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INTRODUCTION

I remember the first time I heard of the Camino...

My then girlfriend and I had driven down in blazing sunshine from her house on the river Lot only to find the Basque coast, as it often is, shrouded in misty rain. We then spent the entire weekend bickering.

On the Sunday afternoon, in Jean Pied de Port, we stood on a bridge over the river Nive and looked at each other and laughed for the first time that day. Because both of us knew we were thinking about shoving the other in. It was shortly afterwards we saw some people in hiking gear with backpacks and she told me, 'People still walk from here to Galicia, it's an old pilgrimage route.' I don't remember my exact reaction but it was something along the lines of:

Why the hell would anybody want to do that?

Ten years later I still haven't found a simple answer to that question. But, I've had a lot of fun looking! Because, despite my initial cynicism, the seed of an idea planted in me that day has grown to be something of an obsession. This book is the product of that obsession. I hope you'll find it informative and helpful and that it will see you safely to your earthly destination.

Gerald Kelly

OUR COMPANION WEBSITE

Don't forget to check out our companion website www.caminoguide.net for the latest news and updates about the Camino and for information our guides to walking the Camino Francés, the Vía de la Plata and the Camino del Baztán.

Also for more details on packing for the Camino see www.caminoguide.net/packing

What is the Camino?

The Camino de Santiago, or the Way of St James, is a medieval pilgrimage route which brought pilgrims from all corners of Europe, across Spain to the city of Santiago de Compostela, believed by many to be the final resting place of Saint James (the Greater) the Apostle.

It's existed for about a thousand years, and all through those centuries thousands of people each year have set out from their homes to travel to Santiago on foot or on horseback. It was one of many pilgrimage routes in Europe but for many centuries it was the most popular.

In the last thirty years the Camino Francés, or French Way, from southern France to Santiago, has become very popular with walkers. It is now traversed by thousands of people every year, for a wide variety of reasons. It takes about 30 days to walk.

Other routes such as the Via de la Plata, from Seville, and the Camino del Norte, along the north coast of Spain, have also become more popular, but not to the same degree as the Camino Francés.

About this book

This book is intended for people planning to walk the Camino for the first time. It contains detailed, practical, impartial information and advice to help you prepare for your Camino. It is based on the author's personal experience and on the experiences of many other pilgrims.

Rather than trying to reduce Camino preparation to a check-list, by telling you to do A, B and C, it is there to assist you in making informed decisions and help you avoid pitfalls. It covers (among others) the following areas:

- **Money:** How much walking the Camino costs
- **Travel:** How to get to your starting point
- **Physical preparation:** Getting to the required level of fitness
- **Packing:** Equipment you need and what you don't need
- **Which section and when:** When to walk, where to walk
- **What to expect:** The Camino experience

In addition, there's an introduction to both **Spanish** and **Camino history**, a **Spanish phrasebook** with vocabulary chosen to cover Camino necessities, and background information of all sorts to help you plan and prepare.

This book is a companion to the books *Walking Guide to the Camino de Santiago* and *Walking Guide to the Vía de la Plata* (also available from Amazon in Kindle and printed formats), which contain the information you'll need about accommodation and services, etc. while walking the Camino Francés and the Vía de la Plata. However, since this book is all about preparation, it can be used entirely independently of any walking guide.

Although much of the information in this book could be useful for any Camino, some parts of it refer specifically to the Camino Francés.

This is a self-published book. Please accept my apologies for any mistakes. You can help by sending corrections and any comments about content or omissions to caminoguidecontact@gmail.com. Because a new copy of the book is printed every time somebody orders one, corrections and additions can be made immediately, without having to wait for a new edition.

The 2013 edition of this book is the product of several years learning and reflection, and three new Camino adventures since the first edition. It's an attempt to rectify the shortcomings of the first edition, based on the feedback from readers. The entire book has been revised, and many parts of it have been rewritten and extended.

This edition, published in January 2014, has been professionally proofread.

MEASUREMENT UNITS AND EURO AMOUNTS

All distances are given in the **metric system** (kilometres and metres) and all times are given in the **24 hour clock** (09:00 = 9am, 18:00 = 6pm).

Temperatures are given in Celsius. Celsius temperatures are easy:

0°C = freezing point of water, 10°C = cold, 20°C = warm

30°C = hot, 100°C = boiling point of water

There's a handy converter here www.celsius-to-fahrenheit.com

The format for writing **amounts** reflects the most commonly used format in Spain. eg. One euro = 1€, fifty cents = 0,50€, one thousand euros = 1.000€ (see page 57).

A NOTE ON THE WORD *PILGRIM*

As I'm not particularly religious in any conventional sense, it took me years before I came to see myself as a pilgrim, and to use that word unselfconsciously. Now, I call myself a pilgrim when I go on the Camino, and I regard all of the other people there as pilgrims too. I no longer see this word as being uniquely associated with organised religion, and I use it inclusively in this guide to refer to everybody who sets out from their home on the open road looking for something (meaning, answers, solace, purpose, etc.)

THANKS / BUÍOCHAS / GRACIAS / DANKE

Roisín Cuddihy, Dalan de Bri, Ana Belén Molina, Sofia Montes de la Riva, Philip ó Ceallaigh, Robbie Turner, Dr Hans Weber. Everybody who's contributed to www.CaminoGuide.net and to this book.

References to the Glossary

Wherever you see (G) after a word it means there's an explanatory note about it in the Glossary on page 134.

PLANNING AND PREPARATION

Everybody prepares in their own way, everybody packs in their own way and everybody walks the Camino in their own way. The following are suggestions to help you prioritise.

Physical preparation

If you're unsure about your physical preparedness, try walking your target daily distance with a full backpack.

If you struggle, you need to either set yourself an exercise regime and work your way up to your target. Alternatively, you could reduce your daily distance target for the first week or so until your fitness level improves. Accommodation is plentiful on the Camino and it can be taken at an extremely leisurely pace if you so desire. The key is finding a pace that suits you.

Walking long distances every day is different from doing it occasionally because your body doesn't get a chance to recover and heal. It takes about a week to find your rhythm, so set yourself modest goals for the first few days.

If you've never before walked long distances, it's important to get an idea before you set out of what it feels like and what you're capable of. Finding and sticking to your own pace is very important in avoiding injury.

Your physical preparation should be done while breaking in your walking footwear and getting accustomed to carrying your backpack at its packed weight. It doesn't matter what you put in it - it can be water in plastic bottles (1 litre of water = 1kg) - as long as it weighs 7kg or 8kg minimum. You should aim to do your Camino training from as early as possible in "full Camino mode": Backpack, boots, everything.

You should begin well before you're due to leave. Try doing three or four short (one or two hour) hikes a week and one longer one (always carrying your backpack). The longer one could start off being two or three hours but you should work this up gradually to about five hours (about 20km). Include a few hills. If you can manage that you'll be fine. You don't need to be super fit to walk the Camino, the chances are many people reading this are fit enough already.

Which part to walk?

Walking the entire Camino Francés from Saint-Jean to Santiago (775km) takes about 31 days at 25km a day. If you haven't got 31 days to spare, below are some suggestions for shorter itineraries.

