

## Previous Pilgrim's Experiences Walking the Way of Francis Camino

Following are how previous pilgrims have responded to the question: "*How would you describe walking the entire Way of Francis Camino as well as the fitness level required to complete it?*"

"The Way of Francis Camino from Assisi to Rome is not a leisurely stroll and is physically demanding: daily hikes range between 14-25 kilometers (9-15 miles). But beyond the distances, the frequent sharp climbs and descents (some in excess of 500 meters [1700 feet]) add to the challenge. Participants who have walked the Camino of St. James of Compostela frequently compare this Camino to the mountainous walks through the Pyrenees Mountains between Spain and France. Pilgrims often say that they are surprised by the varied terrain, some of which is fairly rugged: walking surfaces vary between loose rock, dirt trails, gravel roads, and asphalt. They also note that the frequent steep climbs and descents require exertion of different muscles which they sometimes aren't prepared for. Despite the physically challenging aspect of the pilgrimage, however, virtually all pilgrims comment how this Camino is particularly endowed with rich spiritual moments, spectacular natural beauty, and cultural and historical treasures along the way!"

Bret Thoman

"Make sure you are fit and ready for a strenuous walking experience. The walk includes some serious uphill jaunts, not to mention daily distances in the 20 km (12.5 mile) range; so it's a very smart idea to start a training regime early if this level of physical exertion sounds daunting. Some walkers I've accompanied in the past confessed that their training did not meet their own expectations, and though they made it to the goal they took about 30% longer to walk the early stages than planned, which means less time to relax and recuperate each day. Be well-prepared against blisters and bring a blister kit. You'll want to prevent blisters by working out your combination of socks and shoes or boots in advance, as well as training on varied terrain over long distances. This is even more important than adequate cardio training, since the #1 reason people don't finish a pilgrimage walk is they develop painful blisters! Lastly, pack in a wise and thoughtful manner. Packing heavy suitcases and packs will make life difficult for you."

Sandy Brown, author of *The Way of Francis*

"Minimum preparation should be the ability to hike 14-16 miles with elevation changes. Better preparation would be to walk 40 miles per week, including a 14-16 mile hike with elevation changes. [...] One of the biggest insights that I've gained from this pilgrimage was the very strong sense and powerful nature of community that we existed between [our group of six that departed together]. And how we really were only able to conquer many hardships -- blisters, sore muscles, aching feet, fear of heights, hot weather, and terrain/physical challenges that some were not accustomed to -- because of the power of our community. In our disparate little group we brought many gifts that supplemented each other. In retrospect, we really were not prepared physically to hike [some difficult stretches] or the entire 101 miles, but we did. [...]! All in all, it was a profound spiritual experience!"

Diane Gaidon, Long Island, New York

“I highly recommend that anyone who has not hiked in a hill setting do so long before the trip so that they can gauge their capacity for the trek. Being a strong walker in an urban or suburban setting will not cut it, though it is good for general conditioning. The key difference between walking and hiking is the demands on the feet. The terrain, particularly when going up and down the hills in the woods, challenges the feet. [...] Downhills are the more troublesome as I had to pick my way to be more certain of the footing. If the person is [merely] a walker, they are in for a rude awakening if they have not trained with hills and tougher types of footing conditions. The surprise in the Italian hills was the amount of rocky and shifty gravel. [...] [Regarding] blisters, prevention is the way to go. I got a blister that eventually got to be the size of a quarter. The godsend was Compeed, which enabled me to keep walking without pain. [...] Pilgrims are not necessarily athletes. It would be a shame to undertake a spiritual journey and struggle all the way or have to drop out. Training and experience in hiking helps immensely and I cannot imagine doing the trek without it...”

Virginia Everitt, Long Island, New York

“The Way of St Francis Camino is a beautiful, spiritual but physically challenging Camino. The opportunity to see the country [Francis] walked and feel his impact is unique, and to have his life and journeys explained was wonderful. The physical act of walking is a body mantra which enables one to move from thinking to being. In order for this to happen effectively, the walker need to be quite fit, not just for walking long distances consistently, but fit enough to manage hard climbs, uncertain and uneven terrain. The nature of the terrain is challenging, but to a large extent one becomes fit during the walk. The spirituality of this Camino is hard to name: for some it may encompass walking; for others, visiting the places St. Francis lived and ministered; for others still the silence and the beauty; or the company of other pilgrims. HOWEVER, one could not walk the journey without being affected within one's soul. Walking the first few days was wonderfully stilling and beautiful. Yet, in retrospect, my highlight was walking into the Vatican and seeing the Holy City, it was a bit overwhelming really. I wonder how St Francis, and St Benedict and other must have felt when they arrived at the same place.”

Catie Inches-Ogden, Australia

“To do this walk you need an open heart to experience the pure joy of your faith. The pilgrimage will touch you in ways you never expected. You need to be in good physical shape and train. The trails will challenge you but the walk is so much part of the journey. It gives you time, in the most beautiful surroundings and helps you to process life's challenges. It allows you time to talk with your fellow pilgrimage and learn from them. You also have the opportunity to walk alone and get to know yourself. A pilgrimage is something one should do for themselves on a regular basis. You are not the same person by the end of your journey!”

