

354 Stephen Marriott + Holly ~ The Life Changing Magic of Walking a Long Distance Trail

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What You'll Learn

- What is long-distance walking + why you might want to do it
- What you might be able to expect from life on a long-distance trail
- What you can get out of walking a trail like the Camino de Santiago
- Why walking a long-distance trail is both an inner and outer journey
- How this type of experience can be life-changing

Things Discussed

- Inca Trail
- Lost City Trek in Colombia
- The Motorcycle Diaries
- The Pilgrimage, by Paulo Coelho
- [Wattpadd](#)
- Walking Book Promo

Transcript

Holly: Hello and welcome to the *Into the Woods* podcast, episode 354. This is your host Holly Worton and I have got a new guest for you today *and* even more exciting, I have got the first male guest on this show. As you may know this podcast started out as being a podcast for women entrepreneurs to tell their story. So I only had women guests for the first forever and, for a while, I have been really uncomfortable with that, but I haven't been doing guests and so I didn't know what to do and then I started thinking I really want to have some conversations with people in my life that are really into doing long-distance trails, as am I, and I wanted to share those stories with you.

So I have got Stephen Marriott on the show today. Stephen I met through my friend Adam's Camino de Santiago Meet-up Group, we met, a few years ago I think now on one of Adam's walks.

Who is Stephen? Stephen R. Marriott is a best-selling author and traveller, he grew up in Portishead of the West Country of England. Although just a small-town boy at heart he has worked in stockbroking in the City of London and has visited 50+ countries. His writing career began in 2012, when seeking adventure, he took a very long walk across Spain and subsequently discovered his creative spirit.

So I am very excited to share this episode with you.

So, what are you going to learn today? We are going to talk about what is long-distance walking and why you might want to do it. What you might be able to expect from life on a long-distance trail. We talk about a couple of different trails, not just the Camino de Santiago, which is my dream trail but also walking the Inca trail and the lost city track in Columbia, which I had never actually heard of before. We discuss why walking a long-distance trail is both an inner and outer journey and what can you get out of walking a trail like this? Finally, how this type of experience can be life-changing. So Stephen went into the Camino de Santiago as a person working in finance in London and he came out of it a writer among other things. So here he is sharing his story.

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Holly: Hi Steve, how are you doing today?

Stephen: I am good thanks. I am glad to be on the show, thanks for having me.

Holly: You are actually the very first man to be on my podcast.

Stephen: Wow, gosh, I don't know what to say! It sounds special in a way.

Holly: {laughing} Well I started this podcast as a show originally for women entrepreneurs, so I was only interviewing women, and then time went on and somehow I never had men on the show and I just started thinking: I think it is about time to include the other half of the population.

Stephen: I will try to up the macho image if we need to try to balance things out a bit!

Holly: {laughing} I think you are good as you are! So we are here to talk about long-distance walking which is something that is very dear to my heart and I know that you have got even more experience in this than I have. So before we get into it, what is long-distance walking, how would you define it?

Stephen: That's a good question, because I think long-distance walking does mean different things to different people. I think there are people who walk it for the physical challenge, a sort of test of their physical ability, who walk very long distances on some very well known trails, across various continents. I am not like that, I enjoy the physical aspect, but it is not why I do it, I guess, I do it more for the pleasure and the escapism into nature. How would I define it? I would say an extended walk in the park for me.

Holly: Yeah I agree, to me I am really flexible about what I consider to be a long-distance walk. Like a day walk is obviously one day but anything longer than that when you are walking for two, three etc days in a row, obviously that is long-distance walking. It is quite unusual to kind of keep going on the same trail for multiple days in a row unless it is something that is planned, so I guess that is what I would consider it to be.

Stephen: Yeah, I forget them now, but there are people who do this seriously they have different terms for it which I forget now, but I think for some people it is something specific, but it is longer than walking for a day, yes. I think then, as you walk for longer than a day, and outside of your normal routine, I think that is when the magic can sometimes happen.

Holly: Absolutely and it takes you outside of your comfort zone, and it takes you into a new mindset, a new realm, and I think the more days you spend on a trail the more you disconnect from your normal daily life and your normal rhythms and you kind of get into this other world of the trail.

Stephen: Absolutely, yes, that is what I have discovered and continue to discover I would say.

Holly: So what was your first long-distance trail and why were you inspired to walk it? You have a great story for this.

