Spanish Steps

Tim Moore

One

It's 500 miles from St Jean Pied-de-Port on the French side of the Pyrenees to Santiago de Compostela near the northwestern coast of Spanish Galicia. From the dawn of the last millennium until its final quarter, countless millions walked this route as the final leg of an epic hike from their own dusty thresholds, partly to stretch their legs in one of Europe's most scenically appealing regions, and partly for remission of accumulated sins and a consequently more benign afterlife. Their goal was the cathedral in which were housed the crumbly mortal remains of Santiago, the patron saint of Spain: St James, as anyone who recalls Judith Keppel's progress towards the first top prize on Who Wants to Be a Millionaire? will be aware.

The fourth apostle recruited by Jesus, James was hardly an obvious choice for a thousand-year personality cult: so volubly stroppy his fellow fishermen nicknamed him and his similarly ill-tempered brother John 'sons of thunder', so petulantly arrogant he demanded to be placed at the Son of God's right-hand side in paradise. When he was dispatched westwards by his doomed master on an evangelical mission, these attributes helped ensure that by the time James wound up on the lefthand tip of the Roman Empire, in north-west Spain, he had somehow managed to attract just seven disciples. That mouth clearly did him no favours after his return to the Holy Land: in AD 44 he became the first of the apostles to experience the afterlife, beheaded on the orders of Herod Agrippa.

Still, a martyr is a martyr, and after being sneaked out of Jerusalem, James's body was taken by sea to Galicia, terminus of his inefficient prophetic crusade. If I reveal that this voyage was made in an unmanned vessel hewn from solid marble, you will begin to understand that we are now on a voyage of our own: a journey beyond the shores of Factland, now gingerly skirting the Cape of Myth, now steaming gaily through the Straits of Arrant Cobblers. (Precisely where this figurative journey of ours set sail is a matter beyond sensitive debate, though for contextual ends I'll point out the lack of even biblical back-up for James's previous visit to Spain.)

Washed up on the beach – a beach littered with the scallop shells that came to symbolise Santiago – Jim's hefty aquatic hearse is met by a divinely forewarned army of disciples, perhaps all seven of them. His body is promptly absorbed into a large stone slab, before being carted away by oxen for interment on a hillside significant only for its peculiar remoteness: an ox-whacking 25 miles from the shore.

Despite the many arresting features of its history, Jim's final resting place is quickly lost, and lost so completely that it takes 750 years to find it. By then the Romans have given way to Visigoths, who in turn are handing over the Hispanic reins to the Moors, rushing up from North Africa with Europe-alarming haste: by the early eighth century, Spain finds itself almost completely under Muslim control. I say

Copyright © 2004 Tim Moore
Published by Vintage / Random House

almost, for in their impatience to get at the French they overlook a few Christian huddles hunkered down in the northern mountains. One might draw parallels with Asterix's home village in Gaul, neglectfully unconquered by the surrounding Romans. And if one did, one would be more right than one supposed.

The embattled Christian guerrillas begin fighting back, assisted by Charlemagne, Holy Roman Emperor in waiting, who crosses the Pyrenees to harry the Moors. Yet it's still proving difficult to form a front line across northern Spain, a bridgehead for the Christian Reconquest to start pushing the heathens back to Africa. If only there was something or someone to rally around, a figurehead to unify not only the various anti-Muslim factions in Spain, but focus righteous, fund-raising wrath across the Christian world. If only we could find some— What's that, old hermit type? You saw stars twinkling over a cave on a hillside? You went in there and dug up these bones? Here, Bishop Teodomiro, check this skelly out. Really? Well, that's a result. What about these other two? Fair enough. Hey, everyone: we've just found Santiago! And, like, a couple of other stiffs who are probably his disciples or something.

In a slightly random, Life of Brian way, it was all in place. Campus stellae, field of stars: Santiago de Compostela. The body of St James, a proper apostle, was one of the most prized relics in Christendom – two of them, in fact, because along with the humble Santiago Peregrino, Pilgrim Jim, the pilgrim's pilgrim, we now had the parallel promotion of Santiago Matamoros, James the Moor-slayer. Riding out of the sky astride his white charger, Big Bad Jim was regularly spotted dispatching the heathen foe in splendid profusion: no fewer than 60,000 kills to his name at the (probably fictitious) Battle of Clavijo in 852. A mascot for the cuddly Christians who sought to love their neighbours, and an insatiable psychopath for those who'd sooner decapitate them.

