

A Relaxed North Scotland Road Trip: Castles, Coastlines and Cairngorms in 10-12 Days

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If you're planning your first **North Scotland road trip**, this relaxed 10–12 day itinerary takes you beyond the country's busier tourist routes to discover castles, whisky country, dramatic coastlines and the mountain scenery of the Cairngorms.

Starting in Aberdeen and finishing in Edinburgh, this self-drive route travels through Royal Deeside, Speyside, Inverness, Brora, John O'Groats and the Cairngorms.

Designed around two-night stays in key locations, the itinerary gives you time to properly experience each destination rather than spending every day packing, unpacking and driving.

Instead of following the increasingly busy North Coast 500, we've chosen quieter roads, smaller towns and authentic local experiences. It's a route that's better suited to travellers who want a comfortable pace, scenic drives and the freedom to stop whenever something catches their eye.

We've driven this entire route ourselves, so the itinerary is based on real driving times, worthwhile stops and places we've genuinely enjoyed—not simply distances plotted on a map.

Having grown up in Northeast Scotland, we also know how these roads actually feel to drive, where to take your time, and which detours are truly worth making.

North Scotland Road Trip at a Glance

Here's a quick overview of the route before we dive into the day-by-day itinerary.

- **Duration:** 10–12 days
- **Start:** Aberdeen
- **Finish:** Edinburgh
- **Distance:** 600 miles (965 km)
- **Best for:** First-time visitors and midlife couples
- **Style:** Relaxed self-drive itinerary
- **Highlights:** Castles, whisky, beaches, Highland scenery and historic towns

Road Trip Map

This map shows the route, overnight stops and hotels we recommend at each destination.

<https://www.google.com/maps/d/edit?mid=13bGGVJ5CoC2kyLKeaih4jR8coqZyfL0&usp=sharing>

 **Days 1-2:** Aberdeen & Royal Deeside

→ **Days 3-4:** Speyside

→ **Days 5-6:** Inverness & Loch Ness

→ **Days 7-8:** Brora, East Sutherland & John O'Groats

→ **Days 9-10:** Cairngorms National Park

→ **Days 11-12:** Stirling, Falkirk & Finish Trip in Edinburgh

Is This North Scotland Road Trip Right for You?

Our itinerary isn't designed for ticking off famous locations at pace. It's a great fit if you:

- are visiting Scotland for the first time and want to see more than just a big city.
- enjoy slower travel and two-night stays.
- prefer scenic drives over ticking off attractions.
- love historic castles, coastal scenery and local food & drinks.
- would prefer to avoid the busiest sections of the NC500.

You can condense our itinerary into 10 days, by reducing time here and there, but if you can, the ideal duration is 12 days.

Why this route instead of the NC500?

When the North Coast 500 was first introduced, we thought it was a brilliant idea. As Scots, we completely understood the appeal of showcasing the country's less visited spectacular northern coastline.

Over the years, though, its popularity has transformed the experience. During the summer months, many sections can become congested with motorhomes (RVs), tour buses and heavy tourist traffic.

For example, finding parking at popular viewpoints after 10am can also be frustrating. You might find the drive much slower than you would expect.

That's why we've designed this itinerary differently. It still includes some of our favourite stretches of northern Scotland, including the journey to John O'Groats, but combines them with quieter roads, lesser-known places and longer stays.

We think it offers a more enjoyable first-time road trip, with less time sitting in traffic and more time experiencing the Scotland we know and love.

Our Favourite North Scotland Drive Moments

- Aberdeen's Fittie (Footdee) fishing village
- Balmoral Castle and the surrounding Dee valley
- Culloden Battlefield near Inverness
- Walking on Brora's beaches (seals & sheep may join you)
- Views of Orkney's isles from John O'Groats
- Loch Morlich's forest-backed beach in the Cairngorms
- Stirling Castle & views from William Wallace monument
- Greeting the Falkirk Kelpies in the morning sunshine

Best Time to Visit Northern Scotland

My favourite time in Scotland is from mid May to the end of July, and personally I think this is the best time to enjoy this route.

Expect daylight from around 4am until nearly 11pm and milder weather, often with long sunny spells.

