

# TOURISTIC AND TERRITORIAL DIMENSION OF THE 'RUTA NORTE' OF THE WAY OF SAINT JAMES IN THE BASQUE COUNTRY: DIFFERENT IDEAS, VALUATIONS AND PROPOSALS FOR MANAGEMENT OF A MULTIFACETED PHENOMENON

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## I. INTRODUCTION THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO, A MULTIFACETED PHENOMENON

The Camino de Santiago is a **multifaceted phenomenon**, deeply rooted in Europe.

Firstly we are faced with a **cultural** reference of the first order, as the recognition it has been awarded well testify: *First European Cultural Itinerary* (Council of Europe, 1987), *World Heritage* (UNESCO, 1993), *Treasure of the Spanish Immaterial Cultural Patrimony* (The International Bureau of Cultural Capitals, 2009), *Cultural Asset in the category collection of historic sites* (Decree 14/200, Law of Basque cultural patrimony). Evidently the declaration of the Camino de Santiago as world heritage by UNESCO guarantees it an exceptional universal value which transcends borders but at the same time highlights its fragility, its need for conservation and, in short, the commitment that has been assumed on a global level to its defence, protection, maintenance and rehabilitation. As a patrimonial asset it is part of the cultural heritage, and within the cultural heritage is part of the intangible or immaterial cultural heritage: more specifically it is a cultural itinerary, something which grants it with some unique features.

Secondly, it has an unarguable **religious** and **spiritual** aspect in as much as it is a pilgrimage route, that is to say a journey made by a believer induced by religious considerations to a place regarded as sacred due to its spiritual magnetism. However, as will be shown here, the present day motivations to embark upon the Camino de Santiago are not always strictly religious or spiritual but often combine with aspirations of leisure. One notices that the weight of these respective factors in the decision making process has changed over the years following, for example, philosophical currents and the greater or lesser secularisation within society.

For its part the **territorial** dimension is represented by a wide range of characteristics. The Camino de Santiago is a cultural itinerary which, while accommodating the geographic characteristics of the pre-existing landscape, has, over the centuries, left its mark on them thanks to the transfer of ideas, architectural and urban styles, etc. it has allowed. What is more, like any route, it has acquired its reason for existence through that implied by a movement in space from a starting point (the place of residence) to a destination (the cathedral/sanctuary of Santiago de Compostela), with the journey itself achieving as much or more importance than the experience at the destination.

Evidently the Camino de Santiago has been the object of touristic use since past times, something which has experienced a particular revival as a result of the 'Jacobean year' in 1993. So today the route during the Jacobean year is a **touristic product**, an exponent of cultural tourism but also religious tourism and pilgrimages: It is promoted and commercialised by public institutions and private companies (e.g. travel agencies) alike, through various promotional media and marketing strategies (publications, guides, web pages, etc.) There is no doubt that the Camino constitutes a successful and internationally recognised touristic product which is at the same time 'prestigious', due to the value placed on it by being placed on the list of world heritage sites.

Closely connected to its touristic aspect is the **economic** dimension of the Camino de Santiago, a dimension with the ability to generate income and employment. Following on from this, its capacity as an instrument for regeneration and development of those places it passes through has been of emphasis, particularly in the last few years, and in short as a factor in regional development.

Also related to this is the Camino's **institutional** dimension which has come about as a result of the growing attention given to the Camino by numerous public and private institutions from various areas of competence.

## II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

In the Basque Country, as within Europe, we can speak of, rather than the Camino, the Caminos de Santiago. In effect two ways, the routes of which are marked out by hostels and patrimonial elements, cross the Basque territory towards the same destination. On the one hand, the Camino Frances which, if one considers the territory covered, is less important in the Basque Country than in neighbouring territories (Navarra, La Rioja and Burgos), and on the other the Ruta Norte which runs along the rough Guipuzcoan and Biscay coast. Thus the Basque Country is the front door of the latter, on which was recorded 17,582 overnight stays in 2009 (three times those recorded in 2006).