It was this broad fan base, tempted from their homes by a praise-one-get-one-free pilgrimage, that made Santiago de Compostela one of the Christian world's must-sees. The local king, Alfonso, built a church and monastery on the site, around which a city began to grow up. The first authenticated pilgrims arrived in the late ninth century, and by the mid-tenth the Camino de Santiago was already an institution. At its twelfthcentury peak, with anti-Moor Christian fundamentalism rampant and the crusades in full flow, it has been estimated that between 250,000 and 1,000,000 pilgrims were arriving in Santiago every year; even more in a Holy Year, when Jim's feast day, 25 July, fell on a Sunday. (By papal decree, pilgrims arriving in a Holy Year received total remission, a plenary indulgence, for all previous badnesses committed. Notch up the pilgrimage hat-trick – Santiago, Rome, Jerusalem – and you could build up a credit balance, Sin Miles redeemable against the perpetration of future wrongness.)

At a time when there were fewer than 65 million Europeans, with an average life expectancy of perhaps thirty-five, the demographic implications are arresting: by one calculation (yes – it's mine) between a fifth and a third of the medieval populace would at some time have paid personal homage to St James. As the Council of Europe noted when declaring the camino its first Cultural Route, 'the Compostela pilgrimage is considered the biggest mass movement of the Middle Ages'.

Copyright © 2004 Tim Moore
Published by Vintage / Random House

Google-based curiosity was hardening into something like intent, and this new level of preparation was soundtracked by the weighty thump of footnoted product of academic industry on doormat. An early casualty of the reading was my Monty Python image of pilgrims as a brainwashed corpus of robotic, masochistic zealots: though that Get Out of Hell Free card was clearly top of the Santiago bill, it was difficult to generalise about the pilgrims' motivations. The sick – the horribly, medievally sick – were lured by the hope of miraculous cure. So too the troubled: Thomas Becket himself recommended the pilgrimage to a woman who feared herself possessed by Satan. The curious came for education and adventure – Chaucer's Wife of Bath, no sombre devotee, visited twice in the late 1300s (accurately fictional, as lone women of good repute were a pilgrimage rarity). The naughty came to plunder this invitingly vulnerable tourist army, by violence or deception; and if they were caught, they might come again, as criminals given the option of walking to Santiago in lieu of a less appealing punishment. (Actually, they'd have been strung up and left to rot by the road – on the medieval rap sheet only those guilty of less straightforward crimes would have been spared the noose, such as the Surrey adulteress who in 1325 was given the choice of visiting Santiago or 'being beaten with rods six times around various churches'.)

Some were sent by their village to seek heavenly relief from famine or pestilence, and some by indolent lords and masters on a sort of pilgrimage-by-proxy. Your pain, my gain: by papal edict, the sin-remission was granted to whoever's name decorated what was by now known as the compostela, the commemorative certificate granted at journey's end. At Santiago, the good, the bad and the ugly came together.

And they came from the furthest-flung corners of the known world, or at least the well-known world. God-fearing, foolhardy pilgrims set off for Santiago not just from France, Italy, Britain and Germany but Greece, Poland and Hungary. One of the earliest pilgrim accounts tells of a Viking's trip to Compostela in 970; an Armenian hermit recorded his visit in 983. As their paths converged and their numbers grew, so recognised routes were first trodden bare, then developed. The main route from northern Europe wound through western France and nipped over the Pyrenees just past the town of St Jean Pied-de-Port; gradually joined by other paths from the Mediterranean side, it proceeded ever westwards as the Camino Frances, the French Way, largely following roads laid down by the Romans.

Dropping coins on inn table and collection plate, all pilgrims left a thin trail of gold behind them, and some laid down a fat seam of it. Driven by piety and PR, medieval notables from St Francis of Assisi to El Cid walked to Santiago and most made conspicuous donations. Particularly the procession of monarchs, who arrived in such profusion that the Camino Frances became also known as the Camino Real, the Royal Way. Prince Sigurd of Norway, Louis IX of France, Ferdinand and Isabella of Spain: all keen to display their credo credentials, perhaps keener still to promote the fight against the forces of anti-Catholicism. (Our own Edward I copped out by sending a proxy, and Henry II, having sworn to the Pope that he'd pay personal homage to St James, later quietly switched to the less onerous Canterbury option.) If local entrepreneurship provided the inns and taverns that catered for a pilgrim's physical needs, then the spiritual infrastructure, the gilded, jewelled shrines that sustained their faith along the way, was built by the wealth of kings and their noble henchmen.

