

*Every physical journey is also a spiritual one...
IF you set the intention that it be so.*

Walking “The Way”

El Camino de Santiago

October 2025

El Camino = The Way

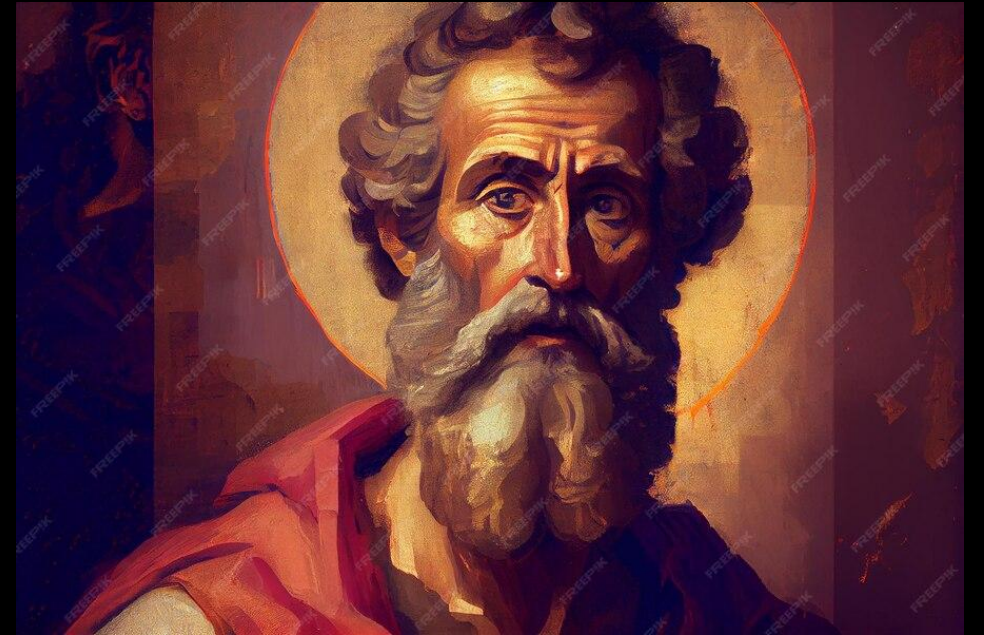
Santiago = Saint James

El Camino de Santiago = The Way of Saint James



The Back-Story

James (the Elder) was one of the 12 apostles and John's brother. He preached in Spain around AD40. He returned to Jerusalem, where he was beheaded, becoming the first apostle to be martyred. His bones were returned to Spain and buried, then rediscovered hundreds of years later. Christians began to journey to the site. El Camino became the third Christian pilgrimage, after Jerusalem and Rome. It ends in Santiago de Compostela.

