

Micro-pilgrimage in France and Spain: Introducing students to the possibility of pilgrimage

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Abstract

For those of us who have witnessed the transformative potential of pilgrimage, the desire to share that experience can be urgent, especially among educators. In doing so, however, we must be careful to allow our students to set their own intentions and shape their own pilgrimages in order for the practice to be of most benefit to them. The tremendous possibility inherent in exposing a new generation to pilgrimage's capacity for peacemaking, remembrance, and personal transformation, among countless other potential outcomes, beckons pilgrims and scholars to find ways to share this with students and other groups.

Inspired by Don DeGraaf's work on study abroad as pilgrimage, Jasmine Goodnow's research on microadventure, and Lisa Signori's philosophy that "less can be more" in her development of short-term pilgrimage experiences for students, I am exploring the practice of micro-pilgrimage within the structure of traditional summer study abroad programs. In this paper, I will examine two micro-pilgrimages one could do with students or other groups to give them an introduction to the practice. The first is in Galicia, Spain, to the Mosteiro de Oseira, and the second is in France to the Abbaye de Gellone in Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, Hérault. Both destinations lie along variants of the Camino de Santiago, allowing instructors the possibility of complete engagement with the history and culture of the Camino. Through the practice of micro-pilgrimage, we can share our enthusiasm for pilgrimage with others while guiding them to make their own discoveries.

Keywords: Micro-pilgrimage, microadventure, study abroad, Oseira Monastery, Saint-Guilhem-le-Désert, Camino Francés, Santiago de Compostela

When one has witnessed the transformative potential of pilgrimage, the desire to share that potential with our students can be compelling. Study abroad programs present us with an opportunity for introducing our students to the myriad possibilities that can be unlocked by going on pilgrimage. Recent interest in high-impact learning experiences for college and university students has generated a host of innovative approaches to study abroad and community-engaged learning abroad. For teacher-scholars interested in pilgrimage, there has been a significant increase in the number of faculty organizing study abroad programs on the Camino de Santiago. As the Camino Francés approaches a critical point in terms of the stress that the large number of visitors' place on infrastructure and local communities, educators

are turning to alternative destinations and formats for their students. We should be careful, however, in giving our students a role in shaping their own pilgrimages for the practice to be of most benefit to them. It is, nonetheless, the inherent potential one sees in exposing a new generation to pilgrimage's capacity for peacemaking and personal transformation that urges us to find ways to share this experience with students.

One significant obstacle to exposing large numbers of students to the practice of pilgrimage is time. Few undergraduates have space in their schedules or the financial resources necessary to allow them to take off the time needed to walk from San Jean Pied-de-Port to Santiago de Compostela. It was with a mind to overcoming this obstacle that Dr. Lisa Signori developed a short-term study abroad trip on the Camino de Santiago for first year students as part of the College of Charleston's First Year Experience ("Past FYE Abroad Courses," n.d.). Dr. Signori's students take classes on the history and practice of pilgrimage prior to departure and upon return. The academic component of the course helps students prepare for and understand what it means to be a pilgrim. The students embark on the Camino midway through the semester, when they travel to Spain over spring break to walk the 100 kilometers required to receive the Compostela certificate. I have accompanied Dr. Signori twice on her spring break program as an observer and program facilitator. It was within this context that I had the idea to organize a micro-pilgrimage of one to two days as part of a more traditional study abroad program. In June of 2018, I accompanied a group of twelve students from The Citadel to Montpellier, France, to participate in a one-month French language immersion program. As Montpellier conveniently lies on the Chemin de Saint-Jacques (the French name for the Camino de Santiago), I felt the opportunity was ripe to organize a micro-pilgrimage to the medieval Abbaye Gellone in Saint Guilhem-le-Désert. The walk from Montpellier to Saint Guilhem stands alone as an ideal two-night excursion. One segment of the Camino walked by Dr. Signori's group could similarly be envisioned as a two-night itinerary: on the Via de la Plata, the segment from Ourense (Galicia) to Oseira Monastery is likewise a two day walk culminating in a visit to a contemplative monastic site. In this paper, I will reflect on these two micro-pilgrimages, exploring both the successes and the shortcomings of undertaking these itineraries with a group of students.

