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Joe Zingsheim's spiritual journey took him 490 miles through France and Spain on foot

It's a pilgrimage that people have been taking for a thousand years.

For Joe Zingsheim of Port Washington, a 490-mile walk from St. Jean in France to the grave site of the apostle St. James in Santiago de Compostela, Spain, was a spiritual journey. It was also a history lesson and an opportunity to meet walkers from around the world and enjoy the hospitality of French and Spanish communities along the route.

Throughout the journey, which he completed in 31 days, averaging 16 miles a day, Zingsheim said he felt the presence of his wife Rosa, who died in December 2010.

"She was there," he said. "There were things that happened that she probably was helping here and there."

It's a pilgrimage Zingsheim has wanted to do since he saw a story about it on a Spanish television station and the movie "The Way" starring Martin Sheen. The pilgrimage is called The Way of St. James, or El Camino in Spanish.

The movie, Zingsheim said, is a credible depiction of the journey and helped him set aside his fear that at age 70 — he will be 71 in late December — he was too old to do it. In the movie, a French policeman tells Sheen he did it once and planned to do it again when he was 70.

Zingsheim flew into Madrid on Sept. 7 and walked every day from Sept. 9 to Oct. 10. He returned home Oct. 17. His longest distance in a day was 22-1/2 miles and the shortest was 10-1/2 miles.

He followed the French and northern Spanish route, which he said is the most common and well-marked route.

"The first day was over the Pyrenees Mountains, a 4,300-foot climb," Zingsheim said. "It's hard to train for that in Wisconsin. That's usually the hardest day."

That day he walked 15 miles.

Zingsheim followed a guidebook that broke the pilgrimage into 33 segments, but he did it in less time.

“The guidebooks warn that there will be days you won’t want to go on, but I didn’t have that,” he said. “Every morning I got up and was ready to go.”

He trained all summer, walking 830 miles from April to September with his backpack weighted to 20 pounds.

“I mostly walked around the block. That way if I got tired, I could just walk in the door,” Zingsheim said.

Zingsheim stayed in hostels along the way. He carried his clothing, snacks and water on his back, but ate meals at restaurants and taverns with other walkers. For Zingsheim, getting to know the other walkers was almost as fulfilling as completing the journey.

He met a couple from Luxembourg who were very familiar with Belgium, Wis., and the Luxembourg American Cultural Center.

Other walkers included a retired major league baseball coach, who worked for the Milwaukee Brewers and the Chicago Cubs.

An investment counselor from Texas, who was doing El Camino by bike, stopped in Port Washington on his way to Whistling Straits golf course.

A woman from Connecticut who grew up in Marinette had a sister who was married to a friend of Bob Dreier, who helps his wife Joy run the Food Pantry in Port.

“I’m convinced that you can go into any tavern anywhere in the world, and you will find a connection,” said Zingsheim, who kept a list of the walkers he met. It totals 20, but he thinks he missed a few.

Several pilgrims had quit jobs, hoping to find a new purpose in life on the journey.

Zingsheim kept in touch with his daughters Ana Farnsworth of Grafton and Yolanda O’Neill-Horwich of Milwaukee and five granddaughters via the Internet and was able to communicate with them almost every day.

“Of the 33 hostels I stayed in, only a handful didn’t have an Internet terminal, and then a tavern or restaurant usually had Internet,” he said. “Only a few really small towns didn’t have anything.”

He didn’t carry a cell phone or tablet.

“You need some solitude once in a while,” he said.

Guidebooks described the lodging along the route, which ranged from five-star hotels to modest hostels, which he preferred.

The symbol for El Camino is the scallop shell and could be found on all the route markers, some of which were more than 800 years old, and on a myriad of items that were for sale.

When walkers start the journey, they get a passbook that is stamped along the way to prove they were there. Zingsheim filled two passbooks.

When he reached the Cathedral of Santiago where St. James’ remains are reportedly encased in a silver coffin, officials checked his passbook and he received a certificate of completion, which is given to people who walk at least 1,000 kilometers.

Last year, 175,000 people were awarded certificates.

Sensing there was something more to his journey, the officials asked what it was. When Zingsheim told them his wife had died, the inscription “in memoriam of Rosa” was added.

While he was elated to have completed the journey and reverent when he saw the coffin in the beautiful cathedral built in 800, Zingsheim said he was more emotional at Mass the next day.

Every morning before Mass the names of those who completed the walk are read.

“I didn’t hear my name, but I heard Wisconsin,” he said.

Zingsheim, who was a Peace Corps worker in Honduras from 1965 to 1967 and married a woman from Nicaragua, speaks fluent Spanish. He watches more Spanish television programs than English ones and reads Spanish-language books and magazines.

Although most people along the way, especially young people, knew English, he said, being fluent in Spanish helped tremendously.

“I use the word blessed to know the language,” Zingsheim said. “Anywhere you go, if you know the language, it enriches the experience. I encourage young people to learn another language.”

Zingsheim said he felt at home in Spain and loved how easy it was to walk around its cities.

He hasn’t walked a long distance since he returned home, but he is preparing for a trip to Honduras. St. Mary’s Catholic Church in West Bend has a sister parish in the village where he lived while in the Peace Corps.

Last year, the parish raised enough money to send 59 students to high school in Honduras,

providing books, uniforms and lodging. He goes to the Central American country to work with the parish and to reconnect with friends he knew in the 1960s.

“We’re all old, but we’re still living,” he said.

Image Information: Photo by Sam Arendt