

# NORTH COAST 500



"Always a highlight, we'll visit the incredible seabird island of Handa, with its dramatic sea cliffs and huge seabird colonies, all set against a stunning backdrop of mountains and azure sea. Here, Great and Arctic Skuas patrol overhead and the cliff ledges are crammed with thousands of jostling seabirds, with around 55,000 Guillemots alone!"  
Craig Round

Dates Fri 17- Sun 26 May 2019  
Price £1,995  
Deposit £350 Single Supp £350

Leaders Simon Eaves and Craig Round  
Weather Late May can be beautifully settled, although wind and rain is possible and snow can still be on the highest tops (10°-25°C)  
Walking Walks will be up to 5 miles on good tracks and paths, but some sections are rough and steep  
Meals All included from dinner on Day 1 to breakfast on Day 10  
Insects Should not be a problem  
Accom Double, twin and single rooms all ensuite  
Group 12  
Route The Official North Coast 500 route begins and ends at Inverness Castle. Created in 2014, the route brings together just over 500 miles of stunning coastal scenery, naturally following the main roads across the coastal edges of the North Highlands

## Just some of what we hope to see:

Eider	Great Skua
Common Scoter	Arctic Skua
Goldeneye	Arctic Tern
Ptarmigan	Puffin
Black-throated Diver	Black Guillemot
Great Northern Diver	Rock Dove
Manx Shearwater	Cuckoo
Gannet	Short-eared Owl
White-tailed Eagle	Whinchat
Osprey	Ring Ouzel
Golden Eagle	Common Whitethroat
Hen Harrier	Hooded Crow
Merlin	Twite
Golden Plover	Otter
Greenshank	Grey Seal
Black-tailed Godwit	cetaceans
Whimbrel	

The NC500 encapsulates everything that is special about the wild Highlands in one superb road trip, as it follows a spectacular coastal route.

- Breathtaking scenery with vast mountainous views, on the most scenic roads
- Huge seascapes from wild headlands, with good chances of Otters and cetaceans
- Thriving seabird and skua colonies on Handa Island and Dunnet Head
- Excellent habitat for raptors including Golden and White-tailed Eagles
- Pristine and deserted white sand beaches
- The highest mountain pass in the UK, with a good chance of Ptarmigan at the top
- All three divers in summer plumage

We meet in Inverness for dinner and to discuss the route and itinerary.

**2-3** Heading north, we shall stop under the Kessock Bridge to scan the Moray and Beaulie Firths for Otter and dolphins. Continuing up the coast, we shall visit the RSPB's Reserve at Nigg Bay for waders, wildfowl and maybe some late Pink-footed Geese.

We shall stop at Loch Fleet for breeding Osprey, as well as a reliable site for Greenshank. We'll continue to stop and scan the bays as we head towards John O'Groats and the most north-easterly point on the UK mainland, Duncansby Head. Our hotel is near Dunnet Bay and we'll spend the next day exploring the rich wildlife of Caithness. The small Reserve at St John's Pool

is an absolute gem, with an enviable list of rarities as well as breeding terns, waders and wildfowl. Nearby Dunnet Head has spectacular views over the Pentland Firth and the island of Hoy. Gannets and auks fish in the Firth and recently there have been regular sightings of Orcas.

The RSPB's new Reserve at Broubster Leans, is on a natural floodplain and is a fantastic habitat for Short-eared Owls and Hen Harriers. We shall visit this Reserve in the evening, to look for hunting raptors as the light fades.

**4-6** Continuing along the north coast towards north-west Sutherland, the scenery becomes very dramatic, with vast seascapes and towering mountains. We'll visit Strathy Point, where the seawatching can be excellent, with



"A real 'road trip to remember' this trip takes in some the finest scenery anywhere in Britain, with vast panoramas of rugged mountains stretching as far as the eye can see and stunning seascapes that take your breath away, along with some superb wildlife with eagles, Otters and huge seabird colonies. The NC500 really does showcase the best of the Scottish Highlands landscape and wildlife!" Craig Round



Kittiwakes, Shags, auks and maybe cetaceans. We have seen a vagrant White-billed Diver here, so anything's possible!

