

La Ruta Vadiniense: a trail guide

Welcome to the Ruta Vadiniense, otherwise known as the Camino of the Peaks. This is one of the most demanding and rewarding hikes in the Camino network, 134 kilometers of spectacular views, natural wonders, great food, historical sites, and friendly people.

The Ruta Vadiniense is a new camino for most English-speaking pilgrims. As recently as 2004 a guide to the northern caminos listed it among “Routes That Have Little to Offer Today.” Still, travelers have been using this route for at least 2,000 years to move safely from the heights of the Picos de Europa mountains down to the flatlands of the Tierra de Campos of León province, with the added bonus of viewing what venerable CSJ guide writer Eric Walker termed “some of the wildest and most beautiful scenery in northern Spain.”

From its official start at the mountain resort town of Potes, Cantabria, the Vadiniense follows 135 kilometers (more or less) of trail and rural roadway over spectacular mountains and along the bank of the Rio Esla. Spiritual seekers may find their pilgrimage begins at the monastery and Shrine of the Holy Cross of Liebana, four kilometers from Potes, and ends at the serenely beautiful Cistercian convent of Gradefes, where 20 nuns still sing the hours in a stony chapel on the plain. A long day’s walk from there, past the Mozarabic Monastery of San Miguel de Escalada, puts the pilgrim on the busy Camino Frances, in Mansilla de las Mulas.

The route can be done in seven days, with stops in towns along the way. Four dedicated pilgrim hostels exist on the Vadiniense: in Potes, at Liebana monastery, in Cistierna and in Gradefes. Other towns offer food and rest at more touristic rates. Unless you carry a tent or have caravan backup, this is not a camino for travelers on a tight budget, as it passes through some of Spain’s favourite tourist areas.

Suggested daily stages are:

Day 1: Potes to Fuente De or Espinama (23 or 21 km.)

Day 2: to Portilla de la Reina (21 km.)

Day 3: to Riaño (14 km.)

Day 4: to Venta de Valdoré (22 km.)

Day 5: to Cistierna: rest day (13 km.)

Day 6: to Gradefes (27 km.)

Day 7: to Mansilla de las Mulas (24 km.)

BE AWARE:

This guide is admittedly short on exact distances between small villages and landmarks. It is a work in progress, compiled by volunteers. Websites and blogs can light the way with fresh photos, maps, and commentary.

The Vadiniense is a high-altitude path, and is very physically demanding. Potes stands in a low valley at only 292 meters above sea level, but in two days the route peaks at 1,783 meters, at La Remoña pass. It ends at 794 meters above the sea, on the meseta. Mountain trails require special caution. Weather can change very quickly, and snow, fog, and rain can render landmarks and trail-blazes invisible and footing slippery. The Picos de Europa national park is criss-crossed with hiking trails, and pilgrims must keep a sharp eye on trail markers to avoid going astray. A good map of the Macizo Oriental, with at least a 1:40 scale, is highly recommended, as well as a small compass. Both can be easily found in Potes souvenir shops.

This is a seasonal path. Parts of the Picos de Europa park are snowbound from October through April. Some hardy souls are said to have made this trek on skis, but park officials warn against high-altitude hiking during winter, when daylight hours are short and the sun sets very quickly.

Livestock wander loose in some areas; wild animals live in the mountains too, although dangerous encounters are very rare. Residents along the way are friendly and helpful, and sometimes are the only source of potable water. A basic level of Spanish is necessary. A mobile telephone is useful for contacting key-holders at albergues and reserving beds at hostels. Internet access and telephone coverage are sparse in some places, as are waymarks.

La Ruta Vadiniense is named for the Vadines, a tribe that inhabited this part of the mountains before Roman invaders arrived. Here and there along the trail you will find Vadiniense tombstones and holy places, but like many cultures assimilated by Rome, little is known about the earlier people. This is a nature-lover's trail, with eagles, wildflowers, glacial cirques, trout-filled streams and frog-songs. A long list of fascinating man-made things dot the way: hermit caves, thatch-roofed sheep-folds, a 10-kilometer stretch of well-preserved Roman road, wayside shrines, abandoned mines and railroad yards as well as charming villages, medieval bridges, a massive dam and reservoir, and monasteries both active and long-abandoned. Days and miles are long. You meet very few fellow pilgrims. Waymarking can be vague and frustrating, so map-reading skills and common sense are indispensable.

The beginning of the *Ruta Vadiniense* can be reached from the Camino del Norte via the Ruta Liebanego, a waymarked mountain road that carries pilgrims from San Vicente de la Barquera to the shrine of the true cross at Liebana, a 10th-century monastery above Potes. The Liebanego route is outlined at the end of this guide.

It is possible to trace the Vadiniense from south to north, and efforts have been made to mark the path both ways. Still, waymarks are easily missed. Mike Osborne, a long-distance hiker, blogged his experiences as a "backward hiker" on the Vadiniense at <http://mikeosborne.tumblr.com>.

This guide owes a great debt to "Ruta Vadiniense Picos de Europa Camino de Santiago," a Spanish-language trail-guide produced in 2010 by the Asociacion de Amigos del Camino de Santiago Vadiniense, a pilgrim group based in Cistierna. Over the past ten years members have tracked, mapped, maintained and (more or less) waymarked the trail, opened an albergue in a disused building in Cistierna, and finally produced a glossy, ring-bound guidebook with fold-out maps and detailed information on the ethnography, geology, history, and legends of the Way. It is written by member Jose Fernandez Arenas. Copies are available for 5 Euros by contacting the association at rutavadiniense_jacobe@yahoo.es.

2013 UPDATE: Parts of the trail described in the printed guide were re-routed in 2012. Updated maps, GPS points, and topographical details can be found on the useful group website at www.rutavadiniense.org. Unfortunately, new waymarking was apparently not completed at the very beginning and ending stages of the trail when this guide was updated. I walked and bicycled

the Way successfully in October 2012 and have attempted to fill the gaps with my trail notes. I trust the missing markers will be in place by the time your journey begins. Aside from one day's walk over the mountain, this trail does not wander far from civilization.

GETTING THERE

Santander is the nearest international gateway, with budget flight options from all over Europe and Spain. Both FEVE and Renfe train lines stop at Santander, and connection to Potes is quick and easy to the bus station in town. <http://www.liebanaypicosdeeuropa.com/varios/autobuses.htm> .

A pilgrim walks. From Santander he can walk along the Camino del Norte to Santillana del Mar to Comillas to San Vicente, and southward from there on the 57-km. Camino Lebaniego to begin the Vadiniense in Potes.

But for those on a schedule, during good-weather months Potes is served by occasional ALSA buses from León and several daily coaches from Autobuses Palomera from Santander, Torrelavega, San Vicente de Barquera, Unquera, and Panes. From June to August the bus also travels the valley to Fuente De. Details can be found at Transportes Cantabria, <http://www.transportedecantabria.es/web/guest/home> or <http://www.liebanaypicosdeeuropa.com/varios/autobuses.htm>.

Farther down the trail, ALSA buses travel Riaño-Mansilla de las Mulas, and Gradefes-Leon routes.

Like most good trail guides, this one is forever evolving. We depend on updates and commentary from those who use the guides to keep them accurate and relevant. Once you finish your pilgrimage and settle in with your trail notes, please share your wisdom to threads and FAQs at the invaluable Camino de Santiago online forum at <http://www.caminodesantiago.me/board/camino-vadiniense/> .

Rebrites (at) yahoo.com.

