

South Africans Walking the Camino: Pilgrimage or Adventure

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Abstract

The Camino Pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is an institution that has been operative for more than 1200 years. The European summer months see hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, whether they be persons of faith, agnostics or even atheists, walking the different routes to the city of Santiago de Compostela in the north-west of Spain. To be officially recognised as a pilgrim, by the cathedral authorities, a participant must walk at least 100 km or travel 200 km by bicycle or on horseback along the route. Most carry their luggage with them, making them backpackers. They are usually on a tight budget, have flexible itineraries and opt for inexpensive basic accommodation. This explorative case study looks at the reasons why South Africans undertake the Camino. The results show that they represent a much older group as opposed to the typical Camino pilgrim or international backpacker. Unlike many other documented Camino pilgrims, men do not undertake the journey for religious or spiritual reasons; rather they embark on the trip to fulfil their leisure, recreational and adventurous inclinations. Their female counterparts see it as a personal challenge and a cathartic experience after having lived through a traumatic event. Lastly, some may use it as an opportunity to immerse themselves in their ancestral European heritage.

Keywords: Camino, Santiago de Compostela, Spain, budget tourism, pilgrimage, backpacking

Introduction

According to Santos (2002), the Camino (or the Way of St James) pilgrimage routes, to Santiago de Compostela and the associated Jacobean experience have been in existence since the Middle Ages. They are amongst the most studied topics of the Galicia region of Spain (González, 2013). Pilgrimages are usually long, often arduous journeys, undertaken as an act of religious devotion, to some holy or blessed place (Scriven, 2014). They are sometimes viewed as a type of walking meditation (Roos, 2006). The core element of the Camino phenomenon is the Christian pilgrimage to the Shrine of St James at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. According to Schnell and Pali (2013), the pilgrimage is linked to notions of purification, penance, devotion, and healing. The Jacobean experience refers to observations made about the places, facts and practices that are connected to St James the Apostle (Murray, 2014). The roots of this pilgrimage can be traced back to the discovery (between AD 813 and 830) of the remains of St James of Zebedee by Teodomirus, the Bishop of Iria Flavia. Bishop Teodomirus discovered St James' marble tomb in a village called Monte Libredón, the site of the present-day city of Santiago de Compostela (Santos, 2002).

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. In terms of the Camino de Santiago, it documents for the first time the experiences of South African citizens on this type of pilgrimage. The lack of academic discourse on South Africans undertaking the Camino is in contrast to the extensive communications from organisations such as Hiking South Africa and the Confraternity St James of South Africa (CSJOFSA) that are dedicated to the promotion of South African pilgrimages and of the Camino on social media and websites such as thesouthafrican.com (Kahla, 2019); and News24 (Brophy, 2019). Furthermore, this study contributes to the South African literature on the topics of backpacking and hiking.

The South African literature on backpacking is well documented in studies by Rogerson (2007a,b); Sixaba (2013); Visser (2003, 2004, 2005) and Visser and Barker (2004). These scholars explore backpacking as a type of travel incorporating the accommodation of the participant. They also describe typical backpackers, the issues of public transport, and the spatial nature of the South African backpacking economy (Donaldson and McKay, 2018; McKay, 2017). Notably, the profile of backpackers in this Camino study present with a very different profile from those documented in the South African literature. Moreover, little scholarly work has been undertaken in South Africa around trekking/hiking, and what has been covered has not been done from the theoretical perspective of adventure tourism (see Hill et al. 2006; Linde and Grab, 2008). In that regard, this study presents an overview of the demographics of these types of pilgrims, as well as the reasons why South Africans embark on the Camino.

The first section of this paper presents the background to Santiago de Compostela and the Camino, while the second covers a literature review on the Camino and backpacking and budget tourists. The third contains the methodology applied in producing this paper, while the fourth presents data and the reasons why South Africans walk the Camino. A discussion then follows. The paper wraps up with recommendations for South African tourist destinations, hiking operators and heritage tourism organisations, then a conclusion follows.

