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A mass phenomenon in God's name

"Pilgrimages are booming" according to an exhibition at the "Museum der Kulturen" in Basel. Christians have actually been going on pilgrimages in their hundreds of thousands for years although most of them want to have increasingly less to do with the Church and religion. The most popular pilgrimage route has long been the Way of Saint James to Santiago de Compostela. It is starting to get very congested.

By Barbara Engel

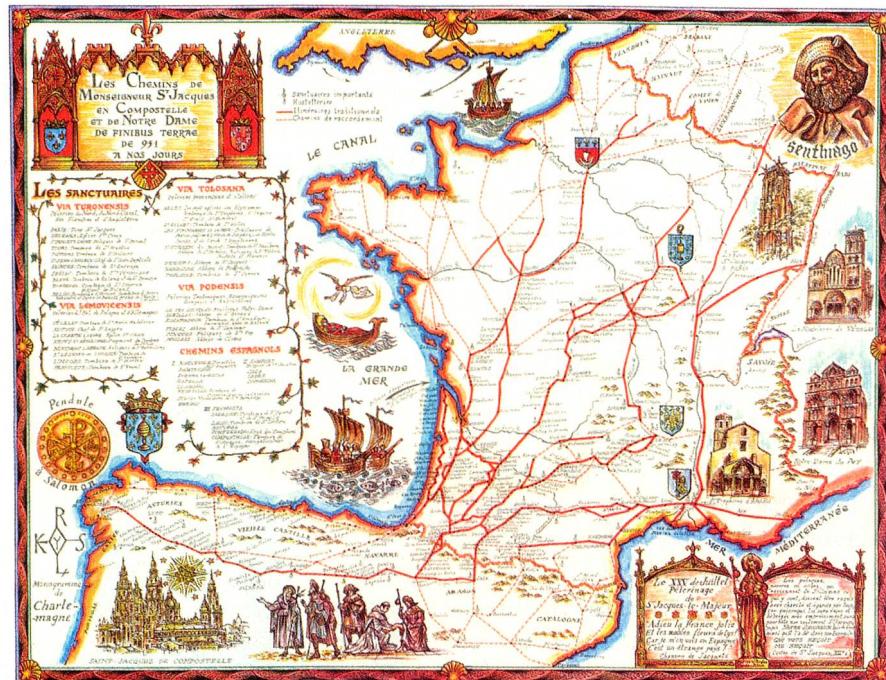
You encounter them, for example, on Mount Nebo in Jordan, where God is said to have shown Moses the Promised Land. They usually appear there in groups and praise the Lord with lots of hallelujahs and hands raised to the skies. You come across them in the historic city of Jerusalem, where they follow in Jesus' footsteps along the Way of Sorrows, sometimes with a tortured downcast look and sometimes staring into the distance struck with awe. A pilgrimage to the Holy Land is of special significance to devout Christians, far more important than, say, a visit to Rome.

Rome has also recently been pushed into the background by the Spanish town of Santiago de Compostela. Tens of thousands of pilgrims can be seen there every day. But something differentiates them from the pilgrims on Mount Nebo or in the Garden of Gethsemane. Those in Santiago de Compostela travel on foot and not in coaches.

Midlife crises, burnout, career breaks

The "Camino de Santiago", or Way of Saint James, has become the most popular and well-known hiking trail in the world within just ten years. Mass is celebrated in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela several times a day so that every pilgrim can receive a blessing. The giant thurible, which half a dozen fathers swing through the nave above the heads of the visitors, is the greatest attraction.

In contrast to the pilgrims in the Holy Land, faith and Christian tradition play a secondary role for those in Santiago de Compostela. Pilgrimages have become a mass phenomenon. People go on them for adventure, as a holiday or for a sporting challenge. Pilgrimages are undertaken in the search for one's self far more than in the search for God. Major life events, such as illness, divorce, midlife crises, burnout or career breaks, inspire many more people to go on pilgrimages than faith. Anyone who doubts this should visit some of the many pilgrim blogs on the Internet.



17th-century map of the Camino de Santiago

One might ask what makes the Camino de Santiago so unique? Perhaps it is the legend. According to historical lore, the body of the apostle James was transported from Jerusalem to Santiago in 44 A.D. Disciples are said to have placed the body of the martyr, who had been beheaded shortly beforehand, on an unmanned stone boat, which an angel then guided to Santiago. The Catholic Church has no doubt this is what happened and that the bones of Saint James lie beneath the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The Armenian Church refutes this story. It claims that James' body – together with his head – are in its possession. However, it has not provided any evidence to support this.

