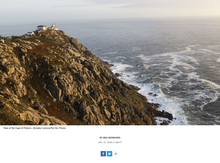
Finding peace and harmony at the 'End of the Earth'



Walk of the Gods at Finisterre. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

BY MEG BERNHARD
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FISTERRA, Spain — They descend to the beach in the evening, clambering down grassy cliffs in ankle on the sand. They roll cigarettes, stream guitars, burn incense, throw dogs deflowered.

At the end of the Iberian peninsula, a little after 9 p.m., the last rays vanish immediately behind the ocean, leaving the sky blue-black. Where the lights go gold and fuchsia, some refrain, others applaud. This is sunset in Fisterra, the End of the Earth.

After nightfall, some climb back up the cliffs to sleep in the forest. Others return to the town. Those who remain on the beach travel into sleeping bags nestled against the rocks, where, some mornings, local police make them with orders to leave.

Some call them hippies. Some call them troublemakers.

Hippies at the fiesta of the Virgin Carmen at the Cape of the Lighthouse. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

They call themselves pilgrims — peregrinos, in Spanish — and come from around the world: Germany and Hungary, England and Italy, and places far beyond. They work in hostels and restaurants, in vineyards and greenhouses, and they live in tents on the beach. Most walked the famed pan-exhibi Camino de Santiago — the Way of St. Jamies — and continued to this small fishing town on Spain's northwestern coast.

Some have lived here for years, a few, just a week. They stay for love, for freedom, for artistic inspiration. They run away from families, drugs, jobs. Fisterra beach, they say, is a place where you can be yourself.

No one can say exactly how many live here. Maybe an. Maybe 50.

Their stories are similar. Once they ran out of land, they had nowhere else to go.

"I said I would stay two nights," said Marga Dia, an, an Estonian who lives with a handful of other pilgrims down a bar on Fisterra's main road. "I've been here two years."

The Atlantic surrounds Fisterra on three sides. To the east, a crescent-shaped beach frames a tranquil cove where seashore gulls and fishermen set out their nets. To the west, nestor cliffs hate in the Praia Langosteira, a beach where dangerous undercurrents have swept away countless swimmers. To the south, the peninsula tapers into a narrow, forested cape, where people gather by the lighthouse and watch the sunset each night.

Pilly years ago, the town's geography made fishing a lucrative line of work. Residents dried cod on the beach and sold it to merchants who shipped it to Cuba. Hammerhead sharks used They are tempers lines in the seafloor and pitted porcelain — prosecuch barnacles, a regional delicacy — from slippery rocks during low tide.

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>
> — Marga Dia

Nadia, a vegan vegetarian from the Canary Islands, and Ingrid, who hails from the Canary Islands, have participated in the first sun ceremony (Mike Kim/For The Times) Nadia, a vegan vegetarian from the Canary Islands, and Ingrid, who hails from the Canary Islands, have participated in the first sun ceremony (Mike Kim/For The Times)

Fisterra had a historical connection to the centuries-old pilgrimage, in which the faithful walked from southern France to Santiago de Compostela, where the Apostle James' remains are said to be buried. Thousands made the trek each year.

Ancient pilgrims sometimes continued on another 30 miles to the sea to reach their Pilly clashes, but Santiago de Compostela was seen as the culmination of the Camino.

Then changed in the centu. Centos associations and travel guides tested Fisterra as a pre-ex Galicia's August Crisis de Retre, the Coast of Death — named for the untold numbers of shipwrecks along its shores.

In 2004, a pan-pilgrim visited Fisterra. A year later, that notion exploded to 15,000.

Nadia, a friend pilgrim who lives in Fisterra, chatting with her tarotist in front of the Santa Marta de Ozas church. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

"It's a change that's been longer in coo. So, we said, 'It's not enough' out ear of life." Fisterra's tourism office tracks the numbers meticulously. The numbers bring in money, but they often turn visitors at the lighthouse and sleep on the beach, despite prohibitions.

Then, there are those who never leave.

In this town of a point, everyone knows those perpetrios. A Frenchman named Pedro, whose lovably wooden walking stick and scraggly white beard give him the appearance of Santa Claus, has been wandering around Fisterra for years. A German woman named Mona Gruss wanders barefoot and nude each year for her Solstice's drug counter. An Englishman named Quentin Cregeen tends to tomatoes and chanting pow at a local garden.

