

# ROUTE 66: THE ROAD THE REALITY

By Gary Koz Mraz

Romanticized by Hollywood, the reality of Route 66 is far harsher. This road is soaked with the sweat of dustbowl Oakies seeking sanctuary in California. In reality, jobs were scarce and harassment by local law enforcement was common, and most returned home on the very same road. Renamed the "Will Rogers Highway" in the 1950's, it was homogenized with fast food chains, gas stations and motels with gift shops hawking novelty Rte. 66 lighters and coffee cups. New freeways allowed travelers direct routes to exciting destinations like Disneyland; forever bypassing historic 66. Today, the Mother Road is paved with daily mundane errands, to pilgrimages by foreign motorcycle enthusiasts who've come to experience main street America on American Harley-Davidson's.

The term Mother Road was first coined by John Steinbeck "... the people are in flight, and they come in to 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads. 66 is the mother road, the road of flight." - John Steinbeck, *The Grapes of Wrath*, 1939.

The story of this road is about the lives it touched, not the lies it romanticized. It's a tale of many faces and of many places. The first-date-face of excited newlyweds traveling west, full of hope and expectations and tired chain smoking truckers at the Last Place Café in a desolate desert. Who tells the collective story of this road?

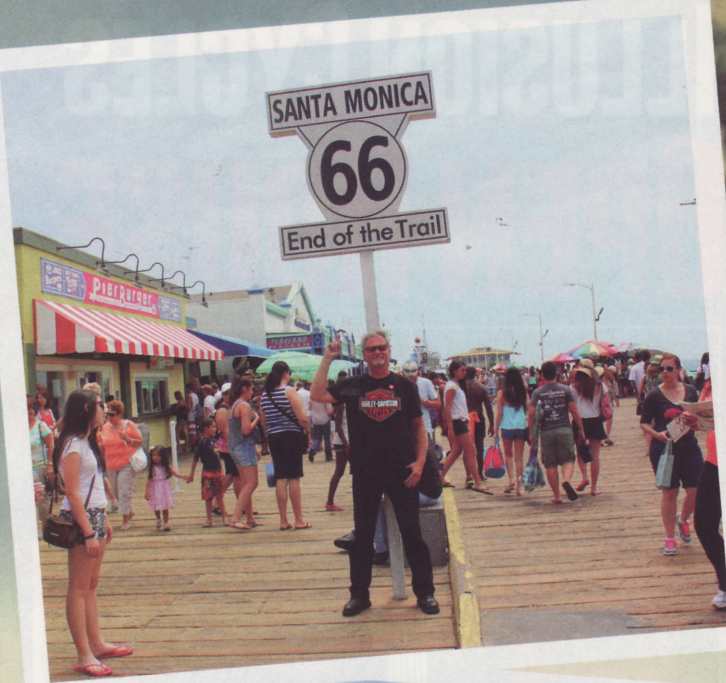
The Autry National Center of the American West has captured this narrative in their exhibition "Route 66: The Road and the Romance". A diverse collection of artifacts from institutions and private collections creating retrospective layers that reflect honestly the history of America's most famous highway. The centerpiece of the exhibition is a 1960 Corvette and

massive neon motel sign inspired by the 60's TV show *Route 66*. They have the original 120 ft scroll manuscript of "On the Road" written by Jack Kerouac. How cool is that! Also included are examples of Native American stereotyping and pamphlets essential for traveling African Americans that mapped towns safe for overnight stays. A multimedia audio/visual experience includes a juke box with 120 versions of "Get Your Kicks" (on Rte 66), by songwriter Bobby Troup to the oldest known Route 66 sign. All in all, over 300 unique items reflect the history of Route 66.

Visiting the exhibition inspired a road trip of my own to see what remains of this symbolic road sign to freedom. Is Route 66 dead, dissected and left to lie in museums behind glass displays as senior citizens reminisce about "the good ole days"? Have the iconic roadside attractions all gone the way of the Dinosaur? I am going to find out.

