



Nanci de Paz Fernández (1950) studied Teaching at the Escuela Normal of León, specializing in English Philology. She worked as a schoolteacher in various places in El Bierzo and Valdeorras.

She pursued studies in French Language and Civilization at the Sorbonne and the University of Angers, and in English Language at the universities of Limerick (Ireland) and Reading (United Kingdom). She obtained the Advanced Certificate in French, English, and Galician at the Official Schools of Languages of León, Ponferrada, and Ourense, respectively.

A mountaineer, Santiago pilgrim, and traveler, she has walked mountains, routes, and countries across the five continents.

The Camino de Santiago in 1976: Following in the Footsteps of the Ancient Pilgrims

The pilgrims who once filled the roads to Santiago had stopped passing, but the legends surrounding them lived on in the collective imagination, and the Camino was still there, calling to us, waiting for someone to tread it again.

That is what we thought in July 1976 when we decided to begin the Camino in Astorga, with a simple plan: 30 km per day and the possible stopping points.

We loaded our backpacks with the bare minimum we might need for ten days, not forgetting our sleeping bags, and set off with energy.

Reaching Ponferrada was easy, since the route was the same as it is today, though without asphalt.

It was evening when the four of us entered Foncebadón. The few inhabitants looked at us with some suspicion, but we knew the shepherd of the flock, who sheltered us that first night.

In the morning we greeted the Cruz de Ferro, then just a simple structure with no abandoned boots. We left our sins behind with the stone we placed on the pile and continued to Ponferrada, where my parents lived at the time – our natural stop and rest.

On leaving town, we avoided the national road as much as possible, following village paths according to the kind instructions of the locals.

While resting in the garden in Villafranca, we met a pilgrim from Madrid who had left Ponferrada that same day. We continued to Pereje and, before sleeping, listened carefully to the directions for reaching O Cebreiro.

We have never forgotten the beauty of those forests. Past La Faba, we lay down to take a nap in the middle of the grassy path until a tractor nearly ran us over. We arrived in O Cebreiro in time to visit the sanctuary and talk with Don Elías, already an authority. He was delighted to see us; he loved when pilgrims arrived on foot. He gave us wise advice about the route, and we changed our itinerary accordingly.

The next day we would spend the night in Samos, where the monks let us stay in the monastery gallery.

From what we gathered in our conversations with the locals, pilgrimages on foot had never completely ceased in that area. People in the villages were not surprised to see us and were prepared to “offer lodging to the pilgrim.” Some cars stopped to ask if we needed anything. They cared about us, offered us food, and refused to charge us in the shops... Everything felt very familiar, though it seemed strange to them that we were doing the pilgrimage without being “offered.”

Apart from the discomfort of walking long stretches on the road and having to retrace our steps whenever we got lost due to the lack of signage, that was the greatest difference between that Camino and the ones we have done since.

Today the pilgrim revitalizes the local economy; back then, we were guests of the village.

Another major difference was the way of doing the Camino, with no pressure at all. Nothing was fixed. We didn't have to reach any place at any specific time. Everything flowed according to where the path led us.

In Paradela, the mayor gave us the school to spend the night. The neighbors debated the route we should take. They told us about a path to Palas de Rei. Tired of roads and intersections, we chose that option without thinking about the possible crossings. We stood before a wonderful stone cross, unsure which of two paths to follow, when a cart loaded with hay appeared, as if it were Queen Lupa's cart carrying the Apostle's remains. Following its tracks, we reached our destination after walking 17 km more than planned.

In the final stages, we crossed paths with another pilgrim, a young Frenchman who had left Roncesvalles traveling extremely light (he had even trimmed his maps). He told us he walked about 70 km per day; he was returning from Santiago, doing the route in reverse toward his home.

A group of horse riders also passed us, coming from Pamplona and taking advantage of the San Fermín festivities.

We spent our last night at the Lavacolla airport, and early in the morning stopped at the fountain as all pilgrims before us had done.

On the hill where Monte do Gozo now stands, the majestic goal of our effort appeared. The bells of San Marcos were ringing.

We continued, unstoppable, with no difficulty entering the cathedral through the Puerta del Perdón with our backpacks on. Yes, there were people, but it was easy to reach the Pórtico de la Gloria.

We managed to fit our fingers into the grooves carved by centuries in the mullion column. Then we gently gave the three croques to the saint, asking for wisdom as the students of Fonseca once did, and walked proudly down the central nave to the front pews to attend the Pilgrim's Mass.

When the botafumeiro flew over our heads at the end, we felt weightless, floating among the beautiful images of the Camino, which made us forget blisters, soreness, hard floors, and paths walked twice... erasing every unpleasant sensation.

Upon leaving, we took the photo in front of the Obradoiro façade, that magnificent image we all repeat when the Camino brings us back, with the same excitement as the first time.

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