Pilgrims seated at a fire ritual by the Praia Langosteira beach. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

Mona Gruss, from her tent, in the forest where she spent the summer living in a cabin she built. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

Christian Mark, a German, gave Fisterra a job at her clothing shop, as she does with many young foreign women who end up in Fisterra.

Mark, 60, was once given a job, too.

One morning in 2007, when Mark hitchhiked the Camino and was eating breakfast at the Bar Fisterra, she met the owner, a fabulous man. After a few minutes of conversation, he offered her work in the kitchen.

Mark accepted on a gut feeling. She would take a sabbatical from her desk job and stay six months.

Soon into her stay, however, she realized she didn't want to leave.

"I was falling in love," Mark said. She spoke her job in German and moved to Fisterra to be with the bar owner.

Under the where, Lopez. He owner of the World Family, never walked the Camino. He came to Fisterra on a bus.

Christian Mark attending one of her stores in the town. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

When he arrived in 2004, he was recently divorced, disillusioned with his job at a multinational tobacco company and mourning the death of his father. At the recommendation of a social worker, he worked in Fisterra's municipal pilmrgen for a few months, then moved into the bar's first-floor apartment. Lopez stayed for years each night.

The year before, 70 people had camped out on the beach in the tents. A group of Spanish hippies had arrived in Fisterra and celebrated the equinox's force. Pitching tents on the beach was prohibited.

But the next summer, dozens of pilgrims returned — without tents. Lopez loved life on the beach. There were candles and guitar sessions and group dances. He left part of community.

Lopez decided to bring the spirit of the beach indoors. In 2004, he and a few friends opened the World Family. Long tents ticken stay on the bar's second floor, short tents walkers stay on the third.

Dante Lopez, one of Fisterra's first founders, entering pagano in the ceremonial apartment. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

Pilgrims volunteer in the kitchen, at the bar, in the garden. They share vegan dinners, paint murals, spend hours chatting on the patio. At nights, the bar becomes a popular party spot, bringing together foreigners and fishermen. Lopez and his co-owners make money from the bar and tourism — but not much.

"This system is different than other places in Fisterra," Lopez said. "It is about what it means to be a pilgrim, not about making money."

Next door to the bar is the Hotel Langosteira, and the owner, Paulina Moran, is wary of the hippies.

During the beach tent bonanza, she says, locals didn't like visiting the Mar de Fisterra. Now, with the beach-dwellers nearby, Moran worries about what might happen to her resort.

For years Moran had arrested the neighborhood's tranquility, but after the bar opened, she noticed a change. Her guests complained about the Saturday night beach pyrgic screams. Once, Moran said, someone vomited all the doorway to her hotel. Moran, who lives in the hotel, had trouble sleeping.

"They aren't hippies," Moran said. "They philosophy, lots and peace and ceremonies, in the body — they live freely without respect for the others."

In actoi, Moran filed a complaint about the World Family to the town hall. Then she filed another. And another. "We continue reporting them," she said.

Jasmin Bertram drawing a tree of life, pentagon. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

On a humid summer afternoon, Gruss stood barefoot at the shag counter, pugging shots tamarisco into her mouth and rinsing out the bear cutlery. Soft Rock music floated from a radio. A Canadian woman who had arrived from the Camino trying to leave stopped on her traveled's backpack.

"I'm pyring," she said. "Thank you for everything." She hugged Gruss and walked out. "Sometimes it's difficult to take the bus back to Santiago," Gruss said. "I guess the made her decision."

Gruss looked at her cellphone. She couldn't remember the day, or the hour. She couldn't recall what she did the day before, and Sadie's made plans for that evening. Time in Fisterra is marked by sunset and the town's two summers: summer and tourist.

Fisterra empties out once the winter cold sets in (record temperatures have been in the high 40s, you hot Australia). Crowding sale pounds the streets. Hundred-foot waves crash against cliffs. Hotels are shuttered, some restaurants too. Few pilgrims walk through town.

The World Family sale pricing a pair of boots. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

The drifters move from the forest into alehouses. They pass their days cooking stews, painting, making for the summer. And some, like Gruss, will decide it's finally time to move on, as to return to the realm of deadlines and responsibilities. That's what she did just a few months ago.

Soon enough, other pilgrims will come to town, some expecting to stay a few days, maybe weeks. But for some, the weeks might stretch into years, and they'll discover like so many before them that the real destination of their pilgrimage was Fisterra all along, that they were meant to be here, at the End of the Earth.

Bernhard is a special correspondent.

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Pilgrims enjoying sunset at the Cape of Fisterra. (Arnaldo Loureiro/For The Times)

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