

Walk ➔ Your Way

Training for the Camino de Santiago
*How to Prepare for the
Physical Challenge of the Way*

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Training for the Camino de Santiago

Welcome to Nancy's Camino Training Guide...for the non-athlete regular person who wants to walk all or part of the Camino Francés.

My upfront disclaimer is that I am not an athlete, not a personal trainer, and not usually even interested in exercise. But I do concede that walking the Camino is a huge physical undertaking, and it is best to be physically prepared. And I also recommend that you start now, regardless of when you plan to walk the Camino. You definitely want time on your side when it comes to preparing your body for the rigors of walking the Camino.

The Task at Hand

I think it's important to begin the discussion of training for the Camino with a clear understanding of what, exactly, you are training *for*.

The Camino Francés is an 800 kilometer trail that stretches across the north of Spain. I will use kilometers throughout this document, since that is how distances are measured in Spain, but just so you know, 800 kilometers is about 500 miles. All distances will be approximations, as the actual distances you walk will vary based on where you start, any site-seeing diversions you take, where you stop each night, if you skip any parts of the trail, and if you take any alternative routes along the Way.

Here is a handy reference for converting kilometers to miles:

Kms	Miles
5	3.1
10	6.2
15	9.3
20	12.4
25	15.5
30	18.6

If you are walking the Camino with the intention of qualifying for the 'Compostela' issued by the Church, you must walk at least 100 kilometers (or cycle at least 200 kilometers, but I am assuming you are a walker). Therefore, that is the minimum we are training for. You can take however long you want to walk this distance, but I am going to assume you will walk about 20 kilometers a day and therefore take five days to walk.

Then at the other end of the pilgrimage spectrum, you might be planning to walk the entire way from Saint Jean Pied de Port to Santiago, or even on to Fisterra. That is the full 800 kilometers, plus another 90 from Santiago to Fisterra. If you plan to walk about 20 kilometers a day, you will be walking for 40 days. If, as an example, you have a time limitation and have only 30 days to walk, you will need to walk 27 kilometers a day.

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Now, let me ask: Can you walk 20 to 25 kilometers in a day?

And more importantly: Can you walk 20 to 25 kilometers a day, every day for a month or more?

This is what you are training for.

I am going to give you a few options for training for your Camino, from the really intense approach that will have you in great shape for the Camino *and* your life in general, to the bare minimum fitness plan that will allow you to get – *at least* – over the Pyrenees from Saint Jean Pied de Port to Roncesvalles.

In the spirit of full disclosure, I have to tell you that before becoming a guide on the Camino I seldom trained for my pilgrimages. Instead I just turned up on the trail and took it slowly for the first week, walking only a few hours a day, and clocking in just 8-10 kilometers to get warmed up for the full walk. I DO NOT recommend this approach, so at the end of this document I will give you my Bare Minimum Training Plan in the hopes of steering you away from the no-training-plan.

Okay, let's get going...

Training for the Camino – A Four Part Plan

If you are planning your Camino well in advance, and you have at least three months or more to prepare, you have plenty of time to have a huge impact on your overall fitness and health. Many personal trainers and fitness experts will tell you that you can transform your body in just 90 days, and in some regards this is true. You certainly can change all the behaviors and eating habits required to have a lasting impact on your health within that time.

Some people use a fitness or athletic event to motivate them to get into shape, lose weight, and get healthy. Your Camino could be this event. But even if it's not, we are going to look at a four-part plan to get you ready to walk your Camino.

Here are the four parts:

1. Cardiovascular health
2. Strength training
3. Flexibility
4. Walking

Ready?

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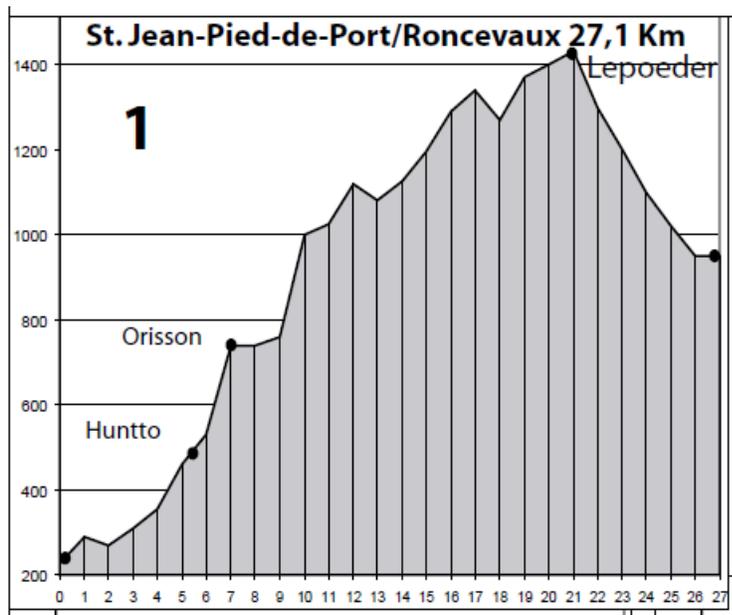
Cardiovascular Health

