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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.

[00:00:37.940] - Tracy

Hello and welcome to Episode 35 of the UK Travel Planning Podcast. One of the absolute pleasures of running the UK Travel Planning podcast, Facebook group, and website is not only the opportunity I have to meet and chat with people from all over the world planning their trip to the UK, but also the ability to promote and showcase some of the most amazing and sometimes less well known destinations across England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

[00:01:04.300] - Tracy

This week's podcast is no exception and is the first part of two episodes. Part two is next week, where I welcome special guest Sally-Ann from private tour company, North Coast Explorer Tours to talk about her home and one of my favourite parts of the world, Far North Scotland. In this episode, Sally-Ann introduces us to the area, including which part of Scotland is classed as the Far North or North Highlands, plus shares information about what makes Far North Scotland so special, including the variety offered by this area, such as the stunning landscapes, wildlife, walks, castles, and more. Sally-Ann also introduces the North Coast 500, a spectacular 500 mile road trip route around far North Scotland, which starts and ends in Inverness.

[00:01:51.420] - Tracy

I started by asking Sally-Ann to introduce herself and share a little bit about her background and journey to not only living in the far north of Scotland, but also establishing their private tour company, North Coast Explorers.

[00:02:04.300] - Sally-Ann

So I'm Sally-Ann, and together with my husband, Robert, we run a small private tour company that's based in the far north of Scotland. In fact, we're actually based on the North Coast of Scotland. We can see out to sea, which is quite nice. We operate just in what we determine is the far north of Scotland.

[00:02:27.240] - Sally-Ann

So we're not talking about Edinburgh, Glasgow, or anywhere south of Inverness, but we run tours across the North Highlands and the North Coast 500, which you may or may not have heard about. I'm sure we'll cover off a bit of that during the course of this chat. And really, what we're looking at is the area north of Inverness on the mainland of Scotland. So we don't cover the islands. So Orkney, Shetland, the Hebrides out West. We don't cover that. We just cover the mainland of Scotland.

[00:03:04.230] - Tracy

Which, of course, is a pretty large area, though, as we were just saying.

[00:03:09.960] - Sally-Ann

Well, it is a large area. And it's interesting because I've looked into this recently, and I know a lot of the people listening to this will probably have heard of Skye or have visited Skye or are interested in visiting Skye. And actually, the area that we cover with our tours is 10 times the size of Skye. So that just gives you a little bit of scope about how big the area is.

[00:03:36.360] - Tracy

That's a brilliant perspective, Sally, and to give definitely. Because I was fascinated when I came across your website and your company, I was absolutely fascinated as well by your back story and how you actually ended up... Because obviously from your accent, you're not Scottish. So would you like to just tell us a bit about your back story and how you ended up living in the far north of Scotland?

[00:03:59.290] - Sally-Ann

Yes. So you're right. Clearly, those of you who are discerning will realise that unfortunately, I don't have a Scottish accent. I have a very English accent. My husband and I both come from the South East of England. He actually comes from the far South Coast. So, yes, we had corporate jobs down in the South East of England, busy jobs. We were in business development marketing roles, and we used to work hard. And I suppose we used our weekends and our holidays to escape, as many people do for sure. And we decided one year that we fancied the north of Scotland.

[00:04:45.290] - Sally-Ann

I don't even remember now why we said we'd like to do it, but neither of us had been. We traveled quite a lot, but not sat there and we thought, yeah, that's what we're going to do. So we came up, we flew up to Inverness and we basically drove the coastal route around the North Coast of Scotland. The route that is now being marketed as the North Coast 500, more or less, but this was many years ago, like about 20 years ago. So we drove this coastal route. I hold my hands up.

[00:05:16.940] - Sally-Ann

We did it in five days. We loved it. That's all I can say is we absolutely loved it. And we vowed that we needed to go back. We needed to experience it a bit more. And we then returned the following year. And actually, we returned every year for the next 10 years. In fact, sometimes we came up twice a year. We brought our parents up one year because we really wanted to share it. It was so beautiful.

[00:05:45.140] - Sally-Ann

We spent my husband's 40th birthday up here with some friends. And every time we came to the end of our stay, we didn't want to come home. We didn't want to go back to the south of England. It felt like a magnet drawing us back. We wanted to stay north. And in the end, the pool was too great. And so we decided that we would investigate what might be possible, if we could change our lifestyle, our lives, and see if we could move up here.

