

Walk The “Way of Francis” - a Camino Walking Pilgrimage

(also known as the “Via di Roma” or the “Via Francigena Francescana”)

A Journey through Faith, Nature, and Culture

The Way of Francis is a Journey of Faith:

From the Middle Ages onward, there were several primary Christian pilgrimage destinations including Jerusalem in the Holy Land and Santiago de Compostela in Spain. From the 1300’s, Rome also became an important destination with the beginning of the Jubilee years. Around the same time, the Plenary Indulgence granted to the Portiuncula placed Assisi squarely along the pilgrimage route.

Thus, the Way of Francis unites two great spiritual and historic cities: Assisi and Rome, as well as two great saints, Francis and Peter.

The Way of Francis is perfect for slowing down to pray and reflect as it is imbued with the simple spirituality of Francis: it is filled with spiritual and religious places that were special to St. Francis and intimately connected to his life. You’ll ramble by humble hermitages and quiet sanctuaries up in the hills and mountains and you’ll also see where he preached, prayed, and rested. Yet, you’ll also marvel at the magnificence of the ornate cathedrals, monasteries and basilicas in Rome and in elsewhere. In fact, the symbol of journey is the keys of Peter, as the Camino ends at the Apostle’s tomb in Rome.

The connection between Assisi and Rome is an important one for the Christian pilgrim, as it represents the connection between the charismatic spirit of Francis and the institutional See of Peter. Beginning in the city of St. Francis – one of the most evangelical and charismatic saints in the Church – where every corner, every street, every view, evokes the words and life of St. Francis, the pilgrimage finishes in Rome – the city of Peter – where the Rock of the Church, the disciple to whom Jesus handed the keys to the kingdom of heaven and earth, was martyred and buried. This journey connects the heart with the head.

Perhaps more important than the exterior journey, however, is the one that takes place within along the way: The pilgrimage is not just to a physical place -- the real pilgrimage is the journey “toward the Divine within.”



The Way of Francis is a journey through Nature:

Unlike some of the other more well-known pilgrim trails, the Way of Francis travels mostly along unpaved footpaths or dirt roads. It meanders along quiet mountain pathways and trails far removed from busy streets and noisy towns.

The Camino boasts breathtaking views and vistas of the expansive valleys of Spoleto, the Nera River, and Rieti. It moves through vast forests, ancient olive groves and fertile farmlands and fields rich in wheat, cereals, and sunflowers. It climbs vigorously up over hills and peaks, followed by gentle descents into the valleys throughout the Apennines.

At times, the views along the Camino are like a brilliant tapestry of blue skies, green misty valleys, or clear star-filled nights.

After walking in the beautiful land of Francis, you, too, will share his kinship for creation: you, too, will want to sing out praises for Brother Sun, Sister Moon, and all creation as he did in his famous poem/prayer, The Canticle of the Creatures.

The Way of Francis is a journey of culture:

As you journey through the storied cities and small towns alike along the Way of Francis, you'll discover a land rich in art, architecture, and local traditions. The Way of Francis is, thus, about people -- both those of yesterday as well as today.

You'll feel a unique connection to antiquity as part of the walk takes you along the ancient Roman roads including the Via Flaminia and the Via Salaria. Elsewhere, too, you will discern traces of once mighty civilizations: ancient Umbrian walls, Roman aqueducts and amphitheaters. Other times, you'll feel as if you've been transported back to the Middle Ages as you pass within the enclosed city walls and walk the cobblestone streets. You'll admire medieval palaces and houses hewn with rough-cut stone as well as later stuccoed palaces that seems as if the Renaissance was yesterday.

In the old churches, you'll discover icons and mosaics that were crafted to tell stories of Jesus and the saints; the later early Renaissance frescoes did the same thing -- in a more realistic way.

The Way of Francis is thus a pathway that tells stories: of a past world of mighty civilizations that engineered roads and aqueducts; of Guelphs and Ghibellines who supported papal fortresses or imperial castles; of privileged nobility and commoners who fought for justice; of saints who sought God's will and sinners who could care less.

Yet, the Way of Francis is not only a journey back in time among bygone eras, relics, and ancient art: it is the discovery of the people who still live on the same land today. You'll be greeted and welcomed by friendly locals; you'll eat scrumptious local cuisine; you'll see how people work and earn their livelihood today.



