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[Commentary] Walking to Santiago on the Camino Portuguese

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Funding: No specific funding was received for this work.

Potential competing interests: No potential competing interests to declare.

Abstract

This piece of prose is an experiment, substituting photos for references, and art for science. It describes and illustrates our recent experiences walking the Camino. Please don't judge it as a failed attempt at a scientific paper which it admittedly can never become. Instead, please enjoy it as intended: an entertaining rambling blog. After all, education in its many forms is always more readily absorbed if it offers entertainment or novelty.

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Having heard many positive comments from folk who had completed the Camino to Santiago de Compostela, I had resolved to follow in their footsteps. Covid-19 delayed my journey long enough to propel the Portuguese variation into my consciousness. This seemed to fit the bill perfectly: a 280-kilometre coastal meander due north from Porto, crossing into Spain after 100 km. A fortnight off work would even provide enough time to walk to Santiago and cycle back to Porto. September seemed an ideal month to go, with the weather good enough to rely on shorts and T-shirts during the journey, and the sea sufficiently warm for a swim at the end of each day's efforts. I talked my mate Mike into coming with me: we've run and climbed together for well-nigh 30 years, and he didn't take much persuading.

We flew into Porto [1] from Newcastle in mid-September 2023 planning 10 days for the walk and 4 more for the return bike trip after a rest day in Santiago. We had obtained our Pilgrims passports in advance and started at the Cathedral in Porto where the Way begins [2]. Sometimes the journey is more important than the destination. That felt so true on the Camino. It was the people we met and the experiences we shared that mattered, more than getting the Compostella for arriving footsore in Santiago. Setting off we walked up the coast and joined the wooden walkway that defines the Camino from Matosinhos. We followed this all our first day, past the old fort that marked the War of independence against the Spanish 250 years ago [3]. We talked in French to our first fellow pilgrims who hailed from France and Quebec and had met each

other on the previous section from Lisbon. We passed lovely beaches and a Chapel built into the rocks where we collected our first pilgrims stamp [4]. These 'sella' were an essential element of each pilgrim's journey, being the only accepted proof of passage along the Camino. Several sella each day ensured clear documentation and often afforded the chance for a rest, being available in cafes or chapels where light refreshments were often available for a small 'donativo'. By midday we had reached the picturesque fishing village of Angeiras [5], where the sight and smell of freshly grilled sardines proved irresistible. After lunch, path meandered through coastal sand-dunes and over rustic bridges [6], other pilgrims gradually joining until we formed a steady stream of walkers heading towards the town of Vila do Conde [7]. We had covered 32 km and arrived at the municipal albergue at 4pm to discover that it was already full. Municipal albergues, we learned, open at 2pm and take pilgrims on a 'first come' basis. This has the distinct disadvantage of curtailing one's hours of walking, but on the plus side they're cheap and generally cheerful. We were directed to the Tourist Information Centre where the lady suggested a small privately run backstreet hotel numbered 123 with a blue door. When we arrived, there was no-one in but the elderly ladies in the house opposite patiently explained in Portuguese that the owner was collecting her daughter from school by motorbike and would be back around 5pm. They were right, and she gave us a smart room at a good price.

We decided to alternate between long walking days when we could book ahead into private albergues (about 20 euros), and shorter days, arriving at municipal albergues (10 euros) for 2pm. This generally worked well and allowed us to maintain an average of about 30km a day if we made an early start. Albergues invariably had showers with warm water, a communal kitchen, and nearby shops. This made the evening meal a central aspect of each day. We'd find that fellow pilgrims would offer olives in exchange for wine, or cheese in return for pasta. Conversations further flavoured the food and friendships were forged over shared experiences. Folk usually bunked down in the common dorms around 10.30 pm and started to leave around 7am, while it was still quite cool and dark. Our usual schedule was to walk for a couple of hours and then find breakfast around 9am once the sun was up. A coffee served with the local delicacy, pastel de nata, felt hard-earned and sustained us through until midday when we'd sometimes stop for a swim before eating again. On our second morning we walked through the rather boring town of Povoia de Varzim before rejoining the coastal boardwalk which led us past endless sports grounds before crossing the river at Esposende. Here the landscape became interesting once more, with an old fish-filleting factory decorated with murals praising women for their work [8] and farmers stacking seaweed to be used as fertiliser for the arable land nearby [9]. There were beautiful panels illustrating history and decorating the coastal Camino [10]. We met a family from Chicago with a mother walking with her two forty-year-old offspring. They shared their story willingly and we enjoyed their company so much we stopped for lunch with them. As a result, we almost arrived too late for roll-call at the municipal albergue in Marinha, only just securing the last two bunks! That evening over dinner we met another American woman and her English girlfriend, along with a young German clinical psychologist. A Dutchman shared his wine and olives with us, and when we met him 10 evenings later on our way back by bike, we reciprocated. Sleep was disturbed (for the first and only time) by a large American who snored all night.

