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VOYAGE WITHIN
Martin Sheen's 2003 trek across northern Spain to the tomb of Saint James inspired his son Emilio Estevez's latest film, *The Way*.

ESSAY

My Road to Truth

How a sacred pilgrimage forever changed **Martin Sheen** and his grandson

BY **MARTIN SHEEN** PHOTOGRAPH BY **DAVID ALEXANIAN**

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Y FATHER WAS FROM THE RUGGED, mountainous, and rainy province of Galicia in northwestern Spain, bordered on the north and west by the Atlantic Ocean and on the south by Portugal. Galicia is fiercely independent, with its own twist on the Spanish language, and known as the home to one of Spain's oldest, most sacred treasures: the provincial capital of Santiago de Compostela, where the remains of

Saint James the Apostle are venerated in a small crypt beneath the main altar of the cathedral. Santiago de Compostela has been a UNESCO World Heritage site, recognized for its cultural significance, since 1985—and the destination of millions of pilgrims from every part of the world for more than 1,000 years.

Growing up, I heard much about Santiago de Compostela, and I was intrigued. I often thought, "I must make that pilgrimage someday." But the idea

would routinely fade. That is, until April 2003, as my fourth season on *The West Wing* came to a close. I had an eight-week break before the start of Season 5, so I seriously considered using the time to make "the Camino," an 800-kilometer trek that begins in the Pyrenees in France and ends in Santiago, Galicia.

Timing was a challenge; for part of my break, my relatives and I gathered for a family reunion of sorts in Ireland, my mother's home, to celebrate what would have been her 100th birthday. Afterward, as we were planning to go our separate ways, I asked if anyone would care to travel with me to

Spain to walk the Camino to Santiago de Compostela. Only my grandson Taylor (my son Emilio's child), then 19, and my old dear friend and fellow actor Matt Clark showed any interest—albeit slight. I quickly welcomed their company and dubbed us “The Three Caminos.”

Reality set in the next day as we discussed a plan at the Madrid apartment of my sister, Carmen. I had less than two weeks before filming resumed in Los Angeles—not nearly enough time to complete the Camino. Nor had I brought any of the necessary hiking equipment, not even a backpack. And although I was in very good physical shape for 62 years old, I had not trained for such a long journey on foot. What was I thinking? Now I was scrambling to salvage the remote chance of doing part of the pilgrimage in the little time I had left.

We knew that to receive a Compostela diploma, a pilgrim must walk at least 100 kilometers. If we could acquire the equipment we needed and walk at least 15 kilometers per day, we could satisfy the requirement and reach Santiago with enough time to return home for the new season. As we started to seriously consider this

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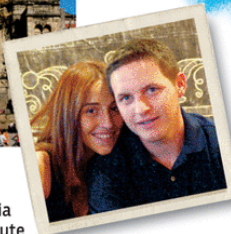
plan, Carmen offered a more reasonable suggestion: “Under the circumstances,” she asked, “why not rent a car and leisurely explore the Camino not as pilgrims in a desperate hurry but as future pilgrims scouting the trail for a more organized effort when time permits?” Though disappointed, in the interest of seeing at least some of the Camino, that’s what we did.

The next morning we picked up



SPANISH SPIRIT

From left: Santiago's cathedral; newlyweds Julia and Taylor Estevez; the route Sheen followed in 2003.



the car and drove toward Burgos, one of the main cities on the Camino, 240 kilometers north of Madrid and about 500 kilometers from Santiago. We arrived at Hornillos, a tiny village on the route, just before dark. The local *refugio* (a hostel for pilgrims) was completely full, so we were directed to El Molino del Camino, a *casa rural* about 25 kilometers away in the remote countryside. There we were warmly welcomed by the owners, Maximiliano and his wife, Milagros, given single rooms, and invited to join them for supper along with pilgrims from France, Germany, and Canada. Part of the beauty of making the pilgrimage is meeting fellow trekkers from around the world, sharing camaraderie and hearing their stories. It was a wonderful evening, followed by a restful sleep.

