

JOURNEYS WITH A PURPOSE

ALREADY INCREASINGLY POPULAR WITH SOLO AND NON-RELIGIOUS TRAVELLERS, PILGRIM ROUTES OFFER A CHANCE TO FIND INNER PEACE AND RECONNECT WITH THE WORLD POST-COVID. WORDS: KERRY WALKER

Like many pilgrims who walk the Camino de Santiago network of pilgrim's routes, Sherly Cho had no obvious religious motivation. Back in 2018, she took a five-week hiatus from her Korean-Swiss cookery school in Zurich, ready for a challenge. But Sherly never anticipated that the 500-mile pilgrimage from St Jean Pied de Port, in the French Pyrenees, to Santiago de Compostela, in Galicia, northwest Spain, would inspire major changes in her life.

The year before Covid-19 slammed the brakes on international travel, the Camino de Santiago witnessed record pilgrim numbers. According to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela's Pilgrims Reception Office, 347,578 hikers received their Compostela certificate in 2019, a year-on-year increase of 6%. Its records also showed that a growing number were solo pilgrims, like Sherly, and that only 40% of all pilgrims claimed religion was their sole motivation.

"Galicia's towns are special, but you wouldn't give them a second look unless you arrived on foot," says Sherly. She was even more impressed by her natural surroundings, despite enduring a baptism of fire along the way, involving blisters, bed bugs and four days of solid rain. "I'll never forget the divine-smelling eucalyptus forests and the remote, desert-like *mesetas* [plateaus], where there's nothing but open horizons, sand and the sound of your own thoughts and footsteps," she notes.

More travellers than ever are embarking on pilgrimages, which offer a unique way to explore and experience a destination. Between 2016 and 2019, sales for all Camino de Santiago routes soared. The increase was especially dramatic for the Caminho Português (pilgrimage routes starting in Portugal),

which skyrocketed by almost 100%. Lesser-known routes are becoming increasingly popular, such as Camino Invierno; this off-the-beaten-track alternative for solitude seekers arriving in late autumn and winter takes in many of Spain's romanesque chapels and vineyards.

Tim Williamson, from UK travel company Responsible Travel, believes pilgrimage holidays will boom in a post-Covid world, as people move away from short-haul city breaks towards fewer flights and longer trips with a sense of purpose.

"In recent years, our pilgrimage bookings have risen markedly," says Tim. "They're very popular with solo travellers, but increasingly families are embarking on them too. Lockdown has shown us that community is important; people want space but miss human connection. Pilgrimages tick many of these boxes."

Beyond offering walking pilgrimages, such as the 141-mile Pilgrims' Way, from Winchester to Canterbury, Responsible Travel deviates from the norm, widening the focus with the likes of kayaking and self-guided cycling trips along the Camino de Santiago.

"Many people still consider a pilgrimage to be an epic, solitary journey — and, of course, it can be," says Tim. "But ultimately pilgrimages are personal. For some, they're spiritual or religious; others are drawn to the history and culture. They can also help you switch off and reconnect with nature. Even a few days can be rewarding and refreshing."

Bookings for traditional routes also look set to soar in 2021. "We're expecting a surge in bookings for this year's Xacobeo, or Holy Year, when the Feast of St James (25 July) falls on a Sunday, which last occurred in 2010," says Mary Lawless, at self-guided

walking holiday specialist Macs Adventure. "Consequently, pilgrims who walk the Camino will be able to enter the cathedral by the 'Holy Door'. And those who visit the apostle's tomb will obtain plenary indulgence: the complete forgiveness of all sins."

Natural remedy

Choosing a journey immersed in nature — an increasingly common reason cited for taking up a pilgrimage — would have resonated with early Celtic saints of the fifth and sixth centuries, such as St David. In the Middle Ages, the eponymous Welsh city was a pilgrimage destination rivalling Spain's Santiago. The Shrine of St David, in its resplendent medieval cathedral, is the climax of a new week-long pilgrimage trail for 2021, forging the Celtic connection between Ireland and Wales as it treads in saintly footsteps along the wave-hammered shores of County Wexford and Pembrokeshire.

"On these coasts, you still feel the spiritual connection with the living landscape," says Iain Tweedale, a guide with both Journeying and Guided Pilgrimage who'll be leading this new tour. "It's what the Celts called a 'thin place', where the gap between heaven and earth is small," he says. "After several days walking, when the mind calms, you observe your surroundings more keenly, seeing simple things like rocks, flowers and birds as if for the first time. The outer journey from place to place becomes an inner journey from head to heart."

If, as Iain suggests, the slow pace of coastal pilgrimage lets us re-encounter a rhythm we've lost — where the tides and seasons, not the clock, become our reference points — can pilgrimage help us heal and provide perspective in a post-pandemic world?



