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The Camino de Santiago: An Undervalued International Asset in the Province of León

After centuries of pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, there is Little doubt about the profound connection between body and soul that this journey fosters in those who undertake it. Something intangible -yet deeply felt- draws us along varied paths, whether comfortable or demanding, for seven hours or forty days, alone or with others. Most reach the same conclusion: it is a remarkable experience.

This personal and rewarding feeling is complemented by the broader cultural value of the Royal French Way of St. James, often described as the 'Main Street of Europe' due to its symbolic significance. Its importance is widely acknowledged: in 1987, it was designated the first Cultural Route by the Council of Europe; in 1993, it was granted World Heritage status by UNESCO; and in 2004, it received the Prince of Asturias Award for Concord. This recognition was given for its role as "a place of pilgrimage and a meeting point for people of different nations that has become a symbol of fraternity over the centuries and a cornerstone of an awareness of Europe." That same year, the Council of Europe reaffirmed its support, claiming that it represents "the meaning of the human being in society, the ideas of freedom and justice (...), a space of tolerance, knowledge and solidarity, a space for dialogue and encounter."

Such recognitions undoubtedly require careful attention to ensure that the expectations of pilgrims are met. In other words, all individuals, as well as public, private, and semi-private entities located along this legendary route, must recognize our shared responsibility to care for this treasure. Identifying and addressing its needs is far from an impossible task. Everybody connected to the Camino de Santiago shares the responsibility to respect, safeguard, and maintain the space and its elements in optimal condition; to promote good practices among residents—fostering education, tolerance, assertiveness, and support for those who, through their journey, enrich our communities culturally, socially, and economically. A well-kept Camino will, in turn, be met with recognition and praise.

It has often been claimed, and it is a well-established fact, that the province of León enjoys considerable economic and cultural benefits from being part of this universal route. Historically, from the 10th century onward, the Camino grew into one of the most significant religious and cultural movements of the Middle Ages. Despite the profound changes experienced globally in recent centuries, pilgrimages like the Camino de Santiago have endured, largely unaffected. While initially rooted in religious tradition, the motivations behind the journey have evolved, turning this mass movement into an advantageous cultural, social, economic, and spiritual asset.

It is also evident that, far from declining, pilgrimage numbers continue to rise, driven by a renewed interest in the Camino. For this reason, those of us who live along it must strive to provide the best possible conditions for the route. However, well into the 21st century, the passage through León - from east to west, encompassing villages, cities, mountains and plains- still exhibits inconsistent conditions, especially in terms of pilgrim safety, a matter that must be urgently addressed. Therefore, as the popularity of the Camino grows, so does our responsibility to protect this Asset of Cultural Interest that crosses the soul of the province - officially recognised in 1999 and declared a Historical Site in 1962. Infrastructure developments such as roads should be avoided to increase the safety of pilgrims. Likewise, the protection of historical monuments suffering from age-related deterioration and unsightly local signage is still awaiting the opening of a well-deserved dossier in several enclaves.

Apart from that, the notion that education is the foundation of all behaviour is a well-established theory that is yet to be fully implemented. This objective could be achieved by raising awareness among the younger generations, who are the future guardians of the Camino, through educational initiatives. Additionally, integrating services such as physiotherapy, language support, and the academic study of our province's strengths deserve our attention as these endeavours have the potential to enhance the pilgrim experience.

Thus far, much of this remains aspirational. In practice, the complex web of overlapping authorities -from local councils to the European Union- can create a lack of clarity regarding the required course of action while hindering the execution of essential tasks. In this context, as a global and impartial outlook is almost utopian, it is perhaps the local Associations of Friends of the Camino de Santiago that at present have shown the greatest sympathy, dedication and understanding of this route. Nonetheless, no organisation is without its flaws.

Ultimately, the meticulous care given to the Camino within the province of León -perceived as quality by those who experience it- has yet to reach the standard it deserves: EXCELLENT.