

# On the road again

Iain Duff camped his way round the North Coast 500, Scotland's spectacular coastal route. Here is Part Two of his tour, from Durness to Inverness

One of the many joys of the North Coast 500 is stumbling across something totally unexpected. More than 300 miles into our road trip, the last thing I would have imagined discovering was a memorial to John Lennon. But there it was, in the remote village of Durness, right on the very northern tip of Scotland. Three slabs of granite inscribed with the lyrics of the Beatles' song *In My Life*, set in a beautifully landscaped garden.

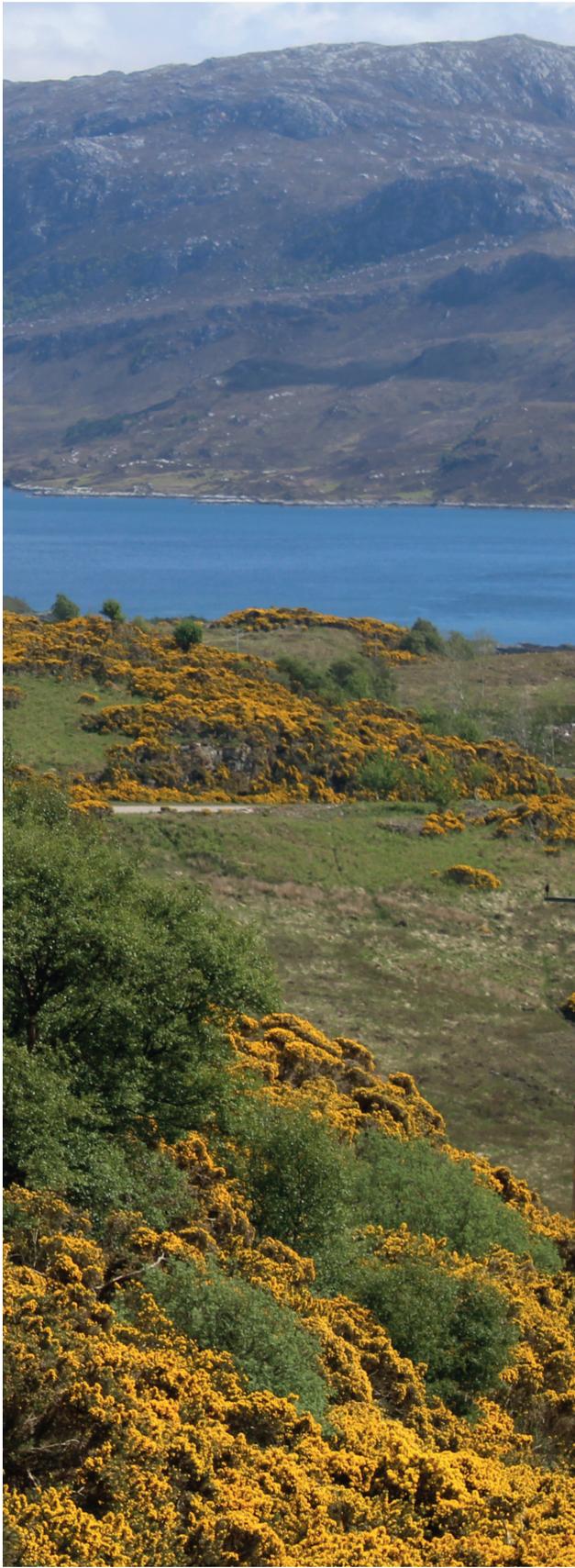
It turns out that Durness was an area that Lennon loved, having spent many childhood

holidays in the village. Every year, he would travel north from Liverpool by bus and spend three weeks at a croft owned by relatives. Those idyllic holidays are said to be the inspiration for *In My Life* and the Beatle returned to the area in the late 60s with his own son Julian and his wife Yoko Ono. And it's easy to see why this young Liverpool lad would have been smitten by the place; with its wide, open spaces and vast beaches it would have been so much different to the urban world he was used to.

More than 60 years later, Durness is still a place to escape to. The campsite sits on the edge of a

## BEST VIEWS

- 1 BEALACH NA BA
- 2 CORRIESHALLOCH GORGE
- 3 DRUMBEG VIEWPOINT



cliff with incredible views out to sea and you can sit for hours gazing at the waves dancing on the shore. Alternatively, you can venture further afield and set about exploring the area. Either way, you can put all the stresses and strains of daily life out your mind and recharge. And that is what we loved most about this whole trip. For a few days, we were able to forget about work, bills and all those niggling jobs that need done around the house, and just enjoy living and breathing, in one of the most beautiful places on the planet. Add in some wonderful camping and it doesn't get much better than that.



