



Roots of Andorra: Santa Coloma

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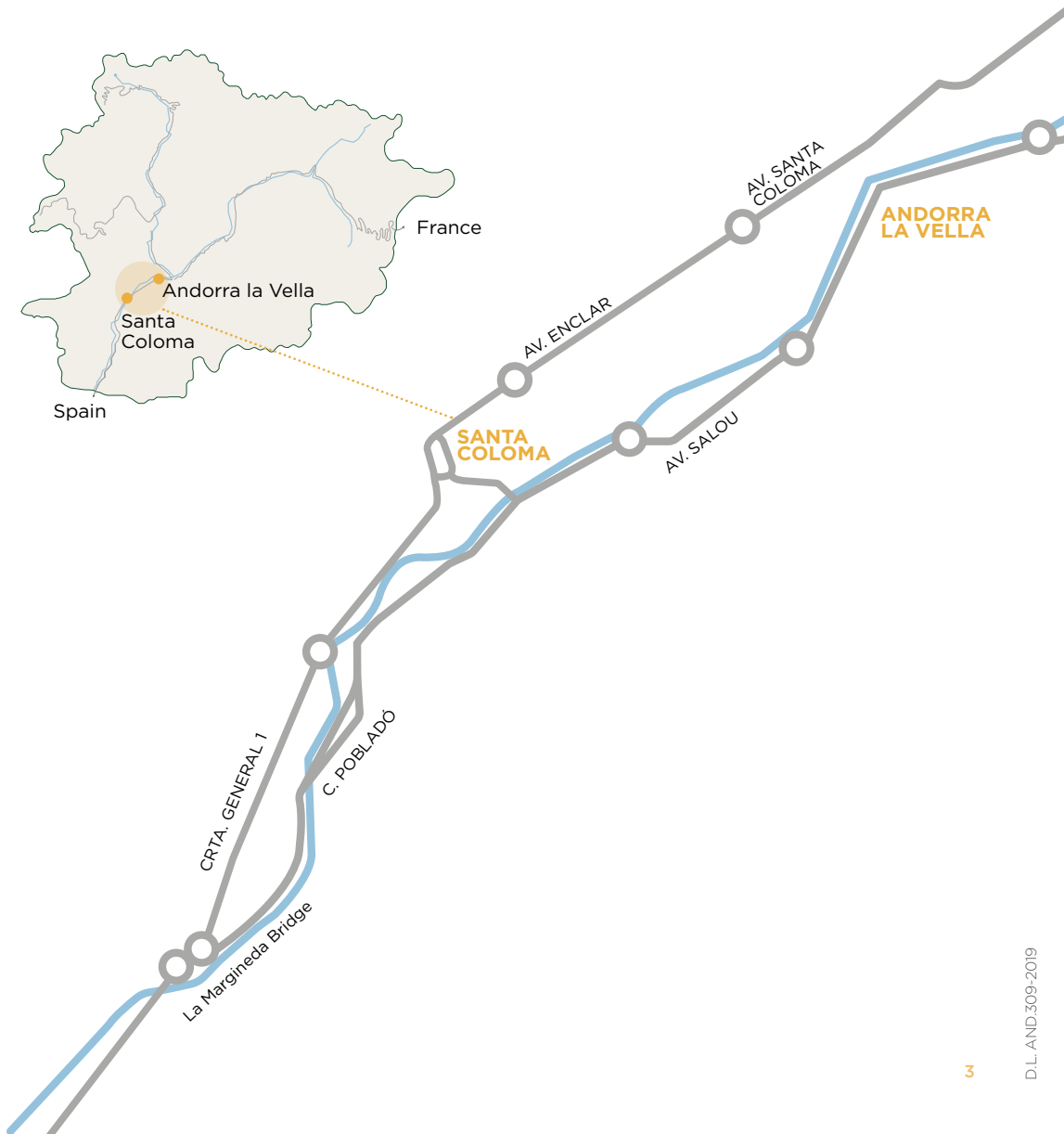
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Santa Coloma, roots of Andorra

Since the remote past, Andorra has been made up of parishes, territorial units with broad competences and forming the structure of the country. Today there are seven, but in the early middle ages (and certainly much earlier, although the first documentary mention is in the 11th century) there were six. The parish of Andorra, the central part, was divided in 1978 into two new units: Andorra la Vella—which preserves the historical heritage of the country as its capital—and Escaldes-Engordany.

