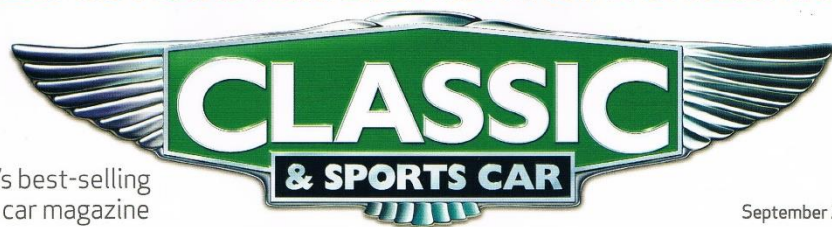


ROLLS-ROYCE ADVENTURE FROM INDIA TO HOLLYWOOD



Britain's best-selling  
classic car magazine

September 2021 f

# GREAT BRITISH DREAM DRIVES

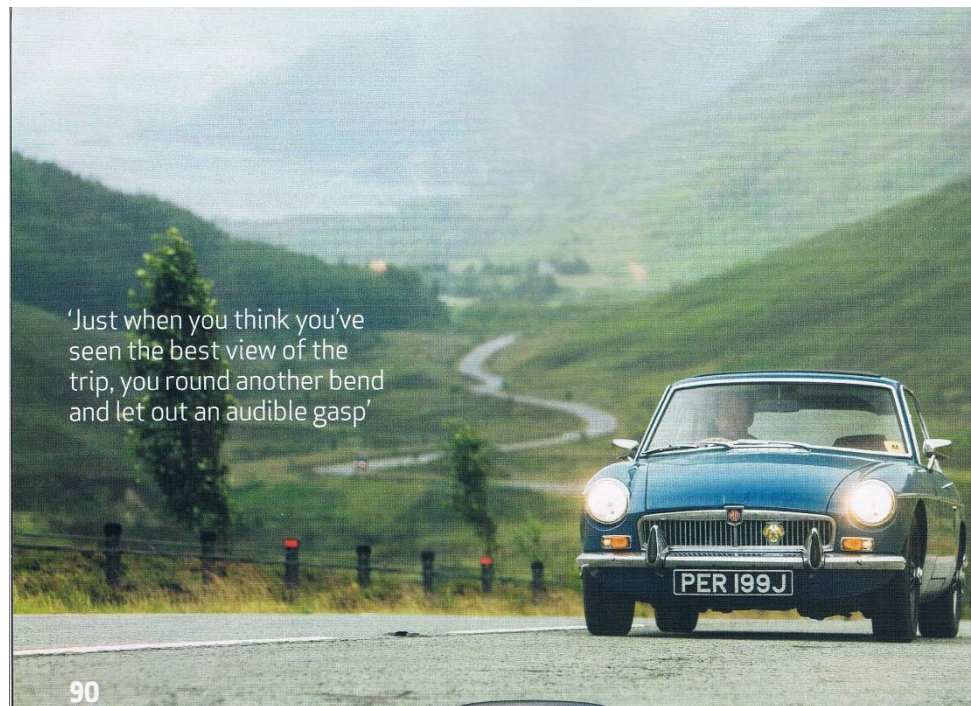
From an MGB GT on the Scottish coast to the Isle of Wight  
**PLUS** 13 brilliant driving routes across the UK



JENSEN S-V8 TAKES  
ON MORGAN AERO 8

HOW AUDI CHANGED  
RALLYING FOR EVER

FIAT'S PRETTIEST  
COUPÉS COMPARE



'Just when you think you've  
seen the best view of the  
trip, you round another bend  
and let out an audible gasp'

90



124



176



150



144



16



116



# DREAM DRIVES ON YOUR DOORSTEP

You don't have to leave the British Isles to enjoy our favourite

WORDS **ED FOSTER**

driving routes, kicking off with the spectacular North Coast 500

PHOTOGRAPHY **LUC LACEY**







From top: not the most northerly point, John O'Groats is the furthest from Land's End; Castle of Mey; planning is advised



Northern Scotland is a land of fairy tales and castles, lochs and glens, distilleries and smokehouses, of winding roads and windswept beaches. In many parts, it's the land that time forgot. Iron Age brochs (roundhouses) litter the landscape, alongside Pictish stones and ruined bothies. The white tips of the waves out to sea and the sheep roaming the hillsides provide the only movement other than the fluttering heather in the summer.

