

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

Contents:

- [Part 1](#)
- [Part 2](#)
- [Part 3](#)
- [Part 4](#)
- [Part5](#)
- [Part6](#)
- [Part7](#)

Part 1 - Wednesday 23rd September

We got off to a bad start, and very nearly a non start. Without the benefit of Ted's trusty 1950's Fordson tractor trundling down to Buckden Barn we would not have got away at all. The van had a flat battery.

Two days later we pitched up near Santander at Soto de Canal. We left the van and started to walk on Sunday.



There was an almost instant familiarity - the half built concrete hillsides, the braying of a donkey, the over-ripe smell of figs fallen from the trees, the strangled cry of the (late) morning cockerel, the old iron bedsteads fencing the fields, the scent in the eucalyptus forests, the barking dogs and, of course, the sun. As it was Sunday there were also lots of church bells, elderly people going to church, cyclists and walkers and the sound of Sunday shooting in the hills.

Yet, in spite of the familiarity, I recognise very little of the route we have taken in the past few days even though we have walked this first section previously. The sweep of the hills and the sharp points of the mountains in the distance are recognisable in a general sort of way but the route itself feels new.

There are the odd exceptions. We walked through Santillana, a medieval village of grand houses, cobbled streets and balconies overwhelmed with flowers. We spent some time there last time and I recognised it again very readily.



I also remembered odd sensations such as reluctantly following the route up a very steep hill away from a village half a mile away which we were absolutely certain would have a cafe con leche waiting for us. The feelings of anticipation and subsequent disappointment as we turned right were identical to those experienced two years ago. I seem to have an acute memory for the places we ate or drank at or, more often, the places that we could not get food.

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

The walking has been hilly and green through pastures and woods, away from the sea with the misty Cantabrian mountains on our left. There has been a little industrial walking, alongside what we think might have been an aluminium plant with its own coal fired power station.

We walked 26K the first and second days and 30 the third and it felt like it too. We are not fit and have done almost no walking with packs this year. The furthest we have walked was from home to Nethergill on the flat. I'm hoping the time/fitness line on the graph will quickly intersect and rise above the time/ hip or knee damage line.

At the first albergue 3 generations of adults played some part in dealing with the guests. The oldest woman sat impassively watching the TV but cleared the plates from the table. I think her daughter did the cooking. One of the men talked incessantly at us through out the meal in Spanish - to which I feigned ignorance to get some respite and another booked us in. Other people drifted in and out through out the evening, and the family was later joined by neighbours.

10 of us stayed there and 8 of us ate. One American, a Peruvian, 2 Germans, 2 Spanish, 1 Dutch and us.

The food was good, the rooms and beds OK and the shower area awful - the single light could not penetrate the cubicles and the doors locked 2 inches open. So, all very familiar.

We have a toilet ranking system. A point each for door (yes really, we have been places without), lock, light, toilet seat, toilet paper, wash hand basin with water, soap, means of drying hands and bonus points for disabled access. We think 5 points is a triumph.

On our second day we got full points but only because the albergue was full and we had to go to a pension. It was at Comillas, a very small sea side resort which is now very quiet with many bars and hotels already closed for the winter.

Comillas is also the home of a couple of Gaudi masterpieces but as they are behind exceedingly high walls, you would never know. I have attached a picture of a Gaudi gateway though, the circular opening is for the birds.



The Pontifical Seminary was also here until being moved to Madrid in the 1960s (and the building has been left empty since then). It is a huge red edifice high on a hill overlooking the town, which it dominates. It could house thousands of people, it is so big.

As always, eating has been a bit of a struggle; trying to find shops or bars open during the course of the day. The hedgerows and garden walls have made up for the paucity though.

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella's tales from the Camino

So far we have had peaches, walnuts, blackberries, apples and figs. For want of a frying pan we have had to forgo giant puff balls and an endless supply of sweet chestnuts.

Last night, at the end of day three we were in an albergue at , just inside the Asturian border with the Picos de Europa replacing the Cantabrian mountains. We met some. British people!

Colombres is renowned for its 'Americana' architecture. A lot of people in this area made their fortunes in S America through slavery. While in Comillas they appointed architects such as Gaudi to build houses for them, in Colombre they copied the style of the colonies, large brightly painted houses with turrets and castelations and large glass verandas.

The albergue was not too bad, 6 in the dorm but 2 snorers and then at about 4am a rat in the eaves began gnawing through the ceiling, accompanied by dancing by other family members interspersed with games of football using marbles. They kept going for hours. The gnawing sounded like a small saw through wood on and on with the same rhythm. The persistence and energy suggested it would not take many nights to get through. Robin, on the top bunk, eventually woke up and whacked the ceiling but it made little difference, only going away with the general walking up of the albergue at just before 7.

In the end I did this email as sleep was impossible.