Copyright © 2004 Tim Moore
Published by Vintage / Random House

So too the network of fortified monasteries and churches that offered a haven from the Moors, and the castles dispatching the soldiery that provided protection in its more proactive form.

In 997 Moorish raiders turned Santiago over and nicked its hallowed bells: they were put to contemptuous use as oliveoil containers in the southern city of Cordoba until the Christians nicked them back 240 years later. Yet by the twelfth century the northern road to Compostela – the Way of St James, the Camino Real, the Camino de Santiago – was largely secure from heathen attack, and prospered not just as a holy procession but as a trade route. The grain and wool merchants of Navarre and Castille were now able to export their produce in confidence: wealth begat wealth, and in gratitude they too funded the cathedrals.

With the Moorish menace receding over the southern horizon, the hard-nosed religio-political rationale that had underpinned every cobble along the camino was now itself eroded. More and more would-be pilgrims were opting for a sort of no-win, no-fee approach: they would beseech St James from the comfort of their own homes, and if the leprosy cleared up, or it started raining, then it was off to Santiago in cheerful gratitude. With the urgent zeal diluted, penitential piety degenerated into tourist loutism: scuffles began breaking out at the Santiago altar, sometimes over queue-jumping at the apostle's tomb, sometimes on crude racial lines, sometimes so bloody that more than once the cathedral had to close for reconsecration. Papal intervention was required to clamp down on stalls flogging 'spurious' scallop shells and other dubious souvenirs in the cathedral square. Professional beggars and quack doctors were beginning to ply their ignoble trade along the route in growing numbers; Louis XIV forbade his subjects from walking to Santiago because of the number of pickpockets, false priests and harlots. 'Go a pilgrim, return a whore,' declared an arresting adage. The golden age was at an end.

* * *

For the first time Christian Europeans began to think the unthinkable, and even to write the unwritable. 'There is not one haire nor one bone of Saint James in Spayne in Compostell,' carped sixteenth-century British traveller Andrew Borde – and that was while he was on his way there as a pilgrim. The Reformation, and the resultant establishment of Protestantism across much of northern Europe, turned the pilgrim tap down from a multinational flood to a steady stream of Frenchmen and Italians. The religious scepticism fostered by science and the philosophical Enlightenment in the eighteenth century reduced the stream to a trickle; the infrastructure of Churchrun pilgrim sanctuaries, the refugios and hospitals where walkers found succour in all its forms, collapsed in 1835 after the Spanish state seized and sold almost all property and land from the major religious orders.

Hidden in 1588 lest Sir Francis Drake follow up his routing of the Armada with a relic-pillaging raid, the bones of Santiago were lost once more. A trio of skeletons turned up under the cathedral floorboards in 1884, but even when the Pope hastily confirmed them as those of Jim and his two disciples, no one was really listening. The sacred way that had for long centuries resounded to the shuffle and thump of holy footsteps fell quiet, and much was gradually reclaimed by nature: by the 1950s,

Copyright © 2004 Tim Moore

anyone intending to follow the route needed a tent, a compass and a machete. An American who walked from St Jean to Santiago in 1982 found herself regularly stumbling about in dark and forested circles, untroubled by human company save the occasional old soldier fulfilling a wartime vow to some heavenly saviour.

Anywhere else but Spain the whole business might perhaps have been forgotten altogether, and with some relief, as the shaming embodiment of religious extremism and intolerance. But because the Spanish still pelt each other with tomatoes in God's name, and christen their boys Santiago and their girls Camino, it wasn't. Built by King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella, the Hostal de Los Reyes Católicos in Santiago's cathedral square might have been converted from the grandest of all pilgrim hospitals to a ponced-up hotel favoured by Julio Iglesias, but by obscure decree the management still fulfilled an ancient obligation. Turn up at its regal reception in your filthy road-clothes with a compostela in your hand, and its management would serve you a complimentary meal, in fact three of them, every day for three days. Whatever they say about free lunches, I could taste them already.

Copyright © 2004 Tim Moore
Published by Vintage / Random House