

# EASY DRIVER

## A SCOTLAND NC500 TOUR

Can a 500-mile campervan road trip round Scotland's rugged Highland coast really rival a hippy motorcycle burn along America's Route 66? James Ruddy pressed the pedal to the metal to find out...

WORDS JAMES RUDDY PHOTOS SUE MOUNTJOY

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After watching the classic hippy biker movie *Easy Rider* three times during my impressionable teenagehood, I have always nursed a nagging desire to don a Stars and Stripes bandana and roar across the heart of America on a customised Harley Davison.

It has never happened. The closest I got to that rebellious dream was climbing onto a backfiring Lambretta scooter in a fur-fringed ex-Swedish Army parka and making bottom-numbing mod revival runs to the Isle of Wight in the 70s.

So, when I learned of the growing interest in Scotland's North Coast 500, I could not resist the chance of slipping into Peter Fonda mode and donning the Ray-Bans for a roar around a route,

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which promised gripping scenery, classic food, majestic castles and some fascinating Highland characters.

Since NC500's launch in March 2015, with backing from the Prince of Wales, gushing media coverage has attracted hundreds of thousands of car and campervan drivers, bikers, cyclists and walkers, some apparently drawn by those nostalgic images of a Route 66/*Easy Rider* experience (without the cannabis and cactus counter-culture, of course).

### Hiring the wheels...

So off I went to experience the thrill. But hold the horses. My partner, photographer Sue Mountjoy, blanched at the prospect of a week on a rented motorcycle, struggling through skin-

stripping Caledonian storms and hairpin bends, in a poor man's rip-off of those scenes from the iconic 1969 film.

I had to concede defeat on the *Easy Rider* plan. There weren't going to be any drop handlebars and booming chopper engines on this trip. I was informed, quite firmly by Sue, that men of a certain age are built for comfort, despite what their mid-life crisis might be telling them.

As a result, creaking bones and common sense took over, so we opted for a hired two-berth Bunk Campers Aero campervan, packed with mod cons, including lots of cupboards, a spacious fridge, loo with shower and washbasin, toasty central heating, a big comfy bed, built-in GPS, a reversing camera and an adjustable dining table.

It was clear that there wasn't going to be a Stars and Stripes crash helmet in sight (although, as a concession, I was allowed to belt out *Easy Rider*'s throttle-pumping soundtrack, including Steppenwolf's 'Born to be Wild' on the Aero's multi-media player).

Privately (don't tell Sue) I was more than relieved to be making the trip in a relaxing home on wheels, similar to the one we hired from Bunk in the summer for our tour of Ireland's Wild Atlantic Way. After all, this was the Highlands in autumn, not Illinois to California in summer sunshine.

### Tackling the NC500

So, how does NC500 match up? Well, that depends on how you do it. Some

people drive anti-clockwise, saving the best west coast scenery till last; others do it, expensively and leisurely, in a fortnight, pampering and gorging themselves at the plentiful luxury hotels and fine dining restaurants; some whizz round cheaply, sleeping under canvas, in a whistlestop weekend; and a few do it in the blink of an eye, like pro cyclist James McCallum, who pedalled round the full 517 madly undulating miles in summer in 31 hours.

To me, there is little reward in tick-box sightseeing. It embeds into your brain a kaleidoscope of fleeting images with no lasting memories to regale your friends with on your return (if they can stand it, of course!).



### Meet Vinnie

So we picked up the Aero – who we nicknamed Vinnie – from Bunk's base near

Edinburgh and headed to Inverness for an anti-clockwise circular tour hoping for eight blissful days taking in east coast sunrises followed by golden Highland forests, as autumn advanced toward journey's end in the craggier west.

We had a few aims: to enjoy some wild camping for which Scotland remains relatively free; to savour some of the cliff-side campsites for vehicle recharging and emptying; to have a couple of contrasting nights in hotels along the way; and, most of all, to enjoy some magical moments to remember forever.

First stop was the Glen Ord Distillery, where the fun began from our guide, David, a cheery former beer salesman. He explained how a retired worker recently told him how – during the 1970s - he would leave the site every evening with one of the distillery's copper 'dogs', strength-testing vessels, full of whisky, attached by a string to his belt and hanging inside his trouser leg. "He always walked with a pronounced limp," recalled David with a smile.

Similar fun can be had throughout this journey, if you look for it. Our next major belly laugh came at Bught Park, in Inverness, where we were lucky enough to join several thousand delirious fans for the annual Scotland v Ireland Shinty/Hurling match (an absolute first for Sue and me, despite my Irish ancestry).

A local expert, complete with green tweedy plus-fours and matching cap, explained that this hybrid clash of the two sports dates back exactly 200 years when two London outfits first met. This latest meeting involved a dazzling display of energy and skill from both national teams. In fact, Sue and I joined a good-hearted pitch invasion at the end and she photographed me commiserating on Ireland's 14-5 loss with three green-shirted athletes. "Oh thanks," replied one of them, "but we're Scotland players who have just swapped our tops with your lot!"

