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4E. The Camino del Salvador



Rebekah Scott, Laurie Reynolds

and Piers Nicholson

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The Camino del Salvador is not for everyone – it is challenging even to experienced hikers and pilgrims. But it offers spectacular scenery, friendly townspeople, great food and drink, and ample accommodation, compressed into a pilgrimage of less than a week's duration.

We hope this guide is useful to those who follow us on the trail, and we strive to keep it up-to-date and accurate. If you have any comments, corrections or additions to make, please contact laurie.reynolds@gmail.com

You may also care to browse:

Rebekah Scott's Blog with further information on this Route:
www.moratinoslife.blogspot.com

Piers Nicholson's website with further information and photographs:
http://www.santiago-compostela.net/salvador/index_sa_en.html

Laurie Reynolds photogallery of this route:
<http://picasaweb.google.com/laurie.reynolds/CaminoPrimitivo1#>

A Guide to the Camino del Salvador

From León to Oviedo: a route through the mountains

Rebekah Scott, Laurie Reynolds and Piers Nicholson



January 2010

Introduction: This route is an ancient one. When the Moors swept northwards through Spain, holy relics from Christian communities in the south were often sent north for safety. Many of them ended up in the Cathedral del Salvador in Oviedo (above). Pilgrims were encouraged to believe they should first visit the Cathedral of Our Saviour in Oviedo before traveling onwards, usually on the Camino Primitivo, to Santiago. As one popular saying goes:

*He who travels to Santiago and not to El Salvador
Honors the servant and ignores the master.*

There are still sound reasons to travel this Camino. It bypasses the overcrowded second half of the Camino Frances beyond Leon. Oviedo is a very interesting city, well worth visiting. Pilgrims are not a common sight, so they are often treated with care. And the scenery is some of the most spectacular in all of Spain. This overview is best read in conjunction with Piers Nicholson's collection of photos, http://www.santiago-compostela.net/salvador/index_sa_en.html which also contains further explanations, diagrams, and GPS maps of the section over the cordillera.

The route: The Camino del Salvador is some 120 kilometers of roads and trails. It connects Leon, a major stop along the Camino Frances, to Oviedo, the start of the Camino Primitivo and a longtime pilgrimage destination in its own right. From Leon, it follows the east bank of the Rio Bernesga for some 40 kilometers of relatively flat river plain. There are a number of small towns and stopping places. From Buiza onward for the next 25 kilometers the path climbs over two significant ridges of the Picos de Europa mountains, to Puerto de Pajares, a mountain pass at the Leon – Asturias frontier.

It descends steeply to Puente de los Fierros, then winds its way through rural Asturian mountain towns and ends with a visit to the holy relics of the “Camera Santa” in Oviedo cathedral.

Many pilgrims stay in Oviedo an extra day to visit the pre-romanesque churches on Mt. Naranco. One time-saving tip is to visit the monuments in the morning, on your way out of town. It is an easy 4 kilometer walk up to the site, and the route joins with the Camino Primitivo nearby. Esclampero, an 8 or 9 kilometer walk beyond Oviedo, has an albergue and a couple of restaurants. That gets you started on the Camino Primitivo, and makes it easy to reach Cornellana the next day.

A visit to the church (San Miguel de Lillo) and the palace (Santa Maria de Naranco), is highly recommended. They open at 9:30 or 10 a.m. depending on time of year. You must take a guided visit, but it is not hurried at all. The two sites are about a 3 minute walk apart from each other and are unique - The palace is the only non-religious pre-romanesque site remaining in Asturias, and both are open on Mondays! Winter hours (Oct. 1- March 31): Tuesday - Saturday: 10:00 -13:00; 15:00 - 17:00. Sunday and Monday, 10:00 - 13:00. Summer hours (April 1 - Sept. 30): Tuesday - Saturday, 9:30 -13:30; 15:30 - 17:30. Sunday and Monday, 9:30 - 13:30.

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- 5 From Oviedo, the Santiago-bound pilgrim may continue on the spectacular, mountainous Camino Primitivo, or travel a few days northwards and connect with the Camino del Norte at the coast, at either Villaviciosa or Aviles. The Camino del Salvador is generally less remote than the Camino Primitivo, with the exception of the high-altitude kilometers before the Puerto de Pajares. It has some segments of asphalt walking, particularly when leaving Leon and entering Oviedo—but it also offers some breathtaking vistas of rural Spain in between.

