

Ultreia susseia et Mageia



Esteban García Alonso

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A reference guide,
with historical background,
to make the most out of the
Camino de Santiago

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First Edition: 2026

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Part I

General Information

Chapter 1

Foreword

It is said that **the only constant in life is change** and the Camino is the ultimate example.

Although the advertising campaigns of the Camino promote it as a millennial route whose path has varied little; in reality, in antiquity the route suffered huge changes in its beginnings, its peak, and its decline, with the modern emphasis on stability being a marketing product.

Today it suffers the same changes it suffered centuries ago, only at a faster pace. New routes, new accommodations, new signage, new technology, more information, more awareness, more diversity, more democratization, more accessibility, allows the pilgrimage to be experienced differently each year, and make the books about the experience and guides from 5 years, 10 years and 15 years obsolete (and not to mention earlier works).

The purpose of this book is **to prepare the future pilgrims physically, mentally, and emotionally for the current odyssey in the 21st century**, as well as to help them choose and intentionally plan the route to be traveled, covering the present needs and challenges as well as those foreseeable in the near future. It must be read, studied, and applied BEFORE starting the adventure. For the day-to-day of the journey, we will need another source of information, specific to the

chosen route. There are numerous websites and mobile apps, and it is very likely that we will build our own app in the future.

This book is directed to all current audiences; it is understood that the reader is accustomed to consuming information from the internet. This implies content written in an accessible manner, only employing complex vocabulary when precision is necessary, and with a depth of subjects that advances with each chapter.

It provides **first-time pilgrims** with an introduction to the journey and the experience of being a pilgrim; for **experienced pilgrims**, information on selecting the next route and enhancing their preparation, and for **advanced pilgrims**, relevant analysis on equipment selection, resource optimization, and general tips.

However, above all, it is directed towards people who wish to make the most of this unique experience and who will very likely want to repeat it many times, exploring different aspects on each occasion.

Why the book's name? And what do they mean by "MAGIC"?

There is a clear risk in using the word "magic" in a title. It is an emotionally charged word, meaning different things to different people and can cause certain rejection.

Many people associate the word MAGIC with a supernatural and/or esoteric aspect; and I find it extremely important to clarify that this book will have ABSOLUTELY NOTHING ESOTERIC NOR SUPERNATURAL. NOTHING. I will not talk about chakras, nor about zodiac symbols, nor about telluric currents, nor about Ley lines, nor about secret messages, nor about Atlantis, nor about aliens. There are many other books that cover these topics with more passion and belief than I can honestly offer. We make this emphasis because we do not want readers interested in supernatural phenomena to be disappointed, even knowing that we will probably scare away readers who underestimate this word.

For us, "*magic*" means something else, something difficult to define and explain in a nutshell... But true, in the context of the book's title...

For those who know absolutely nothing about the Camino de Santiago, I should clarify that there is a very widespread tradition of greeting the pilgrims who pass by, (and even among the pilgrims themselves), with the phrase: "Buen Camino" or its equivalent in Galician, Portuguese, French... (English is the exception, where the expression in Spanish is usually used).

In some languages, this phrase is used in a general way, for example: "Kalo Dromo" in Greek, which literally means the same thing and means "Journey without problems/without accidents," a "(have a) safe journey" in English. However, this phrase, in Spain, is used exclusively with the pilgrims of the Camino de Santiago.

This wish, in antiquity, was expressed using other phrases: "Ultreia" (Beyond) or "Ultreia et Suseia" (Beyond and Upward), originating from the first book that discusses the Way of St. James, the Codex Calixtinus.

Personally, I really like this greeting because it is both a recognition of your role as a "pilgrim" and a wish for a "good journey".

Times have changed a lot and although the Way is still not absent of difficulties and mischievous people, most of the great dangers of the past have disappeared, thanks to modernity, civilization, and the massification of experience.

As a result of this massification, the public and the motivations to do it have also changed.