We were surprised by our fellow pilgrims. Naively, I had expected them to be older, slower and mainly mediterranean. However, most were young and fit. Many came from other continents and there was a distinct female preponderance, with fewer than a third being male. The average age of those we met was around 35, with a broad range from 21- to 76-years

of age. We met many Americans, usually in family or friendship groups, while Germans dominated among European pilgrims. There were sizeable representations from central Europe, and I had plenty of other Irish for company, although we met only three British people on the road. The next morning, we walked inland for the first time and climbed uphill for seemed like forever sweating in the hot sun with our packs. We passed some Ukrainian girls who had stayed at the same albergue the previous night who didn't want to talk. We found a pilgrim statue at Igreja de Santiago de Castelo de Neiva [11] before entering the woods. As we left the trees at Chafe an amazing guy had set up a tent outside his garden with hot coffee, cakes, fruit, and music with deckchairs. He asked for nothing other than a smile, chat and 'donativo' in return. As we walked down into Viana do Castelo we met Max, a South African who was only walking because his German girlfriend wanted his company on the Camino. We discussed the upcoming South Africa vs Ireland rugby world cup game. After lunching in the main square looking up to the monastery on the mountain, we followed the coast road through Carreco and Afife where a friendly farmer discussed both his age and his tractor with us with commendable enthusiasm, before pointing us in the right direction. Mike's feet were aching after 40 km, so Clive accelerated ahead to get to Praia de Ancora [12] as we'd booked a room in a small hotel whose reception closed at 6pm.

Beautiful though the Cathedrals are at either end, we will better remember the quiet mornings in the ancient oak forests, the warm afternoons on the herb-scented mountains, welcome clear-water swims to escape the glaring heat and the long evenings sharing wine, olives and stories with our fellow pilgrims. Early the next morning we walked the short distance to Caminha where we could cross the Minho estuary into Spain. A local farmer drove his sheep and goats through people's gardens [13]! The views were increasingly spectacular from Portugal across the estuary [14]. We were impressed with a Tasmanian called Tony in his early 70's who was doing his second Camino and we took the ferry across into Spain with him. We swam in the calm clear waters on the Spanish side, and after coffee, walked on to A Guarda [15]. Our first Spanish town was beautiful. The coastal walk passed impressive tree art with Celtic symbols painted on trunks, the patterns of which only became apparent when stood in specific spots. After a quayside lunch, we found the large spartan albergue sited in an old school. Mike rested his sore foot while Clive climbed the nearby hill to explore the 5,000-year-old Celtic hillforts restored to incredible condition. The views down the Minho estuary towards Tui were impressive [16]. He met Tony again as he walked back, along with an English couple touring by motor home. The church atop the peak was beautiful, as was the smell of wild herbs which followed him back downhill.

After our shortest day's walk, we needed an early morning start. As dawn broke, we caught up with a young Czech pilgrim called Tereza. The path turned uphill but a local dogwalker explained that we could avoid that section if we stuck to the coast. Tereza suggested it sounded an attractive option, but we were all deceived. After twenty minutes of muddy track, we found ourselves facing a rocky wall. Scrambling upon all fours, we surmounted this obstacle only to find ourselves facing a thicket of high thorns which we had no choice but to tackle. Several scratches later we emerged worse for wear at the top of the very hill we had tried to avoid [17]. Likely our Spanish comprehension had left something to be desired! Undaunted, Tereza stuck with us. As the morning wore on, she explained that many pilgrims carried a stone representing their internal conflicts. They deposited them in piles at the waymarks once they were resolved [18]. She described her dilemma and that she was trying to figure out what to do with her life - aren't we all? We left her after lunching together and crossed inland on the old Via Romana looking back at the light house. We followed rutted tracks down through the