In the south of the parish of Andorra la Vella there is the town centre of Santa Coloma. Situated on flat land, sunny and fertile, it saw the first human settlements in the Valleys, bounded to the south by the parish of Sant Julià de Lòria, the Margineda and the gateway of Aixovall. It is, perhaps, the essence of Andorra, the country distilled, the land concentrated. It is worthwhile to stop here, unhurried, to work out routes that suite your taste. And come back later.







From Sancta Columba to Santa Coloma

A little of its long history

It has always been there. At the very gateway to Andorra's fertile central valley, Santa Coloma exemplifies, perhaps more than any other town in the Valleys, the character of our country. A crossing place, a look-out post and a refuge, Santa Coloma has nobly witnessed the passing of the centuries, always wisely maintaining the difficult balance between the old and the new.

The first mention of the place is relatively late, dating to the year 988. A little later, the church of *Sancta Columba* is mentioned in the act of consecration of Santa Maria d'Urgell, a document that dates to the ninth century but which was really drawn up in the early-eleventh, although that makes no difference. Of course, legends exist to accompany this feeling of great antiquity, inextricably linking saint and place-name. They say that the town suffered a terrible invasion of bears, which destroyed crops and houses, and that the plague was only ended after direct intercession of the saint, who banished the wild beasts. In thanks, her name is conserved in perpetuity by the church dedicated to her. And this legend is not completely unfounded, for Saint Columba, a third-century martyr from Aragon, was saved from a Roman soldier by a bear that had escaped from an amphitheatre. However, other etymological clues also point to

settlement here going back to ancient times: the place-name Columba may allude to the Roman columbaria where the first inhabitants here deposited the ashes of their dead.

However this may be, Santa Coloma—and, by extension, the entire southern part of the Parish of Andorra la Vella—is today a rich depository of memory and heritage. This is a multi-faceted, ever-changing open museum, a mirror reflecting a country and its living history. Within a small area, one that can be easily visited in a couple of hours, are many points of interest, from the most remote, the Epipaleolithic, to the civil engineering of the twenty-first century.



Espai Columba

The Master's home

Mural paintings in Romanesque art were a powerful means for the transmission of doctrine. Andorra preserves examples of this artistic form of the highest quality, although many were taken out of the country during the first decades of the 20th century, sacrificed to the avarice of collectors and victims of indifference. The church of Santa Coloma held a very remarkable display of frescoes. They suffered a fate full of hazards: in 1932 they were sold to the antiquarian Bardolet (for 15,000 pesetas!) and were taken down by an Italian specialist, a Mr. Cividini. The greater part of the set was bought by the Baron Van Cassel, a Belgian banker, who installed them in his mansion at Cannes. During the war, the Nazis requisitioned the paintings and deposited them in some salt mines in Austria. After the surrender, Allied specialists in the recovery of works of art left them in a warehouse in Munich. Although most of the Cassel collection was returned to its owner, the frescoes stayed in Germany. In 1969 they were put into the collection in a Berlin museum, where they remained until 2007, when the Andorran government repurchased them from the Baron's heirs. All this journeying has culminated, in the end, in the paintings being installed in a special museum setting, the Espai Columba, situated opposite the original church and now functioning to contain, explain and

contextualise the frescoes and, by extension, the Andorran Romanesque. The Espai Columba is now essential preparation for a visit to the church of Santa Coloma, as it makes our understanding of the church much richer and more intense.

The iconographic programme of the paintings—conditioned by the pre-Romanesque structure of the apse—is dominated by the representation of Christ in Majesty, flanked by portrayals of the Holy Spirit and the four evangelists. Notable among the apostles is the person of the presiding saint: Santa Coloma.

These are the only paintings on show in Andorra by the Master of Santa Coloma, the most characteristic Romanesque artist of the country, also credited with groups of works from Engolasters, Anyós and Les Bons, which can be seen at the MNAC.

Practical matters

For a guided visit advance booking is recommended. To visit the church of Santa Coloma you first have to go through the Espai Columba.







Opening hours

January to June and September to December:

10.00 to 14.00 h and 15.00 to 18.00 h.

Sunday from 11.00 to 14.00 h.