Rebekah Scott

Day 1: POTES to ESPINAMA/FUENTE DE

20 or 23 kilometers (distance hotly debated!)

Potes - Fuente Dé	(31 km)
- Potes - Mieses	(2 km)
- Mieses - Santo Toribio	(1 km)
- Santo Toribio - Turieno	(1 km)
- Turieno - Congarna	(2 km)

- Congarna - Camaleño	(4 km)
- Camaleño - Mogrovejo	(4 km)
- Mogrovejo - Los Llanos	(1 km)
- Los Llanos - Cosgaya	(5 km)
- Cosgaya - Las Ilces	(4 km)
- Las Ilces - Espinama	(3 km)
- Espinama - Pido	(1 km)
- Pido - Fuente Dé	(3 km)

POTES (pop. 1622, alt. 291m) is one of the most charming villages in the northern Spanish region of Cantabria, full of twee cafes and shops, often overrun in high season. Potes is the centre of the Liebana region, roaring with fast streams, surrounded by spectacular mountains. Narrow streets cross medieval bridges with views to the once-defensive Infantado and Oreja de Lima Towers, now home to galleries and gruesome witchcraft-themed tourist traps. Stately houses are hung with coats-of-arms, beer adverts, and potted flowers. Two historic sites in the compact downtown now house a free, permanent exhibit of documents related to the Beatus of Liebana, a 10th-century illustrated manuscript produced in the monastery nearby that influenced European church doctrine, art, and politics for centuries.

Its stunning natural surroundings make Potes a staging point for mountain sports and expeditions. Local offerings include hiking, mountain biking, climbing, mountain skiing, paragliding, hunting, and fishing. Village cuisine features crocks of *cocido lebaniego* (chickpea casserole), trout, game, and excellent soft cheese. Potes is also noted for its potent home-brewed liquor, orujo, flavored with honey or herbs grown on the mountainsides. A farmers' market goes up every Monday morning in the central square, and the most important livestock fair in Cantabria is held in Potes every year on November 2. Accommodation is abundant, but pilgrims will be most interested in the

ALBERGUE de POTES. This is a purpose-built pilgrim shelter installed beneath the Plaza Mayor to serve the needs of pilgrims to Liebana's 2009 Holy Year pilgrimage. It has 45 beds, a full kitchen with washing machine, lounge, and views over the River Deva. Admission is 5 Euros, keys available at the Centro Estudios Lebaniegos/Pilgrim Reception Centre between 5 and 8 p.m. Phone 942 738 126. Credentials, sello, and up-to-date trail information also available. Check in here if you plan on staying at the Monastery of Sto. Toribio de Liebana, to ensure the albergue is open.

MONASTERIO de Sto TORIBIO de LIEBANA (4 km. From Potes)

The Way leaves town via the CA-185, past the bus station, following yellow arrows and more than a few red-painted wooden placards for the Liebana pilgrimage. The CA-185 highway is the artery for this section of trail, the monastery is on a hillside overlooking the roadway, the diversion is marked with a larger-than-life pilgrim statue decked with both the cross of Liebana and the scallop-shell of Santiago de Compostela.

The monastery road branches left from the CA-185 up a steep 260-meter rise of switchback turns, with a foot-trail alongside the dangerous parts. The splendid monastery is worth the trip, and merits a day's visit on its own if time allows.

The Monastery was founded in the 8th century, and has been a pilgrim destination for a thousand years, owing mostly to a unique religious relic: three wooden boards said to be the largest existing portions of the cross of Christ. They are displayed in a splendid reliquary chapel alongside the darksome church; pilgrims with good luck and timing may sometimes touch the holy object through

a slot cut in its wrought silver frame. It is worn smooth with the faithful kisses of centuries. Tours and Masses are offered daily in summertime. The monastery is also home to:

ALBERGUE MONASTERIO STO. TORIBIO

A 38-bed establishment with kitchen, popular with retreats and student groups. It is often fully booked, so phone ahead if you plan to stay. Price is 5 Euros, contact hospitalero Jesus Maria Madariaga at 942 730 550 or inquire at the tourist office in Potes. Sello and information available at the gift shop. There are toilets alongside the parking lot, but no food is available at the monastery. A fuente on the plaza offers cool spring water supposedly charged with healing powers.

A NOTE ON POTES/LIEBANA ALBERGUES:

When the albergue at the monastery of Santo Toribio is full or closed, the tourist office at Potes routinely lets pilgrims spend two nights at the Potes albergue. On your second day, you can walk out and back to Santo Toribio (about 4 kms each way), then spend the second night in Potes and carry on the next day straight up the CA-185 to rejoin the camino trails in Camaleño.

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FROM Sto. TORIBIO ONWARD:

The monastery and Espinama are linked up and down the valley by a system of local/regional walking trails, and the Camino piggybacks onto them. Each segment empties out into a town, passes through along the road, then goes off-road again, usually to the left. The stretches are:

Ermita de San Miguel (near the Monastery of Liebana) to Camaleño;

Camaleño to Los Llanos;

Los Llanos to Cosgaya;

Cosgaya to Espinama-Pido.

A high-level path is traced on the GPS tracks for the Vadiniense Amigos group, but in October 2012 I could not find waymarks in the pertinent area above the monastery.

The “tried and true” path from the monastery continues up the tarmac road westward to the little chapel of San Miguel, which offers a stunning view back to Potes and a daunting look at the road ahead. The trail head is to your left, alongside the gates to a private house. Follow this woodsy path downward through the middle of CONGARNA; the path eventually returns to the CA-185. Cross over after a few dozen meters and walk into tiny BEARES, where waymarks lead to a fine old *caserio* with a disused fuente in front. A foot trail winds uphill behind the house, waymark is on a pole to its right. Do not take hiking paths that branch off to the right. At an eventual crossroads go left and downhill to SAN PELAYO, which has a campground. Follow the CA-185 another kilometer to

CAMALEÑO, where bike repairs, restaurants, inns, a bank machine, pharmacy, and very good local cheese are available. The turn-off from the CA-185 in Camaleno is not very obvious; If you cross the river on the CA-185, you have gone too far. Just past the strip of businesses take the road leftward past a small shrine, and continue up a cart path at the walled pasture away from the river... this is a beautiful walk, with eagles and buzzards soaring in the cliffs above. The path touches the road again in Los Llanos. Go through the village, round a curve, and you will see a grassy path going up and off to the left. . One nice stop is the old-fashioned Alpine-style Hotel Oso in COSGAYA, with a beautiful chapel on the cliff-face opposite.

A drovers' trail leads vertiginously up from Cosgaya to Puerto San Glorio, an alternative path to Portilla de la Reina that trims a day off the pilgrimage. Canadian pilgrim Austin Cooke details the trail in **Appendix II**.

A tree-lined footpath parallels the road on the south (left) side of the river from Las Ilces all the way to Espinama and Pido.

ESPINAMA (pop. 124, alt. 610 m.) is the last town with bars, grocery, a bank, pubs, and a range of accommodations. Stock up on food, as there are no lunch stops where you are headed tomorrow. Autoservicio Briz, little grocery store, is on the far side of the bridge. Consider staying at Espinama, and sampling the wares of Pido, the cheese-making town just up the road.

Posada Sobrevilla, 651 01 65 19
Remoña (bar and hostel), 942 73 66 05
Hostal Nevandi, 942 73 66 13
Maximo Posada Hotel, 942 73 66 03
Albergue Briz, 942 736 677

From Espinama the C-185 leads onward to the tiny resort town of Fuente De, another 3 kilometers uphill, passing Pido on the left.

