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# PILGRIM PATHS TO ASSISI

300 Miles on the Way of St Francis


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Italy

Florence

Assisi

Rome





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## Introduction: Francis and His Ways

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Everywhere the way of the pilgrim is twofold, the exterior and the interior, the simultaneous movement of the feet and the soul through time as well as space

Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*

Francis brought the world a life of radical simplicity, unmoored to possessions and therefore free to follow the promptings of grace and the path toward God, wherever and whenever God summoned him. His spirit was one of remarkable spontaneity: he leaped to the needs of others, just as he hurried to catch up with God, who was always inviting him to a new adventure.

Donald Spoto, *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi*

This is the story of a pilgrimage to Assisi on the Way of St. Francis—several pilgrimages actually: three on foot and one inward of the spirit. The journeys on foot took six weeks, over the course of several years; the inward one—to be

inspired and even transformed by the life of Francis of Assisi—began decades ago and continues today, as all inner journeys should.

The outward journey to Assisi began in 2018 in Santiago de Compostela in northwestern Spain as I entered the crowded western plaza outside the legendary cathedral. I had just completed a 500-mile pilgrimage on foot. Walking the Camino de Santiago was the culmination of a dream that had bubbled along in my life for 20 years. In that journey I had joined my steps with the millions who had walked before me. It was a walk through space, time, and history.

That pilgrimage was life-changing, and I knew that I wanted to do something like this every year for as long as I lived. I had started that walk solo, but my wife, Jane, joined me during the last week. We entered the plaza together that day—a day I still regard as one of the most significant of my life. We decided that we would take another pilgrimage, this time in Italy along the Way of St. Francis, but first I needed to complete my book about walking the Camino de Santiago. Over decades, we had been moved by reading about the life of Francis, even naming our second son after him. We always planned one day visit Assisi, his birthplace and home.

Unlike the Camino de Santiago, the pilgrimage to Assisi would not take place over a matter of weeks but over a matter of years, with starts, stops, and the COVID-19 pandemic in the middle of it. While the pandemic and the focus on Francis made this pilgrimage different, it did not in any way diminish the journey's power, and in some ways it might have enhanced it.



The Way of St. Francis (*Via di San Francesco* in Italian) is an atypical modern pilgrim path.<sup>1</sup> It starts in Florence in the north and ends in Rome in the south. It stretches 550 kilometers (340 miles). Several recent guidebooks more or less follow this route in part or in whole,<sup>2</sup> dividing it into 27 or 28 stages. On the map it has the shape of an arc, curving southeasterly through Tuscany and then Umbria, before straightening and bending more southwesterly through Lazio and toward Rome. It climbs and descends—repeatedly—the Apennine Mountains of central Italy. Traversing the mountains and foothills is challenging, and the distances belie the fact that there is a lot of climbing. From Florence to Rome, the path has an elevation gain of about 16,000 meters.<sup>3</sup>

Unlike the Camino de Santiago, this route for pilgrims has only been created in recent decades, but many of the pathways it follows are ancient, tramped for centuries, even millennia. Its essence is its linking of dozens of significant places in the life of Francis, places of legend, places of refuge and retreat, places where he may have performed a miracle or preached, and places where he slept or had divine revelations.

The path enchants pilgrims with all the sensual delights of central Italy as it passes mile after mile of olive groves and vineyards, climbs rocky mountain paths, reveals spectacular vistas over wide river valleys, and winds through ancient stone villages and monasteries. It fords streams and crosses rivers, cuts deep into ancient forests where the only sound is the cuckoo. It exudes its own mystical aura, not unlike the deep, mystical spirit of Francis himself. It skirts, and occasionally enters, hilltop towns and cities, some of which appear to be cut from rocky promontories. It passes medieval castles, some still fortified with defensive walls and

towers, reminiscent of Italy's volatile political past. It is rocky, it is paved; it is dirt, it is gravel. It is wild beauty and richly cultivated simplicity. The mountain passes smell of thyme, rosemary, and oregano; the villages of wisteria. It requires vigorous climbs and occasional treacherous, rocky descents. It winds through history, through culture, through fabulous local cuisines. It is ancient stone churches with peeling frescoes, it is abandoned villas and overgrown orchards. It is physically and mentally challenging. It is silent, it is lush, it is remote, it is hospitable.

