

Episode 140 Navigating the North Coast 500: Essential Tips for Your Scottish Adventure

Tracy Collins [00:00:00]:

You considering a visit to the Scottish Highlands? Is driving the North Coast 5 Hundred on your bucket list? In episode 140 of The UK travel planner podcast, discover what you need to know before driving this iconic route and exploring the stunning North Highlands.

Intro [00:00:15]:

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 Collins [00:00:55]:

Hello, and welcome to episode 140 of the podcast. I'm your host, Tracy Collins. And today, we're diving into one of Scotland's most iconic adventures, the North Coast 5 Hundred. Now are you considering a visit to the Scottish Highlands? Is driving the North Coast 5 Hundred on your bucket list? If so, this episode is 100% for you. We're answering the key question, what do you need to know to drive the North Coast 500 safely and to make the most of your journey? Now, to help us explore this, I'm joined by Robert James from North Coast Explorateurs. With years of experience living in and exploring the North Highlands, Robert is here to share practical tips, local insights, and expert advice for navigating this spectacular route. If you're familiar with North Coast Exploratory Tours, you may already know Sally Anne, Robert's wife and better half, who has been a guest on this podcast three times, episodes 35, 30 six, and 42, sharing her knowledge about their tours and the incredible beauty of the Far North Of Scotland. Now it's Robert's turn to join us and share his unique perspective and expertise.

Tracy Collins [00:01:59]:

So whether you're in the planning stages or just dreaming about the North Coast 500, you're in for a treat. So let's kick things off by asking Robert to introduce himself and tell us a bit about North Coast Explorer Tours.

Robert James [00:02:12]:

Okay. North Coast Explorer Tours is a small family run business. It's myself, Robert, and my wife, Sally Anne. We live in the North Highland Region, in fact, on the North Coast Of Scotland, and we provide private, guided tours, bespoke tours for small groups of up to four people, which can last from a single day right up to two weeks.

Tracy Collins [00:02:40]:

And, you take some of our podcast listeners and Facebook group members on tours as well, I believe.

Robert James [00:02:45]:

Yeah. We have. We've been very lucky to have many inquiries coming from the podcast, and some of those inquiries then turning into touring opportunities for us. And the age groups, from those inquiries have been surprisingly broad, actually. I think the youngest group we've taken are people in their thirties, and the eldest, I think, in their early eighties.

Tracy Collins [00:03:09]:

Wow. That's fantastic. Now let's turn our attention to the North Coast 500. So just remind us where and what is the North Coast 500, Robert?

Robert James [00:03:19]:

Well, the North Coast 500, is a periphery route around the North Highland region. And to position this on a map, the North Highlands is the area North Of Inverness on the Mainland Of Scotland. The area is approximately 10,000 square miles in area, but the population density is around about 10 people per square mile. So there's not an awful lot of people. In fact, in the interior of, of the North Highlands, there's very little in the way of human habitation, very few villages, very few roads. In fact, all you'll find really is a mass of wilderness, wildlife, mountains, lochs, and rivers, which is absolutely wonderful. But the main conurbations and roads are around the periphery, following up the East Coast north of, from Inverness and across the North Coast, along the North Atlantic Coast, down the West, and then a region which is through the center of the southern region of the North Highlands taking you back to Inverness. So it's a 516 mile road route beginning and ending in Inverness around the whole of the North Highland region.

Tracy Collins [00:04:33]:

And you've driven this around has it a 50,000 miles?

Robert James [00:04:38]:

I would say at least a 50,000. Sally Anne and I have been exploring the North Highlands. This will be our twenty first year, but I would say conservatively about a 50,000 miles. Yes.

Tracy Collins [00:04:52]:

Wow. That's amazing. So the North Coast Of 500 has been described as a driving route, but a lot of questions are asked on social media about how to drive it. So what are the challenges? Which way around should it be driven? And, you know, what are your thoughts about the term driving route?