woods cut into the soft rock by hundreds of years of cartwheels and hooves. Late that afternoon we arrived at the beautiful historic port town of Baiona, where we clambered around a faithful reproduction of 'La Pinta' in the harbour [19]: the first ship to report the discovery of America 520 years ago to a disbelieving Europe. After a swim around the ship, we had a beer with an Irish couple who were interrupting their pilgrimage to watch the Ireland rugby match in a local bar. Feeling envious, we clambered uphill to a private albergue at Nigran, passing the halfway mark. Our long walk was rewarded with a marvellous seafood supper, served by a waitress who had a hand-written wine menu. We surely slept well that night!

Our fellow pilgrims had many different reasons for walking the Way. Few stated primarily religious motives, but rather most saw it as a challenge or an opportunity to take stock of what really mattered to them. It was a common topic of conversation, and we mused on our own motives as we walked up through Nigran that warm Sunday morning, stopping for coffee and the pasteleras which we found irresistible. Walking the long way around through the woods, we faced a gradual descent into Vigo: an industrial city lifted by decorative Celtic motifs on the buildings [20]. Among the trees above the town, we met Agata, one of 25 Polish people in a large group led by Lukas. She was desperate for new company and seemed reluctant to let us continue without her. The eastern European theme was maintained by a confident Bulgarian woman wearing a flower print dress and carrying her handbag, silk scarf and rucsac who looked like she should be shopping in town, closely followed by two Slovenian sisters who looked utterly exhausted. The town was shimmering in the midday sun by the time we encountered the impressive Celta do Vigo soccer stadium, built to invoke the sea with its curves and shadows representing water and waves [21]. Tereza had arrived via the coast path ahead of us and WhatsApp'd to say that she'd found us spaces at the municipal albergue. After meeting and ditching our bags, the three of us walked up to the fort through the lanes high above the old city and gazed back at the port below [22]. Tereza was keen to eat pulpo (octopus) and led us to a wonderfully understated fish restaurant, where we were eventually served by a frantic young waiter who looked like he may burst into tears at any moment. We dawdled over ice-cream until we realised the lateness of the hour, ran back and narrowly avoided being locked out for the night.

Some pilgrims paid 10 euros for their packs to be transported ahead each day but that limited one's accommodation options and felt a little like cheating. We set off through old railway line parallel to the coast where we spoke to Swiss and Austrian couples who were glad to find a flatter route. That wasn't to last as the path steepened sharply above the impressive bridge near Redondela [23]. We stopped for coffee at a nearby house where the young owner somehow catered for scores of pilgrims, charging a pittance for coffee and cake in her garden while still managing to show us photos of her 7-month-old son. Dropping through the woods the heat built up and when we regained access to the waters' edge, the temptation to spend some time in the sea again proved irresistible. Temperatures were now rising into the mid-30s by early afternoon, and walking with full packs was warm work. We met a determined lady from New Zealand who had hiked around the world, having sold her outdoor activity business two years earlier. Mike was limping as we arrived at the new private albergue in Pontevedra, and examination of his foot revealed an infected toe which required attention. We explored the ancient town before supper, and Sarah from Austria shared her cheese with us while Clive inadvertently threw someone else's dinner in the bin as it looked like waste!

Early morning on the Camino was our favourite time of day while it was still cool, and you could almost smell the breakfast

coffee around the corner [24]. We walked through the old town, over the river and into the forest where we met Lukas, the Polish tour guide. He also wanted a break from his countrymen and shared his plans to visit Ecuador and Galapagos next summer. He knew the Camino well and led us on a detour to show us the waterfall on the way to Caldas [25]. Here we met two Canadian sisters from Alberta walking the 100 km from Vigo with their father. The minimum requirement to earn a Pilgrim's Compostela is 100 km and this seemed a popular option among the older pilgrims. Certainly, the trickle, which had swollen to a steady stream, now felt like a torrent of people converging on Santiago. The marker post under the sweet chestnut tree told us Santiago itself wasn't far away as we approached Caldas [26]. When we arrived at the modern albergue, we found they had a swimming pool which was an unexpected bonus. Suitably refreshed, Clive went to the supermarket where he met a fellow Irish pilgrim, Pat - an accountant from Waterford, looking for cold beer. He invited him to supper. Pat contributed three bottles of wine which undoubtedly enhanced our home-made paella [27].