The parameters of this paper are as follows: two distinct micro-pilgrimage experiences on the Camino carried out in two different countries with students from two different universities. The micro-pilgrimage from Ourense to Oseira was part of a longer pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Those students had chosen to take a course on pilgrimage from among many options available to them to fulfill a First Year Experience requirement at the College of Charleston ("Past FYE Abroad Courses," n.d.). The College of Charleston is a medium-sized public university with around 11,000 undergraduates. It has a robust, nationally-recognized study abroad program, and it ranks among the top producers of Peace Corps volunteers in the United States (Dickison, 2018). By contrast, the micro-pilgrimage from Montpellier

to Saint Guilhem-le-Désert was part of a French language immersion study abroad program. The Citadel is a public military college in South Carolina with just under 2500 undergraduates. Not traditionally known as a producer of Peace Corps volunteers, the school's website instead proudly states, "Citadel graduates have participated in many of the pivotal events in the history of the United States and have fought in every American war since the Mexican War of 1846" ("Celebrating 175 Years," n.d.). Each year, approximately thirty percent of the graduates of The Citadel each year receive military commissions ("Citadel Quick Facts," n.d.). The College of Charleston and The Citadel are located just a few miles apart on the peninsula of downtown Charleston, SC and share some joint graduate programs, but the undergraduate student populations are worlds apart. While Dr. Signori's carefully cultivated pilgrimage program at the College of Charleston has been an overall success, my initial experiment at The Citadel showed mixed results. Perhaps the very different student populations contributed to this, or perhaps it was the framework within which the two pilgrimages occurred.

I will begin by examining the successes of the segment of Dr. Signori's trip that I used as a model for my own program. The micro-pilgrimage segment from Ourense to Oseira Monastery lies in Galicia along the Camino route known as the Via de la Plata. The detour via the village of Cea to Oseira monastery is one of the alternative routes available to pilgrims as they make their way along the Via de la Plata to Santiago de Compostela. Our group of ten pilgrims stayed at the Monastery on our third night in Galicia at the end of our second day of walking. The pilgrimage took place in early March while our students were on spring break, and there were few other pilgrims on the Camino with us. We flew to Madrid and took a train directly to Ourense. After spending the night in Ourense, we walked to Tamallancos to spend our first night. The following day, we proceeded from Tamallancos to Oseira via the village of Cea. This two-night itinerary could be an option for professors leading study abroad groups in Spain who would like to expose their students to the practice of pilgrimage without placing additional stress on the Camino Francés and Santiago itself. In the summer months especially, the Camino Francés is too crowded for a group wanting to participate in a micro-pilgrimage. The Via de la Plata is less traveled, and Oseira Monastery stands as an important destination for a two-day trip. The cathedral in Ourense on the front end of the journey is likewise a good starting point. With these two significant sites as bookends, we began our pilgrimage after attending a Mass at Ourense Cathedral (attendance not required) and concluded the first two days with a dinner following vespers (again, attendance not required) at Oseira Monastery. The priest celebrating the Mass at Ourense offered a message inviting those in attendance to leave behind their preoccupation with the materialistic culture of contemporary times to return to a way of living in which one is fully present for the beauty of life as it unfolds. When we arrived at Oseira two days later, we had the good fortune to be offered a tour of the library by one of the monks, following which he directed us to the small chapel where vespers were being sung. The monk who gave us the tour had a lively sense of humor, and he was able to connect with the students even though not all of them spoke Spanish. It was a

powerful experience for them to have such direct contact with the serene aspects of monastic life—the concept of which is very alien to their busy lives at home.

That evening we stayed in the monastery's *albergue*, or pilgrims' lodging. The accommodations were essentially one large, cavernous room filled with bunk beds, with shared showers and bathrooms. There was no heat except for in a tiny sitting room, and we were traveling in early March. There were, however, plenty of blankets, so everyone was prepared to deal with the cold temperatures that dipped into the 30s that evening. The proprietors of the one small restaurant in town, Café Venezuela, agreed to stay open and cook dinner for us. We devoured what we were served, depleting the place of most of their supplies. When we were heading out the following day, one loaf of bread that had been given to us in Cea was turned into sandwiches for everyone. The kind proprietor of the Café Venezuela took the bread we provided and the remaining cheese she had and made individually-wrapped sandwiches for all of us. I have told this quasi-miraculous story of the one loaf of bread that ended up feeding everyone on several occasions, and it serves as a fitting culmination to the initial segment of our one-week pilgrimage that I have mentally cordoned off as a potential future micro-pilgrimage.