The Camino

The starting points for the respective Camino routes are in different countries, namely France, England, Portugal and Spain, but all end in Santiago de Compostela in Spain. Currently, the pilgrimage is growing in popularity amongst religious and non-religious pilgrims (*peregrinos*) alike, and this region in Spain is undergoing one of the most dynamic tourism growth periods in its history. Annually, hundreds of thousands of pilgrims walk the different Camino routes (González, 2013; Egan, 2010; Slavin, 2003). In the 2010 Holy Year, some 272 000 completed it. This represents a massive growth as in 1985 only 2 500 official pilgrims completed the route (Murray, 2014). Such has been the growth in the number of pilgrims that concerns have been raised about the resultant environmental damage and the sustainability of the route (Kunaeva, 2012). That said, the impact of COVID-19 and its associated national shutdowns have halted much of the 2020 pilgrimage, leading the authors Olsen and Timothy (2020) to postulate that a reset to more sustainable, equitable pilgrimage tourism may be possible.

The rising popularity of the Camino Walk is even more surprising: - to be recognized as an official pilgrim, the distance that any participant must cover across Spain is least 100 km for walkers or 200 km for cyclists or horse riders (González, 2013; Egan, 2010; Reader, 2007; Slavin, 2003). An official pilgrim - that is one recognised by the cathedral authorities in Santiago de Compostela - is awarded a certificate, the *Composela*, which is a "Pilgrim Certificate" and is issued as long as the required distance has been traversed and the pilgrim undertook the journey for religious or spiritual reasons (Reader, 2007; Slavin, 2003). If not for these purposes, the participant would then be awarded a Certificate of Completion (Lois-González and Santos, 2015). A further requirement would be for the pilgrim to have the

relevant *credential* (a Pilgrim Passport), issued by various Camino-associated organizations and stamped by the various *albergues* or *refugios* (or other pilgrim support organisations, such as town hall officials) along the way, as a complete record of stamps is required for the *Compostela*.

As far back as the medieval times, some pilgrims undertook the Camino journey more out of a desire to travel to see new places and to enjoy new experiences and adventures than for spiritual reasons. But, a formal distinction between a tourist and a pilgrim became necessary in the 1970s (Lois-González and Santos, (2015). In that regard, Slavin (2003) sees a tourist as someone who relies on mechanised transportation, usually a speedy form at that, whereas pilgrims either walk, cycle or ride at a much slower pace. Slavin (2003) argues that the slower pace allows pilgrims to be more in tune with their surroundings, so that by implication they can enjoy a more authentic experience. Nonetheless, better communication technologies and mechanised transport have raised the number of pilgrims who now come from all over the world to walk the Camino (Notermans, 2007).

The most notable difference between a pilgrim and a tourist, which is pertinent to for this study, is that pilgrims undertake the trip for religious (Christian) reasons (Collins-Kreiner, 2010). However, in the 1970s, the Camino was no longer limited only to pilgrims. This was in part a response to the rising demand from the not particularly religious to undertake the journey. This change in demand can be attributed to several factors, namely the secularisation of society, a decline in overt religious practice and the de-institutionalisation of spirituality (Fernandes et al., 2011; Roos, 2006). Thus, many now undertake the Camino as a release from the pressures of modern life, to escape stress or to search for hope, purpose, direction and meaning in life (Reader, 2007; Egan, 2010). As a result, Courtney (2013) and Devereux and Carnegie (2006) conclude that the journey is now more about the transformation of the self and for the purposes of accruing health and well-being benefits, including, amongst others, the means to deal with pain or to acquire control over one's life situation. In such cases, those who walk the Camino could be viewed as a type of pilgrim-tourist.

