The Pilgrims’ Ways to Santiago in Galicia

The Fisterra-Muxía Way
The Jacobean pilgrimage as such comes to an end in the city of Santiago de Compostela. However, dating back almost to the discovery of the tomb of the Apostle Saint James (9th century) at a site where today the cosmopolitan city stands, many of the pilgrims from both the Iberian Peninsula and other countries in Europe, decided to extend their journey to the Costa da Morte ("Coast of Death"), located in the westernmost part of Galicia, looking out on to the rough waters of the Atlantic Ocean. The reasons that have inspired this tradition are many, –all different but somehow linked– and they have given rise to the route known as the Fisterra – Muxía Way.

For the people of ancient times –and indeed up until the late Middle Ages– the Costa da Morte was the last redoubt of explored land, the westernmost part of continental Europe, the final stretch of an itinerary traced in the sky by the Milky Way, a mythical and symbolic place whose most extreme point was pervaded by the impressive mass of cabo Fisterra ("Cape Finisterre"). It was a place rich in pagan rites and rituals, an awe-inspiring site for the Romans (2nd century BC) who were struck with wonder when they saw the mighty sun vanish into the sea.

Viaggio in ponente a San Giacomo di Galitia e Finisterrae (XVII c). Domenico Laffi

Fisterra Lighthouse
Nonetheless, the christianisation of the pagan traditions of Fisterra was a process that had taken root by the middle of the first millennium. From the 12th century onwards, Calixtine Codex associated these lands with the pilgrimage tradition. This renowned codex tells the story of how the disciples of Saint James journeyed to the city of Dugium, no longer in existence, in present-day Fisterra, seeking authorisation from a Roman legion to bury the apostle at the site where Compostela stands today. The Romans, suspicious of their motives, throw them into prison. However, they eventually manage to escape, and just as the Roman troops are about to catch up with them, they scurry over a bridge that collapses just as the Romans are attempting to cross in pursuit.

Yet the connections of Galicia’s Lands End with Santiago are rooted, above all, in the integration of many ancestral elements prominent in the area. Not only did it offer the ancient pilgrims a view of the end of the known world, but it was also the site of two of the most popular cults in Galicia. The first is the Holy Christ, in Fisterra, which was described by Moline, a 16th century scholar, in the following way: “at this spot gather the most devout of the pilgrims who come to worship the Apostle” drawn by the possibility of being able to prostrate themselves before the son of God in this most remote place,
after they had visited Santiago. The other cult is to the Virgin of A Barca, in the nearby coastal town of Muxía. According to a tradition dating back to the Middle Ages, the Virgin Mary came to this beautiful spot in a “stone boat” to encourage Saint James in his preaching, in an event linking this sanctuary with that of the Virgin del Pilar in Zaragoza.

The Fisterra – Muxía Way is frequently referred to in odeporic literature, surpassed only by the French Way. The oldest story is that of George Grissaphan, a Magyar knight from the 14th century. The story recounts his adventures as a pilgrim and hermit in Fisterra. In the late 15th century, the Polish pilgrim, Nicholas von Popplau, journeyed to Muxía after having visited Compostela. He described the remains of the “wrecked ship, made of genuine stone” belonging to the Virgin Mary. On his pilgrimage from Italy, the Venetian traveller, Bartolomeo Fontana (16th century), visited Fisterra, and reported that those who were free of mortal sin could move the stones of the ship of Muxía with just one finger. Domenico Laffi (17th century) the clergyman and scholar from Bologna, journeyed to Fisterra as well. He wrote of the lighthouse guiding the sailors to safety through the turbulent waters in the area. Many of these stories mention the Mount of Saint William, who was a legendary hermit in the area. This hermitage, no longer standing, was associated with fertility rites.

The following pages recount the interesting features of this pilgrimage route, which is unique in that unlike all the others, its starting point is in the city of Santiago. In this case, the final destinations are Cape Fisterra and the Sanctuary of A Barca, some 89 and 87 kilometres from Santiago.
After visiting the Cathedral of Santiago, the pilgrim sets out on the Fisterra – Muxía Way from the Praza do Obradoiro, the city’s most emblematic square, and passes between the Raxoi Palace and the Parador, Hostal dos Reis Católicos, which was the old Hospital Real, and leaves Santiago through what was once the Pilgrims’ or Trinity Gate.
The Way passes the Baroque church of San Fructuoso and its magnificent façade, adorned with statues of the Virtues – Prudence, Justice, Strength and Temperance, which can be contemplated from the Praza do Obradoiro. It continues on, winding its way through the narrow streets, typical of the city, one of the most representative of which is Hortas Street.