[00:06:17.340] - Tracy

Which, of course, you did do. So was that about 10 years ago, is that right, Sally-Ann, that you moved up?

[00:06:22.840] - Sally-Ann

Yes, it was. Just under 10 years ago, we knew we couldn't do the jobs that we were doing down south, so we'd do something completely different. We decided we would run a luxury bed and breakfast. At the time, there wasn't a lot of really good accommodation up here. It was still quite a bit away from everything. There weren't a lot of facilities. So we traveled a lot. We had experience of what we thought worked. And so we decided to open up a B&B. So we looked for a suitable property. We found this place right on the North Coast.

[00:07:04.610] - Sally-Ann

It's located very close to the Castle of May, which is a place that some people may have heard of. It was the home, it belonged to the Queen Mother for many years. So we bought this place, we set up our luxury bed and breakfast. We gained a Visit Scotland five star rating, which was fantastic because admittedly, we didn't come from hospitality, but we certainly knew how to give customer service. We ran that for five years and it was very successful and we enjoyed it. Absolutely.

[00:07:39.790] - Tracy

Of course, then you have gone on to start your tour company, which we can talk a little bit about now, but obviously in the next episode of the podcast, we're going to talk more in depth about the North Coast Explorers because we want to talk a lot on this episode about why people should visit this part of Scotland. It's highlighted. But yeah, so you've had the North Coast Explorers now for about seven years?

[00:08:06.100] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, three or four years, actually. Just to explain why we moved on to it. I think when we ran the bed

and breakfast, we were always giving information to our guests, information so that they could enjoy their time with us, lots of information about the area, where to see, also information if they were traveling onward, whichever direction, places they could see, etc.

[00:08:32.130] - Sally-Ann

We even provided some self guided tours at the B&B. We were already following that route and I think we quite enjoyed it. For various reasons, which aren't important now, we decided that actually that was the way we wanted to go. We really wanted to be able to share our love of not just our immediate area, but the whole of the North Highlands. And so, yes, come 2019, we closed the B&B and we formally started up North Coast Explorer tours, which admittedly wasn't the best timing with COVID. So, yeah, it's been an unusual ride, shall we say? But yeah, it's fantastic and it's working well and we're really pleased to be doing it.

[00:09:21.020] - Tracy

That's brilliant. And yes, it is such a beautiful part of the world and a beautiful part of Scotland. And so obviously, I know from my Facebook group and from the website that when people are planning to visit Scotland from overseas, they generally will talk to us about Edinburgh, Sky and Loch Ness. Those are the three places that invariably we talk about. And that's what they want to include in their itineraries. But what I really want us to highlight and what we're trying to get through in this podcast is there are other places to visit in Scotland. And I'm not saying Edinburgh and Isle of Sky and Loch Ness, very beautiful areas of Scotland, but there are other parts of Scotland that really should consider including in your itineraries. So, Salliel, this is your chance to talk about what is so special about Far North Scotland and why should people include it in their itineraries?

[00:10:16.400] - Sally-Ann

Right. So I think from our point of view, we would say it's the best of Scotland without the crowds. That's what we believe. And when I say it's the best, I think in a real overview sense, it's got dramatic landscapes, which I know Tracy will agree with her travels last year. It is very rich in history. It's got an abundance of wildlife, stunning beaches. And I think the beach is the thing that I took away from my very first visit here. I could not believe the golden sandy beaches around the North Coast. And the other thing I took away were the big skies. The skies up here are enormous. I think there's just this amazing, vast space and the skies are fantastic.

[00:11:14.640] - Sally-Ann

And that it means that you get great views, you get fresh air, and you also get the night skies during the winter months. I can actually say that we did have the Northern Lights up here last night. Unfortunately, I didn't see them, but I've seen lots of photographs, and we did have them. And that's one of the really amazing things about the night skies. But together with all the features, the other thing I'd say about our area is that you can find peace, you've got space, you've got tranquility, and there's time.

[00:11:55.760] - Sally-Ann

So if you live in a really busy world like we did down south. And you need a little bit of escapism, but something that's got some real depth and interest and scenery, then you should think about coming to the far north of Scotland.

[00:12:13.820] - Tracy

Absolutely. Well, I totally agree with you. It's an area of the world that I absolutely adore. And it's an area that Doug's been visiting quite a lot since he was a child because he's got family up there as well. So, yes, I couldn't get enough of it. I was really sad last year that we didn't spend longer there. And actually, we were talking about it earlier, how much we want to spend as much time as possible next time we're able to go up to Scotland because it doesn't matter how long I felt we were there. I think it probably would not feel long enough. I'm a bit worried I might want to move there, Sally-Ann!

