



## The Animal Pilgrimage

I had never realised the relativity of "time" as I have now, after our pilgrimage with the dogs to Santiago. Seven weeks of walking, day in and day out the same routine, and yet no day was like the last. It took a long time and sometimes I had the feeling of being far, far away from home, and yet the weeks just flew by.



49 days of getting up at sunrise and of falling into bed completely worn out in the evening. The dogs woke every morning as soon as they heard my voice and drummed with their paws impatiently; so open the cages quickly and take them for a widdle walk, after that quickly prepare a power breakfast, special dry food for the "sporting dog" with fresh olive oil to make it taste better. Before we start we check the paws and treat them with a special cream so they don't get sore. One dog for each pilgrim, a bottle of water and a plastic bag and away we go, walking on average 25 kilometres. No doubt the dogs are the champions! No blisters on their paws, no getting tired, no bad moods when the day was too long, the way too wet, the accommodation too primitive. The daily routine was only interrupted by school visits, where our four-legged friends were thoroughly petted, press conferences and meetings with other animal protection organisations.



Unlike the walkers, who had to rest their weary heads in a different bed every night, the dogs and I had the privilege of sleeping in the same bed every night, they in their boxes in the trailer and I in my car, connected to them via the trailer connection. Every movement in the trailer also moved my bed. Every day I felt more and more connected with them. Surprisingly enough, the dogs loved their boxes in the trailer and couldn't wait to get into their beds by 8.00 p.m. at the latest. Then there was absolute silence until the morning.

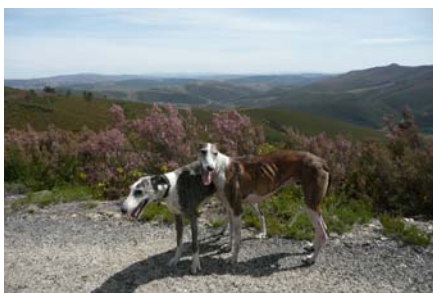


They were great, our "chicos", genuine heroes on the Camino. Bravely and inexhaustibly they walked the long way from Estepona to Santiago. They became ambassadors for all the other animals, bearers of hope for a better future, and they carried out their task with dignity, wagging tails and infectious joy.

## Three cheers for the Camino dogs!



A mixture of all races, colours and characters. Each of them has his own story and his own personality. The giant baby Alfie, who wiggles and rolls on the floor with pleasure when he gets petted, little Rompe, who always gets somebody to play, shy Moro with his amber eyes, Harpo who wants to be big and play watchdog, faithful and beautiful Uno, Perrie who struts in like a princess, Rambo the white prince, Paca the mouse hunter ... they all have won our hearts. And it is not the "heroic deed" to have walked 1200 kilometres which makes them so special, they have enjoyed it even more than we have. It is their individual personality which makes them so lovable. They have shown the people what a few little dogs can do, dogs without master or pedigree. When they get a little attention and are treated well they will walk with you to the end of the world.



Apart from a few small problems such as a thorn in the paw and a little tiredness on the few hot days, the dogs walked all the way with tail held high. Thankfully we had chosen the right time of year for our venture, and apart from a few rainy days we always had good weather for walking, sunny and cool.



## Gentle Hills, precipitous mountains...

It is impossible to compare the gentle hills of the Dehesa in Extremadura with their succulent meadows, where cows and sheep are grazing and can find shadow under the ancient gnarled oak trees, with the precipitous mountains and deep valleys of Andalusia, which were so difficult for us in the first few days. The beauty and variety of the landscape on our way would be reason enough to make the journey again. And I would do it in the spring again, not least because of the pleasant temperatures; it is easier to walk with a cool breeze than in the blazing sun. But there is also the variety of colours, of blue lavender next to gleaming broom, pale pink blossoming trees and the snow covered mountains in the background.



North of Zamora dying villages dominate the picture, with houses entirely built of stone – even the roof tiles are of slate, with narrow lanes through which the icy winds of the highlands blow, and very often only a handful of inhabitants with an average age of 70. When I asked whether there was a school, the answer was a clear “no hay” (not here). The young people prefer the town, and there is no work anyway. A harsh and hard landscape, attractive for the visitor, but to live there is another matter.



And finally the succulent green meadows and crystal clear creeks in Galicia with their stone walls around the fields, their stone houses and the Galician language which sounds so strange that sometimes I got the feeling that we had crossed the borders of Spain.



## “Who exhausts the body makes the spirit free”,

a member of our pilgrimage explained to me once. It is not the spiritual inspiration you seek but that wonderful feeling of having cleared your head. Perhaps a pilgrimage with 30 feet and 60 paws is not the right moment “to find yourself”, but I noticed that we learned to appreciate the simple things in life. Dangling your tired feet in a cool creek, a hot shower, a cold beer, you suddenly notice and enjoy these things instead of taking them for granted. Our experiences and feelings seem to be much more intense.