Of course, this is Scotland and it can and does rain at any time. But don't let this reality put you off, it's part of why our scenery is so green and spectacular :)

Alternatively, come in September. You will find it cooler in the Cairngorm Mountains and Northern coast, but the bonus is stunning autumn (Fall) colours and heather blooms as you drive.

You might also see a snow covered peak or two year round!

 **Our Tip:** Pre-booking is advised on all our recommended accommodation and favourite dining spots as they fill up fast.

Helpful Planning Links

- Flights & Accommodation: [Expedia](#) & [Booking.Com](#)
- Local Tours: [Get Your Guide](#) & [Viator](#).
- Travel Insurance: [Visitors Coverage](#)

Before You Set Off: 3 quick points:

- ✓ Collect your rental car at Aberdeen Airport
- ✓ Buy a reusable water bottle

- ✓ Download offline Google Maps

Day 1: Aberdeen City

Total Driving Today is minimal - in & around town. If you arrive in the morning, we suggest gentle sightseeing after collecting your car. It's around a 5 mile drive into the city centre from the airport.

Highlights:

- St Machar Cathedral
- Union Terrace Gardens
- Maritime quarter, lunch at Silver Darling
- Beach and harbour

Overnight: Aberdeen City

Aberdeen is often overlooked by visitors to Scotland. Some visitors share a first impression of a dull town full of grey stone buildings, but honestly, don't come to Scotland for the weather. And when the sun shines, get ready for a city full of granite sparkles!

We grew up 30 miles from Aberdeen, and studied here too. Even years later, we love that there is an understated feel to our hometown. Often called the 'Granite City' - Scotland's 3rd biggest behind Edinburgh and Glasgow, has a fun personality and unique Scottish history.

Day 2: Royal Deeside & Balmoral

Today you will be introduced to Scottish Castles, Royal Homes and you'll end your day in Royal Deeside.

Highlights

- Dunnottar Castle, near Stonehaven
- Scenic drive through Royal Deeside
- Balmoral Castle
- Overnight in Speyside on the Whisky Trail

Overnight: Royal Deeside

Daily Driving is 96 miles and we estimate just under 3 hours of driving:

- Aberdeen to Dunnottar Castle is a 30 minute drive.
- From here it's around 50 miles/80 km (1.20 mins) to Balmoral.
- Finally, to Speyside it's a further 46 miles/74 km (around 1 hour 15 mins).

Dunnottar Castle is a spectacular start to your Scottish road trip. Perched dramatically above the North Sea on rugged cliffs, it's one of the most atmospheric castles in Scotland.

Every time I visit, my imagination is relit. What must life have been like when William Wallace and Mary, Queen of Scots, visited?

It's open 24/7, but we advise you get there after breakfast to find easy parking and avoid bigger tour groups (especially if a cruise ship is in town).

If you like small towns, spend an hour in nearby Stonehaven. The pretty walled harbour is our go to spot for lunch at the Ship

Inn. The town is also famous for its outdoor lido (swimming pool), the only outdoor Art Deco one in the UK - so take a peek as you drive out of town!

The driving route to Balmoral, Royal Deeside is through some of the most beautiful farmlands with castles dotted around or hidden behind woodland. You'll spot signs for the Castle Trail - one of our favourites being Craigievar Castle with its pink stone walls.

Balmoral Castle interior tours are limited to **12 people**. You absolutely need to book ahead to get in (I've been trying for the past couple of years and it's always sold out way in advance).

Current tickets cost £110 per person - not cheap - but this is a once in a lifetime opportunity to see inside.

However, you don't need to do the tour to appreciate the quiet beauty of the castle, its grounds and the surrounding area. Enjoy the much more affordable £18.50 (£8.30 ages 5-16 yrs) audio-guided tour of the Castle Ballroom and gardens.

If you want to tick off an early distillery, Royal Lochnagar is literally next door, and I really enjoyed checking out their shop on my last visit.

That's another great thing about a road trip is that you have space to splurge a bit on souvenirs and stops. We say, worry about packing it all for the flight home later!

Your final destination today is the town of Ballater in Royal Deeside, Aberdeenshire. You're now close to many of Scotland's finest castles including Royal Balmoral, the Scottish home of King Charles III.

Lunch: Ship Inn, Stonehaven Harbour

Dinner: The Clachan Grill Restaurant & Bar, Ballater

Days 3-4: Speyside Distilleries

From a day of unique castles we shift gears, and your route will take you towards Speyside, and to Aberlour, a famous region due to its many whisky distilleries.