If you've got limited time: The most obvious suggestion would be to walk the last **111km from Sarria**. If getting a Compostela certificate (G) is important to you, then that's what you should do. If you start in Sarria it's important that you get at least one other stamp (see under *Credencial*, page 37), besides the one from the hostel where you slept, each day from a hostel or some other establishment along the route. This is

to provide extra proof when you go to the Pilgrims' Office in Santiago that you did actually walk it.

On the other hand, if you're more interested in experiencing the Camino with the intention of one day walking the whole thing, bear in mind that the Sarria to Santiago stretch can become very crowded in summer. Some pilgrims, having walked many kilometres, find these last few days tough just because there are so many people. So, if you want to experience a little of the history, solitude, camaraderie and beauty of the Camino, consider trying one of the following:

Saint-Jean to Puente la Reina is about five days walking, or six if you break the stage from Saint-Jean to Roncesvalles. It takes in some beautiful and historical villages, the city of Pamplona and some lovely scenery. Alternatively starting in Roncesvalles will avoid that difficult first stage and allow you to finish in Estella.

Pamplona to Logroño is about four days with two more to **Santo Domingo de la Calzada**. Again, beautiful, historic and the city of Logroño is fantastic. Both cities are easily accessible by bus and train.

If you want to experience something of the **Meseta** (G), you could start in **Burgos** and walk about four days to **Carrión de los Condes** or about ten days to **León**. The Meseta gets a bad press because there isn't much pretty scenery, but some people consider this flat bit in the middle to be the high point of their experience. On the Meseta, the very lack of things to see is, in itself, something to see.

If you've got about two weeks you could consider starting in **León or Astorga** and walking to Santiago. Or you could stop in Sarria, which would be about eight or nine days from León.

Of course, the ideal is to walk the whole thing in one go. It takes about a month and it has a strange symmetry. Up to Pamplona you're still a child learning how things work, and wide-eyed at everything you see around you. Then to Burgos you're an adolescent, excitable and curious. Then the middle part as far as Astorga is the part of the Camino, that's like the long, sunny afternoon of life that you think will never end. Then gradually the mountains drift into view for several days before you reach them and you relish the thought of climbing them because you're an experienced walker and as fit as a fiddle but you're also a bit settled in your ways; you have your 'Camino family' and you feel like you've known them for ever. There's also the feeling that you're slowly drifting towards an end point. Which, when you reach it is the greatest celebration and outpouring of relief and happiness. Finally, rest!

Finisterre is the bonus, the icing on the cake. An opportunity to reflect on all that has gone before and how it's possible to fit a lifetime's experience into thirty days. And to figure out how the hell you're going to go back to real life.

When to walk?

Most of the Camino is walkable at all times of the year. However, mountainous areas may be difficult or impassible if there is snow and you should follow local advice about how to proceed.

MARCH - APRIL - MAY

Advantages: Good chance of warm, dry weather. Unlikely to find hostels full.

Disadvantages: Possibility of rain, especially in the west.

JUNE - JULY - AUGUST

Advantages: Fine weather. Lots of people walking with a good mix of ages and types. All facilities open.

Disadvantages: Can be very hot. Possible problems finding accommodation, especially in the west. Overcrowding on the last 100km.

SEPTEMBER - OCTOBER

Advantages: Like spring, with added advantage of lots of berries and figs to eat.

Disadvantages: Possibility of rain, especially in the west.

NOVEMBER - DECEMBER - JANUARY - FEBRUARY

Advantages: Very few other pilgrims. Cool weather is good for walking.

Disadvantages: Very few other pilgrims. Many hostels and cafés closed. Rain, wind, snow, cold. Short days. Mud.

On the question of overcrowding at peak times, bear in mind that people tend to start their walk at a weekend from one of the major departure points (See Starting Points under Statistics, page 83), with a wave of people leaving Saint-Jean on Saturday and Sunday and passing through Pamplona three days later on Tuesday and Wednesday. This can make a pronounced difference to the numbers walking for four or five days after the major starting points. There is also a bigger wave (a tsunami, if you like) of people who absolutely want to arrive in Santiago amid hordes of people for the feast of St James (25 July). They'll be leaving Saint-Jean around 25 June, and working their way along the Camino during the month of July.

It's also important to emphasise that overcrowding is a problem on the Camino in Galicia, during Holy Week and during July and August. Outside of Galicia and those times you're unlikely to encounter any problems.

Continental (or Peninsular) Spain is in the Central European Time (CET) time-zone (as are France, Germany, Italy, etc.), which in winter is UTC/GMT + 1. In summer this goes forward an hour to become UTC/GMT + 2. But because most of Spain, and all the Camino Francés, is west of the Greenwich Meridian, the sun is at its highest in summer around 14:00. So the hottest part of the day may be later than what you would expect in countries whose time-zone corresponds more closely to solar time.

Walking in winter

Apart from the weather, walking in winter (December, January, February and March) presents other difficulties. Firstly, many **pilgrim hostels** will be closed (sometimes even those that claim to be open all year). This applies especially to small hostels and private hostels. Also many other businesses along the Camino that cater to pilgrims, such as **shops** and **cafés**, shut during winter months or operate with reduced hours.

So, walking in winter requires more planning than walking in summer. However, if you plan your stages to end in or close to a larger town or village (generally, those with several pilgrim hostels) you should always find at least one hostel and other facilities open. Failing that, as a last resort, there's always at least one enterprising individual to fill the gap with alternative accommodation. If you're stuck, try asking local people or in shops and cafés.

It's also a good idea to stock up on basic food (bread, cheese, etc.) when you get the chance, rather than assume you'll be able to do so later in the day. If a village shop is

closed, ask around nearby. The chances are you'll be able to find out at what time they will open.

Hospitaleros can often provide you with reliable information about what's open on the next stage. Remember the Spanish for *open/closed* – *abierto/cerrado*. There is also a really useful and regularly updated internet list of winter hostels, it's at www.aprinca.com/alberguesinvierno

Packing: What to bring?

One of the great things about the Camino is that you really need very little stuff to do it. This makes it a good exercise in de-cluttering or seeing what's important and what isn't. The two lists below, covering Essential and Inessential Equipment.

Essential equipment: these are the things you **will need** on the Camino. This list doesn't vary much from person to person. The main difference is between summer walking and the rest of the year. eg. You need rainwear all year round but the rainwear you need in August is not the same rainwear you need in January.

Other equipment: The items on this list may be very useful or even essential, under certain circumstances, but you could either buy or find them easily on the Camino. Whether you pack these items depends on the likelihood of needing them, difficulty of buying or finding them, and their weight/bulkiness.

As a general rule, you should aim to carry **no more than 10% of your body weight** in your backpack. So, if you weigh 70kg, you should have no more than 7kg on your back. This suggested maximum assumes you're fairly close to your medically recommended weight. If you're unfit or overweight, you should aim for less than 10%. If your pack is too heavy, you will have difficulties. You can quickly find out if your pack is too heavy by carrying it for a test Camino day (at least five or six hours walking).

The Camino is not a wilderness walk and you'll never be more than a couple of hours from a shop or café. However, when packing you should take into account that you will need to carry some food and water. A litre of water weighs 1kg, so at the start of each day you'll have an extra 2kg, or thereabouts, in your backpack.

The **Golden Rule of Packing:** Look at each item and ask **Will I really NEED this to walk the Camino?** If the answer is **no** then leave it at home. If the answer is **maybe**, then think hard about the pros and cons of bringing it.

