Introduction

Having kitted out our 30 year-old Land Rover Defender with a roof-tent, fridge, cooker and heating, it was finally time to take her on her first proper road trip. Our initial intention was to tour the 516 miles of the Scottish NC500, but with the beauty of Scotland starting right at its border, it soon became clear that we wanted to capture as much as possible.

It’s a long drive from the south-east of England to Inverness, so we pondered how best we could experience scenic England en-route, without too much of a detour. Not only did we have to get to the NC500, we had to work out what to see and do when we got there, what we should take with us, where we would rest at night, and how long it would take us. We only had seven days in total for the entire trip, so it was a tall order.

We expected it would take us nearly two days to join the NC500 route and we were unsure of where exactly, was the best point (for us) to start. The official start (and end) is Inverness Castle, with the circular route being ventured either clockwise or anti-clockwise. Having anticipated a visit to the Lake District on our way north, we planned to cross the border at Gretna Green and then afterwards return south via Jedburgh and through the Northumberland National Park.

There was so much to consider beforehand:

1. What equipment we considered essential to take with us.
2. How best to kit out the vehicle, given its limited space.
3. What cooking supplies we would use.
4. How to power phones, equipment and lighting.
5. What food we would eat.
6. Where we would stay.
7. What clothes to take.
8. What footwear to take.
9. What toiletries to take.
10. What about the midges, mosquitoes and ticks.
11. What bedding to take.
12. How to keep warm and dry.
13. What map directions to use.
14. Where to fill up with fuel.
15. What money and cards to take.
16. What route to take.
17. What places to see.

Our planned, first main rest stop was Penrith, in the Lake District, where we pitched our roof tent right beside Lake Ullswater, slept for a few hours, ate, explored for an hour and then headed off again in the direction of Glasgow.

Instead of making straight for Inverness where the official route starts, we ventured west past Glasgow, up by Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park, onward to Glencoe, north to Fort Augustus, a little further to Invermoriston then west on the A87, branching off on the A890 northwards to join the NC500 route on the A896 just passed Strathcarron.
It was here where the NC500 tour started for us as we made our way to Applecross, via the Bealach na Ba road. From that point we continued in the clockwise direction around the coastal route through Inverness on the A9, where we spent our final night near Pitlochry before heading south for our journey home.

Details

1. What equipment we considered essential to take with us.

   Our essentials were a fridge, cooker, toilet, small folding bench, hot drink flasks, thermal cups, water bottles, wash basin, bull-dog clips, a thick piece of dense foam, and small doggy-bags for easy waste disposal.

2. How best to kit out the vehicle, given its limited space.

   The tent was a roof-top one, so the back of the vehicle was used to store all our kit and supplies. The awning section zips to the tent and extends from the back door of the vehicle. Once in place it's enclosed, with zipped window, door, roll-up net covers. We used bull-dog clips to attach it to the back of the vehicle at the bottom to avoid any drafts. We placed a foam pad underneath the awning to cushion the ground and stop the plastic floor section getting pierced. A foldaway ladder attached to the tent enables climbing into the sleeping area. Ours is slightly short to the ground so we rested the ladder onto/into a plastic crate to stop it moving or damaging the plastic floor.

3. What cooking supplies we would use.

   The cooker was a robust camping one with an oven, fixed down in the back of the vehicle and had a copper pipe leading to the gas bottle stored on the roof. We kept to the minimum cooking/eating utensils for hob and oven cooking and used plastic plates as well as disposable paper ones.

4. How to power phones, equipment and lighting.

   An Optima battery connected to a Durite split charge system was fixed behind the passenger car seat. This powered the fridge and internal lighting for when the vehicle was stationary. A few bright LED lights were fitted inside above the windows.

5. What food we would eat.

   We stocked up en-route at local mini stores wherever possible, with fresh chicken, mince, peppers, oven ready potatoes, cereal, milk and fruit.

6. Where we would stay.

   It wasn’t easy for us to find spots for wild camping, even though it’s legal in Scotland. Forested areas are fenced off (for good reason...) and other spots are inaccessible for a vehicle. The private campsites we saw looked to be quite exposed to the elements, so not ideal for us with a roof tent & awning. The many parking spots were usually by a “busy” road which is OK for a motorhome or campervan but not for our setup. We spent quite some time at the...
end of the day just looking, resulting in a lot of driving on. One spot, over Little Gruinard, seemed ideal but that night the wind speed and direction changed and we had to decamp early, in the dark, wind and rain, leaving at 4am. We planned our night stays according to the weather forecast, and most of the time managed to have dry weather for setting up and dismantling camp. On one night we found a camp site in a sheltered spot and although we were rewarded with clear, dark, starry skies at night, it poured with rain in the morning and we got drenched packing away. Luckily we were able to use the camp’s facilities to dry off before continuing our tour.

7. What clothes we would take.

Daytime temperatures forecasted for this last week of summer were around 14 degrees C, with sunny spells and lots of rain. Lightweight waterproof jacket and trousers were a must, the type that folds up into its own pocket. We bought ours from Sports Direct. Daywear for me was either leggings or thermal footless tights, long sleeved t-shirt, long tunic top, lightweight cotton denim jacket or padded short coat. Nightwear was leggings and a nightdress. My husband wore t-shirts with a warm sweater and tracksuit bottoms.

