

## Prologue

The idea, at first, was quite frivolous; I had recently been on holiday in Spain and merely wished to leave the cold of an English autumn and get back to the sun. I have been an activist in the Newcastle branch of the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) for several years, and the idea crystallised of a *political* walk in Spain, to attract publicity for the Palestinian cause. The Laurie Lee story came to mind.

In 1935 the English poet and writer Laurie Lee landed at the port of Vigo in north-western Spain, and walked to Madrid, a journey made famous in his book “As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning” – a distance of some 440 miles. Laurie subsequently walked to Spain’s southern coast, leaving Spain briefly, to return and fight in the Spanish civil war for justice and against oppression. My journey 80 years later, doing the same walk from Vigo to Madrid, would symbolise the Palestinian fight for justice, and against Israeli oppression.

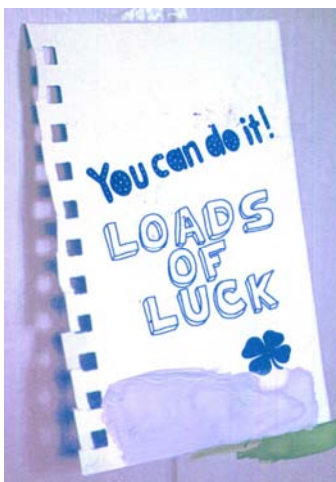
Though I am 70 years old, I am fit. Preparations were speedy, because governed by the need to walk in favourable climatic conditions. A walk of a minimum of 20 miles per day would take around 3 weeks, and I judged that a start sometime past the middle of September (and therefore ending a week into October), would be best, after temperature and rainfall charts for the area had been consulted – I had heard that Madrid in November could be cold. (In the event, the early mornings were often cool, even chilly, the heat increasing from mid-morning, until, in the afternoon, it was usually fiercely hot, sometimes broilingly so.)



Rena with “Free Palestine” T-shirt



Newcastle – with a “Free Palestine” T-shirt



Good luck card



Good luck card

Preparations involved designing a white T-shirt with the message “Laurie Lee/Free Palestine Walk” emblazoned on the background of a Palestinian flag – I had four of them made up. I bought good quality running shoes on the advice of experienced walkers. Looking back, I am appalled at the casual way I considered some items – because I had walking route directions obtained from Google maps (and didn’t know their limitations), I purchased the Michelin maps, which turned out to be absolutely essential, in a spirit of hmmm, might need them, better not take chances; ditto for the magnifying glass. I didn’t take a torch, making map-reading in lonely places at night difficult or impossible. The night before I left I made up the backpack – and to my consternation it weighed some 18 pounds. I discarded everything I could, including a bed-roll and a heavy waterproof jacket (replaced by a light plastic mac) – and reduced the weight of the filled backpack to around 11 pounds. This was definitely the right decision – I don’t think I would have made it burdened with a heavier pack.

My walk differed from Laurie’s in many respects. He was dirt-poor, living off the land, the generosity of the equally poor Spanish peasants and workers he came across, and what pesetas and centimos he could earn by playing his guitar in Spain’s towns and cities – he sang for his supper. Thankfully – since I am tone-deaf and otherwise severely musically impaired – I did not have to sing for mine. Our precise routes, too, must have differed – he often walked through the Spanish fields and forests, whereas I stuck to the major (non-motorway) roads. He walked barefoot, I in good running shoes. He got shelter where he could, often from the kindness of Spanish people – I used hostels and hotels, though I too relied once or twice on the help of Spanish people. From Vigo to Zamora nothing is known of Laurie’s precise route – I took what I considered to be a reasonable route. I did follow and include in my walk all of the places he mentioned in his book. Finally, Laurie was a young man out to see the world, taking his own time and following his inclinations; I was older and constrained by a schedule – my minimum 20 miles per day – determined by money and other considerations.

Some impressions of the walk itself:

- I had been cautioned by experienced back-packers to take care of my feet – blisters and other foot hazards could end my walk prematurely. I examined my feet every morning, treated any blisters, applied Vaseline sparingly (to counter moisture from sweat). As it turned out, blisters were not a major problem – I punctured them with a pin as soon as they appeared, and forced out any liquid – and it did the trick.
- The sheer walking effort, with the burden of the backpack, was always the major problem, especially in the first few days. Although I exercise at home at a local gym several days a week, I suffered in those early days from muscle pains in the thighs despite my gym training. I was concerned in particular with a swelling above my right ankle, brought on, I think, by the continuous impact of foot to ground – which I feared if it worsened could actually end my journey. However, after the first few days, the swelling subsided, the muscle pains lessened (though they never went away), and I learned to just unthinkingly put one foot in front of the other – indeed, to occupy the mind elsewhere.
- Writing the diary, and then sending daily reports home via mobile phone for a website, was a major effort which considerably lengthened my day. I wrote it, and sent the daily texts, at breakfast or other meals in cafes and restaurants. Time and again I found myself starting off late – mid-morning – when I had got up as early as 6.30 or 7am, due to the time entailed in the writing effort, thus setting back my progress for the whole day. A late start meant, due to my minimum of 20 miles per day, a late finish. Sometimes I cursed it, yet I bore in mind its importance on a website to promote the Palestinian cause.
- My photographic skills are about non-existent, and I had only one of those cheap throw-away cameras which can be purchased for a few pounds. None of the night photographs came out (and some in the day when visibility was poor), because I couldn’t work the flash mechanism properly.

- the non-motorway roads I traversed carried less than one-tenth of the traffic on the nearby motorway – and therefore had less cafes, hostels, hotels, and service stations (I regularly came upon them closed and abandoned, no doubt due to the motorway's economic effect). This sometimes resulted in a desperate effort to get accommodation of any kind in a small hamlet, sometimes in the necessity to carry on walking no matter how exhausted. An end-of-day hot bath or shower was wonderful when possible, an exquisite enjoyment and relief – the best part of the day, better than food, better than drink – most of the day's aches and pains were washed away.
- I walked on the hard shoulder at the edge of the road, allowed for walkers. Beyond it was invariably a ditch, often a deep ditch with a concrete water channel at its bottom. I tried to be careful, especially at night (blinded by headlights), not to fall into it, aware that a hard knock to ankle or leg could end the entire journey.
- Spain, compared to the UK, is a very *bumpy* country – sierras and mountain ranges pop up all over the place, and Madrid itself is 6,000 feet above sea level, the highest capital in Europe. More than once I climbed continuously for hours on end – but then the bonus was a long downwards walk down the other side.

The Spanish countryside changed slowly over the course of my journey. In Galicia, I climbed swiftly into beautiful, heavily wooded country, wild and uncultivated, replete with gushing streams – it seemed that it was not possible to walk more than ten minutes without encountering more gurgling water. I warmed to it from the first day – I have always felt comfortable and at home in Spain. As I progressed eastward into Castile and Leon, the country became drier and flatter, with much more arable land – though the distant mountains could suddenly appear before me – as, coming out of Segovia, I strolled on a sunny plain, the tops of the distant peaks shrouded in mist, and, hours later, was battling upwards through those same mists I had seen earlier.

I had said to myself that, though there was a personal element, the purpose of my walk was political, to be judged by the publicity it attracted. Media publicity was non-existent – though efforts were made to interest local newspapers before I left, they failed – it is not too difficult to guess why. Similarly, there was no media interest in Spain, and Spanish pro-Palestinian activists failed to appear, partly perhaps because they had been contacted very late in the day. And yet, publicity (though not mass publicity), with ordinary Spanish people was achieved. I walked the breadth of Spain wearing the “Laurie Lee/Free Palestine Walk” T-shirt. Even to walk into a bar or restaurant with it on was enough to cause curiosity and debate – and I told, with gestures and in my limited Spanish, to whoever would listen the story of my walk and its purpose. All day I gave the anti-fascist salute to the oncoming traffic (indicating the message on the T-shirt), and was gratified by the considerable numbers of hoots, flashing lights, and raised arms in response. People in general, like people everywhere, were sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. I encountered very little opposition – which I duly recorded in my daily reports. After collecting PSC supplies posted to me to the post office in Zamora, I also distributed “Free Palestine” badges and “Disappearing Palestine” cards wherever I could. The last of these (I failed to collect further supplies posted to the main post Office in Madrid) were handed out in cafes and restaurants around Madrid – I handed them to receptive-looking people with a word or two, or just flipped them down in front of others. So, although there was no mass publicity, I did get the political message across, visually and verbally, to many people. And finally, there is this website itself, the product of my walk, delivering further publicity for the Palestinian cause.

