

Touring the Northwest Coast and the North of the Highlands

Ian and Shirley James did the North Coast 500 which they call the North Coast "Extreme" completed in Spring 2025. Ian reports the weather and scenery were brilliant. Driving this journey was to complete our circumnavigation of the coast road of mainland Britain. This was done in stages rather than in one go. Our journey was done clockwise, so this time taking in the West coast majesty and that was breathtaking at times. Travelling around 75 miles per day and staying in B&Bs, Air B&Bs and hotels along the route. We booked the accommodation well in advance to make sure we got good places to stay. Maps for each part of the route. [Link](#)

Most of our places were chain hotels, Premier Inn etc, but if you are thinking of doing the trip yourself please try to make sure you stay at the these places:

- Royal Hotel in Ullapool. [Link](#)
- Castle Cottage B&B in Locharron (lovely hosts). [Link](#)
- Glenshee Guest House Golspie (lovely place, directly on the route and again lovely people). [Link](#)

As we live in the Midlands we managed to cover 2,400 miles door to door. We started our trip at The Duck Bay hotel on the shores of Loch Lomond as a treat for us both. We then picked up the coast road travelling West through Dumfries and Galloway and a large loop South calling at Dunoon.



View along Loch Riddon with Bute in the Distance

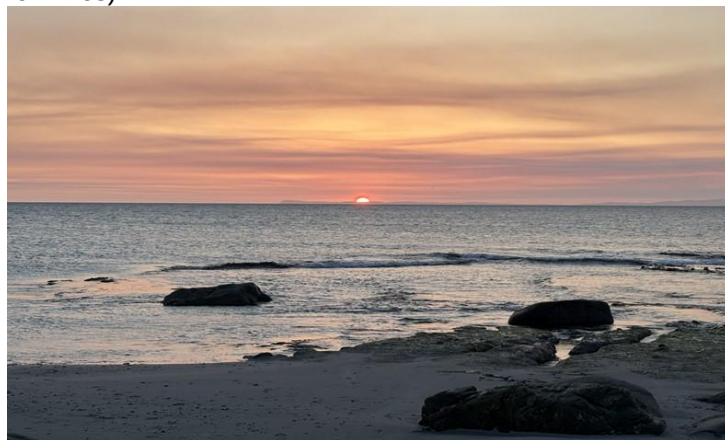


Ardlamont Bay For a picnic lunch (looking at Skipness Point)



Tarbert Harbour Entrance

At Portavadie we boarded the ferry to Tarbert (a very pretty harbour). Leaving Tarbert still heading South to Dunaverty, then back up to Campbeltown resting over night at the Argyll hotel (another hotel well worth a look plus it's the only hotel for miles).



View from Argyll Hotel towards Islay

The next day we travelled North along the West coast road (A83) with fab views across to Jura.



Looking Across to Jura



Part of Arduaine Garden.

Taking a break at Arduaine Garden National Trust (25 miles south of Oban). Oban being our overnight halt.



Oban Harbour

Next morning we set off North along the A85 following Loch Linnhe connecting with our second ferry at Corran, crossing Loch Linnhe at the Corran Narrows south of Fort William to Ardgour.



The Corran ferry landing at Ardgour



Ferry at Ardgour with Garbh Bheinn (884m) behind

Turning now southwest again we encountered our first rough single-track road towards North Corry. Along this road we stopped for an early picnic. With the view below as our backdrop from where we had driven that morning.



Near North Corry looking towards Corran

It was here we first spotted Sea Otters feeding in the Loch but we could not get a clear photograph.

Moving on we carefully navigated the narrow rough road B8043 onto A884 north to Strontian A861 following Loch Sunart then North following Sound of Arisaig to Lochailort (A830). We made one of our only "dead end excursions" which was to Mallaig. This was very scenic, spotting deer grazing and our second Otter experience of the day.

Leaving Mallaig behind us we retraced our route heading for Fort William along the A830 stopping for a Harry Potter moment at the Glenfinnan rail viaduct and the "Bonny Prince Charlie" Jacobite Monument. We then head for our hotel in Fort William for a well-earned rest.