FUENTE DE (pop. 6, alt. 1058m.) sits in a spectacular glacial cirque, but there is not much to do there of an evening, aside from a pricey cable-car ride up to a breathtaking lookout point and several trail heads. Accommodations are limited to a costly Parador hotel, and El Rebeco, a competing Alpine-style hotel across the road, and a campground with 20 refugio spaces. Prices are not low in Espinama, and they are even higher in Fuente De.

Camping El Redondo, Fuente De. Tel. 942 73 66 99 www.elredondopicosdeeuropa.com
Parador Nacional de Fuente De. 942 73 66 51
Hotel El Rebeco. 942 73 66 01

Fuente De is where the highway stops. Follow the blacktop up to its end, and there you will see the Ruta Vadiniense clearly marked on a rutted road into the woods. (the left fork leads to the campground.)

Day 2: FUENTE DE/PIDO to PORTILLA DE LA REINA (22 km)

Should you opt to stay in Espinama, you need not hike to Fuente De to continue on the camino. The Amigos map has re-routed the Vadiniense, but no one has placed any markers to indicate where to pick up the path. From Espinama, simply walk downhill to the riverside, and look upstream – a footbridge crosses the Rio Deva in the woods at the edge of town, and the barn roofs of Pido can be seen from the opposite bank. Follow the path uphill and into Pido – or just follow the CA-185 a few meters and take the blacktop into town. The main street zig-zags, but simply find the Casa Clara cheese shop (your last chance for a local smoked cheese) and climb the steep street to its right. Make your way to the line of sheep and goat barns along the valley beyond, cross two bridges, and take either of the two trails that lead uphill to the left. After a two kilometers of climbing through cow pastures and chestnut and holm woods, the path joins the old Camino on the Senda de la Remoña above Fuente De. It is a challenging climb, but footing is good in dry weather. The Pido route cuts about five kilometers from the total.

Be sure to check with locals as to weather and trail conditions before setting out the second day of

this camino. It is spectacular and challenging, and also the most remote and high-altitude. Be careful up there.

As wild as this day's walk may appear nowadays, it was once a highway of sorts, the only road connecting these heights with the Esla River valley. The camino follows a medieval cart-track that carried armies, goods, immigrants, and saints over the mountains right up to the early 20th century, when the N-621 was cut and blasted over the adjacent Puerto de San Glorio. Road builders originally planned to extend the CA-185 highway over these mountains and join up to the Valdeon valley at Puerto de Pandetrave, but "progress" stopped at Fuente De.

What remains today is la Senda de la Collada de Remoña, 11.5 kilometers of high-altitude glory. The way is earthen, used occasionally by 4-wheel-drive guided-tour vehicles, and it climbs through oak and pine forests until breaking the tree line. Be sure to stay on the road, ignore blazes and trail-markers that lead onto footpaths. Yellow arrows and the new Camino Vadiniense guideposts now appear. The path zigzags along the face of the mountain valley, leading ever upward. All the springs along the way are potable. Be sure to keep your water bottles topped-up. You will need them for the second half of the day.

In clear weather the views are some of the finest you will see in all of Spain, with the Corisco range on one side of the valley and the Remoña on the other, and eagles and vultures hovering in the drafts above and below. As the Spanish guide says, "this path is like a great balcony, a viewing platform to the most beautiful mountains of the Cantabrian range, unforgettable for the grey of the rocks, the white of the snow, the green of the oak and beech woods, and the yellow of the flowering broom."

Atop the highest peak, at 1807 meters, is a trail crossing called the Horcada Valcavao, with a breathtaking 180-degree vista that stretches for miles. A yellow arrow points down to the left, toward the mountain pass. It is a gentle descent, marked with a disused stone-and-thatch *palozza*, wandering cattle, and views up the valley to distant alpine villages. The pathway here has interesting names for its twists and turns: Perdition Crossroads is at kilometer 2, and the wide curves of Ultreya y Suseia at kilometer 5. Finally, at kilometer 11, the dirt path ends at the Puerto de Pandetrave, (1,562 m) a parking area along a local road that offers drivers a layby and viewing platform over the valley. One offers fascinating geological explanations for the multi-colored rock layers and plenitude of fossils in the area.

From here the Way goes left and downward for 10 km., following a paved mountain road and a noisy brook. In summertime a huge herd of sheep grazes here, driven north in the spring across hundreds of kilometers from their winter pastures in Extremadura in the vanishing Transhumancia migration. (Stay clear of the huge Leonese Mastiff guard dogs!) Pretty as it is to view, this is a hot, shadeless stretch of asphalt. Conserve your water until kilometer 3, where a spring-fed waterfall provides a welcome, shady break and water whose quality is noted for miles around. From there it is not far to

PORTILLA de la REINA. (pop. 87, alt. 1240 m.), a friendly little town huddled into a narrow gorge. Here is a little church with a lovely Virgin Peregrina image, and most of all, at the far end of town, a pilgrim-friendly

ALBERGUE de PORTILLA de la REINA: 649 21 91 08. Sello, bar, restaurant, rooms: 30 Euro for a double room and breakfast; dinner menu 10 Euro. Rebuilt travelers' inn where much of the town meets; quiet second-floor rooms for pilgrims, bicycle storage. Another seasonal option in town is:

Casa Rural El Invernal, 987 740 415 www.elinvernal.com.

Restaurant Pico Tres Provincias offers a good-value Menu.

Day 3: PORTILLA DE LA REINA to RIANO (21 km.)

- Portilla de la Reina - Barniedo de la Reina (8 km)
- Barniedo de la Reina - Los Espejos de la Reina - Villafrea de la Reina (3 km)
- Villafrea de la Reina - Boca de Huérgano (2 km)
- Boca de Huérgano - Riaño (8 km)

Leave Portilla de la Reina on the roadway south – the N-621 again. There is no other path between these steep bluffs, so resign yourself to some asphalt underfoot. Meadows and hayfields lie below the road along the riverbank; at certain times of year these offer a good alternative to the pavement. Still, even the most sturdy hiker will find himself scrambling over guardrails now and then, when his path is blocked by barbed-wire, ditches, or crops under cultivation. In springtime many of these meadows are carpeted in daffodils. The next little town,

BARNIEDA de la REINA, (pop. 103, alt. 1,140 m.) offers a bar near the bridge, two fuentes, and an off-road option. Not long ago, most of the roofs in this town were made of thatch. A pretty Romanesque doorway and a notable Gothic window can be seen at the church of San Vicente. Yellow arrows take you over the river and on a winding tour of the town before setting off down the valley on a farm track between vegetable gardens and hayfields toward

ESPEJOS de la REINA. (pop. 49, alt. 1,150 m.) No services in town. The trail continues along the riverbank, where you soon arrive at a lovely waterfall. On the bank above is a restored medieval fulling mill, where flax and wool were pounded by noisy hydraulic hammers into useable fibers of linen and felt. Be careful here in wet or icy weather, as water flows onto the trail even in the dry season.

