

[00:00:00.000] - Intro

Welcome to the UK Travel Planning Podcast. Your host is the founder of the UK Travel Planning website, Tracy Collins. In this podcast, Tracy shares destination guides, travel tips, and itinerary ideas, as well as interviews with a variety of guests who share their knowledge and experience of UK travel to help you plan your perfect UK vacation. Join us as we explore the UK from cosmopolitan cities to quaint villages, from historic castles to beautiful islands, and from the picturesque countryside to seaside towns.

[00:00:38.280] - Tracy

Hi, and welcome to Episode 42 of the UK Travel Planning podcast. This week, we welcome back Sally-Ann from North Coast Explorers, who you will remember from episodes 35 and 36 when she talked about Far North Scotland and her and her husband, Robert's tour company, North Coast Explorer tours. Well, Sally has agreed to come back onto the podcast. And in this episode, Sally-Ann is here to share some of North Coast Explorers favourite experiences in the far north of Scotland. So without further ado, let's welcome Sally-Ann back onto the podcast.

[00:01:13.680] - Sally-Ann

It's a pleasure, Tracy. I hope what we have to share, people find interesting.

[00:01:21.620] - Tracy

Oh, I'm sure. Absolutely. I'm sure. I know episodes 35 and 36 have been very well received and a lot of interest in an area of Scotland that people hadn't necessarily had on their radar. We talked about before, everybody goes Edinburgh or Sky. Let's find out about far north of Scotland and exactly why people should go up and visit there. I know in this episode you're going to talk about your favourite types of experiences that people can have if they travel up to the far north of Scotland. I'm very excited to listen to this as well because obviously I have explored that area, but not as much as I would like to. I'm sure I'm going to get lots of travel inspiration as well in this episode. So obviously, we've had a little bit of a chat before we start the podcast. So you split the experiences into different categories. So would you like to quickly talk us through that?

[00:02:17.350] - Sally-Ann

Yes, of course. It's been quite a hard podcast to think about, really. Not because there's not plenty of things to talk about. But yes, we have when we do our tours, we've actually created a database of over two, two and a half thousand locations across our area that we can pick and choose from, depending on what people enjoy. So yes, we have a real depth of information and places to visit.

[00:02:50.980] - Tracy

Did I hear that right? Two and a half thousand in your database?

[00:02:54.680] - Sally-Ann

Yes. Wow. This is our research. So there's lots of key places that are more familiar and more talked about. But what we've done is obviously tried to find all the other places as well and things that you probably wouldn't know about. So, yeah, two and a half thousand hours and locations we've got on this database that we can utilise when we plan our tours. So trying just to pick a handful for this is quite hard.

[00:03:25.340] - Tracy

Yeah, I can imagine.

[00:03:26.010] - Sally-Ann

But we've done it. I sat down with Robert, so it's been a partnership.

[00:03:32.800] - Tracy

I was going to say, did you agree or was there a bit of a time where you was a bit of no, I don't agree, or did you... Obviously, you came to the agreement at the end, but was there a bit of shifting of things?

[00:03:43.750] - Sally-Ann

Well, I think the way we did it is we both talked about our favourites, and some were the same, some are different. So I'll tell you as we go along, some were very easy, I think, to agree on. Others, it was only fair and right that we picked one or two that we each really enjoyed. But I don't think there's anything neither of us had any disagreement over, really. So it's been quite an interesting thing. But the way we're going to split it, and we're really skimming the surface, I have to make this obvious, but we're going to split it by different areas. So the first thing I'm going to talk about is the scenic side of things, which is something we've talked about in the previous podcast, but the scenery up here is amazing. And so the very first place I just want to highlight is Duncansby Stacks. I don't know if you saw that one on your way around, Tracy.

[00:04:45.080] - Tracy

I don't think I did. It was on our list, but we didn't get there.

[00:04:49.880] - Sally-Ann

Right. So this is Duncansby Stacks. This is a real tongue twister. Sandstone Sea Stacks. And say that quick. I wouldn't try that. No. They're both based in the very far north east of Scotland, so very close to John O'Groats. In fact, just around the Coast from John O'Groats. And they are a very spectacular natural place to visit. They're very popular. But the wonderful thing about the area is that it's just very natural. You go out almost onto a headland, there's a lighthouse there. And then you look southward down the Coast and you see these stunning sea stacks. They're about 60 metres out from the coastline. They're about 60 metres high and they're shaped like witches' hats. They're in these triangles almost, but they're just stunning. And one of the reasons... This was actually my choice. And one of the reasons I picked it is just because it's the space and the freedom and the fresh air and the views that you get. You're quite high up there for the area and so you can look back over towards John O'Groats. You can look north and see the Orkney Islands. You look south down the coastline and see the cliffs, and you can walk all the way along the coastline past the stacks. And it's just a beautiful space. And it's one of my places fortunately, we don't live too far away. So it's one of my go to places when I need some space and some breathing air.

