a path down off Pico Faro – it wasn't to bad but many of the paths over the last few days (and even the whole trip) have been very boggy despite it being the end of summer – could be a very different walk in wet conditions. This one, like a couple of others, has been there long enough to become a watercourse on its own right!

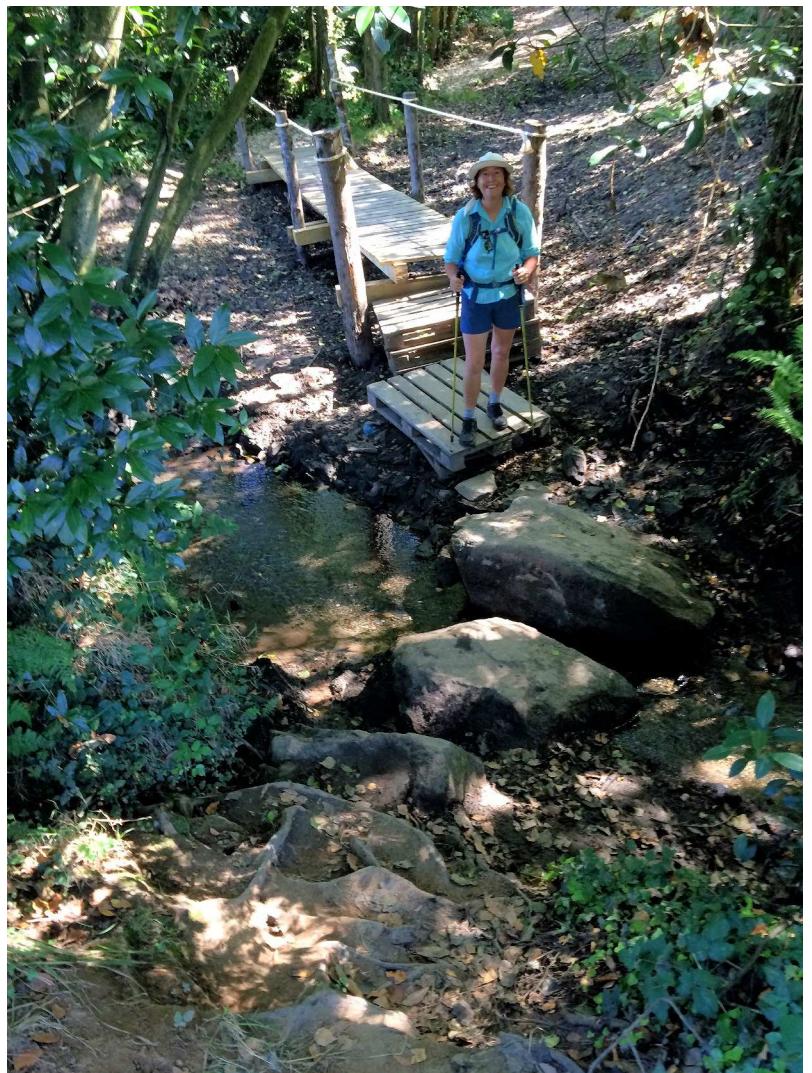
Same distance as yesterday – 22kms – but a much easier walk and we were in our hotel by 2pm compared with 5:30pm yesterday (we started an hour later yesterday but still a big difference)! The hotels are a bit of a lucky dip but we got a good one today, the Palacio Arias, with a beautiful big room and balconies! Breakfast at 7:30am, so I don't have to go shopping for it! I broke my routine and crashed out for a couple of hours before doing my washing – stuffed after two disturbed nights sleep – hopefully no party tonight!

I just ducked out to have a look at the river and got a snap of what looks like one of our surf boats, only smaller. It is a replica of an old whaling boat, which they now race.

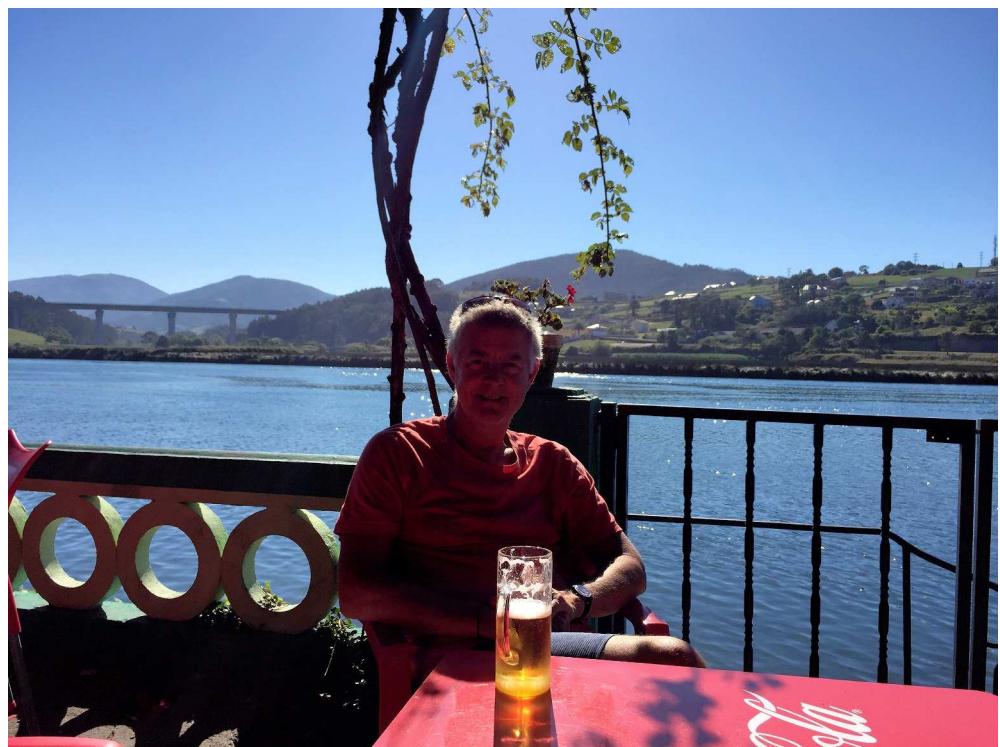
599 kms in total now.

Across the page, Al just outside Luarca after the morning ascent out of town and on the path between Luarca and Otur, the path/waterway mentioned in the blog and me between Villapedre and Piñera, with the church at Piñera in the background.





Al crossing a small brook near Piñera, the Hotel Palacio Arias, a whaling boat replica on the Ría Navia and me having a pre-dinner drink (or two) after a very nice walk. No festival tonight!



August 23, 2016

DAY 28 – NAVIA TO RIBADEO

Great night's sleep and a fantastic (the best of our trip so far) breakfast to get us going for the day! Definitely recommend the Palacio Arias for anyone passing this way...

We set off about 8:10am, across the Rio de Navia and, as usual, a climb up into the hinterland. A quick hop across the train line near Jarrio and then we seemed to spend the rest of the day in corn country! We made it into La Caridad for morning tea around 10:30am, pretty good time for the 9.5km journey. We met and talked with a couple of young German blokes as we walked through Valdepares and El Franco – they had started their journey four years ago in Hamburg and were on the final annual trip, picking the trail up this year in St Jean Pied de Port in France.

The Camino split in Porcia and we took the inland route, hoping for a place to stop for lunch in Brul, 5.6km from the split. The road to Brul seemed endless, with few places to stop even for the couple of nectarines we had in my bag. Finally we pulled into Brul about 1:30pm but not a single shop in town so we pressed (plodded) onto Tol a few kms further on. The guidebook promised a bar and grocery store but both were closed by the time we arrived, so things were looking pretty dodgy – no food since 10:30 and running short of water, plus Alison was just about exhausted! Al sat down at the crossroads of the town while I scouted around – I finally found a 9 hole golf course with a bar and restaurant about 300m away from the crossroads! Very relieved!!!

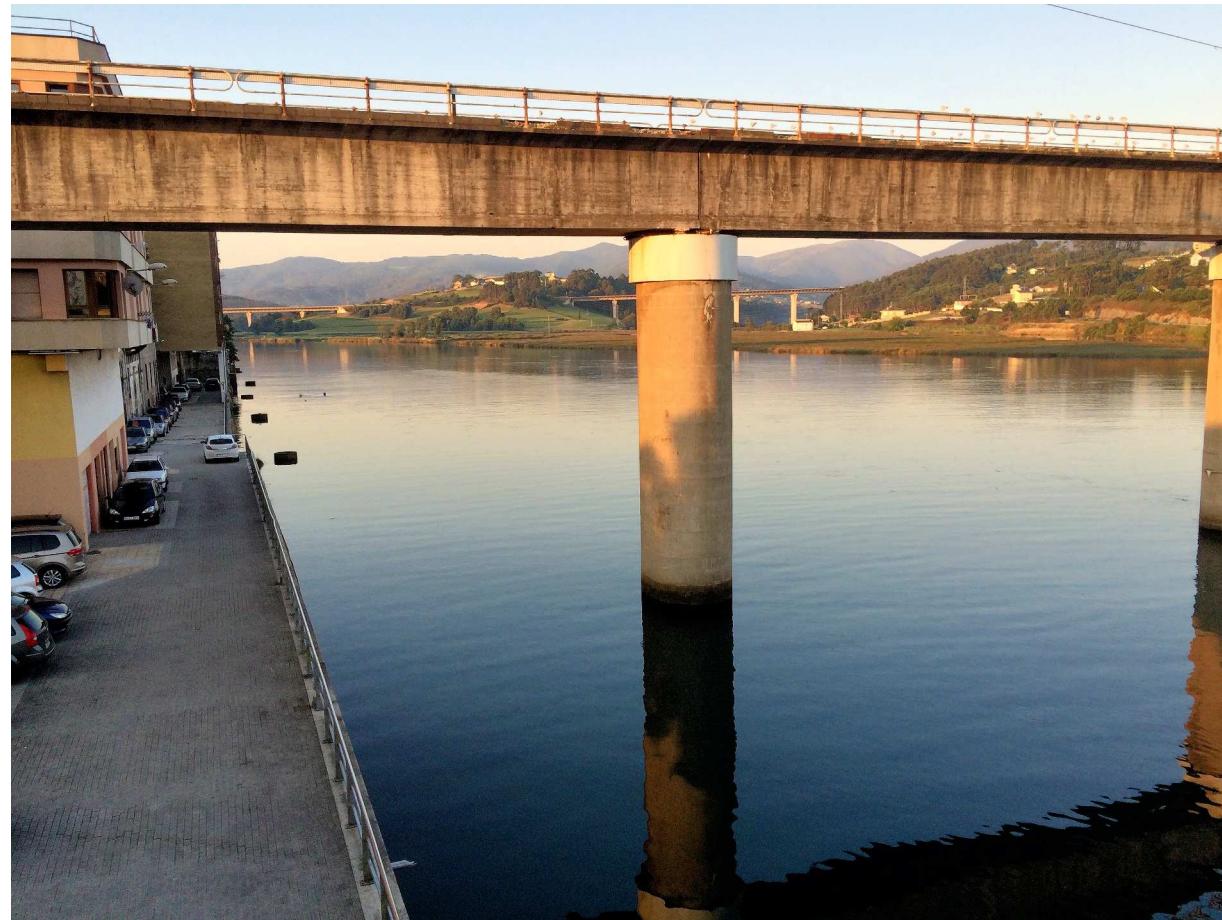
After a 2 course meal and a bottle of wine we hit the road again at 4pm and charged the remaining 8km into Ribadeo, passing through Barres and then Figueras before crossing a massive bridge, leaving Asturias behind and passing into Galicia and the town of Ribadeo.

We found a bar on the main drag about 6pm, had a drink and hobbled to our hotel a few hundred meters away... We just sort of collapsed before getting up again about 9pm for a light meal. When we started the towns were very close together and could be relied on for a bar or restaurant, or even a park to stop in the shade, but they are getting smaller and further apart – bit better planning required on our part!

Rest day in Ribadeo and then we leave the coast to cross the mountains and head for Santiago. 30kms today for a total of 629km. We need to make sure we do nothing on our rest day to recover enough for the final couple of hundred kms to Santiago!

Breakfast at the
Hotel Palacio Arias
before a long day's
walk!

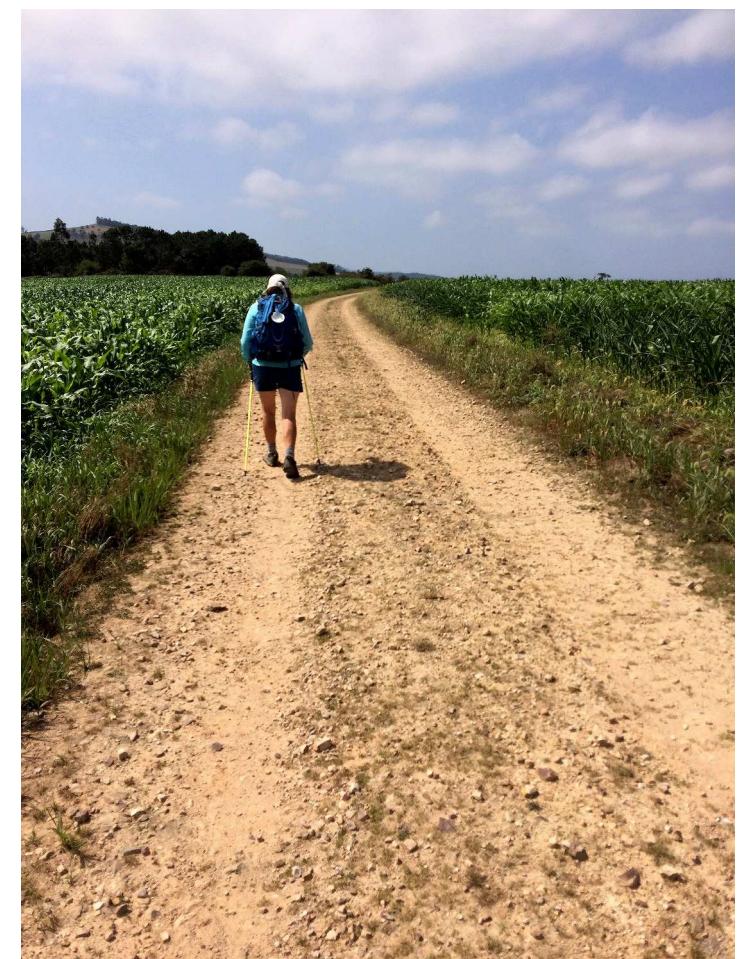




A beautiful start to the day, me on the way out of Navia and then views of the Ría Navia towards the coast and upstream.



