

# MADRIU HUTS ITINERARY

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## Technical Information

Duration: 6 h 30 min (not including stopping times and site visits)

Difficulty: medium

Elevation gain: 586 m

## Introduction

The Madriu–Perafita–Claror Valley has been declared a UNESCO World Heritage Site as a cultural landscape, meaning a natural area where human intervention over time has shaped and adapted the environment to meet human needs. This itinerary takes us into the heart of the valley, starting from the Camí dels Matxos at Pla de l'Inglà, with the aim of visiting the huts once used by shepherds to care for their flocks. These range from the oldest dry stone huts to those built in the mid-20th century. The route also provides insight into other historical human activities in the valley, such as forestry, iron smelting, agriculture, and hydroelectric energy production.

Documentary evidence shows that the Madriu–Perafita–Claror Valley was used for livestock farming in the medieval period, but it was from the 17th century, during the peak of sheep farming, that exploitation of the valley became more extensive. To manage this, grazing lands were divided into [cortons](#), parcels rented by the Comú of the former parish of Andorra to individuals who brought their sheep there in summer. Each cordon contains the huts used by shepherds, often accompanied by other constructions such as pletes or orris.

From the 19th century, this type of pastoral activity declined, and the huts were gradually abandoned. In the mid-20th century, dairy cows were introduced to Andorra and grazed in the mountains. In the valley, these animals replaced sheep, leading to the construction of a series of new huts, known as [cowherd huts](#), which are still standing today and form the central focus of this itinerary.



Farga Hut

## 1. Camí dels Matxos (Introduction and Flora of the Sunny Slopes)

0' – Start

We depart from the information point located in front of the car park just before reaching Engolasters, taking the [Camí dels Matxos](#) (also marked as the Circuit of the Springs) and follow it to a picnic area. This section of the path has been adapted for wheelchair access. Although this is one of the access points to the Madriu–Perafita–Claror Valley, we are not yet inside it; we are in the so-called “buffer zone” or protection area of the valley.

We cross a Scots pine forest (*Pinus sylvestris*) with occasional silver birch (*Betula pendula*). Scots pine, together with black pine, is one of the most abundant trees in Andorra, usually occupying sunny slopes but thriving particularly well in moist areas like this. The bark of birch, once dried, was traditionally used during Saint John's festival to make “falles,” bundles of bark attached to a branch that were lit and spun. Shepherds also crafted small cups called bassulls from folded birch bark, using a twig as a handle.

### **FHASA Tunnel**

10'

We reach a tunnel carved into the rock. The path runs parallel to the canal carrying water from the Ràmio dam to Engolasters Lake. This canal was constructed in the mid-1940s by FHASA (now FEDA) as part of the hydroelectric infrastructure supplying the Engolasters power station. The canal is 2,800 metres long, 1,600 of which are cut into the rock. The tunnel gives an idea of the excavation techniques used at the time. The path we are following was originally the track for the wagons transporting cement and construction materials for the canal, pulled by mules or pack animals, hence the name Camí dels Matxos.

### **15' (25') Picnic Area**

After the Font dels Corralets picnic area, the path crosses the Canal de la Tossa and ascends the shady side of the mountain, passing through a couple of scree slopes and a fir grove. Beyond the picnic area, after crossing the Canal de la Tossa, the environment becomes shadier as we enter the fir grove.

The silver fir (*Abies alba*) is typical of shady, cool slopes and valleys, often growing alongside Scots pine and birch. Hanging from branches, you may notice curious “capuchin beard” lichens due to their filamentous shape. The undergrowth is dominated by dwarf rhododendron (*Rhododendron ferrugineum*) and mosses. Notable mammals in the area include the stone or rock mouse,

which uses its coloration to blend with granite rocks, and the fox, locally called “guilla.”

## 2.Coll Jovell

40' (50')

A steady diagonal ascent brings us to [Coll Jovell](#). We have now entered the Madriu–Perafita–Claror Valley, but before continuing, it is recommended to walk a few metres to the right of the ridge to a viewpoint offering a panoramic view of the valley.