Some of the most significant places include “sanctuaries” and hermitages, places where Francis and his early followers could retreat from the crowds and find solitude, similar to what Jesus and his disciples did. It includes small chapels where he frequently prayed and magnificent basilicas, places that today may contain a letter written in his hand or an item of his clothing. His most isolated hermitages are as dramatic as they are beautiful: often at significant heights, up the sides of mountains, out on a precipice, down into a deep rock cleft, or inside a cave. The most famous of these are routinely visited by tour busses, but some of the most striking and mysterious (and my favorite) are accessible only on foot.

Linked along the Way are cities and towns, such as charming Gubbio, with its steep, narrow streets and medieval quarter, where Francis supposedly tamed a wolf that terrorized the locals, or Greccio, where he staged the first live Christmas reenactment, animals and all. Others are places of miracles, such as Fonte Colombo, where he brought forth water from a rock, or La Verna, where he reportedly received the stigmata (the wounds of Christ) on his body. Some are more mundane, like Foligno, where he sold his father's cloth for cash to give to the poor.

The ascents and occasional remote stretches between these places can seem daunting. The best approach is to walk them in smaller segments, keeping in mind the elevation gains as much as the distances. The climbs force you to slow down and take in the surroundings, to expect and experience a bit more mystery.

Weaving together the legends and history of Francis along the ancient paths make this a unique pilgrimage; at times you can still sense his presence there. Moreover, it is versatile; you can start and end anywhere along its route.

Assisi, Francis's hometown in central Umbria, is the halfway point. It stands above the rest, both literally and figuratively. Sitting like a jewel on an outcrop of Mount Subasio, it is the place where he was born and died, the departure point for a life of purposeful wandering, preaching, and ministry. In its basilica, his mortal remains are preserved and have been venerated for over 800 years. I chose Assisi as the final destination for each of my three journeys along the route, for I consider it to be the heart of this pilgrimage.



He offered his followers, quite simply, a better life, a more joyful life, one that provided the kind of satisfaction that comes to a commitment to something other than money. They found him and his message irresistible

Donald Spoto, *Reluctant Saint: The Life of Francis of Assisi*

Giovanni Bernadone, known to us in history as Saint Francis (*San Francesco* in Italian), was born in Assisi in 1181 or 1182. He died there 44 years later, a short life by modern stan-

dards but outsized in its impact on his own time and on history. He lived more in those four decades than many live in a life twice as long.

Francis—alongside Jesus, Moses, Mohammed, and Buddha—is one of the world’s most widely known, beloved, and revered religious figures. According to contemporary Franciscan speaker and author Richard Rohr, “When Pope John Paul II wanted to gather the leaders of all the world religions to have a respectful interfaith dialogue in the 1980s, the only city in the world that they could agree to meet in was Assisi, because the memory of St. Francis does not carry any negative baggage, even to other religions.”<sup>4</sup> Books about his life and references about him in books proliferate. Apparently, he has the longest card catalog entry of any person in the Library of Congress.<sup>5</sup> In Italian he’s *Il Poverello*, “The Little Poor Man,” and he’s the patron saint of Italy, along with Catherine of Sienna. Since 1986 he is the patron saint of the worldwide ecological movement. In an age of disbelief, skepticism, evangelical fervor, and religious extremism, his wide acceptance comes as a welcome relief. In an age of overconsumption that is heating an already ecologically threatened planet, his life of simplicity and care for the natural world points to hope. The current Pope—eager to emphasize his own commitment to the poor of the world—even became history’s first Pope Francis.

Francis’s father, Pietro Bernadone, was a wealthy cloth merchant among the emerging middle classes of Umbria in central Italy. His mother, Pica, was possibly French, or at least knew French, and called her son Francesco (Francis in English), meaning “little Frenchy,” and the nickname stuck. Pietro took his son on journeys to France and Belgium where he traded for the latest in fabrics. Along the way the young Francesco would have learned the medieval, romantic

tales and songs of the troubadours, legends of courtly love and valiant knights. They remained with him during his life, the poetry and music influencing his preaching. His own poem, *Canticle of the Sun*, is credited as being the first poem written in Italian (versus Latin).<sup>6</sup>

Francesco received an education and enjoyed the privileges associated with being the son of wealth. He caroused with the sons of other affluent merchants and nobility, sponsoring drinking parties and earning a reputation as a bit of a playboy. Like many other young men of his age, he longed for the glories of warfare. To win his reputation he went with several of his fellows to battle with neighboring Perugia, outfitted in an expensive suit of armor. But he was to win neither riches nor glory; he was captured during the brief battle, which ended in a humiliating defeat for Assisi. He suffered for two years in a damp and cold prison, while peace was negotiated and ransom was raised for his release.