On 5 January, 24 and 31 December, the museum opens from 10.00 to 14.00 h.

July and August:

from 10.00 to 14.00 h and 15.00 to 19.00 h.

Sunday afternoon and Monday, closed.

The museum is closed:

1 and 6 January / 14 March / 1 May / 8 September / 25 and 26 December.

Sunday afternoon and Monday, closed.

Prices

Normal: €7

Reduced: €3.5 (groups of more than 10, collaborating bodies and societies, foreign students, people of over 65 years).

Entrance is free: for schools and national students, social services, the disabled, visitors of under 10 years, members of ICOM and Icomos, Magna cardholders and all citizens of the Principality on the first and third Saturday of each month, all year round.

Supplement for guided visit: €1.5 per person

Contact

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Booking service: +376 839 760

Email: museusandorra@gmail.com



*Schedules are subject to modification due to unforeseen events.



Santa Coloma

The essential church

At the heart of this heritage is the Church of Santa Coloma. This is the most characteristic church in the Valleys, the archetype of Andorran Romanesque: a rustic and austere yet elegant and striking architectural work that occupies a superb position and harmonises with the surrounding monumental mountain landscape to create a truly unique site. We should remember, too, that Andorra's churches are not just places of worship; for centuries they were also used as places of representation and assembly where, in by-gone times, the community met to collectively discuss local affairs. This dual purpose, to which end churches are built by the people, for the people, is a constant feature in all Andorra's Romanesque sites. The Church of Santa Coloma is, moreover, the happy result of a combination of two architectural styles, which fuse and harmonise as if the builders, separated by more than two centuries, had reached an agreement. These two styles are: the archaic pre-Romanesque of the nave, which dates to the ninth or tenth century (we cannot be sure); and the Romanesque, represented by the lovely, highly original bell tower. A tour of the exterior gives us a preliminary idea of the building's volumes: the apse with its rectangular ground plan; the solid nave, its walls lightened thanks to embedded beams; the charming porch that faces the midday sun; and, of course, the bell tower. The circular bell tower, built in around 1175, is nearly eighteen metres in height and has four stories with twin windows and

Lombard adornments. If we look carefully at the eaves at the top of the tower, we can see traces of the geometric decoration that once adorned the exterior faces of the church. Long ago, the village people themselves used to ring the bells, a different household each month.

The interior is a haven of peace and quiet dominated by the powerful presence of the triumphal arch that separates the nave from the presbytery, still adorned by the fresco of the Agnus Dei, the only mural painting in the church that was not taken from the walls (because they couldn't find it!), with traces of the angels that flanked the Lamb of God and remains from the geometric decoration on the triumphal arch. Here, too, are the Romanesque carving of Our Lady of Remedies (popularly known as La Geperudeta, or Little Hunchback) and, at the foot of the nave, the baroque altarpiece by the Master of Adrall that for many years concealed the paintings, covered by a thin coat of plaster.

A spectacular video mapping, its colours so bright the walls seem freshly painted, reconstructs the original iconographic programme created by the Master of Santa Coloma. This is an outstanding example of high technology at the service of art. This mapping, with a duration of six short minutes, gives visitors a remarkable insight into the paintings that once adorned this church.

Practical matters

To enter the church of Santa Coloma you have to go through the Espai Columba.

The village of Santa Coloma

A quiet stroll

A small settlement gradually grew up around the church. These were the houses of farming folk who worked the fertile plain of Andorra's central valley, one of the few places in the country where agriculture can be a more agreeable occupation, less badly affected by the harsh climate in the higher parishes. The lands that stretch between the scree slopes and canals of the Serra d'Enclar mountains and the River Valira are a patchwork of pastures and fields of tobacco —now the national crop. The households of Santa Coloma were careful to organise their land. Today, we can find excellent examples of what traditional houses were like. For example, Casa Riberaigua, near the church. The main street, Carrer Major, and the path to la Margineda are imbued with the air of Andorran villages before the tourism and trade booms of the twentieth century. Everything has been adapted: the old barns where hay was stored for the winter are now used to dry tobacco; the one-teacher school of Cal Joan Mateu is now closed; the three drinking troughs

in the village are no longer used by cattle (once, they were also used at pig slaughtering season!). At the top of Carrer Major is Casa Mariano, a house with a covered passage, emblazoned with eighteenth-century inscriptions. The little square outside the house was once used to roll fallas, lighted trunks, intangible heritage that we can still see in Andorra la Vella on Midsummer's Eve. There is no ancient village without its contemporary counterpart: Santa Coloma has expanded to the north, an extension which connects it with Andorra la Vella.AVINGUDA d'Enclar is a specialist area in the motor trade, offering equipment and accessories for motorbikes and cars.

