

# ON THE RUGGED ROAD

Embark on a scenic road adventure around the North Coast 500, and discover the beauty of Scotland's rural northern tip.

**WORDS** SAMANTHA LEE

**PHOTOS** VISIT SCOTLAND, ACKERGILL TOWER, UNSPLASH (ERIC WELCH) & SHUTTERSTOCK (TRAVELLIGHT, STOCK SOLUTIONS, JOHN BRAID, STEFANO VALERI)





**T**he road trip has long held sway over our cultural imagination; consider the hair-whipping freedom of America's Route 66, Italy's Amalfi Coast drive, and Argentina's desolate Ruta 40. Nudging its way into this rarefied list is Scotland's North Coast 500, a 516-mile loop around the country's rugged northernmost tip. In 2015, the region's Tourism Board launched the route as an initiative to harness the touristic potential of the country's rural hinterlands.

Despite its prosaic beginnings, however, the North Coast 500 delivers in magic and sheer wildness. Starting and ending in quaint Inverness, the route winds through rugged mountain trails, stunning white-sand beaches, ancient castles, glens, and lochs. Hikers and bikers have enough here for weeks of distraction, and it's not just nature that beckons. Luxurious castle B&Bs, pristine local produce, and century-old whiskey distilleries promise diverse balms for city-weary senses. It's not dubbed 'Scotland's Route 66' for nothing.

The entire loop can actually be completed in five to seven days of relaxed driving. Of course, a visitor may extend his or her stay indefinitely to profit from the wealth of nature, history, victuals, and plain ol' Scottish hospitality along the way.

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*(Top) Driving on the Bealach na Bà—a winding mountain pass on the way to Applecross. (Left) Ancient glens and Scottish Highland cattle are some of the route's highlights.*



*(This page) Fresh line-caught Scottish langoustines are best eaten with flavoured butter. (Facing page) The stunning Sango Bay beach at Durness in the Northwest Scottish Highlands.*



## NORTH BOUND

Inverness, accessible by daily flights from London or Edinburgh, is a great base. Pick up your rental car from the tiny airport and make a beeline westward the Applecross Peninsula, population 544. Up till the 1970s, the isolated hamlet was connected to civilisation by the **Bealach na Bà**, a treacherous mountain road that winds in heart-stopping hairpin curves.

Today, a coastal road offers a tamer alternative—but what's the fun in that? The Bealach, as it's fondly known, is an attraction in itself, boasting the steepest ascent of any road in the UK. It's unsuitable for beginner drivers, but intrepid motorists will be spectacularly rewarded at the top with unrivalled views of the Isle of Skye, its dramatic Cuillin mountain range, and the Outer Hebrides. The drive down the other side is similarly spectacular, with vistas of the glittering Atlantic unspooling with each hairpin turn.

Perhaps the best way to prepare for the task is a pit stop at the trusty **Kishorn Seafood Bar**. You'll hit it about 15 minutes before the Bealach; stop and fuel up on sustainable, sparkling local seafood, such as plump sea-fresh oysters, and line-caught langoustines swimming in garlic butter.

After a night in Applecross, head to **Torridon**—another tiny village sitting in the shadow of **Beinn Eighe**, a brooding mountain massif that provides days of diversion for hillwalkers and avid hikers. Explore neighboring Glen Torridon, a dramatic glacial trench lined with ancient stones. Or Loch Maree, laced with beautiful pinewoods. Why not spend a day or two rambling around Beinn Eighe National Nature Reserve? Even nature-shy folk will find pleasure in its easier paths—the Buzzard Path is a half-hour trail that meanders through pinewoods

filled with birdsong before rewarding you with a superb view of Beinn Eighe itself.

Next stop: the whitewashed fishing village of **Ullapool**, sitting on the banks of Loch Broom. In the summer months, **Shearwater Cruises** runs from Ullapool Harbour. Drift across Loch Broom to the Summer Isles, where you'll come within breathing distance of basking seals, breaching dolphins, and seabird colonies. Bring your binoculars—there's no telling when you might spot the rare white-tailed eagle, or a breaching Minke whale.

From Ullapool, the route continues further north towards Durness. Along the way, history buffs will be treated to a 500-year-old ruin on the A837: **Ardreck Castle**, which rises like a giant crumbled cookie off the north shore of Loch Assynt. Hop off your vehicle for a photogenic jaunt around the grounds, and soak in the political intrigue of Clans MacLeod and MacKenzie, two of Scotland's most storied families.

**Durness**, Scotland's northwesternmost village, is the perfect jumping-off point for several superlative attractions. Stop by **Balnakeil Craft Village**, home to local artists who purvey one of a kind paintings, ceramics, woodwork, and books. Nibble on organic truffles and chocolate bars made in-house at **Cocoa Mountain**, Europe's most geographically remote chocolate producer.

A short drive north lands you at **Balnakeil Beach**. Park at the ruined Balnakeil Church (it's free!), and go for a languid stroll along the white sand beach. On a clear day, dip your toes in the ocean and marvel at the sand dunes looming over the sandy bay. Finally, spend some time at **Smoo Cave**, a cathedral-like sea and freshwater cave complex. Its millennia-old walls probably have stories to tell: there's evidence of human occupation dating back 5,000 years.