In antiquity, many people did it for "serious" reasons: of "faith", of "health", or as a commutation of "judicial sentence" or "ecclesiastical punishment".

Of course, there were also tourists and travelers, but they were more of a minority in the early times, as well as poor people who wanted to take advantage of the Jacobean hospitality, with a substantial growth of these two groups in later times.

Nowadays, although there are people who do it to honor a deceased

loved one, or to pray for the health of a family member, as in antiquity, these people are a minority.

Most people, currently, do it for less transcendental reasons.

Although there are people who do it as a spiritual search and reflection experience; more people do it for touristic and/or cultural reasons: because they want low-cost vacations; because it is a sporting challenge; because it is trendy; because it gives status to do it; because they want to "get lucky" (to hook up); In reality, there are countless reasons to do it. This is very easy to realize when talking to other pilgrims...

Beyond the reason people decided to do it, many people (most of them, long-distance pilgrims) have found something they didn't expect; something that fills the spirit and is not easily accessible in daily life: Freedom, connection, empathy, solidarity, community, framed in very special, easily identifiable (some even surreal) moments and that generate "indelible" memories... in short, "magical moments".

The search for that "magic" is one of the reasons the pilgrim returns to the Way again and again.

This book is for everyone who wants not just to walk the Camino de Santiago in the 21st century, but also a Camino de Santiago filled with "magical moments".

And as part of that desire, it is to offer an update to that well-intentioned desire for a "good pilgrimage" and transform it into a more complete desire: "Ultreia et mageia"¹: a desire for "good pilgrimage, filled with magic".

How is the book structured?

For someone who knows nothing about the Way, too much information can be overwhelming, so I have structured this book so that all the concepts can be absorbed in an easier and more enjoyable way.

¹The word "mageia" does not exist and is more of a poetic license. It is deformed so that there is no cacophony (that is, so that it sounds good)

The book is divided into 6 parts:

- an introduction briefly describing what the Way is, how was created, and various aspects of the experience; just the bare minimum needed for context.
- a basic practical section, where we explain the entire experience in general terms, focusing especially on daily life and posing some fundamental questions about the experience we wish to have on the journey.
- an intermediate practical section, where we explain in detail the points introduced in the basic section. By the end of this section, we should be ready to go on the Way without issues.
- an advanced practical section, where we analyze some important decisions with extreme detail. While not mandatory, reading this is highly recommended.
- a historical section, expanding on the topics mentioned in the introduction in detail, discussing their various controversies.
- appendix with miscellaneous items, where we discuss different topics related to the Way that do not affect our preparation or our experience.

Additionally, many chapters will feature a section dedicated to the same subject in the Middle Ages. Reading these sections only offers historical perspective and does not impact the experience of the modern journey; therefore, while reading is suggested, these section are optional.

How to read this book?

There are several ways to read this book. If you are a novice pilgrim, you have 2 ways:

Read it sequentially, like any other book. Or start reading the chapters of misunderstandings and the major errors found in the appendix, where at the end of each topic, are recommended some chapters where each specific topic is developed in detail.

Price

Nowadays, it's trendy to contribute by paying for a coffee or a beer when downloading things from the internet. Creating this book required hundreds of hours of work, plus a lot of care, so I thought it was more fitting to set the price at the suggested symbolic price of "**pilgrim's menu**". Of course, those who wish to leave more money are free to do so.

If another pilgrim has passed you the book because they liked it a lot, thank them!

If you enjoyed the book, found it valuable, and it is financially possible for you, you can support us with a donation by visiting our website at <https://aventurasapie.com/> or in ko-fi page at: <https://ko-fi.com/aventurasapie/>

Dedication and Acknowledgements

I wish to dedicate this book to my family, my travel buddies on the Camino, all the volunteer hospitaleros I have encountered, and especially, my fellow traveler "Athanasia", who has made a great effort for this book to come to light.

Chapter 2

What is the Way of Saint James (aka Camino de Santiago)?

