

Preparation for walking on the Camino

Clarity of Purpose

Preparing body and mind for a pilgrimage hike is crucial. Mental preparation starts with clarity on your sense of purpose and desire.

What has inspired you to go for the walk? Are you mentally and physically in shape? Are you seeking accolades or a deeper sense of purpose?

If you are seeking spiritual meaning it is advisable to start with a regular daily meditation. Clear the mind of distracting thoughts. Focus on your breathing. Align your body with heaven and earth. As you practice your higher self will guide you and give you clarity of purpose.

Many pilgrims say the wish to do the Camino starts with a vague thought that grows into a deep desire.

You can start your research by reading one of the many countless books on the Camino. The actual experience however will always be different.

I did my first walk at the spur of the moment without any major preparation and would not recommend it to anyone. My boots and back pack were sub-standard. I did no prior exercising and had to experience firsthand the old Camino saying:

“Be humble or the path will humble you.”



Some pilgrims have followed the ancient tradition by starting the walk from the doorstep of their home, spending months on the road.

But most, who do the walk the first time or have little time, start by walking the short 120-kilometer route from Sarria to Santiago. It will give the hiker a first inkling of the Camino.

Far more profound and life changing is a walk lasting several weeks. It takes at least a week to wind down and to get the body adapted to a daily walk of more than 20 kilometers, another week to completely immerse into the experience and another week to gradually set the thoughts on what comes when getting back home.

Even fit young hikers regularly fall prey to blisters and other physical ailments by walking too fast or too much in the first few days.

Some get horribly lost by missing a way marker or choose the wrong time of the year, underestimating the cold winds and rain in the Spanish winter months.

Authorities have meanwhile closed the mountain route from St. Jean-Pied-de-Port to Roncesvalles between November 1st and March 31st after several serious accidents and loss of life in snow and fog.

In summer temperatures can soar to well over 35 degrees Celsius, especially in the Meseta after passing the city of Burgos.



Almost every year there are reports of a pilgrim dying of a heat stroke, despite the warning notifications in many of the albergues, or hostels, informing pilgrims to avoid walking in the midday heat. Most Spaniards spend the time between 1-5 pm taking a siesta or afternoon nap, shaking their heads in disbelief at pilgrims with heavy back packs walking in the heat.

I would always recommend that people with a history of health issues get themselves checked by a medical doctor before they start their walk.

There are no rules telling you to walk the entire route with a heavy back pack, especially if you are in pain or cannot carry a heavy load because of a back or shoulder problem. Taxis will ferry your luggage to the next hostel or hotel destination for only a small fee.

Even then, every hiker should carry enough water. Drinking water from taps or streams should be avoided at all cost. Pilgrims have suffered severe diarrhea as a result, scuttling any attempt at further walking.

Testing your equipment prior to the walk is crucial. The back pack should feel comfortable with the weight evenly distributed on the shoulders and hips. Hiking boots and socks should be of a high quality and worn-in prior to any longer walk.

Ideally you should not carry more than ten per cent of your own body weight. Most people pack too much stuff on their first walk, believing still that they have reduced the weight in their back pack to the essentials. This packing list serves as a rough guideline:

Equipment:

- 40-45 liter back pack, preferably with an in-built poncho for rainy days.
- High quality hiking boots at least one size bigger than your feet.
- Trekking pants that can be zipped into short pants
- Three T-shirts of which at least one should be long-sleeved.
- Trekking underwear that is quick-drying. One for wearing and one for washing for the next day.
- A hat for protection against the heat and sunburn.
- Two-three pairs of hiking socks.
- Rain jacket
- Sleeping bag not weighing more than 900-1000 grams
- Ultra-light trekking towel. Avoid at all cost cotton towels as they become very heavy when wet.
- Lightweight flipflops for the evenings after taking a shower.

Toiletry items

- Apart from basic items like toothbrush and shampoo, a tube of handwashing cream is useful to do your daily washing.
- A washing line and pegs.
- Foot care products such as an anti-blister stick and blister plasters are essentials.

- A small tube of sun cream.
- Ear plugs if you are sensitive to snoring.
- Magnesium tablets, vitamin and fruit bars, aspirin or other medication you might need.

Technology

- A Spanish SIM card if your cell phone provider is from outside the European Union and doesn't make provision for roaming.
- Adapter for European electric sockets.

Documents

Documents such as ID, airline tickets and passport should be kept in a separate water proof pouch along with your money and credit cards. Make a photocopy of your passport that you can store separately. An absolute must is health insurance for abroad that covers treatment and possible repatriation.

The Credential or pilgrim passport can mostly be obtained from the St.James Confraternities in your home country. The credential is the document that gives access to the albergues or pilgrims hostels and defines your status as a pilgrim. In order to obtain the "compestela" – the document certifying your walk, you have to present the credential at the Pilgrims' Office in Santiago with all the stamps collected daily along your walk and providing a detailed record of your camino.

I have found keeping a diary of my most valuable experiences and impressions an important tool to reflect on the Camino experience weeks or months later. The gist of conversations with fellow pilgrims have crowned my Camino experience in so many ways, and inspired me to write my first Camino book: *Walking on Edge*.

Guide books are an important source of information, especially on accommodation along the route. But you should buy the latest editions and also check the internet for updated information. I've often found an albergue recommended in a guide book to be closed or of a substandard quality. New private hostels and hotels are constantly opening along the route as the popularity of walking the Camino increases year by year.

