



Take the HIGH ROAD

516 miles of what are, arguably, the UK's most epic views...
Darren Calpin tours the North Coast 500 to see if it deserves its 'Top 5 Coastal Routes in the World' billing



LAUNCHED IN 2015 as a way of encouraging tourists to visit Scotland's more remote regions, the North Coast 500 touring route takes drivers on a grand tour of the north Highlands of Scotland via some of the most scenic roads along the spectacular eastern, northern and western coastlines.

With a full tank of fuel in my trusty Fiesta and more provisions than Scott took to the Antarctic, I set off from Inverness

Castle – the de-facto starting point of the NC500 – feeling very excited indeed.

Going against the grain (from travellers I spoke to, at least), I decide to drive the route in an anti-clockwise direction, my main reason being that I want to leave the west coast, widely considered the most striking leg of the journey, until last.

This decision seems justified as I head up the east coast along Cromarty Firth in drizzling

rain, motoring past the brooding oil rigs and industrial platforms that symbolise eastern Scotland's economic prosperity. Further along, the landscape becomes prettier, with picturesque rolling green fields and handsome little towns making it somewhat Blyton-esque, rather like Dorset. The A9 is a breeze and it's not long before the refined town of Tain and its Glenmorangie whisky distillery are in my rear view mirror.

Find out more about the route at northcoast500.com (you can even buy a NC500 beanie hat!)

The white sands of Achmelvich Beach near Lochinver



The 15-metre high Clashnessie Falls



Let's hope Darren left the handbrake on



Darren takes a diversion to Elgol on the Isle of Skye (more on this detour in a future issue)

SHINS AND SALMON

The first of many detours to a nearby waterfall takes me off the NC500 then up, along, and around the Dornoch Firth, an utterly stunning and deceptively large inlet of water flanked by swathes of dark green pines.

As well as giving me my first taste of the region's single-track roads, the majestic Falls of Shin allow me to experience one of Scotland's most iconic wildlife spectacles – the sight of salmon swimming upstream to reach their late-summer spawning grounds.

After watching a good number of the determined fish launch themselves up and over the swirling, rock-strewn rapids, I rejoin the A9, pausing briefly at the stately and

well worth visiting Dunrobin Castle, before pushing on apace.

The landscape becomes more rugged, with intimidating hills replacing the rolling green fields, and winding roads with sharp gradients now the norm. The going gets easier however when I leave the A9 and join the A99 to the old fishing port of Wick.

It's evening time now and I realise I could easily get to John O'Groats within the hour. So I do, passing through an increasingly sparse landscape of intermittent dwellings, abandoned crofters' cottages, and windy, open heathland on the way, eventually easing through the diminutive settlement at John O' Groats to reach Britain's real most north-

westerly point, Duncansby Head. With a fierce wind blowing, rain thrashing down, and only a lighthouse for company, (save some hardy sheep), this desolate spot has a real edge-of-the-world feel to it – a fitting place to end my first day of driving adventure.

THE DRAMATIC NORTH COAST

After a brief stroll along Duncansby Head's 200ft-high cliffs to view its menacing, Mordor-esque sea stacks, I'm back in the car. For this leg I'm heading west along Scotland's dramatic northern coast on the A836. It's still breezy but the sun is out and the sky is blue. The road hugs the coast tightly, wending its way gently past heather-topped headlands and around »



Miles and miles of NC 500 to explore, and not a car in sight

sheltered bays with deserted sandy beaches.

The vistas are sensational, with what seems to be almost the entire north coast splayed out across my windscreen at times. Thurso, a charming Victorian coastal town with neat grey sandstone buildings and a notorious surf break, comes and goes, and, before long, I'm driving up into a vast, hauntingly bereft landscape of empty moorland with towering mountains looming in the middle distance.

My progress slows, partly due to the increasingly challenging roads but mostly because the sheer power of the scenery forces me to pull over time and again to take it all in properly. And the silence. No birds, no sheep – nothing but absolute stillness. Incredible.

A JOURNEY INTO MIDDLE EARTH

The beautiful, unspoilt beaches of Farr Bay and Torrisdale Bay drift into view either side of Bettyhill, the afternoon sunshine making their sandy crescents look like something you'd see on a postcard.

Then, the little Fiesta is ascending again, turning inland and cutting a brief dash south before arcing west once more, across the breathtaking Kyle of Tongue sea loch by way of a causeway which offers the kind of mountain/water shots amateur photographers dream of.