Planning your camino: Good information is available on the website of the Leon-Asturias Friends of the Camino, <http://www.caminosantiagoastur.com>. It suggests stages, lists the towns in between, and shows elevation gains. You may find their outline maps helpful for clarifying the several alternative routes, especially at the places where trails split and rejoin one another.



Weather/when to go: Weather in Leon province is very hot in July and August, and generally similar to that on the Camino Frances. Weather in the high-altitude sections of the cordillera, however, is highly variable and sometimes **dangerous** – especially if you travel outside the high summer season. Deep drifts of snow are a real possibility as early as December and late as April, and we experienced sleet, gale-force winds, and nearby lightning strikes during a sudden storm in mid-September. Travelers also report thick fog, heavy rain, and severe cold. Weather in Asturias can be markedly more damp than that on the Leon side. **Waterproofs and a hiking stick are essential.**

Suggested itineraries: (distances are not exact)

FOUR DAY ITINERARY

- Day 1 – Leon to Pola de Gordon, 36 km
- Day 2 – Pola de Gordon to Pajares, 29 km via Poladura de la Tercia
- Day 3 – Pajares to Pola de Lena, 23 km
- Day 4 – Pola de Lena to Oviedo, 33 km

FIVE DAY ITINERARY

- Day 1 – Leon to La Robla, 27 km
- Day 2 – La Robla to Poladura de la Tercia, 23 km
- Day 3 – Poladura to Campomanes, 31 km
- Day 4 – Campomanes to Mieres, 21 km
- Day 5 – Mieres to Oviedo, 19 km

SEVEN DAY ITINERARY

- Day 1 – Leon to La Robla, 27 km
- Day 2 – La Robla to Buiza, 13 km
- Day 3 – Buiza to Poladura de Tercia, 10 km, mountain
- Day 4 – Poladura to Pajares, 15 km, mountain
- Day 5 – Pajares to Pola de Lena, 23 km
- Day 6 – Pola de Lena to Mieres, 14 km
- Day 7 – Mieres to Oviedo, 19 km

Many towns along the way have hostels, hotels, and pensions available, so pilgrims may break up their days as their energy, condition, and budgets allow.



Oviedo

Once in **Oviedo**, you have many choices. There is an albergue and many hotels and pensiones. We can recommend the Hostal Arcos, Calle Magdalena, 3. Tel: 985 214 773; www.hostal-arcos.com. Well located in the old town adjacent to the Plaza del Ayuntamiento and close to the municipal library, with its 20 computers and free internet.

Hotel Ovetense, Calle San Juan 6, is another reasonable option in the old town.

The pilgrim albergue in Oviedo does not open until 7 p.m. and always gets mixed reviews in the guidebooks.

A visit to the cathedral is essential. Pilgrims traditionally stop to pray before the beautiful statue of El Salvador to the right of the altar, then visit the Camera Santa, an ancient underground shrine at the centre of Asturian ethnic identity. Sellos are available at the cathedral sacristy or the ticket desk of the diocesan museum, which shares an entryway with the Camera Santa. Pilgrims can view the shrine for free, but must pay the usual 2 Euros to view the other museum treasures.

When the road turns to Altu del Padrun, you now have a 5 km hike uphill on a secondary road, through several tiny towns. In Aguilar you may meet Mari Angeles, a friendly lady who offers prayers, chatter, and fresh spring water to tired pilgrims. Just beyond is a clearly marked scallop shell to take you off the paved road and onto a dirt track. The Camino now alternates between tracks and roads. In two kilometers you are in Olloniego.

In **Olloniego** (restaurants and bars), you will then turn left and go down the main street of the town, passing bars, shops and restaurants. As you leave town you will pass the medieval tower and a bridge that has lost its river.

As soon as you cross the 17th-century toll bridge across the Rio Nalon, the scallop shell points you to a track that goes straight up through a forest for about a kilometer. When you reach the top and emerge onto the road, you're next to a place called Centro Reto. There is a shady grassy space there perfect for rest.

