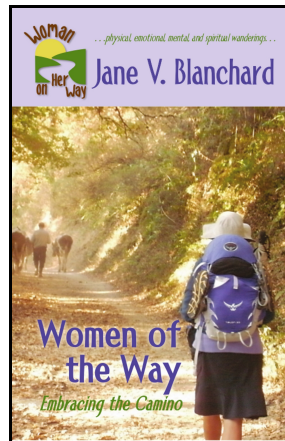


Sample Chapter

Women of the Way: Embracing the Camino

By Jane V. Blanchard



Pyrenees

"Every mountain top is within reach if you just keep climbing." ~ Barry Finlay

The Pyrenees are a range of mountains that form the border between France and Spain. According to legend, Pyrene was a virginal princess who was raped by drunken Hercules. She subsequently gave birth to a serpent and ran away to the woods crying. Her sobs attracted wild beasts that then attacked and killed her. When the sobered Hercules found her remains, he mournfully screamed from the mountaintops, "Pyrene!" and the rocky pinnacles echoed back "Pyrene!" Since then, the mountains have retained the wept-over name.

Most Spaniards start the Camino in Roncesvalles, while other nationalities start in St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, France. From France there are two routes: one over the mountain (Route Napoléon) and the other through "The Valley of Charlemagne." Dennis and I decide to see both the Pyrenees and the valley. Since it is a long and steep climb out of France, we decide to climb over the Pyrenees from Roncesvalles, which is already at 900 meters (2952 feet) above sea level, and return through the valley the next day.

Leaving Roncesvalles that morning, we have difficulty finding the trailhead. Our guidebook is unclear about where the trail starts because it is written for pilgrims descending into Roncesvalles, not for those leaving from it. We find a path in the beech woods leading up the mountain, but it does not look well traveled. We ask directions; one pilgrim says he came down that path the previous night. A French pilgrim tells us that the path we are contemplating is the hard way up the mountain and that a much

easier access starts behind the abbey. Figuring that "the easier route" is the one through the valley, we proceed to the woods and unceremoniously take our first step on the Camino.

This is our first mistake. Our second mistake is not taking sufficient water and food for that day's ten-hour hike. Our third mistake is not understanding that the towns in this area have different names, depending on the language. The Spanish Roncesvalles is Roncevaux in French and Orreaga in Basque. Since the guidebook names do not match the names on the signposts, we are often unsure of where we are.

Immediately the woodsy path becomes arduous, with a steep ascent. Here and there, it seems as if our noses touch the ground. Dennis estimates that we are climbing at a 35° to 45° angle. He uses his pole to help with the precipitous slope. I find it difficult to maintain a stride with poles and hike without them. Soon I am panting, my chest heaving as I gasp for breath. I place each step with intention, and, at times, use my hands to pull me up the mountain. Under the guise of looking at the view, I stop often to catch my breath. My nonchalant breaks do not fool Dennis; he knows that I cannot continue at the rapid pace I set for myself and encourages me to slow down. At this slower gait, I notice the individual stones, the shape of the leaves, and the clarity of the cerulean sky. The slower I go, the more I notice. I am not thinking of reaching the top or getting to the other side; I am happy doing what I am doing, climbing the Pyrenees on a sunny September day. As I get into my rhythm, the effort diminishes. It is still a difficult climb, but I am no longer gulping air or working as hard. As this transition happens, a peace flows into me. I am actually having fun!

Once above the tree line, we are exposed to the hot September sun. Fortunately a light breeze keeps the perspiration in check. Several hours later, we reach the highest point on the high route, the Collado Lepoeder at 1430 meters (4961 feet). Looking back we can see Roncesvalles below us and realize that there are two ascents from the town: the steep one we have just climbed and a longer one through Puerto de Ibañeta (the Roncevaux Pass), a mountain pass where both the Route Napoléon and the lower route join. According to the signpost, the way we just came is called "*Camino de fuertes pendientes*" (Way of steep slopes). Looking down, we realize that the road behind the abbey would have been an easier climb than the way we came. I am humbled. It is not a matter of misinterpreting the French pilgrim earlier that day, but of second guessing what I thought he meant.