While Mike and Pat marched along the Via Romana, Clive dallied the next day to chat to some of the many and varied pilgrims we encountered. These included a group of 4 lively middle-aged women from the Canary Islands, and a Dutch couple who passionately criticised their government's financial policies. He then met a Brazilian girl walking alone with leaves all around her hat, as per Steeleye Span! She was third generation Italian and had natural flamboyance. Eventually we found a common language and she described her rather relaxed motives for walking the Camino. She seemed unphased by anything or anyone and typified the relaxed attitude adopted by most pilgrims we met. These girls from the Czech Republic were planning on travelling on to work in New Zealand after the Camino [28]. We arrived in Padron about midday, and Pat and many others stayed in the town for the night. We stopped for lunch with Catherine who is a young Chinese lawyer who gave up her job to walk the Camino. She'd had enough of 'making rich people richer'. Clive looks impressed while Accountant Pat seems to be falling over in astonishment and Mike thinks it's a hoot [29]. Then we walked on to O Faramello for our last night on the trail and passed many of these small buildings, called 'horreos', characteristic of Galician villages where families traditionally store their grain over winter [30]. We arrived earlier than expected at our Albergue [31], and spent all evening in the garden with Clare, a lawyer from Dublin, and 4 German girls who were an eclectic mix of children's nurses and financiers. We shared stories, sangria and the local delicacy of 'pimentos de Padron'.

We awoke with mixed emotions to the unfamiliar patter of rain the next day. We were only 15 km from Santiago and now we were so close, we didn't want to finish. Mike led the way towards the outskirts of Santiago and the path stayed in the woods until we stopped for breakfast at La Merenguela 8 km from the Cathedral. We had reserved accommodation at the Monastery and arrived at 11 am. Dropping off our rucksacs, we ventured to the Cathedral for midday mass. Although there in good time, the queue for Mass was so long we were turned away after chatting to an Australian lady who had made the trek on many occasions. Back in Cathedral square we met our German friends from the night before in the albergue. They certainly added some colour to the place [32]. We spent the afternoon collecting our Campostella awarded to those Pilgrims still alive at the end of their journey. Mike's chances of survival improved significantly after we went to a clinic where his foot was dressed, and he was given powerful antibiotics. We met a Welsh couple who had just returned from visiting the coast after spending 27 days completing the Camino Frances and were then treated to the melody of a lone Galician piper [33]. We did make the 19.30 Mass and it was well worth the wait. The great ball of incense (Botafumeiro) was swung after the service [34]. Its original purpose was to fumigate the Cathedral from the smell of unwashed pilgrims!

Afterwards we met up with Waterford Pat and had a grand little meal to celebrate in a tiny restaurant in the city centre [35].

Friday morning dawned bright and clear, and the city's vibes were very different in the morning sunshine [36]. We explored the Cathedral complex before collecting our bikes for the return journey [37]. Cycling back along the Camino which we'd walked just 24 hours earlier, we met familiar faces including the Irish couple we'd shared a beer with in Baiona. We had a late breakfast at La Merenguela, while waiting for Tereza who was now a day behind us. We bought her two ice-cold cokes and a rest before she completed her pilgrimage [38]. Leaving the labyrinth of roads south of Santiago, we cycled up an interminable hill. Clive felt terrible that afternoon, with myalgia and fever, and could only manage 50 km to Caldas where we'd stayed 3 nights earlier. Mike kindly negotiated bunk beds, while he slept fitfully in the shade. We met the Dutchman we'd shared wine and olives with ten days earlier, and helped two Italians finish their zucchini but it still took until 10am the next morning before Clive could find the energy to cycle on to Pontevedra for coffee and then Redondela for lunch and a long siesta in 38C heat. That Saturday evening it was still scorching as we wobbled 60km on two wheels down to O Porrino where we stumbled across the annual music festival [39]. Mike found us accommodation centrally and we explored the music scene which was impressively varied but challenged our attempts to sleep.