It's changing, though. The roads are busier, the hotels full and the shops buzzing. It's taken 269 years for change to arrive this far north. In March 2015, the Tourism Project Board of Prince Charles' North Highland Initiative launched the North Coast 500, a 516-mile route that takes people from Inverness, round the very top of the country, down the west coast and back to Inverness. It was devised as a way of boosting visitor numbers to this remote part of the world and, on that front, it's been a raving success.

We need to rewind almost 300 years, though, for the background. And forgive me for trying to cram hundreds of years of complex history into a few sentences... The Jacobite uprisings in the 17th and 18th centuries were mostly down to the belief that the Hanoverians, Georges I, II and III, who sat on the British throne from 1714 onwards, should be replaced by the Stuarts. This reached a crescendo in 1746 when Hanoverian government troops, led by the Duke of Cumberland, faced Bonnie Prince Charlie's Jacobites at Culloden, just outside Inverness. It was a disaster for the 5000-strong Jacobite army: they lost 1500 men, the government just 50. Many more would be killed after the battle on the orders of 'The Butcher of Cumberland' (after whom the Cumberland sausage was named, in case you were wondering).

This wasn't a fight of Scotland vs England, as many people believe, but it brought about the desire to extinguish the Highland way of life and consequently many of the problems the British government faced. Following Culloden, clans were banned, along with tartan and bagpipes. Your first offence would have you imprisoned for six months, the second would carry you to life in a penal colony. Soon came the Highland Clearances: large-scale farming was instigated, and crofters were forced out via, among many things, high taxes. The Isle of Skye's population in 1745 was 40,000. It has never recovered, and even today is less than a quarter of that.

More than anything, the Highland Clearances shaped what you see on the NC500 route now: abandoned, derelict crofts and large swathes of empty land where the only sounds are the rushing wind and the exhaust note of the car you're driving. In our case, it's a 1970 MGB GT, one of 375,147 chrome-bumper Mk2 GTs and



A385 to Ullapool is a treat, taking you over Knockan Crag. Previous page: the well-known bridge by Inchnadamph

'The Highland Clearances shaped what you see on the NC500 now: swathes of empty land, where the only sounds are the wind and your car's exhaust'



'Hours behind the wheel of our MGB were spent pondering cars that would suit the roads better. We struggled to think of any'

The west coast has better roads, but the east still offers some stunning vistas. BGT has just 95bhp, but 110lb ft of torque



The flexibility of a Webasto sunroof is ideal for the often mixed weather in the far north – and this one doesn't leak!



The MG is spacious, and the vinyl seats are comfortable even for tall drivers. B-series (below left) averaged 26.9mpg



roadsters built from 1967-'74. It comes courtesy of Graham Watson at hire firm North Coast Classics, based in Dingwall, just a stone's throw from George Cockburn & Son, Scotland's first-ever Champion Haggis Maker.

If you'd rather take your own classic on the NC500, there are some advisories before you do. Many low-slung cars will be prone to damage on the smaller, bumpier single-track lanes, and you will have to tackle the A9, the only road that links Perth with Inverness. With average-speed cameras and countless lorries, motorhomes and caravans, it is widely regarded as the worst road in Scotland. And that takes some effort.

Hours behind the wheel of our little MG were spent wondering what other car would suit the roads better, and we struggled to come up with an answer. Despite the many petrol stations, only a few of which offer high-octane fuel, the NC500 is an adventure in a classic. Tight, twisty mountain roads give way to open A-roads as quickly as the sun can change to thick cloud and driving rain. MGs also seem to be celebrated on the route – five different people came up to

admire it in the Wick Tesco car park. "I was just wondering," asked one gentleman, staring at my 6ft 7in frame, "whether you sit in the back seat to drive it?" He wandered off to get a trolley while fighting off understandable hysterics.

Whether you tackle the route clockwise or anticlockwise, visit Cullooden Moor before you depart: it shaped everything you'll see. Our trip takes us north, across the Black Isle (which is neither black nor an island) to Dornoch Castle for the night, just down the road from a simple stone set in a private garden with the date '1722' on it. The date, in fact, is wrong. In 1727 Janet Horne became the last woman to be burned alive on this spot under suspicion of being a witch. Dementia, a daughter with a deformed hand and a mistake while reciting the Lord's Prayer were enough to condemn her. Even though much of this area's history was written hundreds of years ago, if not thousands, it is still very apparent if you know where to look for it.

