



# Profile and Motivations of Pilgrims on the Portuguese St. James Way and Their Assessment of the Route

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## Abstract

There are many studies on the St. James Way, also known as the Camino de Santiago, but not enough attention has been paid to the pilgrims' perceptions and motivations, particularly those who choose to do the Portuguese Way. Their motivations may be related to the landscape, the spiritual dimension, the search for well-being and self-therapy, or the need to cope with life's challenges. This study aimed to identify the motivations, profile, and satisfaction of pilgrims on the Portuguese St. James Way. Regarding satisfaction, we also looked at the lack of services or goods provided along the Way. A total of 351 pilgrims responded to a questionnaire, which was complemented by participant observation to obtain some data. The results show that pilgrims' motivations were mainly spiritual and cultural. Regarding the pilgrims' profile, we concluded that most were between 25 and 64 years old, had a high level of education and a formal job, and were doing the Way on foot. Apart from nationality, duration of the walk, and who organized the trip, there were few differences between the pilgrims. Out of the total, 57.3% expressed great satisfaction with the Portuguese St. James Way (the Central Route), which corresponded to their initial expectations. Based on pilgrims' and researchers' assessments, we offer policy recommendations to the local authorities aimed at maximizing pilgrims' well-being.

**Keywords** Portuguese St. James Way · Pilgrims' profile and motivations · Landscape · Well-being

## Introduction

Over the past four decades, certain niche markets of the tourism industry have emerged, such as religious tourism (e.g., Faria et al., 2022, 2024; Kim et al., 2020). The first studies on religiously motivated travel were published in the late 1980s (Kim et al., 2020). Since the revival of the St. James Way in the late 1990s (Mitchell-Lanham, 2015), Santiago de Compostela in Galicia, Spain, has been one of the main destinations for pilgrims, as has Portugal, particularly the northern part of the country, which acts as an important gateway to this religious and cultural city. In the present paper, we opted to use the concept of pilgrim because the St. James Way, also known as the Camino de Santiago, is a religious

route and, nowadays, it is increasingly difficult to separate this concept from that of tourist. In fact, those who do the Camino correspond to several types of individuals who combine the profiles of a pilgrim and of a tourist (Roszak, 2022).

The Portuguese St. James Way is the second most travelled of the ten official routes. Individuals undertake the route for religious and spiritual motivations (Silva et al., 2023) but also in search of self-knowledge, self-therapy/emotional balance, and well-being (Brumec et al., 2023; Faria et al., 2024; Mikaelsson, 2012; Reis, 2007; Vieira et al., 2023).

Currently, there are numerous ways of being a pilgrim in modern times. The great variety of characteristics of the St. James Way evokes various motivations in those who wish to walk it (Heiser, 2021), ranging from encounters with varied landscapes, quiet and rural paths, physical exertion, or contact with local communities to psycho-therapeutic effects (Maddrell, 2013; Faria et al., 2024). Contact with other pilgrims is also a motivation. Indeed, traveling to sacred sites provides religious, spiritual, and cultural experiences and serves as a leisure activity (Liro, 2021; Sofjan & Liro, 2022). The factors influencing pilgrimage satisfaction in a specific area include environmental, economic, and sociocultural activities (Joseph et al., 2020).

Given the motivations of the pilgrims doing the Portuguese St. James Way, we conducted a survey to determine pilgrims' motivations and profile, their degree of satisfaction with the Camino, and the reasons they think it should be recommended to others. In addition, we studied the goods and services offered along the Camino to identify the main shortcomings. In total, 351 pilgrims were surveyed. Using various sources (primary and secondary), the survey was complemented by participant observation, mainly through interaction with the pilgrims and locals we met along the route. Most pilgrims were aged between 25 and 64, were highly educated, were employed in formal jobs, and were completing the Camino on foot.

The research was conducted between the summers of 2020 and 2022. The route starts in Porto (Portugal) and ends in Santiago de Compostela (Spain), meaning that a total of 240 km (149 mi) had to be covered. Of the available Portuguese routes, we opted for the Central Route (the second most travelled of all the routes) as it has a stronger historical tradition and attracts a larger number of pilgrims (21.2% of the total of 438,307 pilgrims on all routes of the St. James Way in 2022 and 19.1% of the total of 499,241 pilgrims in 2024 [Oficina del Peregrino, 2022, 2024]).

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The main objectives of the project were the following: (1) to characterize the evolution of religious tourism in Portugal; (2) to list the existing Camino routes at the national and international levels; (3) to evaluate the main characteristics of the Central St. James Way in terms of the type of landscape, the condition of the route, the information and signage on the Way, the goods and support services and the existing risks; (4) to identify the motivations, profile, and satisfaction levels of pilgrims walking the Portuguese St. James Way, focusing on the Central route; and (5) to propose an action plan to improve the availability of goods and services to pilgrims on the Central St. James Way. This paper focuses mainly on the fourth objective of the project.

The present paper seeks to place these particularities in the broader context of contemporary pilgrimages and to highlight the interplay between tradition and modernity in the pilgrims' experience. Therefore, the relevance of this research lies not only in its specific contribution to the understanding of the Portuguese Way but also in its ability to shed light

on more general aspects of spiritual and cultural travel in contemporary times. Furthermore, this study provides a clear rationale for the investigation by filling a significant gap in the understanding of the motivations and experiences of pilgrims on this route, thus contributing to a more comprehensive understanding of pilgrimage tourism and the dynamics of spiritual mobility.

It is divided into five sections. After the introduction, which is based on a literature review, the second section presents the most important available studies on the motivations and profile of the pilgrims along the central Way. The section on methodology refers to the primary and secondary data used and the methods of analysis applied. This is followed by a presentation of the main empirical findings and conclusions, which include some policy recommendations.

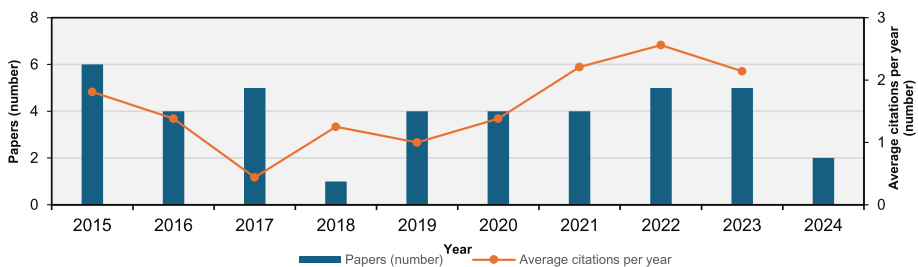
## Motivations and Profile of Pilgrims on the St. James Way

Studies on tourists' motivations and behaviour have been widespread since the 1960s (Li et al., 2015), although it was not until the 1970s that researchers began to assess tourists' motivations in terms of factors related to the individuals and their environment as well as what destinations have to offer. The push and pull factors are a way of capturing the two key dimensions behind the decision to choose and visit a destination (Crompton, 1979). Recently, Li et al. (2015) from a sociological perspective (Wang, 2000), pointed out that motivation needs to be considered in a broader context that includes global structures and social changes.

However, there are few studies focusing on pilgrims' perceptions and motivations. Moreover, research on the St. James Way is even scarcer, which justifies the present study. A search of the Web of Science database using the keywords “Religious tourism AND St. James Way OR Camino de Santiago” showed that only 41 papers were published on this topic between 2015 and 2024 (Fig. 1). These studies come from countries such as Spain, Portugal, France, Brazil, and Italy, countries where the St. James Way has greater importance or there is a predominantly Catholic population.

Of these studies, four refer to the perceptions of the pilgrims about the St. James Way (Table 1). In terms of the data sources used, three are based on quantitative surveys and one on data collected through interviews.

