

INTRODUCTION:

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Before walking the Camino de Santiago, we asked ourselves, "Could we walk the Camino without staying in the refugios (albergues)?"

At 59 and 63-years-young, we were not at all interested in sleeping with 50 to 100 strangers, in bunk beds, in large rooms with the co-ed bathrooms down the hall. No disrespect to anyone who enjoys such an experience, but it's not what we were looking for.

The Camino is hard. At the end of each day we wanted to know there was a private room and bath waiting for us. If you're of the same mindset, we can offer a few words of wisdom based on having been there, done that.

You can find our Camino posts written in real time by clicking on "We Walked the Camino" on the right sidebar of our blog, or you can find the posts in the archives listed as "Camino de Santiago." What we offer here is a more detailed account of our Camino experience, and answers to a few practical questions about the reality of walking the Camino.

The most important thing we can tell you is that walking the Camino belongs to you. So while we offer our Camino as a source of reference, please don't expect the same experience. Everyone walks on their terms. It is your Camino!

THE 64 MILLION DOLLAR QUESTION:

Why are you walking the Camino? I'm not sure we ever answered that question, but I'm quite certain it didn't matter. We walked because we wanted to. There were no deeply profound reasons, no religious convictions or a search for answers. Hell, we didn't even know the questions. We just knew it was something we wanted to do while our bodies were still up to the task. When we started walking we told each other that if one or both of us wanted to stop, without regrets, we would stop. Once we were well into the journey though, there was no way we were going to stop. The Camino takes hold of you and won't let go. It becomes a quest, your daily life, nothing else matters. When you are completely exhausted at the end of the day and fall into bed thinking you can't go on, you get up the next morning and do it all again. We were committed to finishing. That's not to say we didn't think about stopping, especially on Day 8 and Day 12, my two worst blister days, but I wasn't going to be the pilgrim who threw in the towel. I knew I'd regret it for the rest of my life.

STARTING POINT:

Depending on how you choose to find your way to St. Jean Pied de Port, France, it's the starting point for many who walk the Camino Frances - or perhaps the most well-known starting point.

We traveled by train from Paris to Bayonne and from Bayonne to St. Jean Pied de Port by bus. Trains do run between Bayonne and SJPP, but at the time of our travels, (April 2015) the section of track was under construction.

- The bus from the Bayonne Train Station to St. Jean Pied de Port costs 20 euros. The first bus leaves at 7:45 a.m. but the ticket office does not open until 9:00 a.m. The ticket vending machine only accepts credit cards with chips in it and it does not take paper money, only coins. If you do not have a credit card with an embedded chip, you should either buy your tickets the day before or make sure you have enough coins. NOTE: Our bus driver did not collect passenger tickets, it seems to be on the honor system. We also realized too late that we probably could have used our Eurail passes since the bus was a train connector.



St. Jean Pied de Port - Spain. The starting point of the Camino Frances.

PILGRIMS' OFFICE - St. Jean Pied de Port:

St. Jean Pied de Port is a fun place to spend a day/night before starting your Camino. You'll want to be sure to check in at the pilgrim's office as well.

The address of the Pilgrims' office in SJPP:

