DRY STONE ITINERARY IN THE MADRIU–PERAFITA–CLAROR VALLEY

Technical information:

Duration: 5 h 30 min (not including stopping times and visits to the sites)

6 h if continuing as far as the Claror hut

Difficulty: medium–high

Elevation gain: 1,010 m.

Introduction

Dry stone construction consists of a building technique in which only dry stones are used, that is, without any binding material or mortar, so that the structures are held together solely by the way the stones fit together, at most using small stones as wedges to help secure them. It is a very ancient technique and one that is widespread throughout the Pyrenees, Catalonia and, more generally, across the whole Mediterranean. For this reason, in 2018 it was declared Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

The aim of this itinerary is to visit, on site, a selection of the dry stone heritage that can be found in the valley. Along the route, we will be able to see examples of the different types that make up the repertoire of constructions of this kind.

In 2004, the Madriu–Perafita–Claror Valley was inscribed by UNESCO on the World Heritage List as a cultural landscape. What gives the valley this value lies in the fact that it is a natural area in which humans have intervened over time in order to make use of its resources through practices typical of the traditional economy. Dry stone constructions constitute the main material evidence of this intervention in the valley, as they are structures generated by the principal human activities carried out at different elevations: agriculture on the valley floor, with terraces and boundary walls; forestry, which has left us charcoal platforms and log slides; livestock farming, with huts, enclosures and sheepfolds; and communication routes, in the form of paths.

Furthermore, the itinerary will lead us to discover one of the lesser-known corners of this natural landscape, the lower part of the Claror Valley, reaching it via the Madriu and Perafita valleys. In doing so, it goes beyond a simple walk or the practice of a mountain sport, allowing us to understand the imprint that humans have left here throughout history: a heritage that speaks to us of other times, of ways of life that belong to the past but form part of our identity, and which lies at the intersection of ethnology and archaeology.

1. The Mountain Path

0’ – Pont de la Plana

We set out from Pont de la Plana, where we take the Mountain Path. On our left is the Sabater hut, now in ruins. The path, paved from the very beginning, rises gently, running parallel to the left bank of the Madriu River, passing the base of several scree slopes.

10’ – Pont de Sassanat

We arrive at Pont de Sassanat, which allows us to cross to the opposite bank of the river. This semicircular arch bridge was built in the 1930s; previously, there had been a wooden footbridge. From the bridge, if we look at the slope directly opposite, we can see a couple of large terraces built on the scree itself, constructed with massive blocks.

After crossing the bridge, we reach Ton del Quim hut, accompanied by a small dry stone enclosure. Just before the hut, the path splits into two: one route goes in front of the hut, the other passes behind it, cutting straight across the scree. Either can be taken, as they reunite a few metres further on.

The Mountain Path begins in Escaldes and reaches Estany de l’Illa. It is the backbone of human activity in the Madriu Valley. It is named for its historical function: it allowed the inhabitants of the former parish of Andorra (in 1978, this parish was divided into the current parishes of Andorra la Vella and Escaldes-Engordany) to access the mountains, i.e., the Madriu Valley. It was the route for sheep flocks to reach the summer pastures (cortons), and for driving mules and cows to graze near the huts, as well as domestic pigs, which were also taken to the mountains in summer. The path connected the village with the huts, and through it, the hay harvested from the meadows was brought down. When the Andorra or Madriu forge was operating, mules loaded with iron ingots travelled this route. It was also used by smugglers to transport bundles of contraband to the Spanish border or beyond.

The path is paved—or “engraved,” as it was called in the past—from Pont de la Plana to a little above Entremesaigües (a stretch of nearly 2,000 metres). Beyond Ramio, paving exists only in certain sections. The main reason for paving was to make the path impermeable, as otherwise rainwater would turn it into a muddy, impassable track and eventually damage it. It is difficult to determine exactly when the paving began, but it is known that the path was subject to constant maintenance and repair. In the past, the Comú (local council) required landowners to maintain the sections bordering their land; by the 20th century, the

parish hired a couple of men to repair damaged stretches, and maintenance continues to this day. This is a notable example of dry stone work and one of the heritage values for which the Madriu–Perafita–Claror Valley was declared a UNESCO World Heritage site.