Robert James [00:05:08]:

Well, there's quite a few questions in that. I would start by saying there is more concern about driving the North Coast 500 than it really warrants. The majority of the roads, so two thirds of the roads are exceptionally good roads, wide, excellent signage, good visibility. And for a competent driver from any region, whether you're used to driving on the left or not, these roads won't, phase you, and won't provide you any difficulties. Where the challenges really come in is on the single track roads. So this is where a two carriageway road will suddenly and quite abruptly, in some instances, go down to one single lane, where traffic going in both directions is using the same stretch of road. Now there is about a 60 miles of this type of road on the North Coast 500, the majority of which is very easy to traverse, provided that you don't get distracted by the scenery. You really need to be looking further

ahead from your driving seat than you would ordinarily do so that you can plan, how you're going to negotiate around the traffic that's coming towards you.

Robert James [00:06:28]:

And when you're surrounded by beautiful beaches and mountains and lochs and wildlife, it's very easy to get distracted. So provided that you have good visibility and you focus on that, for the majority of the single track roads, you won't have a problem. What you do have to be cautious of though is that in order for the single track road system to work, there are a series of passing places. So these are like little indentations on the side of the road, paved indentations, which are probably every hundred meters, every 50 yards or so between each one. And these passing places are what you use in order to allow onward traffic to pass by you. And there are some regulations that cover driving this type of road, but really, there's some common sense guidelines, which I hope to share with you today that will make that driving experience on those single track roads easier. Your other question, which I'd like to address before we get into some of the detail, is it's billed as the ultimate driving route, which for some people, they think this is a route to drive at speed without stopping. It's sort of a nonstop route.

Robert James [00:07:47]:

You can do that, but to be honest, I think it's a waste of time and what the region has to offer. You can drive the North Coast 500 route in five days, averaging about a hundred miles a day, but that will give you very little time to get out and explore and enjoy the region. I think you really need seven days to fully appreciate the North Coast 500, so that would give you perhaps four hours of driving each day and four to five hours of actually getting out, getting the sand between your toes, and and and enjoying what the region has to offer. So beware of the term driving route.

Tracy Collins [00:08:31]:

And what about choosing which direction to go? Should we go anticlockwise or clockwise?

Robert James [00:08:37]:

Well, we will always take guests anticlockwise and that's because we believe the route builds in a visual crescendo as you go anticlockwise. The East Coast has curving, sweeping beaches and a coastline, beautiful route, but it lacks the mountains that you get on the West Coast. The North Coast then slowly builds with beautiful beaches, and the mountains rear up into the distance. And then as you begin your journey down the West Coast, the mountains and the lochs and the rivers really do build in earnest. So the the route builds in its drama as you drive anti clockwise. But if you're a self driver, we would still recommend going anti clockwise, and that's because, particularly if you're on a rental, you're gonna pick up your rental van or car in Inverness. And if you go clockwise, within about ninety minutes of leaving Inverness, you are going to be on some of the most challenging single track roads the North Coast 500 has to offer. In fact, within ninety minutes, you will be at the dreaded Balachna Bar, which we can talk about a little in a minute.

Robert James [00:09:50]:

And if you are not yet acclimatized or used to your vehicle, it's gonna come as a bit of a shock. You are going to have to be confident and competent enough to be able to reverse your vehicle, often uphill and downhill, and around bends to the nearest passing space,

which could be a hundred meters away. So if you go anti clockwise, by the time you get to those most challenging roads, you're already familiar with your vehicle. And from that point, you can then concentrate on the driving rather than what the vehicle itself is doing.

Tracy Collins [00:10:27]:

Okay. So you kinda touched on, there about the single track roads and some of the challenging sections. You mentioned one that that Doug drove, and I nearly screwed my head off most of the way. So what what to you are the most challenging sections of the North Coast 500 route?

