

My Via Francigena Pilgrimage

No man is brave that has never walked a hundred miles. If you want to know the truth of who you are, walk until not a person knows your name. Travel is the great leveller, the great teacher, bitter as medicine, crueler than mirror-glass. A long stretch of road will teach you more about yourself than a hundred years of quiet. – Patrick Rothfuss, American writer



The Road to Rome or **Via Francigena to Rome** is – like the Camino de Santiago de Compostela – an historic medieval route that takes pilgrims on an epic journey through some of Europe's most stunning regions from Canterbury, England, across the channel to France, and through Switzerland, before crossing Italy on their way to the tomb of St Peter in Rome.

The Via Francigena was named a European Cultural Route by the Council of Europe in 1994.

It was the year 990 when Sigeric, the Archbishop of Canterbury, travelled to Rome to receive his *pallium* (papal investiture) from the pope. On his return, Sigeric made notes of all 79 stops he made, which he called *submansiones*, in his travel diary. Today it is an immensely important historic document that allows us to reconstruct what was very likely the most used pilgrimage path around the year 1000.

But the history of the Via Francigena is more than just Sigeric's words, and stretches even further back in time. The origins of the route date to the Lombards, who by the 6th century were crossing Monte Bardone, between Berceto (Emilia-Romagna) and Pontremoli (Tuscany), near what is today Passo della Cisa (Liguria) in the Apennine Alps, a secure route for reaching the historic maritime destinations of Luni (Liguria) and Tuscia, far from the routes controlled by the Byzantines, their undeniable enemies. With the Franks (Via Francigena = Way of the Franks) and the Carolingians, the road became a major communication route that, around Massa, Pietrasanta, and Camaiore, turned towards Lucca and Altopascio, crossed over the Arno River, and continued through the Val d'Elsa down to Siena. From here, following the original via Cassia, the road passed through the Val d'Arbia and Val d'Orcia on its way to Rome.

The Via Francigena covers 1900 km from Canterbury to Rome. It takes approximately three months to walk the full length. It can be walked or ridden on horseback or on a bicycle. To obtain information and prepare for a journey like this there are many web sites (most important are www.pilgrimstorome.org.uk and www.viefrancigene.org), guidebooks, and apps available and the Road to Rome is very well marked for walkers, bicyclists, and riders.





Many Via Francigena pilgrims break the journey up into separate sections at a time (one to two weeks for instance). In the spring of 2018 I walked the Camino de Santiago de Compostela. After that pilgrimage I became hooked on long distance walking. In the fall of the same year I started my Italian Via Francigena journey. I walked approximately 690 km in three sections:

Piacenza to Lucca in 2018 (Piacenza – Fiorenzuola d'Arda – Fidenza – Fornovo di Taro – Cassio – Cisa Pass – Pontremoli – Aulla – Sarzana – Massa – Camaiore – Lucca, **ca. 280 km, 14 days including 2 rest days**). The highlights of this section were crossing the Apuan Alps (Passo della Cisa) and Sarzana.

Lucca to Siena in 2019 (Lucca – Altopascio – San Miniato – Gambassi Terme – San Gimignano – Monteriggioni – Siena, **ca. 135 km, 10 days including 3 rest days**). The highlights of this section were San Miniato, San Gimignano, Monteriggioni, and Siena.

Siena to Rome in 2020 (Siena – Ponte d'Arbia – San Quirico d'Orcia – Radicofani – Acquapendente – Bolsena – Montefiascone – Viterbo – Vetralla – Sutri – Campagnano di Roma – La Storta – Rome, **ca. 275 km, 17 days including 4 rest days**). The highlights of this section were San Quirico d'Orcia, Bolsena, Viterbo, and Rome.

The shortest daily walking distance was 13 km, the longest 34 km. The daily average was 24 km. On my rest days I loved to explore the towns where I was staying.

Walking the Via Francigena by myself was, like the Camino de Santiago de Compostela, an incredible, life changing experience with many ups and some downs. However, it was not only a spiritual journey of personal growth and self discovery. I also discovered Italy, my new home: from the typical foods and breathtaking beauty of the different regions (Emilia-Romagna, Liguria, Toscana, Lazio) to the various dialects, art, history, and countless cultural sites. I experienced extreme weather from unbearable heat to torrential rain, flooded trails, and ankle deep mud. I met wonderful people along the way and the kindness of strangers saved me several times from harm. But a pilgrim knows that guardian angels are always looking out for him/her and the *cammino* always provides!



Lucca was always an important stop on the Via Francigena. In the Middle Ages there were at least 35 hostels for pilgrims in Lucca. The labyrinth of the Duomo is the symbol of pilgrimage. I highly recommend visiting the Via Francigena Entry Point in the Casa del Boia in via Bacchettoni near Porta Elisa. It has a museum, an interesting interactive multimedia show, and a little gift shop. Unfortunately, it is currently closed due to Covid.

An important document for a pilgrim is the pilgrim's passport. It is a little booklet that gets dated and stamped by each location where the pilgrim spends the night. Upon arrival in Rome, the pilgrim reports to the pilgrim's office and after verification of the passport, the *Testimonium* is issued. The beautiful document, written in Latin, certifies that the pilgrimage has been completed. I have my passports and the beautiful *Testimoniums* of both the Camino de Santiago and the Via Francigena framed and hanging on my living room wall. They are my most treasured souvenirs of my pilgrimages.

My next long distance hike will be the Via del Volto Santo, 280 km from Pontremoli to Lucca, as soon as we are allowed to travel. I can't wait!

– by Diana Stidl

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