Gomes et al. (2019) investigated the motivations of “tourpilgrims” on the Portuguese Inner Way to Santiago de Compostela, emphasizing a dialogue between heritage,



**Fig. 1** Change in the Number of Studies on the St. James Way in the Web of Science Database from 2015 to 2022

**Table 1** Studies on the Perceptions and Motivations of Pilgrims for Walking the St. James Way Based on Interviews or Questionnaires From 2015 to 2024

Authors	Year	Sample	Collection period	Techniques and Variables used	Main results
Alvarez-Sousa	2015	Questionnaire (2,129 pilgrims)	2008 – 2010	<p>Analysis using structural equation model</p> <p>Dependent variables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Returning</li> <li>• Recommendation to friends and family</li> </ul> <p>Sharing of experience on websites and social networks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity to write a travel book and make a novel or film</li> </ul> <p>Independent variables</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reasons for taking the trip</li> <li>• Satisfaction with cognitive aspects (e.g., signage, route/trail maintenance, information services, or quality of accommodations)</li> <li>• Affective evaluation of the Way (e.g., boring-fun; unpleasant-pleasant)</li> </ul>	<p>Satisfaction with tourism resources is essentially determined by the difference in the affective dimension (i.e., those who find the Way boring or fun)</p> <p>Satisfaction with resources influences the overall image of the St. James Way or the product directly, as well as the affective image</p> <p>The travel distance (from country of origin to starting location) determines the interest in walking the Way again</p>
Castro-Fernández et al	2016	Questionnaire (612 cathedral visitors (residents and tourists))	2008 – 2009	<p>Descriptive statistical analysis based on</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• physical characteristics of the cathedral and its suitability for public walkways</li> <li>• typology of users (namely, residents and tourists) and use of the space</li> </ul>	<p>The most important ritual is the participation in the celebration of the Eucharist, the embrace of the Apostle, and the visit to the crypt and tomb of the Apostle</p> <p>Most respondents travelled to Santiago on holiday (44%) or for religious reasons</p> <p>The activities carried out by visitors were concentrated in two main types of tourism, religious and/or cultural, with visits to the cathedral (98.2%) and gastronomic tourism (85.1%)</p>

**Table 1** (continued)

Authors	Year	Sample	Collection period	Techniques and Variables used	Main results
Kim et al	2016	104 semi-structured interviews with pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago (French Way)	2015	The hard laddering technique was applied in two steps. An implication matrix and the creation of a hierarchical added value map were used	Several relevant attributes were identified based on the values identified by pilgrims along the Way. The most notable attribute was prolonged contemplation and self-reflection. The second attribute was the ability to interact with people from different cultures and countries of the world. Another relevant attribute was the encounter with the natural environment and landscape
Nilsson & Testafahney	2016	53 interviews with pilgrims on the Camino de Santiago	2012	The research methodology was qualitative, with the aim of obtaining and interpreting pilgrims' accounts of their experiences. The analysis process followed a grounded theory approach. The interviews were first fully transcribed and categories were established to describe the content. When comparing the categories across the interview, several common themes were identified	The main conclusion from this study is that most pilgrims seek subjective meaning in spiritual and/or reflective ways of life

**Table 1** (continued)

Authors	Year	Sample	Collection period	Techniques and Variables used	Main results
Amaro et al	2018	Online questionnaire (1,140 pilgrims)	2015	Quantitative analysis to assess the profile of the respondents and an analysis of pilgrims' motivations. This analysis was based on the reduction of 25 items to a smaller set of factors using factorial analysis	The results show that pilgrims are motivated mainly by spiritual aspects, by the search for new experiences, by nature and sport experiences, and by cultural reasons. The questionnaire showed that the Portuguese and the Brazilians rate the religious motives significantly higher than the Dutch, French, Spanish and German pilgrims
Gomes et al	2019	27 interviews	2018	Participant observation, interviews, net ethnography, and documentary analysis	Tourpilgrims' motivations are multifaceted: 51.9% cited multiple reasons, 25.9% cited religious reasons, and 11.1% cited cultural motivations. Landscape quality and cultural heritage were key motivators

**Table 1** (continued)

Authors	Year	Sample	Collection period	Techniques and Variables used	Main results
Pereiro	2019	Interviews (32 pilgrims)	2016 – 2017	Qualitative techniques of content analysis based on a study of <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>the tourist experiences of this pilgrimage route</li> <li>the revitalization of the Way and the relationship between tourism and pilgrimage as a general problem</li> </ul>	<p>The motivations for the pilgrimage to Santiago are of a secular type—the desire for communication, cultural knowledge, prestige, and recovery through change—and a religious-spiritual type—sacred motivations, spiritual purification, or the fulfillment of a promise</p> <p>The Way promotes the physical and spiritual closeness associated with contact with natural landscapes</p> <p>The pilgrims noted that there was more signage and information provided, as well as less arduous paths, in Galicia compared to northern Portugal</p>
Frost	2021	Multiple pilgrim sites	March-September 2020	Interviews with shrine custodians, staff, and pilgrims	<p>Pilgrimage flow decreased by 90–95%; significant changes in accommodations and social interactions; rise in virtual pilgrimages and online religious activities</p>
Lienau et al	2022	Questionnaire (425 German-speaking pilgrims)	2017 – 2018	Descriptive statistics for nine indicators of a multidimensional model of religiosity (degree of religiosity and spirituality, public practice, ideology, private practice) Statistical analysis based on <i>t</i> -test to compare religious indicators of pilgrims from Germany, Austria, and Switzerland	<p>The sampled pilgrims sought contact with transcendence through prayer or meditation to varying degrees</p> <p>The religious dimension appears to be a reference point for participants in the study to a lesser degree (about 60%), whereas the “spiritual” dimension is a reference point for more participants (about 80%)</p>

**Table 1** (continued)

Authors	Year	Sample	Collection period	Techniques and Variables used	Main results
Roszak & Huzarek	2022	Interviews and observations	2020–21	Qualitative analysis of pandemic-related changes to the Camino	Identified new trends post-pandemic: increased isolation, rise in individualism, changes in accommodations practices, and a deeper focus on spiritual reflection
Brumec et al	2023	Questionnaire (1,502 pilgrims)	2020–21	Statistical analysis and categorization of motivations based on a detailed typology: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Personal transcendence</li> <li>• Social and cultural interaction</li> <li>• Environmental and spiritual connection</li> </ul>	Identified three main categories of motivations: spirituality and transcendence, desire for socialization and cultural exchange, and close contact with nature. The study also highlighted that religiosity levels and socioeconomic conditions significantly influence route choices

tourism, and religious interests through interviews conducted with 27 individuals. Amaro et al. (2018) addressed pilgrims' motivations, using an online survey as a data source. The results show that pilgrims are mainly motivated by spiritual aspects, want to have new experiences, and have the goal of connecting with nature and challenging themselves physically. Religious motivations scored lowest in the pilgrims' motivations ( $M = 2.68$ ) (Amaro et al., 2018).

A few years earlier, Fernandes et al. (2012) published a study on the Portuguese route and analysed 204 questionnaires sent to pilgrims. This publication was not published in tourism journals and was therefore not included in the results concerning the most significant motivation found by Kim et al. (2020), which identified leisure and recreation followed by religious, cultural, curiosity, exercise, and spiritual motives.

In this regard, a survey of 612 visitors to the Santiago Cathedral conducted by Castro-Fernández et al. (2016) found that most pilgrims intended to attend the Eucharist or visit the tomb of the Apostle. In contrast, a study by Lienau et al. (2022) showed that the interest of German-speaking pilgrims is essentially spiritual rather than purely religious. Pereiro (2019) identified significant differences in the perception of the St. James Way between the Portuguese and Galicia routes, namely different ways of providing information to the pilgrims along the Way. Regarding doing the journey more than once, a study by Alvarez-Sousa (2015) showed that travellers' satisfaction and interest in walking the St. James Way more than once is determined by the starting point of the route.

The COVID-19 pandemic profoundly influenced pilgrimages and religious tourism, as highlighted by Frost (2021). During the first six months of the pandemic, pilgrim numbers at major sites, such as Santiago de Compostela and Lourdes, dropped by 90–95%. Social distancing measures and limited accommodation capacities disrupted traditional interactions among pilgrims. Roszak and Huzarek (2022) noted a shift toward “post-pandemic piety”, characterized by greater individualism and isolation but also new opportunities for spiritual reflection.

Nevertheless, since the Jacobean Holy Year of 1993, a year when the feast of St. James falls on a Sunday, the St. James Way has been successful (Lois-González et al., 2015; Lopez, 2020; Moscarelli et al., 2020), having set in motion a process of “re-semanticization” (transformation in social aspects) that has turned the route into one of Galicia's most important tourist products, making Santiago de Compostela a “polysemic space”, with various functions and interests (Lopez, 2020), and an increasingly important international destination (Lois-González & Santos, 2015; Murray & Graham, 1997; Pérez Guilarte & Lois-González, 2018; Soares et al., 2021). This concept of polysemic space refers to the multiplicity of meanings, functions, and motivations that attract pilgrims and general tourists to the city of Santiago de Compostela via the Way (Lopez, 2020).