From the viewpoint, directly ahead are the Perafita and Claror valleys, and to the left is the Madriu Valley extending to its head. The valley's geomorphology reflects its glacial origin, with the characteristic U-shaped profile, wider toward the interior. The predominant rock throughout nearly the entire valley is granite, eroded by glacial tongues during the Quaternary period (50,000–12,000 BCE). Subsequent fluvial and snowmelt erosion further shaped the valley into its present form.



View of the Madriu Valley from Coll Jovell.

From the junction at the pass, three paths branch off. We take the middle path, which leads to Fontverd via the Solà de Ràmio trail, traversing the sunny slope as it winds deeper into the valley. On our right, at the valley floor, we can see the Ràmio huts, and a little further on, the intake dam feeding the canal to Engolasters, which we passed earlier. Below the Roca de l'Estall, there is a hut accompanied by its corresponding meadow, enclosed by a dry stone wall to prevent flocks from entering as they were led to the valley's interior pastures.

After Coll Jovell, there is a notable change in vegetation as we enter the sunny slope of the Madriu Valley, dominated by Scots pine, though firs can also be found, and at higher altitudes, black pine begins to appear. Lower down, some oaks and hazel trees emerge, while birch continues to appear sporadically in wetter areas. Although Scots pine predominates, the sunny slope creates a much drier environment, with trees more widely spaced and minimal undergrowth, and moss is almost absent. We cross several granite scree slopes descending from the hillside to our left, formed over time by frost weathering, breaking the rock apart. Among the stones, you might spot a lizard (serenalla) or a viper—caution with its bite.

### 3. Junction with the Camí de la Muntanya

45' (1 h 35')

The path levels out and reaches the left bank of the Madriu River, joining the Camí de la Muntanya, which follows the valley floor. At the junction, we turn left, heading east.

*A few metres from the junction, the path passes over a small hill—the site of an ancient charcoal kiln. Charcoal kiln sites are abundant in the valley. Pine logs were stacked with a central chimney, covered with earth and turf, and burned slowly over several days so that the wood would turn into charcoal rather than ash. This charcoal was destined for the valley's iron forge, which we will visit later.*

*To the left of the kiln, the remains of the charcoal burner's hut can be seen. Only the stone base remains; the rest of the structure was built from branches and timber. These were temporary huts, moved as work progressed in the forest.*

### 4. Fontverd

10' (1 h 45')

The path continues with a gentle incline, parallel to the river. It passes through a cattle gate (with a side passage so the gate does not need to be opened, though care must be taken to close it) and enters a wider section of the valley: [Fontverd](#).

In front of us is the refuge and a couple of huts. To reach them, we cross a bog, a natural area of high ecological interest.



Fontverd and the Cowherd Hut.

*Fontverd was one of the first cortons created and used in the Madriu Valley at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. A corton is a communal plot rented by the Comú to individuals for summer sheep grazing. It is an area that preserves structures representative of the traditional activities carried out by humans in the valley.*

*On the left, at the foot of the slope, stands a dry stone hut corresponding to the period when sheep were brought to this corton. It is notable for its construction using large, cyclopean blocks of stone, including the roof, which features a central opening for smoke to escape. On one of the stones forming the wall, to the right of the door, the date 1879 is carved, roughly corresponding to the creation of the corton.*

*On the right, before reaching the refuge, there is a new hut. This belongs to the series of mid-20th-century cowherd huts and bears the date 1950. When sheep farming had almost ceased, dairy cows were introduced to the country. During summer, the cows were grouped in what was called the “common herd” and taken to graze in the valley interior. These huts were built to house the cowherd, who looked after the animals.*

*This newer hut is more modern, incorporating contemporary materials such as cement, especially for the vaulted roof. Inside, there is a hearth, a wooden bed, and four niches for storing tools or utensils. Comparing the interiors of the two huts highlights the effort made to improve living conditions over time.*



Interior of the Fontverd Hut (illustration by Sergi Mas).