The number one mistake first-timers make is bringing too much stuff. They nearly kill themselves for the first few days trying to carry it, then have to go to the trouble and expense of sending things home or onwards to Santiago.

If you haven't done this kind of thing before, you should test pack to make sure it all fits and that you can carry it comfortably for eight or so hours (and there is only one way to find out!) Pack heavy items at the bottom of your backpack and close to your body, to get as much weight as possible on your hips rather than on your shoulders. Finding the best adjustment for your backpack is often a matter of trial and error, and what works for one person won't necessarily work for another. Modern backpacks can be adjusted in several ways; experiment with these to find what works best for you. Once on the Camino, you can ask advice from more experienced pilgrims if your backpack feels uncomfortable, or if you're getting shoulder or back pains.

NB. This book does not endorse any particular brands. Many companies produce good equipment and / or clothes, and when one is mentioned here, it's just as an example of what many pilgrims find useful.

The website caminoguide.net/packing goes into more detail about my own personal experience, with links to information about, and photos of, equipment I use personally or which have been recommended by others.

Packing: Essential equipment

FOOTWEAR

Most pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago bring two pairs of footwear; one for **walking** and one for **resting**. Resting your feet when the day's walk is over is very important and changing to light, comfortable footwear is a good way to do this. This is discussed in more detail below.

Your walking footwear is your single most important piece of equipment. Choosing suitable and comfortable walking footwear, and taking the time to break them in, is very important (See Blisters page 63). If at all possible buy your footwear from a shop that specialises in hiking equipment. A serious outdoor shop will have staff who hike themselves, who'll be able to point you in the direction of the type of footwear you need and who'll know how to measure your feet and match that to a size and type of boot. Consider buying a little bigger than your normal size because your feet will most likely swell after a few weeks walking.

Afternoon or evening is the best time to try on footwear because your feet swell as the day goes on. Wear the socks you intend to wear on the Camino. Make sure you have some wiggle-room for your toes, they should not be jammed together or rubbing of the inside of the shoe.

On the Camino there's quite a lot of walking on gravel paths and paved surfaces so whatever footwear you chose it needs to have good cushioning in the sole.

There are two main options for walking footwear:

running shoes / trainers or hiking boots.

RUNNING SHOES / TRAINERS

In summer it's possible to walk the Camino in a pair of light running shoes with a thick or cushioned sole.

The **advantage** is that they're light. They're made of soft material so are less likely to cause blisters. They're comfortable to wear in hot weather. They're designed for running on hard surfaces so they give your feet enough support and protection to deal with the distances and terrain involved in walking the Camino. They also usually have a degree of breathability. Unlike boots, running shoes generally need zero cleaning and polishing. Unlike leather boots, running shoes don't need breaking in. They should be comfortable from the beginning, provided you get a pair that suits you and that fits correctly.

The **disadvantages** are that most running shoes aren't waterproof so if it rains (and it always rains at some stage) your feet will get wet. Since it's unlikely to be cold (we're talking about the summer here) or to rain for days at a time, you're not in danger of getting hypothermia and your running shoes should dry out pretty quickly once the sun comes out again. So, wet feet is more an inconvenience than a serious problem.

Another disadvantage in wet weather is that running shoes aren't very good in the mud and they and your socks will quickly be covered in the stuff. This again is more an (unsightly) inconvenience than a major problem, and if you wash your shoes and leave them out to dry, they'll be ready to use again in the morning (although they're unlikely to dry properly until the sun comes out). In addition, shoes don't give as much support and protection to your ankles as full hiking boots. This may lead to fatigue or injury. In summary, running shoes are comfortable and light and great in dry and hot weather, but in wet weather they don't give much protection against the wet or mud.

HIKING BOOTS

Hiking boots are by far the the most popular type of walking footwear among long-distance pilgrims year round and almost the only kind worn outside the summer months. Most pilgrims go for light leather and Gore-Tex mix hiking boots rather than heavier mountaineering type boots.

Their **advantages** are that they are designed for walking long distances over mixed terrain and in variable weather conditions. The high ankle offers some extra support to your ankle and some protection from twists, although this will vary by boot and how tightly you lace them. Most of the light hiking boots people walk the Camino in don't actually offer that much ankle protection, especially if you don't lace them up tightly, as most people don't. (This could be important for inexperienced hikers who may need time before they build strength in their lower legs.) They have a strong, cushioned sole with good all-weather grip. A Gore-Tex layer adds waterproofing and breathability. They offer good protection against the cold when walking in cold weather or on frozen ground. In snow they offer good protection against both the cold and melted snow wetting your feet. An additional benefit, when you're walking in shorts you'll get fewer pebbles in your boots than you will in shoes and you can reduce this again by rolling the tops of your socks over the tops of your boots.

The **disadvantages** of hiking boots include that they're heavier than running shoes and less comfortable in hot weather. They can be quite stiff, if not fully broken in, which increases the danger of blisters. It takes longer to put them on and take them off when you stop for a rest or when you get a pebble in them. Boots are also bulky and so difficult to pack away if you don't want to wear them for your whole walking day. Caring for boots properly is not easy on the Camino (although this may not be an important consideration for you). If they are not properly cared for they will quickly lose their waterproof qualities. The type of care varies by brand of boot so the manufacturer's instructions are the last word on this, but generally it consists of cleaning the boots regularly and treating them with a spray or cream which renews their waterproof qualities and breathability, and lubricates the leather, hence lessening its tendency to crack at bend points. In the context of hiking for 30 or so consecutive days you should ideally be cleaning and treating them every three or four days in order to get the longest possible useful life from them. That would mean bringing an adequate supply of cleaning material with you, adding weight to your pack, which for most people isn't an option. Olive oil, which is available in most Spanish restaurants, is quite good as a leather lubricant, but naturally the manufacturer's recommendations are best. Don't leave wet leather to dry near a heat source; this can damage the leather and lessen its waterproofing.

RESTING FOOTWEAR

The term **resting footwear** refers to the footwear you'll wear when you're finished walking for the day and are going around looking at the sights, or just relaxing. Good resting footwear should be light, because you have to carry it all day. It should be compact enough to fit in your backpack or attachable to your backpack in some way. It should be loose fitting and/or soft so that if you do get blisters or discomfort of any sort your resting footwear won't make them worse. It should be comfortable enough to walk around in and be well ventilated to allow your feet to breathe (and possibly heal) after a long day being cooped up. Other desirable characteristics are that it can be worn in the shower and dries quickly. It's also potentially very useful if your resting footwear is capable of replacing your main footwear, at least some of the time (you'd be surprised how many people end up walking some of the way in their resting footwear).

Don't worry if your resting footwear doesn't meet all of these criteria; the main thing is comfort and lightness. It's entirely possible that you already own a pair of shoes that would fit the bill perfectly – and be well broken in.

There are many types of suitable footwear. **Flip-flops** (called **Thongs** in some countries) are very light and compact, but not everybody finds walking in them comfortable. **Crocs** and similar plastic shoes, are light, but again not everybody finds them comfortable. **Sandals** are great too and outdoor sandals such as those made by *Teva* are light and compact and you could actually hike in them (at least in good weather). **Light canvas shoes** like *Converse* are also good but not so well ventilated.

