

Camino de Santiago – Journal Update 8 Vitoria de Rioja to the Meseta

This week:
29.0 miles

Total Miles:
161.4

Contact us at camino@sjnparish.org and visit us at www.sjnparish.org/camino-de-santiago/



Our way out of Grañón was pleasant and relaxed... a time to wander along the pathways and see the many flowers and plants that we had

never seen before. We appreciated the rolling hills that surrounded us. Fields of corn and wheat have begun to replace the fields of vines. Along our route, as throughout our journey thus far, we passed by many street-side markers reminding us of the faith-filled lands we are crossing.



We have been noticing, but now more so than before, the townspeople are out at the cemeteries. More and more flowers are appearing at the gravesites to remember loved ones. Many are cleaning tombstones. It became so frequent that we stopped to ask if something special is happening. There is! As October comes to an end, people prepare for *Día de Todos los Santos* (All Saints Day, November 1). They do so by refreshing gravesites in anticipation of the feast day!



Soon we entered the legendary territory of the *Montes de Oca* (hills of the goose).

Once again, we were reminded of the reality of pilgrims past: this was once dangerous terrain where bandits hid in the hills and robbed vulnerable pilgrims. The journey has been both rewarding and difficult... this reminded us of just how easy our lives are today – despite the struggles we encounter on the Camino.



In *Vitoria de Rioja*, the birthplace of Santo Domingo, we admired the lovely, mountainside-feeling homes, built of large wood beams, stone and plaster – and beautifully painted in warm hues of yellow to deep orange and brown. We had fun seeing river rock inlaid in the walls of homes in the shapes of roosters and hens! A fun reminder of Santo Domingo de la Calzada's birds. A brief stop at the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora de la Asunción* where we were able to see the original baptismal font that was used to baptize Santo Domingo de la Calzada. A solid bowl carved from

stone in the 11th C, with engraved images around the rim that are now too worn to discern. *The village tradition is to return here, no matter where a person is now living, to baptize one's children from the same font!*



Belorado! A small town is set before a hill of caves once occupied by early Christian and medieval hermits. Belorado is larger in comparison to the towns we've been visiting... a big population of over 1,700, ha, ha! The town is topped with a castle of brown-red color, but today it is a ruin of an era long ago. Belorado is the first town in Spain where a fair was held – Alfonso I of



Street-side art—common in Belorado!

Aragón, married to Queen Urraca of Castilla y León, in the year 1116 granted this town the privilege of holding the fair. It continues to the present day on the first weekend of June. The whole town collaborates, making this event one that highlights area craftsmanship with workshops on carving, forging and ironwork, shearing, plaster and stonework, ceramic, wicker, bakery, cheese, and even soap! In addition, there are activities in the streets from live music, to storytelling and street theater for all ages. Arriving in October, we had to get by with the market where local gastronomic & traditional products and artisan objects from the area are sold.



Belorado appears as an important point of reference in one of the oldest travel guides of the 12th C by the Franciscan pilgrim, Aymeric Picaud, who divided the Camino into thirteen stages. The town had several hospitals for pilgrims to rest and was strategically located between two important pilgrimage towns of Santo Domingo de La Calzada and also San Juan de Ortega. We stayed in a charming pilgrim hostel, Cuatro Cantones, deep in the old town with narrow and winding passageways. We had fun imagining ourselves in medieval times! Belorado was a stronghold of el Cid (see last page), held as a dowry for Fernando (the first Castilian king), when he married Jimena. The views from the ruins of his castle were gorgeous.



The priest at the Iglesia de San Pedro kindly offered a Mass and some friendly social time with us and some other pilgrims! The connection to the Camino community was reassuring: we had come so far but still had much ahead. Camaraderie and shared stories of our ups and downs helped us to prepare for the continued journey. But day by day, we were more at home... grateful for our pilgrimage despite it's challenges.

Above — our hostel! Below, look closely — the top of the Iglesia de Santa Maria's bell



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Iglesia de Santa Maria dates back to the 16th century is the 'parish refuge'. It is built around columns, and on its interior it has valuable artistic treasures such as its main altarpiece – a Baroque work dating from the late 17th C or early 18th C, the carved figure of La Immaculada (The Immaculate) is kept in the chapel of the same name.



Though we've seen the caves before, they never cease to amaze... we were captivated by the hillside of caves as our footpath led us on to Tosantos, a tiny village of 56 people. Though small, Tosantos offers a big surprise, which we first glimpsed at sunset, the Ermita Virgen de la Peña (Our Lady of the Cliff). The hermitage was built to honor a discovery of the image of the child Jesus found hidden in the cave under a bell, per the local legend. It is carved into the rock face above the town. In the thirteenth century, a holy hermit lived in these caves. From her hermitage, she ministered to the passing pilgrims and was revered by the townsfolk.



After her death, a chapel was built into the hillside, and each year of the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin (September 8), the inhabitants of Tosantos hold a procession through town and up to the cave. We were able to visit the chapel – by surprise! We were directed to ask for the key, "at the house across from #18". And so we did!



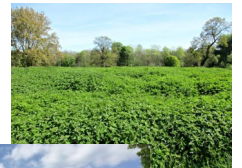
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Back on the road again, we came upon the Fuente Mojapan, the "Bread-moistening spring". Yes, you read that right. This spring was used by medieval pilgrims to revive their stale bread. Whets your appetite, no? (OK, we know that 'whet' means sharpen, but who doesn't love the play on words?!)



The next hamlet was another jewel: San Juan de la Ortega — a village of 20 people! San Juan de la Ortega (Juan Velázquez, “St. John the Hermit”) was a student of Santo Domingo, helping to build the support system for pilgrims on the Camino. ‘Ortega’ comes from ortiga, which means ‘nettle’ – it is here that he cleared a particularly inhospitable valley – full of nettles and bandits!



