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## El Camino de Santiago

This summer, with much appreciated financial help from the Summer Enrichment Scholarship Fund awarded through Alpha Sigma of Chi Psi, I hiked over 300 miles along El Camino de Santiago. In my formal write up reviewing my experience, I believe it is important to cover all aspects of my experience, from actual specific events, to lessons learned and challenges overcome, including what I hope and plan to bring back to Alpha Sigma and UNC in the coming semester and over the remainder of my time as an undergraduate and beyond. I am incredibly grateful for my unique opportunity to have walked El Camino de Santiago, and feel confident in saying that up to this moment in my life, the walk has been the single most powerful, transforming, and enjoyable 22 days of my life.

### *History and background of El Camino de Santiago*

“El Camino de Santiago” translates in English to “The way (road) of Saint James” and is an ancient pilgrimage route leading to Santiago de Compostela in the province of Galicia, Spain. As the story goes, Saint James traversed through France and Northern Spain spreading the word of Christianity during and after the life of Jesus Christ. After spreading the word of Christianity Saint James was beheaded, as Christianity was not widely accepted at this moment in history, and Saint James was seen as a traitor spreading treason. His body was then lost for centuries, until one day, as legend has it, a man stumbled upon the body of Saint James in what is now the location of the city Santiago de Compostela. This man claims to have been led by stars to the body of Saint James, and thus the city name “Santiago de Compostela” directly translates to “Saint James, of the field of stars.” Upon finding the body of Saint James during the Spanish reconquista of the Moors, a large cathedral was created around the tomb of Saint James, as well as a tribute village. With the creation of the city of Santiago de Compostela, many symbolic pilgrimages route arose, leading from multiple starting points throughout Europe, all ending at the foot of the Cathedral of Saint James. Today, there are multiple ‘routes’ including one traversing Portugal, one from southern Spain through Sevilla, one across the upmost northern regions of Spain, as well as the main, most highly trafficked route beginning in St. Jean Pier De Port in France, traveling through Burgos and Leon before arriving in Santiago de Compostela.

Throughout a large portion of the history of the camino, most ‘pilgrims’ completed the journey for religious reasons, paying tribute to Saint James and his contributions to Christianity. However, as time has passed pilgrims now choose to walk the path of Saint James for a multitude of personal reasons, including but not

limited to self challenge, self discovery, adventure, love of travel, desire to meet and interact with people from all corners of the world, recommendation through friends, and of course, personal religious reasons. Personally, I myself am not very religious. I was raised in a Jewish family, but have lost touch with my religious beliefs over time. I, unexpectedly, by the end of my experience learned a great deal about the Catholic faith and the holistic importance it holds for many individuals (of which I will go into in considerably more depth upon the reasons and specifics later).

I, however, chose to walk the camino for a multitude of reasons, including fulfilling a sense of adventure, continuing my exploration of Europe and Spain following a four month study program based in Sevilla, in the south of Spain. I also walked to further advance my Spanish, to challenge my body and mind, to meet and interact with global citizens from countless countries, generations, background, languages, and personality types, and finally and perhaps most importantly to embark on a journey of self discovery and learning. In terms of self discovery, I chose to walk so that I could have a fresh perspective and be given time and opportunity to reflect upon my path through academics, my passions, what I want out of life, and the person I am and hope to become as I grow and transition through college and into adulthood.

The first night of my experience, May 22<sup>nd</sup>, I somehow managed to find myself in a petite, quaint, hospitable cottage owned by a 70 year old French grandmother who spoke no Spanish and no English in St Jean Pier De Port, France. One of the first pilgrims I interacted with was a middle aged Austrian father, who was also staying with the friendly, albeit eccentric (edging on crazy) French grandmother. While this was the first night of my own camino, it was contrastingly the Austrian Father's last night, as he had chosen to walk the camino in reverse, beginning in Santiago de Compostela, thus consequently ending in St. Jean. I asked him, eager and naïve, "Now that you have finished the camino, is there any advice or suggestions you would give to a young American just starting?" he casually, through gritted exhaustion, replied in broken English, "The only thing I know is that you can not know what to expect, upon the camino you will learn the answers to questions you didn't know you were asking, you will find yourself in ways you didn't know you weren't searching."

