



## Being an “Island Pilgrim”



A two-time Island Pilgrim says,

*“I've taken many 'vacations' in my life and as pleasant as they were, they left fragmented memories with varying impacts while my experiences on both pilgrimages are remembered with a rich wholeness that continues to profoundly impact and challenge my life today. It's as if the vacations were outward journeys that were taken in for a period of time while the pilgrimages were inward journeys that nurtured expansion by 'opening' and 'giving' with no time limitations.*”

A two-time clergy-person pilgrim described the first pilgrimage as, *A whole new way of being and seeing.*

Pilgrimage has been an integral part of life in almost every culture and every time. In our time together we will see evidence of thousands of years of this spiritual practice. We know that the visit to the holy river Ganges is a longed-for event for Hindus, the Haj to Mecca is the ultimate joy for millions of Moslems each year, and the visits to ancestral sites are food for the souls of First Nations in Canada and aboriginal people – those still intimately tied to the landscape – around the world. Pilgrimage has become vitally important today for people who feel a need for connection but have not found it in their experience of organized religion. It is an entry point for people seeking a spiritual framework, and a connection for all of us to the heritage of our faith, and to those who shaped the way we see the divine, ourselves and all of creation. Pilgrims seek to challenge and enrich their own beliefs through experience, community and discussion. Pilgrims change their view of the world as they come into contact with the viewpoints of other times and places. A pilgrimage almost always involved physical or spiritual journeying through a number of phases.

Pilgrimage can be very formal, a ritual developed through hundreds of years – the Haj or the Camino de Santiago de Compostella. It can be physically grueling – Croagh Patrick and many of the Buddhist journeys of faith. It can be filtered through the tinted windows of an air-conditioned bus and the interpretation of a guide or spiritual leader. A pilgrimage can be solitary or as part of an event for many thousands – Easter in Jerusalem or at St. Peter's in Rome. Each of these brings joy and growth to the pilgrims.

Where does an Island Pilgrims pilgrimage fit in this continuum? Our group is always small and informal. While I do some of the pre-planning, much is the day-to-day response to opportunities and wishes that present themselves as we travel together. We work to develop *communitas* within the group, being aware of each other's needs, wishes and wisdom. We attempt to integrate ourselves into the cultural and spiritual environment each day. We attempt to tread softly on the landscape and on the feelings of the people we meet. While we give much thought to many aspects of our pilgrimage, we are happiest when we do not take ourselves seriously, when we “travel light” in terms of our physical luggage and our self-image. We are not a “legal tour” in the sense of providing a professional driver, insurance, spiritual director, historian or cook. Each of us finds ways of contributing to the daily tasks whether fitting the luggage into the vehicle, cooking, driving, asking great questions throughout the day, or teaching us a song.

To answer many of the practical questions, let's look at the [phases](#) of an Island Pilgrims pilgrimage.

**Longing.** If you feel pulled to a journey, place or experience by something that is not necessarily based on logic, but on a heart's desire, you may be a pilgrim!

**Discernment.** You find yourself pulled in a particular direction. You pray for guidance about whether this is where you should devote your time and effort. You think about all the alternatives. Despite all logic, this pilgrimage, at this time, to this place seems right.

**Preparation.** Maybe you read, talk to past pilgrims, think about whether there is some question you wish to consider while on pilgrimage. You check that your passport will be valid for a few months after your planned date of return and call your credit card company and tell them that you will use the card outside your home area. You read all the information, sign the booking form, and become one of the 2009 Island Pilgrims. In doing this you are recognizing that you are an equal member of the group, equal in importance, equal in responsibility, that we travel as a group of friends, not covered by any commercial agreement. You make your contribution to the overall costs, and arrange your flight. Into your small carry-on bag or small back-pack, you put your passport, any essential medicine and your credit card, maybe a journal, camera and tooth-brush. In your small wheeled case you pack a minimum of clothes.

**Departure.** This could be when you leave home, leave the airport, or when we drive away from Heathrow, heading west into areas that were and are predominantly Celtic. This departure, whenever it happens in our pilgrimage, is the point at which we shift our focus from responsibilities at home to this spiritual adventure.

Separation	Arrival	Travelling	Communitas
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These four stages intermingle. At some point you realize that things are not the same as at home, you feel a little disoriented but full of adventure. Once, or many times, during the pilgrimage you will feel that you have reached what the ancients Celtic Christians called your "place of resurrection," the place where you feel as if you are already in heaven. You have arrived. This may be repeated in many places, or may not happen till you return home. Throughout the pilgrimage you have the awareness of traveling through the landscape, but also the physical process of walking in places that connect you to a different time and different ways of seeing the world and yourself. An important point in the pilgrimage is when the group of individuals forms into a *communitas*, caring for each other, aware of each others needs and eager to ensure that those needs are met.

**Return.** Near the end of the pilgrimage or after you return, your focus changes. You are back in your everyday world having traveling through the landscape of time and belief. You are not coming back as the same person. You will always be a pilgrim.

**Integration.** You find that your daily life is changed because of your pilgrimage. You integrate parts of the new ways of seeing and thinking into every-day situations. You continue to see the world as a pilgrim.

And the **longing** starts again!

### Recommended luggage:

- A day-pack that can comfortably sit on your knee in the car.
- A suitcase, preferably on wheels, that is small enough to hand-carry easily up three flights of steep stairs.
- Comfortable walking shoes – good for the flight too, and comfortable sandals.
- A light-weight truly waterproof rain jacket.
- Jeans, slacks or skirt, polo shirts, maybe one long-sleeved shirt, maybe a fleecy.
- A reading, song or prayer you would like to share with the group.
- If you take a digital camera, bring a connector cable to download photos onto my laptop. We will make you a CD of all your photos.
- Quick-dry undies.
- No hair-dryer – towel is much quieter!

If you need to take additional items for a different part of your time in Europe, please pack them in a separate bag to check into left luggage at the airport. Our vehicle will be crowded and the baggage space per person very limited.

We do not need to take everything we might need or want. The 710,000,000 people in Europe are well supplied through endless shops and services. Whatever you decide you need while you are away, you will be able to find in England, Ireland or Wales.

[Packing light is a great start to a pilgrimage of discovery and clarity.](#)

An historical note: Ireland, Scotland and the highland areas of Wales were among the first areas in which Christianity moved outside the Roman Empire, some of the few areas in which the introduction of Christianity was not part of an overall “empire package” of alien rule and language, removal of resources and, usually, either enslavement or treating indigenous populations as if they were of no human value. In contrast, Christianity arrived in the Celtic areas, as a minority religion having to fit into existing culture, adopting many of its characteristics and producing a unique blend of beliefs, traditions and practices that are enjoying a wonderful resurgence and enriching the spiritual experience of people around the world.