The tourist boom that the St. James Way has experienced is based on its historical tradition and cultural image, on strictly religious symbols (the pilgrimage, the holy city), and on the broader social-cultural significance of the modern Jacobean years (Lois-González & Santos, 2015; Lopez et al., 2017; Moscarelli et al., 2020; Pack, 2010), which is also reflected in a new concept of spirituality. Roszak and Mróz (2024) address the distinction between spirituality and religion, exploring whether spirituality should be understood as an extension of religion or as an anthropological alternative. In the context of the Camino de Santiago, the line between the spiritual and the religious is often blurred, making it difficult to separate spiritual experiences from traditional religious practices. These authors argue that spirituality can both reinforce religion and function as a secularized expression of transcendence.

At present, tours associated with spiritual motivations have distanced themselves from the pilgrimage's unique religious significance (Lois-González, 2013; Lois-González & Santos, 2015; Lois-González et al., 2015; Murray & Graham, 1997; Oviedo et al., 2014; Remoaldo et al., 2024; Slavin, 2003). In fact, academic studies on modern pilgrimage often emphasise the diversity of pilgrims' motivations and origins, as pointed out by Moulin-Stožek (2019), who, citing papers on the Camino de Santiago, speaks of a new kind of spiritual tourism or secular/post-secular self-therapy. Lopez (2020) uses the term "therapeutic route" to refer to the role that the Camino plays for many of those who walk it. In other words, the most common spiritual motivation is embodied in various interrelated issues associated with health, religion, and pilgrimage.

According to Abdul Halim et al. (2021), spiritual tourism can be perceived as a journey in search of a life purpose and should help to create a balance between body, mind, and spirit. It may or may not have a relationship with religion. In this context, Lois-González and Santos (2015) and Lopez et al. (2017) point out that in many cases the Way is associated with an individual's recovery from personal shocking events (e.g., divorce, death of a relative, job loss, health problems), finding a more balanced relationship with nature, having time for oneself, and benefiting from the rich and diverse landscape along the route. Moulin-Stožek (2019) adds that the journey demands considerable physical exertion from participants and that they experience an altered sense of time and space, as well as a deeper appreciation of nature. Indeed, visits to pilgrimage sites are frequently driven by a yearning for a spiritual experience rather than a connection with God or religious practices (Shinde, 2007). Engaging in such activities allows for self-exploration and self-transformation, which can impact happiness, self-satisfaction, and sense of fulfilment (Headey et al., 2010; Kim & Kim, 2019; Remoaldo et al., 2024; Shinde, 2007).

It is important to differentiate between tourists and pilgrims based on their main motivation for walking the St. James Way (Cohen, 1992). According to Casais and Sousa (2020), Lois-González and Santos (2015), and Moscarelli et al. (2020), the tourist is looking for an experience along the Way associated with cultural tourism, wellness, adventure, or recreation. The pilgrim, on the other hand, wants to undertake the journey mainly for spiritual or religious reasons (visiting sacred sites, monuments, and other specific attributes associated with the Christian faith along the Way). In this regard, religiousness is based on the individual's beliefs and behaviours concerning a specific religious practice (Abdul Halim et al., 2021). Regardless of travellers' main motivations, tourism, as pointed out by several researchers, including Morgan (as cited in Abdul Halim et al., 2021), has long been known for its potential to contribute to individuals' well-being, inner psychological development, and the enhancement of spirituality.

Tourists and pilgrims share the path to Santiago, and their journeys overlap in essence and purpose. Tourists seek an enriching experience, guided by interests such as cultural tourism, wellness, adventure, or recreation. Their motivation is often rooted in the search for spiritual meaning, personal reflection, or the fulfillment of a religious vow. They view the Way as a path to introspection and spiritual growth and visit sacred sites and monuments with a reverence that transcends mere aesthetic or historical appreciation. This distinction is crucial to understanding the dynamics of the Camino de Santiago as it reflects a unique overlap between tourism and pilgrimage, although each has different cultural, social, and economic impacts.

The difficulty in this classification lies in the overlap between walking the Way for spiritual/religious reasons and for getting to know the city of Santiago and enjoying the outdoors (Collins-Kreiner, 2010; Murray & Graham, 1997). Pilgrims arriving in Santiago behave in the same way as those who simply visit the city without having walked the St. James Way

(Castro-Fernández et al., 2016). Both visit the cathedral, go shopping, visit restaurants and cafés, and enjoy the outdoor areas. Also, as Abdul Halim et al. (2021) noted, spirituality in the broadest sense, or religiosity/religiousness, can prompt individuals to visit a place that appears to have no religious significance, i.e., that is not directly connected to their beliefs and practices. As mentioned earlier, ordinary tourists or pilgrims who embark on the journey may do so for a variety of motivations or reasons (Fernandes et al., 2012; Lois-González, 2013; Murray & Graham, 1997; Pérez Guilarte & Lois-González, 2018).

Pearce and Caltabiano's (1983) proposal regarding Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be applied to travellers' motivations for walking the Way. Brumec et al. (2023) developed a comprehensive typology of pilgrim motivations, with 27 Likert-scale items, that explores various factors, including self-transcendence, cultural interaction, and environmental immersion. The study applied a motivation scale titled Walking the Camino, which was also used by Farias et al. (2019).

With this in mind, and based on field research conducted on the French Camino from July 2015 to July 2017, Moulin-Stožek (2019) claims that there are multidirectional relationships and pathways in the symbolic practices, psychological states, and behaviours of pilgrims, both for individuals inspired by religious positions, whatever their nature, and for those who do not follow any religion. Each pilgrim constructs their own personal meaning of the Camino (Moulin-Stožek, 2019).

With regard to the pilgrimage to St. James, it should be noted that, as Lopez (2020) points out using data published by the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, the number of women participating in the pilgrimage has tended to increase since the Jacobean Holy Year of 2010, accounting for 51% of all pilgrims in 2019. The corresponding figure in 2011 was 42% (Lopez, 2020). According to the same researcher (Lopez, 2020), this could be the result of the public positioning of the Camino as a safe and inclusive space that welcomes people of different ages, genders, and cultures.

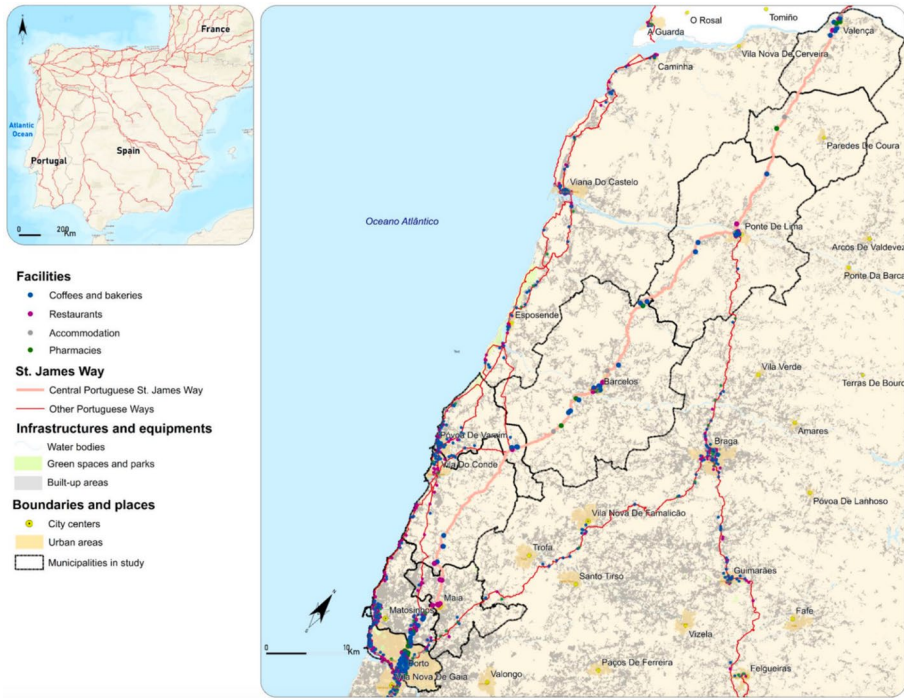
The literature review conducted for this paper highlights the increased research interest as due to the multiple motivations of St. James Way travellers. Only a limited number of studies have examined the motivations, characteristics, and satisfaction levels of pilgrims on the Portuguese St. James Way. The current research contributes to improving our understanding of the topic.

