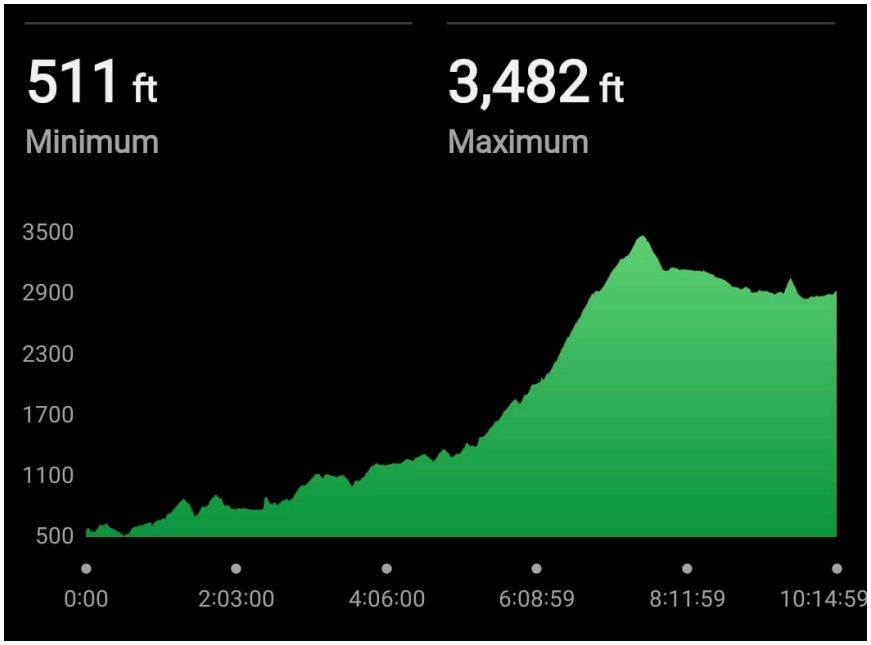
Day 1
Tuesday
August 26, 2025

Saint Jean Pied-de-Port to Espinal
Destination: Albergue Irugoienea

Time on Trail: 10 hours, 15 minutes
Distance Traveled: 19.3 miles (31 km)

Speed: 1.9 mph (3 km/h)
Pace: 32 minutes/mile (20 minutes/km)



Note on Terrain Graph:
As you can see on the chart below, for the first 5 hours, we climbed about 700 feet (216 meters). Approximately 233 feet/hour (71 meters/hour)
 But in the next three hours, the climb was about 3,000 feet (920 meters), or about 1,000 feet/hour (307 meters/hour).
That was perhaps the steepest ascent of the entire Camino. Also one of our slowest average speeds.

Jimś Daily Trail Report:
Äs you can see, it was 5 hours of gradual climbing, followed by 3 hours of steep incline to the , and then a gradual decline for 2 hours.

I should explain here about the data shared above.

Jim had an app that allowed him to get a visual display of the elevation changes we walked each day, with time walked and feet above sea level. It was a very impressive record of the hills and mountainside we walked up and down each day.

The drawback was that there was no ¨absolute¨ standard. So a display showing we walked up and down 4 separate hills that went up 100 feet and down 100 feet between each hill might look almost as hilly as a display showing we walked up and down 4 separate mountainsides that went up and down 1,000 feet between each mountainside. Unless you took notice of the daily metrics, both days would look difficult.

The app also recorded how many miles we walked, and how long it took us. So every day we got a rough daily speed metric. This was not quite as accurate as the elevation display, because sometimes he forgot to start it in the morning, or stopped it when we got to a town rather than to our albergue. Other times he would keep the clock running during some breaks (water breaks, rest stops) and stop the clock for others (meals, tours, shopping). So the time spent actually ¨moving" was not entirely accurate, but did give us a general idea of our pace during each day's hike.

Jim found this hiking pace information quite useful in setting a daily pace. Overall, I agreed, though to be honest, there were times I found it annoying.

Jim also made a brief trail report to share with our family daily at the end of each dayś hike when he sent out the Terrain Graph and the Time/Distance data. Though he did not write much down on our whatsapp messages, , at the end of almost every day he would call his wife Terri and/or one of his kids (April, Jimmy and Krystal). So although his text reports might seem brief, he did share each dayś events with his family.

