

Then onto León, starting like every city so far, with the scruff and the junk: industrial sheds and rubbish strewn verges - a bizarre assembly of Coke cans, fag-packets, condoms, even the wrapper of a Rolex watch. But despite all this, as I drop down the hill towards it, León seems somehow more appealing than Burgos - perhaps because the scruff is much less organised and therefore more endearing, perhaps because there's less of it, perhaps because, approaching the city from above, you can see where you are going; whereas you enter Burgos along the flat.

The refuge is in a Benedictine convent; I am given the warmest of welcomes here, told where I can eat well for 900 pesetas and then encouraged to hurry off to the cathedral before dusk: I do this straightaway, for León Cathedral is one of the glories of Europe.

Unlike many churches, it occupies a generous open space over which it presides with great solemnity. As one enters, it immediately induces prayer - not by overwhelming with bombast, not through intimidation, but through its sublime majesty and calm: the prayer which responds is not one of fear or servitude, it is of thanksgiving and of homecoming.

Even in the gloom of the late-afternoon rain, the windows are radiant, a gentle tapestry of the most beautiful indigos and crimsons - their delicacy, intensity and luminosity a perfect balance to the cold vaulting stonework. It feels like a tomb, 'tomb' in the most positive sense - a great emptiness in which one could happily abide forever. And around the edges of this great tomb are tombs proper: not the pompous memorials of overfed patriarchs, but the resting places of the good; here is a twelfth century bishop I think - around him in deep relief his monks and his canons, all still as fresh as the day they were carved, their heads affectionately and respectfully bowed, their faces not of grief but of peace, faith and hope.

But it is people as much as stones who touch the heart; back at the convent, José, the *hospitalero*, brings me some cheese, sets my wet boots in front of a radiator and mixes up a bowl of salt, water and vinegar in which to soak my still-blistered feet; when the soaking is over, he takes my feet upon his lap, then he gently dries them and dabs the raw flesh with antiseptic. Then, together, we go to Compline.



Thursday 23rd November

Mass this morning at 8 o'clock; not the rushed affair I have come to expect of those for whom it is part of the daily routine, but lovingly eked out, the priest allowed only five words before ten minutes of psalms pushed him to the sidelines; and during these psalms even the sourest of the nuns, whose face seemed permanently drawn into an upside down smile, even she managed to invert her face for just a second.