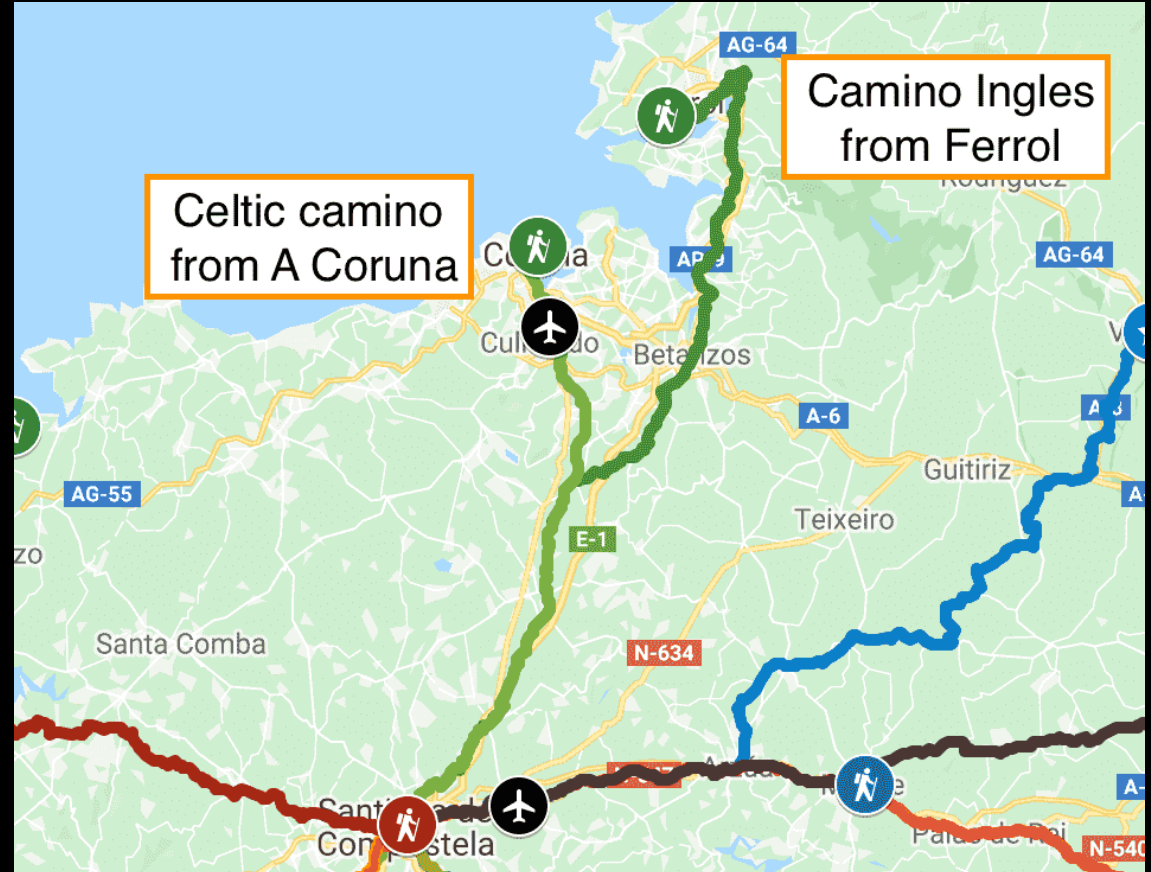
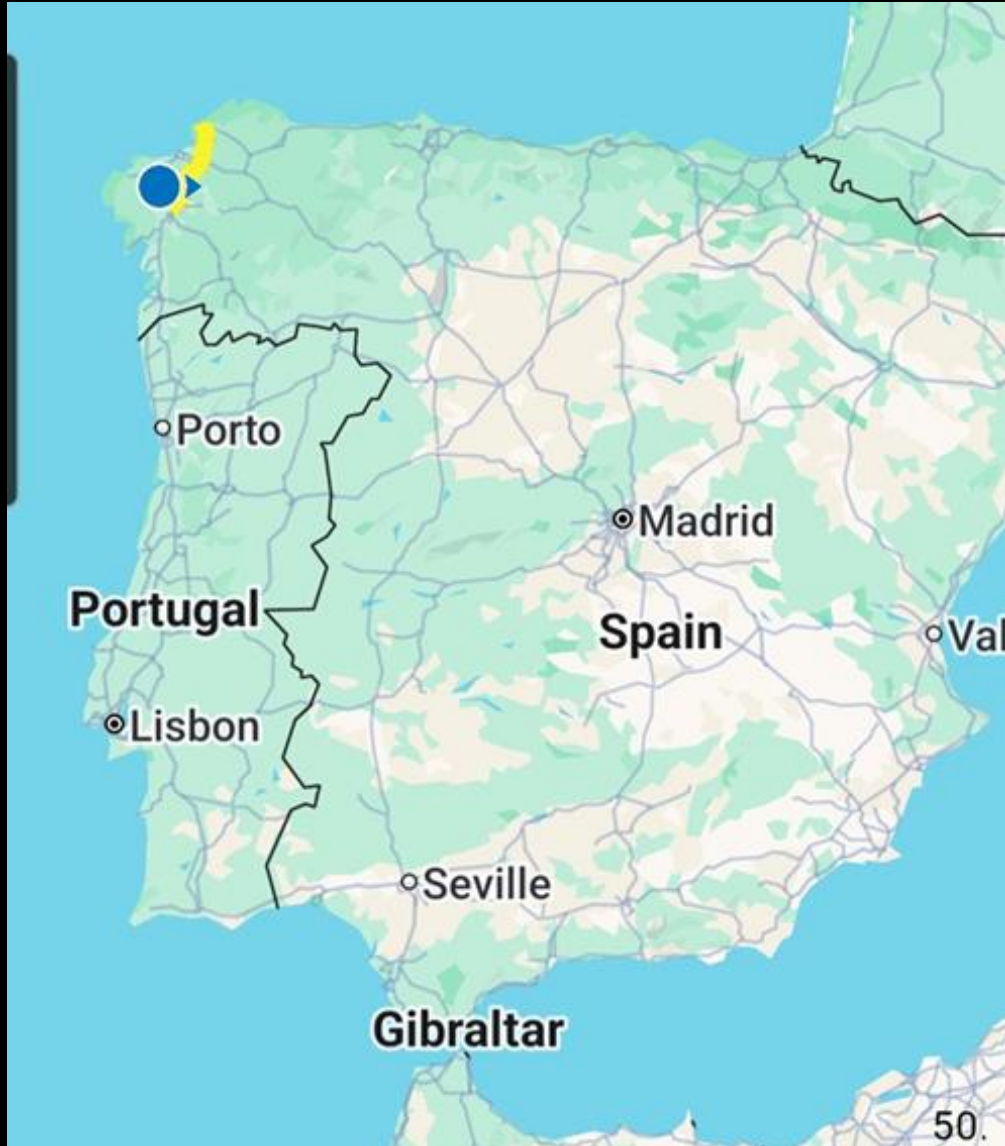