This paper is based on the conviction that understanding, planning and managing a multifaceted phenomenon such as the Camino de Santiago demands an integral vision. Emphasis will be placed on the territorial and touristic dimension and, in particular, on the idea the users of and others involved in the Camino have of it and how they value it. The primary objective consists of evaluating the characteristics and impact of the Ruta Norte of the Camino de Santiago in the Basque Country. With this as our aim, the territorial framework within which the Camino is integrated is presented and the basic touristic infrastructure which articulates the route (accommodation network, restaurants, tourist information

offices) is analysed, as well as the existing demand, with foreign pilgrims being paid special attention. The valuation of the journey given by the protagonists is studied, as is that given by the heads of various institutions. Thereafter, the principal conceptions and interpretations encountered of the northern route are summarised, comprising of a diverse range of visions which are useful to take into account when establishing planning and management processes; consensual processes capable of resolving the complex patrimony-tourism relationship. To achieve these objectives a total of 195 surveys and interviews have been carried out at different points along the Camino. They focussed on the following groups: Foreign pilgrims following the route, business people comprising the basic and complementary sectors along the route, officials in cultural institutions, tour operators and travel agents, and technical experts of the Basque Country Autonomous Community.

After completion of the surveys the data collected was processed by computer, as is habitual in these cases, using the SPSS computer programme. But equally as important as the surveys and interviews has been the field work carried out which has been crucial in truly understanding the territorial aspect of the Camino de Santiago and in detecting its strengths and weaknesses as a touristic product.

### **III. TERRITORIAL DIMENSION AND BASIC TOURISTIC INFRASTRUCTURE OF THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO**

The section of the northern route which passes through the Basque Country Autonomous Community runs entirely through the Basque Cantabrian valleys and, therefore, in an oceanic bioclimatic region. Its course runs in a zonal sense (that is, in an east-west direction) perpendicular therefore to the main rivers which run in a meridional sense (north-south) in the territory (the Bidasoa, Oiartzun, Urumea, Oria, Urola, Deba, Artibai, Lea, Oka, Ibaizabal and Barbadún rivers). Thus the route is obliged to cross a considerable number of interfluvials which explains its winding course and steep inclines. The itinerary runs through regions of various demographic densities and population nuclei that range from areas with only scattered cottages to the large cities of Bilbao and Donostia/San Sebastián. Land use in the rural areas is predominantly grassland and mixed cropping typical of the Atlantic coast countryside, pastures, wooded areas reforested with non-native conifers (*Pinus insignis*) and sporadic patches of native hardwoods (*Quercus robur*, *Castanea sativa*, *Q. ilex*, etc.). It is worth noting the large number of protected natural spaces and sites of cultural interest which the route is home to as well as the stunning landscape resulting from the proximity of sea and mountains.

As regards the basic touristic infrastructure of the northern route it must be pointed out that hostels have been the form of accommodation traditionally chosen, but as a result of the inexistence or infrequency of this service in some places, pilgrims have chosen alternatives such as campsites, farmhouses which take in guests, other guesthouses, pensions and hotels. The number of beds available in hostels in the summer of 2009 was 1,100, distributed between 23 establishments and three distinct types of hostel: public, private and those run by the Associations of Friends of the Camino de Santiago. Almost all those involved in the running of these hostels consider that the pilgrimage route has played some part, to a greater or lesser extent, in their activity although only 34% of them say they have made some

change to their strategy, creating new products or improving existing ones. On the other hand, the existence of restaurants, bars and cafeterias which offer some kind of special menu for pilgrims has been noticed. The infrastructure of information centres for the northern route of the Camino de Santiago is composed of the network of tourist information offices and the Guipuzcoan Association of Friends of the Camino de Santiago, in their Txingudi local offices in Irun. All of these have noticed an increase in the number of enquiries they have received in relation with the Camino de Santiago during the last decade, enquiries mainly from French and German tourists.

