The Tunnel Route
La Ruta Interior
Via de Baiona

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by
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These are a series of notes which may be of use to future travelers of this alternate route from near the French border along the West Coast to a juncture with the Camino Francés at either Santo Domingo de la Calzada or Burgos depending on the variation chosen. To the best of the writer's knowledge they are the same to below La Puebla de Arganzon where the Via de Baiona diverges to Miranda de Ebro and Burgos and the "Tunnel Route" continues to Brinas and Santo Domingo. The term "Ruta Interior" was used frequently locally although I had not heard it before we arrived. The situation is further complicated by variations in spelling and names due to the use of both Basco and Spanish for many locations.

Most route references will be with respect to the Guide published (now available online) by the Confraternity of St. James in London (csj.org.uk). We also found the information published by Mundicamino.com to be very helpful (especially for the Burgos Route).

As a further prefatory explanation, the "we" in this case is my sister and I, who are both 60+ year-old overweight Americans with 30-lb packs who did a fair amount of preparatory training (10 miles with pack 3X a week over local rolling terrain). The plan was to walk from Irún to Santo Domingo over 10 days and to spend a few spare days in Madrid or Bilbao. That plan was thwarted by volcanic ash (from the Icelandic volcano whose name shall not be pronounced) over the Madrid airport and our outgoing flight was rescheduled leaving 9 walking days and travel time. This caused the decision to divert to Miranda de Ebro on the last day for ease of train access. Santo Domingo is a charming town which I visited and enjoyed on the Camino Francés. Timing was late May and we were blessed by perfect weather for the entire walk.

In my opinion, this trip would be difficult with no Spanish at all. I have a year of JC Spanish and came from a Mexican border community. That was more than adequate. People were tremendously willing to be helpful (examples and thanks later) if you could communicate at all. A few words of basque/vasco which are not in the guide also helped a lot. The Vasco equivalent of "buenos dias" is (phonetic) eh-hoo non ("non" pr like moan). That got a blizzard of responses from a couple of stony old gentlemen where "Buenos dias" and "Hola" got only silent stares.

A "Europe compatible" cell phone would be extremely useful. Most of the albergues require "call ahead". Some of the pensions are unattended and have a number to call on the door. Public phones are not common and like pay phones in the States, don't always work when you find them. If I were to do it again I would consider the options available on this.

Pilgrims on this route are rare. By far the majority in Irún are headed on the Camino del Norte along the coast. We met another local couple from Miranda de Ebro who quickly outdistanced us, and then no others. For this reason, this leg does not have the "spiritual experience" of the

Camino Francés. For us it was more a walking vacation in Spain so this was not really an issue, but be advised it is different.

Getting there- Irún is accessible by either train or bus from Madrid. Buses are more frequent and cheaper, we just happen to prefer the train. It can also certainly be reached from/via Hendaya by train from Paris. I did not check buses in this direction. You can also walk from the French side via Bayonne and beyond.

