**From Sonora to Spain: Report on our 2018 Tour**

*By Alex La Pierre, BCA Program Director*

Non profit Border Community Alliance recently led a guided curated trip into northern Spain for a group of 22 guests from May 27th to June 8th. The BCA group’s Spanish itinerary paid homage to a pilgrimage, the Camino de Santiago, a route with easily over a millennium of years in existence. Santiago de Compostela, the landmark destination, continues today to be a significant pilgrimage terminus located in the far northwest of Spain, an ancient Celtic region known as Galicia (also the name of the modern regional autonomous community in the Iberian country). The concept for this tour consisted of linking the Arizona-Sonora phenomenon of pilgrimage back to its Hispanic roots in Spain, by way of directly tracing the Camino de Santiago on our late spring intercultural journey.

Here in southern Arizona and northern Sonora, the local context is the San Francisco Xavier pilgrimage to Magdalena de Kino. This is a binational pilgrim’s trail stretching from San Xavier del Bac mission in the U.S. to Magdalena de Kino and which annually takes place from late September, culminating October 4 in a grand fiesta. The origins of this local phenomenon date to sometime after the year 1711 - the year explorer and missionary Eusebio Francisco Kino died and when devoted followers began making the trek to Magdalena to honor this distinguished Jesuit leader as well as his patron saint, San Francisco Xavier. The Magdalena pilgrimage tradition continues to this day, attracting thousands. Drawing on this, the curated trip aimed to identify this borderland pilgrimage origins in Spain where, arguably, one of the world’s most famous pilgrimage routes - el Camino de Santiago - keeps increasing in popularity, perhaps thanks in part to Martin Sheen’s movie “The Way” released in 2010.

In the nonprofit’s foundational spirit, BCA was privileged to collaborate with architect Luis Valle Cordero of Hermosillo as coguide during this experience. A Tecnologico Monterrey university professor and Sonoran architectural firm partner of UV Architectos, Luis is a transplant from Leon, Spain, one of the hallmark destinations we visited along the Camino de Santiago. As a native of the country, Luis was uniquely able to share with the group his knowledge and personal connection with local culture, customs, architectural traditions, as well as modern political and economic situations . Given the nonprofit's mission, the goal of this experience was educational: for curated trip guests to gain a deeper understanding of Hispanic culture and history connection in our binational region with this trip to Mexico’s colonial mother country, Spain.

Starting off in the capital of Madrid, in the center of the country we rendezvoused as a group in the *Casco Antiguo* or historic heart of the capital. After a wonderful reception at 19th century traditional Madrileno tapas restaurant, Casa Labra, set an upbeat tone to the commencement of the journey. The group had the opportunity to discover Madrid’s sites, such as the Bourbon royal palace, Almudena Cathedral, the ancient city walls of Moorish Madrid, neo-mudejar architecture of the Las Ventas bullfighting ring, neighborhood of Madrid de los Austrias, and the gastronomic complex of Mercado San Miguel among others. We then traveled due north via modern and very comfortable European midsize autobus outfitted with amenities ranging from professional driver to restroom to WiFi with a direction toward Burgos, our initial contact with the camino. In a way, this cultural exchange was also an experience in understanding our shared humanity’s history with the quantity of UNESCO World Heritage sites we encountered. Of these monuments, we experienced the equally breathtaking cathedral of Burgos, the Roman walls of Lugo, and the historic city center of Santiago de Compostela. Surprisingly, one of the group’s favorite stops was Puebla de Sanabria, a culturally rich community near the Portuguese border and off the beaten tourism routes but refreshing with the its combination of natural environment and walled medieval town and castle. Quite a number times now, we at BCA have heard an adage about us that we do not have just one gastronomic tour but all of our tours are - in fact - gastronomic tours! Admittedly, there is quite a bit of kernel of truth to this statement, in that BCA programming firmly considers the action of partaking in another nation’s cuisine is truly a direct experience of the culture hosting the guest. There was no doubt in the quality and diversity of Spanish breakfasts offered at the groups accommodations was particularly astounding and reason alone to wake up. Early on, we learned that there are, in fact, “many Spains” reflecting the country’s diverse geocultural regionality. Indeed, the brilliant regional cuisines of the differing provinces we visited were represented on our tables from the wood fired ovens of Castilla, to the Jamon serrano alternative of dried cured beef known as Cecina from Leon, to the fried peppers known as pimientos de Padron and pulpo a la Gallega or smokey chile powder dusted and olive oil dressed octopus of coastal Galicia. Arriving at what the Romans knew as the “end of the world” or Finisterra was an impactful experience for all being at the furthest west point of continental Spain and extended end of the pilgrim’s trail and looking upon the limitless Atlantic Ocean surrounding.