

Epic UK Adventures: Victoria Greig's 7-Week Journey from Shetland to the Cotswolds

Welcome to episode 118 of the UK travel Planning podcast

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

Tracy: Hello and welcome to episode 118 of the UK travel Planning podcast. In this episode, I chat with our first New Zealand guest, Victoria Gregg, about her and husband Morrie's epic seven and a half week UK trip earlier this year. It's a fantastic conversation where Victoria shares their wonderful experiences, including their time with the award winning North coast explorer specialising in designing and delivering bespoke private tours of the north coast 500 and the North Highlands. This tour offered them unique insights and breathtaking scenery, making it a highlight of their journey. Victoria also discusses their visits to the picturesque Cotswolds and the historic city of York and provides invaluable tips for anyone considering booking a tour or planning a trip to the UK. Join us as we explore the highlights of their adventure and discover what made their trip so special.

Victoria travelled from New Zealand to the UK with her husband Murray

Victoria Gregg: My name is Victoria, and I live in Christchurch in New Zealand. that's in the South island of New Zealand. and we, went over to the UK in April May. I travelled with my husband, Murray. We're both retired and this was the trip that we had planned to do quite some time ago and then it got cancelled because of COVID So with one thing or another, this was the time to do it. And, it was wonderful, absolutely wonderful.

Tracy: And you went for a reasonable amount of time as well. So a couple of months was about eight weeks.

Victoria Gregg: Yeah, we were away for seven and a half weeks, so it was being so far away, you really want to try and pack in as much as you can and make the most of the time that you have available.

Tracy: Oh, absolutely. Because you literally are going from the other side of the world all the way over to the UK. So you spent the entire seven and a half weeks in the UK, which is wonderful to hear, I have to tell you, Victoria. So would you like to give us a quick overview of your itinerary?

Victoria Gregg: Right, so this was really, our bucket list, doing the things that we really wanted to do. So we started off, in Aberdeen for a few days, then we went up to Shetland, which was a place that I'd always wanted to go to. and we had seven days there, we had a rental car, and we turtled around seeing and doing as much as we could. Absolutely fantastic. Then we went down, to Inverness, where we met up with Robert and did our, ah, north coast explorer tour. After that we, went down to Fort

William, to go on the Jacobite Express. That was another thing that was on my bucket list. And then on down to Glasgow and to the Outer Hebrides, which was amazing. So we did a self drive tour around the outer Hebrides, and then we trained back to Edinburgh, and then down to York, and we spent a week exploring York. Absolutely fantastic. So much history in York, and then down to the Cotswolds, where we really indulged ourselves with our love of wonderful, national trust houses and gardens and, yeah, it was absolutely fantastic. And then back to London just for a night and back home, so really was doing the things that we were absolutely keen on.

Tracy: Oh, and I love it as well, because that's actually a lot of slow travel. You say you packed in a lot, but you actually spent a reasonable amount of time in places like York, and so you actually got to get the feel for it. And I know a lot of people can't, and they have to spend a day in, they're on the way, maybe up to Edinburgh, but actually being able to spend that length of time in a place is amazing.

You spent eleven days in the Cotswolds exploring gardens

So how long were you in the cotswolds for, I have to ask.

Victoria Gregg: we had about eleven days in.

Tracy: The Cotswolds, so that's heaven, honestly. I mean, I say that my mom lives just outside Stratford, so they're not. So I'm very lucky with that. But I love the Cotswolds and, the gardens, I mean, Kiftsgate, Hidgate. Oh, honestly, I could just. I just, I was talking yesterday to somebody. I was saying I could just. I could spend all day in those gardens, just wandering around.

Victoria Gregg: It was absolutely fantastic. We had a list of the places that we really wanted to go and see, and I'd group them by days so that we could go and see something in the same area where we were and not miss, you know, try not to miss out places, but we pretty much did a couple of houses or gardens every day.

Tracy: Yeah.

Victoria Gregg: and at the end of it, we were absolutely exhausted by the time we got to London, but it was fantastic.

Tracy: Oh, no, it sounds brilliant.