This change, along with the marketing of the Camino, which falls into the wider framework for the promotion of modern Spanish tourism, suggests that there has been a commodification of this spiritual journey (Fernandes et al., 2011; Murray and Graham, 1997). Importantly, as the most popular Camino routes crisscross northern Spain to the south of the Cordillera Cantabrica mountain range, this region has elected to pursue economic development by marketing itself as an extraordinary tourism destination within the global tourist economy. The Camino is now punted as a unique tourist attraction owing to its presentation as a combination of culture, history, spirituality and nature in one product. This is a means of promoting this less popular tourist region (it lacks sunny beaches) and extending tourist experiences beyond the regular domestic urban and rural tourism offerings (González and Medina, 2003; Murray and Graham, 1997).

Furthermore, it is marketed as an opportunity to engage in authentic encounters with host populations, to gain an understanding of the values and culture of the Spanish people, and to socially interact with others (Samy, 2010; Stoyetch, 2016). Some also see it as a chance for a deeper immersion into European culture and society (Fernandes et al., 2011). The route is ancient, but popular, and a source of income for locals. It is well-marked, with yellow arrows and images of scallop shells indicating the way to Santiago de Compostela. There are numerous water points along the route and the footpaths and roads wind through the towns, and along and through farms and forests (see Figures 1 and 2). It is here that the walkers can find peace in the beauty of nature and are able to focus on their deep innermost thoughts and emotions. Some of them carry small pebbles or shells in memory of loved ones (an old tradition), placing them on the piles alongside the road. While carrying the stone or shell, there is the opportunity

to reflect on the relationship with the person who has passed on. Some pick up conversations with people they meet along the way. At the same time, there are also opportunities to walk alone.



Figure 1. An example of a well-marked route (the yellow arrow), with a resting place and a watering point along the way (Source: authors).



Figure 2. A typical path along the route, in this case meandering through a wooded area in Northern Portugal (Source: authors).

There are many small interesting restaurants along the route serving three-course pilgrim meals for eight to ten Euro's. In these rural areas of Portugal, France and Spain, one must be able to speak the lingua franca, if not, then this will add to the adventure of ordering a dish from the menu! There are also hundreds of small accommodation sites (*albergues* or pilgrim hostels run by either a church, a town council, a non-profit organization or a private company as a profit-making enterprise) along the routes. The cost of accommodation ranges from five to ten Euros, with hotels charging an affordable €40 per night. An *albergue* can be small, with seven beds in one room, or large, with 30 to 40 bunk beds per room. In the late afternoons, the space begins to fill up with pilgrims of both genders. Such a sleeping arrangement can indeed be an adventure in itself, although in a post COVID-19 world may have to change. As a result, some opt to sleep in a hotel along the route.

Backpackers and budget tourists

Backpacking can bring with it socio-economic, cultural and environmental development (Visser, 2004). The term ‘backpacker’ generally calls to mind a budget-minded international tourist, with a pack strapped to his/her back, embarking on a long journey to a number of destinations (Stoyetch, 2016). More recently, backpackers are viewed as young independent travelers, with a flexible itinerary travelling on a shoestring budget (Rogerson, 2011; Visser, 2004). They select budget or inexpensive accommodation and use public transport, showing due appreciation for the bargain value that these factors contribute to their trip (Hindle et al. 2015; Samy, 2007; Stoyetch, 2016). Despite this, they should not be viewed as vagabonds or tramps. Rather, most are professionals, either studying towards a qualification or recently graduated, and hence, short of funds (Rogerson, 2007; Visser, 2003).

Over the past two decades, backpackers have become more prominent in contributing to the travel economy itself and have come under the global tourism spotlight. Backpacking requires a local network of communication, inexpensive forms of accommodation; and other tourist infrastructure such as eateries, transport, entertainment and shops catering for tourists (Visser, 2004). A distinguishing feature is the willingness to consume local foodstuffs, embrace the local culture and spend their money at small and medium-sized enterprises. They tend to stay longer than the average tourist and as such, they can contribute considerably to local economic development. (Rogerson, 2007, 2011; Samy, 2007). Some authors, such as Rogerson (2011), have noted an overlap with pilgrims in that many backpackers see their trips as a way to enhance their personal growth and achieve insights into themselves. This also indicates that the once-held viewpoint of backpacking being synonymous with a hedonistic lifestyle is also incorrect (Rogerson, 2007).

