

Who runs the *albergues*?

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Ever wonder who runs the *albergues* and sets their house rules? Besides the whims of the more or less patient *hospitaleros* currently in charge in any given shelter? There are some common sense conventions that spread by word of mouth and become best practices labeled as “rules,” but an awful lot depends on who launched a given pilgrims shelter in the first place.

There are five sorts of *albergues* and a lot of variety in the rules they follow. Pilgrim shelters are established by local parishes, various Friends of the Camino groups, private enterprise, municipal authorities, and finally refuges run by a given Spanish province or Autonomous Region.

1. The parish and monastic *albergues* were often the first to appear and preferred the old fashioned name of *refugio*. They were usually hardscrabble and homespun since the parish had little or no monetary support from any outside source, and many still in service are barebones operations. A network of heroic free shelters sprang from the parish in Grañón and now includes other wonderful sites of hospitality like Tosantos and San Juan de Ortega. Nuns offer lodging in a number of places like Logroño where a convent repurposed its underpopulated former girls’ boarding school. There are two convent establishments in Carrión de los Condes, and other refuges managed by Carmelite sisters in Santo Domingo de la Calzada and Benedictines nuns in León.
2. The Associations’ *albergues* are volunteer-run like parish houses, but often have more money (their fundraising catchment is wider) and are subject to all the problems of running an often distant physical plant ... not to mention normal group squabbles. These can be either domestic or foreign associations and national styles play their part as seen among dedicated Spanish volunteers in Astorga, the dutiful Dutch in Roncesvalles and Monjardín, practical Brits in Rabanal and Miraz, and ethereal New Age Brazilians scattered in multiple sites like Belorado and Calzadilla de la Cueva.
3. Privates *albergues* are multiplying the fastest right now. They’re for-profit but almost always family-run and not infrequently dedicated to the charitable care that many pilgrims hope for and respond so well to. Not a few are started by former pilgrims who sense a market niche combined with a way to give back to the Camino. There are some standout operations like the gentle attentions found at the Roncal *albergue* in Cizur Menor, and the well provisioned shelters in Boadilla del Camino and Nájera. They legitimately let themselves formulate their own house rules and services, perhaps accepting walkers and bikers without distinction, taking reservations in advance, helping transport backpacks. They may close completely for off-season family vacations.
4. Many town fathers and mothers who rehab and staff an unused municipal building are motivated by a mix of charity and prudent self-interest. The low grade but steady pilgrim business could save the village, and just might attract some matching funds from

governmental agencies. Besides, no province or town on the Camino wants a reputation for being the 'mean' or unfriendly one offering no hospitality at all. Municipal *albergues* are sometimes converted grade schools that were standing empty because of Spain's declining birthrate, or an underused community center or sports complex built in better times. If it looks like a jury rigged hostel, it's probably an offshoot of city hall.

5. When it comes to setting up and running *albergues*, the Autonomous Region of Galicia has the most comprehensive infrastructure and self-interest in play. The Xunta de Galicia, the Region's parliament, instituted the Xacobeo Foundation in 1991 as a non-profit government corporation with authority to regulate walking paths, signage and other infrastructure. It also rehabs, equips and inaugurates new *albergues*, and sometimes simply takes over and assumes control of bad municipal operations. The Xunta mandated the standardized six euros cap for themselves and all municipal *albergues* throughout Galicia, and prudently imposes some safety and operational standards.

So there are lots of answers to who runs an *albergue* and a pilgrim shouldn't be surprised if the rules change with every shelter they visit!