

journey to self

Travelling to any place offers time out from the rut of everyday routine. But when you travel to a place that challenges you physically or emotionally, you are most likely to experience 'time in'. These four women chose such paths, and were led to very different rediscoveries.

WRITTEN BY INGRID CORBETT AND ELSIBE LOUBSER MCGUFFOG
 PRODUCTION BY JULIE TAYLOR AND LUANNE TOMS
 PHOTOGRAPHS BY ELSA YOUNG AND NICK ALDRIDGE



THIS PAGE Mementoes of Jeanne Alston's journey along El Camino allow her to relive the experience until she sets time aside to return. OPPOSITE The Russian base camp from where Shirley Maltz and her family set off for the North Pole.



Jeanne Alston, 64

Owner of Aasvoëlkrans Guest House | Montagu

how to do it

WHAT YOU'LL NEED Get fit. Walk at least 10 kilometres once a week and 5 kilometres each other day. The full French route is about 800 kilometres but you can start at any point. In addition to a return air ticket and Schengen visa, you need an El Camino passport that allows you access to the refuges along the way. You can get one from The Confraternity of Saint James of South Africa (www.csjofsa.za.org). Jeanne used the book *El Camino de Santiago a Pie* by John Brierley (El Pais Aguilar). And yes, you need basic Spanish.

WHEN TO GO Between April and October; August is the busiest and hottest month.

CONTACT www.csjofsa.za.org.

BELOW FROM LEFT The Cruz de Ferro in Puerto Irago, where pilgrims deposit a stone or momento from their country and pause to reflect on their journey; a village cathedral; June is flower season.

After two knee replacements on the same knee, both unsuccessful, Jeanne Alston had begun to wonder whether her pushing-the-limit pursuits were at an end. 'My active lifestyle was very important, I found it empowering and it boosted my self-esteem,' admits Jeanne, a fervent hiker who has completed the Argus 10 times, and once cycled from Paris to Rome with her daughter. 'I love endurance challenges, but for almost two years I couldn't even walk properly. The reality began to weigh me down.'

Enter Jeanne's good friend, Helena Joubert, who for years had been talking about walking El Camino de Santiago, the centuries-old pilgrim route through France and Spain, often embarked on by the followers of St James. 'She called me on a windy day... I was frustrated at the weather, and perhaps open to options as a result,' laughs Jeanne. 'The hike sounded too serious for me, but Helena did a good job of cajoling. The next thing I knew, I'd agreed to do it.'

Granted, the historical and picturesque surrounds of northern Spain were a draw card, but the physical challenge was one of Jeanne's main persuaders. With her husband Tim's blessing, and her duties at the B&B willingly and aptly covered by the family housekeeper, Miriam Lottering, Jeanne boarded a plane in May 2007, in the company of nine women friends, ready to experience 'a hike with a bit of a difference' that, she says, turned out to be 'a fascinating journey on both a spiritual and cultural plain.'

Not one but nearly 100 paths lead to the cathedral in Santiago de Compostela, in Spain, where the pilgrimage culminates. Jeanne's group chose one of the French routes, which runs through a string

of villages, each one scattered with memorials and shrouded in legend. 'Some of them date back centuries, about chickens and witches and miracles. I loved listening to all of it, and liked to believe some!'

The hike itself is no walk in the park. 'It's not for sissies,' Jeanne stresses of the 20 to 35 kilometres covered each day under the substantial weight of a hiking pack. 'You have to be walking fit, and strong, but it's all worth it... every day you are acutely aware that you're following a centuries-old route.'

Sleeping arrangements are informal, usually in the cloister of a church, the refuges used by pilgrims. Hikers are typically allotted a bed and a pillow with a pillowcase. 'You get the feeling that no one is out to make money off you,' says Jeanne. 'There's no charge, and any donations you make go towards charity. On average, we spent 20 Euros a day.'

Jeanne found walking along paths lined with ancient trees an unexpectedly emotional experience: 'It made me realise we don't plant enough in our own country.' Through villages carved out of stone, past diminutive churches, always along a well-worn path marked with distinctive yellow arrows, a cross or a shell – all of it left a lasting impression, and fed Jeanne's sense of upliftment. 'You're never really sure how far you are going to walk, what you'll encounter along the way, or where you will sleep. Your faith in one fact, however, never wavers: you know with certainty that you'll reach your goal.'

It was a rich multicultural experience too, she adds. 'Pilgrims come from many different countries and are of all ages, from 30 to 90 years old. Groups formed casually as we walked, and in the evenings we would cook meals together, the preparation of food a common bond, even when language was not.'

