

Camino de Santiago

QUESTION: What does Te Wahipounamu (South West New Zealand) have in common with the Camino de Santiago in Spain and France?

ANSWER: They are both on the World Heritage List, forming part of the cultural and natural heritage which the World Heritage Committee considers as having outstanding universal value. Te Wahipounamu was listed in 1990 and the Route of Santiago de Compostela in 1993.

Historical background & context:

The **Camino de Santiago** (Spanish) or **Saint James Way** (English) is a network of Christian pilgrimage routes in France and Spain which have been in existence since approximately **813**. Some historical sources indicate a hermit by the name of Pelayo (Pelagius) who saw lights or a bright star shining over a cave in the wooded countryside in the region of Galicia (North Western Spain). That location eventually became the fabulously enticing and exquisitely beautiful city of **Santiago de Compostela**.

In **1985** the old city of Santiago de Compostela was placed on the **World Heritage List** because of its historical and religious significance dating back some 1,200 years. The Muslims, who had invaded Visigoth Spain in **711**, then reached **Santiago de Compostela** in **997** and destroyed it. The city was completely rebuilt in the 11th century and much embellished over the centuries with its Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque buildings. Today, the original old town of Santiago demonstrates that it is one of the world's most beautifully built environments. The oldest buildings are grouped around the tomb of **St James** or **Santiago**, located within the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, and at the main entrance the exquisite **Pórtico de la Gloria** (western façade of this massive cathedral: considered a masterpiece of late twelfth-century architectural design and sculpture).

Back to **813** and a common narrative evolved: this hermit who discovered the long lost tomb, took the local bishop from Iria Favia (today: the modern city on the site of Iria Flava is called Padrón) to inspect some bones found in the cave, including some parchment and eventually Bishop Teodomiro authenticated the bones as those belonging to the **Apostle James**, who was one of Christ's original disciples. At the time, it was reported that the head was severed from the body.

From that moment, word spread very quickly, not only in that part of Europe but throughout Western Europe and pilgrims and construction grew apace, with successive buildings, eventually giving way to the incredibly beautiful and imposing Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The Santiago cathedral is now said to contain the bones or relics of the Apostle Saint James.

Finding and authenticating the Apostle's remains in the remote north western region in the early 9th century was not simply a historical coincidence when northern Spain formally commenced the reconquest against the 711 Muslim invasion and control of nearly the whole of the Iberian peninsular. In a word, there was an overwhelming imperative to have a unifying (religious) symbol on behalf all the disparate kingdoms and political groupings still arguing and fighting amongst themselves (despite all being Christians), rather than being united against their natural, historical and religious foes (the various Caliphates – the Muslim states of Spain). It can be argued with evidence, that these discovered remains of the martyred Santiago did more for Spanish unity than another other person.

James (later Saint James) was one of the Twelve Apostles. According to religious dogma, James (Santiago in Spanish) reached Spain after the death of Jesus Christ and sought to convert the disparate groups living on the Iberian Peninsula (today Portugal and Spain) to Christianity by teaching the gospel.

On returning to Jerusalem in AD/CE 44 he was beheaded by King Herod and according to legend and/or myth was taken back to Spain in a stone boat in record time, with angelic assistance and his body buried where the city of Santiago de Compostela is now located and his remains lost and/or forgotten for nearly 800 years.

Saint James (Santiago in Spanish) became Spain's patron saint and some 800 years after his death was given an inspirational role by the various Christian kings and queens of the Iberian peninsula over a 600 year period from about AD/CE 900 to 1st January, 1492 when the last Arab bastion on Spanish soil fell. Saint James inspired and metaphorically guided them in their constant battles against Muslim occupation of Spain when a combined Arab and Berber force from northern Africa crossed the Strait of Gibraltar to occupy the Iberian Peninsula in 711.

The Middle Ages in Spain was essentially a period of the Reconquest or **Reconquista** of Catholic Spain over an Arab/Muslim Spain lasting nearly 700 years and finally accomplished in 1492. The pilgrimage to the grave of Spain's Patron Saint had become the most popular pilgrimage for all European Catholics, especially in the 11th and 12th centuries. Numbers of pilgrims during this heyday were estimated to be around 500,000 pilgrims per year. Many pilgrims for penitential reasons undertook the Pilgrimage as a form of punishment, metered out by the Church to wrongdoers. Other motives for undertaking the Pilgrimage were not too dissimilar to today's motives for personal fulfilment, spiritual guidance, mixed with fun and pleasure, at the same time seeking their greatest personal adventure they could legally, morally and religiously undertake. The pilgrimage to Santiago became more popular for more people than going on pilgrimage to either Jerusalem or Rome.