The path continues to rise, now with a slightly steeper incline, following a zigzag pattern to ease the ascent. You will notice that the path splits into two routes: one winds in curves, while the other runs straight.

The Mountain Path with the log slide alongside.

The reason for the double sections is that the route incorporates two elements: one is the path itself, which ascends in switchbacks, and the other is what is called a log slide—a ramp used to bring down logs cut in the valley's forests, which, due to their length, could not follow the winding turns of the path. Timber extraction had two main purposes: on the one hand, all the houses in the parish had the right to gather wood and firewood from the communal forests, with the timber used for constructing and repairing buildings, manor houses, huts, and sheds. Later, in the 20th century, industrial sawmills such as Serradora Rossell were established in the country, purchasing forest plots from the Comú for commercial exploitation. The transport of the logs was carried out with animals, mainly mules; paving the log slide facilitated their sliding down.

On our right, between the path and the river, there is a series of hay meadows, separated from the path by dry stone boundary walls. On the left, there are several terraces, which step up the slope until we reach the Entremesaigües huts.

Terraces and meadows to the left of the path.

The terraces, also known locally as marges, are levelled platforms designed to adapt sloping terrain for cultivation. To create them on a slope, a retaining wall of dry stone was built, filled at the back with unworked stones, except for the top 50–70 centimetres, which were filled with soil. They usually follow a straight line, but can sometimes be concave, and are connected by ramps.

Dry stone boundary walls were used to delimit parcels or properties and, above all, to prevent the entry of livestock. Built in dry stone, they are wide and double-sided; in some places, the final course consisted of vertically or slightly inclined stones. In the Madriu Valley, however, this was not the case, as the local granite stones are typically rounded in shape.

Both the terraces and the hay meadows, with their boundary walls, have historical roots: from the mid-18th century, livestock farming in the Andorran valleys increased, particularly the breeding of mules, which gradually replaced sheep. This was encouraged by customs conditions, privileges, and exemptions that favoured trade with Catalonia. Mules do not practice transhumance but remain in the valleys over winter, which required farmers to maintain reserves of fodder,

necessitating the creation of new fields. At the same time, population growth in the Andorra parish created a need for new agricultural land for newly established houses, hence the construction of terraces. These terraces were the main driver of agricultural colonisation in the Madriu Valley, which began in the 18th century and intensified in the 19th century. It is difficult to imagine the effort required to build all these dry stone walls. It is no wonder that the Catalan geographer Salvador Llobet remarked in the mid-20th century that Andorra had a "hunger for land."

Alongside the path, vegetation is fairly sparse, though gradually trees and shrubs are reclaiming abandoned meadow plots. You may encounter Scots pine (*Pinus sylvestris*), silver birch (*Betula pendula*), hazel trees, and boxwood. The birch bark was traditionally used to make St John's torches, and shepherds made bassulls, a kind of cup formed by bending the bark. Hazel branches were used for axe handles and other tools, and boxwood was prized for its hardness. The river's proximity promotes the growth of ferns, lichens, and mosses. Depending on the season, horses and cows may still be seen grazing in the meadows.

30' (40') – Entremesaigües Huts

Entremesaigües is a *cortó*, a cluster of huts used to bring livestock for grazing and to store hay harvested from the meadows, which was later transported to the villages of Escaldes or Engordany to feed animals during winter. Here are the huts of Quimet**,** Peret de la Molinera, and Cal Sucarana, each with its accompanying cabin, where farmers stayed during the working season.

The huts and cabins are not built in dry stone, as their walls are bound with mud mortar; however, the surrounding pens and certain elements, such as stairways leading to the upper floors, are constructed in dry stone.

The Perafita Valley

To continue, we leave the Mountain Path and turn right, crossing the Madriu River to take the path leading to Perafita. Beyond the bridge, the path runs between scree slopes on the right and the Entremesaigües meadows on the left, also protected here by a boundary wall. We are walking along the right side of the alluvial cone formed where the Perafita Valley flows into the Madriu Valley, hence the toponym Entremesaigües.