8. What footwear to take.

I used three pairs of footwear. I wore flat hush puppies most of the time and used snow boots for walking through long grass and on the beach. I also wore a soft pair of Sketchers while inside the tent awning. My husband used two pairs; military desert boots and deck shoes.

9. What toiletries to take.

I spent ages deliberating this. The challenge was how best to stay clean for a week without staying at designated camp sites or a hotel. We purchased three packs of Bath in Bed wipes and these worked well for body cleaning. We also used two packs of face and hand wipes. I brought my fully-charged electric toothbrush, my husband used a normal one and we brought mouthwash too. The privacy of our awning set up enabled us to wash inside. Tea towels and bulldog clips were fixed to the vehicle’s windows, obscuring any view. The toilet, placed in one corner of the awning, helped batten it down.

10. What about the midges, mosquitoes and ticks?

We were very lucky. For the last week in September, we had mixed but mainly dry & sunny weather, with only one night of heavy wind that forced us to pack up and move on. I was very anxious about ticks and the risk of Lyme disease and so avoided going near long grass. We didn’t encounter any big plague of insects, only the odd one or two that got inside our vehicle but they were quickly got rid of. I took a home made essential oil blend and regularly used it on exposed skin. We also took citronella incense sticks, sometimes using them at the entrance of the door or when we ate outside.
11. What bedding to take.

A double duvet, two pillows, a camping (memory foam) 2-inch mattress with waterproof cover, which all stayed up in the roof tent but which got aired every night with the heating set up we had.

12. How to keep warm and dry.

The vehicle has a robust diesel-powered Eberspacher that blows heat into the footwell. It’s also fitted with a very long, detachable hose that extends through the vehicle and up into the roof tent space. Our tea towels got hung over it to dry and my clothes were placed on it to warm up.

13. What map directions to use

We used the Google maps App on my iPhone and had service for most of the time. Sometimes it dipped out when driving low in a glen. We also used the NC500 App to look up the places of interest nearby.

14. Where to fill up with fuel.

We filled up at Glencoe (A82), Lochcarron (A896), Betty Hill (off A836), Wick (A99), Aberfeldy (A827) and Lauder (A68). Our favourite pit stop was Betty Hill where the free range hens came out to greet us.

15. What money and cards to take.

We took about £100 between us including £10 loose change but was able to use cards for all transactions. Coins were needed for the £2 car park at John o’Groats and we donated coins to the contribution boxes at Applecross toilets and Clachtoll Beach car park.

16. What route to take.

- We joined the NC500 at the south west side, near Strathcarron on the A896.
- Lake Ullswater near Penrith in the Lake District, 1st main rest break
- Lockerbie services, McDonalds, mini break
- Opposite Dunbarton Castle on river Clyde near Glasgow
- A82 Loch Lomond
- A82 Inverbeg by Loch Lomond, 1st night camp
- A82 Inverbeg to Glencoe, Loch Tulla Viewpoint
- A82 Fort Augustus
- A890 Loch Carron Viewpoint at Stromeferry, 2nd night camp
- A896 between Ardarroch and Tornapress
- Bealach na Ba road to Applecross and viewpoint
- Applecross
- Applecross to Shieldaig road
- A832 Little Gruinard, 3rd night camp
- A837 Ardvreck Castle, Loch Assynt

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17. What places to see.

- There are so many places of interest along the NC500 route but with the limited
time we had we didn't fully explore them. The views seen while driving were
spectacular with one of my favourites being the drive from Inverbeg to Glencoe.

- We spent time at Loch Tulla Viewpoint, Fort Augustus, Loch Carron Viewpoint, by
the river Kishorn between Ardarroch and Tornapress, Bealach na Ba Viewpoint,
Applecross, Little Gruinard, Clachtoll beach, Kylesku, Kyle of Durness, Balnakiel
Bay, Ceannabeinne beach, Betty Hill, Thurso (Lidl), Dunnet Bay, Dunnet Head,
Brough Bay, John o’Groats, Reiss Beach and Brora.

- On the return journey we made our way from Inverness around the Cairngorms
then drove around the Tay Forest Park area and along the river Tay.

Summary

This trip was very special to us. Our main reason for going far north was to find a spot to
spread my parents’ ashes, which we did, in a most beautiful place near a crofting
community.
Depending on which time of year you visit you’ll get to see Waterfalls, Deer, Stags, Pheasants, Rabbits, Cows, Bulls, Sheep, Goats, Hens, Owls, Stars, Rain, Sunsets, Beaches, Lochs, Glens, Trees, Ziplines, Canoeing, Kayaking, Ticks, Mosquitos, Midges, Wild Camping and if you’re super lucky there will be the Aurora Borealis, which is another reason we want to go back.

We were well equipped, warm and dry. Being on no fixed schedule suited us best because we were able to travel at our own pace, stopping off whenever we wanted to.

The scenery of the Highlands will draw you in. It’s breath-taking and very hard not to explore. Every moment is captivating and simply stunning. If you like being outdoors amid fantastic scenery, then do visit and be prepared for a wonderful experience.

**More Information Web Sites**

Scottish Outdoor Camping Code – know the rules before you go

BBC Article October 2019
[https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-49933065](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-highlands-islands-49933065)

NC500 Route - Interactive Map and more
[https://www.northcoast500.com/](https://www.northcoast500.com/)

Visit Scotland – places to visit, routes to take, mountains to climb, lots to see and do,
[https://www.visitscotland.com/about/](https://www.visitscotland.com/about/)