There are those who believe that, just as the iconic cause in the 1970s and 1980s was the worldwide movement against South Africa's apartheid regime, so the iconic cause in the twenty-first century will be the Palestinian one. I hope that somewhere, in Argentina perhaps, or Japan, or Greece, or even the United States, or elsewhere, others may be inspired to carry out similar walks or projects. Indeed, an EU-wide walk

next summer, with walkers in one country walking to the border of an adjacent country, and symbolically linking hands, would be an exciting proposition for someone to organise.

What about you, reader?

October 2014.

## **As I Walked Out One End-summer Day**

**DAY 1 – SATURDAY, 20TH SEPTEMBER  
FROM ARRIVAL TO THE VILLAGE OF AREAS.**

The plane touches down at Santiago de Compostela at 9.45am, to a warm but misty morning. I don't feel too bad, considering I dozed the previous night on a seat at Gatwick.

I take out a "Laurie Lee/Free Palestine" T-shirt and proceed to the arrivals area, holding it up. No enthusiastic bunch of Spanish pro-Palestinian activists awaits me - I'm disappointed. The small crowd stares at the held-aloft T-shirt with mild curiosity. I meet an Englishwoman also awaiting the airport bus - she's come for the weekend to join her husband, who's at a conference. We talk on the short bus-ride.

She comes from a town where not to be a Tory is frowned upon. She herself is left-wing. We talk about Aldermaston, the CND, stuff that happened before she was born. I tell her how I came upon the march by accident and joined it; how, on the Friday night, we reached Reading, and drank every pub in the town dry; how, at Hyde Park on the Sunday, a member of the League of Empire Loyalists dumped a large bag of flour on the head of Canon Collins, who was sitting on the grass. We are deposited at the bus station, and go our separate ways.

I take the bus to Vigo, where Laurie started his walk, resplendent in my "Laurie Lee/Free Palestine" T-shirt (which provokes some comment), and stare out at the wooded countryside. The bus winds its way down to the port of Vigo, on the edge of a deep blue bay, and I am disgorged onto a handsome promenade right on the waterfront. This must be close to where Laurie himself landed 80 years ago – though today's prosperous scene would have been very different then.

Straight into the nearest restaurant for a beer and a meal. The young waitress and barman are interested. I tell them, in my fractured Spanish, of my journey to Madrid, and about Laurie Lee and his 1935 walk, and his fight for justice in the Guerra Civil - and the Palestinian's fight for justice today. They smile sympathetically, and tell me how to get out of the town.

About 2pm, I start my walk, climbing up the elegant streets to the edge of town. Trying to find the N-120, I go wrong somewhere. A driver crawling up the hill offers to take me, but I refuse - after all, cheating would vitiate the whole project. He gives me directions, and I find the main road.

It's mountainous and thickly wooded, with many noisy streams. I stride out in this new land, so very far from the cold and autumn mists of the UK. There is a sign warning of deer crossing the road. Fantastic! (I later discover that this part of Spain is littered with such signs.) It's very hot - I find that, since I am walking east with the sun to the south, I can get much-desired shade by walking on the road's southern side, because the forest comes right down to the side of the road.

By late-afternoon I'm steaming, my head is buzzing, and I'm soaked in sweat. A bar looms into view. It's pretty rough and basic, and filled with farm workers. One addresses me - americano? "No, no americano, soy inglese." But he's not asking me my nationality, he wants me to buy him an Americano coffee! I oblige. I go to the toilets to change - they bang on the door - I'm in the ladies!

When I get to the village of Areas, I realise I can physically go no further. I go to a bar/cafe, enquire about hostels and hotels, sit outside with a beer, listen to the animated conversation at the next table. Then to a restaurant I had seen earlier. The waiter is quite aggressive - he brings an enormous platter of really shit

seafood - which four men could not do justice to. I think he may have mistaken me for a German (not always too popular around here in this time of (German-imposed) austerity. Or was it the Palestinian T-shirt? Who knows?

I find a pension very late. Panic, where is my passport, needed for the formalities of checking in? Turn everything out, there it is. The room, though old-fashioned, is adequate - it has a bed! Crawl in and fall into a deep and dreamless sleep.

## DAY 2 – SUNDAY, 21ST SEPTEMBER FROM AREAS TO BEYOND A CANIZA.

Don't get on the road until 10.30, later than planned. Straight out there, without breakfast or food supplies.

For hours and hours, the road just climbs steadily upwards. Every bend looks, from a distance, to be the summit – only to find, on arrival, that the road continues to ascend. Finally, in late afternoon, I do reach the top. I take a photograph there, looking South to the distant mountains, with one of those huge advertisements in the shape of a Spanish bull dramatically highlighted.



Climbing out of Areas – the summit

Early in the climb, a tinkling of bells (cow-bells I later find, are widely used here) and, just across the road, practically at the roadside, is a group of cattle – no fence to protect them from crossing the road.. Though they do seem to be cows (bulls have a distinctive beard), I feel a certain relief that we are on opposite sides of the road, and hurry on. The road now leads downwards.

Around teatime I arrive at the little town of Caniza, and take a much-needed drink. I intend to take minor roads, to avoid going north to Ourense, then back south again to Verin. Three different people gave me wrong directions, because I ask for the road to Verin, and everyone, but everyone, goes to Verin via Ourense – nobody goes by the minor roads I had planned. Thus I find myself on the main non-motorway road to Ourense. (Looking back, this was a blessing in disguise – navigation difficulties, and problems with food and shelter, would have been very considerable.)

It's getting dark, then full nightfall, and no shelter in sight. I stumble in to a rough bar. The locals stare at my "Palestine" T-shirt and I try to get across the story of my "Free Palestine" walk – they seem definitely interested. They realise I am an inglese, and produce from their midst a young woman who knows a little English. Together we consult the map, and agree that it's too late now to back-track to find the minor road – best to continue on the main non-motorway road to Ourense.

I go back out and into the darkness, and grimly push on. The road splits and because I'm so tired, I fail to take in the obvious fact that there are white lines which denote the road's continuation. I waste time going back half a mile. In desperation, I knock on someone's door. An old lady peers through the glass. Despite there being a crazy man with a political message on his chest peering inward, she bravely opens the door – and sets me right – it's the road on the right.

I am completely worn out now – it's very late, and I have been a full twelve hours on the road with only small breaks. I'm almost on the point of sleeping rough by the roadside (disastrous though this would probably be for my progress the next day). Suddenly, across the road, I see a full-sized statue of Jesus, encased in glass, the face lit up from below. Momentarily, it scares the shit out of me, I'm completely thrown. Then I see this religious roadside monument for what it is. I resist the temptation to pray for an hotel. Atheists should stick to their guns. Twenty minutes later, when I am almost done in, and, hey presto! –



a lonely building appears in the middle of nowhere. I ask a man getting in to his car where the next hotel might be (I think at first that it's just a restaurant). "Aquí", he says (right here). I can't believe it. Saved!

An old barman and waitress are pottering about. When I'm taken to my room I fall exhausted in to the sack. Don't ask me about the roadside statue of Christ – as an atheist I don't want to know.

### DAY 3 – MONDAY, 22ND SEPTEMBER FROM BEYOND A CANIZA TO OURENSE



Looking down on Ribadavia from the road

Out on the road – after an hour or so, see the little town of Ribadavia below. Wander down to get some food for my journey – bananas and almonds. I can't work the cash point outside the bank – a helpful bank clerk does it for me.

I have trouble with the road signs past Ribadavia – again I get help to get onto the right non-motorway road (why can't I get these Spanish road signs right?).

The highway feels like a minor road and I trudge through small villages, people working in their fields and stop for lunch at a gas station cum bar/restaurant near Ventosela. I order caldo (broth) and a steak. Waiting for the meal I sit

outside and smoke and tell the waiter and two local girls the story of the "Palestine walk". They are interested and sympathetic. The broth is fine, but I can't manage the veal steak – the waiter has given me, perhaps, as a gesture of support, two large veal steaks, and my appetite has failed me. An old farmhand at the next table insists I take some of his tortilla, it's another message of solidarity.