IMAGE: 4 CORNERS

TOP 10 PILGRIMAGE ROUTES

JAPAN: KUMANO KODŌ

This network of ancient trails dives into the remote, densely forested, shrine-topped mountains of the Kii Peninsula, Japan's spiritual heartland.

UK, FRANCE & ITALY: VIA FRANCIGENA

A 1,200-mile route connecting Canterbury to Rome via France, the Swiss Alps and the Italian Apennines, passing churches and shrines devoted to St Francis. viefrancigene.org

SRI LANKA: ADAM'S PEAK

In Sri Lanka's Central Highlands, this conical, 7,360ft-high peak is home to a footprint that's said to belong to — faith depending — Adam, Buddha or Shiva.

PORTUGAL & SPAIN: CAMINHO PORTUGUÊS

The wild Atlantic coast unravels before you on this uncrowded trail from Lisbon (380 miles) or Porto (140 miles) to Santiago de Compostela. caminhoportosantiago.com

TIBET: MOUNT KAILASH

This three-day, 32-mile circuit of sacred 21,778ft Mount Kailash in Tibet is a holy ritual said to bring good fortune.

FRANCE: LOURDES

The 92-mile Piemont Route connects St-Jean-Pied-de-Port and Lourdes, a holy pilgrimage site since 1858, when Bernadette Soubirous claimed to have witnessed 18 apparitions of the Virgin Mary. lourdes-france.org

SCOTLAND: ST MAGNUS WAY

The wide-open horizons, space and silence of Orkney's coastline enthrall on this 58-mile route honouring the island's patron saint. stmagnusway.com

THE MIDDLE EAST: ABRAHAM'S PATH

This epic 1,243-mile route starts in Harran, Turkey, where God is said to have called upon Abraham to 'go forth', and rambles on through Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Jordan. abrahampath.org

GERMANY: VIA COLONIENSIS

Grand abbeys and palaces punctuate this 152-mile trail, uniting the former Roman cities of Cologne and Trier, where fourth-century St Peter's Cathedral is a highlight.

IRELAND: ST FINBARR'S WAY

Traversing three mountain ranges, this 22-mile pilgrimage begins at the Top of the Rock in Dromdaleague, County Cork, where sixth-century monk St Finbarr once preached. pilgrimpath.ie

“Covid has forced us to stop, think and question life’s assumptions,” says Iain. “As we emerge from lockdown, pilgrimage is more relevant than ever, allowing us to take stock and consider our path. Some will go to mourn or rethink relationships. Others will give thanks for pulling through. Modern-day pilgrimage lets you explore your spiritual side without necessarily being religious. We enter into a union with nature as we walk. And this newfound love and appreciation makes us want to protect it. So perhaps pilgrimage can prepare us for tackling climate change, the greatest challenge of our times, once Covid has passed.”

So, just who is the modern pilgrim and what motivates him or her? According to a survey by the British Pilgrimage Trust, around half the respondents cited either emotional wellbeing, connecting with nature, spirituality or cultural heritage as their main motivation. Just 13% quoted religious observance — and if many pilgrimages today are secular, what differentiates each of these journeys from a very long walk?

“There’s usually a reason for pilgrimage — resolving an issue, bringing something in, letting something go,” says Guy Hayward, co-founder of the British Pilgrimage Trust and co-author of guidebook *Britain’s Pilgrim Places*. He believes that at the heart of true pilgrimage is intention, determined by your heart and activated by your feet. “There’s nothing intrinsically religious or secular about connecting with your deepest needs,” he says. “The word ‘holy’ comes from the Old English ‘*halig*’, meaning ‘bringing health’. A holy place can be an ancient yew or a hilltop, a synagogue or a stone circle.”

Guy believes Britain has always been a “land of quest”, with many pilgrimage places on our doorsteps in need of rediscovering. He says new routes could be established in places like Scotland’s Whithorn Way, or St Alkelda’s Way in the Yorkshire Dales.



“Since time immemorial, pilgrimage has offered a physical path with a clear destination, enabling us to structure our search for inner direction in times of change and crisis,” says Guy.

It can also bring clarity, with many pilgrims, including Sherly Cho, reporting a spiritual or emotional epiphany, with the journey acting as a powerful, life-changing switch. “Going alone was a good choice,” Sherly says of her solo exploration of the Camino de Santiago. “I made friends for life. We shared everything: a dorm, an apple, our innermost feelings. I realised that I could make do

without material things; stuff just weighs you down. Now I’m downsizing my home; decluttering my life.”

One step beyond

For many people, pilgrimage is about making an ‘investment’, not necessarily in the physical or monetary sense, but rather being willing to open up to change and any consequences that entails. Covid-19 has presented challenges and restrictions the likes of which few of us will have faced before. As a result, many of us will be seeking journeys that might offer change and therapeutic rewards.