The main thing you are going to need to walk from SJPPP to Roncesvalles, and the rest of the Camino, is cardiovascular fitness. Right out of the gate, your first one or two days on the Camino Francés will be the arduous climb over the Pyrenees Mountains.

The ascent from Saint Jean Pied de Port to the highest point of the pass is a distance of 21 kilometers, much of it very steep, with an elevation change of 1200 meters...up. (In other measures, that is 13 miles, ascending 4000 feet.)

When you start your Camino with [The Camino Experience](#), we stop in Orisson, shortening the first day to eight kilometers and an elevation gain of 600 meters (2000 feet). On the second day we ascend the next 600 meters (2000 feet) over 11 kilometers before the descent begins.

Not to scare you, but here's what the first 27 kilometers look like:



There are many ways to improve your cardiovascular health, and all of them involve elevating your heart rate. For that reason, I recommend you consult a physician before starting an exercise program. And then once your doc gives you the go-ahead, you can hit the gym or the local trails. Or if you don't have either of those things, look around for some tall buildings with some stairs you can climb (office or apartment buildings, department stores, etc). You may also enjoy swimming, tennis, sports, cycling, jogging...anything that elevates your heart rate will do the job.

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Strength Training

This aspect of fitness is by far and away my least favorite, but perhaps one of the most important. Strength training is where you build up the muscles that enable your body to do whatever physical job you are going to ask of it. The experts say that strength training will serve you well if you plan to live a long and healthy life. If you have the time and the inclination, a total body program is best, but for our Camino purposes, you will want to focus on your legs.

With the ascent described above, strong legs are going to be your best friends. But it is on the descent that you really need the strength. Ideally you want to build strength in all the muscles in your legs, but the quadriceps are the large muscles that will get you down the hill without injuring your knees.

There are many ways to strengthen your legs (and other body parts). You can go to a gym and use the machines and free-weights, or you can do body movements that use your body weight to build the muscles. I will share a few online resources with you at the end of this document.

The most important thing to remember when doing strength training is to follow good form. It is better to do less with good form, than to do more without it. A personal trainer can set you on the right track if you have never done strength training using weights or machines.

Flexibility

This is an often overlooked part of training for the Camino, but it is at least as important as all the others. Fitness experts recommend stretching before and after a workout, for the health and safety of the muscles. This is nearly common sense for exercise in general. For the Camino, though, there is another reason you may not be aware of.

Walking is a repetitive movement, and walking the Camino has you doing this movement for *hours* each day. If you are going to walk 20 kilometers, you will be doing the same movement in the joints of your lower body for anywhere from three to six hours. That means your hips, knees, ankles, and toes are doing one thing, over and over again.

Repetitive movement? I'm thinking 'Carpal Tunnel Syndrome', but for the whole body. Imagine.

Stretching – Before, During, After

As a serial pilgrim, I have learned that stretching is critical to preventing joint injuries and pain. When you start doing your training walks for the Camino, one of the best practices you can incorporate into your routine is a stretching regimen that addresses all the joints of your lower body. Start with your hips and work your way down your legs – quadriceps, hamstrings, calves, ankles, feet, and don't forget the toes.

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You might also want to stretch the rest of your body, too. Stretch your back, especially the lumbar region which is carrying your pack. Shoulders, upper back, sides, everything. It takes just a few minutes, and it feels really, really good!

When to stretch? I recommend a warm up first, of walking at a leisurely pace for five to ten minutes. Then pull over to the side of the trail, or hop off the machine at the gym, and stretch.

When you are out on the trail or doing a training walk, I recommend stopping every hour to stretch. This stretch break isn't so much about stretching from head to toe; it is more about changing position. If you are carrying your backpack, take it off and do a couple of squats to stretch out your hips and lower back. Or find a bench or patch of grass in the sun and sit cross-legged for a few minutes, leaning forward to stretch out your hips and lower back. To make the break really effective, you can take off your shoes or boots, air out your feet, do circles with your ankles, and give your toes a quick massage.