[00:06:38.480] - Tracy

I could do with that at the moment.

[00:06:40.600] - Sally-Ann

It's just beautiful. The other thing about it is there's quite a lot of wild potential of wildlife. You get a lot of sea birds on the cliffs. In the summer, sometimes there are puffins if you're lucky. Also, you might possibly see dolphins. And this is the area where in the summer you may well see orca in the seas around that coastline. So it's not just the nature side of it in terms of the landscape, but also the wildlife that the area has to offer. So don't just go to John O'Groats and get the picture at the signpost. Do just go around the corner a little bit. There are signposts and you can take this little single track road up and then go and see Duncansby Stacks.

[00:07:33.700] - Tracy

Okay, I'll be adding that into my itinerary next time and go up there because, yes, we did the photo and then we headed down to Inverness, unfortunately. But yes, I said there were plenty of things we missed.

[00:07:47.830] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, and it's so easy as well to do that. But I guess that's why we're talking about one or two of the things. Some things are more obvious and some people probably would never know. So hopefully it's of interest.

[00:08:01.000] - Sally-Ann

Yeah. So what have you got next on your list, Sally-Ann?

[00:08:03.650] - Sally-Ann

So next on my list is also one of my choices, actually. And it is Castle Varrich. And this is on the North Coast, so it's right on the North Coast at the village of Tongue. It's midway, if you look at the top of

Scotland, it's almost in the middle. It's not a castle, as many of you might imagine, a very formal castle that you can go and visit and enter and experience. This is actually just a 16th century tower that's actually built on the site of an earlier Viking fortress. To be honest, nobody really knows what purpose it served or even exactly when it was built. But where it's situated is on this little headland in the middle of the Kyle of Tongue, which is, for those that don't know, it's where the sea heads inland. And it's as you approach the mountains as you head West across the North Coast. So you can walk up to the castle, which is a really nice walk in itself. And then you get up, you can walk into the castle. They've actually put steps so you can go right up to the top of it now. And you can get a 300 and 60 degree view all the way around the kyle you can see the mountains, you can see out to sea. And it is just a really fantastic spot for views. But one of the reasons I like it is not just the views. It's the fact that actually the landscape around there holds, again, a lot of history and a lot of stories. You've got everything from the fact that it played a significant role in the Jacobite uprising. A French frigate ran aground in the Kyle, and all the locals stole the gold from the ship. So there's lots of stories. There's also a fantastic story about John Lennon, one of the Beatles, all music lovers out there. He had connections with the North Coast of Scotland. He had aunts that lived up here. And without going into the whole story right now, he had a car crash driving around that Kyle back in 1969. So yeah, there's lots of stories and lots of information about the area as well as the beautiful views. So one of my favourites.

[00:10:41.030] - Tracy

Wow. That does sound another one I missed unfortunately.

[00:10:46.380] - Sally-Ann

Well, I think it's one of those things, it's very easy to drive the route around the Coast. And it's beautiful to do that. But if you have the time and you can stop and see these places, you'll certainly get slightly more from it. And the more you read up or you've got somebody on the ground who knows a bit more, then you'll learn some of the stories behind.

[00:11:10.360] - Tracy

It, too. Absolutely. So excellent. Yes. Well, every time I listen to you anyway, I just go, Yes. Well, after we did it the first time, I was like, I'm going to do this again slower. But every time I talk to you, I'm like, yes, we're definitely doing it again.

[00:11:24.760] - Sally-Ann

I think the idea about this podcast is just to give some insights into some specific places people can see because it's very easy to talk generally about our area. So that's why I feel this is important but having said that, the next place I just want to mention, I did mention, I think, in one of the podcasts, but I have no choice but to mention it because it's my husband's favourite place. And this is the Flow Country, which is inland in the North Highland. So we're just been talking about Tongue on the North Coast. If you head directly South, really from there, you head into what is known as the Flow Country. And this is a very vast landscape. It's quite a flat wilderness surrounded by hills and mountains in the distance. It's got quite a lot of lochs. And I think Rob particularly loves it because he finds the true emptiness and silence that the place gives is just staggering when we live in what is perceived as such a busy country generally. There's a large population in a small area. The UK really isn't that big overall. But you can go into the middle of the Flow Country and just feel completely on your own and with nature. And on top of that, you've got all sorts of wildlife around. You've definitely got the red deer. You've got a number of all sorts of bird life. If you're lucky, you can see golden eagles and osprey, golden plovers. If you're a bird person, it's definitely the place to go. So yes, it's just his favourite place and he loves to go out there and escape, I think, from any form of normality, really. Yeah.

