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Midwest Shamrock Tour®
**THREE STATES
ON THREE
WHEELS**

ALASKA
Wild Majesty

NEW ENGLAND
The Shaker Trail



REVIEWS:

2022 SUZUKI HAYABUSA

2020 TRIUMPH SCRAMBLER 1200 XE





SCOTLAND

Highland FLING

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“When your arse is in the saddle, the forecast will be the skies in front of you. In Scotland, there’s little point in looking any further ahead,” Calum Murray, owner of Saltire Motorcycles says prophetically, smiling at my comment that the weather forecast looked promising. I slip out the clutch of my black-and-cream Indian Roadmaster loaner and head back to Edinburgh’s über-artsy Radisson Collection Royal Mile in sunshine.

“That’s a *braw* bike for our *dreich* climate,” says the hotel’s tweed-kilted doorman, hinting, like Calum, that even in July Scotland’s weather is famously fickle.

Sure enough, I awaken the next day to a slate-gray sky, and a chilly *smirr*—a fine misty spray of a drizzle—eddy up the Royal Mile. Passersby snap photos of the retro-glamorous bike as

I prepare to set out for a week-long Scottish Highlands adventure on the North Coast 500 (NC500).

Marketed by Visit Scotland since its 2015 conception as an equivalent to America’s classic Route 66, the 512-mile NC500 begins and ends in Inverness. It stitches together various roads to form a tortuous loop around the untamed northern extreme of Britain. The already iconic NC500 combines epic scenery with thrilling twisties and switchbacks, presenting perhaps the most exhilarating motorcycle tour in the British Isles. You can add to that artisan whisky distilleries, white-sand beaches, salty-aired fishing villages, and historic castles. No wonder bikers are drawn to the NC500 like bees to brambles in bloom.

Most of those bikers, I will discover, ride adventure-tourers. My attention-grabbing Roadmaster

Oliver Cromwell garrisoned his troops in Ackergill Tower in 1651. At the time, this castle on Sinclair Bay was already more than a century old.

A lone motorcyclist roars past Quinag and other massifs of ancient Lewisian gneiss that rise over the moors of northwest Scotland.



Ceann na Beinne and the neighboring beaches are a breathtaking surprise, with their Caribbean-blue sea and pink-hued sands.

seems an oddly deluxe ride by comparison. However, I planned on staying at some of Scotland's finest historic hotels, and I wanted a suitably luxurious heritage ride. Plus, in 2015, I'd ridden the rhino-sized pride of Indian's retro pack through South Africa. I knew that the behemoth bagger was responsive enough to handle the NC500's sinewy single-lane roads.

My two-day ride north to Inverness via the Cairngorms Mountains gives me plenty of time to readjust to the big twin's nearly half-ton

brawn ... And to a quintessential Scottish hazard, hinted at when, after a night of Relais & Châteaux comfort at Kinloch House (think racks of antlers over the fireplace and four-poster beds atop creaky floorboards), I pass a sign reading "deer for four miles."

Seconds later, as if on cue, I note a flash to my left and spy a deer running almost within fingertip reach. The next instant it skews right and bolts in front of me. As I jerk on the brake lever, the panicked buck misses me by inches



and goes sprawling with hooves flailing. Thank God for the Roadmaster's automotive-quality triple-disc ABS brakes!

TOWERS AND PEA SOUP

A light rain is falling as I depart Inverness' boutique Rocpool Reserve Hotel—a chic conversion of a Victorian villa. The drizzle gradually thickens to a prolonged *pish-oot*, the North Sea barely visible as I pick up the A9, hugging the coast throughout my 100-mile ride north to Wick. Already I was singing the praises



of the full-dress tourer's vast, wrap-around batwing fairing, sculpted leg-guards, and push-button powered half-moon windshield with four-inch range. Ensconced in a sculpted well-heated saddle, I ride cocooned in top-of-class comfort. On an adventure bike I'd have been *drookit* (drenched)!