*Between the two huts lie the ruins of a [borda](#). Bordes were mountain buildings used to shelter animals, such as cows or mares, brought here to graze in spring and autumn. The upper floor was typically used to store fodder, and many, like this one, included a small hut to house the peasants during these work periods.*

*On the opposite side of the river is a [meadow enclosed](#) by a dry stone wall. This ancient technique involves constructing walls solely from stones, without mortar, and there are many examples throughout the Madriu Valley and the mountains of Andorra.*

*Above the refuge, we find the ruins of a set of dry stone structures, likely huts or animal pens, which historians do not rule out as having a medieval origin. A little higher, to the left, there are several charcoal kiln platforms, consisting of a*

*platform supported by a straight or semicircular dry stone wall. Like the ones previously seen along the path, these were used to produce charcoal for the Madriu forge.*



Fontverd. Spring (Photo: Ramón Villanueva Carrasco).

From the moment we leave the Fontverd clearing, we enter a forested section dominated by firs, with some scots pine, but just before reaching Collet de l’Infern, the forest becomes predominantly mountain pine (*Pinus uncinata*), again with some birch near the river or a spring, continuing this way up to Pla de l’Inglà. In this area, one can spot traces left by the most notable local wildlife, the Pyrenean chamois and the wild boar. Mountain pine is the dominant species in the subalpine zone, between 1,700 and 2,000 metres; its wood was widely used for traditional houses, beams, joists, floors, props, etc., and for charcoal production.

*Once the forest exploitation for the forges ended, the demand for construction timber led to logging for sawmills. Between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, small sawmills were created for local use, such as the one near the Engordany bridge, and eventually industrial sawmills emerged, like Serradora Rossell or Cal Cintet. All households in the parish had the right to collect firewood for domestic use and timber for building or repairing houses and bordes. When timber plots were allocated to a sawmill, the Comú auctioned them.*

*To transport wood from the forest, mules guided by hauliers were used, and channels called [tiraders](#) were excavated on slopes to slide logs down. Near the forest exit from Fontverd, one of these tiraders can still be seen descending the slope on our left.*

## 5. Baell and the Madriu Forge

25' (2 h. 10')

The path becomes steeper to reach Collet de l’Infern. In this section, the trail is paved and split: the right side ascends the collet in a zigzag, while the left side goes straight. This is because the path for pack animals descending from the forge needs a gentler slope with curves, while the right-hand section is a [tirader](#), which must remain straight as the logs cannot turn on bends.

*Once again, the valley widens. On the left, above the path, lies Cortó de Baell, an old grazing plot with two or three pletes. The first pleta is accompanied by a couple of shepherd huts, with walls still standing but roofs gone, as they were made of vegetal materials. Most shepherd huts had dry stone walls, while the roof was constructed with branches resting on a central beam, then covered with clay, shrubs, and grass for waterproofing.*



Cortó de Baell with its pleta.

*To the left of the pleta, there is a cluster of huts organized around a central square. Their origin is uncertain; they may have been used by hauliers working for the forge or as pig pens, though a medieval origin cannot be ruled out.*

*A few metres further, we pass alongside the Madriu [Forge](#), formerly known as the Andorra or Escaldes Forge. Forges were iron-smelting industries using a furnace powered by charcoal and a martinet, a large hammer driven by a water wheel. The peak of Andorran iron industry occurred between the 18th century and the first half of the 19th century. This forge operated from 1732 to 1836, consisting of two separate buildings, each with its own martinet, a botàs (water reservoir) to power the wheel, a slag heap, and several ancillary structures for the workers and storage of materials, charcoal, and ore. The iron produced was transported down the Camí de la Muntanya for export to Catalonia.*

Shortly afterwards, we reach the Cabana de la Farga, the last shepherd's hut built in the valley, dating from the 1960s. It has two floors: the lower one was used as a cattle shed and wood storage, while the upper floor served as the pastor's living quarters. It is constructed with modern materials and a nearly flat concrete roof, representing the final stage in the evolution of shepherd huts in the valley.