In the interests of full disclosure, I have to mention that I have never walked the Camino in anything other than Ecco boots and sandals (website global.ecco.com), and I have only once had reason to regret my choice. I'm now on my third pair of identical boots. I get about two Caminos from a pair before they stop being waterproof. Between pair two and three I digressed and bought a pair of Ecco boots of a slightly different and lighter design, but after about ten days walking I got pressure sores on the soles of my feet, mostly towards the end of the day. My holidays were over anyway, but this could have been a bit of a disaster had I been planning to go on. The lighter boots had less well cushioned soles, which I think caused the problem, and so I reverted to the old reliables for my next trip. My Ecco sandals serve as my resting footwear, despite being a bit on the heavy side. I think the extra weight is worth it because they're very comfortable to walk in. On hot days, I switch into them at about midday and carry my boots. On my first Camino, I wore my sandals exclusively for the final two weeks because my boots had become too tight. My next pair of boots I got one size bigger and they've been fine even on the longest Camino. Despite knowing exactly what works for me, I always time buying boots to break them in for at least six months before heading off on the Camino.

There is still a small number of hardy souls whose choice of footwear sets them apart from the common herd. I once met a guy from Luxembourg who walks the Camino every autumn wearing flip-flops. His choice of footwear didn't seem to be any impediment to him. But he did favour a particular brand of Brazilian flip-flops. One summer, I met an Irish guy walking in Converse. He said they were fine and he hadn't had a single blister. The prize for audacity goes to a Spanish guy I met on the Camino Mosarabé, during the Biblical deluge of May 2012. He was walking in his socks from

Granada, having made a promesa that if his mother recovered from an illness he'd walk to Santiago descalzado (literally without shoes, although it's often translated as barefoot). He was doing fine, no major injuries, taking his time. The torrential rain wasn't affecting him any more than anybody else. He drew wonderful cartoons illustrating his progress and daily drenching in the libros de peregrinos.

RAINWEAR

Most **modern rainwear** includes Gore-Tex or some other waterproof and breathable material. (For the technical low-down see page 140.) There are several options when it comes to rainwear and the most important factor is the time of year you'll be walking. In the **summer months** you can be minimalistic because you're unlikely to encounter long periods of heavy rain, wind and cold. **Outside of the summer months**, and the closer to January, the greater probability of needing serious rainwear that can also serve as cold weather wear.

WATERPROOF JACKET

A waterproof jacket is a good idea all year round, though in summer you could manage without one if you take a poncho instead. In summer a light jacket is fine but it should be loose-fitting so that you can wear layers under it on cold mornings and in the mountains. In the depths of winter, however, you will need a warm jacket.

A **good waterproof jacket** should ideally be a loose fit for layering. It should come to below your waist so water dripping down will mostly fall on the ground (looseness helps here too). It should fasten with a zip and have a flap which covers the zip when it's closed to prevent water seeping in, especially when walking into headwinds. It should have a hood with pull-strings to keep it in place on windy days. The collar should be sealable (if the zip doesn't go all the way up) to prevent water dripping in and heat escaping. The sleeves should also be sealable around the wrists to prevent heat loss. The zips should be sturdy and have big, easy to grip fasteners so you can work them while wearing gloves. It should have big pockets with zip fasteners and ideally a couple of inside pockets too. Resealable vents under the arms also help to regulate temperature. Finally, it should roll or fold small enough to fit in your backpack.

The quality of the material used is one factor in how much protection your jacket will give you from getting wet. Other factors include its general "build quality". Are seams tightly stitched and sealed? When you're wearing it with the hood up, does water drip down inside? Does water enter through pockets? Does it enter through zips? Does it enter underneath the straps of your backpack?

The **advantages** of a waterproof jacket are that it will help to keep you dry and warm. Because of its breathability, it's comfortable to wear in warm rain as well as cold. It won't flap around in the wind like a poncho and will be easier to put on and take off. It has pockets. It's good to wear if it gets cold in the evenings or even when you stop for a short break. It keeps your upper body dry and some of them even look nice (lets face it, in a poncho you'll look like a walking tent.)

The **disadvantages** are that they can be quite bulky to pack away, especially the winter ones, which is another reason why *layering* is such a good idea. In a prolonged downpour you'll more than likely discover the limits to its waterproofing as water may seep in through seams and under the waist and shoulder straps of your backpack.

However, a good jacket will still keep you fairly dry and warm despite a little seepage because its breathable qualities will help to expel any water that gets inside.

WATERPROOF PANTS (OR, IF YOU PREFER, TROUSERS)

Most pilgrims use the baggy waterproof pants which are designed to be worn as an extra layer over your normal clothes. Waterproof pants are excellent for cold and wet weather and in snow. In summer you might experience a couple of day of rain but it won't be very cold, so you could manage with shorts or light pants made of a quick-drying material. At other times of the year, the extra rain and cold protection will be important in the mountains, where you'll frequently encounter freezing temperatures.

Waterproof pants can be bought in the cheap plastic variety or the less-cheap Gore-Tex variety. They all do the waterproof thing, but if you want breathability you have to spend a bit more. Breathability is not as important as it is for jackets because (especially in cold weather) the lower half of your body won't sweat as much as the upper half.

Make sure the leg-bottoms are wide enough to allow you to put them on and take them off without having to remove your boots. Some models have a zip at the bottom of the leg which widens the opening enough to be able to take it off without a struggle.

There are also top-end waterproof pants made of advanced space-age materials which look like normal pants and are worn next to your skin and are not designed to be layered. These work well but are only really suitable for a mid-winter Camino.

The **advantages**; they'll keep your legs dry and warm in cold weather. They're not heavy (at least the plastics ones) and roll up fairly compactly.

The **disadvantages**; they're hot to wear unless it's freezing out. Getting into and out of them can be a pain.

PONCHOS

First of all, a clarification; this refers to "professional" ponchos, not to the cheap disposable ones which are designed to be used once and then thrown away.

Opinions vary greatly on the issue of ponchos, with some thinking they're the bee's knees and other people dismissing them as more trouble than they're worth. As previously stated, they can be ideal for a summer Camino instead of a waterproof jacket. They can also be an excellent addition to a waterproof jacket in the event of a prolonged period of rain.

A good poncho will cover your backpack completely and hang down to about your knees. It should be made of strong plastic, reinforced at the edges and at the neck (important point this) to prevent it ripping. It should have a hood with pull-strings so you can tighten it around your head. It should be light and pack away compactly.

The **advantages**; they really will keep the rain off the top half of your body and your backpack. They dry pretty quickly and can even be worn still damp, without discomfort. In fact, if you get a plastic one all you have to do is shake it and it's dry. They usually pack up compactly and don't weigh much. You can get a good one for very little money.

The **disadvantages**; windy days, a poncho is difficult to get on and will flap all over the place, taking on alarming sail-like qualities when you eventually manage to get it on. (On the Camino the prevailing winds are westerlies, blowing in off the Atlantic straight into your face. And, as a general rule, when it blows, it rains). In warm

weather you will get quite hot under your poncho and because they don't have the breathability of a good jacket you'll end up damp from sweat. In cold weather your poncho won't contribute much to keeping you warm. They're prone to snagging on bushes (and anything else).