Highlights:

- Speyside Whisky Tasting
- Cooperage Centre Tour
- Deciding which is your favourite tipple

Overnight: Aberlour/Craigallachie

Day 3

Even if you don't love Scottish Whisky, visit at least a couple of distilleries today. This is where you will find yourself in the highest concentration of single malt production in the country.

It's fascinating to be guided through the traditional process, experience ancient techniques, and hear how ancient industry has transformed itself over hundreds of years.

Driving while tasting is not recommended in Scotland. Our drink driving laws are extremely strict - even a sip is frowned upon. So, here's what we suggest:

- book a tour from Aberlour or Craigallachie

- designate one of you to be the driver for the day

Even if whisky is not your calling, we urge you to visit at least one of two of the 130+ distilleries across Scotland. Take a tour to learn about how this liquid gold comes to life and sample a couple.

Popular [Speyside distilleries](#) include:

Aberlour, Macallan, Cardhu, Craigellachie, Glenfiddich, but take your pick and ask your hotel for any special events at the time of your visit.

Lunch: The Malt Barn at Glenfiddich is a personal favourite spot for lunch, and having been many times, I'm happy to recommend it!

Dinner: Copper Dog, Craigallachie Hotel. With a quality menu, focused on local produce. I especially enjoyed their homemade soups and fish dishes during our last visit.

After dinner, head up to their bar upstairs for a nightcap. I'm always astounded by their whisky selection and most recently their growing Scottish gin choices too.

Day 4

This morning, we highly suggest a visit to the Speyside Cooperage, where whisky barrels are made in the traditional way. It's currently £10 per adult for a tour (£6 for 8-17 years).

You can see the artisans at work and appreciate what it takes to create the perfect aging vessel. Having been featured in

National Geographic, their skills are inspiring, especially when you see them at work close up.

Many tour groups include this stop, and so it's essential to book ahead or ask your hotel when you first arrive to see if they can help get you in if it's full.



Our Tip: There is no cafe at the Cooperage, but staff will be happy to point you to their local favourites if you ask.

If you're ready for a change from whisky, take the short drive to Linn Falls (another of our childhood favourites). There are some lovely walking trails, and you can even walk here from Aberlour town centre.

Dinner: **Dowans 57**, within the Dowans Hotel in Aberlour

Day 5: Elgin, Culloden Battlefield

Highlights:

- Elgin Cathedral
- Culloden Battlefield
- Inverness Castle
- Loch Ness

Overnight: Inverness

Total Driving distance on Day 5 is just under 50 miles. (1.5 hours of driving time.)

Morning: After breakfast, follow the A96 road to Elgin, an ancient town in the Moray region, famous for its 13th century Cathedral we locals call 'The Lantern of the North'. It's long been a ruin but the scale and remnants of medieval construction is fascinating.

Next, pop into the royal appointed Cashmere clothing company - [Johnstons of Elgin](#).

You can reserve a tour of their mill to learn how this world famous brand brings their designs to life. These are bookable in advance (strongly recommend) and they start at £15 per adult (£12 concession). The first tour runs at 10am.

While here, you can enjoy a coffee or lunch at their on-site restaurant. Try their homemade soups, always my favourite when I visit, followed by a traditional Scottish scone (with butter and local strawberry jam).

Afternoon:

From Elgin it is around an hour drive to Culloden Battlefield Visitor Centre, where we suggest you spend 2-3 hours.

Start with the museum and immersive introduction taking you back to April 1746. Then, head outside to the memorials throughout this historic field.

This is a unique historical site, where you can walk through the battlefield where 1500+ Scots died in under 1 hour of fighting in a battle with the English military. It's open daily from 9am and the last entry is 4.30pm.

The audio guide helps to bring the history to life as you walk around, and you will also get a glimpse into how people lived, as you peek into thatched Leanach cottage.

If you love Scottish History, you might enjoy adding a visit to **Clava Cairns**, a massive Bronze Age (4000-year old) burial site a few miles from Culloden.

When you're ready, it's a short 6 mile drive into Inverness, where you can relax, with perhaps an evening stroll along the River Ness bank after dinner.