Dennis and I study the signpost, trying to determine which way to go. There are four arms with names that do not match the guidebook. We decide to follow the sign with the scallop shell. Based on the 20.8 kilometers (12.9 miles) distance, we determine that Donibane Garazi must be the Basque name for St-Jean-Pied-de-Port. According to the sign, it is five-and-a-half hours away.

From this high point, the view is breathtaking. The Pyrenees range as far as the horizon and I realize just how immense our planet is, how parochial my life has become, and how much I needed this venture. As I stand upon the mountain with the wind mussing my hair, I do not fret the past or fear the future: I just am.

Everywhere I look, there is beauty. Peaks poke through the clouds, reminding me of frilly Elizabethan collars. A few mountains are green with forest or pastures; most are bare and rocky. Flocks of sheep and

herds of wild horses dot the highland pastures. It is impossible to describe the magnificence and majesty of the Pyrenees.

Apart from signposts at trail crossings and occasional cairns, we see very few markings. Perhaps we miss them because we are hiking the trail in reverse to what is customary. Even without the markings, we do not get lost. Pilgrims walking this path for more than a millennium have etched the Way through the mountains.

It is a hot day; the sun pours down and I consume most of my water. I berate myself for carrying only one bottle, especially since my backpack has a pocket on each side for water containers. I am disappointed when there is no water at the modern stone shelter, Isandorre. I traipse up and down several cols (mountain passes) before arriving parched at the Fontaine de Roland. I guzzle the cold spring water that tastes so fresh, without traces of chemicals or minerals, quenches my thirst, and cools me down.

The pilgrims coming from St-Jean-Pied-de-Port say that there are no other fountains from this point on to France. I see a woman who is walking barefoot. I cannot imagine myself doing that. Sharp cutting rocks, hot asphalt, entangling roots, hay-stubbed fields, animal and human waste are my reasons for not doing so; besides, my feet are too tender. This woman says that she has been walking barefoot for a long time and has developed heavy calluses. She believes that she will have fewer foot problems than those wearing shoes. I wonder if she will be refused admittance to restaurants, stores or churches for not having footwear.

My tank top provides no protection from the cutting backpack straps that have rubbed sores into my upper body. It's too hot to wear a long-sleeve shirt, so I stick a shirt under the straps and across my chest to prevent further abrasion. It looks silly, but is effective. I munch on granola bars, the only food I have, and gulp more water before filling the bottle and continuing the hike.

I know we are on an overall descent, but marvel at how many hills we climb. As I pass the Col de Bentarte, I see a second shelter, Aterbea. This is a low, stony structure built into the mountainside, resembling a sheep shed. I guess it would be inviting to those lost in a storm. On the rocks behind this building is a lammergeier, or bearded vulture. The bearded vulture is Europe's largest and rarest vulture, with a wingspan of up to 2.8 meters (9 feet); we are lucky to see it. I see numerous large birds of prey flying over the mountain: vultures, eagles, and other raptors, but I cannot distinguish one from the other.

Even though there is a cool breeze, I am hot from the exertion. My hair clings to my head, beads of sweat shimmer on my brow. My body is working hard, yet I feel energized, strong, fit. I must be on an endorphin high.

Shortly after this shelter, the mountain path turns into a paved country road. St-Jean-Pied-de-Port is 18 kilometers (11 miles) away. To get there we must descend 1100 meters (3600 feet). Soon we are at the cattle grid (animal barrier) that marks the frontier; I step carefully over the metal grating and into France. Continuing down the road, we walk by the Refuge Auberge Orisson where many hikers end their first day's climb. It does not cross my mind to stop at the inn to ask for water; I am still too new to the pilgrim's ways. From here, the road descends steeply, winding down the mountain and I consider myself

lucky to be walking down rather than climbing up to this point. From this height, I see glimpses of our destination below and the road as it zig-zags into the valley.