A sojourn down another single track road brings me to the sleepy village of Melness. Here the nearby Rabbit Islands, lapped by the most redolent deep blue

seawater I've seen in years, look so close I feel I could reach out and touch them.

Resisting the urge to swim across the narrow channel and make the uninhabited islands my new home, I return to the car and rejoin the NC500, cutting across the epic moors of A'Mhoine with soaring peaks like Ben Hope (927m) and Ben Loyal (764m) for company. This sensational journey through Middle Earth ends somewhat abruptly when the huge aqua scar that is Loch Eriboll hovers eerily into view, forcing me on a circuitous route around its majestic sea-hewn banks until I finally arrive at pretty Sango Bay and the wee village of Durness.

Along with a quirky tribute to John »

Road trip

Lennon (who used to holiday here as a boy) at the village hall, Durness is blessed with a 24-hour petrol pump and a stunning, west-facing beach where glorious sunsets are de-rigour. This, I conclude, is a fine place to stop for the evening.

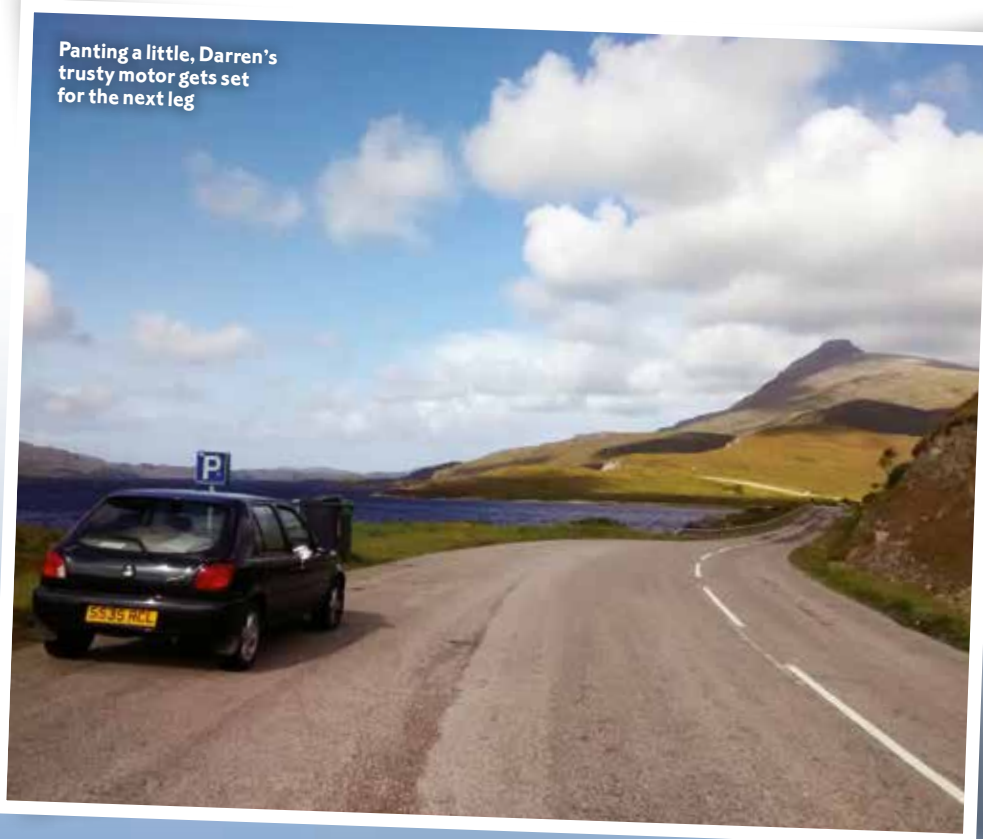
A TREASURE ISLAND VIBE

The slightly overcast weather next morning seems fitting as I wander around Smoo Cave, a huge gaping hole cut into one of the limestone cliffs just east of Durness. Even with the visiting tour groups, this grand sea cave has a real Treasure Island vibe about it, like there could be hidden booty squirrelled away in any one of its myriad nooks and crannies. The waterfall cascading down into the inner chamber only adds to the romance.

