

Walk the Camino de Santiago



Highlights

On this one week guided walking holiday you'll trek along the ancient pilgrimage route of the Camino de Santiago hear Gregorian chants in hidden-away monasteries and may even clap eyes on the Holy Grail. Comfy accommodation, great food and a knowledgeable tour guide are all part of the package too.

One thousand years ago the Camino de Santiago was a different scene than it is today. Scores of pilgrims trekked its paths to the tomb of St James in Santiago de Compostela, but now, aside from high summer, this part of Spain remains well under the tourist radar. It's in the heart of the Pyrenees so it goes without saying, the scenery is spectacular – and because you've got a central base in Berdún – you've got great access to some of the area's most striking settings. What's more, your guides knows this part of Spain like the back of their hands, so you'll be heading down little-trodden walkways and picnicking in spots only the locals know about.

One of the best ways to get to know a place is to get out and walk around – and that's exactly what you'll be doing on this holiday. Days are spent trekking in some of Spain's most striking countryside – the area around the Camino de Santiago. You'll see limestone gorges carved deep into the Pyrenees, follow ancient pilgrimage routes and Roman roads, and enjoy picnic lunches in countryside that's home to birds of prey and all manner of Alpine flowers. You'll also see Spain's first ever cathedral in Jaca, the Holy Grail at the San Juan de la Pena monastery, and stone circles and dolmens on your way through the Hecho Valley. But perhaps the most magical moment comes towards the end of the week – when Gregorian chants fill the air at the Leyre monastery.

Is it for me?

You don't need to be super-fit for this holiday, though you do need a certain amount of stamina as you'll be walking between 15-25 kilometres a day. Most of the walks are downhill so it's not too arduous. As it's a group holiday and the minimum number per group is four people, it's best if you like spending lots of time with other people – not only will you be walking during the day together, you'll also be eating together in the evening.

Accommodation

You'll be staying in Casa Sarasa – a comfy home-from-home with lovely en-suite rooms overlooking the garden and out across fields. It's based in Berdún so it makes a great central place for walking holidays in this region.

In terms of food, everything's included. Breakfast is served at the casa, while lunch is a picnic affair, and dinner is in a local restaurant which specializes in Aragonese meals.

Itinerary

B = Breakfast L = Lunch D = Dinner

DAY 1 Casa Sarasa, Berdún D

Arrival. Transfer from Biarritz to Casa Sarasa in Berdún.

DAY 2 Somport to Villanua B L D

Following the Camino de Santiago from the French - Spanish border at Somport (1640m) to the village of Villanua

Prices from

995 GBP (8 days) per person

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(953m) the walk follows the Rio Aragón on a path through alpine pasture, woods and fields. After the walk we make a trip to see the ancient church of San Adrian.

Highlights:

The Hospital de Santa Cristina - one of the most famous pilgrim hostels of the middle ages is now a ruin (being excavated) in the high pastures just below the Somport pass.

Canfranc International Railway Station - built in the 1920's to serve the rail tunnel to France. An amazing Belle Epoque building in alpine scenery!

Romanesque pilgrim bridges over the beautiful Rio Aragón.

San Adrián Church hidden in a beautiful valley this Lombard/Romanesque building founded in the late 900's was once an important monastery church and was the base of the earliest aragonese bishopric at the start of the Reconquista (reconquest of Spain from the Moors).

Side trip to Sta María de Iguacel/San Adrian de Borau.

DAY 3 Castiello to Jaca B L D

The Camino follows the drovers road (cabañera) from Castiello on a short and picturesque walk (7.5km) to Jaca, the first large town medieval pilgrims would have come to when walking into Spain. A bustling provincial town, Jaca has a magnificent Romanesque cathedral and the Ciudadela fortress started by Philip the second in 1595 and built with an impregnable star shaped design.

After having a good look around Jaca we make an optional walk to Peña Oroel - the mountain to the south which dominates Jaca and has been a place of magic and worship since before the Romans came to Spain.

Highlights:

A pretty and easy 7.5km walk approaching Jaca along the drovers/pilgrim road.

Jaca Cathedral The first cathedral built in Spain. Founded in 1058 by Sancho, king of Aragón and Navarre. This pilgrim church was built under the influence of the Benedictine monastery of Cluny in France. The church has many wonderful sculptures (capitals and timpana) made by the Maestro de Jaca between 1065 and 1080. In the cloister, there is a superb museum with Romanesque frescoes and sculptures from hermitages and churches in the Jaca area.