Part 2 – Monday 28th September

The 4th day was hard. Tired from 3 days walking and not yet fit enough to take it in our stride (sorry about the pun). We walked from Columbres to Playa de Poo (yes), about 28K. We were in sight of the sea all day - negotiating steep paths through woods to deserted rocky coves and crashing waves, walking along the cliff tops seeing the coastal crags and cliffs in front of us or high up away from the sea with just a blue mass on our right as we walked.

We passed 'bufones' along the coast. These are spout holes, up through the rocks which send spume shooting towards the sky as the tide comes rushing in underneath the ground twenty odd metres below. You can see the spray in the picture.



For 3 days we walked in parallel with the Picos de Europa, a continuously massive and intimidating presence. In the grey days the black mass of rock seems an impenetrable wall with razor wire peaks decorating the tops. There's no way in for those who might want to explore (or invade from the sea). Even in the sunshine the Picos are formidable, the sun accentuating the shadows and bringing the rocks into sharper relief. For only half an hour in the mornings, when the sun glows pink on the



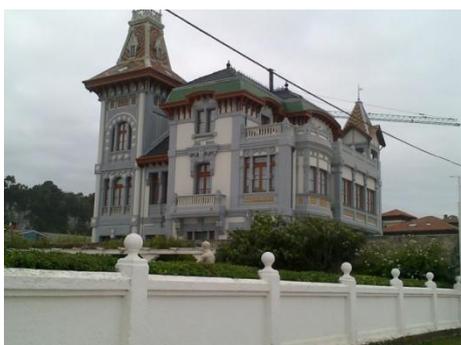
Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

rock and the mist softens the edges does it look just a little less hostile.

The two miles or so between the sea and the Picos is primarily cattle pasture (Asturias is a big milk area), maze fields, small woods and houses. The whole of the maize plant is chopped fine and used as silage or the cobs are dried - on the smaller farms. It seems a productive area but in small plots. We have seen just one lot of pigs.

Just now the farmers are making the maize silage and chopping wood for the winter. Runner beans are drying (the bean not the pod is eaten and neither seems to be eaten fresh) as are walnuts. Tomatoes and other veg are still growing well and fruit is plentiful though much is left to rot on the trees. This is cider country so there are many orchards of small trees with bright red apples. There are also lots of large horreos (wooden grain stores built on stone 'toad stools' to keep the rats out) and traditional hay stacks in fields.

Our fifth night was at Ribadesella and we had rooms at a top of a house for the same price as a hostel. It is a big house in the middle of the town, only one room wide but very deep front to back. The bed room overlooks one street and the sitting room another. The ceilings and floors were wooden and everything was just a bit wonky, but very charming.



Ribadesella was a lovely town. A bridge was built in the early 20th century linking 2 curving spits of land. The old town was squashed into a few streets between the sea and the hills. Along the front are bars and restaurants with shady squares and churches in behind. Across the bridge are some long curving beaches and the newer part of town. In the 1910s it became popular, once the bridge was built, and some large villas have been built on the front. All were individually designed and compete with each other in terms of

quality of design and (holiday home) luxury. They are not Art Nouveau but clearly influenced by it and there are lots of towers and brightly coloured tiles. I've attached a photo of one - not sure it does it justice.

Our sixth night was at Colunga. We had a short day (21K), the alternative being 37K. Accommodation was short in Colunga and we had to stay in a hostel (a cheap hotel). The room was 40E and at first sight really depressing; small, dark, and with old worn out furniture and a tiny bathroom. It looked clean enough though. We drew back the lace curtains on the windows, pulled up the blinds, opened the windows and let the sun in. The room was transformed. What looked dingy became simple and the bare light bulb could be turned off! The views were wonderful over hills and fields.



Our seventh day walking took us inland and off the Camino del Norte onto the Primitivo, on a route not previously walked. It was a long day of 34K with several hundred metres of

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

climbing. There are fewer people walking this route (though more might join at Oviedo) as it is very hilly and the distances between hostels lengthy. We had a dormitory to ourselves in La Vega and only two other people were staying there. (US Las Vegas may be named after the village?).

Away from the coastal villages Spain is much poorer. There are fewer people around and many empty houses beginning to fall apart. Some of them were very grand in their day and look lost behind massive rusting gates. The landscape is lovely, so green and hilly - in the UK it would be a prime area for holiday homes.

I've attached a picture of typical winter preparations. The barn is full of hay, the wood is stacked, the corn cobs and beans are drying on the outside of the horreo.



At La Vega we went to the local bar which also served as the local shop, so you could buy your slippers with your pint. The enterprise was superintended by a woman doing her knitting who served only when ready. There was nothing to eat in the 2 bars so we bought food. We had avocado, crispbreads and empanada (like a pasty) washed down with a tin each of Spanish beer for supper and were in bed before the children had stopped playing in the square. We were the last to bed at 8.50 on a Saturday night!

We have been walking for a week now and are getting fitter. We are used to our packs and apart from stiff hips and knees for the first kilometre of the morning we are doing fine. No blisters or abnormally sore bits and so far no injuries.

Part 3 – Wednesday 30th September

From La Vega we walked to Oviedo on day 8.

