On the Via Francigena in Tuscany, Monasteries and Fellowship

Explorer

By KATHERINE SHARPE SEPT. 7, 2016

View of San Gimignano and its medieval towers on the Via Francigena. Credit Francesco Lastrucci for The New York Times

Summoning our courage, my husband and I knocked on the unmarked door of the Convento di San Francesco, a 13th-century monastery in the Tuscan hill town of San Miniato.

Then we stood back to wait. As shadows lengthened across the stone wall, I began to second-guess our decision to throw a few clothes into a backpack, board a regional train and flee the crowds of Florence in an attempt to find an ancient pilgrimage route called the Via Francigena and walk it south for four days, to Siena.

When at last a sound came from within, it was not reassuring: a deep, resounding clang of metal on metal. Footsteps approached the door, and a tall, gaunt man in a button-down shirt opened it.

“Pellegrini!” my husband, Jesse, and I blurted — pilgrims, one of the few words of Italian we knew.

We were in Italy on our honeymoon, and in front of this doorway because we had read about the Via Francigena at home in Northern California, and been tantalized by descriptions of a beautiful, historical footpath welcoming of religious and secular pilgrims alike, in the manner of the Camino de Santiago in Spain.

While not religious, both of us had found spiritual meaning in outdoor adventures and physical challenges in the past, and a long walk into the unknown together struck us as the perfect way to cement the start of a marriage. So here we were, even though we had been able to find little information on the practicalities of planning a Via Francigena trip. We would show up, we told ourselves, and figure it out.

The man hesitated and then waved us inside. Moments later we were bounding after him up a stone staircase, down a hallway with a painted sign on the wall that commanded "SILENCIUM," under a low lintel, and into a room with two cots and an achingly lovely view of the sunset over the valley and town below.

Then he left us, and we turned to each other, almost laughing in relief and surprise. We were inside. Our pilgrimage had begun.

That evening in the monastery's cavernous dining room, we gathered with the same man (he turned out to be a priest named Father Luigi), four other pilgrims and a white-haired monk in a brown cassock, over a meal of soup, sliced meat, stewed vegetables and bread, washed down with Chianti from a jug.

The path from Monteriggioni to Siena. Credit Francesco Lastrucci for The New York Times

Talk turned to pilgrimage. Our neighbor across the table, a Frenchman who had been crisscrossing Europe on various footpaths for years, showed off a zip-lock bag full of his pilgrim's passports, documents that are stamped at official waypoints to record a journey; the booklets bulged like phone books left to dry in the sun. For the meal and our stay, we paid 35 euros (about $40) apiece.

The official history of the Via Francigena begins with Sigeric, an archbishop of Canterbury who traveled to Rome in A.D. 990 to receive honors from Pope John XV. The detailed journal that he kept, describing his 79-stage trip back to England, became the basis for the Via Francigena, one of the main pilgrimage routes of the Middle Ages.

Almost forgotten for centuries, the Via Francigena (pronounced Fran-CHEE-ge-na, it means "the road that comes from France") has been experiencing a revival in recent decades. In the 1980s, an archaeologist named Giovanni Caselli retraced the route from Sigeric's original document and found much of it still passable on foot. In 1994, the Council of Europe designated the Via Francigena a Cultural Route, and it is now the subject of local and national government efforts to increase its popularity with tourists. (The entire trail, nearly 1,300 miles long, runs through England, France, Switzerland and Italy.)

After dinner, the cassocked monk circled the table with a plate of tiny fruit pies he had made himself. As I bit into mine — flaky, delicious and not too sweet — I slipped into the illusion that I'd already been in this ancient, soothing place a long time, my life's messy logic replaced completely by the simple, appealing shape of the journey.

In the morning, two pilgrims from Turin told us we could walk with them that day. Father Luigi gave Jesse and me our pilgrim's passports, and he slipped a wooden Franciscan cross on a slender brown thread around each of our necks.

Our new friends introduced themselves as Roberto and Ceppo. In their late 40s and best friends since kindergarten, they told us that they hike a portion of the Via Francigena together every year, for spirituality and for fun. Their destination was Gambassi Terme, a 15-mile ramble to the south.

For most of the day we walked on a packed dirt track, following a ridgeline in the Val d'Elsa. Though it was high season for tourism, we passed almost no one. We crossed through fields of knee-high grasses, above irregularly shaped plots of farmland that formed a crazy quilt of gold and green.

