



The Road to Santiago

The pilgrimage route through northern Spain

18–30 September 2026 (MM 171)

13 days

Lecturer: Dr Richard Plant

One of the great historic journeys of the world.

Includes all the major sites and deviates to many lesser-known ones.

An architectural pilgrimage by coach – not a spiritual one on foot – for lovers of Romanesque and Gothic.

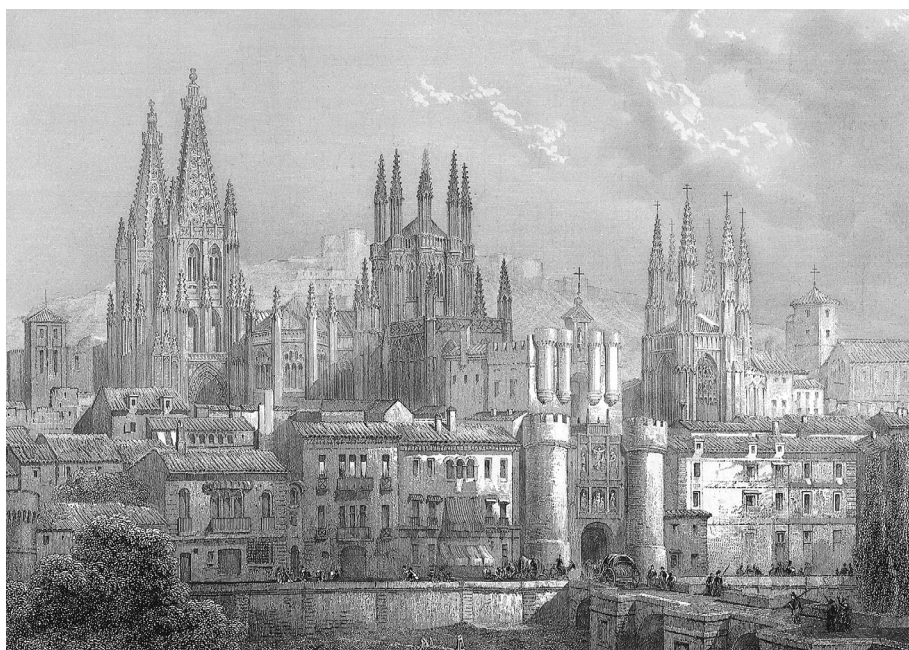
This tour is particularly strenuous. Please read the advice under 'Practicalities'.

'By land it is the greatest journey an Englishman may go.' So wrote Andrew Boorde, physician and former bishop of Chichester in his 1542 *First Book of the Introduction of Knowledge*. The road to Santiago has rarely been without plaudits, from Godescalc, bishop of Le Puy in 950, to Paula Gerson, scholar and sceptic in 1993.

What was claimed to be the tomb of St James was discovered in 813 in the wilds of Galicia and soon began to attract pilgrims. Roads and bridges were built along the approaches which soon coalesced into a standard route. Hospices and monasteries were founded and secondary shrines became established. Various descriptions of the Camino Francés, the Milky Way and the Road Beneath the Stars, the route exerted a pull which was pre-Christian, but the discovery of an Apostolic tomb and the renewal of the infrastructure conspired to make Santiago the most celebrated of all medieval journeys – a byword for Chaucer's pilgrims, a destination to vie with Jerusalem and Rome.

The funds poured into such an enterprise were immense, resulting in an incomparable range of medieval – particularly Romanesque – and Renaissance monuments. With cathedrals such as Burgos, León and Santiago, monasteries of the calibre of Silos and Leyre, the paintings of Jaca, the sculpture of Miraflores, the metalwork of San Isidoro, the textiles of Las Huelgas, the road to Santiago does not want for masterpieces.

But equally impressive is the landscape, a memorial backdrop through which all must pass – the limestone cliffs and tumbling watercourses of Aragón and Navarra, the forests of chestnut, oak and acacia of the Rioja, the vast wheat fields of Castile and the green, slate-divided fields of Galicia.



Burgos.

This is very much an architectural tour – travelling by coach – rather than a walking tour, though it still offers the chance to participate in a thousand-year-old flow of humankind which constitutes one of the most powerfully felt shared experiences in the spiritual and aesthetic history of Europe.

Itinerary

Day 1. Fly at c. 3.30pm (Vueling) from London Heathrow to Bilbao. Drive to Argómaniz (80 km), arriving at c. 8.30pm. Overnight Argómaniz.

Day 2: Pamplona, Roncesvalles. The day is spent in the foothills of the Pyrenees. Reflecting its proximity to France, Pamplona cathedral has a cloister which constitutes perhaps the finest achievement of High Gothic in Spain. Roncesvalles Pass was scene of the famed rearguard action of Charlemagne's paladin Roland, and has a renowned pilgrims' church and hospice. Drive through the spectacular gorge of the Urrobi river. First of two nights in Sos del Rey Católico.

Day 3: Sos del Rey Católico, Sangüesa, Leyre, Jaca. Stroll through the picturesque town of Sos to the church of San Esteban. Sta María la Real in the little town of Sangüesa has superb architectural sculpture, including some by a

craftsman from Burgundy. The monastery of San Salvador de Leyre maintains Gregorian offices in a fascinating church with a good crypt and western portal. Jaca, below the Somport pass, has a Romanesque cathedral with a magnificent collection of medieval wall paintings.