On Sunday Clive felt a little better and we decided to ride on to Tui and cross the river Minho back into Portugal. We took a wrong turn and ended up on the hard shoulder of the Autovia where we were rescued by two very understanding transport police. Not sure the UK authorities would have been so forgiving? Tui itself was a beautiful old town, well worth the hour we spent exploring before we followed the lovely Minho estuary 50 km nearly back to Caminha [40]. Picnicking on route, we stayed at a private albergue in Seixas and walked into Caminha for a late lunch. The village square and church were typically Portuguese and beautifully maintained [41]. Over a pilgrim's meal at the local restaurant, we decided we'd done enough cycling and would take the train the last stretch back to Porto the next day to give us time to explore that city before flying home.

It was a sensible decision as Mike went down with the same illness the next morning. Arriving at the train station, we cycled around Porto and dropped off the bikes before finding an excellent hostel in the centre of town. We walked back via the Crystal Palace and had this view of the city down the Douro [42]. Mike's turn to rest so Clive wandered around the city and explored the Iron Bridge over the mighty river Douro. The next morning was our last and we revisited Porto Cathedral [43] and explored its cloistered interior before leaving this impressive city with all its colour and charm to fly home [44]. It's right that we can worship at the temples we build for God, but for us it's equally important to allow ourselves to marvel at the beauty of the world that God created for us and our fellow time travellers. If only we could all learn to live in peace. Not an angry word heard in 15 days of mixing with people from 25 countries, but so many shared honest expressions of doubt and courage, uncertainty and wisdom, hesitation and commitment. And most of all, a shared determination to explore ourselves!

Figures



[1]



[2]