There is an albergue in Irún, follow the yellow arrows from the train station. It is very adequate and accommodates 33. It opened at 4pm and when we were there was staffed by a trilingual (EN/FR/SP) *hospitalera*. Exit instructions given by the albergue vary from the Guide, being a right out of the albergue, right at the T-intersection immediately adjacent, up the hill toward the train station and church, left across the bridge over the railway at the top of the street, followed by a right onto Calle Aduana which may change names later but is followed past a school on the right (street names are often not evident or well marked). Just keep on without deviating. Just beyond the school there is a street angling left and up and it is well marked with the "Done Jakue Bidea" wooden sign. Follow the sign and this street is ultimately identified as Calle (or Kalea) Belitz as referred to in the Guide. No problems until some distance out of Oiartzun where we encountered conflicting formal signs indicating a left turn and yellow arrows going straight. We always followed the formally marked route and the places this was a mistake are few and noted. The formal route took us up a paved path on a steep hill where we ultimately went left at a T-intersection and rejoined the yellow arrows. Further along we encountered an X'd out signal in yellow (usually indicating "this is the wrong way") where the formal route indicated to go left. A handpainted sign indicating "Camino de Santiago Listoretta" sign is also present here. We continued straight to the next nearby T-intersection and got a lot of helpful hand signals from a local resident to "go back." We did, and turned left over the X. This path continues up a long, steep climb over very mixed terrain including some serious mud on a dry day. It ultimately exits at an Asadero and Bar at Listoretta. I recommend the bar's *bocadillo de tortilla*. Thence continue following the formal marking and yellow arrows to the right and forward and down the road perhaps half a kilometer to another formal sign to turn to the right. I cannot tell whether this is the "dangerous" path mentioned in the guide or not, but it is down a water cut ravine and was slippery mud on a dry day, would be difficult on a wet day, and impassible (really! A waterslide!) in heavy rain. Just outside Hernani the route again deviates from the guide, around to the right through a seedy industrial section but the area is well used by locals walking for exercise. The day ends at the entrance to the downtown section at Pension Zinco Enea. Be advised it is not attended and you must call (number on the door) to be let in and registered. Ringing the doorbell just annoys the guests. The pension is very nice, modern, costs E45 for a double (pretty standard). There are many bars in the commercial section a block or 2 farther on toward the church. We could not find a local restaurant but the street level bar sharing the same building with the pension has good *platos combinados/menú del día* and was very helpful and cooperative after realizing we were helpless American pilgrims. Dinner was E20 for 2 with wine. This is a tough day to start on, a full 24 km with lots of ups and downs crossing the ridges and drainages which lead down to the coast.

The second day began with breakfast (magdalenas) at the *kafetegia* across from Pension Zinco Enea, which opens fairly early. The route to Urnieta was correct in the Guide. Be advised that

the “informal route” out of Urnieta may not be the best choice as the path below the gardens has become disused and a dumping ground for the gardens above and alongside. We were impeded by construction outside Andoain where the guide says to go left to the bed of a disused railway. We did go as marked left but it now goes to the top of a step hill past a nursery, then right at a farm building (?) and continues above a deep ravine to the left of the path, then right again down the hill, then left along a pedestrian pathway, and finally there is access to the pedestrian walk along the disused rail line and through the mentioned tunnel. Either we were lost or the Guide instructions fell apart in Villabona. We entered Villabona on the main street and had lunch at the Parochial Bar adjacent the church. Moving away from the bar with the church on the LEFT there is a T-intersection ahead and the church does have a clock on the tower. The path as marked, however, is to the right at the Tee and crosses the river continuing to the left on the other side. At Anoeta we were routed by the formal signs through a pedestrian area which ended at some apartment buildings with a less than obvious exit to the road to the left, which then ran to the Guide instructions. Arrived in Tolosa and Hostal Oyarbide just to the left as the roads enter the old city was the first accommodation noted so we took it at E45 for a room with “ensuite” bath. The building was a bit agey but the rooms were clean and it was quite acceptable. The reception seems to be attended and is one flight up. We could, again, not find a restaurant but had *raciones* at the K2 Bar on a plaza near the hotel. They were quite accommodating of our desire to eat before the earliest possible hour of 830, even if they thought it a bit strange.