The next stop is the “Carballeira” (oak forest) of San Lourenzo, which was used by Rosalía de Castro as a theme for one of her poems in the Follas Novas collection, an important reference work in 19th century poetry. The “pazo” (manor house) of San Lourenzo de Trasouto, an old Franciscan convent dating back to medieval times, has an interesting architectural ensemble, in addition to the medieval church and in the interior, works of art from the Renaissance and Baroque periods. The cloister boasts an extraordinary boxwood garden.

Here and there, the Sarela River hugs the semi-urban route. On clear days at dusk at certain points along the beginning of this itinerary, it is possible to contemplate extraordinary sunsets over the old city and the façade of the cathedral.

Rua das Hortas. Santiago de Compostela

San Lourenzo oak grove. Santiago de Compostela
On entering the municipality of Ames, the Way reaches the village of Augapesada, which has a small medieval bridge. It then climbs up to the hillock of Mar de Ovellas, which offers a commanding view of the splendid Valley of A Maía.

This area also features excellent examples of religious architecture, such as the Baroque Church of Trasmonte, as well as traditional constructions, whose style is culminated in the village of Ponte Maceira. The houses and the remains of some old restored mills line the banks of the Tambre River, which are connected by one of the most important bridges to be found on this way. This magnificent structure, dating from the late 14th century and reconstructed in the 18th century, formed a vital link between Santiago de Compostela and the Fisterra area.

On the other side of the bridge, the Way takes the traveller to the region of A Barcala, known for its dairy and meat production. The region’s capital, Negreira, is the largest town—with a population of over two thousand people—the pilgrim comes across before...
reaching the coast. At the entrance to the town stands the Palace of Chancela. The coat of arms features the bridge, which was reported to have collapsed, thereby preventing the Roman soldiers from capturing the disciples of Saint James.

The medieval town of Negreira, alluded to by Ernest Hemingway in his novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, offers visitors the chance to visit the Pazo de O Cotón, a medieval fortress restored in the 17th century, as well as the adjacent Chapel of San Mauro, two of its most characteristic monuments.
A small bridge over the Barcala River leads the pilgrim out of Negreira. At certain points along the way, the route once again merges with the old camino real (main route) to Fisterra. The evocative names of towns such as Camino Real and Portocamino are reminiscent of these routes.

At times the itinerary travels across high plateaus giving the pilgrim sweeping views of the lands belonging to the municipalities of Negreira and Mazaricos, the latter located in the region of Xallas, famous for its craftsmanship in basket weaving and for its original straw hats worn by women.

Another feature along this stretch is the popular architecture, some of which has survived to this day in the country villages, featuring simple yet highly attractive examples of individual and sets of “hórreos” – raised granaries, built to preserve the harvest throughout the year. Some of the most notable examples are those to be found in the village of Maroñas, where visitors may also admire the Romanesque Church of Santa Mariña. 

Negreira – Hospital

Raised granaries in Olveiroa
One of the most interesting areas in terms of landscape unfolds around the spurs of Mount Aro (556 m), whose summit offers views of part of the region of Terra de Xallas.

The final sections of this stretch are marked by the overwhelming presence of water. Here the Xallas River and its banks make their presence felt, particularly in Ponteolveira, whose bridge, built in the 16th century and later renovated, ushers the traveller into the lands of the municipality of Dumbría. Skirting the reservoir of a Fervenza, over the Xallas River, the route comes to an end in the village of Olveiroa, which also offers splendid examples of the traditional architecture of the zone.

This stretch concludes in Hospital, a village which used to have a modest pilgrim hospital.

On leaving this village, the Way diverges – the pilgrim must choose between the road that leads to Fisterra or the one that goes to Muxía and the sanctuary of A Barca.
If the pilgrim heads first to Fisterra, the road will bring him close to the Sanctuary of A Nosa Señora das Neves (18th century), with its “holy fountain” and religious festival that draws crowds of followers on 8 September. Another point of interest along the Way is the Hermitage of San Pedro Mártir, which also boasts a “miraculous” fountain purported to cure various ailments. And on the hillock of O Cruceiro da Armada (247 m), the traveller gets his first glimpse of Cape Fisterra looming in the distance.