I became a convert to ponchos late in life. It was October 2013, in Galicia. We'd already endured several days of miserable, cold rain blowing into our faces. At times it was so intense that even the locals were looking at the sky and shaking their heads. I'd spent the night in Palas de Rei, in a hotel, because I was feeling miserable. It was a cheap hotel and the heating wasn't on, so in the morning my clothes, boots, everything, was still damp. Over breakfast the television weather forecast revealed a complex interweaving of rain fronts forming an orderly queue, stretching half way across the Atlantic and moving at a leisurely pace in our direction like the horsemen of the Apocalypse.

And I still had three days to Santiago.

As I grimly headed back to the hotel I fought back tears, mortified in case anyone saw me having a "moment" at seven o'clock in the morning.

Trudging through the town I noticed a shop that was already open and doing a roaring trade, to judge by the number of pilgrims milling around inside. When I got closer I realised why. The mannequins in the window were all sporting ponchos! Gingerly I inspected the wares. They went from the flimsy disposable type to the ultra durable professional type. I contemplated for a moment before deciding I had nothing to lose and also that there was no point skimping (I'd bought cheap ponchos before and seen them shredded to ribbons before the day was over). So I got me the best and most expensive one they had – an Altus Atmospheric, hecho en España (made in Spain), 30€.

Within an hour I realised I was the owner of an impressive piece of raingear. It's shaped to fit over a backpack, has an adjustable hood, a good quality zip covered by a Velcro flap, and it comes down perfectly to my knees. It has wide sleeves which you can slip your arms into and out of as you please (almost like a Friar's robe). And, once you master the technique, it's easy to get into and out of; without your backpack you put the poncho on, and with your arms in the sleeves, you zip it up. Then you pull your arms inside and put your backpack on underneath the poncho.

It works really well. Having worn it for several days in heavy rain I can say it really keeps you dry, at least down as far as your knees. I'll never again go on a Camino, outside of the summer, without it. If I had to make one criticism it would be that the hood is a bit too big and falls over my face. However, wearing a baseball cap solves that problem perfectly.

It's changed my attitude to rain. When I wake in the morning and it's pouring outside it doesn't bother me at all. I feel almost a state of bliss knowing that my wonderful poncho is going to get a day out and that other, less well prepared pilgrims will be staring at me in bewilderment and envy.

BACKPACK

Medium sized hiking backpacks, regardless of who makes them, are all based on a very similar design, and follow the principle that the weight in your pack should be

carried by your hips rather than your shoulders. They have shoulder straps which are mostly for stability, a hip belt which takes most of the weight, an external rigid frame to keep the backpack upright and to allow the weight to be transferred down to your hips, and a mesh back panel which rests against your back while still allowing air to circulate between you and the backpack, to keep you cool on hot days. Backpack technology has evolved a lot in the past twenty or so years and a modern, well-fitting backpack is comfortable to carry, even when over-loaded. That doesn't mean you should over-load it! So, if the basic design of backpacks is more-or-less identical, what are the deciding factors when buying one?

The first thing is **size** (or more accurately **volume**). Backpack volume is generally measured in litres. Most pilgrims carry a backpack of about 40 litres. You can go smaller than this but generally, if this is your first time then 35 litres minimum is a good guideline. How big you go is up to you. Some people like loads of space and go for a 50 or 55 litre backpack. Which is fine, as long as the backpack itself doesn't weigh too much (see below) and as long as you can resist the temptation to fill it with stuff you don't need. (A bigger one can potentially be more useful, post-Camino, than a smaller backpack).

Next is **weight**. If you're aiming to keep your luggage under **7kg** (or whatever your target is), then you have to remember that that **7kg includes** the weight of your backpack. If your backpack weighs 1.5kg, that only leaves you with 5.5kg for everything else. Some backpacks weigh 3kg or more, so remember to check the weight when choosing one.

Your backpack has to **fit** you. The straps are all adjustable so your size across the shoulders and hips doesn't make much difference. The height does. If you're tall you'll be more comfortable with a longer backpack. If you're short you can go for a shorter one. The base of the frame and the hip strap should rest on your hips. It shouldn't slip down as you move. At the same time, the shoulder straps should be comfortable around your shoulders, without being tight. Most of the weight should be on your hips, with very little on your shoulders. This is important; your shoulders are going to get sore if they have to carry a lot of weight for a long period. It's not going to do your spine any good either. The waist strap and the base of the backpack, should be cushioned to make carrying the weight on your hips comfortable. Finally, you really need to put something heavy in the backpack when trying it on, so you get the feel of what it's like fully loaded. Trying it on empty doesn't tell you much. Good outdoor shops will help you with this.

When you're satisfied with the basics - that it's big enough, light enough and it fits you - the remaining features are a matter of personal preference.

A **rain cover** is useful because most backpacks aren't waterproof. They usually come with one built in, but check anyway.

If you want to use a **water bladder** hydration system, make sure your choice of backpack accommodates it (most do, but check to make sure).

Different brands of backpack come with different **fasteners** to close the main compartment. Some have a string pull system with a flap to cover it to keep the rain out. Others have a zip. Both work fine.

Ease of access to the backpack's main compartment is determined by the **size of the opening** at the top. Many string pull backpacks have quite a small opening, and if you need to get something that's right down the bottom, often your only option is to

unpack everything. This is inconvenient at best, and really inconvenient if you need your rainwear in the midst of a sudden downpour. Some backpacks have a **zip opening** at the top, which extends down the sides, so it can open like a suitcase, allowing easy access to its inner depths. Whether this is an issue for you depends, to some degree, on how organised your packing is.

The question of **pockets** also boils down to preference and one's organisational habits. Some people love loads of external pocket, others find that it just makes it harder to find things. If you're the kind of person who always puts things in the same place, and will remember where that place is, then multiple pockets will probably suit you down to the ground. On the other hand, if you're someone who just tends to put things wherever is convenient, and then relies on serendipity to find them again, you might be better off forgetting about pockets and just relying on sticking everything in the main compartment (possibly in cloth or plastic bags). But please, please, please don't use plastic bags that make noise whenever you touch them, because at some stage or another you're going to have to search in them in the dead of night and will wake the whole dorm.

Backpacks aren't for everybody. I met a guy from Switzerland who was pushing a shopping trolley he'd bought in Pamplona. He'd had an accident and put his left shoulder out of joint and wasn't able to carry his backpack. The trolley was a nice orange colour, and it and its owner achieved almost celebrity-like status. On smooth surfaces he could push it in front of him, on rough he pulled it. He made it to Santiago and his arm was so improved that he was able to continue to Finisterre without the help of his trolley. He went on to achieve fame in his home country when a popular newspaper nominated him "Crazy Swiss Person of the Year", or words to that effect.

SLEEPING BAG / SLEEPING BAG LINER

What kind of sleeping bag you bring with you depends on what time of year you intend to walk. In **summer**, a light synthetic fibre one with a comfort range down to about 8°C is ideal (sometimes called *one season*). Some summer pilgrims go without a sleeping bag and instead bring a **sleeping bag liner**. A sleeping bag liner is similar to a sleeping bag except it's much lighter, often consisting of a single layer of material, usually cotton, silk or polyester, although they exist in a fleece version also.

