

Ramblin' on Route 66

Richard Truesdell takes us on the ultimate American Dream road trip – along the mother road, from one end to the other. The first half of the trip starts right here ...

ROUTE 66, the Mother Road of Steinbeck's *Grapes of Wrath*, was at its heyday in the Fifties, America's Main Street. It was the quintessential American road but its two-lane blacktop was eclipsed by ribbons of concrete as America built its Autobahn, the 42,000-mile multi-lane Interstate Highway System. Stoplights, which impeded traffic over its 2448 miles, were replaced by look-alike cloverleaf exits. Increasingly mobile and prosperous Americans felt the need for speed, first in their faux wood-clad station wagons in the Fifties, as they took their flight from crowded

inner cities to the promise of the suburbs, to this day when gargantuan SUVs are the preferred mode of personal transport.

Route 66 has been romanticised in literature, in movies and television; Route 66 represents the essence of American popular culture of past generations. And as Mom and Pop operators of countless roadside businesses are supplanted with anonymous franchised fast food drive-thrus, our landscape has changed irrevocably. Whilst change is normally good, many believe that it's not for the better in this case, as essential elements of popular culture are lost forever, as more

and more of these unique businesses are abandoned by their owners, tired of fighting 'progress' as the high speed Interstates continue to nail their coffins shut. If you're a fan of history and the open road, it makes you want to cry.

Before it's all gone, it's worth the effort to see what remains of this glorious road and the characters that make Route 66 immortal. Decommissioned as a numbered highway in the Eighties, replaced by five different Interstate Highways (I-55, I-44, I-40, I-15 and I-10) running from downtown Chicago, Illinois to the pier overlooking the Pacific in Santa

Monica, California, it can be traversed by car in as little as three days, but to savour all its charms and characters, plan a week or more. To get an idea of how Route 66 was ultimately replaced by the Interstates, venture on to eBay and pick up some road maps and atlases from the early Sixties. Road maps from this era typically sell for between two to five pounds while 50-state atlases, complete with maps of the lower 48 states, sell for between 10 and 20 pounds, depending upon rarity and condition.

If any car is associated with Route 66, it's Chevrolet's Corvette, which starred in a TV show of the early Sixties called ... you guessed it, *Route 66* (see last issue's News pages). On the eve of the introduction of the all-new 2005 Corvette this fall, I had the opportunity to drive the route, end-to-end for the third time, with a current generation Corvette, first introduced in the spring of 1997. However, for this trip I chose to make use of my recently acquired 1964 Rambler convertible. Sat behind the wheel of an American classic with the wind in my hair I had all I needed for a few days of R&R (rest and recuperation); 2500 miles of just me, the Rambler and Route 66.



Day 1 - Chicago to Rolla, MO



THE direction of a classic Route 66 road trip runs east to west, emulating the depression-era migrants who fled from the East and Midwest in search of the better life promised by California. Over the years Route 66 had many different alignments, but today, with the revival movement in full swing, it is generally accepted that the start of Route 66 is Adams, which runs one-way west at Michigan, which runs north-south along Lake Michigan to its east, in the heart of the Chicago Loop. There you'll find the first of what will be hundreds of white on brown Historic Route 66 shields. Traditional US primary highways like Route 66 sport white on black markers while the Interstates that ultimately replaced most are designated with red, white and blue shields except for business loops that often mimic some of the Route 66 alignments, which are white on green.

After departing my luxury digs at Chicago's Swissotel (323 E. Wacker Dr. Chicago, IL 60601, Tel. 001 312 565 0565), I headed for my now traditional departure breakfast at Lou Mitchell's, just south at 565 W. Jackson Blvd. A



Chicago institution since 1923, Lou Mitchell's serves up artery-choking cholesterol by the plateful. Their omelettes are both overstuffed and fluffy, a clear cut above the 'free' breakfast now offered by so many of the low- and mid-priced chain hotels.

