

The Way of Saint James, Europe: Josep Mallarach

Basic Data

Declared: 1993

Category: World Heritage Site (including several protected areas)

Faith: Christianity

Background

The Way of Saint James is the longest and oldest living pilgrimage route of Europe. It is named after the shrine of Santiago de Compostela, a name which literally means Saint James (San Yago) of the Field of Stars (Campus Stella). Santiago is located near the Cape Fisterra / Finisterre (i.e. the end of the land) in Galicia, northwestern Spain. The Way has experienced a significant revival during the last decades, blending spirituality, culture, nature and sport in a unique manner. A large number of private and public organizations as well as public administrations are currently involved in the study, restoration and protection of the Way of Saint James, and many formal and informal arrangements have been set up, mainly in Northern Spain, to conserve and restore both the cultural and the natural heritage related to it. In 1987, the Council of Europe declared the Way of Saint James the first European Cultural Itinerary. In 1993, it became the first pathway of the world to be declared a World Heritage Site by UNESCO.

Depending on the linguistic region it crosses, the Way of Saint James receives different names, of the most important: Camino de Santiago (Spanish), Ruta Xacobeá (Galician and Portuguese), Chemin Saint Jacques (French), and Done Jakueren Bidea (Basque).

History and significance of the Way of Saint James to Christianity

Saint James, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus, who was named, together with his brother, 'Son of Thunder', is said to have evangelised Hispania, a province of the Roman Empire at that time. According to legend, after his death in Palestine, the body of Saint James was miraculously transported by sea to Iria Flavia, a small seaport of northwestern Hispania, where it was buried and forgotten for several centuries. Another tradition states that early in the 9th century a star appeared, pointing out the location of the grave to some shepherds. After some miracles that were attributed to him, Saint James was declared the patron of the small kingdom of Asturias, cradle of the future kingdom of Castile, and, centuries later, of Spain. Around the shrine, grew the old town of Santiago de Compostela at the turn of the first millennium.

The take over of the ephemeral Christian kingdom of Jerusalem by Muslim armies in 1078, almost put an end to Christian pilgrimages to the Holy Land. As a result, Saint James of Compostela, sponsored by the influential Citeaux monastic order, became, with Rome, the most important alternative centre of pilgrimage of Western Europe, being visited by a continuous flow of European pilgrims, especially during the 11th-14th centuries.

Along the main routes to Santiago, thousands of monasteries, temples, hospitals, inns, and shelters of great interest were built and thrived for centuries, most of them up to the present time. During the 12th century, over ten thousand monks and members of chivalry orders were devoted to protect pilgrims, providing for their basic needs. The spiritual and cultural significance of the Way of Saint James has been recognised as enormous for Europe during the Medieval Ages. During the 17th century the flow of pilgrims began to decline, reaching its minimum during the late 19th century, when most pathways were abandoned. However, in the 1950s, recovery efforts began in Galicia, and since then have been rapidly increasing, as has the number of pilgrims and other users of the Way.

The origins of this sacred site and its pilgrimages seem to be far older than Christianity, as demonstrated by the continuity of five millennia old petroglyphs up to the very stones of the medieval cathedral of Santiago. It has been proven that the same site was already a pilgrimage centre during the megalithic civilisation.

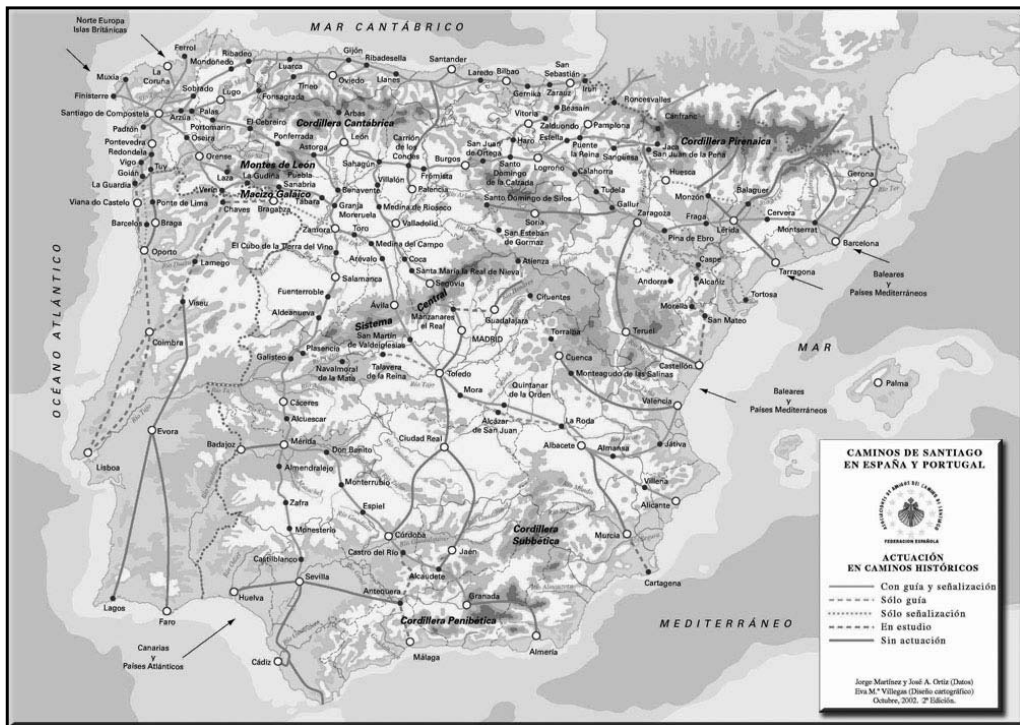
Compostela, near the end of the earthy reflection of the Milky Way in the European continent, would be, therefore, one more example of an outstanding sacred site being recognised as such by successive prehistoric spiritual traditions, until its final integration in a historic mainstream religion –Christianity in this case.