By the time I reach the pier head in nearby Keoldale to take the ferry over to Cape Wrath, the weather has taken a turn for the worse. This makes access to Britain's most north-westerly point a no-go. Somewhat disappointed, I turn my trusty steed south, gun my way across the stark Parph peninsula at speed, and make for the west coast. **GTW**

The Isle of Skye, connected to Scotland's north west coast by bridge, is well worth a detour

Panting a little, Darren's trusty motor gets set for the next leg



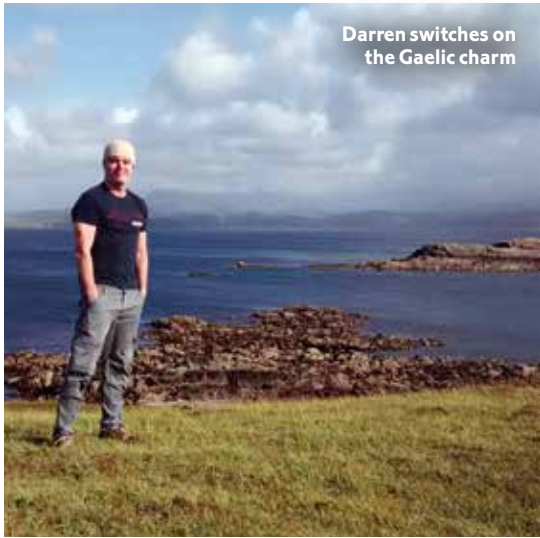
NEXT MONTH:
Darren continues his quest to complete the North Coast 500 as he points his trusty Fiesta ever westwards.

PART 2

If you missed part 1 last issue, email helen.milbank@grouptravelworld.com for a free PDF



Find out more about the route at northcoast500.com



Darren switches on the Gaelic charm



The notorious Bealach na Bà mountain pass

Great Scot

Does northern Scotland’s North Coast 500 trail deserve its ‘Top 5 Coastal Routes in the World’ billing? **Darren Calpin’s** on a mission to find out

IT FEELS A little odd to be driving in one of the least populated areas of Europe yet still be in the UK. But as I leave the stark Parph peninsula on my epic journey around the North Coast 500, the Gaelic road signs seem to have ever-longer place names and the lilting music on the Gaelic radio station I’d tuned into feels like the most apt movie soundtrack ever.

The lochs on this leg, blessed with hauntingly beautiful names like Loch a’Bhadaidh Daraich

and Loch an Daimh Mor are so close to the road I consider how handy Roger Moore’s old submarine Lotus would be right now.

Before long I reach Assynt, an evocatively monikered region which takes me into a completely different world. Tantalisingly, this world turns out to be something akin to The Lost World, as the highly challenging coastal route takes me up, down and around the type of rocky, exotic-looking

landscape of mist-covered peaks and thickly forested glens you think can only exist in CGI special effects departments.

A STEEP CHALLENGE

Unfortunately, the driving conditions make admiring the views a distraction I simply cannot afford to do. My concentration is focused fully on edging down gradients with eye-watering percentages, performing hill starts on roads that could easily be walls, and reversing along single-track roads with vertiginous drops to accommodate other drivers via passing places.

I take a much-needed break at the quiet-as-the-grave hamlet of Clashnessie to see the eponymous waterfall, just a short trek away. Having the impressive 15m-high falls all to myself does wonders for my shredded nerves, and before long I’m back in the saddle. Refreshed and raring to go, I continue tentatively along the Assynt Coastal Route, stopping finally – and somewhat gratefully – at Achmelvich Bay, a well-out-of-the-way

cove boasting yet another bleach-white beach and yet more screensaver-quality sunsets.

MOODY LOCHS...

Next morning I leave the Assynt Coastal Route and, after a lovely cuppa in the busy fishing harbour of Lochinver, continue the drive south along the A83. Though still a minor A-road, it feels like a veritable autobahn following yesterday’s fun and games, and it isn’t long before I’m gobbling up the miles again, coasting around the whole northern bank of Loch Assynt, looking both moody and grand, today as ever, with lonely Ardvreck Castle standing guard over its eastern end.

The NC500 instructs me to take the A835 at Ledmore and this takes me effortlessly past yet more sublime moorland and craggy peaks to Loch Broom and the tourist-friendly town of Ullapool, where the I refuel and chat to a group of thrilled tourists doing this leg of the NC500 on a coach tour. A short drive south on the modernised stretch of A835

out of Ullapool brings me to Corrieshalloch Gorge, a dramatic mile-long deep box canyon with a swaying Indiana Jones-style suspension bridge offering heroic views of the nearby Falls of Measach, which cascade powerfully into the noisy Droma River some 60m below my undulating feet.