It's extremely hot as, around (an English) teatime I approach Ourense on the service road. After a beer in the town I push on a mile so towards Verin, in order to fulfil my mileage for the day. At the hotel where I fetch up, I tell the receptionist my "Palestine walk" tale and give her an official PSC "Free Palestine" badge. Later, at dinner, after a few drinks at the hotel bar, the waiter brings me a truly massive steak, it's huge, almost three inches thick (perhaps they thought I needed feeding up). Even with a full appetite it would be hard to get through. As it is, I have not recovered my appetite (the heat perhaps?), and so, to avoid hurting his feelings, I have to tell him I'd had a large breakfast and lunch. He's nice about it. The bill for the entire meal must have been at least 30 euros – they charged me 8. This happened earlier in the day at lunch – large meal, small bill. I return to the bar and when I come to pay the bill the barman tears it up! I realise that the receptionist has told my story to the hotel staff, and this is their way of expressing solidarity and support. Good for them! I need more of these PSC badges (Mick Bowman, another Newcastle PSC activist, sent me some which I collected at the Post Office at Zamora).

### DAY 4 – TUESDAY, 23RD SEPTEMBER FROM OURENSE TO XINZO DE LIMIA

Breakfast at the hotel bar, then out on the day's march.

There are lots of dogs in this part of Spain, because houses and farm-houses are pretty isolated. They are often big animals, and usually act aggressively, barking savagely as any walker passes by. I am always grateful that they are invariably behind high fences protecting the property. Laurie recounts in his book that he was once set upon by wild dogs – a frightening incident. My Laurie Lee/Free Palestine walk replayed this as farce – a woman opens her gate, and two small terriers set upon me, yelping and snapping at my ankles.

In late afternoon, after walking for hours without respite from any bar, restaurant or cafe, I finally come upon one., and sit out on the terrace with a longed-for cold beer. The manageress, a redoubtable woman,

comes out and I tell her, as best I can, of my Palestinian mission. She approves. She has a son who has a little English, she will send him out to talk with me. He comes - a little hesitantly, I think – mama has ordered him – and I tell him more fully of Laurie’s fight in the Spanish civil war “por la justicia”, and how, 80 years later, I repeat Laurie’s walk, this time for justice “por los Palestinos”. He goes back in.

When I enter to pay my bill he has obviously told the whole story – there they are, mama, son, and several customers spread in a welcoming arc, beaming benignly. Oh, I should have had my camera at the ready, a moment to capture! Sadly, I don’t – merely the camera of my mind’s eye.

Early in the evening I arrive at Xinzo de Limia – I’m so tired that I take the first accommodation I see, at the edge of town. It’s fine (and cheap) – some of these hostels are as good, or even better, than hotels – I have not been to one which didn’t have an en suite bath/shower (except later, in Madrid).

I go out late, and a man tells me that the best eats in town are at an hotel called, like the town, Xinzo. I have my best meal to date – caldo (broth, which I have taken to), prawns in garlic butter sauce (the serving was so generous that I left the last half-dozen), and for dessert a Spanish version of rice pudding (for bulk). I get lost going back to the hostel, but eventually find it.

#### DAY 5 – WEDNESDAY, 24TH SEPTEMBER FROM XINZO DE LIMIA TO VERIN

Leave the hostel, and at lunchtime find a crowded little bar in Trasmiras. The locals seem very interested in my Palestinian T-shirt. I tell them of my Vigo to Madrid walk. Sitting at a table outside in the shade with langostinos, tapas, and a cold beer, I have a scrappy dual-language conversation with a local man, and give him PSC materials.

It’s extremely hot as I walk through the afternoon and enter Verin some time before 6pm. Everything is closed – I haven’t yet fully appreciated that everything (except some of the bars) closes down in Spain as they have their siesta during the heat of the afternoon..

I find a rough bar in a back street – the drinkers stare at my Palestinian T-shirt and I explain my walk. One of them gives me directions, with a scribbled map, to a hostel – it proves to be full, so I take a room in a hotel opposite.

When I’m out in the evening I can’t decide what to eat. I seem incapable of eating any meat dish – is it the heat or something else? My daughter texts suggesting tapas – good idea! I look for a specifically tapas bar in the town centre, fail to find one. I eye the sweet pastry dishes in another bar, but decide they don’t go with beer. Someone in a trendy bar in the centre of town recommends a tapiceria but I don’t find it.

There’s a tapiceria near my hotel but when I get there it’s closed. I settle for an old-fashioned place around the corner, where I have ham and olives with my beer. The old barman potters about making it obvious he’s closing, so I stagger back to my hotel a little the worse for wear.

#### DAY 6 – THURSDAY, 25TH SEPTEMBER FROM VERIN TO A GUDINA

The first few days were so exhausting that at day’s end I couldn’t be bothered to do anything other than eat, drink, and watch tv when possible (some of which is at least as inane as our own – they do those competing family shows as badly as we do).



For my diary, the voice recorder is not for me, I'll stick to good old pen and paper – I think better this way. I'll have to catch up on recording the first few days (I only caught up completely towards the end of my journey, aided by some rest days).

I wake up early, around 6am, despite a few drinks last night, and lie awake wondering vaguely if I should get up and do something POSITIVE. Up at 7am. What a time it takes to get everything done and packed; wash, examine feet, treat blisters, apply Vaseline, dress; check you have the important stuff (credit cards, cash, notebook, passport); check the room and bathroom in case anything missed, and so on.

Trudge down the Avenida de Souros and find a cafe open. Continental breakfast. Too early to get a writing pad for my diary. Buying things is difficult on the road – shops open at 9am or so, and close at noon/1pm, and only open again in the evening for 2 or 3 hours from 6pm.



Coming out of Verin in the morning

It's chilly when I start the steady climb out of Verin, but it's already apparent, as the sun climbs above the distant hilltops, that it is going to be a hot day. How sensitive walkers are to temperature – it's usually too cold (a little) or too hot (worse, because your head starts to boil and swim) – it's rarely as we would like it. It starts to heat up mid-morning.

These old main roads are little used, because long-distance travellers use the motorways - the autopistas. The N-525 I'm walking along runs close, often parallel, to the A-52 autopista, and I can see the motorway has at least 10 times the traffic. Consequently, there are numbers of abandoned cafes, restaurants, and hotels – food and shelter is harder to come by, and this is not in any case a heavily-populated region.

But, when things become a little tough – thirsty, low on water, tired – it's lovely to come upon a stopping-place, like a little salvation. I do so around lunch-time, a restaurant and hotel with a solitary guest sitting outside. We talk in jumbled fashion – he recommends the beef with peppers which he is eating. I tell him the Palestine story, and shortly he excuses himself – his siesta. The waitress has charged me only 1 euro (80p) for the meal and beers. The Palestinian effect again! Unfortunately I can't get the meat down, and have to dispose of it in the bushes so as not to seem ungrateful. This is getting to be a habit!

I climb steadily on. This is hilly, mountainous country, the road bends and loops and turns in on itself (unlike the autopista), avoiding the peaks – 2 or 3 miles walked to 1 as the crow flies. Spectacular views are standard here, looking across the with the mountains behind, half-shrouded in mist.

Mid-afternoon and I come upon two old dears, also hiking – I slowly catch up with them. It's very hot now, I'm tired, can't be bothered to tie a loose shoe-lace. They fuss and cluck over me like two old hens; help me off with my pack, tie my laces. The camaraderie of the road.

I press on, leaving them behind. All day I have been doing the anti-fascist salute to the oncoming traffic – I started this yesterday. I'm getting a decent response, lorries beeping, fists raised – but sometimes just a blank stare. In general, the better the vehicle, the poorer the response.

At a bar at teatime, I get two beers for the price of one. The waitress has done her bit, unasked, for the Palestinian cause.

The last few miles are usually tough, but I arrive at A Gudina early for a change, around 6pm. Have a beer sitting outside on the terrace of the hotel. The waiter tells me where to get a writing pad, and I set off. After a few minutes he hauls up in his car, and gives me a lift to the shop.

This is the first day I have been physically in good enough shape to start writing a record at end-of-day.

#### DAY 7 – FRIDAY, 26TH SEPTEMBER FROM A GUDINA TO PADORNELO

Start off at 9.30 – not as early as intended, but better than some previous days.

The road widens, lots of vehicles on it. I start doing the anti-fascist salute again at the approaching traffic – will they get the connection with the “Free Palestine” T-shirt? The response is good – lots of trucks are beeping their horns, cars are flashing headlights at me, I’m really pleased. Then a police car pulls up – I’ve been walking down the motorway, get in the back of the car. So that’s why they’ve been beeping at me! Disappointing. The cops are very pleasant, and I tell them the “Laurie Lee/Free Palestine Walk” story. They’re obliging – they not only take me back to the road junction where I took the wrong turn (road signs here can sometimes be confusing – to me at least), they take me the same distance down the correct road I should have taken. (I don’t consider this as cheating because I have walked that distance, albeit in the wrong direction.) How wonderful it is to lie back in air-conditioned comfort, compared to the heat outside and the burden of the backpack, even if it is only for a few minutes! They say they will take me further, but I say, “No, no, camino, camino” (I must walk), in my garbled Spanish, and they let me out. I apologise again for my silly mistake, they nod sympathetically. Very civil, these Guardia Civil!

