

The Aussie Camino

WORDS & PICTURES • David Schütz



Why would you spend a week of your annual holidays walking 230 kilometres from Portland on the south-west coast of Victoria to Penola in southern South Australia?

Why would you put your body—especially your feet—to the test of walking up to 38 kilometres/eight hours a day along deserted beaches, freshwater lakes and cliff top paths, through virgin bushland, open pasture and pine forest, along highways, limestone roads and disused railway lines?

If you have to ask why, walking 'the Aussie Camino' along the MacKillop-Woods Way is probably not for you. But if you are like me, as soon as you hear that there is such a thing happening, your heart begins to burn with excitement and you want to be a part of it.

Camino. The word means 'path' or 'way' in Spanish, and is often applied to a pilgrimage route—most famously the 800 kilometre Camino de Santiago de Compostela or 'Way of St James' in Spain. Thousands of people travel to Spain to do 'the Camino' every year, but what if you have neither the time nor the resources to commit to such a journey?

Well, thanks to a few visionary Melbourneans, in particular Luke Mills (a teacher at St Francis Xavier College in Beaconsfield and member of the Focolare Movement) and Sean Deany (a dedicated international walker and cyclist), Australia now has its own 'Camino'.

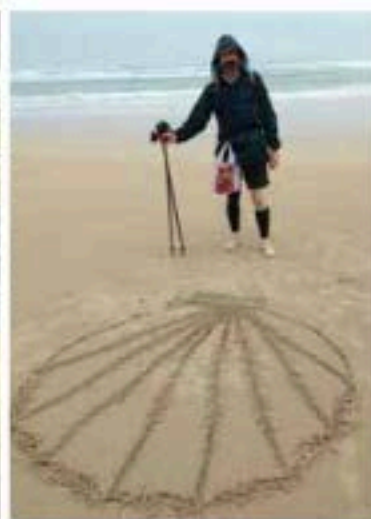
And why not? We have our own saint, Mary of the Cross MacKillop, and she was one heck of a traveller! By coach, on horseback and even on foot, she travelled vast distances across Australia and New Zealand in her vocation as foundress of the Sisters of St Joseph of the Sacred Heart in the 19th century. She even had a saying that is the perfect inspiration for all pilgrims: 'Oh, how I wish we would only remember that we are but travellers here.'

I first heard about the Aussie Camino when a friend from the Focolare Movement came to me and asked me to promote it through my office at the Ecumenical and Interfaith Commission. I had been looking for some kind of retreat to reignite my prayer life and to renew my conversion to Christ during Lent. I looked up articles in *Madonna* magazine and *Kairos* reporting on Luke's

exploratory journey along the proposed pilgrim route last year. Perhaps this was what I was looking for?

I mentioned the idea to my wife that night when we were out to dinner, and she said to me: 'You should do it.' I made excuses. Could I justify taking seven days off work in such a busy time? What about my choir and cantor commitments so close to Easter? And was it fair on my family to be apart from them so long during the school holidays? Was I fit enough? And what gear or equipment would I need? 'You should do it,' she repeated.

So the next day I consulted my advisers: my spiritual director and my myotherapist. My director drily observed that there have, throughout history, been two culturally acceptable reasons for men to abandon the drudgery of their daily responsibilities: war and pilgrimage. 'The Crusades satisfied both criteria,' he observed. My myotherapist, a keen runner and cyclist, prescribed the right runners, special (expensive!) anti-blisters socks, walking poles and other paraphernalia I would need. (I ended up spending a small fortune on the right gear, but can report that I was always comfortable and never had any blisters).



Far left: Pilgrims make their way to Penola on the final day of the Aussie Camino. Top left: David Schutz leaves the mark of the pilgrim in the sand on Wild Dog Beach. Left: The MacKillop-Woods Way pilgrim passport and credentials. Above: David at the cliffs of Cape Nelson on the first day of the 2014 pilgrimage.