The morning walking was one of the loveliest stretches to date. We started at dawn (8am) with the pink sun setting fire to the red apples on the trees and slowly evaporating the mist from the valley bottoms. Far from roads we walked for about 3 hours in woods.

We passed a shrine on top of a hill by a hermitage dedicated to a walker who died on the route. We also saw the arm of a bench tied up with barbed wire with the clear intention of causing harm.

We passed through 3 towns on our way to Oviedo all uninteresting and a bit depressing in a Sunday sort of way; with too quiet streets and shuttered shops. Each town became progressively lively as we passed through post-church/pre lunch drinks, lunch and then post lunch libations. By the time we got to Oviedo the bars, restaurants and streets we're lively and thronged with families - but the kitchens were closed for the day.

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

Spanish walkers have no trouble incorporating the long Spanish Sunday lunch and bottle of wine into their walking day but it is beyond us. One beer was as much as we could manage - in a bar high on a hillside with wonderful views; so restful it was difficult to leave. In the evening we survived on tapas.

We wandered around the old part of Oviedo which was very attractive with a pale stone cathedral (photo), solid town hall and colonnaded streets and squares. There are a lot of modern bronze sculptures throughout the town but we did not have the energy to go and find them. Oviedo is the capital of Asturias and a Principality (a semi-independent 'state' granted by royal charter). It is very proud of its status but, because of the privilege, it is also very loyal to the Crown and Spain. It seemed appropriate to be walking through it on the day of the Catalan vote for independence.



When we walked in Asturias 2 years ago I wrote about the cider pouring and drinking and I'll mention it again. Asturias cider is dry and flat and also quite cloudy. It is drunk from very thin pint glasses, a very little at a time.

The bar man (always a he, this a man thing) pours it from a great height (arm stretched up with the bottle and other arm stretched down with the glass. As he pours he moves the glass to the stream of liquid and catches it but always allows the tiniest of splashes to hit the ground (or, if indoors, a special utensil which looks like a urinal). The long drop and splash is intended to oxygenate the cider and bring out its flavour.

About an inch gets poured at a time which is drunk straight away (and if not completely drunk, the remainder is tipped out on the ground- presumably because it would be flat)). The next pour and drink may be several minutes later and, given the percentage spilt, drinking cider is a sober affair - for the middle aged and elderly. Some cafes have dispensed with the pouring ritual and have invested in machines that aerate the cider - and prevents sticky bar terraces.

From Oviedo we walked to Grado. It was 'only' 28K but a long hot day with temperatures in the high 20s. Aside from the 6K getting out of Oviedo the walking was blissful. Up and down soft dirt tracks in ancient woodlands of oak, beech and chestnut, not a eucalyptus to be seen (photo). The climbs were stiff and long but mostly under the shade of trees. At the bottom of the valleys the remains of a 'molino' (mill) were to be occasionally found by the stream and at the top of the climbs a small chapel. It was a day of small fields of cows - 3 or 4 mums with calves and a bull, larger herds of goats, a few sheep and the occasional smell of, but no sign of pigs and a few Sunday horse riders



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

which, in Spain, is more popular with men than women. There were also signs of wild boar or badger activity in the woods.

The few fields we're primarily growing rocks and there was a general air of a world having been left to itself for centuries. The land and tracks were too steep and stony for machinery and for many miles there were no sounds other than birds, streams and popping acorns. We passed an old man scything around his apple trees while his wife barrowed away the grass to hay stooks. Otherwise the land was deserted.

It was too hot to walk the final 4 miles to the albergue and we stopped at a bar/ pension. Another 8 walkers were there - 2 Spanish men, a Belgian and an Irish man, a German woman and two French cyclists who had cycled from their home near Bordeaux to Santiago and were on their way back on a different route. We had a very lively evening with much vino consumed.

Grado to Espina was 30K, possibly 33K and Espina to Campiello about 25K (days 10 and 11). We had many steep climbs, and descents but it was cloudy and much cooler. Again, much of the time was spent in woods but always with the sound of civilisation - a tractor, dog or road traffic in the distance.

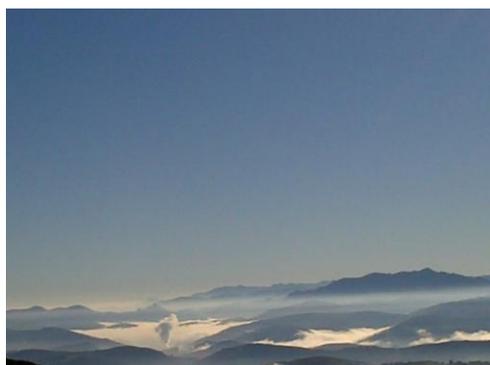
Both Espina and Campiello have great albergues, 15E each for a double room and Campiello is brand new. We are sleeping in the old hay loft above the old cow byre. It is like a luxury hotel room but we have to provide your own sleeping bag - it is a hostel, after all.

I'm writing this from the bar opposite where we will eat tonight.

