The nine hours plus in 3 different trains were charged with expectation and anticipation. The big walk was looming on the horizon. We were being looked after before we even started the walk because our connecting train to Sarria arrived 10 mins late and thankfully someone else in our carriage who was also wanting to board the same train took us under her wing and showed us the connecting platform. To our delight the train had waited.

Once we arrived at Sarria it was time to find the accommodation. Dragging our luggage behind us we started up the first hill. Lots of Hola and Buenas Dias but not many responses as to where to go from the locals. After person number five told us to keep walking up the hill and turn right we finally arrived to our first experience of shared bathroom, small rooms and narrow steep stairs but the hospitality was warm and welcoming and best of all the receptionist organised for our main luggage to be transported to our hotel in Santiago. Her English/ Spanish communication was much welcomed and assured us that all would be good. As she said “go up the road to the top of the hill and follow the yellow arrow”.

The yellow arrow was to become our beacon on the walk. In some places it was a treasure hunt to find and on those times when no one else was around you needed to concentrate to find it.

The first task was to organise a Camino passport at the local church. This passport was to be stamped at different venues and churches along the way. Passports were sold during specific times at the local church.
Once we had our Camino Passports we walked around to savour the culture of this town. Sarria is the town where Camino routes join and pilgrims from France, Portugal and South of Spain take bed, dinner and sometimes breakfast before starting another day.

For dinner that night we chose to eat at an outdoor café and had the first of many Spanish Tortillas. It was at this café that I heard wifi referred to as “weefee”. This translation became a welcomed word because it would mean connections with family while we walked.

Sitting closely at the table near us were 2 girls from Barcelona; one a vet and the other a lawyer. They play in the same basketball team and were walking the Camino together. Ironically they stayed in a room next to us. I told them I had alarm set for 5am, they declined the offer of a wake up knock on the door.

Not sure whether was nerves or excitement that kept me awake most of the night. At 5am we were up and dressed and ready to recheck back packs, do we or don’t we take those extra items?

At 6:05am we sent family a text to say we were starting. It was a cool morning with some haze on the hills. Perfect walking conditions. There were other walkers out starting their trek as daylight approached.. We followed until 5 mins later we had to turn around and follow someone else, one of the few wrong turns we made during the Camino.

The first 5 kms were picturesque with narrow laneways, paddocks, creeks to cross and daylight breaking through the fog.

There was a man who led the pack but he eventually slowed down and that left us up there to lead the way until we joined up with others. It was here that I heard the first on many Buen Camino (pronounced Bwen Camino) greetings extended to all walkers by
townspeople or fellow walkers. As we chatted we made connections, some better than others depending on the English communication.

Along the way we found children as young as 6 walking with parents and determined to carry their own packs. There were also many different nationalities and when they heard we were Australians they thought we were amazing travelling the long distance. We were surprised to see so many young people on the walk. There were many secondary students in groups and workers in their twenties and thirties. Each person walked to their own pace.

Some of the people we met were:

- A single woman in her fifties, engineer from Belgium, studies languages one night a week. She was on her last days of the big 8 week Pilgrimage from St John. Her back pack was big and looked twice as heavy as ours. We heard how cheap and valued University education is in Belgium and how close they are to other countries so it’s not uncommon to travel internationally.
- A father, Emille and with his 13 yr old son Javier (Xavier) and 7 yr old Guillaume (William). They told us to try Octopus for our next meal. Emille told us how he learnt English from his work colleagues. He had done the walk previously with both sons and had back carried Guillaume as he was only 3.
- A couple of experienced walkers from Whitehorse in Canada, near Alaska. They had started at St John and had caught the bus a couple of times so that they could get to their expected arrival date for their hotel booking in Santiago. Their daughter had won a silver medal in Melbourne for weight lifting at the Commonwealth Games. The man walked ahead with me and
told me about the need to bring back technical schools in Canada. He was a principal consultant. It was good to hear about their education system and lifestyle of having minus 40 in Winter.

- Another couple greeted us on our third walking day by announcing, as we walked past them sitting on a fence, that this walk was their golden anniversary present to each other. They too were from Belgium and were finishing the 8 week pilgrimage.
- A young couple from Madrid in their twenties. He shared some English with us and appreciated the barley sugar I shared with him. He was limping but said he was strong and would push through.
- A group of 4 who had connected on their walk, one from Sweden with great English, one from Eastern Europe and the other 2 were from Germany. They shared jokes at one of the lunch stops.
- A couple from Brisbane who had left their home for 3 months to walk the 8 week Camino and back it up with a walk in England. The woman told us that prior to Sarria they struggled to meet up with anyone. Some days they walked without seeing anyone. They were pleased to share some English and Australian conversation.
- The lady from Austria who welcomed us into her garden to refill our water bottles and have a leisurely sit on her garden seat. She retired to a country property and was enjoying the open spaces and vegie garden.
- A man from Sicily walking with his friend from Barcelona.
- A young girl from Washington.
• A grandfather, from Brisbane, with his daughter and 13yr old grandson.
• Two women in their early thirties, both from Madrid. Carmen spoke perfect English. She was a travel agent based in Finland and learnt to speak English while at work. Natalia spoke some English, she spoke fondly of her mother’s homeland Portugal and said that it was her goal to go and work there.

