



VIA FRANCIGENA, ROAD TO ROME 2021 - Ambassador

Autore: Marguerite \_ Berlin & Around

Blog: <https://berlinandaround.com/>

Link all'articolo: <https://berlinandaround.com/2021/09/25/via-francigena-pilgrimage-italy/>

## How a Via Francigena pilgrimage can change your life

25 September 2021

### MY VIA FRANCIGENA PILGRIMAGE: THE (UNEXPECTED) EXPERIENCE OF A LIFETIME

As many of you guys know, I'm a huge fan of walking. I regularly complete 10 to 15 km a day on foot, just [getting around Berlin](#) or whichever city I happen to be in. So when the opportunity arose to join (what I believed was) a traditional press trip following one of Europe's oldest pilgrim routes, I thought, "why not!"

I was invited to participate in a modern-day version of the **Via Francigena pilgrimage**, walking through some of the most stunning parts of **Tuscany** and **Lazio**, Italy. Over 6 days, I was to see fortified villages, miles of vineyards, deep blue lakes and even roads laid by the Romans 2000 years ago.



This was a travel blogger's dream. I could already see my Instagram feed filling up with gorgeous summer Italian shots. And walking 20+ km a day from village to village? Definitely not a problem!

But truthfully, **I had NO idea** what I was getting myself into.

## IN CONTEXT: WHAT IS THE VIA FRANCIGENA PILGRIMAGE?

The **Via Francigena** (pronounced franCHEEgena) is an **ancient pilgrim route** leading from Canterbury, England, to the Port of Apulia in Italy, where ships would leave for the Holy Land (modern-day Jerusalem). The name simply means “the French Route”, as it connects England to Italy through France.

Spanning 1,700 kilometres, this route passes through Rome. As such, it was often used by men of the cloth to walk to the Eternal City in the Middle Ages. Northern merchants wishing to reach Italy while avoiding pirate-fraught waters also took the Via Francigena to access distant parts of Italy.



An Archbishop of Canterbury, **Sigeric**, was the first to document his journey in the 990s, walking some 20 km a day for 80 days. But he was by no means the first person to undertake the trek – the name Francigena already appeared in abbey records over a century earlier.

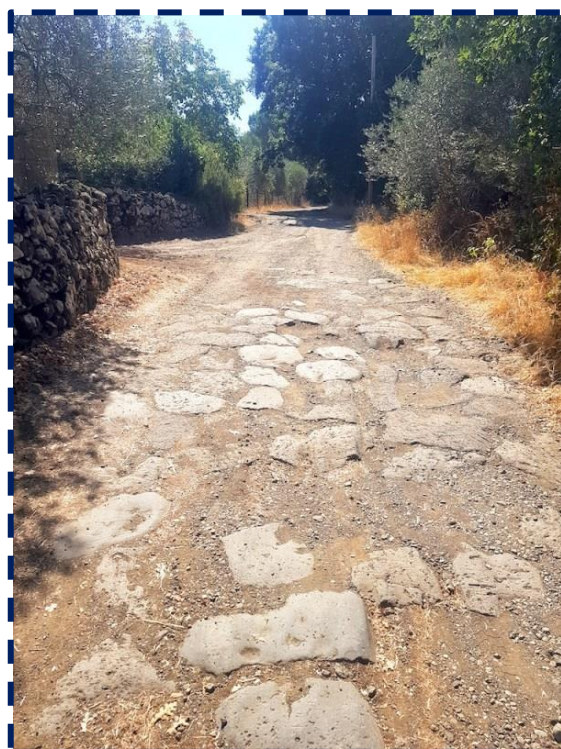
Unlike typical Roman roads which bind cities, the Via Francigena pilgrimage connects abbeys, and thus meanders **through some of Europe's most beautiful rural scenery**.



## THE VIA FRANCIGENA PILGRIMAGE'S MODERN-DAY APPEAL

Today, people undertake the Via Francigena pilgrimage **for many different motivations**, be it for religious reasons, for the adventure, for the physical challenge, to attempt a vow of silence, or simply, as it originally was in my case, to take beautiful pictures.