The scree slopes to our left are made up of granite, the predominant rock in the valley, shaped over time by frost action **(**frost weathering). Among the stones, you may spot a lizard (locally called *serenalla*) or a vipera, so take care with its

bite. Paying attention along the route, one can also find traces of local wildlife: foxes, which mark their territory on the stones; wild boar, which root for roots; and Pyrenean chamois, which you may be lucky enough to see. Rivers and lakes in the valley are rich in trout**,** valued by anglers.

13’ (53’) – Peixadera Spring

A few metres further, we pass Peixadera Spring, named for water emerging through a fissure in a rock. To our right is the junction with the Font Boïgot path (recommended for the descent, as it is easier downhill).

We reach the point where cultivation ends; here, the path has a section with a bank entirely constructed of dry-laid stones. The slope becomes steeper, and the valley narrows. Scots pine forest sections alternate with stretches where the path steps over scree rocks. We pass over the **“**dancing stones**”**, flat granite blocks that locals once claimed could be danced upon.

Alongside the path, we can see small terraces resembling the larger feixes, marking the sites of ancient charcoal pits. The remains of charcoal scattered on the ground also indicate their presence.

Path crossing over a charcoal platform, with remnants of charcoal on the ground.

Charcoal platforms are very common in the valley. They were areas where charcoal pits were constructed to produce charcoal. In this process, pine logs were stacked, leaving a central chimney; the pile was then covered with soil and turf and left to burn for several days. This slow combustion ensured that the wood did not turn entirely to ash but instead transformed into charcoal. The charcoal produced was used to fuel the forge in the valley—the Madriu or Andorra forge—which was built in 1732 and operated for a century, producing iron ingots for export. The forge required large quantities of charcoal to heat the ore. Constructing a charcoal pit required a flat space, which is why these platforms were built in a terrace-like form, with a dry stone retaining wall.

25’ (2 h 15’) – Pleta dels Graus

Suddenly, the path opens onto a large clearing known as the Pleta dels Graus. From the original livestock enclosure in the clearing, only a few stones of the first course remain (imagination is needed here; later we will see better-preserved examples). The name “grau” refers to a narrow passage.

Upon entering, on the left we can see a shepherd’s hut situated beneath the overhang of a large stone, which serves as its roof, while the front is enclosed with a dry stone wall. Approaching the hut gives a clear sense of the harsh living conditions endured by the men who worked in the valley.

Shepherd's hut in the Pleta dels Graus, built using the overhang of a large stone as a roof.

We are now in the cortó dels Sull i Brulls. Cortons were plots of land that the Comú of the former parish of Andorra rented to private individuals so that sheep flocks could graze there during the summer. All cortons contain dry stone structures necessary for livestock farming, such as huts, orris, or enclosures ***(****pletes****).*** *Of those that existed in the Madriu Valley, this one was considered the least valuable, as it has little grazing land, located on the opposite side of the river in the alluvial cone descending from the Astrells channel, to our right.*

Exiting the clearing, we enter a black pine forest, and the path crosses the right-hand slope of the valley diagonally, with a fairly steep incline, negotiating some switchbacks. Below us lies the confluence of the Perafita and Claror rivers.

As we gain elevation and move away from the riverbank, the vegetation changes: black pine dominates, the undergrowth is less dense, and the main shrub is dwarf juniper (neret).

35’ (2 h 50’) – Claror Path

Before reaching the Perafita plateau, upon exiting the forest, we find the signpost indicating the detour to Claror, which we must take to cross the small ridge separating the Perafita and Claror valleys, below the hill occupied by Estany de la Nou. On this path, the red-and-white GR markings have been replaced by yellow circles (if difficult to see, the route is also marked with cairns).

The headwaters of the Perafita and Claror valleys are hanging valleys, originally excavated by glaciers during the Quaternary period, between 50,000 and 12,000 BCE, forming a U-shaped profile. When the glaciers retreated, meltwater rivers continued to erode the lower sections, creating a V-shaped profile and a steep drop between the glacial and fluvial parts of the valley.

The Claror Valley

15’ (2 h 55’) – Claror River

In 15 minutes, we reach the Claror River. On the opposite bank, we can see the Claror hut. If we feel up to it, we can visit it; this requires a half-hour round trip. Simply cross the river via the footbridge and walk straight to the hut.

