

Art of the Pilgrimage

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Phil Coustineau, *Art of the Pilgrimage*

Pilgrimage has goals, risks, and challenges that we would not accept on holiday.

On vacation one goes to get away from life.

Tourists change their environment.

Tourists escape life.

Tourists are trying to forget.

On pilgrimage one confronts life's most important questions.

Pilgrims let their environment change them.

Pilgrims embrace it.

Pilgrims are trying to remember.

Pilgrimage

“The geographical pilgrimage is the symbolic acting out of an inner journey. The inner journey is the interpolation of the meanings and signs of the outer pilgrimage. One can have one without the other. It is best to have both.”

Thomas Merton, Trappist monk, mystic, scholar of comparative religion, poet, social activist

To put that in other words, a pilgrimage is a physical journey in search of spiritual (or inner) meaning.

I will be using “pilgrimage” in its widest possible sense—to describe *all* spiritually motivated travel.

Hajj



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Anadolu Agency

Pilgrimage is one of the “five pillars” or basic norms of Islamic practice. The *hajj*, a journey to Mecca in Saudi Arabia and participation in various rites there, is a religious duty for all male Muslims, at least once in a lifetime, if they are physically and financially able to do it.

In recent years, a growing number of women have participated in the *hajj* and have been permitted to do so without a male guardian.

In 2021, it was estimated that 40 percent of the pilgrims to Mecca were women.

Judaism, the oldest of the three Abrahamic faiths, may have established the pattern of pilgrimage—leaving home and going somewhere for a religious purpose.

Since its founding in 1999, **Birthright Israel** has funded more than 850,000 free 10-day heritage tours of Israel for Jews 18 to 26 years old—journeys that always include some reflective time at the Western Wall.

Even before Birthright Israel, however, Jews have observed three pilgrim festivals for thousands of years...

Those pilgrimages include:

Passover, also known as the feast of unleavened bread

Shavuot (shuh voo owt), also known as the feast of weeks

Sukkot (soo kowt), also known as the feast of booths



Kumbh Mela

From the New
York Times,
Jan. 14, 2025

The World's Largest Human Gathering Begins in India

About 400 million Hindu pilgrims from around the globe are expected to bathe in and around the Ganges in the religion's biggest display of unity.

▶ Listen to this article · 5:35 min [Learn more](#)

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Hindu pilgrims taking a holy dip in Prayagraj, India, on Monday. India's Uttar Pradesh State Information Department, via Agence France-Presse —

The *Kumbh Mela* or “festival of the sacred pitcher” is a Hindu religious festival and pilgrimage that occurs every twelve years in India.

It’s been called the largest peaceful gathering of pilgrims in the world, with over 400 million participants.

However, Christianity—and Roman Catholicism, in particular—has the largest number of and most visited pilgrimage destinations in the world.

Before moving on to Christian pilgrimage, a few words about this near-universal motivation to move around and find meaning in it.



secular pilgrimage

Graceland

Memphis, TN

600,000 people per year



Strawberry Fields

A 2.5 acre memorial in Central Park, not far from The Dakota, the NYC apartment building where John Lennon was murdered.



Burning Man

78,000 people per
year

Black Rock Desert,
northwestern
Nevada

Chinese New Year

An estimated 2.2 billion people set out each year. Whereas pilgrims have a clear destination in mind, Chinese New Year celebrations are typically more localized, centered around homes, communities, and ancestral worship.