## Santa Monica Pier to the Wig Wam Motels

I've lived in Los Angeles all my life and ridden 66 by default for decades but never intentionally taken the pilgrimage. The historical route is fractured and much information is available on every possible detail, <http://www.historic66.com/> has turn by turn details. Today, Harley-Davidson and I will simply follow Santa Monica Boulevard through Los Angeles into Pasadena, then catch Foothill Boulevard eastward. One of the world's most famous roads ends at the world's most famous pier, Santa Monica Pier. The sign "Santa Monica 66 End of the Trail" will be my starting point. Open 24 hours a day and 365 days a year, over 4 million people visit this pier annually. I asked dozens of people why they had come here,



Business District, Colorado Blvd., Pasadena, Calif.



HERITAGE SQUARE



# AD, THE ROMANCE, TY - PART 1

and got a dozen different answers.

My first visit is to Big Dean's Oceanfront Café, which sits on the beach almost directly below the Santa Monica Pier. Basically a shack with a patio serving beer and wine, it's been a fixture here since 1903; the very same year William Harley and Arthur Davidson started their business in a small shack.

Riding down Santa Monica Boulevard, you're in the thick of an ever-changing city whose cemeteries and movie studios tell a thousand tales. If you've come to Hollywood or Route 66 from another state or country, you'll weave together the story you want to see and tell. From a motorcyclist's perspective, its streets are jammed with chaos and endless congestion.

Next stop is the Hollywood Forever Cemetery and the final resting place to more of tinsel town's founders and stars than anywhere else on earth. Founded in 1899, Paramount Studios was built on the back half of the original Hollywood Cemetery, where the studio is still in operation today. Listed on the National Register of Historic Sites, visitors come from all over the world to pay respects to Johnny Ramone, Cecil B. DeMille, Jayne Mansfield, Rudolph Valentino, Douglas Fairbanks, and hundreds more of Hollywood's greatest stars. It's worth the visit and try not to wake the dead with your loud pipes. I also suggest a visit the Formosa Café, opened in 1929, it's an official landmark and a must-see for movie history buffs. 7156 Santa Monica Blvd.

## Rockin with Johnny Ramone at Hollywood Forever

Santa Monica Blvd, AKA State Route 2 connects to the 110 east, America's very first freeway. The 110, the Arroyo Seco Parkway, offers a visceral sucker punch of automotive life in 1940. Its 8.2 miles are riddled with 90-degree exits, signs warning

5 mph off ramps and onramps that literally sit in the freeway slow lane. Understand that in the 1940's, national speed limits were 35mph and 45 mph in California, a far cry from the current 80mph average. By today's standards, this freeway is a demolition derby fraught with potential calamity.

Heritage Square is off the Ave 43 exit (yes, at 5mph) and is a living history museum that explores the settlement of Southern California during its first 100 years of statehood. Eight historic structures located at the museum, constructed during the Victorian Era, were saved from demolition. From the simplicity of the Octagon House to the opulence of the William Perry Mansion, the Museum provides a unique look at some of the people who contributed much to the development of Los Angeles. Its here we bump into 83 year old Mr. Walker, Pasadena resident most of his life. He and his wife came to Los Angeles from Oklahoma via Route 66 for a job opportunity in 1950 and never left. It was the road to a better life and today he's sharing the history of Los Angeles with visiting friends.

## Postcard from 1940: Take note of the street lamps 70 years later

The Pasadena freeway becomes South Arroyo Parkway. Take it to Colorado Blvd and turn left into Old Town Pasadena. For me, this is the epitome of what Rte 66 represents circa 1920 to 1940s. The beautiful old buildings are renovated preserving the classic architecture. Make sure you ride by the city hall; it too is a beautiful building. It's a public place so feel free to stop and stroll around to admire the architecture. It's here on Colorado Blvd we watch the passing parade and have a bite to eat at Le Pain Quotidien French Bakery & Café. The annual Rose Parade passes this strip of Rte 66 and is seen





by tens of millions annually.

We struck up a conversation with a spry older gentleman who had worked at the Parsons Building overlooking Old Town for 25 years. "In the early 1980s it was a war zone down here, this entire area was blockaded and all the businesses boarded up. Filled with trash, it was a scary place for years. Finally the city renovated and look what we have today!" George beamed. Now retired, George comes to Le Pain Quotidien every Saturday and knows all the retailers in Old Town. In fact, George is widely known as the "Unofficial Mayor" of Old Town.