Officially, it is a long pilgrimage that leads to the city of Santiago de Compostela, where the remains of St. James the Greater, one of Jesus's twelve apostles, are believed to be located.

Beyond what the name may indicate, it is not a single route, but a network of routes. This network includes signage and the necessary infrastructure to make the journey from all of the Iberian Peninsula and a good part of Western Europe. And, unlike other religious pilgrimages, where all the emphasis is on visiting the destination, by whatever means; in this pilgrimage, the importance lies in **traversing the route by non-motorized means**.

It began in the Middle Ages with the "discovery" and "identification" of the Apostle's remains and the first pilgrimage of the King of Asturias, Alfonso II the Chaste, who donated money for the building of a first sanctuary. This initial route, now known as the *Primitive Way*, cut through the mountains of Asturias and Galicia and was highly challenging. This mountainous route was necessary because the Iberian

peninsula was almost entirely occupied by the Muslims of the Umayyad Caliphate, and easier routes were unavailable.

With the passing of decades and then centuries, the Iberian Peninsula was progressively reconquered by the Christian kingdoms, and routes of less difficulty were opened for this pilgrimage, the main one being the *French Way*, as it is known today, but it is not the only one. Routes like the *Ebro Way* and the *Portuguese Way* will gain importance over time.

The popularity of the different routes of the Camino was affected by external events. For example, the Hundred Years' War between France and England discouraged English pilgrims from using the French route and boosted the direct maritime route, or the persecution of the Catholics by the Huguenots, which also boosted the maritime route, in this case, from Italy.

Starting from the mid-14th century, its popularity declined as a result of many factors, including plagues, wars, climate change, the Protestant Reformation, poor economic policies, and the fulfillment of its original aims. As this topic is rarely explained properly, we will dedicate a chapter to it at the end of the book.

The pilgrimage remained in a state of "coma" until the 1950s, when some very particular characters initiated efforts to recover the route. During this period, the medieval route was documented, a similar layout was recovered, and it was demarked with "yellow arrows", what would become the synonym for the Way.

Most importantly, pilgrim associations were created to speed up the change, in addition to creating refuges and shelters to host the pilgrims, the key of the success of the experience.

A government plan was put in place to celebrate the Holy Year of 1993 (known as "Xacobeo 93"), which was a tremendous success in terms of popularity and can be considered the turning point for the modern Camino's rebirth.

Its popularity was growing in waves, first with the publication of books, movies, and journalistic articles, interspersed with official

recognitions:

- In 1987, it was declared a European cultural itinerary by the Council of Europe.
- In 1993, the *French Way* and the *Aragonese Way* were recognized by UNESCO as Humanity Heritage Sites.
- In July 2015, the "Camino de Santiago de Compostela" World Heritage site included other four routes of the Northern Ways (*Northern Way*, *Primitive Way*, *Lebaniego Way* and *Interior Basque Way*).
- In 2023/2024, the traditional Jacobean hospitality was declared Intangible Heritage by the Ministry of Culture of Spain.

With the popularization of the internet, and subsequently social media, its popularity continued to grow exponentially, fueled by its own success.

The pilgrimage is recognized, in the present as in antiquity, as an engine of economic growth. This has led governments to help in extending existing routes and the creation of new routes.

Nowadays, due to the very high levels of infrastructure, it is accessible to a large percentage of the population.

While the Camino de Santiago has a Christian origin, one does not need to be devout or Christian to undertake it. In practice, when done traditionally, it serves as an experience of self-discovery and reflection, making it appealing to atheists and followers of other religions alike.

Chapter 3

What makes the Camino unique?

There are a lot of things that make the Camino an unique experience worldwide:

- A religious pilgrimage without religion.
- Focus on the journey rather than the destination.
- Timelessness.
- The Jacobean hospitality.
- The length of the experience, popularity, and infrastructure.
- (Self-generated) Historical and architectural wealth.

A religious way without religion

Despite its religious origin, the Catholic Church as an institution is almost absent from experience, and its presence usually stands out in a negative way.

