

The Camino as Classroom
By Douglas Challenger
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I walked my first Camino in the summer of 2007. On that trip, I got to see the good, the bad and the ugly about myself. The people I met and walked with were my accomplices in that journey of self-recognition. In the years afterwards, as I reflected on the profound experience that entailed, I began to think of how walking the Camino could be of benefit to young college students just starting out in life. What might it be like, I wondered, to provide such a learning opportunity for students at my university in the midst of their undergraduate education before they left school for the “real world?”

That question led me to create a semester-long, walk/study abroad program focused on the Camino that I have now led, along with my wife Laurie, on two occasions in 2011 and 2013. We are currently planning a third trip for the fall of 2015.

Students earn a semester of credit for taking an intensive course in Spanish, an interdisciplinary seminar that I teach on the Camino, and for trekking approximately 1,000 kilometers from Cahors, France along the Le Puy route, over the Pyrenees into Spain on the Camino Frances all the way to Santiago de Compostela and Finisterre. They keep a journal and we have discussions all along the Way, and when they return, they write a long essay about what they learned and they give a public presentation of their experiences to the broader campus.

Leading these trips has been the most difficult *and* the most rewarding experience of my 20-plus-year teaching career. I didn't anticipate how challenging it would be to manage the interpersonal dynamics of group travel. Attending to and maintaining good relationships within the group and between the students and the leaders, I learned, has been the key to having a successful journey. Regardless of how things go along these lines, though, the Camino offers each pilgrim its magic and its life lessons.

Among those lessons I hear my students describe are learning to be comfortable with solitude and with having less “stuff,” getting clear about what and who is really important in their lives, taking themselves and their goals more seriously, falling in love with the world and its diverse people, experiencing the joys of a more simple and mindful life, feeling a sense of physical strength and accomplishment that can be transferred to other endeavors, and trusting that humanity is basically good. The magic they speak about experiencing on the Camino often comes in the form of kindnesses and small gifts bestowed upon them serendipitously by hospitaleros, other pilgrims and strangers they meet along the way. The generosity of others has a powerful impact on them and, in turn, inspires that same sense of service and giving in them.

When they get home and begin to write about the Camino it seems almost impossible to find words adequate to the task. But they try and many begin with an insight I shared with them early in our walk from the Jewish philosopher Martin Buber who wrote, “All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.” They describe those secret destinations the Camino brought them to and sometimes, as in my own case, it was a painful place of recognizing a shortcoming or a personal habit that is not

serving them well and finding within themselves the desire to create new and better ways to navigate life. By the end of their journey on the Camino, they all realize that those new places within themselves to which the Camino led them have become an enduring part of the landscape of their lives going forward.

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