After the Centro Reto, are more tracks going up, more ascent, but it is not strenuous. In a few minutes the city of Oviedo will appear in the distance below – but do not be misled into thinking that it's all downhill from here!

Here the shells take you off and on secondary roads and medieval tracks. The paths are brambly in places, sometimes quite narrow, but they have a fairly nice grade of descent and ascent. There are no problems with finding your way. Soon you will be in the city, and the centro historico is not far from where you come in.

A note on waymarking

From Leon to Poladura de la Tercia trail marking is good, if a bit sparse at times. You really don't need any additional sources. From Poladura de la Tercia to Sta. Maria del Arbas, the route continues to be waymarked, but there are two or three points where additional waymarks would be very helpful – we will detail these in the text. The path is indicated by dark wooden posts (*mojones* in Spanish) with a stick figure of a walker and a yellow arrow pointing in the right direction. These were erected in 2008 by Cuatro Valles, a local tourism association, which in 2009 also released a more-or-less helpful guide to the towns along the trails. The booklet is free and available at tourist offices in Leon, La Robla, and Mieres.

From Buiza to Sta. Maria del Arbas the route passes through the village of Poladura de la Tercia. This is remote mountain country, and there are difficult and isolated stretches. If bad weather threatens it is best to take an alternate path: the Roman mining road from Buiza to Villasimpliz and on to Villanueva de la Tercia. (there are arrows, but they are sometimes a bit hard to find). Once you arrive in Villasimpliz you must walk along the N-630 highway for about 6 kms to Sta. Maria de Arbas. There the waymarking changes to the more familiar conch shell ceramic markers. From here to Oviedo, the marking is generally terrific, but remember: in Asturias, due to some hard-headed regional reasoning, the conch-shell directional guide is mounted **BACKWARD**. Albergues: Leon, Carbajal, Buiza, Poladura de la Tercia, town of Pajares, Pola de Lena, Mieres, and Oviedo.



Cathedral of Santa María de León

Walking instructions

Start your hike at the San Marcos Parador, a Leon landmark that stands alongside the River Bernesga. Moving waterways will be your companions from here almost all the way to Oviedo, but the trip starts out with the river at your back. Walk along the front of the Parador away from the river, to the Avenida de los Peregrinos, to a roundabout with a small airplane on a pole in the middle. From here, straight ahead, you will see the first wooden mojon.

The markers are about a meter high and have a yellow figure of a hiker with a walking stick. The next few kilometers take you through suburban housing estates, a few small towns, fields, and a nature park of pine forest. There is not much elevation gain.

If you want to cut 8 km off this day, you can take Bus #12 from the Plaza de Sto. Domingo in Leon out to Carbajal de la Legua. That will get you through Leon's outskirts and residential suburban development. ALSA bus line runs a regular route from Leon's central bus station to La Robla, Pola de Gordon, and Pola de Lena. Renfe trains also serve several towns along the route. In Asturias, the short-gage FEVE railroad runs a commuter train route from Puente de Fierros to Oviedo center, with stops in many towns along the Way.

Apparently, no bars open in Pola de Lena before 8 am, but a lovely breakfast can be had at the Confiteria Vienna, a fancy bakery on the left side of the main street as you head out of town. The Way follows a well-marked stretch of two-lane road with narrow shoulders on to **Ujo** (6 km). Town with commerce.

In Ujo, there is a much remodeled romanesque church visible from the Camino, and the coffee and pastry shop is right on the square at the church. As you leave Ujo, you walk a riverside path much-used by townspeople as a "Camino de Colesterol." It is pleasant, but paved.

In **Mieres** (8 km from Ujo), the arrows take you across the disused pedestrian bridge and straight into town. The arrows disappear, but as you come off the bridge, just head straight up the street named Manuel Llaneza. When it ends at a T, head left onto Teodorio Cuesta. You will now keep going straight for a while, past a church, past a plaza with a statue of a man pouring sidra from up over his shoulder. (Farmacia on the right here is very pilgrim-friendly: the pharmacist proudly displays his own pilgrim Credencial to all comers.) You will pass a cement plant on your left and walk below several highway bridges. The Mieres albergue is a former school recently remodeled, about 50 meters off the Camino. It is a lonesome and rundown area, and a walk around the buildings did not reveal any information on opening hours or numbers to call for entry. Those who wish to stay in Mieres should consider one of the many pensions or small hotels available in the town center.