Stephen: Yes, I know you are thinking of my first Camino trail, but I have done a couple of longer walks, not longer than the Camino, but if we are going to define it as more than one day, but I won't go into detail about those. Probably what sort of set the seed in motion to enjoy the outdoor experience of long-term walking, I have had over a year out travelling around Latin America over ten years ago, and like a lot of people when I visited Peru, I did the Inca trail. Walking to Machu Picchu I think it was three-

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and-a-half days, something like that, and that really got me into the idea of the outdoors and enjoying hiking. But I think at that stage of my life it was a very memorable, adventurous, experience and the build up of arriving at the Inca city of Machu Picchu, was amazing because you saw Inca ruins and relics on the way. I would say that was not where my mind changed, I think I started to observe more things then, it was very hard not to observe the wonders of the Peruvian jungle and Inca ruins, but that was the first longer walk I did. And then subsequently later on that trip in Columbia I trekked on a trail, which they called the Ciudad Perdida, the Lost City trek, that was again to pre-Columbian ruins on the coastline in Columbia and not many people walked that then.

Holly: I have never heard of it.

Stephen: That was an adventure because you arrived at these pre-Columbia ruins and you had them to yourself and it was a bit of a trek to get there and because Columbia and its past problems didn't have so much tourism, because of that it was a trail that not so many people walked, just a rare bunch of crazy backpackers that then decided to visit Columbia. So that was more an adventurous thing and heightened my curiosity for the world and you might call it a sort of Indiana Jones style walking. I think what I am getting at, when I took a long time out of my life to travel around Latin America, that is where the seed, getting out of one's comfort zone, for seeing the world perhaps through different eyes and starting to realise that there was more out there than just a, how will I put it? Plodding through one's daily routine. And to see more or to visit things, not through a tick-box tourist style exercise, I think you do need to change your environment for longer than you normally do, and I think that is when your awareness heightens. It is not that you see anything more physically, you just become more aware of the subtle things in life, and you start to take more of an interest in things, which were there in front of you, but you didn't pay much attention to. So to cut a long story short, with those, probably the longest trails I first did, but I know that you are alluding to what you would call a really long hike, my 31-day hike on the Camino de Santiago, or the Camino Frances, which is the traditional trail of the Camino de Santiago.

Holly: So let me go back to where you are talking about the Inca trail, how challenging was that? Was that something that you just spontaneously decided to do? Or did you train for that? What was that like?

Stephen: Good question. Well me and my ex-wife knew we were going to travel around South America, so that was just I think one of two things that we knew in advance of that trip that we would definitely do. Apart from that, we had a lot of time, over a year, so we wanted the trip to be kind of spontaneous in a sense, but that one, the Inca trail, I think when we did it, it was 2007. And, even there, it was becoming more regulated. So to protect the walk the authorities only allow a certain amount of people walking the trail a day, arriving in Machu Picchu. I am not sure of the numbers now, but I think in any one day only 60 people can set off on it. So there can be more than 60 people on the trail at any one time, but every day only 60 people are allowed to set off on it. So that is more regulated and because of that you had to plan in advance and apply to do it with a guide etc. To tell the truth I was a little bit younger then, with probably fresher legs. Did we do much planning for it? No not really. Was it a hard trip? Yes at times because it is at high altitude and I think you climb up to about I think 3600 metres/4000 metres, approaching that, on one of the highest peaks and that is hard if you are not acclimatised and not fit. But I would say that the average fit person can do it but they need to arrive in Peru for at least a week before and get acclimatised. Because we had already been travelling and

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already done some other long day hikes, or two-day hikes and things in the Andes, we were sort of mountain fit by the time we came to do that sort of three months into our trip or so. The starting off point or starting city is Cusco and then you have to travel to the start of the walk. In Cusco we would see people arrive straight off the plane and going up and down the hills of Cusco,, with problems already, and bending over and trying to catch their breath. Some of those,, because their time was limited, a day or two later they would be hitting the Machu Picchu trail which I would not advise. I would say if you are unfit, before you go on something like that, do some walks, try to get up to average fitness, but acclimatise, you need to acclimatise when you do anything like that.

Holly: And when you do that trail are you camping? Where are you staying?

Stephen: Yes, so I think it was three nights, so it is three nights of camping, but it is, how do I put it? It is kind of glamping in a sense because you have to have a guide and also they provide porters, so it is kind of an economy for the locals, Andean locals, the indigenous locals in that area. They will carry the tents for you, carry gas canisters for the cooking and the pots and things. They really do lug it around for you. And you have a day pack with your change of clothes in and so you are a bit spoilt on that one and I actually felt a bit guilty and on one of the days I asked to swap for a morning my backpack with one of the porters.

Holly: Oh wow!

Stephen: So initially I had acclimatised better than other people who hadn't been in Peru for as long as I had but my gosh it was a heavy pack and it was funny, because he knew that he didn't have to arrive at the base camp until a couple of hours, and now his load was a fifth lighter or something and when we swapped packs he just held back and took a break for an hour or two, just relaxing. And then a couple of hours later, it wasn't long, until he just passed me with my pack and got to the day camp at the end of the day. That was tough. I would say to anyone if you are doing the Machu Picchu trail, the Inca trail, make sure that you tip generously to the porters because I don't think they are particularly well paid and many of them don't actually get to see Machu Picchu either, they just carry everybody's load there and then they have to leave at the end of the trail to go back to the start and help more people. So spoilt but a wonderful experience.