VILLAFREA de la REINA begins and ends with two tiny chapels: San Roque at the start, and San Antonio at the end. On the main street is the combined bar, restaurant, albergue and hostal of **Venta de Eslona**, 987 74 01 09 with friendly family as staff and tasty tapas on offer. The camino picks up again where the main street leaves off, and soon arrives at the tarmac highway to Palencia. Cross over to the old bridge a trout are often visible in the water below. On the other bank is

BOCA de HUERGANO, (pop. 663, 1100 m), a highway crossroads and government center of the surrounding villages. Here is a health center, pharmacy, bars, restaurants, tourist office, and hostals and the remains of El Palacio de los Tovar, a medieval tower that explains why the towns here all are named “de la Reina.” Here legend says was imprisoned Queen Constanza, “a queen who never reigned, a beautiful royal bastard, lover, prisoner, and widow ... She loved this valley and the mountains around it, and the locals loved her back,” according to one account. She is interred at the 14th-century church in Espejos de la Reina, with the Tovar arms above its door. Strung out along the N-621 you will find several bars and:

Hotel Tierra de la Reina 987 74 01 00; www.hoteltierradelareina.com . The menu del dia is recommended.

Camping Alto Esla 987 74 01 39; www.altoesla.eu.

Once again, the highway is the only route through the mountains to Riaño, the next big town. The campground is on the far side of Boca de Huérgano, and the lane leading to it continues on to the Hermita de San Tirso, a well-preserved chapel that sits alone along the highway. Here you will find

stones carved by the Vadines; one sunburst set into a wall outside, and another recycled into a fuente a little farther down the path.

The Way leads now past the farther reaches of the Riaño reservoir. In dry season you can see the remains of Pedrosa del Rey, one of nine valley towns drowned in 1990 by a great hydroelectric dam project downstream. Bits and pieces of this town's architectural heritage were put to use elsewhere. Its church, La Capilla de la Puerta, is now part of a memorial park in Riaño; its Ermita de San Bartolomew was moved to a well-tended park further along the trail. The original camino and Roman highway are now buried beneath the water, which mirrors the steep mountains; in dry seasons the old Roman bridge can still be seen.

The modern town of Riaño, a struggling lake resort, offers hotels and hostals of several grades, restaurants, mechanics, pharmacy, camping, groceries, a health center, and a sports center with swimming and water sports. A museum staffed by friendly locals has more Vadiniense stones as well as displays on the drowned towns. Try to see inside the chapel at the memorial park – its simple frescos are breathtaking.

Hostal Riaño, a friendly one-star on the Plaza de la Redonda on the way into town, offers en-suite doubles for 30 Euros, and meals at the Cafeteria Tanis downstairs. 987 74 06 16, or 639 83 81 33. The owner is a former mayor with plenty of stories to tell.

Be aware: the well-advertised Albergue Riaño, 609 634 823 is two kilometers north of town...uphill.

Day 4: RIAÑO to VENTA DE VALDORÉ

- Riaño - Carande	(5 km)
- Carande - Horcadas	(4 km)
-Horcadas - Las Salas	(7 km)
-Las Salas - Crémenes	(5 km)
-Crémenes – Venta de Valdoré	(10 km)

Today's walk includes a beautiful Roman pathway, reached only after a 10-kilometer slog of road-walking early on. Trail organizers say they are working hard to find other, more scenic ways for pilgrims to follow, but the flooded valley and high peaks severely limit their options.

Leaving Riaño: Waymarks lead pilgrims to the top of the hill, past the memorial park and down to the causeway across the reservoir. Keep right to use a fuente on the opposite bank, and beware yellow waymarks that lead hikers onto another local trail. Keep on the main road for now, through the tunnels and round the bends. A fresh yellow arrow takes the pilgrim off the highway and down toward Carande, home of a virgin and child image with a sassy cross-legged infant in the arms of a Uma Thurman look-alike. The path makes a hairpin bend across green fields, following the first stretch of Roman road that makes this day's walk so special. It passes beneath the highway and drops into the neat little town of HORCADAS, (pop. 69, alt. 1,120 m) where a fuente can be found outside the tennis court. An albergue exists here, but it is intended for groups. Prices start at 70 Euros.

A yellow-marked trail leads out of town to the left and straight up an adjacent hillside. Don't go

there. Stay on the uphill paved road to the bus stop, where the camino, well-waymarked, rejoins the highway for another kilometer or so. The views across the blue lake almost make up for the hard surface underfoot. Soon you arrive at the tunnel of La Remolina, which leads across the breast of the dam. Just before the tunnel ends, take a sharp left turn marked "Do Not Enter."

(Rest assured, the sign is intended for vehicles. Dam engineers assured me that pedestrians and bicycles are OK.) Head downhill along this lane, ignoring the overgrown paths that lead to drowned villages. Go LEFT at the T-insection at the bottom, and RIGHT about 200 meters along. The trail begins on the opposite side of the little tarmac road, it is marked with ground-level red-and-white posts. Three kilometers on, at the bridge to Salas, you will once again pick up Camino markers.

Cross the river to access LAS SALAS, (pop. 133, alt. 1,020) which has bars and restaurants catering to the trout fishermen who so love the next stretch of riverbank. Options include:

Hostal Las Pintas: Carretera 36, Las Salas. 987 71 08 33; (good menu del dia, fresh fish.)
Casa Rural Tia Amparo: Calle Alta, Las Salas. 987 710 833.

A thousand years ago a boy named Sisenando grew up near here, and was fascinated by the stories he heard from pilgrim-monks from Liebana, traveling this Way to and from the newly-discovered shrine of St. James of Compostela. He later climbed the mountain road you just descended, became a monk, and eventually abbot of Liebana -- and then bishop of what became the See of Santiago de Compostela. Saint Sisenando founded a monastery here in Salas. Only a single arch remains of what was once a bustling institution; its mill is restored. Once you cross the bridge again and turn right onto the Roman road, you will see the remains of his monastery on the opposite bank.

If the weather is kind, the next ten kilometers are a delight of rushing water, wildflowers, high cliffs and singing birds. Stones underfoot sometimes show the ruts worn by hundreds of years of passing cart-wheels. For more than two millennia this was the only highway joining this region to the outside world. The Vadiniense footpath was widened and paved by Roman slaves, many of them local Vadines. King Carlos III had the road reconditioned in the 18th century, and it was still used until the N-621 was built in the early 20th century. This rapid and shallow stretch of water is perfect for fly-fishing. On the riverbank to the left is an "albergue de pescadores," a cabin used by Generalissimo Franco when he came here on trout-fishing holidays.

The initial stretch of Roman pavement winds up at the modern Ermita de la Virgen de Pereda. This country church offers a wide, cool porch and a nice fuente on the site of an 11th century convent, whose founders funded the fountain "for the sustenance of the poor pilgrims." From here, alas, the Roman road is covered in asphalt for a kilometer, on to the bridge to

CRÉMENES. (pop. 271, alt. 1,003m) Here are restaurants, bars, hostals, and a campground. The Riaño dam project spoiled the swimming holes once popular here, but nowadays the attraction is the decaying Church of San Miguel, home in winter to ten cows. They ruminate beneath carved oak beams and an 18th-century painted retablo of Christ, Mary, and St. John. Human lodgings include:

Centro de Turismo Rural Huelde: 987 71 10 05 ;
Casa Rural Reyes: 987 71 10 49.

Re-cross the bridge to return to the camino, which again follows along the left side of the Rio Esla. Here the Roman road becomes even more pronounced, with squared-off paving stones three meters wide spanning the gap between river and mountainside, climbing steadily to the Pajar del Diablo, a narrow passage blasted through the rocks by the Roman builders using fire, water, and plenty of

slave labor. It is an unforgettable walk through forest, fields, and high cliffs on a road once so vital, and now almost-forgotten. If the weather is bad, consider walking the N-621. The Roman road quickly turns to mud, and the stones are steep and slippery when wet.