At first I didn't understand exactly what he meant, but only knew in my excited, adventurous state of mind, it was the best thing I could have hoped to hear. It was not until the end of my trip, and through my reflection looking back upon the all the events and all the lessons learned that I truly understood his meaning. Throughout this report I hope to convey what was meant in that quote, what it meant to me, how I came to understand it, and how I have changed and grown as a person.

### *Camino overview*

Beginning with a 'typical' day upon the camino to help paint the experience, everything starts around 7:30 am. At 7:30, pilgrims start to roll out of bed, wake up,

and get their things together. (The previous night was most likely spent in a municipal albergue, which is more or less a very cheap hostel, with layout comparable to an army barracks with rooms housing 60-100 people in bunk beds. The beds are just a mattress, and every pilgrim carries his or her own sleeping bag to put over the mattress. The size and layout of the albergues varies widely, from some housing up to 200 pilgrims in the larger cities, to some that hold as few as 30. Most cost around 5-8 euros, although some are entirely donation based. They can be anything from a converted old school house, church, monastery, or athletic center to a modern, well kept, hotel style building. Each albergue has running water (toilets and showers) and most offer laundry machines as well. They are also exclusive to only walking or biking pilgrims.) By 8 or 8:30 am, everyone is on their way, beginning the day's section of the walk. Personally, I usually left with 2-5 other close friends in the morning, we would walk about an hour (5km) before stopping for breakfast in the next small pueblo or village. Breakfast usually consisted of a "cafe con leche" (coffee with milk) with a croissant or muffin or small pastry treat in a small bar. Throughout the day you walk anywhere from 20-30 kilometers, which usually averages from 5-8 hours of pure walking time. Lunch can either be had along the way in a small town or along the path if you have previously bought lunch food from a market the day before. Each day you can expect to walk through 4 to 5 small pueblos scattered throughout the Spanish countryside. My walking would end around 3-4 when I would arrive in the village where I would be staying in for the night. When you arrive, the first thing you do is walk to the municipal albergue to secure a bed, no beds can be reserved in advance and they are all first come first serve. When entering the albergue, you present a small pilgrim passport, which is essentially a paper booklet of stamps. This passport proves you are a pilgrim and shows where you have already traveled on the camino, as you receive a unique stamp from each village you stay in along the way. It becomes a game/souvenir to try and get as many stamps as you can along the way. By the end a passport can have up to 40+ stamps, and shows all the villages you have visited along the pilgrimage.

After you check in to the albergue, you have the rest of the afternoon to get food, get drinks, hang out with the other pilgrims, explore the town, rest, reflect on the journey, or attend a church service. I enjoyed the afternoons the most, when I was able to explore the small pueblos, talk to the locals, and hang out and interact with all the other pilgrims walking. We would usually go to a local, quaint bar and order some food, drink wine, share stories and hang out. During this time I was really able to connect with the pilgrims the most, which proved to be the most memorable portion of my experience. Then, by 10-11pm you find yourself moving back to the albergue, desperately hoping you aren't surrounded by powerful snorers.

Though this was the basic overarching formula of a day, every day was incredibly unique, every village different, and every moment a surprise.

*My actual journey*

I began my journey on May 22<sup>nd</sup>, flying from Rome to Barcelona to Pamplona, then rushing in a taxi to catch the last bus (which left 30 minutes after my plane landed in Pamplona) to St. Jean Pier De Port. I began El Camino Frances (the name of the most popular route to Santiago de Compostela) on May 23<sup>rd</sup>, and returned home on June 14<sup>th</sup>. El Camino Frances, from St. Jean to Santiago de Compostela covers 790 km (~480 miles) and typically takes between 30 and 35 days. I, due to time constraints, illness, and other factors covered just over 500 Km (~300 miles) over the course of 19 walking days and 3 days of sickness and non-walking travel days. My path across northern Spain was certainly unique, entirely nontraditional, and of course, unexpected.