The cape is the symbol of the region bearing the same name. Our travels will take us through this region, whether we head towards Fisterra or towards Muxía. Far richer in legends than many other regions, it features one of the most beautiful coastlines of the Iberian Peninsula, alternating between long, placid sandy stretches and rugged rock formations, washed by a raging sea, not often seen elsewhere. Other activities that make this area a feast for the eye and the senses are the shellfish harvests, fishing and agriculture, which all yield high-quality traditional products.
The first destination of the pilgrim in the region is Cee, bustling with commercial activity such as the Sunday market, and offering a myriad of services. The Pazo de O Cotón and the 19th century building housing the Fernando Blanco Foundation are two of the town's landmarks. Also of interest is the Church of A Xunqueira, with its Gothic head.

Not far from Cee is the town of Corcubión, which has a well-preserved old town declared a historic and artistic point of interest, and is largely a reflection of the former importance of its harbour. The town’s church, San Marcos, built in the Maritime Gothic and Neo-gothic style, takes its name from the image of the town’s patron saint, a sculpture of Italian origin, crafted in polychromed wood in
the late 15th century. Corcubión pays tribute to the wealth of shellfish in the area by celebrating the annual Clam Festival on the first Saturday in August.

The Way arrives in Fisterra after winding its way around the two kilometres of sand dunes of the magnificent and vast Langosteira beach. Home to robust sailors and fishermen, Fisterra has been linked to the pilgrimage tradition since its very birth, as discussed earlier in the introduction.

And the epicentre of this relationship is the medieval Church of Santa Maria das Areas, located on the outskirts of the town, on the way to Cape Fisterra. An arcade, believed to have been part of the medieval pilgrim hospital, no longer in existence, opens onto a church housing the dazzling Santo Cristo de Fisterra, an extraordinary sculpture of the Christ figure from the 14th century, which, according to legend, appeared on the coast after having fallen from a boat.
into the water during a storm. After making the pilgrimage to Santiago, many of the pilgrims of yesteryear believed that the perfect way to culminate their journey was a visit to this Christ figure, considered to be the westernmost representation of Christ.

During Easter week, Fisterra celebrates the feast of the Holy Christ, declared to be a religious festival of National Tourist Interest. The event is a representation of the life and death of Jesus, which reaches its high point on Easter Sunday with the resurrection, which is celebrated with a fascinating ancient dance known as “a danza das areas”. The performers in the play, who are residents of Fisterra, are not professional actors.

In addition to the Baroque Chapel of the Holy Christ (1695), also worthy of note is the Renaissance Virgin del Carmen Chapel in the Church of Santa María das Areas. The high altar chapel (14th century) holds a stone image of the Virgin Mary dating from the 16th century. Also worshiped is an image of Saint James which entails a ritual that is reminiscent of that practised in the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. While the main porch is Romanesque, the exterior of the church is dominated by the Maritime Gothic style.

Setting out from the town of Fisterra, the pilgrim must complete the final, short stretch that will lead him to the tip of the mythical Cape Fisterra, heralded by the old lighthouse building, which has been renovated for tourism. Spirit and nature, sea and sky, past and present join hands at this westernmost point of Europe, where ancient peoples thought they could see to the end of the known world, and perhaps they were finally convinced after contemplating the sun as it set majestically into the sea.
Tradition has it that the Virgin Mary, sailing in a boat made of stone, arrived at this site which is today the Sanctuary of A Barca in Muxía, to aid Saint James the Apostle in his preaching of the gospel in the Northwest of the Iberian Peninsula. This explains the site’s connections with Santiago and why it has been included in the pilgrimage routes since medieval times.

Thirty one kilometres separate Fisterra and A Barca. The first direct reference is to San Martiño de Duio, in the vicinity of which the ruins of the lost city of Dugium were thought to be hidden. According to medieval tradition, this was the home of the Roman legion who were approached by the disciples of Saint James seeking authorisation to bury the apostle’s remains in Compostela.

The Way passes through villages, farmlands, woodlands. And the sea is ever-present from the wild beaches like O Rostro to the tiny inlet, Ría de Lires, where the pilgrim can observe an impressive array of birds. Along the route there are splendid examples of traditional rural architecture intertwined with magnificent churches, such as the Romanesque style Santa Leocadia de Frixe and Santa María de Morquentián.

The traveller has to muster up his strength to tackle the final ascent up the hillock of As Aferroas (289 m) with its sweeping views before heading to Muxía. Lourido beach is the ante-chamber of this town, situated in a lovely coastal setting.
Founded in the 12th century, Muxía explodes with colour every July with the celebration of the feast of the Virgin del Carmen and its vibrant, crowd-drawing maritime procession. Two of the most typical activities carried out in the town are fishing and lace-making.