Description of the Ways

Actually, there is not a single route to Saint James, but a number of different pathways, departing from different locations of Spain, France and Portugal. The most important routes are those that cross the Western Pyrenees mountains following northern Spain, from Navarre to Galicia, in two main branches, called the Northern and the Southern Ways. The total length of each of these ways can vary from 750 to 2000 km, depending on where they begin. The Spanish network of routes to Saint James has a total length of over 5000 km, although only half of them have been signposted. Nowadays not all pilgrims or hikers follow an entire Way, but some do it by foot, bicycle or horseback, either in one go or by sections, over consecutive years.

The Northern Way, enters Spain by Irun, and follows the Atlantic coast to Donostia/San Sebastian, and then Santander until Gijón. From there, the Way turns southwest to Oviedo, Cangas de Narcea, Lugo and Palas de Rei. The Southern Way, also called the French way, was the main historic route. It crosses the Pyrenees by Roncesvalles going southwest to Pamplona / Iruña, Estella and Logroño. From there, it goes westwards to Burgos, San Domingo de la Calzada, León, Astorga, Villafranca del Bierzo, Samos, and Palas de Rei. From Roncesvalles to Santiago is about 800 km. Both ways collide either at Melide or Palas de Rei, from where they go to Santiago in the last four days of the walk. The Spanish portions of these two Ways of Saint James, which are well signposted and equipped with facilities, can be followed in four to seven weeks by foot, and less than half this time by bike. The French Way has facilities adapted to the needs of those that go on horseback.

Other Ways of Saint James that have guides and are signposted include the Way of Silver (Vía de la Plata) that departs from Sevilla or Granada, in southern Spain, as well as those departing from Barcelona, Alicante or Valencia, along the Mediterranean coast. The shortest way is called the English Way, since it departs from the two harbours that are closer to Santiago: El Ferrol and La Coruña.



Natural Protected Areas related to the Ways

In Spain, nature conservation is almost completely decentralised, with responsibility lying with each Autonomous (regional) government. The Spanish portion of the two main Ways of Saint James crosses six Autonomous Communities: Galicia, Asturias, Cantabria, Castile-Lion, Basque Country, and Navarre. Secondary branches of the Way include other regions, such as Aragon, Catalonia, Castile –La Mancha, Andalusia, etc. In all of these regions there are projects to integrate the Ways of Saint James to natural heritage or landscape protection schemes, of different scope and stages of execution.

Curiously, the secondary pathways, those that were used in Medieval times only in cases of trouble (since they avoided the main cities), currently have an additional interest for modern visitors, because they go across natural areas, which often are of high quality. Therefore, regional and local authorities or NGOs involved in nature conservation are usually more interested in the old ancillary ways, whereas agencies and organizations working to preserve cultural heritage are usually more interested in the main historical ways.

In Spain, the efforts to restore the Ways of Saint James have been paralleled with the decentralisation process and the declaration of most protected areas by the regional governments, since the mid 1980s. Currently, there are a large number of protected areas which are physically related to the Ways of Saint James, and their visit is suggested to pilgrims and hikers by most published guides. Although many of these protected areas have been established, or proposed, based on natural heritage values (such as those areas included in the Natura 2000 network) there is a growing number that aim to protect and restore –when needed – both natural and cultural heritage values, usually as Nature Parks (which in Spain are equivalent to the IUCN category V) and Special Plans (Plan Especial) a flexible legal figure used to protect and restore both natural and cultural heritage values.

One of the best examples of these types of synergies is found in Cantabria, on the Atlantic coast. There have been five consecutive declarations of Biosphere Reserves, established over nearby existing protected areas, mainly Nature and National parks: Muniellos (2000), Somiedo (2000), Redes (2001), Picos de Europa (2003) and Babia (2004), which constitute the Great Biosphere Reserve of the Cantabric Mountains, the largest Biosphere Reserve of Spain. Its purpose is to be “an instrument to coordinate this area with its cultural and biological values, in an integrated manner based on the Way of Saint James, a structural element, linking the Cantabric mountains with Europe”.