Back on the non-motorway road. I meet an old man, a Belgian, as brown and wizened as an ancient walnut, sitting on a wall, rucksack on the ground. I tell him what I’m doing, but get nothing out of him – I don’t even know in which direction he’s walking.

It’s savagely hot now. A much-needed beer, somewhere near Canizo, and off again. I have learned to utilise such breaks for refreshment to jot down events of the day in a little notebook I keep in my back pocket – a couple of words can bring everything to mind for more complete recording later in the diary.

The countryside is drier than further west, wild, uncultivated, and littered with great boulders among the dry grass – they glitter in the sun. There is a lot of mining in the area, some are large operations with heavy trucks going back and forth with aggregates for road-building. Forestry too, with narrow channels cut up the mountainside through the trees to access the timber.

Unlike east of Vigo, the forested areas here do not come right down to the road. Consequently, there is little cover to provide relief from the sun, and I suffer accordingly, resolve to buy sun lotion as a matter of urgency (something I should have done at the outset, stupid man). I’m getting burns on forehead, arms and legs. Sunny with plenty of shade is okay. But sunny with no cover is to be feared. Suddenly the blessed cool shade of a long tunnel burrowed through the mountainside. Then out again into the burning sun.

A few miles of minor roads, joining two sections of the main N-525. They provide an interlude of deep wooded shade. The road climbs, twists and turns in on itself as it meanders among the mountains. A bunch of cyclists (a common sight on these roads every day) come speeding down towards me, like a flight of disturbed birds.



Lubian

I climb up into Lubian – the excitement of seeing houses, the sheer delight of knowing that, shortly, the aching bones will be relieved, and I will be sitting unburdened in the shade, with an ice-cold beer in hand. Within minutes, I am sitting thus outside a bar. Two Germans approach, the woman in her late twenties, the man perhaps in his early thirties, they're on a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. I ask where they have come from. They have walked from Sevilla (Seville). The man tells me that their completed journey will be 600 miles. I'm mortified – it puts my own 400-mile trek a little in the shade. Fine-looking specimens, tall and strong-looking. We wish each other bon voyage and off they go. I look at their packs, they must weigh two or

three times that of mine, and they look as though they've just stepped out for a bleeding Sunday stroll! How do they do it? Probably sleep rough in the open too, goddamnit.

I get sun lotion and after-sun down the street – pharmacists are handy creatures for those like myself with little Spanish, they always seem to have a good command of English. In a square across from the pharmacy they're putting up awnings and stages for some kind of festival – could this be for the Camino A Santiago? It is. (The Camino is a pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, for religious or other reasons, from numerous different starting points, on foot or bicycle. Promoted by the government in Galicia, it now attracts many thousands every year.)

Off again for the final stretch of the day, always the hardest, the pack feels heavier, the joints wearier. The road climbs steeply for a mile or more and I'm exhausted, the sun has gone down, it's getting cold. Trudge on grimly, put one foot in front of the other and repeat the operation. Then – as always happens – a corner is turned, and there is Padornelo and an hotel. I'd like to know when the restaurant closes, but I can't understand from their Spanish. In any case it doesn't matter, I go to my room and fall into bed – no food, no bath, just blessed sleep.

## DAY 8 – SATURDAY, 27TH SEPTEMBER FROM PADORNELO TO PALACIOS DE SANABRIA

Get a bath in the morning. Surprised how good I feel – I was wrecked last night. It seems that the providers of accommodation don't mind you showering but they hate you to bathe, I've stayed at only one place that provided a bath plug. Have Spanish travellers a penchant for stealing bath plugs, or are Spanish hotel-owners exhibiting a cruel refusal to let you luxuriate? This impression is encouraged by the shortness of the baths, forcing a rigid upright sitting position with legs bent, or torso submerged and legs up the bathroom wall. - I came across only one full-length bath in my travels. I solve the bath plug problem by stuffing toilet paper down the plug-hole, if you pack it down tightly it works.

I've also noticed that, although there are usually non-smoking notices in hostel and hotel rooms, they have to provide, in the bathroom, a glass which can be used. In one place, they provided an ash-tray. So they know we do it on the sly.

The restaurant is closed, I have to make do with coffee and croissants at the bar/cafe.

There are quite a few cyclists and walkers on these old, non-motorway roads. Indeed, on my journey, I come across an entire motley collection of people on pilgrimage, serious walkers, and eccentrics, wandering around this part of Spain. Which category am I? No, mine is a *political* walk.

At lunchtime, I stop for a beer. I'm spending too much time texting, it's slowing down my progress. I must do more texting while walking (although I do this quite a bit already, sometimes just as a diversion).

Mid-afternoon, and I take a picture of the countryside a few miles east of Padornelo.

It's not as hot today, thank god. The sky is quite cloudy, the fierce sun only breaking through intermittently, and there is some cover from trees by the roadside.

I approach a restaurant in the late afternoon; it has a distinctly middle-class air about it. The diners on the terrace stare at me as I come in, discreetly taking in the "Free Palestine" T-shirt and its message. (I've had a very different reaction in working-class bars – they stare and ogle very directly.) A woman whispers something about "Palestinos" to her husband. I order a caldo and an excellent dessert (still can't take a meat course), and wolf it down noisily like a starving man. Is there a faint air of disapproval, or is it just my imagination?

Teatime on the road, and I take a picture of a beautiful old castle overlooking the river Tera.



Castle overlooking the river Tera

I walk on, there's been nothing around for miles, and pass through a small hamlet, but there is no place for refreshment, no hotel, no cafe, not even a bar.

It begins to rain, just a light downpour. I quite like the rain, provided it's not heavy, since it cools an overheated body (normally, I have to take some of my water and pour it down the back of my neck, to keep (briefly) cool.

A cyclist tells me there is definitely no hotel or accommodation at my planned stopping-place at Asturianos – I will have to go on to Mumbuey, around another 10 miles or so.

I can't face it, walking yet again until 11pm. On the other hand, if I sleep in the open (I consider it), I'll be ruined for any effective walking the next day. I walk a few miles and come to the little village of Palacios de Sanabria. There are two bars opposite each other, and I go into one, to ponder my situation. I must; ring my daughters to tell them not to worry; get some food – even though there's only tapas; fill up my water bottle; have some hot coffee.

I tell the barman my predicament. Is there, perhaps, a place here in the village where I can stay for the night, I ask in my mangled Spanish? A torrent of Spanish in reply – half the drinkers in the bar join in – the gist is that there is a house across the road, a Senora Theresa. I check all of the half dozen or so houses there, ringing the door bells – no response from any of them – are they all out on the piss (it is a Saturday night, after all – just like Newcastle, then) – or has mass deafness visited the neighbourhood? Return to the bar – they shrug – what can they do? I go to the other bar across the road, maybe I'll have more luck there. The barmaid rings the senora's house, no answer, she'll try later. I have a drink or two, someone buys me a drink "Por los Palestinos". I have a cigarette outside, and a couple offer to drive me to Mumbuey – I explain why I must walk.

A young woman wants to know my organisation. I take a page out of my notebook, and write down “PSC, Newcastle, Palestine Solidarity Campaign”. Then, lo and behold, there is Santa Theresa, standing over me. I scramble my things together, and follow her to her house.

“I wish to comer (eat)”? “Si, si”. She brings me caldo, a tortilla, fruit, and a bottle of red wine – and leaves me to it. I’m just finishing the figs when she comes back – we fix a price for meal, bed and breakfast (not cheap, but it’s okay), and I follow her upstairs. There is a large room with six beds in it (all empty) – she obviously does lodgers when she can. When she has left, I discover that I have left my mobile downstairs. I stumble around in the dark but am unable to find it – texting my diary to the UK will have to wait (and I’ve already texted my daughters while still in the bar).

## DAY 9 – SUNDAY, 28TH SEPTEMBER FROM PALACIOS DE SANABRIA TO OTERO DE BODAS

Up early, and, as well as writing my diary for the day, do a little information sheet detailing the websites recording my “Free Palestine” walk (a girl in the bar last night gave me the idea).

