

Speaker 1:

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.

Tracy:

Hello and welcome to the UK Travel Planning Podcast. Do you dream of exploring Scotland? For many people, the ultimate Scottish road trip is the 516 mile scenic route around the north coast of Scotland known as the North Coast 500. In this episode of the podcast, we chat to guest Chris Weeble, who has recently returned with his partner from a nine-day trip following the North Coast 500 around Northern Scotland in their self-built camper van. In this episode, Chris shares his day-to-day itinerary, highlights of the trip, and tips for anyone planning to drive the North Coast 500. Hear about destinations, including the Isle of Skye, Smoo Caves, Puffin Cove, Ullapool, and their two-day trip to the Orkneys. Also discover where the Northern most point of the UK is (clue: it isn't John O'Groats), why Chris decided to drive the route anticlockwise and his experience of driving Applecross, not only one of the most scenic drives in Scotland, but also the road with the steepest ascent of any road climb in the UK.

Tracy:

Hi, Chris. It's so great to have you on the podcast today. I'm pleased that you agreed to join us and talk about your recent explorations of Scotland, particularly on the North Coast 500. Would you like to just introduce yourself?

Chris:

Yeah, sure, yeah. So my name's Chris. What can I say about myself? Yeah, so yeah, I'm born raised and spent virtually all my life in the UK, apart from a year where I lived in Australia in my early twenties. As a job, I'm a nurse or originally trained as a nurse. But after doing that for 10 years, went into teaching, worked at universities for 10 years. And now I run my own company going around, sort of delivering training to nursing homes and place like that. So yeah, that's me.

Tracy:

So we were really excited to hear about your trip around Scotland because we are going to be doing it in a couple of weeks' time. Actually, by the time this podcast comes out, I think probably the week after this podcast comes out, we'll actually be starting to do our own drive around Scotland, which we're really excited about. Would you like to give us a brief overview of your trip, where you went, who you went with, and just kind of, yeah, just a little bit of an overview of your actual trip?

Chris:

We basically went round the North Coast 500 in a self-built camper van. It's probably one of the only things I've actually ever built myself. Yeah. So it's been a long time in the making. I bought the van about 18 months ago, and it's taken virtually the whole 18 months to actually build on and off, because unfortunately I lost my dad and my partner lost her dad. So it kind of went on the back burner for a while, but we finally managed to get it finished a few months ago.

Chris:

But the trip has been planned sort of a long time before that. Probably about a year ago, I kind thought of the idea of actually doing the North Coast 500, and it was actually another nurse who actually gave me the idea. One day when I was out training once, the subject of traveling came up and I mentioned I was building a camper van. And this nurse I was teaching said, "Have you ever done the North Coast 500?" I said, "What's that?" And she said, "Well, basically, it's a..." She basically just described it as a tour around the coast around Scotland. I thought, "Well, that's sounds nice," because I've been to parts of Scotland in the past, but never seen all of it. So it kind of went from there.

Chris:

So I did some sort of preliminary research into what it was all about, what the route actually was and things, and then spoke to my other half, Toni, who came with me, and she also helped me build the camper van. And plans went afoot from there. So, even up until the day before, we were still planning where to go and that sort of thing.

Chris:

But the traditional way is to go sort of up the west coast and up to north of Scotland, then down the east coast. But we just decided to do it back to front, mainly because of what we read on some of the blogs and things; that the more scenic side was the west side. So we thought if we get the east coast out the way first, then we could spend more days coming down the west coast to sort of see all the scenic stuff, because we didn't want to sort of rush through the west coast and then find actually we've got four or five days to go down the east coast and there's nothing to see. So...

Tracy:

No, that's a good idea. We actually are doing it the other way around, so it'll be quite interesting to kind of, I guess, compare that. So, where did you actually start from? Was Inverness your start point?

Chris:

Well, no. Well, that was the thing. Although we kind of did the North Coast 500, it was kind of our own version. We went off on a few diversions, and we sort of cut out some bits we weren't interested in. The first day of the north coast, of the trip, was actually a mammoth journey for me because we went up on the Friday night; but on the Friday daytime, I was actually working on the south coast. And you couldn't get any further south than I actually was because I was right down in a place called

Hayling island, which is not far from Portsmouth. So I frantically got through my training sessions to try and finish as early as possible, then drove all the way up to Staffordshire, to where Toni lives, to pick up the camper van, which she'd been sort of loading up over the week while I was away. And then we drove up to just over the border of Scotland, and we stayed in some services overnight. I've forgotten the name of the place now. It's fallen out of my head. Gretna Green.

Tracy:

Oh, yes, yes.

Chris:

Yeah. So we literally, more or less, drove the entire length of the UK in the first night. So I left Hayling Island about quarter to three, and I think we finally got to the services about half past 11 at night, I think it was. And the place was deserted, and it was actually the first time we'd actually ever even stayed in the camper van. So it was quite entertaining trying to put the blooming bed down and try... And I suddenly realized all the electric...

Tracy:

You didn't try it beforehand?

Chris:

Well, this is it. Yeah. We were planning to sort of go somewhere nearby just to try it all out, but we thought in the end, "Oh, no, well, if anything's going to go wrong, it's going to go wrong. So let's just go anyway." So...

Tracy:

Yeah. No, no, it sounds like a great adventure. So, and then from there, where did you go on? So they spent the night at Gretna Green.

Chris:

Yeah, so we stayed there overnight, and then the next morning... Well, I said the next morning, but half past 11 by the time we got going, it was. We then sort of started to head up to the east coast, and I think we got as far as... I think we only did about a hundred miles, and we got as far as Aberdeen, I think it was. And we were both shattered because we'd never really slept in the camper van before. We were both tired because we didn't sleep very well the night before. So we only drove a hundred miles. We went to a little park near Inverness, just to have a wander around and have some lunch. And we thought, "Let's have an easy day." So we booked into a campsite just literally down the road that was on a farmer's land and stayed there. So we were there by two o'clock in the afternoon, and then stayed there till the following morning just to get some rest. So, but...

Tracy:

Yeah, yeah.