[00:12:45.510] - Sally-Ann

Well, you'd be very welcome.

[00:12:48.870] - Tracy

I always have a draw to Scotland. I've got so part of my family history is from Scotland. My grandfather's side of the family was all Scottish and my last name was McConnachie. So I think there's a natural draw there to that area of the world. But I think what would also be useful actually is to explain to listeners what area of Scotland is classed as the far north of Scotland and the North Highlands.

[00:13:12.320] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, it can be very complicated. And I think this is one of the things that's quite important. And I can understand from a listener's point of view that you may... It's not packaged up as well as, say, for instance, Skye I completely understand why so many people want to visit Skye. It is a beautiful place. And Scotland is quite a big... For the UK, I'm not going to compare it to Australia or North America, but it's quite a big country in its own right. And if you halve it, North and South, the upper half tends to be classed as the Highlands.

[00:13:54.630] - Sally-Ann

You have the Highlands and the Islands. So the mainland of Scotland is known as the Highlands, and that extends from South of Inverness. So it includes the area called the Cairngorms, which some people might have heard of, and right up to the North Coast. We, as a tour company, only cover the North Highland. So we cover the northern half of that, really, or northern two thirds. So if you look at a map and you find the city of Inverness, and you also look west over to Skye and draw a line across there, then we class the far north of Scotland or the North Highlands, far north, I should say, the mainland.

[00:14:37.260] - Sally-Ann

I have to be very careful because anybody on the islands gets very sensitive if you ignore them, and I understand that. The mainland, from Inverness to Skye northwards, that's the area we're talking about in this podcast.

[00:14:53.780] - Tracy

Okay, now that's great too. So tell me, obviously, I drove part of the North Coast 500 last year and part of that route, and I was blown away, honestly. But for me, it was the landscape that I absolutely did not expect what I saw. It literally took my breath away. I just couldn't get enough of it, to be honest. It was beautiful. And obviously, I've always got an interest in history, so there was that aspect as well. But there's just so much to the area, you start thinking about all the things that you want to see and want to do and just experience when you're there. So can you tell us a bit more about the variety of what somebody can expect visiting for our Northern Scotland?

[00:15:34.060] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, absolutely. As I said, it's a big area, so it's a great expanse of area, but it's got variety in terms of the landscape, which you obviously spoke about, and I'll come back to that in a second. The history you've also mentioned, so it's great you've clocked that. And also the wildlife and the experiences you can actually have there. This is not an area to come to if you like busy cities or you want lots of brands. You can't survive a day without getting your Starbucks or maybe you're happy to see McDonald's on the corner. It's not like that at all. But what we do have, as you said, is great variety in the landscape, particularly in the history. And if I can break it down a bit, I think this is the best way to do it.

[00:16:27.440] - Sally-Ann

If we take a little route around the far north, and so if you look at the East Coast, north of Inverness, we always describe this as having... It's where the human history exists. So often people talk about the West because it's got mountains, you can see those. The East Coast is a lot flatter, but it's got the human history and it's got lots of little harbours and fishing villages and all sorts of things related to very old history, be it standing stones, or well, we've got the Highland Clearances, which some people may be aware of.

[00:17:14.660] - Sally-Ann

There's clan history. I know there's quite a lot of people, particularly in the US, that have got history in Scotland and are related to some of the clans. So yes, you've got the human history. So it's very unique and it's very easy to drive through that area and actually not see most of it. Then when you come across the north, obviously you've got the coastline and that's when you begin to see some of the stunning beaches that we've got up here.

[00:17:44.650] - Sally-Ann

And the other thing is, as you drive, if I say you drive from east to west, you slowly see the landscape changing. So you move away from the slightly, I use this word loosely, slightly more occupied area. There'll be a few more people over on the east. And you go across the moorland and it's quite flat. This is where you see these enormous skies.

[00:18:13.740] - Sally-Ann

But as you drive across, you'll notice that the mountains start to appear and the landscape starts to get a bit more rocky and craggier. And then you'll stumble across this beautiful beach. And this is what happens as you drive across the North Coast. It's an amazing drive and something that really resonated with us the first time we did it.

