

CAMINO
SPECIAL
LE PUY
CAMINO

OSCAR WINNING CAMINO

It's well known that sequels rarely live up to the originals. After completing the first half of the Le Puy Camino, *Great Walks* returned to France for Part II...

WORDS AND PHOTOS_
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Left: Starting the walk this year, where I stopped in 2023.



It was nearing dusk late September 2023 when I stood in front of the picturesque Pont Valentré in southern French town of Cahors, gesturing a passerby to take one last pic of my pilgrimage, having made the 375km journey from Le-Puy-en-Velay. However, I felt like I was walking out halfway through a movie. So, I made the promise to return and complete the journey to Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port (SJPDP).

Fast forward to May 2025 and I'm back, standing in those exact same footprints in Cahors so as not to miss a step in the next 375km – yes, I am that competitive.

There were lingering doubts though. Would the sequel surpass the original? Would it be a six-oscar winning follow-up like *Godfather II* or a disappointing monumental flop like the 2nd *Speed*? I'm happy to announce it turned out to be the Coppola masterpiece.

Auspicious start

I was well prepared. Six months of daily 15-20km walks had me mentally and physically ready. After crossing the UNESCO Heritage-listed Pont, I surged up the narrow single track, passing others with a friendly Bonjour,

like they were standing still. A near 30°C day wasn't going to slow me down for my opening 20km. I mean, come on, this was just my daily training walk . . . or so I thought.

Wonderful scenery, limestone plateaus, adrenaline pumping and I was patting myself on the back then, Bam! Reality, as I sat at a café just out of Lascabanes, inhaling my espresso and smashing an orangina, which was my regular end of day treat. Due to a typo on my itinerary, what I thought was an opening 20km day was closer to 34km. Instead of finishing at Lascabanes I had to push on to Montcuq. Above the expletives you could hear me deflate.

Trail angels

In the afternoon heat and day one, I struggled those last few kilometres. I was physically and mentally drained, and a little dehydrated. I've heard the term trail angels in the past. An endearing term for someone who helps another in need, but never one I thought I'd need. As I and another pilgrim Dawn stumbled down the steep narrow street into Montcuq, Lucy was tending her roses in the front of her quaint little terrace house.

I think she'd seen that look before and told us to cross the street and sit at a bench shaded by an old oak tree. Soon she reappeared with a pint of icy cold beer, iced tea and nibbles for us. My accommodation was a further 2.5km off trail – Lucy drove me. The epitome of a trail angel.

The next day, the picturesque village of Montcuq closes to traffic and the weekly market filled the streets. I found a nice local vendor to pop across to Lucy's with a bottle of wine.

It's all about balance

Because of the day-one epic, it meant day two was a short 14km stroll to Lauzert. Munching on freshly picked market strawberries and a still-warm baguette, I was revitalised and enjoyed walking through the lush fields before the steep climb to the quintessential medieval village.

Again, I stayed off-trail 6km at Montbarla, but well worth the trip to the iconic restored mill Moulin de Salazar. The only guest that evening, I had the place to myself, not to mention a hot tub by the stream.

But it's always yin and yang. After torrential rain overnight, the offroad tracks of GR65 were a muddy mess and soon to become an issue

for the remainder of my journey. Slipping and sloshing through mud, at times up to my ankles.

From Lauzert to Moissac you quickly fall in love with traversing woodlands, rarely used countryside tracks, crop fields and vineyards. The mud is annoying, but a challenge finding that step that may not be as bad. Approaching Moissac, it's an extended road walk where you get to remove some off the mud off your boots and be rewarded with sweeping valley views as you descend toward the Tarn River.

A Romantic stroll

The walk out of Moissac heading towards Auvillar is one of the best memories you'll retain from the Camino. The flat scenic tree-lined path follows the tranquil Canal de Garonne and dappled sunlight marks your way. The water, reflecting the early light and the occasional barge, soon has you settled into a gentle rhythm.

Peacefully quiet apart from the birds gently singing, it's almost a more suitable location for a romantic hand-in-hand walk than a pilgrimage. You have the option of staying on the main trail and heading over some ominous looking hills or stick with the canal. It was a no brainer!



Main: Le Puy-en-Velay Old Town, the Cathedral and Notre Dame de la France.

GETTY

Above: Some days are spent walking through picturesque fields and farmlands.

Left: Anyone want fresh strawberries?!

Below: Exploring the abbey at Moissac.



Clockwise from centre image:

The climb out of Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

Arriving in Saint-Jean-Pied-de-Port.

This restored mill, Moulin de Salazar.

Communal dinners are a great way to meet fellow pilgrims.



Approaching Auvilliar, perched on a hilltop, the trail offers stunning views of the Garonne Valley. Once you reach the village, it reveals its circular grain market and charming medieval architecture. A pilgrim's mass at the local church, followed by refreshments in the church room with fellow walkers and clergy capped off a memorable day.