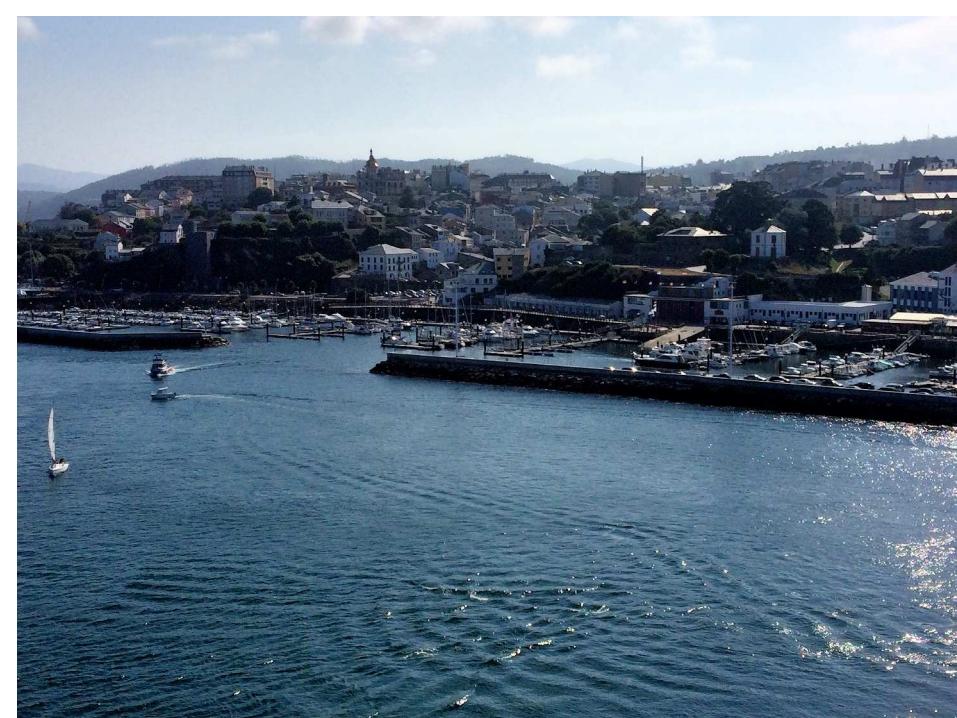
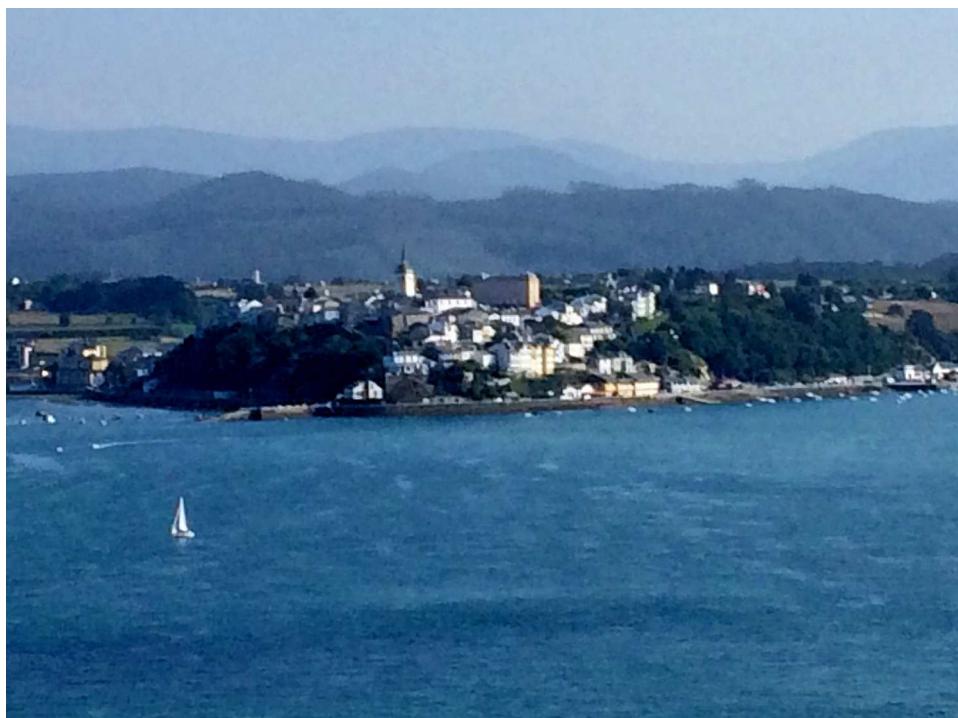
Above, a rural train line and the essential safety precautions between Navia and Jarrio. Left a new form of camino waymarker in Cartavio and, right, Alison between La Caridad and El Franco through the ubiquitous corn fields. This is where the going started to get really tough until we finally found the restaurant at the golf course in Tol.





Above, the restaurant that saved us and, about 6km later, the waymarker pointing towards Ribadeo over the Ría Ribadeo bridge, taking us out of Asturias and into Galicia, our final region of the Camino.

Below right, Ribadeo from the bridge and, left, looking up river to Castropol on the opposite side.



August 24, 2016

REST DAY 5 – RIBADEO



We didn't do a lot in Ribadeo - we were too tired from the day before! The Spanish equivalent of the Tour de France, the Vuelta, passed through town in the morning providing a bit of excitement, and then the day cleared up enough to have a bit of a walk. You can see the bridge we walked over the day before and a bit of Gaudi architecture.



August 25, 2016

DAY 29 – RIBADEO TO VILLANOVA DE LOURENZA

Well, I think we've dodged a bullet over the last couple of days! Our first night in Ribadeo saw a huge thunderstorm come through, with lightning very close to us. We still managed a good rest and the rest of the day was a mix of showers and clearing skies. As it turned out the Spanish equivalent of the Tour de France came through town – we were happy to not be walking and get as wet as them!

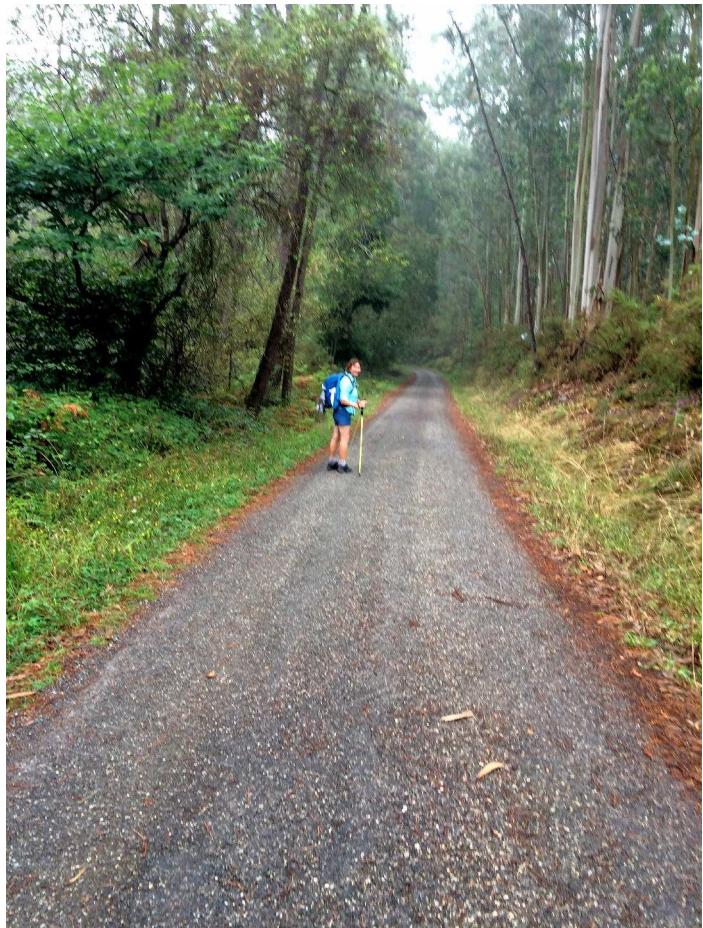
It rained all night last night and the forecast was for more rain and thunderstorms but miraculously, although we were in cloud/mist/drizzle all day, it was not enough to even wet us.

We got away nice and early at 7:45am, which seems to be the key to an easy day, after having breakfast in our room (which we had bought, together with our lunch, the day before). The start was relatively mild uphill but increasingly steep. We stopped for a coffee at Vilela at about 200m then climbed a bit higher before dropping down to A Ponte de Arante and then climbing hard up to about 350m before reaching Villamartín Pequeno, where we had been planning to stop for a break. The guidebook had no facilities between Vilela and San Xusto, 16kms away, so, not wanting to fall into the same trap as a couple of days ago, we were well stocked for breaks! However a new cafe/bar was advertising its presence in Villamartín Grande, 1.8kms (and about 150m descent and ascent) away, so we pressed on and had a coffee and a slice of empanadas there for "pre-lunch". A short drop down into Gondán for our lunch and even further down to San Xusto for a couple of beers and a glass of wine and a water for Al (at the dirtiest bar we've been in this trip!) and we had covered all but 5km of our 28km journey before 3pm! Amazing what cooler weather and a bit of food does to the speed we walk at!

The guidebook described our ascent up to 260m as a brief climb, and we rolled down into Villanova de Lourenza before 4pm. It was our first day heading inland today and most of the day we were walking on small roads and sandy tracks that are very similar to the southwest, so it was a bit hard to convince ourselves we were in Spain! 28km today and 657km in total.



Above, waymarkers taking us out of Ribadeo and looking back past me towards a dreary Ribadeo. Bottom, Alison and some farm dwellers between Vilela and O Vilar.





Our first Galician hórreo, me next to a sign outlining the tourist attractions in the Concello Barreiros, which included the two Vilamartín towns, and Vilamartín Grande in the distance from Vilamartín Pequeño.





Alison looking down towards Lourenzá, the Monasterio de San Salvador in the town and a very frosty beer at the bar around the corner.

Our accommodation was in the newer part of town, about 1km from the monastery, hence Villanova de Lourenzá - the new village. We got the impression we were the only people in the fairly small hotel but we got a lovely home cooked dinner and fresh cakes for breakfast!

August 26, 2016

DAY 30 – VILLANOVA DE LOURENZA TO ABADÍN

Well, a lot of things to say about today! First of all, it rained all night and so all of our washing was still wet, except Al's new shorts and her shirt – a bit of a logistical problem but usually able to be overcome by strapping the wet washing on the outside of our packs, but today the rain had set in and was not letting up. That's the second part of today's story – dreik pretty much from the start! We set off at about 10 past 8 in light drizzle with our ponchos on – for about five minutes! It was way too hot with them on as we climbed out of Lourenza (a short climb according to the book!)! We then used them to cover just our packs as we hiked up over the hill to Mondeñedo in a mix of drizzle and cloud that finally became rain as we made our way into the town for morning tea/dry off. The rain appeared to be lifting as we sat in Mondeñedo (see the pictures of the beautiful cathedral in the town square) but we put on our pack covers as well as our ponchos in an attempt to keep things dry. Just as well as things got wetter until just before Lousada, around 8km from Mondeñedo where we stopped under a dripping tree for a lunch of yoghurt, cheese and bread and a bit of chocolate. By Lousada, we seemed to move out of the rain into cloud/mist and things dried out a little, so the ponchos were put away with just the pack covers to keep things dry.

The final part of today's story is that today was the big hike uphill to the top (or close to the top) of the mountains. Although we hit the highest point in the route in a few days time, today was the big elevation change, rising from 60 odd metres in Lourenza to 570m at today's peak before dropping to 500m at our destination, Abadín, a total of 740m ascent including the up and over in the way to Mondeñedo. From Mondeñedo, we had 11km of uphill!

So the height, combined with the conditions meant that we were walking with less than 100m visibility for most of the day – a bit disappointing but the walk would have been really tough in the sun! We were very happy to stumble into Abadín about 4pm, and as the cloud finally lifted – foot sore and thirsty. 25km today and 682 in total – getting closer!



Alison all smiles as we start out of our hotel in Lourenzá. We started in our ponchos but as usual there was a "short uphill" to head out of town so we shed them fairly quickly.



A waymarker in a small village before Arroxo, Al on a local road about to pass under the A-8 and a fellow traveller after passing through Arroxo.

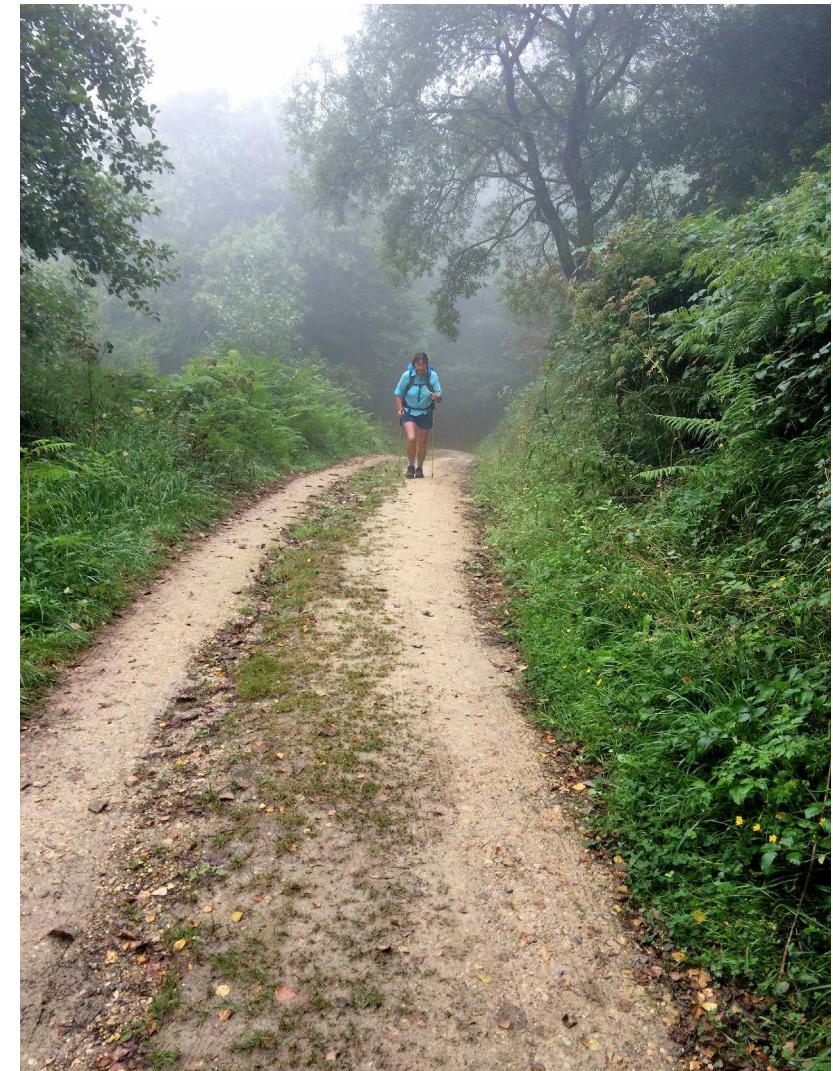


The cathedral in Mondoñedo, and the view back towards Mondoñedo in the early stages of the 11km ascent to the Alto da Xesta just past Lousada. The rain had steadily increased as we approached Mondoñedo so we stopped for about an hour for coffee, tortilla and cakes to dry out.





A farm house part way up the mountain, Alison near the Alto de Xesta just past Lousada and crossing the N-634 shortly before a small descent into Gontán and from there to Abadín. The photos make the fog appear much less dense than it was and we really weren't sure what to do. In the end we listened hard for trucks and cars and scooted across the highway!



August 27, 2016

DAY 31 – ABADÍN TO VILALBA

Much nicer day today! Abadín was a bit of a funny town – 3 pubs and not much else, although Al did manage to get some more plasters for her feet and we got some yoghurt and peaches for breakfast (festival season strikes again – the bar/restaurant was closed this morning for their festival).

We had a bit of a mosquito attack last night – spent about half an hour killing about a dozen of them at around 3 am so bit of a disturbed night and subsequent sleep in! Still, we were on the road just before 9 am and, with the persistent fog, it still felt early. After a bit of up and down to get the day started it was very flat. We got a pleasant surprise in Martiñan after a couple of hours – a coffee shop appeared just in time for morning tea (the guidebook said there was nothing there, so we weren't expecting a break till lunchtime). After yesterday's exertions our legs felt a bit leaden, so the rest was very much needed.