Dr. Signori's spring break pilgrimages have been successful for several reasons. One, I believe, is the small number of students who participate in these programs and the fact that the students choose this particular class among many potential choices to fulfill their First Year Experience requirement. The other important factor in the success of these trips is the careful preparation students receive in terms of understanding the history, background, and philosophy behind going on a pilgrimage. The students read, watch films, have discussions, walk a labyrinth, and participate in a scallop shell ceremony prior to embarking on their journey. Each student has researched an aspect of the walk—perhaps a certain monument or town—and has given a presentation on this in class. Dr. Signori has created an interdisciplinary course allowing students to bring their unique interests to the pilgrimage while at the same time making sure that they fully understand the difference between going on a pilgrimage and going on a hike.

I was hoping to replicate the successful outcomes of Dr. Signori's week-long pilgrimage in a micro-pilgrimage as part of my month-long summer study abroad. At the pilgrimage conferences I have attended, I have heard presentations that encouraged me to believe a short-term pilgrimage experience could be beneficial to students. At the Sacred Journeys 4 conference in Beijing last fall, Jasmine Goodnow gave a promising presentation on the idea of micro-adventure, meaningful experiences of short duration in which one consciously chooses to remove oneself from the demands of day-to-day life. She defines the micro-adventure as being "...close to home, short in duration, and less expensive than traditional pilgrimages" ("Sacred Journeys," 2017). Goodnow's motivation for studying this kind of experience derives in part from an environmental concern—she hopes to reduce the negative impact of large numbers of people repeatedly trekking across the same areas. She

notes, “By encouraging would-be pilgrims to travel close to home instead of venturing onto distant lands, the cultural and environmental degradations of significant pilgrimage sites may be reduced” (“Sacred Journeys,” 2017). I liked the idea of having my students stay closer to Montpellier rather than darting off to Prague, Barcelona, and Paris for the weekends, and I thought Goodnow’s concept would translate nicely as I designed my micro-pilgrimage.

At the same conference, Donald DeGraaf described study abroad itself as being akin to pilgrimage. DeGraaf’s work is based on long-term study abroad experiences; he co-authored an article examining the long-term benefits for individuals who spend at least one semester studying abroad (DeGraaf, Slagter, Larsen, & Ditta, 2013). His book *There and Back: Living and Learning Abroad* is described as a “resource to help students become pilgrims rather than tourists” in order to deepen their study abroad experience (Amazon.com, n.d.). In his presentation in Beijing, he underscored the important work of preparing students to be open to all that they will learn and discover on their journeys.

In Beijing, these ideas and others sent my brain into overdrive. I returned to my hotel room at night and began to plan what I hoped would be a life-changing micro-pilgrimage to Saint Guilhem-le-Désert, a two day walk from Montpellier. I was confident that I could take the work of Signori, Goodnow, and DeGraaf and create something new and exciting for my students. At The Citadel, students are constantly preparing for and talking about war; my program would offer a fresh, much-needed break from that activity. I was confident that by giving students a small taste of the peace one experiences on pilgrimage, they would crave even more. After months of planning and a tremendous amount of anticipation on my part, I must report that my experiment did not turn out as I had hoped. It was, however, a great learning experience both for the students and for me.

Using the example of the route from Ourense to Oseira as a model, I began to design a two-night pilgrimage from Montpellier to Gellone Abbey in Saint Guilhem-le-Désert. After carefully considering the other requirements of the program—intensive language courses, home stays, meals with host families, and cultural excursions—I decided that there was only room in our program for an overnight pilgrimage. I selected a 22-kilometer segment from Montarnaud to Saint Guilhem-le-Désert that would offer proximity as well as a good destination site. Saint Guilhem has served as a sanctioned stop on the Camino for over 1000 years; it is home to a monastery founded by Charlemagne’s first cousin Guilhem, who chose to retire from life as a warrior and become a monk. Charlemagne obtained a precious relic for his cousin, a fragment of the true cross, which can still be seen today along with the relics of Gellone Abbey. I called in February to reserve a gîte (pilgrims’ lodging) inside the walls of the old medieval town; I wanted to replicate the experience at Oseira to the extent it might be possible, so I wanted a place with communal rooms near the monastery and inside the medieval ramparts. At the informational meetings prior to departure, I talked about the pilgrimage and encouraged the students

to explore the topic. Once in France, I pointed out the abundant evidence of the cult of Saint James, and as the day approached, I gave specific instructions to prepare them for the physical aspect of our walk. As The Citadel requires a high level of physical fitness of its students for graduation, I did not anticipate any problems in terms of the physical challenges of pilgrimage. The Citadel is routinely ranked as having one of the most physically fit student populations in the country. Most of all, I really wanted the students to experience the serenity of Saint Guilhem in the evening and in the early morning, when there are no tourists. In this area, my expectations were not disappointed. Far from all light pollution, we were treated to a brilliantly clear sky filled with stars, the crisp mountain air, and the stillness of the countryside. When we woke in the morning and headed to the abbey after breakfast, we were among the first to arrive. The serenity of the place and the beauty of the early morning light streaming in are moving, and when one steps into the cloister, the feeling of peace abounds. Dramatic, craggy mountains soar upward, and the Abbey stands as a tranquil haven in the valley, the restorative gardens inviting all to slow down, reflect, and appreciate the beauty of the space. Some of the students spent lots of time here, moved by the Abbey's history and taking in its stillness.