On May 23<sup>rd</sup> I set out at 7:30 am with four American university students I only met the previous night; Joseph and Ryan from Reno, Nevada, Matt who had studied in Logroño, and Kristin, from the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Kristin had been studying abroad in Granada, Spain over the past few months, as I had been in Sevilla, so we were in very similar situations starting out. The first day we walked from St. Jean in France, to Roncesvalles in Spain. Walking across the border was nothing more than walking past a small sign beside a dirt path that read, "España," not quite the equitable border control we have across our American borders.

While walking, different groups tend to walk at different paces naturally, so fading in and out of groups, usually around 3-4 at a time becomes the usual. This first day, Kristin and I were walking faster than the other Americans, so we decided to split from them, and almost immediately after, by chance met one of the most influential pilgrims upon my entire trip, Gido, a 61 year old Belgian. (I will go into further detail on everyone I met along the camino in the following section).

The first day we walked just short of 30km, and crossed a section of the Pyrenees mountains entering Spain. 3 days before our own, crossing a group of 3 actually lost the path in a storm and had to be rescued. People have died along this section of the trail, and they say the first day is one of the hardest days of the entire camino. Well, on the day we chose to cross, there was a very thick cloud cover, and we were cautioned against crossing the harder path through the mountains, as visibility was limited to maybe 20-30 yards. Adventurous and risk taking, we decided it was worth the risk, and I am glad we did, as it was a powerful, memorable beginning to my journey.

The next day we set out, following roughly the itinerary previously mentioned. At first I met numerous people constantly, but as time passed pilgrims began falling into more consistent groups for walking throughout the day. I continued in this manner for 12 days, taking me through Zubiri, Pamplona, Puente la Reina, Los Arcos, Logroño, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Belorado, San Juan de Ortega, and eventually Burgos.

By this point I had formed incredibly strong relationships with numerous pilgrims, some of which know more about me than I believe anyone else I know. In Burgos, I reluctantly decided it was time for me to skip ahead a little, as I wanted to arrive in Santiago De Compostela before returning home. With only 20 planned walking days it would have been near impossible to walk the entire way without taking a bus for at least a small section. From Burgos I attempted to hitchhike with Gideon, a 21 year old German, across the Meseta, the high plateau of central,

northern Spain. Though hitchhiking was not as successful as we were hoping, I eventually made it to Ponferrada by the end of the night of June 4<sup>th</sup>. At this stage, it was basically as if I had begun a brand new, entirely exclusive camino. I had left behind everyone I had previously met on my experience leading up till Burgos, and continued on completely by myself to attempt the final 220 km to Santiago de Compostela in 7 days. At first this was a very arduous task, the distance averages per day were much higher than before, the terrain was more difficult as I was reentering the mountains of western Spain, and I was down in spirits leaving behind all my friends and relationships I had built up so strongly.

After walking 6+ hours a day with someone day in day out you begin to learn everything about them, and it was extremely difficult for me to leave all of that behind and continue on more or less by myself, again, to attempt the final section. I of course began to form new friend groups almost immediately, but struggled to form the same connections I had had previously. On June 9<sup>th</sup> I was attempting to walk 40 km to make up time and distance to reach Santiago de Compostela. After 25 km I arrived in Palas del Rey, where Juan Gracia, a Spanish friend I had met earlier in my journey (during the first half of my trip) surprised me along the camino! He had caught a bus ahead and then gotten his parents to drive him to Palas del Rey so that he could walk the final 2 days with me.

Well, by this point, I had been pushing my physical limits, and fell into a slightly delusional fever while stopping for lunch. I tried to wait out the symptoms hoping it pass would during the afternoon, but unfortunately it only worsened. Despairingly, I was forced to the realization that finishing the camino was becoming out of reach. There was little hope to walk another 15 km in my state, let alone another 30 the following day. By 8pm that night, Juan called his parents, who live in A Coruña, an hour drive north of Santiago, and his father drove to pick us both up and take us back to his house so that I could rest and recuperate.