Chris:

It was quite... Because although we knew roughly which way we were going, we had no plans on where to stay or, you know, because we didn't know even know where we were going to end up each day. So we kind of almost played it by ear really and just sort of booked sites roughly when we got to about sort of three, four o'clock in the afternoon, when we knew roughly where we were going to end up sort of about five, six o'clock in the afternoon.

Tracy:

Yeah, yeah. So you went, is it, March? It was just last month you went, wasn't it? I know it was really [inaudible 00:07:44].

Chris:

Yeah. We left on the 25th of March, and we were there for nine days. Yeah. So we went on the Friday 25th, and then we came back on the following Sunday. So it was, yeah, just over nine days.

Tracy:

And because you had the camper van, did you just book into sites, like you said, as you were driving along? Did you just check out... And obviously wifi connection must have been fairly good up there or...

Chris:

Yeah. To be perfectly honest, we were really surprised that even when we were climbing up mountains and things, and right out in the back and beyond, we virtually had 4G wifi all the way around. It was only when we were sort of in between two mountains and that's when we lost all signal and stuff. But to be honest, mobile signal all the way around, it didn't matter how remote we were, it was absolutely fabulous. We had no problems with signal whatsoever.

Chris:

And yeah, literally two or three days before we went, I joined the Camping and Caravaning Club because I heard through the grapevine that they offer discounts and things like that. And also, if you have their app, you can kind of go... If you enable GPS, it will pick up where you are and it'll show you all the sites in the 20 or 50 mile radius from where you actually are. And if you click on them, you can literally either book it on the app, if you do it early enough. Or if you just ring them up, they'll usually tell you if there's a site. But I think because we went slightly earlier in the year that most people went, most of the sites were deserted. So yeah.

Tracy:

Yeah, I think I have to say, because we're doing it next month, but we're hiring a car and driving up from Edinburg around by [inaudible 00:09:13], we've actually booked all of our accommodation. We booked it months ago because it looks like it's going to be incredibly busy, and I know the North Coast 500 is so popular. So I'm glad we did,

but I guess for having a camper van, it gives you slightly more freedom. But even so, you still would have to make sure that you booked ahead of time. But that's a really useful app, Chris. I'll get the name of that, and then I'll link to that on the show notes for anybody who's interested in that as well, because that's going to be really good. Just asking, because obviously you had the camper van, so about filling up with petrol, because that's one thing we've been just talking about, is like did you just, when you came across a petrol station, did you just fill up each time? Or did you plan that before?

Chris:

Well, to be honest, we only had to fill up once in the entire journey, because the van that we bought is a short wheel base [inaudible 00:10:05], which is very similar to a transit. And unfortunately, when I filled it up, it was when the fuel prices were at the highest. So it cost me 150 quid to fill the van up, and I literally filled it to the brim. I was there for about five minutes trying to get every last dribbling. So it was it full to the brim. I think it held about 90 liters, I think it was. And that got us all the way up to John O'Groats. And in fact, we actually managed to get round the Isle of Orkney and back down to John O'Groats before we actually started to run low on fuel. So we filled up at the local Tescos there, and that got us all the way back home again. So we actually only had to fill up once while we were actually away.

Chris:

But with regards to petrol stations, they're in all sort of main towns and villages and things. So, even though we didn't need to fill up, as we were going around, even in fairly remote sort of places, we weren't very far away from any fuel stations or anything else of that. There didn't seem to be any shortage of them anywhere, really.

Tracy:

Well. That's good to know. I think that's the Australian in us kind of kicking in, because obviously when we're going outback, you need to know where those petrol stations are...

Chris:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

Tracy:

...in huge distances. So I know that's something we were like, "We need to think about these petrol stations." But that's really good to know. You were saying about... Obviously you had your phone. Do you have SatNav? Or did you take also paper maps with you for backup? Or did you just kind of depend on your phone?

Chris:

We did take paper maps, but to be perfect honest, we didn't open them a single time we were there. Literally just used Google maps all the way around. So yeah, so we kind of, particularly as we got down the west coast, we could kind of decided on key

places we wanted to visit. So I kind of set an itinerary on Google Maps each day, and it literally took us to each of the places that we wanted to go to. And I actually found that Google Maps was quite accurate for taking us to some of these places, even when it was literally just like a lay-by, where you had to sort of walk 10 minutes to actually get to it. It actually took you right to it. So it was actually pretty accurate. So yeah, we didn't need to use paper maps at all really. And everything was really well sign-posted as well, so...

Tracy:

Okay. That's really good to know as well. So, how long in total did you do the drive for? Obviously from when you arrived in Scotland to, I suppose when you started heading back home, was it a week, five days?

Chris:

Yeah, so we were literally on the go for the whole nine days. So we got to our final stop on the Saturday night, which if you'll just bear with me two seconds, I'll just find where it is because I'm rubbish at remembering names. It was the Loch Lomond. That's where we finished up. That was our final stop. So we stayed there Saturday night into Sunday, and then we drove back on Sunday, and we got back about two o'clock in the afternoon on the Sunday. So...

Tracy:

Oh, so fantastic. So, were there any places that you would recommend to eat or drink along the way? Or did you just kind of take all your supplies and then pop into [inaudible 00:12:49] and Tescos along the way that to top off?

Chris:

Yeah, a bit of both really. We took tons of food with us in the camper van, because we've got like a [inaudible 00:13:01], all that sort of thing. So we managed to cook all our own breakfast and dinners and things. But as we were driving around, there was usually sort of cafes along the route and shops and things. So, even when we were out in the really sort of remote areas, when it got to lunchtime, we [inaudible 00:13:15] whether to cook something or whether to actually buy something. And most days, if we were on the go, we sort of pulled into these little roadside cafes and things, which were brilliant usually, usually really well priced and stuff, and had a good array of food and things. So yeah. And again, on Google Maps, if you sort of search for restaurants and things, it'll bring up half a dozen of them within driving distance. So yeah.

