

## **EL CAMINO DEL NORTE A CHIMAYÓ**

### **An American Pilgrimage**

By Jim Carpenter

*(Note to Readers: The first three paragraphs appeared in the December 2015 La Concha.)*

The Santuario de Chimayó is one of the most-visited pilgrimage sites in North America, perhaps second only to the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City. Located in the small village of Chimayó, at the foot of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains in northern New Mexico, this small adobe church attracts tens of thousands of visitors each year from across the region. While some come as tourists, many come as pilgrims, either on foot or, like so many modern pilgrims, by automobile or bus. While the healing powers attributed to the site are steeped in the centuries-old Catholic traditions of this unique area, not all pilgrims are Roman Catholic, nor do they necessarily consider themselves “religious.” Just as at Santiago de Compostela in Spain, many come to Chimayó for reasons they consider “spiritual,” for the sake of a physical challenge, or perhaps simply out of curiosity. Occasionally, veterans of the Camino de Santiago come seeking a close-to-home experience similar to that found on their pilgrimage journey in Spain.

The most recent example of such a pilgrimage took place during the week of September 21-27, 2015, when a group of eleven hardy pilgrims, accompanied by a car-shuttling photographer/videographer, walked the route known as the *Camino del Norte a Chimayó*, or the Northern Way to Chimayó. This 115-mile route starts in San Luis, Colorado and continues southward, ending at the Santuario de Chimayó. These pilgrims ranged in age from 35 to 77 years old, most of whom were veterans of the Camino de Santiago in Spain.

Unlike the Camino de Santiago with its well-developed infrastructure of albergues, cafés, water fountains, and other support facilities spaced every few kilometers, the Camino del Norte a Chimayó wanders along roadsides and forest trails through the sparsely-populated and desert-like sagebrush flats, rolling hills, and mountains of southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. One walks for as long as 20 miles without a place to refill water bottles, purchase lunch or a snack, or even find a shady spot to rest for a few moments. Many of the villages and hamlets along the route have no commercial lodging or food markets, much less a café or restaurant. The only large town along the way is Taos, New Mexico. Pilgrims along this route must therefore either camp out, carrying tents, food, and portable stoves, or if specifically planned in advance, stay overnight in church halls, sleeping on mats or air mattresses on hard floors.

Before getting into the details of this pilgrimage, a brief history lesson regarding the Santuario de Chimayó and the general region of northern New Mexico and extreme southern Colorado will help potential pilgrims to understand the significance of the journey’s destination. Human activity in the general area dates back 10,000 years or more to the Folsom culture first discovered in northeastern New Mexico. Later, pre-Columbian Chacoan and Anazazi cultures existed in the Four Corners region, where the present states of New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona meet a couple of hundred miles west of Chimayó. The ruins of Chaco Canyon, Mesa Verde, and similar sites have been dated back fifteen hundred or more years, although they apparently reached their heyday in the 1200s to 1400s before mysteriously disappearing. Europeans first reached the area with the Coronado expedition of 1540-1542, and permanent Spanish colonization began in the early seventeenth century with the founding of the city of Santa Fe in 1610. Settlement of the area along this Camino route began in the late 1600s and early 1700s. The Anglo-American presence in the region dates back to the early 1800s, with the

explorations of Zebulon Pike and the establishment of the Santa Fe Trail, a trade route from the then-western U.S. frontier in southwest Missouri, across Kansas and southeastern Colorado to Santa Fe. Fur trappers, both American and French Canadian, were not uncommon in the area during this period. The famous scout and guide, Kit Carson, made his home nearby. And, of course, it should not be forgotten that the Republic of Texas claimed the portion of New Mexico east of the Rio Grande River between 1836 and 1845 – a claim that was never recognized by the government of Mexico. Following the settlement of the U.S.-Mexican War of 1846, all of New Mexico was ceded to the U.S., finally becoming a state in 1912.

The history of the Santuario de Chimayó itself is based mostly on local legend. It is generally believed that the sanctuary was constructed sometime between 1813 and 1816 at the site where, according to legend, a large wooden crucifix was found buried in a pasture after one of the early settlers noticed a strange glow emanating from the soil at that location. Digging with his bare hands, he uncovered a large wooden crucifix, whose origin was unknown. The crucifix was moved three times to a church in a nearby village, and each time it disappeared, only to reappear back at the original location where it had been found. Believing that there must be something miraculous associated with the site, the people then petitioned church authorities to build a small chapel at that location. Thus the Santuario de Chimayó was born, and the famous crucifix continues to reside there today. The Franciscan missionaries who first brought settlers to the region also brought a tradition of devotion to a shrine in Guatemala called Esquipulas, where miraculous healing powers were associated with the soil found at the site. Soon after construction of this small adobe church in Chimayó, the Spanish colonists and local native Americans came to believe that the healing powers of the Guatemalan tradition were also present in the sandy soils upon which the Santuario de Chimayó was built.

