

ROUTE 66: The Road, The Romance, The Reality - Part 1

The Mother Road, Will Rogers Highway, Main Street America



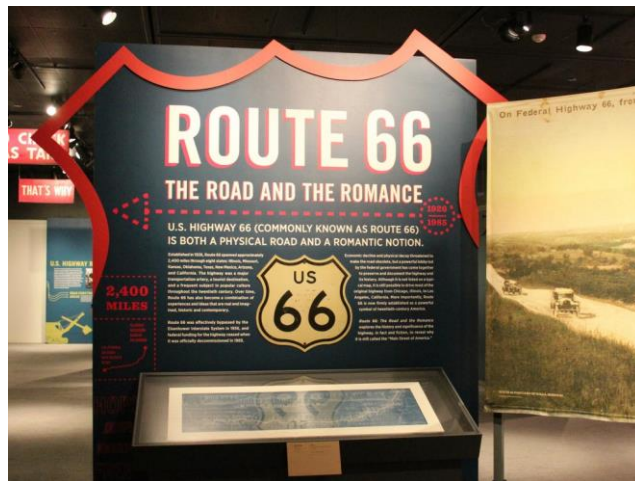
Romanticized by Hollywood, the reality of Route 66 is far harsher. This road is soaked with the sweat of Dustbowl Oakies seeking sanctuary in California. In reality, jobs were scarce and harassment by local law enforcement was common and most returned home on the very same road. In the 1950's renamed the "Will Rogers Highway" 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 Davidsons.

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 to the tired chain smoking truckers at the Last Place Café in a desolate desert. Just 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! 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 that 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, Route 2 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 start point. Open 24 hours a day 365 days a year over 4 million people visit this pier annually. I asked a dozens of people why they had come here and got a dozen different answers.



My first visit is to Big Deans Ocean front 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.



Hollywood Forever Cemetery is the final resting place to more of Hollywood'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 waking the dead with your loud pipes. I enjoy visiting 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

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 motorcyclists perspective its streets are jammed with chaos and endless congestion.

The 2 connects to the 110 east and the onramp to 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 off ramps with exit signs warning 5 mph egress 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 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. 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 Palin Quotidien French Bakery & Café. The annual Rose Parade passes this strip of Rt. 66 and seen by tens of millions annually. We struck up a conversation

with a spry older gentleman who had worked as Parsons Building overlooking Old Town for 25 years. *“In the early 1980s it was a war zone down here, this entire area was a 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 Old Town every Saturday and knows all the retailers and 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 river bed, 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 soon became known as Suicide Bridge with over 100 people commit 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 RT. 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 a reminder of the roads past 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. Inside the cars surrounding me occupants sit face down in cell phones, driving blindly past because GPS instructs them to robotically continue towards *“Your destination is in the right”*.



“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 Route. 66 solely to make a buck off unsuspecting travelers” Excerpt from a 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 now constitute The Claremont Colleges with the oldest being Pomona College, founded in 1887. You will feel like your 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 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 Hells 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 Wig Wam Motel.



It is here Americana, memorabilia, nostalgia and kitsch meet at the crossroads of tomorrow. Today the inimitable Charles Phoenix; self-proclaimed “retro daddy” of America’s classic and kitschy pop cultural was hosting a slide show. Hundreds of fans filled the Wig Wam 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. Its pop culture at its best and I need to lighten up on this storyline and just enjoy the ride.



Charles Phoenix



The coolest road sign ever



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 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.