Holly: And once you get to the top do you hike the same trail back down or do you go down the other side? Where do you go from there?

Stephen: So you arrive at the Inca ruins, Machu Picchu, and one of the other bonuses actually, I should have said, because you hike there, you arrive before all the tourists, you arrive at sunrise. Tourists can arrive at the town below, called Aguas Calientes, and there is train that takes tourists to that town and then they can arrive, when it opens officially at nine or ten am. For a few hours at sunrise, you get the whole place to yourself, but after that you then go down to the town below and you can get a train back to Cusco.

Holly: Oh nice! So obviously this is a mountain trail, how scary is it? Do you have cliff drops down the side of the trail, what is it like?

Stephen: I am going to have to trace back into my memory here a bit, as I said it was 2007 so it is a little bit fuzzy now but there are some things that stand out. There are some peaks and a lot of going

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up and down these peaks and it is hard going down and it is a mixture of rainforest, jungle, rugged terrain and you do pass through some very remote villages, almost like farmsteads. The beautiful thing about it is that you get an education in Inca society on the way there because most people only know the ruins of Cusco, or maybe they visit some in the Sacred Valley near Cusco and of course Machu Picchu, if they go there. But there were ruins and terraced ruins where corn and maize would have been grown and other outposts and things which your guide will tell you about on the way there. I can't remember now but maybe it was four or five significant smaller ruins or settlements or ruins before you get there. So you get a real sense of what Inca settlements are about and nobody knows for sure what happened to Machu Picchu which apparently was only inhabited for about 100 years or so. There are different varying stories, people say they ran out of water, disease (talking about disease and of cities being wiped out!), but nobody knows for sure. The great thing is that as you learn about Incas and you see their various sites, you start to create your own story in your mind about what was their fate, what happened? And then obviously it is a fantastic build up to Machu Picchu itself.

Holly: And it really is like stepping into a different world because you are obviously in a foreign country with a very different landscape than what you are used to, very different culture, it is really very different.

Stephen: It is like stepping back in time, I mentioned Indiana Jones, it does feel a bit like that. I think Hiram Bingham discovered Machu Picchu in the 1950s and the Indiana Jones character has to be loosely based on Hiram Bingham. Cusco is still a little bit wild around the edges, there are a lot of the indigenous Peruvians that live there and tout in the streets and have market stalls and things and the women in their wonderful, colourful, dresses and traditional clothes. And it does feel like that and the train we got back was a sort of rickety old train. Have you ever seen the film *The Motorcycle Diaries*?

Holly: No I haven't.

Stephen: You should watch the *Motorcycle Diaries* if you haven't. It is a coming of age story, if you haven't heard of it, of Che Guevara. This is his motorcycle tour with his good friend around South America before he was known as Che. So they tour, they wanted to see South America, before they committed to being doctors, so it is a wonderful coming of age story, but they trekked to Machu Picchu when they were in Peru. And they have a young Inca boy who acts as their guide and when they arrive on the sort of crevice, a hill, looking down into lower parts of Machu Picchu — and this was in the 50s — you have this real sense of time standing still in the film. Nothing has really changed, it may be different now 10 years later, but when we arrived at the same place in the film that Che Guevara arrives at, and I think it is called something like the Sun Gate, because that is the point that you see the sun rising at Machu Picchu, you are looking down. Of course the tourists haven't arrive then and you are about to inhabit this kind of lost world or lost city, and it really does feel like you are stepping back in time and there are still a few places like that, that are untouched by the modern urbanised world that we inhabit.

Holly: I love that and it is definitely on my list of things to do some day, but there are so many other things!

Stephen: I know yes, I know you have got a few trails left in the UK that you want to do.

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Holly: Oh many, many, I love walking here. So moving from one Spanish speaking country to another, what inspired you to walk the Camino?

Stephen: Ok do you want the abbreviated version or the longer version?

Holly: Just go for whatever! Whatever comes out! {laughing}

Stephen: So my earlier time in South America, I guess you could say might have corrupted me in some ways, for lack of a better phrase or at least put in my mind the adventure and excitement of getting outside of your normal holiday and adventurous side of things. So after coming back from South America, I went back to normal life in the financial world, which is my background work-wise. Unfortunately I went through a few personal changes, I went through a separation, I didn't feel particularly content back in the 9-5 world, my previous company made life very easy for me and gave me my old job back, effectively. So I guess you could say I was looking for something and anyway after another two years back in that job and going through these changes, I decided that I wanted to see more of South America, some of the parts I didn't see before or spend more time in the places I liked and also I wanted to see Asia. So yes I took off again and did some more travelling for about six months, knowing that I couldn't really go back to the world of finance and investment again. A little bit lost and not really feeling that my place was London anymore, because I had gone through a separation as well and wasn't settled. I came back from that trip roughly six months later, having had some interesting and adventurous experiences but, if I am honest, I was probably no happier in myself than I was before and hadn't really found what I really wanted. And so I was then staying temporarily at a friend's place in central London and it was a Monday night and I walked on my own into a pub,, just me and the barman were in the pub, and it was rainy kind of miserable London grey night, you now how they can be sometimes?

