

# THE HUMAN SIDE



## Off the Beaten Path

Sometimes, the most important learning occurs outside of the classroom.

By Brooke Broadbent

It's not often that we can take a break from our responsibilities and spend three weeks in nature carrying all of our possessions on our backs. But that's exactly what I did last year on the Camino de Santiago. When I started my journey, I was an e-learning consultant with years of steady work developing plans and policies for the Canadian federal government under my belt. By the time I ended my journey on the Camino, I knew I would be taking a different path. But more

about that later. I enjoyed the beautiful countryside and met people from around the world. I also learned a great deal about myself. And it changed my life.

The Camino, as many call it, is a 1000-year-old trail across northern Spain. At the height of its popularity in medieval times, about half a million people walked it a year. The destination was a church in Santiago de Compostela, where the remains of Saint James are believed to be stored. Their goal was absolution from

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their sins; the walk was a path to heaven. I've dreamed of hiking there ever since I read about Shirley MacLaine's experience on the Camino. It seemed so mystical, so extraordinary, that it captured my imagination. But at the same time, I had no idea if I was capable of walking day after day.

These days, people walk the Camino de Santiago for many reasons: to exercise, commune with nature, meet new and interesting people, celebrate their spirituality, or be alone. Many of the people I met started as hikers and ended as pilgrims, learning much more about themselves than they could have imagined.

Each day, we walked 12 to 20 miles through the countryside. We marveled at the scenery and enjoyed swapping our life stories with people from around the world. We stayed in hostels along the way and consumed tasty meals in local restaurants. It was a reasonably priced, somewhat exotic holiday in a foreign land.

As I continued on the journey, however, I began to understand that it wasn't just a vacation from work and responsibilities; it was the beginning of a personal transformation. The more that I hiked, the more I became a modern-day pilgrim on the path to self-discovery. I learned the importance of believing in myself and trusting in others, and I learned to cope with my fears.

My biggest concern was about my feet. A colleague and former nurse had warned me that blisters and infection could permanently damage them. I also feared that there wouldn't be a place to sleep at the end of a long day. Fellow hikers lining up for beds an hour before hostels opened confirmed my fear that the supply was limited. But no matter how sore and swollen my feet were, they always managed to heal themselves from hot spots and blisters. And each night, there was a bed waiting for me in the next town. Day by day, my faith in my ability to finish grew. I learned to discount fear and live in the moment.

Devoting myself to the challenge of the Camino and succeeding gave me a new



sense of self. I have a greater appreciation of my physical strength and new connection with my self-confidence. I learned about the importance of community through walking, talking, and eating with new friends. (I still keep in touch with a few of the people I met.) And by spending so much time outdoors, I've become a calmer person. I now take my cues from nature, which showed me how to ride out storms and trust that tomorrow is another day. I've found the inner strength to stay confident during times of crisis.

I walked less than half of the entire Camino, a total of more than 200 miles, in three weeks. I came away with calluses in new places, a stronger back, two inches off my waist, and, even better, new views of the world, myself, and my purpose.

When we become totally responsible for our decisions, personal awareness increases. The Camino experience forced me to see myself under a microscope, and I quickly discovered what works and what doesn't for me. The lessons I learned on the path will always be with me. I'll remember how I overcame physical challenges, dealt with my fear, and made new friends. As a



Left, the church in Santiago de Compostela.  
Above, Broadbent on the Camino.

result, I've identified a new more compatible path that will take me to what I need for myself and have a better life.

After the Camino, I found it increasingly difficult to work in the bureaucratic environment of the government. So, I started giving life coaching advice to my colleagues and organizing informal weekly peer coaching sessions. I wanted to help people progress in their spiritual journeys. Finally, I decided to change my work and devote myself entirely to helping others find the same peace and sense of purpose that I found on the Camino. Now, I'm a personal coach, and I write and speak about my pilgrimage and personal growth.

We can all benefit from a learning experience like that of the Camino—a chance to connect with ourselves and our values, and to reflect on our direction in life and work. It teaches us to stop listening to negative internal voices and start living and leading from the heart. When we are self-aware and self-confident, we smile more often and laugh a little longer. And we believe that we are capable of anything.

**Brooke Broadbent** is a writer and coach based in Ottawa, Canada; [www.brookebroadbent.com](http://www.brookebroadbent.com), [bbroadbent@sympatico.ca](mailto:bbroadbent@sympatico.ca).

Send submissions to **Human Side**, T+D, 1640 King Street, Box 1443, Alexandria, VA 22313-2043; [jrossi@astd.org](mailto:jrossi@astd.org).