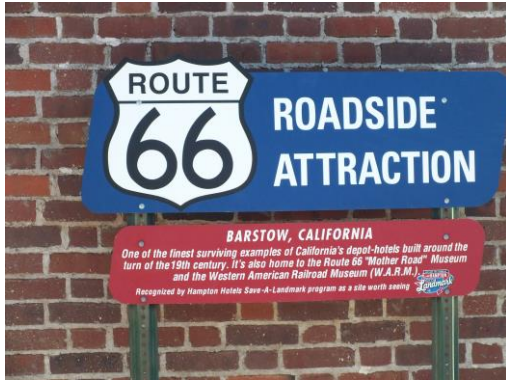
I'll continue this pilgrimage to Barstow and Victorville visiting California's pair of museums devoted to the history of Old Route 66. The [California Route 66 Museum](#) in the former Red Rooster Café in Victorville and the Barstow Route 66 "Mother Road" Museum in the town's former [Harvey House Railroad 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 Part 2: Wig Wam Motel to the Nipton Hotel



Sleeping in the circular one room WigWam Motel is like an Apollo space capsule with a bathtub, a memorable experience. Route 66 continues for two more miles until it hits interstate 215 then becomes then 15 to Victorville. Its here we can jump onto National Trails Highway Route 66 to Barstow. Our destination is the Route 66 Museums in Victorville and Barstow.





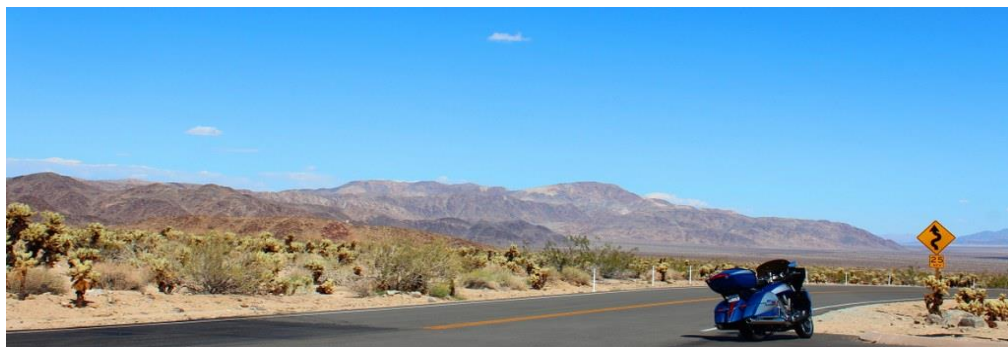
From Barstow we were now in the Mojave Desert and ride Highway 40 to Newberry Springs.



Bagdad Café - Newberry Springs. 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 they miscellaneous electronics are stacked up in the corners. It's untidy esthetically and hygienically. I didn't eat there but try your luck.



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 abandon and newly reborn. Located between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, with stops like the Bagdad Café (from the movie “Bagdad Café”), Zzyzx and the Nipton Hotel, the Mojave Desert offers motorcyclists somewhere close to far away.



Kelso – Mojave Visitor Center and the Kelso Booming Dunes. During the 1970s Kelso was known as the town without TV. Children played outside until dark and adults sat outside and talked together... imagine! 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, movie room featuring Mojave history, free maps and plans for a restaurant. *if you're in Mojave you need to stop here.*



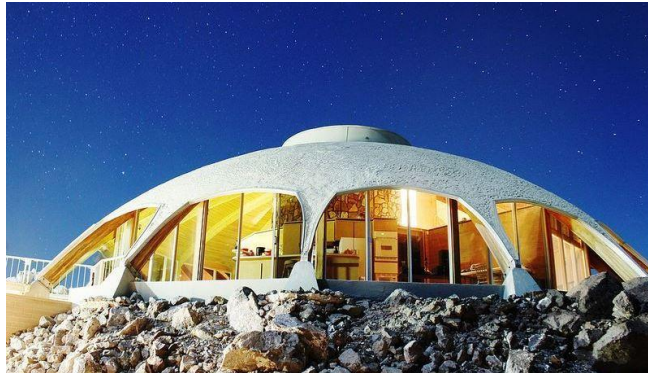
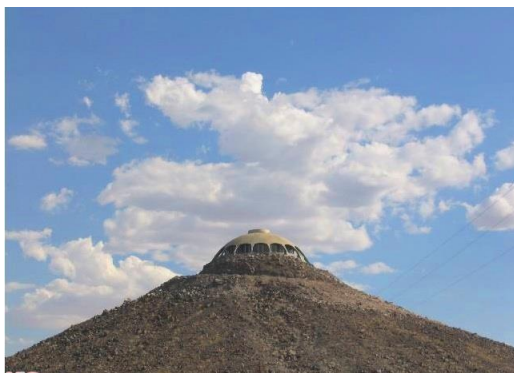
The Kelso Dunes are notable for the phenomenon known as singing sand, or "booming dunes". Hikers typically climb to the top of the dunes and slide down slowly, generating a low-frequency rumble that can be both felt and heard. The Kelso Dune complex has some of the highest dunes (600 feet) in the region. The road is and hard gravel easily by motorcycle. 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. The ever-popular Westways magazine brought the caverns to the attention of the motoring public in 1933. Jack and Ida decided to build 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, 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. The Caverns were closed for renovation at the time of this writing. Reopening is slated late 2014. Call the parks information for dates.



