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A Journey of a Lifetime

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A journey of a lifetime



One of the many statues of St. James that Juan Manuel Gómez encountered on his journey.

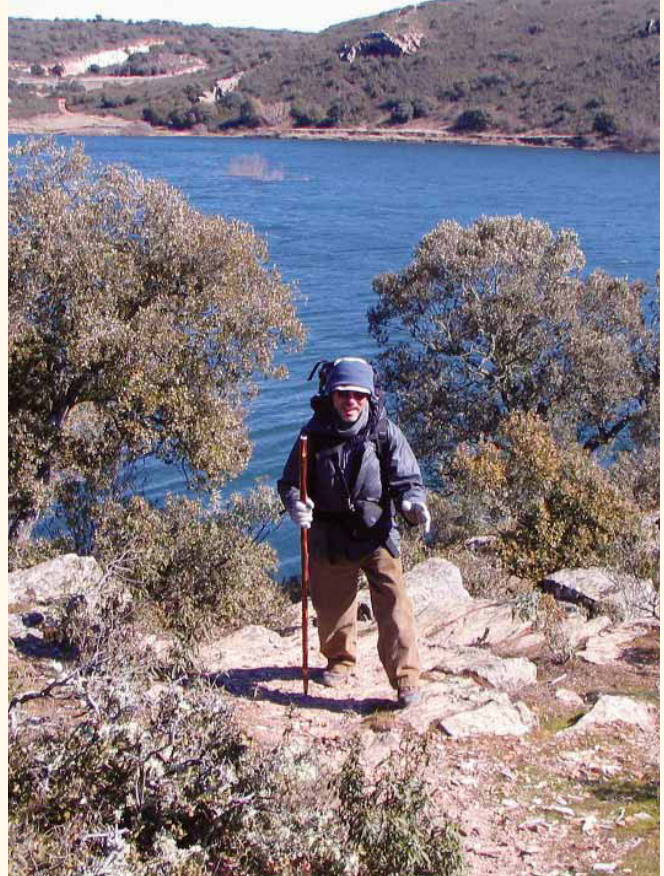
Juan Manuel Gómez is a true pilgrim.

On a recent journey, he traced the footsteps of thousands before him dating back to the 9th century. He covered 1,000 kilometers from Seville to Santiago de Compostela, Spain, over 43 days, with nothing but a backpack and sleeping bag. While his quest was not religious, it was spiritual and emotional. He deepened his knowledge of Spanish history, art, architecture and culture. He learned to rely on the kindness of strangers and to take one day at a time. His journey was a pivotal moment in his life.

According to Dante, there are three types of pilgrims: the “palmieri,” those who go to Jerusalem; the “romei,” those who visit Rome; and the “peregrini,” those who have been to the sepulchre of St. James in Galicia, Spain. They, like James, are true pilgrims because they are away from their homeland, visiting the grave of one who rests outside his homeland. James, the apostle who preached in Galicia, was beheaded in Palestine, but his body, placed in a boat by his disciples arrived pilgrim-like on Spain’s Northwest Coast. Beginning in the 9th century, his tomb became a place for pilgrimage and the cathedral erected on that spot has been visited by millions throughout the centuries.

As an associate professor of Spanish at Linfield, Gómez teaches not only language, but also the history, culture and literature of Spain. His interest in the pilgrimage was sparked during his first sabbatical while researching the Muslim influence on Spain’s history and culture. He became intrigued by the references to St. James (Santiago in Spanish), the patron saint of Spain, who, according to legend, was instrumental in helping the Spanish finally defeat the Moors in the 15th century.

Although several paths lead pilgrims to Santiago de Compostela, Gómez chose the lesser known route stretch-



Juan Manuel Gómez climbing a steep portion of the trail he followed. Some parts were rugged, with severe inclines and fences or trees blocking the way.

ing from Seville in southern Spain. Because he traveled during February and March, solitude was his companion for a large part of the journey. He was alone on the trail for the first 21 days, often encountering no one between stops. Of those he did meet, most were Spanish, although at various times he walked with pilgrims from France, Switzerland and Germany.

“Most of the people who travel are not religious,” Gómez said. “They do it mostly for the experience of the journey, the history, the art or the culture.”

Gómez walked across the wide plains of southern Spain, over low hills and a high plateau. He traveled through hills covered with heather and into an area that resembles Northwest Oregon. He walked through groves of chestnut trees and centuries-old vineyards. The farther north he traveled, the less solitary the land became. Houses and villages were more numerous and he encountered more people who were eager to talk, to learn where he was from, and perhaps to exchange a little gossip.