Further along the coast, we shall stop at the Kyle of Tongue, overshadowed by the dramatic peaks of Ben Loyal. This is eagle and Otter country, with a supporting cast of all three divers, Mergansers and breeding waders.

Our journey continues around the shores of Loch Eriboll and on towards the village of Scourie, where our hotel is perfectly positioned overlooking Badcall Bay. There's a good chance of Otters from the hotel and we shall visit Scourie Bay where calling Corncrake can occasionally be heard.

The next day we shall explore Balnakeil with its beautiful beach. Some of the land at Balnakeil is managed for Corncrakes and we'll look and listen for them amongst the nettle beds. The marsh at Balnakeil is little known and can be excellent, with scarce birds always possible.

The next day will be spent exploring the fabulous Reserve of Handa Island. The 'Bonxies' own Handa and their ever present shapes patrol the skies. Arctic Skuas also breed and we shall get to within a few feet of these birds, but there is much more to Handa, with huge seabird colonies on vertical cliffs. Hundreds of thousands of auks, Fulmars and Kittiwakes breed here and the sights, sounds and smells of Handa are simply incredible.

Our journey continues south through the wilds of Assynt. A famed landscape, with the iconic

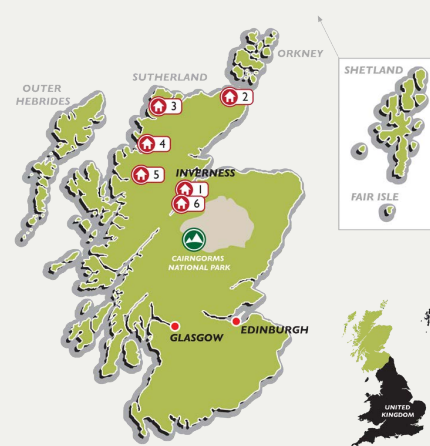
peaks of Suilven and Quinag rising from tracts of bare moorland and blanket bog. There are breeding divers and Greenshank here and the chance of Golden Eagle is ever present. Seals haul out on skerries and there is always the chance of Otter. We shall spend the night in the scenic port of Ullapool.

**7-8** The dramatic scenery continues as we visit Gruinard Bay, overshadowed by the huge rock walls of An Teallach. This is White-tailed Eagle territory and we shall scan the islands and peaks for eagles and other wildlife. The route takes us through some incredible vistas, before running along the shores of Loch Maree Nature Reserve.

We shall stay for two nights in Shieldaig, where White-tailed Eagles regularly breed on an island in front of the hotel. The next day we'll explore the Applecross peninsula and drive over the spectacular Bealach Na Ba, the highest pass in the UK. The views from the top to Skye are breathtaking and we shall walk to one of the summits for Ptarmigan.

**9** Our final day takes us along the shores of Loch Kishorn towards Inverness. Once we have completed the route, we shall have the opportunity to explore and look for wildlife around Inverness and the Black Isle.

**10** After breakfast we say our goodbyes.



## Outline Itinerary

- Day 1** We meet for dinner at our hotel.  
1 night Inverness
- Days 2-3** Travel to Caithness via John O'Groats and Duncansby Head. During our time here we'll visit the UK's most northerly point, Dunnet Head; St John's Pool and the RSPB's Broubster Leans.  
2 nights Castletown Hotel, Thurso
- Days 4-5** Travel to Sutherland visiting Loch Eriboll, Balnakeil Bay and Scourie.  
2 nights Edrachillies Hotel, Scourie
- Day 6** Full day on Handa Island and then travel through Assynt to Ullapool.  
1 night The Ceilidh Place, Ullapool
- Days 7-8** Travel to Gruinard Bay, Poolewe, Loch Maree and Torridon. Exploration of the Bealach na Ba and Applecross peninsula.  
2 nights Tigh an Eilean Hotel, Shieldaig.
- Day 9** Travel back to Inverness via Lochs Kishorn and Carron. Visit the Black Isle area. 1 night Inverness
- Day 10** Depart Inverness

**Simon Eaves:** Puffins, Arctic Skua  
**Simon Pawsey:** Cape Wrath  
**Duncan Macdonald:** Grey Seal, Short-eared Owl  
**Roy Cowley:** Gannet

