

The Way of St. James:

One of the Oldest and Most Prominent Pilgrimages



Over the centuries, a network of pilgrimage routes emerged upon which Europeans walked from their homes to the shrine of St. James in Spain. These thousand-year-old pilgrimage routes became known as the Way of St. James (or, the Camino de Santiago in Spanish).

Although the Way of St. James has many starting points today, the most popular starting point in recent years has been Saint Jean-Pied-de Port in southwestern France. From this starting point, called the French Way, the pilgrimage route is 500 miles long to the shrine of St. James in northwestern Spain. This route, if walked entirely, takes “pilgrims” (or peregrinos) at least 35 days to complete. Although most pilgrims embark upon the Way of St. James on foot, some choose to complete sections of the pilgrimage on bicycle or horseback. During the journey, travelers are given a “Pilgrim’s Passport,” which they get stamped at designated areas along the routes as evidence that they’ve completed certain portions of the trip. Travelers also have access along the Way to structures built over the centuries to accommodate their needs, including hotels, hospitals, churches, monasteries, and bridges.

The pilgrimage ends upon arrival at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. Inside this ancient Cathedral, the pilgrims can obtain a certificate of accomplishment known as a Compostela, visit the supposed tomb of St. James the Greater, and attend a Pilgrim’s Mass.

In recent years, hundreds of thousands of Christians and non-Christians have walked the Way of St. James alone or in organized groups, for religious or non-religious reasons. The Way of St. James has been recognized as one of the most prominent Christian pilgrimage sites in history, comparable in importance to Jerusalem and Rome. In 1993, UNESCO designated the Way of St. James pilgrimage routes as a World Heritage Site.

For more information on the Way of St. James pilgrimage, visit the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela’s website. For a family-friendly, PG-13 movie filmed on location along the Way of St. James and starring Martin Sheen, check out *The Way* (2011).

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