The hut is part of a series built in the mid-20th century, known as cowherd huts, constructed when sheep farming had almost disappeared and dairy cows were introduced to the country. They were built to house the herder (or cowherd) and incorporated modern materials such as cement. These huts replaced earlier dry stone structures. The Claror hut is accompanied by an enclosure (pleta) and the remains of an older hut, both constructed in dry stone. After visiting, we return to the footbridge.

The Claror hut and pleta as seen from the opposite side of the river.

To continue the itinerary, from the right bank of the river, we must climb the slope to the left of the path to reach a plateau with a gentle incline, situated between the hillside and the river. On the right, we can see the remains of a dry stone hut resting against a natural rock block, as well as the remnants of a couple of orris**.**

The hut measures approximately six to seven metres per side and is formed by three walls built in dry stone, while the eastern side is closed off by a rock block. The western wall features a central doorway. As with most huts, the roof has disappeared; it was likely constructed from logs covered with soil, turf, or grass.

*This hut, along with others we will see further on, served as accommodation for shepherds tending their flocks during the summer months on the high pastures. Its construction relied on dry-laid stones**,** fitted together, with double-sided walls, often built by the shepherds themselves. Occasionally, soil was placed between the stones—not to hold them in place, but to fill gaps and block drafts. Inside, there was usually a small hearth, a stone bench, and one or two niches for utensils or a pine-wick lamp.*

There is no marked path to continue, but it is easy to follow: look for a passage to the left of the hut, between a small grove and the scree. There, you will find a

couple of huts nestled among the rocks, and a few metres further, to the right and below, in a hollow, stands a fourth, isolated hut.

We are in an alpine meadow area, dominated by clearings interspersed with small groves of black pine. The main vegetation consists of grasses (*Festuca supina*) and dwarf juniper and heather. In summer, you may hear the whistles of marmots, and it is not difficult to spot them standing at the entrances of their burrows. We are walking over a scree of whitish rock, a glacial moraine in the shape of a tongue left by one of the last glaciers in the area. Its white colour comes from quartz mineral, probably shattered by the glacial ice.

10’ (3 h 5’) – The Pine Orri

A little further on, following the hillside, we reach an orri, easily identified by a pine growing in its centre. It has an almost straight layout, with only a slight bend at the southern end. It consists of two parallel dry stone walls forming a central corridor, with a compartment at one end, and an attached hut. The structure is approximately 50 metres in length.

This orri, with a pine in the centre, is the first one we encounter.

Orris were structures designed to facilitate and organise the milking of sheep. In the early summer livestock cycle, flocks were taken to the mountains to graze, which coincided with lambing and milking. Sheep needed to be milked twice a

day, and orris were used for this task. An orri is a dry stone structure, consisting of an enclosure formed by two parallel stone walls, called a mànega, approximately 1.2 metres high, following a curve or zigzag of 40–60 metres in length. One end is open for the entry of the flock, while the other is closed and includes a separate compartment with a transverse wall, where one or two shepherds could milk the sheep without having to withstand the push of the rest of the animals. Nearby, there is usually a pleta and one or two huts; the entire complex is also referred to as an orri.