## Methodology

### Case Study

The Portuguese St. James Way has two official secular routes: the inland route, known as the Central Route, and the Coastal Route. The Central Route goes from Porto to Matosinhos, Maia, Vila do Conde, Barcelos, Ponte de Lima, and Paredes de Coura to Valença, while the Coastal Route is a variant that starts in Porto and follows the northern coast, connecting several cities such as Vila do Conde, Póvoa de Varzim, Esposende, Viana do Castelo, Caminha, Vila Nova de Cerveira, and Valença.

This case study focuses on the Central Route of the Camino de Santiago, which crosses the Minho region (Fig. 2). This route offers pilgrims a unique experience, passing through breathtaking landscapes, historic villages, and places of spiritual significance. For centuries, this route of the Camino de Santiago has been an important pilgrimage route, attracting people from diverse cultures and backgrounds.



**Fig. 2** Map Depicting the Portuguese St. James Way

In 2020, 54,144 pilgrims visited the Oficina del Peregrino (Pilgrim’s Reception Office) in Santiago de Compostela. Of these, 34,247 had done the Portuguese Way. In 2024, the number of pilgrims rose sharply, reaching a total of 499,241, of which 95,453 chose to do the Portuguese St. James Way and 236,379 one of the French routes.

The landscape along the Portuguese Way is one of the main features contributing to its success and positioning it as an important tourism product (Faria et al., 2024), together with the Portuguese cultural attributes of the area, especially in the Minho section (e.g., various traditions and festivities/festivals, traditional stone houses, agricultural crops, friendliness of the local population). The idyllic landscape along the route helps to promote well-being and self-therapy and finding answers to life’s greatest questions.

This research takes the form of a case study centered on the Portuguese Central Route of the St. James Way, from the city of Porto, Portugal, to Santiago de Compostela, Spain. Following Flick’s (2014) guidelines for case studies in qualitative research, we clearly defined the scope (the Portuguese municipalities and the specific sections where surveys were administered) and the boundaries of the case (the roughly 240 km route). This delineation is justified by the route’s historical significance and the higher flow of pilgrims along this stretch—factors critical for examining pilgrims’ motivations, perceptions, and satisfaction.

## Techniques and Sources Used

Our approach was mainly quantitative in nature and was guided by studies conducted on this topic (Lienau et al., 2022). We used a survey that was conducted with pilgrims on

the Camino by three researchers from the research team, who followed the route twice. In addition, the research team asked some hostel staff to participate in the project and ask pilgrims to fill in the questionnaire. This option was intended to facilitate the collection of questionnaires, especially during the COVID-19 period when it was more difficult to contact pilgrims. Regarding the quantitative approach, a survey of 351 pilgrims on the Camino was carried out between the summer of 2020 and the end of 2022. This survey was one of the techniques used in the current study's holistic research approach, which began in 2020 and ended in 2023, and the sample volume and the results follow the ones mentioned in the literature, especially considering that it was applied during the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides the survey, a grid of 22 variables was built to assess the landscape and its characteristics, and a photographic record (around 2.000 photos) of the path was created as well.

In 2020, the numerous COVID-19 lockdowns limited the ability of the researchers to hand out surveys to pilgrims, and the number of pilgrims who did the Way declined sharply. For this reason, the team made great efforts to achieve a consistent number of filled-in questionnaires, especially in 2022, when the pandemic was less severe. Although we aimed to get a representative sample, due to the various circumstances we faced during the survey period, we only managed to obtain a convenience sample.

The questionnaire was developed by the research team based on the published papers addressing the St. James Way synthesized in Table 1. It contained 29 questions, divided into three sections with multiple-choice and open-answer questions. The assessment tool included (1) 11 questions on motivation, (2) 12 questions on the characteristics of and respondents' satisfaction with the St. James Way, and (3) six questions to determine the sociodemographic profile of the respondents (gender, age, nationality, educational level, professional status, and marital status). As illustrated in Table 2, the questionnaire survey incorporated a series of domains and response options.

Regarding the issue of motivation, the participants were presented with two open-ended questions designed to elicit the underlying reasons for their decision to repeat the route. This was followed by a subsequent question that sought to identify the two predominant motivations, which were categorized as religious (faith), promise, spiritual (personal development, self-knowledge, inner happiness), cultural (history, art, monuments), environmental, tourism, or exercise. An additional effort was made to ascertain whether motivations had changed for those who were repeating the route, encompassing both the predominant motivations and whether they would recommend it to others. Despite the merits of Likert scales, as employed in Farias et al. (2019) and Brumec et al. (2023), the adoption of multiple-choice questions facilitates the incorporation of additional alternatives, which are systematically linked between different questions in the survey questionnaire.

The research tool was initially tested on a small group of nine pilgrims in July 2020 at the Barcelos Tourist Office. The average response time was eight minutes. The administration of the questionnaire occurred while the researchers walked the Way and was done in cafés, restaurants, and other establishments where researchers stopped to eat or drink water. Subsequently, to augment the sample during the period of the ongoing global pandemic, local hostels were selected as additional locations for data collection.

The main objectives of the survey were (1) to identify the profile and motivations of the pilgrims, (2) to verify whether they had ever previously walked the Portuguese St. James Way or other routes to Santiago de Compostela, (3) to analyse how satisfied the pilgrims were with the route and whether they would recommend it to other potential travellers, and (4) to identify any goods or services that were lacking along the Way.

**Table 2** Items of the Questionnaire Survey Used on the Portuguese St. James Way Between 2020 and 2022

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Response Options</i>
<i>First time doing the Santiago Way</i>	Yes, No
<i>Other paths completed</i>	Portuguese Coastal, French, Primitive, English, Silver Way, Finisterre, Other (specify)
<i>Means of travel</i>	On foot, Horse, Bike, Other (specify)
<i>Travel companions</i>	Alone, As a couple, With a family member, With a friend, In a group, Other (specify)
<i>Trip organizer</i>	Myself, Family, Friends, Travel agency, Religious entity/association, Other (specify)
<i>Main reasons for doing the Way (main motivations)</i>	Religious (faith), Promise, Spiritual (personal development, self-knowledge, inner happiness), Cultural (history, art, monuments), Environmental reasons, Tourism, Exercise, Other
<i>Satisfaction with the route</i>	Very satisfied, Pleased, Not very satisfied, Dissatisfied, No opinion
<i>Highlights of the journey</i>	Culture, Monuments, Gastronomy, Route layout, Landscape, People, Socializing with other pilgrims, Overall experience, Other (specify)
<i>Negative aspects of the route</i>	Climate, Route condition, Lack of information/signage, Insecurity, Gastronomy, Lack of accommodation, Service quality, Other (specify)
<i>Recommendation of the route</i>	Yes, No
<i>Reasons to recommend</i>	Good weather, Safety, Landscape, Culture, Gastronomy, Tradition/customs, Preserved Way, Overall experience, Other (specify)
<i>Suggestions for improvement</i>	Heritage revitalization, Infrastructure improvements, Equipment upgrades, Better signage, More tourist routes, Public–private investment, Other (specify)
<i>Services lacking in Barcelos</i>	Pharmacies, Shady spots, Shelters, Drinking water, Restrooms, Trash bins, Informative signage, Other (specify)
<i>Use of services in Barcelos</i>	Restaurants, Supermarkets, Public hostels, Private hostels, Hotels, Tourism office, Pilgrim support, Health centre, Other (specify)
<i>Expenditures during the journey</i>	Accommodation, Food, Handicrafts, Guided tours, Monument visits, Leisure/entertainment, Transport (e.g., backpack transport), Other (specify)
<i>Sociodemographic questions</i>	Gender (Male, Female), Birth year, Nationality, Education level, Marital status, Employment status

These primary sources were supplemented by official statistics from the Oficina del Peregrino at the end of the St. James Way in Santiago de Compostela, which provide the number of pilgrims who completed the route and other information.