During the last decade several regional rules have been passed to protect portions of the Ways of Saint James and its surroundings. A good example is the Law of protection of the Ways of Saint James of Galicia (1996), which provides protection for all cultural elements associated to the Ways in this region, as well as trees and other landscape features in an area 60m wide along the pathway.

Another type of protection approach relies on specific plans aimed to conserve and restore the Ways of Saint James, including not only the pathway itself, but all the historic monuments, bridges, lookouts, shelters, and resting places related to it. Those types of plans (Planes Especiales or Planes Directores) have been set up in many portions of the Way in Spain. A good example of them is the ‘Plan director del Camino de Santiago’ promoted by the Diputación Foral de Álava, which encompasses the route that connects the North and the South Ways to Saint James. This section of the Way is linked to several greenways, as well as to a selection of the best landscapes of the province of Álava, that had been proposed to be protected based on the principles of the European Convention on Landscapes.

Cultural and natural values are closely interrelated on most Ways. Most routes to Saint James are literally filled with hundreds of outstanding historic and cultural monuments, which are often located in areas of outstanding beauty. The Old town of Santiago, with its Romanesque, Gothic and Baroque buildings, gardens and courtyards is considered one of the world’s most beautiful urban areas, and was declared a World Heritage Site in 1985.

Recovery and revival of the Ways of Saint James and its effects on the environment

In the Middle Ages people made the pilgrimage out of religious zeal, no doubt, although those engaged in faith-related organizations could have, in addition, deeper reasons. Nowadays, with the weakening of

Christianity in Western Europe, and the coexistence of other Faiths, motivations for people from all Faiths, to walk hundreds of kilometres to the presumed resting place of Saint James are more diverse. Faith is still a major component for pilgrims, although it can have more nuances. Motivations such as reaction against our overindulging society, an escape from an unhappy, boring day-to-day existence, contact with nature, and a possibility to rediscover one's inner self, are often quoted. Recently, there have been Christian friars that have organised pilgrimages to what they call the 'Way of life' to help young people coming from prisons in their healing process.

People willing to take the Way by foot or horseback (lately bicycle has been added as another acceptable option) for many days, even for several weeks, usually have good attitudes towards natural and cultural values. Therefore, conflicts with them are, very limited. Indeed, pilgrims and ecotourists alike constitute a powerful conservationist force against ill-conceived development projects that contribute to the deterioration of the ancient pathways to Saint James, as well as the cultural, historic and landscape heritage associated with them.

The first known guide of the Way of Saint James, the *Liber sancti Iacobi* –or *Liber peregrinationis*, was written by Aimery Picaud, a monk from the ancient kingdom of Aquitany, eight centuries ago. Since then, particularly during the last decades, a large number of guides have been published in many different languages to serve those who, from all over the world, wish to prepare themselves to take the Way of Saint James^{xxxii}.

Those who take the Pilgrim's Way *bona fide*, i.e. for spiritual reasons, can obtain a personal certificate of pilgrimage (Credencial), which allows them to stay overnight in shelters along the way, in Spain, either for free or for a modest amount. At the end, in Santiago, they can obtain a special certificate, issued by the "Cabildo" of the Cathedral, written in Latin, named "Compostela" which states that they have done the pilgrimage '*pietatis causa*' (because of piety).

A common inner aspiration to most people taking the Pilgrim's Way to Saint James is that, for one reason or another, they will become somewhat better or healthier, either at the physical, psychological, and/or spiritual level. The Way provides a closer relationship with outstanding protected natural areas, significant sacred sites, and centres of spiritual and cultural heritage, as well as close contacts with people from all strands of life, which usually produces, or reinforces, a more conscious and respectful attitude towards the universal values of our common heritage.



Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, Spain.

Courtesy of SacredSites.com

^{xxxii} A selection of those guides can be found in the suggested web sites. <http://www.caminosantiago.com/> includes information about art, history, natural areas, pilgrims forum, restaurants, transportation, advice for those going on bicycle or horseback, etc., available in Spanish, French, English and Italian; <http://www.caminosantiago.org/> site of the Spanish Federation of Associations of Friends of the Way of Saint James (Federación Española de Asociaciones de Amigos del Camino de Santiago) It includes a lot of useful references: detailed maps, books, journals, shelters, virtual guide, useful links, etc., and features the Spanish journal "Peregrino", which is available in electronic format since 1987. ; <http://membres.lycos.fr/ultreia/chemin/assojacq.htm> site of the French Associations of Friends of Saint James; <http://dSPACE.dial.pipex.com/telegraph/04camino/040009d1.htm> includes a complete list of book reviews, maps and guides about the Pilgrim's Way to Saint James, all in English.; <http://www.efdeportes.com/efd87/camino.htm> a well documented site about the revitalization of the Ways of Saint James as a modern long route for ecotourism, hikers, bikers, etc. (only in Spanish.)