[00:13:27.220] - Tracy

Just go out and relax out there, I guess it's that place. Is it that you feel that you could shed all of the worries of 21st century life, I guess, isn't it? Going somewhere like that.

[00:13:39.150] - Sally-Ann

Completely. It's very different and always worth a slight detour to head inland and experience. And

there's a lot of history there as well. We do a single day tour out that way. And things you'd never know were hidden in the landscape. Everything from, if I say, a wind harp, and stone circles, and highland clearance villages, and even a nuclear bunker. Wow. So there's all sorts of things hiding out in the landscape as well.

[00:14:09.490] - Tracy

Incredible. Definitely somewhere to add into my itinerary. I can tell you that. I'm just making some notes here, Sally. And then your next one, now, I don't know how to pronounce this, Kailskew?

[00:14:24.870] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, it's Kylesku which is a settlement out really out on the West Coast. And I use the word settlement rather than town or village because in the North Highland, so often you might see just a handful of properties. So there isn't really enough there to call it even a village. But certainly, there are people living and occupying the area. So the area of Kylesku, again, this is another one of Robert's choices. If you know anything about the area or certainly the North Coast 500 route. You might well have seen a photograph at Kylesku. There is a sweeping bridge that goes across the Kyle. And I think it's particularly well known because it's an unusual site in the North Highlands to have this modern structure, this sweeping, quite elegant bridge across this vast natural landscape. So it's known for that. There's also a very good hotel there, the Kylesku Hotel, which obviously is a good stopping point for people. So you've got that. But the reason Robert enjoys it so much is that if you travel from the North, you come down from Durness and travel down through what's almost like a moonscape of a landscape. And suddenly you get to Kylesku, and then you see this bridge and you've got the mountains there and the lochs and then there's vegetation, and life, and it feels like you've just gone into a slightly different world. And he really enjoys that. And the thing is, again, about the area, and I think this is the other thing, yet you can drive the route you drive over the bridge is quite good roads over that side just in that particular area. But you've got the lock that runs in front of the hotel. You can take a boat trip down the lock, which might introduce you to the wildlife in the area, certainly takes you up to what is the highest waterfall in the UK. I'm not even going to try and pronounce the name because it's quite complicated one. But when the waterfall is in full flow, it's actually three times the height of Niagara Falls. Oh, wow. And that isn't visible from the road. You have to go and find it. So you've got this boat tour that you can take. There's a beautiful walk all the way along the loch. And yet again, you've got wildlife lurking around and the opportunity to possibly see seals in the loch, possibly see eagles if you're really lucky.

[00:17:11.200] - Sally-Ann

But again, just another very special area that has a lot to offer. And of course, when you've finished all your activities, you can go to the hotel, you can go and have tea and cake, go and enjoy the view down the loch. And yeah, another one of our favourite spots.

[00:17:27.810] - Tracy

Absolutely. That sounds very nice, I have to say. And I know you've got another one on the list that you've got in brackets, but you have to talk about it because the name of it is amazing. Wailing Widow Falls.

[00:17:42.650] - Sally-Ann

Yes, actually, and that's not too far from the area I've just been talking about. It's not the waterfall I was talking about, but it's in the same area. We have a lot of waterfalls up in the North Highlands, so I'd be surprised if you didn't see at least one. But this one is my personal favourite and I don't really know why. I just think it could have been the experience when I saw it. It's not that easy to get to. I know some people try and walk along the canyon towards it at the lower level and we don't do that. We certainly don't do it on our tours because for health and safety reasons, we wouldn't recommend it. You can go over the top. You do need good, well, I say, walking boots, possibly even, well, well, wellington boots, rubber boots, mud boots, I think some of our Americans have called them, because it can become very boggy and you need to be very careful. But the view at the top, you've got the loch to one side that the waterfall comes out and then you're standing at the top of the waterfall and it's just a really, really atmospheric place. And so to the name, the name comes apparently because a shepherd was on his way home one night from his work and a storm had come up. So it wasn't a very

pleasant night. He decided to take a shortcut and he slipped and fell into the Canyon, fell down the waterfall, and hence he left his wailing widow. So that is the story behind the Wailing Widow Waterfall.

[00:19:28.720] - Tracy

Okay, well, that's a good story.

[00:19:31.740] - Sally-Ann

Yeah. There are lots and lots of stories about fables and legends in the North Highlands, and they're fantastic. I could probably do a whole podcast on them, actually. Well, I can imagine that. It is interesting.

