

The Secret of Santiago

Only the first 10 pilgrims arriving in Santiago de Compostela can get a free meal. But what if you're eleventh and you play dumb?

MAX CHRISTERN | ODE MAGAZINE JAN/FEB 2009 ISSUE

Minus wants to experience it just once. And he thinks he'll make it today. It is 6.30 p.m. on a Saturday evening; the autumn sun has just slid behind the cathedral. A couple of hours ago I arrived here in Santiago de Compostela with my 75-year-old walking friend. We spent a week making our way through Galicia, a section of the famous pilgrim's route that Minus has walked—in parts or in its entirety, with friends and family, including his father. Now we're sitting on an age-old stone bench waiting for our "reward": a free meal offered by the Spanish government.

On the way here, Minus told me about this "secret of Santiago". Pilgrims from all corners of Europe have been coming on foot for centuries to this city to visit the grave of Saint James. At the end of the fifteenth century, the Catholic kings that ruled Spain at the time commissioned an inn to be built, which was called the Hospital Real. It was Spain's first state inn and those walking the trail were offered both a bed and a free meal.

For centuries, this worked just fine. But then, in the latter half of the 1900s, the pilgrim's route was largely populated by tourists - sometimes hundreds a day - and the Spaniards drew the line. It was simply too expensive and the government decided to put an end to feeding all these modern pilgrims. The state inn had since been converted into a luxury state hotel. And the management of the Hotel de los Reyes Católicos was not so open to welcoming groups of unshaven, unwashed backpackers.

But a couple of fanatic pilgrims decided to fight the decision to suspend this age-old free meal tradition and took the Spanish government to court. Surprisingly, they won. Since then, the state is required to provide a meal to the first ten pilgrims who line up at the hotel's door at 7.00 p.m. "But very few people know this," says Minus.

At 6.45 p.m. we are still the only two hungry pilgrims sitting with our backpacks on the stone bench. Minus thinks this odd and asks a doorman if the bench is still the gathering place for Peregrinos seeking a free dinner. The man shakes his head and points to the left. There, at the bottom of the road where they can't be seen by the paying guests, a group of at least 20 pilgrims are waiting. The secret of Minus and Santiago has leaked out. Somewhat disillusioned, we join the line of animated young people that are doing their best to look just like their predecessors of centuries past. They all have copies of their Compostela, the certificate given to pilgrims by the secretary of the cathedral's chapter who can show (through stamps on a card) they have travelled over 100 km to Santiago. This is required for the free meal. At 7.00 p.m., the hotel doorman selects the first ten in line, who are escorted upstairs. The rest leave to get a meal elsewhere.

What now? Minus isn't about to give up. "We'll simply walk behind them," he states. And what do you know, dressed in his smart walking outfit (shirt, knickerbockers, knee socks, backpack and walking stick) he manages to convince the doorman with a couple of words of Spanish, his certificate, a few hand gestures and his most charming smile, that he and his younger friend should be let in. "I told them that this is my tenth time here," he whispers. "Needless to say, no one has the nerve to refuse such an old pilgrim!"

We follow the doorman. We traverse long halls, cross a courtyard, go down a flight of stairs and find ourselves in a small room in the cellar. Comedor de Peregrinos is displayed on the door. The kitchen is just beyond, where the ten pilgrims are standing with their meat, potatoes and vegetables. Delighted, they file into their little dining room. We remain at the distribution point, staring expectantly into the eyes of the surprised chef. "What are you doing here," he seems to be asking in unintelligible Spanish. He gestures with his arms: no food for you. He has 10 fingers in the air. We look as hungry as we can. The confusion increases. He calls upstairs. Who on earth let these pilgrims in?

Meanwhile, the kitchen fills with hotel staff who have come to eat. And everyone asks the chief what's going on. Increasingly irritated, he calls upstairs again. A short time later a man in a pin-striped jacket arrives and makes it clear to us in three words of English and lots of Spanish that there is no more food. That's going too far, an older lady makes clear who—it later appears—is head of housekeeping. She snaps something at her colleague. Minus translates loosely: "You cannot send these gentlemen away, there is plenty of food!" The man in the pin-striped jacket looks at the chef, who clearly retreats. He sighs and opens an oven.

One minute later we have our plates with cutlets, a pile of vegetables and a mound of mashed potatoes. The pilgrim's room is full but there's space in the staff dining area. We are welcomed like heroes and an English speaking receptionist tells us we've made history: never before have an eleventh and twelfth pilgrim eaten here for free. Minus erupts in his heartiest laugh. Mission accomplished. He has food. And a new "secret".