The Colorado Street Bridge was part of historic Route 66 from 1926 through 1940. It curves over the riverbed, giving the bridge a unique perspective as you ride over it. Along with the lamps located at regular intervals, the bridge has a very romantic and old charm look from a distance. Built in 1913, it soon became known as Suicide Bridge with over 100 people committing suicide from it; plummeting the 150 feet to the ground below. The first suicide was on November 16, 1919, and nearly fifty of the suicides occurred during the Great Depression from 1933 to 1937.

### Route 66: A Street for Lease

Leaving Pasadena Rte 66 picks up at Foothill Blvd and snakes through Monrovia and Duarte. Its here I was excited to look inside the Aztec Hotel, one of the last historic Hotels on this route. It was closed and for lease - this is *not* a good sign. Continuing on official Route 66, it's an endless conglomeration of unappealing strip malls and modern chains stores selling coffee, gas and fast food. "For lease" signs abound with shabby, beaten down storefronts popping out of the modern miasma. As the rumble of my Harley echoes past these relics, a solitary sadness overwhelms me. It's frightening how easily modern day travelers pass the venerable establishments that line this road; inside each is a story, a history unrevealed. While inside the cars surrounding me, occupants sit face down in cell phones, blindly driving because GPS instructs them to robotically continue towards "Your destination is on the right".

### The Aztec Hotel is closed and for lease

**"Understand that Route 66 was the ideal opportunity for swindlers. If you had a problem you were vulnerable, in fact, hucksters from the cities would set up set up shop on Rte. 66 solely to make a buck off unsuspecting travelers"** Excerpt from Dennis Casbier: former director of the Mojave Desert Heritage and Cultural Association.

Old Foothill Boulevard cuts through Arcadia, Monrovia, Azusa, Glendora, La Verne and finally Claremont. Claremont is home to seven educational institutions which constitute The Claremont Colleges with the oldest being Pomona College, founded in 1887. You will feel like you're back east in New Hampshire. This is also a great place to take a break and have lunch. I suggest exploring the newly renovated Packing House off Indian Hill Blvd. We dined at Casablanca and met manager Wally. Originally from the Greek island of Cyprus, Wally was inspired by the Beach Boys and Hollywood movies and came in search of "California Girls". A restaurateur, Wally has literally worked and driven route 66 from L.A. to Chicago and is living his dream.



Continuing on Historic Route 66, we pass the Virginia Dare Winery in Rancho Cucamonga, now business offices, then Fontana, the birthplace of the Hell's Angels. Fontana and Rialto are filled with dozens of seedy little motels that go by names like the Oasis and the Sunshine Motel. Who would stay here and for what reasons are beyond my comprehension? My final destination is on the horizon and we arrive one of the most iconic motels of Route 66, the Wigwam Motel.

It is here Americana, memorabilia, nostalgia and kitsch meet at the crossroads of tomorrow. Today, the inimitable Charles Phoenix, the self-proclaimed "retro daddy" of America's classic and kitschy pop cultural, was hosting a slide show. Hundreds of fans filled the Wigwam grounds to enjoy his unique spin and genuine reverence for all things Americana. Ok, now I finally get it! The selling of 66 need be taken whimsically with a shot 30-weight and a cold beer. It's pop culture at its best and I need to lighten up on this storyline and just enjoy the ride.

This first leg of my Route 66 pilgrimage was only 75 miles but the relentless traffic and poorly timed stop lights make for an arduous 6-hour ride. Feeling mildly inspired about Historic route 66, I realize this is a tale of the people you meet along the way; not sparsely placed road signs. I commend the Autry National Center of the American West for providing a window into its past and recommend a visit. It may revive a personal road story or inspire a new one. The mirror of history reflects the future and American icons like route 66 and Harley Davidson must inevitably change with the times. At the writing of this story, Harley Davidson is on a 30-stop Route 66 tour with their new electric motorcycle.

I'll continue this pilgrimage to Barstow and Victorville, visiting California's pair of museums devoted to the history of Old Route 66. The California Route 66 Museum is in the former Red Rooster Café in Victorville and the Barstow Route 66 "Mother Road" Museum is in the town's former Harvey House Railroad Depot. Ultimately, this road continues through the barren Mojave Desert to the Nevada border. But for now, it's off to In-N-Out Burgers for dinner.