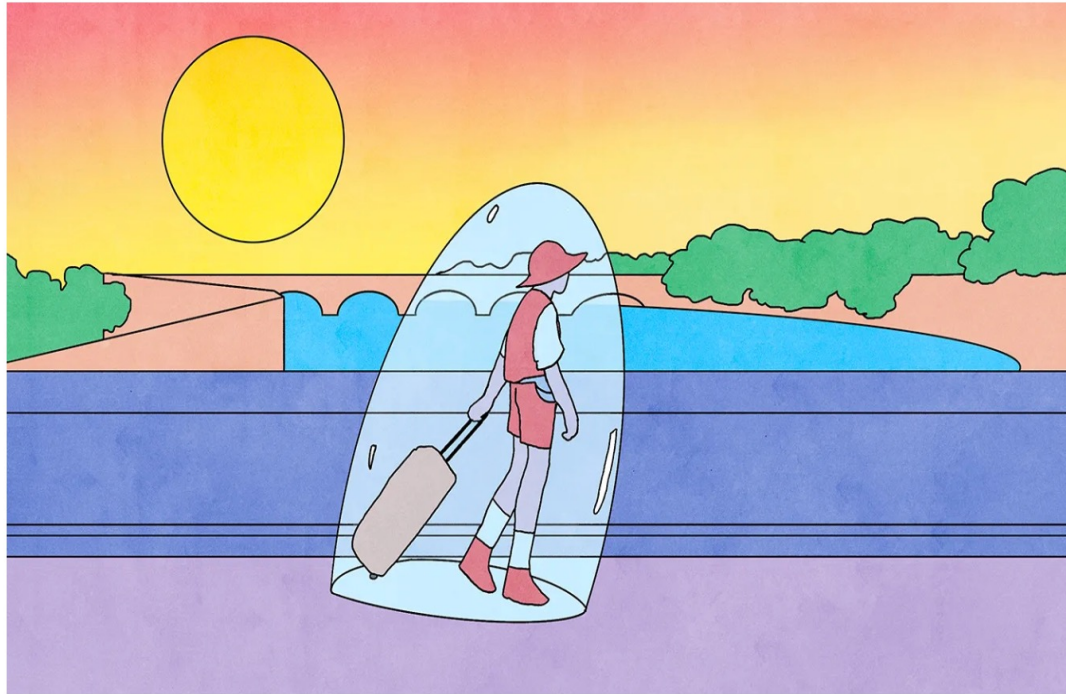


The point is, **lots of people** make pilgrimages to a wide variety of places around the world, and they do so with a wide variety of motivations.

To repeat, lots of people feel the urge to go somewhere and then find meaning in the journey.

But what if pilgrimage—the *idea* of pilgrimage—is flawed, as flawed as the idea that travel broadens a person and makes us better, more interesting people?

What if we tend to “imbue” pilgrimage with meaning and significance that it simply doesn’t have?



THE WEEKEND ESSAY

THE CASE AGAINST TRAVEL

It turns us into the worst version of ourselves while convincing us that we're at our best.

By Agnes Callard

June 24, 2023

So, what is the problem with pilgrimage?

(How much time do you have?)

Pilgrimage is often expensive and time-consuming, and therefore it is out of reach for all but the world's wealthiest people. Being able to make a pilgrimage for many is a sign of privilege.

Worth noting is that more than 80 percent of Burning Man participants are white, and their median annual incomes are well above the U.S. average.

Also, the growing number of non-religious pilgrims points to a growing interest not in pilgrimage as a **spiritual quest** but rather as **adventure travel**.

In other words, walking the Camino for some may be like trekking to the basecamp at **Mount Everest**, or climbing **Mount Kilimanjaro**, or hiking the **Appalachian Trail** (or Pacific Crest Trail).

Martin Luther, the 16th century Reformer, had no use for pilgrimage: “All pilgrimages should be stopped. There is no good in them: no commandment enjoins them; no obedience attaches to them.”

The result of Luther’s opposition was a near-collapse of pilgrimage in Protestant areas of Europe over the next few centuries. (Also, I like Luther’s joke about how many apostles are buried in Spain.)

Beyond the matter of privilege, there is the inescapable fact that many of the most popular pilgrimage destinations in the world are overcrowded and commercialized.

An example can be found at Lourdes in southern France. At least a half million pilgrims descend each year on a town 15,000 citizens. Lourdes boasts the second largest number of hotels per square kilometer in France, an astonishing statistic.



Pilgrims often participate in tourist activities, dress like tourists, eat in the same restaurants as tourists, purchase the same souvenirs as tourists, and often cannot be differentiated from their tourist counterparts in how they relax at night.