Day 3 started in accordance with the Guide to the point of the *polidivertido* (sports complex). We followed the formally marked path to the left where the Guide says go around to the right. The two paths appear to rejoin at the bridge under the N1, and is formally signed to the right beyond the bridge. We did not find a pedestrian walkway, however, but followed what appeared to be the marked path through and above an industrial park and out the other side, over a local carretera, and into an apartment complex. Instructions from the locals were to return to the polidivertido and try again. We made several loops through the industrial complex finding and following what appeared to be bicycle paths (not formally marked) but arriving in the same wrong place. We finally retraced our first path along the marked route and found an UNMARKED turn to the right up a local street at the end of the industrial area on the right where we encountered a formal marker sending us up a paved pathway/small road. At this point we were on the “formal route” and it continued to be marked as such but it also became the longest, most difficult climb and descent of the trip thus far. It does have great views. The descent goes off the paved road onto a trail which was rocky, muddy, eventually became a watercut, and would be a waterslide in any rain. We eventually exited right at a Tee at a small country church then right again into Alegia (or Alegria according to the locals), where we encountered a gloriously wide, flat, dedicated pedestrian/bicycle walkway along the river and road. My advice here is FIND THAT PATHWAY at the sports complex and do not take the formally marked path (unless, of course, you just like long tortuous climbs and want to get your leg exercise). We could not find a bar with *bocadillos* in Legoretta (each bar sent us to another) so we bought bread and cheese and ham and picnicked. When we reached Beasain we were not having much luck finding accommodations so we splurged on a 2-star Hotel for E75 breakfast included, Hotel Igartza, a street or two above and beyond the train depot. It was very nice and modern but we really just wanted a bed and shower. Beasain was the one place where questions in Spanish were met with answers in English from the local young folks.

Day 4 began without incident but be cautious about inadvertently crossing the river, there are city structures built over it. We took the direct road route. Pass the Palacio Igartza on your LEFT as you exit town along the river. After you cross the highway the Carrefour is adjacent to it so go right then back down to the highway and left. Which turn is the 2nd per the Guide may not be evident. We did avail ourselves of the *Turismo* in the *Ayuntamiento* in Segura to make reservations in Zegama and Salvatierra and the lady present was quite willing to assist, but speaks no English. We did go straight at a roundabout following the yellow arrows into Zegama when the dedicated footpath went left. Pension Zegama is directly behind the church and cost only E40 for a double. It is one of the nicest places we stayed, modern, recently renovated, even has an elevator. Bar on the ground floor is good and there is a restaurant attached in the rear. *Platos combinados* are the same as in the bar but it's a lot quieter in the restaurant in the evening; E20 for 2 with wine. Nice bars and plaza at the church. The young lady who attends the bar and restaurant does speak good English when necessary.

And then, the climb. This is an arduous climb (given advisory comments about overweight Americans with heavy packs), it took us 4 hours to reach the tunnel from Zegama. Directions seem to be correct as in the Guide but be advised that there are several opportunities to turn right before reaching the Iruetxeta turn, and the abundant yellow arrows referenced at the turn seem to have diminished or disappeared. There are several gates/barriers to cross along the route now, some with "step throughs". The bar/albergue at the Ermita below the tunnel was not evident but perhaps because we did not want to consider going that far down hill again; there was a building below a good way. We were there on a Saturday and there were many local hikers in the area on both sides of the tunnel. The slope from the Ermita to the tunnel appeared to be loose dirt which would be challenging as wet mud. There is a significant continuing climb from the tunnel to the top of the pass, and the condition of the pathway is poor in several places even in the dry. The change from the coastal climate to the dryer climate of the Alava plane is immediately evident as you come out of the woods. Still very pretty country but very different. Zumarraundi is a road sign, and that in poor condition. It is a placemarker but there is nothing there. We did not find the bar in Zalduondo and it would have been welcome. We did refill our water bottles at the fountain in the park with excellent cold water. Salvatierra/Agurain is quite a nice town with two major churches and what appears to be a university but we did not see it signed. We stayed at the Bar/Restaurant Jose Mari and accommodations were quite acceptable. This was the only "bath down the hall" establishment we encountered but it was just across from the door of the room. We got the "pilgrim discount" of E15 each for the room and we were not charged for dinner in the restaurant. Can't guarantee this treatment but it was quite generous.