Many routes
One destination



“El Camino” is not a single route. It actually comprises at least 11 routes, which all end in Santiago de Compostela. The longest – the yellow one -- is 500+ miles long.

Our route (Camino Ingles):
80 miles in 8 days



We joined millions who have “Walked This Way.”

The first pilgrims walked El Camino in the 9th century. Since then, at least 250,000 walk it each year—some say as many as one million during its heyday in the Middle Ages. On the day we finished, about 900 others finished with us. And that was a low number, since it was late in the season.



These signs at our starting point are an example of the old and the new, reminding us how long people have been walking “The Way.” The banner points out that it’s 112 km (about 70 miles) to Santiago. We added about 10 miles with detours.

We're all pilgrims.

Pilgrim

One who journeys
to a sacred place
in search of
transformation

What kind of transformation? Many kinds. Today, people walk El Camino for many reasons, which often don't have anything to do with Christianity. In the end, the reason doesn't matter. As is often said on El Camino, "*Walk Your Own Way.*"



A traditional El Camino pilgrim in the garb of the Middle Ages

Among pilgrims, differences melt away.



This mural at our starting point emphasizes that El Camino welcomes all, and individual identities don't matter.

As you walk, stress melts away too.



My spiritual take-aways from El Camino

(Use this slide show as a metaphor for your own
journey, whether physical or otherwise.)

Take only what you need.



My new backpack and walking sticks, plus a rosary (even though I'm not Catholic) to help me focus my thoughts. In a spiritual sense, "taking only what you need" refers to noticing negative influences and thoughts that distract you and putting them aside when able.

Relationships may be tested.



I walked with my oldest sister and her longtime friend.
(My sis is the oldest of seven kids. I'm the youngest.)
I jumped into a trip that they had already planned.

I'm an introvert who values solitude and approached this walk as a meditation. I arrived with some heartache and loss that needed attention, hoping for acceptance and peace. I also hoped for some "quality time" with my sis -- sharing of insights and so on.

But my sis and her friend had a lot to catch up on. As an introvert, I have trouble inserting myself into conversations, so didn't. They talked as they walked for the first several days. They also seemed focused mainly on reaching the daily destination. (For good reason.)

I was grateful to be included but felt unsettled at first.
Like "a third wheel." The "little sister." And a bit rushed.

This triggered my insecurities about not being heard, and not "belonging."
(Insecurities often pop up during travel and adventure!)

As with any relationship challenge, whether temporary or ongoing,
the spiritual question is: What does it tell us about our own needs?

My answer came within a day.

Find *your* sacred space.



And so I walked alone. A lot.
I walked at my own pace.
And I found peace.
Comfort.
Even understanding.

Know that other pilgrims are evolving too.



In the end, my sis walked her walk and I walked mine. That's why they say "Walk your own Camino." Once I let go of my need to share a certain kind of experience with her, I was able to honor her achievement without minimizing my own. (She's almost 80 years old, so no wonder she was focused on "the task.") Because I recognized my own needs, I was able to recognize hers too. We enjoyed each other and laughed through the rain.



Many others have been here before you.



Pilgrims leave mementos as they pass. The very old marker on right reminds us that many have passed by before, over several hundred years.

Watch for signs & pointers.



On the spiritual journey, “signs” may show up as serendipity or an inner knowing. On El Camino, they are yellow arrows. The first one we saw, on our first morning, was a dim arrow on the pavement. During the rest of our journey, we found them on markers, walls, lamp posts and private gates.

They may be hard to spot.



Can you spot the sign here?
I was walking alone, and mulling my problems, when I came across this intersection. I almost missed the arrow. This was a reminder to be constantly scanning for the signs. If we're "in our head" too much, we might miss them.