Robert chose north coast explorer tours because they're our partner in Scotland

So I asked you to come onto the podcast to talk, actually, overall, about your itinerary, but to focus on north coast explorer tours, because they're our partner in, far north Scotland. And, Sally Ann was like, I think Victoria would be fantastic to chat too, and, she can talk about our tour. And I just thought it'd be lovely

00:05:00

to hear from somebody who's actually done a tour, with Sally Ann. Robert, north coast explorer tours to kind of explain how it went and how, what sort of things that you did on it. I've actually just finished a YouTube, virtual copper video that I did with Sally Ann, just catching up on how the season has gone, which has been fantastic and I've put lots of

brilliant videos because it is honestly such a beautiful part of the world. But, you chose to book with north coast Explorer tour. So how did you hear about them?

Victoria Gregg: Well, we actually saw an advertisement, in a scots magazine, and it all started as a bit of a joke, really. My husband said, oh, well, when we lotto, we could do a tour like this with our own private tour and our own driver and everything. Anyway, I sent an email off. I thought, well, I'll find out about it and, find out what the cost and everything's like. And when it came back, I thought, actually, this is doable. and there were so many reasons why it was going to be better doing the tour than doing it on our own. and one of the main reasons was if you've got someone else doing the driving, a, they know where to go and b, you can both see everything instead of someone trying to navigate and someone trying to drive. And I heard that some of the roads were pretty, you know, but nasty when you're not used to them. and so it just, yeah, just panned out that this was actually going to really work for us. And it did. It really did.

Tracy: Perfect. And I know Victoria said, you also heard afterwards that, she'd been done with a few podcasts as well, so you get the opportunity to kind of hear Sally Anne through the podcast.

Victoria Gregg: Yeah, that was really good because there was a link on the north coast explorer, website talking about the podcasts. And so we did, we listened to the podcast and although we'd sort of actually had a couple of emails backs and forwards from Sally Ann at this stage to actually listen to the podcasts and hear more, it just reinforced that this is really the right way to do this.

Tracy: Oh, that's perfect. I love to hear that. I really do. And it's so nice. So, Sallyanna, three episodes, and they were just fantastic, honestly. so it was lovely to hear that. I

know you'd already found her and booked. But just the fact that you were able to listen to the podcast and kind of get to know Sally Ann and hear a bit more about the area is amazing.

Can you describe your experience with north coast explorer tours

So can you describe your experience with north coast explorer tours? What were your favourite activities and experiences that you did? I mean, how long did you spend with them? I guess would be a good question.

Victoria Gregg: well, we did a six day trip with Robert, and right from the word go when we met him we thought yep, this is actually going to really work. He was such a lovely personality, so easy to get on with. and I think what we found the most interesting was his knowledge was just encyclopaedic and it didn't matter what it was, whether it was about the history or the geography or the, the plants, whatever, he could tell us all about it and that just made the whole trip so fascinating. and we certainly noticed it when we were out on the Outer Hebrides doing the trip on our own. And we both said oh, wouldn't it be wonderful if we had Robert with us?

Tracy: Oh, it does make a difference, doesn't it, when you're with somebody who's so knowledgeable about an area?

Victoria Gregg: Absolutely. And also knowing the places to go. we had spent, I suppose was well over an hour on a call with Sally Ann, talking about the sorts of things that we were interested and places that perhaps we'd like to see. She threw in a whole lot more and it was from that that they came up with the itinerary that was tailor made to do the

things that we were interested in, which was really great. And I must say they got it absolutely spot on m it was yeah, fabulous.

Robert organised a private tour of New Zealand's countryside gardens

So I guess, you know, from our point of view, one of the things that I was particularly interested in were the gardens. And so Robert had organised, included in the trip, gardens like the Loch Melm shrubbery and arboretum and Oolapool. We ah, went to the gardens in Inveriri and Atterdale gardens and then there was also Castle May and Dunrobin Castle and it was so lovely to be able to go and see the sorts of gardens that we just don't have here in New Zealand. And Robert also gave us plenty of time to walk around those gardens. He'd sort of say to us, well, I've allowed about an hour or an hour and a half or so here, but do you just wander off and take as long as you like and you know, don't hurry back? It was, it was so lovely, it was so relaxing.