Part 4 – Saturday 3rd October

At Campiello, twenty of us met for supper, one long table in the bar, and there were 12 nationalities around the table. English (me) Scottish (Robin), Hungarian, Lithuanian, Dutch, Belgium, Irish, German, Icelandic, Finnish, Spanish, US. It was another lively night - but an early one.

We had slices of empanada (like a pasty), noodle soup, chorizo and lentils, pork with tomatoes onions and potatoes and fruit or ice cream with unlimited bread and wine (for 10E per person!). Breakfast in the bar was equally good - hot fried bread and jam, huge coffees and sponge cake - for a day's walk it was perfect.



It was a wonderful day's walking, the best yet this trip. We started in the fog. It was very cold; hat and gloves cold, but after about 40 min climbing we broke through the cloud and from then on we had hot sun all day. We were climbing for most of the day with the occasional short descent as we crossed from one set of



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella's tales from the Camino

mountains to another. We walked high for most of the day, at about 1200m, and the views were wonderful. All around us we're mountains and below us cloud, sometime looking like a tornado other times like snow (photos). The higher slopes were bare of trees and grass but there was plenty of heather and gorse. Every so often a small plateau would appear, usually on the saddle of a hill, and there would be wild horses and cattle happily co-mingling.



We descended a few hundred metres towards the end of the day to Berducedo, a village high in the hills. We had walked 27K, mostly up hill. The village had 2 albergues and 1 pension, all of which we're full by 6pm and people were sleeping on floors. The numbers seem a surprise to every one. One man, a day short of his 74th birthday, arrived at 10.30pm having walked the last few hours down the mountain in the dark, and was lucky that the last drinker in the bar was prepared to share his (double)

bed with him.

The village was a bit odd. There were 3 bars but only one did food and it was closed but with no notice to indicate this. A few of us had a supper of peanuts and crisps bought from and eaten in one of the bars. Later Spanish walkers bought and ate chorizo, ham, tomato, bread and the bar woman provided plates - if only we had known!

Our room in the pension was 'vintage' but I know not what period to which the room belonged. The walls, to shoulder height, we're covered in a padded stitched plastic fabric, attached to the wall with brass upholstery tacks and in an indeterminate colour somewhere on the 'drear' spectrum. At some point in the past the ceiling had been covered with insulation panels and a sink had been installed which made it difficult to get in and out of the room, so close to the door was it located. The door was also padded but with 2 frosted glass panels at head height. As with all the rooms we have stayed in, it was spotlessly clean, an amazing feat given it must have been half a century since it was last painted.



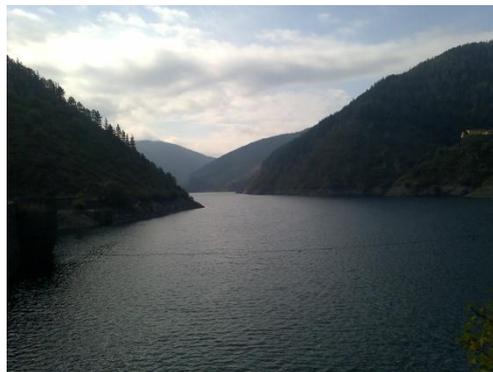
On Friday, day 13, we were walking mainly down hill, the route taking us out of the mountains and towards the hills of Galicia. The descent was long and steep through woodland a lot of which was pine.

For a short while in the woods we had silence. We have had this a couple of times on this trip, always in woods where the terrain is too steep for any machinery, too hostile for cows with their clanking bells and where the roads are miles away. The silence does 'descend' as writers say in novels. You can feel it as it creeps into you ears; it has density and seems to fill your head. I'm assuming there is a physiological reason for this, rather than some weird effect of days of contemplative walking - perhaps the ear drum stops thrumming in silence

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella's tales from the Camino

and it's a pressure change one feels? It is a wonderful feeling; mesmerising but it is (almost) reassuring when we hear noise again.

The lowest (as in height) point of the day was the crossing of a dam, built in 1954 and used as a feeder reservoir for hydro-electric power rather than water. The reservoir lies about a 1000m below the tops of the, almost, vertical wooded hills. It is a narrow band of water winding back up stream and filling in tributaries. In bright sunshine it was vaguely reminiscent of a Norwegian fjord but under the dark clouds it looked menacingly deep, plunging straight down from the rocks with no shoreline.



The building of the dam and subsidiary works was a major enterprise in its day, requiring hundreds of workers and thousands of tons of concrete. The silos for the concrete and the building platforms still decorate the hill and a whole village of hostel type housing rises above the water, all long defunct and left to ruination. The silence, desolation and the dark depths of the water make it a lonely place for walking.

We finished the day at Castro after 25K walking. We stayed in a good hostel with an excellent evening meal. Almost everyone was Spanish.

On Saturday we set off in very cold fog and climbed out of it after about an hour. We spent most of the day in the sunshine in pine woods but it is getting colder. We had an early finish (20K) at Fonsagrada, a dismal town of one street along a very high ridge with spectacular views over the mountains. The sun went in on our arrival and at 1200m it remained cold.

