



The Scottish Baronial style Torridon Lodge Hotel was built in 1887 as a hunting lodge, now one of Scotland's premier country hotels.

# Highland *Fling*

**SCOTLAND'S NORTH COAST 500 WINDS AROUND THE EXTREME NORTH OF BRITAIN. IT'S A TIGHT SQUEEZE, AND A FEAST FOR THE SENSES.**

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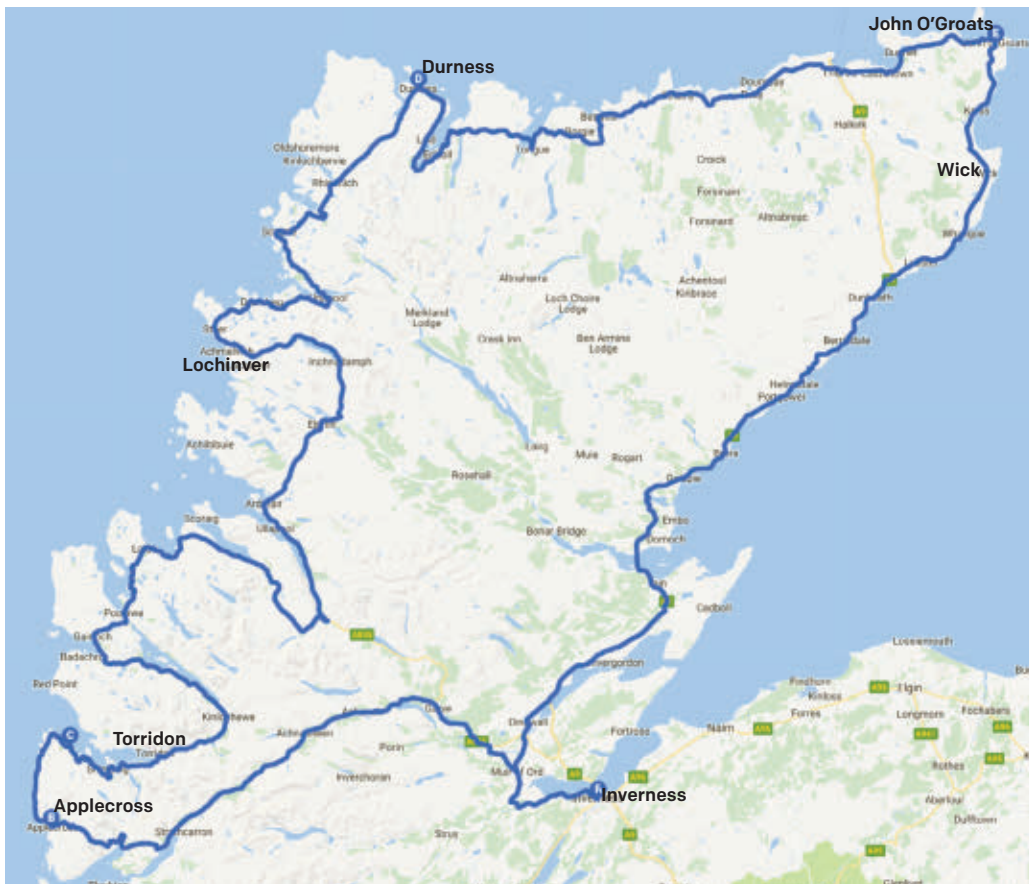
**A**fter a night of old-world luxury at Kinloch House, in Blairgowrie, Scotland, and barely five minutes into a morning ride, the sun was peeking over the pines. The road still shaded and slippery with the sheen of rain, a triangular warning sign was spotted, portraying a stag: "4 miles."

Seconds later, a deer was racing parallel on the left, beyond a stone wall, perhaps 10 feet away. Synapses had barely registered when the beast leaped the wall and rocketed straight at me. Adrenaline slapped me sheer in my seat as I jerked the brake

lever. Thanks to razor-sharp ABS, the panicked buck missed by inches and disappeared, hooves flailing.

Setting out from Edinburgh for the Scottish Highlands, I'd considered the possibility of shaggy Highland wildlife leaping across the road, never anticipating it happening so soon.

In 2015, the North Highland Initiative conceived the "North Coast 500," stitching together various roads to form a touring route. Carving a tortuous course around the untamed north extreme of the U.K., and marketed by Visit Scotland as an equiv-



Exploration of the “impressive cultural heritage” of the Scottish North Highlands along the NC500 route would be incomplete without visits to castles, cathedrals and ruins. Among the many castles en route are: Inverness Castle in Inverness, Castle Leod in Strathpeffer, Dunrobin Castle in Sutherland, Sinclair & Girnigoe ruins near Wick, Castle of Mey near John O’Groats, Thurso Castle in Thurso, Castle Varrich ruin near Tongue and Ardvreck Castle ruins on Loch Assynt. Cathedrals are located in Dornoch and Fortrose and the Nigg Old Church in Nigg contains a monument dating to the eighth century. Learn more at [northcoast500.com](http://northcoast500.com)

alent to American’s iconic Route 66, the 512-mile NC500 combines the best ingredients of adventure, freedom and epic landscapes with exhilarating switchbacks and twisties.