Amies du Chemin de Saint Jacques at 39 rue de la Citadelle

Hours: 7h30 to 12h30 and 13h30 to 22h

Telephone number is 05 59 37 05 09

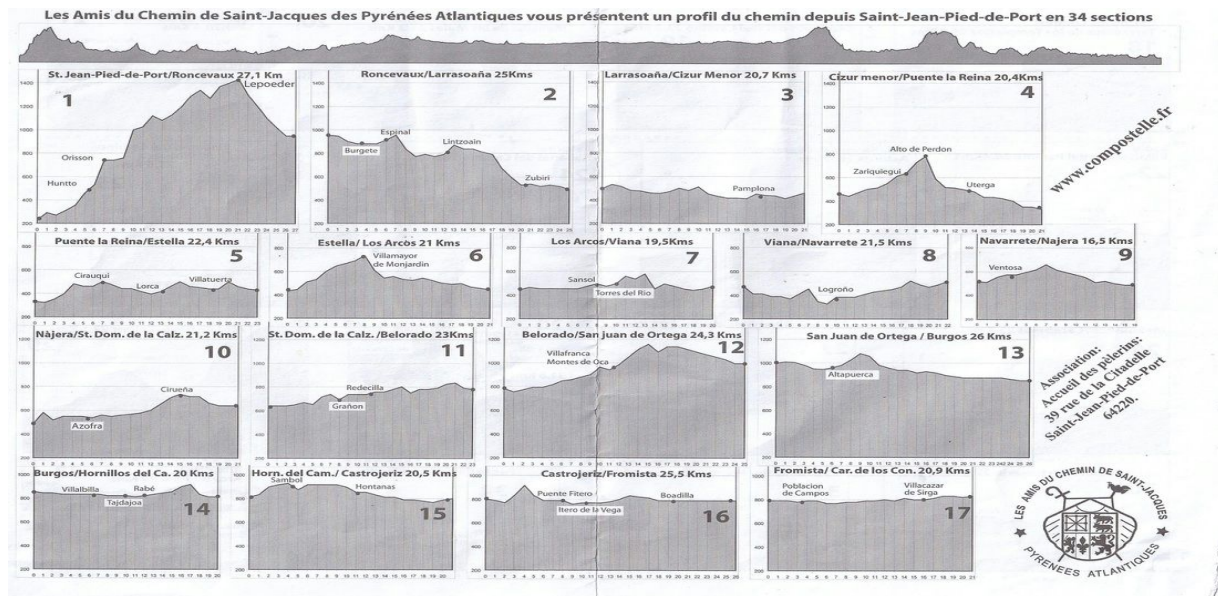
At the pilgrims' office you can get your pilgrims' passport - I believe it was 2 euros - and a sea shell for your backpack. Your pilgrims' passport is fun to have and makes a great keepsake filled with stamps (sellos). Almost everywhere you go from cafes to museums to cathedrals to accommodations, you'll find a stamp and ink pad. In some ways we treasure our passports more than our compostelas. However, if you are planning to stay at the refugios you may be asked to show your passport to get a bed.

- Keep your pilgrim's passport where it is easily accessible as you'll stamp it multiple times each day - should you choose to. And carry it in a ziplock bag with a pen.



ELEVATION MAP:

You can pick up maps at the pilgrims' office and the best map we took was the elevation map. It proved to be very helpful because it is divided into 34 sections of the Camino. Each section shows the mileage and elevation of the day's walk. We used this map every single day to the point it is now a tattered keepsake. We actually wish we had had this map during our planning because it lists the names of villages that aren't always in the guidebooks. http://www.aucoeurduchemin.org/spip/IMG/pdf/profil_d_etape_imprim.pdf



GUIDEBOOKS:

Speaking of guidebooks, we did not carry a book with us - to reduce weight and the trail is well-marked and easy to follow. We used the elevation map as our guide. However, months before we began walking I used two books to research and plan our walk.

A Pilgrim's Guide to the Camino de Santiago by John Brierley

Pilgrim Tips & Packing List Camino de Santiago by St. Yates with Daphne Hnatiuk

Most often, while walking the Camino, we saw pilgrims referring to the Brierly guide, although there are dozens of guidebooks out there. We found Brierly's guide to be helpful in our planning process and actually, the elevation map is segmented very closely to Brierly's book. What I found lacking in his book was listings for other accommodations and some of his walking segments are quite long. We started off planning to follow his lead, but the reality of walking 19 miles in 1 day quickly settled in and we adapted our walk to shorten some of our days. This is where the elevation map proved invaluable.

