

THE WAY
MY WAY

By

Bill Bennett



Chapter 1

Just for a moment, I considered a wheelchair.

Just for a moment.

It was the first thing I saw when I stepped out of the plane at Biarritz airport. There, unattended by the terminal wall. Waiting for me. If it had been holding up a sign with my name on it, I would have jumped into it, unashamedly.

But no, a wheelchair would not be a good look. After all, I was there to walk the Camino de Santiago – the ancient 800km pilgrimage route from the French Pyrenees right across northern Spain. A wheelchair through the airport terminal would definitely not be a good look.

But my knee hurt. An old injury stirred out of hibernation by one of my last training hikes back in Australia, and aggravated by the long haul flight.

Bill, if you can't walk from the plane to the terminal exit, how the hell are you going to walk 800kms across Spain?

I quickly rejected the wheelchair option and put the momentary weakness down to jetlag, and an airline boxed lunch. I limped through the terminal. I'd trained for months and my knee had been fine, except for the last week when it suddenly decided to be tetchy. But it would come good.

As I approached the Arrivals Hall I began to look out for Rosa.

Rosa was a Dutch woman who was to share the taxi with me to St. Jean Pied de Port, my starting point for the Camino. It was 70kms from Biarritz to St. Jean, and I'd decided to get a cab rather than a bus and a train. A couple of months before my departure I'd put a post in a Camino forum asking if anyone wanted to share the ride and split the fare, and Rosa confirmed immediately.

I'd subsequently swapped a few emails with her but didn't have a clue what she looked like. From the reserved and slightly arch tone of her emails though I imagined she'd be in her 50's – most probably a stolid lady who wore clogs and ate sausages and noodles for dinner. She would have hay-coloured pigtails and a full plaid skirt, and she would smell faintly of cattle.

I looked around for such a woman but couldn't find her. Nor could I smell her.

I felt disoriented. Not from jetlag, but because I didn't have to retrieve baggage. I had all my possessions for the five week walk in my backpack.

I was not a regular backpacker. In fact, this was the first time I'd ever worn a backpack. But I found it strangely liberating to walk past the baggage carousel and not have to worry if my luggage was heading to Kazakhstan.

Whilst I was not a backpacker, I was a seasoned traveller. As a film director working out of Australia, I'd travelled extensively during my thirty year career. And if you're trying to figure out how old I was, I was three months shy of sixty. Which meant I had three months left of my youth.

I'd never done anything crazy like this before – a pilgrimage walk. I was not a hiker, and I wasn't a Catholic. In fact, I wasn't even sure I was a Christian. On the last official government census when I had to state my religion, I'd written down Buddhist, mainly because they've had such a hard time in Tibet and I felt they needed my statistical support.

I was also not an adventure traveller. I'd never kayaked down the Amazon or climbed Machu Picchu or trekked across Siberia. For me, adventure travel was flying coach. All this backpacking and wearing of heavy boots and flying off to France to walk ancient pilgrimage routes was a new experience, and not one that made me feel entirely comfortable.

In fact, I felt decidedly uncomfortable.

I was anxious about the walk and whether I'd make it, I was anxious about climbing the Pyrenees, which I'd heard was very high and very steep, and I was now anxious about my knee.

So if you have all these anxieties Bill, why are you doing this walk?

I had no idea.

I'd been to Spain with my wife two years earlier and I'd seen desultory pilgrims walking along various dusty trails following the Camino. It seemed such a futile and meaningless thing to do that it immediately appealed to me.

It appealed so virulently that within a few months of returning to Australia, I'd bought a pair of boots and I was out walking long distances four or five times a week, with the vague notion that one day I might just go back and do the Camino myself.

No sign of Rosa.

No sign of a squat elderly lady wearing Birkenstocks and munching on a fat slug of bratwurst.

During my months of preparation before leaving Australia, I'd done extensive research into the Camino, which involved reading Wikipedia and watching some YouTube videos. Oh yes, and the Martin Sheen movie, *The Way*.