ROUTE 66 MUSEUM - VICTORVILLE, CA

ROUTE 66  
MOTHER ROAD  
MUSEUM  
BARSTOW

# ROUTE 66

## THE ROAD, THE ROM

*Wigwam Motel to the Nipton Hotel: In part 2, we visit Route 66 museums and ride the Mother Road through the Mojave Desert*

*Story: Gary Koz Mraz Photos: Mraz and Ian Parker*

A night in a Wigwam Teepee is like an Apollo space capsule ride; tight quarters but a once in a lifetime experience. The Wigwam came back to life in 2005, thanks to the Patel family. The motel underwent an intense renovation with attention to detail as its main focus. It was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2012. A kidney shaped pool and gift shop complete the Wigwam Route 66 experience. The mother road becomes Interstate 215 only two miles away and then the I15. It's a short 42 mile ride to Victorville where I'll check out the Route 66 Museum.

Admission is free and staffed by friendly volunteers who are more than happy to explain this stretch of old Route 66 to anybody that walks in. There are three rooms full of donated memorabilia and ranging from a 67 Volkswagen hippy van to a 1948 Captain America Mustang scooter. Visit the gift shop in the front corner of the building and help support this historical window on America's transportation past.

The superslab and I separate and I ride Old Route 66, the National Trails Highway. Here you will taste the romance of this road. The Classic Route 66 logos are painted on the black asphalt, and roadside diners with Route 66 emblazoned everywhere. I pass through the tiny towns of Oro Grande, Helendale and Lenwood. Abandoned cafés and gas stations are reminders of a time long past. With two lanes and wide open expanses, Route 66 was sometimes referred to as Bloody 66. With few sign posts or lights, this two lane highway accommodated a wide variety of vehicles. As you can well imagine, heavily laden trucks would have a string of cars following and only the brave or stupid would attempt a speedy pass. Often, an oncoming vehicle would appear racing the other direction and the result was a horrific explosion of metal and blood; no seatbelts, no airbags, no crumple zones.

Route 66 Mother Road Museum in Barstow is also free to the public and a must for all route 66 fans. Take some photos, sign their guest book and there are a lot of souvenirs to be purchased very reasonably. Admittedly though, I am tiring of souvenirs and the Kitsch of 66 and need the harsh



# 6 PART 2: DANCE, THE REALITY

reality of the road, not Hollywood's storybook romance.

From Barstow route 66 skirts Highway 40 into Newberry Springs and then dips down into the Mojave Desert Reserve. It's here we visit the Bagdad Café. Bagdad became the fictionalized setting of both a popular novel and a motion picture called Bagdad Café. The Café location shooting was actually done at the Sidewinder Cafe to the west in Newberry Springs, which has since been renamed the "Bagdad Café." The actual town of Bagdad is gone. I can't tell if they sell hot food or hot car stereos by the way the miscellaneous electronics are stacked up in the corners. It's pretty untidy and I didn't eat there but try your luck.

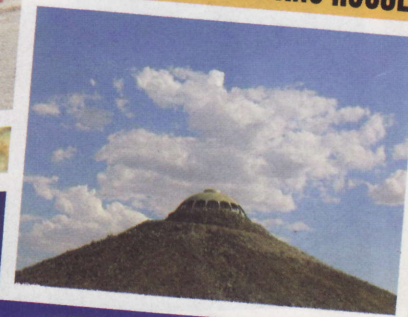
Newberry Springs is also home to the unique Volcano House built in 1968. Donated to Chapman University by its last owner, Huell Howser, it literally sits atop a lava dome with a spectacular 360 degree view. I have crossed paths with Huell and I have seen this home. It's as remote as it gets and unless you are faculty at Chapman University, you never will.

Singing dunes, volcanic cinder cones, Lava tubes and endless highways are all found at the 1.6 million acre Mojave Nature Reserve. A visit to its canyons, mountains and mesas reveals mines, homesteads, and ghost towns long abandoned and newly reborn.

