

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela together with my Rhodesian ridgeback

April, 25th to May, 7th 2019

The first day.

We arrived in Oviedo yesterday evening. On the internet I had already found a parking garage close to the cathedral, the starting point of the camino and not too far from the Oviedo branch of the car rental company. At a car rental company in Santiago de Compostela I rent a car to be able to get back to my own car again. I can return the rental car to the office in Oviedo. Without a dog, I would have chosen to return by train or bus. Dogs are not allowed on Spanish public transport.

The Salesas car park is under the indoor shopping centre and this area too is strictly off-limits to four-legged friends. The signs with a red line through the little dog pictured and the text '*non perro*' do not predict smooth passage from the underground car park. We have to bluff our way through and walk out at a brisk pace among the shoppers. Today, I want to take in the surroundings of the car park and explore the shortest route to the cathedral. From there, the route in the city is marked with copper-coloured scallops on the pavement. Outside the city, we follow the yellow arrows of the pilgrims' route. You really do get lost here on purpose!

A uniformed security guard, however, clearly summons us halfway out to take the same way back. The man exudes some authority; the handcuffs and the truncheon on his belt give his arguments sufficient force if need be. I usually immediately obey to such authority figures. This time, however, the success of my journey to the grave of St James the Greater together with my Rhodesian ridgeback depends on a successful free passage through this shopping centre at the beginning of the pilgrimage. I take turns pointing out my dog and the coveted exit from the posh shopping centre to the supervisor. The man has second thoughts, probably due to the sight of Goof's K9 harness and the credential in my hand, which he may mistake for an official document for the dog.

"*¡Ah, perro de ayuda!*" he clarifies and politely steps back, showing us the way out with a jovial gesture. He mistakes Goof for a service dog! The man is probably attributing an invisible disease to me.

The glass doors of Salesas open automatically. Goof continues to distrust them and goes into ass mode. Some security guard could have seen through us by then: a trained assistance dog ignores such obstacles. We get away with it.

It is Thursday evening and the streets are still crowded. My dog likes the outdoor cafés, as does his owner, but we still have some things to do. The Europcar office here is a small office along a main road near the station building; we'll never manage to return a car here in a few weeks' time. On the little square behind the station I let Goof off the leash. It's been a long time since he's been to the toilet. In a flash he runs across the square and places a scented flag near some trees. 'Goof was here'. Then he looks for a place near a couple of garages to do the big thing. When I tidy up, I discover the green logo of the car rental company on tiny stickers on three garages. Goof is welcome to keep helping me out on this trip; at least a dog like this is useful.

Tonight we sleep in the car. Tomorrow morning we park the car in the garage and then we go to the cathedral to get the first stamp for Goof's Credencial Canina and for mine. I wonder if he will be allowed inside.

The last day.

We have been on the road for twelve days now. I carry dog food for twenty days through the mountains of Asturias and Galicia. Every day I lose half a kilo; Goof neatly makes shit out of it. I have not yet come across any food for my dog in the shops along the way. I have brought my tent, because I assumed that the dog would not be welcome in the albergues. I was wrong: it was seldom that there was no place for him. Goof managed to make himself very popular among the fellow pilgrims. He won most people over immediately with his friendly eyes and funny floppy ears. I often had to explain the ridge on his back, the '*crestado*' or crest. I carry my luggage in a roller suit behind me; a one-wheeled '*travois*', copied from the North American natives. A backpack weighing more than twenty-five kilograms would have spoiled the pleasure of the pilgrimage.

I have about eighty kilometres left. It goes well. The weather is fine, we have met with nice and interesting people, my dog is having a good time. I feel blessed.

And yet, I would have loved to skip this one day! We do not do the beautiful diversions of an extra forty kilometres to walk via Friol to the monastery of Sobrados dos Monxes. Today we walk the shortest route to Puente Romano de Ferreira; those twenty-eight kilometres from yesterday are still in my calves. We have only been walking for an hour or so when we are again greeted enthusiastically and sometimes less enthusiastically by the local canine at farms and houses along the route: dogs of various breeds and breed combinations announce our arrival, accompany us as we pass by and bark loudly when we have long since disappeared from sight. They hardly make an impression on Goof and every time I quickly check whether the boundary between us and the farm dogs is high and firm enough. We now walk through As Cavadas, a deserted hamlet. One of those places where the last umbilical cord was probably cut over thirty years ago. The wind plays with a few window shutters, which is the only sound these houses produce.

