

Galicia beckons with off-the-beaten track treasures

Follow the footsteps of medieval pilgrims to Spain's farthest frontier

Story and photos by Marie J. DeLopez
Special to the Herald Union

During the Middle Ages religious fervor sent thousands on pilgrimages across Europe to holy sites. Today these legions have given way to throngs of tourists on quests for novelty and recreation, but one destination continues to draw travellers with either motive — Santiago de Compostela in Spain's northwestern corner, Galicia.

This most distant region of the Iberian Peninsula was originally called Finis Terrae, literally Land's End, by the Romans in the belief that it was the westernmost land in the world. Its fame grew enormously in the Middle Ages when the Camino de Santiago, or Route of St. James, became the most important pilgrimage route in Europe.

Still largely rural and happily ignored by the rest of Spain, Galicia is in many senses another country. It is reminiscent of the western coast of Ireland with its damp climate, lush green vegetation, local legends and ancient myths. Its vibrant Celtic roots and unique historical experience, including domination by the Viking, and remote geographical location have endowed the region with a distinct cultural quality.

Most travellers to Galicia head straight for Santiago de Compostela, one of Spain's most beautiful cities and still one of the most important pilgrimage destinations in Europe, rivalling Rome.

The city was founded early in the Christian era. As myth tells it, after his execution the body of St. James the Apostle was transported by two disciples from Jerusalem to Santiago. Pilgrims by the thousands travelled the route in the Middle Ages. To this day contemporary visitors continue to trek the route from the French border to the shrine.

Whenever Saint James' Day, July 25, falls on a Sunday, as was the case this year, the coincidence is celebrated as a holy year or jubilee year. Many more pilgrims set out for Santiago de Compostela this year

in accordance with a long-standing tradition dating back to the 15th century.

In addition to its religious significance, fantastic monuments and still evident medieval charm, Santiago de Compostela offers visitors much to enjoy. It is a lively town, full of great restaurants and bars offering the widest variety of regional foods at very affordable prices. It is home to one of the most famous universities in Europe and owes its unique ambience to its large number of students.

There are a host of attractions to visit in the city. The cathedral is probably the most monumental construction. It shows influences of the French Romanesque style while retaining the regionally distinct Romanico Compostelano of its own. Through its famous Obradoiro Door visitors enter the Old Cathedral, a Romanesque crypt with the first vaults of groined arches ever built in Spain.

Outside the cathedral the Plaza de las Platerias is named for the abundance of shops making and selling silver articles that are to be found under its porticos. The square also offers a magnificent view of the cathedral's Gothic portal with its original Romanesque sculptures. More of these exceptional sculptures grace the Portico de la Gloria, another entrance to the cathedral.

Seaside sports and pleasures

But there is more to awe visitors to the region than well preserved relics of a bygone age. Beaten by the Atlantic ocean, Galicia offers visitors a wealth of memorable scenery to enjoy. The wild coastline is dramatically indented with majestic estuaries and is dotted with coves, beaches, sophisticated cities and romantic villages.

Gastronomic pleasures add another pleasurable dimension to the Galician experience. Fish has long been a main staple of the diet, and when the appetite rises thoughts turn to seafood. Traditional dishes

include fruits of the sea such as sea scallops, octopus and shrimp, empanadas (large, savoury pies with a variety of fillings), hand-made cheeses such as the creamy, regionally famous tetilla, and a wealth of juicy fruits. Eating out is generally cheap, and Galicia is known worldwide for the wide array of locally produced wines.

Those with some time to explore can take to the road to explore the winding coastline with its surprising vistas and seaside attractions. Along the Rias Bajas in the southwest are a myriad of beaches and low-key resorts that host travellers. Head for the Islas Cies, three beautiful islands with sandy white beaches, and the charming nearby medieval city of Pontevedra.

Another great stop just south of Pontevedra is the historical, sophisticated and vibrant city of Vigo. The city is graced with an abundance of gardens, pine forests and wild flowers in all seasons. Vigo's ancestral Celtic roots fill the local folklore with legends and no dearth of bagpipe celebrations.

The city's nightlife offers a wide variety of op-

tions ranging from the enjoyment of a quiet dinner savoring delicious dishes in a terrace across the bay to taking in a concert or theatrical production, investigating the pubs and discos or a simply relaxing night stroll along the beach.