Karen Harmon, Ontario, Canada

“Most of the pilgrims I met did not have the opportunity to train in similar terrain [i.e. mountainous]; most of the pilgrims came from flatter terrain; and many of the pilgrims had to resort to training at a gym. [This], coupled with physical limitations that come with age, made this walk very challenging. Unless you can train in similar terrain, this walk is extremely challenging

and is more suitable for individuals that are experienced in trekking in areas with significant ascents and descents. I am 51 years of age, had physical limitations with my right knee, and had to use an expensive knee brace and walking sticks to complete my daily walks. Without the knee brace and the walking sticks, as well as the less strenuous options offered, I would not have been able to complete the pilgrimage successfully. In the end, I walked approximately 113 miles and feel blessed to have done so; but, yes, it was extremely challenging! And, one more thing, I wore very expensive hiking boots that I had “broken in” and trained with prior to the pilgrimage. I only ended up with one blister and the boots, while very costly, did also make a difference in me being able to complete the pilgrimage. Therefore, you need to make sure you have high quality gear for this pilgrimage; otherwise, your feet and body WILL suffer! Lastly, my husband, who is a retired Marine from the United States Marine Corps and served in the Infantry (therefore he did many extensive marches/walks throughout his military career carrying extremely heavy backpacks), said that this pilgrimage was very physically challenging! He also said that the expensive hiking boots I bought him made a significant difference – he ended up with NO blisters!”

Ruth Goldberg, Sigonella NATO Base, Sicily

“[This pilgrimage] is not the same as the pilgrimage to Santiago. The climbs [on the Way of Francis] are more difficult [than Santiago] and the path not as well marked. There are fewer places to stay and stop along the way. One needs to be prepared to be flexible, be challenged physically, be patient with fellow pilgrims and be moved spiritually. Having said that, the walking pilgrimage has the potential to change your perspective on what is important in life... I had a great experience: it was challenging, rewarding, frustrating, liberating, spiritual, and emotional. I’m sure I’ll be processing it for a while to come.”

Michelle DeMers, Texas

“It ain't easy. [...] Some of the walks, the steep climbs and the loose rocks, both in ascents and descents [are very difficult]. I would describe the soreness of the first four days, and then, the miracle of this body God designed when the soreness went away and the body-machine started to work efficiently. I had not experience that since high school football and it was a nice revelation all over again. ... [Regarding training for hills] there is no way I could have simulated them near Charlotte on a regular basis. I walked 40+ miles each week in preparation, but was unprepared for the steepness and length of the hills. That being said, we all made it. It was part of the sacrifice of the pilgrimage and I think a good beginning bonding experience for the participants. [My highlight was] walking in the flat, rural areas. The sunshine, the fruit on the trees and vines, the sheep, feeling my heart beat and my legs work. Simply a sense of God everywhere. I expected good exercise, a closeness to nature, a spiritual retreat of sorts and an intimate view of Italy. And I got it all. I went to Mass 5 or 6 times during the trip and said my regular morning and evening prayers. The walk itself was full of spirituality, the effort, the sacrifice, nature, sunshine only proved the whole world is a church with God present everywhere.”

John Gallagher, North Carolina

“Obviously the trail is what is, and although we did have mostly excellent weather on our pilgrimage, that can't be changed either. Support from all the guides couldn't have been better. I'm

not sure we got a complete picture of how challenging the way 'could' be, because our weather during the two weeks was very accommodating: it wasn't in general too hot, and very little rain fell on us during the walking portion of our days. I would say, though, that the people participating on the pilgrimages should be in excellent condition, and have a certainty that they can walk a considerable distance over multiple days. Also, the possibility of blisters should be emphasized. Participants should be educated in best blister prevention techniques, and proper blister treatment products should be carried by all participants. ... All in all, accommodations were great, baggage transfer was great, the route was scenic and inspiring, and our final entry into St. Peter's Basilica in Rome was the highlight. A really great experience! ... Combined with the cultural and spiritual components I think this pilgrimage is a first-rate experience. I would definitely recommend it to my spiritually-minded friends."

Gary Gregg, Seattle

"Coming from a flat geographical area, the mountains were more than I expected. I am grateful you offered options to work around that or I might still be on the trail. The Way of St. Francis is not for the faint of heart. The mountains are difficult if you are in average shape or from a flat geographical environment. However, the trail is beautiful and restful until the suburbs of Rome as not many pilgrims travel this route, and there are only a few places where one needs to be on major roads. ... It was so moving and unbelievable to pass through the Holy Doors and walk down St. Peter's aisle. I got goose bumps from the presence I felt there. I still am in awe wondering how this kid from a small town in Michigan got there. It was truly an amazing and highly spiritual trip for me that I will hold dear to my heart for as long as I live."

Jennifer Martin, Virginia

"The humidity was not something I had prepared for, and it was challenging! You should be in really good shape before attempting this walk. There is a mountain every day, and each day ends with a mountain! There are far less people walking this way than the Camino, less stops during the day - it's more remote. Language can be an issue at times, the locals aren't as accustomed to seeing pilgrims, either."

Teresa Cardoni, Colorado