Chris:

But we also roughed it a few times as well. For example, one day when we were on the Isle of Orkney, I decided to dig my metal detector out to go hunting on the beach and didn't find anything. But we decided to have sausage sandwiches in the back. So, while I was off making an idiot of myself, detecting my own shoes, Toni cooked us a sausage sandwich in the back. So yeah, it was kind of a mixture really. We didn't really eat out at many restaurants. We mainly cooked in the van in the evenings and

stuff. But for lunch and breakfast, we either sort of ate on the sites or as we were driving around, as it were. So, but we had plenty to keep us going if we couldn't find anywhere, but we never found it to be a problem. So...

Tracy:

Yeah. I know mostly we've booked into many bed and breakfasts, so we'll go the breakfast before we leave in the day, and I think we're going to buy ourself a cool box and then keep that stocked up as well. So we've got drinks and bits with us. I always think when you're driving, you eat more. I know I do. We definitely sort of pick a bit more, and we need to have the sweets and crisps and things on the go. So, if we think about, kind of go rewinding a little bit, and kind of thinking a bit more in detail about your actual itinerary and how it panned out, would you kind of talk us through those nine days in terms of where you went and what the highlights were? I think that would be really interesting. We're very interested to think what we absolutely must do and not miss out.

Chris:

Absolutely. I mean, all of Scotland is absolutely beautiful. Literally, as soon as you cross the border, as I'm sure you know if you've been there before, you literally go from sort of industrial sites to suddenly, "Wow, there's mountain." And yeah, and as I say, although we've been through parts of Scotland before, we didn't know quite what to expect. but we were pleasantly but surprised by all of it. I think the research we did behind it, we did this right. I think we did do it right to go the anticlockwise way round because I would say all the best scenery is definitely on the west coast. But then saying that, even though it's a lot flatter on the east coast, there were still plenty to see.

Chris:

So, as I say, on the first official day, which was the Saturday, we drove from the services on the motorway, as I say, up to Aberdeen. And that's where we sort of stayed for the first night. And I think it was 18 pounds per night to stay on this farm, and had all the electric hookups and all that sort of thing. So we just had a motor around near sort of Aberdeen. On the official route on the North Coast 500, it kind of takes you up north there around sort of Peterhead and Fraserburgh. And I was tempted because I remember years ago there used to be that series on the tele about sort of [inaudible 00:16:07] and all that sort thing. I remember that was a film around there, and I quite fancied going to see that. But then I think, as you always do when you go with somebody else, you have to sort of do a little bit of give and take. And when I explained it to Toni, that was the only reason I wanted to drive a hundred miles out of our way to go and see somewhere that a program that she'd never seen was filmed, she goes, "Do we really want us drive around a peninsula that's probably going to take us four hours to get around?"

Chris:

So we decided to sort of basically cut off the peninsula that goes up towards that way, and we then headed up towards Inverness. And in fact, by Saturday evening, we

were actually in [inaudible 00:16:42]. So we literally did a mad dash virtually up the rest of the east coast because we were trying to decide where to stay, and there wasn't really anywhere that was on our list of places that were any further north up the east coast. So we decided after we'd had a motor around Aberdeen and sort of driven up a little bit, we then rang up a campsite in Thursday because that's where we were heading to over the next few days anyway. And we did like a mad dash, took us about two hours to get there. So we went literally from Inverness all the way up to [inaudible 00:17:15]. And we got there about six in the evening. So, that was our next sort of stop on the next day.

Chris:

And the following morning, when we woke up on the Sunday, we discovered it had snowed, which is always good, because it was blazing sunshine the day before.

Tracy:

Yeah. Scotland [inaudible 00:17:31].

Chris:

Yeah. So yeah, we went to John O'Groats, and we went to the sign there where it's got all the like "900 miles to London" and all that sort of thing, and got a photograph taken. And I was actually quite personally surprised there because I kind of thought it would just literally be a signpost in the middle of nowhere. But there's actually lots of nice restaurants there and sort of like gift shops and things like that. But even the scenery behind it is beautiful. You can see all the rigs in the background, but you can also see across the Isle of Orkney and things like that. So it was absolutely beautiful to see the scenery.

Chris:

And one thing I didn't actually realize until we actually got there, again, probably because it was a breakdown in my research, I always thought that John O'Groats was the most northern point of the UK. And when I was looking at it on the map, I thought, "Hang on a minute. There's a peninsula there. It's actually a bit further north." And when you Google it, it says actually Dunnet. I think it's called Dunnet Head. It's actually the most northern point in the UK. So yeah, so that was our next port of call, was we went out to Dunnet Head and had our photograph taken by the lighthouse there.

Chris:

But if anybody can make it to Dunnet Head, it's definitely worth the journey, because you just pull into this car park, you think, "Oh, this is going to be rubbish." And you walk up to like the viewpoint, and it's just absolutely breathtaking. The view over the sea is absolutely amazing. You've got the lighthouse to your right. And it's just wherever you look, there's mountains and waterfalls and all sorts of beautiful things to see. So we literally had to drag ourselves away because we didn't want to leave it. It was just one of the most breathtaking places we've ever been to.

Chris:

And they'd really done it really well as well, because there was lots of like notice boards around that tell you a bit about it and about the lighthouse and things. And we found that all the way around; that no matter where you went, there was loads of information and histories about it and all that sort of thing. So it was great.

Chris:

And yeah, so after we finished at Dunnet Head, we then caught a ferry across to the Isle of Orkney because that was always on my bucket list of places to go. I don't know why. I'd never been there before, didn't know much about it. But it was just one of those places that I'd always had on my list that I wanted to go to because it always looked so beautiful when you Google it and things.

Tracy:

Definitely.

Chris:

Yeah. So we caught the ferry sort of early afternoon, I think it was. And I think it was about 70 quid each way, I think it was, if I remember rightly. And we weren't sure how long we were going to stay on Orkney because we didn't know sort of what was there, whether it was worth staying a few days. But luckily the lady in the booking thing, because you can actually book it on the day, said it's the same price if you book a return or if you book two singles. So you can basically sort of pay for your journey over there and then book it a couple of days later or whatever you want to come back, and it's the same price as if you buy a return. So yeah, so we took the camp van onto the ferry and went across.