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Despite the predictions of many, I suffered no ill effects from the 12 hour old tuna fish and egg salad sandwich yesterday. Hooray for me and my digestive system!

Our first "morning departure" routine went fairly smoothly and quietly, considering we were all novices. We managed to leave before 7AM, shortly before dawn, which was about 7:10 at that time of year. We weren't the first out of the dorm, but we weren't the last ones out either.

Because I had been so intimidated by the steep incline of the road going just from the hostel to the Pilgrim Office the night before, and the sight of the imposing mountains ahead, I quietly discarded a few items from my backpack before we left the albergue in an effort to lighten my load.

Until I started training with Jim a week earlier, I had been training under the assumption that I would have a backpack weighing about 15 lbs (7 kg). When I got to Europe, I was advised to take more gear, and my backpack swelled to 22 lbs (10 kg).

An additional fear factor was that I had never hiked any significant incline longer than a quarter mile. Those conditions simply did not exist near my Chicago home, except for a few Lake Michigan sand dunes.

So, in a mild panic, I ditched my “spare” pair of shoes, leaving my hiking shoes and electing to stay with my more comfortable running shoes. I was warned that my running shoes might be slippery on wet rocks or leaves, but I chose comfort over safety. Time would tell if that was a wise choice.

And I left behind a rock that my friend Diane had given me to leave at the *Cruz de Ferro* (Cross of Fire). It simply read BELIEVE.” I believed I needed to leave it behind. Although it probably only weighed 8 ounces (0.2 kg), in my mind it suddenly grew to weigh 5 lbs (2 kg).

I also left a couple long sleeved shirts - including my treasured “Statler & Waldorf" Muppet shirt. Leaving that shirt behind is one of my few Camiono regrets. It had much sentimental value. If you look at the photos in the Prelude, you will see a photo of Jim and I wearing matching shirts. Now only Jim has one. Mine is who knows where…The next time I visit St.Jean Pied-de-Porte, I will make sure to stop in at Gite Izzaxulo and see if my shirt is still tucked into the cubbyhole where I heartlessly abandoned it.

Though this culling probably saved me a few pounds, I doubted that it would be sufficient to help me make it through the day.

Our first day on the actual Camino was an eye-opener for me.

Because we were unable to make reservations at Orrison or Roncesvalles on the more popular "Napoleon Route” over the Pyrenees, we were hiking the “Valcarlos Route” which skirted most of the mountain range.

The Valcarlos Route is actually the older and more traditional route, and the only route open from November through March. And this route was the historic site of the Battle of Roncesvalles, where Charlemagne’s army was ambushed and the heroic Roland was killed as he defended its retreat.

But the Napoleon Route is currently much more popular among pilgrims. So I was disappointed not to be able to hike it. It would probably have provided better opportunities to meet other pilgrims at the start of our Camino. Our route was almost devoid of other pilgrims that first day, So it took us a few extra days to start to recognize faces as we traveled. Many of the other pilgrims we met in the first few days had already formed groups from the two larger and more popular albergues in Orisson and Roncesvalles.

And although our route was considered somewhat easier than the other route, it is still considered formidable, with an especially steep section near the end, with a long stretch with no rest stops or drinking water available along that stretch.

The first 7 miles (11 km) of our day was primarily on paved, one-lane road, going up and down rolling hillsides.

Despite a terrain chart that showed a mild gradual incline, it was soon apparent to me that terrain charts LIE! We would hike up 100 feet (30 meters) then down 75 feet (23 meters), then up 150 feet (45 meters), then down 100 feet (30 meters). And repeat endlessly. So, yes, after five hours, we did gain 700 feet (216 meters) in altitude, But in reality, we must have hiked upward 1,500 feet (457meters) and downward 800 feet (243 meters).

At least that’s how it seemed to me. “Mostly flat, with a gradual incline”. “Pshaw!” I say!

The weather was sunny and mild and the countryside was very rustic and beautiful, with lots of greenery, many small farms, and an occasional flock of sheep or vineyard. Very quiet and peaceful.

