Mikeś 22025 Camino Memoir
Preface

I don't remember where I first heard of the pilgrimage of the Camino de Santiago. But my interest in it was heightened when a woman from my parish, Bernadette Rodgers, loaned me her DVD copy of the movie “The Way”. Directed by Emilio Estevez,and starring his father, Martin Sheen, it is a story of a father who walks the Camino de Santiago Frances to honor his son, who died shortly after he started to walk the Camino. This was back in 2014. I don’t remember the reason she gave me the movie. I think she just said, “I think you will enjoy this.”

It took several months before I got around to watching it. And even then, my primary motivation for watching it was so that I wouldn’t feel guilty every time I saw Bernadette in church.

When I finally did watch “The Way”, I thought it was an interesting (if not very original) story, with beautiful photography, great acting, and a likable cast of characters. Since “Road Trip” movies are one of my favorite genres, I was already naturally inclined to enjoy the story.

The pilgrimage seemed like an adventure that I would enjoy. But not one that I would ever realistically hope to afford in terms of time or money. And I was already 62 when I watched the movie. So age was another factor making the adventure unlikely.

Fast forward 10 years to 2024, and my son Jeremy, mentioned that his wife, Alison, was interested in hiking the Camino. She had become acquainted with the Camino de Santiago through the Spanish classes she was teaching. He knew I was interested in the Camino, so asked, “Dad, would you like to join her in two years? I agreed, doubting that the proposed trip would ever happen. Later I realized that she was interested in the “short” version of the Camino de Santiago Frances. The last 100 km from Sarria to Santiago. I did not say anything at the time, but I was honestly not interested in the abbreviated adventure. If I were to attempt a pilgrimage, I wanted to complete the entire length of the Camino de Santiago Frances.

Unbeknownst to me, my younger brother Jim was also interested in the Camino de Santiago. He was looking for a challenging post-retirement adventure. His son, Jimmy, and Jimmy’s wife, Emily, were already avid hikers, and encouraged him to attempt the Camino. Jim contacted me in early 2025, letting me know he was planning on going, and wanted to know if I wanted to join him. The only stipulation was that we go in 2025 rather than wait till 2026. That was fine with me. It meant less time to train and prepare. But it also meant there was less time for me to become injured or seriously ill before I had a chance to begin..

We agreed to go in late August, 2025, figuring the worst of the hot summer weather in Spain would be over, and we would finish before the autumn rains began.

I started training in early March. I had been a letter carrier for most of my 50 years with the United States Postal Service. And I generally enjoyed the door-to-door walking delivery aspect of my career. So the idea of being outdoors and walking long distances in all kinds of weather actually appealed to me.

Additonally, I had faithfully followed a four-times-a-week 20 minute at-home light exercise program for almost 40 years. So I was not terribly out of shape.

But I knew that throughout my life I had been easily winded by any time of extended activity. And I also knew that I had never in my life trained for any sport.

So I bought several different pairs of shoes - both running and trail styles. And I started training for the pilgrimage.

During the month of April I worked myself up to a 3 mph (5 km/h) pace indoors on a treadmill, which I could keep up for an hour on a 5 degree incline. Then, from May through early August, I hiked outdoors on various trails through local forest preserves. I would carry a 15 pound (7 kg) backpack on two 5 mile (8 km) hikes and one 8 mile (13 km) hike every week. My time went down slightly, from 3 mph (5 km/h) on the treadmill to 2.5 (4 km/h). But I had built up my endurance. I even completed one 16 mile (26 km) hike before I was advised to tone my hikes down. "You don't train for a marathon by running marathons," was the advice I received. Although I was pleased with my progress, I knew I was really not in the condition that a long-distance hiker should be in. I was still taking too many breaks for rest and water. And I was still easily winded on any uphill climbs.

In the meantime, Jim was training in Nevada, where his hikes were curtailed by temperatures that climbed over 100 degrees F (38 degrees C) by 7:30 in the morning. Jim was also busy researching Camino advice and making the travel arrangements.

By mid August, we were as ready as we would ever realistically be. Jim flew in from Nevada to Chicago, and we managed to finally hike together - an 8 mile hike on packed dirt and gravel trails on a local hiking trail. The next day, Jeremy and his family hosted a large gathering at his house, and we enjoyed a cookout and were warmly toasted by over twenty family and friends, each one expressing their wishes for our well-being and success.



Putting our best feet forward



Our wild & crazy American support group

Our Camino experience actually began in Germany. Our sister Marylou lived in Europe for almost 40 years - most of her adult life. And although she and her family had come to visit her parents and siblings in the States frequently, neither Jim nor I had ever reciprocated. This Camino trip would give us an opportunity to finally do so.

In fact, once we committed to the Camino and to visiting Marylou's family in Germany, all of our surviving siblings decided to join us in Germany. So, with Marylou's blessing, we had a European Vrtis Family Reunion. For five days, Marylou and her husband Thomas hosted her five surviving brothers as well as two of her sisters-in-law in their home.



