

Travel and Adventure: A city in Spain still celebrates its favorite saint

by Fred J. Eckert

SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA, Spain - The man walking across the Plaza de Obradoiro was dressed in an outfit quite unlike anything I had ever seen.

CATHEDRAL STANDS TALL - The focal point of the Galician city of Santiago de Compostella is the Cathedral of Santiago (St. James). Its main entrance looks out on the vast Plaza de Obradoiro, one of Spain's and Europe's most imposing squares. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. MAD HATTER - Galicians are known for their festivals, usually marked by colorful costumes such as this unusual hat. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. CLOSE TO THE COAST - Cities along Galicia's Atlantic coast are known for their scenic settings and for their great seafood. CNS Photo by Fred J. Eckert. LA TUNA - In Santiago de Compostela, male students from the local university deck out in medieval capes and perform as strolling minstrels, part of a university ritual in Spain called La Tuna. Photo by Fred J. Eckert. He wore a broad-brimmed felt hat, turned up at the front, decorated with a bright scallop shell. He was holding onto an 8-foot-long stave. The stave also had a scallop shell attached, and a gourd tied to it at the top. He was wearing extraordinarily thick sandals. He was also wearing a long, hooded cloak decorated with three more scallop shells.

Long ago, Santiago de Compostela, the largest city in Spain's Galicia region, was a top destination in Europe, one of the most famous places in the world, considered one of the three great pilgrimage sites of Christianity, after Jerusalem and Rome. Here, says Spanish lore, Christianity's first martyr, the apostle St. James, was buried and later appeared to rally Christians for their re-conquest of Spain.

That man walking across the square was dressed as one of the pilgrims who used to trek across Europe along the "Way of St. James" destined for Santiago de Compostela. He wore thick sandals because of the long walk and a long cloak to use as both a raincoat and night blanket. The stave and gourd were for carrying water. The scallop shells were a symbolic badge of honor marking one who has made the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela.

While very few dress up the ancient way, many still make the pilgrimage today, rarely on foot but often by bicycle. This Galician city honoring St. James is to many the most delightful city in Spain. As you walk along its narrow, arcaded cobbled streets and among its small squares, a pleasant, soft sound falls gently on your ears: the hauntingly evocative sound of flutes. Sources of the music are male students from the local university decked out in medieval capes, strolling minstrels who are part of a university ritual in Spain called "La Tuna."

The focal point of the city is the Cathedral of Santiago (St. James), dating to the ninth century and built to house the remains of the apostle. Its main entrance looks out on the vast Plaza de Obradoiro, one of Spain and Europe's most imposing squares.

Each of the four sides of the cathedral is of a different facade and faces out on a plaza of its own. This enormous structure is renowned for its "Door of Glory." Decorated with its more than 200 smiling and laughing holy figures and standing 60 feet high, 13 feet wide and 51 feet deep, the highly unconventional work by Maestro Mateo is considered a masterpiece of Romanesque sculpture.

This fine city is usually all that most tourists see of Galicia. That's too bad. Galicia - the provinces of Spain's northwestern corner, bordering the Atlantic Ocean on the north and west and Portugal on the south - is a lush and scenic coastal and mountain area that is well worth a visit. So if you are going to be in Santiago de Compostela, make an effort to see more of Galicia.

Take a couple of extra days, rent a car and head southwest from the big city to the Rias Baixas, the four large inlets along Galicia's western Atlantic, where you will take in bucolic scenes of the agriculture, forestry and fishing pursuits that are the backbone of this scenic region.

This is a beautiful, unspoiled area of small towns and fishing villages, an area of lovely coves and sandy beaches where, because it sits astride Spain's most fertile fishing grounds, you will dine on some of the tastiest seafood you have ever enjoyed.

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