Accounts of what happened next vary and even conflict, but this much is agreed upon: He returned home a changed man. This was the beginning of an ongoing and gradual conversion leading to a dramatic and painful confrontation with his own father, when he stripped himself—figuratively and literally—of his family’s wealth and station and embraced a life of voluntary poverty. He spent the next two decades wandering, preaching, and caring for the poor and sick, especially lepers. He poured out this love to those he met, impressing those who heard his simple sermons and having a profound effect wherever he went. The common person, feeling distant from God through the practices of the Roman Catholic Church, now felt God very near and approachable. In a time of near-continuous warfare and political and religious foment, Francis stood out as a Christ-like figure. Like Christ he invited people to follow, and follow



they did, in the tens of thousands. Among the throngs who came to follow him were the “cream” of Assisi’s youth, the offspring of other wealthy Italians who also chose the path of voluntary poverty. This included Clare, a young woman who created a scandal similar to Francis’s when she chose to follow his life of service to the poor. He called his followers “friars minor” or “little brothers,” a term taken from the social orders of the time, in which the *minore* were at the bottom of society, just above the outcasts.



Throughout his life from now on Francis emanated an almost radioactive energy which seemed to derive from his continuous proximity to God. It was said he didn’t love God, but was in love with him. To live in his company was therefore formidable yet also exhilarating, for his conviction was infectious and communicated to many of his companions a faith as luminescent as his. United in everything they did, they quickly discovered a degree of trust, purpose and collective happiness they had never remotely experienced before.

Adrian House, *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life*

His welcoming spirit and love of animals—indeed the entire natural world—appealed to those who felt that God (and the church) were too otherworldly and removed from the everyday experience of the common person. Popes, kings, the nobility and the wealthy, scholars and clerics also were drawn to him. He inspired them to leave everything and follow him—some during his lifetime, many in the generations after his death. He preached peace, at risk to his life, to both Christians and Muslims in Egypt during the Third

Crusade. The Sultan was so impressed by Francis that he honored him with a hearing and treated him with deep respect.<sup>7</sup>

Assisi initially rejected Francis but eventually came to revere him. Francis died there in 1226 and was made a saint in 1228, perhaps the fastest canonization in history. This movement had, paradoxically, received the approval of the powerful Roman Catholic Church, though at its very core it represented values that directly contradicted the institution. The Roman Catholic Church raised a magnificent basilica to house his remains, completed in two years, a record time for such church construction in the Late Middle Ages. More significant than the basilica is the lasting spiritual impact Francis has had on Christianity and other religions and faith traditions.



Francis does not really provide many systematic answers to theological questions as much as he *is* a living answer to those who ask the right questions.

Richard Rohr, *Eager to Love: The Alternative Way of Francis of Assisi*

My own fascination with Francis began with the film *Brother Sun, Sister Moon*, which I saw in my early twenties, while in seminary. The film is visually lush, its message striking.

I was struck by Francis's deep spirituality, commitment to God, and dedication to his calling.

I was struck by his simplicity and delight in the natural world.

I was struck by his nonjudgmental, gracious spirit and his nonviolence.

I was struck by his deep humanity and love for all living things (including animals), but the poor in particular.

I was struck by his willingness to give up security, privilege, and material comforts.

I was struck by the freedom that he gained, by giving up society's most cherished securities, including status. I was reminded of the words of Jesus, who said that to "gain" our life, we must "lose" it.<sup>8</sup>

These things constitute the "inner way" of Francis, a way that has impacted millions over the centuries.

I left seminary before completing a divinity degree, as my own sense of vocation and calling took a different turn. But I never stopped learning about Francis or feeling impacted by him. Over the next decades I read several biographies of his life, while my wife and growing family and I embraced a life of service and material simplicity, all in pursuit of many of the same spiritual longings and ideals of Francis. The peace we sought was a response to the same anxieties, conflicts, stresses, and never-ending preoccupations with money, possessions, and social status that Francis renounced and that are possibly even greater and more oppressive in our time.

We joined first one, then a second, intentional Christian community—something like a commune—beginning in a poor, urban area, then later in a rural context, closer to nature and the outdoors. We lived there 14 years while our children grew, then in 1998 decided that we would "re-enter" society in order to be closer to my aging parents. This meant earning our own living and re-acquiring personal possessions, but we kept our lifestyle simple. We made sure, as much as possible, to stay focused on the values that Francis stood for—his message of peace, of service, of love

and grace for others, care for the poor and for the natural world.