From the church, it is about 4 km more to the town of **Pola de Lena** (7 km from Campomanes). Pola de Lena is a big town with private accommodations, an albergue, shops, restaurants, bars, and a health center. Make sure to wander the town in the evening and into a Sidreria. There you can sample *sidra*, the pride of Asturias: fermented apple cider that's poured into big glasses from high altitudes.

The albergue is up a hill by the train station, behind the big central church. It's on the second floor of a building full of social services and association offices. If you arrive during business hours the attendant at the door will give you keys to access the building as well as the albergue. Accommodations comprise two sex-segregated dormitories. The female side has bunks for at least 16 people. Showers have tons of hot water, and there is internet on the main floor at a youth center, where they are very nice to pilgrims. The building is closed on weekends, though, so pilgrims must go to the police station on the Plaza Mayor for the key...and learn the hard way that hot water is a weekday luxury!

Private Accommodation in Pola de Lena:

Hotel La Payareta (2** hotel), Menendez Pidal, 12. Tel. 985 493 975 (rooms 35E).

Hotel Lena (1* hotel), La Playa, 4. Tel: 985 493 329.

Hotel Dona Gaudiosa (1 * hotel), Munon Fondero, 38. Tel. 985 490 625.

In the town of **La Robla** (about 26 km from Leon) there are several restaurants, general commerce, and private accommodations. We had a good meal in Meson la Bogadera close to the Camino in the Calle Plaza de la Constitucion, 9. Private accommodation in La Robla can be found at the Hostal Ordonez de Celis, on the Calle Ramon y Cajal, 5. Tel: 987 572 342.

The La Robla Turismo is just inside the doors of the ayuntamiento building on the Plaza Mayor. They have sellos and tourist guides to the Camino del Salvador.

Ermita del Buen Suceso is a charming little hermitage along the N620 about three kilometers from La Robla. It is open to visitors throughout the year and has a fuente out front. Across the highway is the popular Cafeteria del Buen Suceso, which offers breakfasts and a good-value Menu del Dia.

Pola de Gordon (10 km from La Robla) has two supermarkets (though they are only open for normal Spanish shop hours), restaurants, commerce and private accommodations: Pension El Arenal, Calle Arenal, 4. Tel: 987 577 427. Individual room with bath 15E. Hotel El Fontanan (2 **), Calle Constitucion, 169. Tel: 987 588 458. Email: reserva@hostalfontanan.com

Meson de Antonio, at the main downtown crossroad, serves a good Menu del Dia each afternoon. The meson next to Pension El Arenal serves breakfast starting at 7 and offers croissants fresh from their oven. Take food with you when you leave Pola de Gordon, as grocery stores and restaurants are rare for the next couple of days.

From Pola de Gordon to **Buiza** (5 km), head into the mountains on a paved secondary road.

There is a new (2008) municipal albergue in Buiza, in the refurbished school building on the right as you enter the town. Some report a bar for food, but it only opens at the whim of the owner. If you stay in Buiza, you are advised to carry your own food in with you. The albergue offers a small kitchen with only microwave cooking capacity. To have the place opened, walk up the main street to a small green garden gate on the right, where a radio blasts Top-40 hits night and day. That is La Casa de Angel, where the hospitalero lives. Bang loud and long on the door, and someone will arrive soon to help you out.



The route splits in Buiza



Pre-romanesque church at Santa Cristina de Lena.

At Vega del Rey (a few km after Campomanes) keep an eye out for a pedestrian bridge over the highway. It's off to the right after a warehouse/workshop place with a bright blue roof called Talleres Prada. From the pedestrian bridge, it's a short but steep walk up to a great picnic place and a beautiful pre-romanesque church, Santa Cristina de Lena. The simple, severe little church was built in the mid-800s, and has a lot of very stout buttress-like columns. Apparently most are not for support, but mainly decoration. In fact, the church has 365 corners if you go all around the building. Lawns outside offer great picnic spots.

Hours of Santa Cristina de Lena church: 11-1 and 4:30-6:00; closed Monday (have to call Maria at 985-490-525 or 609-942-153). Admission 1 Euro; sello.