Just before Martiñan we discovered the origin of the phrase "... when the shit hits the fan...". We have been seeing what looked like water trucks on many farms and today we found out what they really were: a tractor towing one pulled passed us and then, a few hundred meters further on, started spraying a mixture of cow dung and water over his fields! I have to tell you, the stench was unbelievable (and we have smelled some pretty terrible piles on this trip!) – definitely the fastest we have walked as we passed the field!

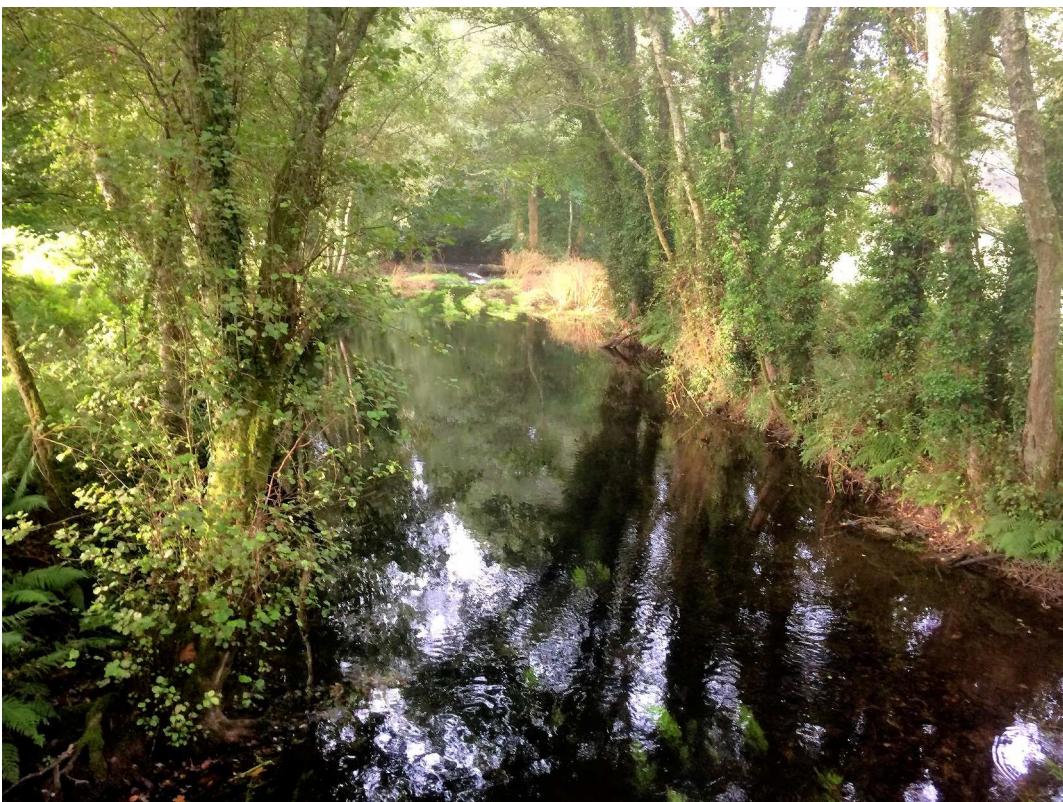
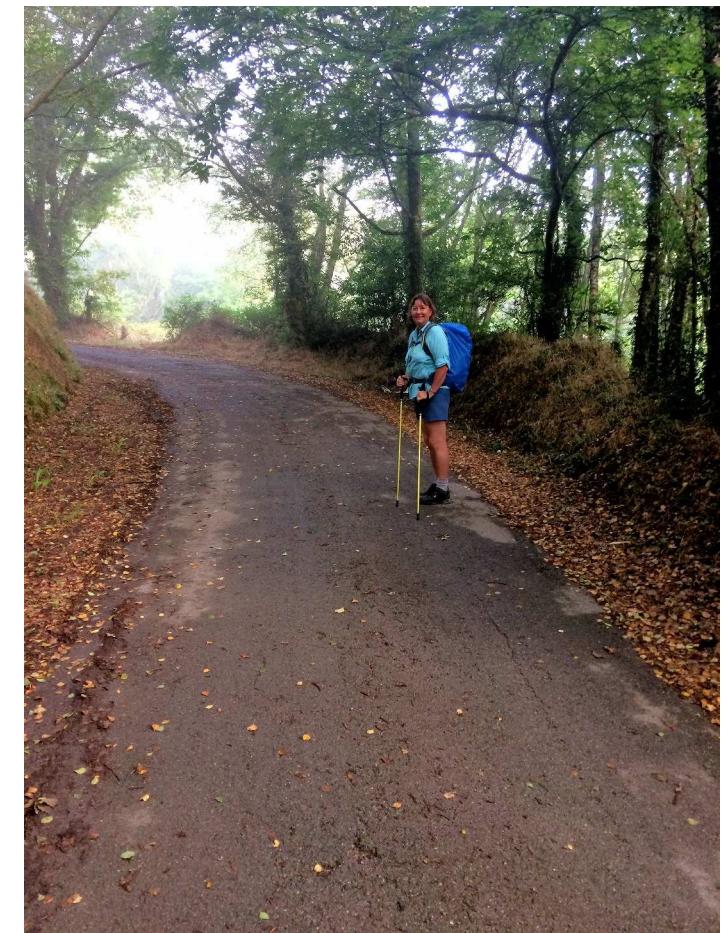
A gentle 7 or so kms from Martiñan to Goirix for lunch and then 5kms to Vilalba – by now the sun had appeared and we were happy to get in about 3:30pm. We have finally struck a beautiful hotel (a Parador) for a two night stay, although once again it is festival day so everything appears to be closed. Oh well, just have to sit around and do nothing tomorrow! 20kms today and 702 now in total...

Al on the bridge over the Río Abadín just before Ponterroxal.





Fog outside our bedroom window at Abadín, and the likely cause of the mosquitoes - the kitchen vent! Alison on the path out of Abadín, the sun breaking through between Abadín and Ponterroxal and the Río Abadín from the bridge.





Above, me and then Alison on paths between Ponterroxal and Martiñan. Notice how the path Alison is on has become eroded and sunken through centuries of use.

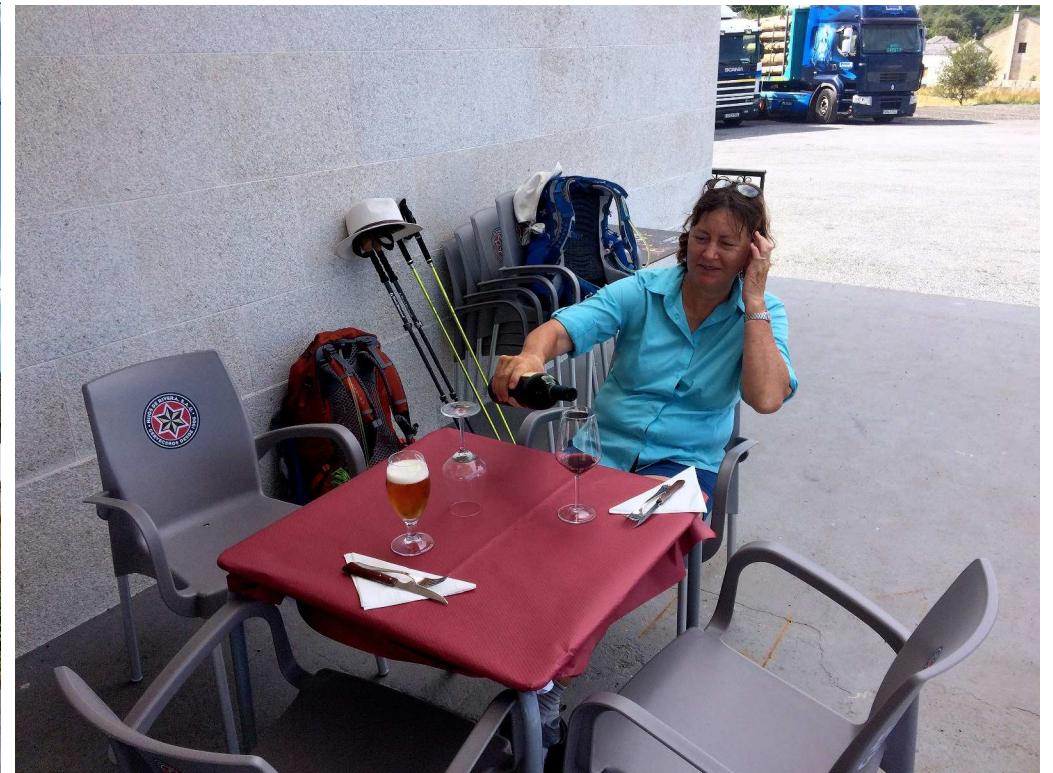
Below, Al at the very welcome cafe at Martiñan and then again on medieval path just out of the town.





Me, further down the path out of Martiñan, and Alison preparing for lunch in Goiriz at the Hostal Helvetia. It had become quite hot once the fog lifted and we were ready for a drink!

Bottom left, the cemetery at Goiriz as we walked out of town after lunch.



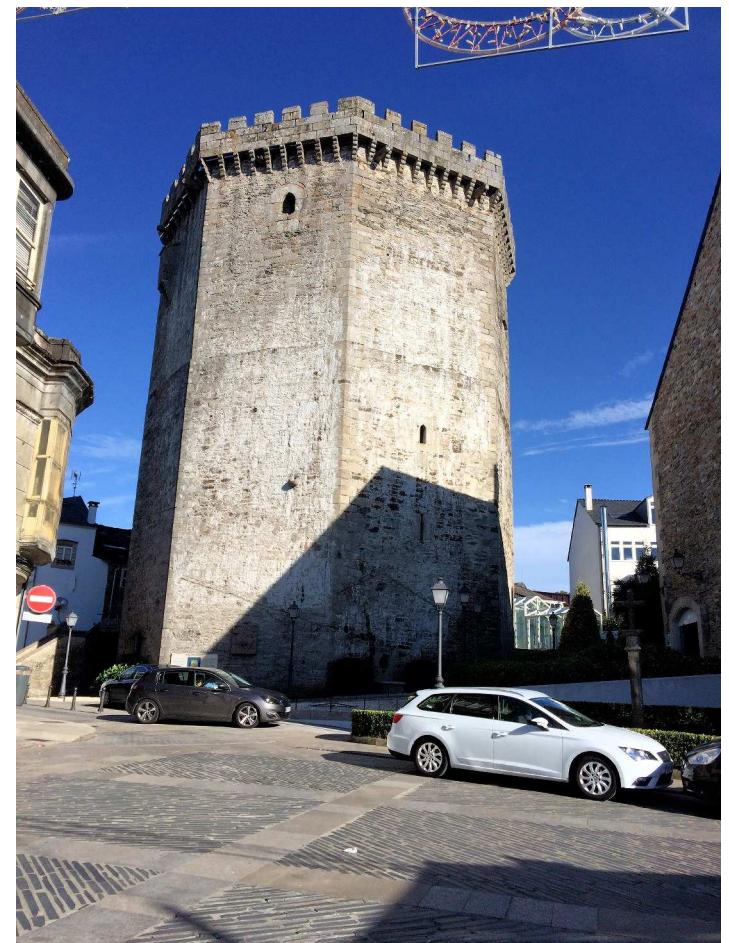
August 28, 2016

REST DAY – VILALBA

Another festival day on our rest day at Vilalba so everything was closed, a pity because Alison's blister and sore knee were getting quite painful and we could have used a pharmacy to get some band-aids for the blisters and tape for the knee.

The Parador Vilalba was certainly our most luxurious hotel since arriving in Spain and we enjoyed the extra day there. The parador is connected to the 15th century Torre de los Andrade which now has rooms and a restaurant in it.

We didn't really think about it at the time, but this was our last accommodation on the Camino del Norte. For the next three nights we will stay off the camino and then we will be on the Camino Frances with the crowds!



August 29, 2016

DAY 32 – VILALBA TO BAAMONDE

Another very pleasant walk today after a day's rest in Vilalba. We got off to a comparatively late start, knowing we didn't have far to go today, at about 8:40am after a very nice breakfast. Whether it's because we are still up a bit in the hills (we started the day at 460m), or the season is beginning to turn, the morning had a real nip to it for the first time, which made walking really easy! Not a lot of villages now we are off the coast but lots of small hamlets which make the walk interesting. We also had a couple of sizable medieval bridges and some medieval paths again today, but for the most part walking was easy and on minor country roads and dirt tracks.

We passed through San Xoán de Alba about an hour and a half out from Vilalba (where we met a young German girl returning to the path after a 2km walk in the wrong direction!) then on to our first stop for the day at Ponte de Saa (where the larger of the bridges was). We ran into our first Australian of the walk, a young guy named Danny from Wollongong who was so rapt to see another Aussie he had to give Al a hug! Anyway, it was good to chat for a while and share stories over a coffee.

After Ponte de Saa we passed through the small hamlets, Penas, Contaritz and Casasnovas are the ones shown on the map but there were more, before arriving a couple of hours later at our destination for the day, Baamonde, for lunch (we had a free-ranger join us to clean up the scraps!). Baamonde looked like a real wheat belt type town – petrol station, general store/mini-mart, a couple of bars, a crossroads and dust! Tonight is the first of three nights that we are staying away from the Camino at the Hotel Biterra. They come and pick us up when we are finished for the day and drop us back the next morning, so we have two days with only light day packs! Can't wait but will be tricky to pack – for the last 5 weeks we've had everything right there on our backs!

The hotel is next to a working farm that has one of the cow dung/water pressure mixers – hope they don't use it while we're here...

20kms again today/722kms overall and just 101kms to Santiago!

The water fountain outside the Parador Vilalba.





Clockwise from above, the path between Vilalba and Gabin after passing under the A-8, the view back towards Vilalba from further down the path, crossing the A-8 again, with its reminder of how far we have come, just before Ponte de Saa and Alison on the Ponte de Saa after our morning break.





An hórreo near Penas, the free ranger that wanted some of our lunch at Baamonde, the fertilizing machine on the farm next door to the Hotel Rural Biterra, similar to the one we'd seen in operation near Martiñan, and the sun setting over the Hotel Biterra.