(photo by Jon Tyson on Upsplash)



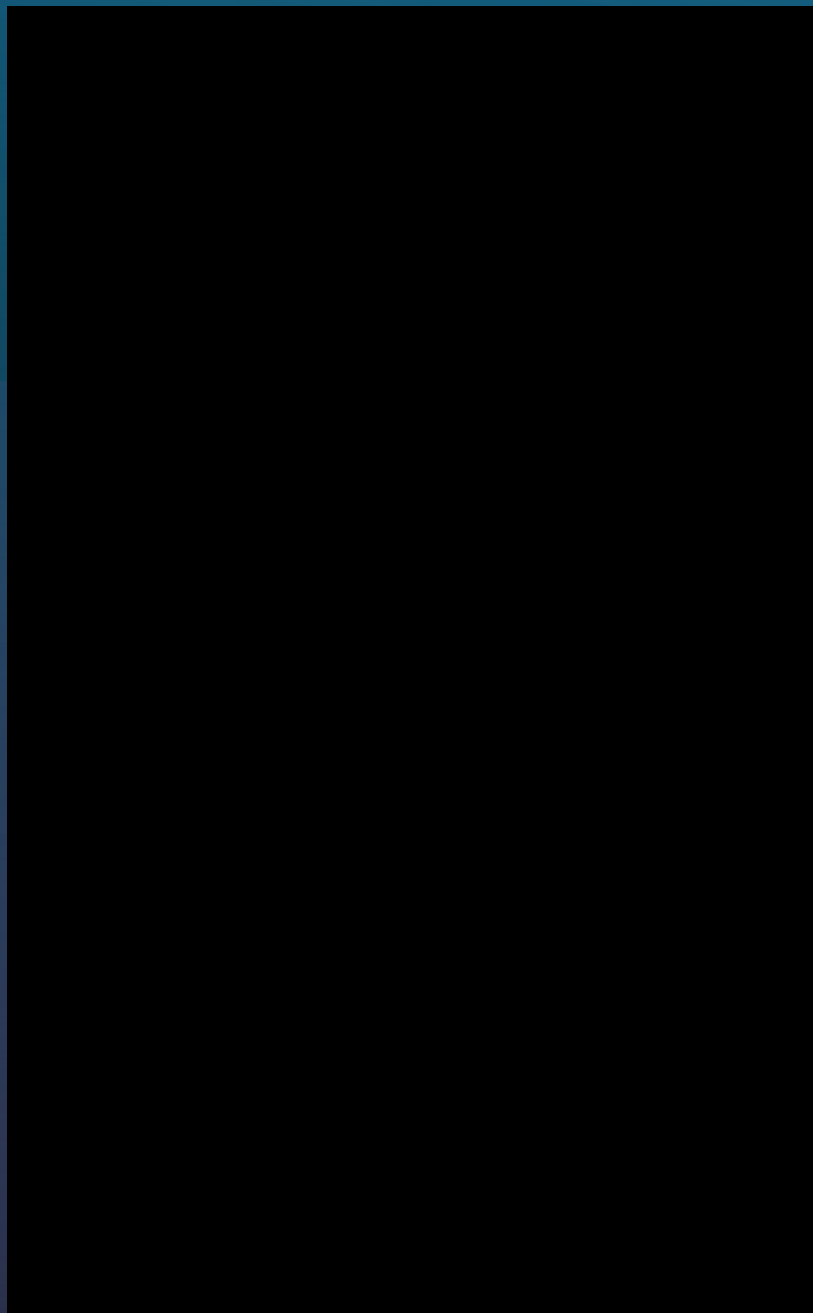
At the end of my Camino de Santiago:
I had walked 500 miles—without
blisters or injury—and I was proud of
it.

Was there religious significance in my
arrival? Almost none.

(On the other hand, attending the pilgrim mass at
the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, soon
after my arrival, surrounded by a few hundred
other pilgrims, did help to refocus my attention to
the spiritual nature of my walk.)