Currently getting our carbs replenished in the local bar with a cerveza.

Part 5 – Wednesday 7th October

Sat night was a strange night - at Fonsagrada. The town was empty, most unusual for a Saturday night. It was a long one street town on a mountain ridge about 1000m high with a few blocks of flats on the slopes. As one of the highest points for miles around the views were amazing, Galician green hills stretched out to infinity. It was the sort of place that, in the UK, would have been sought after. but here it was lost and poor looking. Really friendly people in the shops and bars though, and good food followed by an early night in a dormitory to ourselves in a new albergue.

Sunday was terrible, awful. I tripped over a tree root and fell head first downhill followed by my rucksack pinning me to the ground. Consequently, my face is a bit of a mess and there are pains all over my upper body which took the brunt of the fall.

Just as I got on my feet the rains started which continued for most of the day. We got completely soaked - early and often, but eventually the rain stopped and the wind was so strong that we actually dried out a little. There were storms and flooding all over the North

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

of Spain. The roads became rivers and the paths were cleared of all of their summer debris in the torrents.

We did 32K which was a long day and it certainly felt it. The sun came out as we finished - too late to enjoy it. I am sure the country side was lovely but we spent the day with our heads fixed towards the ground, trying to shield our faces from the strong wind and rain.

Monday was a little better with heavy rain mixed with light showers, but no wind. The hills are much rounder and gentler in Galicia than Asturias. The houses are bigger, squarer and made of granite and give an impression of solidity and permanence. Here there are also big gardens with lots of vegetables. Overall, it feels just a bit more prosperous and there is an impression of a cultivated and managed landscape rather than one left to nature.

I've attached a picture of a salamander. It's intact but dead (I think). We have seen a few squashed on the roads but this was on a track - you can see how well its yellow and black colouring acts as a disguise?



We stayed at Lugo on Monday night. Lugo has the largest Roman walls (2k circumference) in Europe. It is several metres high and largely intact. One section is about 6" away from our pension window. As well as the walls, Lugo



has a number of very fine old buildings and a lovely cathedral. But it also has much dereliction, right in the centre, within the walls and close by the cathedral. I've included a photo of one old building with a new tin roof put under the original roof trusses.

Our walking day was short (22K) and we had started early to spend some time in Lugo. We had a bit of a wander in the rain before settling down to a glass of wine and tapas in a cosy taberna - with a view to having a snooze later. We found ourselves in the red light district - a corner of derelict houses within 100M of the cathedral.



Our stay in Lugo coincided with its local arts festival. We saw bits of open air concerts (under a roof of leaky plastic sheeting) and street entertainers and bands, all including the Galician pipes.

On Tuesday we walked from Lugo to As Seixas, 32k but we think it was closer to 35K. The hills have got much flatter and gentler and the walking continued through woods, alongside small fields and passed villages of just a few houses. It rained for the third day running but each day has been a bit better.

We spent the night at a casa rural - in terms of good quality accommodation we have peaked too early - a dorm tonight will be a hard return.

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella's tales from the Camino

Part 6 – Thursday 15th October

We started walking on the Camino del Norte and then the Camino Primitivo. Our last leg of the Camino was on the Camino Frances which is the main Camino route. Hundreds of people walk it including a great number of people on arranged tours with accommodation provided and baggage carried. You can even have a 'pilgrim experience' trip where a guide will walk a group for the last 5 miles or so, all carrying a 'pilgrim' walking stick with gourds attached. For ultimate authenticity the pilgrims might also purchase a brown felt hat with a large soft rim, the front of which is pinned to the body of the hat by a red cross.

Wishing to avoid such crowds, we decided we would compress our last 3 walking days into 2. So, on Wed we did 41K and on the Thursday we did 28K into Santiago. Apart from the last few kilometres through the suburbs of Santiago the walking remained lovely - hilly, green, rural and sparkling from the recent rains. On Thursday, our last walking day, we had sunshine all day.



Arriving at the cathedral square, even after our comparatively short walk (just under 3 weeks and 532k) and 4 previous arrivals, was still special. For so many people completing the Camino is a momentous event and only the most jaded and cynical could not be moved by the overwhelming feeling of confraternity and solidarity in the Praza. Most people are happy and there is much celebration but there are a few that break down (I think in thanks for having made it) and there are many tears too.

Those arriving in the square on any one day will vary from people walking just a short distance to people (often Poles or Austrians) who walked out of their front door over 6 months ago carrying everything they needed for the journey. We passed a woman today who has 'walked' 800K from St John Pied A Port, (just over the Pyrenees on the French side). She has 2 prosthetic legs and mixes a bit of walking with driving her all-terrain wheelchair. She has 2 helpers (one driving a truck with all her kit and one who walks with her). It has taken her 9 weeks to get to Santiago (twice the time it would take a fit walker). We passed her with about 8k to go, a timely reminder of our (comparatively) good health and fortune).