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ST MARY OF THE CROSS MACKILLOP

Both prescribed a regime of preparation and training. I had five weeks between the end of February and the start of the Camino in April. During this time I worked my way up to walking 10-15 kilometres every day. By the time we began the pilgrimage, I had walked about 400 kilometres and was feeling 20 years younger. My spiritual director recommended praying the Liturgy of the Hours using the Divine Office app on my iPhone while walking. This and listening to hymns and inspiring music helped sustain me along the way.

Thirty other pilgrims, between their early 30s and mid-70s, registered with me at the Mary MacKillop Heritage Centre on Saturday 5 April. Fr Kalka celebrated Mass for us, and blessed our scallop shells, the universally recognised mark of the pilgrim. We drove to Portland, where we joined the parish for their Sunday vigil Mass. Beginning what was to be the pattern of the rest of the journey, we dined together in a local hotel and, while some stayed at the hotel, others stayed at a local tourist park. The next morning we began walking.

Portland was where St Mary was living with her family when Fr Julian Tenison Woods asked to establish the Josephite order and school at Penola. The MacKillop-Woods Way does not pretend to follow the route she took between the two towns, but takes 'the road less travelled'. Following the 'Great South West Walk', the Way leads from Portland to Cape Nelson and Cape Bridgewater to the Bridgewater Lakes, then from Lake Monibeong to Nelson. We then crossed the Victoria-South Australia

border to Port MacDonnell, to Mount Gambier, Kalangadoo and finally Penola.

Throughout history, pilgrimage has always been a mix of spiritual discipline, retreat, adventure and plain old site-seeing tourism. This was no exception. The dramatic coast and open countryside were awe-inspiring. I alternated between walking with others, engaging in conversation and telling/hearing stories, and walking on my own. In fact, one day I walked entirely on my own, rushing off from the hotel at the beginning of the day thinking I was the last to leave, when in fact everyone else had just gone to McDonald's for breakfast.

There were times when the going was tough, but each day I rose with joyful anticipation of the day ahead. For me the pilgrimage was a time of challenge and conversion as well as deepening commitment. Listening to the Psalms of the Divine Office, I became aware how much walking featured as an image of spiritual life for the ancient Hebrews: 'Guide me in the right paths' and 'He will keep you from stumbling' and so forth.

Fr Greg Bourke walked with us for a few days, and he kindly said Mass on the mornings he was with us, but it was not compulsory for all pilgrims to participate. There was a moment of reflection before leaving each morning, but besides this, each pilgrim made the journey as spiritual or secular as they wished it to be. Everyone on this inaugural Camino was Catholic, but there was a wide spectrum of degrees of belonging to the community.

One night, after the usual end-of-day meal and celebration together, I was encouraging Luke to continue with his plans for the Camino in the future. I am convinced that the Aussie Camino has a role to play in the New Evangelisation in Australia. There is no prerequisite level of faith required to participate, but it does provide a space (literally!) for people to reconnect with their faith or to make that connection for the first time.

St Mary MacKillop is constantly in the background, and I found ample opportunity to talk about matters of faith with both my fellow pilgrims and the people we met on the way. In fact, I hope that in the future members of other Christian communities will join us, as well as those who belong to other faiths, or even no faith at all.

When we arrived together at St Joseph's Church in Penola on the eve of Palm Sunday, and entered our names on the first pages of the official MacKillop-Woods Way Pilgrim Register at the Mary MacKillop Centre, there was a sense of having participated in something historic.

This year's Camino was just the first. It will be repeated again next Easter, and the Easter after that, and hopefully will still be going strong in 100 years' time.

I can honestly say that I have rarely ever been as happy as I was during the seven days I was walking the Aussie Camino, and will definitely walk the Way of St Mary of the Cross again next year. ☺

For more information on the camino, contact Luke at lukej.mills@bigpond.com.

Read David's blog posts on the Camino at: scecclesia.com/archives/7541