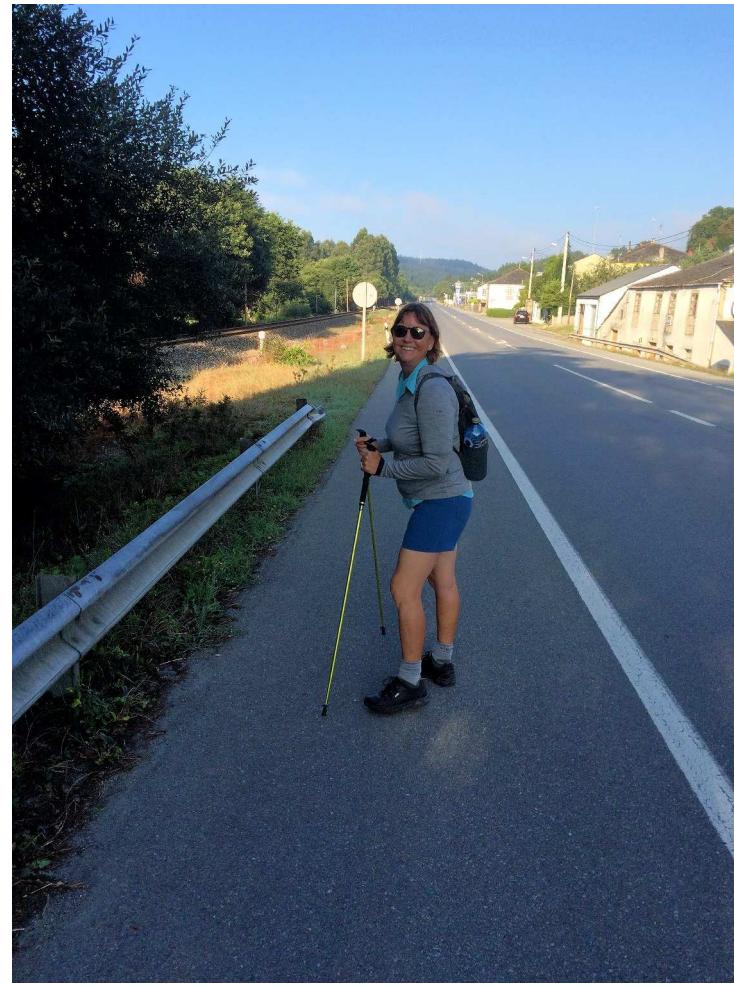


August 30, 2016

DAY 33 -BAAMONDE TO ALTO DA MÁMOA

Wow! What a difference not having the backpack on makes! Very nippy again this morning when we got up: a leisurely breakfast at 8am, in the car at 9am and back at Baamonde by 9:20am, Al with a jumper on for the first time. 3kms on the highway to start then a lovely walk through a mix of hamlets, old oak forest and the usual pine and eucalyptus forests. For the second or third time only, we missed a turn and got slightly off the Camino but only for a few hundred meters then regained the track before stopping after an hour and a half at Carballedo for coffees and a bocadillo. As we drove to Baamonde we saw perhaps a dozen peregrinos walking along the highway, and most of them were here having their mid-morning break! From Carballedo a very similar walk towards Miraz for lunch. We stopped along the way at a place where a guy does amazing works in stone and also does candle wax Knights Templar sellos to go in your credencial so we got one of those each. From Miraz, where we were scheduled to stop, at the suggestion of the folk who run the hotel we are staying at, we pushed on to Alto do Mámoa, about 6 1/2 kms further on. The landscape really changed as we scaled the next mountain or hilltop up to 610 m – we stepped out from forest into fairly exposed granite as we moved over the top. We called our hosts from the sign at Alto da Mámoa and we're back in our room by 4:10pm for a 21km day and 743kms overall...





On the previous page, sunrise over the Hotel Biterra.

Clockwise from the top left, waiting for the car to take us back to Baamonde, Alison on the highway out of Baamonde and both of us on the path leading up from the highway towards San Alberte.

We had not been in any form of transportation for 24 days since being dropped off in and picked up from Escalante!



Above an hórreo near Deva and then another near Diga, both on the way to Carballedo. Below, Al at Carballedo waiting for our morning coffee and, left, a farm after Miraz. The scenery looks fantastic but the stench was outrageous from using one of the fertilizer machines



The scenery changed quite quickly after we left Miraz as we climbed towards the Alto de Mamoa. Not long after these photos we turned on to the CF-2102 and reached the peak, a short time after which we were back at our hotel relaxing. Another set of abandoned shoes and, again, no idea how the former wearer continued!



August 31, 2016

DAY 34 – ALTO DO MÁMOA TO SOBRADO DOS MONXES

We picked up the track this morning at Alto do Mamo at about 9:30am after a fairly leisurely start to the day. Very breezy and a bit overcast early on as we made our through Roxica (stopped for a coffee), Travesa de Ledro and Marcela, which the book says is the highest point on the trip at 710m. We had some company on the road early on – some cows coming back from milking before Roxica and then many more pilgrims after Roxica. To get a Compostela at Santiago, you need to have walked at least 100km, so now we're inside the 100km radius we are getting more walkers. We passed another set of discarded boots near what I'm calling the peak, just before we entered A Coruña province, of 720m! We sat outside for a drink and a bocadillo at Meson before we got too cold and moved inside for another round! The afternoon warmed up quickly and we were happy walk past Lago Sobrado to our destination Sobrado dos Monxes, home to a magnificent if less than fully used monastery that was founded in the 10th century. The pathway into Sobrado looks like it has about 4ft walls either side but in fact, like many of the paths we have taken, it is 4ft below the ground level on either side – the cumulative impact of hundreds of years of pilgrims' footsteps! 19km today and 762kms overall... backpacks back on tomorrow for the walk into Arzúa where we join the Camino Frances.

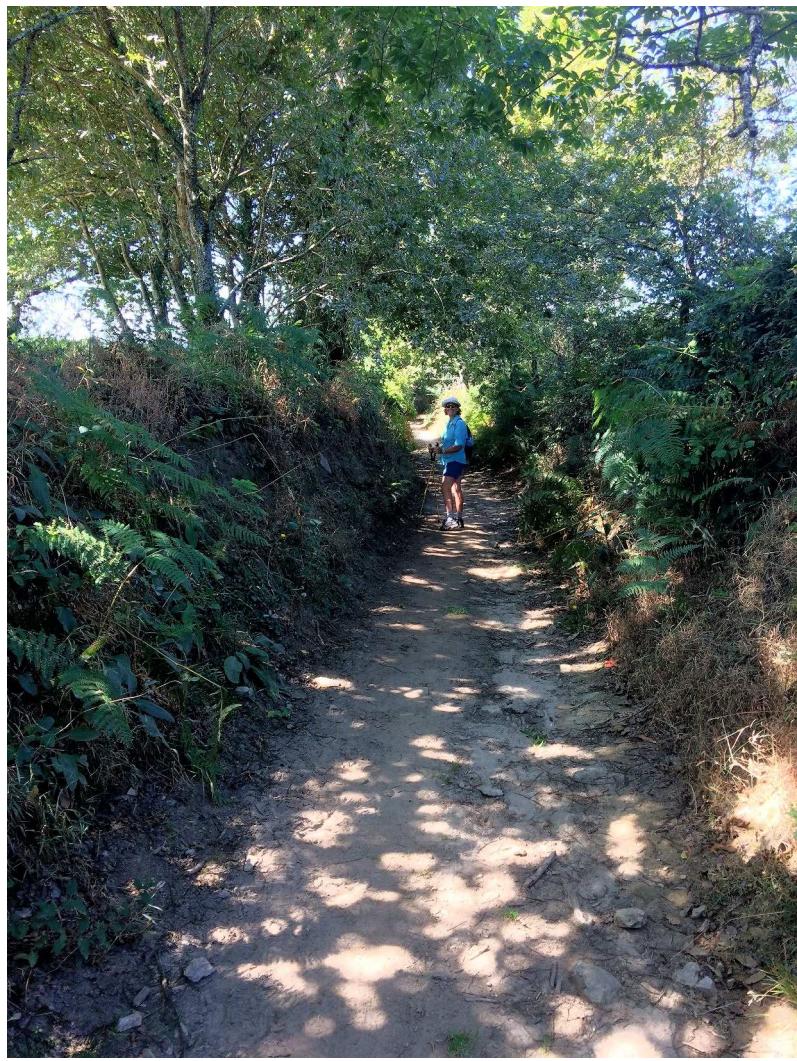
Setting out from Alto de Mamo.



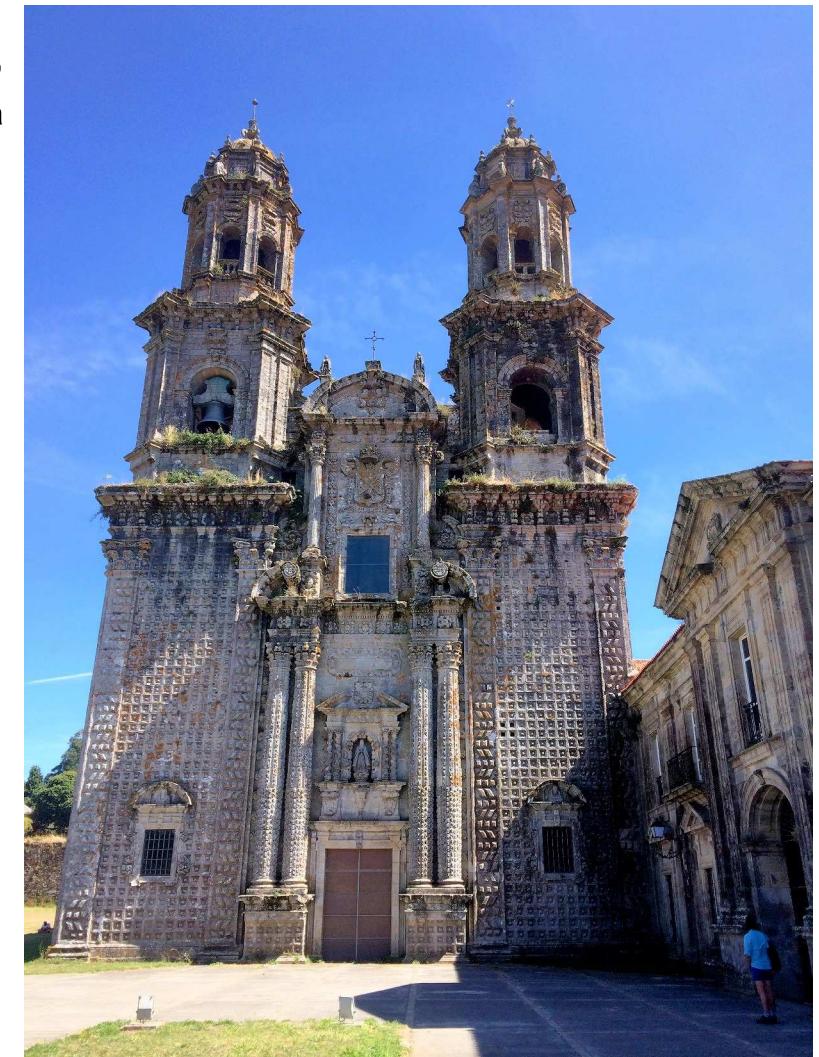


Clockwise from above, the cows near Roxica, Alison at the peak and next to the discarded boots just past it, and lunch at Mesón. We stayed at Mesón for quite a while, partly because there was only another 5.5km to walk but partly because we walked to another restaurant at the opposite end of town, which looked really bad, before returning to this one.





The eroded part of the path from Mesón to Sobrado Dos Monxes, Lake Sobrado, and the Monasterio de Santa María de Sobrado from a distance and up close.



September 1, 2016

DAY 35 – SOBRADO DOS MONXES TO ARZÚA

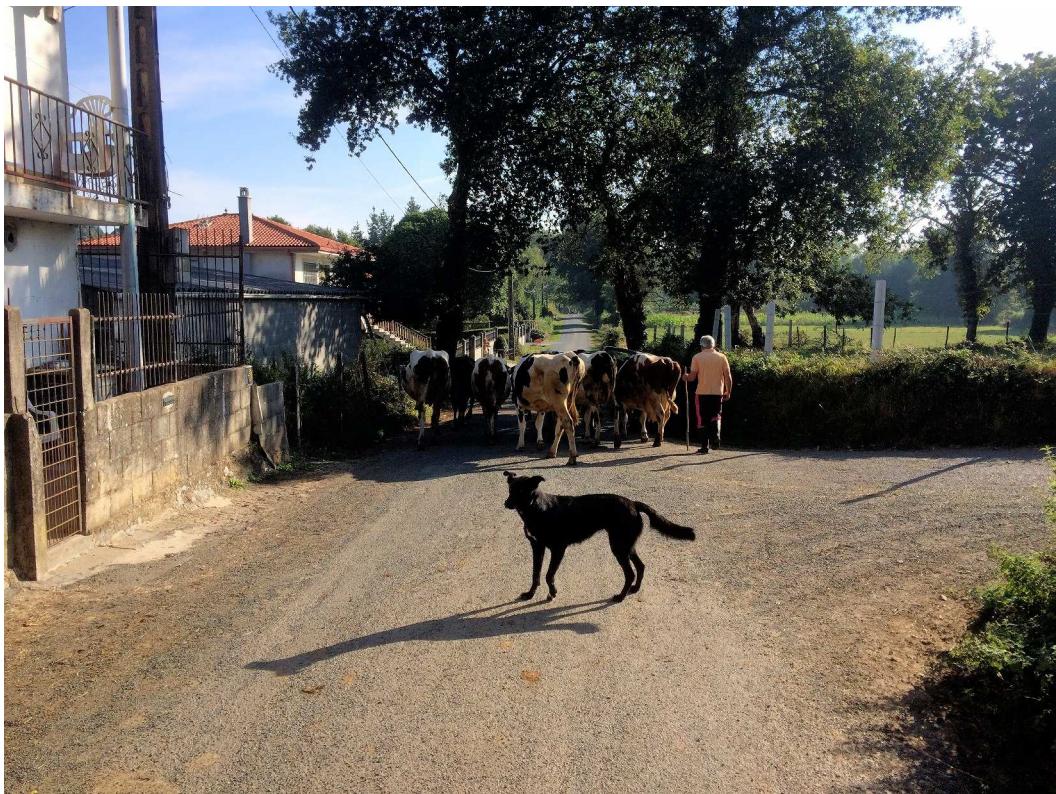
Very late out of the blocks today! 9am breakfast, in the car by 9:30am and then back with our packs on heading out of Sobrado dos Monxes by just before 10am. It was really weird going over some of the road we had walked the day before in the car – it just zooms by! We missed most of the other walkers by being so late getting started but caught a few at As Corredoiras, where we stopped for coffee. We had to share the road with some bovine walkers again today though, and later in the day a few free rangers! Unfortunately we came across a young Irish guy just out of Corredoiras who had broken a couple of toes (stress fractures?) – a very nice Spanish lady was going to take him to see a medico, hopefully he can do something to get him through the last 50kms!

We had mostly shaded, off road, tracks through fairly gentle rolling hills up until lunch at Boimorto. After that, though, we gradually transitioned to more roads as the temperature climbed to 31C – the hottest day so far and more to come. Finished off with a nice steep climb into Arzúa just after 4pm!

