

Divine Camino

The pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is no stroll in the park. Thank the Lord, then, for a soundtrack that smoothes the way

Sally Howard
The Guardian, Saturday 9 September 2006

[A larger](#) | [smaller](#)



The long and winding road ... The pilgrimage route to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Photograph: Alamy

You may not know the name but you'll recognise the music. As well as composing seven albums alongside Neil Hannon in the pop group The Divine Comedy, keyboardist Joby Talbot wrote the music for *The League of Gentleman* which won a Royal Television Society award in 2000. Since leaving The Divine Comedy, he has become the first composer in residence for Classic FM, and he's been busy writing Hollywood film scores, with credits including *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* and the forthcoming *Penelope*, starring Reese Witherspoon.

But his recent project is a little different, to say the least. "When I was asked by Tenebrae, a professional choir, to compose a piece based on the pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, my first response was panic. They'd been impressed by a three-minute madrigal I'd written for choral group The King's Singers. So I travelled the Camino [route] under the cloud of having to write hours of music based on my impressions." The result is the ambitious choral work, *The Path of Miracles*.

"It seemed to make sense for the four movements to be named for after the stages of the Camino, with their distinctly different landscapes and emotional challenges," says Joby.

Carving its east-west arc from the Pyrenean foothills, across the dusty plateaus of Castile y Leon, to the bottle-green valleys of Galicia, the Camino de Santiago is the world's most enduring route of Catholic pilgrimage. At its height in the 15th century, more than a million Christians a year walked the two-month route to the north-west reach of the Iberian peninsula and the apostle St James' mortal remains, in the hope of buying credit to set against their tally of sins in the afterlife.

In the past 10 years, the "path of St James" has been rediscovered by a new breed of sturdy-shoed adventure pilgrims, tens of thousands of whom congregate at the Roncevalles, starting point of the Camino Frances, the most popular route to Santiago.

"At Roncevalles, you can't escape this nervy energy," said Joby, who travelled points along the path with his artist wife Claire Burbridge and then one-year-old son Maurice. "The weather is fast-changing; one minute it's gloriously sunny and the next minute a cloud blows in. And there are all those expectant faces, talking in their rising Babel of languages."

The second stage of the Camino, Burgos, has a distinctly different landscape. "The

weather in Burgos was gusty and bleak," said Joby. "One night, I left Claire and Maurice at the hotel and crept off to film the cathedral. The sky was bright red and there were clouds bleeding across it, with ink-black gargoyles silhouetted against them; I found it a very macabre place. There's a crucifix in the cathedral dating from the 1400s, covered in the remains of what is supposed to be human skin. They found out recently that the monks were rattling it to petrify sinners. I guess it brought up everything that made me a nervous wreck when Catholic guilt was driven into me as a child."

Burgos's uneasy creep across unforgiving terrain contrasts with Leon. "In Leon, they've stripped all the baroque clutter from the interior of the cathedral, leaving this airy gothic space with its kaleidoscope of stained glass," said Joby. "It once had the third greatest acreage of stained glass in any cathedral in the world. I think it may be the second now, apparently the previous second crumpled due to lack of supporting walls. There's an also an air of jubilation here, the anticipation of the end of a hard road after shuffling through all those miles of huge sky and flat, sunbaked land."

The Path of Miracles concludes, as pilgrims must, in Galicia. "Before I reached Galicia, I was told it was nicknamed 'the urinal of Spain', as it has a greater annual rainfall than Ireland," said Joby. "After all those dusty plains it's hard to believe, until you see it. It reminded me of Orwell's idea of the golden country in 1984. This is very unintensively farmed land, sunlit and blanketed in green. We stopped to picnic on lovely Galician cheeses and sweet, ripe tomatoes, while Maurice took his first steps through the wild flowers."

The Camino pilgrim then approaches Monte de Gozo, the "mount of joy", from whose summit the city of Santiago de Compostela, and the end of their toil, is in sight. "It was pouring with rain as we reached Santiago, as it always is," said Joby, "I was sheltering just inside cathedral beneath the amazing 12th-century Portico de Gloria, with its 250 intricately carved faces depicting the Last Judgment. The square was filled with a hundred-plus soaking-wet pilgrims. They'd piled up their battered rucksacks, jackets and staffs and were singing and dancing around them with such unalloyed joy that Maurice and I couldn't help but join in."

• The Path of Miracles, performed by Tenebrae, is available on Signum Records (Tenebrae-choir.com, JobyTalbot.com, Signumrecords.com). It will be performed live at the North Wales International Music Festival, St Asaph Cathedral on September 16 (Northwalesmusicfestival.co.uk). EasyJet (Easyjet.com) flies to Oviedo and Asturias, Ryanair (Ryanair.com) to Santiago de Compostela. Greenspainholidays.com has a range of rental properties across Galicia. Further information at Santiagoturismo.com/camino.

Readers' tips

Malaga: [El Vegetariano de la Alcazabilla; Atmospheric and cosy veggie restaurant in Malaga](#)

After several months in Spain, any vegetarian restaurant is a marvellous find. This charming restaurant in a rustic alley, conveniently placed for a break...

Posted by happyyetpoor 19 Feb 2011

Barcelona: [La Boqueria](#)

Staying in a self-catering apartment in Barcelona? The tapas bars may be tempting, but we were even more tempted by the variety and quality of the food...

Posted by gdeanouk 19 Feb 2011

Mallorca: www.digamemallorca.com

This great free monthly magazine is distributed in hotels, bars, tourist offices, restaurants as well as many other locations and its a great way to know...

Posted by emmst 19 Feb 2011

Seville: [Blanco Cerillo](#)

Blanco Cerrillo is one of the oldest bars in Seville. Very simple and no fuss. It is perfect for eating fried fish tapas, and the adobo is loved by the...

Posted by BecomingSevillana 18 Feb 2011

[Show all 1451 readers' tips](#) | [Send us a tip](#)

guardian.co.uk © Guardian News and Media Limited 2011