Methodologically, we combined qualitative and quantitative approaches in a coherent manner, aligning with Bernard's (2006) recommendations for mixed methods research and Flick's (2014) principle of data triangulation, thus ensuring robustness and interpretative depth. A structured 29-question survey was administered in person—often in collaboration with certain accommodations—between 2020 and 2022, featuring multiple-choice questions, satisfaction scales, and open-ended items exploring motivations, satisfaction, sociodemographics, and general impressions. In total, 351 responses were gathered; pandemic constraints necessitated convenience sampling, possibly limiting the broader representativeness when compared to pre-pandemic data. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, averages, percentiles) to outline the pilgrim profile, non-parametric tests (Kruskal–Wallis) to detect statistically significant differences

across groups (e.g., gender, age range, nationality), and multiple correspondence analysis to explore relationships among categorical variables, including motivations and perceived positive and negative aspects. Prior to full-scale implementation, a pilot test was conducted with nine pilgrims in Barcelos, following Flick's (2014) guidelines. This step helped refine the phrasing of questions and confirmed an average response time of eight minutes.

In addition, participant observation (Bernard, 2006; Flick, 2014) was integrated to capture the day-to-day pilgrim experience, from communal meals and rest breaks to interactions with residents. Three researchers walked the Camino in 2020 and 2022, recording field notes and collecting roughly 2,000 photographs documenting landscapes and signage issues.

## Data Analysis and Procedures

The techniques used in this study were general descriptive statistics (frequency, proportion, mean, asymmetry, kurtosis) and a Kruskal–Wallis H test to compare the difference between different sociodemographic characteristics and level of satisfaction. The Shapiro–Wilk normality test yielded a statistical test value of 0.702 with a *p*-value of 0.000, so the Kruskal–Wallis H non-parametric test was used instead of ANOVA F-tests.

Multiple correspondence analysis was used to analyse the relationship between categorical variables. This was particularly useful in identifying patterns and relationships between motivations and the positive and negative aspects mentioned by pilgrims.

After examining the relationship of up to eight dimensions, only two dimensions of the multiple correspondence analysis provided statistically relevant results. The total variance explained by the two combined factors was 12.2%, which is a relatively low value. The first factor has the highest eigenvalue (3.180) and accounts for 6.9% of the total variance, followed by the second factor with an eigenvalue of 2.423 (5.3% of the total variance; Table 3).

The factor loadings indicate how strong the relationship is between each item and each factor. The factor loadings range from 0.498 to 0.773, with each item loading most strongly on one factor. It appears that the factor analysis identified two underlying factors in the data with good internal consistency, but, as mentioned earlier, these factors account for a relatively small proportion of the total variance.

Following this procedure, we conducted a cluster analysis of the results of the multiple correspondence analysis. Cluster analysis was used to group the variables based on similarities in their patterns of association with the multiple correspondence analysis categories. The number of clusters was determined using K-means clustering. After determining the

**Table 3** Results of the Multiple Correspondence Analysis of the Pilgrim Questionnaire

Dimension	Cronbach's alpha	Variance accounted for		
		Total (eigenvalue)	Inertia	% of variance
1	0.701	3.180	0.069	6.912
2	0.600	2.423	0.053	5.267
Total		5.602	0.122	
Mean	0.657	2.801	0.061	6.090

number of cases in each cluster (cluster 1 = 139 and cluster 2 = 212), we attempted to analyse the characteristics of each group to understand the factors by which they differed. All statistical analyses were performed with a 95% confidence threshold ( $p < 0.05$ ).

Thus, the data analysis combined different approaches to provide a comprehensive understanding of the pilgrims' experience. Initially, descriptive statistics (frequencies, means, percentiles) outlined a general profile, while non-parametric Kruskal–Wallis tests revealed statistically significant differences between demographic groups. Subsequently, multiple correspondence analysis allowed us to explore the relationships between motivations, positive experiences, and complaints, offering a deeper and more integrated view of the data.

## Results

Sociodemographic characteristics of the respondents and positioning towards the St. James Way.

The sociodemographic characteristics of the 351 respondents are listed in Table 4. Those who did not respond to the questions about their personal characteristics were not included.

The sample was predominantly male (55.6% men compared to 43.9% women). This result corresponds to the figure of 50.83% men obtained by the Oficina del Peregrino in 2021, which is lower than the figure obtained in 2020 (55.82% men).

Of the total of 351 responses collected, the distribution of respondents by age varied from under 25 (10.5%) to 65 and over (7.4%), with the majority in the 25–44 age group (50.4%). Similar results were found in the studies by Fernandes et al. (2012) and Amaro et al. (2018).

Many of the respondents in the current study were of European origin (88.8%), namely from Portugal (31.1%), Spain (15.1%), Germany (13.4%), or Italy (9.1%). This respondent profile is similar to that found by Amaro et al. (2018), where the pilgrims who walked the Camino de Santiago were Portuguese (31.7%) followed by Spanish (17.9%), German (12.6%), and French (6.1%). A small number of pilgrims came from other geographical regions (continents), such as Brazil (3.7%) or the United States (3.4%). The remaining group (other nationalities) had a frequency of one (Australian, Belgian, Belarusian, Canadian, Estonian, Israeli, Malaysian, Mexican, Slovak, Swedish, and Taiwanese). Of the respondents, 1.8% had dual nationality, mainly Brazilian together with another European nationality.

The educational profile of respondents showed that most had a university degree or a postgraduate degree (75.5%). About half of the pilgrims interviewed were single (50.7%). This characteristic does not correspond to that found in other studies. For example, in the study by Fernandes et al. (2012) the number of married pilgrims was equal to that of single pilgrims, and in the study by Amaro et al. (2018) the percentage of married or cohabiting pilgrims was 57%.

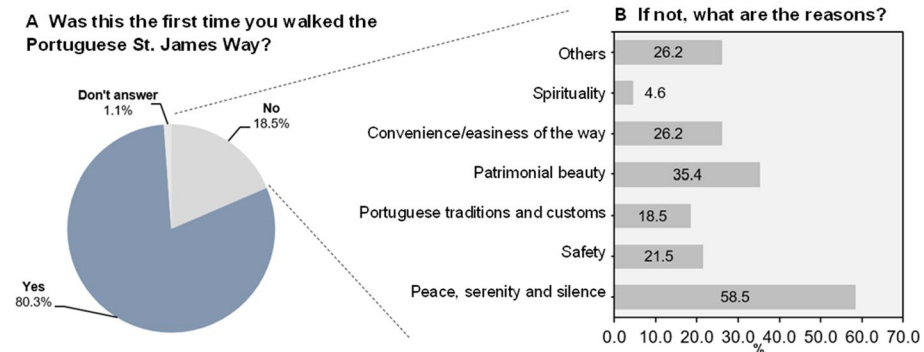
When asked if this was the first time they had walked the Way, most respondents answered yes (65.5%; see Fig. 3). The French Way was the most popular, although 40% of the 120 respondents who had previously walked the St. James Way had walked the Portuguese Coastal Way. The fact that the French Way was the most popular is consistent with other previous research and confirms the data from the Oficina del Peregrino mentioned in the previous section.

**Table 4** Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Respondents

Socioeconomic characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
<b><i>Gender</i></b>		
Male	195	55.6
Female	154	43.9
Did not answer	2	0.6
<b><i>Age</i></b>		
< 25 years	37	10.5
25–44 years	177	50.4
45–64 years	106	30.2
65 +	26	7.4
Did not answer	5	1.4
<b><i>Nationality</i></b>		
<u>One nationality</u>		
Portuguese	109	31.1
Spanish	53	15.1
German	47	13.4
Italian	32	9.1
Polish	18	5.1
Dutch	14	4.0
Brazilian	13	3.7
American	12	3.4
Czech	8	2.3
English	8	2.3
French	7	2.0
Danish	4	1.1
Peruvian	2	0.6
Swiss	2	0.6
Other nationalities	11	3.3
Dual nationality	6	1.8
Did not answer	5	1.4
<b><i>Education</i></b>		
Does not know how to read or write	2	0.6
Basic education (up to 4 years of schooling)	4	1.1
Basic education (up to 9 years of schooling)	16	4.6
Secondary education (10 to 12 years of schooling)	62	17.7
Graduation (bachelor's degree)	183	52.1
Post-graduation (master's or doctoral degree)	81	23.1
Did not answer	3	0.9
<b><i>Work</i></b>		
Student	40	11.4
Formal employee	207	59.0
Informal employee	57	16.2
Domestic worker	3	0.9
Retired	22	6.3
Unemployed	9	2.6
Other	11	3.1

**Table 4** (continued)

Socioeconomic characteristics	<i>n</i>	%
Did not answer	2	0.6
<b>Marital status</b>		
Single	178	50.7
Married or in a common-law relationship	134	38.2
Divorced	28	8.0
Widow	7	2.0
Did not answer	4	1.1

