

THE PERSONAL PILGRIMAGE

Whether religious, exploratory or athletic in nature, walking tours serve body, mind and spirit

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"The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meaning and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both."

Thomas Merton, 1964

When asked to write about walking pilgrimages, I realized I am the perfect person for the task. As a teenager in the Sixties, I left my home in Montreal unannounced, hitchhiking across the landscape of North America to the **Haight-Ashbury** district of **San Francisco**. Along the way, I discovered what it was like to trudge many miles each day, ultimately searching for my 'self' in the faces of strangers and along the backroads of our collective geography. Walking takes courage, and one must be open to changes as they unfold.

These days, people are boarding jets to far-off destinations in order to go for a walk, pilgrimage or excursion. As I look further into the variety of walking itineraries around the world I am amazed to discover legions of like-minded souls guiding themselves, or being led by experts, on cultural forays and religious pilgrimages. It seems we have rediscovered the oldest form of travel.

It is the unique blend of the physical and spiritual involved in exploring nature by foot that compels us through new pastures, around ancient corners and into unknown terrain. It also fires our primal instincts, as the notion of exploring a physical place unearths qualities in us, while interaction with locals soothes our senses and satiates our wanderlust. Personal walking pilgrimages ultimately serve body, mind and spirit.

HISTORY OF PILGRIMAGES

Known as 'the Way of Saint James' in English, the **Camino de Santiago de Compostela** through **Spain** and **Portugal** is one of the most legendary European pilgrimages. This ancient ritual has spawned a walking culture dating back some 2,000 years. In fact, the world's first travel guide, the *Codex Calixtinus* (circa 1140 A.D.), was written to offer advice for pilgrims in the Middle Ages headed to the **Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela** in northwestern Spain's region of **Galicia**, the walker's ultimate goal.

The ancient *Codex* is written in five parts, with Book V being a pilgrim's dream. It contains suggestions of where to break from the ordeal, which sacred relics to venerate along the way, how to avoid scams and even where to watch out for bad cuisine. The other top-tier religious pilgrimages attracting travellers throughout the calendar year include **Rome**, **Jerusalem** and **Mecca**, while still other destinations are gaining popularity in this specialized travel niche, places like **Chile**, **Mexico** and **Costa Rica**.

CHILE

As Europeans settled the world outside their own borders over the past 1,000 years, they carried their cultural and religious traditions with them. South American countries like Chile are witness to crossover religious festivities attracting new generations of global pilgrims.

In early December, the **Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary** is celebrated widely in this country. This is the time when devout residents of Santiago make a pilgrimage to **Santuario de Lo Vásquez**, a shrine some 80 kilometres from the capital. Some locals cover many kilometres on their knees as a sign of respect to the Virgin and as acknowledgement for the life She has granted to these faithful.

Each year on February 8, some 50,000 pilgrims and more than 3,000 dancers from all over Chile congregate at the **Santuario de la Candelaria** in the **Atacama** region's capital city of **Copiapó** for an important religious festival called **Fiesta de la Candelaria**. Lasting nine days, this colourful celebration honours the patron saint of the local miners.

The **Fiesta de La Tirana** is the most dramatic of Chile's festivals. For three days in July, the village of **La Tirana**, 64 kilometres inland near the **Atacama Desert**, is host to some 150,000 dancers who take to the streets in ribald costumes and handmade devil masks. This popular fête is a manifestation of this area's unique religious blend of Christianity and ancient indigenous traditions.

Of course, if you seek a more typical walk through the spectacular Chilean geography, companies like **Gap Adventures** cover the gamut of both cultural and destination sights. Travellers are able to design the length of their foray to suit their needs and interests, i.e., six days, nine days, et cetera, and the company's outstanding guides provide the expertise and itineraries.

COSTA RICA

For a more personal style of pilgrimage, or for those travellers seeking a challenging trek involving all their capabilities, there is none better than the **Transcontinental Hike** across Costa Rica offered by the **Talamancan Association of Ecotourism and Conservation** in **Puerto Viejo**. "If you are crazy enough to try this 70-kilometre trek, you'll never forget it," is part of their description.

This magical ramble is listed as taking "from six to 15 days," tramping through exquisite rainforests and dreamy mountain cloud forests. Participants cross the **Continental Divide** in the company of an experienced Cabecar native guide. The adventure leads walkers from **Ujarrás** on the Pacific Ocean slope of the **Cordillera de Talamanca**, to a peak of 2,700 metres, then down through thick, mystical forests to the Caribbean village of **Coroma**.

For a memory guaranteed to last a lifetime, and a physical challenge of the highest degree, this transcontinental quest is sure to captivate, while providing a wonderful way to explore Costa Rica's biodiversity and gain unparalleled exposure to unusual wildlife.

MEXICO

An apparition appearing on the clothes of peasant **Juan Diego Cuauhtlatatzin** on the outskirts of Mexico City in 1531 is now the most popular religious icon in Mexico. According to legend, Juan Diego was travelling between his home and Mexico City when **Our Lady of Guadalupe** appeared to him and spoke in his native Nahuatl language.

She told the peasant to build a church on that very site. When Juan Diego told the local bishop, he did not believe him, and asked for proof. According to the story, even though it was winter Our Lady told him to pick flowers, and Spanish roses bloomed immediately at his feet. As Juan Diego presented the flowers to the bishop, the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe was miraculously imprinted on the material of his garment.

In the aftermath, missionaries quickly took advantage of the power of this story to convert millions of Aztecs. It is no surprise therefore to learn that pilgrimages to the **Basilica of Our Lady of Guadalupe** make it the most visited Catholic shrine in the world. Ten million visitors come to this venerated site each year.

FINISH LINE

Whether you're interested in a self-guided stroll through the countryside or captivated by the cultural curiosities presented in a formal group tour, walking pilgrimages are an increasingly popular travel option. Heralding a wide menu of possibilities on all continents, the central theme of walking is, after all, to self-propel, and travel companies are set to accommodate all fashion of walkers, strollers and hikers. Be it a religious pilgrimage or a ramble driven by wanderlust like this writer had as a young hitchhiker, remember the words of Scottish-American naturalist John Muir, when he said, "Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you, and the storms their energy, while cares will drop off like autumn leaves." ■