The route is managed by the [European Association of the Via Francigena \(EAVF\)](#). This is the organization that put together the [#RoadtoRome2021](#) event I attended, a call for bloggers and journalists to walk sections of the Via Francigena in relay. Some members of the organization are actually walking the entire 1,700 km!



## MY JOURNEY ALONG THE VIA FRANCIGENA: LITERAL AND FIGURATIVE NEW HORIZONS

My Via Francigena pilgrimage began in **Radicofani, Tuscany**. After being pampered by [Hotel Gregoriana in Rome](#) for a few days, I set off for this remote Tuscan village.

My train ride from Rome to Chiusi went flawlessly. Upon reaching Chiusi, I waited patiently for the bus that connected this larger town to Radicofani once per day. The bus never came, though, so my only option was a 40-minute cab ride, which turned out to be quite entertaining.



## VIA FRANCIGENA, ROAD TO ROME 2021 - Ambassador

While the driver only spoke Italian, I was able to understand that we were crossing an ancient volcanic landscape at one point.

The ride was indeed breathtaking, if dizzying, with many abrupt twists and turns. A great introduction to the rolling hills of Tuscany! Soon Radicofani's iconic fortified tower appeared in the distance.

### REALIZATIONS IN RADICOFANI

I reached my accommodation in Radicofani as rain began to threaten. My home for the night was a rustic chic loft in an old stone guesthouse, which I was to share with another blogger.

Tired from the journey and sensing no point in taking pictures in stormy weather, I opted for a nap before meeting the EAVF group that evening.

It seemed that I had barely closed my eyes when I woke to a knock on the door. The Via Francigena crew had arrived early. Instead of walking the planned stretch of their journey that day, they were given a lift for the last leg after having been held up somewhere. (The car ride was in no way linked to the heavy rain. **I would later find out firsthand that this group walked through downpours.**)

I opened the door in glasses, my hair a mess – you know, not the best first impression to make on what I still believed to be a typical media trip.

When my new roommate immediately started filming the loft, I ducked into the bathroom, saying something like “please don’t film me – I’m not very Instagrammable right now!”. She just gave me a long look but assured me I wouldn’t be in the footage.

It was through talking with my roommate a bit later that **I realized I literally didn’t have any of the necessary gear for the walk the next day**, sunscreen aside. Among other things, I was missing a water bottle, a poncho and a sun hat. **“You’ve never been on a walk like this before, have you?”** my roommate asked. I didn’t even need to answer.



I like to think that I experienced several miracles on Via Francigena pilgrimage. The first of these was the **kindness of people around me.**



I was able to get a **reusable bottle** of water from the EAVF organizers. The group's photographer gave me a hat. And just when it was starting to rain heavily and we were in the middle of nowhere a few days later, another walker whipped out a second poncho for me.

Coming from the world of typical press trips where organizers handhold and spoil you, I was, needless to say, quite unprepared. Somehow, I had missed the part of the briefing where **the trip was about literally stepping into a pilgrim's shoes**.

I'm pretty sure the only thing I was prepared for in Radicofani was a **photo session**, where the same photographer commented, quite surprised, "you know all the Instagram poses!"



## WHAT IS IT REALLY LIKE TO WALK 25+ KILOMETRES A DAY?

I quickly realized **there is a big difference between the walking I was used to and this walking**. Strolling around the city, stopping in coffee shops or parks for a break, had nothing to do with this experience: putting one foot in front of the other for 12 km straight before a short break, only to do it all over again.

On the longest day, **we walked 32 km from Montefiascone to Bolsena**, following the shores of the picturesque **Bolsena Lake**.



## VIA FRANCIGENA, ROAD TO ROME 2021 - Ambassador

So here I was, walking for hours along country roads, going from one small Italian village to another, mostly in **silent contemplation**. Of course, there was conversation with the other “pilgrims”, but most of the time, we were just admiring the scenery – or preserving our strength.

One of the other bloggers said she was used to hiking in the Alps, but this flat, long, constant walk was more challenging. I immediately understood what she meant.

Yet I soon realized that *I could do it*. Before I knew it, **I was surpassing my own physical limits**.