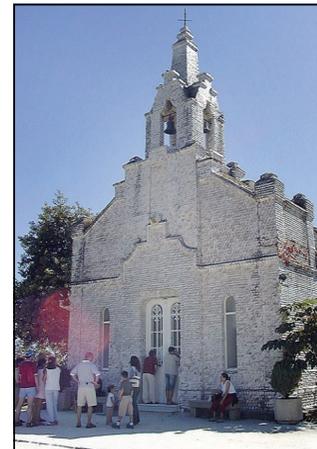
Crowning the city center is El Castro, one of the region's most beautiful urban parks. Its walled fortress dates from the 17th century and offers a breathtaking view of the city below and the ocean beyond.

While in Galicia it is also worthwhile to visit the Isla de la Toja, an island on the southern arm of the Arousas estuary just north of Pontevedra. This tourist mecca is a small paradise featuring luxury hotels, a casino, a plethora of aquatic attractions and golf.

Traveling to Galicia is an experience in itself. From Germany the 2,300-kilometer pilgrimage crosses France to San Sebastian in the Spanish Basque country. The road continues through Burgos and Valladolid, both major stops on the medieval route as well. From there modern highways whisk travelers to Santiago. As the Galicians say, *Bon Viaxe*.



The Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, the burial place of St. James Apostle, draws pilgrims to worship as it has since the 11th century.



A church completely covered in seashells at La Toja. The scallop shell has served as the symbol of St. James for nearly 2,000 years. Medieval pilgrims would return to their homes with shells as a symbol and proof of having made the pilgrimage to the saint's tomb.



A dramatic sculpture of Saint James being transported to Santiago de Compostela graces one of the city's many squares.



Pedestrians wend their way through the seaside town of Bayona. The relaxed pace of life in Spain's northwestern corner lends itself to long lunches and leisurely strolls.



Samil Beach, a 1,300-meter stretch of sparkling sand outside the town of Vigo, is just one of hundreds that attract tourists and local residents alike to the Atlantic surf. The coastline of Galicia is dotted with beaches, coves, cliffs and seaside towns that cater to those inclined to enjoy a wide range of water sports.

Commercial Travel Office to charge fees

The Commercial Travel Office will begin charging a transaction fee for each official and leisure travel booking beginning Oct. 1 as a result of changes in the commercial airline industry, said officials.

The cause is a change in commercial airline commission policies. Between September 2004 and January 2005 most airlines operating in Europe are eliminating commissions, including the major U.S. flag carriers that comprise the majority of the CTO business.

Without commissions from the airlines as a source of revenue, the current CTO, SatoTravel, will receive little or no compensation for the services they provide to the government. To ensure these services continue, SatoTravel will begin charging a transaction fee for each ticket that it books through its agents. The transaction fee for booking official and leisure airline tickets is projected to be from \$14-15 per ticket.

Fees will apply to reservations for both official and leisure air travel and will not be refundable: If a ticket is canceled, the fee will not be returned. Fees do not apply to rental car, train, ferry or hotel bookings.

Transaction fees will be charged for every individual traveler for each complete trip, which is considered to include a departure, intermediate stops and a return. In cases where one complete trip requires the issuance of two separate tickets for the same traveler, only one fee will be charged. For example, if a complete trip for a single traveler involves flights on two separate airlines (an interline connection), the traveler will only be billed one transaction fee.

If a change or modification to a trip requires the cancellation and reissuing of a ticket, an additional fee will be charged. For example, if a traveler changes airlines, travel route, or the name in which the ticket was issued, an additional fee will be charged.

If the change or modification does not require the cancellation and reissuing of the ticket, no additional fee will be charged. For example, if a traveler changes the date or time of a flight on the same route and with the same airline, no additional fee will be charged.

If a traveler chooses to book a leisure flight in conjunction with an official flight (leave in conjunction with official travel), the government will be charged a transaction fee for the official portion of the flight, and the traveler will be charged a separate transaction fee for the leisure portion of the flight.

In the past travel agencies did not charge customers for providing travel services. Airlines paid the travel agent a commission for selling and booking tickets on their flights. The travel agents used these commissions to cover their operating costs and provide a profit. As a result the CTO had no reason to charge customers for the service.

In the United States airlines ended the practice of paying commissions in the late 1990s, forcing travel agencies to begin charging fees for travel services. All U.S. government travel contracts are based on the CTO charging a transaction fee. Unlike those in the United States, overseas airlines continued to pay commissions for international travel until recently. SatoTravel, contracted by the government for travel services in Europe, continued to operate without imposing transaction fees because of this unique overseas situation. (Courtesy of the Installation Management Agency-Europe Public Affairs Office)

