



Boots on the Ground

In mid-May we took an early flight from Edinburgh to Madrid, ate some lunch there, and then a train from the Chamartin station to Sarria in Galicia that afternoon. The next morning at 7am the small town lay quiet in a cold blanket of fog, and we set off on the Camino de Santiago.

Our motivation, my daughter Peggy-Nan and I, for walking the Camino together was mixed up in family history, just as much as the possible routes and starting points of the walk itself are often obscure and dispersed across the political geography of Europe. There is a web of walking routes spread across the Iberian Peninsula that make up the Camino – or rather, the Caminos. The most commonly used path by pilgrims is the one coming over from the east, the Camino Francès, over the Pyrenees from St Jean Pied-du-Port in France. That one could typically take a month or so travel. The oldest route, sometimes said to be the original one, is the Camino Primitivo – from Oviedo in North West Spain. You can also travel more or less directly North on the Camino Portugues, coming up in a line from Lisbon, Coimbra and Porto; on the Camino del Norte, passing along the north coast from the east through the Basque country and the royal city of San Sebastian; or from A Coruña, on the Camino Ingles. In fact, the only shared feature in the many possible routes is the destination – Santiago de Compostela – and the shrine to St James in the Cathedral there, where his bones are kept.

Nor is there any set distance to be travelled, no official or regulatory designation of beginning points or measured distances that must be covered each day – you can walk from Ukraine, Lithuania, Norway and Croatia and further still. In order for a pilgrimage to be recognised and certifiable by the Church, however, there is a minimum distance of at least 100km to be covered by foot. As such, our setting out from Sarria would rightly appear to be merely a random or arbitrary selection of base for the route. The town lies 113km from Santiago, almost directly east on the Camino Francès. It might not be fair though, to say that the choice signalled a lack of dedication on our part. – that we elected for the shortest option. In truth, it was an *inherited* decision to do so,