[00:19:44.640] - Tracy

Yeah, I can imagine the oral history up there will be something, obviously, the stories get passed down from generation to generation as well, which is really important. I was previously a history teacher in a previous life, so keeping track of oral histories, so important for those stories to get passed down and whether we record them now or video now, obviously, we've got the advantage of doing that. But it's great because there's always a story behind these names. I just also want to ask Sally-Ann, because obviously we've talked about some absolutely beautiful places. So if I could have some photos, that would be fantastic of each of these places as well, because we can share those on the website so that people can actually... Because obviously, I can visualize them when you're talking about it, but I'm sure I know there's going to be listeners that are going to send, I really would like to see what this looks like.

[00:20:33.970] - Sally-Ann

Absolutely. No, I think it's really important. We can certainly sort that out.

[00:20:38.460] - Tracy

Fabulous. So history. So your next category is history. So obviously a lot of history in the far north of Scotland. So you've got two places that I don't even want to try and pronounce, so I'll let you do that.

[00:20:50.180] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, there's lots and lots of history. But in fact, actually, I've got two places to talk about. One Robert chose, one I chose. The other the first one is Achavanich. You want to learn that, Tracy? Achavanich. And it means field of stones. Now, this is up in the Caithness countryside. So again, in the Northeast of the area. And we do have quite a lot of very old history up here in the North Highlands, Neolithic Bronze Age, all those things, lots of cairns, standing stones, all this type of thing if you're interested. But this particular site is a Bronze Age site. It's a 4,000 year old... It's a unique stone enclosure. And why it's unique is it was two things actually, but currently it's in a horseshoe shape, so it's not a full circle. They don't know whether it was a full circle originally or not, but it's in the shape of a horseshoe. But the most important thing is that the stones... When you get a stone circle like Stonehenge or the ring of Brodgar or Orkney, normally the stones face inwards, but these stones don't. They are perpendicular to the centre, so they're at right angles to the centre, which is really unusual. And there's been so much research, but people don't really know why that's the case. But when you stand there, it's a really atmospheric place. It's quite close to a loch. It's in the very flat, open countryside. Normally with these things, there's meanings with sunrise and sunset in terms of the direction of things. But I think the thing that really gets my husband is the fact that it's not just the stones, but very close to this site, there was a burial of quite an important woman. And she was found in a very unusual grave, and it's cut into the nearest rocky outcrop to this set of circles. A lady called Ava, who died 4,000 years ago. So we know it's all of the same time. And what is really special about this, and you talk about photographs, so I think we might have to include one of these. The archaeologists and the historians have actually reconstructed her face. They've scanned her skull. They've used reconstructive techniques. They've added muscle and skin. They've used DNA analysis on her on the remains, and they've defined the colour of her hair and her eye colour and the colour of her skin. And even for me, my husband loves history. It's not my first passion. I think it's fascinating because it brings an area that just looks like a piece of landscape to life. And it makes it really real. And when you look at this photograph, this picture that they've created, yeah, you could be looking at somebody that lives down the road. So it's really exciting, actually, and really interesting.

[00:24:06.960] - Tracy  
Brings the past to life.

[00:24:08.230] - Sally-Ann  
Yeah. So that's Robert's favourite.

[00:24:10.790] - Tracy  
Yeah, I love the sound of that. That definitely appeals to me. But that ability to bridge the gap between... We're talking 4,000 years that we can actually see what somebody looked like and where they were living and where they were buried, 4,000, it's amazing. Absolutely. I love that thing.

[00:24:31.400] - Sally-Ann  
It is. And it's very special. And I think that's part of the North Highlands is there's been no disruption to the area in real terms. There is a very small single track road near to the... Which enables us to get access to the area. But it's still so natural. So you can really take yourself back. Yeah, I can imagine. It's quite amazing. And talking of taking yourself back, you see the other place, which is just one of my favourites and I just find it so evocative. It's Am Ploc Church. It's actually an open air church. It's out over on the West Coast in the Torridon area, for anybody that's familiar. It came about because of the religious disruption of the 1840s. This is more modern history we're talking about in real terms. This is when there was a big split in the Church in Scotland. Enormous problems ensued. And about, I think 450 ministers left the main Church body to set up their own version and it caused all sorts of problems. So the local crofters couldn't use their own church. Those that wanted to change and move on and go with the times, I suppose. And so they created... They weren't allowed to build a formal Church because the landowner wouldn't let them. So this piece of wasteland as it was, they took over and created what is an open air Church. It's like a natural amphitheatre in the rock. It's very close to a loch. It's overlooked by the mountains. I can't tell you how atmospheric this place is. Whether you've got any interest in religion or the church or not, just to go and stand in this place or sit in this place because you've got stones that have been placed to almost create about four rows where you can sit. There's also a natural standing stone which acts as a pulpit. Just to imagine being there in all weathers in this natural environment, I just find amazing. And I suppose how committed the local people were as well. So one of my personal favourites, which, again, you would never see from the main route or the main road. Yeah, absolutely.