WALKING STICKS:

Walking with walking sticks is a bit of an art form. You have to learn to include them in your stride. We were advised by an experienced pilgrim to begin walking without them, to get a feel for the Camino before making the decision to buy sticks. Wise words. We never used them. Quite frankly, for me it would have been just one more thing to deal with.

Many Europeans walk with sticks because it's a more standard practice for them. I should tell you that so many pilgrims either dragged their sticks along or had them attached to their backpacks. And many only used 1 stick.

Our suggestion would be that if you think you want walking sticks, borrow some or buy a super cheap pair at least 3 months before you begin your Camino. Start training with them and see if you can adapt to walking with them. Find your stride. And go out into the hills to walk/hike, not just through your neighborhood.

And remember, if you're flying to Europe, most likely you would not be able to carry them on the plane and would have to pack them inside a checked bag/pack. If you decide you want them, you can purchase them in SJPP or pretty much anywhere along the Camino. At the end of your walk, donate them to an albergue.

SHOES & SOCKS:

We both started our Camino wearing Keen brand shoes. Abi's were new and broken in, mine were about 4 years old. We both wore cotton *Wright Sock* socks. Abi was successful with his Keens and socks, I was not.

There are many who will suggest all you need is a solid pair of walking shoes (such as Keens) and a pair of flip flops. And maybe that's all you'll need, but here's what we found. Even in the best shoes your feet get hot and tired. Really hot, really tired. On day 4 I bought a pair of sneakers and Abi bought a pair of sturdy hiking sandals to be worn as relief shoes. It made a big difference for our endurance to change shoes every few hours. Everyone talks about changing socks, but very few mention a change of shoes. Probably because of the weight of the 2nd pair of shoes, but for us it was well-worth it and we sacrificed extra clothing in exchange. I also carried a super cheap pair of flip flops that weighed practically nothing.

I was plagued with blisters (see Blisters). When we reached Leon I bought 2 pairs of Synthetic socks - *Lurbe! BmaX* - and changed socks every couple of hours. It was the best decision ever. Our suggestion: wear synthetic socks, preferably socks that have padding in all the right places. You can find them in athletic clothing/gear stores.

BLISTERS:

I am someone who never thought blisters would be an issue. We've been walkers for years and I have no memory of ever having a blister. We started the Camino wearing the same brand of shoes and socks. Abi had 1 tiny blister that was gone in 2 days, but I was plagued by them, on both feet.

If you ask 100 different people how to treat blisters you'll get 100 different answers. Here's what we learned from the owner of an athletic gear store in Leon, Spain. He had walked the Camino 4 times. He spent 30 minutes with us, just out of kindness, and his wisdom saved my Camino. No exaggeration.

The best treatment for blisters is to do nothing. But, in reality when you're in the middle of nowhere and a blister pops up or worse, (as it happened to me) it bursts, you want instant help.

If you're on the trail and a blister arises or bursts, use a Compeed patch to pad/cover it. Compeed is medicated and padded, it will wear off after several days. Do not remove it before then. Once the Compeed comes off, do not replace it. The goal is to let your blister(s) dry out. In order to walk use a simple band-aid, and/or a sterile non-stick pad, and wrap your foot with non-adhesive gauze/bandage. At the end of your walking day unwrap your foot, remove the band-aid or pad and let the blister air out.

PREVENTATIVE:

We highly recommend NOK foot cream, which was suggested to us by the owner of the athletic gear store. Use generously every morning and wear synthetic socks, and remember to change your socks every couple of hours. Hang your alternate pair of socks on your pack to dry out between changes. (unless of course it's raining)

Friction and moisture leads to blisters. Once I adopted this routine, all of my small blisters healed and disappeared and I had no further problems.

FIRST AID: (fits in a zip-lock bag for easy access)

Compeed patches

Non adhesive gauze roll

Quality band-aids

Sterile pads

NOK foot cream

Small scissors & tweezers

Tylenol

WHAT'S IN THE PACK?