Practical matters:

Guided tours during the summer

Reservations: Tourist office of Andorra la Vella
info@oficinaturisme.ad







La torre dels Russos (Enclau St. Jordi)

The Andorran utopia

The path from Santa Coloma to la Margineda passes one of the most unusual buildings in Andorra: *La Torre dels Russos*. Built in 1917, it was the first work of the architect Cèsar Martinell, a disciple of Antoni Gaudí (and the first house in Andorra with a detailed project). Martinell drafted it after winning a competition held by the Barcelona School of Architects. It is an irregular-shaped building on three floors, which draws on Modernist elements – especially in the decoration – but leans especially towards the more rationalist Noucentista architecture. Privately owned, it was restored in 1997.

The project was sponsored by Frederick Fiske Warren, an American paper manufacturer (and excellent tennis player) who wanted to bring the Fairhope Single Tax Enclave initiative to Andorra, an attempt to set up a cooperative based on member solidarity, one of the practical applications of utopian socialism. The Catalan journalist and poet, Josep Alemany, was a colleague, who told him about Andorra's exceptional geographical and political situation. Nikolay Popov, a Russian, supervised the building of the

house – hence its nickname “The house of the Russians”. The Andorran experiment was called Enclau de Sant Jordi (St. George's Enclave), in honour of Henry George, the spiritual leader of the movement. At the height of the First World War, Andorra's neutral status was the ideal platform to launch the project; one of the main activities was selling cod to France, using an ingenious auction system. However, due to Andorra's idiosyncrasies and, more specifically, a disagreement between Warren and Popov of a “sentimental” nature, the Enclave dream floundered and was never spoken of again. Nevertheless, La Torre dels Russos stands as a permanent memorial.



*Private building, the visit is not allowed



La Roureda de la Margineda

Early deposits

In 2007, campaigns of archaeological excavations began at la Roureda de la Margineda, the largest site that had never yet been the subject of digs in Andorra and one of the most important in the Pyrenees. Historians and archaeologists are still arguing about the exact nature of the remains unearthed at this site, located on an elevated point over the plain between Santa Coloma and la Margineda. The site, 1,500 square metres of walls that delimit rooms and streets, was occupied during different periods from Bronze Age times. The central and most important period of occupation was from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. The most interesting hypothesis links these structures with the final period in the history of the Fort of Sant Vicenç, which was the subject of a transaction between Ermengol VIII, Count of Urgell and the warlike Viscount Arnau of Castellbò in 1190. A century later, the demolition of the fortress was agreed in the first clause of the second *pariatge* agreement for shared sovereignty over Andorra, the peace treaty between Bishop Peter of Urg and Count

Roger Bernat III of Foix in 1288. This find has enormous symbolic power for the country: the Fort of Sant Vicenç was the bridgehead that the lords of Castellbò-Foix established in the centre of Andorra to give material force to their total opposition to episcopal rule. Modern Andorra was shaped by these agreements for sharing power over the country. The Fort of Sant Vicenç is, therefore, a memorial in stone to the origins of the system of joint rule, the cornerstone of Andorra's independence that has assured the country's continuing existence throughout history.

Practical matters

La Margineda archaeological site offers during July and August guided tours by prior appointment. You can book a tour at the Tourist office of Andorra la Vella or by telephone (+376) 750 100 or e-mail: info@oficinaturisme.ad To make your reservation, you are also welcome to contact Molines Patrimonis by telephone (+376) 805 950 or e-mail: administració@molinespatrimonis.com In winter, only school groups.







The village of la Margineda

Authentic Andorra

The tiny village of la Margineda is the most southerly in the parish. The entrance along the path from Santa Coloma leaves us in the heights of the village, a point that commands superb views over the valley. From here, we take the path known as the Camí de la Callissa down to the road. Along the way we can admire several well-conserved examples of traditional Andorran architecture, among which Casa dels Pobres is the most interesting, and the well-tended agricultural

landscape. This is also a good point from which to observe the botanical wealth of the valley floor and, above all, to discover some of the most characteristic traces of Andorra's traditional economy. The name of the village alludes to *marges*, dry stone walls built by practically superhuman efforts in order to claim small strips of arable land from the mountainside. Today, UNESCO has proclaimed dry stone walling as intangible heritage, and the local agricultural landscape here illustrates the wisdom of this proclamation.