Chris:

And I mean, absolutely stunning place. I mean, you could literally drive around the whole of Orkney in about three hours, I would say, because it's basically about four or five main islands that are kind of joined together with bridges and things. But yeah, we saw all the main sort of sites. So the first thing that we spotted when we came off the ferry was something called Churchill's Barrier, which is a scuttled ship in the bay there, which was designed to sort of stop U boats getting into the harbors during the second world war. And there's also like a brick made out of sort of bricks and things. It's now a driveway, but it was originally the original sort of barrier.

Chris:

Something I actually found quite funny about it was... Because something that I always do whenever I find something interesting, I'll go away and research it and read books on it and that sort of thing. And I find it quite funny to find that they actually only finished the barrier about three months after the war ended. They started it back in 1914. It took [inaudible 00:21:14] years to build it. And it was declared finished about three months after the war ended. So, rather than

demolishing it again, I think they built a road over it so people can get onto the mainland, as it were. So, but yeah.

Tracy:

How long did [inaudible 00:21:33] to get from the mainland over to Mainland? Because I know that's a bit confusing because it's called Mainland to the mainland.

Chris:

It was literally an hour. I think it's about eight miles in distance across the sea. And yeah, it took about an hour. And the ferry is lovely. You can go up onto the deck and watch the crossing and things. Or you can sit in there and have a meal and whatnot. And so yeah, it was a nice journey. And so they're really helpful and to help you get on and board.

Chris:

One thing that did frighten me a little bit when we were boarding is that all the lorries that were going on were reversing into the ferry. I thought, "Oh my God, I don't fancy doing that." But luckily, if you're in a car or a van, you can just drive straight in; then it kind of loops and that.

Chris:

So, but yeah, on the Isle of Orkney, it's absolutely amazing. The scenery is breathtaking. And I suppose the only place that I've been to which is similar to it, I suppose, is sort of like Jersey and Guernsey. It's got that sort of feel like it's 30 years ago as it were. Everything's very rustic and things like that. I mean, there's some beautiful towns and things like that over there, which we had a wander around. But we went up to like the stones, which is very similar to sort of Stonehenge and that sort of thing. And went to a few of the other historic sites around and had a bit of a wander. But yeah, it's definitely worth a visit because, like I say, there's so much history on there that you don't... It's just not in a lot of these sort of travel brochures and things that you read about.

Tracy:

It's been on my bucket list for a long time. I actually worked with somebody, must be 20, 20-plus years ago, who actually got a job working on one of the smaller islands in Orkney. And it's always been on my... So just knowing that it actually only just takes an hour to get cross, it might be something we can look at to add into our trip as well, because it would be good just to pop in, as I say. And do you mind as well if, with the show notes, I add in some of your photographs of these places, Chris, as well?

Chris:

Of course. No, help yourself. Yeah, absolutely. My pleasure.

Tracy:

So, did you stay over on the Orkneys? Or did you head back after the day? Or...

Chris:

Yeah, no, no, we did stay over. We were initially thinking maybe to stay for a couple of days, but I would say if you get there early enough, you could probably see everything there is to see in a day, if you keep going. But yeah, to see it all... I mean, the campsite we stayed at in [inaudible 00:23:57] the night before, the chap was actually English and he actually came from Bristol. And it was quite weird when we actually went up to the kiosk to pay for our night's stay, because he had this broad Bristol accent. And I was like, "Well, you don't sound very Scottish." And he was like, "No, I'm ex-police. I just moved up here while I've retired." I was like, "All right. Fair enough."

Chris:

But he sort of said, "Oh, you'll probably need about three days to see all of Orkney if you're really going to see everything." But to be perfectly honest, depending on what you want to see, I would say that you could drive around everything easily in a day and still have time to spare to do a bit of shopping and things like that. Because there are some places where, although it's a main tourist attraction, there's not actually that much to see. There's a lot of cans on the Isle of Orkney, sort of burial things. And literally every few miles that you drive, there's an advert for one and things. And to be honest, they're all the same. So, once you've seen one, there's no point going to see the other sites because it just looks like pale stone, to be honest.

Tracy:

So then after you stayed the night and then went back over to...

Chris:

Yeah, yeah. So we stayed overnight, and then we had a quick wander around the shops the following day. And then we caught the ferry back at lunchtime the following day. Yeah. So yeah, so we saw all the, like I say, all the stones and all the cans, and had one round sort of those main towns and things. And yeah, but definitely worth a visit. It's a lot more built up, particularly around the towns, than I expected. I expected it to be a lot more rural. But when you head up to the north of the mainland, again, it's beautiful scenery, sort of small mountains and things, waterfalls. And like I say, you've got all the historic stones that are similar to Stonehenge. And they're definitely worth a visit because you can actually get up close and personal with them, whereas you can't in Stonehenge, where you have to [inaudible 00:25:39] the parameters.

Tracy:

Yeah. That's excellent. So then after the Orkneys, where did you head?

Chris:

After Orkney, yeah, then we started to sort of head south. I'm just looking at my map here to see where which day, because I'm not sure I remember exactly. Yeah, we came back, and then we headed sort of south. And I think on the next day we ended up in Ullapool, which is just before you get to like the Isle of Skye and the Applecross and things. So yeah, so we headed off at about sort of eight o'clock in the morning, and I think we got to Ullapool about six in the evening, I think it was. And so we literally just followed North Coast 500 route round, and it just sort of took you around all the mountains and things like that.

Chris:

And we also stopped off at a place called Smoo Caves, which is just as you start to head down. And yeah, definitely worth a visit. It's a lot smaller than I thought, because you walk down some steps onto the beach, and then you can walk into the cave. And then there's like a walkway which takes you into like a cavern where there's a waterfall coming into it like an underground lake. But it's fairly small, to be honest. You can probably get around it in 15, 20 minutes and things. So, but it was definitely worth a visit.