Tracy: that's the beauty as well, when you have your own, private tour, because you have that flexibility, you haven't got, you haven't got to join a tour group, you haven't got that kind of pressure of like, we need to be back on the coach by xtar. You get all that flexibility, which is just fantastic. Isn't it absolutely amazing to be able to do that?

We started in Inverness and went up the east coast

so obviously you managed to get into some of the gardens. I have to just ask you at this point because Sally and I are, ah, always talking about Hidden beach. Did you get to

Hidden beach?

Victoria Gregg: No, and I would have loved to have gone to Hidden beach, but it was one of those things, that there were so many things that we were trying to see. so we sort of started in Inverness, went up the east coast, we went through the flow country, which I know is one

00:10:00

Victoria Gregg: of Robert's favourite places. And I must say it was absolutely amazing that this starkness, the barrenness, but it's absolutely beautiful. and one of our favourite times was just before we sort of started in the flow country. We stopped at Glen Loth and had this magnificent view down the valley. And Robert, had been telling us about the Highland clearances and he read an extract, from a book of a firsthand account of somebody that had actually been there in the clearances. And it was so moving, it was absolutely incredible. I mean, you could almost, you could imagine the smoke coming up from the burning of the villages and everything. And it was things like that that just made the whole trip so magical. You could have just driven through and it would have meant nothing but hearing all about it. It just was wonderful to see,

Tracy: The historical, the context into it as well, so that it. Yeah, it brings it alive, doesn't it? I mean, it's a beautiful area anyway, but to know the kind of the history and what's happened in those areas is again, it brings it all to life, doesn't it?

Victoria Gregg: Yeah, yeah. Some of the other things that we really enjoyed doing was, I loved the old castles, the Sinclair Gurnigo castle, that's on the side of the cliffs. I mean, that was. The ruins there were just fabulous. And the most amazing view standing,

looking at the castle and the sheer drop down the cliffs below. it was absolutely beautiful. Really loved that. the cliffs I found. Absolutely amazing when we went up to likes of Dun Cansby head and stacks and just seeing these magnificent cliffs, it was. Yeah, I have a thing about heights, so there's no way I was going to go anywhere near the edges.

Tracy: I've got some pictures of my kind of like as close out as I would get to the edge as well because I'm the same. I'm like, okay, this is far enough.

Victoria Gregg: So, I mean, that was absolutely amazing. We really enjoyed that. Bauna keel beach. I'm just absolutely in awe of these amazing beaches with the pure white sand and hardly anybody on them. It was just absolutely mind blowing, really. But Bauna keel would definitely have to be one of our favourites. And with the ruins of the church at one end, it was just quite spectacular. Yeah, just seeing the views, it was just wonderful. Never get tired of them at all.

Robert drove you around for the entire time that you were there

So about you took lots of photos, thousands of photos.

Tracy: I'll be asking to share some in the show notes because I know that people will be like, I want to see what this looks like because you're painting this amazing picture. To be honest, no photo will do it justice. But you will get an idea.

Victoria Gregg: Yeah. My husband was a very keen photographer and, Robert was very good about, stopping on demand. And of course, he knew the best places to stop to get

these amazing views. it was absolutely fantastic. I mean, we'd have maybe stopped in one place and he'd say, no, no, we'll just go a wee bit further on and, yeah, capture the views.

Tracy: so obviously you were transported. Robert drove you around for the entire time that you were there. So that was great. So again, you get to sit back and relax and enjoy the views while you get chauffeur driven. You can't ask for better, can you?

Sally Ann made all the bookings for us for accommodation on the way

And accommodation is also included. So what sort of accommodations did you stay in on the way?

