



About the Author

Mike Wells is an author of both walking and cycling guides. He has been walking long-distance footpaths for 25 years, after a holiday in New Zealand gave him the long-distance walking bug. Within a few years, he had walked the major British trails, enjoying their range of terrain from straightforward downland tracks through to upland paths and challenging mountain routes. He then ventured into France, walking sections of the Grande Randonnée network (including the GR5 through the Alps from Lake Geneva to the Mediterranean), and Italy to explore the Dolomites Alta Via routes. Further afield, he has walked in Poland, Slovakia, Slovenia, Norway and Patagonia.

Mike has also been a keen cyclist for over 20 years. After completing various UK Sustrans routes, such as Lôn Las Cymru in Wales and the C2C route across northern England, he then moved on to cycling long-distance routes in continental Europe and beyond. These include cycling both the Camino and Ruta de la Plata to Santiago de la Compostela, a traverse of Cuba from end to end, a circumnavigation of Iceland and a trip across Lapland to the North Cape. He has written a series of cycling guides for Cicerone following the great rivers of Europe.

Other Cicerone guides by the author

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The Danube Cycleway Volume 2

The River Rhone Cycle Route

The Loire Cycle Route

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CYCLING THE CAMINO DE SANTIAGO

THE WAY OF ST JAMES – CAMINO FRANCÉS

by Mike Wells

CICERONE

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Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/969/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time.

The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: The Alto del Perdón, where 'the path of the wind crosses that of the stars' (Stage 3)

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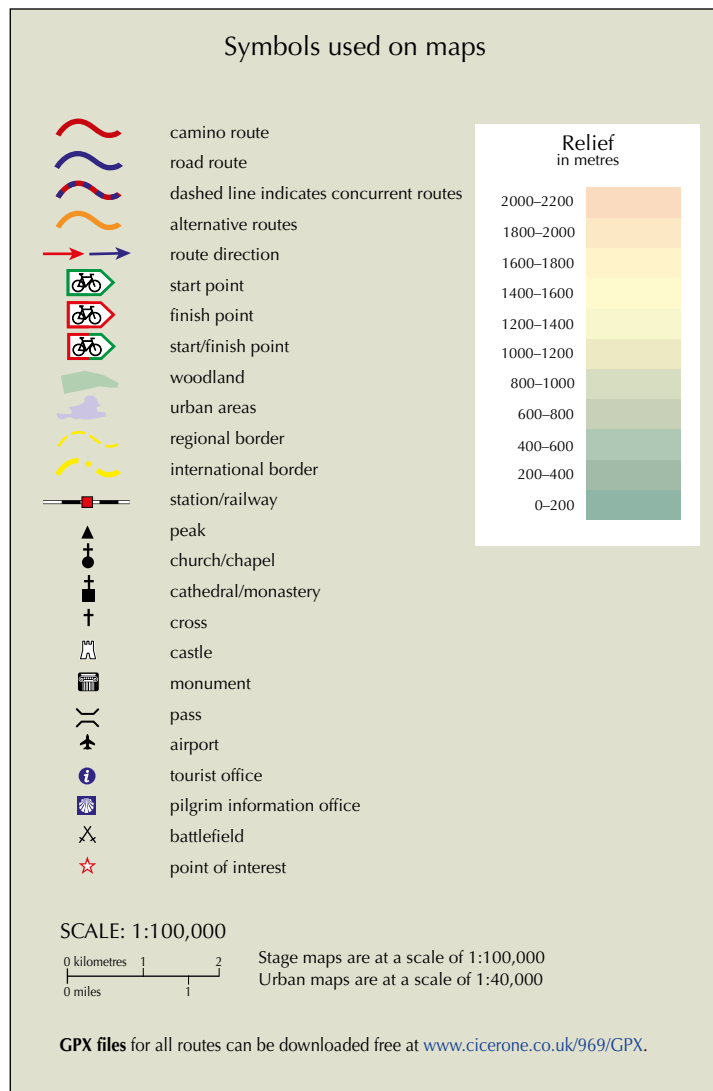
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Santa María church in Viana (Stage 4)