Take a picture of Senora Theresa in front of her house (it doesn’t come out). Before leaving she writes out a telephone number for me – useful perhaps in an emergency? Well, no – it’s her own number, she thinks I might drum up some business for her. Go back to the bar before leaving, give them a handwritten copy of the information sheet, “Dicen todos vos amigos” – tell all your friends. (Unfortunately, I never get the information sheet typed and copied, so it’s of no further use.)

Coming out of the village it’s pleasantly warm – the real heat comes in the afternoon. Yes, that’s why they have siestas, stupid!.

Nice lunch outside cafe in Mumbuey. As I walk outside with lunch in hand I hear them talking volubly about Los Palestinos – at least I’ve created some interest.

Motorway trouble again! A road sign misleads me on to it. The strange thing is that, this time, no-one among the oncoming traffic flashes their lights or beeps their horns in warning. I realise that this might be because a man with a Palestinian political message on his chest is frantically waving them to stop – maybe they think I’m some kind of Palestinian TERRORISTA with a malevolent car-jacking intent? A couple of old dears do stop, however, and take me back to where I went wrong. I can’t be arsed to go back to the offending sign to see what misled me, it’s too hot – SO I STILL DON’T KNOW!

Later, a diner tells me, when I have a beer at the restaurant near the junction where I leave the N-525 and take the N-631; a road number on a blue background is an autopista; a road number on a white background is a non- motorway. This does help me later to avoid further motorway trouble.

The wild, uncultivated scrubland continues – there is nothing for miles – not a hotel, not a bar or restaurant, not a damned thing! At last! A service station-cum-bar at Otero de Bodas, my planned destination for the day! The hotel opposite is abandoned, closed and shuttered, the sign on its roof broken and twisted. Not a good sign. A guy with good English tells me that no nearby accommodation is available – it’s the hunting season and the hunters have taken everything there is. He looks and sounds credible. So I am in the shit again, just like last night! He does tell me that sparsely-populated areas such as this end at Zamora, and from there to Madrid I should have no further problems with food and shelter. It’s a relief to know (turns out later that he was wrong).

He very kindly rings around, finds me a place and drives me there. It’s an entire (and well-appointed) house. News of my imminent arrival has been passed around, and a group of curious villagers are there in the little square. The wife and daughter are there to welcome me – then off to the bar while they see to the bed-linen etc. I think I have a room in their house, but find out later that I have the entire house to myself.



More curious villagers at the bar – get fairly pissed, back to my own little casa. Too tired to write up diary. It can wait until morning.

DAY 10 – MONDAY, 29TH SEPTEMBER  
FROM OTERO DE BODAS TO POZUELO DE TABARA



Daughter of the family whose house I rented

Up at 6.30 and steep in a long, luxurious hot bath, wash my hair, write my diary. At 8 as promised, the daughter, Judith (a student) picks me up, to take me back to Oteron de Bodas. First I take a picture of her (a very bad picture, it transpires) outside the house where I stayed. It's chilly and very misty, as bad as an English autumn.

Back at the same service station-cum-bar as the previous evening, some hunters come in as I'm having breakfast. They are hunting deer. They wish me "Buen viaje" (Bon Voyage) as they leave. "Good hunting", I say.

I make good progress in the next few hours - there's nothing to stop for. If anything the country is even less populated than before. At mid-day I see a bar sign, hurry towards it. Disappointment - the place is abandoned, some of the windows are smashed.

A car pulls up in front of me, and a middle-aged lady offers me a lift. She asks me if I'm going to Santiago (de Compostela) - a famous place of pilgrimage of course. A number of people have asked me this - even though it's patently obvious I'm going in the opposite direction. Could it be that they're as shit at navigation as I am? If we had both been 18 I might have taken up her offer. As it is, I press on.

The heat is tolerable. I'm doing my anti-fascist salute at oncoming traffic every day now, though, in truth, the traffic is not heavy. If I get a beep, flashing lights, or whatever in reply before the vehicle has pulled up level with me, I flip my arm up even higher in acknowledgement - then I and the driver are both contento. As I'm doing a salute, a Guardia Civil police car speeds by, but it's okay, they're cool, it's a free country. Later, another police car passes, and one of the cops raises his arm in a return salute.

The road goes on and on. As I top each gentle rise in this flat country, I look for Tabara. At last it looms into view - I'm hungry. A hotel in the village plaza. I have a leisurely meal, and spend two hours there, mostly finishing my diary. As I leave, the woman warns me that there is no further accommodation until Zamora, which is some 30 miles away.

I soon find some only a few miles down the road - did she know? I get into Pozuelo de Tabara around 6.30 - my best day yet to have finished my 20-mile minimum by this time. I'm so pleased - my feet no longer plague me with blisters, my thighs and upper leg muscles no longer ache to the same extent, and even the swelling above my right ankle (which had been causing me concern) seems to have gone down somewhat.

A sizeable bar/restaurant, a young couple with their baby in conversation at the bar. The young woman has a fair grasp of English. I tell them what I'm doing. When I mention the fight for justice for the Palestinians she jumps up, exclaiming, "I am freedom" – her name is Libertad! She looks up Newcastle PSC on her mobile phone - not like my ancient mobile - and there is the stuff about my walk, it's the first time I've seen it. We talk of the dire employment situation in both Spain and the UK. I get a room.



Later, I sit outside with my drink and take in the beautiful evening.

**DAY 11 - TUESDAY, 30TH SEPTEMBER  
FROM POZUELO DE TABARA TO ZAMORA.**

At breakfast, I spend so much time writing my diary, and texting the daily report that I don't set off until 11.30am – should have done more last night.

The countryside now is more cultivated, and the road traffic is heavier. I stride out with a faster pace, to make up for lost time. It's warm but not yet hot.

I notice, as I do my anti-fascist saluting, that more vehicles seem to be beeping, flashing lights, raising arms, and so on, as happened earlier. This is especially so with the trucks. Could it be that a mobile-owning trucking fraternity have passed the word to each other (a la Clint Eastwood and his monkey) to watch out for the crazy inglese (mucho poco loco) with the Palestinian message on his chest? The Guardia seem especially supportive, arms raised, just as previously.

I march on, and come across a restaurant overlooking the river Esla – need a good meal for the slog ahead. I order lamb chops – and the plate is delivered with no less than seven large lamb chops – they're feeding up the Palestinian supporter, bless them!



Off again, over the bridge, and a car pulls up. Martelino is a nice guy, his English is good, so I tell him Laurie's story, how he returned to fight in the Guerra Civil, por la justicia, as we seek justice now for the Palestinians. I refuse the lift. He opens the boot – there is a large basket of white roses. Take some, take as many as you want ! I say I will take two, one for each of mis hijas (my daughters).

I bump in to two Frenchmen, who look so scruffy that I feel well-dressed in comparison, each pulling a trolley piled with their worldly goods. They're travelling 1,200 miles! I feel put in my place (as previously with the two Germans).

The suburbs of Zamora seem to go on for ever. Two women I meet are massively helpful. They book a hostel for me, via their mobile phone, and would drive me there, but accept that I have to walk. The daughter sketches a little map for me. I arrive at the hostel too late to go out for a drink.

A bizarre idea occurs to me. Suppose Benjamin Netanyahu tried to walk across Spain, with a T-shirt emblazoned (on top of an Israeli flag) with a legend such as "WE'RE STEALING ALL OF THE PALESTINIAN'S LAND WITH AMERICAN HELP – WHAT DO YOU THINK ABOUT THAT, BUDDY?". I fancy he might be pilloried, he might be biblically stoned ...

**DAY 12 – WEDNESDAY, 1ST OCTOBER  
REST DAY AT ZAMORA.**

There are chores to do; collect PSC stuff from the post office, get clothes washed, get another throw-away camera. The Post Office is just around the corner from the hostel – I collect the parcel of PSC "Free Palestine" badges and "Disappearing Palestine" cards. The woman at the hostel takes me to a cleaners (I collect the clothes later in the day), and a camera shop where I make the purchase.



The river at Zamora



Zamora –“Free Palestine” mural by the river

Afterwards, I descend the streets to the river, take photographs, walk along the riverbank looking for a suitable cafe. A shed by the river is painted with a “Palestina Libre” message and mural – I take a photograph.

I find a bar/cafe, and sit outside on the terrace with a glass of wine, writing my diary. A well-dressed middle-aged couple are sitting nearby. I proffer them a PSC badge. The woman answers curtly, “No!”

In the evening, an Italian restaurant next to the hostel, where I have an indifferent Bolognese, and continue with the diary.

A quiet day. No backpack – heaven!