Methodology

As research on South African Camino pilgrims is a new area of study, the explorative case study method was used (Saunders and Lewis, 2012; Zikmund et al, 2013). In the words of Saunders and Lewis (2012, p. 115), exploratory research is suitable when new information about a topic is sought in order to provide “new insights, ask new questions and assess topics in a new light”. However, this research design has shortcomings as results cannot be generalised (Gerring, 2007). The data collection process for this study used semi-structured questionnaires and a snowball approach to find South Africans who had officially completed the Camino. In total, 23 people participated. Thus, the results must be considered with caution both the sample size and the sampling method employed.

Results and discussion: The South African pilgrim

Participants indicated that they had become aware of the Camino through word-of-mouth reports from relatives and friends who had undertaken the journey. All had walked the Camino in the past six to eight years but said that they would like to complete another Camino Walk again, if possible. As was the case with this study, the vast majority of pilgrims in the Fernandes et al. (2011) study had also only undertaken the Camino once. Despite word-of-mouth recommendations, most were confident enough to book their trip online, thus avoiding the travel agencies. This change in behaviour was predicted by Levinson and Milne (2004) and it seems now that even the so-called older ‘digital immigrant’ population has embraced online bookings owing to cost-saving and information opportunities.

Most had embarked upon the longer Northern (830 km) or more popular French (790 km) routes. Both start on the French/Spanish border. The French route offers many more accommodation sites than the other routes. Only a minority did routes shorter than 300km. All started their Camino Walk during the late spring (May/June), before the peak European

summer holiday season – to avoid the busiest and most expensive tourist times and to ensure that they could access affordable accommodation. Most used pilgrim accommodation (*albergues*), the most inexpensive option. They bought meals from restaurants, while breakfast (usually fruit or bread) was bought from a shop on the previous evening, to ensure that they could head out early the next morning (see Table 1). While all participants were over 40, the South African female Camino *peregrinos* were, on average, roughly 10 years younger than their male counterparts.

Table 1: Attributes of the South African interviewees walking the Camino

Variables	Male <i>peregrinos</i>	Female <i>peregrinos</i>
Age while walking/cycling the Camino	Mid 50s to early 60s	Mid 40s to early 50s
Reasons for walking the Camino	Adventure/recreation Lifetime experience	Personal challenge Peace, solitude
Awareness/information about Camino	Family and friends	Family and friends
Booking of flights to Europe	Online	Online
Time on the Camino	Longer route	Longer route
Time of the year walking the Camino	Summer months	Summer months
Accommodation during the Camino	80 - 90% <i>albergues</i>	80-90% <i>albergues</i>
Meals and snacks during the Camino	60 – 80% restaurants	60–80% restaurants

Since the South Africans appeared to be a lot older than many of the pilgrims, this set them apart from the other nationalities. The bulk of the pilgrims in the Fernandes et al. (2011) study were between 40 and 49 years of age, although there were a number of people younger than 40. Furthermore, in the sample by Oviedo et al. (2014), the average age was 32. The South African participants were all backpackers. There is a slackpacking option where one’s backpack is carried for you, but no South African took this option. They also did not embark on the Camino for religious reasons (see Table 1). Compared to typical backpackers, the South Africans could be described as rich in both money and time. It may be that these South Africans could only undertake the Camino in their later years, as a result of the freedom and income security that are associated with being in the older phase of the life cycle. It is also possible that Schengen visa issues (the cost and documentation required), as well as the huge cost (due to the weak Rand/Euro exchange rate to travel to Europe, prevented younger South Africans from undertaking such a trip.