It’s as thrilling a journey as any in the Kingdom, drawing motorcyclists like bees to brambles in bloom. Adding artisan whiskey distilleries, salty-aired fishing villages and historic, haunted castle hotels, a wedding invite in England was all the reason needed for a Highland fling.

Visit Scotland had themed 2017 to celebrate “impressive cultural heritage.” “The forecast will be the sky in front of you. In Scotland, there’s little point in looking any further ahead,” warned Calum Murray, of Saltire Motorcycles, when picking up the loaner bike on a gloriously sunny Edinburgh day.

The ride north to Inverness—the official beginning and end for the NC500 loop—via the Cairngorms Mountains offered plenty of time to adjust to the Indian Roadmaster’s big-twin brawn.

It was raining as I departed Inverness. The North Sea was lost to view through



**Two riders ascend Britain’s longest sustained climb, the Bealach na Bà switchback. The ‘Pass of the Cattle’ is also Britain’s third highest mountain pass.**

a shroud of drizzle as I hugged the A9, northbound for Wick. Fortunately, this 100-mile first day was replete with cultural draws, highlighted by Dunrobin Castle, south of Brora.

With its fairytale conical towers emerg-

ing from the mist like Brigadoon, the French-style chateau looked like a piece of the Loire Valley transplanted. Happy to escape the “dreich” (dreary) weather, hours were spent exploring its 189 rooms, crawling along like a caterpillar. Though



hawking displays are given in the garden below, all flights were grounded.

Upon departure, the rain began sheeting down. Thankfully, the full-dress tourer reduced “droukit” (drench). Enscorced in a cocoon of comfort, acres of wrap-around fairing shoved the torrent aside, aided by leg guards, a sculpted well-heated saddle, and adjustable electronic windshield. Still, riding in rain is not fun. A break for the whiskey 101 tour at Clynelish Distillery forwent a “wee dram,” of course. No bottle and throttle!

Scotland’s weather is famously fickle. Riding through cold, pea-soup fog was unnerving. The road to Berriesdale climbed steeply and tightened into whiplash-sharp coils hemmed by barely-visible walls of wet Caithness flagstone. The onboard tablet-like navigation was zoomed to a full-screen road map, giving a real-time visual of each bend ahead.

Magically, the clouds cleared while pulling up to crenellated Ackergill Tower, perched atop the craggy cliffs of Caithness, as if conjured for a Hollywood movie. With its tartan carpets, wood-paneled Great Hall and cozy antique-filled guest rooms, the 15th-century baronial-style hotel, proffered a warm “couthie” (pleasant) welcome at the end of a wet and wintry Scottish summer day.

A liveried butler emerged to ooh and ahh at the black-and-cream eye-candy bike as I photographed it by the entrance. Oodles of chrome dazzled in the late afternoon sunlight against a deep cobalt blue sky.

Beyond John O’Groats village, was the first taste of the lauded NC500 drama, as the A836 swept westward in broad scimitars through a vast expanse of wind-scoured bog and moor. Abandoned crofts—melancholic mementos of the Highland Clearances, when landowners evicted tenants for more profitable sheep grazing—haunted the austere, yet blindingly beautiful landscape.

Not a town for miles, nor service stations, rare as the Scottish wildcat. Briefly engaging in a sublime, throttle-open ride through cliff-top curves, sheep scattered at the lion-like roar of the engine, before settling on saner speed.

From the village of Tongue, the road clawed down past Castle Varich to the



**Late afternoon sunlight outside Ackergill Tower Hotel. A perfect complement to the luxe of this 15th-century country house hotel, near Wick, Scotland.**

gunmetal-gray village of Kyle of Lochalsh. Charcoal clouds draped the brooding hulks of Ben Hope and Ben Loyal mountains to the south.

The NC500 shrank to a narrow single lane around Loch Eribol, painted in patches of turquoise and teal by crepuscular pencils of sunlight. Westward, on the A838, the kaleidoscope twirled again as the road rolled in swooping arcs past surging peninsulas and postcard-perfect beaches with melodic names—Ceann na Beinne, Sango Beag and Balnakeil—and

carnation-pink sands dissolving into Caribbean blue seas.

Beyond Durness, the thread-thin road unfurled south, streaming through a wild, minimalist landscape of breathtaking grandeur, like fine whiskey pouring through heather. Dome-shaped mountains rose sheer from thistle-strewn moors with wind-ruffled lochans. Emptiness and humbling beauty. This was what the hype was all about.

Passing Places were spaced, on average, every one hundred meters. Fortu-



**In many places, the NC500 narrows down to a single-track road, with passing places spaced on average every one hundred yards, as noted here, in the remote Assynt peninsula.**

nately, most vehicles courteously pulled over. Riding cautiously, the Roadmaster seemed out of place as dual sports and sportbikes flashed by.