Robert James [00:10:46]:

Well, Balach Na Bar, which is Gaelic for the parts of the cattle, is the one that gets all the headlines. Alright? So this is a single track road section which is about 12 miles in length, and the Balaknobar itself, if you go, clockwise, rises from sea level to about 2,000 feet in around about four miles. There's a series of switchback hairpin bends, precipitous drops, blind corners, but it's not as challenging to drive as you might think. Provided that you keep your eye on what is happening a couple hundred meters up the road, you won't be surprised at any point along that road. I think where the challenge comes is that people are so focused on the front of their vehicle and where that is going, they often miss vehicles coming down the road towards them. And being not able to plan can make that drive a little bit tricky. But the beauty of Balaknaba is that in the main, you can see a good mile ahead of you. So there shouldn't be any surprises if you keep your eyes on the road.

Robert James [00:12:02]:

I personally think, having driven this route hundreds of times, I think the most challenging part of the North Coast 500 is actually the Ascent Peninsula. So this is from Lochinver around to the Kyle Skew Bridge. It's a single track road. It's about 25 miles. And what makes this route harder to drive, in my opinion, is that there are lots of blind corners, small ridges and falls in the road. And what you're likely to find on this stretch of road, because you can't see very far in front of you because of the nature of the road and the terrain, is that you're likely to meet cyclists and motorcyclists out of the blue. And cyclists have priority on British roads, so no matter where they are on the road, you will have to reverse back to a passing space to let them go. And even with motorcyclists, they will also have priority over you, because they don't have a reverse gear.

Robert James [00:13:04]:

So even if they're only just a couple of meters past the passing space, it's really beholden on you as the driver of the car or the RV to reverse back. So that's what makes the Assin Peninsula more challenging. It's the other road users and the very twisty turn turning nature of the road and the fact that you can't see very far in front of you.

Tracy Collins [00:13:26]:

I'm just gonna throw into there sheep as well because and actually deer because I have a recollection of, going around a corner and a massive stag being in the middle of the road. So that's one. And, oh, and also the time that we drove part of it actually was May and there were lambs everywhere. Everywhere.

Robert James [00:13:45]:

I think you just need to drive to the conditions. I rarely go above 20 miles an hour when I'm driving the Ascent Peninsula or black in the bar For that very reason, Tracy, you just don't know what's around the corner. And if you come around the corner at 35 miles an hour and there's someone doing the same speed coming the other way, that's a closing speed of 70 miles an hour, and that's just far too quickly. So just take your time, and, and put that into the planning. I think one of the challenges is is when you look at a map, a road map of the North Coast 500, it looks like the majority of it is an A class road, a top class road. So to actually find yourself on an A class road, which is actually no wider than about eight meters, is quite concerning sometimes if you're not prepared for it. And as you write, throw in a few highland cows, some young ewes, and, and deer, and that can that can make, for quite a challenging drive.

Tracy Collins [00:14:45]:

Definitely. So have you got any special tips for driving on single track roads, Robert?

Robert James [00:14:50]:

Well, other than be aware and drive much yeah. Concentrate much further into the distance, I think the major one for me and for other drivers is the convoy. Don't travel in a convoy. Now convoy doesn't have to be a lot of vehicles. Most passing places on a single track road will be big enough for two cars. If you are traveling in a convoy and you are the third car and you are competent with reversing, you won't have a problem because if you're traveling behind the two other vehicles, they have to pull into a passing space and there's traffic coming towards you and you have the confidence to reverse, then back you go. No problem. If you are number two in the convoy and you have a vehicle behind you and that vehicle behind you is not confident in reversing, when you get to that passing place and everybody bottles up, the guy behind you won't reverse.

Robert James [00:15:45]:

You are all stuck. And I have seen this so many times where everybody is reluctant to reverse, and then everybody starts to try to drive off the side of the road, to drive past other vehicles, and that's the time when you'll bang wing mirrors or, even worse, get a puncture. I have seen so many vehicles try to save themselves just a few minutes by going off the side of the road to get past other vehicles rather than reversing back. And if you get a puncture, most rental cars these days don't have a spare wheel, so you will be laid up on the side of the road waiting for a recovery vehicle to come. So please, if you were to take one piece of advice away from this podcast is don't go off the side of the road, reverse back to the passing space. And you can only really do that if you travel in a convoy of less than three vehicles. If you end up finding yourself driving along and you're in a convoy of three or four vehicles, just pull over to the side of the road and let everybody go and then start afresh on your own. Much more enjoyable to be able to drive at your own pace and enjoy what is random about you than feel pressurized by other vehicles, coming up behind you.

