



NORTH COAST 500

A fully supported and guided cycling holiday around the North Coast of Scotland

7-days, 500 miles, 30,256 ft of climbing

Grade hard/very hard

This information should answer some of your questions about the trip and give you a better idea of what we do day-to-day. It doesn't hope to answer everything. If you have any questions please get in touch.

- ***Fully vehicle supported and guided***
- ***All breakfasts and lunches included***
- ***Good standard accommodation***
- ***Bike collection service available***
- ***GPS files available***

THE TRIP

This is a relatively new cycle tour in our portfolio. Cycling 500 miles around the Scottish coastline in 7 days is a tough ride. The total ascent is the equivalent of cycling to Camp 3 on Mount Everest twice and we haven't even mentioned the wind, which is almost guaranteed to blow, and as we are navigating the coastline at some point it will be in your face. Yet this tour is perfect for the sportive rider, looking to test him or herself on some of the most challenging and spectacular scenery that the United Kingdom has to offer. We will be following some of the official NC500 route but have chosen some quieter alternative roads in places, including a quiet and route back to Inverness via Strath Halladale, Strathnaver and Altnaharra. This enables us to almost completely avoid using the busy A9 south of Wick for the return ride to Inverness.

Travelling by train and arriving into Inverness, the capital of the Scottish Highlands gives a taster of the countryside that will be on offer during the following week. Plan to arrive the night before the tour departs and you will have chance to savour the sights and sounds of the city that is the starting point of what will become a memorable cycling adventure into the Far North of Scotland.

Our support crew will be on hand to meet you from the railway station or Inverness airport and help you settle into your hotel, in preparation for the following morning's departure.



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Rolling out from Inverness Castle on the first morning of the tour
- Spectacular scenery of Strathconon Forest
- Gazing at the Isle of Skye from Shieldaig
- The amazing climb up the Bealach na Ba
- The beautiful smell of the sea at Applecross
- The stunning view of Upper Loch Torridon from Badan Mhugaidh viewpoint
- Counting the species of whales and dolphins seen by whale watchers close to Gairloch
- A wee dram at the Altnaharra Hotel
- The amazing ride from Rhiconich to Durness
- Sighting the Atlantic Ocean at Bettyhill
- Looking for a hen harriers in Strath Halladale
- The final celebration in Inverness

ACCOMMODATION

Your accommodation, on a twin share bed and breakfast basis, will be in a mixture of hotels and good quality bed and breakfasts. We will endeavor to accommodate the group in the same location, however on occasions this might not be possible.

FOOD

A packed lunch will be provided. You will need to purchase your own evening meals, which are usually eaten communally, although of course you are free to do your own thing if you wish.



DAY-BY-DAY ITINERARY

The route of this itinerary is flexible and should be seen as a guide only. Local conditions, weather or fitness could lead to changes in our daily plans. All times and distances are approximate. (BLD) refers to meals included in the trip cost, i.e. Breakfast, Lunch, Dinner.

ARRIVAL DAY

Our leaders will be on hand to meet you as you arrive at our accommodation in Inverness. You will need to book this yourselves or we are happy to do it for you and add the cost to your invoice.

Day 1 Inverness Castle to Lochcarron 64 miles (B,L)

Ascent 2169 feet Descent 2171 feet Maximum Elevation 663 feet

After a hearty Scottish breakfast we will make our way to Inverness Castle for the obligatory start of the tour photographs and then cycle through the city, crossing the River Ness and heading out to Clachnaharry and Bunchrew, to our right we will have tremendous views of the Beaully Firth. From Bunchrew we will head west, before turning northwards and cycling to Muir of Ord. As we leave Muir of Ord we will pass the famous fish ladder at Rogie Falls, onwards through Garve and Lochluichart whilst passing the diminutive railway station at Achanalt and continuing along the A832 to Achnasheen. At Achnasheen we turn left onto the A890 and ascend alongside Loch Gowan with spectacular views of Ledgowan Forest away to our right. We will now be riding alongside Loch Dughail with stunning views of Achnashellach Forest to our left, pine trees line the carriageway and as we head from Achnashellach Station the A890 becomes a single track road with passing places. This transition marks the final miles to Lochcarron, which is where we will be stopping for the evening.