*(Facing page) The ruins of Ardreck Castle sit on the banks of Loch Assynt. (This page) The colourful buildings of John O'Groats in Caithness county; Highland coos (as they're locally known) have their way on the streets.*

#### ESSENTIAL TIPS:

- Numerous car rental companies are situated less than five minutes from the airport. Most offer an airport pick-up.
- You'll come across plenty of single-track roads, especially in the rural areas. Drive slow, and pull into 'passing places' (these are usually marked with signposts) to allow cars travelling in the opposite direction to pass.
- Book your accommodation early. July to September is the best time to visit, and hence the region's busiest season. Small B&Bs usually fill up months beforehand.
- October to November is the shoulder season, during which the crowds disperse and the scenery takes on the golden hue of fall. Winter brings dramatic scenery and deep tranquility.
- Scotland's weather is famously fickle. No matter the season, always bring warm and waterproof clothing, a hat and sturdy boots/shoes.
- Whiskey buffs can tailor a driving tour that covers many of the North Coast's numerous distilleries. Visit [www.northcoast500.com](http://www.northcoast500.com) for whiskey-themed itineraries.



### THE FAR NORTH

Your next destination is the settlement of **John O’Groats**, famous for being the northernmost point of the British mainland. Take your time getting there; the drive boasts some of the route’s most jaw-dropping landscapes. As the vast expanse of the Atlantic slips by on the left, pastoral grazing fields, tiny hamlets, and spinning giant wind turbines take precedence on your right.

John O’Groats’ most Instagrammable attraction is its ‘Journey’s End’ signpost in the main square, but its most sublime one is **Duncansby Head**. Accessible by an easy coastal ramble across rising cliffs and sheep-dotted fields, the clifftop outpost is Scotland’s north-easternmost point. Pay a quick visit to its lighthouse, then veer immediately south towards the **Stacks of Duncansby**—giant blade-like rock formations that rise out of the water. Millennia of glacial erosion have carved these granite structures out of the leering cliffs, to the joy of the sea birds that squawk, argue, and make their homes in the area.



## CASTLES AND DRAMS

What goes up must come down—the second half of your journey tugs you back south. If you're in the mood for some rest and relaxation after a windswept ramble, book a night (or several) at the **Ackergill Tower** in Wick. The 15th century castle—now a luxury B&B—is steeped in history (ask about the ghost of Braemore) and 19th century ephemera: taxidermied birds decorate billiard rooms and libraries, while meals are taken in a cavernous mahogany-paneled dining hall.

To top off a sumptuous night at a castle, why not whip out some **Old Pulteney whisky**, fresh from the Wick-based distillery? Almost a century old, the distillery—which offers daily tours—produces award-winning single malt whisky. The maritime malt, aged in sherry casks by the sea, is said to be infused with a whiff of Scottish coastal air.

More delights pave the road back to Inverness. Next up: 700-year-old **Dunrobin Castle**, one of the UK's oldest continuously inhabited great houses. Its impressive Versailles-inspired gardens, 19th-century curiosity museum, and quaint tea shop will quickly fill up your time, but don't miss a visit to its falconry. During the summer months, bird of prey demonstrations—during which golden eagles and peregrine falcons show off their hunting prowess—are held daily.

A quick 30-minute drive south will land you at **Glenmorangie Distillery**, one of Scotland's best boutique whisky producers. A tour through their facility affords a first-hand experience of the distilling process, which includes sniffing at fermenting malt, gazing at their giraffe-like copper pot stills, and—of course—sipping a dram or two.

Glenmorangie's experimentation with extra-maturation—in which a spirit is matured in more than one cask—results in complex, layered expressions of flavour. To wit: the Lasanta, a single malt matured for 10 years in ex-bourbon casks, before spending another two years in Pedro Ximénez sherry casks. The result? A warm, full-bodied spirit with hints of juicy sultanas, caramel, and spiced orange.

After you've soaked up Glenmorangie's delights, take a moment to sober up before heading back to Inverness, less than an hour away. Cap your trip with a meal at any of the city's stellar modern Scottish restaurants. **River House** serves up sustainable, locally-caught seafood such as Isle of Lewis mussels steamed in miso broth, and hot-smoked salmon pate from South Uist island. Those more inclined towards something hearty might indulge in juicy aged Scottish beef at **Prime**, a modern steakhouse with a convivial vibe.

Here's where you return your rented car and attempt to get used to city life again. But the infinite calm of Northern Scotland's beaches, lochs, and glens isn't one that's easily forgotten. ■



*(This page) Spend a night at the luxurious Ackergill Tower in the small town of Wick. (Facing page, from top) Fluffy sheep grazing in open meadows, with the Stacks of Duncansby as a backdrop; a trip to John o'Groats village should include a visit to the striking Duncansby Head, which is the real northeastern tip of the Scottish mainland.*

✈ SINGAPORE AIRLINES FLIES TO LONDON DAILY. FROM THERE, TAKE A CONNECTING FLIGHT TO INVERNESS.