We got a late start to a short day since the restaurant didn't do an early breakfast on Sunday, but the Guide instructions were probably correct all the way. We managed to miss a turn in Ezkerekotxa, the formal sign appears to point straight ahead across the intersection so we continued to follow the road to the next steeple. Wrong steeple but a nice walk. Look for a turn to the left here. Should you make the same error there is a simple recovery. There is a good paved road behind the church, follow it until you reach the *carretera* and turn left to follow it to Alegria-Dulantzi, where we spent the night at the Pensión Poker which now seems to be Casa Antolín (but the carved name on then door gives it away). This is at the top of the town below a church and public square. It was nice at E42.80 with breakfast, except that when we came down for breakfast they couldn't get the coffee machine to work, so we ate at the very good pastry

shop on the square at the bottom of town. It has a restaurant which seemed expensive so we ate sandwiches at the bar which serves pizza on the plaza. There is now an albergue here, very clearly signed, but again you have to call a number on the door to use it.

Leave town passing between the church and convent on what was a street being reconstructed when we passed through (Calle Nuestra Senora de Aiala) and it will take you to the railway station, where there is a bridge over the railway which will take you to the Ermita if you missed it on the way in. Walking instructions were good all the way to Vitoria-Gasteiz. The construction is still a bit of a challenge. On arrival at the construction and passing a local church, turn right and then stay left across a small triangular field which will take you to a pathway along a flood channel and behind some houses. When you can go no further in the channel climb out to the right and then left and follow the arrows through the construction, eventually going left on as yet unused road. We went straight on the broad pathway down the center of Calle Santiago marked with local signage on the ground. As we neared the center of town we deviated from the marked path to find *Turismo* and get a local Hotel (the Amarica) which was good. Everything in Vitoria is substantially more expensive, the hotel was E50, *vino tinto* is E2 where it was E 0.70 elsewhere, etc. There are several bars with reasonable *platos* available if you look around. The hotel was very near Calle Florida which is the exit route in the morning.

And that is where we went the next day. On the way out we had to find an open bar for breakfast so at the Parque del Prado we dropped down to the right and found several along the adjacent business streets, open about 730. Be advised that if you plan to return to the path, as we did, you cannot follow the periphery of the park to the intersection of the road you were on. The path deviates to the left in the middle of that edge of the park, so should you do this turn left at the edge of the park to rejoin the path at the Capilla de la Sagrada Familia and go right. Then just follow the well marked (on the ground) wide central pathway past the Basilica and into Armentia. Be also advised that the first occurrence of Avenida de San Prudencio to the right is just a neighborhood loop. Do not take it. Stay on the "yellow brick road". We took "the valley route" and should have had no problems if we paid attention to the Guide. We missed the turn at the second bridge and came to a seriously fenced and locked gate and had to turn back and crossed the *autopista* as we should have the first time. Be advised here that the route you need to take is immediately adjacent the *autopista* so having crossed the bridge IMMEDIATELY turn back and down to get on it. Do not continue to the apparent highway on the other side of the valley as might be interpreted from the Guide. We were assisted by a local cyclist here (and for the record, my sister was right). The old highway is virtually unused and carries you directly into La Puebla de Arganzon. Nice church and bar on the square. For the albergue (call ahead) go to the street behind the church and turn right. For the *pensiones* continue to the other end of town (not far) and turn left on the street toward the railroad tracks, and cross the tracks and road on a pedestrian bridge. This will bring you immediately in front of the Hostal Palacios where we stayed E48. Nice place, but beware that if you go to the bar for breakfast in the morning you may not be able to get back in since the entrance will be closed; take your gear when you leave. Immediately adjacent, part of the Asadero next door, is Hostal (Pensión) Pili. It is not evident until you walk over there. Food at the *asadero* is excellent and dinner for two with wine was E21. You can get basically anything cooked over wood coals, beefsteak, pork ribs (*costillos*, which we had), sardines, fish, pancetta. There is no *menú*, the waitress just tells you what there is, and she was extremely kind and helpful to us. Generally served with the ubiquitous *ensalada*

mixta which was also very good. It is a laborers/truckdrivers place and my sister may have been the only woman present.