Arrival at the final destination of Santiago was sobering. 'The cathedral is unbelievably beautiful. I just sat there, tired and somewhat dirty, like a real pilgrim, and was just quiet.' Jeanne had covered 300 kilometres, walking through the pain in her knee. The experience had humbled her. 'There was an old man of at least 80 who walked just ahead of us every day. He was Canadian Indian and a healer, and had walked 900 kilometres in total. His sight was failing, but he was up at the crack of dawn each day.'

She was left with one defining thought: 'We must get rid of our baggage. On the pilgrimage, you have to carry all your own belongings. After the third or fourth day you literally start getting rid of your baggage – you give up a pot of face cream one day, a T-shirt the next. It gave me time out to get rid of the nonsense in my life: all the stuff that goes on in my head.'





Shirley Maltz, 36

CEO of Home Choice | Cape Town

Some very big decisions are taken on the spur of the moment. Shirley Maltz and her family were enjoying a casual dinner in 2006 when they decided to journey to the North Pole. 'We'd eaten and had probably enjoyed too much red wine when someone came up with the idea,' recalls Shirley. The family has travelled extensively and are known to seek out the more unusual destinations and favour rugged travel plans. 'My brother was keen, as was my younger sister and my dad. After that, it was hard to back out.'

The expedition would take two weeks, the physical training and mental preparation, longer. Shirley knew it would satisfy her love of a challenge, but she didn't realise how much it would redefine her concept of goal. 'I'm relatively fit,' she says. 'I do a lot of yoga. I've been to Everest base camp and I climbed Kilimanjaro, so I've done trips that challenged me physically.' But the North Pole is no ordinary hike.

Only 10 people made it to the pole that season. It's very cold: the average temperature was -30°C and it can get down to -60°C. Hikers have to wrap up in four layers of polar gear and cover their faces; anything exposed will get frost-bite. And then you wear goggles too. 'I was pulling about 55 kilograms of supplies on a type of toboggan called a pulk. We were on skis, to ensure that our weight was evenly dispersed over the ice. Ice shifts the whole time, creating ridges and obstacles up to two metres high. When two ice shelves collide, they create what looks like ice rubble. That's what you walk across – and climb across – pulling your pulk.' The group walked an average of 10 hours a day. 'We'd walk for two hours, then stop for five minutes to drink something hot and eat as much high-carb food as possible. You burn up a lot of energy because it's physically taxing and your body heat naturally goes up to compensate for the cold.'

But it's not only physically taxing. Prior to starting, their Norwegian guide, Inge Solheim, told them to speak to him rather than argue among themselves whenever they felt frustrated. A temper tantrum can be draining when you don't have your normal emotional resilience.

Shirley trained by pulling tyres along the beach for four months to strengthen her back and legs. 'I felt I was going to push myself emotionally, physically and mentally more than ever before. I'd be getting the opportunity to discover my edge, my boundary. But once there, I realised I had no idea what "tough"



really was and how hard this challenge actually is. Nothing could have prepared me. For one, I'm afraid of water. We were constantly crossing ice where it breaks. On the first day, I was absolutely petrified. My whole body was tense from fear. When I woke the next day, I realised I couldn't control whether I fell in the water or not, nor could I control my inevitable death if I did. So, in order to not ruin my trip, I had to relinquish control entirely. From then on, things became more playful. I'm still wary of water, but I had to put aside my fear entirely. What it taught me is that your boundaries don't actually exist.'

For Shirley, there was a lesson in relinquishing control, too. 'You pitch your tent, for instance, but because the ice moves, when you wake you're actually further away from the pole than you were the previous day.' Every day the North Pole is a different piece of ice. Eventually Inge stopped telling them what degree they were on; it was demoralising. 'Then one day, we'd been walking for 10 hours and I knew we were probably walking backwards, because Inge was telling us that we must carry on. I started crying from exhaustion and frustration. But my tears froze on my face. I laughed with surprise. That was a huge lesson for me. You can have all these goals, and sometimes, when you get to them, they're not what you thought they would be.'

Shirley has changed a lot, in little ways. 'Now I'm able to look at myself and say, just stop and be where you are instead of thinking where you want to be tomorrow. I'm also stronger yet gentler, and more rooted in my own energy. This comes from realising that each one of us doesn't really have limitations: we set limits, but they're in our minds only. It was also humbling, because you realise how small and insignificant we are on this beautiful, fragile planet.'

Even though Shirley's life is different now – she's married and has a baby, Isabella – she would love to go South and has begun to plan a trip to the South Pole in December.

how to do it

WHAT YOU'LL NEED You'll need to buy kit and polar gear, which is unfortunately not available in South Africa. Food supplies should include instant noodles, dehydrated food, and dried fruit and nuts. **WHEN TO GO** It's dark at the North Pole for most of the year, so the expedition season, and that means 24-hour daylight, is June and July. **CONTACT** Email Inge Solheim at inge@borderland.no for the Arctic trip. Visit www.white-desert.com for useful kit lists and contacts for the Arctic or Antarctic trips. Your guide will help you arrange your trip and will advise you on gear and all the necessary supplies.