Holly: Yes. {laughing}

Stephen: Yes, I think the barman sensed maybe depression in me or loneliness or something and he, without my even speaking to him, he looked over at me from across the bar and said: you need to walk the Camino de Santiago... sort of out of the blue.

Holly: That's so wild.

Stephen: It is yeah! And I had heard of the Camino but I had completely forgotten about it, it was something that someone had told me about probably ten years before, and I always liked the idea of walking across Spain, because Spain always appealed to me, it wasn't too far away and I liked Spanish food. So I listened to him, he had also walked the Camino, and the end result of him walking the Camino a few months before meeting me was him having the courage to move to London, not commit to a career in the restaurant trade in Poland, he was Polish, and also to commit to his dreams of being a filmmaker, that was his passion, he was a photographer and a filmmaker. Funnily enough a few days before, and the same week I met him, him, and his producer friend, had raised funding for an independent film, a million pounds of funding.

Holly: Wow!

Stephen: Yes, so it was a pretty amazing story and it all started with him walking the Camino, leaving his fiancé, leaving his former catering/restaurant trade behind and coming to London – so it was an

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amazing story. It stayed with me for a few days but I guess again like everything you get back into your life and I was still thinking about: should I go back to the financial world again? Working things out. And maybe a week or two later I went to a bookshop with a friend of mine and he was looking for the book, *The Hitchhikers Guide to the Galaxy*. I don't know if that was a sign, just in the name of that book. He went hiking around the Waterstones bookshop we were in, to look for that book, and I, as I normally do in a bookshop, found myself browsing in the travel section of the bookstore and one book in particular got my attention, or the spine of it, it seemed to be poking its way out at me or this is how I remember it romantically now, it was a book by Paulo Coelho, called *The Pilgrimage*. I don't know if you know that book, but that was his first book, a lot of people are aware of his very famous book *The Alchemist*, but *The Pilgrimage* is his first book, which actually he wrote after walking the Camino Santiago himself and that experience gave him the courage to commit to being a writer.

Holly: I know, I love that, I read that book in 1996.

Stephen: Did you really? Wow!

Holly: That was first time I had ever heard of the Camino and I decided I had to do it, and I have had that in my mind ever since and I have *still* not walked the Camino. That book was the first thing that planted the seed of the Camino in my brain – 1996!

Stephen: It is very inspirational, as are all his books, and I have read three or four of his books and as I say, *The Alchemist*, they do have that sort of quest, or seeking something, or trying to understand something in your life, and often they do involve going on a journey. Yes so I was surprised to find this because I assumed *The Alchemist* was his first book. So I think I must have bought that book, read it, and I just kind of think it was a sign: the Polish guy, Paulo Coelho, and there was a third thing... I think I went back to that bookshop for more travel books and I saw Paulo Coelho again, *The Alchemist*, was on the top of a pile of the books they were promoting. And I just kind of thought, you know what, I am still crashing at my friend's place, my flat is rented, I didn't have a job to return to, I was unsettled still, within a few weeks I found myself at the start of the Camino Santiago, which if you take the traditional route is the Camino Frances, which I am sure you are aware of, having done research now.

Holly: Much, much, research! {laughing} I have read so many books!

Stephen: That is a little French village, Basque village, on the French side of the Pyrenees, which you start at. I found myself ready and about to walk the Camino, that is what took me there, signs, I guess it is only in hindsight that I started to put the dots together, and think maybe something pointed me in that direction. Maybe because of my previous travels I was a little more aware of going with my intuition a bit and of letting various ideas pop into my head through whatever means and just being open to them. The thing I would say about the Camino is you have to give yourself time, you don't want to rush the experience, for physical reasons, because you don't want to have an injury, and also to just be able to enjoy the experience and I had plenty of time. So yes, that is how I ended up there.

Holly: So what was this experience like for you, because this was the longest trail you had done at that point?

Stephen: That's right, so depending how fast you walk, anything between four-five weeks for the average walker and it took me I believe 31 days. Gosh how do I summarise an experience like the

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Camino? As you say [it was] much longer than the other ones. The other ones were pretty physically challenging because they were high up in the Andes, and mountainous, and you do cross a few mountain ranges on the Camino. And the very first day is a tough challenge, if you are not fit, crossing the Pyrenees into Spain and that is tough on some people and it is a real test of your I think courage and commitment to walking the Camino. But the next day is downhill after that, you get fit as you walk, you get fit for purpose, and it sounds a bit of a cliché but mind, body, soul and physically on that. But how would I say, how was it? It is a community in so many different ways is how I put it, this walk, it is a community. I can expand on that if you like?