Continued the following morning and the Guide instructions are good but the marked path now continues down the old and unused N1 past the bar/gas station then turns left. This is actually quieter than the farm path which more closely follows the autopista. At Estavillo we took the turn to Miranda. The Guide is correct, go down out of the town and under the *autopista* and follow the well marked path into Arminon. Before the "Nitrogen of Chile" tiled building, turn right and pass over the bridge and under the railway onto the very obvious dirt road heading Straight over the hill. About half way up there are conflicting markings at a concrete structure, yellow arrows to the left and formal road signs continuing straight ahead. We chose the formal signs (and never saw the yellow arrows again until Ribaguda, can't tell you where they might take you). The road will carry over the top of the hill and down to another *autopista* at which you will turn right and follow to a pedestrian under pass to the left. When you reach town go right around the church and left at its front, and this will take you to the center of town where there is a nice bar for lunch.

At this point, in Ribaguda, I would have to say "we lost it". The last yellow arrows we saw were in front of the church on a curb. When we got to the center of town we asked for directions from folks in the bar and at the *Ayuntamiento*, and we followed them as reported below. This is a marked path into Miranda and it is marked as the formal path. It is not, as we were later informed, the "Via de Baiona" and it does not pass through Lacorzana or Bayas. It is a shortcut with a few less kilometers to walk and is good surface, but it does bring you into Miranda in the wrong place for the albergue, which the *hospitalera* in Irún rated as "4 stars". Nobody we spoke to in Ribaguda seems to have ever heard of Lacorzana, only a kilometer and a half away, and from the photos an interesting place to pass through.

Should you choose to follow the route we took, it is as follows. Continue through Ribaguda with the bar on your left and the *ayuntamiento* on your right, straight down the road ahead. This will bend to the left and enter countryside. Pass over two bridges close together, one with an adjacent park. You will see "formal signs" here. Continue on the main road a few hundred meters more and there will be a formal sign indicating a left turn at a very small paved road. A better road goes to the right and is marked with a local destination which I did not record. Proceed about a hundred yards and TURN RIGHT on an UNMARKED dirt farm road (see "thanks" for how we found this). Continue on this until you reach a signed Tee intersection and turn left. Continue straight following signs until you reach a bridge over the highway and cross it. Continue straight until you crest the hill and Miranda will be below you. Continue down onto paved roads to a major street following the railway (below the "RENFE" sign) and go right. Take the next available left into Miranda. At this point we were met by a charming lady who was the representative of the local Caminos Association who gave us a brochure on the Via de Baiona and offered a ride to the albergue, and informed us we were NOT on the Via de Baiona. We needed to go to the RENFE and get tickets for the following morning so we declined, and chose to stay at the adjacent Hostal Ferroviaria which was quite acceptable at E45 with a cheap but good restaurant and bar on the ground floor. For information, the albergue is somewhere across the river roughly at the level of the Hostal Ferroviaria and perpendicular to the railroad tracks, we did see signs to it while exploring. The "old city" here is pretty small and uninteresting

although it appears to be the home of Fr. Damian, presumably of Hawaii's leper community fame.

Finally, thanks are due to the many people of Spain who were extremely gracious and helped us along the way, some of the more notable of whom are:

- The couple from Miranda whom we met in the albergue in Irún, who made reservations for us at Pensión Zinco Enea. At the Pensión we woke them from *siesta* by ringing the doorbell and they very kindly called the owner to register us.
- The gentlemen on the farm road who taught us a few words of Basque/Vasco on request.
- The several students in Beasain who responded to our crude Spanish by helping us find a hotel in English.
- The lady (Txus) who met us at the crest above the tunnel, who had been to the U.S., spoke English, and offered us an emergency contact in Vitoria when we arrived.
- The many residents and drivers (including a tour bus) who stopped and pointed the way when they saw us studying the Guide for directions.
- The lady who asked what we were looking for and walked us to the pensión in Alegria-Dulantzi.
- The man who did the same in La Puebla.
- And finally, the elderly man who, unrequested, rode his bicycle ahead of us as far as the final bridge to Miranda stopping and pointing out each turn including one which was not marked at all.

Enjoy your trip.