

Acácio Augusto Castro da Paz: From making millions to guiding pilgrims

Bestselling author Paulo Coelho knows why Acacio Augusto Castro da Paz gave up a big-spending lifestyle in Brazil to open an inn for pilgrims on their way to Santiago de Compostela.

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The modern pilgrims arrive tired but content at the Praza do Obradoiro (“workplace square”) in Spain’s Santiago de Compostela, the end of their journey. This impressive square next to the cathedral is the final stop for the hundreds of thousands who make the long trek mostly from Saint Jean Pied de Port, a small village in the French Pyrenees, to Santiago. You can spot them between April and November every year, thanks to their bursting backpacks and long walking sticks with dangling shells symbolizing Saint James (“San Tiago”), the holy man for whom the city was named. Many of the men have let their beards grow, and nearly all the walkers radiate a contagious aura of satisfaction. A couple more steps and they’ve arrived at the holiest of holies: the centuries-old cathedral where the officiating priest blesses them during the daily service.

Smiling, Acácio Augusto Castro da Paz observes the Peregrinos - as the Spanish call the walkers - as we meet at the entrance to the cathedral. Just after we exchange greetings, the Brazilian explains you’re supposed to lie on your back, with your head raised, looking at the cathedral. “That gives you a different perspective of the world, which you often also get as you walk,” he says. Da Paz found a different perspective for himself a decade ago, leaving a lucrative career and lavish lifestyle in his native Brazil to care for pilgrims on their way to Santiago.

Da Paz, 50, knows better than anyone what the pilgrims passing him on the square are experiencing. More than 10 years ago, he walked into this city for the first time. He wanted to empty his head during the pilgrimage to Santiago. For centuries, people have taken the same route as Da Paz. It was one of the most important Christian pilgrimages during medieval times and therefore highly traveled. However, the Black Plague, the Protestant Reformation and political unrest in Europe during the 16th century resulted in its decline. By the 1980s, only a few pilgrims arrived in Santiago annually. But since then, the route has attracted a growing number of modern-day pilgrims from around the globe.

“Something was gnawing at me and I wanted to know what it was,” he explains as we leave the square in search of a café. “I had a good life in Brazil. I worked hard, made a lot of money, but something told me I needed to radically change my life.”

Ten years earlier he’d read *The Pilgrimage*, Paulo Coelho’s walking bible that inspired so many to make the trip. Da Paz’s plan to do his own pilgrimage was hatched way back then. He knew Coelho a little from the bars in Rio de Janeiro, the city where they

were both born, and was impressed by his work. But it wasn't until Da Paz was 40 that he gathered the courage and the calm to make the trek.

"I was much too focused on money," he says, cradling a glass of wine at a café on Rúa do Vilar. "I was a good salesman. I'm good at convincing people of my ideas." A small earring sparkles in his left ear above the gray stubble and a black baseball cap that never leaves his head, even indoors.

Da Paz sketches the course of his life with some resistance. He'd rather remain in the present, but because that "now" can only exist thanks to what preceded it, he describes his three marriages and his four sons, his work (distributing pharmaceutical products to hospitals) and the things from his curious professional past that he looks back on with diffidence. These include "business" cruises aboard luxurious yachts that were mainly about fun in the sun with beautiful women whom Da Paz recruited and brought on board. He isn't proud of it, but it fit in with his life then, a life that was all about making a quick buck.

That life failed to fulfill his childhood dreams. Da Paz was a good soccer player—very good, in fact, even if he says so himself. As a teenager, Da Paz seemed destined to join the ranks of a generation of great Brazilian soccer players, but he stopped at the age of 17. Soccer brought him money, but not the happiness he was seeking. He began studying to realize another childhood dream: to become a helicopter pilot. "I was ambitious and studied hard, but once I had the diploma, the desire was gone."

The problem in Da Paz's life was the target of his ambitions: money. After he completed his first Camino - as the Spaniards commonly call the pilgrimage - the truth began to dawn on him. But the Brazilian would need to walk many more miles before he dared break free from the life he was leading. "I needed to completely clear my head," he reflects. "In 1999, I walked the Camino three times and only after the third time did I truly know what I wanted. I stood here on the square and ripped up my return ticket to Rio. I didn't need to go back; I wanted to stay here."

In the first few weeks, he stayed with a friend in Santiago. Every evening, showered and shaved, he reported at 6 p.m. to the Parador dos Reis Católicos, the old monastery where each pilgrim was once welcomed and given a free meal. Later the complex was converted into a beautiful hotel, but the tradition of welcoming the pilgrims continued in a modified form. Nowadays, the first 10 pilgrims who report to the gate of the hotel get a free meal in a room down near the staff dining room. "I reported there every evening for a month to experience how it is to live without money," Da Paz explains. His eyes shine from behind his small glasses. "I liked it just fine and that proved to me that I could handle a new life." The life of spending was over, to be replaced by a life of asking, receiving and giving.