The **advantages** of sleeping bag liners are that they're very lightweight, very compact, and cheap. On hot nights (and in hot stuffy dorms with little ventilation), they're more comfortable than a sleeping bag. Sleeping bag liners are also available pre-treated with bedbug repellent.

The **disadvantages** of sleeping bag liners are that they're really only suitable for hot nights, and even in summer it can get cold at night. Sometimes blankets are available in hostels, but this is by no means guaranteed, and if available, they may not be very clean. If you just bring a sleeping bag liner you may need to sleep in your clothes occasionally.

A sleeping bag liner, as its name suggests, can also be used inside a sleeping bag, where it will lower the minimum comfortable temperature by about 3 or 4 degrees.

In **winter**, a cold-weather sleeping bag (sometimes called *four seasons*) with a comfort range down to about freezing, is advisable.

Most modern **sleeping bags** are insulated with synthetic fibre although you can still find down (duck feather) filled ones. **Down** filled sleeping bags are warmer for their weight, but if they get wet they're very difficult to dry. You can wash them in a washing machine, but they have to be dried on a flat surface, or the distribution of feathers inside the bag becomes uneven. **Synthetic fibre** sleeping bags are slightly bulkier, but will still keep you warm even when wet and will dry a lot faster. They can also be tumble dried.

Most sleeping bags are *Mummy* shaped; they get narrower towards your feet, and have a hood for your head. If you find this claustrophobic, you can still find the old-style square ones, which have the added advantages of allowing you to open the zip at the bottom and stick your feet out to keep cool, and to open the zip completely and use it like a blanket.

Sleeping bags usually come with a storage bag (sometimes called a stuff-sack). Sometimes the manufacturer recommends rolling it before putting it into its bag, other times they just tell you to stuff it in. Have a look at the label before you throw it away.

Also, pay attention to the dimensions of the sleeping-bag, especially if you're tall, broad shouldered, or broad anything else too.

I've had a variety of light sleeping bags down the years, which always did me fine on the Camino Francés. However, for my first trip on the Vía de la Plata in winter, I really suffered. All I had was a summer sleeping bag, and it was cold in the dorms at night and there were no blankets. I ended up wearing all my clothes (including my rainwear) inside my sleeping bag and I still froze. When I got home, I splashed out on a duck feather sleeping bag from an Army Surplus Store, which is absolutely amazing to sleep in (like checking into a four-star hotel, minus the mini-bar!) and warm enough down to about freezing point. The only disadvantage is that it is hard to dry once it gets wet. After I wash it I lay it flat on the back seat of my car and park it in the sun, and even then it takes a couple of days to dry (I live in Dublin, and sunny days are rare). My summer sleeping bag is from Deuter (who also make the most popular brand of backpacks among non-Spanish pilgrims). Its label says it has a Comfort temperature of 12°C, with a Limit of 8°C, and in my experience that's fairly accurate. It packs very neatly, weighs a couple of hundred grammes and only cost about 50€.

TOWEL

Most pilgrims carry a lightweight, quick-drying pack (AKA *microfibre*) towel, rather than a traditional cotton towel. Although, for only a small bit of extra weight, you could bring a small conventional towel. Just bear in mind that getting it dry in winter might be difficult.

The **advantages** of a pack towel over a traditional one are that it dries quickly, it's light and rolls up very small. In fact, after wringing it out it's dry enough to use again. The only **disadvantage** is that the feel of pack towel on your skin isn't a particularly pleasant experience, and drying yourself with one require more patting than rubbing. Not everybody's cup of tea.

MONEY BELT / DOCUMENT POUCH / TRAVEL WALLET

The tradition **money belt** isn't popular on the Camino because of the heat. Basically, it will make you feel hotter and it will get soaked with sweat. **Pouches** that you hang around your neck are more popular and give some protection for their content from

rain, however, they don't always combine well with a backpack from a comfort point-of-view, and they are also a bit obvious. **Bum (Fanny) Bags** work too and, worn at the front, have the advantage of being easily accessible. Again, it's obvious where your valuables are and they mightn't combine well with a backpack. A **Travel Wallet** may also be useful, although there isn't much to distinguish it from a normal wallet.

For your documents, you need something big enough to hold your passport and a Credencial (see page 37., the traditional *Amis du Chemin* Credencial issued in Saint-Jean, is 17cm x 10cm, Spanish ones are slightly smaller) and whatever else you need to keep safe and dry, not just from the rain but also if you want to keep it with you when you take a shower.

You need something that you're comfortable carrying and that isn't too obvious. I used to use a pouch hung around my neck but I found it irritating and uncomfortable at times and on one occasion I lost it because I took it off when I stopped for a break. After that I started wearing pants with secure zippy pockets, one for my wallet and one for my passport and Credencial, with cards split between the two. It works well for me, it's comfortable, secure and discreet. You just have to have the pocket requirement in mind when you go pants shopping.

EAR PLUGS

Some people are deep sleepers and manage fine without ear plugs. The rest of us like to have them handy for encounters with those legendary creatures who can keep not just a whole dorm awake, but a whole hostel, and possibly the neighbours too.

There are several kinds of noise reducing ear plugs made of foam or wax. The wax ones, if they fit correctly, offer the best noise reduction. Using them is easy, hold two in your hand until they soften, mould them into the shape you want and insert them in your ears. They're reusable. The foam ones are made of mouldable (or memory) foam and just go straight in your ears. Some are single use and some are reusable.

If you've never used ear plugs before, try out a few different kinds to find out which are the best for you.

Stash a pair of ear plugs under your pillow when you go to bed so you'll be able to find them if you need them. But don't stash all your ear plugs there because you're bound to forget them at some stage.

TOILETRIES

Most pilgrims use hard **soap**. It has the advantage of being small, light and long-lasting. You can use it for hand-washing clothes as well as yourself. It's commonly available, even in the smallest village. It can be a bit messy in your backpack, so you'll need to store it in a sealable, waterproof container or a mesh bag so you can hang it out to dry after using it.

Hardcore hikers and cyclists sometimes cut the handle off their **toothbrush** to save a couple of grams. It makes washing your teeth a lot harder though.

Nail clippers; long toe nails can cause problems for your feet.

Toothpaste, toothbrushes, soap, and any hygiene and toiletry products you might need are widely available along the Camino route. In villages you won't get much of a selection but you'll get all the basics. In supermarkets in larger towns all the major European brands are available. The content of your toilet bag is up to you, and really won't be so different from a normal holiday, except that you'll have to keep things to a bare minimum and, if possible, go for smaller packets.

SUN SCREEN

For more information about sun screen see page 62.

PASSPORT / ID

By law, you must have your Passport (or ID card, if you're from an EU country that issues them) on you at all times. You may be asked to show it when checking in to some of the bigger municipal hostels.

MONEY / CASH AND CREDIT CARD

See, Banking and Money, page 56.

CREDENCIAL

See, The Credencial / Pilgrim Passport, page 37.

CLOTHES

Materials for clothes As a general rule, any item of clothing you bring with you should be hard-wearing, light and easy to pack away compactly. It's also important that it does not absorb a lot of water, keeps you warm even when damp and is quick drying. This mostly confines you to synthetic fabrics. Polyester is a good example of a material with these qualities. This type of material is sometimes also referred to as *Tech* or *Technical*. A natural alternative to artificial fibres is Merino wool, which is popular for sports clothing because it naturally draws moisture away from the wearer's skin (in a process known as *wicking*). It's soft and light and keeps its insulating properties even when wet.