And then there is our living so close together. Those who have never spent a night in a lodging for pilgrims cannot imagine the melee of smells and sounds which can quite easily rob a poor pilgrim of his sleep. I imagine that a group of 15 pilgrims is not very popular with the other pilgrims either. It is not only the nights, especially for the 8 participants who stayed for the whole 7 weeks and spent 24 hours with each other, plus our film crew of three, Dietmar who cared for 20 people from his mobile home and myself as organiser and “doggie mother”, which doubtless was a very intensive time of living together. I won't be surprised if the resulting film of our travels doesn't have a slight touch of a television reality show. Friendships developed which might last a lifetime, but there were also tensions and tears.



Like a present from heaven an unannounced participant joined us. When I started to organise this project it was my greatest wish to take a donkey along with us, but for reasons of logistics this was not possible. But the donkey came by himself and in the company of a very experienced pilgrim who enriched our group not only with his donkey. Narziso from Chiplona (Cádiz province) attached himself to our group just



after Seville. His quiet and calm way of walking the Camino almost made some of the pilgrims envious as, with Patrick as leader, they bravely endured the 5 kilometres per hour, breaks included. Narziso left each day before us and arrived after us. On the way we usually found him having his siesta, Moreno, the donkey freed of his burden and grazing and Narziso comfortably snoozing in the shadow of a tree.



**The colourful mix** of personalities, nationalities and languages not only enriched our group, it also impressed the press and the town halls. The fact that people from all over the world – altogether nine nationalities – walked together through Spain to attract attention to the rights of animals has given some of them food for thought. If we could measure the situation in Spain by our experiences on the Camino we could believe we live in a wholesome world. The people who came to us are not those who are mistreating animals – they did not show! But they are there, and they will still be there after the end of the Camino. We cannot change the world overnight, and we know it will be a long way before we reach our goal, but we have started something that cannot be stopped so easily. El Camino – The Way has become a symbol for many animal protection groups. We have made a start to go on this road together. We can only hope that the President of Extremadura keeps his promise, but the fact alone that he received 15 dogs and a donkey in his presidential palace emphasises the importance he places on animal protection in Extremadura. And this is exactly what we wanted to achieve, to attract attention, to encourage discussion, and not to leave the protection of animals to the animal protection groups. The protection of animals is important to all of us, we are all responsible for the animals because animals are living creatures and we share this planet with them.



**Each journey is an experience**, and if you travel with your eyes open you can learn a great deal. The numerous meetings with the local animal protection groups were very enlightening. On this journey I have realised many things, and especially painful was the realisation that we protectors of animals sometimes are the reason that nothing changes. If we solve the problems of the town halls instead of admonishing them to do their duty we effectively prevent their action. Animal protection groups like ADANA, which has looked after abandoned dogs and cats for 20 years without any support from the authorities, are many. Along the way we visited an animal shelter where more than 800 dogs live in large kennels, more than 100 dogs in each, most of them not neutered, fat and lazy from eating raw parts of chickens donated to them. They are somewhat supported by the town, but cannot afford dog food. 3 people look after these 800 dogs, sacrificing their free time, live only for the dogs, but we have to ask ourselves: Is that animal protection? Does it make any sense to have such camps for dogs? All these groups are struggling with the same problem, a handful of volunteers sacrificing themselves to do something for the animals. Their whole energy goes into looking after a growing number of dogs. There remains no time for political work and education programmes.



**El Camino was the beginning**, the beginning of a way we must go together. We must learn from each other, must go forward together and incite change, otherwise all our strenuous work makes no sense. We will organise a meeting in October and everyone is invited who took part in the Camino one way or another: walkers, animal protection



groups and town halls. This meeting should give us an opportunity to exchange experiences, to give advice and to start cooperation, mutual education projects, mutual help and political work.

Our arrival in Santiago de Compostela, at which we were accompanied by about 200 members of animal protection groups and at least as many dogs, was a great experience. When after seven weeks we finally stood in front of the imposing cathedral we hardly could contain the tears. We hugged each other and everything was forgotten, the blisters on the feet, the snoring in the lodgings, the rainy days and the exhaustion. We had made it!

I wish the whole world could have heard the words of Padre Francisco during the following mass and blessing of the animals in the church of San Francisco, right next to the cathedral. His words would have made many a person who mistreats animals blush with shame. Never before have I heard anyone express so wonderfully clearly and from the heart what is so important: that we share this planet with the animals and that we are all part of the same creation.