ROUTE SUMMARY TABLE

Stage	Start	Finish
1	St Jean-Pied-de-Port	Roncesvalles
2	Roncesvalles	Pamplona
3	Pamplona	Estella
4	Estella	Logroño
5	Logroño	Santo Domingo de la Calzada
6	Santo Domingo de la Calzada	Villafranca Montes de Oca
7	Villafranca Montes de Oca	Burgos
8	Burgos	Castrojeriz
9	Castrojeriz	Carrión de los Condes
10	Carrión de los Condes	Sahagún
11	Sahagún	León
12	León	Astorga
13	Astorga	Ponferrada
14	Ponferrada	O Cebreiro
15	O Cebreiro	Sarria
16	Sarria	Palas de Rei
17	Palas de Rei	Arzúa
18	Arzúa	Santiago de Compostela
Total	St Jean-Pied-de-Port	Santiago de Compostela

Camino route			Road route			Page
Distance (km)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	Distance (km)	Ascent (m)	Descent (m)	
28	1106	345	27.5	961	200	50
42.5	491	982	46.5	316	807	58
45	814	848	48.5	704	738	69
48.5	863	904	46	660	701	81
50	797	540	49.5	623	366	93
34	579	274	33.5	540	235	105
38.5	406	493	36	292	379	113
40	327	368	51.5	376	417	123
43.5	323	301	45	232	210	132
39	216	219	42	233	236	141
55	258	253	54.5	253	248	148
47.5	346	316	48	325	295	160
54	824	1150	54.5	801	1127	172
53	1046	285	54.5	988	227	182
38	611	1479	44.5	373	1241	194
47	943	827	47.5	914	798	203
28	431	595	29.5	460	624	213
38.5	739	869	39	566	696	221
770km	11,120m	11,048m	798km	9617m	9545m	



The kindly image of Santiago Peregrino over the Door of Pardon in Santiago cathedral (Stage 18)

INTRODUCTION



Navarrete in the Rioja wine region has 11 bodegas (wineries) (Stage 5)

When a ninth-century Galician shepherd found the long-buried body of the Apostle James in a remote corner of north-west Spain, he could not have envisaged that his discovery would lead to a huge pilgrimage with hundreds of thousands of people making their way every year across Europe to visit his find – or that this pilgrimage would witness not one but two periods of popularity, with 500 years between them. The first pilgrimage, which ran between the ninth and sixteenth centuries was a hard journey. Medieval *peregrinos* (pilgrims) would travel thousands of kilometres to Santiago with no maps or guides, in basic clothing, braving the weather,

dangerous animals, thieves and polluted drinking water to gain absolution from their sins by touching what believers claim to be the tomb of Santiago (St James), a disciple of Jesus Christ. When they reached Santiago, they had to turn around and retrace the hazardous journey. They could be away from home for up to a year, with no way of contacting family and friends. Significant numbers would never return home, some dying en-route and others settling down for a new life in northern Spain.

The journey is much easier for modern pilgrims. They can travel in weatherproof clothing on well-way-marked trails, drinking safely from

countless drinking fountains that are tested frequently to guarantee water purity, with neither wolf, bear nor robber in sight. Every night they can stay in basic but comfortable *albergues* (pilgrim hostels) and consume good-value filling food and wine from pilgrim menus in a wide choice of restaurants. They can use mobile phones to call home every night and post online pictures of themselves on their journey. When they reach Santiago, they can fly home effortlessly in a few hours.

The degree of hardship may have changed, but the journey is still one of discovery, both of new places and of the inner self. The route followed may have altered slightly but it still has the same name, El Camino de Santiago (The Way of St James) or usually just 'The Camino'. Medieval

pilgrims either walked or travelled on horseback. Modern pilgrims still walk, but very few use a horse. Those that do ride nowadays favour a bicycle and take approximately two weeks to complete the journey across northern Spain from St Jean to Santiago and it is for these cycling pilgrims that this guide has been written.

There is more than one pilgrim route to Santiago, but the most popular in medieval times and again today is the Camino Francés, named for the large number of French pilgrims who followed this route. Pilgrims started at many points throughout France or further afield, using different routes that converged upon St Jean-Pied-de-Port at the foot of the lowest and easiest pass over the Pyrenees into Spain. Their approximately 800km route from St Jean to Santiago follows

a generally east–west trajectory, south of and parallel with the Cantabrian mountains. Beyond the Pyrenees the trail undulates through Navarre then crosses the wine-producing region of Rioja. After steadily ascending then descending into Burgos, the route reaches and crosses the northern tip of the meseta, a vast area of rolling high-level chalk downland that occupies much of central Spain. After León, the forested Montes de León and fertile Bierzo basin are crossed before the rolling green hills and valleys of Galicia are reached. The Camino ends at the great religious city of Santiago de Compostela, where the tomb of St James housed inside an 11th-century cathedral is the ultimate destination of the pilgrimage.