Built as a baronial hunting lodge in 1887, The Torridon is one of Scotland's finest deluxe hotels today.

This early NC500 section offers heaps of cultural draws, including neolithic burial chambers and Pictish stone stelae. No fun in *dreich* weather! Instead, I call at Dunrobin Castle, which emerges from the mist like a welcoming Brigadoon. Pinned by fairytale conical towers, the Duke of Sutherland's dramatic French-style chateau boasts 189 antique-filled rooms, which I explore with a tour group. Alas, even the twice-daily hawking displays given in the castle's garden are canceled, the birds grounded by heavy rain. So, I ride another five miles to the Clynelish Distillery for a Whisky 101 tour and a wee warm-me-up sample dram.

As the road coils sharply upward to Berriedale, the temperature plummets. I'm suddenly enveloped in pea-soup fog. Not ideal on an unnerving narrow switchback with invisible whiplash-sharp bends. I reach forward and boost the brilliant seven-inch tablet-like telematic touch screen display—responsive while wearing gloves—to max. I pilot through the fog by sat-nav, thankful for a real-time visual of each bend ahead.

With their shaggy red coats, Highland cattle are a distinct highlight—and often a road hazard—along the NC500.



Forget haggis! Scottish seafood is as good as anywhere, from blue native lobster and slim langoustines to Orkney scallops.



As I draw up to 15th-century Ackergill Tower, the clouds magically dissolve. The deep cobalt blue sky and the juxtaposition of ancestral styling—castle and cycle—are too much to resist. I pose the eye-candy bike in front of the crenelated castle and photograph it with its acres of chrome dazzling in the late afternoon sunlight. I'm fortunate to experience the warm *couthrie* welcome of this baronial-style clifftop hotel, with its wood-paneled Great Hall, tartan carpets, and cozy antique-filled guest rooms with stupendous ocean views. Shortly after my visit, the 32-bedroom castle was sold to Dr. Betsee Parker, a wealthy Episcopalian minister from Virginia. She laid off the hotel employees and turned it into her private holiday home.

THE WEE BAD ROAD

West of John o'Groats, the NC500's scenic drama begins and soon builds to stupendous heights on my day-long, 150-mile run to Lochinver. The A836 sweeps past the Dounreay nuclear plant before leaving civilization behind. I pour on the gas for a sublime throttle-open ride as

the road rolls and arcs through a vast expanse of heather-clad, wind-whipped moor and bog. Sheep scatter at the lion-like growl of the 1,811cc V-twin Thunder Stroke engine. I throttle back for a saner speed. The forbidding landscape is littered with derelict crofts: melancholic mementos of the 18th and 19th-century Highland clearances, when aristocratic landowners evicted impoverished tenant farmers for more profitable sheep pastoralism.

Beyond Tongue, the road corkscrews down past Castle Varrich to the sea loch of Kyle of Tongue, crosses it, and becomes the A838. I ride beneath a darkly threatening sky. The mountains that rise over northwest Scotland's uninhabited wild interior are shrouded in gunmetal clouds. But the sun keeps peeking through. Crepuscular rays paint lovely Loch Eriboll in patches of teal and peacock blues. I feel like I'm viewing the Highlands through an ever-changing kaleidoscope. The NC500 now rolls atop surging peninsulas and dips down in great swooping curves to Instagram-perfect beaches with sand



the color of Valspar Perfection, dissolving into an impossibly Caribbean-blue North Sea.

The road has long ago shrunk to a thread-thin single track, with passing places spaced on average every 100 yards. First come, first served. Oncoming cars and camper vans courteously pull over for me, and I do the same. It grieves me that most of the bikers—especially those on sports bikes—seem to be riding the *entire* NC500 in one day, with no heed for such courtesies. They blaze past at insane speed, forcing oncoming vehicles to give way. It seems sadder still that with their racetrack mentality, they can't possibly cherish the solitude and humbling beauty.