Bealach na Ba



Corrieshalloch Gorge



Drumbeg



Above: The editor reaches the limit (again)

Loch Torridon



## DAY 4: DURNESS TO DUNBEATH

For the first (and last) time on the trip, we wake up to discover the weather is overcast and a bit damp. However, it takes more than a little drizzle to stop me frying up a hearty breakfast of sausage and black pudding rolls outside our trusty Outwell Birdland tent. I'm going to take a moment here to mention how much I love this tent. It's so easy to pitch and is the perfect size for weekends away with the kids or for couples on touring holidays. We've taken it all over the country, and never had a bad experience. Even when the elastic shock cord in one of the poles snapped on one trip, the tent still went up no problem (I probably should get round to repairing that one day though!).

After breakfast we pay a quick visit to the quirkily-named Smoo Cave on the outskirts of the village. This natural sea cave is accessible for free 365 days a year, with a walkway leading from the impressive entrance into the waterfall chamber. Guided tours into the cave operate seven days a week, between April and September. Unfortunately we have to set off before the first tour of the day, so miss out on the full experience.

The route out of Durness takes us along the mostly single-track road that goes around Loch Eriboll. This is one of the least populated areas in the UK, a true wilderness that is largely unspoilt by modern life. Once we have rounded the loch at its southernmost point, we head north west along the opposite coast, the road climbing to give us a view over Ard Neackie, a mound of land

### STAY AT

#### SANGO SANDS

Sango Bay, Durness,  
Sutherland IV27 4PZ  
01971 511726/07838381065  
[www.sangosands.com](http://www.sangosands.com)

A brilliant site, right on the edge of Sango Sands beach in Durness. Fifty eight electric hook up points, some hard standing and some on grass. Lots of space for tents. Toilet block, showers, campers' kitchen, dishwashing, laundry. On site bar and restaurant.

#### INVER CARAVAN PARK

Houstry Road, Dunbeath,  
Caithness KW6 6EH  
01593 731441

[www.inver-caravan-park.co.uk](http://www.inver-caravan-park.co.uk)  
A small but perfectly formed site that is just off the A9 but is surrounded by glorious countryside and enjoys views to the sea. The facilities block was recently upgraded and now has double glazing and underfloor heating throughout. There are three private shower rooms, including one suitable for disabled visitors. In the laundry room, you'll find a washing machine, a sink for hand washing clothes and an iron and ironing board. There's no tumble drier but given the amount of wind, drying clothes on the washing line is not a problem!



Sango Sands



Lennon Memorial



John o' Groats



Breakfast time

that is only linked to the shore by a thin strip of sand and shingle. This was once home to a ferry which crossed the loch to an inn, now gone, on the western shore. The ferry stopped in the 1890s but the ferry house, built in 1831, is still standing, although in an increasingly derelict state. Ard Neackie also has four large lime kilns built in 1870.

From here we pass through Tongue and join the A836, which winds along the top of Scotland, through Dounreay (home of the nuclear power station) and Thurso, towards the most northerly point on the mainland. And as everyone knows, that's John o' Groats, right? Well, no, actually, it's not. That title goes to Dunnet Head, a peninsula about 12 miles to the east of the better known village. I don't know how John o' Groats managed to persuade everyone that it is the UK's northernmost destination, but it certainly has pulled out all the stops to cater for the masses of tourists who descend on the village as a result. Unfortunately they decided to appeal to the lowest common denominator, meaning you're treated to tacky gift shops, overpriced tearooms and concreted coach parks. Dunnet Head, on the other hand, has nothing more to offer than an unmanned lighthouse, an RSPB hut and some of the most fantastic views you'll ever see. It's an odd but thrilling feeling to know that you're standing further north than anyone else on the



mainland. And it's certainly a more rewarding experience than being at John o' Groats, which feels like a motorway service station transplanted onto the coast.

After posing for the obligatory signpost photograph and lunching at one of John o' Groats' less-naff eating establishments, we head south along the east coast towards this evening's camping stop at Dunbeath. The weather is glorious and compared to what we've been used to over the last few days, driving here is a luxury. There are even white lines down the middle of the road! Inver Caravan park is a tiny, but very well-appointed, site just off the A9 and close to the sea. It's surrounded by beautiful countryside and has views to the sea, and although a tad windswept, makes for a great stopover. There's a pub serving food a few minutes' walk away but we decide to drive to Helmsdale, a bit further down the coast.