The last several kilometers are difficult. Not only are we unaccustomed to walking all day with the backpacks, but we have not eaten enough food to fuel us. Our bodies are stalling, or "bonking." Dennis is more affected by this than I am. How could I have put in all the time and effort in planning the trip, and not plan the first and most arduous day? I am an experienced hiker and should have known that climbing the Pyrenees is no walk in the park. In my haste to start the Camino, I was reckless. I should have asked the café where we ate breakfast to make sandwiches for us. What was I thinking! Why wasn't I thinking? I have been too long enamored with the idea of walking the Camino; I must now push aside my infatuation and start being practical.

Then, the Camino provides. We come into a patch of wild blackberries. Many pilgrims have picked over the lower branches, but Dennis uses his walking stick to lower some of the higher branches and we munch on the succulent berries. This unexpected treat helps energize the last hours of our day's walk.

When we arrive at the old town gate to St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, Dennis sits, spent, while I try to locate the *auberge* (French inn). In front of us is a great looming citadel with a large portal. I do not realize that this is the entrance to the city, and proceed to the train station to ask directions. I then walk back to Dennis and we set off, adding what feels like miles to our walk as we enter the Rue de la Citadelle from the back, climbing old granite steps, and walking uphill on a narrow, cobblestone street lined with red sandstone walls. The inn is located in the heart of the medieval old town, just down the street from the Accueil Saint Jacques, which is the pilgrim's office. We are exhausted. At last, we enter the Auberge du Pelerin.

The inn is pristine, with white walls, dark wood beams, and dark tiled floor. A staircase on the right leads to the second floor dormitories. The dining room is bright and overlooks the terrace. As lovely as it sounds, it does not feel homey. The hosts do not greet us and seem too busy to be friendly. Everything is business.

I soothe my aches and wash the road dust from my body in a steamy-hot shower. When I leave the stall, I notice that the shower water flowed into the bathroom. Embarrassed, I check to see what I did to make this mess, but can see no reason for it. I conclude that there must be cracks in the shower tiles that conduct the water into the room. I find a mop and pail in the corner of the room and sponge up my mess. At this time, I do not know that the mop and pail will become ever-present and the swabbing up of spilled water a nightly routine.

We share a room with Trish, a woman from Canada who arrived that day on the train from Paris. Excited about starting her adventure, she wants to chat, but we are too tired. That night we share supper with Trish and other pilgrims from Ireland, Germany, and France. The hostess offers an aperitif, a half shot of sherry. Dennis and I are in a celebratory mood, having crossed the Pyrenees and completed our first day on the Camino. Everyone except Trish will start their hike in the morning; she will visit the town and await a friend's arrival. Before retiring, I want to check my email, but the French keyboard frustrates me and I go to bed.

The next morning my thigh muscles are screaming and my legs wobble. Trying to get down the stairs to the dining room for breakfast is excruciating. I am hoping that today's "easy" walk will keep the blood flowing and help the thighs recover. I did not drink enough water yesterday to wash out the lactic acid. Today, I promise myself, I will drink more.

Prior to leaving St-Jean-Pied-de-Port, we visit the pilgrim's office to get directions for the lower route. There is information for cycling the lower route, but not much for walking it. Since the Accueil Saint Jacques encourages pilgrims to take the Route Napoleón, they only have a one-page sketch showing the route through the valley. From there, we go to a deli to buy ham-and-cheese sandwiches for a picnic later in the day, then to the local outfitters to buy wool socks for Dennis, because he has forgotten his at home, and then we walk out through the citadel portal and towards the valley route.

We do not get very far. Once outside the gate, there are no markers or signposts indicating the way. We need to ask several people before finding someone who can tell us how to walk to Arnéguy, a small town on the border between France and Spain. Once again, not having a good guidebook or accurate map causes us to walk an extra mile or two.