The reason the movie was called *The Way* was because the Camino de Santiago is known as *The Way of St. James*. St. James was one of Jesus' apostles, and it's believed his remains were buried in Santiago de Compostela, the capital of Galicia in the far north-west of Spain.

Scallops are abundant in the seas off Galicia, and the scallop shell has become the symbol of the Camino. The route is way-marked with either yellow arrows or scallop shell symbols, and pilgrims heading to Santiago traditionally hang a shell off their backpacks.

Even though it's been a pilgrimage route dating back even before St. James to pre-Christian times, it's only been in the last twenty five years or so that the Camino has become hugely popular. More than 200,000 people each year come from all over the world to walk to Santiago – and each year its popularity grows.

I wasn't doing the pilgrimage because I wanted to see some musty old relics. And I wasn't doing it to prove anything either, to physically challenge myself before my body clock ticked over to the big six-oh.

I certainly wasn't doing it to be fashionable. There were easier ways for me to be fashionable that didn't involve walking 800kms across a country whose language I couldn't speak or understand. I could buy a pair of Prada sunglasses, or I could pretend I knew who Pink was.

No, I was doing this pilgrimage because...

Yes Bill, why ARE you doing it?

I had no idea why I was doing it. All I knew was that I *had* to do it. There was no question about it. I simply had to walk the Camino.

I limped along the terminal concourse until I came to the top of a large set of stairs that would take me to ground level. I stopped. There was a crowd down below presumably waiting for the new arrivals, and I was conscious that in amongst that crowd would be Rosa.

Somehow I had to get down those stairs without pathetically clutching the handrail. I didn't want Rosa's first impression of me as being someone in need of a Zimmer frame.

Also, I immediately recognized the cruel symmetry of the occasion. Tomorrow I had to climb up the Pyrenees. Today I had to climb down the airport stairs. I couldn't climb up the Pyrenees unless I climbed down the stairs. There was no getting around it.

I went down the stairs slowly, wincing as each step sent a stab of pain into my knee. I stayed close to the handrail – close enough to grab it if I stumbled, but not so close that I looked like I needed it.

A delicate balance.

A kindly gentleman in a tweed jacket, noticing my discomfit and caution, went to help me by taking my arm, but I hissed at him between clenched teeth: *Get away from me sir!*

I didn't want Rosa seeing me nurse-maided down the stairs.

The gentleman stepped back as if I'd just told him I was 2IC in Al Qaeda, then he descended the stairs nimbly, looking back at me over his shoulder and muttering. I felt guilty, and envious. Guilty that I'd hissed at him, and envious at his mobility.

I reached the bottom of the stairs and began to mingle amongst the crowd, looking for Rosa. She was probably a cyclist as well as being a hiker. Weren't all Dutch women cyclists? Didn't they cycle everywhere? She probably had chunky calves. I began to look for a squat 50 year old woman with pigtails, a plaid skirt, and chunky calves.

As for me, I was wearing black Nike track pants, black merino wool long sleeved top and black jacket. Plus a red Sydney Swans football cap. I wasn't wearing black to be cool, but for practical reasons. If needs be, I could go several days without doing my laundry if I wore black. The dirt wouldn't show, nor the sweat stains.

I'd decided on the red Sydney Swans cap not because I was an ardent fan of the Australian Rules football club, which I was, but because the cap was red. Bright red. I figured if I fell down a deep ravine while walking up the Pyrenees, I'd be more easily visible to rescuers.

That's assuming the cap stayed on my head.

Doing my own laundry though was one of the things I was going to have to deal with on this walk. The last time I did my own laundry was several years earlier when all my clothes came out of the dryer so shrunk they were only wearable by a fourteen year old. A *stunted* fourteen year old.

My wife, Jennifer, in fact had banned me from doing the laundry. She'd had to throw away several of her favourite outfits after I generously washed her clothes for her. At the last moment I'd thrown in my new Sydney Swans jumper, which of course was bright red.

And I thought she liked pink...

Whenever I was away on film shoots, I had minions do my laundry for me. I also had those same minions make me coffee, bring me lunch, and attend to my every need. So this would be another new experience for me. Doing my own laundry. And not having minions.

And while we're discussing new experiences, let's discuss my sleeping quarters.