About the “Way of Francis”

The “Way of Francis” begins in the city of Francis: Assisi. It then ambles across the medieval hill towns of the Spoleto Valley including Spello, Foligno, Trevi, and Spoleto. It then climbs up past the Franciscan hermitage of Monteluco above Spoleto and descends into the Nera Valley on the other side of the mountains passing by the smaller towns of Ceselli, Macenano and Arrone. After ascending up the Marmore waterfalls, it passes along the shores of Lake Piediluco. After a climb up to the Beach tree of St. Francis, it passes by several more Franciscan hermitages -- Poggio Bustone and La Foresta -- before arriving in the “Holy Valley” of Rieti. The last four days walks adjacent to the ancient Roman salt road, the Via Salaria, through scenic and gentle olive groves all the way to Rome. Finally, the Camino culminates in the arrival at the tomb of St. Peter.

The entire Camino from Assisi to Rome takes 12 days:

Day 1: Assisi-Spello (14 easier or 18 km harder)

Day 2: Spello- Trevi (19 km)

Day 3: Trevi - Spoleto (18.8 km)

Day 4: Spoleto-Macenano (21 km)

Day 5: Macenano - Piediluco (25 km)

Day 6: Piediluco - Poggio Bustone (22 km)

Day 7: Poggio Bustone-Rieti (17 km)

Day 8: Rieti - Poggio San Lorenzo (22 km)

Day 9: Poggio San Lorenzo – Ponticelli (23 km).

Day 10: Ponticelli – Monterotondo (30 km)

Day 11: Monterotondo – Montesacro (18 km).

Day 12: Montesacro - Saint Peter’s Rome (15 km)



Options:

We can offer various options: the full option for expert and fit hikers who want the challenge of taking on the entire Camino walking every step of the way (*see below); a slightly modified version that removes a few of the harder days; or the easiest option that focuses only on the flattest, most tranquil portions of the itinerary.

The Way of Francis can be either self-guided with a guidebook (for the most adventurous), or with an accompanying guide (for those who prefer the reassurance).

If you prefer not to carry all your belongings in your pack, we can arrange a luggage transfer service so that you bring only what you need each day in a light pack.

If you only have a week or so to walk, we can arrange for you to walk part of the Camino:

Assisi-Spoleto (3 or 4 days)

Spoleto-Rieti (4 days)

Rieti-Rome (5 or 6 days)

**Note that if you choose to walk the entire Camino, daily vary between 10-16 miles. Terrain is hilly and mountainous, and there are some steep uphill and downhill trails — some in excess of 500 meters (1800 feet). It is essential that participants be in fit condition in order to complete the entire journey. See next pages for personal testimonies.*



Previous Pilgrim's Experiences Walking the Way of Francis Camino

How would you describe the Way of Francis Camino as well as the fitness level required to complete the entire journey?

"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. Many walkers I've accompanied experienced blisters on their feet as this is not uncommon. The causes are the distances involved, as well as the varied terrain. 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 will make life difficult both for you and your luggage transport service [if you opt for it] who will have to jockey heavy suitcases up and down stairways in some cases."

Sandy Brown, author of *The Way of Francis*

"The Way of Francis Camino from Assisi to Rome is not a leisurely stroll and is physically demanding: hikes range between 14-25 kilometers (9-15 miles) per day. 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 also say that they are surprised by the often 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 spectacular natural beauty and extraordinary panoramas: mountains, valleys, forests, wheat fields and rivers are par for the course.

Those who've made other Caminos also note how little this Camino walks along busy roads and, instead, is immersed in nature for most of the time. They also frequently say how much they enjoy the delightful walled, medieval towns and the numerous Roman ruins along the way!"

Bret Thoman

"Minimum preparation should be the ability to hike 14-16 miles with elevation changes. Better preparation would be to be able to walk 40 miles per week, including a 14-16 mile hike with elevation changes. (If you have not trained to that level, you [should be able to] complete the journey, but you will be much slower.)

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 us [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. And deep down, I did not doubt that we would just push through, one step at a time, and that we would support each other every step of the way also. So mental fortitude trumps physical preparation, at least in our case!

All in all, it was a profound spiritual experience! There were several highlights: Holy Eucharist at the second meadow in the Nera River Valley (Spoleto to Ceselli), the special reception for pilgrims at St. Peter's, the scenery throughout the trip, enjoying a sunset in Labro, extra time spent in Assisi (I especially loved San Damiano), the sense of community with the group and supporting each other through an arduous journey."

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. Until I had done it in Scotland [St. Cuthbert Camino] I had no idea how [my] feet work on uneven terrain. Downhills are the more troublesome as I had to pick my way to be more certain of the footing. If a person is an experienced hiker, they will know this. If the person is 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. In our group this was most prevalent at the beginning of the pilgrimage. It was manageable but I felt that it required concentration, particularly on the down hill.

[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. One should try hard to prevent blisters but you should also have supplies to deal with what comes up.

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. Also, our group was very supportive and that helps everyone with whatever problems crept up. Again, I underscore the difference between hiking and walking and the need to prepare by hiking."

Virginia Everitt, Long Island, New York