We had skipped breakfast in Saint Jean Pied-de-Port, but we did stop for breakfast at a modern rest stop in Ventos. It was laid out almost like an American truck stop. We were able to get coffee and some snacks. I believe we might have encountered our first chocolate croissant there. These delicious pastries seemed to be present everywhere along the Camino. It was a food break I needed desperately, as I normally have a large breakfast at the start of the day.

But after two hours of hiking up and down hillsides, it was obvious that I was not in shape for this terrain. Before long, Jim and Valerie would patiently wait for me as I panted to the top of each rise, and then continue to pull ahead down into the next valley and up the next rise, where they would again wait for me to catch up. This pattern repeated itself throughout the morning.

Because of my frequent need for breathers, we did not reach Valcarlos, which was less than halfway to our next hostel, until almost noon.

The final approach to the town Valcarlos was up a wide steep, grooved cement roadway that even one guidebook described as “challenging”.

Although Jim and Valerie were able to conquer it without any obvious difficulty, I was breathing heavily by the time I was even halfway up, despite taking short steps, and zig zagging across the road in a slalom pattern.

By midway up the hill, both of my arms cramped up from the unfamiliar strain of using the hiking poles so vigorously.

By the time I reached the top, I was just dragging the poles along, unable to flex my arms. Additionally, the tops of my feet were in pain from the sharp angle of the pavement.

I did finally manage to join Jim and Valerie at the top of the hill, where the road quickly led into the town of Valcarlos itself.

It was there that I decided that the Camino had already defeated me. I could no longer continue for the day. We hadn’t even reached the much more difficult steeper part of the trail, and already I was in pain.



Jim waiting patiently for older brother Mike to catch up.



The final descent before the ascent into the town of Valcarlos that did Mike in.

It was decided that Jim and Valerie would continue on, while I took a taxi to our next hostel in Espinal, where Jim had already made a reservation. We also decided that I would take their backpacks along with me, and they would travel on with just their hiking poles and water bottles.

We were able to contact the local taxi service through the operator of the town *farmacias* (pharmacy) thanks to Valerie's help in explaining our need. (In Spain, these medical supply stores displayed larger GREEN crosses to identify them.)

After a short break and the start of what would become a Camino tradition (a daily dose of ICE CREAM), Jim and Valerie continued on, while I waited for the taxi.





Valcarlos, Spain: The Pilgrim Mural, the Parroquia de Santiago, a 2022 sculpture commemorating the contribution of the local townspeople who assembled to ambush Charlemagneś invading army

It took over an hour for the taxi to arrive. I am guessing that it is more frequently needed on the busier Napoleon Route which is some distance away. I shared the taxi with another pilgrim, a slight young man, who got off in Roncesvalles, and I traveled on to Espinal. Because of my embarrassment, I did not talk with this fellow taxi passenger, but I did spot him several more times along the Camino, and we studiously avoided acknowledging our mutual first-day failure.

We had only walked about 7 miles (12 km), and Jim and Valerie still had 12 miles (19 km) to go. The hardest 12 miles.

Fortunately for them, they no longer had to carry their backpacks. But they still had to face a sizable stretch of trail right on a busy, winding 2-lane country road, followed by a long, very steep mountain incline. WIth absolutely no rest or supply stops for the next 7 miles (10 km).





Images from Jim & Valerieś mountain forest hike.

Our hostel in Espinal, the Alburgue Iruguiena, was a combined home and dorm, with a family living in the upper half the building, while the lower level contained our albergue - two dorm rooms and showers, toilets and a large lobby, with a laundry tub and drying rack in an outdoor patio.

As typical for almost all hostels on the Camino, our hostel was closed to pilgrims from about 8AM till 2PM for cleaning and maintenance. I got there slightly early, so I waited outside and watched a couple of very small lizards chasing bugs. One of my rare encounters with any ẅildlife"on the Camino.

When the albergue finally opened, I was joined by two other men and one woman. The men stayed outside on the patio, drinking from a bottle of rye. The woman immediately started re-bandaging her right ankle, calf, and knee. We talked, and she introduced herself as Becka, from Washington DC. She had sprained her ankle on her first day, walking the Napoleon Route over the Pyrenees. On her doctor's advice, she was now on her third day of rest. (Generally speaking, hostels do not allow pilgrims to stay for more than one day, but often make exceptions for the sick and injured, as long as they vacant during the cleaning process.)