It is well marked and very well cleared, a recent project of the Asturian Forestry Commission. Along the way there's a pretty little chapel of San Miguel (closed of course) but it's a nice rest spot.

Between Fresnedo and the small hamlet of Herias, there's supposed to be another town/village – Heros. It may very well be a couple of closed up and falling down houses on the route. In Herias there are no facilities. From Herias it's only a couple of kilometers to Campomanes, which is where the two options join up again.

Remember that in Asturias the use of the scallop shell as a directional signal is reversed from the rest of the Camino. In Asturias, only in Asturias, you go the way that the smaller side of the scallop is pointing, not the way all the radiating lines are pointing (this will be crucial at a couple of points, particularly one after Herias).

In **Campomanes** (6.5 km from Pte. de los Fierros), restaurants, much commerce, and private accommodation. Hospedaje Senda del Huerna (a 2 ** hostel), Avenida del Huerna, 8, 1D. Tel: 985 496 447.

From Campomanes there's only one way to Pola de Lena, on the old N-630, but there is very little traffic on this part of the road. There are bars and shops along the entire stretch between Campomanes and Pola de Lena.

In Buiza the camino takes you to the parish church, where the path splits. A clear marking points the way to Villasimpliz on the right, or Rodiezmo uphill to the left. If you take the option to Villasimpliz, you will end up walking on the N630 highway for many kilometers up to the Puerto de Pajares. The leftward and better-waymarked route goes to Poladura de Tercia (and also has occasional written signs to Rodiezmo); it goes through remote mountain areas with plentiful wildlife and beautiful views. ***Snow lies deep on the northward-facing stretches of this path well into April, so be prepared.***



In the mountains after Buiza

The 9.6 kilometers from Buiza to Poladura starts with a moderately steep climb. There is a large and growing quarry on the hillside just above the village, and the path has been pushed further to the East in order to avoid it. After that, the upward path resumes, past a towering rock named Las Forcadas de San Anton. It then reaches an upland meadow, which may be the site of the monastery of San Anton which looked after travelers on this route in the Middle Ages. You reach the summit at 1401 m. and there is a cleared track for the gas pipeline crossing the Camino at right angles. From the summit, there is a steep descent on a wide track through woodland. You pass a water control house with a door badly damaged by floods, and shortly afterwards, the track does a hairpin right turn with another water control house just beyond the turn.



From Pajares to Puente de los Fierros

In **Puente de los Fierros** (9 km from Pajares), you have another choice, essentially the same choice as at Pajares: you can either go on the “right side” of the valley (meaning along the N-630) or you can stay on the “left side” and enjoy a beautiful rural walk. The split comes before you reach the actual bridge in Puente de los Fierros, you will see on the left hand side two yellow arrows, one pointing up and indicating “Fresnedo” on a little path—that’s the one to take for the off road route. The other direction says “La Frecha”, and it will take you along the highway on pavement till Campomanes. It’s hard to think of any day of more beautiful Camino walking, maybe with the exception of a few days on the coast of the Camino del Norte. From Puente de los Fierros you walk on the side of the hill up to Fresnedo, a little hamlet with a few residents. In Fresnedo, you get on a beautiful track through hardwood forests with incredible views.

Turn left going out of the albergue and the road goes up to the highway. After about a minute on the highway, you will see the “Leaving Pajares” sign (Pajares with a red line diagonally through it) – the path to San Miguel del Rio is on the left side of the road you are on. This path takes you down a few km, a little steep at times, through beautiful countryside. This path is used by all-terrain vehicles, which means the grade is not so steep that you have to scramble.

At San Miguel follow the signs for Santa Marina, the next little hamlet on the Camino. This tracks along a little-used rural road. When you near Santa Marina, you will see a scallop shell pointing you straight ahead, and a road sign pointing to the left (and up a hill) to Santa Marina. If you follow the Camino marking, you will wind up going back up to the N-630 highway. Follow the road sign to Santa Marina, and don’t worry, the Camino arrows will reappear.