In late afternoon we arrived at Ostello Sigerico, a friendly pilgrims' hostel in a weathered stone church from the 13th century. After checking in and asking to share in the group dinner later, we walked up to town for a beer and a snack. In a leafy piazza, we played a game of foosball with our Italian friends, who won handily. Ceppo answered a cellphone call from his mom in Turin, while Roberto, for our benefit, gently poked fun at her intensive Italian mothering: "Is your bag heavy? Have you eaten?"

In fact, light bags and full stomachs are among the main pleasures of a walk on the Tuscan stretch of the Via Francigena. Walking stimulates the appetite, and each day's efforts end in a variation on a theme: local wine, hearty food and a real bed, luxuries almost impossible in the United States, where multiday walks usually mean wilderness backpacking.

The next day, Jesse and I struck out alone for San Gimignano, a hill town and Unesco World Heritage site that is sometimes called the Manhattan of the Middle Ages for the 14 towers that adorn its skyline. Though the route is short, just eight miles, it's hilly, and the heat of the day added to the challenge.

While we walked on a chalky white road through vineyards, the vines bursting with the new, bright-green leaves of springtime, I tried to define what's so pleasant about traveling by foot. There is something addictive about the sense of purpose that comes from starting each day with a destination firmly in mind. To walk a path is to not be hectored by the endless choices that usually beset a tourist — and that constraint, paradoxically, leaves one more open to the experiences that do arise.

In midafternoon, a view of San Gimignano's famous spires peeked through the trees, and soon we joined a road filled with cyclists in bright spandex outfits.

Roberto and Ceppo had recommended we spend the night at the 13th-century Augustinian monastery in San Gimignano, a building attached to a church famous for a fresco cycle of the life of St. Augustine, painted in the 1460s by Benozzo Gozzoli. (As of this writing, the monastery no longer hosts pilgrims overnight.)

Unsure of how to get in, Jesse and I wandered into the gift shop.

"This isn't a hotel, it's a church," the man we encountered there snapped, in Spanish, as we fumbled to produce our pilgrim's passports.

"Are you true pilgrims?" he demanded.

"Yes," I insisted, hoping the question was about our mode of transportation, and not our faith.

At last he relented. After a skeptical comment about my flimsy Tretorn sneakers, he led us to a room with pitted walls, three narrow cots and a small tray for donations, issuing a stern reminder to leave the key in the door when we departed in the morning.

And that brought us straight to the question. Were we pilgrims? And did we have any business being where we were?

"I long ago gave up trying to define who is and who is not a true pilgrim," said Brian Mooney, chairman of the Confraternity of Pilgrims to Rome, a Britain-based group that promotes pilgrimages. "As far as I am concerned, anyone who walks an ancient pilgrim route is ipso facto a pilgrim —

“I long ago gave up trying to define who is and who is not a true pilgrim,” said Brian Mooney, chairman of the Confraternity of Pilgrims to Rome, a Britain-based group that promotes pilgrimages. “As far as I am concerned, anyone who walks an ancient pilgrim route is ipso facto a pilgrim — regardless of their religion, motive or means,” he said in an email.

But he also said that he frowns on affluent travelers taking advantage of welcoming monasteries. “I just draw the line at prosperous pilgrims, whether believers or secular, in exploiting religious hospitality for a subsidized holiday,” he said.

Alison Raju, author of an English-language guide to the Via Francigena, said she believes that anyone who walks with real contemplative intent should feel welcome. Many of the pilgrims she meets are secular people who have taken the trail to process a trauma or turning point in their lives: divorce, bereavement, job loss, illness or recovery.

The Convento di San Francesco, in San Miniato. Credit Francesco Lastrucci for The New York Times

“If you get challenged, you can say that you’re not religious in the sense of being a regular churchgoer, but that you have things that you need the time and space to think about,” she said.

In the morning we faced a 20-mile walk, the longest of our trip. Navigating the Via Francigena is not difficult, at least in Tuscany, where every twist and turn in the trail sports a multitude of cheerful red-and-white waymarkers, many bearing the trail’s logo, a medieval pilgrim with a knapsack and stick.

We followed the steep path downhill from the town's walls, then into a woodland where it wove past young walnut trees and a seemingly abandoned center for pig breeding.

After lunch, I developed a serious blister — perhaps the man at the monastery had been right about my bad shoes after all. We hobbled off the trail and into the town of Colle di val d'Elsa, where I salved my pain with espresso and pastry.

It rained, and then the rain passed over, leaving roiling clouds and a silver light that intensified the colors of the landscape. We trudged through olive groves and a beautiful field where red poppies and purple flowers grew among stalks of undulating, sea-green wheat.