The Madriu Forge

## 6.- Estall Serrer

(25', 2 h 35')

After leaving the cabin, it is necessary to temporarily leave the Camí de la Muntanya and cross the river using wooden footbridges. Next, take the path that leads to Estall Serrer, following the red and yellow GRP markers. We move away from the sound of the river and arrive at some meadows where, on the left, an old dry-stone cabin is preserved, leaning against a natural rock. Turning to the right and following the path, we finally reach the [Estall Serrer](#) enclosure.



The Estall Serrer enclosure, with the new cabin on the right and the old ones on the left.

*This is another of the pasture plots in which the valley's grazing areas were organized, one of those used for the longest period. At the foot of the channel that descends from La Maiana, there is a large enclosure ([pletia](#)) bounded by a dry-stone wall. To our right is the shepherd's cabin, dated 1924. It was built in dry stone, with walls leaning against a natural rock. The roof is a barrel vault, entirely of dry stone, with the stones fitted together like the pages of a book. It has a small fireplace and a sleeping area. Its modest size allowed it to accommodate only one or two people.*

*A few meters further on, there is a group of four cabins, also in dry stone but older, whose roofs have already disappeared. Probably, when the new cabin was built, these were already out of use and are likely contemporary with the use of the plot in the 17th or 18th centuries.*

To continue, we must retrace the path, but we cannot reach La Farga cabin directly. At the end of a meadow, a footbridge (without any sign, though the GRP markings are nearby) allows us to return to the Camí de la Muntanya, which runs parallel to the river a few meters away. At the junction, we must turn right (following the red and white markings of the GR 7) and continue deeper into the valley.

## 7.- Pla de l'Ingla and the Serrat de la Barracota

55' (3 h 30')

Just before reaching Pla de l'Ingla, we cross an area of large granite blocks. This is no longer a scree slope like the ones we have seen but a glacial moraine. In the final stages of glaciation, there was no glacier running through the entire valley; only small cirque glaciers remained, without tongues, but their weight continued to break the rock and form moraines like this one. There is a point where, if we pause and listen, we can hear the sound of water flowing beneath the stones of a subterranean stream before it empties into the Madriu.

Another small gate opens onto Pla de l'Ingla, a narrow plateau occupying the valley floor. To the right, atop a small ridge, is the Serrat de la **Barracota** cabin, another example of a vaquer cabin, with characteristics similar to the one we saw at Fontverd, to the point that they seem to have been made by the same hand.



La cabana del Serrat de la Barracota.

*This area, together with the Setut and Riu dels Orris valleys a little further upstream, forms part of the first pasture plot (cortó) created in the valley, which was called the “Ribera dels Orris.” In the 17th century, sheep farming entered its period of greatest development, which led to increased demand for access to the mountain pastures, which had previously been freely used. The Comú regulated the use of these pastures by creating cortons and renting them to shepherds. The*

first of these cortons was “la Ribera dels Orris,” which included Pla de l’Inglà, and was later divided into three: Setut, Sodornet, and Estall Serrer.

From this historical period of shepherds and sheep flocks, we still have several traces along the plateau, especially at the foot of the right-hand slope, consisting of cabin foundations and the remains of an *orri*, a structure designed to facilitate milking the sheep. Recent archaeological studies have determined that there was already human activity in this area during Roman times, with the exploitation of pitch kilns.

Although the planned itinerary ends here, at the far end of Pla de l’Inglà is the Riu dels Orris refuge, for those who wish to spend the night and divide the route into two days. For those with more energy, it is possible to go further and visit the Setut valley, where there is another vaquer cabin and three or four orris; it is accessed via a wooden footbridge near the refuge. Another option is to continue along the trail to the Estanys area, where near Lake de la Bova there is another cabin. Continuing further, one can reach the guarded Estany de l’Illa refuge.

The return is made along the path we came, that is, via the Camí de la Muntanya heading west. After Fontverd, we must pay attention to the junction near the charcoal site we crossed on the way up: we must take the path to the right, while the left path is the Camí de la Muntanya, which would lead to Ràmio.



Cabana de la Barracota

[Return to the Engolasters parking](#)

3 h. (6 h. 30’)