[00:18:35.640] - Sally-Ann

So you've got the change of landscape going across the North Coast. And then obviously, as you come down the West Coast, I say, obviously, not everybody realises this, but this is where you've got the mountains and a lot of lochs. Lochs are just the Scottish version of a lake, really. So you've got the mountains and the lochs.

[00:18:59.560] - Sally-Ann

And what a lot of people don't realize is it's actually a large section of it is a UNESCO geopark. So it's got a lot of geological history and a lot of explanations, which for some may seem really boring. I hold my hands up and say, I'm not really a rocks person, but there are one or two facts which are really interesting and really explain the landscape that you're seeing. So it's fascinating because as you drive around this area, you'll see very different views and lots of interesting, very interesting spots.

[00:19:42.840] - Sally-Ann

And the other thing is that obviously I've just talked to you around the Coast, but if you go right into the centre of the far north, the area which actually really not many people visit, then, well, all I can say is, Wow, it's just this vista of space.

[00:20:05.580] - Sally-Ann

And this is often where you find red deer. This is one of our specialities. Less so in the summer, more so maybe spring, autumn, certainly winter, you might find them very close to the road. But this landscape is just amazing. And again, it's quite unique because a large part of it is made up of what is known as blanket bog, which is not a very friendly term.

[00:20:33.230] - Sally-Ann

It's a very odd term, I know. It's very special peatland, and it's a really important aspect of the landscape up here because blanket bog is one of the things that is really good at fighting climate change. I'm not going to go into all the details here, but it's a really unique place to go and visit. The wildlife, the flora and fauna, and just the general views in the field. So a lot of people miss that, but it's just another aspect of what the far north has to offer.

[00:21:13.760] - Tracy

I think I missed that. I need to come back. I need to come back and see it.

[00:21:19.350] - Sally-Ann

Yes, it is. And that's the thing. I think the coastal route has been marketed more recently, and so people tend to follow it. And that's fantastic because it's beautiful. But it's just a real shame that if you don't have a chance just to spend a day or half a day just driving inland a little bit and experiencing some of this beauty. And there's a hotel right in the middle. It's called the Garvault. And I know it's

coined the remotest hotel in the UK. And I swear, you can stand outside the front of it and do a 360 degree turn and probably see no other form of 360-degree habitation, as in there are no other buildings. It's stunning. It's just an amazing experience to have.

[00:22:18.940] - Tracy

It sounds fantastic. Yes, definitely. I can't wait to be back, I tell you. So interested in wildlife, because when we were there last year, we did see deer. We stayed in a glamping pod and we were surrounded by deer. We had to catch the ferry from Gills Bay over to Orkney quite early in the morning. So we set off about, I don't know, something like a quarter past six. It was pretty light, so it didn't really matter. And it was warm ish. But we saw loads of deer. They just seemed to be everywhere we went and obviously there's lots of sheep on the road and we expected to see lambs because it was May. But it was... And you have that sense of...

[00:23:02.040] - Tracy

Obviously, the North Coast 500 is popular route. Certain times we did pass quite a few cars, but sometimes we didn't. We just felt like there was just us for stretches of it and lots of sheep. But it was lovely. And so I'm just going to ask about puffins, because I know that's something that comes up quite often about when... Because obviously you can see puffins on the North Coast of Scotland.

[00:23:26.520] - Tracy

So I'm what time of year would I need to come if I wanted to see the birds?

[00:23:32.360] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, that's really important because sometimes people can be disappointed. And that's really sad because puffins are the most amazing creatures to see in real life. We do have puffins around the North Coast of Scotland. And it's really interesting. Their seasonality tends to be April. They will arrive on the Coast sometime during April. I think many people would probably say late April, but if you're lucky, they might arrive earlier in the month. And then they come and they basically they nest in those early weeks and they are resident on the cliffs until late July, early August, I would say. August is a bit like April. Depending when you're there will depend on whether you have the luck of seeing them or whether they will already have left and flown back out to sea. So yes, it's basically April to July/August. That's when you're likely to see puffins. You are almost certainly unlikely to see them outside of that time period.

[00:24:46.920] - Tracy

Okay, that's good to know. So if somebody listening wants to plan a visit to the North Highlands, how does one go about that?

[00:24:56.000] - Sally-Ann

Right. Well, I think the first thing is how you get there. By many people, it's perceived to be a long way away. I think if you're traveling from abroad, you're coming from countries like North America or Australia, it probably doesn't phase you. But I know a lot of Brits think we're the end of the Earth, which, of course, we are up here.

