

NOT ALL PILGRIMS ARE ATHLETES

What happens when a pilgrim soul is housed in a non-athletic body?

I do not have a hiker's body – in fact, my body was really not made for great adventures, and I don't have an athletic bone in me. I have a spiritual heart, though, and pilgrimage in all its forms calls me to assess my limitations and take to the Path. Walking a camino is not easy for me. I don't speak Spanish. I don't do well in heat. I am extremely blister-prone and allergic to many bugs. Most difficult of all, I am coeliac and cannot tolerate any exposure to gluten in any form.

It took years to work through my fears, years in which I walked in France, read voraciously about the camino, and followed various other pilgrimage routes on foot, by car, and even once on a bike. Those that weren't done by car left my body in pain, but I couldn't ignore the fact that the camino continued to call and I needed to prepare carefully.

There are, of course, many caminos, and many ways to make a pilgrimage. The process of becoming a pilgrim starts with being honest about what it will take to successfully complete your pilgrimage. Some routes are more strenuous than others, and some offer more amenities. Without self-honesty about your strengths and your limits, you run the risk of doing yourself more harm than good, physically and mentally. There is no such thing as a standard pilgrim. We are, now and always, of differing sizes, shapes, abilities, and every person carries personal challenges – only some of which will reveal themselves in the early stages of planning and preparation.

The route pages on the CSJ website give a brilliant summary of the various camino routes. Look carefully at three things initially: length, elevation/climbs, and amenities. The routes vary in what they offer. Will there be an infrastructure to support you in taking care of your body? Will you need frequent breaks or rest days? Choices for food options? Might you need to find transport or pack portage to help you over certain points of the route? You will meet pilgrims who call this cheating so you'll need to come to terms with both your needs and your decisions. If you climb that hill, will you simply be tired or will you incur physical damage that might send you home early? Only you can answer that. Listen to your body!

Personally, I love the feeling of independence and empowerment that carrying my pack affords - but the cinch strap causes problems for my damaged intestinal system, problems that I can't risk becoming permanent. Ultimately portage became a matter of being able to continue on to Santiago on foot or abandoning my camino. That was the moment that I admitted that my body is my most essential piece of kit, the one that will go forward with me not only as I walk the camino, but as I travel on towards old age.