

A journey for body and soul

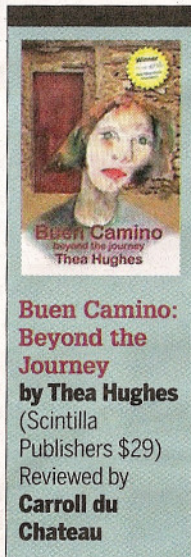
WHAT INSPIRES people, usually those well into middle age, to turn into pilgrims prepared to walk for weeks, day after day, rainstorm or sunshine, never knowing for sure where they're going to stop, eat or sleep?

Many of these pilgrims seem to be driven by spiritual rather than religious beliefs. Many don't seem to be especially troubled. And hardly any of them are spectacularly fit. So what entices them to take precious months off work to walk the 764km Camino de Santiago pilgrimage across Spain? And what do they hope to get out of the experience?

Auckland writer Thea Hughes' novel, written like a great walk itself, puts an end to all those questions. A first-time novelist, she writes with verve and enough plot to keep you whipping through the pages.

You learn that the Camino is no lyrical walk in the countryside. It's long as hell. Although much of the route is picturesque, pilgrims frequently share the roads with exhaust-belching trucks and buses. Most of their fellow travellers don't speak the same language. The way ahead entails crowds, mountains, rain storms, hard beds and unexpectedly locked refugios (the pilgrim-style backpacker hotels most rely on). Sometimes there's nowhere to buy dinner. Many nights people are so exhausted they can't eat anyway.

And the secret that makes it all do-able, and



**Buen Camino:
Beyond the
Journey**
by Thea Hughes
(Scintilla
Publishers \$29)
Reviewed by
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worthwhile? Just keep putting one foot in front of the other and let the stress of everyday life melt away.

Thea Hughes lets her travellers explain: "I think el Camino's greatest gift is to teach pilgrims how to live humbly," says one. Another chimes in about learning about life's choices: working out what's important; learning to decide to make your life complex or simple. Alongside the homespun philosophy — thankfully not much of it — is the tough counterpoint of this narrative. It is also, I suspect, the core of what's important about the Camino: most people who do it have a grief or challenge they're trying to come to grips with.

For Ana, our heroine, the dark side is the early sexual abuse that makes her distrust life in general and men in particular.

Her parallel story is told sparsely, yet so believably, it made me wonder if it is ethical to write so candidly about how a father entices his young daughter into sex. Making it into a game at first is probably the way most of them do it. Poor Ana.

But most of the time *Buen Camino* meanders on, in many ways resembling the great pilgrimage it describes. Small but significant events occur, people become kinder. They look after each other, overcome their demons and, as the walk continues, get fitter and have more fun.

Ana's relationship with her walking companion is unlikely. She's 30; he's much older and his Alzheimer's disease gets worse as they walk on. The fact that he's so unsuitable is the only reason she allows herself,



PILGRIM'S PROGRESS: For some on the Camino trail it is all about faith. For others it's a personal challenge.

little by little, to rely on him. And likewise, Hughes lets the everyday details of life on the Camino build, over its 250-odd pages, into a strangely satisfying novel. *Buen Camino: Beyond the Journey* not only answers my question: "What

on Earth do they get out of it?" but also provides a fascinating example of why, as Robert Louis Stevenson wrote, "To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive". ☺

Carroll du Chateau is an Auckland reviewer.