Watch for guides.



The statue of St. Francis was a timely reminder, on my 2nd morning, that I seek peace. (From that moment, I found it more easily.) The local gentleman spoke no English and I spoke no Spanish, but his cheery welcome made me feel like I belonged, reminding me to engage with strangers. He unknowingly banished my feeling of “not belonging!”

Sometimes, the guidance will make you laugh!



Encountered in a roadside restaurant just for pilgrims!

Be grateful for sunny days...



...and also wet or windy ones.



It's contrast – in weather and
in all things – that adds
texture and meaning to our lives.
We live in dichotomy.
It's the nature of human life.
Embrace it all, without judgment.



“The Way” is not always beautiful.

(Or fun.)



Political graffiti followed us to Spain.
We walked through industrial areas.
We sometimes started out in a drizzle, before sunrise.
It's all part of "The Way."

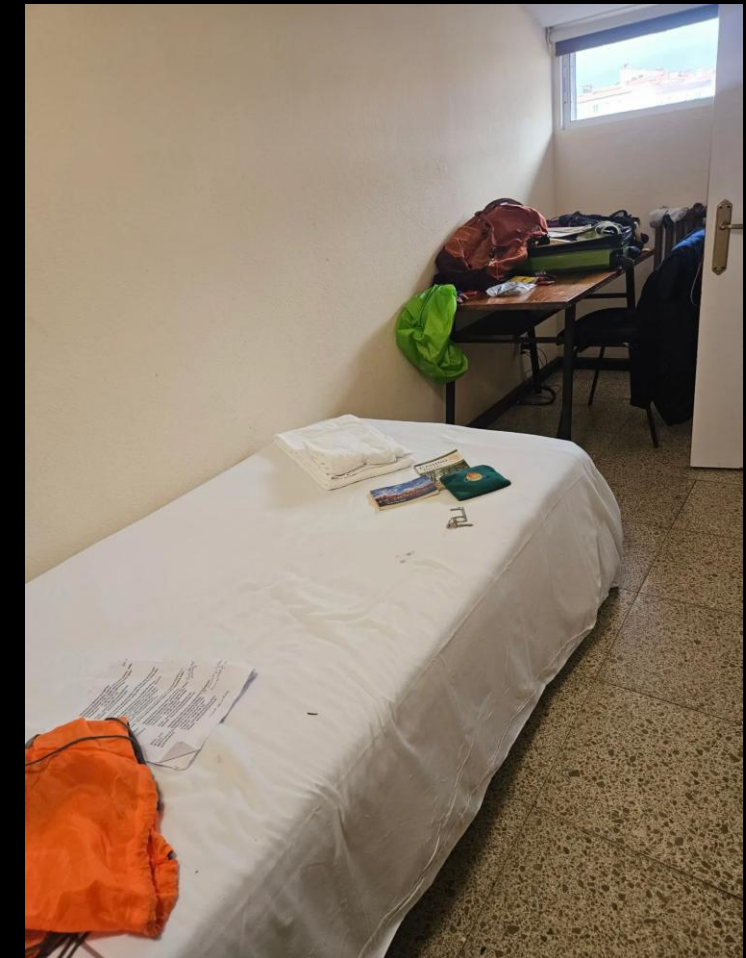
“The Way” can be messy.



We passed piles of detritus at times.
At our last lodging, we arrived to a roomful
of pilgrims' bags waiting to be sorted.



“The Way” can be simple, even stark.



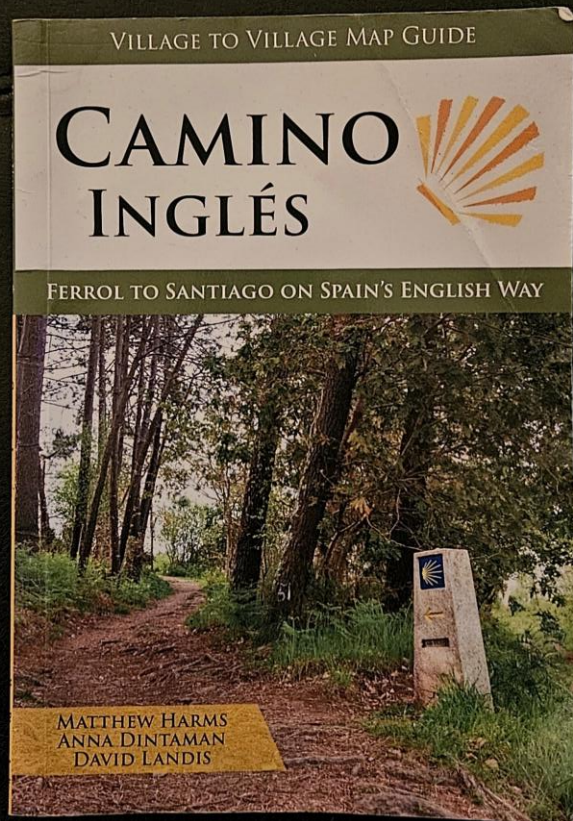
Our lodgings were simple and
sometimes barren.
(But they worked out fine!)