And then, all of a sudden, things go wrong! Out of nowhere, two enormous dogs appear from behind one of these boarded-up farmhouses. No gate or fence can stop them. Frightening, oversized, white Dogo argentinos, two specimens simply bred for size and aggression. Two dog-headed ponies approach us without hesitation. I immediately untie Goof from the leash, so he can get away. Unfortunately Goof is not a scaredy-cat and waits for the two with his tail held high and his back stretched.

I shout "Run!" to him, but that must be an unknown command for my ridgeback. Goof jumps agile and beats the attack of the first dog away. I take care of the second monster and hit him with full force with my walking stick high on the front legs just as he takes a leap at me. His head is no use, I know. It is made of concrete.

I literally shit myself with fear! While I see from the corner of my eye that my dog resists the much heavier fighting dog, the now lame Dogo comes at me again. Then I remember that in my day-pack I have a little can of pepper spray against dogs. I found this half a year ago in a German hardware store and - in our country completely illegal - bought it anyway; you never know. The spray squirts out of the can like serpentine and I can aim it perfectly at the eyes of the miscreant. He immediately takes off, whining and bumping into street furniture. In the meantime Goof has managed to avoid the ripping jaws of his attacker, but he can't prevent the front legs and full weight of about eighty kilos of the fighting dog landing on his back. Goof screams out in pain and crawls to me. With the rest of the pepper spray I immediately chase away number two of the aggressors,

Goof is lying on the street, sprawled out, shivering from fear and pain. I whimper. I kneel down by my dog and try to reassure him. We have to get out of here before the two come back for more. I dump the contents of the Ortlieb Duffel in a dry ditch. My clothes, cooking

and camping gear stay here. With great difficulty I lift Goof into the waterproof bag. His head pokes out above the zip, uncomprehending. With my wounded camino friend on the Dixon roller pack I walk back to Lugo. Perhaps I will meet the Finnish physiotherapist with whom I shared a double room in the Alba pension yesterday. Goof meekly accepts the transport on the roller pack; he can hardly move in the transport bag. From time to time I stop to see how he's doing. His eyes are bright and when I stroke his head gently I can hear a tail moving enthusiastically somewhere in the Duffel. These six kilometres back to Lugo have become the toughest kilometres of the camino for me. Not because of the weight of the forty-five kilos of Goof that I now have behind me, but certainly because of the concern for my dog.

And then things go very fast. I am suddenly a spectator in my own life: the Finnish Ilja, together with the manager of the bed & breakfast, take over the reins from me. Goof is quickly taken to a vet. X-rays and a scan are made. No serious injuries, but Goof has to rest for a few days. He'll be sagging in his front for a while, the doctor predicts.

"The remaining eighty kilometres of the Primitivo... you could still do it after that. This dog is strong and young", the doctor says.

The physiotherapist asks the vet if there's anything she can do for Goof.

"Physiotherapy for humans works in the same way as for quadrupeds. I would definitely do it."

The vet indicates where the damage is and how to treat it.

Ilja continued to work on it lovingly that day. It is clear to me: I will not take any risks with my four-legged friend; it is not worth it to me.

So no compostolates for us. It will be for another time. The host also solved my logistical problem: after hearing my decision, he went with an acquaintance to collect my car in Oviedo. When I wanted to reimburse them for the costs incurred and invite them and the Finnish woman to dinner as a thank you, they declined.

"You go back to the Netherlands and have some peace and moments of rest in your mind. You have experienced too much here today. Just make sure you get home safely."

Goof lies stretched out in the back of the Landrover. The treatment by Ilja has really done him good. I help him to get in and out of the car at the stops. Jumping is definitely not allowed. He is doing better. He also has to get used to the fact that he's not a pilgrim anymore. With gratitude I think back to the people in Lugo who, completely in the spirit of the camino, offered help when it was necessary. They must have found the envelopes with money by now and I hope they will take the time for a dinner in one of the nice restaurants of the city one of these days.

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