If you feel any pain in your legs or feet while walking, that is another good time to stop and stretch. The surprise here, though, is that you don't want to start with the body part that is hurting. Instead, move up one or two muscle groups or joints and start your stretching there. That means that if your ankle or calf hurts, you want to start with stretching your hips and work your way down to your toes. Everything is connected, and everything works *together*, as a team.

Finally, after you finish exercising, have a seat, sip some water, and then after five or ten minutes, run yourself through a set of stretches.

Another Way to Increase Flexibility

I tend to get bored pretty easily when it comes to exercise and physical activity, so I prefer to mix things up a bit. Practicing yoga is a great way to gain flexibility and add variety to an exercise plan at the same time. And it's really easy to incorporate yoga moves into an on-the-trail stretching regimen.

If you have never practiced yoga, I recommend finding a class at a local studio. There are many styles of yoga, and I favor Hatha for the first-time student. A good teacher will introduce you to both the physical and spiritual aspects of yoga, ensure you are using good form, and encourage you to push yourself in your practice.

Walking

Now we move onto perhaps the most obviously necessary part of training for the Camino: walking.

In the case of walking, more is, in fact, more. When on the Camino, you will be walking for three to eight hours a day, day after day, and the only way really to prepare for the walk is to *walk*. If you have the time, the best walking training plan is one that mimics

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your days on the Camino. That means walking three to five hours a day for three to five days in a row, then taking a rest day, then doing that again. And again.

Not everyone has the time to walk that much – ‘real life’ has a pesky way of encroaching on our best-laid plans. If you can’t dedicate that much time, then aim for one or two *loooong* hikes each week for the two months before your departure. By ‘long’ I mean 20 kilometers (12 miles) or more, taking as much time as you need to complete the walk.

That reminds me to mention something about *time*. When you are on the Camino trail, you will have the entire day to cover the distance you are going. The Camino is a walk, not a race, and in my experience, a relaxed pace is a more enjoyable pace. (For more on this, read ‘*Walk in a Relaxed Manner*’ by Joyce Rupp.)

You can train for the Camino by focusing on either time walked or distance walked, or both. I think it is informative to track both time and distance, so you have a sense of how long your days will be on the Camino. I recommend following a training plan that has you increase both time spent walking and the distance covered as you approach your Camino start date. I will give you a sample plan in the Resources section at the end of this document.

Preventing Injuries

A common cause of injuries and blisters on the Camino is walking too far, too fast, or both. Walking too far in a day or walking any distance too fast can put unnecessary strain on your body, specifically your joints and feet.

Another cause of injuries and blisters is carrying too much weight in your backpack, especially if you are not accustomed to carrying the weight. During the last month before your Camino start, I recommend loading up your backpack to the weight you will carry on the Camino, and carrying it for all of your training walks. Be sure to include snacks and water, so you can match the weight and weight distribution as closely as possible to real-Camino conditions. As you train with your backpack, you will learn what your body can carry comfortably, and you can begin to weed out any unnecessary items you are carrying.

A final note on walking: Be sure to train in the boots or walking shoes you will wear on the Camino. Your feet must know those boots well by the time you begin your Camino walk!

Trekking Poles

If you plan to use trekking poles (also called walking sticks or poles), buy them now and learn how to use them. They are fantastic aids to training for and walking the Camino. When you start your Camino experience with the ‘[Just Get Me Started](#)’ program, we show you how to use your trekking poles to their best benefit.

There are plenty of YouTube videos that will show you how to use trekking poles, but not all of them are good. For the true expert, I go to Jayah Faye Paley. You can start by

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watching her video on how to adjust the straps on your trekking poles:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HOQFPL2lpMY>

Nancy's Bare Minimum Training Plan

As I've said, more really is more when training for the Camino. The more you can train, the better shape you are in, the more you practice with your backpack on, the easier your Camino walk will be for you physically.

But I am a realist. And if you are like me, you will find every possible distraction to avoid training for the Camino. So now I present my three-step Bare Minimum Training Plan.

