

# WOW

magazine

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# Motorcycling Scotland's North Coast 500

*I powered uphill toward a sharp-curved summit near Drumbeg and stopped in awe at the spectacular view of rugged isles and craggy peninsulas fringed by alabaster-white beaches. Beyond, glacier-scoured mountains surged towards the untamed northwest extreme of Britain; then a red fox trotted across the road. As I raised my camera she turned bushy tail and merged into the gorse like a ghost.*

by Christopher P. Baker

**M**y second day riding the North Coast 500 route was proving wilder than my wildest dreams as it twined through the Scottish Highlands like fine whisky pouring through heather. In 2005 Prince Charles' non-profit North Highland Initiative conceived this iconic touring itinerary stitching together various roads around the coastal edge of the Highlands. Carving a tortuous course via John O'Groats and the Northwest Highlands, the "NC500" forms a 500-mile loop that begins and ends in Inverness. Epic scenery and breathtaking wilderness, plus castles, whisky distilleries, and salty-aired seaside villages are some of the reasons this journey is hailed as one of the world's most spectacular drives.

## LIKE BEES TO BERRIES

Four wheels will give you a memorable journey—two will make it unforgettable. Combining the classic road trip desire for adventure and freedom with exhilarating switchbacks and twisties, the route is as thrilling a motorcycle journey as any in Britain. No wonder bikers are drawn to the NC500 like bees to berries. So, I arranged through Saltire Motorcycles, in Edinburgh, for a 2017 Indian Roadmaster—a deluxe "heritage" tourer with vast fairing and windshield to protect against being drookit (drenched) if it rained.

After a night at Edinburgh's artsy G&V Hotel, I fired up the big V-twin and set course north via Cairngorms National Park—gateway to the Highlands—for Inverness. The chance of a stag leaping in front of your vehicle is a distinct possibility. Sure enough, outside Pitlochry a sign warned "Deer for 4 miles." Moments later I consorted with a deer running parallel almost within fingertip reach. Suddenly it skewed right and bolted in front of me. As I jerked on the brake, the panicked buck hit the deck with hooves flailing. Nature seems so much closer from the seat of a saddle!

## BOUND FOR THE HIGHLANDS

"When you're in the saddle the forest will be the skies in front of you. In Scotland, there's little point in looking any further ahead," Calum Murray, owner of Saltire Motorcycles had told me. I departed Inverness's Rocpool Reserve

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hotel—a chic conversion of a 19th-century manse—in light rain. It didn't let up, the seascape barely visible throughout my day's ride to Wick.

This section offers plenty of intriguing sites at which to duck the dreich weather: Neolithic burial chambers dating back 5,000 years, Pictish stone stelae with enigmatic engravings, and—a de rigueur stop—Dunrobin Castle, the Duke of Sutherland's dramatic French-style chateau, pinned by fairytale towers like a piece of the Loire Valley transplanted. Don't miss the twice-daily falconry display in the gardens below. Then I warmed up with a wee dram at the historic Clynesh Distillery after a fascinating factory tour. Thankfully, the clouds cleared as I drew up to 15th-century Ackergill Tower, a baronial-style estate hotel with crenellated ramparts rising dramatically over the tidepools of Sinclair Bay.

## BREATH-taking GRANDEUR

Beyond John O'Groats, the circuit cranks up the drama as the A836 scrolls through a vast expanse of heather-carpeted moor and bog, augers down past Castle Varich to lovely Loch Eribol, then swoops past picture-post-

card beaches with Caribbean-blue seas. It's the stuff of coastal-ride dreams. You're never far from melancholic history, however. The route is studded with long-abandoned crofts dating back to the Highland "Clearances," when wealthy landowners evicted tenants for more profitable sheep grazing. Lambs litter the road.

Cutting south from Durness, the NC500 slingshots through a wild, minimalist landscape of wind-ruffled lochans and dome-shaped mountains rising sheer from moors cloaked in heather and gorse. Oncoming cars and campervans courteously pulled over for me at Passing Places, spaced on average every 100 meters. Crossing the curving Kylesku Bridge I turned west onto the snake-thin B869. This "wee bad" section circling the remote Assynt Peninsula is a writhing roller-coaster that left me still smiling as I pulled up to the Inver Lodge Hotel, perched over Loch Inver. You could never have so much E-ticket fun in a car.