[00:27:15.020] - Tracy  
So the next category, you've gone on to another one of my favourite things to talk about, food. Yeah, just.

[00:27:22.700] - Sally-Ann  
A little bit different this one, I tell you. Well, I looked at this and I thought, again, I could spend all morning talking about it, I think. But obviously, food and drink is, well, I think it's important to most people, certainly if you're on holiday. I've only picked two spots and I could have done all sorts. We have Whiskey Distilleries, gin distilleries, cafes, restaurants, seafood, all of the above up here. But there's two I picked and the first is the Lochinver Larder. Well, we call it the pie shop, which is based on the West Coast at Lochinver, a little town out on the West Coast. And it's a small cafe and take away. It does serve breakfast. But what it's known for are its pies, which is why it's locally known as the pie shop. And forgive me for saying this, but I didn't realise, in fact, until Robert and I were discussing this podcast, that some of our guests actually don't know what a pie is. We've had people come and we've put it on our itinerary and they didn't even know what they were heading to. So if I can just explain.

[00:28:45.610] - Tracy  
So do you want to describe it? Because obviously the Australians, Australians will because Australians say they have the best pies in the world, but I'm not going to agree with that. But would you like to describe a pie?

[00:28:57.600] - Sally-Ann

It's a baked good. So you've got a pastry dough, some form of pastry, and it's all encased and it's baked, and it can have, well, it can have any filling that you want, to be honest. And the Lochinver pie shop does savoury fillings and sweet fillings.

[00:29:16.720] - Tracy

So do you have a favourite, Sally-Ann, I'm sorry. Do you have a favourite out of those savoury or sweet?

[00:29:22.630] - Sally-Ann

Well, it's a difficult one. Can I have one of each?

[00:29:25.350] - Tracy

You can do, absolutely. Would Robert be the same? He'd want one of each or is he more sweet or savoury?

[00:29:33.750] - Sally-Ann

Probably would go with the savoury but the one thing I would say is sometimes our guests, when they realise, they decide, Okay, yeah, definitely, we'll have one of each. They don't need to eat anything else for the rest of the day, I can assure you. They're filling. But my favourite, savour one is probably venison and cranberry. But they do all sorts. So you've got steak and ale, you've got traditional Scottish haggis, neeps and tatt, you've got vegetarian, you've got chicken curry, you've got I think there's a cheesy one as well. But you've got all sorts of savoury ones. And when it comes to sweet, clearly they do traditional ones like a good apple pie. That's what we would have over here. But I think mine is probably chocolate, almond and pear

[00:30:30.300] - Tracy

Yes, that sounds good too.

[00:30:34.370] - Sally-Ann

Yeah. So they do these pies and within our tours, we often use that as a lunch stop. What we actually do is normally pre order them as a take away and then Robert will drive somewhere just a little way away to a beautiful scenic spot and then you can have a picnic with your pies looking out at the beautiful views. But it is a popular spot up in the North Highlands and it's well worth it. Absolutely.

[00:31:06.930] - Tracy

Definitely. And then the next one we've got is the River Bothy Tea Room.

[00:31:11.160] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, that's right. I know lots of visitors ask about afternoon teas, or they have an expectation of tea and cake. We don't have lots of what I would call really traditional cafes up here across the North Highlands. We do have a handful, and we do have some very good bakeries and places that you can pick up some very yummy food. But the River Bothy is a little cafe on the East Coast. It's at a place called Berriedale, and it's a little family run tea room, also deli. So it sells some extra food items and also a gift shop as well. It sells quite a lot of local crafts and things that are produced by a lot of the local people. But some really nice products. And yeah, they serve breakfast, they serve lunch, and they serve delicious cakes all day and every day. And it's a very good place to go. It's a beautiful little spot. The owner, she's delightful and very committed to what she does. The staff are lovely. I've had breakfast, I've had lunch, I've had cake, I've done afternoon tea. We highly recommend it for sure.

[00:32:39.960] - Tracy

That's good to know. Those are the types of things that you don't know unless you live in that area, you see?

[00:32:46.690] - Sally-Ann

No, absolutely. And things like that are very important.

[00:32:50.860] - Tracy

Absolutely. So we've got the fourth category now. So we're going to talk about wildlife, which I know a lot of people are always very interested to know what they can see when they visit the UK. And obviously they're going to follow Scotland. What animal life can we expect to see?