Camino Waymarkers

We follow the D933, a fast vehicular two-lane road all the way to Arnéguy, missing the path through the beautiful tranquil forest with a bubbling brook. The guidebook explains that there are several footpath options: the Camino, marked with yellow arrows; the French GR 65, one of the European network of long-distance trails, but it does not describe the markings (a blaze consisting of a white stripe over a red stripe); and new blue and yellow posts. How can we go wrong with three different markers? Dennis, having recently hiked the Appalachian Trail in the US, is accustomed to looking for blazes and sees several GR markings, but, without an accurate guidebook, he is unable to interpret their meaning. I do not see any markings, either because I am counting on Dennis to find the path, I am distracted, or because they are not there. Eventually, we would learn to look for a variety of trail markings. Some, like the yellow arrow, remain constant throughout the Camino; others are specific to a region.

In Arnéguy, I ask a policeman for directions, specifically inquiring about the Camino, which he does not know about. I do not think to ask about the "Chemin de Saint Jacques," the French name for the Camino; perhaps, he would have recognized that name. Eventually we find a trail, but miss a turn and end up climbing about 600 meters (2000 feet) on a switchback road up some mountain peak. Dennis keeps insisting that, according to the sun, we are heading in the right direction. I no longer hear the highway nor see the river; we are too high. The bucolic town across the river with its white houses and tiled rooftops, steeped church, and vibrant green pastures appears smaller with each switchback. At one point, there is a sign in Basque and French stating that the hill is infested with vipers; we walk in the middle of the road. Dennis keeps assuring me that we are heading west and soon will descend into the next town. I am starting to have doubts.

It is getting late and we are out of water. When I hear an old truck whining its way up the mountain, I stop the driver to ask for directions and water. The balding, paunchy Frenchman is wearing a green T-shirt with the saying "Time to make it happen." He tells us that the trail we are following is *très désolé* (very desolate) and that we have to descend about 7 kilometers (4.5 miles) to get back on the Camino. My weariness and disappointment must have touched his heart. He talks with his wife and they agree to turn around and take us to where we missed the turn. We hop into the back of the white Nissan pickup truck and they give us a bottle of cold Perrier. As I swig the delicious water, I can feel my body respond; my temperature lowers and I can speak more clearly with my mouth no longer parched.

At the missed turnoff, we are amazed to see a bare sign the size of a storefront window with a tiny Camino sticker in the upper right-hand corner. The "trail angel" tells us that he used to work on the corner and was constantly whistling to pilgrims to point them in the right direction. Why no one improved the marking is a wonder.

In gratitude, we offer money to pay for the gas and their time, but these two kind Frenchmen refuse to take it. Instead, they ask that we pray for them when we arrive in Santiago. I promise to think of them and their kindness and generosity when I get to the cathedral. Once again, the Camino provides for us.

We cross the border river into Spain and hike uphill to the town we kept seeing from the mountaintop. Valcarlos/Luzaide is a small village with a population of about four hundred inhabitants. We stay at Casa Marcellino, a refurbished historic hotel with modern amenities. Our room has twin beds with a private bath and overlooks the street.

The tub is short, but deep. I fill it with hot water and soak my overworked and painful thighs. Although I cannot extend my legs, the hot water helps alleviate the tightness. Because of the wrong turn, today's gentle walk was more strenuous and steep than I had anticipated, and, once again, without sufficient hydration. My quadriceps are rock hard, my legs wobbly.

I use the handrail to hobble down to the dining room. That night I feast on hake, a white fish, Dennis has pork tenderloin, and we share a bottle of red wine. After two exhausting days, sleep comes effortlessly.

The next day we leave the hotel at 10 a.m. and have no trouble finding our way out of town; there is only one major street. The trail markings are still inadequate, but we do not get lost. I am spent and my thighs ache from the two previous days' climb; every step uphill is an effort, every step downhill produces a moan as it stresses my thighs.

Determined not to run out of water, we fill our bottles at a natural spring trickling down the mountainside. It is cold and tasty and—I hope—safe to drink.

At Puerto de Ibaneta, the two routes from St-Jean-Pied-de-Port to Roncesvalles merge. There is an upright flagstone slab commemorating Roland's call for help to Charlemagne using an olifant horn, an ivory horn made from an elephant's tusk. I am too tired to find this fascinating, though I vaguely recall reading about it in *The Song of Roland* in college. Instead of checking out the monument, I stretch out on the grass, lean against my backpack, and shut my eyes. Dennis is the history buff; he can tell me all about it later.

