

MACFAB!

MIDGET, A, C, F AND B DRIVE THE NORTH COAST 500

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Dunbeath Heritage Centre

The North Coast (NC) 500 has been around as a concept for a couple of years. It's part of the North Highland Initiative (NHI) to encourage visitors to spend more time (*and money*) in the top end of Scotland rather than just rush up and down the road to John O' Groats. It's marketed as "Scotland's *answer* to Route 66, the new scenic route showcasing the fairy tale castles, beaches and ruins." "*Answer*" is a well-chosen word as the original US Route 66 was linear and nearly 2500 miles long whereas NC 500 is circular and a tad over 500 miles – so quite different really. And we are still waiting for the song although I anticipate something in Gaelic before too long. The official NC500 route is Inverness Castle to Inverness Castle via the West, North and East coasts. NHI recommend taking 5 or more days – this is not about completing the journey as quickly as

possible but all about taking your time, enjoying outstanding scenery and visiting the attractions. NHI has provided a comprehensive website (and App) at www.northcoast500.com to aid planning. Usefully the App includes where to buy petrol.

Several members of the Highland MG Owners' Club decided last year to drive the route in early May 2016 and this article gives our impressions and hopefully some useful advice to fellow MG owners interested in giving it a go.



First, the route does live up to the hype; there are fantastic views, castles and interesting places en-route. This is our home turf so most of us had driven these roads before in sections (to paraphrase Eric we'd driven all the right roads but not necessarily in the right order). We decided to drive it in 4 days/3 nights and to have longer drives on Days 1 & 4 which were on the faster, more familiar roads and to take our time on Days 2 & 3. We also decided to go round anti-clockwise as this was more convenient for members starting from Skye

and Latheron (early on we'd decided not to fuss about following the precise route). Four cars met at Tore Services on the Black Isle and headed northwards on the A9 for lunch and a visit to the Dunbeath Heritage Centre where the 5th car rendezvoused having driven south from Latheron. The A9 is quite a busy road until you pass Invergordon but still provides stunning coastal views. On the way to Dunbeath the 4 of us popped-in to Dunrobin Castle for a photo opportunity – as you can see the weather was showery.



Dunrobin in the damp

After lunch we carried on via a stop in Wick and John O'Groats to our first night in Thurso where we were made very welcome at the Park Hotel.



Guess where?!

Day 2 was the leg along the North coast to Drumbeg via Durness. Passing Dounreay the road became single track for most of the rest of the leg. It's a dramatic coast with views northwards to Orkney and as we headed westwards, there was a good distant view of the light house at Cape Wrath. You need to plan your refreshment breaks and fuel stops carefully; we stopped for lunch at the busy Smoo Cave Inn in Durness and those feeling-up to the steps visited the cave of course.



Smoo Cave

We turned the corner and headed southwards before turning west along probably the most demanding bit of single track road, especially as there was heavy rain, to our accommodation for the night, the Drumbeg Hotel, where we had taken 5 of the 6 rooms. The Drumbeg Hotel is how I remember Highland Hotels in the 1970s. There was no wifi and no cell coverage – the modern equivalent to the red phone box in Local Hero was a climb to the local view point for that one bar of cell; nevertheless, we were made very welcome and fed and watered well.



Wet MGs at Drumbeg

The weather forecast for day 3 was the worst and it was certainly windy but it remained largely dry. Our MGC GT driver suggested that we diverted off the recommended route at Lochinver so that we could take in Stac Pollaidh. After yet more stunning scenery we arrived below the Stac.



Stac Pollaidh



Ava & Mavis enjoy the view.

We continued via lunch at Ullapool, then Loch Ewe and Gairloch (coffee in the excellent Old Inn) before the run along Loch Maree to our last night's accommodation at the Kinlochewe Hotel. Andrew & Gail made us very welcome – Andrew has a Mk2 Midget. We had a great dinner before some serious research in to single malts.

The sun was out for our last day as we headed along the beautiful Glen Torridon.



Beinn Eighe



Upper Loch Torridon

We arrived quite early at the Walled Garden in Applecross for lunch but again they were very accommodating. Suitable fortified we tackled the long climb then descent to Tornapress. No one over heated, probably helped by 30 mph winds.



MGA follows MGC down Beallach na Bà

Our last stop as 5 was at Lochcarron; the MGC GT detached to make its way to Portree, the MGB GT headed off to Glencoe, the Midget headed to Strathpeffer while the MGA and MGF made their ways home via Tore.

So would we recommend the NC500? Yes, we would! In fact we're seriously planning to do it again next year but in a clockwise direction and taking at least one more day so that we can visit Cape Wrath (a foot passenger ferry/mini bus ride). We'd also go slightly later in the month (May) so that the Castle of Mey would be open to visit. About 100 to 120 miles driving per day would be our recommendation which gives plenty of time to stop and stare. You need to plan and book your accommodation well in advance, especially if in a group. However, none of the hotels we used had an issue with single night occupancy. Petrol availability was not a problem, even for the MGC GT. The main recommendation though would be 'take your time'.



Take our time!

Single Track Roads

The Highway Code says:

Rule 155

Single-track roads. These are only wide enough for one vehicle. They may have special passing places. If you see a vehicle coming towards you, or the driver behind wants to overtake, pull into a passing place on your left, or wait opposite a passing place on your right. Give way to vehicles coming uphill whenever you can. If necessary, reverse until you reach a passing place to let the other vehicle pass. Slow down when passing pedestrians, cyclists and horse riders.

Rule 156

Do not park in passing places.

To which I would add:

Do not travel in close convoy – aim to have at least one vacant passing place between you and the vehicle in front.

Don't play chicken with the locals!