Next Morning we were greeted with a frosty scene. So we decided to go for a walk through the town well worth a longer visit. We then took the A830 west towards Skye.



Glenfinnan Rail Viaduct



Plockton harbour



Jacobite Monument close by



Skye Bridge from the A830

We had made the decision not to visit Skye as it was a one way on and one way off route, so we turned North again at Kyle of Lochalsh up to Plockton (where Hamish Macbeth was filmed in the early 80s). It was truly lovely there.

Continuing north following Loch Carron, we skirted around the top of the Loch and found our accomodation in the pretty lochside village called Locharron. **This is where we picked up the North Coast Route.**



Locharron waterfront.

Locharron is popular with 500'ers so its important to secure a bed somewhere near here. This is one of our reccommendations at the start.

Moving on next morning we cotinued North West taking the diversion across to Applecross. (do not miss this route it's the best). Taking in the "Pass of the Cattle" historic Bealach na Bà is truly a driving expierence. If you are a nervous passenger or driver definitely avoid this route. We came across a friendly Policeman near the summit who was there nearly on a daily basis to help with stuck vehicles etc. Campervans (RVs) were a pain in this area.

Stopping for a break at Applecorss we took in the local Applecross Inn hospitality. To quote in the link in the article describing the route over the pass contributed by Victor Smith, in Applecross "there are lovely views across the Inner Sound of Raasay, to the isles of Raasay and the distant Cullin mountains on Skye". [Pass of the Cattle](#)

Taking the North Minor Road out of Applecross you have some stunning views towards Torridon.



Pass of the Cattle over to Applecross (Bealach na Bà)

Heading east again you quickly cover the miles to join A832 towards Poolewe and just after the village there is Inverewe National Trust Gardens, well worth an hour to have a look and a driving break. Once refreshed we moved on to Aultbea where there is a very interesting Arctic Convoy Museum (telling the stories from WW2 arctic convoys). Loch Ewe was the base for the convoys in and out to USA and to Russia. It's a must visit. Continuing, the A832 turning onto the A835 heading along Little Loch Broom beyond Dundonnell we encountered our next wildlife encounter, wild goats.



We ended our day in Ullapool at the Royal Hotel, a really nice hotel. We took the opportunity here to try the locally landed seafood and it was fantastic.

Next morning whilst packing for the off a gentleman approached me asking about the RV8. During the conversation he told us he was a geologist and had been on a field trip north of Ullapool and told us to look out for certain rock features. The next 50 miles he told us you are driving through some of the oldest exposed rocks in the country if not the world. So, as we drove along the views were very dramatic indeed.

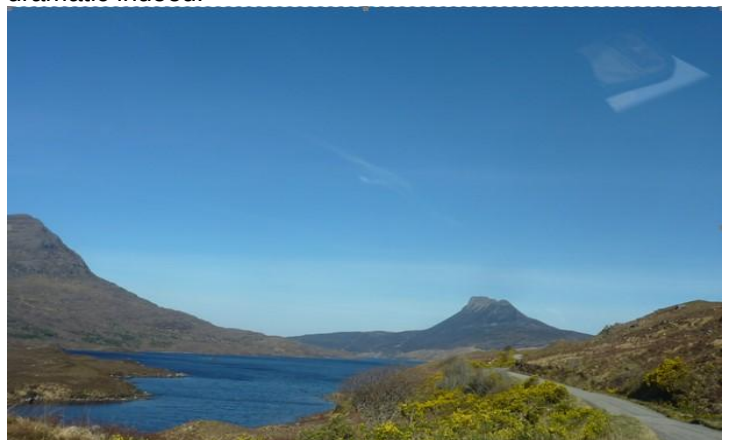


The Applecross Inn

Once you traverse across the top of the peninsula to Shieldaig you turn onto the A896.