Victoria Gregg: the accommodation, it was lovely because, Sally Ann basically said to us, what sort of budget, have you, do you want to spend on the accommodation? And then she came up with a list of places, and we made our own bookings for the accommodation. But it was wonderful having the recommendations. a. It had to fit in with the stops where Robert was planning an overnight stop or something. But it was really great to hear that they don't recommend anywhere that they haven't actually stayed in themselves. So all the accommodations we had was amazing. We stayed at, some bed and breakfast. We stayed at a couple of little hotels. They were absolutely beautiful. The standard was amazing. and the other thing that we really appreciated was because there's not much in the way of restaurants or whatever. It's not like being in a city. and so Sally Ann had also said to us, well, I'll send you some information for places that you might like to go for dinner. And then she made all the bookings for us. We'd arrive at a place cheque into the hotel or the bed and breakfast, and then there

was somewhere already booked for us to go for a meal, which was just made it so easy.

Tracy: Oh, that's fantastic. Absolutely fantastic.

Robert has what he calls the sky explorer, which is his drone

And did you have any unique or unexpected experiences during the tour?

Victoria Gregg: it was really quite fun. Robert has what he calls the, sky explorer, which is his drone. Ah. And I had never had any experience of this at all. And so you put on the headset and you really felt as if you were flying. So we used the drone a few times, like flying over the top of a waterfall. It was just absolutely amazing. A totally different sort of view. and also the Eileen Doonan castle. again, it was just flying in and you could see all these people walking around it, but we had the bird's eye view.

Tracy: Yeah, that's amazing, isn't it? I mean, not many people can do that unless you're getting a helicopter, but been able to do it where you can. And I know Sally Ann's described it, you kind of put these goggles on and

00:15:00

Tracy: then. So you actually see in the view from the drone.

Victoria Gregg: Yeah, yeah, it's quite weird. It is very weird. But, you know, you're flying over the top of the loch and here's this view underneath you. It's absolutely wonderful.

Tracy: Oh, no, sounds fantastic. So, obviously, you had a. You thoroughly enjoyed it. I know you had a fantastic time. So how would you kind of compare a tour with north coast explorer with. With other tours that you've done, would you say? I mean, obviously, this is. It was a private tour, bespoke for you. So I don't know if. Was that the first time you'd done that type of tour or.

Victoria Gregg: We've not done that sort of tour before. I mean, we've done just day sightseeing tours or whatever. and. But they've been with, you know, other people just. I guess we felt very spoiled being just on our own with Robert. It was his vehicle and everything was. Was so comfortable. And the fact that he would stop anywhere that you wanted to, and we were seeing the places that we really wanted to go to, not what's just on the sightseeing list that, you know, everybody else maybe wanted to go to. So we really felt that we got the most out of the tour. and the fact that he was sharing his knowledge with us, that that's what made it absolutely magical.

Tracy: Yeah. Yeah, no, that's great. I know. I was talking to Sally Anne the other day and she said that, Robert is studying, is still studying. yeah. Which is fantastic, isn't it? So, you know, he already knows a lot, so learning even more.

Victoria Gregg: Absolutely. And that really impressed us, actually, that he kept on, doing more study, you know, and his knowledge is really what made the trip so great.

Tracy: Oh, that's brilliant.

I'm going to ask you about wildlife as well, actually

I'm going to ask you about wildlife as well, actually, because it was something Sally Anne and I were talking about. Last time I was up there, just a sheer amount of red deer that I saw. I just wondered, did you see any, I'm just throwing this question in, but did you see any wildlife when you were there? I mean, there's lots of birds, but I,

Victoria Gregg: There weren't many deer. We saw a few on the way through the flow country. But I must admit I'd seen some pictures that he'd posted up later where they were quite a few herds of deer and whatever. We just saw the odd one or two. And we were a bit early for things like puffins, when we were out at Duncansby Head. And, yeah, so it was a wee bit early for those. But, I love highland cows. So very happy to see the highland cows.

Tracy: I do too. I do too. And they're so docile and lovely and just gorgeous, aren't they?

Victoria Gregg: They're just so lovely and cuddly.

Tracy: They are.

So, what tip would you share with anybody considering booking a north coast explorer tour

So, what tip would you share with anybody who's considering booking a tour with north coast explorer?