We traveled before and after our Camino walk, for a total of 13 weeks so packing was a bit tricky. While in Paris we purged out packs of items we would not need on the Camino and shipped a box to the landlord of the apartment we rented in Aix en Provence for after our walk. Three days into our walk, while in Pamplona, we purged our packs again and got them down to the bare minimum. Our packs were only about 16 - 18 pounds which is not that heavy, but you'll want to carry the least amount of weight possible. If you are also traveling before and/or after your walk, ship a box to your destination, rented apartment or otherwise. The pilgrims' office in Santiago will hold luggage and I believe the post office will hold a box for 30 days. There are options, just think ahead.

<http://peregrinossantiago.es/eng/pilgrims-office/welcome/>

When packing your gear, remember to include the weight of your backpack and a water bottle. The general rule is to carry 10% of your body weight.

I carried with me:

- 1 pair of lightweight hiking pants
- 2 short sleeve shirts
- 1 long sleeve shirt
- 4 pairs underwear
- 2 sports bras
- 1 pair of gym shorts for sleeping
- 2 pairs of synthetic socks
- 1 rain jacket
- 1 pair rain pants
- 1 cold weather jacket
- 1 pair Keen hiking shoes*
- 1 pair sneakers
- 1 pair hiking sandals
- 1 pair flip flops

- Taking my Keens was a mistake because they didn't have enough umph left in them to make the trek, which is why I bought the sneakers and hiking sandals. I ended up leaving my Keens behind about 3 weeks in. I have feet issues, so footwear was a big component of my Camino.
- Abi carried the same clothing items as I did, except his hiking pants were convertibles (zip off legs to wear shorts). And of course, no sports bras!

ADDITIONAL ITEMS TO CARRY:

hat - essential
sunglasses - essential
sunscreen
reading glasses
first aid bag (see blisters)
prescription meds, toothbrush, toothpaste, comb
documents folder - passports and such
cell phones - served as our cameras
chromebook
chargers
power adapter - essential
water bottle
snacks
carabiners - super handy
large safety pins - super handy
packing cubes - so you don't have to go through your entire pack looking for 1 thing
handkerchief - used as sweat rag, wash cloth, towel
plastic bags - used to bag our electronics inside our packs on rainy days
1 roll of small plastic bags (such as used to pick up dog poo) for used tissues, garbage, etc.
kleenex pack - travel size - you can buy them along the camino

TIPS & SUGGESTIONS:

- Most of the places we stayed had amenities so we did not carry soap or shampoo. We used bar soap to wash our clothes while in the shower. Usually, we would take any shampoo and soap we didn't use so at the occasional stay without amenities we were covered. Plus, we used the soap for laundry.
- We walked in April/May and endured quite a bit of rain. We were grateful we chose rain jackets and pants over ponchos. Ponchos blow in the wind and they don't cover your legs.
- Carry a Kindle instead of books, much lighter in weight.
- You can buy anything you'll need in villages/towns/cities along the Camino.
- Be certain your backpack fits well. Stores such as REI are great at fitting packs.
- We met a woman on the morning of day 3 and she told us she had at least 1 pound of cosmetics with her and she'd be dumping it. If you're someone who wears make-up each day, ship it forward, you won't want or need it on the camino. It will only take a couple of days to realize how you look is not important.
- Give yourself several days to find your stride. You can do all the preplanning you want, but the reality of walking will be vastly different than anything you planned. It took us a good week and a half to feel as if we were beginning to find our stride and get a solid feel for what we were doing.

BACKPACK TAXIS:

We carried our packs for the first two weeks and then declared, this is bullshit. I was already plagued with blisters and didn't need the added weight of my pack. In addition to the weight, my left shoulder ached deeply and I was a bruised mess on my arms and shoulders. Yes, I wanted to walk the Camino but I didn't need to be a martyr to do so.