Tracy Collins [00:17:03]:

So you do you see a lot of stranded vehicles when you're driving around, Robert?

Robert James [00:17:08]:

Well, I think a lot is a term that I would avoid using. I would say that every week, I would see at least one. And these tend to be in the more challenging areas like the Ascent Peninsula

and Balaknava, where people are reluctant to reverse. And the and the and and one of the issues, of course, is that because it's an area that's devoid, really, of large conurbations, that's part of its beauty, it also means there aren't an awful lot of recovery vehicles to come out and help you. So if you do get a puncture, you could be waiting quite a while for somebody to come out. So much better to avoid that happening in the first place. And that just involves just reversing back and, and adding a few seconds to your journey rather than adding a few hours waiting for repair. So I do see vehicles broken down by the side of the road.

Robert James [00:18:02]:

I always stop to ask if they're okay because one of the challenges that you can have is, where am I? I'm gonna call a recovery service to come and help me, but I I don't know where I am. There's a very very good app in particular called What3words. This is a smartphone app, and it essentially divides the surface of the globe up into one meter squares and then assigns three English words to each of those squares. Now those three English words don't actually have to make a coherent sentence, but those three English words will identify the exact square where you are. And all emergency services and recovery services in the North Highlands use what3words. So when you want to try and guide somebody to to you for for help and assistance, what3words will send them directly to you.

Tracy Collins [00:18:54]:

So that's very useful to know. And, I'll be adding that to my phone anyway because I think it's a it's useful even if you're in a city of London, to be honest, to be able to identify where you are. Now is there anything else you think we should be aware of when driving the North Coast 5 Hundred?

Robert James [00:19:10]:

Well, there are, some practical things. There's often anxiety about are there enough fuel stations, are there enough charging points. The answer is yes. You will never be more than about 40 miles, say, 60 kilometers away from a diesel or petrol fuel station. A lot of these are twenty four hour, so you you won't have any anxiety about being able to refuel. And there are increasing number of charging points too. Now there aren't as many of these as there are fuel stations, but there are more than enough to recharge you overnight. So these are not only charging stations provided by many of the hotels along the route, but also in public car parks as well.

Tracy Collins [00:19:53]:

Perfect. So before we finish the podcast, because we always finish with the same question, do you have one last tip for anyone planning to drive the North Coast 5 Hundred?

Robert James [00:20:03]:

If you are renting a vehicle, make sure that you stipulate what type of transmission you want. There are an awful lot of cars in The UK that are still a manual transmission, and I have had to give guests a crash course on how to drive a manual or stick shift in the car park of the rental company in Inverness. So when you're booking, please stipulate an automatic if that's what you require. You will not get one as a matter of course.

Tracy Collins [00:20:35]:

Perfect. So, Robert, would you like to just share where listeners can find you, your website and other information, please?

Robert James [00:20:43]:

Thank you, Tracy. Yeah. I the the best place to go is we we have social media pages, but it's our website where you will find all of our contact details. You'll also find some outline routes, of, places that you can go and the number of days associated with that. And that is at www.northcoast.scott.

Tracy Collins [00:21:05]:

Perfect. Oh, thanks so much. It's been lovely to talk to you, Robert. I mean, I love talking to Saliad, but it's been lovely to meet you too.

Robert James [00:21:11]:

Thanks ever so much, Tracy. It's great to have the opportunity to speak in person.

Tracy Collins [00:21:17]:

Thank you for tuning in to this week's episode of The UK Travel Planning podcast. As always, show notes can be found at uktravelplanning.com. If you've enjoyed the show, why not leave us feedback via text or a review on your favorite 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 say until next week, happy UK travel planning.