Denim and other types of wool, are too heavy and take an eternity to dry in cold or damp weather. Cotton socks or underwear are OK as long as you have a few spare pairs. Cotton T-shirts and shirts will dry quickly in summer, but after a few days of rain (which can happen in summer too) you may end up wishing you'd gone for those synthetic fabrics or Merino.

Dark colours will be easier to keep clean-looking when all that's available for laundry is a sink with cold water. However, they will absorb more heat from direct sun.

SOCKS

On the subject of socks there are several schools of thought, and little consensus. Some pilgrims go for **sports** or **running socks**, available in outdoor shops. These are usually made of thin, fast-drying wool, and may have extra cushioning in vulnerable spots and / or double layers of material to reduce friction. There are also specialised **hiking socks**. Other pilgrims (and this seems to be a Nordic peculiarity) wear **two pairs** of thin socks together, possibly combining wool and silk. The logic being that wearing two socks reduces friction on your skin. Other pilgrims take a minimalist approach and wear **light sports socks** or even **everyday socks**.

Three pairs of socks is a good number to bring since you mightn't always be able to get them dry in one day. One (or even two) more pairs gives you a bit of extra leeway.

I always wear cheap everyday socks made of a mixture of cotton and polyester (approx 70/30), the same kinds I wear at home. In my experience, if you get your boots right you don't have to worry about your socks. I usual bring four pairs and if they're not dry in the morning, I tie them to the outside of my backpack, like a mobile clothes-line.

UNDERWEAR

Most pilgrims go for standard cotton undies, which do the job perfectly well. More technically sophisticated underwear is available from sports and outdoor stores, which may dry more quickly or keep you slightly cooler.

Most female pilgrims wear sports bras. When choosing what to bring make sure it works together with your backpack.

For men, although the extra ventilation of boxer-shorts may be nice on a hot day, the extra support of more conventional briefs may be more comfortable over time. Two pairs should be enough, but an extra one might be wise. In winter, you could consider a mix of normal and thermal undies.

The most important consideration is comfort when you're walking long distances.

GLOVES

Useful to have in summer as well as winter. They weigh very little and don't take up space and you could be very glad of them if you hit some cold weather in the mountains (especially if you want to use walking poles). A pair of rubber washing-up gloves can help keep your hands warm in wet weather, and they weigh almost nothing.

FLEECE

Even in summer, you'll need something warm for evenings or early morning. A fleece is ideal, but really you can take anything that's capable of being combined in layers with your other upper body wear, to give you warmth when you need it.

PANTS, ETC.

The ideal pair of pants for a summer Camino will be made of a light, hard-wearing, quick-drying material, and be light in colour to reflect heat from the sun. In summer, most pilgrims walk in shorts and have a second pair of pants for when it's cool in the evening. Hiking pants with zip-off lower legs are a useful alternative to bringing shorts. In winter, pilgrims generally wear heavier pants for walking and have a pair of tracksuit bottoms for evenings and possibly also for sleeping in.

In summer, some women walk in skirts (and occasionally summer dresses), as an alternative to shorts. Naturally, a gentleman can avail of the benefits of skirt-wearing by attiring himself in a kilt, and at the same time, acquire a cachet of Sean Connery-like sophistication.

Leggings are also popular all year round for walking wear or evening wear.

Whatever your preference, take into consideration whether it has pockets, whether the pockets have zips, and whether they're big enough to be useful for carrying things you're likely to need frequently.

T-SHIRT / SHIRT

Whether you go for T-shirts or shirts (or one of each) is a personal preference. Shirts have the advantage of allowing air to circulate more freely around your body to keep you cool. The collar will protect your neck from the sun. The sleeves will protect your arms. In cold weather, it offers a little more protection from the cold because it can be buttoned up and tucked in your pants. It can also be worn between a T-shirt and a fleece on really cold days. Shirts made of synthetic material will dry in a flash and don't look like they haven't been ironed.

HAT

Ideally you need one hat which can protect you from the sun, the rain and, at other times, keep your head warm. That may be too much to ask of one hat, so in summer consider something with a wide brim, to keep the sun off, ventilation holes, and a chin-strap so it can't blow away on windy days. In winter a "woolly" hat of some description, will keep you head and ears warm.

SCARF / NECK WARMER

Protecting your throat from the cold can be difficult on days with a cold wind blowing in your face. **Scarves** aren't that useful on the Camino because they're bulky and don't fit well with a waterproof jacket with a tight collar. A **neck warmer** is a tube of material which you wear around your neck or which can also double as a hat. It's compact and light. It's also useful as a blindfold against emergency exit lights (which many hostels have been installing in dorms in recent years, and which stay on all night). A subspecies of neck warmer is the **bandanna**, which with its multiple uses on neck and head, is a possible alternative to a hat in summer.

WATERBOTTLE

You'll need storage for at least a litre of water and preferably two. There are two main schools of thought on "rehydration solutions": the waterbottle and the bladder.

Waterbottles come in all shapes, sizes and colours, but the main categories are plastic and metal. **Plastic waterbottles** are made of hard plastic. The size of the drinking opening varies, larger ones are easier to fill (especially in a shallow sink) but also easier to spill. They're closed with a plastic screw-on top, which should be attached to the bottle in some way, so you don't lose it. They're usually transparent so you can see how much water is in them, it also makes it easier to inspect the interior. Modern *Nalgene* waterbottles claim to be unbreakable and probably are. The main **disadvantage** of large-opening bottles is that you have to stand still to drink from them or risk pouring half of it over yourself.

Metal waterbottles look a bit like a flask with a small, screw-on top. This smaller opening makes them easier to drink from while walking (although you still need to look where you're going). Their interior is coated with a material which prevents the build up of bacteria. They're pretty tough and it would take a real effort to put a dent in one. Their main disadvantage is that you can't see how much water is in there or, for that matter, what else. Also, not everybody is comfortable with the sensation of drinking from a metal container.

Bladders are clear, flexible plastics sacks with a screw-on top, with a hose attached with a "bite valve" which the user drinks from. The bladder is normally stored in your backpack (most modern backpacks have a special compartment to hold it, and a hole to run the hose through). The pressure exerted by the weight of the contents of your backpack should place the water in the bladder under sufficient pressure that when you open the bite valve with your teeth to drink, the water should squirt out of its own accord. The **advantages** of bladders are that you don't have to stop to drink, so you can drink small quantities more frequently, which is the recommended way to avoid dehydration. You can keep your water cooler, because it's in your backpack away from direct sunlight. There are no **disadvantages** to this system really, except perhaps that it discourages you from taking your time.

I've tried all of the above at different times and, in the end, I concluded the handiest thing is two one litre plastic bottles (mineral water, Coke, etc.). They're widely available and zero maintenance. I fill them with tap water and put them in the mesh side pockets of my backpack. They're light, transparent, and they last about a month before they start looking unsightly. I wash them out daily to prevent build-up of bacteria. Plus, stretching your arm back to get one, without taking your backpack off, is a great exercise for your shoulder joints!