Fields of nettles

In town, we visited the Iglesia de San Nicolás de Bari which is dedicated to the saint who saved San Juan’s life, St. Nicholas (see below), when Juan was returning from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land.



His boat was on treacherous waters and he began to pray and begged the Lord, through the intercession of St. Nicholas of Bari, to save them from danger. He promised to build St. Nicholas a hermitage, should they survive. The miracle happened, and so we enjoy the promise fulfilled.



The highlight of this church is the Romanesque capital, also called the Christmas Capital. It shows, in splendor scenes leading up to the birth of Christ. The Annunciation of the Archangel Gabriel kneeling before Mary, announcing that she is going to be the mother of Jesus. The second motive (shown on the left) is the Visitation of the Virgin to her cousin Elizabeth. Look for their embrace and how Isabel puts her hand on her cousin’s belly, behind is a servant. In the center of the Nativity capital, the Virgin is lying down attended by two midwives. Above

Mary is the manger with the child Jesus. The figure of Saint Joseph, seated and with a sleepy disposition, is with the Angel, which in dreams, explains the miracle of the birth of Jesus. The capital is finished with the Annunciation of the Angel to the shepherds. ***This capital, twice a year at the spring and autumn equinoxes — when the night and day are equal — enjoy a ray of light that enters the left-side back window of the nave and beams on the capital, beginning with the Annunciation of the Angel to Mary and ending with the birth.*** The engraving was captivating. The emotion shown in it is clear and the detail portrayed these events of our faith wonderfully.

San Juan’s tomb is also found here and lit by dozens of colorful candles. Legend tells that when his tomb was opened, white honeybees were discovered inside, and the scent of roses filled the air.



We also lit candles, each for our own special intentions. They we said an Our Father and Hail Mary to the artists who took the time to honor the occasion of our Lord’s birth in such a special way.

San Juan is the protector of children – we were so glad to visit and honor him in this month of October, a month that we focus on ‘Respect Life’ and the genesis of our pilgrimage!

Unusual to a church, on the right side, we found colorful cushions on the floor, meant as a meditation area. We sat in the quiet for quite some time.



As the birth of Christ will be upon us soon, we noted that San Nicolás, who San Juan prayed to, is the same St. Nicolas who is known today as “Santa Claus”. He was Bishop of Myra in Turkey in the 4th Century and tradition tells us that when he heard that the two daughters of a poor man were going to have to be sold into slavery because the family was destitute, he threw two bags of gold through the window of their house anonymously to save them from this fate and thus become associated with giving gifts. When the Muslims invaded Turkey, his relics were secretly taken to Bari in Southern Italy where they remain in the cathedral today. In Medieval times he was a popular saint to pray to; especially concerning dangers, shipwrecks, fires and economic problems and over two hundred churches are dedicated to him.

We were soon back on the Camino again and were passing through the high plateau of Castile and Leon. — the meseta. Open sky and seemingly endless horizons. Almost exactly half of the Camino is located in this region. The wildlife is stunning. We saw clusters of white butterflies resting peacefully before dawn on stalks of purple thistle. It felt like a new awakening. Full of hope. *We are pilgrims.*

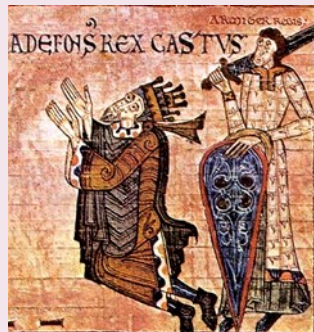


We could imagine the medieval knights and royal battles in the landscape, each fighting for power over Iberia – the kingdoms of Castile, Leon, Navarra and Aragon... or sometimes between the Christians in the north and Muslims in the south. Despite the fact that there were battles, we learned there was a lot of harmony too! Many centuries were marked by creative flourishing of the diversity of the cultures coming together. Either way, there's a lot of history here – battles, memorials, architecture and the influence of shared cultures in all that we see!

This area is full of *bodegas* – these are family wine cellars with underground passages dug into natural or manmade hills (so cool!). Families make and store their wines here but they also store other harvested and produced foods from cheeses, sausages (chorizo!), and cured hams to grains, roots and legumes. We're looking forward to visiting them while in the region!



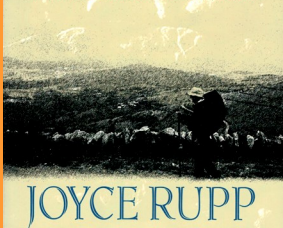
El Cid



El Cid, knight and king Sancho II of Castile (illustration from 1118)

This is the territory of El Cid, a Castilian mercenary with an Arab nickname (al-sidi, meaning 'lord' or 'sir') who fought on many sides, north and south, for Christian and Muslim kings, depending on whose mission and purse he felt best served his efforts at the time. "Rather than seeing El Cid as fickle, his shifting loyalties speak honestly about the nature of life in the 11th C Spain, where kingdoms vied for control and the dividing lines were not always drawn by religion but by other, more human quirks, such as morality, friendship, and loyalty, not to mention the need to make a living."

WALK IN A
RELAXED
MANNER
LIFE LESSONS FROM THE CAMINO



Our Camino Book Club has started!

Join us as we explore life lessons from the Camino.

We hope you enjoy and benefit from the notes offered from the Book Guides; you do not need to read the book. However, we're finding it interesting and insightful. We think you'd enjoy it. If nothing else, it'll help keep you in the spirit of a pilgrim on the Camino... or simply in life.

Our notes are emailed to all pilgrims and can be found at the sjnparish.org homepage: www.sjnparish.org/camino-de-santiago/

Do you have reflections from reading the book? Email us and we'll share in our notes!
Camino@SjNparish.org