

JOURNEY TO THE END OF THE EARTH.

Ky rie eeee eeee eee eee eee eee eee eeee eleison
Christe eee eeee eeeeeee eee eee eeee eee ee eleison

The sweet, melodic, exquisite, tone perfect, amazing high pitched voice echoed through the massive towering supports of the great 1000 years old cross shaped cathedral of Santiago de Compostella.

An angelic looking nun, eyes turned to heaven sang the Kyrie Eleison as we entered the packed to the rafters cathedral at about 12.10pm on Wednesday 13th May, 2010.

A special mass occurs every day at 12 noon. A cast of hundreds from archbishops down to trainee priests all dressed in their brocaded gowns and fancy hats of rank offer praise to their gods and saints.

The mass is especially for pilgrims who have trekked up to 1000km to this iconic cathedral along the famous El Camino, the pilgrims trail to Santiago. In reality it is packed with bus loads of tourists and locals who use it as their daily mass.

There is standing room only for most peregrinos who can watch from the sides on weary, aching legs or sitting on the floor staring at the many big TV screens adorning this 10th century building. God has gone high tech. Look out Microsoft.

The cathedral is reputed to be the burial place of St. James, the Apostle. The most popular track to Santiago is known as the way of St. James. Early pilgrims trekked here to pray to St. James and gain plenary indulgences and other heavenly favours.

We had just finished walking 420km in 19days having left our last stop at 6.30am to cover the final 19 km to the finish by noon.

Next day I sat on the 1pm bus to Finisterre, which I had been told took about 1hr and 15 mins. The actual journey which involved multifareous stops took 2 and three quarter hours.

That left me with about 1 hour to see the town they call the end of the earth because of its prominent position on the very edge of Europe. It was where,

during the flat earth period, before Google earth, that people believed you dropped off into an eternal abyss.

Back then many people were reported missing, especially after a night at the local bar.

Galileo tried hard to point out to authorities of the time that the earth was actually round. He was put firmly in his place by the Christian church. These holy men were not only experts on moral and philosophical thought but, also scientific. Through this ignorant, so called enlightened approach to science, they in fact have held progress back by more than 1000 years.

In my view, we would otherwise by now, be regular visitors to other planets, have cured cancer and wiped the planet of most diseases. We would also probably be living to 150 years of age.

Anyway, I digress from the end of the earth. Finisterre, was a beautiful town perched on the edge of nowhere but, I could not avail myself of its treasures due to pelting rain and mist and fog.

I told myself as I sat on the bus back to middle earth that I had at least been to the end of the earth. I was disappointed though, that I couldn't bungee jump off the flat part and maybe glimpse the eternal void.

I spent most of the journey back to Santiago musing about the longest walk I had ever been on, 19 consecutive days covering 420km or about 22km per day. Our longest day was 32km and shortest was 14km.

On the walk itself you don't take in all the beauty around you as on long walks something is always hurting a bit and on rock and shale you are focusing on staying upright.

The landscape varied from long flat seemingly endless stretches to 1000 metre rises which went forever and ever towards the skies.

We trekked across beautiful, stunning wild flower and heather covered valleys, hills and escarpments.

We meandered alongside cool inviting streams and rivers full of trout. We crossed ancient bridges and battlements and strolled through villages 1400 year old.

We marched through 2000 years of history with our mobile phones turned on and our touch iPod in the back pack. We marvelled at the ancient structures and were constantly amused and amazed by the numerous stork nests on church towers. There were sometimes as many as 6 nests on one tower. All complete with storks in residence.

Temperatures varied from 28deg to minus 5 and from beautiful clear blue skies one day to snow, hail, sleet, rain and mud the next. Variety was the spice and we enjoyed all of it.

We stopped for coffee breaks and lunch at wonderful bars and hotels where really good coffees were served for about \$1.70aud and massive beautiful cheese, omelette or ham rolls were served for less than \$6aud.