[00:33:07.340] - Sally-Ann

Well, we have varied wildlife, I'm sure. We've touched on some of it, and we've touched on obviously the red deer, lots of bird life, puffins we talked about previously. But there is a lot of sea life. Obviously, a lot of what we're talking about is a coastal route, so you have quite a lot of opportunities to see things. But we've got everything from all the different seabirds, including puffins, seals, porpoises, dolphins, the orca I mentioned. And I think if you're not used to either being near the Coast to have the opportunity or certainly you don't live somewhere where you're likely to see them, it can be quite an exhilarating experience. I think I mentioned previously, we live quite near to the Coast where we are. We're very lucky. I have to say, when we first bought the house, we walked down to the shoreline and went for a walk along the shore and literally stood there and went, That's seals we can see, isn't it? That's seals on our shore that's like 10 or 15 minutes walk from our house. And it was just staggering. I lived in the middle of the country previously, so this was just amazing so it's very exciting. And what I would say is where particularly seals are concerned, you can see them around quite a lot of the coastline. I know people always say where there are certain spots and we have certain spots, we take our guests, which pretty much guaranteed. But obviously it does seasonality can depend with different things. Orca are often seen in the May June time. And there is a week up here in Caithness that they call Orca Watch, where they have specific people located around the Coast, keeping their eyes open and noting them. And last year, we had quite a lot of sightings, and I was thrilled to see my first Orca up here last year. And I found it incredibly exciting. It was just mind blowing to think that it was in its natural environment. And it was off our coastline. But often the best way to see, particularly the sea life, there are a number of boat tours around the area. We can have the links to these certainly on the show notes. But there's one down in Cromarty I know that people often talk about the Black Isle and going to see the dolphins down there, which is very popular. But there's also a boat trip that's out that way. You've got John O'Groat's ferries who do a wildlife tour every afternoon during the summer that actually often goes around Duncansby Stacks that I was talking about earlier. And there's another one out of Wick that goes down the East Coast as well, Caithness Seacoast tours. And then there's also a couple on the West Coast as well. So one that goes out of Loch Inver. And yes, they all have the possibility of seeing sea life and certainly the birds on the cliffs. And if you've got chance and you have sea legs, of course. I highly recommend it as an alternative way of seeing the area and the coastline.

[00:36:35.400] - Tracy

And it's always a nice way to see that because obviously you get a completely different perspective when you're on the sea looking back at the land as compared to when you're always on the land looking out towards the sea. So the opportunity to get out there and do that is if you've got the chance, definitely. And just say if you've got the sea legs for it. I know Doug would be going, No chance, because he gets very sea sick just looking at boats he definitely would.

[00:37:01.260] - Sally-Ann

To be honest, I do too, and I need a very calm sea, really. But having said that, I have done some of these and they are worthwhile if you can.

[00:37:11.920] - Tracy

Definitely. So the last category you've got is, it's something that people might not associate with Scotland, but I've seen so many wonderful pictures. I think it's Lewis and Harris, just beautiful beaches. And so obviously the far north of Scotland, you have got some absolutely stunning beaches up there as well, haven't you?

[00:37:33.070] - Sally-Ann

We do, yeah. We really do. And you're right, Lewis and Harris and the Hebrides, out of Hebrides. I haven't been there yet either, and I'm desperate to go and explore. But the North Coast of the mainland itself has equally beautiful beaches. And yeah, I've got two. But the first one is particularly poignant to both Robert and myself it's Balnakeil Bay and it's the far northwest corner of Scotland.



And we visited Balnakeil on our very first trip to Scotland 20 years ago. And we actually stayed in Durness, which is the nearest village to Balnakeil. And this particular bay, I think the reason it resonated with us was because it's a big sweeping sandy beach for a start. It's large. But also there is a ruined church right on the end of the bay, the closest end where you arrive. I think the combination of this ruined church and this beautiful sandy beach just evokes these wonderful feelings of space and freedom and history and everything all wrapped up that the North Highlands has to offer, to be honest. The church is ruined now, but it's 16th century, we believe, but built on the site of a former church. It has its own history. There's a couple of interesting burials there. Beautiful spot to be at sunset, to be honest with you. But it's a fantastic place for walks. You can walk along the beach and then out to the head. You're very close to Cape Wrath, which people may or may not have heard of. You need a little boat to get over there. And then there's a little minibus that will take you out to the far side where there's a lighthouse and some of the deepest cliffs. It's just amazing. But yeah, it's just a very special place. And it just felt like the end of the earth and the place of peace for us when we first visited.