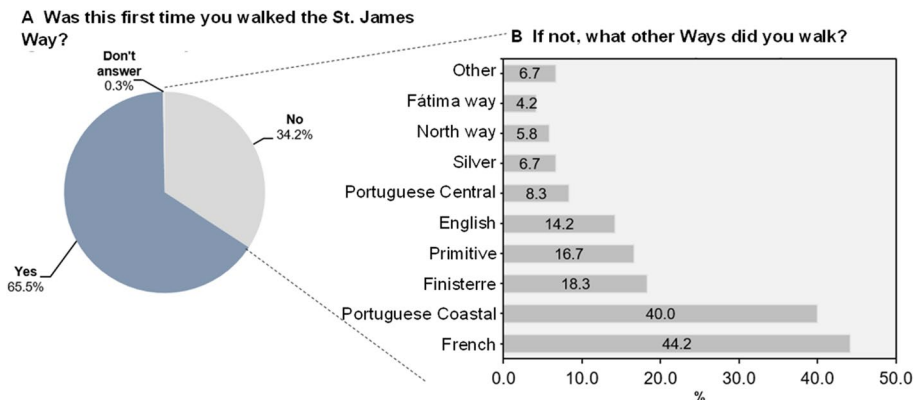
**Fig. 3** How Many Times Has the Respondent Walked or Done the St. James Way?

The promotional efforts and services created can promote other routes that may be good alternatives to the French Way. It should also be noted that those who have travelled the French Way usually choose another route later. Lois-González and Santos (2015) came to this conclusion in a study commissioned by the University of Santiago de Compostela, the Junta de Galicia and the Oficina del Peregrino, which recorded the responses of 3,000 annual pilgrims on the St. James Way between 2006 and 2010.

During the survey period, it was found that 80.3% of pilgrims were walking the St. James Way for the first time (Fig. 4). Of those who were walking it again, their reasons for doing so are worth mentioning. Among the most important attributes of the Way identified by respondents were its peace, serenity, and silence (58.5%), patrimonial beauty (35.4%), the convenience/easiness/comfort and simplicity of the Way to Santiago (26.2%), or safety (21.5%).

Perhaps the fact that people seek serenity and peace compared to their hectic daily lives justifies the fact that we found that 40.7% of pilgrims were walking the Way alone and 16.0% as a couple (Table 5).

The results demonstrated that only 17.1% of the participants undertook the Way in a group. Moreover, 68.1% of the participants organized their own pilgrimage, and 91.5% did the entire St. James Way on foot. The percentage of pilgrims in our survey who were walking the Way was similar to that calculated by the Oficina del Peregrino for 2020 and 2021, which was 91.5% and 93.8%, respectively.



**Fig. 4** Percentage of Respondents Walking the Portuguese St. James Way for the First Time and Other Routes Walked

**Table 5** Travel and Organization of the St. James Way

How to carry out the trip	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Travel mode</b>		
On foot	321	91.5
Bicycle	28	8.0
Other	1	0.3
Did not answer	1	0.3
<b>Organization of the trip</b>		
Oneself/on one's own	239	68.1
Family	28	8.0
Friends	59	16.8
Travel agency	1	0.3
Other	22	6.3
Did not answer	2	0.6
<b>Accompaniment</b>		
Alone	143	40.7
Couple	56	16.0
With a relative	30	8.5
With a friend	41	11.7
In a group	60	17.1
Other type of accompaniment	20	5.7
Did not answer	1	0.3

Thus, based on our results (Tables 4 and 5), it is possible to identify different types of pilgrims. As Haab (1996) stated, travellers who start on the St. James Way have different reasons for doing so. Some pilgrims walk the entire Camino, others join it on different sections of the route, and some end up as tourists (Fernandes et al., 2012; Lois-González, 2013; Murray & Graham, 1997; Pérez Guilarte & Lois-González, 2018).

Based on our own survey data and the analysis we carried out, two clusters were identified, as shown in Table 6. The significant differences found between the two clusters concerned the nationality of the participants ( $\chi^2=24.104$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), the average travel time required to reach the start of the Camino ( $\chi^2=7.411$ ;  $p<0.05$ ), the number of people travelling together ( $\chi^2=30.840$ ;  $p<0.001$ ), and the number who organized their own trip ( $\chi^2=39.080$ ;  $p<0.001$ ). The clusters look the same with regard to age group, education level, employment status, whether they were walking the St. James Way for the first time, and whether they were doing it exclusively on foot.

The main characteristics of the groups are as follows:

Cluster 1 (*Pilgrims from nearby destinations*): This cluster has 137 respondents. Many respondents in this group were between 25 and 44 years old (50.4%) and had a bachelor's degree (43.8%). In terms of nationality, Portuguese (40.1%) and Spanish (23.4%) were the most common. Many of the respondents in this cluster were formally employed (59.9%) and were married or in a common-law relationship (51.8%). They tended to travel alone (30.7%) and had organized their trip themselves (53.3%) or relied on friends or relatives (20.4%). In this cluster, the percentage of respondents who travelled on foot was high (87.6%), and 61.3% had never done this Way before (61.3%).

Cluster 2 (*Pilgrims from more distant countries/locations*): This cluster has 212 respondents. Many were between the ages of 25 and 44 (50.9%) and had a bachelor's degree (58.0%). In terms of nationality, Germans (17.5%) and Italians (10.4%) were the most common. Many respondents in this group were formally employed (59.0%) and were married or in a common-law relationship (41.0%). They mostly travelled alone (47.6%) and had organized their own trip (78.3%). In this cluster, the percentage of respondents who travelled on foot was high (94.8%).

As mentioned above, there were no significant differences between the two clusters concerning employment status or marital status of the pilgrims.

## Main Motivations for Walking the St. James Way

The tourist boom that the St. James Way has experienced is now quite widespread, based not only on its historical tradition and cultural image but also on its broader sociocultural significance (language, traditions, or customs) (Lois-González & Santos, 2015; Lois-González et al., 2015). Therefore, it is only natural that the motivations that prompt pilgrims to walk the St. James Way have evolved and that the choice of a particular route among those available is likely to reflect this new reality.

Based on the survey of the pilgrims, we found that their main reasons for walking the Way were primarily spiritual (personal development, self-knowledge, peace, inner happiness). The percentage of respondents who reported this in first place was 53.0% (Fig. 5A). Next, 30.8% of the respondents chose the cultural dimension of the Camino (knowledge of heritage, landscape, and places) as the second reason. Finally, environmental motivation (contact with nature and scenic beauty) was also reported as an important element (17.4%).

The motivations of pilgrims are very diverse. Some have a connection to faith associated with particular painful life events. In this regard, for example, four pilgrims told us the following:

**Table 6** Pilgrims' Segmentation Based on Sociodemographic Characteristics and Motivations

Characteristics	Cluster 1 ( <i>n</i> = 137)		Cluster 2 ( <i>n</i> = 212)		Chi-squared	<i>p</i> -value
	N	%	N	%		
<i>Gender</i>						
Male	72	52.6	123	58.0	1.008	.315
Female	65	47.4	89	42.0		
<i>Age</i>						
<25	10	7.3	27	12.7	3.549	.470
25–44	69	50.4	108	50.9		
45–64	47	34.3	59	27.8		
65+	11	8.0	15	7.1		
Did not answer	2	1.5	3	1.4		
<i>Nationality</i>						
Portuguese	55	40.1	53	25.0	24.104	.002**
French	2	1.5	5	2.4		
German	10	7.3	37	17.5		
Italian	9	6.6	22	10.4		
Dutch	3	2.2	7	3.3		
Polish	7	5.1	11	5.2		
English	2	1.5	6	2.8		
Brazilian	4	2.9	9	4.2		
Spanish	32	23.4	21	9.9		
Other	13	9.5	41	19.3		
<i>Education</i>						
Does not know how to read or write	2	1.5	0	0.0	10.674	.058
Basic education (up to 4 years of schooling)	3	2.2	1	0.5		
Basic education (up to 9 years of schooling)	8	5.8	8	3.8		
Secondary education (10 to 12 years of schooling)	28	20.4	34	16.0		
Graduation (bachelor's degree)	60	43.8	123	58.0		
Post-graduation (master's or doctoral degree)	35	25.5	46	21.7		
<i>Work</i>						
Student	10	7.3	30	14.2	7.236	.300
Formal employee	82	59.9	125	59.0		
Informal employee	27	19.7	30	14.2		
Domestic worker	0	0.0	3	1.4		
Retired	9	6.6	13	6.1		
Unemployed	4	2.9	5	2.4		
Other	5	3.6	6	2.8		
<i>Marital status</i>						
Single	71	51.8	107	50.5	7.236	.081
Married or in a common-law relationship	47	34.3	87	41.0		
Divorced	17	12.4	11	5.2		
Widowed	2	1.5	5	2.4		