At about the same time our family made that transition 25 years ago, my own spiritual understanding and outlook expanded. I became fascinated with the spiritual aspects of pilgrimage. I felt drawn to make a pilgrimage on foot to some of the most famous sites, starting in Europe. I hungered to visit places of significant spiritual history, places where the past still lives, “thin places” where the spiritual and mystical break through the physical. I traveled to some, such as Iona and Lindisfarne in the United Kingdom, Newgrange and Glendalough in Ireland, and Vézelay in France. I stood in awe before Canterbury Cathedral and dozens of other medieval cathedrals in France, Switzerland, and Germany, finally culminating in 2018 when I made my long-awaited pilgrimage to Santiago. My hope was that pilgrimage on foot would become an ongoing part of our lives for as long as we could still strap on a backpack and move our feet.

My Franciscan impulses reawakened and I felt drawn next to Umbria and to Assisi. I wanted to see the land of Francis, to take in its scents, feel its stones, touch its soil. I wanted to experience the remoteness, the solitude, the quiet of the mountains and the paths that challenged and fed the mind, spirit, and soul of Francis. I wanted to feel inwardly the places of his history. So, after we returned home, we began to prepare for our next pilgrimage, one that would complete the circle of faith, discovery, and spiritual longing to understand and appreciate Francis that had begun four decades earlier. This book is that story.

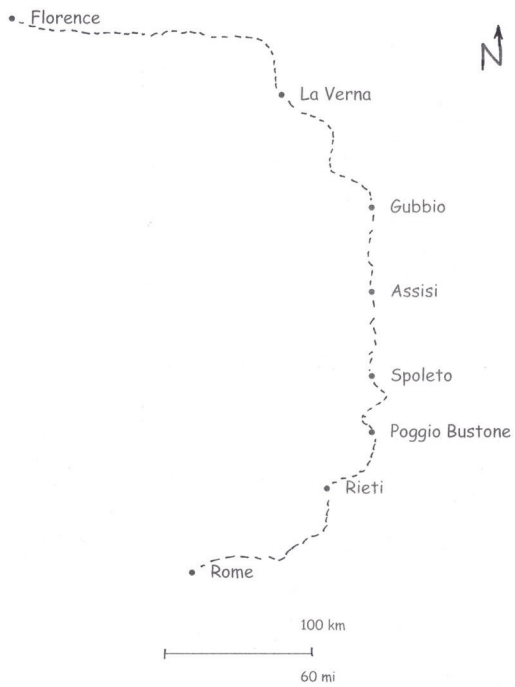


In 2018 as I prepared to walk to Santiago de Compostela, I developed a set of seven principles that guided me on my journey, and they served me well. On subsequent pilgrimages, I expanded and modified that list, and it is now up to twelve. I share these “Pilgrimage Principles” at the outset of this book as they provide a framework to the meaningful journey that I am about to share with you.

While these principles are woven into my time spent along the Way of St. Francis, they also are helpful for all of life.

1. Keep your pack light.
2. Don't be in a hurry.
3. Absorb your surroundings with all your senses.
4. Accept whatever is offered you, as a gift from God.
5. Walk in expectation of the unexpected.
6. Keep plans flexible and adapt as you go.
7. Accept your limitations.
8. Greet and take interest in other pilgrims; offer them something if they need it.
9. Have reverence for those who have walked before you.
10. Appreciate the locals and get to know them. Sample their foods.
11. Read historical markers. Touch the stones.
12. Leave behind somewhere an appropriate token.

## The Way of St. Francis







## An Arduous Journey

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When the scales of laziness fall over our eyes and we have begun to take life for granted, we must take an arduous journey to relearn the essential truths of the life right before our eyes.

Phil Cousineau, *The Art of Pilgrimage*

ONE MIGHT NOT IMAGINE that an arduous journey could begin in Florence, birthplace of the Renaissance, a *Patrimonio Mondiale*, a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Cultured Florence, which gave us Dante, Machiavelli, the Medici, and Michelangelo and which today is known as Europe's art capital, is itself a work of art. With its stately *piazzas*, richly decorated churches, iconic Duomo, bustling, narrow streets, high-end boutiques, crowded restaurants, sidewalk cafés, colorful flowers, well-appointed gardens, and famed Ponte Vecchio—Florence is the essence of the Italian *Dolce Vita*, the “sweet life,” celebrating beauty, comfort, and ease.