The Way descends on a series of meanders, and eventually rejoins the N-621 at VENTAS de VALDORÉ. Directly across the road is the eponymous venta:

Hostal Ventasierra, 987 711 029. Here along the bank of the river, is a popular wayside hostel, bar and restaurant, evidently the only place of its kind in the neighbourhood. Food is forgettable and rooms are less than luxurious, but the roar of the water outside the riverside rooms drowns out the world. Cistierna is 13 long kilometers distant, and daylight fades fast in the mountains.

VALDORÉ, (pop. 25, alt. 970 m.) a popular put-in spot for whitewater rafts, canoes and kayaks, is a few meters down the road. Mariscos El Tintero, Plaza La Iglesia, offers shellfish dinners and rooms by previous reservation: 686 97 71 67.

Day 5: VENTA de VALDORE to CISTIerna

13 kilometers

Yes, it is a short day, but the long distances between lodgings on the two following days make a short walk a practical alternative. You may be ready for a rest day, and Cistierna offers plenty of shops and a few more sites of interest than you find in smaller towns.

Some hikers might prefer to spend the night in Cremenés, to even-up the mileage figures of days 4 and 5. It's up to you, pilgrim. In any case:

The camino from here is waymarked two ways: the more-direct road walk along the N-621, and on a newly-established track of country lanes and pathways. It is this backwoods way we detail here, as the highway is perfectly straightforward.

From Ventas de Valdoré follow the N-621 past the bridge. Do not cross into Valdoré. The camino, clearly marked, follows a shady lane on the highway side of the river, and soon takes you along a tractor path through fields and flowers, to a little town called

VERDIAGO. (pop. 80, alt. 990 m.) Cross the highway to access the Centro de Turismo Rural El Sabinar, a bed-and-breakfast inn: 987 71 10 58; or make a right turn (clearly marked) across a small bridge to continue on the rural camino. This leads along a wooded cliff-face where coal was mined for several decades of the 19th and 20th centuries, including one intriguing cave marked "The Imponderable." Tailings, erosion, and runoff could make this stretch difficult for bicycles. The path passes by an interesting suspension bridge over the river, and finally turns back to a country lane (the CV-105) in a pueblo called

ALEJICO. With the river on your left, just keep going for 2 kilometers or so. The only tricky moment comes at a woody highway underpass where the trail jogs to the right and forks. Take the LEFT turn, to keep the river on your left. (yellow arrows are there, but at ground level.)

When weather is dry you will notice soft coal dust underfoot, and the hoofprints of horses that wander semi-wild in this area. The trail opens out to the spooky and much-vandalized remains of a coal processing plant that provided jobs in this valley for more than a century, and closed down for good in the 1990s. Continue along the riverbank and round a bend to what was a great rail yard, with abandoned mines dotting the hilltops on both sides of the valley. From here tons of coal were

shipped north to the steel mills and shipyards of Bilbao, along a trunkline now used by the FEVE short-gauge rail system. Yellow arrows vanish in the wide blankness, but follow the bicycle tracks - this is a popular bike trail from Cistierna. Head for the water-gates of a millrace to the right. The camino is squeezed here between the cliff face and the waterway, and eventually leads to clearly-marked entrance to

CISTIerna. (pop. 4108, alt. 980 m.) Historians say people have lived in this neighborhood since Celtic times, and left behind hilltop forts, incised stones, and all kinds of mining waste. The name Cistierna could date back to great cisterns used by Romans to wash the copper extracted from nearby hillsides, or perhaps to the Arabs who lived here briefly and enjoyed bathing in a thermal pool north of town. Christians have been here since at least the 10th century, when a double monastery existed alongside the Church of Santa Maria, just down the street from what is now the pilgrim albergue. In more recent days Cistierna was an important rail junction, and now it is a regional marketplace and administrative center. Here are a health center, restaurants, bars, hostels and pensions, a railroad museum, pharmacies, bakeries, and grocers. (Be sure to stock up on food, as stores and eateries are scarce in the following two days.)

Perhaps Cistierna's best attraction is **Albergue San Guillermo**, headquarters for the Ruta Vadiniense/Picos de Europa Association of Amigos of the Camino de Santiago. It stands at the top of the town, beyond the city hall and plaza on Calle San Guillermo the street that leads up the mountainside to the patron saint's votive cave. The albergue itself is on the second floor of an unremarkable government building.

The facility has space for 35 people in single beds, most in rooms for two or four. Kitchen facilities are very limited. What makes it special is its extensive library of pilgrimage publications and the cheerful volunteers in charge of the facility. Pilgrims must phone the member whose number is posted on the door, as the staff changes according to rota. Within moments a smiling Cistiernan will arrive with the keys, the sello, and registration book just like a regular pilgrim albergue. The general phone number is 987 702 065 or 696 071 378. E-mail is: rutavadiniense_jacobeas@yahoo.es.

Other accommodation options include:

Hostal El Cruce: 987 700 041

Hostal Iberico : 987 700 011

Hostal Moderno: 987 701 138

Pension Central: 987 701 056

Pension Okendo: 987 700 646.

Hotel Rio Esla: 987 701 025.

Day 6: CISTIerna to GRADEFES

23 kilometers

- Cistierna - Sorriba del Esla (2 km)
- Sorriba del Esla - Modino (5 km)
- Modino – Santibañez (4 km)
- Santibañez de Rueda - Carbajal de Rueda (3 km)
- Carbajal de Rueda - Villacidayo de Rueda (4 km)
- Villacidayo de Rueda - Gradefes (5 km)

Today the camino leaves behind the mountains and follows the Esla southward onto the fertile plains of the meseta. Horreos and stone buildings give way to *palomares* (dovecotes) and adobe. Water flows alongside the Way through a complicated system of water-gates and canals that irrigate the crops and attract great gatherings of storks.

Scallop-shell road signs lead drivers out of Cistierna along Constitution Avenue, but yellow arrows indicate a quieter way south for hikers and bikers, past the municipal swimming and athletics complex, and to a crossroads where a memorial honors generations of millers at the nearby Molino Sandalio (now abandoned) for their hospitality to passing pilgrims. Five kilometers from Cistierna is el Puente de Mercadillo, an elegant stone bridge across the wide Esla.

The crossing dates to Roman times, and in later days a village grew up on the opposite bank. A popular pilgrim hospital and chapel were dedicated to saints Catherine and Barnabas, and people came from all over the district to the market there. A few abandoned houses still look out over the river, which is dammed just after the bridge. At this spot the pilgrim must decide which bank of the river to follow. Each bank offers a different appeal. Looking downstream, consider:

EAST SIDE (24 km. To Gradefes, 26 more to Mansilla)

The left bank passes through historic villages, and is better served with hostels, restaurants, and repair facilities. It continues the historic Roman path, now covered in asphalt and N-625 traffic. A parallel dirt footpath offers an alternative to asphalt for most of the way, but it offers less shade, quiet, and tree cover. Its attractions (including an abandoned bridge, a Vadiniense fort site, and a castle ruin full of storks) require short detours off the route. It is better explored by those with a car or bicycle. Towns include:

- Sorriba del Esla - Vidanes (5 km)
- Vidanes - Villapadierna (5 km)
- Villapadierna - Palacios de Rueda (2 km)
- Palacios de Rueda - Quintanilla de Rueda (1 km)
- Quintanilla de Rueda - Vega de Monasterio (3 km)
- Vega de Monasterio - Cubillas de Rueda (3 km)
- Cubillas de Rueda - San Cipriano de Rueda (2 km)
- San Cipriano de Rueda - Sahechores de Rueda (3 km)
- Sahechores de Rueda - Villahibiera de Rueda (3 km)
- Villahibiera de Rueda - Quintana de Rueda (4 km)
- Quintana de Rueda - Villamondrín de Rueda (3 km)
- Villamondrín de Rueda - La Aldea del Puente (4 km)
- La Aldea del Puente - Villalquite (2 km)
- Villalquite - Villomar (5 km)
- Villomar - Mansilla de las Mulas (5 km)

Vidanes was birthplace of the baroque author Padre Isla, and many houses in town wear noble arms outside their doors. Travelers may also enjoy the cheese, meat, and vegetables sold in the industrial stretch on the far side of Vidanes. Cecina de Leon, the local dried beef or horse-meat speciality, is especially good here. A knoll in the pines just beyond is thought to be the site of a prehistoric

dolmen.