Day 4: Eunate, Puente la Reina, Estella.

At Eunate a mysterious round chapel with encircling arcade rises from the midst of a cornfield. Puente la Reina is the point where pilgrim roads from France converged, and is equipped with hospices, churches and an amazing bridge. Estella, once a largely French-speaking, new town with an important collection of churches including the magnificent San Miguel. Overnight Santo Domingo de la Calzada.

Day 5: Nájera, Santo Domingo de la Calzada, Burgos. See the Royal tombs at Santa María la Real in Nájera. Santo Domingo cathedral has Renaissance and Baroque accretions, and a cockerel still crows over the shrine of the saint. Arrive at Burgos, which grew up at the foot of the fortress of the Kings of Castile. The magnificent cathedral combines French and German styles; remarkable vaults, 16th-cent. choir stalls and a wealth of sculpture. First of two nights in Burgos.

The Road to Santiago continued

Day 6: Burgos, Quintanilla de las Viñas, Santo Domingo de Silos. Free morning in Burgos. In the afternoon drive to the Visigothic chapel at Quintanilla de las Viñas. Santo Domingo de Silos is the largest and finest Romanesque monastery in Spain, and has an epoch-making 12th-cent. cloister with magnificent sculpture.

Day 7: Burgos, San Miguel de Escalada. The Carthusian monastery and royal mausoleum of Miraflores has superb 15th-cent. sculpture by Gil de Siloé. Just outside Burgos is the Early Gothic convent of Las Huelgas Reales, a place of royal burial. Pressing westwards, we stop at San Miguel de Escalada, an elegant Mozarabic gem. First of two nights in León.

Day 8: León. Former capital of the ancient kingdom of León, the city has many outstanding medieval buildings. The royal pantheon of San Isidoro is one of the first, and finest, Romanesque buildings in Spain, with important sculptures. The cathedral is truly superb: Rayonnant Gothic, with impressive stained glass. The monastery of San Marcos (our hotel) has a splendidly exuberant Plateresque façade.

Day 9: Lena, Orbigo, Villafranca del Bierzo. Drive through the Puerto de Pájaros (mountain pass) to Santa Cristina de Lena, an exquisite 9th-cent. church. Puente de Orbigo is a 13th-cent. bridge which carried pilgrims over the River Orbigo. Villafranca del Bierzo was an ancient haunt of hermits and anchorites and subsequently studded with churches and hospices. Overnight Villafranca del Bierzo.

Day 10: Villafranca, O Cebreiro, Portomarín, Vilar de Donas, Santiago de Compostela. Three churches punctuate the final stretch of the journey: O Cebreiro, site of a great Eucharistic miracle; Portomarín, a Templar foundation guarding the bridge over the Miño; and Vilar de Donas, decayed and evocative knights' church. Finally: Santiago de Compostela, goal of the pilgrimage. Three nights in Santiago.

Day 11: Santiago de Compostela. The morning is dedicated to the great pilgrimage church, the shrine of St James, one of the most impressive of all Romanesque churches; also outstanding treasures. Explore the university quarter and the narrow picturesque streets and visit Sta María del Sar, where walls splayed and buttressed support a charming Romanesque church against its cloister.

Day 12: Santiago de Compostela. Free day.

Day 13: Noia. Continue westward to the coastal town of Noia, whose medieval quarter is dominated by the 15th-cent. church of San Martiño. Drive in the afternoon to Santiago de Compostela for the flight to London Heathrow (Vueling), arriving at c. 6.00pm.

Lecturer

Dr Richard Plant. Architectural historian specialising in the Middle Ages and with a strong interest in the modern. After reading English at Cambridge he obtained an MA in the History of Art and a PhD on English Romanesque and the Holy Roman Empire at the Courtauld. He went on to teach at the Courtauld, as well as at University College and Queen Mary College, London where he taught both medieval and modern architectural history. He was formerly the Deputy Academic Director at Christie's Education. He has published on English and German architecture.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach; hotel accommodation; breakfasts, 2 lunches and 10 dinners, with wine or beer, soft drinks, water and coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. **Parador de Argómaniz** (parador.es): 4-star hotel; simple rooms. **Parador de Sos del Rey Católico** (parador.es): 4-star parador with views of surrounding countryside. **Parador de Sto Domingo de la Calzada** (parador.es): 4-star parador in the heart of town. **NH Collection Palacio de Burgos** (nh-collection.com): 4-star modern hotel in the centre of town. **Parador de León** (parador.es): 5-star hotel in a grandiose Plateresque pilgrim hostel. **Parador de Villafranca del Bierzo** (parador.es): 4-star parador in a contemporary building. **Parador de Santiago de Compostela** (parador.es): 5-star parador, for centuries the abode of the grander pilgrims. *Single rooms are doubles for sole use throughout.*

How strenuous? We stress that this is a long tour with a lot of coach travel, seven hotels and a lot of walking, often on uneven ground. A good level of fitness is essential. Average distance by coach per day: 85 miles.

Group size: between 10 and 22 participants.