Lunch: Johnstons of Elgin Restaurant

Dinner Option: Maybe try a pub experience vs a more formal dining option. The Malt Room, or The Castle Tavern get consistently good reviews.

Day 6 - Loch Ness Boat Trip

Leave your car parked today and enjoy a tour to Loch Ness. Located south of the city, it can sometimes be difficult to park at top stops, so a small group (or private) tour removes any stress from the day!

Even as locals, we were enthralled by stories of Nessie, and every time we sailed on these waters, kept a sharp eye out for a sighting. Of course, there's always a possibility but to date, we're still waiting :)

You're much more likely to see Urquhart Castle as you sail. Personally we're less impressed with hyped-up tours with scanning equipment etc, and prefer those that concentrate on enjoying the scenery, rather than "Nessie-hunting."

Here's how we recommend making the most of a day trip on and around the Loch.

[Take a Look at This Popular Loch Ness Tour](#)

Plan for 6 hours or so to enjoy the area around the Loch.

Overnight: Inverness

If you prefer, it is of course possible to drive yourself here. The drive is only 13 miles (21km) one way on the A82 route.

Plan for around an hour of driving time to and from and more if you go onto the castle or other local attractions around the loch. You can park next to 'The Loch Ness Experience' for 2.30 hrs if you visit their center.

 Our Tip: . If you prefer something on dry land, go feed local Alpacas or simply walk with them through local woods, down to the shore. Or hang out with Highland Coos at their home in Drumnadrochit.

Days 7-8: Brora, East Sutherland & John O'Groats

Highlights

- Coastal Drive
- Lunch in Dornoch
- Afternoon at Dunrobin Castle
- Evening in Brora

Overnight: Brora

Day 7

From Inverness, it is a 57 mile drive on the beautiful A9 coastal route north. If like us, you are tempted to stop along the way to take another photo, just pull into a parking spot and snap away.

Without stopping it will take around 1.5 hours to reach Brora but we say make a stop in Dornoch for a leisurely lunch.

What may surprise you the most is how many stunning sandy curved beaches greet you on this stretch of the Scottish mainland. Dornoch is famous for golf (not our sport), but if you love it, why not check ahead of time and play a round at its famous course.

Continuing north after lunch, an option is to make a stop at Dunrobin Castle, the most northern in Scotland and pretty impressive with almost 200 rooms. It's open from May to October (10am to 5.30pm). Buy entrance tickets on-line: £16 for adults, with reduced prices of £14 for visitors 60 years+.

We didn't make this specific stop on our recent tour, as we were keen to get to Brora and enjoy its blue flag (environmental award) beach, where you can often see seals basking and sheep grazing.

After checking in at our hotel, we walked 5 minutes around the corner, and were greeted with a tiny fishing harbour, with 3 or so local boats tied up.

We then walked through a pathway down to the beach (you can't miss it because the golf course is on one side, the ocean on the other!) If you enjoy golf, you might want to book a round - the first 9 hole course was designed here in 1891.

It's quite rocky in parts, but strikingly raw and rugged surrounded by golden sands. We walked for around 30 minutes before turning around and returning along the footpath (grassy)

meeting a small group of sheep happily grazing. They were not at all bothered by us or the golfers.

Lookout for nesting arctic terns in the summer (May to August), along with dolphins, and minke whales.

Lunch: Highland Larder - casual spot on Dornoch Beach!

Dinner: Marine Hotel Restaurant, Brora

Day 8 - John O'Groats Drive & Return to Brora

Today's day trip is 62 miles (1.5 hours) north hugging the coastline until you reach the top of the UK mainland, known as John O'Groats.

(Actually a small headpoint called Dunnet Head is actually the more northern spot, but John O'Groats is the famous and more visited stop.)

When you reach the signpost, enjoy a walk along the coast, spotting the near shore islands that stretch into Orkney in front of you.

We had a coffee in the relaxing cafe with glass fronted glass which breaks the wind (it can be ferocious at times) but leaves the views.

You can easily enjoy a boat ride here to take you towards some of the islands and spot sea life and on a calm day, it's breathtaking scenery.

Alternatively, check out the distillery and several local gift shops with some fun t-shirts and other souvenirs confirming you made it to the top of Scotland.

Return to Brora for a relaxed evening, or stop off in Helmsdale on the way to eat: Thyme and Plaice is very welcoming, and only 11 miles north of Brora.