I spent 3 days with his family in A Coruña recovering from my fever. At this point, it was June 11<sup>th</sup>, and I had to be in Madrid by 7am on June 14<sup>th</sup>, making returning to the camino and finishing impossible. Thus I decided to use this opportunity to return to my original group of pilgrims I had walked with during the first half of my journey. On June 12<sup>th</sup> I took a bus from A Coruña to Astorga, a city 2 days walk (50km) before Ponferrada (the starting point of my second leg of the camino). Upon arriving in Astorga, I walked backwards a small distance along the camino and surprised everyone I had met and become close to during the first section, who were just arriving in Astorga that same day by foot from the east.

I spent my final day in Spain hanging out and reconnecting with everyone from the first 12 days of the camino. On June 13<sup>th</sup> I walked my final day on the camino, from Astorga to Rabanal, before catching a 2am bus to take me to Madrid, to catch my 10 am flight home to the United States.

A few snap shot memories from the camino include:

In San Juan de Ortega, a very small town with a population of 60 a day before Burgos, myself, two Americans, and four 20-25 year old Danish kids sat outside of

an ancient cathedral and played music with their 2 banjos, harmonica, spoon-drums, and African morocco, as other fellow pilgrims sat out in the sun or danced in the plaza.

In Pamplona, we stayed at a German hostel, where they barely spoke English or Spanish. We managed to luckily enter Pamplona during the middle an extremely traditional, city-wide festival celebrating the old central city. The streets were flooded with people, and there was live music and performances at every corner.

In Los Arcos, as we were resting in some grass after a day of walking, a very elderly man approached us and sang traditional Andalucian songs before showing us a hand crafted walking stick with every city along the camino etched into the side along with quotes and prayers.

There is a legendary fountain along the way, but instead of clean water, red wine pours out when the handle is turned.

Along the route there are a number of stands run by locals that offer completely free items to pilgrims. They give away anything from souvenirs to walking sticks, to snacks, to the symbolic shell of the camino. I left my water bottle at one by mistake, but wasn't too troubled by the idea of loosing a water bottle. 30 minutes later the elderly man working the stand comes driving down the road in a beat-up van just to find me and return my small green athletic bottle.

On my birthday (June 7<sup>th</sup>), I walked 38 km, the longest distance of my entire trip, with a Spanish Grandmother of 70 and her son and other fellow pilgrim, Victor. They were from northern Spain, spoke no English, and we walked for nearly 9 hours of pure walking time crossing 2 mountains, talking in Spanish the entire way. I met them because I wanted to make up distance that day, and left the hostel before at 6am, which it was still completely dark. I followed them out of the hostel as they had head lamps, and I didn't, and I figured it would be a poor idea to walk alone through the woods in the dark, with no light. After meeting them that morning, they organized a surprise birthday celebration for me in the hostel that night with numerous other pilgrims I hadn't met.

There are countless more stories, many more exciting than the ones listed above, but you will have to find me and ask me in person to hear them.

### *Pilgrims that had a lasting impact on my experience*

I wanted to share a brief list of the pilgrims, and their backgrounds, that had the strongest impact upon my experience. This serves to demonstrate the diversity of the camino, and the relationships formed across national, generational, and linguistic barriers.

Gido- 61 year old Belgium who works with a Flemish technology company. Gido (pronounced hee-dough) told us to call him "guy" for those that couldn't pronounce his name. He was a very friendly, goofy, married man who began his camino in northern France, walking over 2000km in total. Met on first day walking. Said he was walking "because his wife told him to," though it is unlikely he was walking 2000 km without a deeper hidden reason.

Stefan- 49 year old divorced German. Stefan struggled with English, but was very memorable as being extremely funny, and a "camino partier." At first seemed like a happy-go-lucky guy, but after walking with him for a few days I learned he was relatively unhappy, a slight alcoholic, and was walking to escape from his life and try to find himself and find happiness. He just picked up and left his old life one day to begin the camino without telling family or friends where he was going.

Gideon- 21 year old engaged German. Gideon has lived a very interesting life, proposing to a French girl after knowing her for a little over a month. He is a DJ and has raised money through DJ'ing to travel southeast Asia, Africa, and across Europe. Though he told me we was "walking for the experience" I soon learned about his internal conflict, and that he was walking to think about his life and his coming marriage and decide if he was truly ready to get married at such a young age.