ABOVE FROM LEFT Shirley crossing a lead (a channel of water in an ice field); Shirley with her father, Rick, and sister, Robyn (right) standing proud at their final destination; tents on the ice make for chilly nights. Shirley's sense of humour kept her going. 'Robyn and I would make silly jokes for hours before bedtime.'

Veronica King, 45

International marketing manager | Joburg

how to do it

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

A prep course in South Africa is required prior to your trip. Contact Pam Roux to link to various workshop providers, and for advice on trip dates and costs. To go, you will need the content of the prep course as well as the different flight routes, which you'll plan on your own. You'll be collected in Chennai and transferred to the Oneness University.

WHEN TO GO December and January are the best months.

CONTACT Pam Roux at pamroux@gam.co.za or (011) 460 1798; visit www.onenessuniversity.org.

BELOW FROM LEFT Peaceful surrounds; Veronica with a delegate from the Netherlands in front of the Oneness temple on campus, which houses the meditation hall and is architecturally constructed to facilitate powerful chanting; enjoy silent walks and reflect on the lessons absorbed.

As a young girl, Veronica King often dreamed about visiting exotic destinations, and the picture she painted in her mind's eye was always one of beautiful settings in peaceful surrounds. Years later, as her senior marketing role for an international hotel group saw her boarding one plane after another, reality was not quite as pretty. 'I was constantly on the go, for two years I travelled abroad every month, away from home, from my daughter, in and out of airports, on to business meetings. I was present in the corporate world, but not in my own life,' recalls Veronica. 'The guilt associated with that was crushing.'

Afraid that the life she had worked so hard to build was not satisfying her, Veronica took stock. 'I felt a deep desire to find contentment.'

At the same time her friend, Pam Roux, had just returned from Oneness University, a centre for learning and growth in the south of India. 'Shortly thereafter, two representatives came to South Africa. I attended a few group sessions, participated in an introductory course and knew I'd found what I was looking for.'

Veronica's mother, who had moved from Durban to Joburg, was also part of the household that includes a live-in housekeeper and an au pair. 'With so many people under one roof, you sometimes lose sight of the gifts and the blessings, not to mention yourself. I craved perspective.' Veronica's eight-year-old daughter, Amber, was accustomed to her mother's frequent trips and was accepting, but curious: a silent retreat? How would she ask for something to eat? 'I explained I was going to miss her so much that I had requested permission to call her once a week, which did a lot to reassure her.'

The only obstacle left, was getting time off work. 'I asked for a month's leave, and decided that if it

wasn't approved, I would resign and do it anyway.' The leave was granted, affirming her belief that she'd made the right choice. Three weeks later and nearly 8 000 kilometres away, Veronica embarked on a very different kind of journey, in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh.

'I tried very hard not to have any expectations; my only intention was to benefit from self-discovery,' she says. The course Veronica enrolled for, the Oneness Process, unfolds over 21 days under a vow of silence. 'Some conversation takes place on the first day during orientation, but thereafter questions are only voiced when deemed necessary, and for the most part, they're written on pieces of paper. The main objective of observing silence is to allow you to focus on your internal world. That's where self-discovery happens.'

The centre in the tiny village of Battalavallam attracts people from all over the world, and from various walks of life. 'There's an incredible collective energy,' says Veronica. 'More than 100 people in the same place, at the same time, seeking the same thing.'

But despite an overall harmonious atmosphere, there were moments that affected Veronica deeply. 'Taking a vow of silence allows you to explore deep places. Things you've chosen to bury surface at any given time. People would often wake up in the night crying out, and though your instinct is to comfort them, you often don't have the emotional energy to do so.'

The defining moments were numerous. 'During a lecture on liberation from the mind, I became aware that it is our thoughts that cause us pain and suffering, and that many of us share similar stories. In my case, pain came from a preoccupation with guilt, and the more I resisted it, the more I suffered. I learned that accepting it doesn't make it go away, but it makes it more tolerable.' Another lesson addressed the importance of the relationship between child and parent. 'I learned that parents are the roots of the tree, and we are the branches – we cannot expect to grow if we cut ourselves off from the root.' The simple analogy gave her peace of mind. 'Not only did I gain understanding of my parents' intentions and find forgiveness, I was also able to let myself off the hook when it came to my relationship with Amber – I know I'm doing my best.'

'I emerged with a sense of self-approval,' says Veronica, who feels less dependent now on the external equivalent. With increased confidence, she has broken through the limiting corporate ceiling and has accepted a directorship in advertising where she will be developing the business and its people, the latter being something she is particularly passionate about.

