



Bealach na Ba pass to Applecross

THE NORTH COAST 500: By Graham Read

Scotland's Route 66

America's iconic Route 66 has long established a place in road trip folklore, but Scotland's increasingly popular new alternative, known as the North Coast 500, is marketed as a 'must do' bucket list journey.



Time to head north in a Mazda CX-5 to find out if all the hype about the route is justified and to assess how good this Japanese manufacturer's large SUV really is.

The stylish but rugged CX-5 seemed like a logical choice for a road trip into some of the most remote areas of the UK. First introduced by Mazda back in 2012, it has been kept up to date through subsequent revisions and the version tested was the mid-range 2.2d SE-L Lux Nav. The car boasts an attractive exterior and is instantly recognisable as a Mazda through its distinctive frontage, whilst the interior and boot offer plenty of space. The CX-5 has a decent level of standard equipment for its price and its Skyactiv technology makes it frugal in its fuel use with low emissions.

The circular North Coast 500 itinerary, which is 516 miles in length, starts and finishes in Inverness and can be undertaken in either a clockwise or anti-clockwise direction. You can take as long as you like to travel round it, but a minimum of four days is recommended. The clockwise route

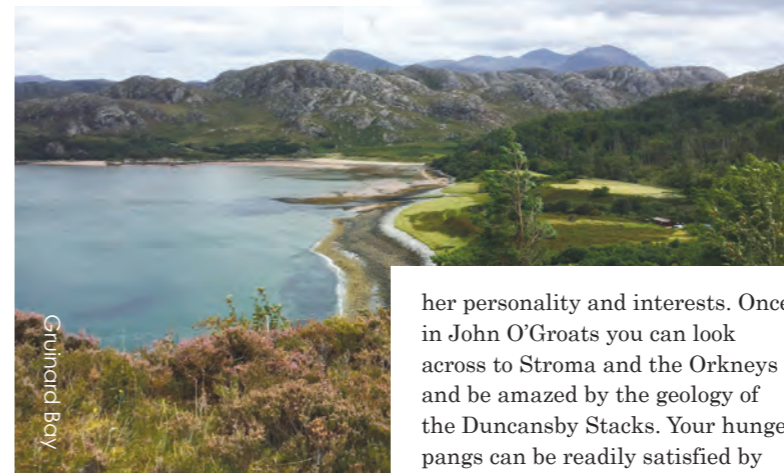
initially takes you west through attractive countryside until you reach Strathcarron, where it is worth making a short detour to stretch your legs around the carefully maintained Attadale Gardens.

Next up is the challenge of driving over Bealach na Bar (Gaelic for pass of the cattle), a dramatic single track road over the peaks of the Applecross peninsula down to the west coast. It is almost Alpine-like with some steep gradients and hairpin bends, but there are plenty of passing places. The weather gods threw everything at us as we made a wet and misty ascent, but just past the summit we were suddenly blessed with sun and clear skies and the views across to the Isles of Raasay and Skye were breathtaking.

From Applecross skirt the coastline via Fearnmore to picturesque Shildaig, a great place to pause and take in the splendour of the scenery. Time then to head past Loch Maree to Gairloch for an overnight stay. Numerous accommodation and food options are available and the Old Inn certainly

offers a warm Highland welcome and excellent food and service in attractive surroundings.

Early the next day drive to nearby Loch Ewe, making sure you visit the Isle of Ewe Smokehouse near Aultbea to pick up a few culinary treats. You will be overwhelmed by the friendliness of the owners Paula and Alastair Gordon and their passion for what they do so well. Then press on to beautiful Gruinard Bay and the Corrieshalloch Gorge before arriving in Lochinver via Ullapool.



Gruinard Bay

Another single track road leads you to Kylesku, from where more stunning surroundings escort you to remote Durness on the north coast for another overnight stay.

Before leaving Durness, spend a while on gorgeous Balnakeil beach and visit Smoo Cave before rounding Loch Eriboll and meandering along to Thurso. Take time out too to make a short diversion to Dunnet Head, the most northerly point of mainland Britain. The nearby Castle of Mey, formerly owned by the late Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, provides a fascinating insight into



Gairloch Bay

her personality and interests. Once in John O'Groats you can look across to Stroma and the Orkneys and be amazed by the geology of the Duncansby Stacks. Your hunger pangs can be readily satisfied by the mouthwatering offerings in a unique environment at the recently opened Stacks Coffee House & Bistro, located within sight of the famous waterfront signpost, but try to book in advance as its popularity means it can get very busy.

The final sector of the route takes you down the east coast back to Inverness, but pause at Dunrobin Castle to enjoy its historic interior, manicured gardens and falconry displays before again breaking your journey for an informative tour of the Glen Ord Distillery at Muir of Ord where you can learn how whisky is made.

In conclusion, Mazda's CX-5 should definitely be on your shortlist if you are looking for a quality value-for-money large SUV.



Dunrobin Castle

Although far from small, it handles well, having dealt easily with all the challenges of the previous four days. The North Coast 500 route is stunning and worth the journey north to experience all that it has to offer (detailed information is available via the official website www.northcoast500.com). The route offers a brilliant driving experience, amazing coastal and mountain scenery plus welcoming Scottish hospitality and food. Our road trip to the Highlands had us singing our own version of a certain Proclaimers hit as we drove back south "I would drive 500 miles!"



Mazda CX-5 2.2d SE-L Lux Nav 5dr	
Price	£26,595
Engine size	2.2 litre
Power	150bhp
Fuel	diesel
Top speed	126mph
0-62 mph	9.2sec
Official average mpg	61.4
CO ² emissions	119g/km