We conversed in our best Spanish with the bar owners and in English with the other pilgrims. You would see familiar faces for several days, then they would disappear and reappear at some later stop further along the Camino. As the landscape changed so the faces changed.

We saw blisters, limpers, strugglers and bicyclists all heading for the one place. We spoke with Americans, Koreans, English, Germans, Swiss, Austrians, Danes, Irish, French, Spanish, one lone kiwi and 2 Aussies. There were many more women than men, some in groups of up to 8. Camaraderie was the order of the day.

All along the way was the golden arrow pointing towards Santiago de Compostella. This was coupled with the shell, a logo indicating that all roads lead to Santiago. The track was well marked and it was difficult to get lost.

Our hotels were good varying from 1 star to 4 star . Our first hotel at Carrion de los Condos was a magnificent 14th century restored monastery.

Food was very good and a three course meal with wine and water could be had for between \$12 and \$17. Beer was under \$2 a middy and spirits were served by the glass rather than by the usual thimble.

A glass of wine was about \$1.80. Good wine too. Australia now seems very expensive. When you buy a drink in Spain it mostly also includes a small snack or tapas.

We came across many Basil Fawltys in the hotels we stayed in but there were enough good Sybils to offset them. Not many Manuels as they were all holidaying in Barcelona.

There were a lot of cyclists who used a combination of the roads and the walking tracks and the cry of “buon camino” rang out as they passed us. On wet days the cyclists were covered in mud from the tracks.

There was a good vibe between all the pilgrims. Like the old pilgrims, many were doing it as a religious trek. “Buon camino” was the cry of the day and was said with passion by all we encountered along the way.

Just as many were doing it to soak up the beauty of another landscape, explore the culture and history and enjoy the fun, food, wine, company and experiences of fellow time travellers. Viva la difference!

We were doing it to help free the bears from their constant pain and trauma of physical and mental imprisonment.

We of course enjoyed all the exotic aspects of this great trek which follows the ancient footsteps of the original pilgrims.

Spain seems to be a country on valium and manyana could mean next week. We came through village after village without sighting a human. Maybe the odd cat or dog, but generally places seemed deserted, especially between 2 and 5 pm which is siesta time, even in winter. Of a night most restaurants don't open till around 8.30pm. Then real life starts in Spain, as the towns and bars come alive. Prior to 8.30 the town squares are packed with kids playing football as their parents enjoy a wine and a tapas on the sideline.

We walked 420km instead of the planned 500km. We were thwarted by volcanoes in Iceland. We couldn't fly out on our scheduled flights to Spain from London. The best we could do was a ferry 4 days later from Portsmouth across the Bay of Biscay to Santander. From there by taxi another 200km to Carrion de los Condos. We had prebookings all along the route so we had no options but to keep to schedule.

To date we have raised around \$5000 for the bears and are still taking donations until June 30th. Don't forget all donations are tax deductible in Australia. Thanks to all who have supported us and the bears with your

generous donations.

Please make donations payable to;

“Free the Bears Inc”

and send to

Tom Boyle
P.O. Box 807
Bowral NSW 2576

Thanks to Alan Burniston (Au), Greg Miller (Au) and Tony Bennett (U.K.) for their great support, for their sense of humour and for all the fun we had along the way.

Tony Bennett deserves special mention as he walked all the way with many blisters, fluid retention and a pacemaker. How he did so I don't know. He epitomised the Churchillian spirit of “never, never, never give up”

Greg Miller who has represented Australia in Para Games, walked many days with a painful groin injury. We all walked into Santiago together to complete a memorable 420km. 19 day trek.

We also enjoyed the company of Jane Mulvihill, Judy Venn, Brenda and John Woods (U.K.) and Jeanette Burniston (Au) who joined us for 7 days on the trail.

But as always we could stop the pain, we could rest, we could sleep. The bears can't unless we free them from their cage of darkness.

Love and best regards,

Tom Boyle.
1st June, 2010.