Today, pilgrims come from across the region to obtain samples of this soil from a small pit in a room adjacent to the sanctuary. Annual pilgrimages, especially during Holy Week, bring thousands of pilgrims to Chimayó seeking healing for themselves or for family members. Most of these pilgrimages are large group affairs organized by area churches; however, it is not uncommon for individual pilgrims or independent, small groups of pilgrims to come on their own. At present, most independent pilgrims walk only short distances from nearby starting points, and thus don't require a great deal of support. There is, however, a nascent movement to establish a longer, defined route from Colorado to Chimayó and to identify at least minimal food and lodging opportunities along the way to support individual and small group pilgrimages. This route was first pioneered by a group of pilgrims from Our Lady of Guadalupe Catholic Church in Denver, who walked the 360 miles from Denver to Chimayó in 2012. Since then the leader of that group, Ann Sieben, has led a handful of other pilgrim groups to Chimayó from various starting points, including Durango in southwestern Colorado. However, because of the magnitude of arranging lodging and food over the distances involved, recent efforts have focused on San Luis, Colorado, as the most practical starting point for a pilgrimage from the north.

San Luis is a small town in the southeastern corner of the San Luis Valley, approximately 18 miles north of the New Mexico state line and 40 miles south of the Great Sand Dunes National Park. The San Luis Valley was settled by Spanish colonists moving northward from the Santa Fe area and the Taos Valley around the turn of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The town of San Luis holds the distinction of being the oldest continuously occupied town in Colorado. Because it has the oldest church in the state and is the site of its own religious shrine – the famous Stations of the Cross, a series of bronze sculptures by the artist Huberto Maestas which portray Jesus' journey to his crucifixion – it is a logical starting point for the pilgrimage to Chimayó.

One of the cultural and historical highlights of the Camino del Norte a Chimayó is the number of historic adobe churches along the way, many of which date back to the Spanish colonial period. These unique structures, with four- to six-foot thick walls of hand-made adobe bricks plastered with mud and with roofs supported by telephone pole-sized *vigas*, or beams, are found in almost every village along this route, especially along the mountain highway known as the High Road to Taos. The interior of the churches feature hand-carved wooden *santos*, or saints, life-sized crucifixes, and hand-painted altar screens called *retablos* depicting various apparitions of the Virgin Mary and the patron saints of the churches. The villages along the route are usually small – a couple of hundred people or less – and are populated by people who trace their roots back to the earliest Spanish colonists. In recent years the High Road to Taos has become a haven for artists, with painting, sculpture, weaving, and jewelry studios commonly found along the highway and in many of the villages.

So what's it like to walk this route? In actuality, unless one camps out along the way, the stages are set by the availability of food and lodging. This results in a seven-day itinerary that begins with three days averaging 20 miles each, followed by days of 14, 17, 15, and 9+ miles each. Much of the route involves walking along paved highways, with less than 30 percent of the way on gravel or dirt roads or trails – and it would have been less than that if we had not been granted permission to walk through a portion of the Taos Pueblo on mostly dirt roads. As noted above, the terrain varies from sagebrush flats to piñon and juniper-covered hills, to lodgepole pine and aspen forests. The elevation varies from 7900 feet at the start in San Luis to 6100 feet at the Santuario de Chimayó, with much of the way in between being above 8500 feet. It also includes the crossing of a 9200-foot mountain pass between Ranchos de Taos and Peñasco. It's clearly a pilgrimage walk not to be taken lightly, even by Camino de Santiago veterans. Cellphone coverage is limited along most of the way, particularly on the arduous Day 5 climb over the pass, so getting help in case of an accident or injury can be problematic. When we walked in late September, daily temperatures varied from the low 40s F in the morning to the low 90s F in the afternoon, so dressing in layers is strongly advised. Because much of the route involves walking along narrow highway shoulders, the usual cautions regarding facing oncoming traffic and wearing bright, visible clothing apply.

Our group assembled in San Luis on Sunday. We spent the day shuttling half of our cars to Chimayó – a five-hour round trip – where they were left for our return journey. Returning to San Luis, we assembled for an evening meal at a local café, and then retired to our sleeping quarters for the night – some to the local parish hall, others to the lone local motel, and others to a room in the former parish convent. We were up before dawn on Monday to commence our first day's walk.