In the perfectly preserved tiny medieval walled town of Monteriggioni, we checked into a pilgrims' hostel and put our aching feet up just as a fresh fall of rain splattered the town square.

About 25,000 people walked on the Via Francigena in 2015, according to Luca Bruschi, director of the European Association of the Via Francigena, most of them for short distances. The number is minuscule compared with the Camino de Santiago, where 262,459 pilgrims checked in at the pilgrim's welcome office in Santiago in 2015. But it is on the rise, in part because of the very popularity of that route; many discover the Via Francigena after walking the Camino de Santiago first, leading some to call it the "Italian Camino."

On the last day of our trip, we visited an informal rest stop called the Punto Sosta ("stopping point"), a wooden picnic shelter beside a ring of tree-stump seats in the front yard of a house halfway between Monteriggioni and Siena. No one was there when we arrived, so we admired the rustic furniture and kitsch art, like a mirrored sign exhorting pilgrims to upload selfies to the Punto Sosta's active Facebook page.

Pilgrims arriving in Gambassi Terme. Credit Francesco Lastrucci for The New York Times

Soon the home's owner, Marcello Pagnini, pulled up in a sporty car. He unloaded a large prosciutto ham from the trunk, carried it inside, then returned and made us espressos and sandwiches. (We placed some euros in a donation box there.) A retired hairdresser, Mr. Pagnini opened the Punto Sosta in 2012, after pilgrims began knocking on the door of his house and asking for water.

On leaving, we quickly found ourselves on the outskirts of Siena. We passed a cemetery, and a wooded area with a sign forbidding passers-by to forage for mushrooms or truffles, a regional specialty.

After a lunch of pici pasta with sausage and truffles at a roadside restaurant, we passed through Siena's impressive walls. Florence's age-old rival city has similar medieval architecture, but a scrappier feel. We liked it immediately.

In the sociable, bowl-shaped Piazza del Campo, the focal point of town, we sat down between a young couple making out and two students reuniting with a former teacher. We took a selfie. The clouds parted, and the afternoon sun struck the clock tower, turning it blinding white against a deep blue sky.

At our last hostel, we had been given the name of a monastery in Siena where pilgrims can spend the night. But as we wandered the city amid intermittent showers, we couldn't find it. Eventually we stopped trying to, and the failure began to feel appropriate. Our trip was over. As quickly as we'd entered it, the parallel world of the journey had released us. I slipped my hand into my husband's, and we walked on down the street, not pilgrims anymore, just ordinary people looking for a place to stay.

IF YOU GO

Where to Stay

Convento di San Francesco, Piazza di San Francesco 1, San Miniato Alto; 39-0571-43051. A tranquil and working Franciscan monastery. Suggested donation for a double room with dinner and breakfast, 35 euros (about $40) per person.

Ostello Sigerico,Via Volterrana 59, Gambassi Terme; 39-0571-638242; ostellosigerico.it. A friendly pilgrim's hostel, with dinner and breakfast, in a 13th-century abbey. Dorm beds from €12, double rooms from 16; dinner, €8; breakfast, €3.

Holiday Home Santa Maria Assunta,Piazza Roma 23, Monteriggioni; 39-0577-304214. A cheery hostel with shared kitchen and bath, overlooking the main square. Accommodation for pilgrims,€20. Email: casaferiesma@live.it.

The **Confraternity of Pilgrims to Rome** maintains a list of pilgrim accommodations along the entire length of the Via Francigena, and updates it periodically (pilgrimstorome.org.uk/accommodation).

Where to Eat

On the trail, it's wisest to pack a lunch and ample water. Because each day's itinerary ends in a town, you will have multiple options for a restaurant meal (and glass of wine). Additionally, some pilgrim's accommodations offer dinner and breakfast.

Resources

The official website of the European Association of the Via Francigena has useful details for travelers: viefrancigene.org.

Pilgrims' passports can be ordered in advance from SloWays (sloways.eu/shop/gb). Credentials are also available at selected tourist offices in Italy (visit.viefrancigene.org/en/AEVF/credenziale-online).

Several companies offer self-guided walking tours of the Via Francigena in Tuscany, with prebooked accommodation and bag service, including Francigena Ways (francigenaways.com) andSloWays (sloways.eu). Walking season lasts approximately from April to October.

A version of this article appears in print on September 11, 2016, on Page TR7 of the New York edition with the headline: Monasteries and Fellowship on a Pilgrims' Path. Order Reprints| Today's Paper|Subscribe