To even use the words *sleeping quarters* made me shudder. I usually used the word *suite*, and sometimes even *penthouse*. I liked it best when the two words were co-joined – *penthouse suite*. On this walk however there would be no suites, and no penthouses, and not even any Standard Single Rooms. I was going to be sleeping in what were called *albergues*.

Albergues are dormitory styled hostels set up along the Camino to cater specifically for pilgrims. We're talking bunk beds in rooms sometimes the size of small aircraft hangers. And just as draughty. Needless to say they don't have air-con, nor do they have flat screen tvs, mini-bars, and turn down service. They have nothing, other than bunk beds.

The bunk beds sometimes have pillows, sometimes they don't. Sometimes the rooms have heating, often they don't. No sheeting, and in fact you're lucky to get a blanket. And so you have to sleep in your sleeping bag.

Yes, tucked away in the bottom of my backpack was the sleeping bag I'd bought just for the walk. I was thirteen when I last slept in a sleeping bag. I'd gone on a school excursion into the Outback to see sheep being shorn and cattle being castrated.

When you're thirteen and you're in an Outback shed with all your school friends and you've just seen a procession of bulls have their knackers cut off, sleeping bags are fun. When you're nearly sixty and you're in a draughty aircraft hanger with dozens of strangers who snore, sleeping bags are not fun.

The albergues had communal showering and toilet facilities. Mixed genders. No quaint Male and Female here. I didn't relish that. Not that I had anything to hide, or show off for that matter, it's just that I like my privacy.

The one redeeming feature of pilgrim albergues though was their price. They were cheap. Rarely did it cost more than €10 for the night, and there was no set price – you donated whatever you could afford.

The other advantage of albergues though was that they provided a great opportunity to meet other pilgrims. Which brings me to my next anxiety – people.

When I was preparing for the pilgrimage back in Australia, one of the biggest fears I had about walking the Camino was meeting people. It's not that I have a problem with people, or that I'm anti-social - it's just that I wanted to walk by myself.

I wanted to think, and it's hard trying to think when you have someone walking beside you who insists on telling you in vivid and unscrumping detail all the traumatic events in their life that culminated in them doing the Camino.

I'd also heard that Camino "families" quickly formed, cliques of pilgrims who banded together and didn't let others in. There were also Camino "buddies" - people you met who became friends, and eventually life long pals.

I didn't need any more friends. I had nearly three hundred friends on Facebook, thank you very much, some of whom I actually knew. I didn't need a Camino buddy either. My best buddy was my wife of thirty-one years, Jennifer. She was buddy enough for me. I just wanted to walk by myself and be left alone.

Is that Bill Bennett? a voice called out from the crowd.

I looked around for the pig-tail flouncing Rosa. All I could see coming towards me was a bloke dressed in hi-tech hiking gear. He was in his mid 30's, all muscle and buff, like he was ready for the Winter Olympics.

Is this Rosa?

He introduced himself at Balazs, from Hungary. His head was clean-shaven and his face was chiselled, yet he had a huge grin and he radiated light and warmth. I liked him immediately.

He told me he was going to be sharing the taxi, and led me over to two others who'd been waiting for me to arrive. One was a large, and I mean *very* large man named Laszlo.

Laszlo was also from Hungary, and when we shook hands, he laughed. It was a laugh that could have set off car alarms outside on the street. His whole huge body exploded in mirth. His eyes twinkled and my hand disappeared into his massive paw. I wondered if I'd ever see it again.

Finally he let me go, and I was introduced to Rosa.

Rosa was late 20's, slim and lithe, blonde hair and cover-girl beautiful. She had a smile that could have thawed the snows off the Pyrenees. She was gorgeous. I introduced myself and, at a loss for words given my prior expectations, I asked her how much her backpack weighed.

I'd become obsessed with the weight of my backpack. Before leaving Australia, I'd weighed everything on my digital kitchen scales. I did this secretly, up in my office, in case my wife discovered I was weighing my underpants.