[00:25:18.040] - Tracy

But I was going to say that because honestly, it is. For a lot of people, we used to go a lot by train. So I've been up to Thurso and Wick before with Doug on the train. We'd been to the Kyle of Lochalsh before on the train. And that was the first time I realised that once you got up to that part of Scotland, it was flat. I didn't realise it was going to be flat. I was like, Why is it flat? I just assumed it was going to be all mountainous. So we've done that. But I know a lot of people we spoke to, it's like, Oh, no. Even a lot of Brits just go as far as, or English, I should say, only go as far as Edinburgh and Glasgow and maybe that's it. Maybe to Fort William if they're going to do the Jacobite. But yes, certainly to go up as far as Orkney always seemed an absolutely a real bucket list so far to go to Orkney. It was somewhere on another... And it's not. We did that last year. We're like, Well, that was easy. Why did we not do this before?

[00:26:09.310] - Sally-Ann

Yeah, absolutely. People think Orkney is a long way off the mainland. And it isn't. It's at the closest point. It's about a 40, 45 minute ferry ride. I can see it. If I just move my head a little bit and look out our window, I can see one of the Orkney Islands. So it's close to the mainland. But yeah, going back to how you get up here, actually, it's not as bad as people think.

[00:26:36.700] - Sally-Ann

Inverness is the main hub to access the whole area. But there are roads, there are decent roads, not motorways, but decent roads to get up to Inverness if you're driving. But you can, as you rightly say, Tracy, you can get up by train and it's a beautiful ride. Beautiful ride through the Cairngorms and the mountains. The other way by train is to take the Caledonian Sleeper train up from London overnight, which is actually what we used to do most of the time.

[00:27:11.780] - Sally-Ann

That's our favourite.

[00:27:12.720] - Sally-Ann

She's smiling at me as as I say that.

[00:27:16.500] - Tracy

That's a happy train. We love that. We love taking the train Inverness, the Caledonian Sleeper Inverness, or Fort William. I know we've done a podcast episode about taking it because that's Doug's favourite, absolute favourite is to do the Caledonian Sleeper. isn't it, honestly, waking up in the morning and looking out, you look out the window and you're like, Oh, this is a fantastic, absolutely fabulous.

[00:27:36.910] - Sally-Ann

I absolutely agree. I mean, even if I take a trip south to see family, on occasions, I'll use the sleeper and I still get that feeling, waking up and looking out of the window and seeing the views. It's just so different to when you're leaving the suburbs of London. It's fantastic. So it's always worth giving that some thought as an option because that's a really good way of utilising time quite well.

[00:28:06.620] - Sally-Ann

But Inverness has an airport, so there are flights that come up from the south, various airports in the south to Inverness Airport. So it might seem a long way, but actually there are good transport links to get to the southern end. So that's what I would say. First thing to do is to get to Inverness. And then obviously you have to make a decision. I think the first decision is how long can you spend in the area? And that will obviously dictate how much you can see and how far you can go. Obviously, you need to decide whether you're hiring a vehicle or whether you want to take a tour. I mean, it's not just a tour like ourselves, but there are other companies that do tours in small minibuses and actually bigger coaches as well, I think.

[00:29:02.340] - Sally-Ann

Or whether as with Tracy, you take the train ride just right up to the North Coast. It might blow your mind a little bit because it's a single track and it tends to be two carriages and it's quite a slow train. I think the train ride from Inverness up to Thurso takes about four hours, which is quite a long time. But again, it's a beautiful journey. It really is.

[00:29:31.810] - Sally-Ann

So you can take the train all the way up to the North Coast and you can... I mean, you can take a tour with us. I'm not going to go into that now, but you could take a tour with us in the area. Or if you wanted to go over to Orkney, then you'd be very close to one of the ferries when you get to Thurso and you could just hop over to Orkney. So there's all sorts of different ways of traversing the area. The difficulty and I think the challenge when you're planning the area is the information. Because it's such a big area, information historically has not been in abundance. And I think that's one of the main differences from talking about Sky or actually indeed all the other areas that I know you've covered, Tracy, both in your podcasts and on your website.