Because my pack had a large capacity, we stuffed everything we could into it, including electronics, toiletries, extra clothing, etc. We used Abi's pack as a day pack for our power adapter and phone charger, our rain gear, extra socks and sandals; making for a much lighter load. I carried a small cloth pack in which I carried our documents, first aid kit, snacks and water. If it rained, we were able to put my small pack inside Abi's.

The difference for me in not carrying my pack was huge. I had much more endurance and did not feel so battered at the end of each day.

There are several taxi companies that carry bags, depending on where you are on the Camino. Quite truthfully, had we known the impact of carrying packs, we would have done it from Day 1. We paid anywhere from 3 to 7 euros for each pickup/dropoff. Nothing was stolen, nothing was broken. Simply put the money in the envelope and attach it to the pack. Call for pick up - or ask your host to call. It's so easy and so worth every penny.

JACOTRANS LEÓN-SANTIAGO	
Taxi JUAN Telf. 655 828 729 MOLINASECA - O CEBREIRO	 TRANSPORTE DE EQUIPAJES TRANSPORT OF BAGAJES TRANSPORT DE SAC À DOS TRANSPORT VON RUCKSACKEN
<i>Para servicio de taxi avisar un día antes</i>	
Nombre - Name - Nom - Name: _____	
Recogida - Collection - Ramassage - Abholug: _____	
Entrega - Delivery - Livrer - Hinbringen: _____	
Teléfono - Phone - Téléphone - Telefon: _____	
www.caminodesantiago2010.com.es / info@caminodesantiago2010.com.es	

PEOPLE TAXIS:

Amazingly, even in the smallest of villages, you'll find the phone number of a taxi posted somewhere. If you can't, just pop into any business and ask. There's nothing wrong with taking a taxi if you need to. Don't let the hype of "oh, I need to walk every single step of the Camino" cause you to push yourself beyond reason. Better to catch a ride than put yourself in a position of having to put an end to your Camino.

FOOD & WATER:

You will eat really well. There are a multitude of bars, cafes, cantinas, stores and restaurants along the Camino. At certain points there may be up to 5 miles between stops, but we never felt as if we were in trouble of finding food. I remember on Day 2 we came out of the forest and there was a food trailer parked on the side of the highway and he had cold drinks. A little oasis; you'll find them in places you'd least expect.

Breakfast is often served at your accommodation but not usually included in the room rate. It will cost from 4 to 7 euros. It is almost always the same anywhere you stay. Coffee, juice, bread, cheese, ham, salami. Because we don't eat breakfast we usually skipped it. Most mornings we'd stop around 10:00 (depending on where we were) and have coffee, juice and a slice of Spanish Tortilla, which we would share. And in most villages there was a bakery where you could buy a baguette or croissants.

Pilgrim meals are the best deal on the Camino. For 9 to 15 euros you can have a 3-course meal, with options! Every salad you order, no matter where you are, will look and taste the same, but the good news is they are all fresh, crisp and tasty. A typical pilgrim meal might include salad, entree (such as chicken and fries) and dessert. Or, it might be a big bowl of pasta, entree (fish) and dessert. Each meal comes with a bottle of wine or a large bottle of water. We had some delicious meals and a few that were not so great, but they filled our stomachs. There were definitely times when we chose not to eat the pilgrim meal. In Sarria we went to a local Italian restaurant and had pizza, for example.

There are water sources all along the Camino. Water is heavy to carry so we each carried a small 8 oz bottle of water and just refilled throughout the day. Most villages have public wells with potable water.

Small food stores are in pretty much every village and of course when you walk into a city such as Burgos or Leon, you can find anything you want. You will not starve!

And, if you're a vegetarian you should be fine. The Spanish are big meat eaters, but there are options such as, salads, pasta, fish, bread, tortillas, potatoes, etc.

WHEN TO WALK:

We started walking April 12, 2015 and walked into Santiago on May 16. I would not walk in the summer because of the heat and the large number of pilgrims. April - May and September - October seem to be the best suggestions for when to walk.