The Sanctuary of a Nosa Señora da Barca is only a short distance from Muxía. To get there, the pilgrim must take the route skirting Monte Corpiño, by way of the “Camiño da Pel” (The Way of the Skin), so called, because nearby there was a fountain where the pilgrims would wash themselves –as a symbol of purification and respect at the end of the route– before entering the sanctuary. The Way between Fisterra and Muxía may also be travelled in the opposite direction, if the pilgrim chooses to visit the Sanctuary of A Barca first.
The Fisterra – Muxía Way offers the traveller two alternative routes on leaving Hospital. We have detailed the itinerary that goes to Fisterra and from Fisterra to Muxía. We will now focus on the route that takes us directly to Muxía, covering a distance of nearly 30 kilometres, which early on crosses the little village of Dumbría, with its 17th century church.

Some stretches of the way coincide with stone-paved segments of the old camino real, and in San Martiño de Ozón the pilgrim will find an excuse for making a stop. It is home to of the largest granaries in Galicia, a church with a Romanesque apse and vestiges of the old Benedictine Monastery of San Martiño.

Another interesting feature was the Monastery of San Xulián de Moraime, which is no longer in existence. To reach the area, the pilgrim must cross the village of Os Muíños, which is on the waterfront, and whose name (The Mills) is attributed to the great number of traditional mills that operated there. This was the most influential monastery in the region of Fisterra. Still standing is the Romanesque church with three naves and Gothic paintings.

The stretch that brings the pilgrim into Muxía provides a clear view of this town and its surrounding area, presided over by the omnipotent sea, with its rock formations, its light and its sands. The seaside promenade of Muxía, the port and the Maritime Gothic style Church of Santa María mark the concluding stages of a way that culminates at the Sanctuary of A Nosa Señora da Barca.
The 17th century church forming part of this sanctuary first comes into view to receive the pilgrim. The interior holds a Baroque high altarpiece of superb quality and, above all, the Gothic image of A Nosa Señora da Barca, to whom one of the largest religious festivals in Galicia is dedicated, held on the first Sunday after September 8. Outside, the spot’s magic unfold its secrets. All the pilgrim has to do is to follow the ritual and approach the rocky point, and with one foot almost touching the sea, he will be able to make out the hull, the sail and the rudder of stone of the boat that brought the Virgin Mary to this lost point to aid Saint James in preaching the gospel. This is the time when each pilgrim conjures up his own dream.
One of the most striking characteristics of the Pilgrims’ Way to Santiago is the hospitality offered. From the very beginning of the pilgrimages to Santiago, there have been religious, political and social institutions and organisations, as well as a myriad of anonymous people whose primary goal was to serve the pilgrim.

Modern-day pilgrims also enjoy these privileges, which go hand in hand with the historical significance of the Pilgrims’ Way to Santiago. The Galician public network of pilgrims’ hostels, which are found all along the Galician itineraries, and in many cases, in important historic buildings, came into being in the early 1990s, in keeping with the traditional vocation of providing pilgrims with help and assistance.

This public network of accommodation is free-of-charge and the regulations governing the system stipulate that they are to be used first by pilgrims travelling the Way on foot, and secondly by those travelling on horseback and bicycle. Reservations are not permitted and the beds may not be booked ahead and are given out on a first come, first served basis for a one night stay only.

However, pilgrims and other travellers have a range of alternative accommodation options. There are a number of religious and municipal centres also serving the pilgrim, especially during busier periods. In recent times a wide-range of modern hotels and rural tourism establishments has cropped up along the different routes which have added to the diversity of the services and attractions to be found along the Way.
Negreira
Newly constructed building*
Rúa Patrocinio, s/n. Negreira
20 beds
3 parking spaces for bicycles
Distance from next hostel: 33.2 km
(Oliveiroa, Dumbría)

Olveiroa
Set of rehabilitated constructions built
in traditional local styles*
Olveira, s/n. Dumbría
34 beds
Parking spaces for bicycles
Stabling for 3 horses
Distance from next hostels: 30 km
(Fisterra); 29 km (Muxía)

Fisterra
Rehabilitated building*
Rúa Real, 2. Fisterra
24 beds
Parking spaces for bicycles

Muxía
Newly constructed building
Rúa Enfesto, 22. Muxía
32 (+ 32) beds

* Accommodation with disabled and special needs facilities.
Town Councils

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Urgencias
Medical emergencies
061
Emergencies
(general, free of charge and international)
112

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The discovery of the Tomb of the Apostle Saint James the Greater at the beginning of the 9th century soon brought about a stream of travellers making the pilgrimage to the site, which is today the Galician city of Santiago de Compostela. This vast influx of pilgrims from all over Europe led to the creation of a network of itineraries, known collectively as the Camino de Santiago or the Pilgrims’ Way to Santiago.