We head north past Dunrobin Castle, an extraordinary, 189-room edifice on the shores of the Dornoch Firth. The traffic eases, allowing





Amazingly, Dunrobin Castle near Brora is still in private hands. Pininfarina-tweaked BGT design has aged similarly gracefully

the torquey MG to hit its stride in overdrive top. We aim for Helmsdale, a small fishing village that grew in importance during the Herring Boom at the turn of the 20th century when, in a single year, 2.5m barrels of fish were exported to Germany, Eastern Europe and Russia. A small part of this operation were the professional gutters, mostly consisting of women. The best could gut 50 fish a minute and fill a barrel in 10. Extremely sought-after by the fishermen, they enjoyed travelling the coast as the potential of meeting a husband grew with every port visited.

As you head north, the landscape changes dramatically: arable fields turn to grassland and towns give way to rolling countryside, dotted with derelict bothies and hand-painted signs saying 'Fresh Eggs For Sale'. Some of the rusty corrugated-iron roofs look as if the edges have been attacked by acid, giving a small clue to the winter climate up here. John O'Groats passes as we aim for Dunnet Head, the most northerly

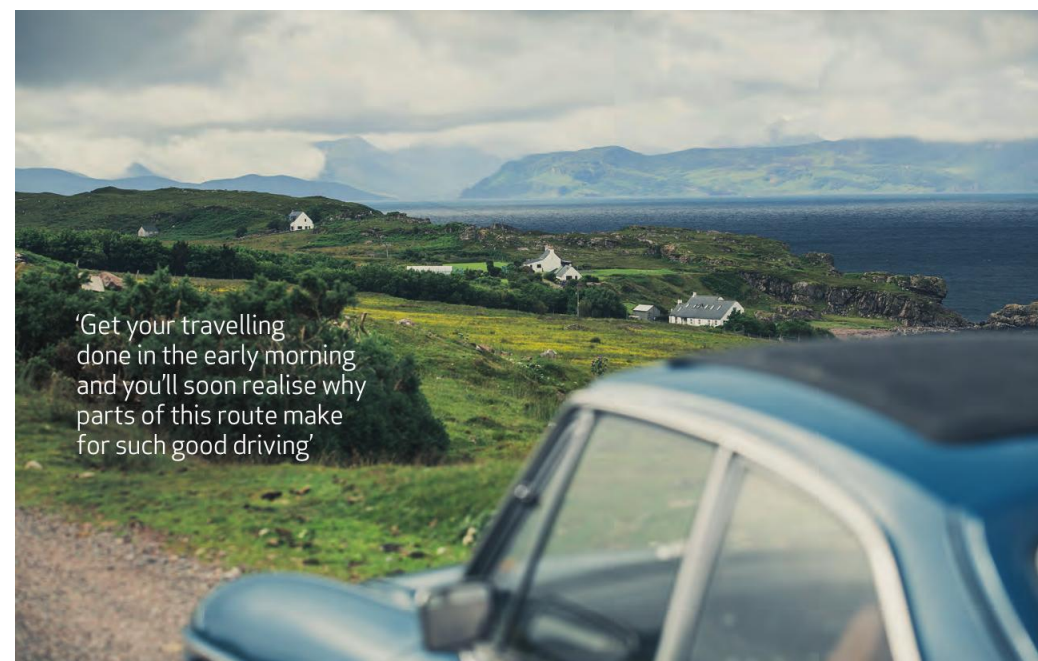
point of the UK mainland, after visiting Brough Bay where we meet Mick, dressed in wellies, overalls and a cap. "I was an engineer at Rolls-Royce in Derby working on the Vulcan bomber," he says, "but I didn't like the idea of working on something that dropped bombs. I moved up here with my family in 1970 and have been a crofter and lighthouse-keeper ever since." Mick has a couple of lobster pots in Brough Bay, which he uses to feed his family. What's the best way to cook them? "Steam them," he replies quickly.