MONEY:

How much money you spend each day is really up to the individual. On average, our daily expenses, for the two of us, were about:

Breakfast: 7 euros

Pilgrim meals: 20 euros

Accommodations: 60 euros

Incidentals: 10 -15 euros

- Incidentals included: snacks, admission fees, backpack taxi, etc.
- If you budget 100 euros per day, per couple, you'd be good to go.
- In some cities such as Leon, the admission to the cathedral was 5 euros per person, so it depends on whether or not you choose to visit such sites.
- Our night in Astorga, in the convent, was only 20 euros, while in other places we paid as much as 70 euros. But overall budgeting for 60 euros per night for accommodations would be a safe bet.
- We did not make any purchases while walking - such as souvenirs - because we didn't want to carry them and it helped to reduce expenditures.

ATM & CREDIT CARDS:

There are ATM's everywhere along the Camino, we never had a problem. With that being said though we usually kept 100 euros in our wallet because not everyone accepts credit cards.

If you are going to carry a credit card make sure you have a card with a chip in it. Europe is way ahead of the US on this. We managed well enough without a chip card (ours arrived 2 days after we left home) but it's much easier if you have one. Many of our accommodations accepted credit cards but there were some that did not. The same can be said for cafes and stores.

We tend to charge as much as we can because of our points program.

WiFi & SIM CARDS & CHROMEBOOK:

You can find WiFi pretty much everywhere along the Camino and I'd say about 95% of our accommodations offered free WiFi. It wasn't always a strong signal though, just really depends on where you're staying.

We bought a Spanish sim card - in Estrella - for Abi's phone. It proved to be worth the cost because there were places we stayed where we had to call for a ride. And just knowing we had a working phone, should we have an emergency, was reassuring.

Aside from the fact that I write a travel blog, we were both glad we decided to carry our chromebook with us. It's much lighter than a laptop. Not only did I want to chronicle our Camino experience for our readers, I wanted it for us. While walking the days tend to blend into each other and so often we'd ask ourselves, where were we when we saw xyz and neither of us could remember. Now, we just need to read the blog!

Also, because we were traveling for a total of 13 weeks, the Chromebook kept us connected to our lives and paying those pesky bills.

SE HABLA ESPANOL:

No, you do not need to speak Spanish to walk the Camino. But, it's always a good idea to learn the basics such as please and thank you; because along with a smile it goes a long way.

Both Abi and I can understand more than we can speak within the context of the situation, and we can muddle our way through the basics. It was enough. Many of the locals speak some English - not always though, so bone up on your Donde Esta?!

TRAINING:

Unless you are someone who is incredibly physically fit and takes on serious backpacking, the Camino is going to kick your butt, so training is really a personal choice. We know couples who trained and couples who did not and they both shared the same stories of aches and pains.

We trained to some degree. We walked up to 9 miles in the snow and sludge and we did some walking with our packs. But we did not take it to the extent of going out into the hills and such. Frankly, I don't think it would have mattered much because nothing could have prepared us for some of the Camino terrain.

My biggest debate while walking was which was the lesser of two evils: uphill or downhill.

ACCOMMODATIONS:

If you're not looking to stay in the albergues, accommodations can be a bit difficult to find. With the exception of large cities such as Pamplona and Leon, many pensions, B&B's, casa rurals and hotels, can't be found on the internet because they don't need to be. They survive because pilgrims walk into the village and find them.

And to some degree this may work but you could get stuck. We walked into Astorga with no reservations because we were a day ahead of our itinerary. It was May 1 and we quickly learned May first is a major holiday in Spain and we could not find a hotel room to save our lives. We walked the length of the city at least 3 times, after walking 10 miles to get there. We went to the municipal albergue but they only had bunk beds in a huge dorm room. The woman working there called the convent for us and we secured a private room and bath for the night.