You better gas up in Amboy because there are no other options for many miles. My next destination is Nipton, 122 miles away and they don't have a gas station! Littered with abandoned Cafes and Hotels, the remnants of America's motoring past lie scattered along this lost highway. The roads here are wild and wooly. Sections of newly paved asphalt suddenly become pitted with potholes and gravel. Nevermind the unending undulating dips and crests, which can be a lot of fun. These roads should absolutely be avoided in rainy weather. The dry terrain causes flash floods that will literally wash a car off the road. This eerie ride on old route 66 traverses much of the Mojave Preserve and is the best part of the ride for me.

I love the lingering mist of its haunted past; entire towns now abandoned. **Bagdad, Danby, Cadiz Summit, Chambless, Siberia** - Population 0, **Cima** - Population 9. **Ludlow** - Population 10, **Amboy** - Population 19, **Goffs Ghost Town** - Population 23. **Essex** - Population 111.

If you're planning a ride through the Mojave, there are some very interesting stops you may want to include on our Route 66 road trip. Kelso - Mojave Visitor Center and the Kelso Booming Dunes are one. During the 1970s, Kelso was known as the town without TV. Kelso Depot, which once provided food, recreation and accommodations for Union Pacific Railroad employees, is now the principal visitor center for Mojave National Preserve. It's staffed and houses displays, a movie room featuring Mojave history, free maps and plans for a restaurant.







**HOTEL NIPTON**



The Kelso Dunes are notable for the phenomenon known as singing sand, or "booming dunes". Hikers typically climb to the top of the dunes and slide down slowly, generating a low-frequency rumble that can be both felt and heard. The Kelso Dune complex has some of the highest dunes (600 feet) in the region. It had rained the day prior and the dunes don't Boom if damp. The drier they are, the bigger they boom. It's definitely on my bucket list.

**Mitchell Caverns** -Jack and Ida Mitchell built a road, trails and stairs where they led tours of limestone caverns now called Mitchell caverns. They built a home and permanently live at the caverns. Considering they live in the middle of the desert and the nearest neighbor was 15 miles away, that's fortitude. Mitchell Caverns is located in the heart of the Providence Mountains State Recreation Area. Spectacular and intricate limestone formations found include; stalagmites, stalactites, helictites, lily pads, draperies, curtains and cave popcorn. The caverns were purchased by the State in 1954 and are the only limestone caverns in the State Park System.

Land Fair road spikes north off Route 66 and is the final leg of my ride. I'm very glad to have topped off the gas tank in Amboy because this next jaunt is miles of barren desert to Nipton. No gas, no food, nobody.

25 years ago, Nipton was virtually abandoned but in 1984, the entire town was purchased for 200 grand by geologist Gerald Freeman. He installed solar panels to power the entire town and Wi-Fi. It's now home to the Hotel Nipton, The El Oasis Café and the Nipton Trading Post. Originally constructed in 1904, Hotel Nipton was restored by Freeman in 1986, and recently refurbished in 2004. This 5 bedroom Hotel is open as a bed-and-breakfast inn to serve visitors of Mojave. This 100 plus year old Hotel was favorite getaway to silent film actress Clara Bow. Room 3 was her room and is a patron favorite.

Room 1 is the Train Room, because it facing the train tracks with many windows. I stayed in room 5, the newest additions and wasn't bothered by the train whistles. There is a Jacuzzi and a pond on the property. A clean, well maintained facility offers a western movie big sky experience. The El Oasis Café food is exemplary and Chef grows their own herbs and uses his mother recipes. The Nipton Trading Post stocks beer, wine and snacks. Nipton also offers tented cabins, roomy enough for a party of six. These Eco-Lodges are designed to provide a comfortable camping experience in the natural desert environment. Each cabin is air-cooled and outfitted with two double beds, a wood-fired stove, electric lights and overhead fan, table and chairs. It's the "only" hotel within the Mojave National Preserve and is a completely unique and enjoyable experience.

This tattered shamble of unmaintained 66 through the Mojave tells the naked story of the Oakies escaping the Dust Bowl. It's here you really sense the hope that drove them and hardship they endured. That feeling still prevails on these long lonely miles of unforgiving desert. For me, this ride has been the best of what Route 66 represents and one I will come back and ride again and again. I'll pass on the fanciful romance of Route 66 and embrace the reality of this road. It's a story where nature prevails and the best laid plans of men and mice are anecdotes.