Peña Oroel the sacred mountain. This is a beautiful walk to the top of the mountain dominating Jaca to the South. There are magnificent 360° views over the surrounding mountains and valleys and the walk to the top takes us through superb silver fir and beech forest. Peña Oroel has always been a sacred spot and we visit the cave/hermitage of the Virgen de la Cueva where the local people of the area venerate the Virgin Mary with a Romeria (pilgrimage) every May as they have done for over 1000 years and possibly well before when the cave was most likely a place of pagan worship.

DAY 4 The Monastery of San Juan de La Peña B L D

A fascinating walk on a rarely trodden path that once would have been taken by medieval pilgrims as a detour from the main Camino path to see the holy relics (including the Holy Grail) at the monastery of San Juan de La Peña. Oak forest, views of Pyrenees Atarés traditional rooves Losa.

Highlights:

A walk in a magical landscape, unchanged since the middle ages, with ancient oak forest, honey coloured cliffs where vultures nest and, at the top of the Peña (hill/mountain), views for miles north and south.

The Monastery of San Juan de La Peña. The monks of San Juan knew how to pick a good spot for their monastery. The earlier monastery founded in the early 1000's nestles under an overhang in the cliffs by a holy well and has an open air cloister with fantastic Romanesque, sculpted capitals. The newer Baroque monastery set in meadows at the top of La Peña was built after a disastrous fire destroyed most of the first monastery. San Juan de la Peña was founded and sponsored by the kings of Aragón and many of them are buried here in the Royal Mausoleum. The monastery was one of the richest in Aragón and was a centre for painting and the arts during the middle ages. Museum.

DAY 5 The Camino de Santiago down the Hecho Valley B L D

Today's walk is along another branch of the Camino de Santiago which comes into Spain over the Col de Pau and along the Roman road down the Hecho Valley - one of the most beautiful valleys in the Pyrenees.

Highlights:

The walk in beautiful alpine scenery follows the course of the Roman road built by Caesar Augustus 2000 years ago.

Neolithic and early Bronze age dolmens and stone circles dated at 4 - 5000 years old are testimony to the first inhabitants of the valley who would have spent the summers here with their flocks.

Alpine flowers and birds of prey. The Hecho Valley is unrivalled for its huge variety of flora and fauna. We will see many birds of prey soaring above us, including the magnificent Lammergeier the 'Condor of the Pyrenees', the rarest of the vulture family with an 8 feet wingspan. The alpine meadows are studded with many alpine flowers, orchids especially, in early summer.

The Boca del Infierno gorge is really impressive with limestone pinnacles towering above the best preserved part of the Roman Road.

We end the walk at the lovely village of Siresa where we visit the Monastery church of San Pedro de Siresa. The monastery was founded by Charlemagne in the late 800's when the valley was a Frankish foothold in a country mostly controlled by the Moors. The church itself dates from the 1100's and is a beautiful Romanesque construction with some exceptional and very rare medieval sculptures.

La Mina - Hecho. Siresa. Dolmens.

DAY 6 On the Camino from Hecho to Biniés past the Hermitage of the Eleven Thousand Virgins B L D
Today's walk from Hecho to Biniés follows the Hecho branch of the Camino up and over the Sierra de Los Dos Rios to descend to Biniés in the Veral/Ansó Valley. The walk is through open mixed, mountain woodland and fields and descends on a dramatic path above the amazing Biniés Gorge (Foz de Biniés). At 25 km this is the longest walk of the week with a 425m ascent.

Highlights:

A fascinating route taking you back in time. These hills are nowadays rarely visited but until recently were used as winter farms by the people of Hecho. We'll see the old farms and fields and the ruins of a Romanesque monastery called the Hermitage of the Eleven Thousand Virgins!

Fabulous views from the Sierra de Los Dos Rios and down into the Biniés Gorge.

Birds and wildlife are fascinating in this virtually deserted corner of the Pyrenees. We often see wild boar, many birds of prey soaring above us and we'll look down on the Griffon Vultures in their nests in the Biniés Gorge.

The Biniés Gorge is a majestic landscape of high cliffs carved out by the River Veral. At the end of the gorge lies the village of the same name with its traditional houses and castle dominating the entrance to the valley.