Day One is a 21-mile walk south from San Luis to Costilla, New Mexico, along mostly gravel county roads. The first 3.5 miles is stroll along the base of San Pedro Mesa, paralleling Culebra Creek. The group of eleven soon separated into three, loose, smaller groups – fast walkers, average walkers, and slow walkers. This grouping became the routine for the rest of the pilgrimage. At approximately Mile 4, the road begins a steady climb of 500 feet or so up the flank of the mesa and onto a large plateau. The plateau, and the road, then continues at a gentle slope upward to the southwest for several miles. Apart from the main county road, which is well-maintained, the plateau is crisscrossed with a grid of deteriorating gravel roads dating back to an old development attempt to sell 5-acre ranchettes. A few cabins are scattered here and there, but mostly it is a scrubland of low juniper, sagebrush, and *chemisa*, a low shrub with bright yellow flowers which is also known as rabbit brush. It is not uncommon to see wild horses roaming this plateau, and in fact, the local name for this mesa is Wild Horse Mountain. Lunch consisted of whatever we carried in our backpacks for the day, and was taken during a short break under one of the few piñon trees large enough to afford a bit of shade. The descent from the mesa

starts around Mile 12, and at first follows a series of relatively gentle switchbacks. The road deteriorates into a faint two-track trail after the last remote ranch house, and ultimately concludes in a steep, mile-long drop over broken, jagged rock that would challenge a rugged, 4-wheel-drive jeep. Once back down on the valley floor, the trail returns to a more manageable gravel road, crossing a state highway at approximately Mile 16 and continuing for four more miles to the small village of Garcia, Colorado, which is located right on the New Mexico state line. A drive-through liquor store in Garcia affords the day's first opportunity to refill water bottles or to get a cold drink of something a little stronger. Our destination for the night, Costilla, New Mexico, lies just across the state line. Construction of a new parish hall at the Costilla church was not complete, so we were provided an evening meal at a local roadhouse and arrangements were made for us to sleep in a vacant motel, where we bunked four or six to a room.

Day 2 is a 20-mile walk along a long and boring, two-lane state highway from Costilla to Questa, New Mexico. The day began with breakfast burritos and coffee, and everyone took an extra burrito along for lunch. The first mile consisted of a flat gravel road which at first paralleled, then merged with the state highway. The next 18 miles were spent walking along the asphalt shoulder of the long and very straight highway, with barren sagebrush flats along both sides. In places where the right-of-way is wide and level enough, it is possible to move a few feet off the pavement, but only if the rough grass has been recently mowed. The foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains were off to the east, a mile or two away, and a few scattered hills could be seen to the west. There were no trees to speak of along either side of the road, and personal needs were most often taken care of in occasional culverts where one could get out of sight of the cars speeding by a few feet away. A roadside gravel quarry provided a fortunate rest stop at mid-morning, including a chance to fill water bottles and to use a real toilet. For lunch, most of us stopped at a wide, grassy spot alongside the road at approximately Mile 12. As we neared the town of Questa, a gas station/convenience store provided a welcome oasis for a snack, cold drink, and relief break. The final mile or two into Questa was a gentle grade down into the valley of the Red River, one of the many small rivers and creeks flowing out of the mountains to join the Rio Grande River a few miles to the west. The local church was located right alongside the highway as we entered the town. Because the historic adobe church was undergoing a major renovation, the parish hall had been temporarily re-purposed into the sacred space for the parish, and we were unable to sleep there. The local church community did, however, provide us with a delicious meal of local New Mexican cuisine served in the adobe church, and we were housed in local private homes for that night.

Day 3 is a total of 19.5 miles, the first 13.5 of which are along the same state highway as the day before. However, instead of the boring sagebrush flats, we were now in a roller-coaster series of steep hills and valleys which are reminiscent of the mountains of Galicia along the Camino Francés in Spain. The hills are covered with dense piñon forest, and many local residents were busily gathering piñon nuts in the forest along the roadside. The day was cooler, and we experienced the only rain of our pilgrimage, a brief shower around lunch time. At about Mile 12.5, the road begins a steep descent for a mile or so into the valley of the Rio Hondo. At the crossroads settlement of Arroyo Hondo there is a convenience store and bar which provides a chance to rest and refill water bottles if necessary. The route turns east from Arroyo Hondo along a narrow paved roadway which follows the Rio Hondo for a mile and a half or so, then up a steep 300-foot climb out of the valley and onto the sagebrush flats. From there it was a hot, 4-1/2 mile walk into the artsy village of Arroyo Seco, which is a popular stopping point on the road leading up to the Taos Ski Valley. We spent the night at the parish hall, where the wonderful ladies of the parish prepared us both a delicious evening meal and breakfast the following morning. We spent that night on air mattresses on the floor of the parish hall.