The reasons for doing the Camino were varied but generally based around personal reflection and spirituality. One person commented on the amazing energy of the group all going the same way for the same cause.

Unconditional support and encouragement were extended by and to everyone.

While waking the Camino you have time to reflect, share, contemplate and dream. So many times I reflected on Fr Terry’s famous reflection about “What’s in your back pack?”

What do we carry that we think is important?

What do we really need?

What can we do without?

Some people chose to get their back pack transported between towns via a bus, some discarded along the way. Many had big back packs to carry and others had medium sized. Some back packs had shoes hanging from them or rolled yoga mats on top.

Whatever the back pack the weight cuts into your shoulders and you connect to those who carry heavy burdens, you walk those extra steps for them. You appreciate your health and the opportunity to be part of the pilgrimage of hope and trust and opportunities to be
grounded and be thankful for your relationships, family, friends and loved ones, your work colleagues, students and families.

This pilgrimage fills all your senses; the smell of the rich earth freshened by the overnight dew and the rich smell of cow manure, hearing the birds, cattle, sheep and leaves in the afternoon breezes, touching the different surfaces of the worn pathway through the soles of tour shoes, the kiss of the sun on your back, the gift of the genuine handshake and warm hugs, the strength of the cow as it walks by you on the narrow bridge, tasting the local fare especially the crusty breads and Spanish tortillas and highly acclaimed octopus, saying “hola” and “buen Camino” “buenas Dias” and feeling the strength of the group all wanting everyone to do their best to achieve their dreams.

The landscape opens the mind and soul to majestic mountains, fields of corn, vegie gardens and old country homes. Along the track we met up with our own running of the bulls, a lady was moving cattle and herded them cross the narrow bridge that we were crossing. It was an up close and personal experience and on the same day of the annual Running of the Bulls event. She shared a wry smile.

We walked right past people’s homes in small villages and we heard later that the corn is used to feed the cattle. Cows being milked, sheep being moved to paddocks, well kept chickens and amazing vegetable gardens met you at every corner.

The walk was up and down hills and over stones, rocks, pavements, small pavers, concrete squares, earth, dust and asphalt. Each time you went down hill you knew there would be an uphill climb within metres. The times most welcomed were the flat tracks through shady trees. The up and down times remind you of life and how
much we love being up and yet we know it doesn’t last and that we bounce back from the down hill passages.

We saw eucalyptus trees, silver birch trees growing prolifically, many deciduous trees, magnificent hydrangeas and magnolias “Little Gem” but the most welcomed sight was The Cathedral of St James at Santiago.

On our Camino we walked mainly together, at our pace and covered a great distance the first day. We wanted to make the first day the longest distance. We never expected to cover 46 kms. Covering this distance meant that we struggled to find any accommodation. Finally the hotel could help out with 2 single beds and ideas for eating dinner.

After hot showers and dinner we slept like logs and woke at 7am ready to start the day. On this day I had envisioned we stay at a farm Albuerge as we had passed many along the way. They were dotted along the route and looked more authentic that the local town accommodation on offer. We walked through the town and kept walking on and on and on and on. Finally we saw a sign for an Albuerge, it was on the main highway but it was the only one on offer and we were starting to feel weary. We asked for accommodation but they were booked out. The next on offer was 6 kms away. So digging into our reserves we walked on and on. A sign for an Albuerge (Pension) appeared in the distance. It looked inviting nestled on the hills amongst the tress and only 100 metres off the track. To our delight the place was nearly empty so yes we could stay. Ironically it is owned by a retired man from London. He was generous with his time and facilities.
We slept soundly again and woke at 7am. With only 27kms left we decided to keep walking to the Cathedral.

The last 2 kms were hard going and it was difficult to find the yellow arrows and scallop shells set in the pavements once you arrived in Santiago.

Sore and exhilarated we made it to the registration office, where you pass in your Camino passport, at 1:10pm. There was an orderly slow moving line of pilgrims all waiting to get a certificate and enter their details. Proceeding individually to different counters and both Phil and I were asked if we had caught a bus. Proudly I said “No and I carried my back pack”. We had been asked because we had made amazing time completing the walk from Sarria in 2 and a half days. Most pilgrims take a week and some make it in 4 days.

Fortunately our hotel was able to accommodate us an extra night. Once showered and changed we headed out for dinner and to celebrate the Pilgrim’s mass at the Cathedral. This mass is celebrated at 12 noon and 7:30 pm each day. Even though it was said in Spanish it was a mass of great joy and hope for continued belief in the goodness in others. Golden lights framed the altar and a nun sang parts of the mass. Genuine congratulations were shared during the sign of peace.

Over the next couple of days of exploring this city of pilgrims we were fortunate to meet up with some of our walking partners we had made along the way.

St James has left a great legacy with the people who take time to ground themselves in their being and in the gift of others. Deo Gratias!

Today is a gift ..... how will you use it?
What will you carry in your back pack throughout each day?

*Trish Stewart 9th July 2015.*