“There’s immense unresolved, unsupported grief because of the epidemic,” says Dee Dyas, director of the University of York’s Centre for Pilgrimage Studies and author of *The Dynamics of Pilgrimage*. “People are desperate; they need to process their lives, find meaning in special places, create positive memories, say their goodbyes. And pilgrimage doesn’t have to involve a long walk — it’s far more multifaceted than that. Humans are hard-wired to respond to special places and look to something bigger than themselves. There are ‘accidental pilgrims’ who tick the non-religious box

In a frantic digital age, where we’re often disengaged from our environment, the elements and our truest selves, the slow pace of pilgrimage and the physical and mental space it allows can help us reflect, realign our goals and press the reset button



solvitur ambulando (“it is solved by walking”).”

With their crowds and extreme outpourings of faith, pilgrimages in many parts of the world can seem like the antithesis of walks for quiet contemplation. Take Kumbh Mela, the world’s largest pilgrimage gathering; it’s celebrated in the form of a 12-year cycle at four spots along the Ganges, where 120 million Hindus take to the sacred waters, praying for emancipation from the cycle of rebirth. In Saudi Arabia, the hajj sees 2.5 million Muslim pilgrims descend upon the Great Mosque of Mecca.

Israel is welcoming more pilgrims than ever: a record 4.5 million arrived in 2019. And for many, it’s exactly these immense numbers, the mass of humanity, that’s the point of pilgrimage.

If ‘intention’ is the start and ‘investment’ the heart of every pilgrimage, then ‘gratitude’ is the end reward: for life and good health, for nature and its wonders. It was for the latter that, in 2019, photographer Tim Bird decided to cycle the recently opened St Olav Waterway, a coast-hugging pilgrim trail linking Finland and Sweden.

“The pilgrimage was meditative and spiritual, but not in a prescribed religious way,” says Tim. “I enjoyed the remote nature, the physical replenishment after the long Finnish winter. The headwinds and downpours were challenging, but the wildlife was remarkable: migratory birds, deer, hares and the occasional elk swimming island to island. Coming across a newly arrived flock of cranes was a delight.”

In a frantic digital age, where we’re often disengaged from our environment, the elements and our truest selves, the slow pace of pilgrimage and the physical and mental space it allows can help us reflect, realign our goals and press the reset button. As we face the long post-crisis path ahead, we might see ourselves as pilgrims in a brave new world, where nothing is more powerful or necessary than the simple act of giving thanks and putting one foot in front of another. And, as Sherly Cho says, it’s as straightforward as that. “I got up at 6am and walked eight hours a day,” she noted. “Hiking the Camino was the happiest and healthiest I have ever felt.” □

LEFT: Nachisan Seiganto-ji Temple and the Nachi Falls, on the Kumano Kodō pilgrim trail network

PREVIOUS PAGE, FROM TOP: Hikers in the Tibet Autonomous Region on a *kora* (a type of pilgrimage), circumambulating Mount Kailash, sacred to Bon, Buddhism, Hinduism and Jainism; an official stamp for St Olav Waterway, a coast-hugging pilgrim’s trail linking Finland and Sweden

but subsequently find spiritual enlightenment — even God. Pilgrimage is a metaphor for life: uniting the inner and outer journeys.”

At its most fundamental, pilgrimage has changed little since the Middle Ages, when Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales*, about a group of pilgrims travelling to the shrine of St Thomas Becket — a work that has come to epitomise the practice.

“Within three years of Becket’s violent death [in 1170], 700 miracles had been attributed to him, and pilgrims flocked to Canterbury to worship at his tomb,” says Naomi Speakman, curator of the British Museum’s 2021 exhibition *Thomas Becket: Murder And The Making Of A Saint* (22 April to 22 August). “The pilgrimage to Canterbury is at the

heart of our exhibition, and *The Canterbury Tales* still resonates with modern audiences.”

Thomas Becket wasn’t the only saint to leave an indelible imprint on Britain’s landscapes, forging paths for future pilgrims. New for 2021, The Northern Saints Trails will revive six ancient routes across the North East, paying homage to Northern saints like St Cuthbert, St Aidan and St Hilda.

“Pilgrims would have approached Durham from different directions in medieval times; these trails reflect this,” says route coordinator David Pott. “The major motivation back then was seeking healing. That’s often true today, but in a different way. It’s no coincidence many people go on a pilgrimage after a life crisis. I believe in the maxim attributed to Saint Augustine:

MORE INFO:

spain.info/en/discover-spain/xacobeo-camino-santiago
macsadventure.com
responsibletravel.com
journeying.co.uk
guidedpilgrimage.co.uk
britishpilgrimage.org
pilgrimagestudies.ac.uk
britishmuseum.org
northernsaints.com
stolavwaterway.com

FURTHER READING:

Britain’s Pilgrim Places, by Guy Hayward and Nick Mayhew-Smith. RRP: £19.99 (Lifestyle Press)
The Dynamics of Pilgrimage, by Dee Dyas. RRP: £33 (Routledge ebook)