## WEST COAST DELIGHT

Next morning, I looked out on a cold horizon, the loch buried beneath a charcoal sky. But ensconced in a well-heated saddle and dry







At the hamlet of Applecross, the route turns inland to claw its way to 626 meters over the third highest road pass in Britain. The Bealach na Bà ("Pass of the Cattle") also claims the UK's steepest prolonged ascent, with gradients of 1 in 5 on the hairpins.

behind the fairings, I accepted Scotland's famously fickle weather with a smile.

From Lochinver, the NC500 ripples east past Loch Assynt and turns south for Ullapool, a lovely fishing port nestled on the shores of Loch Broom. I was treated to staggering views of Suilven, Cul Mor and Stac Pollaidh—dark brooding inselbergs, inconceivably old—silhouetted by golden streaks slicing down through the clouds. These sandstone "sugarloafs" rise from a plinth of three-billion-year-old Lewisian gneiss. Speeding along the NC500's two-lane sections seems at odds with the ancient geological languor. Take it slow.

Shifting westward as the A896, the route whittles down to a sliver and slices down through Glen Torridon, hemmed spectacularly by sheer terraced mountains. I admired the archetypal Highland landscape from the warmth of The Torridon, a sumptuous former hunting lodge at the head of an eponymous sea loch. This corner of Scotland has plenty of delicious dining, from venison to fresh-caught lobster and Scrabster salmon. At The Torridon I savored hand-dived scallops, succulent lamb rump with turnips and kale, and a divine white chocolate semifreddo with strawberries and almonds.

#### ULTIMATE HIGH

Beyond Torridon, the route—now an unmarked one-laner—hugs the shore of the Applecross Peninsula. Sport bikes flew by. No wonder! The 24 miles to Applecross unfurl a non-stop, grin-inducing combo of tight corners, whirling twisties, and wide-open cliff-top straights. It's a perfect warm-up for what's considered the apogee

of the NC500. At the hamlet of Applecross, the route turns inland to claw its way to 626 meters over the third highest road pass in Britain. The Bealach na Bà ("Pass of the Cattle") also claims the UK's steepest prolonged ascent, with gradients of 1 in 5 on the hairpins.

As I throttled uphill from Applecross a stag appeared on the hillside. Then an entire herd dashed from the woods and across the road. A thrilling reminder for caution! Within minutes I was amid a swirling cloud. The summit viewpoint lost in fog. Still, the ride was sublime, corkscrewing in precipitous hairpins then sluicing downhill through a U-shaped valley to Tornapress and a fast, eastbound beeline for Inverness. As I closed in on the finish, sunbeams broke through the clouds to the north, tempting me to ride the NC500 again.



#### HELPFUL HINTS

##### Tours and Bike Rental:

Saltire Motorcycles  
[www.saltiremotorcycles.com](http://www.saltiremotorcycles.com)

##### Accommodations:

G&V Royal Mile Hotel  
[www.gvroyalmile.com](http://www.gvroyalmile.com)

Rocpool Reserve  
[www.rocpool.com](http://www.rocpool.com)

Ackerjill Tower  
[www.ackerjilltower.com](http://www.ackerjilltower.com)

Inver Lodge Hotel  
[www.inverlodge.com](http://www.inverlodge.com)

The Torridon  
[www.thetorridon.com](http://www.thetorridon.com)

#### THE NORTH COAST 500 ROUTE

Although it's possible to complete the route in two days in a rush, it's better to do it over four or five days at a relaxed pace. With so many sites to see—breweries, whisky distilleries, cultural centers, etc.—one week isn't too much. It can be ridden either clockwise or counterclockwise. The latter is best, as the increasingly spectacular scenery builds up the drama of the Bealach Na Bà switchback. However, unless you've already made hotel reservations, it may be best to check the forecast and take whichever direction promises the best weather. Much of the route is on single-track road, with regular passing places. Fuel stops are few and far between and those on the West Coast close on Sunday.

The route has its own website with interactive maps:  
[www.northcoast500.com](http://www.northcoast500.com).

About the author: Christopher P. Baker is a professional travel writer, motojournalist and tour leader.

Scotland's magnificent countryside is just what the doctor ordered. Throw in a bit of whiskey tasting just for good measure. Cheers!

**WOW**

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