DAY 7 The Camino from La Virgen de La Peña to Escó B L D

The final walk of the trip starts at the Ermita de La Virgen de La Peña - a chapel dramatically perched on a cliff edge 600m above the Escá Valley and follows a dramatic limestone gorge out of the High Pyrenees and into the gentler terrain of the Canal de Berdún - for millenia the main east-west route for Celts, Romans, Moors and, of course, for pilgrims on their way to Santiago. The last part of the walk follows ancient walled pathways through abandoned fields to the fascinating abandoned village of Escó. We continue by car to the Leyre monastery to hear Gregorian chants sung by the monks in the beautiful Romanesque monastery church. A magical finale to the week.

Highlights:

The Hermitage of La Virgen de La Peña. Perched on a cliff edge 650m above the Escá Valley, this chapel is still used by the Cofradia (brotherhood) de La Virgen. The local villages have long disputed the ownership of the Ermita and there are stories from the middle ages of fights and killings over ownership. These places were very important!

We walk the Sigües Gorge along the old path a few hundred metres above the river. There are many vulture nests, huge stands of box trees, high cliffs and gorgeous vistas over the valley.

Perhaps the most authentic, untouched part of the Camino. On the last part of the walk it is easy to imagine that you are back in the middle ages as there is nothing to suggest the 21st Century. Ancient walled tracks through farmland take us on a gentle route to the abandoned village of Escó which is a mysterious and fascinating relic of preindustrial Spain.

Gregorian Chants at The Leyre Monastery. Leyre is one of the most important monasteries of Northern Spain and has a Romanesque church with a stunning doorway and a unique Crypt dating from the 9th Century. Each evening the monks practice Gregorian chants/plainsong in the church and it is a moving experience to hear sacred music which has been sung here since the Camino de Santiago was first trodden by pilgrims in the 11th Century.

DAY 8 Transfer B

Transfer to Biarritz Airport for those that require it.

Details

Getting there

Flying from the UK...

Fly to Biarritz Airport (BIQ) in France, near to the border with Spain.

-From the South East: Ryanair flies frequently throughout the week from London Stansted to Biarritz.

-From the Midlands: Air France flies daily from Birmingham International Airport to Biarritz.

Getting to Berdún...

You will be met at Biarritz airport. The provider arranges transfers to coincide with the arrival of Ryanair flight FR372 from Stansted. If you are flying from a different location you need to be at Biarritz at 15.00 when you will be met and transferred to Berdún.

Price includes

Accommodation, in-country transport, all meals and a tour guide.

Price details

Price based on fixed departure. Single supplement £70. Minimum group size 4.

When is best

April, June, September and October.

Comfort level

Reasonably comfortable (Inns, B&Bs, luxury camping etc.)

Experience required

A reasonable level of fitness and interest is all that is needed

Reviews (2)

Reviews of this experience

“ The trip was very well organised, and the accommodation was excellent. What really makes a trip like this special is that you can walk off the beaten track and our guide Richard was very knowledgeable so we learnt a lot about the local history, flora and fauna. Nothing was too much trouble for Richard or our hosts Peter and Melanie and that made the holiday really enjoyable. I would definitely recommend this trip. ”

Pat reviewing Walk the Camino de Santiago

“ I would be happy to recommend this holiday to anyone! Richard, the guide, was extremely knowledgeable and it was a delight to go walking with him, Snippets of information about the geology, history, architecture, flora and wildlife added extra interest to every walk we went on. The walks were well planned out in terms of the interests we had expressed and our walking ability. One member of the group was injured and Richard, along with our hosts at Casa Sarasa, made individual arrangements so that she could still join us at different stages of the walks. They also adapted a couple of days because of poor weather but managed this in such a way as to still provide excellent and varied walking experiences.

We stayed at Casa Sarasa which again exceeded our expectations. Peter and Melanie had exactly the right balance between treating us as friends in their home and customers. We could not have been more welcomed or better looked after. Our daily picnics were a triumph and different every day.

Organisationally everything went like clockwork; Richard and Peter made the planning look effortless a sure sign that in actual fact a lot of thought had gone into it!

I would score this holiday a 5 and we hope to book again. (Probably 2012 as we have already booked a 2011 walking holiday through Tourdust) We would again want to stay at Casa Sarasa and have Richard as our tour guide, we would include some of the other activities on offer, canoeing, riding etc and we would go a bit later in May hoping for warmer weather! ”

Sian reviewing Walk the Camino de Santiago