"When the North Coast 500 was launched, my son was on a flight from Boston to New York and in the in-flight magazine he saw a photo of Brough Bay with the Northern Lights above it. That day the world changed." What does he think of the NC500 today? "I don't mind it," he admits, "but I do hate the trains of campervans. They block all of the entrances, don't use the facilities and put little into the local economy."

You cannot write about the NC500 without



Timespan museum recalls Helmsdale's fishing past. Above: in 1986 a Bronze Age cist burial was found below Carn Liath broch



'Get your travelling done in the early morning and you'll soon realise why parts of this route make for such good driving'



The sign at Tornapress greets you following Bealach na Bà. Ness Head (above left) is good for a swim if the tide is right. Right: Dunnet Head Lighthouse



mentioning campervans. Mick recalls driving from Thurso to Durness and seeing only three cars. The day we do that section we see 29 campers, not counting those that litter the car parks and verges. This year is no doubt worse than others, thanks to the rise of the horribly named 'staycation', but they are now a fact of NC500 life. The best advice is to avoid the summer months and get off the actual route to see more of the countryside. Indeed, one of the most often-used views of the NC500 (see p14) is not on the route, but of Glen Docherty, due east of Kinlochewe on the west coast. Queen Victoria passed Loch Maree at the bottom of the valley in 1877 and called it: "Grand and romantic. Hardly anyone ever comes here." How times change.

Just when you think you've seen the best view of the trip, you round another bend and let out an audible gasp. The NC500 is filled with such

moments, a particular favourite being the vista that slaps you in the face as you leave Durness and look up Balnakeil Bay. The cliffs have now made way for white sandy beaches – the type that wouldn't look real if you painted them. Yes, some are crowded, but take time to hike to Sandwood Bay to the west of Durness and you might be the only people there.

Get your travelling done in the early morning and you'll understand why parts of this route make for such good driving. Long straights are followed by even longer corners that you can see all the way through. Brake early, double-declutch for fun down to third, use the MG's accurate rack-and-pinion steering to turn in, get on the power before the apex, flick the overdrive switch and accelerate back up to cruising speed. Repeat again and again, the distinctive four-cylinder bark muffled by the wind noise with the Webasto

sunroof open. Very few places in the UK can offer such a playground for motorists.

Just outside Durness is the Balnakeil Craft Village, an arts and crafts centre that has emerged out of buildings erected in 1950 for the Ministry of Defence as an early warning station during the Cold War. Here we meet German Philipp Tanzer, an artist with a studio, who also has a hairdresser (in the art studio) and a massage therapy business (not in the studio). He moved to the area nine years ago and is a big fan of the NC500. "The problem," he explains, "is that the council doesn't spend more on the services and roads." We did come across a sign that listed the (lack of) local tourist facilities in the area. Some had been taped over, but the ones that weren't included 'toilets, refuse and recycling'.

Tanzer is all for working with the tourists and creating a better place to visit, a view that isn't





'The beauty of the west coast is partly why many people do the route anticlockwise – the views just keep getting better'



From top: Brough Bay pier was built to land materials for Dunnet Head, designed by Robert L. Stevenson's father; 16th-century Ardvreck Castle

necessarily shared by all the local residents who perhaps settled here for the peace and quiet. Just as we're leaving, Tänzer asks: "Would you like to see something you will find nowhere else in the Highlands?" We say a tentative "yes," before he opens a door marked 'private' to show off a corridor of Trump supporter flags. You never know what you'll find on the NC500.

The beauty of the west coast is partly why many people do the route anticlockwise – the views just keep getting better, along with the roads, especially when you finish the single-track section after Durness. Our lunch stop at Lochinver summarises much of the NC500 experience: 'bikers chatting on the side of the road at the petrol station, the car's exhaust ticking quietly as it cools after the latest section of winding road, and a queue for the Spar as locals and tourists get supplies. The NC500 is not the south of France in terms of culinary options, but plan ahead and you'll find some diamonds in the rough such as the Kylesku Hotel. Lockdowns have been particularly hard on the hospitality sector, but at some hotels it seemed as if they had given up, with rubbish gathering around the entrance, plant pots left to weeds and empty restaurants on a Thursday night, despite the rooms all being booked.