Despite that, amid the splendid weather in mid-April, as the city exerted its seductive pull and tourists streamed in, my wife and I headed out to begin our arduous journey.<sup>1</sup> People could be excused for thinking we were crazy, leaving one of the world's most historic and beautiful cities less than 24 hours after we had arrived. Our destination was Assisi, 290 kilometers and 17 days away. We were continuing a journey we had begun more than two years earlier that had been stalled by the COVID-19 pandemic, heading out to find the places of St. Francis somewhere in the mountains to the east and south. On the previous journey we had approached Assisi from the south, starting in Rieti, but now, following the convention of the guidebooks, we were coming at it from the other direction.

Walking to the mountains—and through them—was going to be the arduous part. Heading that way, we were reversing history, leaving the chic present and heading backward through the Second World War, Mussolini, and Fascism; backward through the *Risorgimento*, or unification of Italy in the 19th century; backward through the Renaissance, the birth of the Italian city-state and communes; backward to the age of Francis in the early 13th century; and backward even beyond that, nearly 3,000 years, to the Roman Empire and to the Etruscans.



FLORENCE, founded as a colony for former soldiers in 59 B.C.E. by the Romans at a ford in the Arno River, was still struggling to become a Republic in the late 12th century when Francis was born. Its treasured Duomo and Ponte Vecchio had yet to be built, its first gold *florin*, a standard of medieval coinage, had yet to be minted. As an up-and-

coming power center, Florence, not unlike Rome, figured small in the life of Francis. But our guidebook started the journey there, so there we began the part of the Way of St. Francis that would be for us the most arduous, and likewise the most rewarding.

Ahead there were mountains to climb and the deep and remote Casentino Forest. I had read that the isolated pathways could be rocky, muddy, even slippery; the route markers might be confusing and at times nonexistent. We would have to rely on our phones for navigation. As grueling as the steep climbs could be, going down would be even slower and more treacherous. The high mountain passes are long, lonely, windy, and potentially chilly in spring.

The small towns are farther apart from one another. Occasionally we would have to haul extra water and packed lunches. On top of it all, we hardly knew the language. We would have to rely on our basic Italian vocabulary, smiles, and bits of Spanish.

All this I knew. But there were other challenges ahead that would make the journey even more arduous than we anticipated.

Lodging wasn't always available. We were booking our rooms only one or two days ahead as part of our Pilgrimage Principle 6, to "keep plans flexible and adapt." Sometimes the hoped-for host didn't answer the phone or email. We were starting to walk during Holy Week and were competing with weekend hikers, vacationers, and pilgrim-tourists in cars or buses who sometimes took all available rooms in B&Bs, *rifugios* (mountain inns), and hotels. The Way is not solely oriented toward walking pilgrims.

Occasionally the bed was too hard, the room too hot or too cold. Some hosts did not speak or understand a word of English and didn't grasp that we didn't understand a single

thing they were saying; one of them was in her eighties and hard of hearing.

Some churches I had hoped to visit—sacred places in which to pause and reflect—were closed. A few times, heavy clouds rumbled in from the horizon and the downpour turned the path into a river. Just as suddenly the cloudburst was over, we had to stop to peel off our raincoats, and before long we sweltered in the sun.

And then there was the path itself. Streams that our guidebook said could be easily crossed on dry stones had swelled with spring rains, leaving no dry crossing. Ahead or behind spring storms, stiff winds buffeted us on the high passes and trees fell over the path. We had to duck underneath, scramble around, or climb over them. Our legs grew tired, and yet the map showed another climb ahead. Progress was sometimes slow.

I had my own insecurities: Could I haul my now-65-year-old body up the steep ascents of the Apennines? What about my knees on the long descents? What would it feel like to plunge into the deep and remote forests of the Casentino, miles from nowhere, the countryside and the mountains unknown to us? The pandemic, waning, was still on the periphery: How might/could it affect anything?

Jane had her own uncertainties. Along with me she'd studied the stages of the journey ahead, and the difficult climbing made her apprehensive. I knew that she was fit, loved to walk, and enjoyed these types of adventures once she was on them. But of the two of us, I was more of the adventurer, even known to be a bit reckless. Yet here she was joining me, in spite of any qualms about the journey ahead. I admired her willingness to face the challenge. How many other grandmothers, having earned a well-deserved retirement, would instead choose a 290-kilometer trek

through steep, unknown mountains with a 7-kilo pack on their back?