1. Improve your cardiovascular health. You MUST have this in order to cross the Pyrenees, so you must at least put in some time climbing hills or stairs or otherwise getting your heart rate up. You will know you are on the right track when the incline you start with – whether it is stairs, a treadmill, or a hill – becomes easier and you get winded less quickly.
2. Strengthen your quadriceps. This can be done while doing other tasks, so no excuses! While watching TV or a movie, stand up, place your hand lightly on a wall or piece of furniture, and do three sets of 10 squats or lunges. Do this every day for a month, and your quadriceps should be able to power you up, over, and down the mountain. (Be sure you are using proper form so you don't injure your knees.)
3. Break in your boots or walking shoes. New shoes sometimes take some getting used to. Breaking in boots is not just about getting your feet comfortable and preventing blisters, though.

When you break in a new pair of boots or shoes for the Camino, you need to build up the muscles in your legs that are used with the new footwear. The heavier and more sturdy your boots, the more time you will need to get your legs and feet ready, so start as soon as possible. And just for good measure, you may as well 'move into' your boots for the last two to three weeks before you start your Camino. (That means wear them all the time, and only them, for the weeks leading up to your start date. I do this *every time* I am headed to the Camino.)

The Most Important Aspect of Training

No matter how you approach training for the Camino, the most important point is to start your training NOW. The more time you have to train the better, so please don't waste any time getting started. If you have more than a few months until you walk the Camino, you can start slowly, with just a walk or two each week. This is a good practice to get yourself accustomed to the *routine* of walking.

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Tips to Keep it Interesting

Walking can become a bit routine, and you will likely have times in your training – and on the Camino – where your enthusiasm for the task lags some. Here are some tips to make training more enjoyable:

- Walk with a friend or loved one. A good conversation really helps you cover ground.
- Pick a problem or idea to work out in your head as you walk. I come up with some of my best ideas while walking. The repetitive nature of walking works allows my mind to go to interesting places.
- Listen to music, but only if you are on a machine at the gym. (Wearing headphones outside can present a safety hazard.)
- Change up where you walk. This is a great time to explore the parks and trails in your area, or to get to know your urban center from a new, slower perspective. And it is a good idea to practice walking on a variety of surfaces – dirt, scree, pavement, mud, up and down hills – to mimic the real experience on the Camino.
- Rearrange the items in your backpack and pay close attention to how it feels during your walk. Heavier items are best placed close to your lower back, at the bottom of the pack, but be sure to test out what feels right for you.
- Sing. Loudly. Pick a theme for the day, like show tunes, gospel music, folk songs from the 70's, etc.
- Walk at different times of the day to experience different temperatures, lighting, and daily-life activities happening in your walking area.
- Write your own walking songs as you go. (When you start with [The Camino Experience](#) you get to learn Nancy's magic 'Blue Sky' song.)
- Keep a journal of your walks. Record time and distance walked plus any insights you gained, interesting people you met, startling discoveries of your neighborhood, etc.

Resources

As I hinted above, I am definitely not the Queen of Exercise. I know people who are, and I have great respect for them. While I won't likely become a Q of E anytime soon, I am happy to learn from the experts and share those resources with you. Again, the disclaimers: I am not a personal trainer or medical professional. I recommend you check with a physician before starting an exercise program. **This information is shared in the spirit of goodwill and you participate at your own risk.**

Online Resources

A quick internet search will reveal far too many options, so I'll narrow it down and give you just two websites that offer free workouts that combine cardiovascular and strength training benefits. Note that these websites show mostly women, but the programs will work for men as well.

The Tabata Workout

This workout was designed for Olympic athletes in the 1970's. I just learned about it from my fitness-genius best friend, and to be honest, I'm scared to try it. But she has told me I have to do it, so I will. It's really intense, but it gets results with just a four-minutes-per-day commitment. Here is an article from Shape Magazine on the [Tabata Workout](#).

PopSugar Fitness

The PopSugar website has a little of everything, but its focus is mainly on fitness and healthy living. My go-to page is the one on [Workouts](#). They give a bunch of options for people who don't have access to fancy equipment or a gym (or who don't *like* to go to the gym).

For Women Only

If you think you might like to use the Camino as the goal to overhaul your entire physical-fitness life, you may want to consider working with a personal trainer or coach. If that's the case, I would be happy to refer you to Sylvia Ferrero, who brilliantly combines personal training and coaching in her work with women who are looking for a total mind-body-spirit approach to fitness. Sylvia is my fitness-genius best friend's personal trainer and coach, making her a Genius Fitness-genius, in my book. You can find Sylvia online at <http://www.sylviaferrero.com/>

For Women and Men

Another option for the pre-Camino physical-fitness overhaul is Bill Phillip's Body for Life Challenge. This guy has been around for a while; I completed the challenge in 1999 and achieved incredible results with a combination of cardiovascular exercise, strength training, diet changes, and most important, support from the structure of the Challenge. The Body for Life Challenge is a 90-day program that focuses on total fitness, specifically by reducing body fat and gaining muscle. It is geared towards those of you who love working out at the gym, and it is not a Camino-specific training program. But it works really well, and I love to share things that work!

