

North Coast 500...

I love it when a plan comes together!

Although we didn't drive in Black GMC vans with Red striping for a narrow escape from Colonel Decker, looking back on the North Coast 500 road trip we did last June this is a phrase that comes to mind. The plan was shaped in April 2018 actually. After the Jim Clark memorial was announced, I decided to visit the event no matter what since Jim Clark is one of my racing heroes. Talking about it with some Lotus Club Holland people, they asked me to announce it to try to get more Dutch Lotus owners involved. This was the start of the first road trip I organised for a group: the Jim Clark Memorial Tour 2018 during which we also visited the Midlands and Hethel. We met quite a few UK Lotus owners then and all in all organising this tour and especially driving it was one of the best things I had done. Ever. Until June 2019.

When the Jim Clark Memorial Tour was done and the ferry entered Hook of Holland, someone muttered 'North Coast 500' and finished that sentence with 'maybe next year?'. To be honest, I wasn't completely sure about this tour; I didn't know anything about it and hey, we had just seen Scotland hadn't we? But that approach soon changed. Once you start reading about the NC500 and have seen clips on YouTube you just want to go there. Up to now, I haven't read a single negative thing about this road trip from people who have been there, who have experienced it. Except for the weather maybe. And for camper vans and too many people on the roads in peak season. But about the driving, the roads, the magic scenery, the people you meet along the way, the castles and estates, the food, the B&B's, no complaints whatsoever. And they are right. It's all incredibly great and wonderful. It really is a road trip to drivers heaven.

Not to raise false expectations, this article won't transfer the experience of driving the NC500 to the reader. It won't come close at all. It's merely meant to push them who have thought about driving it, but who have never put their money where their mouth is. Here you can read a bit about planning it, driving it, see things, do things. But most of all, let the photos do the talking. When questions pop up after reading, for instance about the planning, satnav files, first hand experience about B&B's, anything really, just sent me an email (info@bendsandcurves.com) or a text message (+31628662491). Or keep an eye on my website, (www.bendsandcurves.com) for more road trips will be planned and I'd like to welcome UK drivers for sure! Go drive it, life is too short to make plans and not execute them!

When to start planning your NC500 road trip?

Depending on if you travel alone or in a group, in the latter case it might be wise to start planning early. The bigger the group, the earlier the booking of B&B's should start. Don't expect to find hotel chains along the way, except maybe for Inverness. Most accommodation is B&B or pub-related. Which means that 5-10 rooms is quite common. And not all have a wide choice of twin rooms so if you and your co-driver are friends but not that familiar, you better not waste time. We were with 8 cars/10 people and I started booking accommodations a few weeks before Christmas 2018, so about six months before D-Day. Once all hotels and rooms are confirmed, the foundation of the tour has been laid.

Clockwise or anti clockwise?

Planning accommodation can only be done after you've decided to go clockwise or anti-clockwise. Because the NC500 starts and ends in Inverness, the choice is up to you. I chose to drive it anti-clockwise. This because, after reading all kinds of travel reports, it seemed that the Eastern and North Eastern part of this roundtrip are the least attractive. Which is meant as a relative comparison to the North Western and Western parts. With road tripping, I like the experience to grow to a climax instead of starting with the climax. This choice was wise I think. The Eastern and North Eastern part are more like 'common' great driving roads while the other side is epic, awesome and what not.

How many days?

Driving 500 miles can be done in a day. If you don't care for the scenery and the full experience, but just want to go for fast driving, I suppose the NC500 can be done in a day. But you would be mad to do so, I think. After that day the only thought that will come to mind is 'what the hell has just happened' and that's it. So be wise and take at least five days to drive these 500 miles of beauty. About 100 miles a day is comfortable driving and it gives the opportunity to explore a village or two, do some hiking and so on. Of course, the more extracurricular activities you want to do, the more days you will need.

In our road trip we've used five days to drive the NC500 and I can assure you that we did see some great things besides the road and sheep from behind the windshield. Just read on. Coincidentally, these five days sum up the weekdays when others are working. So by starting on Monday (just don't get caught in Inverness traffic) and finishing on Friday you could avoid some weekend travellers with camper vans.

Our itinerary from day to day - the short short version

For writing down a full day to day report I should have asked Jane to clear half of Club Lotus News for this article - I think she would have nodded 'no'. And besides that, I think it wouldn't make an interesting read. It is impossible to translate the experience of NC500 drivers happiness to words. So for an impression of our itinerary, have a look at the map in this article. While looking at it you will see that we actually have skipped Inverness. Maybe this is not the way to do it, but in my defense we had been driving a long way from Newcastle before Day 1 started and we didn't feel like ending up in a traffic jam in Inverness. So we started Day 1 in Evanton ('A' paddle in map) which is near the NC500 route. Day 1 also marked the start of five consecutive days of dry and sometimes even sunny weather! Which is quite remarkable for early June in Scotland we were told. Of course this helped the NC500 road trip with being epic.

So Day 1 ended in John O'Groats ('B' paddle in map), about 110 miles from Evanton. Probably a rough and not particularly pretty area when it rains and storms. But with a clear sky and a setting sun and no wind, this place can be really charming.

On Day 2 we drove about 120 miles from John O'Groats to Rhiconich ('C' paddle in map). From the second part of this leg and onwards the unrivaled beauty of the Scottish Highlands starts showing. And it marks the start of driving single track roads. This adds up to the driving fun; driving with 8 cars on single track roads is no problem since the Scottish road department has built ample passing places. It's just that some drivers don't understand how to use them. Nevertheless, these single track roads should be taken into account when planning this road trip for a group. I think 8-10 cars is about the maximum size of a group to avoid annoyance with other drivers.