If you have the energy, walk into Brora village for an ice-cream this evening. Pick your flavour at Capaldi's of Brora (in business since 1929) and sit just outside in the tiny village square as you enjoy it.

 Our Tip: If you want to visit Orkney from John O'Groats, add on 2-3 days and take the car ferry over from here. Just ensure that you pre-book accommodation as the islands attract most visitors in summer.

Days 9-10: Cairngorms National Park - Aviemore, Kingussie & Highland Perthshire

Highlights:

- Loch Morlich Beach
- Cairngorm Mountain Train
- Kingussie
- Outdoor activities in Aviemore

Overnight: Aviemore or Kingussie

Day 9

From Brora to Aviemore, it is 85 miles, and you will arrive in the heart of one of Scotland's favourite outdoor recreation areas.

One of my early memories of exploring Scotland was coming to Aviemore as a family, and later in my twenties with friends to nearby Nethybridge. It always amazed me how much stunning countryside there is in Scotland, much of it easily accessible and affordable.

On this trip, we chose to stay in Kingussie for a change, but for a first visit you might enjoy the larger town of Aviemore.

If you love hiking or biking, this is your place to park the car and get outdoors. Go to any of the outdoor retail stores on the Main Street (Grampian) and they'll help you find the perfect activity for you.

Alternatively, if this sounds too active or walking isn't for you, delay your lunch and book yourselves on the Strathspey Railway for a sumptuous afternoon tea. This is the same steam train experience that contestants travel on for The Traitors TV show.

They run twice during summer months: 12.45pm and 3pm. Tickets are £50 per adult (minimum 2 passengers per booking) with reduced prices of £27.50 for ages 5-15 years.

 [Find Out Availability and Timings for Strathspey Railway Journeys](#)

Dinner:

We ate at The Winking Owl (Pub) recently - it was more of a late lunch but it was busy and the food was good (not outstanding). There are higher rated restaurants although we didn't eat at them on our last visit including The Rowan Tree or Anderson's.

Day 10

After a relaxing evening, we suggest you head to the Cairngorm Mountain Train via Loch Morlich within the Glemore Forest Park. Famed for its curved sandy beach, this is actually one of the highest altitude beaches in the country.

What I love most about coming here are the incredible Mountain Views behind the pine forests that fill the sky when I'm standing on the beach.

This is where to try a wild swim (with a wetsuit), paddle board, stroll the beach or sit under the shade of the trees and soak it all in.

It's a stunningly beautiful part of the highlands and is somewhere not to miss. There is a car park at the beach (paid).

You're pretty close to the Mountain Car Park area now, so keep going towards the train depot to get your tickets for the short funicular ride up what is in winter one of Scotland's main ski resorts.

Look out for the reindeer herds - they are known to graze close to the train tracks, or make an appointment to visit them afterwards.

We didn't do this because living in Alaska for some years, we were lucky to see many of them around the state.

Take it easy for the rest of the day, enjoying a glass of wine or a local gin back in Aviemore where you can take in more of the stunning landscape.

Days 11-12: Stirling and Falkirk

The final stops on our road trip circle back to some of Scotland's great heroes, along with contemporary art in the Kelpies Folklore.

Highlights:

- Stirling Castle
- William Wallace Memorial Tower (246 steps to the top)
- The Kelpies
- The Falkirk Wheel

Overnight: Stirling/Edinburgh

Day 11

The drive from the Cairngorms to Stirling is around 100 miles, and we suggest a stop for lunch in Pitlochry, where you can check out their famous salmon ladder.

Arriving in Stirling, park up and head to the Castle, built as a Royal Palace. Pay for an audio guide and step back in time to when Scotland had a King, and glimpse how life might have been inside this fortress walls.

There are a couple of cafes within the castle for a break after walking around, and in summer the gardens are lovely to stroll around before leaving.

 Our Tip: We stayed at a comfortable Bed and Breakfast, a short walk from the castle (although up a steep track) and into town without driving.

After checking in to your accommodation, we suggest having dinner at award winning Brea, in Stirling's city centre. It's a tiny place, but don't let that put you off because the service and Scottish food is outstanding.

We didn't book, but I would recommend you do especially for weekends and during summer as in 2024 it was voted in the top 10% of restaurants worldwide. Having eaten here in 2026, I totally see why & wouldn't be surprised if we see a Michelin star awarded here in the future.