When you get up to Santa Marina, circle around the church at the end of the village and in a minute or two you will pass through a series of gates in sheep pastures, marked with yellow arrows. (Seasonal greenery and tractors can obscure this path. If you can’t locate it, any of the friendly locals will show you where to go.) A stone path will appear underfoot. It goes up pretty steeply. This is a very nice walk to Llanos de Someron (fuente) and from there you get on the very rural road (maybe 4 cars passed in 4 km) which takes you down to Puente de los Fierros. At Puente de los Fierros, the paths on the two sides of the valley meet up.

➤ It is very easy to go wrong here – unless you need to return to civilization right away, you do NOT want to continue on the wide track through the gorge, which will take you to Rodiezmo, and quite likely to many kilometers of road-walking on the N-630. Look to your left past the little shed and you will see a waymarked path running diagonally on the contour along the face of the cliff. This contour path skirts round the mountains with terrific views, and takes you westward over meadows and along the valley to Poladura de la Tercia.

➤ The final kilometer of the waymarked path into Poladura is a morass of barbed wire, erosion, thorn bushes, and a deep creek. It is recommended that you head into the neighboring San Martin de Tercia when it comes into sight – several paths will lead toward it to your right. It is less than a kilometer from there to Poladura on a much more walkable tarmac road.

➤ If you click on the small map above, it will take you (after January 2010) to the Camino del Salvador pages of www.santiago-compostela.net, with a larger version of the map and many pictures of the route.

Be aware that semi-wild horses and cattle wander free in this area. They may be curious, (especially if you are carrying fruit with you), but none so far have proved dangerous.

Poladura de la Tercia (9.6 km from Buiza): Private accommodation at La Posada del Embrujo, see it online at: <http://www.toprural.com/ficha/es.cfm/idp/24/ids/4433.htm>. Recommended highly. There is an albergue in the old school in Poladura, but no cafes or shops; the only bar is in the Posada. They provide meals, but advance notice is recommended. Proprietors are pilgrim-friendly and know the route; they can also locate the albergue keys if you choose that option.



The next leg of the journey requires some forethought. It is the highest-altitude and most remote section of this camino, and your mobile phone probably will not work there. Snow, sometimes drifts hip-deep, stays on the path and hides the waymarks well before and after the winter is felt in the valley. Listen to weather reports, and keep a sharp eye on the sky. Carry a compass, a good map, and warm, waterproof layers. If walking alone you are advised to inform others of your time of departure and estimated time of arrival at your planned destination.

The path from Poladura starts out along the tarmac road for a hundred meters, crosses a creek and then goes off across a field to the right (marked by a mojon just beyond a metal gate on the right). The path is fairly easy to follow in good weather. There are quite a lot of markers, and only two or three places where you might go wrong because of their absence.

In Pajares/Payares, you have choices to make. Our recommended route is given below. However you may prefer to stay on the east side of the valley where the albergue is located along with along with the N-630 highway and the train tracks. If the weather is bad you can simply walk along the edge of the highway and take your chances with the steep grades and smoking brakes. Alternatively, you can follow the waymarked woodland path on the eastern side of the valley. Markers will take you up and off the highway past the Pajares train station and on to charming Asturian towns like Flor de Acebo, Romia de Arriba, Navedo and La Muela. In March 09 waymarks on this path were faded, and footing was bad in some areas. This path enters Puente de Fierros on the eastern side of the highway. If you wish to continue along a well-marked and pleasant (and uphill!) woodland path the rest of the way to Campomanes, cross the highway and the eponymous bridge, and pick up the Western/ Fresneda alternative on the opposite bank of the river – it is clearly marked, in yellow paint, on a concrete abutment. The other option, marked “La Frecha,” means following along the noisy highway for another 13 kilometers, but staying on relatively level ground.

Our recommended alternative from Pajares is to descend to the river at the bottom of the valley at San Miguel del Rio, and stay on the other side of the valley with no N-630 and no train. Both routes come together again at Puente de los Fierros. It is rural, beautiful and fairly remote. Here are instructions if you want to go that way:

Leaving Puerto de Pajares, you must walk (carefully!) along the shoulder of the N-630 for another five kilometers to the town of Pajares. If you would rather escape the roaring traffic, follow the highway a half km or so from the Puerto until you spot an emergency gravel stop lane for trucks with failing brakes, and a sign that warns of a 15% grade descent. To your LEFT is a marked Camino path, an overland alternative that is longer, but much more pleasant and safe.

