



10 Powerful Life Lessons My Retreat Guests Learned While Walking the Camino de Santiago

There's something mysterious about walking the Camino de Santiago. Maybe it's the rhythm of your boots crunching on gravel, the way strangers become soul-friends while walking the last 5 kilometres, or how life's biggest questions suddenly feel smaller after a 3 days of walking.

After hosting countless retreats along this ancient path, I've witnessed transformations I never could've predicted—people arriving lost and leaving found, arriving burnt out and walking away bright-eyed.

Here are 15 life lessons learned by real guests—some profound, some hilarious, all Camino-certified.

By Dr Margaretha Montagu

Curator of slow walks, soul discoveries, and quiet revolutions in the French countryside.

1. Change Happens at the Pace of Your Breath

Sophia, a high-powered executive who measured life in quarterly targets, found herself frustrated with the leisurely rhythm of our first morning. Two hours in, as she crested a hilltop overlooking an ancient stone village, she suddenly stopped walking. "I've been fighting this path since we started," she admitted, watching her breath billow in the crisp morning air. "I keep trying to walk at my New York pace." That evening, she sat longest at dinner, savouring each bite, each story shared. "I've spent decades rushing to destinations," she said, "never realizing the journey itself had its own perfect timing."

2. Our Burdens Are Often Self-Imposed

Marcus arrived with a backpack so heavy the seams strained. "I've packed for every contingency," he explained proudly on day one. By lunchtime, his shoulders were raw, his pace slowing dramatically. When Nicole offered to carry his water bottle, he hesitated before relenting. That small act of unburdening sparked something. Each hour afterward, Marcus removed another "essential" item.. By evening, his pack was half its original weight, and his smile had doubled in size. "Turns out," he laughed at dinner, "most of what I thought I needed was actually weighing me down."

3. Strangers Are Just Friends You Haven't Walked With Yet

Eleanor, divorced after twenty years of marriage, kept to herself the first morning, answering questions with polite brevity. When Jean-Pierre, a local shepherd, joined our path and offered freshly picked blackberries, Eleanor initially declined. But as they walked, Jean-Pierre's

stories of growing up in these hills slowly drew her out. By the time they reached the ancient chapel, Eleanor was sharing her own childhood memories of berry picking in Maine. That night, she joined three other retreaters for a spontaneous stargazing session. "I came here feeling utterly alone," she told me the next morning. "Now I realize loneliness is often just an unwillingness to take the first step toward connection."

4. Pain is Inevitable; Suffering is Optional

David's blisters appeared early on day two, angry red bubbles that made each step a wincing affair. When offered bandages, he waved them away. "I'll push through," he insisted, lips tight with determination. After an hour of watching him fall increasingly behind, Marie-Claire, our seventy-year-old retired nurse, took matters into her hands. "There's no medal for unnecessary suffering," she told him firmly. After proper foot care and a change of socks, David's entire demeanour transformed. As we sipped wine that evening under plane trees, he reflected: "I've always thought acknowledging pain was weakness. Today I learned that addressing it is actually strength."

5. The Path Has Its Own Wisdom

Rebecca, a meticulous planner, brought printed elevation charts and distance calculations. When a fallen tree blocked the intended route on day two, forcing a detour through an unexplored valley, her anxious energy was palpable. The unexpected path led alongside a stream where pilgrims had stopped for centuries, evidenced by the stacked stone cairns dotting the banks. As Rebecca added her own stone to a tower, something in her shifted. "I've spent my life trying to control every variable," she admitted that night over hearty cassoulet. "But sometimes the unexpected detours hold the greatest discoveries."

6. Simple Pleasures Are the Foundation of Lasting Joy

Jonathan, a tech entrepreneur who had recently sold his company for eight figures, arrived with the latest ultralight gear and a smartwatch that tracked his every metric. Halfway through day two, when he stopped at a humble farmhouse for lunch, the farmer's wife served fresh bread, local cheese, and homemade wine. Jonathan's expression as he bit into that simple meal was transformative. He removed his watch before dinner that night. "I've been chasing complex happiness," he said, raising a glass of regional wine, "when the most profound joy comes from the simplest sources – bread broken with new friends on an ancient path."