Fearnmore looking towards Rona



Stac Pollaidh in Assynt

Continuing on we had a break at The Kylesku Hotel for lunch and it was fantastic. (All fresh out of the Loch that morning). Around the corner was the famous curved bridge.



Kylesku Bridge

Back on the road we were in awe of the scenery as we passed through, every corner seemed to be hiding a stunning panorama. Once again, we left the main NC500 roads for single track roads.



Views near Inverkirkaig

The Highlands were now behind us and scenery remained rocky but not as towering as the previous days.



View Near Laxford Bridge (North West Sutherland).

We bedded down at Durness that night at an Air B&B on an old converted armed forces base that had been converted into homes, holiday lets and craft workshops. To say it was an experience then that would be an understatement. (try to avoid staying there on your trip). Moving on next day across the North coast itself now was still dramatic. The weather had turned by now to windy and overcast.



Coast views near Bettyhill, Tossidale Bay

Our next port of call was Dunnet Head (furthest point North on the coast). With a popular lighthouse to visit.



Moving on our next stop was The Castle of Mey. This was the holiday home of the late Queen Mother who purchased the castle when King George VI passed away. So, whilst at Kylesku we met a guide for the Castle (off duty) and he was also interested in our car but told us where to go around the back of the castle as it is still all public roads even with the no entry signs being shown. So, "in for a penny" we drove around the rear and ended up on a farm track, on one side we had the cliff and sea and the other the boundary wall for the Castle. We kept going and came out the other end ok. We haven't had any Royal communication asking what we were doing there to this day. LOL.



Castle of Mey.

Site. The actual site was a short walk from the car park but was very interesting to see.



Historic Village Clearance site Badbea Village.



Our route along the back indicated

The Castle was closed so we continued to John O' Groats for a photo etc.



Millie at John O Groats

Staying in Wick that evening on the East coast we felt we were once again on our way home.

With an early start we travelled south now on the A99 and then onto the A9 with clear views over the North Sea. We decided to stop at the Heritage Historic Village Clearance

From Here we also spotted Porpoise breaching in the sea. Moving on down the A9 we visited Dunrobin Castle which is well worth a visit including a bird of prey demonstration.



Dunrobin Castle

A quick exit and drive to Golspie for our B&B for the night. This place, Glensee Guest House, was brilliant very clean and comfortable. We had little eating options though, but the local chippy was very good, we ate our meal overlooking the sea on a bench, it was great.



Glenshee Guest House. Golspie

Next day we were straight on the road for more. Not long into the journey we spotted Seals basking near the shore at Comarty Bay.



Finding our way back to the A9 north of Inverness we headed south and then east after Inverness. Driving to Fort George (home of the Black Watch Guard) and ending our day near Nairn.

The NC 500 Route Splits off at Inverness heading West across the country towards Locharron.

On the move again next day, we called in at Brodie Castle NT which with over 400 varieties it has one of the largest national collections of Daffodils. (Luckily we just about made it in time to see the display).

Continuing along B roads heading east. We rested overnight at Peterhead in a large Waterside Hotel. Nice and comfortable, but coach parties were everywhere.



Part of Brodie Castle display of daffodils.



Driving on to Cullen for lunch



Fraserburgh Harbour

The following day we mostly hugged the coast, choosing to motor on down the east through Aberdeen down to Stonehaven and Dunottar Castle. This castle is well worth a

look for a couple of hours. It's perched on top of 160 foot high rock and surrounded on three sides by the North Sea, these dramatic and evocative cliff top ruins were once an impregnable fortress. built in the 15th and 16th centuries.



Dunottar Castle Most NC 500'ers would miss this.

We motored on down to Montrose, Arbroath, Carnoustie Golf Course and our accomodation on the outskirts of Dundee.

Next Day we decided, as we were near the end of the route, to take a trip to Glamis Castle for the morning. This was very good but the guided tour is only around the original part of the Castle which is only a small portion of the property. Grounds and garden were extensive if you have the time to explore.