Day 2 Lochcarron to Gairloch 80 miles (B,L)

Ascent 6916 feet Descent 6892 feet Maximum Elevation 2032 feet

After a comfortable night in our accommodation we will be fresh and ready to tackle one of the most memorable day's cycling in the United Kingdom. As we gently roll out of Lochcarron the landscape gives a big clue as to the type of day that lies ahead. Yesterday was a warm-up, whilst the preparation of the previous weeks should pay dividends and ensure you will have a brilliant day in the saddle. With Loch Kishorn away to the left, the climb up Bealach na Ba (11/10 in Simon Warren's 100 Greatest Hill Climbs) begins with a left turn at Tornapress. Select a very low gear

and gently grind away, up and up, breathe deeply and negotiate the hairpin bends and watch the magnificent view unfold. As you reach the car park at the summit of the pass a silver coloured information plate outlines all the mountains in the distance. From here there is a long, steep and tricky descent all the way down to Applecross. From Applecross we will now be cycling to the north, with some gorgeous views of the Isle of Raasay away to the west. As we reach our most northerly point at Fearnmore we turn south-east and now have Loch Torridon and Loch Shildaig to the north-east.



The next village of any note is Shildaig, a place where sea otters can occasionally be spotted close to Shildaig Island, where sea eagles have nested. Leaving Shildaig we have some more short sharp ascents and descents, whilst the route gives some exceptional views of Torridon, a tiny village on the shore of Upper Loch Torridon. Leaving Torridon we will be cycling through Glen Torridon along the southern front of Liathach one of the most imposing mountains in all of Britain, eventually, after a long, gentle, descent, we will reach the village of Kinlochewe itself dominated by Beinn Eighe the largest mountain of the Torridon Peaks and where we can stop at the Visitor Centre. Leaving Kinlochewe we head alongside Loch Maree where you might be lucky enough to spot a black throated diver before turning to the north-west to eventually arrive in Gairloch.

Perhaps a little tired but undoubtedly excited and inspired by what we have seen and achieved during a superb day on the bike and by the sea view from the hotel.

Day 3 Gairloch to Ullapool 56 miles (B,L)

Ascent 4153 feet Descent 4112 feet Maximum Elevation 1103 feet

Today is a shorter and less hilly ride but once again it is spectacular. From Gairloch we climb out of the village on the A832 and head to Poolewe. We pass the WWII anti-aircraft batteries going into Aultbea and you may want to visit the Arctic Convoy museum just outside the village. We then cycle along the first and second coast and along Gruinard Bay with Gruinard Island – site of the anthrax experiment in 1942 to our right. We then climb up to Badcaul with Little Loch Broom to the north and the An Teallach Hills to the south. This range of hills is comparable in terms of beauty with the Torridon Peaks and the Cuillins of Skye. Crossing Fain Bridge marks the beginning of the Dundonnell Forest which is a wild and magnificent ride, which after another long and gentle descent eventually reaches the junction with the A835 at Corrieshalloch Gorge. We then turn north-west and cycle along the A835 to reach the picturesque village of Ullapool and from there we will be once again be in open countryside, a viewpoint just to the north of Strathcanaird gives magnificent views of The Coigach Peaks which include Beinn an Eoin and Cul Beag amongst others.

Day 4 Ullapool to Kinlochbervie 80 miles (B,L)

Ascent 7021 feet Descent 6997 ft Maximum Elevation 850 feet

Today is the hilliest day of our tour of the northern coastline of Scotland. With 7,021 feet of Scottish climbing in prospect a good breakfast is essential. We will be rolling out of Ullapool and heading northwards for a few miles before turning to the northwest at Drumrunie and cycling alongside Loch Lurgainn with beautiful views and undulating terrain. We continue on through Inverkirkraig and Strathan before arriving for a break in Lochinver. As we leave Lochinver we turn northwest once again, cycling alongside the coastline on the B869. The landscape is notable for its numerous small limestone lochs, many un-fished for years and holding the wildest of trout and possibly some red-throated divers.

By now you will be in the familiar routine of short sharp ascents and similar descents. As you cycle through Drumbeg and Nedd look out for the striking Y-shaped Quinag which dominates the landscape. Near Unapool we will be leaving the B869 and taking the A894, stopping at the Rock Stop café, before heading northwest over the curved bridge at Kylesku which traverses Loch a Chairn Bhain. We head to Scourie, once a stronghold of the Clan Mackay, and now situated in the

very heart of the North West Highlands Geopark. The final miles of this memorable adventure take us through Laxford Bridge and at Rhiconich we turn off to Kinlochbervie along the side of Loch Inchard and the tranquil Kinlochbervie Hotel, our home for the night, is nearby.