7. Your Body Speaks Wisdom Your Mind Often Ignores

Amelia powered through the first day and a half, setting a pace that had others struggling to keep up. When another guest suggested she might want to slow down, she laughed it off. "I run marathons," she explained. By mid-afternoon of day two, though, she was sitting on a rock, massaging her knee, tears of frustration in her eyes. As they gently stretched together, she confessed she'd been ignoring twinges for weeks. "I'm so used to pushing through pain," she said. That evening, after resting and walking the final stretch with a handcrafted walking stick gifted by a local artisan, she reflected: "My body has been sending signals my achievement-oriented mind refused to hear. This path taught me to listen again."

8. Companionship Transforms the Journey

Peter, a widower of three years, initially kept pace at the back of our group, his eyes often distant. When Lucas, our youngest retiree celebrating his graduation, dropped back with a thermos of coffee to share, something remarkable happened. Their conversation grew animated, hands gesturing as they walked. By day three, they were inseparable – Lucas learning about Peter's fifty years as a geology professor, Peter soaking up Lucas's enthusiasm for environmental engineering. "I came to walk alone with my grief," Peter told me on our final evening. "Instead, I discovered that sharing the path doesn't diminish your journey – it illuminates it."

9. The View Is Worth the Climb

Christine struggled visibly with the steep ascent on our third morning. Several times she paused, looking doubtfully at the rocky path ahead. With each rest, all stopped, creating a rhythm that normalized the challenge. No one rushed ahead; the group tacitly understood they would arrive together. When they finally reached the summit overlooking the medieval pilgrimage town below, Christine's face transformed. "I nearly turned back three times," she admitted, catching her breath as she took in the panorama of rolling hills and ancient rooftops. "How many magnificent views have I missed in life because I feared the climb?"

10. Every Ending Contains a Beginning

Miguel walked the final kilometres in contemplative silence. As a recent retiree after forty years with the same company, he'd spoken often during his journey about feeling unmoored. When he reached the ancient cathedral marking our journey's end, rather than celebration, his expression held a touch of melancholy. As we gathered for our closing ceremony in the garden, each sharing what we were carrying forward, Miguel spoke last. "I came seeking closure for what I've left behind," he said, voice steady despite the emotion in his eyes. "Instead, I found something more valuable – the courage to begin again without knowing the destination."

Walking the Camino won't solve every problem you ever had. But it will change the way you look at your problems. Offer new and unexpected perspectives. And that's often enough. Sometimes it's a small shift. A deep breath. A softened heart. A willingness to believe in new beginnings.

These stories represent just a glimpse of the variety of transformations that unfold when you walk the ancient Camino de Santiago paths with purpose and presence.

Your "Someday" Just Called. It's Ready When You Are.

You've just read 10 life-changing Camino stories.
Wouldn't it be awesome if the 11th story was yours?

These 5-day Camino de Santiago retreats are the perfect blend of:

- Just enough walking to feel accomplished (but not enough to contemplate hitchhiking)
- Just enough solitude to hear yourself think (but not enough to start naming rocks)
- Just enough French cuisine to feel indulgent (but not enough to require new trousers)
- Stories you'll be telling for years to come (embellishment encouraged)

Small groups, big experiences, and zero pressure to have a profound epiphany on schedule (though they do tend to happen when you least expect them).

DATES: Starting every first and third Saturday from March to December

Our little band of modern-day pilgrims is waiting for you to complete the circle. Only 4 spots available per retreat because, let's be honest, nobody wants to fight over the last piece of French cheese.

Contact me at margarethamontagu.com and mention "code: baguette" for a special hiker's welcome gift.

P.S. Warning: Side effects may include spontaneous laughter, newfound perspective, and the irresistible urge to sell everything and move to a quaint little French village.

"This wasn't just a walk through beautiful countryside—it was a walk back to myself."
—Nico, a previous Retreat Participant

The path has been calling pilgrims for a thousand years. Perhaps it's been calling you, too.

MargarethaMontagu.com/retreats

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