[00:40:02.100] - Tracy

Amazing. And then the last one you got to talk about is Hidden Beach.

[00:40:08.550] - Sally-Ann

Yes. So yeah, I left this till last and I don't know if it's a good idea because people might not be very happy with me.

[00:40:15.920] - Tracy

Yeah, I was just wondering the fact it's called Hidden Beach is maybe because people don't want anybody else to find it.

[00:40:22.580] - Sally-Ann

Well, we've called it Hidden Beach. And the truth is that my husband's done lots and lots of research across the whole area. And one of the things he did was a geology course as part of his learnings, I suppose. And this is a spot that he visited. And then he started to put it on our guest itineraries and he put it on as Hidden Beach. Well, I hadn't been and I didn't know where it was. And I was like, what is this place you keep talking about? And then one day, in fact, actually, it was not long after lockdown had been lifted with COVID, and we were able to get out and travel a bit further afield. And he said, would you like to go and see Hidden Beach? I said, yes, please. And I'm not going to say where it is because this is a very special spot. Clearly, it's on the coastline. I'll say it is on the North Coast, but it's not immediately obvious. And it's a special place where you're quite close to other beaches. But as he said, rarely, if ever, do you see anybody else on this beach. And the reason it's so special is, apart from it being a beautiful sandy beach and you've got beautiful views out to the North, it's scattered with these amazing rock formations and different shapes, different sizes. But the colours are just stunning. I mean, it's all to do with the geology, but you get purple lines and blue lines and stunning reds against dark grays. I'm not a rocks person, but I found it absolutely beautiful and just a very special place because it's hidden and not many people know it. So yeah, I think that's just an example of the fact that sometimes you have to tread a little bit off the beaten path to find some real hidden gems, as well as the more obvious and popular sites that people enjoy.

[00:42:35.100] - Tracy

Absolutely. Obviously, if people want to contact you and ask you guys to put together some tours for them, a multi day tour, obviously you've got your huge database, you've mentioned some amazing places in this podcast, so they can choose those places to go to. Obviously, Hidden Beach would be something that they would have to come on a tour with you guys to actually be able to discover. I think it would be worth Sally-Ann just talking because I know everybody's going to be listening to this and going, Well, why did we not know about the amazingness that is for North Scotland until this point? Obviously, this is the third podcast episode we've now been sharing where you are lucky enough to live in the world. And it's been lovely that you've been able to come on and share it with our listeners. So if people contact you and they say, we've listened to the podcast, we just want to come and visit. So what happens after they contact you, after the email you send you?

[00:43:35.900] - Sally-Ann

So obviously, we welcome people getting in touch. That's the best way because our tours are not standard. They're all bespoke. For us, the first questions we like to ask is, Well, how long have you got? How many days do you have? Obviously, roughly, hopefully, you know when in the year you're looking to come. That helps us from a seasonality point of view and what it's best to see at that time of year. But then we ask you, what are you most interested in? Are you interested in history or wildlife? Or is it good photographic spots where you can get the perfect photograph or whatever? We ask all these things so that we can then tailor the tour. Obviously, for some people, it's, well, we just want a really good feel of the area, and that's fine, too. We can put a general tour together. So we have that conversation and once that's done, we might put a rough outline itinerary together to get a feel for whether that suits what the guest is looking for and if they agree with that, we do ask for a deposit. But once that's all signed and sealed, then we'll put together a detailed itinerary. And that can be anything. We do do some single day tours in certain areas, but otherwise it would be a multiple day tour, but it could be anything really. And we talk to you about the areas and how it can best work for both you and us, and you get the most out of it. So yeah, conversation is the best way. We can do it via email, obviously, but it might be a little bit more of to-ing and froing. But yeah, we welcome discussion, that's for sure.

[00:45:22.260] - Tracy

Absolutely. And I guess every tour that you take is going to be different because you say it's the multi day one.

[00:45:29.260] - Sally-Ann

It is, absolutely. That's right. We've taken a number of tours recently, and I'd say every single one of them has been different. And sometimes we completely understand. I think I received an email the other day, we know we don't know what we don't know. Yeah, absolutely. We completely understand that for most people, actually, you don't have an awful lot of information potentially about the area and therefore you're relying on us. But we want to be able to share what we can and make it as easy for you as possible. And so we'll talk you through all that and give you as much idea as we can so that you can then make a decision. Well, actually, should I do three days or four days? Well, no, I think I should do four or whatever it happens to be. But yes. And if there's specific places people want to enjoy or they definitely want to include a whiskey distillery or whatever it might be, I mean, it might be they want to include a boat trip, or there's a zip line as well on the route if you're into those sorts of things. So yes, we can include whatever the guest wants to have included.