Day 5 Kinlochbervie to Melvich 73 miles (B,L)

Ascent 6071 feet Descent 5950 feet Maximum Elevation 731 feet

We shouldn't really say that oneday of the tour is the best of all, but some of our clients think this is it. Kinlochbervie to Melvich is hours of pure cycling heaven. Rolling terrain, a few hefty ascents, rollicking descents and views that surpass each other at every turn, all this goes to make it undisputed strong favourite for best leg of the journey. On these 70 miles, take your time, there's no rush, the days are long in the Far North so soak it up, it's what the North Coast 500 is all about and why you have come to ride it. After a good night's sleep we will be back on the road, rolling out of Kinlochbervie and retracing our steps back to Rhiconich before rejoining our route. The first half of the day starts with a wild and exposed ride from Rhiconich to the Kyle of Durness, famous as a great place for fishing for sea-trout at low tide. At Durness we will stop at the Balnakeil Craft Village to visit the famous Cocoa Mountain café. From Durness we hug the coastline, stopping off if we wish to visit the Smoo Cave, cycling southwest in the remote countryside alongside Loch Eriboll before turning back north and then west to cross the Kyle of Tongue. The terrain stays undulating for a few more miles and we can stop for a brew at the Bettyhill Hotel if we need to before we eventually reach Melvich.

Day 6 Melvich to Dornoch miles 93 miles (B,L)

Ascent 3926 feet Descent 4082 feet Maximum Elevation 647 feet

We thought long and hard about the route from Melvich to Inverness, should we follow the 'official' NC500 route back to Inverness, which follows the A9 south from Wick. Undoubtedly, the Caithness coastline is beautiful. However it's a trunk road, it's fast, the only road north and south for articulated lorries, is very narrow in places, it has a number of blind corners and all these factors make cycling the A9 not worth the risk. So from Melvich we will follow very gentle National Cycle Network Route 1 (NCN 1) and then turning inland and cycling alongside the Halladale River, famous for its salmon fishing and then through Strath Halladale which is known for its hen harriers.

Continuing due south, we will pedal through Achiemore, Craigtown, Croick and the delightfully named Trantlebeg before reaching Forsinard Station where the RSPB Forsinard Flows is situated.

The terrain is undulating rather than hilly and nothing-in comparison to what we have tackled earlier in the tour. At Kinbrace we head west on the B871 and now push our pedals alongside the River Helmsdale before passing Badanloch Lodge, Garvault Hotel and eventually reaching Syre, an infamous location associated with the Highland Clearances in Strathnaver. Look out for the board telling you about Donald MacLeod's book 'Gloomy Memories, about the clearances The final miles take us through the beautiful Naver Forest and a gorgeous section of undulating road alongside Loch Naver before stopping for a rest at Altnaharra. We then have a challenging climb, as we push on along Strath Vagastie under the towering presence of Ben Klibreck and after a steady climb we will reach the top of the long incline. As we descend from here we pass Crask, whilst a short distance beyond is one of our favourite watering holes, the The Crask Inn. From the Crask Inn we have some gentle downhill cycling on the NCN1, which is also a single track road (A836) to arrive into Lairg, a village with a population of around 900 and known as the 'Crossroads of the North', Lairg is also famous for its huge one-day sheep sales which are held in August. We finally headi out to the east coast and after a very short section of A9 we cycle along the banks of Loch Fleet, where we may see seals basking in the sun, before arriving at Dornoch.



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Day 7 Dornoch to Inverness Castle 55 miles (B,L)

Ascent 3268 feet Descent 3309 feet Maximum Elevation 923 feet

We push again away from the coast, cycling on relatively flat terrain, with good views over the Dornoch Firth, to Bonar Bridge and Ardgay, where we'll stop at Ardgay Highland shop and Café which is a treasure trove if you are looking for gifts to take home. After leaving the café we have a long occasionally steep climb over the 'Struie'. As we come down off the Struie we'll cycle through

Evanton after which we have another short section of A9 to cross the Cromarty Firth, before we turn off to Culbokie.. The end of our journey is in sight as we cycle through the Black Isle. We go through Munlochy and some undulating countryside before we cross the Beauly Firth to the west and the Moray Firth to the east on the Kessock Bridge cycle path. The last couple of miles involving some city centre cycling to take us back to Inverness Castle where it all began a week ago. After celebratory photographs we will be having a meal in one of Inverness' many fine restaurants to round off a great cycling adventure.

Day 8 Departure day

On departure day the support crew will be leaving early in the morning for the journey back to Sheffield.