When Jim and Valerie arrived about 2 hours later, Jim advised Becka on how to bandage her injuries better. Just one day on the Camino, and Jim was already providing medical advice and supplies. It was a pattern he repeated frequently throughout the Camino. He must have distributed 100 meters of the red stretchable self-adhesive tape to numerous fellow hikers along with instructions on how to use it properly.

Becka was curious about our origins. (We soon discovered that curiosity is a common trait among Camino pilgrims). Valerie from Germany, and Jim and I from the States (originally from the Chicago area, though Jim was currently living in Nevada). Becka herself was presently living in Washington DC, where she worked "for a bank" (which, she confided later, were DC code words for "working for the government").

Becka helped us by acquainting us with two important Camino traditions: the Camino Pilgrim Meal and the invaluable (for me) Camino Donkey Service.

Becka invited us to join her for a Pilgrim Dinner being provided at another nearby hostel. Many hostels (and restaurants) provide relatively inexpensive group meals to travelers with their Camino Passports. These could be dinners and/or breakfasts. And during her 3 day recovery, Becka had discovered a place nearby where we enjoyed our first Pilgrim Meal in the company of a dozen fellow pilgrims from many countries.

Valerie again proved invaluable in helping us communicate with others at our table. Especially with a talkative French woman who was traveling with a much younger female companion. I would consider her "elderly" - but in reality, I doubt she was much older than me. (So what does that make me?) She did seem frail, but still enthusiastic about being on the Camino. Valerie, despite not being proficient in French, made a valiant effort to translate my questions to her, and her responses to me.

My Whatsapp comments for the day mention "We joined pilgrims from France, Italy, Denmark, and Canada (Quebec)... Lots of laughter and stories shared, despite language differences (thanks to Valerie)."

All in all, it was a wonderful feeling to sit at a table with strangers and yet share a common enthusiasm for the journey ahead. It was the first time on the Camino that I felt part of a bigger experience.

Becka also told us (me) of the Camino's Donkey Service - a taxi service for luggage! For a small fee (usually 4 -5 euros) a pilgrim could have his luggage (usually just his backpack) taken from one hostel to the next. She assured me that it was a well established and reliable service available all along the Camino Frances.

Though I had my doubts, Becka helped set me up to have my backpack taken tomorrow morning from Albergue Irugoienea to our next hostel, Albergue "San Nicolas" in Larraosana, where Jim had made reservations for Day Two. She showed me how to fill out the delivery envelope to tie to my backpack, and helped me through the process of calling the Delivery service and arranging the luggage transport.

Today was our first experience with the idea that "the Camino provides". As was to happen so often during our Camino, we were given unexpected help on our pilgrimage. We realized later that if I had not taxied from Valcarlos and taken JIm and Valerie's backpacks along with me, it was likely that they would not have been able to complete the final section of the first day's journey. Unplanned by us, the Camino allowed us all to finish without serious injury or mishap.

And I believe it was already here on the first day that JIm learned that it would be necessary to reserve hostels along the route. Not just for the next day (because we had to know where to send my backpack). But also for days and weeks in the future. He spent time every evening for the next week or more searching his travel links and making reservations. Especially for the bigger towns, like upcoming Pamplona, but even the small towns with limited facilities available. And from what he heard from others, the hostels along the FINAL five day stretch for Sarria to Santiago were filling up quickly, even though that was still a month away.

I know it was a logistical nightmare for him to estimate how far we could travel each day and find housing for the two of us. And sometimes three or four when Valerie, Anja and Asef were with us. Often, hostels in the recommended stops were already booked up, and he would have to reserve beds in towns either before or after the recommended "stage ends". That meant that there were dreaded days when we had to hike up to 5 miles (8 km) longer than the recommended 15 mile hikes. (Of course, that meant that there were also those wonderful days when our hikes were almost 5 miles shorter!)

One final impact Becka had that had a lasting impact on our Camino was to introduce us to the idea of sharing contact information, to allow us to keep in touch with other hikers on the Camino. But more on that on Day Two.

Overall, our first day on the Camino was a good one. A day of Enlightenment and good humor.

And for me, today was also a lesson in humility. I had already failed to complete a full dayś hike. Hopefully by using the Donkey Service, I could continue hiking by significantly lightening the load I was carrying. Only time would tell.