My Radicofani roommate later told me she thought I would only make it through the first half of the first day. **Spoiler alert: I walked for 5 days, clocking over 100 km.**



### WHEN DID SELF-AWARENESS & SPIRITUALITY KICK IN?

Perhaps it is this mix of physical exertion combined with hours of contemplation that led me to **start seeing the more spiritual side of things**.

**I no longer cared much about the stuff that I normally cared about**, like pulling out my tripod to photograph just about every pretty view. Or posting on Instagram.



What **did matter** was the water fountain welcoming us after 5 km of walking in the afternoon sun. And the fruit growing alongside the road, ripe for the picking. The moment I got to sit down at the end of the day. And the following morning when I realized that my sore feet of the night before had miraculously healed.

I had this overwhelming **sense of gratitude for the simple things**, and that's when I started to feel free.

It seemed to me that I had entered **another universe**, so far removed from my routine at home. It was just me, facing myself, asking myself hard questions and listening to my answers without judgment.

**I saw a new strength in me. I saw resilience without fear.** And from that point on, I could appraise my life from the outside looking in. And more than anything, I could see where I wanted – needed – to be.



## THE SERMON I NEVER HEARD THAT CHANGED MY LIFE

After 4 days of walking, we reached the town of **Viterbo**, a very holy site for Catholics and the birthplace of Santa Rosa, a 13th-century saint who performed miracles for the poor before her tragic death at the age of 17.

Paying homage to Viterbo's heritage, this part of the journey included an optional religious element. After freshening up at the hotel, we were invited to attend a special mass for pilgrims.

The priest who greeted us did not speak English and gave his sermon entirely in Italian, so I sat in one of the pews a bit further back and waited for it to be over, suddenly very conscious of the fact that my dress might be a bit too short for the liking of the church.

One of the other Via Francigena “pilgrims”, a tour guide with whom I’d become friendly on the road, offered to translate the sermon for me afterwards. Her words were pretty much the following:

*“Everyone in this room today was motivated to undertake their Via Francigena pilgrimage for a reason, perhaps to search for something, and that took courage. Maybe the reason why wasn’t even clear at the beginning.”*

*“But now that you’ve walked on the Road to Rome, **you’ll probably have realized some things**. And going forwards, it’s about having the **courage** to take your Via Francigena pilgrimage realizations back home and make the necessary changes in your life.”*

I got chills when I heard that. It was as though the priest were speaking directly to me, **communicating a universal message across cultural, religious and linguistic barriers**.

Being on the road had given me time to imagine my ideal life, away from pretense and fear. I could see so clearly what I wanted and who I wanted to be. But, as the priest said, I now needed the courage to make the **necessary changes**.







VIA FRANCIGENA, ROAD TO ROME 2021 - Ambassador

## CONFESSION: I MET SOMEONE NEW ON MY VIA FRANCIGENA PILGRIMAGE

Yes, I did. **I met the best, truest version of myself** – and meeting her changed me forever. All of a sudden, I could visualize it all. The life I wanted. The type of relationship I wanted. The chains I need to break off.

Fast forward a week and my stuff was in storage in Berlin. My partner and I had ended our 4-year-relationship, having had the courage to admit that we just weren't right for each other. And I was finally doing what I knew in my heart I wanted to do all along: **travel solo for an extended period of time and write all about it.**

Some friends remarked that I was off to live my own *Eat Pray Love* story. At first, I thought that was true. But then I realized I had already experienced my *Eat Pray Love* condensed into one week on the Via Francigena.

I ate too many amazing meals to count, because, well, I was in Italy! I think we covered the “pray” or spiritual portion of the journey. And love? First and foremost, **I learned the true meaning of self-love and acceptance on my Via Francigena pilgrimage.**

**Now on to the next chapter of this crazy, wonderful, surprising life!**



### MARGUERITE \_ BERLIN & AROUND

Based in Berlin, Germany, Marguerite is an avid traveller, blogger and business owner. Combining her passions, she founded Berlin & Around to help others explore the world off the beaten path. Marguerite has lived in 6 countries, visited 29, and can't wait to discover many more destinations.