Victoria Gregg: Do it. We've done quite a bit of research on north coast 500, of the sort of areas that we were interested in, things we were interested in seeing, while we were on

the trip. and as I said, listening to the podcast made a huge difference because you were getting so much more information and feedback. but I think if you're doing any trip, do a bit of homework so you sort of know the sorts of things that you might like to do on the way. I'm terrified of missing out on something. It's terrible if you've been somewhere and you found that sort of ten minutes away from where you were was this fantastic place that you should have been to. So, yes, that was why it was so good to do the tour, because Robert had all these little secret places that he, that he went to, and knew about them. I mean, we stopped in the middle of nowhere one day and he was this big sort of concrete box, sort of, you know, in this paddock. And he said, well, what do you think this is? And absolutely no idea. Anyway, he lifted up the lid and down, looked down this hole and here was this ladder going right down to the bottom. And it was an old nuclear bunker from the cold war days just in the middle of nowhere. Now, only Robert would know about that.

Tracy: Yeah, absolutely. Everybody else would drive past it and not have a clue.

Victoria Gregg: Yeah, absolutely.

Tracy: It's priceless though, that that sort of, that sort of knowledge. And you only get that from somebody who knows the area is a research area and knows that, you know, all the ins and outs and there's little secret places that not everybody knows. And I have to say I have because I know Sally Ann will be listening to this podcast, obviously, but hidden beaches on my list when I get up there.

Sally says South Ireland is one of the most beautiful places in the world

Sally, I'm here to, I've seen too many pictures of it now, and I think often people are quite surprised actually, with how beautiful the beaches are in that part of the world.

Victoria Gregg: Yes, the beaches are absolutely amazing, but I mean, just, but the views from the road, just driving through, the views on the road from the likes of Skari to Oolapol were just absolutely stunning. And I know one place we were and we stopped and you could count seven different ranges of mountains, one after the other after the other. We had the most beautiful weather when we were on the trip. It was just amazing. But those sorts of views were just absolutely mind blowing.

Tracy: And I have to say, and you live in New Zealand, South Ireland, New Zealand,

00:20:00

Tracy: which for me is up there with Scotland as one of the most beautiful places in the world. I have Scotland, Norway and, New Zealand, South Ireland for me, on my three, that I just go, you know what? You can't be anywhere in the world. So that coming from a New Zealander who lives on South island is a huge compliment.

Victoria Gregg: And I know that, later on in summer, when the heathers are out, you'd get the most glorious colours and everything. We were there when the gorse was out and so our photos, some of them are just amazing. You've got this wonderful bright yellow of the gorse. it just was absolutely beautiful.

Tracy: Oh, fantastic.

I just want to ask what the highlights were in York for you

I'm just going to skip on to a little, just ask a few questions about your trip to England. So I'm going to throw this in now just as a quick one. So I just want to ask what the highlights were in York for you.

Victoria Gregg: Well, one of the main reasons that we wanted to go to York was my husband was very keen to go to York minster. and that was absolutely fabulous. It was just magnificent, the building, just walking around it, let alone inside it. And we did do, a tour of the cathedral. That was just lovely. the shambles, it was absolutely fascinating. We got up one morning, about 06:00, to go to the shambles before all the crowds get there. we were so early, we saw a couple of foxes.

Tracy: Oh, wow.

Victoria Gregg: Which was lovely. But those wonderful old buildings and the angles and you sort of wonder how they're still standing. That was just. Yeah. the museum gardens, we spent quite, a long time walking around those. That was just wonderful. And the wall, walking on the wall. there's just so much history in York, and it's so easy to get around.

Tracy: Very walkable city, isn't it? Yeah, absolutely. And I say, I'm glad that you spent a week there. It's brilliant.

Did you take any day trips out or did you spend the entire time in York

Did you take any day trips out or did you spend the entire time in York?

Victoria Gregg: we had one day that we went out with, some friends and we went out onto the Yorkshire Dales, and had a lovely look around and we went to Caldon, through Nesboro and whatever, and that was really nice. It was lovely to get out. we went to one of the, abbeys that went in the ruins of the abbey and that was absolutely fabulous. But the rest of the time we were in York and we could have stayed there longer. I mean, every day we were out doing things, but there was so much to see and do in York.