One of the biggest perks of having reservations is knowing you've got a room for the night and you can stop and smell the roses along the way. What's the point of walking the Camino if you have to hurry to the next village to secure a room for the night?

This becomes especially true after Sarria. Sarria is near the 100 km point and it's where many pilgrims start walking. If a pilgrim walks from Sarria to Santiago - 100 kms - they can get a compostela. The same compostela a pilgrim who has walked the entire Camino receives. There are a lot of mixed feelings among pilgrims about that, but it is what it is. From Sarria forward the Camino becomes very busy. For us, it felt as if we were on an entirely different journey once we left Sarria.

The best source we used to find accommodations was [Booking.com](https://www.booking.com). Highly recommend using the site for your Camino. We did not have one single problem booking through them. They are well-established with Camino accommodations.

The following 2 pages provide you with a list of our accommodations, as well as our overall walking itinerary. Each room we booked was private with a private bathroom and non-smoking. Many places will advertise they have a/c and heat, but what we learned is that 9 out of 10 times the management controls the system. So they may have a/c, but it doesn't mean you can cool the room beyond the default setting.

Some of our accommodation choices were better than others, but they were all serviceable for what we needed and there were a handful that were exceptionally nice.

If you have questions or concerns as you plan your Camino, feel free to contact me at: Patti@oneroadatatime.com and I will do my best to point you in the right direction.

Destination:	Date:	Miles:	Accommodation:
Roncesvalles	4/12	16	Roncesvalles Hotel
Larrasoana	4/13	15.5	Pension Casa Sangala
Pamplona	4/14	9	Hotel Yoldi
Puente la Reina	4/15	14.7	Hotel Rural El Circo
Estella	4/16	13	B&B Zaldu
Estella	4/17		Hospederia Chapitel
Los Arcos	4/18	12	Latorrien de Ane
Viana	4/19	12	Placio de Pujadas
Navarette	4/20	15	Hotel San Camilo
Najera	4/21	10	Hostal Hispano
Santo Domingo	4/22	12.4	Hospederia Cisterciense
Belorado	4/23	14	Casa Rural Verdeancho
Villafranca	4/24	7.5	Hotel San Anton Abad
Atapuerca	4/25	12.4	Rural Papasol
Burgos	4/26	12	Hotel Forum Evolucion
Leon (train from Burgos)	4/27-4/30	10.6	Hospeteria Monastica Pax
Hospital de Orbigo	Bus from Leon, began walking again from Orbigo.		
Astorga	5/1	10	Apostolic Missionaries

Astorga	5/2		Hostal Coruna
Rabanal	5/3	12.5	Apartamentos Rurales
Riego de Ambros	5/4	12.7	Pension Riego de Ambros
Ponferrada	5/5	8.4	Hotel Aroi Ponferrada
Villafranca	5/6	14.3	Posada Plaza Mayor
Vega de Valcarce	5/7	10	Casa Rural Reconto
Piedrafita	5/8	8	As Miguinas Do Cebreiro
Triacastela	5/9	12.7	Pension Vilasante
Sarria	5/10	13	Albergue Puente Ribeira
Portomarin	5/11	13	Casa Santa Marina
Palas de Rei	5/12	15	Casa Blanca
Melide	5/13	8	A Lua Do Camino
Arzua	5/14	8.4	Casa Lucas *
Arca	5/15	12	Pension 9 de Abril
Santiago	5/16	11	Mexico PR
Santiago	5/17		Hotel Miradoiro de Belvis

- Casa Lucas was nice, but it is about 12 kms out of Arzua. They will pick up/drop off, but it is remote. Before going out to Casa Lucas we ate a late lunch at Casa Teodora's restaurant and it was by far the best meal we had on the Camino. Order anything with the Galician cheese sauce! Had we known, we would have booked a room at Casa Teodora and stayed in town.

~ **Buen Camino** ~