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 a remote as it gets and unless you are faculty at Chapman University, you never will. **1 Star Rating.** *Totally awesome place but completely inaccessible.*



Zzyzx Road – Soda Springs. In 1940's, Dr. Curtis Springer, a Methodist minister and physician, (he was neither), established a mineral springs resort. He named the resort Zzyzx designed to be the final word in the English language. He promoted it wildly on his quasi-religious Los Angeles based radio show. He claimed his mineral spring's spa and his special diet could cure everything from hair loss to cancer. Attracting much attention he built up a thriving business that lasted over 30 years. The American Medical Association gave Springer the dubious title of "King of Quacks". The government discovered he built the spa on land he didn't own. In 1974 he was evicted, arrested for food and drug law violations, and spent several months in jail. Zzyzx is now home to California State University's Desert Studies Center. Open to the public, you need to drive down here next time you're heading to Vegas. Incredible views of Soda Lake and open Mojave. It's a paved road, parts are washed out but don't panic, it will pass. Feel free to walk around and its history is posted on the bathrooms. It's remote, unkempt and somehow forbidding but don't be afraid, it's ok to be there.



Soda Springs on Zzyzx Road



Zzyzx

Nipton - Hotel Nipton. 25 years ago Nipton was virtually abandon but in 1984 the entire town was purchased for 200 grand by geologist Gerald freemen. 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. Whatever you desire they can cook up, Vegan, Gluten Free to home made blended smoothies made with fresh fruits and veggies. The Nipton Trading Post stocks beer, wine and snacks. Nipton also offers RV space, hook ups and tented cabins, each accommodating up to four adults but roomy enough for a family 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 bed sized bedsteads, a wood fired stove, electric lights and overhead fan, table and chairs. *It's the "only" hotel within the Mojave National Preserve but more importantly, this is a completely unique and enjoyable experience.*





Cinder Cones & Lava Flows About 16 miles southeast of Baker, Kelbaker Road traverses a 25,600-acre area of lava flows and volcanic cinder cones thought to range in age form 10,000 to 7 million years old. In 1973, the area was designated as Cinder Cones National Natural Landmark.

Aiken Mine Road (19.5 miles southeast of Baker) offers an interesting side trip through the heart of the area and access to a lava tube. You won't be getting here on an Electra Glide, high clearance and/or four-wheel drive recommended. As the lava streamed out across the land, it slowly began to cool. Often, the top of a flow would cool while liquid lava continued moving underneath, creating a tunnel. Accessible via a 5-mile drive from Kelbaker Road. Climbing through a collapsed hole in the tube's roof, visitors have a rare opportunity to view this lava tube.



Amboy Crater



Roys – Amboy on Route 66.

Old Route 66. Littered with abandon Cafes and Hotels the remnants of Americas motoring past lie scattered along this lost highway. An eerie ride traverses much of the Mojave Preserve. This alone is worth a visit to Mojave.



This tattered shamble of unmaintained 66 through the Mojave tells the naked story of the Oakies escaping the Dust Bowl. It's here you can 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 the road. It's a story where nature prevails and the best laid plans of mice and men are anecdotes.