Day 4 was approximately 13 to 14 miles, the first half of which was a unique experience in which we were granted permission to cross the normally restricted tribal lands of the Taos Pueblo. The Puebloan people claim to be the descendants of the ancient Chaco and Anasazi cultures of the Four Corners region, and the central village of the Taos Pueblo is recognized as the oldest continuously-occupied settlement in North America. It is designated as a World Heritage Site. As we entered the village we were met by a group of *fiscali*, as the tribal religious leaders are called, who gave us a private tour of their church and a very informative presentation of the tribal history, followed by a refreshing snack of fresh fruit and soft drinks. This was a special privilege that was pre-arranged by our group leader, Ann Sieben, who because of her previous relations with the people of the pueblo, allowed us to be welcomed as special guests. Future pilgrims should not expect such a visit to be routine, and in fact, entrance to the tribal lands other than those areas specifically open to non-native tourists is strictly prohibited. The remainder of the day was spent walking into the town of Taos, then along a long, dusty and busy roadside to Ranchos de Taos and the well-known San Francisco de Assis church, our destination for the night. Again, the ladies of the parish provided a delicious meal, and we all slept in the charming, traditional New Mexico style home of one of the parishioners.

Day 5 was perhaps the most difficult day of the entire Camino. After a breakfast provided again by the ladies of the parish, we set out for the arduous climb through the Carson National Forest and over a 9200-foot mountain pass to the town of Peñasco. The day begins with a pleasant walk of a couple of miles across a level prairie to the base of the mountains, where a deeply rutted dirt road begins a gentle climb through the piñon and juniper woods. Because the route of this pilgrimage is not permanently marked, veteran pilgrim Ann walked ahead, placing arrows made from stones or branches, or merely scratched in the dirt with her trekking poles, to show the way. Even though Ann has passed this way several times, the maze of old logging roads and two-track forest trails can be confusing, and we found ourselves using the GPS function of our smart phones and downloaded topo maps to keep us on track. The trail became steeper as we neared the pass, and the piñon and juniper gave way to aspen and lodgepole pine. We finally made it to the pass and began the 5-mile descent into the village of Vadito, where we joined the highway known as the High Road to Taos. After a rest stop at Vadito, it was a two-mile uphill climb out of a valley to Peñasco, where we spent the night again in a church hall, with dinner and breakfast the next morning provided by local parishioners. As tough as this day had been, someone commented that at least we were off the pavement and didn't have to be ever watchful for distracted drivers veering into our roadside path while they answered a text message or searched through the playlist on their MP3 players.

Day 6 was another 15 miles along the shoulder of the paved highway, a series of long, seemingly unending uphill and downhill grades through forested hills. Ann had arranged a stop at the town of Las Trampas and a tour of another historic adobe church, San Jose de Gracias. This church, built circa 1760, is not normally open except at Mass times, but we were able to meet with one of the local *patróns*, who allowed us inside and gave us a brief history lesson of the church and the community. From Las Trampas, we continued through the rolling hills to the town of Truchas, which was the location of the filming of the movie, *The Milagro Beanfield War*. Our final night of the Camino was spent at the local parish hall, with dinner and breakfast provided by local parishioners.

Day 7, the final day of our Camino del Norte a Chimayó was by far the easiest day of all, not only because it was the shortest – just a bit over nine miles – but also because it was downhill all the way. We left early, getting away before 7:00 am in order to make it to the Santuario in time for the 10:30 am Mass. As always, the group strung out over those nine miles based on walking speed, but we had decided to meet a half-mile from the Santuario and walk in together as a group. We entered the church

in procession with the priest and were seated together at the front of the church. After the homily, as the sermon is called in the Catholic Church, we were each called forward and given our certificates of completion – the Chimayó equivalent of the Compostela given at the completion of the Camino de Santiago. Our final group activity was lunch at a lovely local restaurant, followed by hugs and farewells before we made our separate ways back to our homes.

The Camino del Norte a Chimayó was a unique experience, and although shorter in duration than most of our previous experiences on the Camino de Santiago, it was equally strenuous in its physical challenges and equally meaningful in its emotional and spiritual experience. I think I speak for all of us when I express our sincerest gratitude to the people of San Luis, Garcia, Costilla, Questa, Arroyo Seco, Taos Pueblo, Ranchos de Taos, Peñasco, Truchas, and Chimayó for their gracious hospitality and generosity in providing us meals, lodging, prayers, and blessings on our journey. All costs for our meals and lodging were paid strictly on a donation basis, and looking back, it seems like the services we received were worth much more than the small recommended *donativo* amounts we gave. I would be remiss if I didn't also acknowledge the role played by Mary Warner, a photographer who accompanied us in an SUV, not only creating a photo and video record for a future guidebook but also carrying extra water and some of our heavier personal items like air mattresses and sleeping pads. Future pilgrims on this route must consider the extra weight they will be carrying if they don't have this luxury.

There are currently no guidebooks for this route; however, one our fellow pilgrims, Patt Bekken, is in the process of writing one. Ann is hoping to arrange for marking of the route, at least the Day 5 portion through the Carson National Forest and over the mountain pass. Patt also hopes to organize future group pilgrimages to Chimayó. Her website is [www.peregrinity.org](http://www.peregrinity.org).