Holly: Yeah sure, because it is like a whole kind of subculture, it is like a different world.

Stephen: Yeah, you don't know what to expect.

Holly: Yeah.

Stephen: You don't know what to expect, and you are a little bit anxious for a number of reasons, especially if you walk it on your own, like I did, and the majority of people *do* walk it their own. And anxious about: who will I meet?, the uncertainty, can I walk 800km across a country? But I think there are a community in different ways, there is a community of solo-walkers who before long come together and make friends and walk with each other. Before you know it, you have made a best friend within a few days. I was lucky I met a group of Italians, a Brazilian, and a French girl and we all bonded easily. It is the camaraderie of that community because you are all doing the same thing, you are all walking to Santiago which is at the end of the trail, you have all got your doubts, you are all going to pick up an injury at some point, whether it is blisters or not. And so you are there helping each other in that sense. You all walk at a different pace, so sometimes you will walk together, and sometimes you will walk on your own, and other times there will be someone who is keen to get to the village that you perhaps decided that you are going to stay at that night and will go ahead and reserve a bed for you in the hostels, the *albergues* as they are called. So there is that camaraderie with the people you walk with, and there are other people whose paths you cross as they walk. And you are all understand a little bit about the history and the idea of walking, so there is that camaraderie as I say. And I think it becomes quite intimate as well, as a community, because there is nothing else to do really apart from walk and talk, sleep and eat, and of course observe nature and everything around you. And so as you walk, you often, it is the well-worn phrase, people ask: what is your reason for walking the Camino? And everybody should have a reason and generally does have a reason, so you start to talk about your past life and maybe problems you have had and a lot of the people I walked with and met generally had something they wanted to overcome in their past life. And then the other community is the villages, and the towns, and the cities you pass through.

And, again, the villages that the Camino passes through are very open and accepting to the pilgrims because they know the history of it and know that it is a pilgrimage that at its height, for example, had a million pilgrims walking it a year, Christian pilgrims. So they are very connected to the history of the Camino and what it means and so the villages you pass through, it is an economy in that sense as well. There are municipal and private hostels you can stay at, there are restaurants and people create economic opportunities along there, whether it is a fruit stall or a shop or something. So everybody understands and the locals and yourselves are part of that community. And I think for some people there is a community in terms of faith, it has its roots in Catholicism, and a Christian walk; and maybe, I

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don't know, a third of the people who walk it now still walk it for religious reasons, so you have for the regular pilgrims masses set up in the local churches each day that you can attend. There is a community in terms of faith and I would say, for me, I am not religious but there is a spiritual connection between everyone and I think that is very much a community in that sense, because you all know there is something special about it, you don't know why, but there is as I say, that connection in terms of spiritual feeling that you all have.

Holly: So one of the things that I really like about going on a long distance trail in this country, in the UK, is that I am often alone for hours at a time and I love that and the Camino seems much more social. So on this more social trail were you able to reconnect with yourself and go within and have like the inner reflection and transformation during that walk?

Stephen: Yes absolutely, yes it is very social, and I have described some of the walking part of that but it is also social, as I have alluded to, in the hostels, eating together and you often drink together. One of the benefits of having the pilgrim meal, which all pilgrims can do, is that there is always about half a bottle of wine for each pilgrim, so it is very social yes. One of the things about walking the Camino is that you can choose to walk it however you like, so even though I started it on my own and in the first few days made friends with a group and they were always there, I decided to walk on my own for a couple of days and intermittently throughout the day walk on my own and just arrange to meet later in the day, at a café or something, which you could see on the map was in another village or something. And everybody was really respectful of that, because everybody knows you might need your space, you might have something that you are working through in your mind and you need that distance. So absolutely, if you want to. For me it was perfect because I could be social when I wanted and I could also be a bit introverted and find my own space. When I was trying to come to terms with really: what do I do next? That was my answer and I did have a sort of spiritual epiphany, although I wasn't really aware of it at the time, but, by the end, things just seemed to... well, let's just say the journey continued as the effect of the Camino worked its way through me.

Holly: And I think that's something a lot of people don't take into consideration, the walk isn't just the walk, the x amount of days that you are on the trail, there is an integration time afterwards, where you whole system is kind of taking on whatever transformation it is that you have experienced.