[00:46:43.310] - Tracy

Absolutely, because there's so much to choose. I'm just going to quickly because you keep mentioning whiskey distilleries and gin distilleries. So just going to ask how obviously you pop in and visit the distilleries. So are there quite a few to choose from up there? Because obviously I know Speycide and some of the island distilleries, but not being a whiskey connoisseur.

[00:47:07.140] - Sally-Ann

No, we have. I think it's related to something I said in a previous podcast about the fact that there's more human history on the East Coast. So actually, you will find a handful of whiskey distilleries as you go up the East Coast. I'm thinking there's about five off the top of my head. I hope I haven't missed one. So yeah, there's about five whiskey distilleries. There's gin, obviously has become more and more popular in recent times. There's a very good gin and vodka distillery up in the Northeast corner. We've also got a, I think there was another rum and gin distillery on the North, and there's a gin distillery on the West Coast. So yeah, they all exist. There's also a couple of breweries, one down in the Black Isle and one actually at John O'Groats, the John O'Groats Brewery. And so you've got local beers as well. And the John O'Groats Brewery has got a little bar. It's located in the oldest house in John O'Groats, not far from the signpost. So there are drink suppliers, but if you want the West Coast, there's less out there. Most of it is on the East.

[00:48:30.000] - Tracy

Okay, well, there's plenty of things for people to think about when it comes to coming up to Far North Scotland to choose from and hopefully get in touch with you very soon as well to talk to you about the

tours that you offer as well. Is there anything else that you can think of? Obviously, we've done this, the third podcast now, Sally-Ann, and so we're really getting then Far North Scotland out there, hopefully to all our listeners. Is there anything else that you can think of that you'd like to share? Obviously, we'll have you back on the podcast later on in the year because we can talk about how the summer season has gone and how it's been and possibly going into the winter because I'd be actually quite interested to think the difference between your tours in the summer as opposed to the winter? And do you go the whole year? Do you do 12 months of the year or times of the year when you don't do tours?

[00:49:23.700] - Sally-Ann

Well, our main season, I would say, is March to October. The main reason for that is that the daylight hours are much shorter in the winter. So obviously you have a much shorter day. It's not to say we wouldn't do a tour over the winter, and we have, but people need to understand the expectation of that, really. But it would be interesting. There are some key differences between summer and winter up here, and I'd be very happy to discuss it further for sure. Absolutely. I think the one thing I would say is I really do realise that this is quite a big area that we cover, and that's why people will probably have lots of questions. And all I'd say is if people do have questions, no question is too crazy, then they should either contact us directly or come through your website or your Facebook page and ask any questions that you have about our area. And we'd be very happy to try and help and answer them.

[00:50:27.970] - Tracy

Absolutely. And I say we'll put links to your business pages and your Facebook pages and your website. And obviously you've got an Instagram as well. I know I was following an Instagram, so you've got that. So we'll put all those links in as well. So obviously people get in touch with Sally Anne. She's the expert on this part of the world. So if you've got questions, Sally-Ann and Robert are the people to talk to. Absolutely. So I'm going to wrap it up again, Sally, because this has been another fantastic episode. Thanks again so much for coming on the podcast. It's always lovely to talk to you and to learn about a part of the world that I love very much, but just to learn so much more about it and that in depth knowledge that you've got and love of the area which comes across so strongly. So thanks so much.

[00:51:18.250] - Sally-Ann

Well, thank you, Tracy. We do love our area and we love to share it. And yeah, we would love to see some of you listeners come up here and visit. Absolutely.

[00:51:31.380] - Tracy

Absolutely. Thanks so much. Once again, thanks so much to Sally-Ann for coming on to the podcast and talking all about far north Scotland. It really is an absolutely beautiful part of the world. So I'd highly recommend adding it into your itinerary. And honestly, considering visiting that part of Scotland, it is absolutely beautiful. I just want to also say that all links to everything we've talked about in today's episode will be at [uktravelplanning.com/episode-42](http://uktravelplanning.com/episode-42). I'd also just like to give a quick shout out to Erin RGA from Australia, who left us a fantastic review, five stars, my favourite podcast. This podcast is my favourite. Every Tuesday, I whip out my air pods at work and I'm never disappointed. I'm currently planning a UK trip and I've learned so much. Also, check out their Facebook community. Thanks so much, Erin. It was lovely when that review picking up on my phone today. It always makes me smile. So thanks so much for taking the time to do that. So again, please pop over to the website. We've got lots and lots of resources over there. You can find links to Sally-Ann and Robert's company, North Coast Explorer tours as well. So have a look over there and get in contact with them, book a tour. Until next week, though, all I want to say is happy UK travel planning.