La Balma de la Margineda

Back to the beginnings

Five minutes on foot from la Margineda roundabout, perfectly visible from a road travelled by thousands every day, la Margineda Cave (la Balma de la Margineda) is an outstanding archaeological site, not only in Andorra, but in the whole of the Pyrenees. The cave lies at the southern end of la Margineda, on land that is the subject of a territorial dispute with the Parish of Sant Julià de Lòria. In Andorra, the boundaries between parishes are sometimes rather fluid as a consequence of the difficulty of adapting ancient practices, such as common land, to modern times. However, the first inhabitants here knew nothing of borders or boundaries: la Margineda Cave,

a perfectly oriented rock shelter overlooking the River Valira, was the scene of humanity's first settlement in the Andorran valleys, an occupation that endured for a long period, from around 10,000 to 4,000 years BC.

Discovered by Pere Canturri in 1959, the site was excavated by Jean Guilaine and Michel Martzloff between 1979 and 1991. Archaeologists documented an extraordinary amount of information about lifestyles and many objects used by the first settlers in Andorra: bone harpoons, tools and so on. La Margineda Cave is the great unknown of Andorran heritage, an enigmatic site once inhabited by hunter-gatherers, the first people who dared to penetrate that cold, hostile territory at the end of the last Ice Age.







La Margineda Bridge

A marvel on the river

The New Bridge of la Margineda (Pont Nou de la Margineda) is the most iconic in Andorra, one of its most high-profile sites and clear evidence that the country's heritage does not begin and end with its churches. We do not know exactly when it was built. Documents from the early-fifteenth century speak of a *pont nou*, or new bridge, leading us to believe that, not long before, an "old bridge" must have stood here. However this may be, the bridge must have been built at around the turn of the fifteenth century. Medieval engineers did not choose its site at random, for it stands at the mouth of La Portella d'Aixovall, the narrow pass separating the Parishes of Andorra and Sant Julià, enabling the royal way to be widened into two branches, one on the sunny side, the other on the shaded side.

The bridge is remarkably slender, a humpback construction with a Roman drop arch, a span of nine and a half metres and a length of thirty-three metres. The bridge is a survivor, for its structures are in permanent danger. Nonetheless, it is in an excellent state of conservation, something that speaks highly of the skill of its builders. This "new bridge" has withstood dozens of disastrous floods that, little by little, have reduced the number of historic bridges over Andorran rivers. To cross it today is to go back in time, for so many people used it over six centuries. And, from above, we can enjoy views of the Valira, a powerful young river with a short but intense course that finds its most attractive point precisely at la Margineda Bridge.



The Madrid Bridge

The power of engineers

Three hundred metres upriver from la Margineda Bridge stands the Madrid Bridge, which provides the perfect counterpoint to it. The contrast between the old and new constructions is striking and fascinating. Here, the royal way is replaced by the country's most important road, the CG1, and mule trains give way to cars and lorries. Opened in 2008, the Madrid Bridge is the sister of the Paris Bridge

in Andorra la Vella. The nature of the road's course, requiring the installation of a curved platform over the river, posed an enormous challenge to the engineers. The cables that support the bridge come together in a steel sphere, four metres in diameter, resting on two enormous feet, also made of steel. This triumph of engineering, which vehicle occupants hardly notice as they pass over it, is best admired in all its impressive glory from afar by pedestrians.







The Enclar Valley

Natural environment

The Rock is also the gateway to the Enclar Valley, one of the most beautiful natural sites in Andorra. Here, the presence of human habitation —roadside walls, disused fields, the path, traces of forestry management, ranges and pasturelands— have retreated before nature, which always overcomes all in the end. From a little hill, the Collet de Sant Vicenç, the path takes us through a lonely valley towards the mountains of the Sierra. The first section ends at Els Prats del Paquetaire, a name that alludes to one of the traditional activities in Andorra: cross-border trade. Next, we come to El Bony

de la Pica and Pic d'Enclar, among the best-known peaks in the parish. This is the land of the chamois, which has found a sanctuary on Mount Enclar, where hunting is banned. Not only chamois live here, though; at any time the visitor may spot a roe deer or a wild pig. And, flying overhead, the great birds of prey: griffon vultures, eagles and, with a bit of luck, even the mythical bearded vulture.