Stephen: I think there are number of things, there is an internal, as you suggest, spiritual transformation perhaps which I think started to happen maybe a week or so after I sort of committed to the Camino, in terms of my mindset. And then there is that, when it comes to an end, then there is that sort of coming to terms with it: I have just had this experience for a month or so which is just a very simple experience of walking, breathing, eating, and being amongst nature for most of the time. So there is that sort of hard thing about when you step off the trail: how do I adjust? I think that when you come back to the real world you know you have got some learnings but how do you communicate that to others who might not have walked the Camino. How do you then...you maybe had some romantic notions of what you really wanted in your life, how do you make them happen, when everybody has got financial commitments etc? So there are those... trying to understand and work out those things. What was the exact question sorry, so I can summarise?

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Holly: I don't remember what the exact question was but I think a lot of people consider the experience to just be the time when you are on the trail but sometimes when you come back it takes time to integrate whatever it is that you have experienced, or learned, and understand the experience also.

Stephen: I think so yes, and there were, at least for me, a number of different things in terms of stepping off the trail and some of the ideas which started to blossom inside me: how do I bring them into my life? Also I guess the one thing, there are those things, how do you come to terms with it all? I think you have to have faith, have faith in the journey and have faith in the work that has maybe subconsciously happened on that walk will come through and not force it. I guess you could say I tried to force it a little bit in the sense that I didn't have all the answers to what work I would do at the end of it, I didn't have that sort of lightbulb moment, but what I did do, for the first time, set up a blog and just wanted to share some of my journals and a blog piece about what the Camino is, the people I met, some of my experiences, and you could say that was trying to force it out onto the world or get some meaning from it.

Holly: And also process your experience, because sometimes when it is in your head, it is not organised, but when you put it into written words it helps you understand what you went through.

Stephen: I think so yes, it gave definitely more clarity there and I wanted to tell the world and shout about it and share it and by writing it down you sort of decipher some of that noise in your head.

Holly: At what point did that blog turn into a book, because you have eventually written some books?

Stephen: That's true, so that was the precursor to me writing books, and again I didn't set out to write books inspired by the experience, but I set up this blog and I wrote a blog piece of my condensed micro-memoir of walking the Camino. I had this blog now and then somehow, I don't know exactly how it started, but I started to write a fictional blog story and that was a sort of, it morphed from that original blog piece into a character who was a flamenco guitarist, a young flamenco guitarist, who had raw talent but didn't really believe in his talent or didn't see where he could take it. That was definitely inspired by seeing people busk on the Camino or busking in towns and cities you passed through so that original website then became a serial blog, where I would just for fun maybe write one chapter or a sequence, then a week later write another sequence as to where this character was going. I put it on something called <https://www.wattpad.com> are you aware of wattpad?

Holly: I had never heard of it until I heard you mention it in another podcast episode, so tell us what that is.

Stephen: I think it is still going, basically wattpad is a blog site, a popular blog site, where you can share fictional stories for free. *Fifty Shades of Grey* actually started on there. So my books are pretty tame to be honest they are not raunchy, sexy, or anything like that in that sense. The point is that people do go to wattpad and clearly in the case of *Fifty Shades of Grey* it got a lot of fanfare there, it had to be taken off, and published, because it was so popular. I started putting my blog serial pieces on there and each time I put another chapter on there I seemed to get more followers and readers, starting with 50 or 60 the first day.

Holly: Wow that's good.

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Stephen: Yes I think maybe I was lucky at the time it was pretty popular, and I am sure it is still popular now. Then the next time I put the second chapter up 200 people had read it and people were starting to engage a little bit and leave comments, and ask: when is the next piece coming? By the time I got to the penultimate chapter on there, I was up to maybe 1000 reads of something like that, and so I was like: oh, maybe I have got something? So, I didn't publish the final chapter and I took down the story from wattpad and then discovered Amazon self-publishing, independent publishing, and put it on there, did it professionally, got a professional editor, and got it copy-edited and proofread and started to realise that there was another way of getting your words out there. And yes, on Amazon I started to get nice reviews and people were buying the book and that is how it started. I didn't set out to write a book about the Camino, as I said the Camino was really about: okay, follow the signs and the end result really in many ways kind of a creative journey, finding my writer's voice. I have always loved books but I had never written a book before, I guess the closet I got to just writing was financial pieces that I had to write in my former day job in a stockbroker/financial services company.

Holly: That is a bit different from a novel. {laughing}

Stephen: Yes. I was able to express my journey in a fictional sense and so that is how I ended up writing the books.

Holly: Excellent, so you kind of got a whole new career out of the Camino?

Stephen: How do I put it? I am not a best-selling author.

Holly: Not yet!

Stephen: But it is very nice when you see this extra bit of pocket money come into your account each month and I have been number one in a few different categories on Amazon and things.

Holly: Excellent.

