

# St. JAMES' WAY – MANUEL VICEDO MARTÍNEZ

Interview conducted by Isabel Capitán and Rafael Arenillas



*Manuel Vicedo is a biologist, he worked in primary and secondary education and nowadays he is a lecturer at the Permanent University of the University of Alicante. Since 2014, he has been organizing trips to the St. James' Way for the senior students of the university.*

## **Manolo, what made you decide to do the St. James' Way for the first time?**

When I retired in 2009, I decided to take the backpack and do the Way. I had heard a lot about it, and I had many friends who had done it, but as a biologist, I was more interested in natural experiences, and that's why I took so long to decide. On the one hand, I had a cultural interest; and, on the other hand, the personal challenge, the feeling of being able to beat myself up. I did most of the Way with a friend, and although he stopped at Santo Domingo de la Calzada, I continued until the end. For 36 days, I walked the 792 km of the Way from Roncesvalles to Santiago. That was a unique experience, difficult to repeat in these times. I completed from 18 to 20 km. a day. I passed through 205 urban centres, 7 provinces; in short, I covered the entire north of Spain. It was an exceptional adventure that has marked my life forever. From my point of view, one of the main reasons why the road leaves this feeling on you is the people. Although you walk alone, you are always accompanied by people who come from all over the world. You sleep in hostels sharing life with these people you didn't know before, creating bonds, helping each other, sharing, and finally you return home full of experiences.

In 2014, the students of the Permanent University asked me to organize the trip for them. I loved the idea of spreading the spirit of the Way and living an intense experience with my senior students; therefore, since then, I have scheduled one stage of the Way a year, about 9 days long, during which about 100 km are covered at a rate of 15/18km a day. The first trips were so successful that I had to create a new group that started again from Roncesvalles.

## **The Way has evolved over the years, and with them the reasons for walking it, in your opinion what are the current ones?**

Since Sancho de la Rosa set out on the Way in 1132, starting from Roncesvalles with religious motivation, the reasons why people decide to do St. James' Way have changed over the centuries. Today there are basically three: cultural, religious and sport. To these, we must add the personal challenge and the feelings of solidarity, cohesion and coexistence, which are shared

among the walkers. Living experiences with people from other countries with different mentalities also offers a linguistic and cultural richness to the traveller.

### **Is it necessary to sleep in hostels and carry your backpack all along with you to be considered a good pilgrim?**

In the old days, there was no logistical infrastructure, hostels or hotels, as we have today along the Way, so the pilgrim had to carry his backpack with all his equipment on his back. Today, however, it is not necessary to do it, as there are systems to pick it up to the end of our stage. This is much more comfortable for the pilgrim, as it allows him to relaxedly walk and not worry about it during visits and stops. Nonetheless, it is advisable to carry what is only necessary, few clothes and little weight.

As for sleeping in hostels, this is the traditional accommodation: they are simple, cheap, and usually equipped with laundry and other essential services. However, it is difficult to find a place in some seasons due to the considerable number of pilgrims. An alternative is to sleep in hotels, which generally offer many facilities and make it easier for older people, who used to face a very hard to do the Way, to do it now without too many difficulties.

### **What does it feel like to finish the Way and reach the Plaza del Obradoiro in Santiago?**

There are many indescribable emotions. Joy, happiness and a feeling of pride are the most obvious. The first thing pilgrims usually do when they arrive at the Plaza del Obradoiro is to give each other a congratulatory hug for having reached their goal after great efforts and sacrifices. Then, you have to go to the Pilgrim's Office to request the famous "Compostelana", a document that proves that you have completed the pilgrimage.

### **What impresses you most about the Way?**

Along the Way, the pilgrim can enjoy a variety of landscapes of incredible beauty and contrasts, ranging from the wooded areas of the Pyrenees, through Castillian moors, to Galicia wetlands.

Each city, each village we pass through, each of the hermitages along the Way has its charm. The pilgrim stops and feels enraptured in this contemplation. There are Romanesque temples, such as the cathedral of San Pedro in Jaca, the church of San Bartolomé in Logroño, Santa María de Eunate in Navarra or the Collegiate Church of San Isidoro in León, and Gothic temples such as the Cathedral of Burgos or Leon which impress the pilgrim.

Last but not least is the relationship with the other pilgrims you meet on the Way, for just one or several days, and with whom, besides having a common goal, you share experiences and a part of your life, establishing relationships that will last for many years to come.