Chris:

And after that, we went to a place called Puffin Cove, which was just a bit further along the coast. It was on a lot of the things online. It sort of said that you could obviously see puffins nearby, and there was a nice little cave and cove and things. And I think that was probably the only strenuous part of the journey, was actually getting there, because Google Maps took you straight to it, but then it was a 15-minute hike across the moorland to actually get to it. And then you had to climb down some sort of craggy rocks to get onto the beach. And unfortunately, Toni, my other half, she's damaged her knee a few times in the past. So she stayed at the top and just sort of laughed at me as I kept slipping down on the mud.

Chris:

But yeah, as I got down, it was absolutely breathtaking. It had some quite unusual sort of rock formations. I think they're manmade. It looked like something out of the Blair Witch Project. It had stones all stacked up in a pile, sitting in various around the beach. But when you sat there, it was sort of like... Because the waves were kind of crashing over the sides of the cliff, it was absolutely breathtaking. And there was quite a picturesque cave off to the left. So yeah, definitely worth a visit to sort of go down there, although it was probably one of the most difficult treks to get to. But once you get down there, it was great. But we kind of got the impression that a lot of people sort of saw how strenuous the climb was and turned back, because there was two Polish guys who were walking back as we were walking down. And in their broken English, "Wall too steep, too steep," is what they said to us. But yeah, I don't...

Tracy:

[inaudible 00:28:21] climb down. [inaudible 00:28:23] Did you see any puffins?

Chris:

No, didn't see one. But no, it was still worth the journey though. So...

Tracy:

Absolutely. So then Ullapool, so yeah, we're also staying in Ullapool before... Actually I think we head there from Skye straight up to Ullapool. So you stayed in Ullapool for the night?

Chris:

Yeah, we stayed in Ullapool for night. To be honest, Ullapool was the only place where we actually struggled to get any accommodation actually because all the camp sites were booked up, probably because we got there quite late compared to other days. But another app that we used, and to be honest, we only used it twice while we were away, is an app called Park for the Night, I think it's called. And you can download it free of charge on Apple and Samsungs and things. And it's basically run by sort of camping and caravaners and things, and they mark on the maps different places you can stay, either free of charge for the night or for a small fee. Or like if you eat like a meal in the restaurant, you can park in their car park for the night.

Chris:

And when we got to Ullapool, like I say, it was a beautiful sort of fishing town. Lots of art shops and antique shops, which is right up my street. And we were really struggling for somewhere to stay. And one place that sort of seemed to be suggested by a lot of people was in the car park near Tesco's there, which I know sounds quite grotty, but it was actually quite a nice car park. Although I was quite willing to sort of rough it as we went round, Toni, my other half, was a bit dubious about sort of staying in a car park where there was a lot of lorrie drivers around and things like that. So, another place that came up on this Park for a Night app, it was a hotel called the Queens Hotel in Ullapool. And it basically said that they actually have sort of allocated parking spots for camper vans. And you pay... I think we paid 10 pounds for the night. And they allowed us to go into the hotel to use all the shower facilities and wash facilities. But we also had like electric hookup as well, so we could power everything in the camper van and stuff.

Chris:

And as I say, we didn't book. We just literally just turned up, and I wandered into reception and said, "I see you've got a couple of spaces free. Any chance we could park here for night?" And she goes, "Oh, of course you can. Yeah, no problems at all." So hand them 10 quid over, and it was actually one of the most relaxing nights we had, because across the road from the hotel, you got the harbor and there's a few of the signposts of North Coast 500 and things. We got our photograph taken next to those. And Ullapool is definitely worth a visit because it's a beautiful sort of fishing village. You can see all the sort of fishermen going out in their boats and things like that. So, that's definitely worth a visit. So...

Tracy:

[inaudible 00:30:55] was there.

Chris:

Absolutely. Yeah, yeah. Could definitely recommend the actual restaurant in that hotel because I think a three-star hotel, and I think it's fairly expensive to stay there. But you can just sort of wander, and you don't have to be sort of a resident to stay there. But the meals were out this world, honestly. They were fairly cheap and, yeah, a massive plateful. And it's not often I leave food behind, but I couldn't finish it.

Tracy:

Well, I'll definitely put a link to that in the show notes because that'll be good to know. And then, so the next day, you left Ullapool, heading down to Skye. So I guess you did the famous Applecross drive, did you, that day?

Chris:

Yeah, we did Applecross first. That was first on our agenda. So I think it took us about two hours to get from Ullapool down to Applecross. Again, because we were coming down rather than going up the west coast, we did it kind of back to front. And yeah, I'd say Applecross was... Although it's absolutely breathtaking. I mean, literally, it's about four or five hours of just unbroken, beautiful scenery with waterfalls and bays and mountains and stuff. That was probably the only time when I was actually a little bit nervous because it's pretty much, the entire peninsula round, it's like a single track road. And although our camper van isn't particularly big, a lot of the ones we were passing, coming in the opposite direction, doing twice the speed we were, was a bit hairy. So there were kind of passing spots you could pull into to actually get past. And sometimes when you were coming up to like hair pins and stuff, and somebody was coming around the other way, doing 50 miles an hour, you had to swerve out of the way a bit sharpish and stuff. But no, it was all good.

Tracy:

Yeah, definitely.

Chris:

Yeah. And I'd say Applecross is probably the one place where you really felt really remote. It felt like you were miles away from anywhere. Although we did sort of see a fair few people come in the opposite direction, we could probably go 10, 15 miles before we actually saw anybody. And then when they did come, it was like two or three in a row, as it were. So, but we stopped for lunch and cooked. We actually made our own lunch on this particular day because there wasn't actually many places to stop. And we found out that we'd actually parked in a car park we shouldn't have been in because it belonged to the British army, where they actually did all their rifle training and stuff like that. So we had to get off a bit sharpish because there was a...

Tracy:

Did you drive down to Skye the same day then? Is that where you were headed?