STUNNING SEASCAPES

After spending far too much time taking photos of the gorge, I reluctantly get back in the car. The two cheery talk show hosts on my now favourite Gaelic radio station are having a whale of a time chatting about whatever it is they’re talking about and I notice that, not for the first time on this trip, I have a broad smile on my face too. The only thing that removes this inane grin is the “Oooooooooohhh...” I say aloud as I round the A832’s first coastal bend and find myself looking out over Gruinard Bay.

With Gruinard Island in the foreground, the Summer Isles in the middle distance and the spearhead peaks of Assynt as a backdrop,

it is one of the most stunning seascapes I’ve ever seen. Inevitably, I pull over to take it all in. Aside from the odd passing motorcyclist, I have the whole vista to myself. It is heaven. The west coast of Scotland is indeed a special place.

I decide to take a detour off the NC500 route, convinced the headland west of the bay will provide even better views. After about 15 minutes of driving along, you guessed it, another single-track road, I come to the tiny village of Melon Udrigle. Here, I find not just the sweeping, uninterrupted seascape I was hoping for but also a deserted white beach, kissed by the kind of crystal clear blue water normally seen in the Caribbean or the Med. Sitting by the surf on an upturned rowboat, I realise the smile on my face is as broad as it’s ever been.

GRAND YET SOMBRE

After what seems like an age spent in introspective bliss, I eventually rejoin the NC500 and continue my journey south »



across yet more open moorland. I stop at Loch Ewe, a wide and somewhat eerie inlet that was once the home base and starting point of the Royal Navy's notorious Arctic Convoy operations to supply Britain's Soviet allies in WWII. It is a grand yet rather sombre place.

By early evening I'm motoring along the western bank of Loch Maree, a 12-mile freshwater loch dotted with Caledonian pine-covered islands. It looks like something out of a dream and, before long, I'm on the water in the inflatable kayak I packed in case just such an opportunity arose. Paddling lazily across the perfectly still water, now a faint marmalade colour courtesy of the late evening sunshine, I feel like I've won the lottery of life. Then the rain comes, followed swiftly by the appearance of a hundred-million midges.

Evidently, I should've read the terms and conditions on my lottery ticket more carefully.

HEBRIDEAN VIEWS

Applecross is a noteworthy stop for any tourer driving the NC500 in an anti-clockwise direction. Why? Simple: getting there is

dangerously beautiful and getting away is just plain dangerous. The 'dangerously beautiful' element comes from the fact the winding single-track coast road from Sheildag provides jaw-dropping views of the Inner Hebrides, which are so cinematic it's almost impossible to stop yourself from taking a sneaky peek at Skye, Raasay, et al, even when you're reversing up a 15% gradient to let yet another bungalow-sized camper van pass by.

BACK TO THE BIG COUNTRY

This is mere child's play compared to the epic exit route east – the infamous Bealach Na Bà. This winding single track road climbs (via myriad switchback turns) to a height of some 626m, throwing in gradients of around 20% just for good measure. This is, quite easily, the steepest ascent of any road climb in the UK and as such it's definitely worth putting on fresh underwear before taking it on.

Driving it is a genuinely thrilling experience and I, for one, was very thankful I'd 'earned my driving spurs' on previous legs of the trip. From here, there's only one direction to go – east,

Above: Glorious Farr Bay near Bettyhill

back to Inverness. After a brief stop in the pretty lochside village of Lochcarron (no underwear change needed), the Fiesta is cruising along the A890, past Glen Carron and on to Strath Bran.

With its wide open spaces and greying, forested peaks, this region has a 'Big Country' look and feel to it, like something you'd see in a modern Western movie. I'm surprised and, if I'm honest, slightly unnerved to encounter a speed camera at the village of Garve. Turns out I'm back on a main road now (the A835) and, as such, Inverness is less than an hour's drive away. I stop a little further on to marvel at another site of natural wonder, Rogie Falls; partly because I can't get enough of waterfalls and partly, I deduce, because I don't want this enjoyable, exciting and highly invigorating road trip to end. But, about an hour later, it does, and two hours later, I'm in a cosy Inverness pub, looking at my map, working out how I'll do things differently when I take on the NC500 in a clockwise direction next year... **GTW**