“I may walk a bit slower than you. Will I be holding you back?” she had asked me as we made our plans. “No,” I said, “the speed of the journey doesn’t matter. Having you along to share it with me is more important than how fast we go. And I’m so glad you know Spanish; you’ll probably be a lot better than me at communicating in Italian.” That was no small thing: I was delighted for her to be in charge of figuring out the lodging and communicating with hosts, a tedious task for me and one that she enjoyed.

If we had let them, the fears could have defined the journey. Yet what we sensed before we left and learned with certainty along the way was that it was the unknown, the thrill of the challenges, that make life—and pilgrimage—all the more rewarding. We discovered that by plunging into it with a bit of abandon, with faith, by laying aside our fears and opening ourselves to the unexpected provisions that a pilgrimage offers, wonderful things transpired and they, not our fears, defined the journey. The unknowns could even be said to make it more “authentically Franciscan” as we relied on others, on serendipity, on chance. Francis himself had endured the same challenges as he traversed these very hills, relying on the generosity and goodwill of others.

Lodging full? A host with good English and a cheery voice calls back about a nicer accommodation and offers to pick us up, then provides us a four-course, homemade Tuscan meal.

Feet tired? An unplanned shortcut slices an hour and a few miles off the route, or a bus stop appears along the highway with a bus arriving in minutes to ferry us along when we can’t go a step further.

Hot? The long deep silence in the cool of the forest

becomes a welcome companion after an hour in the beating sun.

Fatigued? We arrive hungry and weary, and our hosts unexpectedly place a delicious meal—and a tall beer—in front of us.

Wet? The rain stops, the sun comes out, and wet clothes quickly dry. The clouds break open or the mists lift, unveiling a stunning vista over the mountains.

Hungry? The path down from the mountain pass is smooth with a village around a bend where a sandwich, a pastry, and a cappuccino lift our mood.

Can't cross the stream? A pilgrim-angel appears from nowhere and points to a shallow crossing that we haven't seen.

Trees blocking the path? A man with a chainsaw is there to cut them away.

Out of water? More pilgrim-angels materialize and give two liters to us.

Simplicity reigns: A picnic lunch, some buns purchased in the bread shop, and some cheese and fruit from the small *alimentari* (grocer) are spread out on a grassy meadow. Together with the mountain vista they become a banquet.

Fellow pilgrims, seekers, and wanderers, bring conversation and exchange snacks, smiles, and encouragement. We become one with them and then part ways just as easily.

The door to an 11th-century church is surprisingly open, and inside is a beautifully preserved slice of medieval architecture and modest piety, complete with ancient frescoes. Its peace enters your heart as you sit in silence.

For all our apprehensions, we found comfortable beds, delicious meals, warm hosts, hot and soothing showers. We discovered that with our tiny bit of Italian and Spanish and

our hosts' smattering of English, we could even pass an entire evening making deep connections.



*Busy streets of Florence*

THE JOURNEY BEGAN as we shouldered our packs (about 7 kilos or 15 pounds each) and stepped onto the narrow sidewalk along the jostling, chaotic street outside our Florence hotel. Horns honked. A steady wind blew down the urban canyonland of five-story stone buildings. Pedestrians flowed in both directions, dodging the scooters and



bicycles that zipped by: adults on their way to work, kids on their way to school, tourists heading for the museums. The warm air stank slightly of diesel. Workers shouted to each other from atop scaffolding as we ducked beneath it. An occasional car inched its way through the throng.

It was going to be a perfect day for walking. Though we hadn't completely recovered from jet lag, we had energy and excitement, and a spring in our step.



We had to be careful navigating out of the city. In Florence the streets twist, turn, and can suddenly end, and the names can change. Our route seemed straightforward, though in the city there were no markers or signposts showing us the way. Until we hit the countryside there would be no blazes on trees, no signs to mark the route. I had a guidebook with a

map but chose to navigate with my iPhone, the most modern of pilgrim devices, which would always pinpoint our location and make sure we stayed on the correct path.

Heading northeast from our hotel near the central train station, we passed the Via dell'Ariento, home of the Mercato Centrale, a street lined with booth after booth of leather jackets and purses. Florence is known for its leather goods, and the hawkers, holding up an item, relentlessly called "*Trenti euro!*" to us. But we ignored them. I wasn't shopping, and the last thing I wanted was more weight in my pack.

