

## **She Sits in Bergerac**

Dr Jennifer Baxter

She sits on a terrace, overlooking the Dordogne river. Partly in the sun, partly in the shade. It is a beautiful spring day in Bergerac, already 19 degrees and predicted to go up to 21. She rests in shorts and a t-shirt, sweat building beneath her arms, sunscreen applied to the patches of skin reddened by yesterday's nap on the lounge in the midday sun. The skin of her left ear is peeling, the result of days spent walking in this sun, albeit at cooler temperatures; always headed in the same direction, the same half of her body more greatly exposed to the elements.

They had started out in Vence, a small town just outside Nice, adjusting to the 9-hour time change and visiting old friends. Warm and sunny enough to have enjoyed a dip in the Mediterranean, she in her sports bra and underwear, not willing to let the opportunity pass. Then off they had travelled, whisked away by train to Le Puy-en-Velay. The starting point of their Camino. Anticipation and excitement were high; they couldn't wait to begin.

She sits in the sun, sipping delicious red wine and snacking on succulent strawberries - perhaps the best she has ever had - purchased from the open-air market yesterday. Her crutches sit beside her, resting against the stone wall, waiting for her next ambulation. She cannot realistically manage complete non-weight-bearing of her injured foot with what they were able to procure, but she can take it slow and take most of the pressure off. At least until she gets home.

While the symptoms are the same, the experience is entirely different. Last year they walked over 750km from Lisbon to Santiago de Compostela on the Camino Portuguese. She spent the last 10 days in escalating discomfort, hoping against hope that it wasn't deep down what she knew it to be. She persevered, her grit driving her to complete the pilgrimage. To walk her way into the central square in front of the imposing cathedral, to place her foot alongside those of her companions on the scallop shell that marks the completion of the pilgrim's journey. She collected her Compostela, alongside hundreds who had made their own journeys to this historic site. Following the way of Saint James.

She had prepared herself for this to be different. She had set a different intention, reflective of all the work she had done over the last year. This Camino was about the journey, not the destination; respecting the line between the grind of it and the grit she always knew could push her beyond what was good for her. The grit that had over and over again gotten her into trouble, pushed her beyond her limits, caused her harm. Pain. Suffering.

This year it was on their fifth day of walking, roughly 100km in, that she felt the first twinges. Flickerings of recognition. She looked into her heart and knew that the 30km day ahead was not wise - far too likely to bring the entire journey crashing to an end. And so they did something she never would have imagined twelve months prior. They accepted the kind offer of a ride in the morning from their host for the night, cutting off the first 9km. They shortened the day to 20km of walking, more fully appreciating the

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beauty of the Aubrac, making their way through farmers' fields as they embraced a more manageable day.

The relative rest paid off. They continued on their planned route, with no further pain until the tenth day, when climbing hills became uncomfortable. Reminiscently, undeniably so. Downhills too. Her foot aches in the evenings, and again on waking in the mornings. They agreed that they would walk to Figeac and stop there, shortening the trip by one week. A natural stopping point on the Chemin.

On the eleventh day, as they trudged through the pouring rain, pants and gloves soaked through and plastered to skin, bearing a brief stint of hail pellets, it became clearer that this pain wasn't going to get better. The thought of the following day, anticipating rain for the entirety of the 25km trek into Figeac, became too much. She knew it was time to stop. Her heart was slower to appreciate this, and she wept in frustration. Cried tears of disappointment. Grieved the loss of the experience she had come to love.

A taxi ride to Figeac, rapidly passing by the terrain she had expected to walk, twisting and turning at speeds she barely recognized, was nauseating. They spent the day trying to stay out of the rain, hunkering down in cafes and restaurants as much as they could, until they were able to check into their guest house. It was a dreary day, no way around it.

The following day involved a train ride out to the pilgrimage site of Rocamadour. It required 15km of walking in the end - much more than anticipated - and while she was glad to have seen this incredible structure and medieval town built into the side of a cliff, overlooking the Alzou valley, the ache in her foot was a clear reminder of why this was their last day of walking. That she was crossing the line between grind and grit, flirting with the side she had vowed to avoid.

And so she sits in Bergerac. Sipping a delicious red wine of the region, overlooking the boats of the Dordogne. One of which she will board this afternoon for a scenic ride, her foot resting, her heart slowly embracing a new rhythm. Beating to a slower, but no less beautiful drum.