From here, it is only 3 kilometers (1.8 miles) to Roncesvalles. I am tired and achy; feeling the toll of the last few days. As we approach the monastery grounds, a large Charolais cow comes clomping down the center of the two-lane road, her cowbell announcing her presence. We let her by—she is bigger than we are. Suddenly she stops, and then looks right, left, and behind. She is apparently lost. She then looks directly at me and moos plaintively, as if to say, "Where am I?" Dennis and I find this hysterically funny—even the cow cannot find her way.

This time the monastery officials allow us to camp and we set up our tent in a field behind the abbey. I make reservations for dinner at the hotel and am lucky to get the first seating. All the walking has given me an appetite, and I can hardly wait until dinner. Finally, the doors to the *comedor* (dining room) open and hundreds of pilgrims scurry to tables. Dinner is served family style, with piles of pasta for the first course and a choice of chicken or fish for the second. We talk about our getting lost with those seated with us at the table. Everyone says that the Camino is better marked in Spain.

Sated, we return to the campsite. It is quiet. This silence is very different from the bustling abbey experience a few nights back. Since we are sheltered from the abbey lights, the starry sky is extraordinarily brilliant, the clarity of the twinkling Milky Way takes my breath away; I am in awe. No wonder the Camino is sometimes called the "Way of the Stars."

I use my headlamp to finish reading about Margery Kempe, a medieval pilgrim. I had started reading her autobiographical account before leaving home in hopes of better understanding the medieval pilgrim's travails. Her mystical antics have been a source of merriment to me, even though it was seriously written.

Just before I fall into a deep sleep, I think about how easy it must have been for pilgrims in Margery Kempe's time to get lost; they had few guidebooks.

Margery Kempe

"Sir, you will one day wish that you had wept as surely as I do." ~ Margery Kempe



Medieval representation of female pilgrim taken from a wall decoration near Frómista

One of the earliest English autobiographical writings is that of Margery Kempe, who is known for being the first woman to dictate her biography, *The Book of Margery Kempe*. This book chronicles her life and pilgrimages to various holy sites in Europe and Asia, including her visit to Santiago. In the book, Margery calls herself "the creature" and speaks as if talking about someone else.

Margery, an English woman, was born around 1373. At the age of twenty, she married John Kempe and had fourteen children with him. After the birth of her first child, Margery became depressed and was kept in a storeroom for six months, where she started having mystical conversations with God. Afterward, she was a businesswoman for several years before dedicating herself to the spiritual calling. In 1413, Margery started making pilgrimages within England to visit the holy places or talk with other mystics and spiritually minded persons. She later traveled to Jerusalem, Norway, Assisi, Rome, and Santiago de Compostela.

Margery had to get permission to go on these pilgrimages, first from her husband and then from the bishop. She found protectors and benefactors who helped finance her journeys. At times, she had nothing and relied on the goodness of others to feed and shelter her.

In her writing, Margery does not spend a lot of time discussing the hardships of the pilgrimages. She talks more about the spiritual side, and about the hardships that she endured because of her spirituality. She does mention difficulties of being a woman in a foreign country, with little or no money, and no understanding of the foreign language.

Margery recounts that the Lord commanded her to go on pilgrimages two years before she went to visit Rome, Jerusalem and Santiago. When she asked Him where she would get the money to go to these places, Margery wrote, "Our Lord replied to her, 'I shall send you enough friends in different parts of England to help you. And, daughter, I shall go with you in every country and provide for you. I shall lead you there and bring you back again in safety, and no Englishman shall die in the ship that you are in. I shall keep you from all wicked men's power. And daughter, I say to you that I want you to wear white clothes and no other color, for you shall dress according to my will.'"