The car we'd rented had a standard shift, and only Matt knew how to use one, but he insisted that Taylor and I learn so we could share the driving. While Taylor took the first driving lesson, I walked to the next village to get the feel of the Camino. Being alone and walking for a purpose

moved me: I was trekking along the same path that Saint Francis of Assisi and millions of pilgrims have walked for 1,000 years.

They say that you cannot make the journey without community, but you're doing it on your own. The destination is the same, but the interior journey, which is deeply personal, makes every experience different. As I walked, I was filled with satisfaction—something I felt often throughout the trip.

That afternoon, during my driving lesson, we discovered a natural hot spring not far from El Molino. The three of us soaked and relaxed completely. The area was so lovely that we decided to stay another night at El Molino, a decision that, unbeknownst to us, would prove monumental for Taylor and our family.

Back at the *casa rural*, Maximiliano and Milagros showed us to our rooms and invited us again to the pilgrim supper that evening. There, we met our hosts' lovely daughter, Julia.

We started out early the next day, after a light breakfast and a warm “*Buen camino*” (“Good journey”) from our hosts. Matt took the first turn at the wheel as we continued on the road to Santiago, passing hundreds of pilgrims forming along the trails of the Camino and guided by the bright-yellow shell markers leading to the tomb of Saint James. The next four

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Road to Santiago

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days were a memorable montage of shared driving and walking across the majestic terrain of Galicia on the road from León to Astorga to Ponferrada and finally to Santiago. As Matt and I walked, Taylor drove; then I drove as Matt and Taylor walked; then Taylor and I walked as Matt drove, and so on—though we did not walk together. Strange as it seemed, we each came to treasure the time walking alone, and to grasp the importance of the pilgrim's inner journey of transcendence, which is a hidden mystery and the only lasting reward of any pilgrimage.

At Santiago we entered the cathedral with a huge throng of pilgrims from every corner of the earth. We attended the Pilgrims' Mass, celebrated every day at noon, which concludes with a final blessing. Then a gigantic incense burner, the *botafumeiro*, was hoisted aloft on a pulley by a half dozen men wearing medieval costumes, and was flung from one side of the cathedral's ceiling to the other. It filled the air with an enormous cloud of sweet fragrance and prompted thunderous applause from the delighted congregation. Before leaving the cathedral, pilgrims lined up to receive their treasured Compostela diplomas, but we did not. Though we had clearly walked far more than the requisite 100 kilometers, we decided that the experience, for us, was more important than the diploma.

As we drove back to Madrid, the mood inside the rental car was gen-

erally quiet and reflective. But as we approached Burgos, Taylor begged us to stop for an overnight stay, and we agreed. Later that night he revealed that he and Julia had been in frequent contact by cell phone since the night they met at El Molina. She had invited him to a soccer match that night in Burgos—an evening that would be the start of a beautiful relationship. They wed a few years later and have lived happily together in Burgos ever since.

After our 2003 journey, I recounted the entire experience for my son Emilio in the hope that he might consider writing a script about it that we could film in Spain. His first plan was to develop a narrative that would focus on the love story between Taylor and Julia. But over the next five years, completely on his own, he became consumed with researching Santiago de Compostela and the Camino. Writing and rewriting, he worked hard to develop a story that he would direct, that would allow us to play father and son on-screen for the first time since *The War at Home* in 1996. The movie would illustrate the powerful personal transformation you can experience on the pilgrimage to Santiago.

In 2009, we spent six weeks filming entirely on the Camino, and I can say I now have walked enough kilometers to qualify for three diplomas!

Emilio called the film *The Way*, and I am proud that he dedicated it to his grandfather, Francisco Estevez. What started as a journey inspired by my father ended with a tribute to him. It also changed me, my son, and my grandson forever. ■