From apostle to slayer of the Moors

Saint James only became famous centuries after his journey from Jerusalem to Spain thanks to Alfonso II, King of Asturias. He proclaimed him the national saint in the 9th century, had a church built on top of his grave and declared Santiago de Compostela to be the third most important pil-

grimage destination after Jerusalem and Rome. Alfonso II's motive was less the glory of Saint James than his own. However, for the people and the Church, this saint became an example of piety in the crusades against all non-believers and a symbolic figure in the struggle to recapture the Iberian peninsula, which had been conquered by Moors from Africa between 711 and 719. The once peace-loving apostle was presented as a soldier of God and was given the epithet "Matamoros", the slayer of the Moors.

That is all in the past, even for the Church. Today, it makes every effort to promote pilgrimages as this is a lucrative business. The number of pilgrims walking the Way of Saint James has increased rapidly over the past 30 years. There were 200 in 1980, 5,000 in 1990, and 55,000 pilgrims were recorded in 2000. The figure reached 240,000 in 2010, which was an "Año Xacobeo" – a year in which 25 July, Saint James' Day, falls on a Sunday. A pilgrimage then is particularly rewarding for Catholics: the Church grants complete absolution. In 2010, twelve million visitors

were counted at the Gate of Forgiveness on the east side of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela.

A papal visit of significance

The Way of Saint James experienced its first golden age in the 12th century. 400,000

souvenir shops and guesthouses as well as luxury accommodation. The production and sale of devotional objects has become a major source of income.

Besides the Pope and other Church officials, eminent secular figures have also contributed to the pilgrimage boom and

"The Camino: A Journey of Spirit". For MacLaine, the journey ended with a spiritual experience that is extremely embarrassing for readers.

On foot, on horseback or on a donkey

Those who arrive in Santiago de Compostela after what may have been arduous and exhausting days or weeks only need to obtain the official stamp in their pilgrim pass to achieve salvation. This is today available in most countries from pilgrimage companies or Church organisations. It costs 15 francs in Switzerland, five euros in Germany and 10 euros in the UK. The much-coveted stamp is nevertheless only given to those who have covered the last 100 kilometres on foot, on horseback or on a donkey. Cyclists are required to travel twice the distance and have to start their pilgrimage 200 kilometres from Santiago de Compostela.

The onslaught of pilgrims is increasingly bringing problems as well as joy. An invasion of bugs last year ensured nights of misery for pilgrims staying in the hostels. Those who want to be sure of securing a place in a hostel for the evening ought really to hit the road at between three and four o'clock in the morning to be able to check in before midday. Organised groups of pilgrims more interested in self-indulgence than self-denial are proving increasingly tiresome for those pilgrims seeking peace and spirituality. On the German pilgrim forum, one outraged pilgrim summed up his experience: "Just back from the party bar".

BARBARA ENGEL is the editor-in-chief of "Swiss Review"



The cathedral of Santiago de Compostela

pilgrims are said to have walked along the Camino each year during this period. It then remained quiet for a few centuries. The revival was triggered by Elías Valiña, a priest in the small Galician village of O Cebreiro in 1982. After Pope John Paul II had reminded Catholics of the ancient tradition of the Way of Saint James on a visit to Santiago de Compostela, the priest began marking the Camino Francés between the Pyrenees and Santiago de Compostela with yellow arrows and opened a hostel for pilgrims next to his church in O Cebreiro. The publicity was incredibly effective and the time was clearly ripe for new swathes of pilgrims to arrive. UNESCO declared the Camino Francés a world heritage site in 1993.

The economically underdeveloped region of Galicia subsequently received significant funding, not only from the Church but also from the state and the private sector. Monasteries and churches were renovated and restaurants opened along the route. There are now first-aid posts, shops selling pilgrimage and hiking equipment, massage salons,

economic success, not least Paulo Coelho, the Brazilian esoteric writer, with his book published in 1986 entitled "The Pilgrimage". Shirley MacLaine followed his lead in 2000, as did German comedian Hape Kerkeling shortly afterwards. He provided his fans with an account of his experience called "Ich bin dann mal weg" (I am on the road). The title of MacLaine's pilgrimage journal is

EXHIBITION IN BASEL

"Pilgrimages are booming" is the title of an exhibition at the "Museum der Kulturen" in Basel which will run until 3 March 2013. This focuses on Christian pilgrimages in Europe. It becomes evident that there is no clear distinction between purely religious pilgrimages and those where salvation or miracles are sought. Some of the 500 exhibits are very unusual, such as the "Three Kings Certificate", which is supposed to protect pilgrims against enemies and attack, and the feet, hands, chests and stomachs made of wax known as wax votive offerings. The exhibition focuses on both historical documentation and a sociological analysis of pilgrimages. The pilgrimage pass of German comedian Hape Kerkeling, who recounted his experiences on the Way of Saint James in 2007 in his book "Ich bin dann mal weg" is also on display. He made the fun factor a new element in the life of pilgrims.

"Pilgrimages are booming" exhibition until 3 March 2013, Museum der Kulturen, Münsterplatz 20, Basel. www.mkb.ch