15’ (3 h 20’) – The Orris of Planell Gran

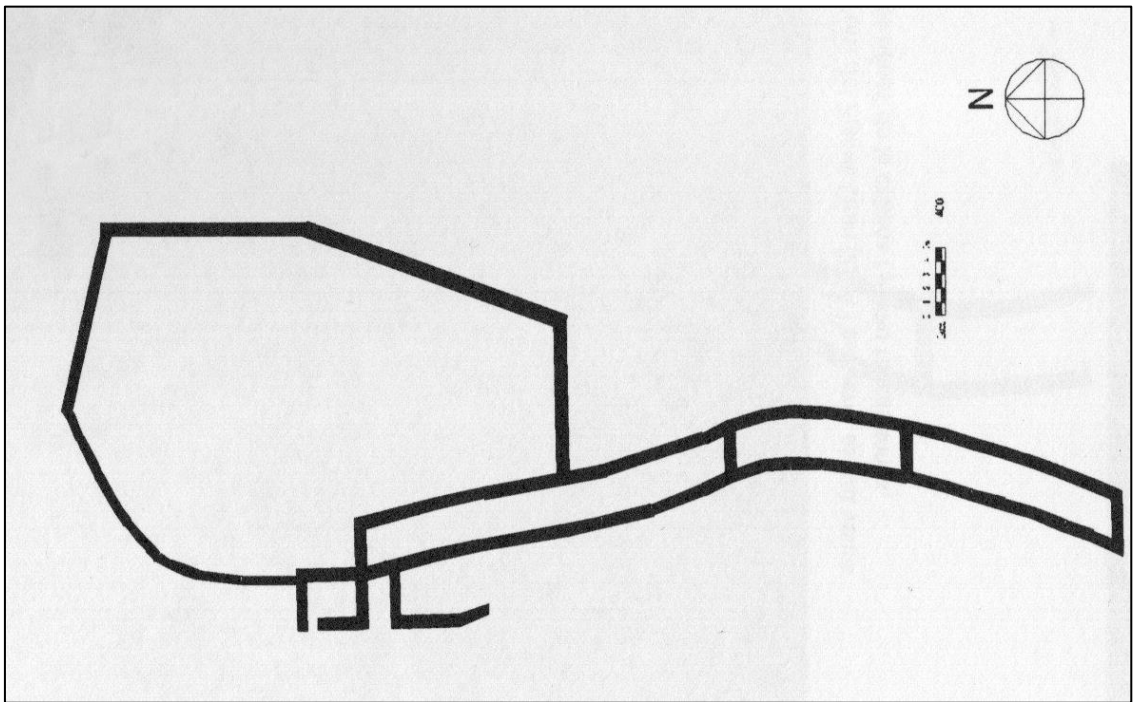
From the orri, a small path branches to the left, leading into a small valley occupied by a scree slope, where the path ascends via switchbacks with dry stone embankments made from the same stones as the scree. We follow this valley to reach a meadow between the forest and the river, Planell Gran, which contains two complexes, each formed by an orri, a pleta, and a hut, along with the remains of other huts.

The first complex is located closer to the riverbank and has a tree in its centre. At the base of the tree stands the hut, and to its right begins the orri, which has an S-shaped layout. Above it lies a pleta divided into three enclosures.

The lower orri of Planell Gran, seen from the opposite side of the river.

The plateau is crossed by the path leading from Claror Refuge to Estany de la Nou. We need to follow this path, and above it lies the second complex, at the

base of the scree, where the main structure is an orri, or mànega, approximately 60 metres long, accompanied by a hut and a pleta.



Layout of the upper orri of Planell Gran.

The pleta is an enclosed space where the sheep were locked each night, surrounded by dry stone walls. This allowed the flock to be controlled, prevented losses, and also provided protection against predators, especially wolves and bears—species that are now extinct in Andorra. Additionally, during the lambing period, ewes that were nursing were separated from those that had not yet lambed, called basives, each kept in different pletes to avoid mixing.

All these complexes are located in the lower part of the Claror pastures, a zone known in the Middle Ages as Forganyà. It was a communal grazing area used jointly by the parishes of Sant Julià de Lòria and Andorra; flocks from either parish could graze here, which occasionally led to disputes. To resolve a disagreement over the use of this area, in 1288 the Count of Foix, Roger Bernat III, issued a decree confirming shared usage. This document also indicates that these pastures were already in use in the 13th century. By the mid-17th century, it was customary that the first shepherd to place a sprig of boxwood in the Claror orri had the right to use it; in 1607, a legal dispute arose because shepherds from both parishes claimed to have been the first to do so.

After visiting the two complexes, we follow the path northward, towards Estany de la Nou (15'). We skirt the lake on the west side and reach Perafita Refuge. (If the itinerary is split over two days, an overnight stay can be arranged here.)

For the return, we head to the path descending to Entremesaigües, passing in front of the 20th-century Perafita cowherd hut**,** and reconnect with the junction we took earlier to go to Claror. We simply retrace our steps, though it is recommended that before reaching the Entremesaigües huts, you take the Font del Boigot path**,** as it is more comfortable downhill than the Mountain Path and offers a different perspective of the valley.

Return to Pont de la Plana car park

2 h 10' (5 h 30' total)