Practical matters

Guided tours during the summer

Reservations: Tourist office of Andorra la Vella
info@oficinaturisme.ad



El Roc d'Enclar

The fascination of power

El Roc d'Enclar (the Enclar Rock) is a granite outcrop that springs from the magnificent Enclar Massif, dominating Santa Coloma from a height of one hundred and fifty metres. The area provides an excellent example of how mountain communities have adapted to a changing natural and political environment. El Roc is an open book that illustrates the history and development of our country.

The timeline of human habitation here begins with a Bronze Age settlement on the site of which an Iron Age village was established, and continues with agricultural occupation under the Romans, when wine was made up on these heights! Later also during the Roman period, perhaps around the fifth century, a small fort, or castrum, was built, probably part of a system of fortifications created to halt the Pyrenean invasion by Germanic tribes. The church, dedicated to Sant Vicenç (Saint Vincent), is the oldest in the country, its construction dating back to the late-seventh century. It has a small circular bell tower that, perhaps, served partially as inspiration for that of the Church of Santa Coloma. Probably converted into a mosque during the fleeting Moorish presence here, the only trace of Caliphal rule in Andorra was found on one of its walls: a short inscription in Arabic wishing good health to the faithful.

The Roman fort was altered in the ninth century, though its original structure was essentially conserved intact. This is the Castle of Sant Vicenç, briefly mentioned in documents dating back to the year 952 and which was probably reborn two-and-a-half centuries later in the form of a castral settlement lower down the mountains in La Roureda de la Margineda. We should remember that, in medieval times, Andorrans were reluctant to allow their feudal lords to build fortresses all over the country: the fire at Castle Bragafolls in around the year 1003 must have given them due warning...

The only way up to the Rock is on foot, along a lovely if steep path up the scree-covered slope. A half-hour trek upwards takes us to the heights of this superb lookout point.

Practical matters

Guided tours during the summer

Reservations: Tourist office of Andorra la Vella
info@oficinaturisme.ad







And more nature

The perfect complement

Santa Coloma is a perfect compendium of different Andorran landscapes. Broad tobacco fields (everywhere in Andorra since the 17th century), market gardens, residual cultivation, the great oak woods in the valley bottom —the natural woods of Andorra, the riverside thickets, scree, mountain dwellings: an open encyclopaedia of Pyrenean flora and fauna. The area of Santa Coloma is a multicolour mosaic which covers all possibilities, from an environment profoundly conditioned by man to the most original and unchanged ecosystems in Andorra.

And how can we approach it? The simplest way is just by strolling about. The network of traditional paths has survived to modern times and in roadways, and can still be followed: the paths are signposted and well maintained. Traces of the ancient way which followed the Valira valley can be found at the Margineda bridge. Today, alongside the CG1 road, the main highway through the country, we find the River promenade, connecting Santa Coloma with the capital and much enjoyed by runners, walkers and cyclists.