Today's Camino de Santiago:

In today's context: anyone can become a bona fide "pilgrim" provided they obtain a pilgrim passport from one of the many volunteer organisations supporting the vibrant pilgrim routes located around the world or at the first refuge they arrive at the end of the first day. In the English speaking world, the best known is the **Confraternity of St James**. The pilgrim's passport is called in its Spanish name: a «**credencial**».

To have a **credencial**, legitimately entitles you to stay in refuges or albergues and basically carry everything on your backs. Many of these refuges are manned by volunteers from around the world including a very small number of Australians and New Zealanders, who themselves were once pilgrims.

Unlike **DOC** (New Zealand's **Department of Conservation**) huts costing trampers or trekkers NZ\$40.00 per night, per person on the Kepler or Milford Track (classified as **Great Walks**), the pilgrim/trekker invariably does NOT pay more than NZ\$10 to NZ\$12 per night for a bed AND a hot shower and sometimes free food and drinks. Sometimes you need only make a "donation" (and these donations average out between 2 to 3 Euros per night – approximately NZ\$4 or NZ\$5). You can do your own cooking in many refugios/albergues or go out "hunting and gathering" and not pay more than NZ \$15.00 for often a most memorable three course meal including wine, called a «**menú del peregrino**» (a set pilgrim's meal).

In terms of value for money and comparing the costs incurred in tramping through New Zealand's wilderness areas, the pilgrimage routes must be **THE BEST VALUE IN THE WORLD**. No place on Earth allows you such a level of comfort, security, hygiene, quality inclusions such as Internet, washing facilities, emotional support, massages and rest after doing 20, 30 or 40 km per day, and available on all the pilgrimage routes in France and Spain.

Today, you do NOT need to be religious, Catholic or indeed Christian to partake in this most unique, very long distance walk. Some modern day pilgrims are orthodox Jews (but not in great numbers) who walk with the traditional skullcap (yarmulka) on their heads.

In fact, if you begin in one of the four different locations in France, this pilgrimage is the longest walking track in the world: it dwarfs the **82 km Heapy Track** in the Kahurangi National Park. For example, Le Puy en Velay (France) to Santiago (Spain) is 1,500 km whereas the **Heapy Track**, designated as NZ's longest **Great Walk** takes 4 to 6 days to maybe New Zealand's most challenging track the **Dusky (84 km)** in Fiordland. From the Pyrenees separating France from Spain, pilgrims are on the track for at least 30 to 35 days walking 800 kilometres, whereas the **Dusky** requires a little over 8 days. That length in New Zealand is considered very long even for the isolated World Heritage South West corner. Food supplies invariably have to be carried on one's back in excessively overweighted backpacks and last for more than a week. On Stewart Island you can tramp 125 km for 10 to 12 days around the island, but so few trampers do that.

How many people complete the Camino and what are their motives?

Reliable statistics are collected by the Archbishop's pilgrimage office in Santiago de Compostela, which decides whether the pilgrim/walker/trekker gets the **Compostela** (certificate) or another certificate simply testifying to having done the pilgrimage route.

Santiago de Compostela is the capital city of the autonomous community (political and social region) called **Galicia** in far north-western Spain and very far away from the traditional tourist locations of Spain such as the Costa del Sol and cities like Barcelona and Seville.

The **World Tourism Organisation** (UNWTO) figures place Spain after France (79 million visitors) as the most visited country on earth, with nearly 59 million visitors in 2006 (latest figures). New Zealand in 2006 had 2,409,000 international visitors to Australia's 5,064,000. It is a truism to say that the world's leading tourism destinations are still the locations which have the sun and the sea.

The **Camino de Santiago** is the total antithesis of the sun and the sea tourism destinations. Travel & tourism is basically looking outwards; whereas pilgrimage is looking inwards and multiple journeys are undertaken by the pilgrim/walker.

In 2007 (which is the latest year to have collated all the statistics) there were over one hundred and fourteen thousand (114,000) registered pilgrims. **38%** indicated religious reasons for undertaking the pilgrimage; **53%** said they were motivated for «spiritual reasons» (in other words, not a formal religious affiliation) and just under **10%** for non-religious reasons.

Females were 41% and males 59% with gender parity increasing.

Spain had the majority of pilgrims with 55,000. The next group were Germans with nearly 14,000 Italians (10,000) and French (7,000). That's understandable, propinquity or geographical closeness counts: they are all in Europe and part of the European Union. Europe's post War World Two walking culture encourages and promotes their unique heritage and therefore these fabulously exciting European pilgrimage walks are well known throughout Europe.