A cluster analysis carried out after the completion of 100 surveys has allowed the definition of two profiles of foreign pilgrims. The first profile, to which 58 pilgrims belong, has an equal distribution of gender, an average age of 49, a relatively high educational level (60% with university studies), are currently working (65%) or retired (20%) and are of a medium/high economic class (96%). The second profile comprises of 34 people, with a lower average age, around 27 years old, slightly more women (18 women to 16 men), a high educational level and low or very low level of income due to the fact that 75% of the group have not yet completed their studies. Around 82% of all those taking part in the surveys are from Europe and four out of ten repeat the pilgrimage experience, which demonstrates a high level of loyalty. Almost all of the group travelled the route on foot and around half unaccompanied, with the time taken varying. When finding information in order to prepare the trip internet is the most popular source, as well as well as specialised guides, and the trips are often organised without using travel agents. Irun unarguably stands out as the main departing point for the route. Of the pilgrims taking part in the survey, 26% were hoping to gain some personal or spiritual experience, 14% did it for fun and the rest expressed no clear expectation. Overall the main motive that attracted them to this route as opposed to others was rooted in the landscape and enjoying the natural surroundings, a motivation that coexists with other factors such as spirituality and religion.

#### IV. DIFFERENT VISIONS AND IDEAS ABOUT MANAGEMENT OF THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

The unique nature of the Camino de Santiago encourages one to regard it as a complex natural phenomenon which can be interpreted from distinct perspectives, as many perspectives as, at least, different profiles of participants in the pilgrimage. The wide range of impressions gathered has been classified in three large groups of opinion:

- **The Camino de Santiago as a space of personal/religious pilgrimage**

This understanding is one held mainly by the Associations of Friends of the Camino de Santiago. They see the Camino as a collective phenomenon, but individual in nature in that motivation of a religious or spiritual kind prevails, which leads them to offer a variety of services as an act of solidarity. Generally they express a profound rejection of any vision of the Camino de Santiago as a touristic product, arguing two main points: on one hand, that the aforementioned point of view adulterates the spirit of the Camino, and on the other, that the accommodation intended for the pilgrims is saturated by tourists.

- **The Camino de Santiago as a cultural, sport, nature, etc. touristic product**

Those people who belong to the public or private sectors related with the tourist industry interpret the Camino de Santiago essentially as a touristic product; a system

in which the pilgrim provides a demand seeking a supply that satisfies their need for leisure activity, and will travel to find it. It is true that these travellers have a wide range of motivating factors from the desire to practise sport to the enjoyment of cultural and natural patrimony, discovering the traditions of the places they pass through or the taking opportunity to enjoy an alternative holiday. The management model of the Camino should adjust itself to market laws, include all stages of the touristic chain and, in so far as concerns economic activity, pursue profits in this respect.

- **The Camino de Santiago, route of coexistence of tourists and pilgrims**

Certain institutions and businesspeople that have ties with the Camino de Santiago consider that this is a space in which pilgrims with religious, spiritual or personal motivations and tourists seeking leisure can coexist without generating conflict of use if managed in such a way that all options are valid and there is a place for them. Consistent with this, we propose a management model in which cooperation and coordination are essential.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The diagnosis formed of the characteristics and impact of the northern route of the Camino on the Basque Country and the valuation of it by different social groups have highlighted a series of opportunities, threats, strengths and weaknesses.

Among the former the following can be emphasized: 1) The promotional opportunity being demonstrated by the Jacobean Year 2010 and also its inclusion as one of the most significant aspects of the international offer of «España Verde» (literally Green Spain - the name given to the Spanish northern maritime façade exposed to the Atlantic Ocean in Galicia which also runs along the coastal strip lying north of the Cantabrian and Basque mountains, along the Bay of Biscay.); 2) The chance to continue promoting territorial cooperation and for the Camino de Santiago to become an instrument of social and territorial cohesion; 3) The opportunity the northern route presents to become a touristic product which is an alternative to the traditional French way, particularly for those pilgrims unsatisfied by the latter due to its overcrowding; 4) The possibility that the *Camino* can be a genuine instrument for regional development and , more specifically, for *rural development*; 5) The challenge that the Camino can become a means of contributing to awareness of and holding in esteem patrimony, not only for travellers but, above all, for the local population; 6) the opportunity to implement formulae that enable the transfer of part of the profits generated by tourism to the conservation and upkeep of patrimony.