Rain, rain go away

From Auvilliar to Lectoure, Condom, Montreal-du-Gers and Eauze on successive days (about 115km) is varied and rewarding and you're deeply entrenched in rural south-western France.

Perfect weather allows you to meander across the rolling hills of the Tarn-et-Garonne and Gers regions, passing soon-to-bloom sunflower fields, vineyards and more charming medieval villages. Its country lanes and Romanesque churches allude to its Roman roots.

But just when you're basking in your good fortune, between Eauze and Nogaro, out of nowhere the clouds start to build and a massive storm rolls in, lashing the GR65 with hail then torrential rain, enough to penetrate even the most highly rated Gore-Tex boots and wet weather gear.

Paths turned into streams; adjacent fields spewed their mud across dedicated trails. Temps dropped dramatically. Cold, wet, I was drenched, couldn't feel my fingers or toes but determined to

push on. Make the most of it, not every day will be picture perfect, so kick a few puddles. Trail tip: never underestimate the value of a heated towel rack for drying clothes and shoes.

Turn on the subtitles

The Le Puy Camino is one of the oldest and easily accessible pilgrimage paths in France with references dating back to the 10th Century. Most French are aware of the route through their history and education, making it a culturally familiar and revered journey.

It's not uncommon to walk for a few days and only encounter French nationals or stay in accommodation where the hosts only speak French. Being more rural and less commercialised is an attractive option for the locals who quite often complete their journey in stages over many years.

So brush up on your French, even if it's just the basic pleasantries. There will be lots of hand gestures or scrolling to Google Translate. I found translation earbuds a practical modern addition. But at the end of the day, a smile is a smile in any language.

Rest days

Departing Nogaro, the sun was shining and temperatures rising, but the GR65 was still sodden when crossing fields and unpaved

trails. Being 11 days in I was now track conditioned and ready to take on the 120km over four days to Navarrenx via Aire-sur-l'Adour, Arzacq-Arraziguet and Arthez-de-Bearn.

The landscape becomes much greener and more wooded as you enter the Bearn region, and you're uplifted as you catch that first glimpse of the Pyrenees on the horizon. The path is mainly quiet country farm roads. It's peaceful and scenic as you start to also notice other subtle changes, particularly in the signage and language as you enter what is the Basque region.

120km over four days is a slog and raises the great debate among pilgrims surrounding rest days. Everyone has an opinion and for what it's worth here is mine. I prefer to walk daily, but if you feel you need a rest, like I did then, why not schedule two shorter days back-to-back? Instead of a 30km, do two 15km days.

But a caveat, if you have developed a rhythm and even perhaps a circle of pilgrims you've befriended through daily contact, you will probably lose touch with them as your itineraries are now out of sync.

Supporting cast

The Camino is not just physical challenge, but also mental and emotional. Those whose paths you cross come and go but your pilgrimage

is enhanced even if your encounters are brief. You learn so much about each other's lives and comparing cultures. It's amazing how some people open up to complete strangers. It wasn't the first or last time that I felt like I was taking confession. Work/family/relationships/finances – it's like no subject is taboo. But in the blink of an eye, perhaps a rest day, and they depart your life.

The final act

The last 75km to SJPDP from Lichos is a scenic stroll through the foothills of the Pyrenees along quiet country lanes, passing through picturesque Basque Villages like Aroue, Saint-Palais and Larceveau.

Spreading it out over four days was a great decision and really gave me time to reflect on my journey and embrace the lush green valleys and panoramic views.

The final stretch was a climb up to fortified SJPDP then descending the town's cobbled streets, the gateway to the Pyrenees and the starting point of the Spanish Camino and a rewarding end to its lesser travelled French cousin.

That's all folks . . .

Don't leave your seat just because the credits start to role, any good movie has bonus content. Arriving in SJPDP was a sense of accomplishment, albeit spread over two parts over 18 months. But it wasn't just about finishing the Camino but acknowledging the early mornings and thousands of kilometres I'd endured training for the pilgrimage.

But why come all this way and finish at the foot of the Pyrenees? Surely a few more days won't hurt. So I added three more days and 65km to cross from France into Spain to finish in Pamplona.

Will there be a Part III? There are many more trails in France, or for something different, this Camino is marked in reverse too. Now there's a thought... 

NEED TO KNOW

Walking season is between April and October, but best to avoid mid-season as it can be quite tough going in the summer heat. You can plan your own trip, or you can take the stress and planning out of it by engaging a Camino specialist like Raw Travel rawtravel.com.au to handle every part of your itinerary – from maps/accommodation/luggage transfer with the added comfort of local on ground support. You can sign up for the full-length trip or like the French, engage in petite bites, tailor-made to your needs.