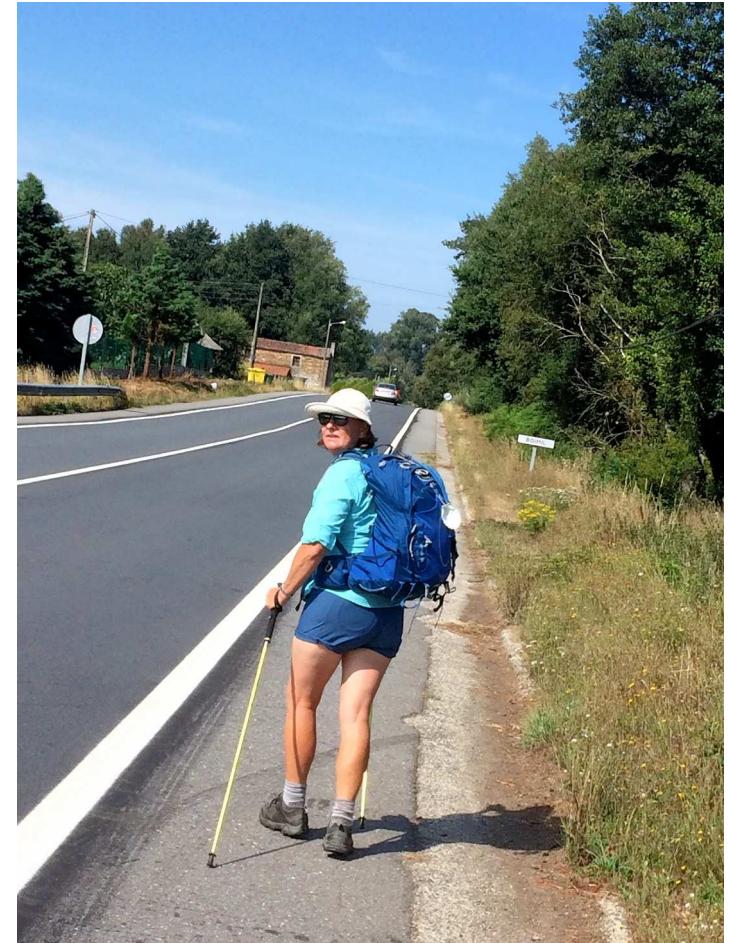
We've now joined the Camino Frances but yet to experience the inundation of walkers – perhaps tomorrow! 22 kms today and 784km so far in total!



Alison starting our last day on the Camino del Norte crossing the road from the monastery to the path on the opposite side. We only got as far as the supermarket down the road before stopping for supplies!



Some bovine friends just outside of Sobrado, Alison on the AC-234 about to enter Boimil after meeting the Irish guy with two broken toes, a farm looking to the right from just about where Alison is and the view towards Arzúa after leaving Boimorto.





The free rangers, very close to Arzúa, we finish the Camino del Norte and join the Camino Frances, and a glass of wine before dinner at our hotel the Casa Teodora Arzúa.



September 2, 2016

DAY 36 – ARZÚA TO RÚA

Well, I can confirm that the Camino Frances is busier than the Norte! By 7am, more people had walked past our room than we had seen in the previous 35 days! As you can see, some people are travelling light and getting into the spirit of the Camino! They also have bins and much fancier way markers... Nevertheless we had a lovely walk, turning right just out of our hotel and following the trail of walkers (no trouble finding the way markers today!) out of town and then mostly gravel tracks and mostly in shady forests. First stop (for everyone on the Camino today it seemed – a guy actually rushed past us to grab the seat we were heading for!) was A Calzada for a coffee just under 6kms out of town. Bit of a tactical error – the next several bar/cafes were pretty empty as everyone had stopped at the first one! More people/gravel paths/forest to our next stop at Salceda, another coffee, then on to A Brea for lunch and a rest, just 3 or 4 kms from our destination for the day. The action in the bars is just frantic as wave after wave of pilgrims come through, some just looking, some drinking and eating, some just sitting down for a bit.

A guy we met last night who has done the Frances a few times says it is just the last 100kms that are like this and the rest is very beautiful...

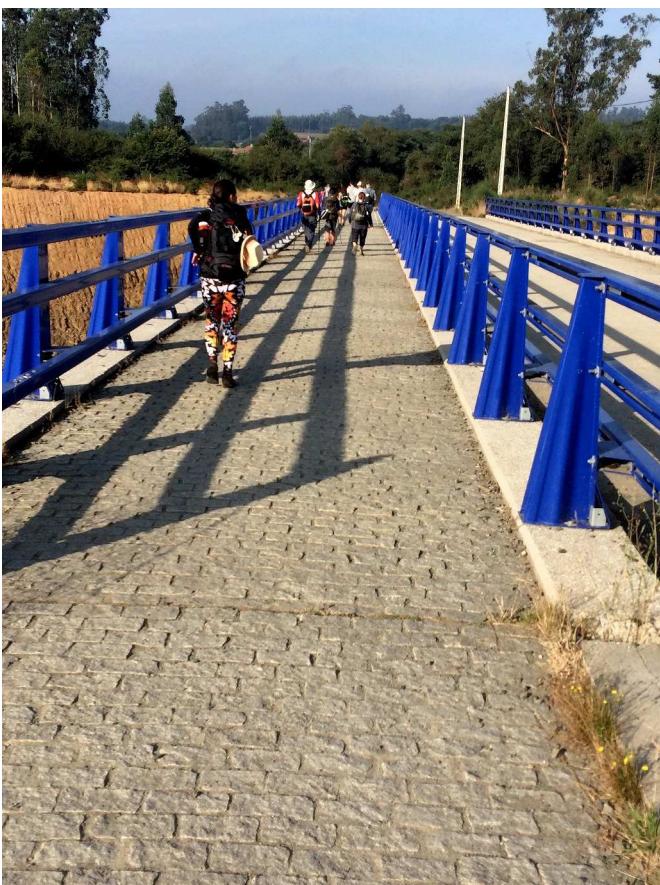
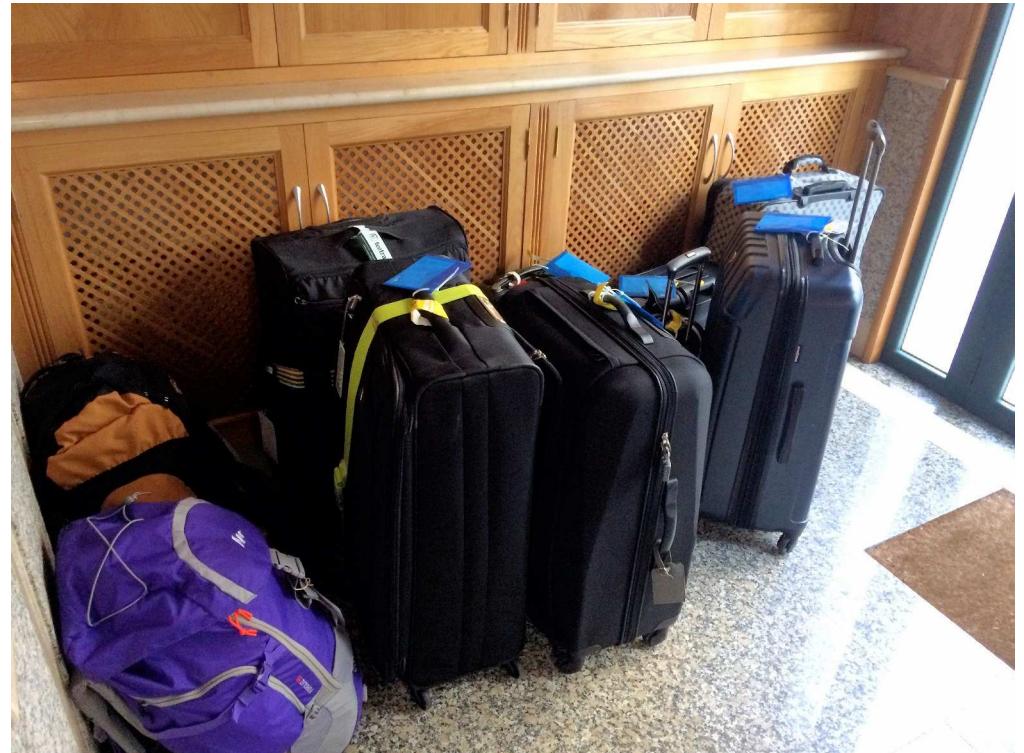
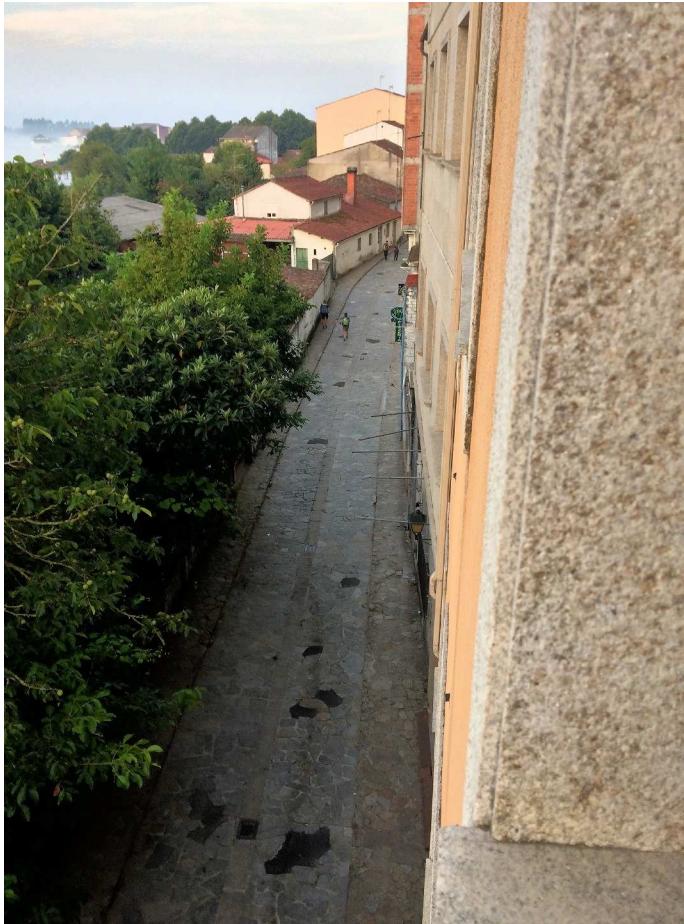
With so many more walkers on the trail I was amazed at the number of younger walkers with rock tape, knee supporting bandages etc – maybe coming from close to zero exercise to what is a fairly strenuous trip.

We're in a rural casa for the night tonight (with a pool!) so pretty relaxing!

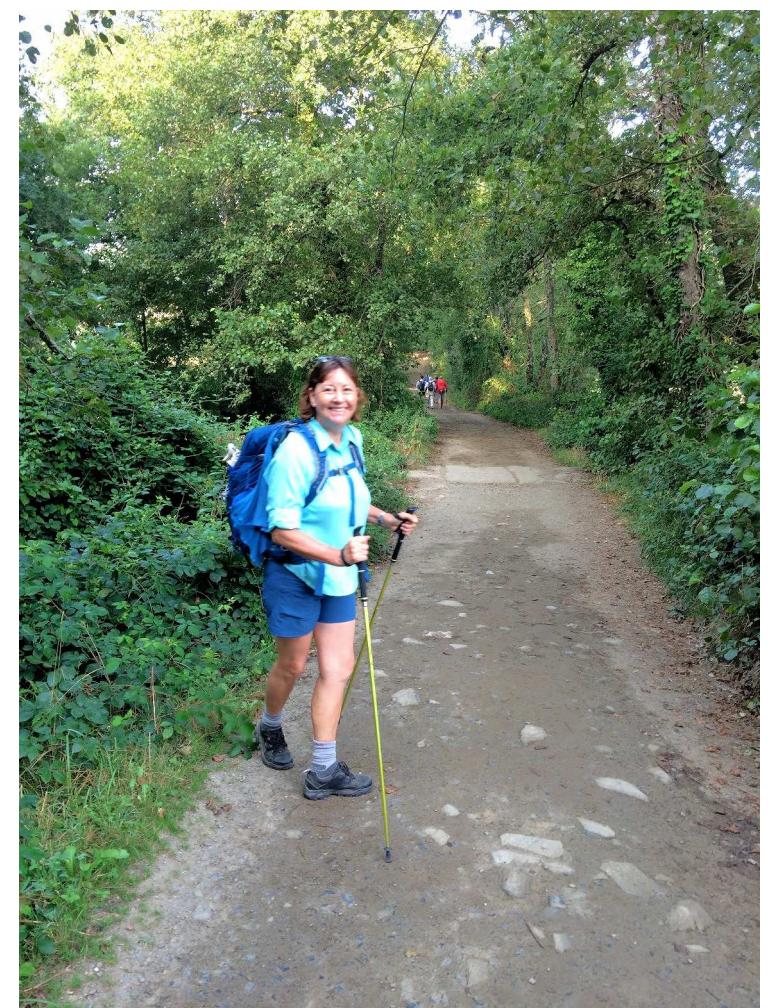
A very gentle 18 kms today and 802km so far in total....



The view out over the valley to the south from our hotel room.



Clockwise from the top left, the Camino heading out of Arzúa directly below out hotel room, suitcases packed to be dropped at the next hotel in the hotel foyer (I felt a bit put out by the fact people were doing this, not carrying as we are, however we won't be carrying next time!), Alison between Arzúa and A Calzada and a fairly busy bridge over the N-547.





Above, Alison as we are leaving the cafe at Al Calzada and something we had not seen on any path on the del Norte - a bin!

Across the page, lunch at A Brea and, left, getting into the pool at our (very nice) hotel at Rúa, the Casa Rural O Acrivo.

We spent the afternoon in the beer garden drinking beer and wine and talking to a couple of Australian women working their way through some G&Ts. I'm not sure how but somewhere in Rúa I lost one of my cash cards!



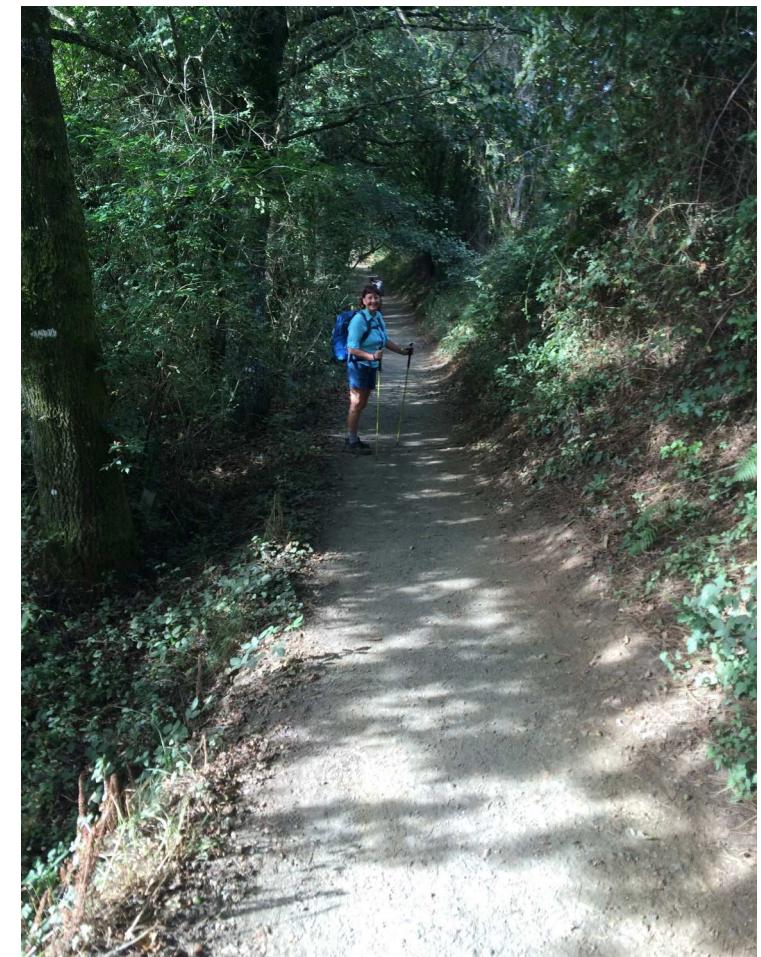
September 3, 2016

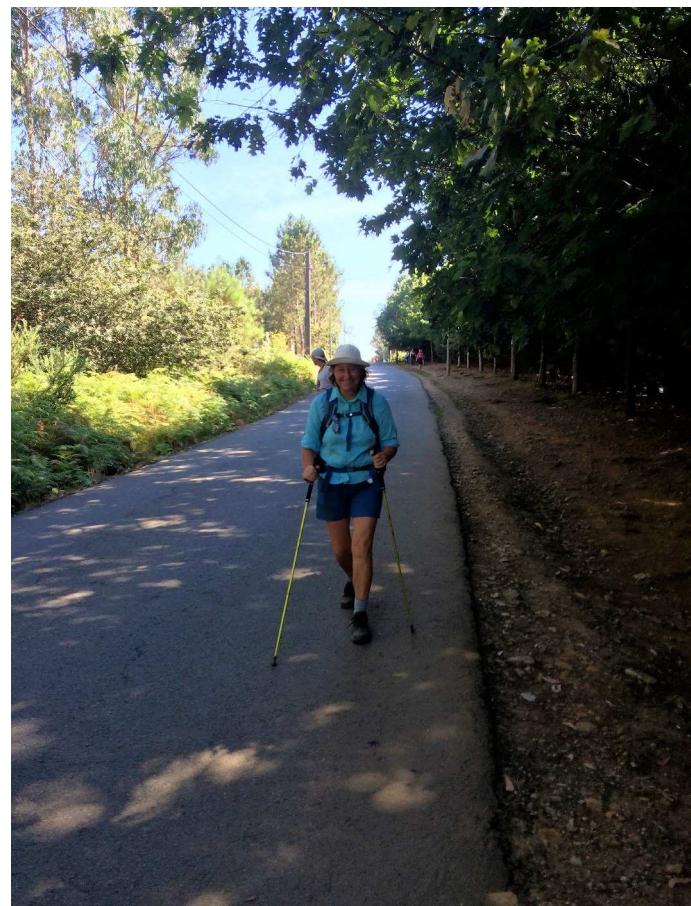
DAY 37 – RÚA TO SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA!