As for the strengths the northern way presents, below are some of those we feel should be highlighted: 1) The varied and extraordinary richness of landscapes that the conjunction of coast and mountains offers is without doubt a highly valuable economic, natural, cultural and touristic resource; 2) its more comfortable climate, in comparison with the French way, for completing the route in the holiday season, the time with greatest numbers of pilgrims; 3) its lower level of saturation compared to other traditional routes, a key factor influencing the satisfaction of many pilgrims; 4) the exaggerated relief of the area which, for some, could be seen as a weakness because of the physical effort needed to overcome it, but also

as a strength in that it offers the possibility for the establishment of rest areas from which the landscape can be contemplated and interpreted; 5) the awareness of the public administration of the need to draw up a master plan for the northern way of the Camino de Santiago and the initiation of some actions such as the creation of a visitors' centre in the Basque Country about the northern way.

Regarding the main weaknesses which have become apparent during this study the following are noteworthy: 1) a lack of coordination between institutions and between municipalities, and a predominance of isolated initiatives which reflect the absence of an integral plan for the northern way; 2) deficiencies in the signposting and infrastructure along the route which in the former consist specifically of «insufficient, defective and repeated» signposting and in the latter of the poor condition of the footpaths and maintenance problems; 3) insufficient supply of accommodation in the network of hostels for the demand detected; 4) conflicts of property use which have, in some cases, affected the course of the traditional route, causing it to deviate, 5) lack of an interpretation and adaptation of patrimony plan.

Alongside all these looms the threat of repeating the model of the French way (in the opinion of some of the survey participants «saturated and exploited, fundamentally, as a business») and the risk of promotion and dissemination of the route without a binding use and management plan. This would undermine the exigency for the protection of a patrimony, due to its exceptional value, belongs to humanity in its entirety.

In concordance with this the main proposal that arises here consists of the development of an integral plan for the northern way, from its start in Irun to its end in Santiago de Compostela, in which its condition of special cultural itinerary prevails as does that of territorial patrimony. Within this context we have formulated the following courses of action: 1) guarantee continuity in the effort being made in inter-territorial cooperation and networking; 2) encourage relationships between public and private organisations, pursuing in some way the initiative started spontaneously at a local level in Deba; 3) resolve the deficiencies in signposting, making one single organisation responsible, and consolidating the route, maintaining the path and revising its boundaries; 4) guarantee a minimum quality in all services on offer to tourists and make a decision on prioritising either the network of hostels or the regulated accommodation services (guesthouses, holiday home rentals, etc.), taking into account the fact that, firstly, this would fit in with the preferences expressed by foreign pilgrims and with the 'spirit of the Camino' emphasised by hostel workers, and secondly would be related to the aspiration that the Camino contributes to rural development; 5) create a network of rural accommodation and restaurants included in a special rates program especially for «pilgrims»; 6) draw up a patrimonial interpretation plan and create a series of rest areas with water fountains, tables, benches and panels with information on the characters and potential of the territory being travelled through; 7) develop a web application about the countryside and heritage of the route; 8) carry on with joint actions aimed at the promotion of the regions involved and the creation of publicity materials.

The different views analysed have highlighted the conflictive relationship between tourism and patrimony, two concepts controlled by participants with different interests. This conflict is augmented when it involves a cultural and historic itinerary which crosses various Spanish autonomous communities (with transferred powers) and a route with a religious and spiritual character travelled by voyagers with heterogeneous profiles.