



Take the HIGH ROAD

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



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.



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.