My Bonds Comfy Undies by the way came in at 65gms. My razor weighed 45gms, my toothbrush 15gms, and 6 plastic clothes pegs totalled 24gms. My deodorant weighed a hefty 84gms, so I left it behind. I figured that if I stank on the Camino, then it would be someone else's problem, given I had a very poor sense of smell.

Rule of thumb has it that your backpack should weigh no more than 10% of your body weight. My body weight was 75kgs, so my backpack should have weighed 7.5kgs max. But no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't get it below 8.8kgs. Which meant one of two things - I had to lose a further 1.3kgs from the backpack, or eat a lot so I weighed 88kgs.

That second option certainly appealed to me, given that it would be more fun and much easier than deciding what to ditch from my pack – but I couldn't manage either, so I flew out of Australia having transgressed the sacred 10% rule.

I was curious though as to whether other pilgrims had been similarly 10% challenged – and hence my question to Rosa. She was coy about her backpack weight though, and I sensed she thought me strange for asking.

I quickly turned to Balazs.

His pack was at the 15% mark, which made me feel good, until I found out that along with everything else, he was carrying a coffee shop – an espresso machine, grinder, and a big bag of freshly roasted beans. Balazs liked his coffee.

Laszlo, himself being on the super-extra-large size, blew the 10% of body weight rule completely out of the water, so his pack weight was irrelevant. However, he did carry around his neck a big heavy digital SLR camera.

Immediately I got camera envy. I'd left my professional Nikon gear behind in favour of a smaller lighter compact camera. It was one of the most difficult and agonizing decisions I'd made when considering what to jettison. Being a film director, images are very important to me. I love taking photos. I looked at Laszlo's camera and knew I'd made the wrong choice.

The taxi finally came and we threw our packs in the trunk and hopped aboard. I was exhausted. I'd been traveling for two days from my home in Central New South Wales. The others had come off short European flights, so they were fresh and bouncy.

We chatted, and I discovered that Laszlo was an architect, not married, and Balazs was a former restaurateur, and now a commodities broker. He was married, with a couple of children. Laszlo and Rosa were sitting together in the front, and so I didn't really get to find out much about Rosa, but I didn't have to.

I was just relieved she didn't smell of cows.

The cab wound its way through lush green valleys, slowly heading up towards the medieval town of St. Jean Pied de Port at the foot of the Pyrenees – the traditional starting point of the Camino de Santiago.

I looked out the window and saw the massive mountain range looming in the distance, its impossibly high snow capped peaks shrouded in cloud. Tomorrow I would attempt to climb those mountains.

Balazs asked me what I did and I told him. I mentioned that I was soon hoping to make a film about intuition and that I wanted to walk the Camino intuitively. He looked at me strangely.

What do you mean? he asked.

I explained that I'd developed a concept called PGS – which stands for Personal Guidance System. I believe each of us has within us a PGS, like a GPS in a car, which tries to guide us through life. Several years earlier my life had been saved by a sudden intuitive insight, and ever since I'd been fascinated by intuition.

I told him that normally, I was a very organised person. Particularly when I travelled. But on this trip, on this pilgrimage, I wasn't going to plan anything. I was going to let my PGS, and *The Way*, guide me.

Rosa turned around and smiled. *That's interesting*, she said.

Why is it that when a pretty young girl turns and smiles at a sixty year old man – sorry, a *nearly* sixty year old man - that nearly sixty year old man suddenly realises he's nearly sixty years old?

The taxi dropped us in the parking lot at the bottom of the old quarter of St. Jean, and we each paid our share of the fare. We were all staying at the same albergue, so we walked together through the historic centre, our packs slung rakishly over our shoulders, our new shiny scallop shells dangling off the back.

I was excited. I was thrilled. I was finally there. After two years of dreaming of walking the Camino, I'd finally arrived. I *felt* like a pilgrim. I felt special. I felt somehow ... *medieval*. I felt a part of something that was beyond my immediate comprehension. I couldn't wait till tomorrow, to start what I knew was going to be an extraordinary journey. Possibly even a life-changing journey.

There was only one problem –

To get to my albergue I had to climb up a long and steep hill. And I wasn't sure I could make it...

I looked around for a handrail.