The Camino is not just a two-week ride through northern Spain. About half of walking peregrinos make the pilgrimage for religious reasons. For them the journey can become a voyage of self-discovery with the opportunity to meet and talk to like-minded believers, visit and perhaps take communion in ancient churches and cathedrals, while having time to contemplate the spiritual side of their lives. Others, including many cyclists, make the journey for exercise and recreation. For them the challenge is to successfully cycle 800km including traverses of the Pyrenees and the Montes de León. Yet more are attracted by the cultural side of the Camino, seeking to visit stunning cathedrals, historic abbeys and

ancient city centres. The appetite is catered for too, with a wide variety of local foods accompanied by good-quality wine. In summary, the Camino has something for everyone. ¡Buen Camino! (have a good journey).

HISTORY

The earliest known inhabitants of northern Spain (from around 800,000BC) were pre-hominids and Neanderthals, whose remains have been discovered at Atapuerca near Burgos (Stage 7). Later, successive waves of Stone Age, Bronze Age and Iron Age civilisations arrived from Central Asia via western Europe. The last of these were Indo-European speaking Celtic tribes who arrived in Spain during the sixth century BC.

Roman civilisation (218BC–AD439)

The Romans came to Spain in 218BC, initially to conquer the Carthaginians who had settled along the Mediterranean coast. From here Roman control spread slowly north and west in campaigns against Celtic tribes but it was not until 19BC that all of Iberia came under Roman rule. The Romans involved local tribal leaders in government and control of the territory. With an improved standard of living, the conquered tribes soon became thoroughly romanised. Indeed, the Roman province of Hispania became an important part of the Roman Empire, with three emperors being born there: Trajan (ruled



Rich medieval pilgrims travelled on horseback, nowadays only a handful use animal power (Stage 5)



Castromaior castle was an Iron Age camp later used by the Romans (Stage 16)

AD98–117), Hadrian (AD117–38) and Marcus Aurelius (AD161–80). The VII legion was settled in Legio (León, Stage 11) while nearby gold mines made Asturica Augusta (Astorga, Stage 12) a rich and prosperous town. Roads were built linking cities across Iberia, including one across northern Spain, south of the Cantabrian mountains from Pompaelo (Pamplona, Stage 2) to Brigantium (near Coruña) via León and Astorga that 1000 years later would be partly followed by the Camino. The Romans knew this as Via Lactea (Milky Way) as it was said to follow the stars to Finis Terrae (the end of the world) on the Atlantic coast of Galicia.

During the fifth century AD, the Romans came under increasing pressure from Germanic tribes from the east who invaded Gaul (France) and

moved on into Hispania. Roman rule ended in AD439 with the Romans allowing the Christian and partly romanised Visigoths to take control of most of Spain after a brief interlude of Suevi (Swabian) rule.

Visigoths (AD439–711)

Despite consolidating power by defeating other Germanic tribes and inheriting the well-established levers of Roman rule, Visigoth rulers did not have the same grip on power that their predecessors held. Internal disputes were common with periodic civil wars, assassinations, usurpations of power and free-roaming warlords all destabilising the state. Like other civilisations of the Dark Ages, the Visigoths left little in the way of architecture or art and few written documents, resulting in the soubriquet 'invisigoths'. After

AD585, when they conquered Galicia, they controlled all of Iberia apart from the Basque country, Asturias and Cantabria on the north coast.

Moorish invasion (AD711–22)

From AD618, when the prophet Mohamed fled from Mecca to Medina, Islam spread rapidly through the Middle East and along the north African coast, arriving in what is now Morocco by the end of the seventh century. In AD711, the Moorish army of the Umayyad Caliphate crossed the Strait of Gibraltar and invaded southern Spain where they defeated a Visigoth army at the Battle of Guadalete. King Roderic and many nobles were killed, leaving Spain with no army and no leadership. This allowed the Moors to capture much of the country unopposed.