Importantly, all the South Africans were of European decent, in line with the findings of Fernandes et al. (2011) and Oviedo et al. (2014), leading to speculation that immersion in their ancestral European heritage may have been one of the motivating factors for their journey. Motivations appeared to differ in terms of gender. The men said that they had undertaken the journey for adventure and the recreational attributes associated with such a long hiking trail. They perceived it as a once-in-a-lifetime ‘bucket list’ experience. This notion of undertaking ‘bucket-list’ activities in one’s 50s and 60s has been confirmed as an emerging Western cultural trend by the work of Freund (2020) and has been noted in the adventure tourism literature as well (see McKay, 2013). Overall, the men saw it as a fun, recreational and adventurous activity.

The women, however, said they had engaged in the Camino as a personal challenge to assist them to overcome a negative life-changing or traumatic experience. Thus, the women undertook the Camino for deeper reasons, such as peace and solitude, making their motivations more aligned with a pilgrimage than adventure or leisure tourism. Of the South Africans respondents in this study, none would be classified as pilgrims *per se* as religious motivations were not pertinent. Instead they could be viewed as pilgrim-tourists. The South Africans saw the Camino as an opportunity to temporarily escape from the hustle, bustle and the hectic pace of modern life. They all enjoyed the slow pace of walking, the beautiful scenery and the landscapes of Northern Spain, in line with the findings of Lois-González and Santos (2015). They also liked meeting other walkers and getting to know them on a more personal level than normal (see Figure 3).



Figure 3. Two pilgrims who spontaneously elected to walk some of the route together. One is from South Africa and one from Chile (Source: authors).

This finding differs from that of the Fernandes et al. (2011) study, that had 35% undertaking the Camino for religious reasons, and only 5% for spiritual ones. Furthermore, only a few in the Oviedo et al. (2014) study claimed to be there as sensation seekers. Not one participant in the Fernandes et al. (2011) study labeled the walk as ‘an adventure’, although 39% stated that they had done it for recreational and leisure purposes. As in the case of this study and those of Fernandes et al. (2011) and Lois-González and Santos (2015), there were many who did it for recreation, leisure and to have ‘fun’. These comments are very different from those of the pilgrims who formed part of the Oviedo et al. (2014) study, with many walking the Camino to achieve religious or spiritual growth, and to find direction in their lives or for their own religious convictions.

This paper now turns to examine the Camino from the perspective of the adventure literature. There are several reasons for the relevance of this approach. Firstly, Cave and Ryan (2007) maintain that backpacking is a type of adventure tourism. Secondly, some of the participants in this study, as well as some in the Fernandes et al. (2011), Lois-González and Santos (2015) and Oviedo et al. (2014) studies postulated that they undertook the Camino for adventure, recreation, leisure, fun and for sensation-seeking reasons. The notion of ‘sensation seeking’ is common amongst adventurers, as is the notion of undertaking the activity to escape mundane daily routines, for fun or for enjoyment (Allman et al., 2009; Buckley, 2006; Litvin, 2008; Morrissey, 2008; Sirgy, 2010; Woods, 2010). Thirdly, adventure offers an opportunity to challenge one’s physical or mental limits. The successful completion of such feats can give

a sense of personal satisfaction and accomplishment (Schneider and Vogt, 2012). The psychological and physical challenges of such an adventure can also boost self-confidence and have positive mental health benefits (Clough et al., 2016). Thus, some pursue adventure to define themselves, to achieve positive transformation, emotional engagement, explore the inner self and gain personal insight (Allman et al., 2009; Brymer and Oades, 2009; Fuchs et al., 2016; Mykletun et al., 2016; Weber, 2001; Willig, 2008). On this basis, adventure can be a deeply transformative experience. Likewise, the Camino can be also, even in terms of physical health (Bernay, 2019; Harris and Wolf, 2013; Lyons, 2013). Fitzgerald (2015) even argues that it can lead to deep introspection into modern economic life and socio-economic norms. Similarly, as with adventure, hikes such as the Camino are viewed by the participants as a way to break out of daily routines, a chance to experience strong emotions and to undertake an activity that is a mix of risk, challenge and active physical involvement (Bourdeau et al., 2004; Pomfret, 2006, 2011). As such, the Camino holds out the promise of self-discovery and perhaps even self-mastery (Foley et al., 2003).