Typically, pilgrims start their journey in front of the Basilica di Santa Croce, the world's largest Franciscan

church and the place where the first *timbro* or stamp on the *credenziale* (pilgrim passport) might be obtained. We had gone there the day before to get ours stamped, but since we were staying on the other side of the city, we had decided that our journey would begin at the hotel. A shorter and more level route of about 19 kilometers heads directly east along the Arno toward Pontassieve, the end of the first day's stage. We chose instead to follow an older route that would take us up into the surrounding foothills, where we could get a glimpse of Florence's skyline. It was about 4 kilometers longer, 23 kilometers in all, and would require more climbing before the descent back to Compiobbi where we would rejoin the more level route along the Arno about nine kilometers from Pontassieve.

Walking through the city, we passed the crowds queuing up to enter the Accademia, one of the most famous of Florence's art galleries, and home to Michelangelo's most famous sculpture, *David*. We continued past the delightful botanical garden, the Giardino dei Semplici, and before long entered the wide and green Piazza della Libertà. We went through the tall Porta San Gallo and stood in front of the triumphal arch across from it.<sup>2</sup>



*Porta San Gallo*

FROM HERE ON, I had to consult the route via my phone more frequently. We went under a railroad track. We wound clockwise at roundabouts and twisted and turned with the

route. The road and the sky became gradually wider after leaving the Piazza della Libertà, the scenery more suburban. The hills grew nearer, with their green parklands. We crossed another intersection, the road narrowed, and the sidewalk disappeared. Cars still whizzed by too closely, but within minutes the traffic thinned, and after a few more turns and bends we were finally away from the cars, to our relief.



*The columnar cypress along the road*

Our route gradually led us upward into the foothills. The air freshened as the traffic disappeared and the sky

widened into a classically Tuscan panorama of stone villas, columnar cypresses, and the distinctive *Pinus pinea* (umbrella pine). This Mediterranean native can grow up to 25 meters or 80 feet in height. It was a typical feature in the landscape of ancient Rome. Rosemary bloomed everywhere, its lavender flowers cascading over stone walls, splashing the hillsides with color along with the white apple blossoms and cherry trees decked in pink. Instead of noisy traffic, there was the loud buzz of bees flying from blossom to blossom. Instead of diesel fumes, there was the fragrance of the wisteria draped over gateways.

We hardly thought about the weight on our backs. We felt at home on the trail, and our spirits remained light with each step. I had been worried about some pain in my knees during the weeks before we left, but out here my sense of wonder grew and any doubts about myself vanished. Any worry about my knees disappeared.

A grassy path along a blooming apple orchard lifted us above the road and past a small settlement toward a tall, castle-like tower. It was the charming Castello di Mezzaratta, which, though looking medieval, was just a century old. We passed it and after a brief climb arrived at the Piazza Desiderio, where we turned to see the magnificent vista over the city.

Looking south, we saw the distinctive orange Duomo and its smaller twin dome, San Lorenzo. Farther east we could see the twin towers in the Piazza della Signoria and the long, distinctive profile of Santa Croce. Farther east, the Apennines grew considerably higher and closer.

We continued east a short distance into the village of Sentignano, and since it was noon and we had been walking for three hours, we bought some cold, bottled water in a café, then stepped into the central plaza, pulled off our

packs, and sat down in some shade. The ice-cold water was refreshing and the break rejuvenating, but we wanted to press onward, so we soon shouldered our packs and continued our journey.

For another hour we continued along a quiet road that was alternately dirt and paved. We passed luxurious villas with small vineyards, olive groves with their ancient, gnarled trunks dotted the hillsides. All around we saw tall and brilliant redbud trees. I had been missing our own redbud in bloom at home but discovered that the Mediterranean had its own, the *Cercis siliquastrum* (Judas tree), a variety native to southern Europe. We finally saw our first route markers: the red and white blazes of the *Club Alpina Italiano* (Italian Hiking Club or CAI). Much of the Way of St. Francis follows the club's hiking routes. We also came upon the blue and yellow blazes of the Way of St. Francis itself and the five-sided "official" route markers of the Via di Francesco Toscana.

IT WAS midafternoon when we descended to Compiobbi, where we joined the shorter and flatter route from Florence. It was a good time to stop and have lunch, so we made our way into the town. We picked up some sandwiches in a café and asked them to refill our water bottles, then found a place along the river to have our picnic and watch the Arno flow by lazily. We could hear the distant sounds of trucks on the highway across the river, but it was an otherwise peaceful spot. Ducks floated down the river past a few old men fishing. I leaned back on my pack and momentarily closed my eyes.

