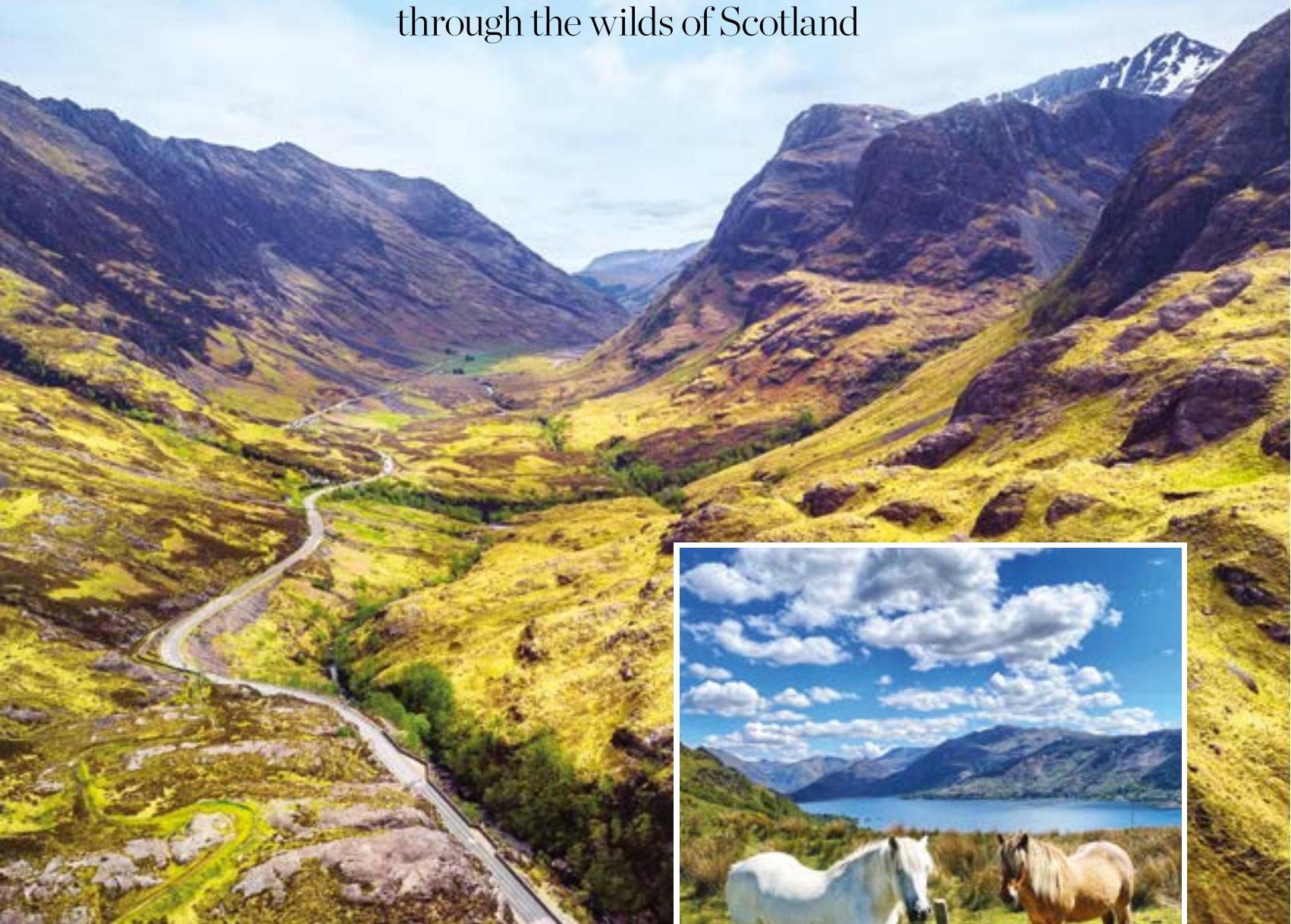


I would walk 500 MILES

HOLLY RUBENSTEIN traces a new adventure through the wilds of Scotland



Five hundred miles is a distance synonymous with Scotland, whether it's walking 500 miles in the classic Proclaimers hit or driving the same distance on the North Coast 500 road, the popular coastal trip covering the northern half of Scotland. If you're keen to tick off this diverse country's most memorable stops and epic landscapes in one trip – and stay in some of the very best hotels along the way – we have a new route for you. A 500-mile loop from east to west coast and back again. We call it: the Highland Beginner's 500.



FROM ABOVE: Holly hit the road through the Scottish Highlands; meeting friendly locals en route

1 EDINBURGH

In many respects, Scotland's compact capital (*right*) is the perfect precursor for what is to come: inventive food, diverse culture, endless hills, enormous bodies of water on all sides and some of the finest hotels in the world. Conveniently located on Princes Street above Edinburgh Waverley station, **The Balmoral** (p148) is one of the city's most beloved addresses, and a perfectly positioned launch pad to experience the city. Opt for a room with a view of Princes Street Gardens and Edinburgh Castle, the first of many castles on your route. So inspiring is its energy that author JK Rowling chose to finish writing the final book in the *Harry Potter* series, *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows*, in one of its luxurious suites. **BOOK IT:** From £180 B&B. roccofoorthotels.com



Take in Edinburgh's unforgettable skyline



FROM LEFT: The Scott Monument stands next to The Balmoral Hotel; a sumptuous suite