The path begins with a steep downhill walk for a couple of kilometers, but it is pretty, passing through forests and pastures. A few kilometers along is another branching of the Camino, marked with two ceramic conch shells. Going straight will take you down to San Miguel del Rio at the bottom of the valley on the river (very pretty but no place to stay). Going to the right will take you back up to the N-630 and into the town of **Pajares** (not the mountain pass). Pajares has a long tradition of pilgrim hospitality, and a spotlessly clean and well-staffed albergue. The phone number of the hospitalera is on the door.

The albergue in Pajares (capacity for 16 in bunks in two separate rooms) is in the house where the school's teachers used to live. Showers are very hot, and there are room heaters that you can regulate yourself. Views are top-notch! There is a minimal kitchen, but nowhere to buy groceries – coffee and tea are supplied. Food is served at the Taberna de las Cortinas, a meson at the top of the town on the highway. Be sure to ask for food prices before ordering – strangers seem to pay more. Take something extra back with you to the albergue, as breakfast is not available anywhere in town.

The first few kilometers go up, up, up past mountainsides of grazing mares and foals. When you reach the top, a wide valley opens up before you. The scenery is splendid, and the waymarks disappear. Turn right and follow along the lip of the valley until it dips down to a natural notch, a shepherds' trail to the next valley. Here you will pick up yellow arrows painted on concrete markers and rocks. These lead uphill again and to the left, following the contour of the cliff-face and leading up through the sharp vertical rock formations to the north that give this range its name, the "Sierra de Cuchillos," or "knife mountains."

Keep an eye out for waymarks along the next series of high meadows, as they are painted at ground level and are sometimes obscured by undergrowth or snow. When all else fails, look for the yellow metal poles that mark the natural gas pipeline traveling along the ridge on the other side of the valley – you will intersect that pipeline later on.



Pass through another notch in the mountain (and navigate the barbed wire fences!) The camino eventually descends a bowl-like valley criss-crossed with cattle trails; keep left, cross the creek, and you will find the first mojon in many kilometers at the base of yet another sharp uphill climb. From here you can see down the valley to the N-360 and the little town of Busdongo, with its train station and mountain hostels. A signal tower blinks from the peak of the hill you're climbing, but a mojon will send you off to the left when you reach the top.

Follow the signs downhill, where they disappear again in a scrubby hillside wound with barbed wire. Head northeast, (rightward) following a fallen barbed-wire fence, and you will eventually meet the waymarks again – they lead left, down a pretty farm road, past a waterfall, and through a wide cow pasture toward the N-630 and Santa Maria de Arbas. (If all else fails, follow the high-tension powerline down the hillside to the highway. **Take great care on the final descent, which is dangerously steep.**) If you click on the small map (left), it will take you (after January 2010) to the Camino del Salvador pages of www.santiago-compostela.net with a larger version of the map and many pictures of the route.

The summit on this section of the route is at 1574 m. **Take all precautions for walking in exposed mountains. Even in high summer the weather can change very quickly.**

From Poladura to Santa Maria by this route is 9.3 km, but the going is rugged and it seems a lot longer when you walk it... especially when the weather turns nasty. We took just short of 6 hours.

Sta. Maria de Arbas del Puerto (approximately 8 km from Rodiezmo on the highway option and 9.3 km over the mountains from Poladura de la Tercia). In Sta. Maria de Arbas del Puerto there is a beautiful Romanesque church and former pilgrim hospital, usually open, with Sello. Sunday Mass at 1 p.m. The meson over the road is usually closed; no stores or bars. Fuente.

From Sta. Maria, the “official” route goes to the east of the highway, but it is not well marked, it is populated by bulls and barbed wire, and it bypasses Puerto de Pajares with its welcoming bar.



Upwards towards the Puerto de Pajares

Walk along the highway for another km or so, and Puerto de Pajares, the dividing line between Leon and Asturias, offers up beautiful views and a family-run bar that serves up sandwiches and full meals. This is not a town, just a mountain pass. There is a now-closed Parador on the west side of the highway, the layby is a popular stopping-place for travelers and truck drivers. We have heard rumors about making it into an albergue, but that seems unlikely.



View from Puerto de Pajares