Cringingly embarrassed, I fired up Vinnie's 2.3-litre diesel engine and we headed as fast as the speed cameras would allow up the Black Isle (look out for the small brewery of the same name



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that turns out a full-bodied dark ale). Our target was Dornoch, a charmer of a small town, with its blue flag beach and world-class golf course, where we dined sumptuously in the AA Rosette Garden Restaurant at the ritzy Castle Hotel.

After inquiring politely at the hotel, we parked Vinnie in Dornoch's peaceful former marketplace, alongside the tree-ringed cathedral where singer Madonna had her son Rocco christened.

If you do your pre-trip research (we Googled and used our local library), you soon discover that there are stacks of fascinating facts to be had along NC500, involving celebrities old and new. For example, on your return, you can mention Dornoch and Madonna to your friends in the same breath as a woman called Janet Horne. Suffering senility, she was the last alleged witch to be executed in the British Isles (in 1727), her traumatic end is marked on a stone in the town and involved being stripped, smeared with tar and burned alive.

Celebrity-hunting does not particularly rock our boat, but later in the trip we did find one place bristling with them: Poole House, a historic family guest house on the shores of Loch Ewe, where the owner told us of a past visitor list that included Sir Winston Churchill, Brad Pitt, John Le Carre and Kate Winslet, the latter said to have performed some remarkably athletic exercises on the secluded lawn.

**Foodie heaven**

If food and drink are your thing, then the trip will do nothing for your waistline. There are eating choices galore, from gastro pie and deli shops to 'greasy spoon' haggis takeaways. We simply muttered "Oh what the heck" and dived into huge plates of freshly caught haddock and chips with panoramic loch-side views at both the Ben Loyal Hotel, in Tongue, and the Kylesku Hotel.

In readiness for evenings spent dining 'at home' under Vinnie's mood lighting, we called at several artisan food places, one of the best being the Isle of Ewe



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**INFORMATION**

If you are interested in an NC500 campervan tour, Bunk Campers have a huge fleet of well-equipped vehicles to suit all pockets and needs. They can be booked in London, Glasgow and Edinburgh, or taken by ferry from bases in Dublin and Belfast. Search [bunkcampers.com](http://bunkcampers.com) or call (Monday to Friday 9am-5pm) [02890 813057](tel:02890813057)

For planning a trip and suggested itineraries, go to [northcoast500.com](http://northcoast500.com)

For a stay at the apartments at John O'Groats search [naturalretreats.com](http://naturalretreats.com)

One-bed studio apartments start at £103 a night. For the Torridon Inn, go to [thetorridon.com](http://thetorridon.com) where bed and breakfast doubles are £120 a night.



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Smokehouse. We picked up several treats there including salmon smoked using whisky barrels and local larch, Highland Black Crowdie cheese and hand-made oatcakes. To wash it down, we had snifters of Dunnet Bay Distillers Rock Rose gin, which is making huge waves with its unusual flavourings using local and traditional berries and herbs.

Of course, autumn on a drive like this has its many advantages: near-empty roads, golden explosions of wilting leaves at every turn, Highland mists around the hills and glens, magical sunrises and big turf fires in the pubs. There are also none of the summertime nibbling female midges that can leave you resembling a measles patient in seconds.

In high season, there are growing accounts of lengthy motorhome convoys along some difficult stretches, around 200 miles of which are single carriageway although, thankfully, with plenty of passing places. These are occasionally blocked by sheep and Highland cattle, but you may also be sharing the carriageway with suicidal pigs, roaming

deer, nosy otters and even red squirrels.

We were lucky to experience four sunny days and only one night of vehicle-rocking gales. Next morning, after a walk at a completely empty Balnakeil beach, near Durness, we returned to Vinnie sandblasted, drenched and looking like we had emerged from a washing machine set on a 1200 rev spin.

Campsites of all types have emerged along the route. At the up-for-sale Halladale, in pretty Melvich valley, we found ourselves enjoying a huge roast beef dinner at the next door inn and a walk to the beach in the morning; at Gruinard Bay Caravan Park, on the north-west coast, the landscape was stunning, with the waves breaking just below, perfect for a meal of haggis, coupled with local neaps and tatties.

By contrast, on two nights, we opted to park Vinnie and stay inside real buildings. First up was the Natural Retreats luxury apartments at John O'Groats, and at the Torridon Inn, where we avoided such energetic activities as walking, mountaineering, rock climbing

**“ pro cyclist James McCallum pedalled round the full 517 madly undulating miles in summer in 31 hours! ”**

and kayaking.

Without the hippy frenzy of Route 66, perhaps the magic of the NC500 is the all-embracing inner peace that is instilled by its huge scenery and the old world charm of the Highlanders.

We met many of these reserved yet friendly people, who have kept alive their ancient culture, from their

native Gaelic tongue and dancing to their peat fires. Their tragic history is obvious at every turn from the landlord clearances of poor farmers, who were replaced by more lucrative sheep, and also exiled overseas or to unfamiliar coastal towns where many tried fishing and drowned.

Despite such a harsh environment and bitter past, everywhere Sue and I went we felt a warm greeting and that sense of fun which gave us memories galore. It is best summed up in Rabbin Burns' own words:

In Heaven itself I'll ask no more,  
Than just a Highland welcome.

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