Remote and picturesque Loch Duich



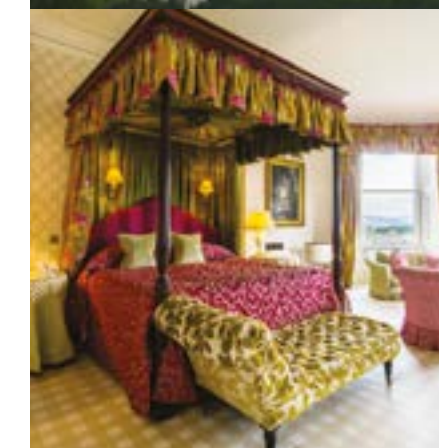
2 FORT WILLIAM

Be sure to leave a full day to cover all the highlights on the road from Edinburgh to Fort William. The scenery really kicks in on the A82, winding through Rannoch Moor and Glencoe. With each turn in the road the hills grow taller, the bends sharper and the lochs larger. Soon you'll smell the sea air as you hit the west coast at Loch Linnhe and head to Fort William, dubbed 'the outdoor capital of the UK' for its adventure activities. A trip to Scotland wouldn't be complete without sleeping in a baronial mansion and the 19th-century **Inverlochy Castle Hotel** (*right*), just a caber's throw from Fort William, was once frequented by Queen Victoria, who said she 'never saw a lovelier or more romantic spot'. Named after the ruined medieval castle nearby, it's at the foot of snow-capped Ben Nevis, overlooking cow-filled pastures and rolling hills. Its restaurant, Michel Roux Jr at Inverlochy Castle, is a gastronomic destination. Beginning with drinks by the fire in the Great Hall, guests are then led into one of three dining rooms – each with its own special view – to experience a five-course Franco-Scottish menu.

BOOK IT: Doubles from £375 B&B. inverlochycastlehotel.com



ABOVE & BELOW: Inverlochy at the foot of Ben Nevis; a bed fit for a queen



3 KYLE

The feeling of splendid isolation grows as you journey north into the wildlands of the Highlands to reach **57 Nord** (*below*), a new private-hire home that, as its name suggests, sits at 57 degrees latitude. With panoramic views of the serene Lochs Duich (*above*) and Alsh, framed by the Kintail mountains, its ultra-sleek minimalist Scandinavian design and floor-to-ceiling glass walls maximise the surrounding rugged scenery. The power of a place to affect our mood and behaviour is palpable here, particularly in summer when there are only a few hours of darkness. Be sure to visit the charming but lesser-known nearby beauty spots of Glenelg, Plockton and Applecross, too.

BOOK IT: From £1,050 for three nights, off-peak, self-catered. 57nord.co.uk



Drink in the view from 57 Nord

PHOTOS: GETTY IMAGES



ABOVE & BELOW: The Three Chimneys is perched on the edge on Loch Dunvegan; its delicious home-grown menu



4 ISLE OF SKYE

It's a quick hop over Skye Bridge or a scenic ferry ride to reach the otherworldly Isle of Skye: wild, rugged and beautiful. The largest and most accessible of the Inner Hebrides islands, it's home to some of the UK's most striking scenery, its irregular coastline made up of a series of peninsulas radiating from its mountainous centre. In the small village of Colbost on the island's most picturesque northern coast is **The Three Chimneys**, a multi-award-winning restaurant with rooms (p151). Housed in an original Skye croft, and sitting on the shores of Loch Dunvegan, it has garnered a global reputation for its menu, using ingredients mostly sourced within a few miles' radius. Its six luxury bedroom suites make it the ideal spot from which to explore the jagged peaks of the towering Black Cuillins, the dramatic upland of the Trotternish Peninsula and the magical Fairy Pools of Glenbrittle.

BOOK IT: From £365 B&B. threechimneys.co.uk

5 BRAEMAR

The drive now crosses the country from west to east coast, with the A890 to Inverness snaking along endless lochs, through deep glens, and up over mountain after mountain, showcasing the sheer magnitude of this wilderness landscape. At Inverness the route heads south, and it's all change as you head into Cairngorms National Park. The pine forests and steep peaks change to pea-green grassy hills, dotted with Highland sheep and cows. Nestled in the rounded heathery Cairngorm hills is the village of Braemar, home to the Highland Games, and your final stop, **The Fife Arms** (below right). A passion project from international art dealers Hauser & Wirth, it's a bucket-list destination for culture vultures, with an original Picasso in the drawing room and a Lucian Freud in the lobby. The design is an ode to maximalism, with Scottish heritage (think tartan and taxidermy) juxtaposed with world-class contemporary art. There's no end of outdoor pursuits on your doorstep and beautiful Balmoral castle and the trendy village of Ballater are 20 minutes down the road. Round off your trip back at the hotel with a nightcap in Bertie's Whisky Bar, which has a library of 365 different tipples for each day of the year. Next day it's an equally impressive drive out of the Cairngorms to complete the Highland Beginner's 500 back to Edinburgh.

BOOK IT: Doubles from £435 B&B. thefifearms.com



ABOVE & BELOW: Spotting wildlife in the Cairngorms; The Fife Arms



PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

The most scenic spots en route



GLENCOE, Lochaber Geopark

The deep valleys and mountains of Glencoe were carved out centuries ago by icy glaciers and volcanic explosions. Look out for several photogenic little white houses dotted throughout the park, which provide both scale and contrast to the brooding peaks behind.



GLENFINNAN VIADUCT, Glenfinnan

This dramatic 21-arched bridge was made famous by the *Harry Potter* films as the crossing for the Hogwarts Express. Today, it's used by the red and black Jacobite steam train, which chuffs across twice daily, to the thrill of fans perched on the hillside.



EILEAN DONAN CASTLE, Loch Duich

One of the most recognised castles in Scotland, this restored 13th-century castle on a tidal island is an easy stop-off, and the perfect place for a dip in the loch.



THE OLD MAN OF STORR, Isle of Skye

This 48-metre rock pillar is one of Britain's most extraordinary landslide features. Climb up the craggy paths that surround it to enjoy magnificent views of the island and beyond. ■