



Classic American Road Trips: Walking Tours of Towns along Route 66 (Look Up, America!)

Doug Gelbert

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There were long-distance American highways before Route 66 but none has endured longer in the country's psyche. John Steinbeck first dubbed Route 66 the "Mother Road" to describe the promise the highway held when thousands of poor Oklahoma and Arkansas families were blown off their farms by the Dust Bowl drought conditions of the 1930s and forced to head to California. The 2,400-mile, dog bowl-shaped roadway from Chicago to Los Angeles inspired popular songs, movies and an iconic television show that lured millions of travelers to its two lanes of concrete. Route 66 was done in by the interstate system - some of which was laid on top of the old road - and doesn't appear on modern maps anymore but lives forever in the imaginations of any motorist with a hint of wanderlust.

Route 66 was never a static road, especially as paving was introduced. The original plan in the 1920s was to connect the main streets of rural and urban communities and over time the route shifted to eliminate sharp turns, bypass some smaller communities, eliminate railroad crossings, and to shift routings in major metropolitan areas to avoid traffic congestion. Nowhere is this more apparent than at its very start (if you're heading west) in Chicago. Originally, Route 66 kicked off on Jackson Boulevard at Michigan Avenue and later moved to Jackson at Lake Shore Drive. Wherever you begin to follow the essence of Historic Route 66, look for the brown markers and get your odyssey rolling through Illinois. ? ?Route 66 tackled the Mississippi River in two places, one went directly into St. Louis and the other slid around the northern edge of the city. This Route 66 Bypass crossed on the Chain of Rocks Bridge, a private toll bridge built in 1929 at the cost of \$3,000,000. The "chain of rocks" were a dangerous set of rocky shoals that were eliminated by dams and canals in the mid-20th century. The bridge itself was notable for a sharp 22-degree bend that slowed traffic and fostered pile-ups. For that reason the bridge was not used by the Interstate Highway System and was eventually closed in 1967. It sat decaying for 30 years, spared from demolition only by a crash in the market for scrap metal. In Missouri, "America's Main Street," ran through the wooded bluffs of the Meramec River valley.

?Route 66 was born in Oklahoma. Cyrus Avery, a Tulsa businessman and Oklahoma's first highway commissioner, spearheaded the national committee that created the U.S. Highway System in 1926. He championed the Chicago-to-Los Angeles route (making sure it dropped south to his home state before turning west) and picked the now famous double sixes as the new road's official number. Oklahoma has about 400 miles of Route 66 and more drivable miles of the old highway than any other state, although in a pastiche of new route numbers that requires its own guidebook. Historic Route 66 through Oklahoma is studded with the small towns and kitschy roadside buildings that came to define the Mother Road.

Upon reaching Amarillo, Texas the road is ready to sprint west on one of the flattest crossings of the Rocky Mountains possible. For that reason most of the road was co-opted for the interstate highways. Entering California, the end of your journey on old Route 66 is in sight. The old road survives intact for most of its 315 miles through the state. There is no better way to see the towns of Route 66 than on foot. And there is no better way to appreciate what you are looking at than with a walking tour. Whether you are visiting a new town or just out to look at your own town in a new way, a walking tour is ready to explore when you are. Each walking tour describes a mix of historical and architectural and ecclesiastical landmarks. A quick primer on identifying architectural styles seen on America's streets can be found at the end of the book.

?Tour towns included:

Chicago

Springfield

St. Louis

Tulsa

Oklahoma City

Albuquerque

Los Angeles

Hollywood

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