[00:30:23.780] - Sally-Ann

There is a lack of information, but a couple of good places to go would be, well, first off, the North Coast 500 website itself. That has got a website, it's got a lot of information on it to do with routes, accommodation, activities, places to visit. So that's a good source of information. You've also got Visit Scotland itself, which is our main tourist body. Again, they've got lots of information to do with different places and accommodation, et cetera. There are some agencies that do do packages all together. They'll put self guided routes together. They'll put tours, we work with one. So if you wanted the whole thing packaged up with accommodation and tours, there are people that do that as well. Otherwise, there are guidebooks. You can go back to the Good Old Fashion Guidebook, which is exactly what we did first time round. There are a handful of good ones. There's two particular ones that I know are our favourite. Yeah. Which I can mention or talk about.

[00:31:49.960] - Tracy

Yeah, absolutely. Feel free.

[00:31:51.580] - Sally-Ann

One of them is the North Coast 500 guide book by a gentleman called Charles Tate. He's a local guy. He's actually based on Orkney, but he's very familiar with the area. And that's a mine full of information. It really is.

[00:32:07.360] - Sally-Ann

And the other one is quite a beautiful book, actually. It's called The North Coast Journey, and it's by Bridget Benson. She's got a lovely way of talking about different places, and it's beautifully laid out. They're two really good information books. There are some other newer books which I think probably have maybe a bit more practical information in. And I have to say I don't have the names offhand, which might be more of interest if you're thinking maybe of hiring a camper van or you want to be a bit more independent.

[00:32:45.780] - Sally-Ann

But I guess the only thing I would say is that you do need to double check information on the ground. Lots of things do change season to season in terms of what's open and what's available. So I would always say if you're making a plan and you're using guidebooks in terms of accommodation or restaurants or visitor attractions that you hope are open, it would be good to check online to make sure that they're still operating and to check their opening hours so you're not disappointed.

[00:33:24.680] - Tracy

No, I think that's a good point. We planned our trip quite minutely last year in terms of the accommodation and the driving distances every day and working out what was doable each day because Doug was driving and I refused to drive it, point blank, which I'm glad I did more than navigating and looking out the window going, Wow, this is gorgeous. Well, he was like, Well, I'd like to see it, but I've got to concentrate on the road. That's another advantage going out with you guys, but we'll talk about that in the next podcast. Yes.

[00:33:56.220] - Sally-Ann

I was just going to say it is an advantage going out with us, but I mustn't get onto that. I know. I think one of the important things for people visiting to understand is that the roads up here may be different to the roads you're used to driving on. I think, Tracy, I'm sure you can vouch for that.

[00:34:17.440] - Tracy

Absolutely.

[00:34:18.820] - Sally-Ann

Particularly as you go across the North Coast, in the North West corner and some of the roads on the West Coast, there are a lot of single track roads and basically that means there's only room for one vehicle. So if you meet someone, you've got to know what to do. We would always say you need to be able to reverse your vehicle. You need to be prepared for not knowing what's around the corner. I think you've mentioned the sheep, but there could be sheep, there could be cattle, there could be a broken

down truck.

[00:34:55.670] - Tracy

Great big deer in the middle of the road a couple of times. We did the Applecross and there was a deer. On Apple Cross, I think I closed my eyes most of the time doing that.

[00:35:08.470] - Sally-Ann

Yes, there's a lot of talk about Applecmanoeuvreross. People might have heard of that, and particularly if they've looked at all at the far north. It's the road that you'll often see a picture of, going down the side of a mountain with these hairpin bends. It's a beautiful view from the top if you've got the weather, but you do need to be aware and mindful. And that's the one thing I'd say if you've got a big vehicle. Lots of people say, Oh, my vehicle is so long, can I drive it? They don't recommend you do, and with good reason, unless you are an exceptional driver and know how to maneuver your vehicle. But please don't get me wrong, many people can and many people enjoy it. It's just you need to be prepared.

[00:35:56.740] - Tracy

So obviously, the North Coast 500, it's been well marketed. So I think a lot of people will be aware of it. So is there a better way, if somebody's going to drive it, is there a better direction to drive it? Would you recommend doing it the anti clockwise from Inverness and round or the clockwise direction?

[00:36:13.600] - Sally-Ann

Yes. So the North Coast 500, it basically came into being in 2015, and I'm sure many people have heard of it. I know it's been marketed globally and very successfully. But for anybody that doesn't know, it's basically a 500 mile circular route around the far north of Scotland, starting and ending in Inverness. So it's great. It's great for people because it's in a circle, you drive around it and you follow your nose, really. In terms of which way we would suggest you go, we would say east to west, which I think, Tracy, is the opposite to the way that you went last year.