The heyday of the pilgrimages took place between the 11th, 12th and 13th centuries with the granting of specific spiritual indulgences. This trend, however, has endured to a greater or lesser extent over the course of the centuries.

Since the mid 20th century the Pilgrims’ Way to Santiago has been experiencing an international rebirth, which combines its spiritual and socio-cultural tradition with its tourist appeal, and once again it has become a melting pot for all types of peoples and cultures.

Traditionally the Pilgrims’ Ways are at their busiest during the Holy Years, held at intervals of 6, 5, 6, and 11 years—the next will be in 2010—, but any time is ideal for following the Way towards its ultimate goal: the city of Santiago de Compostela.
Throughout its twelve hundred year history, the Pilgrims’ Way to Santiago has given rise to an extraordinary spiritual, cultural and social vitality. Thanks to the existence of the Way, the first network of assistance in Europe came into being and monasteries, cathedrals and new urban centres were founded.

A new culture was born from the convergence of peoples of diverse backgrounds, based on the free exchange of ideas, artistic and social trends, in addition to a socio-economic driving force which boosted the development of a number of areas in Europe, especially during the Middle Ages. The mark left by the Way and by the pilgrims on the city of Santiago de Compostela can be clearly seen from an endless number of public and private testimonies, in the different art forms, and also, for example, in the publication of over one thousand books worldwide, which in recent decades have extolled the virtues of this Way, a work of art and the heritage of all Europeans.

The main routes of the Pilgrims’ Way to Santiago were declared the First European Cultural Itinerary (1987) by the Council of Europe and a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in the stretches travelling across Spain and France (1993 and 1998, respectively). In 2004 it also received the Prince of Asturias Award for Harmony from the Prince of Asturias Foundation.

The Pilgrims’ Way in Europe
According to ancient legend, the Iberian Peninsula formed part of the lands where the Apostle Saint James preached Christianity. After he was beheaded in 44 AD, tradition says that his disciples took the body of the saint by boat to Galicia, one of the Spanish lands he preached in.

The difficult times during the early years of Christianity and the fact that most of the northern part of the peninsula was sparsely populated would have meant that the exact location of the burial site would have fallen into oblivion. However, around the year 820 remains were found which were attributed by the ecclesiastic and civil authorities to be those of Saint James the Greater. This event, which took place in remote Galician woodland, would give rise to the founding of the present day city of Santiago de Compostela.

Santiago became the attractive goal of a pilgrimage that would, over the centuries, lead pilgrims from all walks of life and via the most diverse itineraries, to the tomb of the only apostle of Jesus, along with Saint Peter in Rome, who is buried on European soil.
The diverse origins of these pilgrims gave rise to a total of six European ways leading to Galicia.

The busiest and most important itinerary from a socio-economic, artistic and cultural view, is the route known as the French Way, which enters Spain across the Pyrenees and Galicia via the mythical hills of O Cebreiro.

However, there are five other itineraries that have also earned a place for themselves in the history of the pilgrimages to Santiago.
They are the Original and North Ways, of great importance in the early pilgrimage days, with two major routes that enter Galicia via Asturias, from the Basque Country and Cantabria; the English Way, followed particularly by pilgrims, who from northern Europe and the British Isles arrived at ports such as A Coruña and Ferrol; the Portuguese Way, which was used by pilgrims travelling from Portugal up through Galicia’s southwestern region; and the Southeast Way, used by pilgrims who, on their way to Santiago from the south and centre of the Peninsula, followed the popular Vía de la Plata, between Mérida and Astorga, continuing on into the territory of Ourense to Santiago de Compostela.
There are two other routes whose symbolism is believed to be closely linked to the Pilgrims’ Way to Santiago: the Fisterra-Muxía Way, used by a number of medieval pilgrims, who after worshipping at the tomb of the apostle, were enticed to undertake the journey to Cape Finisterre, the westernmost point on earth known at the time; and the route known as the Route of the sea of Arousa and the river Ulla, recalling the itinerary, which according to tradition, was taken by the boat bearing the mortal remains of the Apostle to Galicia (1st century).