Day 12

On your last morning, if you like to be active, head over to William Wallace monument. Climb 246 steps to the top for never-ending views, including the site of the infamous battle of Stirling Bridge.

There are several floors to pause at during your climb. Each has displays of historic moments in the life of William Wallace and it's fun checking out the views from the top. Don't judge my hair in this video - it was super windy when we visited last!

 Our Tip: It is a steep climb from the car park to the monument, but there is a shuttle bus (Free) from here to the entrance, to save your legs.

Afterwards (or alternatively, if you don't want to climb), spend up to an hour immersed in local social history at the quirky Stirling Smith Art Gallery and Museum.

They have on-site parking and it is free to enter. Look out for the world's oldest football and a curling stone from the 1500s within the collection.

Back in the car, it's around a 20 minute drive to Falkirk, our final day destination, before you end your road trip in Edinburgh.

We suggest you visit the Kelpies first, the largest equine sculptures in the world. They're truly magical on a sunny day - walk along the adjacent canal area, enjoying an ice-cream.

A hop around the corner and you'll be at the only working rotating boat lift in the world.

The Falkirk Wheel is an engineering marvel and it's possible to take a slow ride on a boat as it takes you from the Forth & Clyde Canal to the Union Canal.

Their visitor center is really informative so go here before you take the boat ride to get an idea of why this was built and how it works.

There's an adjacent cafe, or if you want to be a little more active, you can hire canoes, have a game of mini-golf, or ride bikes along the canal.

Returning to Edinburgh (or Glasgow)

We always return to Edinburgh after road trips in Scotland as that's our base, but if you plan to fly straight out, Glasgow is just as easy an option. We often are asked whether people coming to Scotland should [visit Glasgow or Edinburgh](#), so we put together a comparison article that you might find interesting.

Edinburgh Airport (best place to return your rental car) is outside the city and only about 20 miles from Falkirk.

If you plan to spend a few days in Edinburgh, our 3 day guide to the city includes choices of experiences we enjoy the most. We pop in alternatives for rainy days and where to go for less crowds, or a more local atmosphere.

.Places to Stay On This Scottish Road Trip

On this trip we generally stayed in comfortable mid-range hotels and guesthouses, paying between £120- £300 per night, with the highest prices in Brora and the best value in Stirling.

It is worth knowing that many countryside hotels in Scotland serve fantastic dinners. Usually the chef puts emphasis on local ingredients to showcase the best of seasonal produce.

Our picks are also based on location, ease of parking, proximity to main sights and places that are relaxing and quiet at night.

Location	Recommended Accommodation
Aberdeen (1 night)	 \$\$ - Residence Inn By Marriott - you will be in the heart of the city, and around a 20 minutes walk from the beach!  \$\$\$ - Malmaison - on Queen's Road, offers modern luxury, within a classic setting. We rate their restaurant.
Royal Deeside (1 night)	 \$\$ The Auld Kirk - award winning, stay in a church, transformed into a cozy Bed and Breakfast. Only 10 miles from Balmoral Castle.

Speyside (2 nights)	📌 \$\$\$ The Highland Star - pub style traditional hotel, excellent breakfast & value. Some rooms are a little small. 📌 \$\$\$ Craigellachie Hotel - our splurge stay, and worth every penny!
Inverness (2 nights)	📌 \$\$ Ardentorrie Guest House - in the heart of Inverness, making it easy to walk around with needing to drive. 📌 \$\$ Apartment 306 By the Bridge - if you like a little more space, this riverside option is both central and relaxing.
Brora (2 nights)	📌 \$\$\$ Royal Marine Hotel - a few minutes walk to town, beach and golf course. Our highlight was the service and food served in their on-site restaurant. 📌 \$\$ No 17, The Links Apartment - for direct sea views and to be adjacent to the golf course, this is an alternative option. Watch out for sheep grazing around the course!
Aviemore/ Kingussie) (2 nights)	📌 \$\$ Ravenscraig Guest House - a quieter bed and breakfast option in Aviemore gives you easy access to the town. It receives high ratings from couples who enjoy the local style hospitality. 📌 \$\$\$ Star Hotel, Kingussie - we stayed at the recently refurbished, traditional high street hotel. Our room was comfortable and modern, with thoughtfully designed features for today's tech, on-site parking and casual restaurant.
Stirling (2 nights)	📌 \$\$ Castlecroft Bed and Breakfast - close to the castle, our stay here was the ideal end our road trip. Laura, the host, bakes the most delicious fresh bread every morning - bliss!!

