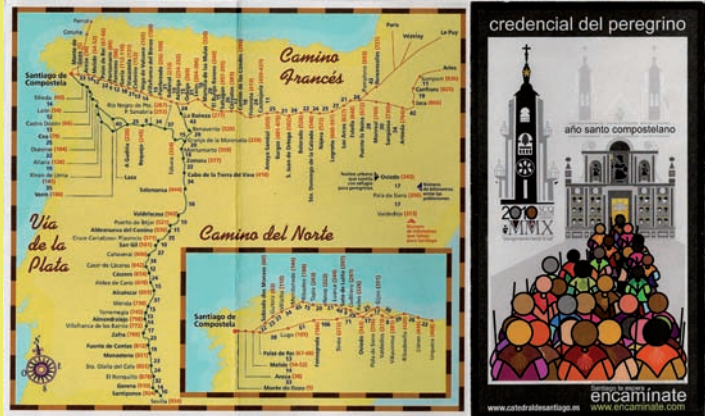


A WHOLE-Y RIDE IN A HOLY YEAR

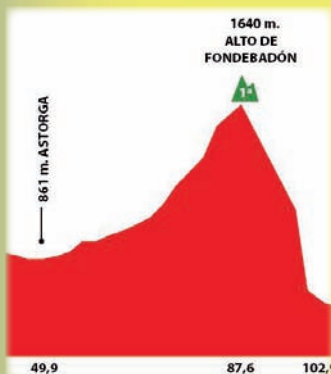


THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO 2010 ASTORGA TO SANTIAGO - 270KM, 1 DAY

The Camino de Santiago is a Catholic pilgrimage whose route traces various paths across the whole of Europe. However, most people, whether on foot or by bike (or sometimes even on horseback) traditionally start from either St. Jean Pied de Port, in south-west France, or Roncesvalles, in north-east Spain. The distances to Santiago de Compostela (in Galicia, north-west Spain) are some 800 km or 780 km respectively. My connection with the Camino began in spring 2008, when I undertook the 'full' and 'proper' route on foot from St. Jean, eventually carrying on beyond Santiago to Finisterre, the end of the world, so adding some additional 100 km to my trek.

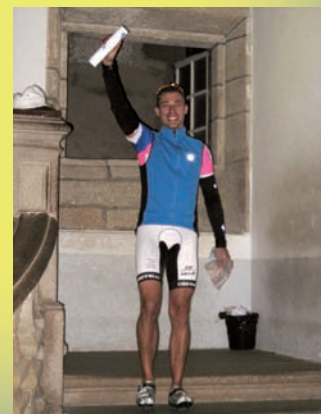


It is a thoroughly enjoyable experience, but I can add a thoroughly more unpleasant one to the options available: Astorga (in Castilla y León) to Santiago, some 270 km according to Google Maps for the route more-or-less taken, in one day. Ok, 270 km in a single day, a one-off, may not sound like a big deal, being around 170 miles, but you have to consider the terrain and play by the Camino's rules.



First, the terrain: lying between these two towns are two mountain ranges, so guaranteeing a category one climb (according to the 2008 *Vuelta a España* and 2010 *Vuelta a Castilla y León*) to the Puerto de Foncebación at some 1,600 m and an only slightly less strenuous drag up to Pedrafita/Alto do Poio at around 1,300 m. The route seems flat after that, but it is not. Galicia is the lush, almost-Celtic corner of Spain, irrigated by many rivers, so resulting in innumerable rolling valleys. No sooner are you at the top of a regular but testing pull up to one watershed or another and plunging down the other side, than you are confronted with exactly the same again. A sort of unrelenting hill interval training, with large intervals. The additional lanes marked out for heavy goods vehicles on the upward sides of the road give this game away.

Second, the rules to complete a qualifying Camino de Santiago and obtain a *compostela*, a pilgrim's certificate: either walk at least (usually the final) 100 km or cycle 200 km. These thresholds are deliberately low, probably to allow the elderly, infirm and usually overly-religious to complete a pilgrimage, or to allow large parties of schoolchildren to finish a Camino on a school trip of acceptable duration. To demonstrate compliance, the pilgrim carries a *credencial*, a pilgrim's passport, in which stamps are collected at various hostels, churches and sundry amusing locations along the route. As a rule, the shorter the Camino undertaken, both in length and duration, the more stamps that are needed to evidence that one did not just go for a day's pleasant driving. (On occasion, the pilgrim is asked



to confirm the details of their pilgrimage in the pilgrim office when the *credencial* is examined, so having actually observed the strictures helps answering with a straight face and maintaining eye contact). In practice this means that the ride is not just about tapping out 30 kph and arriving after about nine hours in the saddle, but involves getting off the bike, getting the paperwork out from wherever it is being stored away from the elements, going into an establishment, waiting until somebody decides to help you out (do not underestimate the Spanish aversion to customer service), stamping the passport, and then putting everything back again and getting back on the bike. This takes more time than might be imagined.

So it was in the autumn of 2008 that I dreamt up this challenge while in Astorga and scratching around for a bit of athletic action. I borrowed a bike from one of the town's pilgrim hostels (albeit without a rear brake, since I had disabled it following a tumble on an earlier descent from the Puerto de Foncebadón, which had rendered it inoperable) and gamely set out at 6:40 a.m. to Santiago. On that occasion I arrived precisely as the cathedral bells struck 9 p.m., the closing time of the pilgrim office, and claimed the last *compostela* issued that day. Exhausted, but task accomplished. The next year, I borrowed a spare bike from Astorga Cycling Club's Señor Waddington, the chairman. This was a clapped-out Minali, seemingly hewn from a lump of pure lead, and whose seat stem had broken while on a climb a few weeks earlier and which now accommodated the seat post with the aid of cable ties. Struggling with this monstrous, decomposing bike and a puncture on route, I arrived on the same day in Santiago, albeit too late (9:15 p.m.) to claim my certificate, which undermined the achievement in my mind.