At Durness, the NC500 turns south and unspools through an austere landscape of dome-shaped mountains, soaring sheer from thistle-strewn moors cloaked in a palette of Monet pastels and dappled with wind-ruffled lochans. I feel like I'm riding through an *Outlander* set, accompanied by the skirl of bagpipes! But better is still to come...



The 14th-century Urquhart Castle, on the banks of Loch Ness, offers a great vantage point for trying to spot Nessie.

Tucked within Loch Broom, tiny Ullapool is one of the most picturesque fishing ports in Scotland.



The Whisky Bar at The Torridon offers 365 malt whisky labels—enough to satisfy even the most demanding connoisseur!

The Indian Roadmaster that I rode is a #instaperfect complement to the elegant Rocpool Reserve Hotel.

Crossing the curving Kylesku Bridge, I stop at the junction of the B869 and debate whether to tackle the denuded, snake-thin section that locals infamously nickname the “wee bad road.” Circling the remote Assynt region, this writhing roller coaster has been described as a challenge even for experienced riders. I turn!

The tortuous hair-breadth track dives steeply through boulder-framed defiles, then soars to blind sharp-curved summits. Hyper-alert, I engage in a non-stop feathering of throttle and clutch. Notwithstanding its bulk, the Roadmaster is superbly balanced and flawlessly smooth, thanks to precise throttle-by-wire fuel delivery and low-gear stump-pulling torque. The suspension simply soaks up the innumerable potholes. I could never have had so much E-ticket fun in a car, I muse, grinning inanely as I arrive at my hotel at Lochinver.

WHO LEFT THIS EGGPLANT HERE?

The Scots have an entire lexicon for bad weather. “Plowetery!” comments the receptionist as I check out of the Inver Lodge Hotel and ready the bike beneath a grim charcoal sky. Sanguine, and dry behind the fairings, I accept Scotland’s fickle weather with nae problem!

Riding through the heart of the Coigach Peninsula before turning south on the A835 for Ullapool, I marvel at the staggering views of Cùl Mòr, Stac Pollaidh, and Suilven—whisky-brown



inselbergs silhouetted by sunlight slicing down between sheets of rain. These sandstone sugar-loaves rise from a plinth of three-billion-year-old Lewisian gneiss. Speeding along this rare two-lane section seems at odds with the ancient geological languor. I take it slow to steep in the Hollywood grandeur.

Beyond the pleasant fishing port of Ullapool, the NC500 shifts west along the A832, a busy two-laner laden with cars, caravans, and campers heading to Inverewe Garden, at Poolewe (its appeal apparently undamped by the weather). After the lean, sparsely-trafficked roads farther north, the A832 feels like a freeway as it curls around a hand-shaped fistful of lochs and runs southeast along the length of landlocked Loch Maree. At Kinlochewe, the NC500 diverts right onto the A896. That this one-lane sliver is considered an A-class road seems comic! It snakes uphill to Loch Claire and spills magnificently down through Glen Torridon—an archetypal wild Highlands landscape hemmed by monumental mountains the color of eggplant.

“How sublime it must look in sunshine!” I think, shaking off the bleak weather over a dram of 12-year-old single malt Bunnahabhain at The Torridon. This baronial-style former shooting lodge, built in 1887, is now a luxury hotel at the head of an eponymous sea loch. My week has witnessed a gourmand’s indulgence of venison and fresh-caught lobster and salmon.



Tonight, Michelin-starred chef Ross Stovold's table d'hôte menu features Torridon farm beef tartare, cured Loch Torridon langoustine, Morayshire lamb rump with kale and turnips, and a wicked white chocolate semifreddo with almonds and strawberries.

OUT OF THE RAIN

I've chosen to ride the NC500 counterclockwise, knowing that my fourth, and last, day's ride will be climactic. It begins with a 24-mile shoreline circuit of the Applecross Peninsula on an unlabeled one-laner offering vast views over the sea to the Inner Hebridean isles of Rona, Raasay, and Skye from atop wide-open clifftop straights. Throw in tight corners and whorling twisties, and the result is motorcycling Nirvana. Sports bikes flash past as if this were the Isle of Man TT.