Sometimes, you face a choice on “The Way.”



What to do when the arrows point both ways? Decide which is most important; shorter or more scenic. (For us, the answer was different on different days. Your spiritual choices may vary also.)

Sometimes, you need a better map.



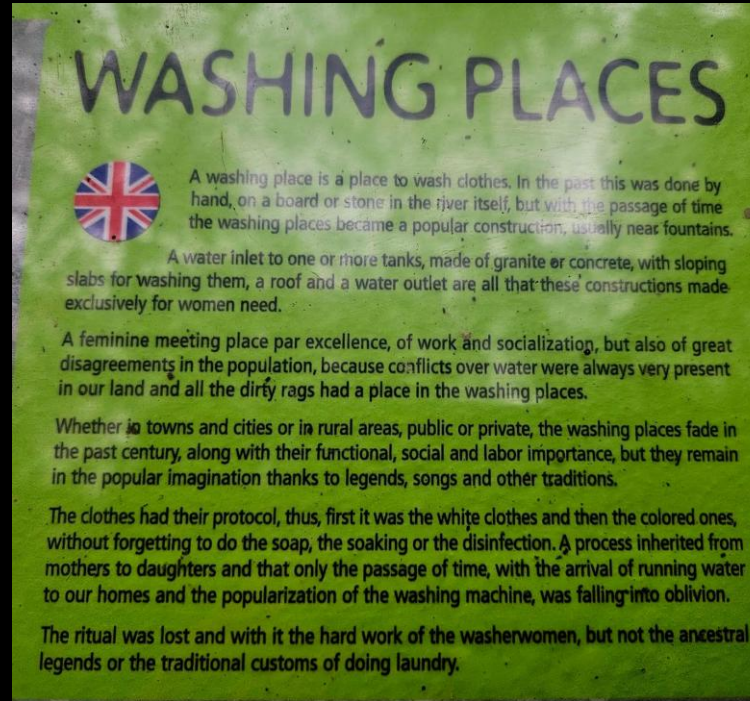
We began with a physical map. As I walked alone more often, usually out of sight of other people, I leaned on my phone app. It told me if I was “off-trail.” On the spiritual path also, you may need to vary your “map,” or tools. Can’t sleep? Try meditating. Too agitated? Try verbal prayer. Distracted thoughts? Try journaling.

Sometimes, your planned “rest stop” is closed.



We were looking forward to this hilltop coffee shop after a long climb. Closed. ☹️ We kept walking. You may be looking forward to a retreat or a spa day after a stressful event, and your plans go awry. Resist discouragement. Try something else. Start by breathing deeply, which is its own “time-out.”

Sometimes, you want to wash away “the dirt.”



Our culture seems verbally dirty lately, and sometimes we want to wash it from our minds and hearts. Former pilgrims needed to wash too, especially the ones who carried their beds on their backs. These washing stations were made for them. (And their clothing.) Me? I just filled my water bottle and kept walking. The water was pure and refreshing. Sometimes that's all it takes to wash away negative thoughts. Take a drink!

Find quiet places to breathe.



Since I was consciously seeking peace – remember, setting an intention – I stopped in every church I could, including the ancient monastery on the left. I sat in a pew, or on a rock, and just breathed. I let my walking companions continue on while I lingered. On the spiritual path, too, set your own pace.

Others will encourage you on “The Way.”



On El Camino, locals put up signs to encourage the pilgrims passing by. ("Buen Camino" is the greeting you hear from fellow pilgrims and locals.) We can also find encouraging signs on the spiritual path – inspired books, songs, and sometimes just a smile.

Support shows up in unexpected places.



Along El Camino, we encountered a refreshment stand and a few ad-hoc “trailside shops” offering mementos for one euro apiece. While walking the spiritual path, we sometimes find inspiration or support in unexpected places...if we keep our eyes and heart open.

