

I walked from Salamanca to Ponte De Lima between the 5th and 19th of May before continuing on to Santiago on the Central Route. As the dust has now settled and I have been chained back at my desk for over a week my thoughts are now clear enough to post a report that I hope helps to update the state of this Camino and perhaps encourage at least one other person to give it a go.

I used Wikilocs trackers including ones by forum members alansykes and Magwood {for which Thanks}. I also consulted Magwood's blog and Alan's report before I went and it was entertaining at times to realise I was at a point where they had an adventure. I particularly recommend Magwood's Trepidatious traveller blog for the albergues prior to Ciudad Rodrigo.

Stage 1: I left Salamanca at 9am on Sunday morning in bright sunshine which with the exception of two mornings followed me all the way to Santiago and laden down with water and enough food to see me (I hope) to Ciudad Rodrigo. You leave the city south over the old bridge and from that point I found the arrows adequate if not copious. This being my first day, nerves had me consulting my GPS often but if your Camino radar is functioning you should have no real problems. I would guess that the first 10km is on or by roads but includes memorable views of Salamanca so remember to stop and look back often. After you leave the road the day is full of distant mountain vistas as you pass through the rolling farmland of Castile & Leon. Eventually a short walk on the road brings you to Robliza de Cojos. The bar at the swimming pool at the start of the village does standard fare and the very basic albergue (donativo) and the big yellow house where you get the key are both on Calle Escultor Vernancia Blanco north of the main square. There are no showers so you can only wash in a basin but after 33km on day one I am simply grateful to have come through in reasonably good shape.

Stage 2: I delved into my Salamanca bought supplies for breakfast, and after backtracking down the road for c2km, had a blissful morning walk of 20km to San Munoz through progressively more idyllic landscapes. I arrived in the village to find both bars shut as it is Monday. I sat down outside the local government office on the plaza to collect my thoughts. The postman arrived marked me down as a peregrino and got the assistance of two workmen who called the hospitalero and gave me directions to the albergue on the south edge of the village. The albergue is donativo again and has a proper kitchen with cooking utensils and a bathroom. I dine on food bought from the shop on the plaza (it was open at 5.30pm) and sleep well.

Stage 3: An early start with several km on a very quiet road through lovely country before I headed off into the woods and fields. Again a happy day to be walking. I had to wade barefoot through two muddy streams but this adds to the adventure but by the time I get to the river before Alba de Yeltes where the albergue is I decide to hop skip and jump across the stony beds and arrive just about dry footed. The last couple of hours turned into a trudge which I put down to the effects of three days exertions on my unfit legs but after meeting the hospitalera and settling into the albergue for a siesta I am on the up again. Still feeling quite tired I eat more of my bought food and adjourn to the bar for a coffee where they are showing bullfighting on television rather than the normal football. The albergue is a room at the back of the community centre with 4 beds and is warm and comfortable. There is a good shower and toilet and once more it is donativo. Today's stage was 26km.

Stage 4: Two hours of rainy road walking but once more through nice country before Bocara, where the bar on the Plaza is shut. I eat an apple take off my raingear as the sun is now shining and set off to Ciudad Rodrigo. This is a stunning walk and the last few km are walked in view of the city. Wildflowers mark the route and this is the best day yet. I booked Hotel Arcos for €36 through Booking.com and this proves a good choice opposite the cathedral in the old city. I walk the circuit of the walls finding the spot where the assault took place in 1812 visit the lovely cathedral and get a stamp before eating at the hotel's sister bar on the Plaza Major where they have a very big flat screen television on which to show the bullfighting. Although I am of the belief that cultures do not change at the instigation of outsiders this is not an aspect of Spain I will miss when I cross into Portugal tomorrow. Today's stage was 25km.

Stage 5: As I have only 21 days to reach Santiago, I have marked out today as a long stage and walk the 44km to Almeida. I stopped at bar Arroyo on the main road in Gallegos de Arganan after 17km where there is an albergue and at Aldea del Obispo 2km before the border which also has an albergue. Notwithstanding quite a lot of tarmac walking I cannot find anything bad to say about this day. Even my rattiness at the unwillingness of Almeida to arrive is part of the experience. To quote from Peter Fleming, at times I felt like I was in a folk tale. Stampeded cows, wildflower meadows and finally a bird of prey swooping to seize a snake from the roadside just feet in front of me, by now London seems a million mile away. I stayed in Casa Morgado (€25 once more through Booking.com) just South of the walls and ate at the restaurant opposite.

