

James Spencer

James is a professional artist working in Hexham, Northumberland where he has his gallery.



There are many ways in which travelling inspires my painting. The best example of this would be in 2023 when I walked across Spain whilst following the Camino de Santiago. The ever-changing light, weather and variety of landscape provided so much fuel for painting that I created a new exhibition inspired by the Camino.

My favourite thing about learning a new language is the greater sense of connection with the people and places I visit. I find that even a very basic understanding of a new language can enrich the experience of travel massively.

I love asking people for local food and drink recommendations; it's my favourite way to learn about a new place. I often get stuck trying to formulate sentences, so I'd like to be able to express myself more quickly and with a bit more nuance.

At school I had lessons in both French and German. At first I loved the idea of learning new languages but I found them extremely difficult, and struggled to make any real progress even after years of lessons. Grammar seemed to be the priority rather than gaining a general understanding of the language. I certainly can't put all the blame on the teaching approach though, at the time I think I probably lacked the required dedication.

That experience left me feeling that languages were probably not for me, I'm not sure I even believed it was possible for me to learn a new language, and I didn't have another go until I was approaching my thirties.

I now follow the comprehensible input method, reading and listening to as much as possible and then studying grammar in areas where I get stuck.

I find that people enjoy testing out their English and it's usually far better than my French or Spanish! Even when they are clearly comfortable speaking English people tend to be very kind and encourage me to practise my new languages though.

We (my now wife and I) did the whole 900 km of the *Camino Francés* averaging 30 km a day, and staying in *albergues*, meeting people from all over the world. I discovered that the fittest people get overexcited by the challenge and the landscape, and end up hurting their calves by walking too fast.



One of James' paintings of El Camino

It always feels good to have a bit of a language up your sleeve , just so you can say something back when people greet you, so I had rehearsed my Spanish before we left. Only to find that a lot of the walkers I met were from Italy – and that they had the best parties! – so I improved my Italian too. My strategy was to copy what they said and then say it again later on to get a reaction.

My favourite companion was a kitten walking the Camino on a lead with its people. I watched it grow into a cat over that time! The humans were quite happy waiting for it to come down from whichever tree had attracted its attention before they set off walking for the day. The kitten story is one I still tell ...

Human communication is one of the things I really value. Before opening my studio in Hexham I was working alone as an illustrator in watercolour, often through the night, in order to meet deadlines and with little social interaction. Now people are walking past, looking in the window as I work and dropping in to say hello or look around. I've learnt to enjoy every day.

Buen camino!

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