We spent the rest of Thursday and all day Friday wandering the city. We sat on stone benches in the Praza watching the pilgrims and tourists or in parks eating ice cream. We had a few beers and coffee in the sun and ate octopus for supper. The sun shone and the granite city sparkled. We went to bed late and got up late.

The city is lively at night with busy bars and restaurants. Galician bagpipes can be heard everywhere. A lot of Northern cities have 'university' 'tuna' bands (with players not a day under 40 years of age). These are



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

groups of men playing the Galician pipes, stringed instruments and accordions, dressed in black velvet breeches with university capes covered in ribbons and heraldic badges . Under the colonnade of the Ayuntamiento in the Praza they played lively Spanish and S American songs late into the night. They played well and had a good audience who sang and danced with them - and bought their CDs. I wonder what they do by day?



Under an arch by the side of the cathedral at the bottom of the 'pilgrim steps' - the Camino route to the Praza, there are also buskers throughout the day, mainly pipers but late at night opera singers perform popular classics. The lateness of the hour, the light from the cathedral and Praza, and the solo voice resonating off the high arch makes it very atmospheric.

We had an apartment in the middle of the city which turned out to be a noisy mistake. The noise was at its loudest from 2-4 in the morning with people going home - singing, calling on mobiles (who to at that time?), loudly talking and often shouting. The tall narrow streets meant the noise ricocheted and echoed for great distances.

On the second night we walked with some of the returning home revellers across the city (we were catching the 5am bus to Santander). It was noticeable that they were sober, all ages and all Spanish. Loud is normal but brings out the anally retentive British in me.

With the help of travel sickness tablets - chosen for their propensity to make one drowsy, we slept on and off for most of the 9 hour journey to Santander.



As soon as we got to Santander we set off in the van going south. We finally got to Cabo de Gato on the south coast at 7 pm on Sunday evening. We drove from the lush, green northern hills through the dessicated rusty soil flat lands of mid Spain, harvested of all their crops other than blackened sun flowers, and onto the southern deserts of weird rock formations, cave houses and square mile upon mile of polythene green houses - and then a small beach surrounded by rocks and the crashing waves of the

Mediterranean. Plus, of course, a dozen other motor homes. Exhausted we repaired to the bar to watch the sunset and have a beer.

We stayed 3 days at La Isleta, a lovely village with a couple of small rags of sand, a lot of rocks and mountains behind. It was very quiet.

We were driven on by toothache (Robin) and went 40K north to Mojacar for treatment. We drove through the Cabo de Gato natural park which is basically a huge area of land covered in volcanic slag heaps, some the size of hills, others are much smaller mounds. It is arid with

Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

only scrubby vegetation surviving. The volcanic heaps create an attractive coast area but as you go further inland, it just seems inhospitable. There are occasional villages with white cube houses and also the remains of farms and houses.

Between the Cabo de Gato Park and the Sierra Albigilla is a long flat valley about 10k wide. It is almost totally taken up with polythene greenhouses, each the size of a football pitch, like a massive polythene city that totally dwarfs the town the processes the vegetables and provides the labour. The water must be pumped from deep underground, there is no rain here and the hills are insufficiently high for snow melt.

Mojacer is a long string of beaches (several miles) with typical seaside accommodation and bars along its length. When Spain began to develop its costas in the 1960s, this was not one of them and there was very little development here until the 1980s and even then, it was slow. Consequently, most of the development is low rise, looks pleasant and its scale seems much smaller than further north; it does not extend back more than a few streets from the beach. There are Brits enough though (all of mature years).

Robin went to a health centre where he was prescribed antibiotics and pain killers and we decided to stay in the town as they will take a couple of days to have an impact. The campsite is right by the beach, is amongst trees and feels spacious, but only because there are so few campers given the time of year.

We are pretty tired from the walking and travel. I have recovered from my fall in that my face will have just one scar to add to my frown lines. However, I think the pain in my left ribs is a fracture as it has been much slower to improve and I can't yet cough without clutching my chest (not a good look). Robin is still in a lot of pain from the toothache so we are taking things easy just now - all of a sudden we feel like a couple of old crocks.

Part 7 – Tuesday 3rd November

With our various ailments we had several days of enforced relaxation at Mojecar and at Colpe, both unexceptional beach resorts with nothing much of interest. Both had good beaches and old towns and Colpe had a large rock (like a small Gibraltar) - but that was it.

So, on 20 Oct we drove onto Valencia which, once we got past the high rise suburbs and into the city, was very pleasant with a squat cathedral, a couple of old city gateways stranded amongst the more modern buildings and some elegant late 19c/early 20c buildings - now mainly given over to shops.

For me, the stand-out feature was Valencia's 7.5k linear park constructed from the old river bed which is at least as wide as the Thames. There are wooded areas, open grass areas, and sports areas (football, rugby, tennis, petanque, skate boarding etc.), and it even has a cinder track for running. It runs in a curve between the older and newer parts of the city and is accessible from both.



