HAPE KERKELING is the kind of comedian who is not above putting on funny wigs and false teeth to get a laugh. His best-known character, Horst Schlämmer, is a tiresome, boozed addled reporter for a small-town German paper who snorts when he laughs, revealing a mouthful of nasty dental work, and paws any young woman within reach. It is a coarse act, and Germans can’t get enough of it.

Mr. Kerkeling has become one of this country’s most popular entertainers, with his own television variety show, film career and sold-out concert tours. Perhaps inevitably, he has also cranked out a book, which, given his celebrity, might have been expected to sell decently.

As it turns out, the book, “I’m Off for a Bit, Then,” has become one of the best-selling nonfiction works in Germany since World War II, selling 14 times as many copies as Günter Grass’s much-discussed memoir, “Peeling the Onion.” Since it was published in May 2006, Mr. Kerkeling’s book has topped the best-seller list in the magazine Der Spiegel every week except for when it was briefly displaced by the memoir of the former chancellor Gerhard Schröder and a meditation on Jesus by Pope Benedict XVI.
With sales of nearly 2.9 million copies, the book is a publishing phenomenon, all the more improbable because it is about a pilgrimage Mr. Kerkeling made to the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in Spain, following the medieval pilgrims’ path known as the Way of St. James.

“I just got up off my couch one day, after finishing a Diet Pepsi and a bag of chips, and started walking,” said Mr. Kerkeling, who professes to be as mystified as anyone by his success.

In this land of empty churches and creeping secularism, Mr. Kerkeling has clearly tapped into something. His whimsical, moving and ultimately spiritual account has caught the imagination of Germans. (It will be published in the United States by Free Press in 2009.) People here are setting off on the pilgrimage in large numbers.

Last fall, a German television network broadcast a weekly series, with celebrities retracing Mr. Kerkeling’s six-week journey. Religious and political leaders have debated why the book is so popular.

They offer mostly familiar theories: the spiritual anomie of post-reunification Germany, which creates a hunger for some sort of fulfillment; the failure of traditional religion to inspire; even a reaction to the rise of Islam in Europe, where Muslims are building mosques next to cathedrals. And, it must be said, the pope’s book, “Jesus of Nazareth,” has also done well in his native land, with about 450,000 copies sold.

“With the breakdown of old ideologies, there is a new search for the meaning of life,” said Peter Schneider, a noted German author.

Or could it be simply that Mr. Kerkeling, shorn of his comic alter egos, is an agreeable travel companion?

“I think the book works on three levels,” he said. “You can read it simply as a funny book; you can read it as an adventure story; or you can read it as a spiritual journey.”

A CUDDLY fellow with an ever-present cigarette and a passing resemblance to Jerry Lewis, Mr. Kerkeling, 43, said he did not view his pilgrimage as a quest that would hold lessons for others. Though raised as a Catholic, he stopped going to church years ago. He describes his faith as a fusion of Buddhism and Christianity.

Born in 1964 in Recklinghausen, a town in the Ruhr Valley, to a family with Dutch roots, Hape Kerkeling — his first name is a combination of his given name, Hans Peter — came up in show business through radio and television comedy shows. In 1991, he dressed up as Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands and almost talked his way into a state dinner with the German president.

By 2001, Mr. Kerkeling was one of the most recognizable faces in Germany, but he said he felt physically and spiritually spent. After having his gall bladder removed, Mr. Kerkeling
said he needed a “timeout.” He chose the pilgrimage, known by its Spanish name, el Camino de Santiago, after coming across a book about it.

“The first book that more or less landed at my feet was called ‘The Joyful Path of St. James,’ ” Mr. Kerkeling wrote in his first chapter. He found the whole idea preposterous. “Chocolate brings joy, to some extent,” he wrote, “and whiskey, in extreme situations.” He bought the book anyway, and read it in one sitting.

A self-described couch potato, Mr. Kerkeling was unprepared for the rigors of a 400-mile trek. The trail begins in St.-Jean-Pied-de-Port, in southern France, traverses the Pyrenees and then winds across northern Spain, past Pamplona and the vineyards of La Rioja. It ends in the ancient city of Santiago de Compostela, where, legend holds, the Apostle James is buried.

“I figured I’d fail completely on the first day,” Mr. Kerkeling said. He was nearly right. Hobbling up the mountains in a driving rain, he was soon exhausted, his knees swollen. But he soldiered on, and came to realize he was tougher than he thought. “I’m not really an esoteric person,” he said, “but I did begin to feel a calling of some kind.”

Most of the book is a travelogue, written with a gentle, wry humor that recalls Bill Bryson. Determined to avoid devout pilgrims — because, he writes, they will be no different at the end of the journey than they were at the start — Mr. Kerkeling instead encounters an array of tourists, oddballs and adventurers, to whom he speaks in any of his six languages.

There is Anne, a woman from Liverpool who wears “Harry Potter eyeglasses,” and Claudia, a pretty young Brazilian woman who wants to be more than friends. After Mr. Kerkeling tells her that they will not be involved romantically (he is gay), she leaves him on the road. “We had, in a single day, all the experiences a couple would have in 30 years,” he said.

THERE are also some vivid images, like a hat seller who collected and hung hundreds of discarded hats and caps belonging to pilgrims from the ceiling of his shop. Or a waiter who showed up at Mr. Kerkeling’s breakfast table, wearing a T-shirt inscribed “Keep on Running,” at a moment when he was on the verge of giving up.

During his journey, Mr. Kerkeling kept a diary, largely, he said, to pass the lonely evenings. Back home, he put the notes in a filing cabinet, with no plans of turning them into a book. After he discussed the pilgrimage on a television talk show, a publisher called him with a proposal.

Writers as diverse as Paulo Coelho of Brazil and Shirley MacLaine have mined the Way of St. James for successful books. And for Mr. Kerkeling, the book seems only to have added luster to his star. But he said the experience had also raised his expectations of himself. “The Camino really begins after you’ve finished it,” he said. “Life becomes more challenging.”

Mr. Kerkeling is taking time off, again, to work on two books: one fiction and the other nonfiction. Still convinced that “the official churches don’t have the answers,” he recommends the Way of St. James to anyone who asks — with one proviso: skip the mountainous hike on the first day.