Really, I should by now happily give up this folly. I have proven my point, it can be done, and there is a rose-tinted nostalgic glow in looking back on those efforts. But 2010 was a holy year in the Camino calendar, being a year on which *El Día del Patrón* (Saint James' day), 25 July, falls on a Sunday, and these years attract more pilgrims, more focus on the Camino story and the Pope himself. I wanted to be part of this. And having now purchased a new Orbea Aqua for myself, so as not to rely on anybody else's generosity or deathtrap, it should now be an altogether more pleasant experience.



So on 30 September I set off at just after 7 a.m. from Astorga on the dark and unlit roads leading to the north-west León mountains. The previous couple of days involved intensely monitoring weather forecasts as vague as they are varied, futile as it is trying too carefully to judge the likely conditions over this distance and terrain. It looked reasonable. But as dawn broke and the road turned more severely upwards, the first mountain summit, only 36 km from Astorga, appeared shrouded in cloud. It got worse: it was not just cloudy, there was fine drizzle, almost suspended rain, and nigh-zero visibility above 1,200m. Going uphill, this was no big deal, but it made flying down the other side impossible or foolhardy – you choose – but this is where I hoped to make up time. The road is too steep to take chances in those conditions: the corners appear out of nowhere and braking power was reduced to negligible even without pedalling (at the end



of the ride the chainstays and rear forks were covered in a thin black film of brake dust deposited from these conditions). Plus it was bloody cold; I was soaked to the bone and the wind-chill of descending just froze me numb.

At the picturesque village of Molinaseca, an old friend Mati had taken over as the warden of the municipal *albergue* (hostel). It was his bike that I had used for my first one-day Camino. He kindly offered me a shower and the opportunity to warm up, but sadly there was not time. A quick exchange of pleasantries, a large, red stamp in the passport and on my way. Next up the somewhat ugly city of Ponferrada, a recent contender to host the cycling world championships in 2013. I have yet to pass through this city and not get lost. I think that is why the 2008 *Vuelta a España* passed twice through this metropolis when the town featured as a stage finish; the riders were only meant to visit once, but could not find their way to the finishing line. It does at least contain about 5 km of flat roads, I swear the only flat section on the whole route.



Finally the much-vaunted Spanish sun put his sombrero on as the road headed out into the Bierzo winelands, and I began to dry out. This is a lovely section, comprising good roads and a winding valley road via little villages before the gradient increases up to the Galician border. It is continuously off and on the bike to get the *credencial* suitably stamped up. (I'll admit that, to enhance the *credencial's* visual appearance and make it more engaging, in the days before setting off I amble around Astorga and acquire some stamps in advance, usually from some fairly daft places, such as the CSI unit, a bakery or my wine bar of preference).



At around midday I scale the summit of Pedrafita, and it is a beautiful panorama, a little above cloud level, sunny, yet with frost still patched on the road. Also, I'm feeling pretty knackered by now. But after the kind lady of the Hostal Santa María at the summit had given me a quick tasting portion of her beef stew, I am in slightly better spirits and know that it is all downhill for the next 15 km to Triacastela, my lunch destination. I don't use a musette, I would

rather have a rest, and in the sun it is rather warm. This is also the half-way point, so every kilometre further seems easier knowing that I am past the point of no return (and I have no intention of returning back up the big hills anyway).

Time and distance passes more easily on the undulating roads to Santiago from Triacastela. The significant towns appear broadly every 20-25 km, making for useful stamp and drink stops, with a longer stop in Palas de Rei to eat as much sugar-laden food as I can lay my hands on. By this time it is about 5:20 p.m. and I know that, barring unforeseen mishaps, I will make Santiago in good time. There is only about 65 km to go, albeit up and down the many valley sides described earlier. Shortly after leaving Palas de Rei, Raquel blasts past in her car, having finished her lessons for the day a few hours earlier. So now there is some human encouragement at regular points along the remainder of the parcours, as well as photographs of a somewhat psychotic and ragged-looking figure.





Santiago is a wonderful city in every respect, and looks wonderful from a distance. But here the yellow arrows and shells that mark the Camino's path throw a curve ball, diverting pilgrims away from main roads and through suburb backwaters. Somehow these seem to be perpetually uphill, even featuring a stretch that makes the Mur de Huy look like the camber on my driveway. In fact, in some places the Camino ceases to be a road, so in the dusky gloom it becomes a nutter's cyclo-cross. However, it is not too long before it is beyond the in every sense horribly inaptly named Monte de Gozo (Mountain of Joy) and into the city proper. After getting slightly lost again, I weave through the historic cobbled streets and crowds to reach the pilgrim office shortly before 8:30 p.m. and receive my *compostela*. A relaxing evening and the following day in Santiago are well worth the effort.



I keep saying not next year and probably never again, but each next year it actually seems like it was all quite good fun. It is difficult to convey the personal side, friendship and warmth experienced on the Camino, whether on bike or, better, on foot. The Astorga Cycling Club is considering organising a club ride along these lines. Let me know if you want in.