This was not the case for all the students, however, and I have learned the lesson previously stated about the importance of allowing each student to be in control of his or her own pilgrimage. It is important that they take ownership of pilgrimage's potential for transformation in a way that is meaningful for them. I should have been attentive to the highly competitive nature of my students as well as their tendency to work as a team when it comes to completing feats of physical endurance. Despite my insistence that our 22-kilometer walk was not a race, they dove into the challenge, topographical maps in hand, ready to conquer the terrain and to get through it together. They were truly brilliant at navigation, and their map-reading skills came in handy in France, where the trail markers are not as consistent as on some of the Spanish segments of the Camino. Many of my students pushed hard, were unwilling to slow down, and arrived in Saint Guilhem too exhausted to benefit from the tranquility of the village and the abbey.

From 2012 to 2015, I accompanied study abroad groups to Munich, and we would set aside one day to visit Dachau. My colleague and I spent considerable class time trying to prepare students for the experience, but it was always difficult to judge how they would react. One of our goals was to make sure the students behaved in a way that was respectful while hoping they would also take away some lessons. It was sometimes predictable which students would be moved, which ones indifferent, and which ones unable to handle the overwhelming tragedy of what had transpired there. These students were part of a larger study abroad program to Germany, Austria, and Italy: the day at Dachau was only a small part of the experience, and studying the Holocaust was not the primary focus of the program. Still, some students identified that day as the most meaningful one of the summer studies abroad experience. I had hoped that the pilgrimage to Saint Guilhem would offer a different but equally meaningful experience for my students on this recent trip.

Dr. Signori's week-long pilgrimages over spring break were successful; I selected her design as a model, hoped to replicate it on a smaller scale within the context of a study abroad program, and did so with mixed success. In the surveys the students completed following our micro-pilgrimage, some expressed disappointment that we weren't entirely in natural settings and that some of the hiking was along busy roads. Another said he wasn't "really into religious trips," and still others noted that they had underestimated the physical challenges. And then, there are those priceless responses that make me realize that it was in fact worth it after all:

"It is so nice to escape our modern digital world and all the problems of humanity even if only for a brief time. I highly encourage anyone to get out there and enjoy what nature has to offer. I also believe people should set goals for themselves no matter how big or small. The feeling of accomplishment has no equal. The longer and harder the struggle, I believe the sweeter the victory. It is a gift you give yourself, or a deposit that continuously earns interest. I believe the longer duration the better, perhaps? But for most people's modern hectic schedules with life and family, perhaps frequency (no matter how short) can be a great reward by itself. It would be much better to maintain spiritual tank levels rather than waiting to experience emotional/spiritual exhaustion."

And this: "Walking into the empty church in the morning light was a sight and feeling I hope to always remember."

Finally, this observation: "This hike was everything I was looking for and more when I wanted to return to Southern France. I wanted to be immersed in ancient lands and feel the way of life. I wanted to be present, a feeling foreign to most Americans. Thanks to you, I felt the heartbeat of the land. I just wish I had stretched more."

Perhaps this student has succinctly summarized what I can conclude myself of the Saint Guilhem experiment: I needed to have stretched more—stretched my imagination, my own expectations, and my willingness to understand the students at The Citadel for who they are. Having never served in the military myself, I perhaps understand better the College of Charleston students, who are more likely to serve in the Peace Corps. I took the wonderful experience we had on our walk from Ourense to Oseira and put it on a pedestal, holding the Saint Guilhem pilgrimage in comparison. While initially disappointed that the students were not all absolute enthusiasts for the pilgrimage to Saint Guilhem, I have come to appreciate what they did gain and perhaps more importantly what I learned. Pilgrimage and its potential for transformation may not, in fact, be of interest to everyone. Yet still I will continue to try, nudging and prodding and encouraging any of my students who are so inclined, and perhaps some who aren't, along the path. Certainly, in doing so we will all stretch a bit more.

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