

Today a day of phone calls, of laundry and some painting. Mid-afternoon I set off up to Honto, where I am told it is possible to spend the night: it's only about 5km beyond St. Jean Pied de Port, but one hour gained today could make a big difference tomorrow.



It's a beautiful evening as I cross the Pont d'Espagne, many a tourist turning their heads and eyeing up the passing pilgrim - for now I'm walking with two sticks (a stranger sight than one), the second lately cut to help me over the hill which now I begin steadily to climb, winding ever upwards around lush Basque brows, reaching Honto just before a mist descends and a sudden chill hurries in the dark.



## Thursday 26th October

After acres of cerulean skies yesterday, today the rain starts at dawn - not much of a dawn, rather a gradual lightening, an awakening of the mist. And so, instead of a spectacle of endless ridges and shining snow-capped peaks, I am treated to 3 metres of grassy verge, flanking here tarmac, here a grubby stone track, bracken ever present at the fringes.

Suddenly, I see a tree, naked, stately in the mist, the first beech I have seen for weeks. And then more beeches, lining the bank below the road, as the road winds and climbs onwards and upwards.

Most days of late I have walked with a song or a hymn on my lips, or at least in my head, each subconsciously chosen, the rhythm somehow seeming to suit the pace or length of stride, or the breathing pattern; recent favourites have been the prayer of St. Francis and 'The Lord's my shepherd' - but today, strangely, for a brief moment of the ascent, the 'Come Dancing' theme tune comes to the fore. Quite how or why I will never know. But such frivolity is quickly quashed and St. Francis is rightfully returned to the cranial gramophone...

*Vierge d'Orisson*, altitude 1100m: A bench vaguely discernible in the mist at the meeting of two roads, a supposed statue of Notre Dame utterly invisible. I walk towards the bench, from where normally I presume a fine view is to be found. The bench turns out to be a low concrete shooting butt.

A signpost points to *La Vierge*, a direction my guidebook tells me not to go. I walk perhaps ten or twenty metres further to see if the statue is over the nearby rise. Suddenly, the mist clears a path, and there she is to my left, exposed for just a couple of seconds, a flash of gilded blue and white, standing on higher ground about 150 metres away. The visibility so far today has been only 10-15 metres all the way from Honto. Perhaps it may yet brighten.

Suddenly it is indeed brighter: there's the virgin again, clearer this time, standing on her rock and looking straight towards me: *Je vous salue Marie, pleine de grace, le Seigneur est avec vous, vous etes benie entre toutes les femmes et Jesu, le fruit de vos entrailles, est beni...* A swig of water and a prune and I am ready to continue.

The brightening is short-lived, as is a lull in the rain; but the drizzle now is of the gentlest sort.



Trees, more beeches, emerge to my right, my head level with theirs. Then a fence: oak posts, five runs of barbed wire - in all like any farm fence, four feet high and well-weathered. But this fence is more symbolic than one acre to another, for along this fence runs the Spanish frontier: a fence that has been fought over, with a new language, culture and currency on the other side. And yet the same grass runs under it, the misty beeches overhang it.

I follow the fence along, tempted to put my stick between the wires, to touch the new-found turf, but I wait.

Now a spring, piped from the bank, rushes noisily across the path: ahead of me the fence bends round and the path runs through it, over an unmarked cattlegrid. Here is Spain: I'm half way to Santiago. *Au revoir La France et merci bien. Buenos Días España.*

I'm alarmed to find that the path continues to climb, occasionally dipping, but steadily up, through beechwoods, emerging in denser mist and drizzle on a rocky moorland. Then suddenly, just as the wind is stirring, a yellow arrow signals down, the path plummeting through beechwoods, the floor

a slippery carpet of oranges and purples - no - perhaps not a carpet, more an Homeric mantle cast over the whole landscape, the leaves regularly ankle deep.

Now the sky briefly brightens and with a flurry of breeze hundreds of leaves come spiralling down, a novel kind of rain. Then the descent eases, but still I'm wading through this deep carpet of orange, still overshadowed by the stately canopy above - and there suddenly is the monastery, framed by the beeches, only minutes away: this is Roncesvalles.

The culture shock is immediate. I feel such an idiot entering someone else's country, but unable to communicate with them. And because I haven't made the effort to learn Spanish, I become, upon entering the pilgrim reception, a stammering object to be herded and compartmentalised. My ears strain, trying to extract a modicum of meaning from the swift lisping. And as I open my 1970s phrasebook for the first time, I realise there's little to help me there: "Have you a room with a sea-view?" and "Can I have these trousers pressed?" are strangely irrelevant.