Stephen: So there must be something in it, but most of all I just enjoy the process. And after that first book, I didn't expect it to turn into a series and it is going to be a trilogy now and I am working on the third book. I got such nice reviews from the first book, maybe the first third of the earlier reviews that I got with the book asked: well, what happens next with the character? And I kind of thought: well, I have written my book, in my mind I know where I have left my character, it is pretty clear that he is going to complete the Camino Santiago. But, like for me, and like for my character, that was just the start of his journey. So I wrote a second book which I have been very pleased with, and had some great feedback, and great numbers on the Amazon bookstore etc, and now I am on the third book.

Holly: Excellent.

Stephen: I think the words for me maybe they are inside me, but the catalyst to get in touch with those words, definitely came from my experiences along the Camino and I think it was nature, stepping out of my everyday environment that kind of awakened the spiritual and creative side to me that I guess I always wanted but never utilised.

Holly: So you have actually gone on to walk a couple of different trails in preparation for your second and third books, is that correct?

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Stephen: Yeah absolutely right, so everybody knows the Camino Frances, which is the traditional Camino across Northern Spain, across four regions of Spain ending up at Santiago de Compostela. The Camino is kind of a tributary of different trails all ending up at Santiago because it was a European pilgrimage, mainly from north Europe to Santiago. And so there are lots of different ways to get there and most of them then, at one point or another, arrive on the main Camino, Camino Frances. But there are other trails that crisscross across Spain, and so for the second book, my character who is now on his flamenco journey, arrives in Madrid. And I hadn't realised that from the south of Spain, Andalusia, there are trails which will take you up to Madrid or take you onto what is known as the Via de la Plata which goes through the spine of Spain. There are Caminos from the Mediterranean called the Mozárabe which take you onto as I say that spine trail, Via de la Plata. So I was researching Madrid, where my character would go, but I know he had to get back on the road at some point and Madrid was not his answer. And I discovered, when I was there, that there were other Caminos which I wasn't aware of, because they are less well walked, from the Mediterranean, but of course historically there would have been pilgrims, in medieval times especially, who would have made their way up from the coastline of Spain. And so I discovered what is known as the Mozárabe, so I walked that a couple of years ago for research for my second book. My character actually walks it in reverse to the coast, I walked it the traditional way from the coast, because I didn't want to get lost, and it is not particularly well-worn. Only I think about 100 people a year walk it at the moment. It is very rural and South of Granada and a very rural part of the village, a lot of elderly people, typically quiet, distant, hilly, remote at times, and that was fantastic. If you want to be totally on your own, I only ever saw two pilgrims on bicycles, who waved at me from a distance, this is the one if you want complete isolation. Your only company will be villagers or the odd person that crosses your path and again the villagers are very open and it is a different experience, there are not so many municipal hostels. I stayed in a couple of Mayor's houses actually, they offered a spare house, or a school, to you to stay. But that is an alternative one. There are a number of different ones there is the Portuguese, which I know you know about.

Holly: Yeah! {laughing}

Stephen: And I know you will go when we get through all of this lockdown. So the Portuguese I think is the second, you will know better than me, is it the second most popular?

Holly: It is yes. It is still way behind the Frances but, yes, it is the second most popular Camino.

Stephen: So I walked half of that last summer and this is preparation for my third book and the working title is called *Santiago's Guitar*. This is, there has been about a eight year gap between Santiago's last story of completing his Mozárabe Camino and he is now living what he thinks his dreams are, and what he wants, and his life has moved on. And so I went to Portugal, Porto, it does start in Lisbon actually, I started at Porto, and walked for about six days to Tui which is on the border, just beside Spain, it is the point that you arrive at Spain on that Camino, and then there is another five days left which will take you up to Santiago. So you walk North through Portugal and Spain on that one. So I have got, what would you call it "Caminoitis", at the moment, but I love the fact that the books give me an excuse to return to the Camino and the experience just gets richer and richer as I see it from country's perspective, different landscape, and of course, for me, it is also about the people that intersect your journey.

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Holly: So I am conscious of time, but I really want to ask you, in summary, what do you get out of walking long distance trails and why would you recommend someone else give it a try? That's huge I am sorry! {laughing}

Stephen: It is a great question and,, as someone who writes about this, you would think that I would have a succinct answer, but I was slightly dreading a question like that. What do I get out of the Camino? I think for me it is the peace that it gives, it is just stepping outside of the routine of life, where really you don't see the woods for the trees often, we are running around so much, we never take the time to stop. I think the Camino forces you to slow down, be open to new cultures, to Spain on that particular one. I think long distance, you have to slow down, or you would give yourself an injury, to give yourself time. And I think it has changed me in a sense now that even though we are on this lockdown period but in the UK we are allowed out for our daily exercise, which can involve walking, and living in South West London I do have a few parks here, luckily, including Wimbledon Common.

Holly: Excellent.