It think of the pilgrim as **"a source of income"** (a walking Euro sign with a hiking pole and a backpack), instead a representative figure of Christian values (the image promoted at the beginning of the pilgrimages).

This results in disappointing pilgrim-church interactions: most churches are closed, and those that are open charge admission or have opening times that are strange and incompatible with the pilgrimage. Additionally, the church has begun charging for events and milestones of the Jacobean pilgrimage, such as the operation of the botafumeiro (the world's largest censer) and the visit to the Portico of Glory, which was theoretically the main entrance of the Cathedral of Santiago for pilgrims.

Despite this, a few priests, by their own initiative and recalling the Church's charitable and missionary efforts, have opened pilgrim hostels ("albergues") that offer the "traditional Jacobean hospitality", similar to those of the past. Unfortunately, some of these hostels have been affected by current economic pressures and have also turned into businesses.

Emphasis on the journey and not the destination

Unlike other pilgrimages where the destination is paramount (e.g., any pilgrimage to a particular sanctuary, Fatima in Portugal, Lourdes in France, Luján in Argentina; or Mecca for Muslims), the focus is on the experience of the journey/pilgrimage.

It is perfectly normal and valid to traverse a section of the Camino de Santiago, without reaching the destination and feeling that you have lived the full experience. Ironically, due to distortions created by economic interests and the popularity of the route, the spirit of the pilgrimage has been lost in the final kilometers close to Santiago, so it is easier to live the essence of the Camino far away from Santiago.

Timelessness

Unlike other pilgrimages, which emphasize visiting a sanctuary on specific dates, the pilgrimage to Santiago can be done at any time of

the year, and as we mentioned, even in stages, without reaching the final destination.

Traditional Jacobean hospitality

This refers to the tradition of the Church of providing shelter, medical aid, and food to pilgrims, enabling them to continue their journey to Santiago. In ancient times, this service was offered entirely free of charge, funded by donations from kings, nobles, and the charity of the populace, as well as rental income from other estates. Today, medical care is no longer provided, and lodging is no longer free, but is financed by the donations of the pilgrims themselves.

Due to the disassociation from the Church, this tradition is largely maintained by the hostels of various Friends of the Way associations, which are looked after by volunteers.

Concerning meals, these hostels can offer breakfast, sometimes dinner, and in exceptional situations, all three meals, in villages without services.

The respectful treatment of the pilgrim was not limited to the Church; and Jacobean hospitality also extended to the towns along the route. This courtesy is still maintained today, particularly in areas with low pilgrim traffic.

The duration of experience, popularity, and infrastructure

The Way is comparable to other religious itineraries in terms of distance: the Via Francígena (Canterbury-Rome); the Way of St. Olaf (Oslo-Trondheim) and the Kumano Kodo in Japan. However, they are not comparable in terms of infrastructure or popularity. None of these other routes even have a fraction of the low-cost accommodations considered necessary to make a long-distance route **popular and inclusive**.

The historical and architectural richness

The Way was, economically speaking, a source of wealth and culture, due to the cultural exchange with France at first, and then with the rest of Western Europe later.

But it was not limited to that; it also served as a population driver, necessitating the creation of populations to serve the pilgrims, along with the infrastructure to house and feed them, as well as basic services, and as a generator of road infrastructure by creating roadways and bridges.

It also functioned as a commercial and communication axis between the main cities of the kingdoms. Throughout history, the different kingdoms and empires have decided to display their splendor in their capitals, as a symbol of their success and for the enjoyment of their monarchs and then their subjects. And that is a key reason for the richness of the Way. For example: the ***French Way*** passes through 5 current regional capitals: **Pamplona, Logroño, Burgos, León, and Santiago** and other capitals of the past: **Jaca, Estella, Viana, and Nájera**. The same can be said of other routes, and their passage through previous and current capitals.

To simplify the introduction, we will conclude here to fully immerse ourselves in the experience of the Way, and there is no better way than to describe a typical day.