Sometimes, it comes from animals.



Dogs & cats, but also donkeys (with a pig), wild and tame geese, sheep, cows...





...colorful chickens and beautiful horses.
Animals of all kinds are such a comfort when in distress, sadness, or confusion.

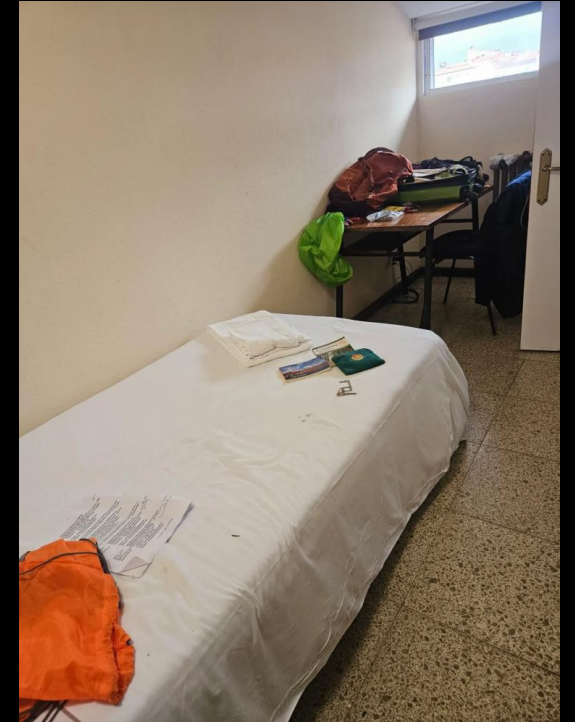
What happens when you “arrive?”



The cathedral in Santiago de Compostela is the destination for all pilgrims. My sister and I took it in. (The plaza was quiet this late in the season but is packed in summer.) Did we feel satisfaction? Yes. Did bells ring in our heads? No. Where was the big “a-ha?” Sometimes it’s more an “ah” than an “a-ha.” Sometimes “the meaning” shows up later, or somewhere else...a reminder to set aside expectations for a certain outcome.



It doesn't always look like what you expect.



Our last night's lodging was a converted monastery near the cathedral. I anticipated a quiet place full of history. It wasn't what I expected. The building was impressive but the entrance innocuous. The rooms were serviceable but had "no soul." Noisy fellow pilgrims interrupted sleep. I noticed it all, and my reactions to it.

You might not feel what you're
“supposed to feel.”



So, into the cathedral itself, hoping I might “feel spiritual” there. The gold impressed but did not inspire me. The bones of Saint James, said to be under the altar, did not move me. But...lighting a candle and adding it to the bank of candles left by other pilgrims...that was the moment I “arrived.” I symbolically joined the community of seekers and I felt welcomed. It was a moment. But it was enough.

Take the next step.
Trust the process.



Whenever something doesn't show up the way we expect it to, just take the next step. In Santiago de Compostela, the stones under my feet...both the ancient one on the left and the new one on the right...reminded me how many have done this before me and will follow after me. I'm sure someone has had the thoughts I'm having right now, standing in this place. But don't look down too long or you might miss the next gift!

Watch for pleasant surprises.



This plaque (in Latin) near the cathedral honors a battalion of literary heroes. My people! Writers and readers who value knowledge! It often feels, these days, as if *lack* of knowledge is celebrated. Yet, a craving for knowledge can also distract us from the spiritual path... especially if it comes with a need for credentials.

Credentials aren't what matters.



Capitulum huius
Almae Apostolicae
et Metropolitanae Ecclesiae
Compostellanae, sigilli Altaris
Beati Iacobi Apostoli custos, ut
omnibus Fidelibus et Peregrinis ex toto terrarum
Orbe, devotionis affectu vel voti causa, ad limina
SANCTI IACOBI, Apostoli Nostri, Hispaniarum
Patroni et Tutelarum convenientibus, authenticas
visitationis litteras expediat, omnibus et singulis
praesentes inspecturis, notum facit: *Dominam*

Mariam Elisabetham Hanson

hoc sacratissimum templum, perfecto itinere
sive pedibus sive equitando post postrema centum
milia metrorum, birota vero post ducenta, pietatis
causa, devote visitasse. In quorum fidem praesentes
litteras, sigillo eiusdem Sanctae Ecclesiae munitas,
ei confert.

Compostellae die 31 mensis *Octobris*

Anno Dni 2025



Códice Calixtino

A lovely certificate in Latin,
with our names (also in Latin).
Cool, but...