'We were taught that everything fully experienced is bliss. Even physical or emotional pain can be confronted. I put this into practice, and it works.'





Lisa Chait, 41

Radio talk show host | Cape Town

It was around 10 years ago that Lisa Chait first set foot aboard the Mercy Ship Anastasis. 'It was docked at Cape Town harbour and they had opened it up for the public to tour,' recalls Lisa. The sheer magnitude of the vessel and scope of charitable work the hospital ship undertakes left a lasting impression on her. 'I noticed that each cabin had a name next to it, with a picture of the person who inhabits it, sometimes entire families. They were regular people who had stepped out of mainstream life to give something back, and I thought, "I want to do this".'

The opportunity presented itself a few years later. 'The radio station I worked for ran a competition to send two people to the Mercy ship docked off the coast of Liberia and I went along. I had been reading about Charles Taylor and his shocking war crimes in Liberia and neighbouring Sierra Leone. Fourteen years of civil war had left Liberia ravaged on every level: there were thousands of orphans, inadequate sanitation, only two dentists in the entire country. People were living on less than a dollar a day. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf had just become the first ever freely elected woman head of state in Africa, and there was a huge United Nations presence, a reported 15 000 troops, there to maintain peace and stability. I wanted to be a part of that.'

With support from her family and friends who were accustomed to her 'unusual adventures', Lisa found a housesitter, took leave and packed her bags. 'Everyone was worried about my safety... we seem to have this perception of Africa as an unsafe environment. The truth is I've never felt more at ease! With UN troops patrolling at all times, there's far less violence in Monrovia than in Cape Town.'

However, the dire state of the country shocked Lisa deeply. 'I knew it would be bad, but nothing could have prepared me for the reality. On a tour of the city I could not believe what had happened to the Dukar Hotel, a five-star establishment that had once been a jewel of West Africa. It had become a tenement block – no electricity, no running water, no windows, no doors. Refugees had flooded the city and found shelter wherever they could.'

On the ship itself, volunteers are roped in on all levels to free up the medical staff who devote themselves to treating patients. At any given point, there are around 400 people on board. Lisa was given a variety of tasks: 'I worked in the kitchen, painted walls at an orphanage, visited children who were terminally ill. I was also able to spend time with women who had undergone fistula



operations.' When women give birth very young, often as a result of being married off early, or raped, the bladder frequently ruptures. Lack of bladder control is considered a great shame and the women are often ostracized, some for up to 20 years. 'The relatively simple 40-minute operation repairs the rupture,' says Lisa. 'All of a sudden, they are welcomed back by their families, reunited with their children. It is humbling to witness a woman regain her self-esteem.'

What impressed Lisa most was the sense of dignity in each person she encountered. 'Many have witnessed atrocious horrors, been victims of unspeakable crimes, and yet they have found the strength to continue, to make a living, to provide support to others in need.'

Volunteers aboard the ship are drawn together by a similar focus, living according to defined spiritual principles. Lisa made many lasting friends but one in particular left a deep impression: 'Paula is of West Indian descent and used to be a dancer. Her spiritual path led her to the Mercy ship. She's been living on board for 20 years, supported by benefactors. Her cabin is two metres by four and neat as a pin. She has one dress for special occasions. That's her life. She won't accept presents, she just gives.'

When Lisa returned she inevitably began to question the way we live. 'We tend to look out for ourselves. On the ship there is a greater goal to help out collectively. You worry less about the future and the past because you are practically involved in something bigger than yourself. It's not about ego. You are in a community doing something good. What surprised me most was that I had gone expecting to encounter poverty, and yet what I noticed was spirit.'

Involved in a number of humanitarian activities, Lisa currently works with the Group of Hope, a prisoner initiative at Malmesbury Prison that helps children and struggling families on the outside. 'These guys, in jail for murder and armed robbery, have had time to reflect. They score no points and are awarded no benefits for this. It renews your faith in the human spirit.' ■

how to do it

WHAT YOU'LL NEED

You'll need to travel to the port where you will board. Check with that country's embassy whether you'll need a visa. You don't need to be a doctor to join. Volunteers are employed as cooks, mechanics, etc.

too. Volunteers can choose between a short-term or a career stint on a ship. Volunteers stay for two weeks (the minimum) to a year, while 'career volunteers' join for two years or longer. You have to pay your own way, a fee of R1 355 (\$175) per month. Many volunteers are sponsored.

WHEN TO GO There's no season, but it's dependent on when you're needed.

CONTACT Visit www.mercyships.org for more information and application forms. Once accepted, you will first undergo training.

ABOVE FROM LEFT The Mercy ship Anastasis; Lisa with children at one of the many orphanages in Monrovia; volunteers raise funds and maintain buildings.