

Camino Trees

by Karin Kiser



I was somewhere along the meseta, the flat central plateau between Burgos and Astorga. The height of summer along the Camino Francés, and yet there wasn't a single pilgrim in sight. The weather was hot, dry and glorious. Fields of wheat as far as the eye could see. No cars, no tractors, just me and the singing birds. Minutes became hours, immersed in the beauty of stillness.

Suddenly, I spotted something in the distance. Was it one of those tiny towns that seem to materialize out of nowhere along the meseta? No, that was no church top ahead. Instead, it was a single, solitary tree. I felt like I was in the desert seeing water for the first time. Perhaps my mind was playing tricks on me?

Coming closer, the tree appeared enormous against the background of everlasting sky. I soon realized the tree wasn't directly along the Camino path, but off in the middle of a field. No matter. It would be worth the detour. I headed for it, fantasizing about the picnic I would have in the shade of its many branches. I came closer, admiring the strength and resilience of this lone tree.

Then it hit me like a punch in the stomach. I wasn't the only pilgrim to venture off the path to take refuge under this tree. The magnificent picnic rest stop I had imagined was more like a *restroom*, surrounded by used tissues and human waste. Heartbroken, I apologized to the tree, lingered a few moments in disbelief, and then turned and walked away.



I ruminated for days over how people could walk an ancient spiritual path and leave anything but footprints behind. I was determined to play a part in leaving the Camino in better condition than when I found it. Unfortunately, for all my good intentions, the last thing I wanted to do while walking all day, fully loaded with a backpack and trekking poles, was stop and collect some rubbish. Bending down with a full pack seemed a Herculean task. So it wasn't until years later when I volunteered at an albergue in Galicia in 2018 that I got my chance. During the two-week commitment I assumed responsibility for the 3km stretch on either side of the albergue and rounded up a dozen bags of waste. Since then, I've collected nearly 100 bags along the Camino Francés.

The experience was transformative. I knew I was meant to be involved in the Camino beyond just walking it. I decided then that I would use part of the proceeds from my books to support maintenance efforts along the Camino. This year, I had planned to take a small group of Camino veterans with me to Spain to continue the trash pickup, but alas, 2020 had other plans for us all.



While the Camino is resting, my newest venture in giving back to the Camino is with trees. By far the hardest part of the Camino cleanup effort for me was seeing trees surrounded by waste. Trees, as living beings, deserve better than this. They clean the air and provide valuable shade along the journey. In fact, a single tree can absorb 4.5kg of air pollutants a year. Trees are more than just the lungs of the Earth and storage vessels for carbon dioxide. They are a source of natural intelligence, ancient wisdom and healing properties. Spending time among trees can help boost our immune system, lower our blood pressure and even help us sleep better.

Although I can't pick up litter around the Camino de Santiago trees this year, I can team up with local groups in Spain to get more trees in the ground. From now through the end of April 2021, I am doing just that. I'm calling it my "Global Regeneration with Trees" project, and I hope to inspire others to plant trees not only in Spain but around the world. With more than 32,000 hectares of



trees being cut down every day, it will take more than just a few of us to regenerate the Earth. Here's how:

Plant a tree in your yard.

Protect ancient forests and the stewards who care for them.

Support tree-planting groups in your community.

Join others from around the planet who are restoring harmony and balance to the Earth, one tree at a time.

*Karin is the author of 10 books, including *Your Inner Camino* and *After the Camino*. A San Diego-based writer and personal development coach, she leads a "Camino Cleanup" trip each fall along the Camino Francés. To learn more about planting trees along the Camino, email her at support@KarinKiser.com.*

Karin's books *Your Inner Camino* and *After the Camino* are available at www.CaminoChroniclesPress.com.