I could have taken a nap, but it was now after 2:30 and I thought it might be better to find the bed in our B&B in

Pontassieve. That bed was still nine kilometers ahead, close to two hours of walking. With determination we got to our feet and headed upriver, then cut inland, crossed the railroad tracks, and in another three kilometers arrived back at the river in the town of Le Sieci. The dirt trail along the river was peaceful, and it was tempting to stop again, but we could see Pontassieve just a few kilometers ahead. We passed through the town, crossed a small highway, and went under the train tracks, which followed the river all the way from Florence

I looked at my guidebook and my GPX tracks.<sup>3</sup> The book and GPX pointed back up into the foothills, but it was clear that an alternate path ran alongside the railroad directly into Pontassieve. It turned out to be way-marked for the Via Francesco. Going directly would be shorter, involve less climbing, and get us to that B&B and a nap sooner. We could see locals walking this path with their dogs. We chose to go more directly.



*A quiet path through Le Sieci*

With the determination that comes from the first day of a long pilgrimage, we walked on in silence, our minds too tired for conversation. On our right, over a fence, was the railway; on our left were empty plowed fields below the foothills we had gladly chosen not to climb, despite their vistas. The eagerness for our final destination and a bed and shower propelled us forward in spite of our physical and mental fatigue.

The path soon dove into a small wood, and within five



minutes we were on the edge of Pontassieve, cars once again whizzing by us as we entered town and found our B&B. It was now after 5:00. The owners, friendly but knowing no English, showed us our room, where we showered, hand-washed clothes, and hung them up to dry before we finally caught a well-deserved nap. We arrived tired but agreed that everything about today's walk felt perfect, with the energy of two-and-a-half years of waiting relieved.

The journey ahead may be arduous, but we were on pilgrimage again, just where we wanted to be.



*Pontassieve*





*The Medieval gate in Pontassieve.*



# Notes

## Introduction: Francis and His Ways

1. It can easily be confused with some other historical routes, such as the *Via Francigena*, which starts in Canterbury, England, and crosses the English Channel on its way through France and Switzerland before winding its way across Italy to Rome. That route is over 2,000 kilometers long and takes about three months to walk. Another, the *Camino Frances*, or “French Route,” is the most commonly walked section of the Camino de Santiago, from St. Jean Pied-de-Port in France, to Santiago de Compostela.
2. *The Way of St. Francis* was written by Sandy Brown and first published in 2015 by Cicerone. It was the first guidebook for the complete Florence-to-Rome route and divides the walk into 28 stages. *On the Road with Saint Francis* was written and published in Italian in 2004 by Angela Maria Seracchioli and details a route from La Verna to Rieti. Terre di Mezzo published that Italian edition and then in 2013 an excellent English translation. Most recently, in 2023 Matthew Harms wrote *The Way of St. Francis*, part of the series of Pilgrimage Guides published by Village to Village Press, which divides the route into 27 stages. For more details on each, see the Bibliography.
3. For Americans, that’s over 52,000 feet, which is 10 miles. Climbing.
4. Rohr, Richard, “A Prime Attractor,” daily meditations, May 17, 2015, <https://cac.org/daily-meditations/a-prime-attractor-2017-06-05>.
5. Rohr, Richard, “A Prime Attractor,” daily meditations.
6. House, Adrian, *Francis of Assisi: A Revolutionary Life*, p.11.
7. At the time Francis visited the Sultan, his preaching would have been considered proselytizing and therefore punishable by death. This makes the Sultan’s respect all the more incredible.
8. *Gospel of Luke*, 9:23.

## 1. An Arduous Journey

1. The curious reader might be happy to know that we returned to Florence the day after we reached Assisi and spent three days there as “ordinary” tourists.
2. Constructed in the late 13th and early 14th centuries at the northern boundary of Florence, San Gallo—site of a convent ironically named

after an Irish monk of the late 6th and early 7th centuries—was the main northern gate in the city walls, on the principal route to Bologna. Two similar gates still exist in the city, but the old walls are mostly gone, cleared out in the 19th century as the city expanded. The outline of the old city walls can still be traced by the Viali di Circonvallazione, or “ring road” on modern maps of Florence, a pattern similar to what is found in many old European cities. The walls were demolished in the mid-19th century and replaced with a series of wide boulevards, inspired by what had been done in Paris.

3. GPX tracks are routes recorded by previous walkers with GPS (Global Positioning System) that can be followed on a mobile phone app, such as GURU or GAIA, both of which I use. They are especially helpful when route markers are sparse.