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Route 66

Something of a ghost, the highway still provides plenty to see in Missouri

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If blue skies and balmy days are giving you the itch for a road trip, satisfy your wandering spirit on the Missouri stretch of Historic Route 66. With the top down, on a Harley or in the family sedan, it's a nostalgic journey along a big slice of Americana.

Though the official U.S. Route 66 was replaced by interstate highways and decommissioned in the 1980s, Historic Route 66 remains a marked scenic byway stretching from Chicago to Los Angeles. You just follow the signs marked Historic Route 66. The Missouri stretch stands out for its diverse scenery, passing through cities, rural areas, farms and the rolling Ozarks.

The various numbered roads that form Missouri Historic Route 66 roughly parallel Interstate Highway 44 from St. Louis southwest to Joplin, a distance of 280 to 317 miles depending on whether you include spurs along former road alignments. Hop on and off the interstate to pick up stretches of highway with the main attractions.

From the banks of the Mississippi

Head down to Missouri on Interstate Highway 55, stopping in St. Louis to order a concrete at Ted Drewe's Frozen Custard (6726 Chippewa St.), which has been satisfying sweet teeth on Route 66 since 1929. Do your homework at the Museum of Transportation (2967 Barrett Station Road), where exhibits tell the Route 66 story. There you will see the original no-tell motel — the art deco Coral Court Motel — and a jalopy the Joad family might have driven west during the Depression. John Steinbeck was the first to call Route 66 the "Mother Road" in his "Grapes of Wrath."

Head to Stanton and one of the oldest roadside attractions on the route. When it opened in 1935, Meramec Caverns (americascave.com) advertised by painting its name on roadside barns, prompting motorists to stop and gawk at stalagmites. Today you also can pan for gold, buy fudge, take boat rides and rent a canoe on the Meramec River. This year a zip line opened, taking visitors on a tour through the trees.

"Mural City"

After Route 66 opened, motels, cafes and filling stations sprang up. The Wagon Wheel Motel in Cuba, Mo., earns a listing on the National Register of Historic Places as the oldest continuously operating motel on Route 66. Its stone cottages have just been spiffed up for guests.

Cuba is best known for its collection of 12 murals. At the "Four Way," the intersection with the only stop sign between St. Louis and Springfield on Route 66 during its heyday, a mural is painted on a stone filling station built in 1932. Another mural on the local newspaper office depicts actress Bette Davis, who came to town in 1948 with a "gentleman companion." When the local reporter snapped her photo, the man gave chase, but the budding paparazzo escaped and Bette appeared in the next issue

Heading west from Cuba, have your picture taken at the World's Largest Rocker, standing 42-feet, 1-inch high beside the Fanning U.S. 66 Outpost General Store (5957 Missouri Highway ZZ).

If trinkets-and-trash stores are your thing, stop in Rolla to browse the Totem Pole Trading Post (1413 Martin Springs Drive). Claiming to be the oldest original business on Missouri Route 66 that's still in operation, it's a hodgepodge of flea market finds and assorted kitsch. Belly-button lint brush, anyone?

A beauty of a biker bar

Terry Roberson, owner of the charmingly seedy Elbow Inn & BBQ in the hamlet of Devils Elbow, said he gets motorcyclists from Norway and Australia who spin onto his gravel parking lot for a taste of what he calls "classic American culture." And what does this naughty-but-nice biker bar offer them? A pool table, gritty bar and dozens of bras tacked to the ceiling, most decorated with graffiti. Roberson shrugged, saying, "It's a biker thing."

Crank up the volume on "Get your Kicks on Route 66," recorded by Nat King Cole in 1946, and head southwest to Lebanon. The local Kmart has been converted into the town's public library and contains the Route 66 Museum and Research Center (915 S. Jefferson Ave.). The museum gets 2,000 to 3,000 visitors a month during the tourist season, and they come from every U.S. state and 75 other countries. Among the exhibits are vintage gas pumps and a collection of salt and pepper shakers from Route 66 restaurants.

Birthplace of Route 66

The road rises to Springfield, which claims to be the birthplace of Route 66 because the name of the highway was first proposed there on April 30, 1926. Stop for a breakfast of stuffed oatmeal or eggs with sweet potato hash browns at Gailey's Cafe, a 1930s diner. On St. Louis Street, you will pass a Steak 'n Shake that's kept its 1962 design and sign.

The Best Western Route 66 Rail Haven motel has been refurbished to reflect its glory days on what has been called "America's Main Street." The motel plays up its past with old cars and gas pumps (ethyl for 32 cents a gallon!) and theme suites named for Elvis and Marilyn Monroe. Turn on the TV and you almost expect to see Buzz Murdock and Tod Stiles cruising in a Corvette on the '60s show "Route 66."

Millionaires on the "Mother Road"

Route 66 runs through Carthage, noteworthy for the Jasper County Courthouse built of Carthage stone in 1894-95. At the time, Carthage had the most millionaires per capita in the country thanks to the discovery of lead and zinc deposits. It has three historic districts and 20 Victorian mansions, several of which are now museums and bed-and-breakfasts.

Head west out of town and you will pass the last of six original drive-in movie theaters named for Route 66 that is still in operation, The 66 Drive-in Theatre. Built in 1949, it's on the National Register of Historic Places.

Carthage was the home of the mine owners, while the miners lived 10 miles away in Webb City. Hop aboard a 1916 trolley built by the Southwest Missouri Electric Railroad to take workers to the mines. The route passes the 32-foot Praying Hands statue, a Route 66 icon created by an artist more than 36 years ago.

Hot Joplin

The mines also made Joplin a boomtown and a wild one at that. Stop in City Hall to see how famed Missouri muralist Thomas Hart Benton depicted the lawless town. A second mural, by his grandson, shows Joplin in the heyday of Route 66.

Route 66 might have been an escape route for Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow when they fled town after a shootout at their apartment in 1933. The hunt for the outlaws intensified after film was developed in a camera they left behind. For the first time, authorities had a reliable description of the couple. Some of the photos are at the Joplin Museum Complex (504 S. Schifferdecker Ave.), along with their jewelry and clothing.

Historic Route 66 continues for a couple of miles west before it cuts 13 miles across the corner of Kansas and drops down into Oklahoma. The Mother Road Marathon travels through these three states every fall, with the next race set for Oct. 10.

Ah, but the joy of 66 is not having to race.

If you go

Lodging

Wagon Wheel Motel, 901 E. Washington St., Cuba, 573-885-3411, wagonwheel66cuba.com, \$50 to \$100 per night.

Best Western Route 66 Rail Haven, 203 S. Glenstone, Springfield, 800-304-0021, bwrailhaven.com, \$69 to \$99 per night.

Grand Avenue Bed & Breakfast, 1615 Grand Ave., Carthage, 417-358-7265, grand-avenue.com, \$74-\$109.

Dining

Elbow Inn & BBQ, 21050 Teardrop Road, Devils Elbow, 573-336-5375.

Gailey's Cafe, 220 E. Walnut St., Springfield, 417-866-5500, breakfast and lunch only.