On Day 3 we drove to Ullapool ('D' paddle in map, a bit over 90 miles drive).

But not before we had visited the beach at Oldshoremore and a wonderful detour to the ferry to Handa Island. Ullapool is a very nice village



...Planning A Road Trip To Drivers Heaven



spread out across the hills next to one of many many bays and firths at the west coast. It helps you remind that you're not alone out there, it's by far the most lively place apart from Inverness.

On day 4 (120 miles) we reached the climax of the NC500, in my opinion. Better driving roads, scenery and views are hard to find. Applecross ('E' paddle in map) was the destination. Not so much to do there, but nevertheless it was one of the most memorable places to be at. To know why, you have to go there. Hopefully you can enjoy the beautiful sunset with a beer and a great meal in the Applecross Inn like we did. Unforgettable.

Our last day - of the NC500 that is - lead us back to the East Highlands (110 miles). We passed Bealach Na Ba early morning which is the best time of day to do so. We were alone and that is a magical experience. If you haven't heard about Bealach Na Ba, Google it and read some reviews about this road. After this mountain pass the route brings you back down to earth - literally - and is easy to drive so you have some time to reflect on what you've seen so far. This makes clear that the South Eastern part is not the best part of the tour when it comes to driving and scenery. We ended up in Fortrose ('F' paddle in map), tried to spot dolphins (but we didn't) and finished the day with a whisky flight in The Anderson. That helped to overcome a feeling of sadness for finishing this road trip to drivers heaven.

Some tips

Many books and websites with tips about the NC500 are available. NC500 even has its own website (<https://www.northcoast500.com/>). After driving it, each person will experience his or her own highlights. For me, definite highlights in no particular order, apart from the never ending winding roads, the most obvious highlights and spectacular views on firths and seas, are:

- A detour from Fortrose to Bonar Bridge (white pin on the map), with a better drive than the original NC500 and with an amazing view on Dornoch Firth. Rays of sunlight on the water made the view super special.

- Dunbeath Castle (green pin on the map). A privately owned castle, not open to public, situated on a cliff with one of the most beautiful driveways imaginable. Here we had a wonderful lunch and we visited the beautiful gardens too (which are open to public after making an appointment). And since the petrolhead owner of the castle liked the fact that a group of Lotus cars were visiting, he showed us around the castle himself (which is not possible to book). An unforgettable experience it was.

- Strathnaver museum in Bettyhill (light blue pin on the map). Not the best or most spectacular museum one can visit. But a very small museum in the middle of nowhere run by volunteers to keep the heritage of this part of the Highlands and the history of the Highland Clearings alive, deserves a spot on this list.

- Oldshoremore beach (purple pin on the map). This sandy beach in one of many bays is the perfect spot for an early morning walk.

- Route to Handa Island ferry (yellow pin on the map). We didn't get the chance to visit Handa Island because we arrived on Sunday - which is no-ferry-day. But the route to the ferry, which isn't part of the NC500, is truly amazing. A must drive.

- Route from Drumbeg to Stoer (dark blue pin on the map). It's like driving in the Garden of Eden. Narrow roads, small lakes, beautiful colours. If amazing, unrivaled sceneries are not for you, skip it.

And finally, a bonus!

The sadness that filled our hearts after saying goodbye to the Highlands was temporarily. Which was not just because of the whisky flight. Before driving back home I had planned an extra 200+ miles driving day to meet our Scottish Lotus friends at their monthly meeting in Bo'ness. To get there, we drove the long way round, using the



Cairngorms Old Military Road after a very short stop at Loch Ness. Very different from the Highlands - on this day we had rain all day for instance - but boy, what a hidden gem this road is! A narrower road than this road is not possible I think, which is no problem because this road was almost free from traffic.

Just as the NC500, this driving day was unforgettable. Not in the least because of meeting Andrew Laing, Jim Love, Jim Grant and many other Lotus owners in the Bo'ness Motor Museum. Andrew, Jim Love and others drove up North first to meet us at Dalmunzie Castle Hotel; while the maintenance condition of the road to this remote location was quite 'overdue' only Jim and his co-driver had lunch with us at the hotel. After finishing that they drove back with us to the Bo'ness Motor Museum. We got the grand tour in the museum and then both Jims took us to the Bo'ness hill climb course at Kinneil Estate. We walked the track while Jim Grant told us about his own experience with driving the hill climb, about the history of the hill climb, the Bo'ness Revival and so on. After that we visited the Kelpies in Falkirk with Jim Love. What an impressive piece of art these horses are, especially at night. So all in all, the Scottish Lotus owners lived up to the Scottish fame of hospitality and kindness.

The next day was the last day of this unforgettable road trip. We used the morning to drive scenic roads in a somewhat familiar area: the Border region. After lunch in Duns, where we also had a sneak peek at the new Jim Clark Motorsport Museum - the doors stayed closed while workers were finishing the museum for the grand opening - we took the fast lane to Newcastle. One thing's for sure; the memories of this fabulous road trip will never fade!

PS: we've visited so many wonderful places to eat and to stay in Scotland. For me it's a 'trademark' for road trips I organise, because I think road trips are not just about driving. A good road trip in my opinion is a mixture of perfect roads for drivers, magic sceneries, splendid locations for stops and great food and conversation. You can receive information about these locations if you'd like that. Still, I want to point out a very special one: Glentruim Estate in Newtonmore. We had tea in the castle part of the estate while driving from Newcastle to Evanton and it was overwhelming. First of all the arrival is grand. We were welcomed ever so friendly and the tea was ... well royal doesn't do justice to it. It's absolutely worth a visit for lunch, tea or dinner or to have a wedding if you'd like. **Jan Blom**