Very interesting day today! To start at the beginning, we headed out from our accommodation at Rúa just before 9 after the best breakfast we've had all trip! Although we saw a few walkers while having breakfast, and as we set off, it was nothing like the torrent we encountered yesterday. Our accommodation was just before the much larger town of Pedrouzo, so I'm guessing this meant the bulk of people were ahead of us. We started in fog again and for the most part were walking by ourselves on shady gravel track. A short stop for coffee at Amenal after an hour and then uphill past the airport at Lavacolla. We should have stopped again but pressed on for Monte de Gozo, hoping for lunch there. Just under 8kms of mostly uphill and increasingly on minor roads. Unfortunately there were no real places to stop leading into Monte de Gozo and none that we could see there. There is however a huge 370 person albergue that looks like a construction camp! From there it was a short walk downhill into Santiago de Compostela but Al's knee was really giving her grief by then! We stopped at the first place we saw – a pulperia right on the outskirts. The guy couldn't have made it more obvious he didn't want us there but we had a couple of beers and wine and some food and rested for an hour. There's a park just inside the city boundary where a lot of people were celebrating their arrival, however the cathedral is still nearly 4kms away, so we kept going through the fairly modern outskirts of Santiago to the old town. A couple of twists and turns and there we were! Our hotel is right next to the cathedral so we checked in, had a shower and a bit of a nap and headed out to queue up for our Compostela. Had a bit of a look through the cathedral, which is truly magnificent, then a couple of drinks and dinner – in bed by 9pm truly knackered! While it is great to be in Santiago and to have completed our goal, at least 98% of the people have done the Camino Frances and more than half of them, I would guess, just the 100kms from Sarria, so you are not sharing a similar experience. We ran into a German bloke and his daughter that we had seen on and off since Ribadeo and they felt the same way – the hustle and bustle of Santiago and the Frances over the last couple of days has really made us appreciate the truly unique experience of nearly 800kms of quiet solitude, spectacular scenery and genuine challenge on the Norte! 21kms today making it 823km in total. The guide book says 817km but we deviated a bit from Bilbao to Santander and again around Posada Lunada. The Compostela says 803kms – no idea where they get that number from!



Both of us heading out from Rúa in the morning. Alison has a big smile on but she is in a fair bit of pain from both knee and blisters, so it could be a grimace! Left is the waymarker just past Pedrouzo, not long after we started from Rúa and right, passing to the north of the Santiago Airport about 3 or 4 kms further on.







Opposite page on the left, catching up with the crowd just past Labacolla towards Monte de Gozo, and Al starting the downhill towards Santiago - again, it looks like a smile but could be a grimace - and, top right, some ruins a bit further on.

Opposite, and above on this page, Al and I at the pulperia. The smile is real this time because the shoes are off!

To the right, a statue of a peregrino on the outskirts of Santiago and Alison moving through the relatively modern town towards the old town and the cathedral.

Although we hadn't made it yet to the cathedral, the time we spent at the pulperia was the real "... we actually made it!" moment, at least for me.



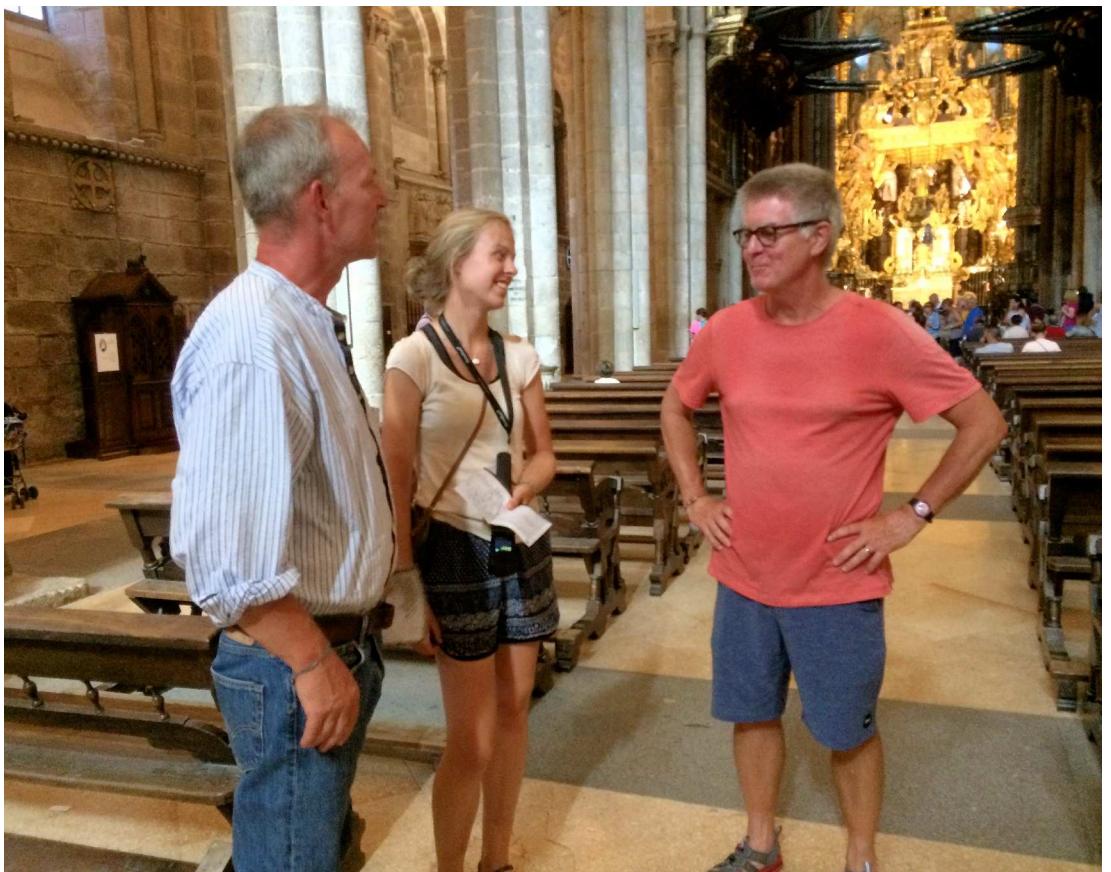


Finally, we arrived at the cathedral at Santiago de Compostela! I wanted to sort of soak up the atmosphere but Al was keen to get to our accommodation, the Hospetería San Martín, which we did and had a shower and brief nap before joining the crowd to get the last stamp on our credencial and to obtain our compostelas.



Above, our certificates of distance in our left hands and compostelas in our right hands. Left and right, our completed credenciáls





Alison and me in the cathedral, and also chatting to the German father and daughter we had met on and off along the Camino del Norte! Below a quiet celebration - we had completed the Camino del Norte de Santiago! But, remember, we had booked the extension to Muxía back in early August - starting in two days time!



September 4, 2016

REST DAY 7 – SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA



Although we didn't understand a word, the pilgrims mass was very emotional with many people openly weeping for themselves and their relatives.

To the right, the buildings other than the cathedral that form the Plaza del Obradoiro, including the Hostal de los Reyes Católicos.





We mostly rested during the day before going out for dinner. Here's Al just before we turned in, hoping her knee and foot feel better the next day!

September 5, 2016

DAY 38 – SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA TO NEGREIRA

I wasn't sure we'd be walking today but we did! After a fair bit of relaxing, including the extraordinary pilgrim's mass, we had concluded we were going to have to catch a taxi today due to Al's knee. However the combination of rest, cream, massage and drugs must have worked because when we woke up at around 8am, the swelling had reduced and Al decided she could walk! A quick breakfast and a quick snap of a taxi number on the way out and we were on our way by just before 9am! We hadn't gone too far when we spotted a farmacia (they were all closed on Sunday) and bought some kinesiology tape – we had been searching high and low for this tape since starting the Camino and, once again, had just about given up when Al said "... fysioterapia..." and the pharmacist knew what she wanted and, even better, had some. So, armed with taxi phone number and rock tape we set off!

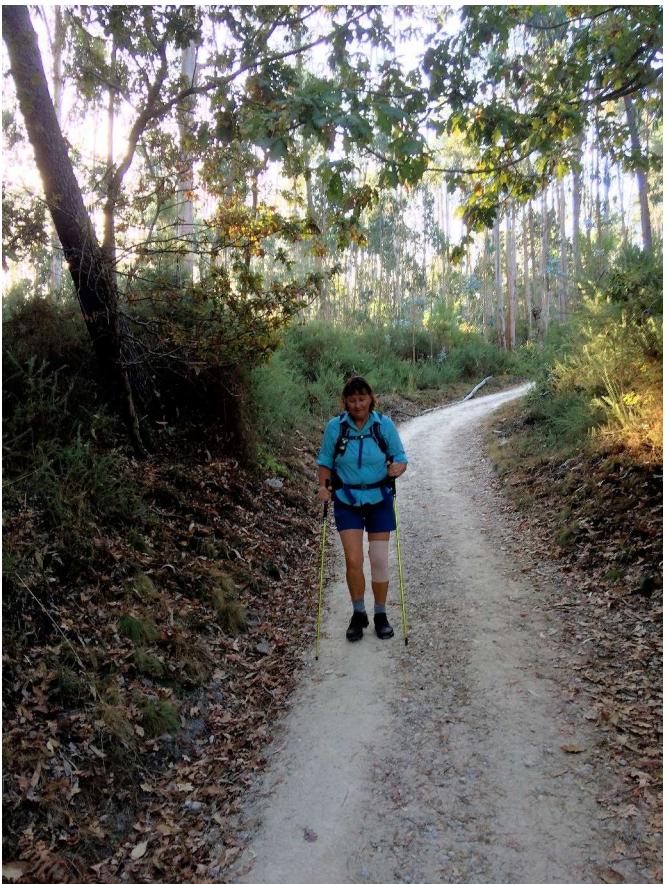
The exit from Santiago is much nicer than the entrance, to the point where I would recommend making sure you come from Finisterre, Muxía or Ferrol. Also, the number of walkers had dropped – more than on the Norte but way less than the Frances! We had beautiful views of Santiago on the way out and then went over the hill and into the next valley. Al had an elastic brace on and it helped on the flat and uphill but downhill still caused a fair amount of pain. We stopped just over the Rio Roxos for a peach and a break then up and over into the next valley. We stopped at the valley floor to put the rock tape on, which made things much better for Al. A really steep ascent got us over the hill to Trasmonde where we had a beer and lunch then slowly downhill to what the book describes as the prettiest town on the Camino – Ponte Maceira – which is hard to disagree with. We had another beer and set off for our destination. It was really hot by now but the first half of the last leg of today's journey was in shade along the lovely river the Ponte took us across. The last km or so was really hard going in the heat but not long after 4pm we made it into Negreira. An unexpected 21kms today and now 844 in total! Expecting 38 degrees tomorrow so we may make use of the taxi numbers!



Al looking brave outside our accommodation before setting off for Negreira.



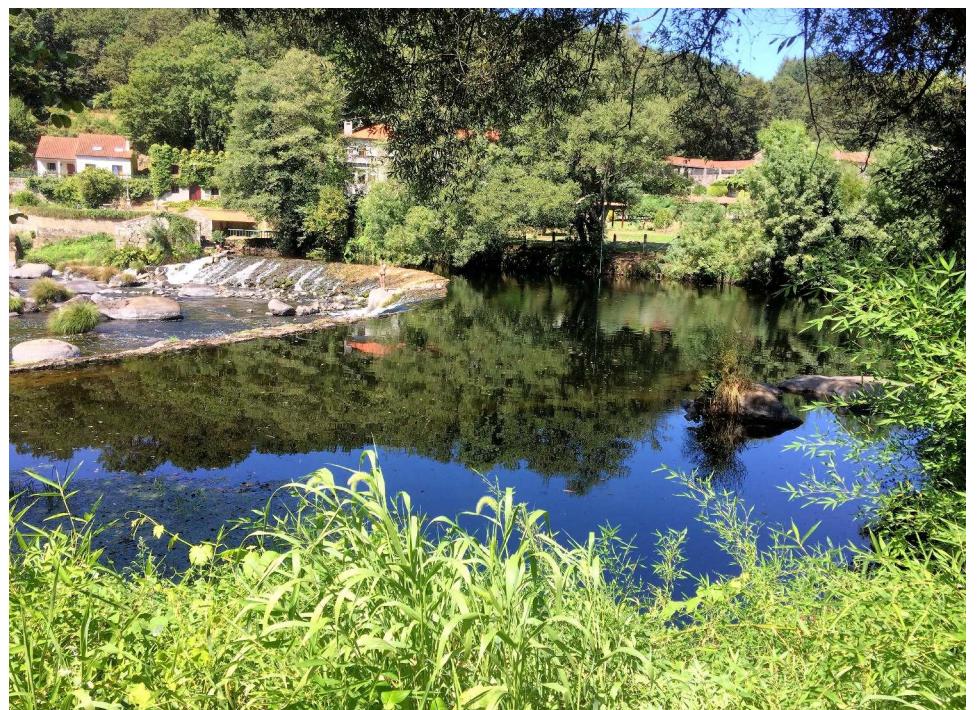
Waymarkers, the first just after we bought the rock tape, and the second further up the hill toward Piñeiro. The view back towards Santiago from part way up the first hill of the day, and Alison coming down that hill very slowly.





Farmers working the fields a lot like their ancestors would have, just before our first break at Río Roxos and, right, Alison at the bar at Augapesada having taped her knee.

Bottom right and left, looking down towards Ponte Maceira after lunch at Trasmonte and then at the pool near the ponte.





Although we weren't far from either our last stop (Trasmonte, a couple of kilometres away) or our next stop (Negreira, 3.9 km away), this place next to the pool at Ponte Maceira seemed like a very good place to spend a bit of time!