In Villapadierna are the ruins of a great 15th-century walled tower, now home to a stork community. Off the camino to the right is Vega de Monasterio, site of one of the many monasteries founded in this valley in the 10th century. Its elaborate doorway is now incorporated into the village church.

Cubillas de Rueda is administrative center of the area, and has a health center and pharmacy.

Sahechores is only 2 kilometers from the bridge to Gradefes. On this side of the river is La Alegria, Gradefes' only hotel and restaurant. Unless you wish to stay at Gradefes pilgrim albergue, you may want to check in here before crossing over the river to visit the Cistercian monastery.

WEST SIDE of the ESLA (23 km. To Gradefes)

The right bank offers green shade, friendly little towns, winding roads, and a long history of pilgrim travel. It offers no hostels or restaurants, but it is the route recommended for hikers by the local Amigos chapter, who have worked to shift pilgrim traffic off the pavement and onto tractor paths alongside. To follow this route, cross over the Mercadillo bridge and turn left. The camino joins a forest path to the right, which leads to

MODINO.

Look sharp after the bridge as the camino hooks right, climbs past the cemetery and along a bumpy back road to SANTIBAÑEZ. A kilometer beyond town, the camino takes a left and follows past tree farms, horse pastures, and spectacular growths of blackberries. Parts of this path are quite overgrown and rutted, bicyclists may have to dismount and walk. The path empties into

CARBAJAL de RUEDA.

All these towns offer fuentes, church porches, and shady spots for a rest, but the only food or drinks establishment for the day is the Embutidos shop on the far side of Carbajal. This opens only at the owner's whim, and serves as the local bar and meeting-place.

These towns keep a special devotion for the Virgin Peregrina. A hermitage along this road once possessed its own mill, lands, and pilgrim refuge, but when it fell into ruin the virgin statue was moved to the church in Carbajal. There she is honored on a baroque altar, laden with staff, scallop shells, and a one-eyed baby Jesus. Like many peregrinas, she wears a tired and wistful look on her face.

After Carbajal the camino goes off-road to the left again, over a creekbed and along an irrigation canal. It passes a busy dairy farm with several guard dogs – keep your stick handy. The waymarks peter out in VILLACIDAYO, but keep straight on through the village to the church and the road. The camino again shifts into the fields to the left. Here the roads follow a grid, so once into the acreage all roads lead to

GRADEFES (pop. 1076, alt. 852 m.) administrative center for 19 small pueblos. All the towns 'round about were established on Roman or pre-Roman foundations, re-populated in the 9th or 10th century as vassals of the powerful local monasteries of Gradefes, San Miguel de Escalada, and Eslonza. In 1168 Gradefes became the second Cistercian nunnery founded in Spain. Its abbess held both civil and criminal jurisdiction over the region, and daughters of many noble houses held the post for centuries. Its church is built more like a pilgrimage sanctuary than a monastic house, with characteristic severity of design.

Twenty sisters live here still. They sing the hours in the enclosed *coro* at the rear of the church, and they keep the doors open from about 9 a.m. until after 9:30 p.m. Vespers is sung. Visit on Saturday or Sunday and merry Sister Mary Dolores can show you the chapter room, the tiny cloister, herb garden, and the orchard, beehives, and lawns within the walls out back. Because she has lived all 82 of her years in Gradefes, she has a store of memories and connections: her niece is the mayor, and keeps the keys to the new

Pilgrim Albergue de Gradefes. The town is well-served with bars, a supermarket, health center, pharmacy, and sports center. For years there was no place to have a meal or spend the night but across the river at La Alegria, or in a bare-bones unheated room at the convent. In the spring of 2011 the municipality renovated a flat on the far edge of town for pilgrim use. To stay there, phone ahead (987 333 153) to inquire at the ayuntamiento, or ask any bartender or grocery clerk to dial the mayor on your mobile phone. The albergue has a full kitchen, washing machine, lounge, and beds for 16 pilgrims. Cost is 6 Euros.

Camping is allowed in the riverside park near the medical center.

While in town shop for picnic supplies for the next day, and if any energy remains, take a walk through the parks along the riverbank. La Alegria, the hotel across the long bridge along the N-625, serves dinner and breakfast. The bus to Mansilla, Leon, and Riaño stops outside.

Day 7: Gradefes to Mansilla (23 km)
(mileages vary according to tracks used)

- Gradefes - Cifuentes de Rueda (6 km)
- Cifuentes de Rueda - Casasola de Rueda (2 km)
- Casasola de Rueda - Rueda del Almirante (3 km)
- Rueda del Almirante - San Miguel de Escalada (3 km)
- San Miguel de Escalada- Valle de Mansilla (5 km)
- Valle de Mansilla - Villacontilde (3 km)
- Villacontilde - Mansilla de las Mulas (4 km)

From Gradefes south is a wide, fertile valley raked into high limestone escarpments. Today's journey wends through country ruled and populated for hundreds of years by monks and nuns. Notes here apply to the WEST SIDE of the Esla.

Outside the Gradefes albergue head south along the quiet blacktop road to the bridge and bus stop, where waymarks point left to an adjacent dirt road. It leads into

CIFUENTES (pop. 185, alt. 840 m.) There is a Celtic lookout on the cliff to the right, with remains of several successive fortifications built on the foundations of the last owners. Local legend says a rock inside the old castro bears the hoofprint of the horse of Santiago Matamoros, who fought the Moors here long ago. Maps indicate a new route shifting to the left outside this town and emerging onto the roadway again below Rueda del Almirante, but no waymarks existed in October 2012.

If this still is the case, continue along the road and make a well-waymarked left into tiny CASASOLA, (pop. 7) , with its sweet-water fountain and still-in-use lavadero laundry pool. This was once a major fork in the road, where pilgrims turned right to visit the Benedictine powerhouse of San Pedro de Eslonza, and from there continued south to join the Camino Frances further west at

Puente Villarente. (San Pedro de Eslonza monastery is now a hulking ruin, its treasures stripped and shared among churches and private homes throughout the diocese. You can see its splendid 18th century facade today in Leon, recycled as the front of the parish church of Santa Maria de Renueva)

The left fork – the road we take – means a stop at San Miguel de Escalada, a hilltop monastery founded in the 7th century by Visigothic Christians. Its ties to Santo Toribio de Liebana made it especially appealing to northerners traveling on this camino. Choosing this Way added days to the medieval pilgrim's journey to Santiago, but it included a stop at Santa Maria de Sandoval, a Cistercian foundation outside modern Mansilla de las Mulas. Their collection of saints' relics made it a must-see pilgrim stop for the pious traveler. The Sandoval monastery is still standing, but the modern camino bypasses its village. It moulders in a field, forgotten, is cloister a habitation for goats, its statues and choir stalls a feast for woodworms.