In the English speaking world there were 2,229 from the USA; 1,696 from the UK; Australia had 785 and New Zealand had 195 registered and successfully completed pilgrims.

From the Antipodes (New Zealand and Australia) the trend is very clear: it is increasing significantly from a low basis over the last 10 years.

New Zealand's population is 4 million plus and Australia's 21 million. The ratio is roughly 1 to 5 and that matches very closely the ratio differences between Kiwi and Australian pilgrims.

However, if we analyse the respective populations of the USA (300 million) with NZ's (4 million) the population ratio is 75 to 1. Therefore, on a pro rata basis, New Zealanders in pilgrim numbers, simply swamp the Americans: Proportionately, American pilgrims would have to be over 10,000 in number to equal their Kiwi counterparts. And despite the fact the USA has a far greater catholic tradition than NZ; the latter having Presbyterian and Anglican traditions.

What does all this mean?

It proves that the Kiwi who leaves his homeland for a period of time is adventurous, an intrepid traveller to the four corners of the globe: no place on earth is too far away; too difficult or too different.

It is a given that New Zealanders are world-renowned for their love of the outdoors and doing extraordinary physical feats around the world.

And with the **Camino**, they have discovered in small numbers at present, the very best and the most unique walk in world. Absolutely nothing compares with these different Camino pilgrim routes which are like very fine spider webs crisscrossing France and Spain and all ending at its epicentre in North Western Spain - in Santiago de Compostela.

The vast majority of Kiwi pilgrims begin their Camino on the most popular pilgrim route called **el Camino Francés** (the French Route) which begins in the foothills of the Pyrenees on the French side, at a small town called: **Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port (SJPdP)** (population 1,500) which is approximately 800 km from Santiago de Compostela.

SJPdP is the town that is visited by 70% of all pilgrims starting elsewhere in France or commencing their pilgrimage.

The Pilgrimage office not only advises the pilgrim when and how to cross the Pyrenees (in bad weather it can and is treacherous and sometimes deadly) into Spain but also collects very reliable statistics.

We know exactly how many Kiwis go through **SJPdP**. In **2007, 117 Kiwis** registered at this Pilgrimage Office, compared to **83** in **2006**. That is a huge jump. Australians were 442 in 2006 and 490 in 2007. In 2005, there were **78** New Zealanders registered and 344 from Australia. What is interesting, the proportion remains roughly 1 to 5 according to the population differences between the two countries – although on balance there are proportionally more Kiwis.

At **SJPdP**, this pilgrimage office is completely staffed by volunteers and called: **Au Coeur du Chemin**. They offer all pilgrims a scallop shell with a string to identify them as bona fide pilgrims.

Given Australia's population is 5 times bigger than New Zealand's; the numbers here are close to being in direct proportion with their respective populations. A truism: overseas: Kiwis & Aussies have much more in common than simply being divided by the Tasman Sea and being sporting rivals and the mutual object of countless barbs and jokes.

The writer invariably saw Kiwis and Aussies walk the Camino together in order to give each other emotional and other support. This tradition of Australians and Kiwis mutually supporting each other in unfamiliar and foreign environments (and sometimes hostile) commenced in April 1915.

Ironically, if New Zealand has the "finest walk" (the Milford) in the world; these magical long distance walks in Western Europe offer all (pilgrims and walkers alike) the «best» value in the world. Americans would say: you get more bangs for your bucks.

Final words and a word of caution:

Here, the writer needs to declare his professional interest: He is a specialist French and Spanish language teacher for senior high school students and adults. Kiwis should not undertake the **Camino** without having linguistically prepared themselves by undertaking the study of the Spanish language for at least 12 full months. The writer, whilst walking the **Camino** observed Kiwis (and fellow Australians) being linguistically challenged and many of those were suffering from the effects of mono-lingualism (i.e. frustration, inability to get the appropriate information at the appropriate time, isolation and disempowerment). It is sometimes called cultural shock.

English is now the world's **lingua franca**, but that doesn't follow that on the **Camino** (in Spain) locals and many fellow pilgrims know or understand the English language. On the other hand, if Kiwi pilgrims have tramped extensively their two islands, then they are indubitably physically, technically and emotionally prepared for all sorts of weather and walking conditions the Camino can throw at them at any time of the year, anywhere on the Camino.

Using languages, making linguistic connections and moving between cultures would add inestimably to the Kiwi experience on the **Camino** and therefore change them for ever.