Botafumiero







Via Francigena

Canterbury to Rome...

The **Via Francigena** is an ancient road or pilgrimage path which begins in the cathedral city of Canterbury, continues through (what is now) France and Switzerland, and ends in Rome. The path was in use by the late 8th century.







Cruz de Ferro (or Iron Cross)

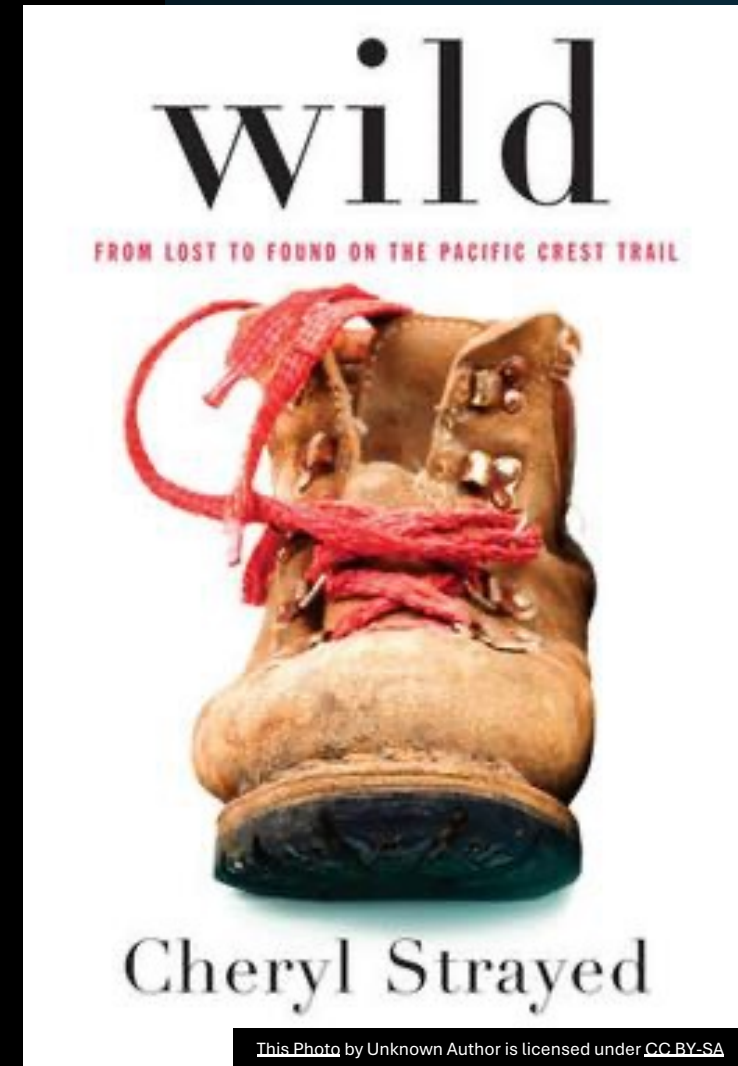
Marking the highest point along the Camino, the Cruz de Ferro became a stop along the way in the 1500s. It's where pilgrims typically leave something of themselves behind, symbolically letting go of a weight or burden in their lives.







Cheryl Strayed's book, *Wild*, is a remarkable account not only of how she walked the entire length of the Pacific Crest Trail, but more important the inner journey she takes to sort out her messy life.



Walden, Henry David Thoreau

A remarkable account of Thoreau's two years, two months, and two days by Walden Pond. His daily walks in the Walden Woods became occasions for reflection on his life and his personal beliefs.



Pilgrim at Tinker Creek

A mystical excursion into
the natural world



*Book-of-the-Month Club News
*Publishers Weekly *John Barkham Reviews

***Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* won the Pulitzer Prize for General Non-Fiction in 1975.**

The author, Annie Dillard, found meaning not by flying to a well-known destination on the other side of the world, but by exploring a creek less than two miles from her home.

The book touches on themes like faith, nature, as well as—remarkably—theodicy and the apparent cruelty of the natural world.

The more Dillard looked, the more she saw.