SAN MIGUEL de ESCALADA, (pop. 131, alt. 930 m.), the next stop on our route, is just as lonely, but not so forgotten. Its monastery is a much-restored national monument, a museum. When the winding road meets a T-intersection, go right for the monastery, left for the village.

Monastic settlement here dates to the 7th century, when hermits lived in caves in the chalky hillsides round about this hilltop. They abandoned their community when Arabs invaded, but the monastery was re-established by Cordoban refugee monks 100 years later. They built the present church in 913, in a distinctly Mozarabic style they brought with them from the south. The building stands today with only one of its four cloister galleries intact, but even so it is a jewel. It was here that artist-brothers copied the *Beatus of Liebana*, the bizarre apocalyptic treatise that made the northern monastery so influential in the Middle Ages. Their commentary and illustrations were singular enough to earn their copy a name of its own: *The Beatus of San Miguel de Escalada*.

If you are fortunate enough to arrive when the visitor center is open you can get a nice sello on your credential and see inside the church for a small fee. If your Spanish is good the security guard is a fine tour guide, and works for tips. San Miguel de Escalada is unique in Spain, its luxurious simplicity echoes the mosques of the south with their horseshoe arches of marble and granite and columns topped with capitals "borrowed" from nearby Roman and Visigothic ruins. It was built to accommodate the Mozarabic Rite, the Mass that evolved in a Spain isolated from Roman influence. The altar area and priests were hidden from the laypeople, and the levels of monastic hierarchy well-defined by the building itself. (The Mozarabic Rite was swept away when reforming Benedictine monks from France carried the Roman Catholic rite across Spain along the Camino de Santiago.)

Windows are covered in sheets of alabaster instead of glass, and admit only narrow shafts of soft light. Sculptures and tombstones found on the site were built into the walls by restorers, leaving a strange parade of inscriptions and patterns all around the building. An adjacent funerary chapel holds the bits and bobs not hauled away to museums.

After the monastery, head back down the hill and into the long, straggling town of San Miguel de Escalada. Toward the end of town waymarks point to the right, up to the church of San Antonio de Valdebasta and onto a sun-blasted cart track toward the ruins of San Pedro de Eslonza and the old path to Puente Villarente. Small yellow arrows, marked with an M for Mansilla, point southward along the highway. Go that way.

Continue down the roadway and into the great "Valdebasta," translated variously as "Valley of Plenty," or "Valley of Provisions." All this once belonged to the priory of San Miguel, whose monks brought with them efficient Moorish methods of irrigating crops and milling grain.

The road weaves, but the elevated irrigation canals head straight on. When the road curves southward about a kilometer out of San Miguel, notice the little yellow arrows pointing down the main water canal. Take a heading on the mobile-phone tower on the bluff down the valley, and follow the maintenance road alongside the water channel. It keeps to the base of the cliffs, and cuts out a good three kilometers of road walking. Water in the canals is not safe to drink, but it provides a cooling splash on a hot day. And don't forget to look up! On the limestone cliffs all along this valley are excavations, cave dwellings supposedly used by the earliest hermits of San Miguel. A path from this road leads up to one of the better examples, and energetic pilgrims (or those seeking emergency shelter, or a rough campsite charged with history) can scramble up the bluff for a look.

The path meets the road again outside VALLE DE MANSILLA, and continues south.

At VILLACONTILDE the Amigos map provides a clever shortcut, but the waymarkers again have not reached this far south. Follow the main street into town to the T intersection, then go left. Take the Calle Quintanillas out of town and into the grid of fields. Head east, (leftward,) toward the line of trees that marks the river's course. Turn right (southward) onto the final gravel road, cross a canal bridge, and make a LEFT along the canal. (the "do not enter" sign is for vehicles only, as evidenced by picnic tables on the path beyond.) A vehicle barrier is visible up the road – head that way. Just beyond the barrier is a bridge over a beautiful pool of still water. An immediate right will reveal the next yellow arrow – and the path up to the N-625.

From here it's an easy 3 km. walk into Mansilla de las Mulas, joining the Camino Frances pilgrims who've traveled the lonesome Roman Road from Calzada del Coto.

If you choose to take the sure way from VALLE DE MANSILLA, just continue south along the pavement past Villiguer, Villafalé, and left on the N-120 into Mansilla de las Mulas.

The Ruta Vadiniense ends here, where it meets the Camino Frances on its way to Leon. MANSILLA DE LAS MULAS (pop. 1785, alt. 802 m.) with its markets, churches, medical center, bus station and pilgrim refuges, is one kilometer to the left.

If you are still in a monastic mood, cross over the N-120 and see the forgotten church and monastery of Santa Maria de VILLAVERDE DE SANDOVAL on the old Way of Santiago.

The monastery comes with a lovely old story: Don Ponce de Minerva, a local knight, was captured in Africa by the Moors and imprisoned for so many years that his wife, Estefania, assumed he was dead. She became a nun at Carrizo, a town west of Leon, and occupied herself with caring for pilgrims. Years later her husband was freed, and decided to walk to Santiago to give thanks before returning home. Estefania one evening was washing the feet of the pilgrims, and recognized a familiar set of toes. She threw aside her veil, and she and Ponce went rejoicing together to Santiago de Compostela. They returned to Villaverde to found the monastery on land donated by the king.

The present buildings date from the 12th century, and show similarities to the buildings at Gradefes. This was a major pilgrim stop for a good 400 years, and a center of education for even longer, but when the bridge was built at Puente Villarente pilgrims abandoned this route and opted for the more direct Mansilla-Villarente path used today.

Villaverde still has much to offer the visitor who finds the neighbor lady and pays a couple of coins to see through the place. The neoclassical cloister, the two-sided reliquary altar (with an elephant carved in the back!) and a fine set of choir stalls, the refectory granary, and *sala capitular* are all still there, for now.

And so is the old camino. Follow the road outside westward and into the trees until it ends in on the banks of the Rio Porma. Here for two centuries pilgrims forded the river, carrying their packs over their heads, hoping they did not fall in and drown.

Imagine the risks they took and the suffering they did on their long trip to see the saint. Perhaps we modern pilgrims, worn-out as we are from walking mountains and asphalt, will feel how light the camino weighs on our shoulders.

Ruta Vadiniense Links

The Spanish Amigos association website is your primary source: www.rutavadiniense.org/ (*in Castellano*). Maps, GPS track, photos and news.

A brief overview, with strip maps and a video: <http://rutavadiniense.webcindario.com/>

Facebook page can be found at: <http://www.facebook.com/pages/Ruta-Vadiniense/225222057497701>

English speakers can start their search for up-to-date information at the Vadiniense division of Ivar Revke's invaluable Camino discussion site: <http://www.caminodesantiago.me/board/camino-vadiniense> . Pilgrims who have walked the Vad give advice and answer questions.

For an array of photos and maps: <https://www.google.com/search?q=vadiniense+ruta&oe=utf-8&aq=t&rls=org.mozilla:en-GB:official&client=firefox-a&um=1&ie=UTF-8&hl=en&tbm=isch&source=og&sa=N&tab=wi&ei=hel3UI0v0JCFB4m-geAO&biw=1024&bih=433&sei=lel3UPHmGqGS0QW00IAo>

APPENDIX I

The Ruta Liebaniego

Connects San Vicente de Barquera (Camino del Norte) to Potes (*Ruta Vadiniense*). 55 kilometers.

