

# AROUND THE WORLD ON FOOT



## An Interview with a Peaceful Pilgrim

**Petr Hirsch has plans to walk across every country in the world. What inspired him to set such an ambitious goal? How can he afford to travel for such long periods of time? We sat down with this worldwide walker to talk about his inspiration and the details of his journey.**

### What made you give up your job and start a pilgrimage\*?

It was just before I turned thirty years old. I had a wife, a house, a mortgage\*, and a good job as an IT worker in Prague. I spent most of my time in front of a computer and earned a pretty good salary. I don't know why, exactly, but I grew unsatisfied•. I started to ask questions like "What is my purpose?" and "What am I doing here?" One day I woke up and I felt that I just had to go.

I did some research and I was amazed that people in the Middle Ages could do trips like this. They walked hundreds or thousands of kilometres from their homes to different holy places: Rome, Santiago de Compostela or wherever. I thought, if our ancestors could do it without cars, planes or the internet, then what was stopping me?

**You've already visited three holy Christian places: Santiago de Compostela, Rome and Jerusalem – and now you'd like to walk all around the world, which will take decades.**

### How do you manage to support yourself?

I funded my first pilgrimage with my savings, but after two and a half years on the road I had to return home. I started making presentations and sharing my photos, which allows me to earn a little money, but I also have sponsors who help support this unusual project.

### How do you handle language barriers?

I speak some English, as well as very basic German and French, but the first barrier I felt was in Spain. Most people didn't speak English very well and I didn't speak any Spanish. For the first two weeks I was completely lost and it was really hard. I tried to learn about twenty basic words – left, right, water – in other languages, like Italian, Greek, Albanian, and Turkish, but as fast as I learned them I forgot them again.



**"One day I woke up and I felt that I just had to go."**

Eventually, I learned that language is not the most important thing you need to travel. I love seeing how willing people are to make an effort to help, through drawing, gestures or even just smiling. In one Turkish village, I wasn't able to say anything, but after half an hour of searching they were able to find someone





who spoke French. Another guy called his son in Istanbul and translated over the phone.

### Have you had any particularly difficult experiences?

In one remote area in the mountains of Turkey, there was a family of six people. None of them spoke a language that I understood, but I'd been in the country for one and a half months, so I could say a few words in Turkish. I didn't understand anything, but we were smiling and happy, or so I thought.

After four hours, nine policemen arrived with their guns drawn, shouting at me in Turkish while I was sleeping. They took me to the station and explained that the family had been afraid of me and they'd thought that I was a terrorist. I must have said something that they misunderstood. Luckily, the police realized that I was really a peaceful pilgrim and let me go, but it took some time. They arrested me around midnight, took me to the police

station and released me at around 2:00 pm the next day.

Luckily, that was the exception. I would say that 90 % of my memories and experiences are positive.

### Do you ever miss normal life?

When I reached Santiago and decided to continue walking, I was really homesick for a few weeks. I missed my friends and family, but I wanted to see how far I could go. I've never regretted the decision to leave everything behind here in the Czech Republic.

### What would you recommend to other people who'd like to try a pilgrimage?

I would tell them to walk. Not to think about it, but just to do it.

**Auburn Scallon (USA)**



Was it difficult to just start walking? What are Petr's plans? And how is his walking connected to charity? Read the extra article on [www.bridge-online.cz](http://www.bridge-online.cz) ("Extra články" section) to find out!



Go to Petr Hirsch's Facebook page to follow his pilgrimage and see where he is at the moment: [www.facebook.com/uPoUtNiKa](http://www.facebook.com/uPoUtNiKa)

## The Practical Side of a Pilgrimage



**INTERNET?** Petr didn't use any electronic devices on his first pilgrimage, but now uses a smartphone with GPS and local SIM cards to share photos and stories almost daily. "I'm doing this for other people as well as myself so I try to share as much as possible. I'm a modern pilgrim!"

**SLEEPING?** He will sleep anywhere except in hotels. He has slept outside under the stars, on the floor of a bus station, or at local church buildings and mosques (= Islamic religious buildings). Sometimes locals invite him to stay at their home.

**FOOD?** Petr carries some food and a gas stove with him, and stops at shops along the way.

Breakfast: oats, raisins and honey

Lunch: bread and cheese plus fresh fruit, like an apple

Dinner: rice, pasta or potatoes

"I only go to restaurants for coffee and maybe to charge my devices. And of course, I can't take one step without chocolate or cookies. My body needs sugar for energy."

**PUBLIC TRANSPORT?** Ferries are okay, but he doesn't use public transport or hitchhiking, even when offered. He just walks.

"Sometimes I accept a ride to stay at someone's house, but I go back to the same place to start again the next day. I have a small GPS that records my steps, so I can prove that I'm actually doing what I say."

### GLOSSARY\*

**pilgrim** – a person who makes a journey on foot, often long and difficult, to a special place, usually for religious reasons. Such a journey is called a pilgrimage.

**mortgage** – when you borrow money from a bank in order to buy a house

### LANGUAGE POINTS•

- In English, we often use the verb **to grow** instead of to become for feelings that change slowly over time. e.g. *Over the years, I grew to love travelling, but I also grew tired of carrying all my possessions with me.*
- The action of taking a gun out of its holster is referred to as **drawing your gun**. So guns drawn means that someone has their guns out and ready to use.