



# THE POWER OF PEDALING



If you are considering a little adventure in your life, but are stuck for ideas, try this for size; Cycling the Camino De Santiago also known as The St James walkway in northern Spain.

Don't be put off by the distance (885km), the organising (Global Cycling Adventures.com will do that for you), your fitness level (they have \*e-bikes), your age(49yrs-77yrs on the last trip), your gender (men, women, couples) or any other excuse that may stymie you.

In the words of Nike (the global sports brand as opposed to the Roman Goddess of Victory), "Just do it!"

Ralph Freeman has the enviable job of escorting tour groups of up to 24 'Type A' personalities around the world to startling locations. He does the thinking, you do the biking. Even if you haven't trained for it, an \*e-bike will do that for you too.

The bike tour starts at San Sebastian, conveniently located 20 km from the French border in the Bay of Biscay within the Basque region of Spain. Here you will be tempted by pintxos, or tapas as they are known further south. An epicurean's delight as the bar tables groan with them. Wash them down with lashings of Rioja, a lusty red, popular in Spain.

The first nights accommodation is at the Astoria 7, a wonderfully themed boutique hotel demonstrative of the distinctive lodgings to follow nightly. Film festival themed, Alfred Hitchcock looks on, stony faced from the reception area, as we gather around 8am for our first day of cycling. Tyres are pumped, luggage stowed, jackets donned and we're on our way.

Following the beacon that is our amiable tour guide, Ricardo, we jostle for position as he leads us out, serpentine through the city streets. Once free of the urban sprawl we stretch our legs on the undulating countryside. The group drifts into three equable paces, with a guide for each. Ralph the tour operator sucking up the scenery from behind. Vladimir from Malaga, takes the middle ground and I shadow him and his Garmin digital map as we trundle on.

Having a guide is invaluable en route. You get to enjoy the benefits of travel without the maintenance. As long as you have Ricardo's white lycra-ed behind, Vlad's whirling kerchief or Ralph's broad smile in your periphery, you are safe. Renee the \*BFG from Germany lurks just 'around the bend' wearing his tea towel as a uniform, signaling the lunch-time stop.

Chairs and tables have been set up for our makeshift cafe in any lay-by we can squeeze into. The jamon hangs beguilingly off the kitchen van, promising aged meat delights. Salads, cold cuts and cheeses accompany breads and brightly coloured cutlery. Chatter and clatter ensue as we fall upon it, calories spent. Appetites assuaged, we take a moment to stretch out and relax in the mid afternoon sun before remounting our bikes for the final kilometers home.

Home is where the next 4 star hotel is. We daydream about it and the cold beer or Gin and Tonic that awaits us. The riding is pleasant but after many hours we are keen to discard the bike and our whiffy clothes and assume the upright position for lengthy periods.

The speed merchants ride into town first with Ricardo and make a bee-line for the hotel bar. Beers are ordered and gin (pronounced Yin in Spain) and tonics are poured freehand into oversized globed tumblers. A chorus of sighs fill the room.

Eventually, the entire gang swing into town, joyous at the days end. We regroup at 7pm most nights for a tour discussion of the following days course. Ricardo entertains us with his grasp of the English language.

Logistics over we ferry out to the hotel's restaurant where we are served a large multi-coursed meal and local wines to aid digestion and assist sleep. A quick roundup of the day from Tom the lawyer showcase any antics that occurred that day and the lucky recipients are duly named and shamed.

Morning means breakfast. As we outnumber the hotel guests we wear our lycra proudly to the buffet. Weet-bix is nowhere to be seen. In its place is five types of cheeses, numerous cold meats, whole and finely sliced fruits, a bakery of breads and if we're lucky; Spanish eggs. Everyone eats everything. It could be a long time before we see the BFG again.

The courtyard is aflutter with cyclists. Honing our routine we sit astride our bikes in readiness for our guides. Some towns take 5 minutes to exit, others longer. The countryside sun warms the morning chill from our bodies. The vistas fill our heads with questions and answers. Our tracks intertwine with the pilgrim's. Walking as they have done for centuries along this route towards their holy grail; St James remains at the Compostela de Santiago at the journey's end. Some walk together, some apart, uphill, downhill, with and without heavy packs, silencing their demons with every kilometer tramped. We swish past effortlessly fueled by momentum and caffeine.

Every 5-10 kms we are rewarded with a downhill slide into a stereotypical European village, complete with haphazard housing surrounded by medieval roadways that soon jolt you out of your whimsical reverie. The countryside push up views of castles and spires. Visits inside these precious sites excite. Patient inhabitants indulge us with stamps to our camino passports. Their feigned expressions deeply etched, due to overuse.

Tourism is alive and well and living on the Camino. Made in China talismans line the racks that explode out of the many outlets along the way. People of all nations identify with the scallop shell, synonymous with St James and can be seen flaunting it in some form on their person.

After eight days of riding we make it to Santiago. Inexplicably all in one piece with only two flat tyres to report. I was waiting to be 'over it' mentally and physically before now, but that never happened. Ralph's German precision planning and Willy's back-up van ensured our combined states of mind were never in jeopardy.

Santiago means the end, and the end of The Way. The team gathered in the large square at the foot of the cathedral and laid our bikes to rest. Relief flushed through us. Reality smacked. We hugged.

With one last formality, we queued to officiate our journey. One of a million per year certificates, was issued bearing my Latin name. Miriam felt proud. The thirteenth century accommodation that still housed working monks was a great choice for the finale dinner. We put the hat round for the guides who had chaperoned us successfully and made the presentation at dinner. Jokes and speeches were shared with our newest friends and future links cemented.

If sight seeing, exercise, camaraderie, shopping and epicurean delights seem like a good idea to you, find your way to.....