Packing: Other equipment

Walking poles: They will, if used properly, take some of the strain of walking off your leg muscles and joints, and make downhill sections easier on you knees. So, if you're worried about that, or if you have a history of knee problems, it might be worth your while trying them. The best way to learn how to use them (it's not as obvious as you might think!) is to join a *Nordic Walking* group near where you live. Or search for videos on the internet. They also may help to reduce swelling in your hands, a non-serious condition which affects some people as a reaction to the heat. If you're not concerned about your knees and don't specifically want to exercise your upper body, then don't bother with them.

My own experience with walking poles has been mixed. I tried them for one Camino and, they definitely did make it easier on my legs. However, I found if I used them all day I ended up with a sharp pain at the base of my neck. So, it was a toss up between that and sore knees. As a compromise, I used them some of the time, and mostly on downhill sections. So they spent most of the time strapped to my backpack. More recently I haven't bothered to bring them because I manage without them, and because you can't take them as hand-luggage on internal EU flights.

The old pilgrim hostel in Roncesvalles used to have a pilgrim "swap shop" area where you could leave things you'd figured out you didn't need after your first day's walking, and take stuff other people had abandoned. Among the tents, inflatable mattresses and camping stoves gathering dust, there was always a couple of walking poles. I didn't feel tempted.

Many pilgrims bring them but most don't know how to use them correctly and end up walking along tapping the ground with them. So, if you want to try them, take the time to learn the technique.

Bandages: specifically, tubular support bandages for your knees or ankles. These can be surprisingly helpful in easing minor joint pain. They don't weigh much or take up much space, so they might be good to have if you're worried about your joints.

Torch / Flashlight: Can be useful for finding your way to the bathroom late at night, though most hostels now have emergency exit lights which never go out. If you're walking in winter it makes more sense to have one. It's worth investing in a good quality torch; the cheap ones just break quickly. Check the on switch can't be pressed by accident when it's packed away or else when you need it the battery will be run down. Most smart phones have a built-in torch (also acts as a flash).

Sunglasses: Great to have in summer if you're in any way sensitive to bright sunlight.

Sleeping mat: Cheap, light and very handy if you have to sleep on the ground or outside (always a possibility in Galicia in July and August). Also great for siestas / picnics, etc.

Cutlery (knife / fork / spoon): Camino kitchens tend to have lots of cutlery, until you arrive in Galicia. However, if you like to have picnics, a knife and spoon are handy.

Zippy Bags / Baggies: These resealable plastic bags come in different sizes and are excellent for keeping your passport, Credencial and other bits and pieces dry. They can also be used for general organisation of different categories of equipment and (hopefully) preventing complete chaos in your backpack.

Bathing Suit (or whatever you want to call them): In summer many Camino villages have a public open-air swimming pool. Occasionally there are opportunities for river swimming. However, you're better off sticking to the approved places, signposted as *Playa Fluvial*.

Hankies / Kleenex: It's handy to have a small supply, but they are easily bought in almost any small shop.

Plastic Bin Bags / Trash Bags: These weigh almost nothing and take no space but they're great for "ultimate waterproofing". No matter how wet the weather, if you line your backpack with one of these you can feel confident that at the end of the day you'll have dry clothes to change into and a dry sleeping bag to curl up in. Well worth it!

Medical Kit: It's handy to have basic pain killers, plasters, etc. and possibly a basic blister treatment kit (Compeed, needle, thread, disinfectant). However, it isn't worth your while bringing a lot of medical supplies. Just about everything you could possibly need will be available from Pharmacies along the Camino.

Needle and thread: apart from any medical uses these can be handy for quick repair to clothing and equipment.

Plastic sheet: For sleeping outside, 2m x 2m. Not as good as a tent but much cheaper and will protect you from rain, dew, bird droppings, creepy-crawlies and nosy sheep.

Mobile phone: If staying in contact is important. Bring one with a good battery life and save on the hassle of finding a place to charge it every day. If it's got WiFi you can use it for emailing, etc. Or get yourself a Spanish SIM card (see page 57).

Multi-socket adaptor: Electricity outlets are often in short supply in hostels. An adaptor which allows you to plug in more than one device at a time can save you waiting around for an outlet to become free.

Camping stove: You won't save much money by cooking for yourself and you'll have the added weight of stove, food, plates, etc. If you want / need to cook for yourself, most of the time (except in Galicia) it's possible to plan your stages to only stop at hostels with kitchens.

Tent: Unless you're determined to sleep outside, this is a complete waste of space. The law in Spain relating to wild camping varies from region to region. However, it is always prohibited near historic buildings and main roads.

Clothes line: Basically, a piece of string, although camping shops sell more professional ones. Handy at busy times.

Clothes pegs: These are handy to have because often they're in limited supply at hostels. Try to get a distinctive design or colour so you'll know which are yours. Safety pins can also serve as clothes pegs and weigh almost nothing.

Duct tape: Useful for emergency repairs to just about anything. It also works well as friction protection on heels. Better still, Gaffer Tape doesn't leave a sticky residue and is easier to handle.

Umbrella: Useful against rain and sun. Not much use in strong winds.

Net clothes bag: To keep your clothes together if you're sharing a washing machine with other pilgrims.

Hi-Viz Jacket: A yellow reflective jacket (like the ones cyclists wear) makes you more visible to drivers in winter when days are short and possibly dull.

Resealable food container (Tupperware): This is useful if you're preparing your own meals. Leftovers become tomorrow's lunch.

Camera: More and more pilgrims are using the camera on their phone, but if you want to take good photos a proper camera is essential. Digital cameras use rechargeable Ni-MH batteries, most of them don't work well with disposable batteries. If you don't want to carry a charger, you'll need, either to carry a supply of charged batteries or to get a camera with a build-in charger.

Gaiters: These waterproof covers which fasten around your ankle and lower leg, protecting against water and mud, are useful in winter to stop water going in over the top of your boot and protect the legs of your pants from mud.

Pillow case: albergues generally provide pillows however they don't always provide pillow cases, or if they do they don't always wash them every day. Carrying your own can save you from some yuck moments.

Notebook and pen: Making notes, taking people's emails, drawing pictures. Keeping a diary can be a nice souvenir of the Camino.

I have a list in a spreadsheet of everything I need for a Camino. It varies a little for summer and winter, but not much. I print it out a few weeks before departure and mark out the items I need to buy. Then, a few days before departure, I start assembling everything. Once it's packed, it's crossed off the list. That way I know I haven't forgotten anything, and that I haven't packed things I won't need. You can download a sample list from caminoguide.net/packing

How to get to the Camino

Possible starting points are listed in Camino order (apart from places which aren't on the Camino, which are at the end). Look up the place you want to start, and you'll find a description of how to get there. General information about booking trains, buses and flights as well as useful websites is in **Booking travel online** (Page 30).

Departure times given are subject to change. Please check on the company's website for your travel dates.

The Spanish for *Bus Station* is *Estación de Autobuses* and *Train Station* is *Estación de Tren* although the word *Ferrocarril* / *Railway* is also used.

Students and people under 26 often qualify for discounts on train and bus tickets. When booking online look out for Spanish *estudiante* or French *étudiant*. When travelling, you will need to have proof of your age and / or a student card. Often a national student ID won't be enough; you'll need an internationally recognised one. Ask your Students Union or college for more details.