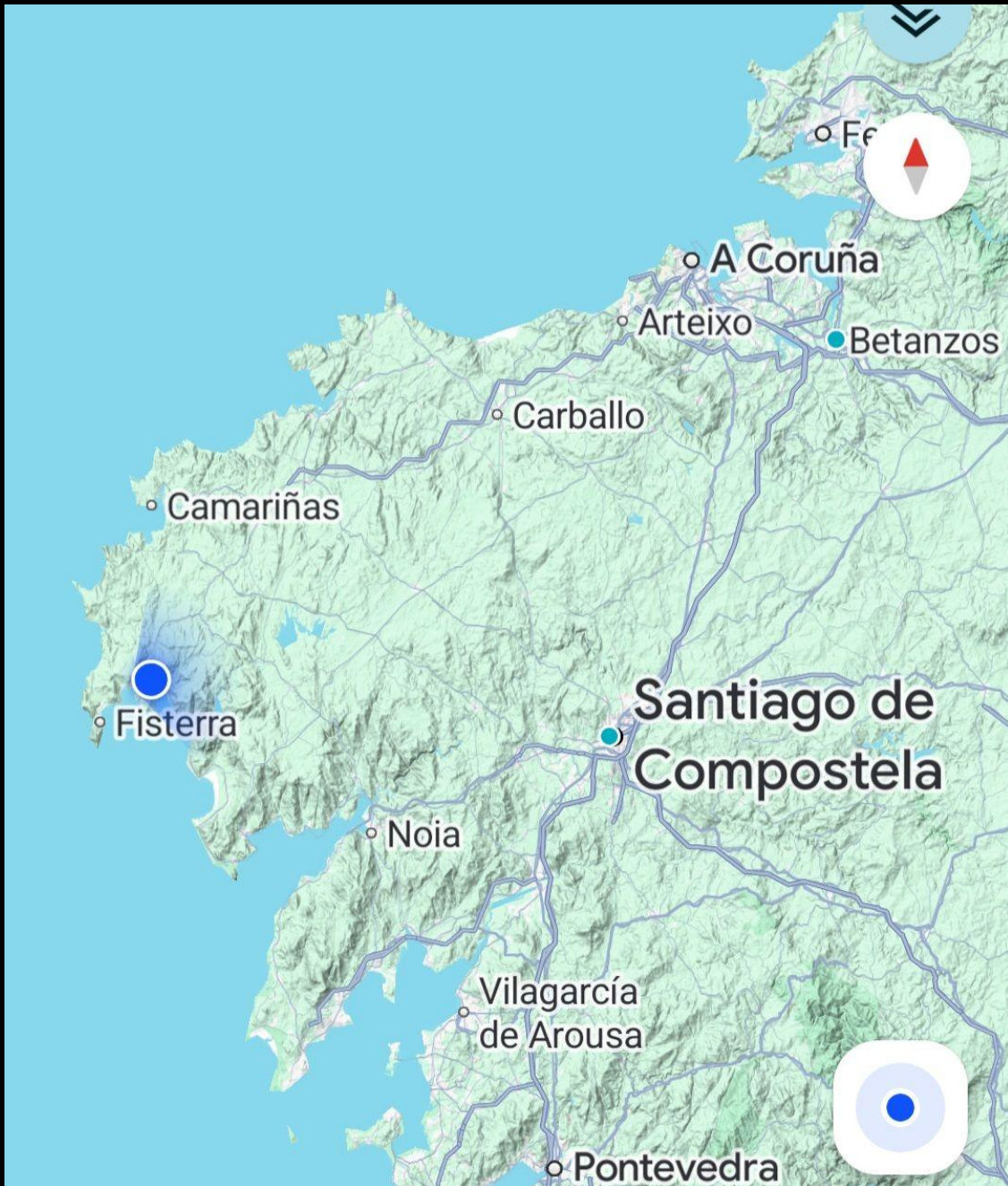
It's the journey that matters.



For me, the journey was all about those miles I walked alone through the forest. The “just walking” somehow led to acceptance...of both myself and others... and an understanding that we all walk our own paths in our own way and time. What a relief to release judgment and expectation!

Sometimes, all this “insight-seeking” feels like work. (Because it is.) So...

It's ok to “take a tour” sometimes.