Gas pumps in the Highlands are as rare as Scottish wildcats, and those on the West Coast close on Sunday. I arrive in the bayshore hamlet of Applecross near the limit of the Roadmaster's 5.5-gallon range. When the single unmanned

pump refuses my credit cards, a Swiss couple on a BMW R 1200 GS bail me out. Fueled up, I turn inland for the apogee of the NC500. "Not advised for learner drivers," reads a sign at the foot of the Bealeach na Bà alpine switchback. Instantly, the road begins to claw its way upward in ever-sharpening curves to the third highest road pass in Britain (2,035 feet), and beyond the UK's steepest prolonged descent, with 20% grades on the hairpins.

Within minutes of leaving sea level, I'm enveloped in a swirling cloud. The howling wind bites like a lynx at the fog-bound summit. I stop for a photo-op, then auger cautiously down through the horseshoes and open the throttle for the steep, fast, and thrilling descent—like an exponential mathematical curve—through a glacier-scoured, U-shaped valley. At the base, at Tornapress, I merge with the A896, from where the route flattens and quickens through wooded glens. Then the clouds break. Sunbeams pour down. As I aim the Roadmaster east on a final beeline for Inverness, I'm tempted to reset the sat-nav to retrace the NC500 while the sun shines. **RR**

The craggy massifs of the Assynt peninsula typify the wild beauty of the whisky-brown Scottish Highlands.

SCOTLAND

APPROXIMATELY 890 MILES

OVERVIEW

The North Coast 500 route was conceived by Prince Charles' North Highland Initiative to promote the remote region. The main draws are the superb scenery, plus fly fishing, whale watching, and hiking. The best time to travel is May through September, when the weather is mild and daylight hours long.

Most people rent a bike in Edinburgh, from where the A9 dual-carriageway winds north to Inverness via Cairngorms National Park. The slower, more scenic route that I took runs via St. Andrews and Blairgowrie.

Lodging options are limited on the NC500. Planning and reserving ahead is vital, especially in summer. For that reason, many bikers choose to race around the route in one or two days, but we strongly recommend you plan well in advance and take your time.



Always consult more detailed maps for touring purposes.

ROADS & BIKING

The NC500 offers all kinds of roads, from fast two-laners with sweepers to one-lane roller coasters with tight turns and twisties. Some of the narrowest sections are deteriorated. Be prepared for variable weather, including fog and rain year-round, plus ice and snow in October-April. Stay alert for deer and elk darting across the road, and for sheep, which roam free on Highland roads. Gas stations are few and far between on the NC500, and are closed on Sundays.

RESOURCES

- *The Rough Guide to the North Coast 500*
ISBN: 978-1789194074
Publisher: Rough Guides (2019)
Available for purchase on Amazon, Price: \$11.66
- *The North Coast 500 Guide Book*, Charles Tait
ISBN: 978-1909036604
Publisher: Charles Tait Photographic
Available for purchase on Amazon, Price: \$18.69

- *Scotland's Highlands & Islands*, Neil Wilson & Andy Symington
ISBN: 978-1787016439
Publisher: Lonely Planet (2021)
Available for purchase on Amazon, Price: \$17.99
- Scotland National Tourism Organization
www.visitscotland.com
- North Coast 500, www.northcoast500.com
- Saltire Motorcycles, www.saltiremotorcycles.com
- Highland Motorcycle Hire
www.highlandmotorcyclehire.co.uk

MOTORCYCLE & GEAR

2018 Indian Roadmaster
Helmet: Nolan N44 High-Viz
Jacket: BMW BlackLeather, Port Authority SRJ754 Challenger, Olympia Horizon Rain Jacket
Pants: Sliders 4.0 Kevlar Motorcycle Jeans
Boots: Merrell Moab Adventure
Gloves: REV'IT! Dirt 3