Stage 6: Descent to the river Coa followed by a climb up the other side of the valley warms the muscles up and I stop for coffee at a friendly bar in Valverde. The next hour or so is along roads where the traces of last year's fires are clearly visible. After this the Camino descends for several km to the bottom of a river valley which you follow pleasantly for several km upstream to the hilltop town of Pinhel where I stay at the very good Alecrim Rosmaninho (€36 Booking.com and excellent breakfast), dining forgettably on chicken and chips on the main road up the hill. 26km today.

Stage 7: A 32km grind on the hottest day of the camino to Trancoso. I remember the morning being as pleasant as previous days before the heat kicked in, the villages passed barless and the asphalt miles stacked up. Eventually after 5km uphill on the road Trancoso lay before me. Do I stay on the lovely contour hugging road for the last 1.5km or follow the Camino down into the valley and up the real route to the castle on top of that very steep hill in front of me. By the time I got to the bottom of the valley my legs had turned to jelly and the climb up the other side was a slow and painful affair. I stopped at the first bar in town for a cold drink then made my way wearily to Alojamento Dom Dimis (€20 Booking.com good breakfast included). Shortly afterwards I am revived enough to go for an excellent meal for €20 at Area Benta within the walls. I have been the victim of my own overconfidence and incompetence today, not taking enough breaks and not having food with me. By bedtime I feel fine though and am looking forward to tomorrow.

Stage 8: Revived by a good night's sleep and the buffet breakfast at Dom Dimis I set off on a short Sunday walk with the intention of staying in Ponte Do Abade. At about 10 am I think I am hallucinating as descending the hill in front of me is a backpack. This turns out to be a real

peregrina, the first I have met since starting. She is Matilde from Germany where she has lived for 40 years and is getting to know her native Portugal by walking the Via Lusitano. We enjoy a pleasant chat walking to Ponte do Abade where Matilde has booked and where ominously they have plenty of rooms. I have stayed in worse but all I will say is that the German Outdoor guide no longer recommends this place. For the record it was €25 for the room with dinner and breakfast. Only 20km today

Stage 9: The Via and the Camino Torres differ in their routes but converge at Momenta da Beira and Mathilde kindly books rooms at Residencial Pico do Meio-Dia and we go our separate ways to meet again in the evening. Today's walk is lovely but with a long road stretch that spoils it slightly before the climb to today's hilltop destination. The hills are getting bigger and the climbs longer but with more than a week in my legs I feel good. After the last stop tonight's accommodation is a real treat and food is included for a total of €28. This is definitely the best value I experience on the Torres.

Stage 10: An early start and growing excitement about tomorrow's crossing of the Douro. Today's stage is 30km to the city of Lamego and is the first day where there is little flat walking. With the slopes come more spectacular views and more villages. The country is more densely populated and has a clearly different feel to the remoter areas I have walked through so far. There are two stiff climbs to do before cresting the last ridge to see Lamego which at a distance does not impress and the descent and climb up to the city is not a highlight. Nonetheless the centre is pretty and my hotel, Solar dos Pachecos (€50 with breakfast Booking.com) is near the cathedral and is comfortable enough. They do not have a stamp and mass is taking place at the cathedral when I go there, so I eventually get my credencial stamped at Manjar do Doro where Mathilde and I have a farewell meal before our paths diverge tomorrow.

Stage 11: I have been looking forward to today since I decided to walk this route and it does not disappoint. The morning descent to the river is unexciting although I meet and walk with a very nice French peregrina called Emilie who is walking the Interior route with a tent. We have a drink together in Peso da Regua and then I head off to start the climb to Mesao Frio. The steep climb from the river is the toughest part of this Camino but you are rewarded with an achingly beautiful walk of 10km along the valley before you dip down and after another steep little ascent follow the road for another 5km to tonight's destination. All of today is on road but it doesn't really matter. For my second and last literary reference I will steal Bill Bryson's comment about Durham. "You haven't been to the Douro valley, go now, take my car." I stayed in my most expensive accommodation in Mesao Frio at Casa Portas do Douro (€68 Booking.com) but it is a lovely place and the views are magnificent. 28km today.