Kristin- 21 year old American student at the University of Wisconsin, Madison. Kristin and I were most similar, having both studied abroad and traveled Europe before beginning the camino. Kristin was perhaps the most influential pilgrim I met along the trail. I walked with her from day 1 and we walked together consistently for the first 12 days until Burgos. She taught me an incredible amount about what it truly meant to be a 'good person' and the power of helping and caring for others. She was also perhaps the most religious pilgrim I was fortunate enough to get to know, and taught me a lot about the power of religion and the importance it holds in guiding some lives. I previously didn't necessarily understand Catholicism very well, but she showed me how, if individually defined and followed, it can be a very powerful tool in one's life.

Ryan/Joesph- 19/20 year old students from Reno, Nevada. Joesph had a large American flag tattooed on his arm, and they could be seen to fit the European stereotype of the "classic American." The first two people I met on the bus from Pamplona to St. Jean.

Korean gentleman- Knew very little Spanish or English. Showed the difficulty, yet comedic aspect of a strong language barrier. Joseph, before knowing his language challenges, asked the man a detailed question about housing problems in Korea and how it was affecting the man; the man innocently smiled, giggled, looked around, thought, responded "uhh, yes!" nodded, and went back to eating.

Maeve- Middle aged British woman, walking alone most of the time, walks for the experience. Watched the *The Way* (a movie about the camino) ten times in a week and has since become obsessed with the camino. Was walking for her second time.

Juan and Abuelo- Juan was the 20 year old Spanish kid from A Coruña, walking with his grandfather. We became very close throughout the trip, and it was his family that rescued me when I was extremely sick and helped me recover my strength. Juan is now currently in Vancouver, Canada learning English with plans to join the Spanish military.

Jane and Brazilian women- a group of 8 'diva' Brazilian women who were walking for fun and the experience. Very vivacious and friendly, they walked at times in matching pink rain suits. Jane invited me to visit her in Brazil for the World Cup, which I fully hope to take advantage of.

"The Danes"- Ida, Benjamin, Lasse, and a final girl I have forgotten her name. 20-25 year old Danish kids who didn't have much of a plan. Carried musical instruments with them and played and joked around all the time. Friendly, exciting, and inspirationally complacent.

Nashville Bartenders- A couple, ~25 years old. Nashville musicians, bartending to make some money while they try to make it in the music industry.

Canadians- Two biker friends. Dennis and "the senator" (nickname). Very eccentric, wild, retired bikers doing the camino because they "knew nothing about it, but figured it would be interesting."

Spanish Grandmother/Son/Victor- The grandmother was walking the camino for the third time. They are the group I walked 38 km with on my birthday and then organized a surprise birthday party for me that night.

Russ- Very athletic ~35 year old from Louisiana. Russ hiked part of the Appalachian trail, and heard about the camino from a friend and just decided to jump in a do it with no preparation or knowledge of what it was. Russ also has run in ~13 marathons, including the Boston marathon, where he finished before the bombing.

Paula- A Middle aged south African woman who did yoga every night and was the most sincere, 'pure,' content woman I encountered on the journey.

Albergue director in Ayegui- This man converted an old gym into an albergue to house pilgrims. The year before he started working in the albergue, he walked the camino a dozen times, and in fact is known as "the man who walked the camino 12 times in 2012." Incredibly friendly, I was blown away by the connection he made with pilgrims and his mental and physical toughness to have walked a 790km path 12 times in one year, totaling 9500 km (~6000 miles) in 365 days.