The small independent kingdom of Asturias, on the north coast, became the focus of resistance to Moorish occupation. In AD722, a Moorish army confronted a small Asturian force led by Don Pelayo occupying a narrow gorge at Covadonga in the Cantabrian mountains. Here, against all odds, the Moors suffered their first defeat in Spain. This Asturian victory is regarded as the beginning of a Christian fightback against the Moors which became known as the Reconquista (Reconquest).

The Reconquista (AD722–1492)

Other victories followed with the boundaries of Asturias being extended slowly west into Galicia, east into Cantabria and south over the Cantabrian mountains into León. Christian legend tells of a victory at



San Juan de Ortega monastery church (Stage 7)

STAGE 1

St Jean-Pied-de-Port to Roncesvalles

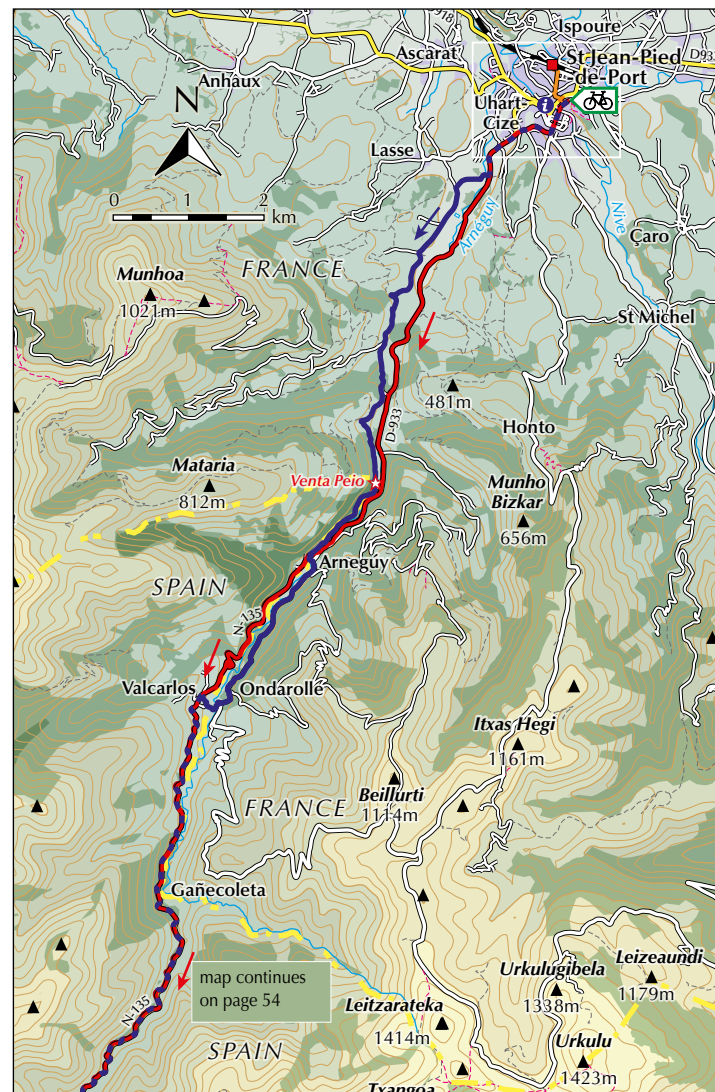
Start	St Jean-Pied-de-Port, office of Les Amis du Chemin de St Jacques (187m)
Finish	Roncesvalles abbey (948m)
Distance	28km; road route 27.5km
Ascent	1106m; road route 961m
Descent	345m; road route 200m

There is a choice of three routes to reach Puerto de Ibañeta. The most popular for walkers is the route Napoléon via col Lepoeder (1450m). This has a long, very steep road ascent (reaching a maximum gradient of 25 per cent), while the upper section, although less steep, is off-road on rough or grassy tracks. It is suitable only for very experienced mountain-bikers and then only in good weather. The lower less steep route via Valcarlos and the Ibañeta pass (1057m) has two variants, a walking route and a cycling route. The lower part of the walking route, which follows quiet roads as far as Valcarlos, is passable by all cyclists but the upper section on steep woodland paths is not recommended.

The camino route described below follows the walking route to Valcarlos then joins the road route over the pass, while the road route is on the well-surfaced pass road throughout. From Puerto de Ibañeta, both routes follow the main road descending slightly to Roncesvalles abbey.