Tracy: Oh, absolutely. I go back to York every time I'm. Well, when I lived in the UK, we always go to York and every time I go back now to the UK.

Victoria says the kohri shellac gorge and waterfall were most beautiful

So, Victoria, would you like to tell us what your top, most beautiful things that you saw when you were in Scotland were you?

Victoria Gregg: well, the kohri shellac gorge, and waterfall. That was lovely. The walk down from the car park, following the river down, and then standing on the swing bridge looking down into the gorge and the waterfall that went down, that was just beautiful. And it was such a lovely walk through the trees. we really enjoyed that. another special place for us where we stopped was, near torridon, the emplock open air church. And this was quite stunning. And that here's this little church that the local, people had made. That was just a natural little, space with the stones around and on one side was the lock and it was just absolutely beautiful and so peaceful. And I think the last service that they had there was back in the 1980s or something. So, I mean, it was really rather

a special place. and one other thing that we did with Robert, which was such fun, was the Kempster Cairns. and you could actually go inside the cairns and, Robert took Murray into one of them. But what really impressed me was out of Robert's bag came knee pads and gloves so that they wouldn't get their knees all dirty, and gloves so that they wouldn't, you know, scruff their hands or whatever. And Murray said it was absolutely amazing. You had to crawl in through this narrow little wee tunnel and then when you got inside the cairn, you could actually stand up and there was a hole in the roof. Robert had the story about how the hole was formed, but Murray said it was absolutely spectacular. But again, who would know which was the right cairn to go into? This was the one that was in the most original condition. There were other ones, but the fact that he had all the equipment, it was quite bad. Absolutely.

Tracy: Oh, that's fantastic. Did you go in or did it with just Maury? Because I can't go in those places. I get caught.

Victoria Gregg: I actually twisted my ankle just before we met up with Robert, so crawling in was not going to be something that I did. But Robert had, walking poles for me. Out of his bed, out of the boot of his car, came the walking poles, which was absolutely fantastic. So he's prepared for everything.

Tracy: Oh, that's fantastic. It's brilliant. Oh, and see, there's just. There's so much to see. And every day is just. I don't know, every day always takes my breath away when I'm up there. And, it feels like nowhere on earth to me.

Victoria Gregg: Yeah, I would agree with that. And to be quite Frank, we'd love to do another one. We'd

00:25:00

Victoria Gregg: love to do another tour. There's so much more that we didn't actually get to see that we'd like to go back and do again. So maybe. Maybe one day.

Tracy: Lovely. It's been lovely talking to you today, Victoria.

Victoria: Do a bit of research before travelling to the UK

Now, I always end the podcast with the same question. So what is the one tip you would share with someone planning to visit the UK for the first time?

Victoria Gregg: Do a bit of research and find out what places particularly interest you. we've got a big roadmap of the UK that's got everything in it and it's got things like all the National Trust places, it's got historical sites and everything, and we actually pour over that. and have planned routes and things when we've travelled, basically using that, it also gives you an idea of distance and scale and whatever. Things are actually much closer than you think.

Tracy: But sometimes it takes you a little bit longer than you think to get from a to b. That's the only thing I'd say.

Victoria Gregg: But actually, we use trains a lot, getting from a to b. And in New Zealand, we don't have a good train service at all and love train travel. And in the UK, I know people grumble about it, but really, you guys have got an amazing train service. It's so easy to get from one place to another and the trains seem to be so regular.

Tracy: Yes, absolutely. Well, Doug will be pleased to hear that because he's a massive advocate for travel and the UK by train. But, it's been lovely chatting to you today.

Victoria, thank you so much for coming on.

Victoria Gregg: Thank you.

Tracy: Thank you for tuning into this week's episode of the UK travel Planning podcast. As always, show notes can be found [@uktravelplanning.com](mailto:uktravelplanning.com). If you've enjoyed the show, why not leave us feedback via text or a review on your favourite podcast app? We love to hear from you and you never know. You may receive a shout out in a future episode. But as always, that just leaves me to stay until next week. Happy UK travel planning.

00:26:56