

We Are Pilgrims, Ipso Facto

The decision to walk the oldest pilgrim trail in the world came about as do many things in life, quite by accident. In early May I drove to Altopascio, arriving around 2pm. Everything was closed so I put on my runners and headed off for a walk out of town. There I noticed a copy of an ancient map on display. It included England, France, Switzerland and Italy in its story. I couldn't read it, but while admiring the calligraphy and the old markings, I felt it grab me. I was completely ignorant of what I'd stumbled across.

Back in Lucca and pronouncing it incorrectly (it should be *Fran-CHEE-ge-na*), I went on a mission to find out its origins. The Archbishop of Canterbury, Sigeric, also known to his friends as Sigeric the Serious, travelled to Rome in 990 AD to receive honours from Pope John XV. Sigeric kept detailed records of the 79 stages of his return journey back to England. Via Francigena (the "way" from France) became the main medieval pilgrimage route, also a vital European trade route.

The original *Via*, 2091 kilometres, forgotten for centuries, has made a comeback! UNESCO and the Council of Europe have recently designated it a Cultural Route.

On learning that anyone can participate, I enthusiastically committed to walking from Lucca to Siena. There are 27 sections in all. I aimed to complete just 7. Training involved a few months of walking 10 km or more in the hills of Matraia every other day, with longer walks on weekends. Discovering the endless nature trails in and around Lucca was a super bonus.

A great friend from Australia who I'd recruited to join me, had just finished the Kokoda Trail Marathon in Papua New Guinea (in the rainy season every step is in deep mud). She was super fit and ready to go but had never been to Italy, so the VF was to be her baptism.

Checking our gear and packing the night before departure, I glanced at the instruction booklet which stated, "excellent mapping skills required." We both had a great laugh and wondered if in fact we were about to walk round and round the walls of Lucca for 7 or 8 days. Two middle-aged, directionally-challenged, would-be pilgrims were to begin their journey. (Note to would-be pilgrims: The trail, I am happy to say, is clearly signposted. The logo, a cheerful, plump medieval pilgrim with knapsack, lines the route, making it almost impossible to get lost.)

The Tuscan scenery was breathtaking, the air earthy and fresh. Hills outlined by pencil-pine, patchwork-patterned olive groves, and "oh my god this can't be real" hilltop towns entranced us, providing extraordinary distractions when a 26 km day turned out to be 33 km.

I mentally photographed hundreds of mind-boggling locations for the next version of *Under the Tuscany Sun*. Etched in my heart were a thousand places and faces I must see again. I wanted to live in every little borgo along the way, but alas, only one life!

Friendliness and generosity toward pilgrims is ever present. Food and water is left out along the way, continuing the tradition from centuries ago. We walked



along a street towards San Miniato: one late afternoon in the heat of the sun, flanked by little tables set up in front yards. Water, fruit and snacks like *biscotti* were left out, with touching wishes of good luck for us "pilgrims". Between Monteriggioni and Siena, village residents had built a rest stop called *Punto Sosta*, with refreshments and an odd mirrored sign encouraging pilgrims to take a selfie, to upload onto their Punto Sosta Facebook page.

On the morning of second to last day, nearing San Gimignano, we met a farmer moving his sheep across a road from one field to another. Directing them with the help of two kelpies, he spotted us and stopped to introduce himself. The sheep and dogs continued on their way. He was surprised to meet two Australian women on the Via Francigena. He then animatedly told us about his beloved relatives who live in Australia now. "Did we know them?" he asked. I love the fact that many non-Australians find it impossible to conceptualise the sheer size of the land Down Under. We waved farewell and continued on our way, grateful to have met such a charming man.

After seven days of blissful walking, it felt strange taking our final pilgrim steps through Siena's impressive walls, arriving amongst hundreds of tourists in the bowl-shaped Piazza Del Campo. We had walked more than 200 km, soaking up the magic of Tuscany one glorious step after another. We flopped down at a café facing the Duomo. Feet tired but spirits exuberant, we raised our glasses of Campari. *Salute* to our experience, a miracle and a privilege!

Author's note: Months later the question still remains. Are we pilgrims or walkers? According to the Confraternity of Pilgrims, "anyone who walks a pilgrim trail, regardless of motive, religion, or reason is IPSO FACTO a pilgrim".

— by *Bobbie Salmon*

*We booked the self-guided walk (120 euro per day with fabulous accommodations, meals, & luggage transfers) at www.sloways.eu
Info site: www.visit.viefrancigene.org*

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