[00:36:59.520] - Sally-Ann

And the reason we say that, often, as I think I mentioned, people talk about the West and people can often disregard the East Coast. And the interesting thing, just talking about roads is you don't have the same single track roads on the East Coast. It's a two way road, so a normal road, not a big road, but at least you've got two way traffic. So for a start, if you're coming up to the far north and you come up the East Coast, it's an easier drive. So from a practical point of view, I think it makes sense to go east to west because if you go west first, you are going to come across Applecross quite early on and it might just scare you before you've even started.

[00:37:47.140] - Tracy

Which, of course, we did.

[00:37:51.580] - Sally-Ann

There's a good practical reason for going up the East Coast. If you do your research or you have a guide and you really get the most of it, you get a really good grounding, I think, in some of the history of the area. And that's the best side to do it in, really. So we would say east to west. And then the scenery builds as you drive around the route. And I think that's what is so magical about that drive and that route is the fact that you start with the... They are actually known as lowlands, really. The flatter scenery and the Coast, you can see the Coast, you can see the cliffs, beautiful views along that coastline. Then you drive the north and as I said earlier, the scenery builds and then you hit the West. Awe inspiring is the word. I think the fact that you can build up that view, the fact that the driving is easier on the East Coast when you start are two really good reasons to do it that way around. And the other thing that we would say is, obviously, you need multiple days to do this.

[00:39:12.260] - Sally-Ann

To give the North Coast 500, I mean, to give it credit, you really need six or seven days. You can drive it in three or four, but it will literally be a drive. You won't experience it like you could. And if this is a one off visit, it would be a real shame not to do that. But yeah, so you need that time to cover the

route.

[00:39:42.670] - Tracy

And I think that's a really important thing to stress, actually, because we did it too quickly last year and we'll go back and do it far more slowly next time and actually soak it in rather than, I just say it did feel... I mean, we experienced the drive, which was a bit of a nice, pretty mind blowing, but definitely do it slower. But I think that's a really good point to make, Sarah, because quite often, if you've only got 10 days or 14 days vacation, often people are trying to squeeze in a lot of places in a short period of time. And I think that's important if you're planning to do and really make justice out of the area is to really think about how much time you want to spend or you can spend exploring the area.

[00:40:29.330] - Sally-Ann

Yes, I think it's right. And to be honest, if you don't have six or seven days, you shouldn't necessarily be put off because you can do some of it in a lesser time frame and still get lots of rewards from it. You could choose to do part of the East Coast. You could choose to go up through the middle and then do part of the West Coast. So don't be put off by what I've just said, because there is opportunity to see parts of it and still thoroughly enjoy it.

[00:41:03.800] - Tracy

You see what I think is if somebody comes in the day, three or four days, they'll be like, I need to come back. You need to come back and do it all. That's what happened.

[00:41:11.640] - Sally-Ann

And that's what often happened to our B&B. People would come and they'd be touring on quite a quick short break and they would say, We're going to be back. And they would come back as well.

[00:41:23.850] - Tracy

Absolutely. So you're right. If you can just fit in that, give yourself a taste, but guarantee you will want to go back for longer. So we're going to finish this first episode of the podcast, but next week in Episode 2, it's actually going to be Episode 36, but Part 2, I should say, with Sally Ann, we're going to be talking about North Coast Explorers, which is the tour company that Sally Anne and her husband, Robert own. So I just want to say thank you for this episode, Sally Ann.

[00:41:52.320] - Sally-Ann

Thank you.

[00:41:53.360] - Tracy

Thanks again to Sally Anne for coming on to the podcast this week to share her love and passion for far North Scotland. If listening to this podcast does not have you rushing to visit this beautiful area of the world, then I don't know what will. You can find links to the destination's websites and books mentioned by Sally-Ann in the show notes to this episode at [uktravelplanning.com/episode 35](http://uktravelplanning.com/episode-35), including a link to Sally-Ann and Robert's tour company, North Coast Explorer Tours.

[00:42:22.940] - Tracy

On that note, don't forget to tune in next week when I chat with Sally-Ann again in more detail about North Coast Explorer Tours, including what you can expect if you book a private day or multi day tour with them and answers to frequently asked questions. It's a wonderful episode, so if you haven't already clicked follow on your favourite podcast app, make sure you do right now so you don't miss it.

[00:42:45.060] - Tracy

That just leaves me to say, until next week, Happy UK travel planning.