Chris:

Yep. So yeah, to get around Applecross, that probably took us about four hours, I think, in total. And I think if you're coming up the west coast, I would say the first part of the Applecross is probably the worst part because there's a lot of hairpin bends. And the bit that was a bit hairy was that there was literally, for us, it was a sheer dropdown, was the road literally went down. It literally felt like it was about a 45-degree angle going downwards. It was quite a hairy drive going down. And by the time we got to the bottom, our brakes were actually overheating. You could actually smell them coming into the cab because we had to keep slowing ourselves down and stuff. So I imagine if you were coming up the west coast, you'd have to try and drive up that hill, as it were. And a lot of the bigger camper vans and bigger vehicles were really struggling. You could see right down in first gear, literally just shuddering up the hill. It was that steep. So yeah, it was a... So I think anything bigger than a short-wheel base van, I think people would struggle to drive up now, to be honest. So...

Tracy:

I'm glad we've got a small car.

Chris:

Yeah, that's it. Cars are absolutely fine. I think it's just anything bigger that is a struggle.

Tracy:

And when you went over to Skye, did you go on the... Obviously you went over on the Skye Bridge?

Chris:

Yeah, we went on the Skye Bridge.

Tracy:

Because quite a few people [inaudible 00:34:25] that was actually a bridge to Skye [inaudible 00:34:28] and get the bridge over.

Chris:

Absolutely, yeah. I mean, even though Skye was always on the agenda and we always had a few places that we wanted to visit, we hadn't really done much research into how to get there. And it was only as we were sort of traveling down from Ullapool that we realized there was a bridge, because we half expected to get like another ferry. Because when you look at it on the map, it looks like it's a completely separate island to the mainland. But yeah, there's Skye Bridge that goes across. And I think that's one of the most beautiful bridges I've ever been across because it's literally one lane in, one lane out, and you just drive over the harbor. And again, you've got the mountains and background. And I think because we got there about half past six in the evening, I think it was, the sun was setting over the sea. So you had that beautiful glimmer over the sea as we were driving across. And we tried to get some

photographs as we were driving, but it doesn't always come out when you're trying to drive with your arm out the window with the camera.

Chris:

So yeah, and then we stayed on a [inaudible 00:35:25] caravan site sort of in the middle of Skye, I think it was. And it was the first night... Because one of the things I always hoped, while we're over there, is that we could park somewhere, so as we could actually have the van looking out over the lakes or over the mountains. And that was the place where it met my wishes there, because we stopped at one of the official camping and caravanning sites, and we managed to park right next to the loch. So, when I opened the doors in the morning, I kind of got the picture that originally gave me the idea to build a camper van, where you open the camper van doors and there in front of you is the loch and the mountain in the background and things.

Tracy:

Wow.

Chris:

So we sat there until seven in the morning with a coffee in our hands, just watching the world go by, watching all the ducks and things swimming on the loch and things with the mountains [crosstalk 00:36:10].

Tracy:

Fantastic. So, how long did you spend on Skye?

Chris:

Yeah, we stayed on Skye for two days because we actually found there was loads to do on Skye. Although, again, the scenery was breathtaking, we went up into the mountains and sort of climbed up the mountains and stuff and that. There's some photographs of me sort of standing on a very hairy looking sort of rock hanging off the mountain. Yeah. So yeah, so we had a hike up there. We went up to sort of some of the waterfalls there as well and took some nice pictures and things. But there was just so much. I think you could literally spend a whole week on Skye and you still wouldn't see it all. There's so much to see, and it doesn't matter which direction you go in. It's just breathtaking scenery all the way around. So yeah, I would say Applecross and the Isle of Skye were definitely the highlights of the journey. That's where the most breathtaking scenery was.

Tracy:

That definitely would. That was going to be one of my questions actually. We're staying on Skye for three days.

Chris:

Good choice. Definitely.

Tracy:

So, when you left Skye, did you cross back over the bridge? Or did you get the ferry? Because we're getting the ferry to...

Chris:

We were toying with the idea of getting the ferry because we decided to head off about 3:00 PM, I think it was. The next stop was we were heading towards Fort William and Glencoe, and it looked like the quickest way to get that way was to catch the ferry across to [inaudible 00:37:30] from a place called Armadale, I think it's called. Yeah. And the ferries go about every hour and a half. But when we did a bit of basic math, we found that it was actually quicker to drive around the peninsula again, come across the bridge and drive down, than it was to get the ferry, only because we'd just missed a ferry and it would've been an hour and a half wait, plus another hour to get across. So it would've taken two and a half hours to actually get to the spot where we could've actually driven it in an hour and a half. So we saved ourselves an hour. But yeah, the ferry was about the same price as going across to Orkney. I think it was about 70 quid one way, I think, to go from Armadale across back to the mainland, across on the other side of Skye. So yeah, even though we didn't. Yeah. And then we...

Tracy:

And then did you head to Fort William, was your next destination?

Chris:

Yeah, so that was our next up. So we got to Fort William in the evening, and we had our first takeaway that evening, because one thing that we were actually quite surprised of and we noticed fairly quickly when we were driving around was that there was virtually no takeaways in all of the Highlands. So we did not see a single McDonald's, KFC, Burger King, anything, probably because we missed out a few of the major towns. But when you drive around the coast and up to [inaudible 00:38:41] and all the way back down, we didn't see a single takeaway. So, as we came into Fort William, we passed our first KFC and we thought, "Right, that's it. That's where we're going." Unfortunately, we chose the one that had the most slowest service on the planet, because it took us about 40 minutes to get through the driveway. And we literally had four minutes to try and find the campsite that we'd booked into; otherwise they were going to close the gate. So, even though my camper van is speed restricted to 60 miles an hour, I was literally taking it up to the top speed, trying to make it to this campsite.

Tracy:

So you spent one night in Fort William?

Chris:

Yeah, one night Fort William. Yeah. So we stayed overnight, and then we spent the day, most of the next day sort of wandering around Fort William. We went up to like

the Glenfinnan Viaduct and had a wander around Fort William town as well, because the town's beautiful. It's got some lovely gift shops and antique shops and things. So we bought some souvenirs and things, because we were planning on buying like stickers and things, or like magnets, of all the places we went around. But I think because we were in so much of a hurry trying to get to the next place, we didn't actually get time. So, although we had been to all these places, we bought all the magnets in Fort William for all the places we'd been to.