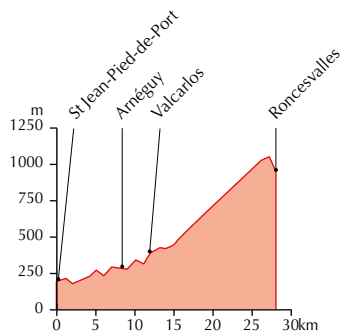
**Getting to the start**

From front of **St Jean-Pied-de-Port station** (157m), follow Rue de la Gare E, then fork R (Ave Renaud, sp Accueil des Pèlerins). Ave Renaud is one-way street with contra-flow cycling permitted. Bear L to reach T-junction. Turn L and immediately R (Pl du Trinquet) on ramp back beside main road. Turn L (Rue de



The streets in the old town are pedestrian only from 11.30 to 18.30.

From St Jean until the border the route is waymarked as 'Chemin de St Jacques' (French for Camino de Santiago).



France) through city walls into old town to reach T-junction. ◀ Turn L steeply uphill (cobble) to soon reach office L of Les Amis du Chemin de St Jacques at 39 Rue de la Citadelle (**0.7km**, 187m).

Camino route

◀ From Les Amis du Chemin de St Jacques in **St Jean-Pied-de-Port** (accommodation, albergue, refreshments, camping, tourist office, cycle shop, station), follow

ST JEAN-PIED-DE-POR



Rue de la Citadelle is lined with old houses

and decorated with carvings showing the names and occupations of former residents. It leaves by crossing the river Nive on a so-called Roman bridge

St Jean-Pied-de-Port (pop 1500) is a medieval walled town stretching along one main street that is the route of the Chemin de St Jacques. At the north end of town, the Chemin enters via the Porte St Jacques gate then passes many attractive old houses built in grey, pink or red sandstone

(actually medieval and restored in 1634) and passes through the Porte d'Espagne gate. Beside the bridge the Church of the Assumption and neighbouring houses with wooden balconies overhanging the river are much photographed. Above the town, the Mendiguren citadelle first built in the 12th century as a castle for the kings of Navarre was extended and strengthened in the 17th century by the French military engineer Vauban. There are walks along the ramparts but the fortress is occupied by a college and cannot be visited.

cobbled Rue de la Citadelle back downhill through old town past Church of the Assumption L and over river Nive, then ascend to reach Porte d'Espagne gate. Continue ahead (D301, sp St Michel) for 100 metres then turn R (D381, Ch de Mayorga) climbing out of town through **Uhart-Cize**.

Emerge onto main road (D933) and bear L. After 700 metres pass house 33 on L then fork R and cross river Arnéguy. ▶ Bear L at T-junction then go ahead over small crossroads. Fork sharply L at T-junction, winding through fields. Fork L downhill at next road junction. Pass between buildings of Mespia farm and after 100 metres fork R uphill through woods. At next junction fork L downhill and pass Carricaburia farm R. Continue through woods with short gravel section where road crosses unmarked Franco-Spanish border to reach carpark of **Venta Peio** (refreshments). ▶ Continue past shops, then bear R on red asphalt strip past service station (do not cross river) and follow winding track through woods to **Arnéguy** (**8.5km**, 256m) (accommodation, refreshments).

In centre of village drop down L on concrete ramp then dogleg L and R across main road and follow road bearing L over river Arnéguy, re-entering France. Turn R (D128, sp Ondarolle) uphill between wall of open *fron-ton* (Basque pelota court) R and church L. At end of village fork R, following lower road (D128) ascending gently above E side of river Luzaide. Pass through **Ondarolle** hamlet with Valcarlos on R bank, then fork R descending steeply. At bottom turn half-R on winding lane and

The road route continues ahead on the D933.

The former duty-free shopping complex of Venta Peio is in Spanish territory and attracts French customers with lower Spanish prices.



The road route
rejoins here.

descend to cross river on narrow bridge (crossing border for final time) then ascend very steeply to reach main road in centre of **Valcarlos (11.5km, 367m)** (accommodation, albergue, refreshments). ◀

Turn L (N-135) and follow road ascending steadily through forest for 14km with views down into Luzaide valley L and up to Ibañeta pass high ahead. Cycle round seven hairpin bends to reach summit at **Puerto de Ibañeta (26.5km, 1057m)**.