Above, me before crossing the ponte over the Río Tambre and the view up and downstream from the bridge.

It was a long 3.9kms into Negreira but day one of the extension done!





September 6, 2016

DAY 39 NEGREIRA TO SANTA MARIÑA

I'm not sure whether readers have gathered that the Spanish eat late: it's a struggle to get breakfast before 8am, lunch before 1pm and dinner before 8pm, and in general the Spanish prefer to eat at least a couple of hours later than that. All the time we've been in Spain, though, we've been thinking at least some people must be up early – well, last night we found them: they drive through the main intersection in Negreira between 4am and 6am, right below our hotel room for the night!

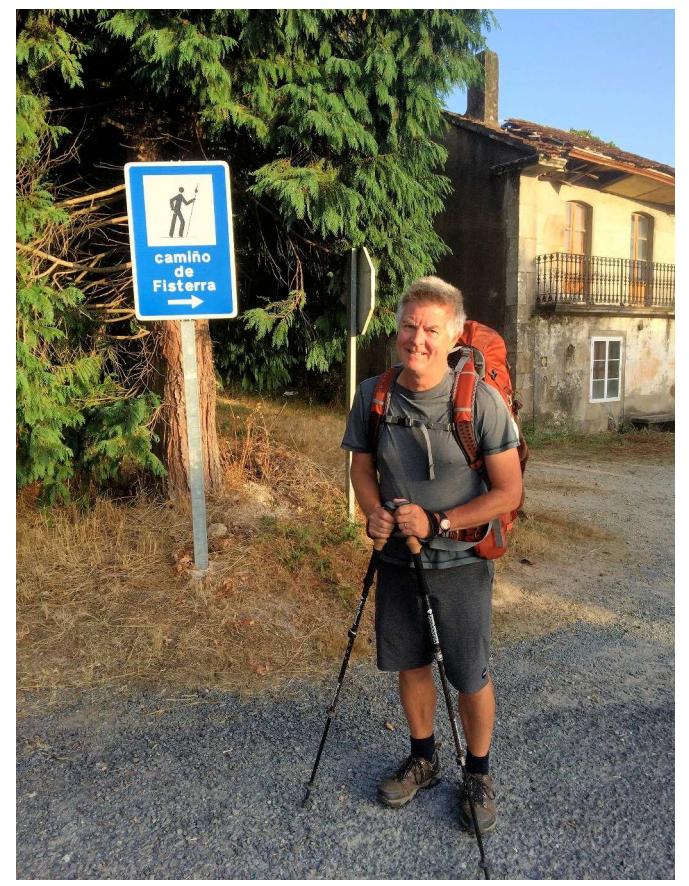
Anyway, we set the alarm for 7am today and, after some initial confusion about whether we were setting off early to beat the sun or having a rest day, we hit the road just after 8am. On the way out of town we were rewarded with a great view over the town and valley just as the sun was rising (even the sun is up late in Spain!) A beautiful morning with a light fog and a great section through forest past Zas and A Peña, where we stopped for a coffee. After another hour, but more roads and less shade, we arrived at Vilaserio, where we had a water before setting off again. The sun was really starting to get some bite into it as we shifted from mostly forest to mostly road and by the time we hit Santa Mariña just before 2pm it was 35c in the shade. This had been our target for the day – our accommodation for the night is off the Camino so we had to call them for a pick up anyway, so we had a couple of waters and a sandwich (ok – I had one beer as well!) and called it a day. Bit of a stuff up when we did arrive at our hotel, Casa Jurjo, where they had no reservation for us (glad they didn't check before picking us up!) but they had rooms so no problem in the end. It is a bit disconcerting though to have that seed of doubt about whether you have a room for the night while walking during the day...

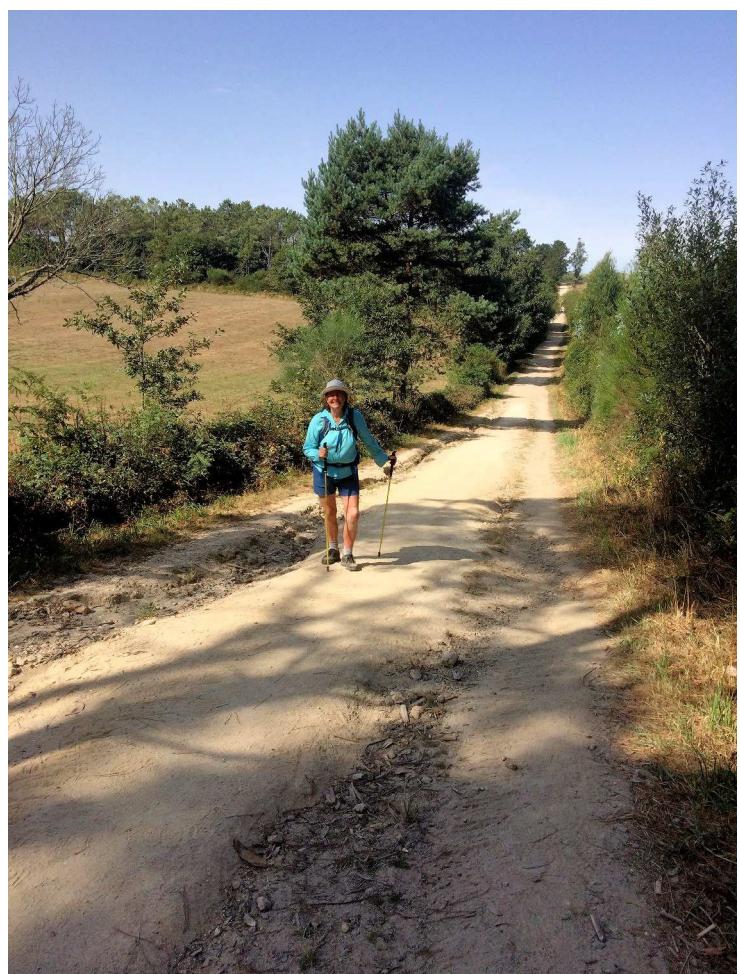
21kms today before the heat beat us and 865kms now in total. We will skip about 12kms tomorrow – the weather is supposed to cool down but apparently it's all highway so no great loss! Back to the sea tomorrow if everything goes to plan!

Setting out through the old part of Negreira in the morning.

Opposite, looking back toward Negreira, Alison in the forested trail near Zas and me just before Zas.

A windfarm viewed from just before Rapote, they are becoming as ubiquitous as the corn in Asturias!





Communal baths in Rapote, coffee at A Peña and part of the long hot section between A Peña and Santa Mariña, where Alison is pictured below.





Settling in for a beer at our accommodation at Abeleiroas, Casa Jurjo, and the sun finally setting on the hottest day since we arrived in San Sebastián.



September 7, 2016

DAY 40 – OLIVEIROA TO CEE

It stayed hot for a long time last night but a couple of beers before dinner made the sunset over the ubiquitous wind generators seem picturesque! A little bit of a sleep in today and then a car ride to our start today at Oliveiroa, skipping about 11km of the track. Oliveiroa has many horréos – corn drying sheds that first appeared in Cantabria as big square wooden structures and have changed size, shape and building materials as we've move along the coast.

We got away about 9am – nearly missed the first turn just outside of Oliveiroa where about 30 German peregrinos were singing a hymn before setting off! We walked through a great high path through valleys first to Logoso and then Hospital where we had coffees and short breaks. From Hospital to Cee there are no shops so we bought a bocadillo to take away (para llevar!) to go with some fruit we had already bought. Again a very nice walk to our first break at Santuario de Nosa Señora San Neves (with the Germans) but a very dusty and monotonous road from there past our second break at Ermita de San Pedro Mártir. The descent into Cee came on suddenly with great views to Cabo Finisterre – our first view of the ocean since leaving Ribadeo about 11 days ago!

The descent into Cee was very steep and hell on Alison's knee but we made it!

19kms today, 884 in total and back on the coast! A bit of surgery required for Al's blisters and she'll need to renew the tape on her knee tomorrow as well!



All set to hit the coast today at Cee!



The hórreos in Oliveiroa, the view out over the Río Xallas and reservoir, and Al on the ridge above the river valley.



Walking into Logoso, where we enjoyed a coffee and, below, the shop at Hospital where we again had a coffee and bought some bocadillos. We ran into an English guy at both places, by Hospital he had upgraded to beer from coffee. I saw him again in Cee, again with a beer and the next day on the way to Finisterre.



Right, the Camino splits not far from Hospital, right fork to Muxía and left to Finisterre.
Above, Alison at a local shrine where you are supposed to drop a stone.

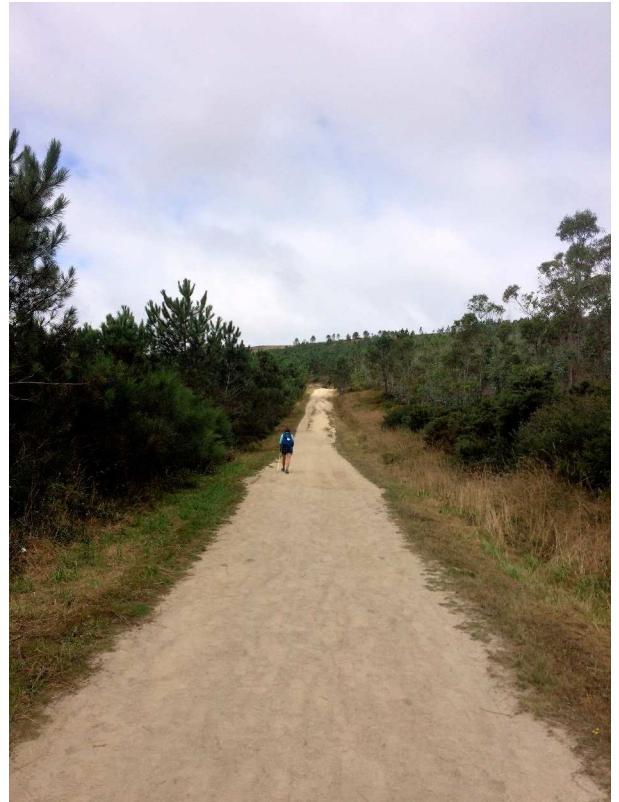




Left, the Santuario de Nosa Señora San Neves and, right, the seemingly interminable walk first to Ermita de San Pedro Mártir and then, bottom left, from the ermita down the hill to Cee.

I'm standing at about the peak of the mountain with Cee in the background.

Al's still smiling as she walks down the hill but she was in lots of pain!





Beautiful views out over the Cabo de Cee and into the town of Cee itself. Right, Al finally gets to sit down after a long walk into town while I go and find the hotel.

While I was looking for it I ran into the English guy, again having a beer!



September 8, 2016

DAY 41 – CEE TO FINISTERRE

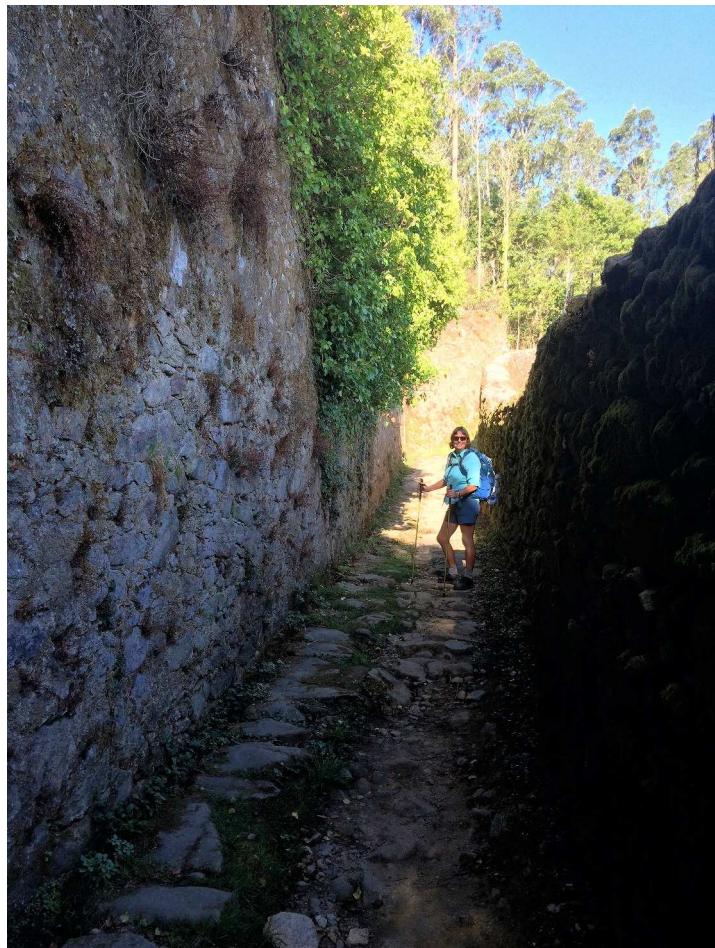
Well, we awoke this morning to a beautiful crisp day and were treated to one of the nicest walks yet! A lateish start just before 10am then quickly out of town into the nearby (and much nicer) village of Corcubión before climbing up over the ridge to Estorde (encountered a few sheep on the way!) where we had a lovely coffee overlooking the Playa de Estorde. Quickly then through Sardiñeiro before rising again and then a final descent to the beach at Finisterre. It was fantastic to get our feet wet again – first time since Santander I think! We should have stopped at this great bar at the end of the beach but instead headed for our accommodation which seemed to be at highest point in the town!

We headed down into the town for a late lunch and discovered the the next three days are the town's annual festival! You can see the fireworks in one of the pictures – at some stage they'll think of letting them off at night! Checkout the size of the sound stage! Thankfully it is a long way from our hotel and our window is pointing away from it but I'm sure we'll hear something. We head out to Lires tomorrow and Muxía after that then back to this hotel, so we will leave some stuff behind and lighten the load a bit!

11km today and 895km in total... second big milestone (Finisterre) reached and one last one to go! Lucky, because I think we are both nearly stuffed!



Alison enjoying breakfast at our hotel, La Marina, before heading to Finisterre - all carbs!