In her mystical communications with the Lord, Margery would wail and cry out like a woman in labor, sometimes falling to the ground. She could not look on an image of Christ's passion without endless weeping. She would receive communion "with plentiful tears and violent sobbings, with loud and shrill shriekings." In addition to the snoring and body sounds, pilgrims had to endure Margery's nightly wailings, which sometimes lasted for hours. Some people thought that she was mad or possessed by devils, or feigning the fit for attention. She was an oddity, wearing white (reserved for virgins), because the Lord commanded her to do so, and she was criticized for it. Other pilgrims were disturbed by her actions and constant talk of the Lord. For all these reasons, Margery was expelled from or ostracized by the group, or forced to eat by herself. She saw this alienation from the other pilgrims as a persecution to be endured for the sake of the Lord.

About July 7, 1417 Margery set sail from Bristol, England, for Santiago de Compostela in Galicia. Though Margery talks little of the pilgrimage, she does talk about the preparations for the journey and how she solicited money for the trip. "She was summoned to appear before the Bishop of Worcester, who was staying three miles outside of Bristol. The bishop welcomed her into his home and she stayed there until God sent wind, so that she could sail."

People were wary of sailing with Margery and told her that if "They had any storm, they would throw her into the sea, for they said it would be because of her; and they said the ship was far worse for her being on it."

She beseeched the Lord to save her and, "She sailed forth with her companions, whom God sent fair wind and weather, so that they reached Santiago on the seventh day.

"And then those who were against her when they were in Bristol were now very nice to her. And so they stayed there for fourteen days in that country, and there she had great happiness, both bodily and spiritually, high devotion, and many loud cryings at the memory of our Lord's Passion, with abundant tears of compassion.

"And afterwards they came home again to Bristol in five days."

In all, her pilgrimage to Santiago took twenty-six days.



During the later-Middle Ages, solo women pilgrims were looked upon with disfavor and often mistrust. It was believed that an unsupervised female traveler would end in sin and shame. To allay this mistrust, some women would justify the pilgrimage by seeking the intercession of saints to heal maladies for themselves or others. They had to appear to be passive, or be understood as passive, in order to do

something active, and, given the negative assumptions often made about female pilgrims, they had to display both that passivity and that activity to the satisfaction of others.²

Those females who went to Jerusalem, Rome, or Santiago out of devotion or to visit places described in the Bible were looked upon with less tolerance than the woman who made the trek in search for a miracle on behalf of her child or other person. At that time, the belief was that a woman should be in her home, not traveling for months or years or taking the money from the household to finance the trip. Because of these perceived social roles, male pilgrims did not welcome women as fellow pilgrims.

In spite of this intolerance, women went on pilgrimages. Enough women traveled to Jerusalem that a separate women's hostel was built around 1050 AD.

Women pilgrims had the same legal status in canon law as did the male pilgrims. They could seek hospitality and protection from religious institutions and religious leaders along the route. Yet, women had to endure the same social patriarchy that existed at home. Unmarried women needed permission to travel from their father, married women needed permission from their husbands, and a widow needed the permission of her parish priest. Since pilgrims were to be celibate during the pilgrimage, women accompanied by their husbands were not looked upon favorably either.

In the mid-1400s some shrines, such as the Sancta Sanctorum in Rome, were closed to women for fear that they would mark the shrine with their menstruation.³ Other times, the shrines were closed to protect women from the press of the crowd, because women were believed to be prideful, or because women were meant to be silent and invisible. For whatever reason, women of this time were excluded from many holy places.

Just as Margery Kempe was forced from her group, women had to fear abandonment if they did not confirm to the modest and invisible nature expected of women at that time. Female pilgrims often traveled together, not so much for propriety as for security.

Nowadays, women do not need to fear walking alone. It is safe. I encountered many solo female hikers and none talked about fear. During the Middle Ages, there were thieves, wolves, epidemic diseases and few pilgrims. For these reasons, it was necessary to band together. Last year, there were 180,000 pilgrims who completed the journey, according to the pilgrim office in Santiago. One is never alone for long along the Way.

I did hear about a non-English speaking woman who had started to walk with a male pilgrim. She enjoyed his company until another pilgrim warned her about her companion. She then ran from him to another group, afraid and looking for protection. She told the group that she was walking with a murderer. Alarmed, members of the group checked into her statement and learned that she had been told to beware of the man because he was a lady-killer, the meaning lost in translation.

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