This is the road used by pilgrims from the north coast to visit the shrine of the Holy Cross of Liebana. It passes through Potes, the mountain junction town where the Camino Vadiniense begins. Information on accommodations and distances is drawn from materials produced by the Gobierno de Cantabria for the Liebana Jubilee Year pilgrimage of 2009, and intrepid pilgrim Laurie Reynolds, who walked this Way in June 2012. Pilgrims considering this Way should consult with the hospitaleros or active tourism experts in San Vicente, who may have more detailed and timely information. This is a high-altitude path, not suitable or safe for walking in Winter or foul weather. Most of it follows paved minor roads.

DAY 1

San Vicente de la Barquera to La Fuente: 27 km.

km.San Vicente de la Barquera0,0La Acebosa3,0Hortigal4,5Gandarilla7,5Alto de la Rejoya11,5Bielva15,0Cades17,0Venta de Fresnedo21,5Sobrelapeña24,1Lafuente

From San Vicente follow the Camino waymarks across the waterway and south 4.5 km. To Hortigal, where the Liebana pathway branches southward off the northwestward-leading Camino del Norte. Yellow arrows are replaced by a stylized red cross. Take a look back over the long valley to the sea, which you may not see again until you reach Finisterre.

The camino passes through a number of small towns, including Bielva (rest area) and Cades.

Just before crossing the river into Cades (about 15 km) is a 3-star casa rural, Casona del Nansa. www.casonadelnansa.com. Pricey, but a way to shorten the first day.

In Cades, the town hall is on the highway. Cold water, sello, and bathrooms are available. About 1 km further on, off to the right about 250 m, is a restaurant.

From Cades to LaFuente (10 km) the path ascends Alto de la Rejoya (380 m) and descends again to the riverbank, never too steeply or sharply. The riverside offers occasional detours for shade sitting and feet soaking. Just after Cades is a road junction: To the right is LaFuente and the albergue; 1 km. to the left is Quintanilla, which has a grocery store.

When entering LaFuente an arrow points up and to the right to Burio. For the albergue,(telephone 942 72 79 58, or 942 72 78 10) continue straight ahead to the reconditioned schoolhouse. Ground floor has about 20 beds; showers, sitting room, and kitchen with microwave area upstairs. LaFuente is a pleasant little village, the neighbors like to chat with pilgrims. Lafuente (or Lamas) is home to a 13th century church, with a sculptured “Pareja de Lamas” next door.

DAY 2

La Fuente to Potes via N-621 highway: 23.2 km. OR

LaFuente to Cabañas via trail: 19.5 km.

Landmarks include:**Segunda etapa: Lafuente – Potes – Monasterio de Santo Toribio de Liébana**

km.Lafuente0,0Burió1,5Collado de Hoz4,0Cicera6,0Collado del Arceón9,5Lebeña15,0Castro Cillorigo18,5Tama21,0Ojedo23,0Potes24,5Monasterio de Santo Toribio de Liébana27,5

The path from Lafuente climbs to the 690 meter ridge above the Rio Nansa for 5 km. When leaving the albergue, do not backtrack to the road. Turn left and take the path up to Burio. It is a short 1 km, off road, on the old cart tracks. In Burio, rejoin the road. Continue on to the pretty town of Cicera, which maintains a 20-person shelter at Casa No. 40. (phone 679 53 01 05 or 942 73 09 64, closed January to March.) Travelers who spend their first night at the Casona near Cades often make the Cicera albergue their second-night stop.

From Cicera the road climbs uphill to the Collado Arceon, a pass between the mountains. The way is pleasant, the pavement hard and secure underfoot. At the summit arrows are often vandalized, but the top of the pass is unmistakable. If arrows cannot be found, head toward the high voltage power line. From there Lebeña can be seen, as well as the dirt path that leads there. Finding where the path joins the ridge may require some scouting, but only be patient.

The path from the hilltop down to Lebeña is mercifully off road, though it is rocky dirt for the most part. Occasionally steep but nothing too terrible.

In Lebeña there is a beautiful Romanesque church, open for visits on the normal Spanish visiting hours. It is closed Mondays.

Lebeña presents two options:

The first: Head up to the charming village of Cabanes, where hikers can stay at El Hayal, a private albergue with swimming pool, meals, and an average price of 16 Euros per night, per person. (Be sure to phone ahead! 942 744 211 or 667 648 541.) Other bed-and-breakfast options are also available during the July-August tourist season. The Cabanes option leaves you with an easy 9 km walk into Potes the next day along the path to Pendones and Castro Cillorigo.

The second option is to walk straight into Potes, 9 kms from Lebeña on the side of the narrow road. Relief can be found in the roadside town of Tama, where lodging, bars and cafes can be found, as well as a bridge to a quiet riverside walk all the way into Potes.

WEB RESOURCES

http://www.edicionesdesnivel.com/files/ediciones_desnivel_lebaniego.pdf (maps)

<http://consejosperegrinos.com/el-camino-lebaniego/>

<http://rutasconsendas.blogspot.com.es/2011/09/camino-lebaniego-9-11sept2011.html>

San Vicente de la Barquera

Ayuntamiento de Cillorigo

La Liébana

Liébana y Picos de Europa

Centro de Estudios Lebaniegos

Jubileo Lebaniego

APPENDIX II

Cosgaya to Puerto de San Glorio

by Austin Cooke, as of 2011

As with the Espinama variant, this path is used by locals for grazing and occasional transport purposes, but is not patrolled and should only be undertaken in the best of conditions—preferably not by a solo pilgrim for even a minor injury could leave one waiting a long time for the next traveller. It would be extremely foolish to take this route in poor weather and, without professional equipment, in the winter. Consultation with locals is strongly advised.

That having been said, it is spectacular. The gravelled path itself is in good condition and is

designed for farm equipment and four-wheel drive vehicles. It takes about three hours to the Puerto de San Glorio and is a gentle but unforgiving climb most of the way. In October 2011, it was not waymarked.

Entering the village of Cosgaya from the highway, you will pass behind the statue of Pelayo, the early mediæval monarch who now guards the playground with a fierce glare, and head up to the right, continuing a few hundred metres to a fork in the road where there will be a sign indicating that this is a grazing road only. Go to the right, and head up further.

About an hour out of Cosgaya, there will be a stretch of almost a kilometre where those with vertigo may be uncomfortable, but bushes and trees on the right-hand side by the drop helps considerably. This road, continually ascending hugging the hill on your left and the Río Cubo in a ravine to your right, will continue for the next hour or so. There will be a fork in the road, with a concrete water apparatus covered with a grill, conveniently placed for a short break. Retrace your steps a few metres and take the left fork, as the right one leading past the water tank will only lead you up to some shepherds' shelters and a dead end. Heading upward you will enter into a large open meadow, the path still climbing, with a stone shepherds' shelter in the middle (solar panels on the roof). This is the Prao Cubo, a stretch where, in bad weather, the pilgrim could be exposed to the elements and might be in serious trouble.

The road winds to the right, then to the left, and climbs up to the high point of the Collaud de Llesba. When I walked this stretch, there were herds of beautiful and gentle horses, raised for the tables of Spain (when I asked a farmer the next day the name of his horse, he answered: "Embutidos," or cold-cuts) loping through the meadow in a way which brought me back to childhood readings of Narnia.

At the Collaud de Llesba, there is a monument near a pinnacle of rock, and a viewing point (Mirador de Oso) by the parking lot, for from here the road is paved for tourists and sightseers who want to enjoy the view across the valleys of the Picos. It is then a 30-40-minute walk down to the national highway by the Puerto de Glorio, and heading right a further hour or so to Portilla la Reina.