Thus, there are clear overlaps between walking the Camino and adventure, with hiking considered to be a type of hard adventure (McKay, 2017). Therefore, it is appropriate to critically examine the applicability of the adventure tourism literature to pilgrimages of this type. Since pilgrims are also tourists, it is also necessary to explore adventure tourism. Although definitions of adventure tourism vary, a defining factor is risk (Buckley, 2000, 2005, 2006; Fletcher, 2010; Kane and Zink, 2004; Stanbury et al, 2005; Swarbrooke et al, 2003). Such risks are generally managed by the guides or operators (Bentley et al., 2001). Additionally, Cloke and Perkins (1998:185, 189) and Trauer (2006) argue that adventure tourists seek meaningful “participatory experiences” involving physical activity and challenge in the outdoors. Buckley (2006) adds that adventure tourists also want to have fun. Thus, adventure tourism is the sale of a guided adventurous activity, where tourists are active and physically involved, with some risk, uncertainty and challenge. But as the Camino is self-guided, it is deemed to be adventure recreation rather than adventure tourism (Fennell and Dowling, 2003). With adventure recreation, an individual undertakes an outdoor physical challenge using specialised skills or equipment (Hardiman and Burgin, 2011; Lynch and Dibben, 2016). For the Camino, some specialised equipment and clothing are necessary such as good hiking boots, a backpack and suitable water bottles (at the very least). With adventure recreation the adventure is personal adventure with the risk is borne by the individual alone (Davies, 2016).

As with all adventure, the Camino holds the possibility of misadventure (Mortlock, 1984). People get lost, hurt or even die (Caldwell, 2013; Felkai, 2018). Unfortunately, there have been several Camino pilgrim deaths due to acute coronary syndrome (heart attack); road traffic accidents or homicide (Minder, 2017). In addition, deaths due to exhaustion, stroke, hypothermia and drowning have occurred (Felkai, 2018). Assaults and robberies have been reported. There are other risks as well, such as extensive sunburn and heatstroke since the walk is undertaken in the hot summer months, where temperatures regularly exceed 35°C, Black Fever or *Visceral leishmaniasis*, blisters, chafing, sprained ankles, superficial wounds or even minor bone fractures (Watkins et al. 2014). Data on the Camino shows that male pilgrims are more likely to be injured than women pilgrims and pilgrims over 50 sustain more injuries and are more likely to die than those under 30. Thus, it is hardly surprising to hear that pilgrims are advised to take out insurance. There is also the potential to get lost, to take longer to complete a day’s journey (and so finish in darkness), not to find accommodation (especially in peak Camino times) or to run out of water. The weather is also a risk, especially in the more mountainous Northern Spain where it can quickly turn wet and cold, a serious problem if a hiker has not packed appropriate clothing. Summer thunderstorms can also turn streams into

raging torrents (Belmonte and Beltrán, 2001). Furthermore, pilgrims must be physically fit enough to walk at least 100km (roughly 10 to 20km or 15 to 35km per day, depending on the route and number of stops one opts for), read maps, carry a backpack and converse a little in French, Spanish or Portuguese (Anderson et al., 2009; Norbert Schön et al., 2007). Self-guided hiking is, therefore, a skilled activity, as one must understand and be prepared for these hazards.

In the case of adventure tourism, the challenge, danger and risk are managed by either the tour operator or guide/s, ensuring clients have a safe, fun-filled experience (Buckley, 2007). This is not the case with the Camino, as it is self-guided. However, it is argued here that the Camino experience resembles that of adventure tourism. This is due to the route being well marked, with many water and resting points along the way. The route is also well trodden, and one is unlikely to be left completely alone on it for any length of time. Emergency services are never far away. Insurance is available, and there are multiple ways in which the pilgrims are supported. This includes specialised map books, a Facebook page that is always active, cell phone apps and a system of accommodation facilities and other related organisations to assist them. Additionally, online information, much of which is in real time, enables independent travel. Thus, walking the Camino is more akin to adventure tourism, than adventure recreation, due to the support offered by the adventure tourism infrastructure and the online information. The infrastructure and online information together create a safety envelope enabling pilgrims to undertake the journey without the need for a guide or a paid tourism operator. To a large degree, the adventure tourism infrastructure and online information help to reduce the risks in a similar way to which an adventure tour operator would.