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella's tales from the Camino

At one end is Valencia's arts and science park which contains a concert hall, music school, science museum, exhibition centre and the world's largest aquarium all housed in stunning white modern buildings set among park land and huge water spaces for swimming and canoeing .

From Valencia we went further north up the coast to Tarragona. The country side got much greener from Valencia with rounded hills covered with trees and orderly citrus groves on the plains.

Tarragona has every thing you could want for a holiday destination but falls just short of perfection. It has a sandy beach but it is small, beside the railway line, and difficult to access by foot. The city has a wealth of Roman ruins but they are scattered widely and marred by adjacent modern developments.

There is a marina and a port (but half an hour's walk from the town). When we were there, there was a huge racing yacht - low in the water, sleek, grey and beautiful. Just beyond the port is the fishing quay with sea food restaurants and crowded fishermen's streets, behind. The boats are very small, not much bigger than a park rowing boat and there are hundreds of them all roped together by the harbour wall. A good many have lights (like old fashioned 'helmet' hair dryers) for night fishing.

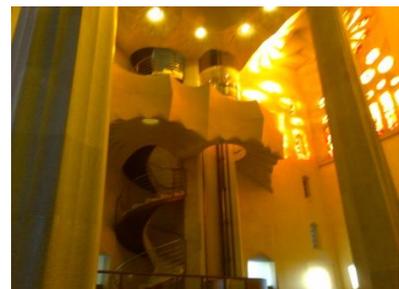
There is a lovely medieval/renaissance core to the old town with long well-preserved sections of the old city walls. Tarragon has its own 'ramblas' - a wide pedestrian street of bars and posh shops shaded by trees. It also has many narrow streets and alleys joined together by tiny squares and open spaces. Churches abound and there is a walking route covering the tracks of the first Christians. The city is not so big and has a very relaxed restful feel.

From Tarragona we went to Barcelona, the main focus (after walking) of this trip and it was our first visit.

We spent 5 very full days in the city where we sated (and exhausted) ourselves on 'modernista' (Art Nouveau) architecture. The highlights were the Sagrada Familia, the Parc Guell, the Hospital de la Santa Creu and some of the houses dotted around the 20c parts of the city.

The Sagrada Familia Cathedral looks just as it does in photos and yet so different. It is a building of contrasts - eternal but stunningly modern; intricate detail and carving and bare simplicity; rounded 'feminine' shapes and angular 'masculine' sculptures; dirty old stone (some of it is now over 100 year's old) and bright white new stonework.

Inside, the light is incredible. Gaudi's engineering and mathematical knowledge allowed the maximum roof loading on the minimum pillar girth. Also, unlike most Spanish cathedrals, it is not filled with gaudy side chapels so the light floods in from all sides. The morning light coming from the East is cool blues and greens through the stained glass while the evening oranges and reds burn the interior stone work.



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella's tales from the Camino

For all its modernity, it is immediately recognisable as a cathedral and, in some respects, looks very 14c by its shape, size and the way it compels you to look upwards towards the heavens. It is a work in progress and not due to be finished until 2026. The huge towers (seen above the roof line from all over the city) are overhung by cranes and workmen are busy every day - sawing, banging, shifting stone; emphasising its eternal nature. I thought it was both magnificent and beautiful.

Gaudi built a small, very simple, single story school for the cathedral workers' children with a curved outer wall and wavy roof which is now within the cathedral boundary. Its rural domestic appearance contrasts greatly with the towering cathedral beside it.

We also visited the Park Guell, another Gaudi creation with its walks, grottoes, houses with tiled spires and wavy tiled parapets acting as seats. Its totally ridiculous, like a fantasy dragon's playground in a child's story book. We loved it. Other Gaudi houses in the city are similarly extravagant and surprising; his brilliance evident everywhere.

But he was not the only brilliant architect in Barcelona at the time. We loved the Hospital with its outlandish external facade - colourful tiled roofs and turrets, coupled with simple serene wards with huge windows overlooking gardens. We also liked, very much, some bits of the Paleau de la Musica but found some of it too much.

The parks were restful especially the gardens created in old quarries - like climbing down into a cool green well. These, plus the medieval Jewish quarter, the 19c slums with their narrow streets and high buildings, and the promenades by the sea were endlessly interesting and provided a haven from the endless traffic (5 lanes streaming across the city in places).

There is some stunning (very) modern architecture and parts of the city have been cleared to make open spaces around these new buildings (mainly galleries and museums). The fusion of old buildings (often convents) with modern extensions seems to be a feature of the city. I was not taken with the 1992 Olympic buildings - huge, grey and sterile to my eyes but that maybe because the vast esplanades around them needed people to give the place life.

I also found the Richard Rodgers conversion of the 1900 bull ring into a shopping centre rather depressing. Only the exterior had been retained supported by an external steel structure (like the Pompidou Centre in Paris) and the inside looked just like any other windowless shopping centre - the views from the roof were good, though.

I was also only moderately taken with the 'Ramblas' the wide traffic free promenade up through the shopping centre, selling flowers and souvenirs and crowded with street cafes. The main attraction was its lack of traffic - also, the human 'statues' were of a standard I've seen nowhere else.