->> [Click here for more great accommodation choices](#)

Our Car Rental - What To Know Before You Book

Although I'm Scottish, and we spend several months a year in Scotland, we prefer just to rent a car as and when we go on longer trips.

Our experience: We hired a Ford Kuga - a small hybrid SUV. Over our trip we averaged around **65 miles per gallon**, making fuel costs surprisingly reasonable.

So, although fuel prices in Scotland are higher than you might be used to, our total fuel bill for this trip was lower than we expected, with a fuel-efficient vehicle.

What We Spent on Fuel

- Vehicle: Hybrid rental car - \$750 (we booked it from the USA - cheaper!)
- Average fuel economy: 65 mpg
- Route: Aberdeen → Speyside → Inverness → Brora → John O'Groats → Cairngorms → Stirling → Edinburgh - 650 miles.
- Total fuel cost: £150 (\$200) for the trip.

Hybrid rental car - Worth the Upgrade?

Yes! Although hybrid vehicles can cost slightly more to hire, we found the fuel savings significant over a 10–12 day itinerary covering several hundred miles.

Driving in Scotland: Laws, Rules & Etiquette

- Always drive on the left.
- Drive to posted speed limits (there are many police speed cameras)
- A red light means stop - it is illegal to make a turn.
- Distances are posted in miles (although the country uses metric).
- Petrol (Gas) stations are plentiful but always keep your tank at least half full. Fuel prices are quoted in litres.
- EV infrastructure is improving - we saw Tesla charging being installed in Brora, but don't assume they're available.
- Bring your drivers licence and credit card you made the reservation with when you collect the car
- You have to pay extra for a spouse to drive (it can be expensive)
- We suggest you pay for Loss Damage Waiver (full coverage) in addition to the standard 3rd party liability insurance.
- Never drink and drive. The legal limit is 50 mg of alcohol in 100 ml of blood.

 Our Tip: Because Scotland has one of the strictest drink-driving limits in Europe, even a single drink could put you over the legal limit. We recommend not drinking at all if you're driving.

- Make sure your rental is compliant for city centre access to all major cities in terms of emissions standards.
- Roads are narrow and often route through areas populated with wildlife so be mindful of signs for deer and other creatures, even otters and hedgehogs have their crossing signs.

- Sheep are notorious for taking over grass verges on roads, so slow right down and give them right of way.

 **Our Tip:** It's worth downloading a map as back up because there are spots when signals might drop out, especially in more remote areas.

FAQs

Is this route the NC500?

The North Coast 500 does follow parts of this route but has become so congested in summer with camper vans (RVs), and traffic generally, that we recommend avoiding it altogether. It is more relaxing to explore quieter (but no less stunning areas), and weave in and out of the NC500 route along the way,

Is John O'Groats in Scotland worth the long drive north?

Reaching the celebrated end point of Scotland is a must if you are touring the North Scottish coastline. The drive from Inverness north to the jump off to Orkney has views that are hard to beat from sheer cliff drops to sandy beaches that sweep around hilly dunes.

Is the Cairngorms worth visiting in summer?

Visiting Scotland's outdoor playground around Aviemore and the Cairngorms is worthwhile any time of the year.

But, during summer nature is at its best, and the choice of outdoor activities from local trails, to mountain trains, and high

altitude beaches edged into lochs is unique. Come in winter too for a taste of Scottish ski-ing!

Comfortable, Realistic Scotland Travels

So you now have all you need to plan a once in a lifetime Scotland Road Trip itinerary that takes you from cities to coastal towns, islands and highlands.

Not luxury travel, not budget travel—just the kind of well-paced, comfortable road trip that many of us are actually looking for these days.

Our [guide to visiting Scotland](#) is packed with more tips on how to plan and prepare to explore, from packing tips to more driving information. If you would like to browse another [Scotland Islands and Highlands adventure by car](#), we have this alternative to check out.

Finally, to help you kick off your plans, take a minute to check the best flight routes from your nearest airport to Scotland.