## *Challenges*

Of course on a journey like this there will always be challenges along the way. First off, throughout the entire experience I was planning on/executing the making of a documentary about my experience. The theme was going to be exploring the idea surrounding the fact that so many people from around the entire world, walking with completely different reasons, goals, expectations, from different social, economic, and generational backgrounds, come together, seemingly at random, to do more or less the exact same thing as everyone else (walk), while forming deep connections, with complete disregard for the past or external situation of everyone. How, the camino is a mutually exclusive experience, where someone's background is entirely irrelevant when forming friendships and relationships. Well, the documentary was coming along successfully with filmed footage, but unfortunately 5 days from the end, my camera was stolen from a small hostel in Villafrana del Bierzo. It was very difficult for me to get over losing all of my photos and videos from the entire camino in a split second, and still have to continue and finish the experience.

Also, the physical and mental challenge of walking day in day out for 5-8+ hours. Though enjoyable, as you walk through small beautiful villages with inexplicably interesting people, the physical challenge still exists, and took its toll on my body with my sickness coming suddenly, yet severely, so close to the end.

## *What I learned and plan to bring back to Alpha Sigma*

A lot of what I learned came to me gradually and additionally has stuck with me after reflection and thinking back upon the lessons presented along the camino. I learned the power of religion, and the importance and role as a 'life roadmap' it offers to many. Going into the camino I was not very religious at all, and after leaving I don't believe my personal beliefs have necessarily changed to any accountable degree. However, I have developed a deeper understanding of the power religion holds for many, but also how important is to realize that religion becomes something that is self defined for everyone. I learned that you can not try to force beliefs on anyone, and everyone has to respect, accept, and actually be subconsciously ok with the fact that everyone defines religion in their own personal ways, which are different for everyone. Kristin, the girl who taught me the most concerning the aforementioned, was devoutly religious even though her family was not necessarily as much so. She loved to talk about her views and why it was important to her, yet never once tried to get anyone to agree with her or to change anyone's mind/push her beliefs to any degree. I believe this idea of 'individually defined religion' has become somewhat lost with many, and many believe religious beliefs are either correct or incorrect, and are seen too much in black and white.

I learned the power and benefit, as well as relative ease, of doing small simple everyday favors for people. One time, in Ayegui, it started to rain, and many

pilgrim's clothes were outside on a clothes line. A small Korean girl simply went outside and brought everyone's clothes inside and laid them on a table. It probably took her all of 5 minutes to do this, but saved everyone in the albergue a lot of unnecessary trouble dealing with soaking clothes, when many only brought one other change of clothing. This simple act really stood out to me, how her minimal effort made a relatively significant difference in the lives of 20-30 people. She received no benefit from helping everyone, but did so regardless. I hope to bring the idea of small, yet significant favors, back to the lodge. We are a brotherhood of anywhere from 70-105 depending on the time of year, and if half of that number did one 5 minute favor for another everyday, all 70-100 lives would be significantly easier and more enjoyable. This could be something as simple as picking up someone's trash in the hallway, that takes about 30 seconds, and if 20 people do it, that 10 mins of collective effort can drastically change the outlook and character of the entire lodge.

I discovered that no matter where you are from, or who you interact with, people from different backgrounds around the world are still relatively similar. We all find the same things funny, we can connect of the same interests. Everyone enjoys a casual conversation, and everyone can share their story and find a connection with anyone else. All it takes, is a slightly open mind, and a small portion of time out of the day.

I further understand the importance of having a deep connecting conversation with people, and actually listening to their responses instead of simply waiting for your turn to speak. Everyone has a story to share, everyone has passions, and if you listen to someone speak for 10 minutes, you can learn an immense amount, especially if they are different from you in background or personality.

### *Conclusion*

In all, I am very grateful for the entire experience. The biggest regret I have from the entire trip was that I didn't allow myself enough time to walk the entire thing continuously from start to finish. Looking forward in the future, I am loosely planning to make the hike again the summer after graduation, but we will see how things are academically and based on job opportunities and where I am in my life.

I look forward to presenting my experience to the brotherhood and to members of the corporation. I am also more than happy to follow up and answer any questions or respond to any comments. Please, feel free to contact me at eabrandt137@gmail.com, or if you see me around the lodge, just ask.

I also recommend anyone considering undertaking the experience to talk to me, it has, I believe, changed my course through my life with academic and social decisions I have recently made. The camino has something to offer everyone in any situation, and is just waiting to be taken advantage of.