Glamis Castle

Returning to route we travelled from Dundee over the Tay Bridge down to St Andrews. Past the Golf course and University Campus. Very nice it was too. Pitty the weather wasn't as good.



Tay Road Bridge at Dundee

Continuing on around the coast we made a stop at Leven where we came across a statue of Robinson Crusoe. It actually depicts the real life castaway Alexander Selkirk. But Daniel Defoe took the story and rest is history as they say. The sculpture was unveiled in 1885 and Sculpted by Thomas Stuart Burnett. Cast in Bronze.



The weather dramatically changed soon after as we approached Edinburgh, so much so that we completed the trip but it was actually bucketing down with rain at the Britannia Dock area that we continued on to after our finish. We made our way now onto A720 and skirt under Edinburgh to the M8 and onto the M74 making our way to our final hotel just off the M6 near Penrith in Cumbria. Making our way home the following day via the Lake District.

NC 500 "Extreme"

We call this version as the NC 500 "Extreme" as we set our goal of taking the closest road, track, unadopted road, beach, or tidal road to the sea. It was eventful at times but all above board and good fun. We completed the trip in our beloved Oxford Blue RV8 (Millie). Chassis 1555.

Everyone we met on the trip was kind and helpful, always wanting to know more about the car. Yes we did come across some irresponsible driving standards at times but on the whole a great memory.

If you are thinking of doing it,

- buy a guide,
- plan and book your accommodation well in advance as in some areas it can be difficult to find a room.
- if you have a thirsty vehicle make sure you top up with fuel regularly.

We started and completed the entire Coast Road of the UK at The Britannia Yacht site Edinburgh. It has taken us 8 years to do but during that time we had approximately 45 days on the coast route.

So don't put it off before you cannot or will not be able to do it with sunglasses on, top down and go for it, not forgetting your waterproofs and brolly.

By the way 3 weeks later we were at Lands End on another holiday but not in "Millie" our RV8.



Shirley and Ian at John O Groats

See a set of maps for each section of the route - [Link](#)

- Map1 from Loch Lomond round to Campbeltown and overnight at the Argyll Hotel on the A83.
- Map2 A83 towards Tarbert, west to Kilbery and north to Lochgilphead, Kilmartin, Arduaine Gardens and Oban.
- Map3 A828 from Oban via Appin to the Balachulish bridge then A828 to the Corran Ferry across Loch Linnhe.
- Map4 from the ferry south on the A861 to Strontian, Loch Sunart, Acharacle and Lochailort. Then via Arisaig to at Mallaig returning on the A830 to Glenfinnan to Fort William.
- Map5 Fort William to Kyle via Invergarry on the A87 and Glen Shiel. From Kyle north to Plockton village, then via Strathcarron on the A890 to the head of the loch and turn left to Lochcarron village on the A896.
- Map6 Lochcarron round to Kishorn, over to Applecross, north to Kinlochewe, Shildaig, Poolewe and Dundonnell, then east to Braemore Junction. There you turn left on to the A835 and then down to Ullapool.
- Map7 Ullapool north on the A835 into Assynt via Ledmore, left on the A837 for Inchnadamph, Lochinver, Kylesku Bridge, Scourie and on to Durness on the North Coast.
- Map8 across the North Coast from Durness to Tongue, Bettyhill, Melvich, Thurso,
- Map9 Thurso continuing east to the Castle of Mey, Dunnet Head, John O'Groats and south & overnight at Wick. Next day from Wick south down the A9 to Badbea Village & Dunrobin Castle with an overnight stop at Golspie.
- Map10 Golspie south over the Dornoch Firth, to Tain, over the Cromarty Firth, to Dingwall and down to Inverness. Then round the coastal route on the A96 to Nairn, Elgin and on to Peterhead.
- Map11 Peterhead on the A892 via Aberdeen, Montrose, Arbroath and Carnoustie to Monifieth outside Dundee.
- Map12 Monifieth to Glamis Castle, St Andrews, Kirkcaldy, over the Forth Bridge and on to Leith on the Firth of Forth by Edinburgh.