### DAY 13 – THURSDAY, 2ND OCTOBER FROM ZAMORA TO TORO.

I leave the hostel. The morning chill is sufficient for me to wear jeans and a pullover – I’ll change later when it warms up.

Go to the same central plaza where I arrived – I like the cafeteria there. I sit with my coffee and croissants, writing up my diary. I start off mid-morning.

Going through the outskirts of Zamora I spot a shop selling cameras – the man there is really helpful, and shows me how to work the camera which I had tried and failed to use the previous evening.

I wander in to a large supermercado out of curiosity – it would be nice to buy a melon for the road but they’re huge and weigh a ton, it would be like carrying a small baby in addition to the rucksack.

Out on the road, I change into my shorts and Palestinian T-shirt as the morning heats up. I walk on. At Fresno de la Frontera I have beers and a good lunch. What a beautiful name, it beats Jarrow or Gateshead any day of the week. The man at the next table is a mechanic. I tell him the “Palestinian walk” story as best as I can, and give him an official PSC badge from the stock I collected yesterday.

As I walk through the afternoon heat, I look out for Monte la Reina, the next village on my route. I walk on and on, but it never appears. What happened, did the Michelin guys get it wrong, did I miss it in some heat-induced hallucination or (forewarned) did some dastardly Zionist agents camouflage it to cause alarm and confusion? Mysteriously, I never do see Monte la Reina (another lovely name).

Around a bend, there is Toro, towering above me on a massive rock. A steep climb in to the town, with a spurt of energy brought on by the prospect of refreshment in cool shade. I have a couple of drinks at the first bar I come to, and give the waitress a SPC badge. One of the drinkers tells me where to find a hostel.

The manager tells me the price for a “solo” room. He waves aside the usual formalities of presentation of my passport, writing out the bill, my signing it, and so on – he will show me to my room and we can do all that stuff later. I unpack my things, stretch out on the bed, relax. Later, as I’m drinking at the bar, he comes across and asks – demands – my passport. I go to my room and get it, then to his office to complete the formalities. The price has gone up – I object – he insists, no, I mis-heard. We both know it’s a cheap con, but he knows that a weary traveller is not going to get his things together and decamp rather than pay the extra dineros – and he’s right. I stay, but I am not best pleased.

The evening doesn’t get any better.. I give the barmaid a PSC badge, but when I invite a group of drinkers to take some they refuse, they’re “not political”. Around midnight as they leave, I say to one of them, “I’d like to thank you for your support for the Palestinians”. I hear them muttering as they go out of the door. Not a great evening, all told. I go to my room and sleep.

#### DAY 14 – FRIDAY 3RD OCTOBER FROM TORO TO VALLALODID AND REST.

Laurie on his 1935 journey, got a lift at two points; one was a car which took him all the way from Toro to Valladolid – some 40 miles. I will take a bus.

To the bus station – a driver shows me the stand for the bus to Valladolid, I’ve arrived just in time, it’s leaving. It’s sheer bliss to sit back and be driven, and to be relieved of the burden of the backpack. Then I’m at Valladolid, it’s only 9.30 in the morning, and I’ve got the whole day off!

I walk through a park to the city centre, take a picture of a man and baby sitting by a pond, with fountains as backdrop. At the Plaza Zorilla some students are doing a charity stall – we exchange donations and I give out PSC badges.



Valladolid - man and baby in the park

A taxi driver knows of two hostels next to each other, and takes me – right back to the bus station. They prove to be full, so back to the city centre where I find one within 15 minutes.

Laurie talks about Valladolid near the cathedral in the 1930s how the street urchins, blind beggars, and poor soldiers from the nearby barracks, intermingled at night in a froth of impoverished humanity. It’s very far from this today.



Valladolid – Plaza Zorilla

I wander around the city – many elegant plazas, shops and buildings, women wearing the latest fashions. The populace throng the outdoor cafes. Drinking, chatting, taking in the afternoon sun.

I take photographs – a palace, a theatre, a plaza, the house where Cervantes lived, etc (due to my execrable photography skills most don’t come out).

In the evening, I settle down in a bar/cafe which is bright but not too crowded. I have seafood tapas, and beer with a large whisky chaser (it helps the thought



processes) – and write the diary. Distant city, drink and notebook – shit, I feel like Graham Greene ! I’ve noticed that people love writers – they’re curious, they treat you well, waiters fuss over you, attend to every need.

I end up very late in one of those trendy places frequented by young people with money to spare. What the hell am I doing? Outside, some students give me directions back to the hostel – I give them PSC badges.



**One of the main squares in Valladolid**



**Street scene in Valladolid**



**Church - Valladolid**



**Valladolid - theatre**



**The house where Cervantes lived in Valladolid**

DAY 15 – SATURDAY, 4TH OCTOBER  
FROM VALLADOLID TO OLMEDO



Leaving Valladolid

I'm sorry to leave Valladolid, I would have liked to stay a week or more, but neither time nor money permits.

It can be difficult for a walker, when leaving a large town, to find the correct road. Not this time, however, I know the main road I require passes near to the bus station. Back there I have cafe con leche and croissants – I've become continental – and make the trek through the outskirts to the open road.

Late morning and it's getting hot again. I change into shorts by the roadside, hope the passing traffic doesn't mind my little strip number.

By lunchtime I'm in need of a drink and some shade, but there's nothing in sight – just the open road stretching ahead. Then, a sign for a restaurant – “200 metres” – off-road. I'm disappointed, it's shuttered up and abandoned. Rather than walking back to where I left the road, I climb over a 6-foot high wire fence, though I'm concerned about a cut or other damage to my legs, but it's okay. I keep going on bananas.

Early in the afternoon, and I come across a small cafe, order a beer, and go to sit outside. I get into conversation with a Spanish couple – they live nearby – and tell them my story. They donate two euros, “For you”. No, but I will take it “por los Palestinos”. I give them a “Free Palestine” badge, leave, and realise down the road that I've forgotten to pay for my beer. I hope they will defend me to the waitress.

On into the savage heat of the afternoon. At last, in late afternoon, when the sun is at its hottest, a large bar and restaurant appears. It's a Saturday afternoon and the locals are whooping it up. The bar is crowded – someone pops a bottle of champagne – they're getting really rowdy, some of them are dancing. What will they be like at midnight? Just like Newcastle, then! I sit outside for a cigarette – a couple tell me they doubt I will get accommodation at Alcarazen, where my 20 miles is up – they prove to be correct. It's too hot, there's no awning or tree for shade, so I go back in and have tapas with my beer. I leave my water bottle (the only thing I lost on my entire trip).

Thankfully, in view of the lost water bottle, it has turned overcast. There is a roadside hotel a mile or two short of Alcarazen, but I won't have completed my 20 miles, so press on, even though I might have to do 25 to Olmedo. And that's what happens. The last few miles I'm walking in the dark – no water, no cigarettes. I can see the lights in the distance, but it seems to take forever to get to get there.

I fall into the first bar I come to. Two guys there from Madrid, out for a trip somewhere, turn out to be – Spanish pro-Palestinian activists! We talk – the mother of one is a Muslim – then they have to be off. I give them “Free Palestine” badges. The barmaid tells me there is a hotel a couple of hundred metres away.

The hotel seems to be frequented by lorry drivers. I need cash, so walk over to the little town and stay drinking there. A curious young barmaid comes out to look me over as I sit outside with my drink and cigarette. Black satin hotpants, with top to match, good legs, and she knows it. A rugged old man sitting nearby gets up and accosts her, and I catch, “menos cincuenta anos” (“If I was fifty years younger”) – we laugh, he sits back down, she (pleased I think) goes back in. Another old guy comes by and sits down at my table – he's drinking water, and this man is definitely more than a little crazy. He talks, but I can't understand – every so often he breaks into song. I indicate, would he like to join me in a beer and whisky chaser? No, he prefers agua. After two or three snatches of song he wanders off down the street, glass of water in hand. Drunk? I don't think so. More than a little unhinged (mucho poco loco). People stroll by in twos and threes, taking in the evening.

Back to the hotel.

## DAY 16 – SUNDAY, 5TH OCTOBER FROM OLMEDO TO SANCHIDRIAN

Late start again, because I have to write my diary (which I should have done last night). I leave, forgetting to replace the lost water bottle.

As the morning heats up I do my usual roadside striptease, switching from jeans to shorts, and applying sun lotion.



**Beer at a service station looking across to Tolocino**

Around lunchtime, a service station. I have a beer, buy two bottles of water, take a picture of the little hamlet of Tolocino across the road.