Stephen: So when I get out it is for a walk, it is not a long walk in the sense of what we are talking about, but at the moment, or last week, it only lasted for a couple of weeks but there is the cherry blossom, in the most nearest park here. It is stopping to appreciate these fleeting moments in life that you can miss if you don't stop and on a long distance walk, if you don't stop and appreciate something you will have passed it. So that, for me, that is it, it is a heightened awareness that you get of your surrounding environment which sometimes we lose sight of when we don't take the time to stop. Even though it is walking, I know it sounds a bit strange, but for me it is stopping. What was the second part?

Holly: Why would you recommend someone else embark upon a long distance trail?

Stephen: I think that in whatever way it will get you outside of your comfort zone and I think it is very easy to be comfortable and not challenge yourself. It could physically challenge you, if you just think how could I walk across a country, as you do on the Camino Santiago? You can do, most people can. As I say the average person with average fitness can, but you have to learn to break things down into bite-size chunks. So it maybe a month walking 800km if you choose that as a long walk, a village, town, city, mountain range region, if you break it down like that. And so I think we just have to learn how to change our mindset with something, even if it is a physical challenge. I think it will get you outside of your comfort zone if you are used to staying in hotels, staying in a hostel with other people, that is getting outside your comfort zone of literally comfort. I think it also makes you appreciate your home comforts and help you look at them in a different way. So I would say it is a fantastic way to challenge yourself in different ways and get outside of your comfort zone.

Holly: Excellent, so this is going to live on Monday May 4th, and it is going to coincide with our promo of walking books. We have teamed up with a few other authors who have written books on walking and getting outdoors, and we will all be offering a discount on our books, and this is also going to coincide with the launch of my second edition of my South Downs Way book. Is there anything you would like to add to that, I am super-excited about this, this was kind of your idea.

Stephen: It was, and I hadn't realised that it was going to tie in with the podcast so that is an added bonus, it is very exciting. Have I got anything to add to that? Just that there will be a few other walkers, long-distance walkers who are going to be involved with that promo and we are all reducing the price

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of our books to around 99p or 99 cents, around that level, it might be different depending on the book and the author. I am excited to share my first book in this series which I have called the reluctant pilgrim series. So *Candyfloss Guitar* is the first book and that will be available for 99p on the same day that this podcast comes out. I am excited to grab your book as well.

Holly: Oh yes, I have really enjoyed your book and I am looking forward to reading the second one to see what exactly happens with the reluctant pilgrim. Thank you so much for joining me, I really, really, enjoyed this conversation and I could keep talking about walking for hours but probably no one wants to listen to a three-hour podcast episode.

Stephen: Well certainly not to me anyone, you have got a much nicer, how shall I put it, narrator's voice but it would be nice to talk about these things but hopefully yes, your listeners will have got something out of this podcast.

Holly: I am sure they will, I love walking so much so I am happy to talk about it with another walking aficionado.

Stephen: It makes me want to get out now so at least the great thing is that we can social-distance by walking, so that is something.

Holly: Exactly and we can take advantage of this lock-in time to read books about future long-distance trails that we might want to walk and get inspired.

Stephen: That sounds like a good idea, I wonder if we can think of something to help on that basis!

Holly: {laughing} So I will be linking to that promo in the show notes and we will both be spreading the word about that once it goes live. Again, thank you for joining me and thank you for talking about walking.

Stephen: It has been great Holly, thanks again.

Holly: So this is a little addition to the outro that I recorded yesterday, after I did the interview, because I realised it has been a year-and-a-half since I did an interview...this wasn't really an interview, it was more like a co-hosted conversation about long distance walking, but the point is it has been a long time since I had a new person on the show. So that means that I forgot to invite Stephen to share where you can find him online. So his website is <http://stephenmarriott.com> and you can also find him on Instagram: StephenRMarriott and he has a great Instagram profile, I love seeing pictures of his travels and walking. I love seeing where other people travel and highly recommend that you follow him there. You can find his two books on Amazon *Candy-floss Guitar* is the first one and *Santiago's Guitar* is the second one. Those are the two books in the reluctant pilgrim series. As I said I have read the first one and really enjoyed it and I am very much looking forward to reading the second one.

Thank you for listening, I hope you enjoyed this episode. I know we are still under lockdown as I record this, but I think it is really important for us to start thinking ahead and dreaming of things that we might want to do once lockdown is lifted, and we can enter a new phase of our lives. So I hope you found this interesting and useful and I hope you check out our book promo which will be coming up in a couple of days. I will be sharing a link to that in the show notes of this episode and I will also be sharing it on social media and to my email list.

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So again, please drop me a line and let me know what you thought about this week's episode, you can email me at: holly@hollyworton.com or find me online and get in touch, I am also welcoming of your feedback and I would love to hear of any another topics you might want me to discuss.

Thank you for listening and remember to visit <http://hollyworton.com/354> for the show notes on this episode. Thank you.