



The Aussie Camino

WORDS • Luke Mills

People travel for many different reasons: for health, broadening the mind, relaxation, work and sport.

A pilgrimage has a different objective. It is a journey with a religious purpose: to visit sacred places, often associated with a saint, where people can feel near to the saint either through relics or miraculous stories.

Australia is not a country that people associate with pilgrimage. For pilgrimage to become part of the Church's witness in a particular country, one needs saints and a kindling of the desire to visit places associated with their lives.

In April, Steven Murphy, Anthony Mills, Michael Dillon and myself, who work together at St Francis Xavier College, Beaconsfield, set out on a journey from Portland, Victoria, to Penola, South Australia, a pilgrimage we have called 'The Aussie Camino'.

The pilgrimage was inspired by the film *The Way*, starring Martin Sheen and his real life son Emilio Estevez. In the film, the son (Estevez) is killed in a freak storm the day before he was to begin *el Camino de Santiago de Compostela* (the Way of St James); the father (Sheen) undertakes the camino in honour of his son.

The movie struck a chord with us. Why are there only caminos in Europe and the Holy Land? Can we have one here now we have a saint of our own, St Mary MacKillop?

Where would it begin and end? Mary MacKillop was a traveller. Her work took her all over Australia and New Zealand. We decided it should be from Portland to Penola.

St Mary MacKillop traveled widely but her last teaching post as a lay teacher was in Portland. From here, she was called by her mentor and co-founder priest Fr Julian Tenison-Woods back to Penola, where they had met a few years before.



Penola is widely accepted as the birthplace of St Mary MacKillop's order, the Sisters of St Joseph. A town with a population of only 1300, it is 383 kilometres from Adelaide and 412 kilometres from Melbourne.

It was when St Mary was called from Portland to Penola on 19 March 1866 that she wore her black habit for the first time and declared herself Sr Mary. Although her path is not recorded, she would have passed through many of the same towns we did as we walked the Aussie Camino.

An important part of the camino was to provide structure through 'bookending' it by visiting the Mary MacKillop museums in Melbourne before we began and then in Penola at its conclusion.

Our days began with a lively 'Buen camino!' in the main street of each town and then, with maps in hand, we set out for our destination. Every day included eight hours of walking—an average of 31 kilometres—and each was long but spectacular, as it was planned to be both a spiritual and religious experience. It was important to have a camino that recorded the places of Mary MacKillop but also appealed to people who have a sense of awe in creation. The camino includes walks along cliff tops, beaches, sand dunes, goat trails and farm tracks. Only about 10 kilometres of the whole camino was on major highways.

I wanted to stay in the local hotel of each town. At the front bar of every small hotel in the country you can meet

characters who are only too happy to share their stories. Whenever anyone asked if we were walkers we said, 'No, we're pilgrims. We are on a camino.' Needless to say, we would be met with curious looks, but with a bit of humour and good spirit we were able to enter into lively discussions about what our journey was all about.

It was a terrific week. Although we were tired at the end of each day, with a shower, a hot meal and a good sleep, we were ready for the next one. The peace and solitude, combined with the steady rhythm of our feet and walking poles, provided many moments of reflection. In this busy life we do not often get a chance to really talk with one another, but on the road we were able to reveal very personal experiences.

After 217 kilometres and seven days of walking, we were met in Penola by the director of the Mary MacKillop Museum, Clare Larkin, and Krystyna Moore, a representative of Cobb and Co. We convened for dinner with other members of the Penola community, all of whom were interested to hear our story. Where else but at the local pub? This time we could claim that the Royal Oak Hotel does have significance since it was once owned by Mary MacKillop's uncle.

I hope to do the Aussie Camino again next year. Buen Camino! ☺

Details: lmills@sfx.vic.edu.au. Check out the YouTube clip: search for 'Aussie Camino' by Luke Mills and look for the kangaroo photo.

Luke Mills is a teacher at St Francis Xavier College, Beaconsfield.