

Astorga to Acebo

by Taya DeLong

I wake up to the sound of multiple alarms going off. It's a cacophony of dings, rings, and beeps. *What the crap?* I think to myself. I glance at my watch. It's 6:00 am. I sigh with relief, laughing inwardly at the irony of the situation. Me? Wanting to wake up early? And actually enjoying it? It's unheard of. On the Camino de Santiago, however, it is a different situation. The Camino is an 800 km trail that winds from the border of France and Spain, to the western coast of Spain. It starts in the French and Spanish Pyrenees and ends in Santiago, Spain. We are on our 29th day of walking. Each morning, the *peregrinos* (people hiking the trail) wake up at an absurdly early hour and begin joyfully trekking to the next *albergue* (the Spanish hostels that you stay in on the Camino). Every day, you wake up, eat, walk, talk, meet interesting and foreign people, eat, explore, sleep, repeat. It's gloriously simple and highly enjoyable.

I prepare myself for the day by expertly packing my backpack. After packing and unpacking every day for the last 29 days, I have become well accustomed to doing so. As I pull the drawstring tight and buckle the buckle, I glance upwards at the nearest window. I can just see the top half of the sunbathed and immaculately detailed *Cathedral de Astorga*. After gobbling down a quick breakfast of yogurt, tortilla de patata, and baguette, we enter the sunlight flooded cobblestone streets of Astorga. I take a final peek at the stunning, Disney-inspiring Gaudi Palace before winding up and out of the city. Once on the trail, we weave in and out of forests, and through several small Spanish towns. Many familiar *peregrinos* are stopped along the way for breakfast, sipping *cafe con leche* and munching on buttery croissants *a la plancha*. We even pass a grinning, mustachioed French man who plops down along side the trail to begin joyfully strumming his guitar.

About ten kilometers along the way, we stop for a short break on a park bench across from a bakery. Our guidebook map informs us that we still have twenty one kilometers left to our destination, Manjarin. We have carefully planned the previous week of hiking so that we will end up at this particular *albergue*. We first heard about it in a journal account written by an American family who walked the Camino de Santiago about ten years ago. Manjarin is a very small *albergue* at the top of the highest point on the whole trail. There is no running water or electricity. According to the journal account, it is a fantastic place with good food and nice people. We are stoked to be finished walking.

As the sun rises higher in the summer sky, my legs grow wearier. The trail begins to wind up and away from the flat Meseta behind us. I can nearly see the curve of the earth. To the left, I notice the sharp, snowcapped Picos de Europa (literally the Peaks of Europe). It's a good day. We stop in a small village for some *tortilla de patata*. Feeling instantly rejuvenated by the delicious and nutritious snack, we trudge on through the dry summer air.

After hiking into the mountainous region of Galicia for multiple kilometers, we reach the highest point of the Camino de Santiago. Exceeding even the renowned Spanish Pyrenees in

elevation, the Cruz de Ferro marks the legendary spot with an enormous wooden pole that stretches high above the enormous rock pile that buries its base.

It is a Camino tradition to carry a rock with you the entire way until this point. Once you arrive at the Cruz de Ferro, it is the custom to leave the rock in the pile. The idea is that once you leave this extra weight behind, you can finish the Camino knowing that your burden has been lifted. Depending on the person, this can be interpreted in a literal or spiritual sense.

The base of the tall Cruz de Ferro is sheathed in layers upon colorful layers of multinational prayer flags, pictures and mementos of lost loved ones. Thankful for a chance to relieve ourselves of the weight of our backpacks, we collapse onto the plush grass in the shade of some fragile pines. I dig into my backpack and pull out my own rock. It's a small, round, pale, and swirled ocean rock from the Puget Sound. I run my fingers over it one last time and look around at the other *peregrinos* taking out their own rocks, letters, pictures, and ribbons. We are all preparing to leave something behind. After stiffly rising to my feet, I toss my little piece of Washington into the enormous pile of international burdens.

As the sun burns away above us, casting impressive shadows across the mountains and trees, we hike on. It has been a long day. We have covered many miles and become impressively tan after countless hours under the scorching sun. Finally, more than thirty kilometers closer to Santiago than we were this morning, we arrive at Manjarin. It is a tiny *albergue*, and the entrance is decorated with multiple national flags: Spanish, French, German, American, Italian. There is also a creative sign presenting the distances to Santiago, Rome, Paris, Jerusalem and other cities. It looks friendly and vibrant. As we walk inside, however, it appears less and less cozy and more and more creepy. The place is rather dusty and neglected, and the only people there are two suspicious looking men and a lone Slovakian *peregrina*. In confusion, we ask where Tomàs, the infamous *albergue* owner, is. The mysterious worker men tell us that he is napping and order us to wait to talk to him about staying there until he wakes up. Finally, a fat, sleepy, drooling man waddles ignorantly past us. The worker men whisper to us, "That's Tomas". We turn our heads to watch him in disbelief. *This* is the wonderful, cheery, friendly Spanish man that we had heard so much of? Something does not feel right about the situation. Eventually, the workers lead us to the sleeping quarters, which is a small, musty hut with dirty mattresses.

Our friends, who are supposed to already be here, are nowhere in sight. The kind Slovak lady who had been waiting with us, takes one look around and decides that she is leaving and will be staying in the next town. Abruptly, we are the only people left at the *albergue*. It is 5 pm. On the Camino de Santiago, every *albergue* is full by 5 pm. My gut tells me that staying here is not the right choice. The combination of the creepy men, the weird, neglected atmosphere, and the uncanny emptiness, tip us off that we should move on.

The only problem with walking to the next town, is that it is nine kilometers away. It is late now, and we are nearly the only *peregrinos* left walking. It has already been a record day of thirty-one kilometers, and now we are planning on topping that with nearly ten long kilometers more.

With aching hearts, heads, and legs of lead, we deliriously push on. Jokingly, I do the math and calculate that we will have walked a full marathon today.

We walk for hours, with our heads down, halfheartedly attempting to be careful of our footing as we descend. Eventually, after walking forty long kilometers, we spot the shining black slate roofs of the next town, Acebo. Thirsty, hungry, and thoroughly exhausted, we stumble into town at nearly seven o'clock. The first three albergues apologetically tell us that they are full. We hobble past many other *peregrinos*, already showered and eating dinner. Miraculously though, the last *albergue* in town has three beds left. My brother, mother, and I collapse with joy inside. Our friends, and the Slovak lady are all inside. I nearly fall over in exhaustion and relief while taking a shower. We are informed that there will be a delicious communal dinner in an hour. No cooking, no work, just hot food served to us. It is perfect. The fairytale ending to an exhausting and unexpected day. I have never slept so hard in my life.