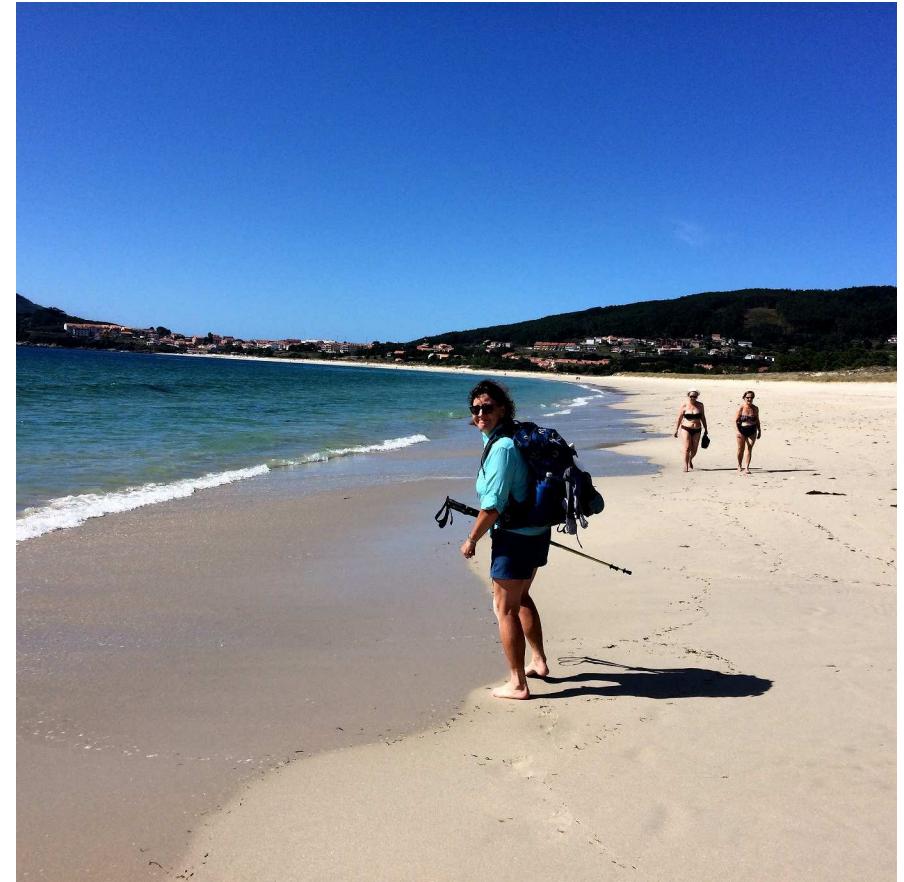


Opposite, top left, the view back into Cee on the way to Corcubión and top right the view from there into Corcubión. Still opposite and bottom left, Alison climbing up the steep walled path out of Corcubión and bottom right the view back over both towns from the ridge above them.

Above, Al's flock on the ridge above the two towns and the view from that ridge to the western most point of continental Europe, Cabo Fisterra (or Finisterre in Spanish).

Below, Playa Estorde, where we had a coffee and once again saw the same English guy, again with a beer, and finally, an interesting garden decoration walking into Sardiñeiro.







Opposite page, looking out over the Playa Langosteira before reaching Finisterre, Alison on the playa and fireworks going off in town.

The boats are just outside the bar we should have stopped at - we were back in Finisterre a few days later, the weather was miserable and the bar closed!

On this page, settling in for a few wines and a paella after dropping our gear off. Quite a difficult process for Alison because, as you can see from the following page, the Hotel Rustico Spa is a long way up a steep hill.





The view from our hotel back towards the Cabo de Cee and the Montes de Buxantes that we had walked over the day before.

September 9, 2016

DAY 42 – FINISTERRE TO LIRES

Another one of those starts where it's not clear whether we were sleeping in or getting going but eventually we headed out of the hotel just after 10am with a much lighter load, having left a fair bit of gear behind at the hotel (I think I managed to reset the combination on the luggage lock as I was closing it, so that's some fun to look forward too!). Finisterre is a long thin town so the first bit was retracing our steps from yesterday, albeit parallel to the beach and a bit higher up the hill. After San Salvador we had a big uphill into pine forest, where we stayed for much of the day, with occasional glimpses of and even more occasional views of the Atlantic. We made it to Castrexé for lunch – a beautiful looking beach there! A bit more uphill, during which we ran into a couple of Kiwis on their 5th Camino, and then a fairly rough descent down to the Rio de Lires, along the valley and up to our hotel in Lires by 2:30pm, just in time for a few drinks and some pimientos de padron...

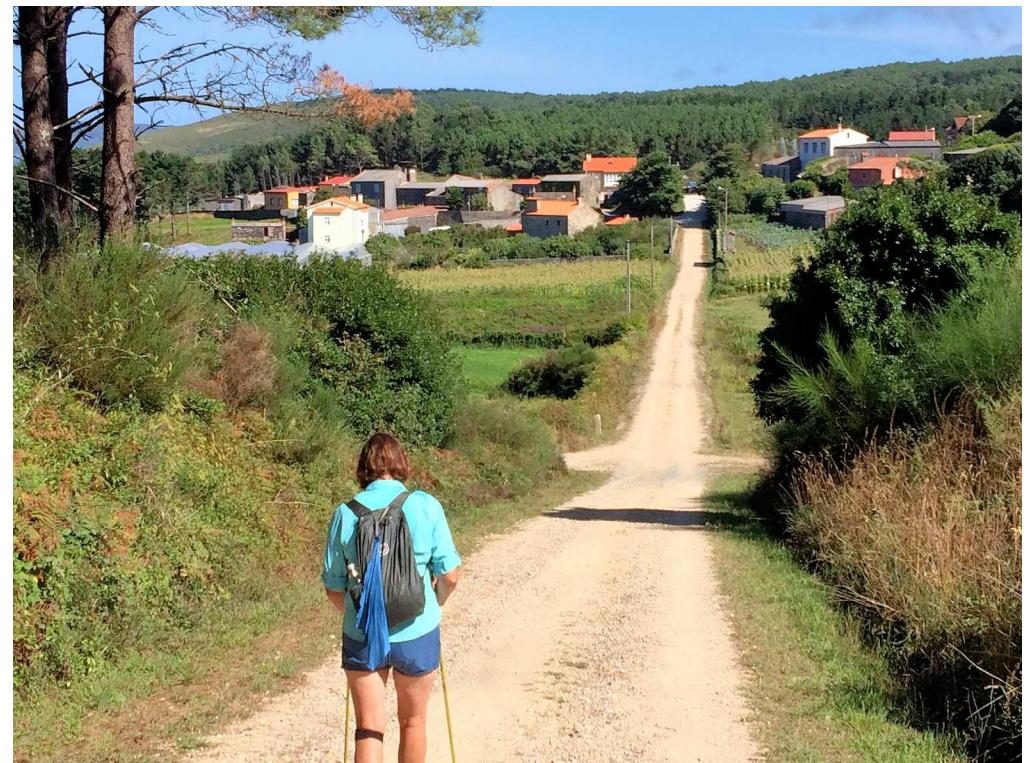
Not a long walk, just 13km to take us over the 900km mark at 908km. Looking forward to the beer after the last walk tomorrow!!!





Above left, Alison walking out of Finisterre looking back over the straggling town towards Cabo de Cee and, previous page, the back beach of Finisterre from close to where Al is standing above. Left, a waymarker pointing us out of Finisterre towards the village of San Salvador de Duio and right top and bottom, the path between San Salvador and Castrexo.





Above, looking out towards Praia de Rostro and Alison walking towards Castrexo not far from where the previous photo was taken.

Below, lunch at Castrexo with the Praia in the background. More often than not, and if we were not at a restaurant, we had to eat our lunch on a log or a boulder - next time we're packing lightweight chairs to sit on!





Checked into our hotel at Lires and waiting for our pimientos de padrón.

September 10, 2016

DAY 43 – LIRES TO MUXÍA

Awoke to low clouds this morning just before 7am – checked the weather and rolled over for a few more zzzzs – forecast was for “showers” most of the day! We got underway just before 9am in a Scottish mist that gradually got worse until we reached the top of the mountain – a real head down and get through it sort of day. Once over the mountain, though, the rain gradually lifted to the point where the last few kms were dry albeit windy (and our first view of the ocean for the day). Naturally, it’s Muxía’s festival today (actually it’s a 3 day festival) and there were lots of people at the point. Although we will go back to Finisterre and take the 3km hike out to the lighthouse, this is really the end of our long, sometimes challenging but stunning and rewarding journey to “... the end of the world...”. Very mixed emotions – relief, excitement, thirst (for a beer) and a feeling of “... what are we going to do if we don’t walk every day?”

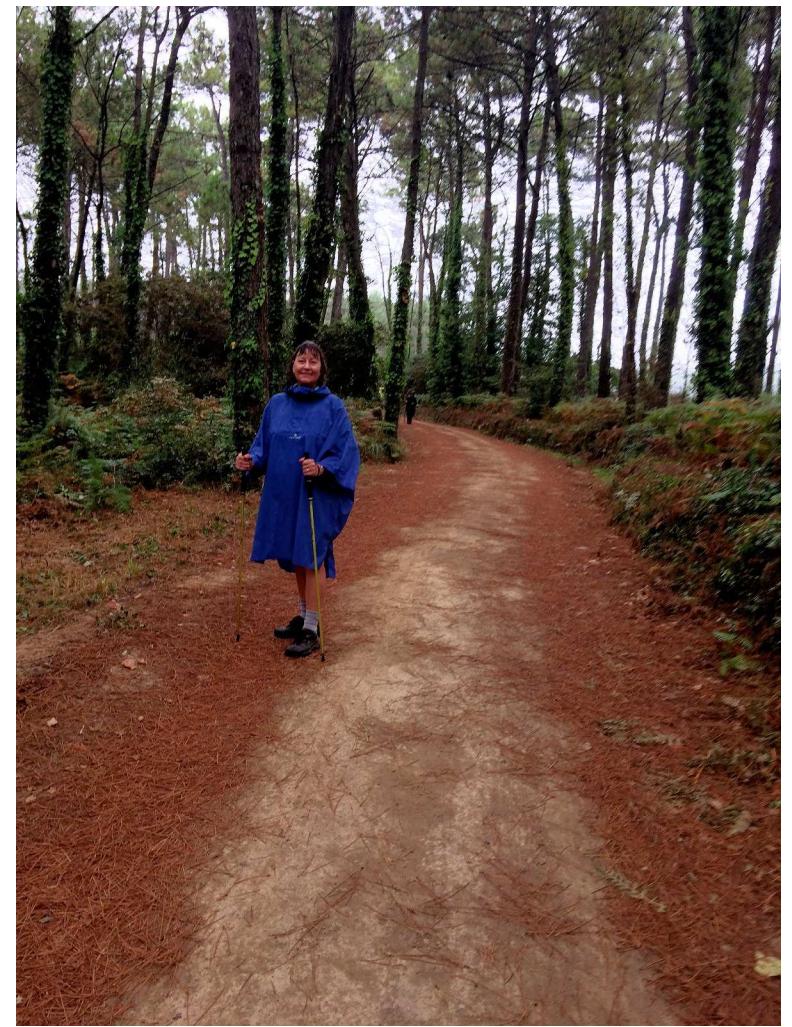
More pictures etc after we go back to Finisterre but in the meantime I might have a little lie down! 15kms today and the final count stands at 923km!



Alison, all set for a wet day, with the Río Lires in the background.



Clockwise from above, me, after crossing the Río do Castro and the initial climb up the hill to Muxía, Al still on the uphill a bit further on, some cows make the path a bit muddier, and Al, this time close to the top of the hill. I know there are some towns along the path but I can't remember their names nor did we take any photos of them - as I said in the blog it was just heads down and keep moving!





Above, Al on the downhill as the clouds started to lift and our first glimpse of the Area de Lourido, the bay immediately preceding Muxía.

Below a wet looking Alison having a sit down next to a freshwater fountain and the view a bit further on past the bay with the Punta da Buitra in the background.

At the fountain we were 2 to 3 kms out of Muxía and when Al went to stand up her knee collapsed! Fortunately she was able to get it working again but she literally limped in the last few kilometres





Above, the view back into the Area de Lourido in the road into Muxía and me posing at the same spot.

Left, part of the festival having arrived in Muxía and making our way (with some difficulty) to the Punta de Barca and the Iglesia Nosa Señora de Barca.



It's obvious where we are: Al and me with, variously, the Iglesia de Nosa Señora de Barca, the Faro de Punta de Barca and the Atlantic Ocean in the background. There was a service at the church for the festival which made it all a bit more special, albeit more crowded





Above, more photos of the Punta and below, sitting down after walking 923kms in 43 days with 7 rest days: 50 days in total.

We hadn't given too much thought to the weight our packs but we weighed them a couple of days later at the airport at Santiago de Compostela - mine was 12kg and Alison's 7kg, both without water...





The view from the point at Muxía and the end of an unbelievable trip - not the trip of a lifetime because we hope to do other Caminos together before too long but definitely one of the great experiences of our lives. People have asked us since we finished what we did all day, did we listen to music or pod-casts on our phones or iPods? The answer is no, we spent all day each day talking to each other about all kinds of things - our lives together so far, what we would do in the future, what we'd seen or experienced on the walk and anything else that came into our heads. It was great!

EPILOGUE

We spent a bit over 5 weeks after finishing the Camino in Spain. We had thought that we would pick up another trail somewhere and keep walking but Alison's knee needed rest, rest and more rest. We stuck with the slow travel theme where we could, catching trains and buses.

Immediately after finishing at Muxía we returned by taxi for two nights back at Finisterre, where we had left a lot of stuff to reduce Al's pack for the last few days to a day pack.

After that we taxied to Santiago to catch the plane to Barcelona where we stayed for four nights then caught the train to a beautiful "white village" called Peñiscola, south of Barcelona, for six or seven nights. From there we caught trains and a bus to another seaside town called Tossa de Mar on the Costa Brava north of Barcelona, initially for four nights but eventually for just under 3 weeks.

Finally, we caught the bus and train back from Tossa to Barcelona and then the fast train to Madrid. In Madrid we took a day trip, again on the fast train, to Tolédo before finally leaving Spain on the October 16, arriving back in Perth on October 18.

To say we had a fabulous time would be understating it and we took tonnes of photos, too many to put in this book, so the following pages have one picture from each location...



The marina at Muxía looking back towards the Punta de Barca



Alison, back in Finisterre two days after we finished, finally able to make the 4km walk out to the lighthouse and the ..."end of the world...". I read later that both Finisterre and Muxía have claims to be the western most point of Europe so we have both bases covered and had walked from the north east border of Spain and France to the west of Spain!



The beach at Barcelonetta. We walked too much around Barcelona for Alison's knee and took in the usual tourist spots like Las Ramblas, the Gaudi works, the Sagrada Familia and the Gothic quarter but found Barcelona very crowded after 50 days of rural bliss, so we really enjoyed getting out of the city to this beautiful enclave.



The Playa Sur and Playa Norte de Peñíscola from the top of the Templar castle in the old town, and the castle and old town from the Playa Norte.

We had a great time here in a small B&B called Dios Esta Bien in one of the white buildings, basically walking (hobbling) to the one of the beaches in the morning, having lunch then a sleep, dinner, sleep and start all over again.





The view over Tossa de Mar from a Templar tower to the west of the town. You can just make out the castle on the right and, top left the points from each of the beautiful bays outside of Tossa as you go north.

We stayed at a lovely but expensive hotel called the Casa Granados for four nights and continued the routine we had in Peñíscola. After four days we didn't want to move on so we booked an apartment in the white building middle left for 14 more nights. Al's knee started to recover and we walked as far north as Cala Pola and south to Blanes

By the time we left the beach was empty, all the boats and beach-side cafés packed away and most of the hotels closed up for winter.



The walled city of Toledo in Castille - La Mancha. We caught the fast train (the RENFE) from Madrid in the morning and joined a bus tour before walking through the city and around the outside of the city walls along the river.



In contrast to Barcelona, we really enjoyed Madrid. Our first day was spent at the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia seeing Picasso's *La Guernica*, having passed through the town of Gernika two months previously, and the Prado Museum. We also visited the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza and wandered around the new and old parts of Madrid. Our last night in Spain was spent at a rooftop bar around the corner called Terraza del Urban going through their complete range of gin and tonics! As you can see we had a sensational sunset to see us off.



After a dusty morning in Madrid (self-inflicted), a short flight to Heathrow, an overnight stay near the airport, and longer flights from London to Dubai then Dubai to Perth, we're finally back in City Beach, an equally great sunset to the one we experienced before leaving Madrid.