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

Our wandering meant we found the posh and the sleaze and saw different views of the city as it transitioned from day to night. There is much wealth - the yachts on the waterfront and the fur shops attest to that, and great poverty with much begging and bin scavenging. The cloisters of a medieval convent was filled by tourists in the day but as dusk fell began to fill with the homeless for the night.

Although Barcelona shops seem to be much the same as anywhere in the world we noted the number of knife shops (one also sold swords and replica guns) and 'head' i.e. drug shops. There was a shop that sold only espadrilles (not much trade in the winter, I wouldn't think), another that sold only baskets (how many does one need?) and one selling only condoms - the shop all pink and pastels like a sweetie shop.

Spain loves its fiestas and there were no fewer than 5 in Barcelona when we were there - a jazz festival, a festival of food and drink, an international guitar festival, a festival of Columbian music and a festival of immigration (I think) which was celebrating resident but new cultures. There was a lot going on but it was often difficult to get information on anything. We went to see the (Italian) classical guitarist, Aniello Desiderio at the Paleau de la Musica concert hall - another explosion of stained glass, extravagant stone carvings and colourful tiles. The concert was excellent too.



After Barcelona we went to Montserrat (with a half day taken up with replacing brake discs and pads at a cost of over 500 euros - ouch!). The monastery of Montserrat is high up a mountain perched on a rock face and was built there to take advantage of the isolation the location offered. Nowadays there is a road, a cable car and a funicular railway to disturb the peace. It's a huge, not very attractive, monastery that blends quite well with the rock face, unlike some of the ancillary tourist developments which are quite ugly. The setting is spectacular and worth a visit for the funicular ride, alone.

We also spent time in Figueres with its huge 18c castle, parts of which are still in use by the military, and the Dali Museum which is as 'surreal' and wacky as you would expect (photo), especially the giant view of Mae West's jewelled nostrils which can only be seen by climbing steps to view her mouth and nostrils from under the belly of a camel and through gigantic (at least 13 foot high) blond tresses.



From Figueres we went to Girona for a day, a lovely medieval and 'modernista' town with 13c Arab baths; lots of ramparts; several kilometres of city walls; a medieval Jewish quarter full of old narrow streets, shadowy stone stairs and alley ways; a cathedral; and a very good local history museum. We also saw the lion whose rear end



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

good citizens (and visitors who hope to return to Girona) should kiss. As you will see from the photo, the shine suggests many do.



Our next stop was Empuries which contains both a Roman and Greek site with the nearby village being, mainly medieval Iberian. The situation of the sites is wonderful - on a shallow sloping hillside right down to the sea surrounded by pine woods and fields and without any other development except one small hotel. We visited on a hot summer's day - clear blue sky and sea, and you could almost see the arrival of Greek trading boats with amphoras of wine.

Empuries history is interesting and unusual. The Greeks set up a trading station which eventually became a Greek city. As they were traders and brought what the locals wanted, they were welcomed by the indigenous population and permitted to build and grow. When the Romans expanded into (i.e. colonised) the Iberian peninsula, they allowed the Greeks to remain and to be self-governing due to the help the Greeks gave to them in the Punic Wars. The Romans built their own new town overlooking the Greek town just slightly higher up the hill. Eventually the 2 cities and cultures did merge and became Roman, just before the end of the Empire.

Empuries died because of new Roman roads that bypassed it and the transfer of sea trade to (now) Tarragona in the South and Marseilles in the North. Its gentle death, rather than through war with the Visigoths, has probably done much to preserve it.

We stayed that night at a very strange campsite. The facilities were basic in the extreme and the toilet and shower lights went off mid activity - with the light switches located far away by the main door! There was also a strange man opposite us, living in a stone building. He spent hours wailing woefully but as, the next morning, he seemed perfectly OK, we concluded he was drunk rather than mentally ill. In front of his chalet, he had rigged up a powerful spotlight which he sat under but shielded himself from the glare by two large umbrellas. He had several old plastic tables overflowing with large plastic bottles, plastic crates and dishes of all kinds.

Glad to move on, our next stop was the Cap de Creus, a beautiful green and hilly national park with cliffs to the sea interspersed with small coves in the north of Catalunya. Cadaques is the biggest town and, as the area is protected, there has been little development. It used to be something of an artistic colony (Dali being the magnet) and a hippy village in the 1970s but now attracts those with money. Access is difficult (a long climb over the hills); and the beaches are very small, a long way from car parks and primarily dirt and stone rather than sand. But, it is mainly traffic free with long promenades, attractive white and granite buildings along the front and up the hill sides, and it has good sea food. Just along the coast is Dali's house at Port Lligat, a tiny village in a rocky bay, reminiscent of a Scottish West coast sea loch and



Peregrina del Norte – 2015 – Stella’s tales from the Camino

equally lovely. Cadaques was our last coastal stop before turning north and inland for the journey through the Pyrenees towards Santander.