Tracy:

And then so you went to see the Glenfinnan Viaduct and the monument?

Chris:

Yeah. But one thing I would definitely recommend is there was a sandwich shop halfway down the high street in Fort William that does the most amazing sandwiches. I've never tasted anything like it. I mean, you name it, they'll make it for you. And it comes in the great big chunky [inaudible 00:40:08] and it's about two pounds each. And again, very rarely do I leave any food, but I could not finish the sandwich. There was so much of it. It was so cheap as well. So...

Tracy:

I'll have to look it up for that one.

Chris:

I can't remember now, but one thing I do remember is it was opposite the mountain warehouse shop where you can buy all the sort of climbing stuff. So you can't miss it. So yeah.

Tracy:

I'll find out the name of it anyways.

Chris:

[crosstalk 00:40:30] so that's another sort of... Okay.

Tracy:

Excellent. So then, yeah, so you drove to Glenfinnan, had a look around there, the Viaduct.

Chris:

Yeah. So yeah, so we did Glenfinnan Viaduct the first thing in the morning. And that was nice because we've been there about two, three years ago. And the last time we went, it was literally you had to walk from a car park up to the thing, up to the bridge. But they've actually built like a visitor center now, which looks like it's brand new. And there's like a little sort of museum about it, and there's like a nice little dirt track now that they've built, sort of takes you right up to the bridge and stuff. So yeah, it was a lot nicer than the last time we went. We got soaked to the skin sort of

walking through the grass and things like that. And yeah, so we went up there, took some photographs, walked down by the lake and things that goes underneath. And then headed into Fort William, had a wander around the shops and took some photographs of the harbor and things, and then on to Glencoe. Yeah.

Chris:

And Glencoe was one of the places that was right at the top of our list to visit because, as you may have seen in the photographs, it was where my partner Toni's dad liked to go on his motorbike over the years. And unfortunately he passed away last year, and he was cremated. And so we scattered some of his ashes over the loch near Glencoe. And ironically, I don't know if anybody believes in this sort of thing, but after we scattered all the ashes, we found a piece of quartz balanced on top of a stone, and all the other stones were slate. And there was just one piece of quartz balanced on top of this stone. And Toni, my other half, was convinced that it was a gift that had been enough to her by her dad. So she took it home as a souvenir and that, yeah, to remind her of why she scattered his ashes and things. But we couldn't have picked a better place because, like I said, this loch just, again, looked out of the mountains and you had Fort William in the background and things. So it was absolutely breathtaking in Glencoe. So yeah, definitely.

Tracy:

Yeah. Glencoe is probably one of my most favorite places on the planet. I think there's something about Glencoe.

Chris:

Oh, I love Glencoe. Yeah. Fort William and Glencoe are absolutely beautiful, definitely.

Tracy:

Beautiful, beautiful area. So, after you drove through Glencoe, did you head down to the [inaudible 00:42:33] of Loch Lomond? Is that right?

Chris:

Yeah. So I think we headed off about half past four that afternoon, I think it was. And then we got to Loch Lomond about quarter to seven, I think it was, because we stopped off and took a few photographs on route. Yeah. And we stayed at another one of the official camping and caravanning site places. I think it was about 20 quid for the night. And that was probably the busiest site that we actually saw because it was actually on Loch Lomond. The site was literally on the loch. So yeah, but so again, we sort of opened the doors in the morning. We had the loch behind us and all the beautiful scenery. But it was probably the busiest site we'd stayed at because there was literally everybody on this site that you could possibly imagine. It was all this sort of professional Winnebago setups, all the way down to the basics or tents and things with teenagers who clearly hadn't got a clue how to put them up. Yeah. So it was good. And we found out a lot of these official sort of camping and caravanning

sites, a lot of them have little shops and things where you could buy the provisions and whatnot. So, if we ran short on milk and stuff, we could get it from there.

Tracy:

Oh, so that was brilliant.

Chris:

Yeah. And then the next morning we headed east.

Tracy:

Oh, perfect. So, that was it. It sounds absolutely fantastic. So I'm going to ask you a few little questions, which I think would just be useful for anybody listening and that's planning to do this drive. Is there any driving tips that you would give? Because I know you've mentioned for some parts of the roads, obviously, it's single lanes. So I guess it's kind of making sure you use... that they have got lay-bys that you can use when you let people pass.

Chris:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, to be perfectly honest, all the roads are really good in Scotland, I mean, apart from Applecross, which is a bit rough and rutty in places. Most of the roads even go through the mountains, are really well maintained and things. And yeah, I think apart from Applecross and a few of the minor detours that we did sort of through the mountains, most of the roads are really good and really easy to drive. And although I probably did about 80% of the driving, Toni did 20% and she'd only driven our van literally once before we went away. And she felt quite confident in driving it. And I think the only bit that she wasn't very keen on was doing around Applecross because at one point when we did go around one of these hairpin bends, she was like, "Oh!" sort of screaming. Yeah, I didn't quite anticipate how quite sharp it was. So I had to slam on my brakes, and I virtually spun the back out a little bit. So that was probably more me trying to drive like a champ as it were. Yeah. But...

Tracy:

If there's anything that you know now, because obviously you've done the trip, that you wish you'd known before you set out, is there anything you would've done differently? Did you learn something and think, "Hmm"?

Chris:

To be perfect honest, I think the main thing that we took away from it is that although you can go to all these very remote places, you're not very far away from civilization. So we actually took a lot more stuff with us than we actually needed. So we took things like Wellington boots and tons and tons of woolies and things like that. And to be honest, we didn't use them. We didn't actually use our Wellington boots at all. I mean, I think one thing that everybody would definitely need to go around Scotland is a good pair of walking shoes, but make sure they're waterproof

and that's perfectly sufficient to sort of go round and things. And even when we went to the Angel Falls and things on the Isle of Skye, which is quite a rugged walk and things, even there, the walking shoes were perfectly sufficient.