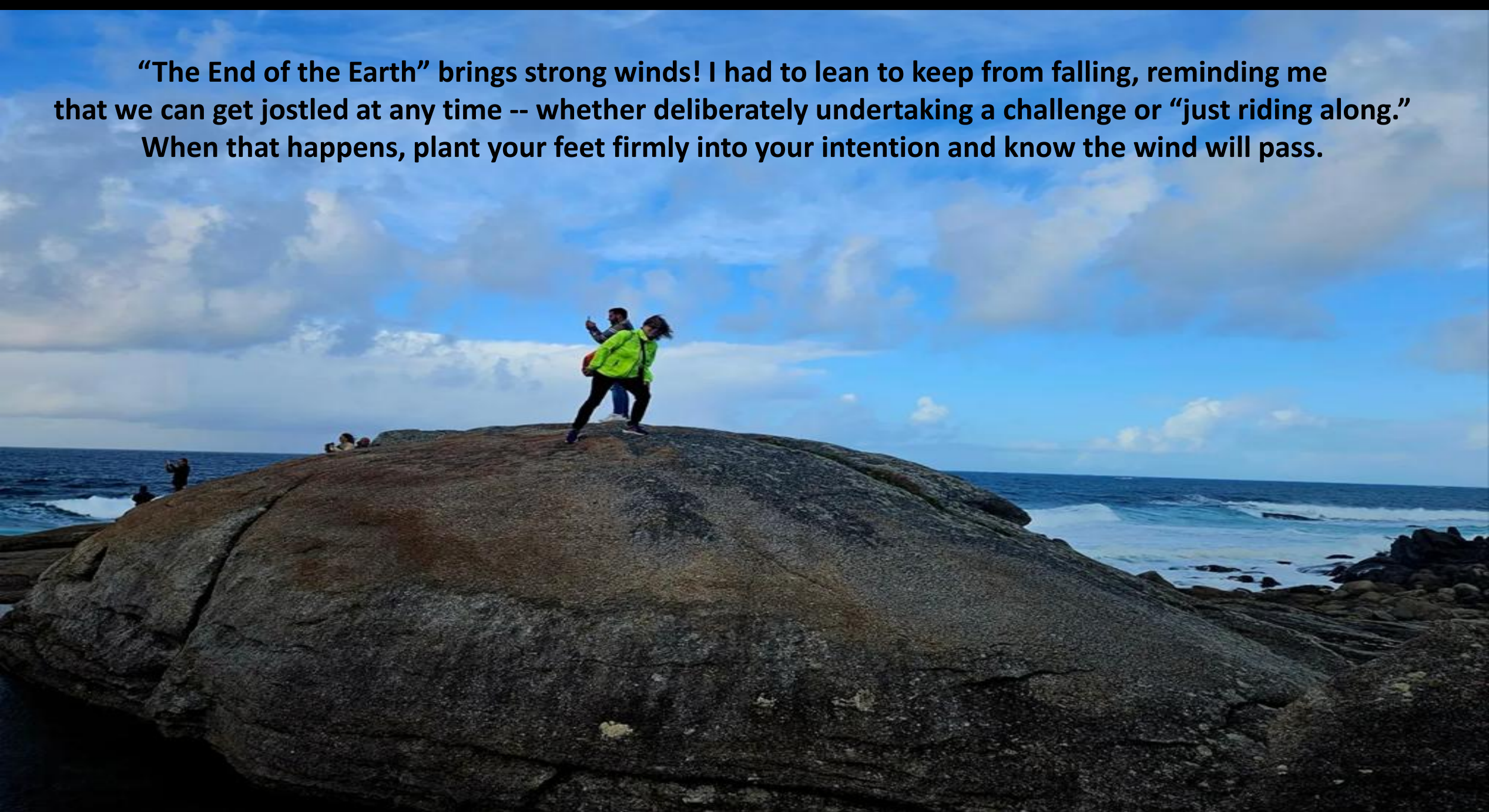


After finishing our 80-mile walk, my sister and I took a bus tour to Fisterra, or “the end of the earth.” It was relaxing to let someone else do the navigating and driving.



Along the way, we saw charming harbors and an ancient bridge with Roman origins.
Even though we followed someone else's plan, we still ran into surprises...

“The End of the Earth” brings strong winds! I had to lean to keep from falling, reminding me that we can get jostled at any time -- whether deliberately undertaking a challenge or “just riding along.” When that happens, plant your feet firmly into your intention and know the wind will pass.



The bottom line:

Set your intention.

Listen.

Wait.



And in all things,
give thanks.

Buen Camino!



See and read more about
this journey at my blog:

<http://mindfulmary.org>