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Smoo Cave

Helmsdale



## DAY 5: DUNBEATH TO INVERNESS

It's our last day but there's lots still to see, so we set off early. Around 10 miles from Dunbeath we pull over to visit the abandoned village of Badbea. Perched on steep slopes above the sea, the village was created in the 18th Century by families evicted from their homes to make way for sheep farms, as part of the Highland Clearances. To say life on this storm-lashed outpost was tough is something of an understatement. By 1911 the final resident had left, and today, all that remains is a few ruins of cottages and a memorial to the former inhabitants. It was a fascinating place to visit, though, and well worth the 15 minute yomp over the moorland to reach it. The contrast

between Badbea and our next stop couldn't have been greater. After a glorious drive down the east coast, we pull in to Dunrobin Castle, the family seat of the Earl of Sutherland. The imposing building, which dates back over seven centuries, stands on a hill and towers over the formal gardens below like a fairytale castle. We take the tour, which provides a fascinating insight into the history of a family that was once part of Scotland's ruling elite. The castle museum, filled with a huge collection of hunting trophies and other items plundered by family members during their exploits around the world, is just as interesting but certainly not for the faint-hearted. Back on the road and we continue south towards Inverness. At Tain, we leave the main



Inver Campsite

## EATING

### STOREHOUSE

John o' Groats, Caithness KW1 4YR  
0844 384 3166 | [www.naturalretreats.com](http://www.naturalretreats.com)  
John o' Groats is a bit grim in general and isn't renowned for fine dining, but this is a cut above the other eating options in the village. A modern, clean café/diner that offers Starbucks coffee, a decent range of cakes and a selection of tasty pizzas and sandwiches. Not surprisingly for a tourist trap like this, it's a bit pricey and the menu is limited but it's by far the best option in the vicinity.

### LA MIRAGE

7-9 Dunrobin Street, Helmsdale, Sutherland KW8 6JA  
01431 821615 | [www.lamirage.org](http://www.lamirage.org)  
Quirky is probably the best way to describe La Mirage, which claims to be "the North's premier restaurant". The décor was apparently inspired by the original owner's good friend, Dame Barbara Cartland, so you get the idea. Interior design apart, this restaurant is worth a visit for the huge portions of fish and chips, not to mention the chance of spotting a celebrity or two. Over the years famous names like Colin Jackson, Michael Portillo, Victoria Wood, Nick Hancock, Paul Young and Edwyn Collins (who lives nearby) have all dined here.

### BISTRO BY THE SEA

Main Street, Portmahomack, near Tain, Ross-shire IV20 1YS  
01862 870169 | [www.caledonian-house.co.uk](http://www.caledonian-house.co.uk)  
A cosy, friendly restaurant right on the front of a pretty little seaside village. Open Thursdays to Sundays, the food is fresh, imaginative and beautifully cooked. The popularity of this place might mean you have to wait a while for your lunch, but it's worth the wait and if you can get a window seat, the setting overlooking the Dornoch Firth couldn't be better.

Helmsdale



What you looking at?



Imposing Dunrobin Castle



route and head out towards the little seaside village of Portmahomack. As well as having the most charming name of anywhere we visited, it also has a couple of good bistros. We have lunch at one of them and enjoy a bracing walk along the beach, before getting back behind the wheel and rejoining the main road. Inverness Castle, where the North Coast 500 officially ends, is only 40 miles away and within an hour we reach our destination. It has been an unforgettable adventure.



Inver campsite



Caravan-free roads!

Single-track driving



## SINGLE TRACK DRIVING

Long stretches of the North Coast 500 are single-track roads and these require certain skills to negotiate. Here's some top tips for safe driving.

### 1 CONCENTRATE

Single track roads tend to be winding as well as narrow, so you never know what might be coming round a blind corner. Stay alert the whole time and work on the assumption that another vehicle could be literally around the corner. And don't be distracted by the scenery!

### 2 WATCH YOUR SPEED

Tempting as it is to put the foot down on these quiet roads, driving too fast means you might not be able to stop in time when you encounter another car, especially if they're also going too fast.

### 3 BE ASSERTIVE

We're not suggesting you should be aggressive, but if you are too timid on these roads then you could end up being stuck for ages letting cars pass you. And if there are other cars behind you, that will not make you popular.

### 4 TIME IT RIGHT

Adjust your speed so you meet approaching cars at a passing place without either of you having to stop.

### 5 KEEP TO THE LEFT

Even on a single-track road, driving towards the left is the best way to avoid a head-on collision. Also, if the passing place is on the right, stop on the left of the road rather than pulling across to the other side.

### 6 DON'T PARK IN PASSING PLACES

It doesn't matter how amazing the view is or how desperate you are for a wee, stopping in a passing place is NOT the done thing.

### 7 LOOK OUT FOR OTHER ROAD USERS

It's not just cars and lorries you have to worry about. Cyclists, pedestrians and horse riders use roads like these and deserve special attention. And there's a good chance you'll encounter sheep, cattle or wildlife at some point on your travels. If you have to, just stop and let them pass.

### 8 BE READY TO REVERSE

If you reach a Mexican stand-off with another car, something's got to give and that means one of you reversing to the nearest passing place. Usually the person closest to a passing place makes the move.

### 9 LOOK BEHIND YOU

Keep an eye on your mirrors and if you notice someone coming up fast behind you, try to let them past at the next passing place.

### 10 KEEP CALM

Driving on single track roads can be stressful if you let it, but if you stay relaxed, concentrate and think ahead, you should be fine. And if you get stuck behind a slow moving caravan or tractor, just chill out and enjoy the views.