

THE DIATRIBE ON SANDALS

Four Caminos and several thousand kilometers have made me a true believer in a good pair of sandals. Four Compostelas using three different models of sandals, I've gone through an evolutionary process. If I had a choice of walking in sandals or boots, it's going to be sandals every time. The fourth Camino was in the winter, and I mistakenly left my sandals at home. I would recommend taking a solid trekking sandal in every season, including winter, for your Walk in Spain.

Sandals are not as critical for getting a half size larger, as in buying boots. When your feet swell in sandals (which is actually less) you have adjustable straps to loosen.

The main considerations with sandals are the tread, a good arch support, their weight, the 'shock absorber coefficient', and the straps. Let's look at these one by one.

(1) The Tread. Most trail-friendly sandals will have enough tread to qualify as off-road footwear. My 2003 Camino found me in a National Geographic 'Bayliss' sandal, the best I could find way back then. In 2004 I graduated to a pair of Teva Stratus that had a smoother tread than I would have liked, but they still made it to Santiago .. twice. The Tevas I'm currently wearing are the 'Open Toachi', this year referred to as the 'Toachi 2'. Their tread is excellent and I have good traction on all surfaces. I also own a pair of Chaco 'Z1' sandals that have a real live Vibram sole, just like a full grown mountain boot. Their traction is excellent, but they are not as good in other departments. They weigh 30% more (886 vs. 690 grams), have a lesser arch support, and very importantly, are not as soft to walk in.

(2) Arch Support. When I was first playing with sandals, it hadn't dawned on me how important a good arch support would be. It is paramount. Most Tevas and the Chacos have a reasonably good arch support; the Teva 'Toachi' has the best arch support I have ever experienced. Make very, very sure the sandals you buy have a profound arch. Among other things, it helps keep the sandal aligned on your foot properly. More importantly, it supports your foot correctly. I have seen otherwise great sandals from world-class manufacturers with little to no arch support. Do not consider these for a moment, regardless of name brand.

(3) Weight. Lighter is almost always better. In their 1982 study 'Energy cost of backpacking in heavy boots' the British researchers concluded a pound on the foot is worth 6.4 on the back. By shaving off the 196 grams with the above cited sandals, you would anticipate about a 1.25 kg reduction of equivalent pack weight. But wait, it gets better. My winter footwear is an Adidas Gore-Tex XCR mountain shoe, a mere 988 grams/pair. Now we're looking at a 2 kg equivalent pack weight savings. How much do those 'real' mountain boots weigh? I have heroic old pair of Lowas, full leather uppers, a great winter boot that weigh in at 1984 grams. That's about three times the weight of the Teva 'Toachis' above. Let's do the math: take those 1984 grams minus 690 grams equals a 1294 grams savings on the foot. Now those 1294 grams times the 6.4 penalty factor equals the equivalent of 8.3 kilograms on the back. Hello? That 8.3 kilograms is what your PACK should weigh, not the dynamic burden of your footwear. Lighter is way better.

(4) Shock Absorber Coefficient. A weekend walk is one thing; two or three days of hiking, then back home again. That's not the Camino most of us experience. It's generally at least a month's worth of walking. For two or three days, perhaps even a week you could put up with a bone-jarring lack of cushion on the foot, but not a month or two. A soft shock absorbing platform is what your feet, ankles and knees need to survive. To further enhance the softness of the Tevas, I wear a thick wool-blend sock. They also minimize the abrasion that straps may exert on your bare skin. As a bonus, they seem to keep a few stones from getting under your heel, not sure exactly why but I've made the observation.

(5) Straps. The straps need to keep your foot stable on the sandal while allowing for infinite adjustment. Nylon and Velcro excel in this department. The old leather straps with a steel buckle are not that foot friendly. The Toachis additionally have a layer of foam between you and the strap separation points. I use them barefoot most of the time, but come Camino time, it's almost always with a sock. When you're fitting sandals in the store, wear your heaviest socks.

The Camino is littered with shoes abandoned by their owners, especially on the Meseta. Makes for interesting pictures, but I'm sure every picture has a tragic back story. Cool dry feet in sandals are much less likely to be the hot blistered feet you hear horror stories about.

The further away the mass of a moving part, the more energy it takes to move it. Your footwear is at the very end of your leg, so moving it takes relatively more energy. That's physics. You can save energy by reducing the mass of that part, in this case you reduce the mass of the footwear.

Weight/Pair	Footwear Type
70 grams	Disposable spa sandals
684 grams	Teva 'Stratum' sandals (Camino 2004)
690 grams	Teva 'Toachi 2' sandals (Current use)
718 grams	National Geographic 'Bayliss' sandal (Camino 2003)
886 grams	Chaco 'Z1' sandals
916 grams	Adidas leather mountain boot (Caminos 2003 & 2004)
988 grams	Adidas Gore-Tex mountain boot (Camino 2010)
1984 grams	Lowa mountain boot



Abandoned boots on the Camino Frances



Guess which footwear is mine

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