**Table 6** (continued)

Characteristics	Cluster 1 (n = 137)		Cluster 2 (n = 212)		Chi-squared	p-value
	N	%	N	%		
<i>First time on the Way</i>						
Yes	84	61.3	146	68.9	2.373	.123
No	54	39.4	66	31.1		
<i>Travel mode on the Way</i>						
On foot	120	87.6	201	94.8	7.411	.025***
Bike	17	12.4	11	5.2		
Other	1	0.7	0	0.0		
<i>Number of people travelling together</i>						
Alone	42	30.7	101	47.6	30.840	.000*
Couple	17	12.4	39	18.4		
With a relative	13	9.5	17	8.0		
With a friend	14	10.2	27	12.7		
In a group	40	29.2	20	9.4		
Other type of accompaniment	12	8.8	8	3.8		
<i>Organization mode</i>						
Oneself/one one's own	73	53.3	166	78.3	39.080	.000*
Family	16	11.7	12	5.7		
Friends	28	20.4	31	14.6		
Travel agency	1	0.7	0	0.0		
Other	20	14.6	2	0.9		
<i>Initial motivation</i>						
Maintained	81	59.1	206	97.2	3.551	.060
Has changed	6	4.4	5	2.4		
<i>Recommendation in the future</i>						
Yes	130	94.9	208	98.1	1.972	.160
No	4	2.9	2	0.9		

\*  $p < .001$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\*  $p < .05$ 

My wife died last year from COVID-19 and I promised God I would change my life. (I.1)

This year, I decided to walk the Camino de Santiago. I made this promise because my sister got very sick. It was very hard, but I also learned a lot. (I.2)

My mother died four months ago, and I promised her I would do the Camino instead of her. She tried to do it before dying, but she didn't manage to do so. (I.3)

My main motivation was to lose weight, but I didn't accomplish it. In some places, the food was too good. (I.4)

It should be noted that 81.8% of the respondents maintained their motivation after completing it, which indicates a good relationship between expectations and experiences along the way (Fig. 5B). This is very important in determining the level of satisfaction of those who walk the Way.

Level of satisfaction with the St. James Way and recommendation to others.

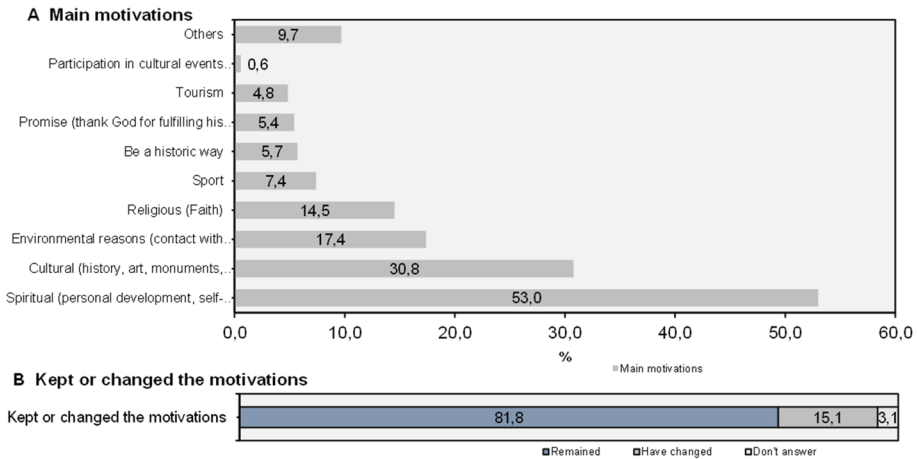


Fig. 5 Main Motivations for Walking the St. James Way

Assessing the level of satisfaction that a particular individual (tourist, religious pilgrim, or other) has achieved with an experience or a product is very useful in improving less successful practices. Regarding the St. James Way, 57.3% of respondents indicated that they were very satisfied and 36.2% were satisfied with the experience they had had.

To test whether there were differences in pilgrims’ satisfaction with the St. James Way related to their sociodemographic characteristics, statistical tests were performed using the average of Likert scale responses, standard deviation, and the Kruskal–Wallis test (Table 7). No significant differences were found in most groups. Nevertheless, some differences were found related to gender ( $H = 5.396$ ;  $p$ -value = 0.022) and who organized the trip ( $H = 4.203$ ;  $p$ -value = 0.002). Women were more satisfied with what the trip offered them (3.61), although only slightly.

From what respondents told us, the level of satisfaction with the Way can be expressed in the following narratives:

It was a very good Way. Yesterday, when we arrived in Barcelos [a Portuguese municipality on the St. James Way], we were very tired. So, we went to dinner and had a few glasses of wine to fortify ourselves for the next day. We drank so much that we did not know the way home anymore and our cell phones had no battery charge. (I.3)

I liked doing the Camino a lot, but the first part, beginning at Porto, was quite disappointing. The landscape was not interesting. Too much noise and urbanisation. It improved a lot nearby Barcelos. (I.5)

A very positive experience, but I had problems with accommodations. (I.6)

The fact that most respondents were very satisfied with the Way is related to several aspects highlighted in the survey, namely the landscape (43.3%), the contact with other pilgrims (25.1%), and the experience as a whole (22.5%) (Fig. 6A).

Some negative aspects were also identified that should be carefully considered by local authorities and other stakeholders to overcome them for the sake of the pilgrimage experience and to attract new pilgrims to the Way. Among the most important issues is

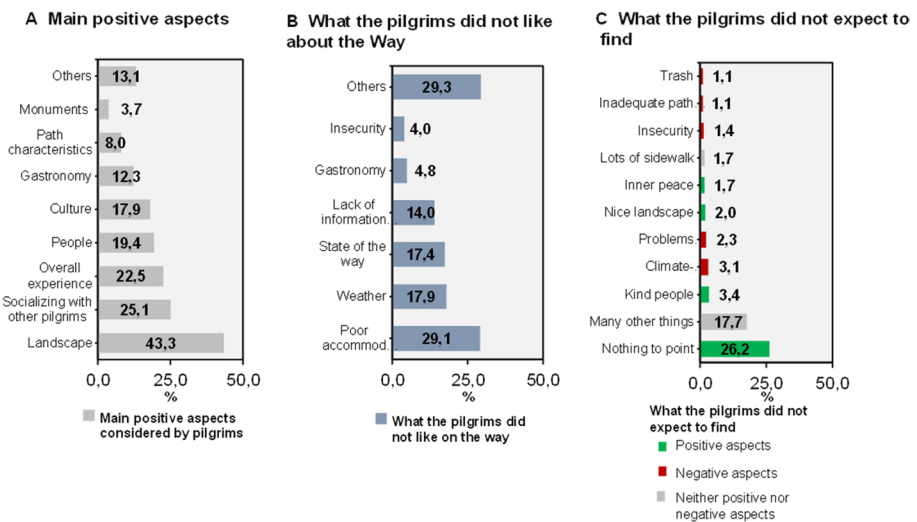
**Table 7** Differences in the Level of Satisfaction With the St. James Way Based on the Individual Characteristics of the Pilgrims