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Okay, had enough of the overall fitness approach? Good. Now we move onto a Camino training plan that's all about walking...

A Walking Plan to Train for the Camino

When training for the Camino, there are two primary goals:

1. Establish a walking habit.

That means start walking now, and walk often. Aim to walk five days a week, even if it is just for 30 minutes to an hour.

2. Increase time walked as the Camino start date approaches.

As you count down to your Camino start, aim to continue to walk five days a week, spending more time each time you walk. For simplicity, you can measure your walking time in our blocks – one, two, three hour walks, and so on.

Here is my simplified take on increasing time walked as you approach your Camino start date:

A Five Month Training Plan

Time Walked	ONE Month Before	TWO Months Before	THREE Months Before	FOUR Months Before	FIVE Months Before
30 mins-1 Hr		3 times per wk	3 times per wk	3 times per wk	5 times per wk
2 hours	3 times per wk			2 times per wk	
3 hours			2 times per wk		
4 hours		2 times per wk			
5 hours	3 times per wk				

What if you've just decided to walk the Camino, somewhat last minute, don't have five months to train? If that's the case, you will need to accelerate your training timeframe, but still aim to walk the same blocks of time as described above. For example, what if you have only 10 weeks to train? Here is what that plan might look like:

A Ten Week Training Plan

Time Walked	TWO Weeks Before	FOUR Weeks Before	SIX Weeks Before	EIGHT Weeks Before	TEN Weeks Before
30 mins-1 Hr		3 times per wk	3 times per wk	3 times per wk	5 times per wk
2 hours	3 times per wk			2 times per wk	
3 hours			2 times per wk		
4 hours		2 times per wk			
5 hours	3 times per wk				

You can adjust the top grid to match your training timeline, regardless of how much time you have to prepare for you Camino.

And now here are a few more ideas you may find helpful:

Track how far you walk.

Eventually you will want to be able to cover 20 or more kilometers in a day. The only way to know if you can do this is to track how far you walk each day. If you write this number down next to your hours walked, you will have a clear record of your training progress.

Use a Mapping App to track your progress.

Just about everyone has a Smartphone these days, so why not take advantage of technology to track your training? A pilgrim friend from Australia introduced me to [MapMyWalk](#). I think it will do the trick.

Stay Motivated

I find it really motivating to plan and track my goals and progress *visually*, so I like to use a wall calendar and a journal notebook to plan and track my training. I also enjoy bright colors and interesting images, so I mark up my calendar and journal with bright highlighters and symbols of the Camino. What display can you create to plan and track your training and keep yourself engaged in the physical preparation for your Camino journey?

Okay, how are you feeling about training for your Camino journey? I want to wrap this up by saying, *you can do this*. Yes, this is a BIG thing you are taking on. Yes, you need to put in the time and effort to prepare for such an undertaking. Yes, there will be challenges.

But I suspect you have done other 'big things' in your life, and things worked out just fine. ***You can do this!***

Now, before I leave you to it, I have just one more thing to cover...

Postscript

What if you start training to walk the Camino and you discover you *hate* walking? Or what if you get a few weeks into it and you just can't find the desire to keep going? You have some options.

1. The first thing to do is look back at your reasons for walking the Camino. *Why* are you walking? What was it that called you to the Camino in the first place? Use that reason to motivate you to continue your training.
2. Refer to the section above on 'Tips to Keep it Interesting.' Find something, *anything*, to mix it up.
3. Fall back onto Nancy's Bare Minimum Training Plan. It's not ideal, but it does work.
4. Talk to people who have walked the Camino. Connect with the pilgrim community on Facebook. Stay in the Camino conversation any way you can.
5. Redesign your Camino to include *some* walking and perhaps a car rental or bus tour that catches the highlights and ends in Santiago.
6. Choose another goal. Just like sky diving, climbing Mount Everest, or eating snails, walking the Camino isn't for everyone. If the Camino is calling to you but you don't want to walk it, you can find other ways to be involved. The Camino is a UNESCO site full of destinations in their own rights, so perhaps you just want to visit as a tourist. No shame in that.