He learned quickly that a walking stick was essential.

“Sometimes you are on a trail that is narrow and climbing and you need it for support,” he said. “You also need it to keep away dogs. One time, a dog came after me and if I had not had the stick, I would have been bitten.”

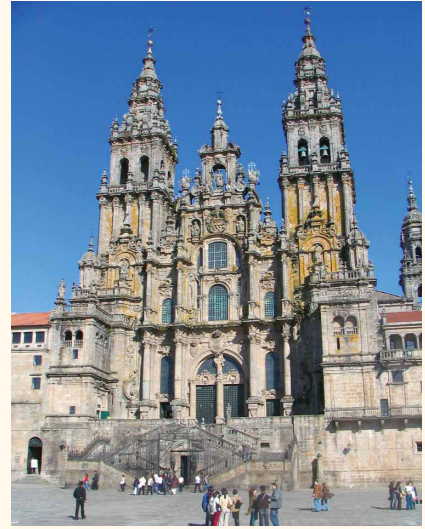
He not only encountered an occasional hostile dog, but also pigs, usually restrained, and cattle, which occasionally were not. At least twice, he opted to jump a fence rather than confront threatening bulls.

He had ample time for his thoughts.

“I thought of home and why I was doing this,” he said. “I am spiritual and religious and believe in the inter-



The road built by the Romans is still visible and often the trail follows it. There are a number of Roman bridges still in use throughout the country.



The cathedral at Santiago de Compostela.

cession of saints, but I was not going to Santiago in search of a miracle.”

Whenever Gómez became lost or uncertain, someone was always there to help. At a roundabout, when he couldn't figure out what direction to take, a gentleman stopped to give him directions. In Salamanca, when he had no idea how to find the local inn for pilgrims, a woman stopped him and his companions, asked if they were pilgrims and gave them the number to call. A restaurant owner fed them and refused to take their money.

“This is something special,” Gómez said. “You always find the people at the right time. And that's one of those things you cannot overlook. The other thing is that people treat you very well, whether in a small town or a metropolitan area. You have those experiences and you think ‘this will never happen again.’ But it does.”

Gómez was surprised at the intensity of his emotion when he reached the end of his journey. At the cathedral in Santiago, he walked through the stunning Gate of Gloria portico, and touched the Tree of Jesse, where the



Markers along the trail in Galicia mark the direction to the journey's end. Galicia is the province in which St. James is said to have preached before he returned to Jerusalem and was martyred.



A pilgrim touches the Tree of Jesse at the Cathedral in Santiago. The pillar is worn from the touch of the millions who have made the pilgrimage from across Europe and around the world.

hands of millions before have left their prints. He tapped the forehead of Maestro Mateo, the builder of the gate. He walked to the altar of St. James, under which lies the saint's tomb, and gave thanks for all who had helped him on his journey – those who gave directions, provided food and housing and offered friendship to a stranger. He placed his hand on the statue of St. James, marking the end of his journey. Twice he was nearly overcome with emotion – when he received his certificate, recording the completion of his pilgrimage, and when they announced it at mass the following day.

All along his journey, he encountered statues of St. James, always dressed as a pilgrim, and examples of the influence the pilgrims have had on the history and culture of Spain.

“Santiago is a place where so many events have taken place,” Gómez said. “This is a place that has linked Europe with Spain. Santiago has been, in a sense, a meeting of

cultures, where you see the Romanesque, the Gothic, the Muslim influences. Spain received this influx of art, writing and music because of this intercourse of culture.”

Since his return, Gómez has continued his research into how the figure of St. James is used as a conqueror, an intercessor in battles. Much of what he has seen and learned, including some 2,000 digital images, is bringing history and culture to life in his classes. His life is richer for having had the experience.

“I was 60 years old and I had never walked 20 kilometers in one day, or maybe in my entire life,” he said with a laugh. “I walk a mile every day, but that’s with my dog. But 20 or 40 kilometers a day for 39 days? I just feel that I’ve done something for myself that will stay with me for the rest of my life. I have accomplished many things in my life, but this is one of those main pivotal events.”

— *Mardi Mileham*



A self portrait of Juan Manuel Gómez. Although the weather was unusually dry, there is snow in the background. He had only two days of snow during his entire 43-day journey.

A fortress, built to defend the town of El Real de la Jara, near Seville, against the frequent Portuguese attacks.