Strolling through the flat countryside in the afternoon, I hear the gentle tinkling of bells – a flock of sheep ,and, nearby, the shepherd with his dog. How we city slickers love this sort of stuff !

Mid-afternoon – a restaurant next to a service-station, but it's closed. "Domingo" (Sunday) explains the station attendant. Why don't the Spaniards eat on Sundays ? I sit outside on the forecourt with a beer.

At teatime , a "knife and fork" sign entices me off the road to the village of Monuenga (walkers are wary of such diversions, which represent lost time and effort) – but I'm hungry. Inside the bar several card games are in progress. Spanish people don't do sedate with their cards – they fling them down dramatically, have frequent arguments, and boisterously enjoy themselves. I eat a sort of scampi, and dole out some PSC badges.

I walk on into the evening - the sun lowers amidst a mackerel sky, and a rich, earthy smell blows from the fields. Then it's dark, bleak and desolate, not a light to be seen, and getting colder – I put on my pullover and jeans. I trudge on, then – lights, civilisation ahead.

A police car pulls up – the Guardia beckon me over. They point to the ditch and fields. I must go down there. Not understanding, I think they mean I must sleep there for the night. One keeps pointing to his yellow vest, it dawns on me, I must wear something bright! I whip off my black pullover, revealing the white Palestinian T-shirt. Is this okay? No, no he insists – must be yellow, yellow ! The penny drops – I must walk in the ditch and fields. They speed off. I briefly consider carrying on as before, then reject the notion – if they sneak back to check on me, I will legally be in the shit (ignoring police instructions, breaking highway laws etc., etc.) Progress through the springy grass is slower – but the distant lights are only a mile or so away.

Sanchidrian is just off road, but I need a place for the night. Half the men in the village seem to be at the local bar, watching "el futbol". The barmaid says there is no chance of accommodation in the village – I must go to nearby Avila. As I'm waiting for the taxi, the football match on the TV ends – the massed ranks of the villagers rise as one, and leave the bar – about three remain. I wonder how much (or how little) they spent when they were there.

The taxi takes me to Avila. I tell Ismael, the driver, the "Palestine walk" story and give him and the hostel manageress PSC badges. Too tired to write diary before bed.



DAY 17 – MONDAY, 6TH OCTOBER  
FROM SANCHIDRIAN TO SEGOVIA.

A late start again due to my not having written the diary the night before. The waiter wants to take me back to Sanchidrian, he won't call Ismael, who I have already arranged to pick me up – and he can't take me until he's off at mid-day. I lose my cool, he says calm down – he telephones. Ismael duly arrives and drives me back to the main road at Sanchidrian where I left it. I am so intent on starting that I forget to take a photo of him.

I'm getting quite a good response to my anti-fascist saluting – especially from lorries. It's heartening when a driver gives multiple hoots on his horn. I reflect that I've done more anti-fascist saluting across the breadth of Spain than La Pasionara. Laurie, you would have been proud of me !

Taking my lunchtime drink in the shade, a man comes out and sits at the next table. It's obvious he wants to say something on the Palestinian issue. At last he ventures, pointing to my "Free Palestine" T-shirt. "Terroristas!" he asserts, "Mal". "Los Israelis son los terroristas" say I, "Propaganda", without knowing the Spanish equivalent. He goes back inside.



Villacastin – where I switch roads to Segovia

Take a photograph at Villacastin, where I switch from the N-601 to the N-110 for the final leg into Segovia. A couple have stopped – is it to offer me a lift? I explain my "Free Palestine" walk. "Muy bien" they say. After they drive away I realize that I hadn't thought to give them PSC badges.

On the N-110, there is absolutely nothing on the road for mile after mile – I see only the lights of distant villages and farm buildings. It becomes apparent that I might have to walk all the way to Segovia to get shelter – and so it proves. I walk on into the night, under a full moon. It gets colder, and I put my pullover on. Colder still, and I switch

from shorts to jeans. I see a mass of distant lights. Surely this must be Segovia ! It isn't, the road swings away. It rains. I put on my plastic mac – the rain stops – I'm too tired to take the mac off, even though it's causing me to sweat. I lie down full length on the hard shoulder – the only time I have ever done so – and find it difficult to get back up. I stumble on until after 2 in the morning.

Finally. Segovia, an hotel! – I've been 14 hours on the road and walked 32 miles, my longest daily distance yet. The night clerk is momentarily taken aback by the bedraggled stranger – I'm not the sort of customer he's used to, but he's too polite to show it.

Then a lovely hot bath to relieve the aching bones. A long hot bath is the best thing of all, better even than eating. I lie in bed and put the TV on. I'm amused to see they have porn channels just like those in the UK – the trailers to encourage punters to buy are, if anything, even saltier. How Franco would have frowned !

DAY 18 – TUESDAY, 7TH OCTOBER  
REST AND SIGHT-SEEING DAY IN SEGOVIA.



**Segovia – plaza and cathedral**



**Segovia – a bird pecks at my tapas**



**Looking out from Segovia**



**Looking out on Segovia**

Leave the hotel and have breakfast in the bus station cafeteria. Oh for a full English breakfast! That sets you up for the whole day (though I rarely have one at home). The kind you get in those “British” pubs in Majorca; the ones where Britain’s youth disport ; the ones with cocktails with suggestive-sounding names; the ones to avoid except in times of desperation.

I find a hostel in the centre. Sit in a restaurant in a spacious plaza writing my diary. A group of American youths sit nearby – I hope they will react to my Palestinian T- shirt – they don’t. A long lunch then wander idly around the town taking photographs.

The hostel manageress helps me with bus times and stopping points for my final ride to Madrid (as Laurie did). She’s intrigued by Laurie’s story – I give her a PSC badge.



In the evening I sit writing on the terrace of a cafe, fortified by whisky and cokes, until it gets too cold. Shouts and raucous laughter from the disco below my room as I plan tomorrow's walk.

**DAY 19 – WEDNESDAY, 8TH OCTOBER  
FROM SEGOVIA TO NAVACERRADA**



**Leaving Segovia – the aqueduct**



**Leaving Segovia – the mountains ahead**

Breakfast in a tiny Spanish bar at the same plaza where I wrote my diary yesterday. Groups of tourists with their guides are continually going past. I spot a group of American tourists and drift past them. If they take in my "Free Palestine" T-shirt they don't show it.

I have a little trouble finding the right road out of Segovia – a couple direct me to the Aqueduct. It's sunny as I leave the suburbs behind me - but directly ahead are the mountains, their tops shrouded in mist, and I will be walking into them.

At San Idelfonso La Granja there's an attractive restaurant, but I put aside the thought of lunch because I've made insufficient progress. The manager speaks very good English - as I leave after telling my Laurie Lee story, he sticks his head out of the window - would I like a bocadillo (sandwich)? No, thanks, I never eat bread.

At La Pradera de Navahorno - I really must eat. Two caldos (broths), but they are thin and watery. The waiter is friendly. I give him a PSC badge, and another to the diner at the next table, who looks at the "Disappearing Palestine" card and tells me he knows the history. Good!

The road climbs and climbs in heavily wooded country. There are lots of cars parked by the roadside. Are they caballeros taking exercise on the back seats with their chicas? But no, the cars are always empty of people. Hunters, then? But there is no sound of shooting. Finally I find a guy by his car, he looks like a hunter, dressed in khaki, and ask him. No, he says, pointing to a basket of - mushrooms. So they're hunting wild mushrooms! But why is he dressed like a hunter - do they have to sneak up on these wild things?



**Climbing up out of Segovia**

It gets colder, damper, and mistier as the road ascends ever

upward - I've gone in a short distance from 4,200 feet to 5,500 feet and I'm still climbing. It's pretty cold now, I don jeans, sweater, and mac, I'm amidst the swirling mist I saw above me in the morning. Still the road twists and turns and climbs on - I'm very tired. At last, at 1,880 metres (6,100 feet), I hit the summit -



**Out of Segovia - summit on way to Navacerrada**

and photograph the marker sign. No wonder the lady at the hostel, when I showed her my route, made the Spanish equivalent of "Phew!"

At the summit, there's a ski resort, several hotels, all except one closed as it's out-of-season. Only the bar/cafe is open at the one which is open. The barman says there is nothing before Navacerrada, making it another 25-mile hike for the day. One of the drinkers says he will give me a lift. I explain my walk, pointing to the "Free Palestine" T-shirt, very kind, but I have to walk. PSC badges are doled out. He tells me the road is now downwards all the way - a

comforting thought.