Chris:

But yeah, no, like I said, I think that throughout the whole route, I think they've really invested a lot into this North Coast 500, and there's lots of stops along the way where you can buy food. There's plenty of shops where you can buy provisions or clothes and things, if you haven't taken anything with you. So I think we actually went overboard, although obviously we didn't have a massive itinerary of where we were actually going to go to. We actually over-planned with the amount of equipment we actually took. And to be honest, I think you can actually get away with the basics, so long as you've got sort of somewhere to stay, whether it be a tent or a camper van or a hotel. You just literally needed a good pair of walking shoes, probably like a fleece or a jacket and a mobile phone. And that's pretty much all you need, because I think in today's day and age, particularly if you've got a car, in Scotland, although on the map it looks like places are quite far apart, you're only looking like a maximum of an hour's drive to most of these places.

Chris:

And yeah, so I think you can kind of make it what you want it to be really, because I was quite willing to sort of rough it, going around, staying in lay-bys and things, and Toni didn't. So we were never stuck for somewhere to have a shower or anything. So, even though we didn't have a shower in the camper van, most of the sites we stayed at had really decent showers and things like that. So yeah, I think just the same as you have for any other holiday, really. So long as you've got warm enough clothing, a decent pair of walking shoes, decent phone with some signals, particularly if you're like me and get lost in your own garden, you know, a map to help find your way out again. I think you're fine.

Chris:

And again, one thing we found is people were so friendly all the way around, and not just the Scots, but other travelers that were going around, either the opposite way or the same way as us. Everybody was interested in where you'd been, where you were going to, and things like that. And it didn't matter where we were; if we weren't sure what to go visit or what to do, there was always somebody that could give us a bit of advice or guidance and things. So yeah, we just found the whole trip a lot more pleasant than we anticipated, because we heard all these rumors about midges biting everywhere. And

Tracy:

Yeah, yeah. I think that might be later on in this.

Chris:

Yeah. I didn't see a single midge all the time. Probably the time of year we went. We didn't see a midge all the way around. And although the weather was a bit

unpredictable, because like I say, one minute it could be blazing sunshine, the next time it'd be snowing, we never felt unsafe driving around. So yeah, so I think next time, because we're planning a trip to drive around the coast of Ireland and down to Cornwall and Wales and things like that, we're actually going to of take less stuff with us this time and just make sure we've got enough food and enough clothing and things. But these are the things you learn when you go off on these travels, isn't it, when you go...

Tracy:

Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Yeah, I'm going to kind of put you on the spot because you've given us loads of tips there. But because we're going to be doing this month, so this is going to be us, so what is the one tip that you would give to us or anyone planning to drive the North Coast 500? So, what would be the one thing that you would say absolutely you need to know?

Chris:

One thing I would definitely... Well, a couple of things I would definitely say. One is that you will definitely need more than a week to see it all, because you do read online where some people say, "Oh, you could do in two or three days." You can't. Even to see some of the well-known sites, you're going to need at least a week to go around. And I think if we'd actually wanted to see everything that we wanted to see, we probably would need two to two and a half weeks, I think, if we'd actually planned it better.

Chris:

But the other thing as well is that I don't think you need to have a massive plan to go. I mean, as long as you know roughly where you're going, most of the sites that are worth seeing are actually really well signposted, even sort of 50 miles back. So there were some places that we came across where we're driving along, "Oh, what's that?" And we just Google it. "Oh, we'll stop there. That looks nice." So I don't think you necessarily need to sort of do a massive amount of research to go, because if you follow the route round, most of the sites that are worth seeing are actually on the route itself, sort of off the road that you're actually on, or they're signposted nearby. So, a lot of the places that have the best scenery weren't actually on the agenda. They weren't places that were well advertised or whatever. So I think just keep your eyes and ears open, and just sort of... Because even on the signpost, it tells you what it is. So, if it sort of says it's like a cave, it'll give you a brief description of what it's all about and stuff. So yeah, so we actually found that some of the best sites that we actually saw weren't even on our agenda in the first place. So I think...

Chris:

I mean, one thing I would sort of suggest, I mean, although there are some places that are worth seeing, just go basically and just follow the route round. And there's very little you can actually miss just by sort of keeping your eyes on the road signs and things like that. So it's all very well signposted. They put a lot of money and time and effort into advertising things. So, although you could obviously go with a

guidebook, I think actually, as you go round, it's all pretty much laid out for you, so as you can sort of... You know, it's almost planing your journey as you're going along really. So...

Tracy:

No, I think that, yeah, because that's basically what we've done. We've booked our accommodation because we know that's something that you need to really do if you're going in sort of peak season, and then just kind of going from A to B and see what will come across along the way. So, that's going to be great.

Chris:

Absolutely.

Tracy:

So I have to say, Chris, it's been absolutely fantastic talking to you today, and loved finding out all this information about the North Coast 500. We're very excited to be doing this next month. We can report back afterwards as well, how we found it, and we'll be sharing lots of things in the Facebook group and on our website as well, and possibly doing a podcast follow-up. But thanks so much, Christopher, for coming on, agreeing to come on and talk about it. It's been absolutely brilliant.

Chris:

No, it's so my pleasure. Hope to speak to you again soon. Brilliant.

Tracy:

Thank you.

Tracy:

Well, since we recorded the podcast, and inspired by Chris, we've adjusted our own Scotland road trip itinerary to include two days in the Orkneys. You can follow along with our UK travel adventure, including our road trip around Scotland this month, via our Facebook group, website, Instagram, and YouTube channels. You'll find links to everything we chatted about in this episode, plus some of Chris's photos of his trip in the show notes at UKTravelPlan.com/episode10. If you've enjoyed this podcast, please leave us a review on your favorite podcast app, and subscribe so you don't miss future episodes. We really appreciate it. You can also support our work via the Tip Your Guide button on our website. Many thanks to Kathy, Lori and Clifford who've already done so. We also have a range of products, including a UK train travel guide, a set of itinerary planners for nine popular UK destinations, and a UK travel planning toolkit, all available in our online shop, which we'll also link to in the show notes. This just leaves me time to say thanks for listening, and happy UK travel planning.