At the end of that month, he asked the organization behind the pilgrimage route - an association run by volunteers, the Catholic Church and the Spanish state - if he could be a volunteer. And in the seven years that followed, Da Paz worked along the route in

the many Refugios, inns where walkers stop to eat and rest. “I saw over 80,000 pilgrims come and go during that period,” the Brazilian says. “I helped where necessary, I listened to their stories and I admired them for their courage.”

That’s how Acácio Augusto Castro da Paz discovered the source of his happiness. “I want to help people. Everyone along the route is the same. We literally look a lot alike. We don’t need to see someone’s car because all we need is our legs - and each other’s help. Here it’s about immaterial happiness, and everyone who can make the journey with an open mind can discover that happiness too. I’ve seen it happen.”

People come from all over the world to make the pilgrimage, and the shared experience creates an immediate bond. Da Paz sees this every day when he joins the pilgrims at the table for dinner. He has made it a habit to ask everyone before the meal who they are and why they’re walking the Camino - and they can all reply in their native languages. “It doesn’t matter if they’re Danish, Argentinean or Chinese,” he says. “Everyone at the table knows exactly what that man or woman is saying at that moment. That’s so wonderful to see. It is the essence of life: that we all understand one another.”

The table Da Paz is referring to is now in the Pensión Peregrinando (“wanderer’s inn”), his own Refugio, a small, homey inn he runs with his friends in a village along the route. The village, Vitoria de Rioja, is northeast of the smokestacks of Burgos and has a population of 31. Three years ago, Da Paz thought it was time to find his home. He’d spent seven years as a volunteer moving from inn to inn. “I drew up a plan and took it to the bank,” he says. “I had put together a bundle of stories from and about me and told the bank, ‘This is my resume. I don’t have a regular job, I don’t earn any money and I would be very pleased if you would help me buy a house.’” Three weeks later, the bank called to say he’d been given a mortgage. “The funny thing is I wasn’t surprised. I think the bankers saw that there was no hypocrisy in my story. They trusted me.”

Friends helped him make ends meet. Sometimes their donations are material, like the beds and tables his old friend Coelho bought for him, and sometimes the pilgrims leave a voluntary contribution after a night’s stay. The inn has 12 beds. Da Paz and Orietta, the Italian life partner he met 10 years ago along the route, recognize the feelings expressed by the hikers.

He still finds it fascinating to see the people come in every day. And his greatest satisfaction often comes 12 hours later when they resume their journey. “They look more cheerful and happy thanks to our talks, the peace they found here and the concerns they were able to share. All I do is facilitate that. It makes me very happy.”

One day later we meet again, this time at the Parador café. As he drinks his café con leche, Da Paz talks about the differences between the hikers. “Most are old,” he says. “They’re retired and come to catch their breath and think about all that’s happened in their lives up to now. They are often restless because they don’t know what life has in store for them and how they should fill in the blanks.”

What advice does he give the visitors? “I always say: ‘Open an inn,’” Da Paz laughs. “But what I really mean by that is, don’t stop working, keep thinking. Don’t just take a trip but link that trip with something. Write a beautiful book about it, write a walking guide.” Massive numbers of people have followed that advice, he says, chuckling. He has been sent scores of books and countless blogs.

“The pilgrims are mirrors for us just as we are for them,” Da Paz says. “This means we learn something every day about life and about ourselves.” He gives an example: “If you’ve decided for yourself that money should no longer play a key role in your life, it doesn’t mean your money worries are over. We live here on gifts and donations but sometimes we need money and I get annoyed that the money’s not there. The difference now is that I’m much more relaxed about it than I used to be. Now it’s a question of stopping the things we want to do but can’t for now and calmly waiting until the means are there. That continues to be my lesson in this lifetime.”

Evening falls on Santiago. The towers of the cathedral appear suspended in a mix of fog and floodlights as we cross the square. One last question arises as we walk, a question all pilgrims ask themselves during their journey: What does it all mean? Under his cap, Da Paz remains silent for a moment. Somewhat apologetically, he says, “I don’t know. Nobody knows.”

But then he adds, “Don’t take too much weight along on your journey.”

Satisfied, we silently walk on.

“In his early twenties, Acácio Augusto Castro da Paz had only one aim: to win his first million. By the age of 30, he had achieved this (in a rather unorthodox way). But by his late 30s, he had left everything behind and decided to take care of pilgrims traveling the road to Santiago de Compostela. He has been there for years, against all odds. He never stops, despite the harshness and difficulty of the road.”

-Paulo Coelho, bestselling writer and Ode columnist



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