Many motorcyclists attempt to ride the NC500 in one day, unfortunately giving no heed to courtesy, and blazing past like commuters recklessly lane-splitting a Los Angeles freeway.

Crossing the curving Kylesku Bridge, the NC500 turns right onto the infamously tortuous, testy and car-wide B869, circling the remote Assynt Peninsula. An E-Ticket ride, the writhing snake-thin roller-coaster—nicknamed the “wee bad road” by locals—plunged and peaked like the skirl of bagpipes. The blind bends and sharp-curved summits required hyperattention and judicious, nonstop feathering of throttle and clutch. Technical road riding at its best.

A red fox trotted across the road. As I stopped to raise the camera, she turned bushy tail and merged into the gorse like a ghost. Exhilarated and grinning in-



**A motorcyclist heading counter-clockwise on the NC500 arrives at the 2,305-foot summit of the mist-shrouded Bealach na Bà pass.**

anely, I arrived at the Inver Lodge Hotel, perched over Loch Inver.

From Lochinver village, route A837 unspools east past Loch Assynt and skews south to Ledmore Junction, where a right turn onto the A835 leads to Ullapool, via

Drumrunie. Setting out before coffee kicked in led to running south on the tendril track to Inverkirkaig and Badnagyle, through the heart of the Coigach Peninsula. Nae problem, being treated to singular views of Suilven, Cul Mor and





**South of Durness, a rider heads north through the Assynt region, where inselbergs rise dramatically over the moors and lochans.**

Stac Pollaidh. Inconceivably old, whiskey-brown islands of quartzite-capped Torridian sandstone silhouetted through intermittent curtains of rain. Scotland's savage beauty brought a smile as streaks of sunlight suddenly sliced down through the clouds, gilding the mountains.

Finally emerging onto the A835 at Drumrunie, I turned south for the lovely fishing port of Ullapool, on the banks of Loch Broom. After devouring a delicious fresh-caught monkfish at The Frigate, the journey continued south on the A832, a meandering route past a veritable feast of coastal inlets and lochs.

The road emerged from a forested vale at Kinlochewe, where the NC500 veers west onto the A896, signed for Torridon and Shieldag. It was comical to think this was a major road: It quickly pared down to a sliver as it climbed alongside the River A'ghairbhe. Beyond Loch Claire, plunged through wild, lonesome Glen Torridon, bounded by sheer terraced mountains, "It was cold, bleak, biting weather: foggy withal."

Spurred on by the luxurious glow of The Torridon below, a former shooting lodge built in 1887, by the Earl of Lovelace, in classic Scottish Baronial style. Its magenta tartans, aged wood-paneling,

and racks of antlers over the massive fireplace recalled its stately past.

I sank into a plump leather chair in the whiskey bar and savored a dram of light, fresh, peaty 12-year-old Bunnahabhain; one of more than 350 malt whiskies filling wall-to-wall shelves. Scottish dining frequently included fresh-caught salmon and lobster, but at The Torridon's 1887 Restaurant, Scotland's gourmet field-to-fork revolution was at its best. Dinner included hand-dived scallops, succulent lamb rump with turnips and kale, and a divine white chocolate semifreddo with strawberries and almonds.

Day Four on the counterclockwise route delivered what is considered the climax of the NC500. Despite the drizzle, 8 miles beyond Torridon, the NC500 becomes an unlabeled one-lane, turning west to hug the shore of the Applecross Peninsula, with vast views over the sea to Skye. The 24 miles to Applecross were a mouthwatering mélange of tight corners, whirling twisties and wide-open cliff-top straights, resembling the Isle of Man TT course. Sportbikes flew by.

This was just hors d'oeuvres!

From the bayshore hamlet of Applecross, the road turns inland, clawing its way to 2,035 feet over "The Pass of the

Cattle," before dropping back down to the A896 at Tornapress. Fueled up on coffee, cheesecake and petrol, the bike pointed toward Bealach na Bà. "Not advised for learner drivers" read a sign at the foot of this notoriously treacherous alpine switchback. The third-highest road pass in Britain is its steepest prolonged ascent, hairpins with 20-percent grades.

As I throttled uphill from Applecross, a stag appeared on the woodsy hillside, then an entire herd emerged from the shadows and bolted across the road. Adventure required caution. The engine flawlessly delivered stump-pulling torque up the switchback and within minutes was amid swirling cloud, the summit viewpoint lost in fog. The bitter wind stung like a wildcat's bite as other riders were photographed clawing up through the horseshoes from Tornapress.

Firing up the big twin one last time, I corkscrewed cautiously down through the hairpins, opening the throttle for the downhill sluice, steep and fast, through a valley hemmed by monumental rock walls the color of eggplant. Returning to Inverness through the forested glens, eyes actively scanned the roadside shadows for stags, closing the loop on a perfect five-day Highland fling. **MCN**