From Lochinver we head east past the ruined Ardvreck Castle before the climb to Knockan Crag, the rolling mountains and low-slung cloud continuously drawing our attention from the road disappearing into the distance. The digital COVID sign on entering Ullapool wrenches us back to reality and the modern day. The MG seems to be running even better now that it's had a good few days of motoring and, bar a small top-up of oil, it's been faultless. Before the overnight stop in Gairloch, we pause by the side of the road in Gruinard Bay to look out at Gruinard Island. While the Highland Clearances account for many of the empty islands off the coast of Scotland, Gruinard lies vacant today partly thanks to an anthrax experiment in 1942. Its population of six in 1881 was long gone before the Biology Department at Porton Down chose Gruinard as the preferred spot to test its new biological weapon: the appropriately creepy 'Vollum 14578'. The video of it, declassified many years ago, is a chilling watch on YouTube. To be fair, not as bad an experience as that of the 80 sheep used in this wartime experiment. An anthrax-infected soil sample, presumably from the island, left by angry locals outside Porton Down in 1981 accelerated the decontamination effort and, 48 years after the island was infected, it was once again deemed safe. It was sold back to the original owners for £500, but many believed it was being sold on the open market for that price and offers came flooding in, despite its history.

You may be tempted to cut out some of the many loops of the NC500, but make sure you tackle the unnamed road that links Shieldaig with Fearnmore, Callakille and, eventually, Applecross. Starting in the trees, you wonder if it's just another single-track road to negotiate, but you soon climb on to the coastal hills and feel as if you've reached the end of the earth, dappled sunlight hitting the Isle of Raasay in the distance. Arriving in Applecross, the crowded pub and car

## LOCAL KNOWLEDGE

**WHERE TO STAY** There are more than 1000 options on the 516-mile route, with your choice largely depending on how many miles you want to cover each day. At the luxury end there's Kylesku Hotel, The Torridon, Links House at Royal Dornoch, Rua Reidh Lighthouse, Shieldaig Lodge, The Granary Lodge and Mackay's Rooms. We visited Dornoch Castle Hotel, Mackays in Wick and The Old Inn, Gairloch

**WHERE TO EAT** As with the accommodation, there is an enormous choice, but the following have come highly recommended: Lochinver Larder, Applecross Inn, The Whistle Stop Café in Torridon, The Midge Bite, the Walled Garden or Potting Shed in Applecross, Kinlochewe Filling Station and The Ceilidh Place. Do also stop at Cocoa Mountain in Balnakeil, which has excellent chocolates and proper coffee

**PITSTOPS** The best chances of finding high-octane fuel are at the Tesco Extra in Inverness, the Jet in Ullapool, the station in Contin and the Tesco in Wick



The road from Braemore to Gairloch is a particular favourite, especially when driven in the early morning or late evening

park seem totally out of place. From there, it's another fantastic climb to the top of Bealach na Bà (Pass of the Cattle), and back down. The vistas here are spectacular... At least we've been told they are. As we climb into the clouds, we can't see further than 2m in front of us until we arrive at Tornapress. It's in a passing place on this road that a man, wearing leather driving gloves, wafts past in his Jaguar XF, shortly before a topless male runner gives me a wave for waiting.

The NC500 is a busy route shared by many people. It can be frustrating, but above all it's an adventure. Scribbles on a paper map, tricky roads to navigate, place names like something from a Tolkien novel, history swirling around you and stops for fuel when you don't really need any, just in case you don't see another station for a while. Make sure you leave plenty of time for the trip – five to 10 days if possible – and get up

early to make the most of the quiet roads and stunning views. The arrival back in Inverness will fill you with the satisfaction of a mission completed, and sadness that the road ends here.

The Highland Clearances might have changed the course of Scottish history for ever, but you get the impression that the launch of the NC500 in 2015 will also mark a turning point in this corner of the world.

**Thanks to North Coast Classics, which also offers a 1978 MGB, a '64 Volvo Amazon and a '73 Volvo 1800ES, with prices from £169 for a day including fully comprehensive insurance (see north-coast-classics.co.uk); Mackays (mackayshotel.co.uk); Dornoch Castle Hotel (dornochcastlehotel.com); The Old Inn (theoldinn.net). The North Coast 500 (northcoast500.com) will help you plan your trip, and it's also worth buying the NC500 Rough Guide**