



The North Coast 500

Your Complete Guide to Scotland's Ultimate 516-Mile Road Trip

THIS GUIDE INCLUDES

- The full North Coast 500 route, stop by stop
- All 31 key stops with what each is famous for
- Ready-made 3, 5 and 7-day itineraries
- Where to eat: verified seafood, pies and pubs
- Whisky and gin distilleries along the route
- Practical driving tips for the Highlands
- Where to base yourself each night

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The Route at a Glance

Distance	516 miles (830 km) full loop
Start and finish	Inverness, the Capital of the Highlands
Time needed	5 days minimum, 7 ideal, 10+ for the west coast
Regions	Inverness-shire, Easter Ross, Sutherland, Caithness, Wester Ross, Black Isle
Best months	May, June and September
Roads	A-roads plus single-track with passing places
Tolls	None anywhere in Scotland
Car hire base	Inverness Airport (route start and finish)

The beauty of the North Coast 500 is its simplicity. It is a loop from Inverness, so you cannot get lost, and you can drive it clockwise (gentler east coast first) or anti-clockwise (straight to the dramatic west). Most drivers go clockwise to save the best for last.

The 31 Key Stops

#	Stop	Famous for	Road
1	Inverness	Capital of the Highlands, start and finish of the loop	A9
2	Rogie Falls	Salmon-leaping waterfall and suspension bridge	A835
3	Chanonry Point	One of Britain's best dolphin-spotting beaches	B9160
4	Glen Ord Distillery	Home of the Singleton, on the Black Isle	A832
5	Dornoch	Cathedral town with a championship golf links	A9
6	Glenmorangie Distillery	Famous Highland single malt by the Dornoch Firth	A9
7	Dunrobin Castle	Fairytale castle, the most northerly great house	A9
8	Wick	Home of Ebenezer Place, the world's shortest street	A99
9	Whaligoe Steps	365 stone steps to a hidden natural harbour	A99
10	John o' Groats	The famous far north-east corner of mainland Britain	A99
11	Duncansby Head	Towering sea stacks at the mainland's tip	minor
12	Dunnet Head	The most northerly point of mainland Britain	B855
13	Thurso & Scrabster	Northern town and ferry port, acclaimed seafood	A836
14	Durness	Smoo Cave, Balnakeil and the wild north-west	A838

#	Stop	Famous for	Road
15	Smoo Cave	Vast sea cave with a subterranean waterfall	A838
16	Balnakeil Beach	White sands and the craft village with Cocoa Mountain	minor
17	Kylesku	Iconic curved bridge, langoustines from the loch	A894
18	Wailing Widow Waterfall	A 50ft cascade from Loch na Gainmhich	A894
19	Achmelvich Beach	Crystal-clear white-sand beach near Lochinver	B869
20	Lochinver	Seafood village famous for the Lochinver Larder pies	A837
21	Ardvreck Castle	Romantic ruin on the shore of Loch Assynt	A837
22	Stac Pollaidh	Beginner-friendly peak with panoramic Assynt views	minor
23	Knockan Crag	Geology nature reserve with interpretive trails	A835
24	Corrieshalloch Gorge	A 46m gorge and waterfall with a suspension bridge	A835
25	Ullapool	Historic fishing port, seafood capital of the route	A835
26	Inverewe Garden	Subtropical gardens on the shore at Poolewe	A832
27	Torridon	Glen Torridon, the most scenic glen in Scotland	A896
28	Applecross	Remote village and the legendary Applecross Inn	minor
29	Bealach na Ba	Legendary 2,000ft pass of dramatic switchbacks	Bealach na Ba
30	Plockton	Palm-fringed conservation village on Loch Carron	minor
31	Eilean Donan Castle	Scotland's most photographed castle (optional final leg)	A87

Ready-Made Itineraries

3-Day NC500 (the time-pressed)

Day 1: Inverness to Durness via Dunrobin and John o' Groats. **Day 2:** the wild west through Assynt, Kylesku and Lochinver to Ullapool. **Day 3:** Corrieshalloch, Torridon and the Bealach na Ba back to Inverness.

5-Day NC500 (the sweet spot)

Day 1: Inverness, Black Isle dolphins, Glen Ord whisky, Dornoch. **Day 2:** John o' Groats, Duncansby Head, Caithness to Durness. **Day 3:** Smoo Cave, Balnakeil, south to Kylesku. **Day 4:** Assynt beaches, Lochinver pies, to Ullapool. **Day 5:** Corrieshalloch, Torridon, Bealach na Ba and Applecross, back to Inverness.

7-Day NC500 (the ideal)

Spread the five-day plan across seven: add a distillery morning, a slower Caithness heritage day, a full day in Assynt to climb Stac Pollaidh and swim at Achmelvich, and an unhurried Wester Ross finale with Inverewe Garden, the Bealach na Ba and a scenic return via Plockton and Eilean Donan Castle.

Where to Eat & Drink

Seafood & pubs

Seafood Shack, Ullapool - haddock wraps, langoustines, crab. **Deli-ca-sea, Ullapool** - crab sandwiches, mussels, top fish and chips. **Lochinver Larder** - famous Highland pies. **Kishorn Seafood Bar** - ultra-local shellfish with Skye views. **Kylesku Hotel** - creel-caught langoustines. **Applecross Inn** - legendary west-coast pub. **The Torridon** - three-rosette fine dining; the Torridon Inn does the famous NC500 burger. **Cocoa Mountain, Durness** - the best hot chocolate in Scotland.

Whisky & gin

Glen Ord (home of the Singleton) and Glenmorangie near the start, and Dunnet Bay Distillers (Rock Rose gin) near the top of the mainland. Enjoy a tour, but always save the dram for the end of the day. Never drink and drive the single-track roads.

Highland Driving Tips

- Drive on the left; all distances and limits are in miles.
- On single-track roads, use passing places on your left for oncoming and faster traffic. Never park in them.
- Fill up with fuel whenever you pass a station; garages are scarce in the far North and West.
- Watch for sheep and deer on rural roads, especially at dawn and dusk.
- A smaller car is an advantage on single-track roads and the Bealach na Ba.
- Save this guide and the GPS route to your phone; mobile signal is patchy.
- Book your hire car early for the busy summer months.

READY TO DRIVE THE NC500?

Compare cheap car hire Scotland deals and pick up your car at Inverness Airport to start the loop straight away. Book early to secure the best rate.

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Researched and written by the Digitalhound editorial team for getcarhire.com. Every guide is thoroughly researched with genuine local knowledge, road numbers, food stops and practical driving advice. © getcarhire.com