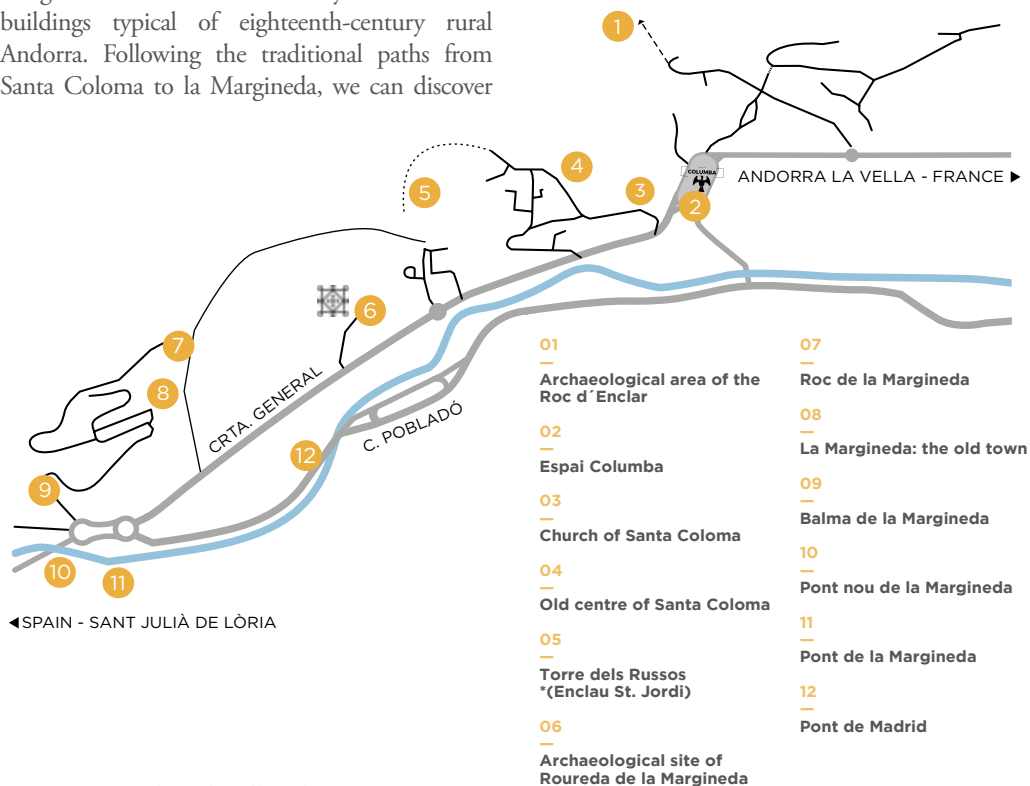
If you want to get in among the mountains you can take the path directly up the Pica Romana, one of the footways for access to the Madriu-Perafita-Claror area. On the other side of the river, closing the bank on the east is the Vall d'Enclar, one of the areas of highest natural value in Andorra. This is a territory where the presence of man —boundary walls, ancient hayfields, the road, traces of woodland exploitation, common lands and grazing areas— has retreated in favour of nature, which always ends up by imposing itself. The road to get there is the same as the one that goes up to Roc d'Enclar.



Cultural tinerary: Arc Patrimonial

Santa Coloma, one of the oldest and most typical villages in these valleys, lies in the south of Andorra la Vella parish. The village is the gateway to one of the most important monumental sites in the Pyrenees, including the extraordinary Church of Santa Coloma with its cylindrical belltower. The village itself conserves the street layout and several buildings typical of eighteenth-century rural Andorra. Following the traditional paths from Santa Coloma to la Margineda, we can discover

the house known as the Torre dels Russos and the archaeological site at Roureda de la Margineda. Continuing southwards, we come to la Margineda Bridge and, a little further on, la Balma de la Margineda, a rock shelter where Andorra's first inhabitants lived, 12,000 years ago.



Nature itinerary

Through the Vall d'Enclar

From the Barrers street in Santa Coloma a track starts which passes through the scree and goes on to the little hill of Sant Vicenç. The track continues to the left for a visit to the pre-Romanesque church of Sant Vicenç and the archaeological area of the Roc. To the right, the road goes straight on towards the mountains, through a wild valley, an ideal place for watching raptors and also for seeing the big animals: chamois, roe-deer and wild boar. Vall d'Enclar (Enclar valley) is one of the two parts of the Principality where the largest numbers of chamois are found. If you are visiting early in the morning or at the end of the day there is a chance of seeing one or two. If not, it is always possible to find traces of their presence, in the form of tracks or droppings.

- Climb: 350 metres
- Distance: 1.600m
- Difficulty: easy
- Time: 2h 30min
- Season: All year round

Roc d'Enclar via ferrata

Next to the road that goes up to Roc d'Enclar, in a wood of holm oaks and skirting steep slopes, accessed from the Barrers road in Santa Coloma, there is also the start of a via ferrata 270 m long, with the equipment necessary to ensure a really thrilling climb. The use of helmet, harness, shock absorber and appropriate footwear is compulsory. Access to this via ferrata is free, it faces to the east and the summit is at 1,190 metres.

- Approach: 15 minutes.
- Going up: 2 h. Return: 40min.
- Climb: +190 m / -190 m
- Difficulty: average
- Distance: 270m