From left to right: *Jim, *Ray, *Marylou, Thomas, Vicky, *Bob, *Mike, Mel, *Nick, Charlie the wonder dog in the foreground. (The Vrtis siblings are marked with an *)

We toured their hometown of Julich, visited Cologne and Aachen (and saw our first two European cathedrals),and toured the old castle ruins at Drachenfels (The Dragon's Rock). It was there that my niece Valerie adopted a small stuffed donkey which she named Jike (for her Uncles Jim and Mike). Jike would later become our Camino trail mascot. And Jike definitely sounds like a better name for a trail mascot than the alternative - Mim.



Meeting the dragon at Drachenfels



Jike joins our Camino enterprise

While we were there, we also looked through scores of old family photos and dozens of old home videos, shared countless meals, and played a handful of card games. Almost every day, Thomas and our nieces Valerie, Kalini Anja would lead Jim and me on hikes on the local trails to keep us in training for the Camino. In fact, Valerie made arrangements to schedule her vacation so that she could join us on the first portion of the Camino.

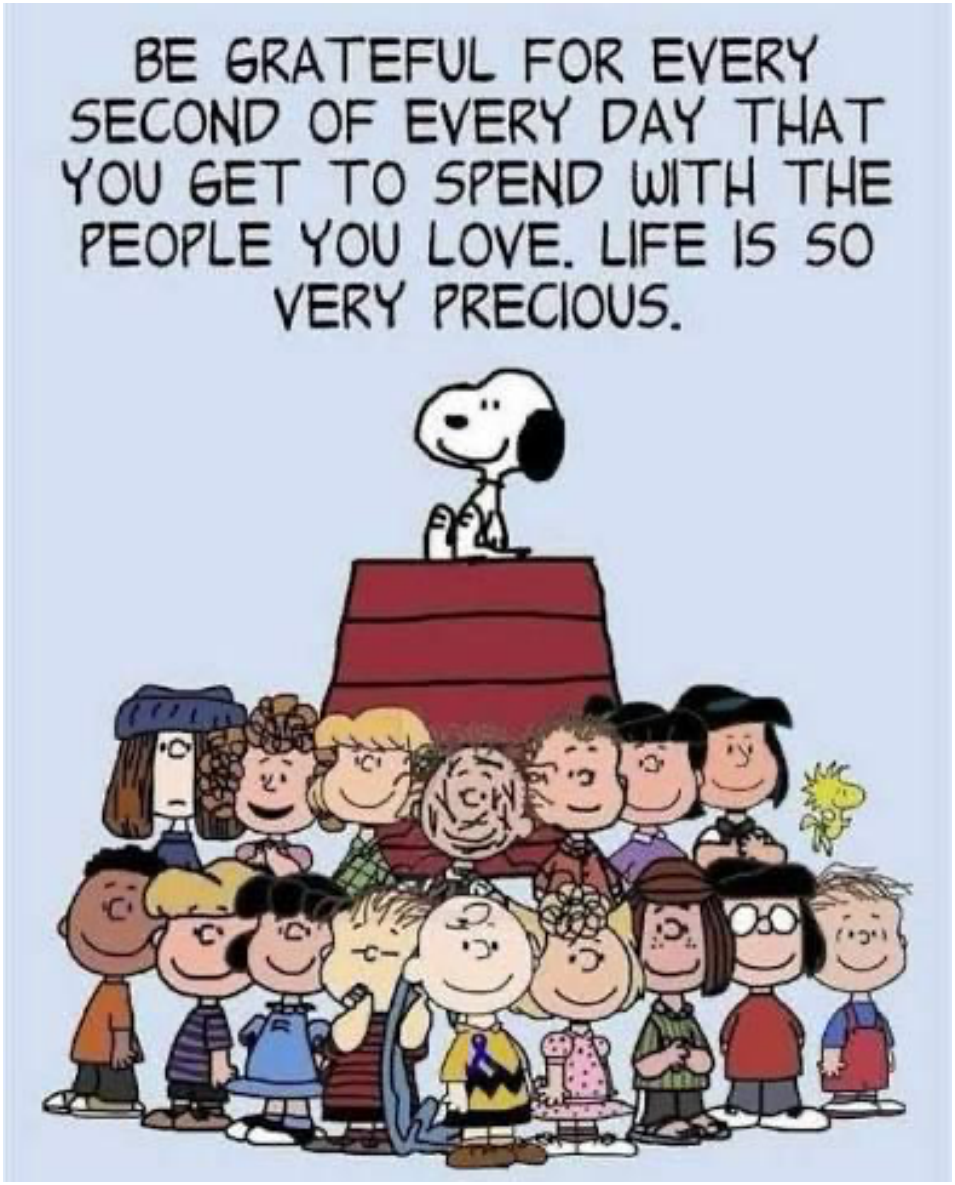




Plenty of camaraderie and beer in Germany

The day before we left, one by one the entire group toasted us with wishes of safety and good health and success.

It was a wonderfully enjoyable prelude to our pilgrimage. And we left knowing we had the support of family and friends both at home and abroad.


BE GRATEFUL FOR EVERY SECOND OF EVERY DAY THAT YOU GET TO SPEND WITH THE PEOPLE YOU LOVE. LIFE IS SO VERY PRECIOUS.