THE BATTLE OF RONCEVAUX

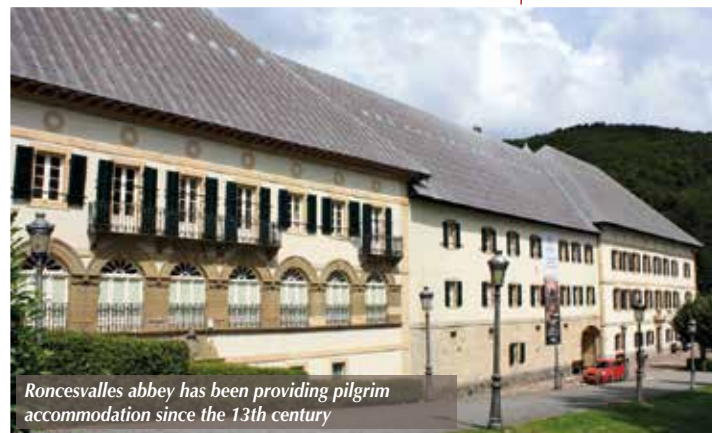
The Ibañeta pass (1057m), one of the lowest crossing points of the Pyrenees, is claimed to be the site of the Battle of Roncevaux (AD778). Here, as Charlemagne's Frankish army was returning to France after the siege of Zaragoza, its rear-guard was attacked by Basque guerrillas in retaliation for the destruction of the Basque capital Pamplona. All 3000 soldiers were killed, including the commander Roland. However, this delaying action enabled the rest of the army to escape unscathed to France. Subsequent legends have grown around these events, many of which describe it as a battle between Christian and Muslim forces (most of Spain including Zaragoza was under Moorish Muslim control) although the Basques were not Moors. It was claimed that the Franks were attacked by 400,000 Saracens and that Roland



The Roland stone on the Ibañeta pass commemorates the Battle of Roncevaux

blew a sacred horn (the Oliphant) to summon help but this arrived too late. Roland became a cult-hero figure and model for chivalric knights for many centuries. The *Song of Roland*, which describes the battle, was sung by medieval French pilgrims along the way. Written by an anonymous French 11th-century poet, it is regarded as the oldest known literary work in French. A memorial stone (erected 1967) commemorates Roland. The chapel of San Salvador and the summit cross are also 1960s' additions.

From summit, follow main road downhill round another hairpin to soon reach **Roncesvalles abbey (28km, 948m)** (accommodation, albergue, refreshments, tourist office).



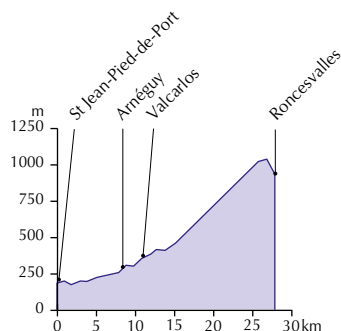
Roncesvalles abbey has been providing pilgrim accommodation since the 13th century

Roncesvalles Augustinian abbey dates from the 13th century when the first buildings and the collegiate church were built on the orders of King Sancho VII of Navarre, who is buried in the chapter house. The museum and library hold religious and secular items together with items associated with Charlemagne and the legend of Roland. The monastery has a long history of providing accommodation and refreshments for pilgrims, reflected in numerous additions to the original core buildings. A pilgrim mass is held in the abbey church every evening.

Road route

From Les Amis du Chemin de St Jacques, follow cobbled Rue de la Citadelle back downhill through old town past Church of the Assumption L and over river Nive, then ascend to reach Porte d'Espagne gate. Continue ahead (D301, sp St Michel) for 100 metres then turn R (D381, Ch de Mayorga) climbing out of town through **Uhart-Cize**.

Emerge onto main road (D933) and bear L, at first descending slightly then ascending gently. Pass **Venta Peio** shopping complex (refreshments) on opposite bank of river R. Continue on main road through **Arnéguay** (8km, 256m) (accommodation, refreshments), where Franco-Spanish border is crossed, to reach



Valcarlos (11km, 367m) (accommodation, albergue, refreshments).

Continue on road (N-135) ascending steadily through forest for 14km with views down into Luzaide valley L and up to Ibañeta pass high ahead. Cycle round seven hairpin bends to reach summit at **Puerto de Ibañeta** (26km, 1057m). From summit, follow main road downhill round another hairpin to soon reach **Roncesvalles abbey** (27.5km, 948m) (accommodation, albergue, refreshments, tourist office).

Venta Peio duty-free shopping complex on the Spanish side of the French-Spanish border