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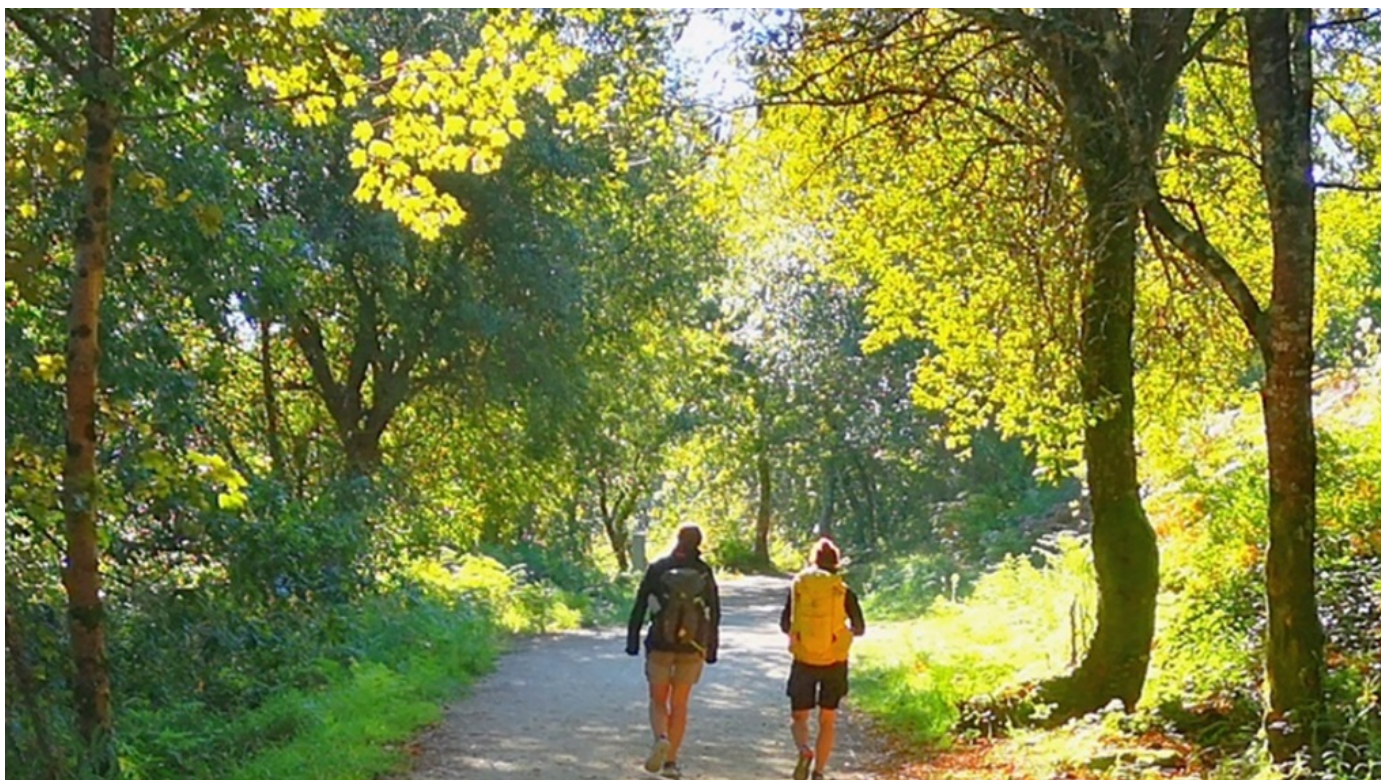
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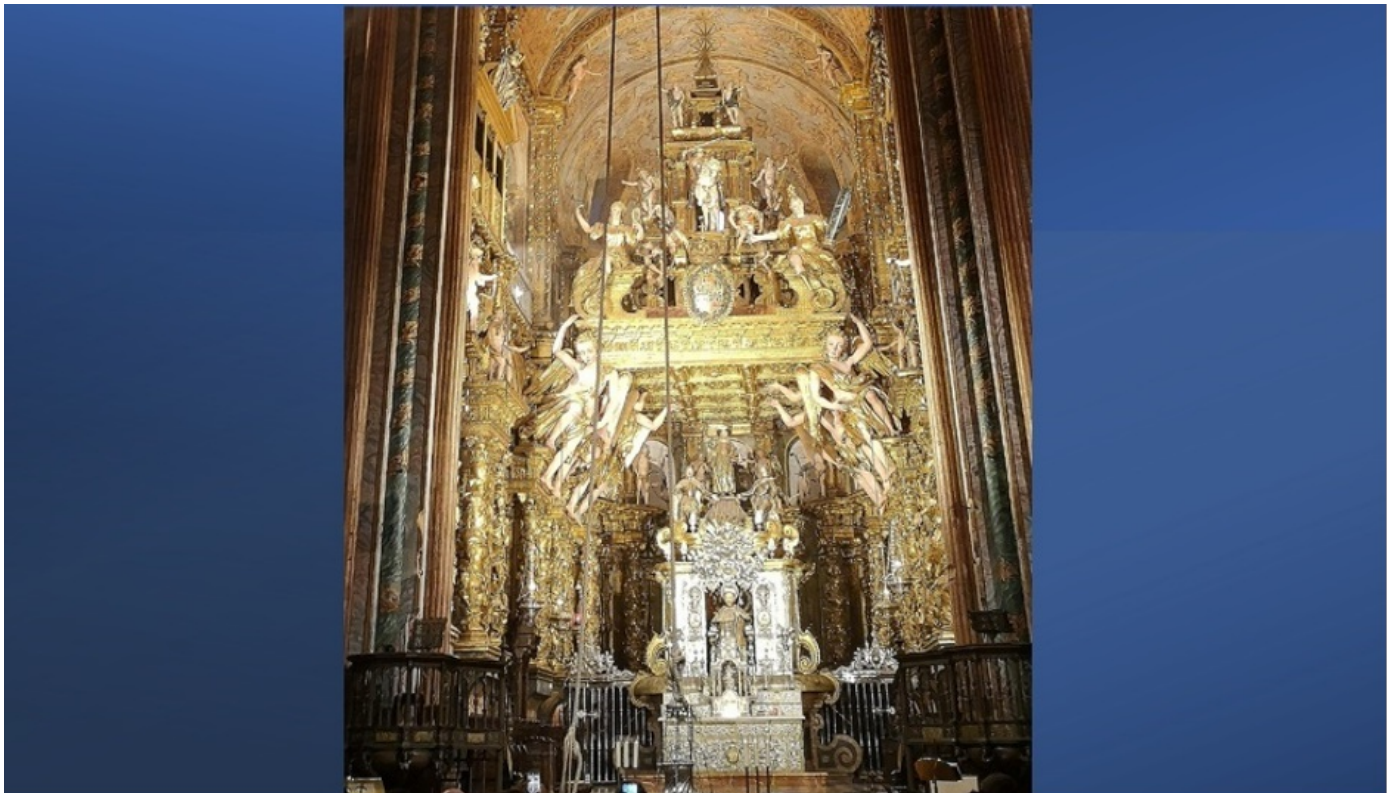
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