Individual characteristics	Satisfied and very satisfied (3 + 4 Likert scale)	Mean	SD	Kruskal–Wallis H <sup>1</sup>	p-value
<b>Gender</b>					
Male	92.8	3.46	0.636	5.396	.022*
Female	94.8	3.61	0.553		
<b>Age</b>					
<25	94.6	3.43	0.603	2.030	.566
25–44 years	92.7	3.52	0.641		
45–64 years	95.2	3.55	0.573		
65 or more	96.2	3.64	0.490		
<b>Education</b>					
Does not know how to read or write	100.0	3.50	0.707	3.054	.383
Basic education (up to 4 years of schooling)	75.0	3.00	0.816		
Basic education (up to 9 years of schooling)	93.8	3.25	0.577		
Secondary education (10 to 12 years of schooling)	93.5	3.62	0.555		
Graduation (bachelor's degree)	92.9	3.52	0.611		
Post-graduation (master's or doctoral degree)	96.3	3.54	0.613		
<b>Work</b>					
Student	87.5	3.33	0.694	2.505	.474
Formal employee	96.1	3.57	0.544		
Informal employee	89.3	3.52	0.738		
Domestic worker	100.0	4.00	0		
Retired	100.0	3.55	0.510		
Unemployed	88	3.56	0.726		
Other	90.9	3.27	0.647		
<b>Marital status</b>					
Single	94.4	3.52	0.595	1.223	.747
Married or in a common-law relationship	95.5	3.53	0.598		
Divorced	85.7	3.56	0.698		
Widowed	85.7	3.43	0.787		
<b>Accompaniment</b>					
Alone	98.6	3.61	0.714	7.168	.067
Couple	91.1	3.50	0.479		
With a relative	100.0	3.33	0.640		
With a friend	92.5	3.48	0.701		
In a group	88.3	3.48	0.607		
Another type of accompaniment	95.0	3.50	0.605		
<b>Organization mode</b>					
Oneself/on one's own	97.0	3.59	0.549	4.203	.002*
Family	89.3	3.21	0.738		
Friends	87.9	3.38	0.697		
Travel agency	100.0	3.00	-		
Other	100.0	3.68	0.477		

**Table 7** (continued)

Individual characteristics	Satisfied and very satisfied (3 + 4 Likert scale)	Mean	SD	Kruskal–Wallis H <sup>1</sup>	p-value
<b>Travel mode on the Way</b>					
On foot	94.6	3.51	0.609	1.611	.657
Bicycle	96.4	3.64	0.559		
Other	100.0	4.00	-		

\*  $p < .05$



**Fig. 6** Main Positive and Negative Aspects of Respondents’ Experiences on the St. James Way

the poor supply of accommodations (29.1%), the condition of some roads or pathways (17.9%), and the lack of information and signage on some paths of the Way (14.0%) (Fig. 6B).

Even though the number of catering and accommodation establishments has increased significantly since 2012, it is necessary to consider the lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, as this prevented some services from opening in 2022. In a study conducted by Remoaldo et al. (2024), a questionnaire survey was administered to 112 business operators along the Way from August 5, 2020, to August 25, 2021. The results indicated a lack of accommodations, with 22.9% of the surveyed businesses reporting this issue. Furthermore, 24.8% of the respondents noted a shortage of transportation options between the various sections of the Way.

As a pilgrim from Warsaw (Poland) told us,

“The Portuguese hostels were closed and it was very difficult to find cheap accommodations with a kitchen” (I.4).

Another aspect that was considered negative during the survey period was the weather (endorsed by 17.9% of the respondents). It rained frequently. This made it necessary to evaluate the questions raised about other weather periods to verify the influence of this dimension on the pilgrims' level of satisfaction.

Respondents were also asked about what they did not expect to find along the Way. Here, the landscape, the inner peace they experienced, and the kind people that characterized the region where the Portuguese St. James Way is located were particularly highlighted (Fig. 6C), especially the welcoming behaviour of the residents.

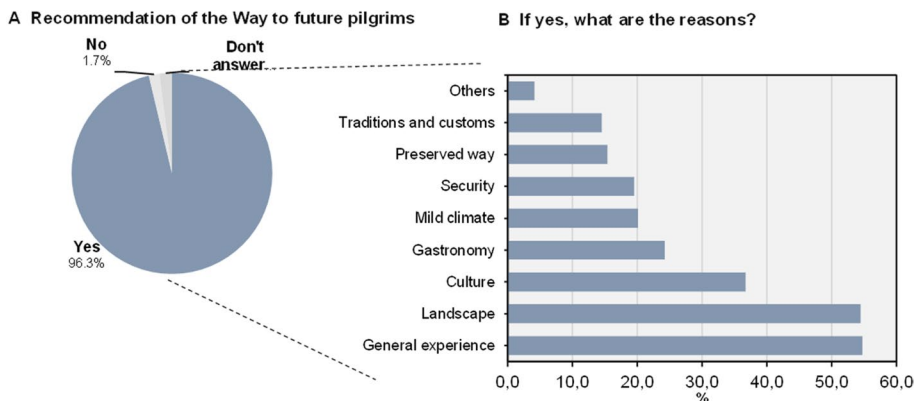
Most respondents stated that they would recommend the Camino de Santiago to others (96.3%) (Fig. 7A). The main reasons cited for recommending it were the general experience (54.7%), the attractiveness of the landscape (54.4%), the local culture (36.7%), and the local gastronomy (24.3%) (Fig. 7B). These territorial attributes could be considered strategic by public authorities and business operators for the promotion of the Camino de Santiago to maintain its status as one of the main pilgrimage routes in Europe and the world.

## Discussion and Conclusions

Based on quantitative and qualitative data analyses, this study aimed to contribute to the literature on the profile of pilgrims and their motivations for walking the Central Route of the Portuguese St. James Way and help identify potential policy recommendations.

Based on our survey data, we found that pilgrims were motivated primarily by spiritual and cultural reasons and that most were between 25 and 44 years old, had a bachelor's degree, were doing the Camino for the first time, and travelled it on foot. In examining potential differences between the respondents, we found two groups: pilgrims from nearby destinations and pilgrims from more distant countries/locations. The first group, as the name suggests, consisted mainly of a group of pilgrims of Portuguese and Spanish origin, and the other group was from more remote places.

In many cases, being a pilgrim on the Camino means travelling alone to come into contact with different types of landscapes and the cultural attributes of the places visited and local communities, and it requires great physical effort and commitment from



**Fig. 7** Responses to Question About Whether Respondents Would Recommend the St. James Way to Others

travellers. In the studies carried out since 2015, it has been shown that motivations such as spirituality or the search for different sensory impressions are more important than exclusively religious ones.

In our research, we also tried to verify whether there are differences in satisfaction with these pilgrimages based on the profile of the pilgrim, that is, their gender, age, or level of education.

By addressing the Central Route of the Portuguese St. James Way, and, in particular, pilgrims' perceptions of the route and their level of satisfaction with it, we provide policymakers with information that is useful for mitigating some existing constraints regarding the infrastructure and services provided, which have an impact on travellers' satisfaction and on strategies to promote the route.

For policymakers, we recommend prioritizing broader systemic issues, such as improving infrastructure development, ensuring environmental sustainability, and regulating pilgrimage activities to preserve the natural and cultural heritage of the route. Addressing issues like the supply of accommodations, the condition of the roads and paths, and the lack of information about the route and poor signage should be central to the interventions. The model implemented in Galicia could serve as a good exemplar for signage improvements, offering more homogeneity along the route and using durable materials such as large granite stones placed regularly along the path that indicate the distance to Santiago de Compostela.

For tourism planners and local communities, recommendations should focus on practical, localized interventions. Enhancing service quality by expanding accommodation options, improving cleanliness, and ensuring the availability of goods and services tailored to pilgrims' needs could directly impact satisfaction levels. Pilgrims frequently criticized the lack of cultural experiences and meaningful activities at overnight locations. To address this, tourism planners could implement creative initiatives, such as engaging pilgrims in traditional activities—e.g., making clay pots in the Minho region or participating in local gastronomy workshops with community members.

Additionally, we acknowledge that some issues raised in the surveys about accommodations and services were conducted during COVID-19, when many public and private accommodations were closed. This context should be considered when interpreting the findings, but it does not diminish the importance of long-term solutions designed to ensure the resilience and attractiveness of the Portuguese St. James Way.

In terms of future research, it would be valuable to explore the cultural and religious expressions (e.g., cairns, writings on stones, and symbols left along the route) that occur along many of the paths of the St. James Way. Understanding how these expressions contribute to the overall experience could further inform targeted interventions. Additionally, analysing the potential of creative and cultural activities in underutilized lodging areas could shed light on how to better utilize pilgrims' downtime, fostering deeper engagement with the destination and its traditions. It is also important to survey local communities as this would help all stakeholders maximize the positive effects of pilgrimage tourism on host communities. Reinforcing positive attitudes towards tourists, common visitors, and pilgrims, and the quality of services provided, would increase the overall hospitality of the destination in the medium and long term, thus ensuring more satisfied visitors.

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## Declarations

**Competing Interests** The authors declare no competing interests.

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