Stage 12: Today is a transitional stage. The morning sees me climb 650m in mist to the highest point of the Camino at the watershed of the Douro valley before a long descent down a wooded valley to Amarante. Official Camino Torres markers now appear at key points and I no longer consult my GPS. This also means that the route deviates from older GPS tracks as you near Amarante. The final approach to the city takes walkers along a gravelly path next to the motorway which is frankly grim, and I wondered if this really was the way as after the first one there are no signs until you suddenly emerge into quite a posh suburb. A combination of roads and steps then take you surprisingly quickly down to the old town. A good day but probably the

least interesting one so far. I stayed at Hotel Navarras, close to the river (€55 with breakfast Booking.com) and which is much better than it looks from the outside.

Stage 13: From now on until Ponte De Lima the Camino has a similar feel to the Central route but minus the pilgrims. I do meet my only other Camino Torres peregrino at the start of today's stage, but he is only walking 20km today whilst I am going as far as Guimaraes which Wikilocs will record as 42km and we part ways. After a decent climb out of Amarante I follow roads through smallish villages until my GPS takes an alternative and to be honest not very nice route around Felgueiras. At a roundabout just after the town as I am checking to make sure that I am about to take the right road I am spotted by a member of the local association in his car who spots an opportunity to help a lost pilgrim. Despite my protestations that I know what I am doing he later catches up with me again followed by his English-speaking son who he has summoned to interpret. I manage to convince them that I know my way and am not in need of food and head off down a pleasant road with welcome and frequent yellow arrows. Half a mile later another car pulls over and a second member of the Camino Association offers his assistance. Communicating in a shared language this time (French) I am able to reassure him and go my way. A frustrating but heart-warming experience that cheered me up no end as I walked on. I passed a nice monastery (Cistercian by the look of it) over a Roman bridge (I have decided that every bridge in Portugal over 100 years old is Roman and every one in Spain saw a battle in the Peninsular War) before a woodland scramble took me up to the high miraculous Guimaraes cycleway. 7km smooth tarmac going gently uphill through a tunnel of trees with no sound of traffic and only the odd cyclist to disturb my reverie. The stage ended with a 3km downhill walk to the old city and Trovador City Guesthouse (€40 Booking.com). Guimaraes looked a lovely city and I genuinely regretted that I couldn't spend a day there. This looks like the best option for a rest day on the Torres.

Stage 14. A pleasant but unexciting 22km walk to Braga which my GPS seeks to enliven by taking me the direct route over the one real ridge of the day, involving a steep 10 minute scramble uphill through Eucalyptus trees and bushes on a barely existent path. If you come across my GPS tracker for this stage on Wikilocs (Gideon123) don't use it and pay better attention to the arrows than I did. Braga is another city where an unprepossessing walk in ends in a lovely old town. I stayed at Urban Hotel Estacao (€36 Booking.com) which is unsurprisingly opposite the station and was fine but characterless. For reasons that must have made sense at the time, but that I can no longer recall, I had a hamburger for dinner.

Stage 15: Today I walked the last 34km of the Camino Torres to Ponte De Lima. Once again most of the walking is on road but after you leave Braga behind it was enjoyable nonetheless. I walked from Porto via Ponte de Lima in October and remembered the row of backpacks outside the albergue when I arrived from Barcelos. As we were now into the real season I didn't fancy the prospect of an upper bunk and a communal shower so booked Terraco de Vila behind the plaza facing the bridge (€40 Booking.com) marched purposely over the golf course and faced the hordes of the Camino Portuguese.

I hope this is at least mildly useful for anyone contemplating this Camino. It has some quite tough climbs but these are not excessively long. From this perspective I think the toughest stages are between Momenta da Beira and Guimaraes. The two longest stages that I did can be

divided in two so if you have a couple of extra days these can be avoided. Overall I do not think it is harder physically than other caminos I have walked. As I only saw three walkers in the fifteen days it is really still one for people seeking solitude. In one Albergue visitors' book before Ciudad Rodrigo I saw fifteen names so far this year. With more time there were several places I could happily have spent an extra day.

Accommodation is obviously limited especially in Spain where there are only simple albergues. I spent more on accommodation than I have on other Caminos where I stayed in albergues but given the limited options I wanted some reassurance that I would have somewhere to stay and despite some effort I just can't get my head round Portuguese yet. I was fortunate on the price of flights from the UK and as this was my only trip of the year didn't mind the cost.

Overall there were lots of highs and few lows all of which I got over quickly enough. Would I do it again. The answer to that is that I would go tomorrow if I could, although Toledo to Zamora is calling.