Recommendations for South African backpacking, heritage tourism and adventure tourism operators

The results of this study suggest that there is scope for new forms of niche tourism in the South African market. It may be that there is a market for backpacking, heritage tourism and adventure tourism operators to come together to create new experiences for an older, more affluent group of backpackers. There is already a strong hiking market in the country, with hiking being a very popular adventure activity. The McKay (2017) study recorded 114 operators which makes hiking the second-most-common adventure operator by activity type. Notably, some South African tour operators have already started to venture into Camino type pilgrimages. These include The Sungazer Pilgrimage, operated from Paul Roux in the Free State, offering guided and somewhat luxurious pilgrimages across the Free State province; The Cape Camino, a guided packaged walk along the Cape Peninsula (and beyond) and the Tankwa Camino in the Northern Cape, a slackpacking hike in the Karoo. Lesser known pilgrimages are the Baviaans Camino, in the Eastern Cape; and the Namaqua Camino in Hondeklipbaai, Namaqualand (both slackpacking).

However, most are more reminiscent of hikes than true pilgrimages, although the Cape Camino does start at a shrine. This study demonstrates that there is a market for pilgrimages in South Africa but ones that are a mixture between spiritual experiences, an opportunity immerse oneself in the local culture, food and heritage resources, as well as experience an adventure. Provinces that are well suited to this new pilgrimage product are those identified by van der Merwe (2016, 2019) as rich in cultural heritage resources, namely the Western Cape, the Eastern Cape and Kwa-Zulu Natal; and by McKay (2017) and Rogerson (2007) as also being home to multiple adventure tourism resources and a large number of hiking operators. Although in the context of the Camino in Spain, no operator is required, this is not recommended for South Africa as the country does not have a similar adventure-recreation infrastructure as that of the Camino. Additionally, issues of crime are serious, so hiking without support from an operator is unlikely to be popular or even recommended.

This spatial overlap between backpacking, heritage tourism resources and adventure resources points to the possibility of hiking operators working with the owners, managers and operators of heritage tourism products, backpacking products and adventure products to create a new niche tourism product that is currently not available in South Africa. Unlike the traditional young professionals or students that backpackers generally represent, the target market, that this study has shown, consists of older people, who are both rich in terms of money and time, who want a combination of adventure, personal challenge, spiritual growth and opportunities to engage with the local people, their history, culture and foods.

Conclusion

The South African pilgrims who participated in this study represent a much older group of Camino pilgrim. As backpackers, they also present a different demographic and socio-economic profile from that previously presented in both the international and South Africa literature. The South African participants undertook the Camino for a combination of reasons, namely for spiritual and personal growth, for leisure and recreation, and for cultural and adventure purposes. This study, therefore, argues that there are links between heritage and adventure tourism, hiking and backpacking. Consequently, the South African tourism market could exploit these links and in so doing, cultivate a new niche tourism sector catering for older people who want to experience backpacking, immerse themselves in the local history and culture, as well as face personal and physical challenges. With the COVID-19 restrictions making international travel difficult, this may be the perfect opportunity for such tourism businesses to promote this new form of domestic tourism, helping to achieve the tourism ‘reset’ now advocated in the literature.

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Dedication

This manuscript is dedicated to the late Frank Simmonds (1939-2013) Geography Teacher, Head of St Andrews School for Girls and founding member of the Independent Examinations Board (IEB). Under his guidance, St Andrews School for Girls was opened to all races in 1982 and launched several initiatives to improve education for poor Black African children such as the Outreach Foundation and the Daveyton Enrichment Project in 1990. His career ended as Deputy Director of the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa and founding member of the Alexandra Education Committee.

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