Looking down on leaving, the mist gives a ghostly quality to the villages below. I take pictures (but they don't come out, I haven't used the flash mechanism). The man who offered me a lift passes in his car, shouts "Buen viaje", and is gone. I plod on downwards in the dark, finally arrive at Navacerrada, pass by a prosperous-looking hotel to find a hostel.

At the nearest bar a guy rings round for me, says I won't find anywhere else. But first I go to an Italian restaurant, The waiter is from Chile. I tell him that an American I once met, an oilman who had visited 92 countries in 5 years, had told me that the most beautiful women in the world (beautiful coffee-coloured women) were those in Santiago. Yes, he says, beautiful women in Chile! I ask him if he ever goes home. No, he says, a little sadly - because of "la familia". I'm left to speculate on what he means.

Back to that hotel, bedraggled but sporting the "Free Palestine" T-shirt. The clerk at reception tells me they're full - now I'm really in the shit! I'm about to leave, and a Dutchman intervenes and fixes things. I'm given a room. Wonderful to soak in a hot bath! Wash my hair, too.

## **DAY 20 – THURSDAY, 9TH OCTOBER FROM NAVCERRADA TO MADRID – FINITO**



**Arrival at Collado Mediano**

Laurie got 2 lifts on his trek from Vigo to Madrid ; the first was from Toro to Valladolid; the second was on his second day out from Segovia – he walked one complete day, then he was given a lift at some point during the second day, into Madrid. These two lifts reduced the walking part of his total journey by some 70 miles. I therefore plan to similarly walk a part of the day, and then get a bus to Madrid.

A long hot bath and soak in the morning, even though I had one last night.. At breakfast they have cereal (which I've been missing) – but not the full English breakfast I've been longing for.

The hotel staff tell me that if I'm not getting the bus from Navacerrada (it's no good because I have to walk at least a few miles), it will be very difficult to get to the next stop on the bus route. They advise walking to Collado Mediano where I can get a train to Madrid.

I thoughtlessly leave my PSC stuff at the breakfast table – just as I'm leaving the hotel, the waitress rushes out to give it to me.

I walk to Collado Mediano in the rain, lose my way and have to retrace my steps. After a few miles, there it is. So this is it, then, the end of my walking ! I take a picture of the sign into the town, a bullfight poster in the town (they're still Spanish, they still do bullfighting).

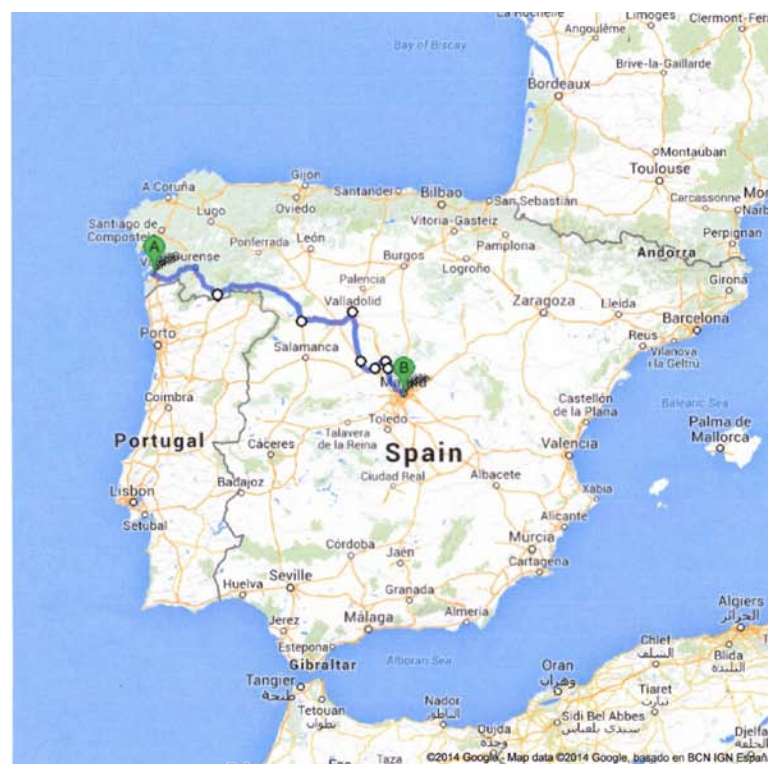
A woman helps me buy the ticket from the machine (apparently there are two stations in Madrid, and I want the second, most central one). The train arrives at 12.45 and we speed towards Madrid. Stupidly, I imagine Madrid to be the terminus – the man next to me tells me we have passed Madrid, I'm on the way to Guadarrama. I get off at the next station and rush to the other platform, just in time to catch a train going the other way.



**Bullfight poster at Collado Mediano**

I finally arrive in Madrid at 2.15 in the afternoon, under a leaden sky. I had kept one “Free Palestine” T-shirt clean and un-worn and one pair of white walking socks. No group of pro-Palestinian Spanish activists greet me to walk in comradely fashion (my “Free Palestine” T-shirt prominent in the throng) through the streets of central Madrid. There is no official announcement in El Pais of “... the arrival in town of the distinguished British scholar on the Palestinian question, Sr. Tinmouth”. I am swallowed up, unceremoniously and anonymously, in the great maw of Madrid.

I have travelled some 440 miles across Spain, taking transport as Laurie did for 70 of these, and walking 370 miles. Ignoring rest days and transport periods, I have averaged a walking distance of just over 22 miles per day, exceeding my planned daily average of 20.



**My journey from Vigo to Madrid**



I look for a hostel in the rain. I will celebrate tonight, and hand out as much PSC stuff as I can in the day or two I stay in Madrid before flying home.



**Madrid – Fuente de Cibeles**



**Madrid – my favourite cafe off the Paseo de Prado**



**Madrid – where I bought souvenirs**



**Madrid – middle-of-the-road restaurant**



**Street in central Madrid**



**Bar in central Madrid**



**Madrid - panaderia**



My journey is over.

## Epilogue

I arrived in Madrid on day 20 of my walk, in the early afternoon, and left two days later, on a Saturday evening, to fly back to the UK.

In between, I finally caught up with the backlog in my diary, mostly written on the terrace of what became my favourite cafeteria, just off the Paseo de Prado.

I failed to collect further PSC supplies from the main post office (they said they had not yet arrived), and distributed what supplies I had left in the cafes and restaurants on my last day.

A Swedish couple I met not only had heard of Laurie Lee, they had actually read his books, including “As I Walked Out One Midsummer Morning”. We talked about Swedish stuff on British tv, “Wallander”, “The Bridge”, and so on. Henning Mankell, the author of “Wallander”, was involved in the attempt to break the siege of Gaza by that fateful convoy of boats attacked by the Israelis with murderous results.

In the UK it is a rare week that does not go by without my losing at least one pair of reading glasses. I managed my walk with the loss only of one water bottle. In Madrid, however, I twice almost lost my precious diary. I left it in a Turkish kebab house at midnight, and raced back to recover it. The next, final morning, I left it in a bag at the foot of the stand in the bus station, deposited on the ground while I checked bus times to the airport. In the adjacent train station concourse I realised and raced back upstairs. Disaster, it wasn't there! Then I saw the group of Spaniards holding the bag and discussing what to do with it. Saved again!

I never got into the Prado to see Picasso's “Guernica” (or anything else) – the queue was long and I had too many things to do on my last day. I snapped anything interesting, to use up my remaining photographs, bought little souvenirs for my grandchildren

Back in the UK, on the airport bus to London Victoria, I was delighted to see the Spanish girls from the same flight, shouting to each other as we entered the capital, and acting generally in as sassy a manner as any group of Geordie girls on a Saturday night out.

I took the night bus north rather than wait for a train the next day – I refused my daughters' offers to pick me up at Newcastle – I could just as easily get the Metro home. Mick, another PSC activist, was there at the bus station to welcome me – nice of him to be there at 6am on a Sunday morning.

Lunch at my youngest daughter's, and as I had guessed, she had cooked what I had been dreaming of – roast lamb with mint sauce (nice with pimientos but not quite the same). My granddaughter Rena had festooned the windows and doors with “welcome home” messages and cards. Home at last!



Welcome home cards

I will continue, as we do most weekends in the centre of Newcastle, to do the mundane business of the PSC stall, the giving out of leaflets, talking to people. It is with such small efforts, replicated in towns and cities around the world, that ordinary people, together with the struggle of the Palestinians themselves, will effect change, to bring justice and a state to the Palestinian people and an end to their long oppression.

October 2014