Eschewing the traditional west out of Chicago departure through Cicero, I headed north on this trip up along Lake Shore Drive, also known as US 41, taking in the famed Miracle Mile. The reason? The opportunity to shoot the 1967 Shelby Mustang convertible at the Volo Auto Museum (www.volocars.com), north-west of The Loop at the intersection of IL 120 and US 12. If you're into cars, this combination of car museum, consignment shop and flea market is well worth the detour.

If you get into Chicago a day early, leave plenty of time to check out the museum's collection. In fact, it's possible to buy a road-ready classic there, drive it to Los Angeles and sell it there as there are dozens of classic car specialists in the City of Angles that would be happy to take it off your hands. You might even make a few bucks if you buy and sell right.

If you take the Volo detour, you can get back on track by taking IL 59 due south until you rejoin I-44/US 66 just to the west of Joliet. If you buy just one Route 66 guidebook, I



TOP: CLASSIC ARCHITECTURE - EVEN THE BUILDINGS ARE CHROME PLATED! NO MATTER WHERE YOU GO ON ROUTE 66, YOU WON'T HAVE TO LOOK FAR TO FIND A SUPERB PHOTO OPPORTUNITY

ABOVE: NOW THAT'S MARKETING AT ITS BEST!
LEFT: REAL ROADSIDE STOPS LIKE THIS SURE BEAT THE HELL OUT OF TACO BELL OR ANY OF THE OTHER COOKIE-CUTTER FAST FOOD CHAINS

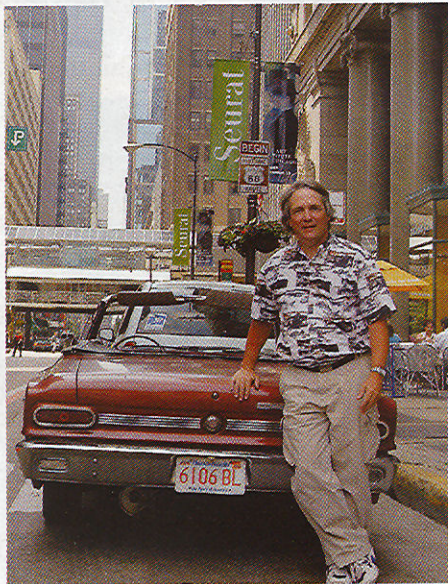


suggest Tom Snyder's *The Route 66 Traveler's Guide and Roadside Companion*. It's of a size that conveniently fits inside your glovebox, or above your visor. Rather than detailing all of the various alignments that Route 66 has taken over the years, this book, with period-correct maps, gives detailed instructions on how to find the remaining sections of Route 66, while avoiding the soulless Interstates at all costs. It even will tell you where the new road is overlaid over the old.

Heading southwest, one of the first Route 66 landmarks that you'll want to take in is the Dixie Truckers Home in McLean. While the look is modern, inside the atmosphere is classic American truck stop and it has faithfully served travellers along Route 66 since the Twenties. In fact, it's been closed only one day since then, on account of a fire back in 1965.

Classic architecture is what makes Route 66 so special and nowhere is this more evident than in Litchfield, Illinois, home of the Ariston Café. Using the exceptional book *Route 66 Lost and Found* by Russell Olsen, the Ariston Café looks much as it did when it first opened in 1923. Over the years, as Route 66 took several different paths through town, the front became the back and the back became the front, as various owners adapted to the changes in the alignment of the road. Just off the current business loop that runs through town, it is a great place to stop for lunch.

Crossing into Missouri over the mighty Mississippi River with the famed Gateway Arch to your right, you can detour into St. Louis, or continue heading south-west. For me, no trip on Route 66 would be complete without a stop at Ted Drew's Soft Custard Stand, where the ice cream overflows the cone. Make sure to take plenty of napkins.



TOP: WOW – IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT WAGON IN THE BACKGROUND THIS PHOTO COULD HAVE BEEN TAKEN ON CRUISE NIGHT CIRCA 1970! I WONDER IF THE QUAKER STATE OIL PEOPLE ARE FLATTERED BY THIS IMITATION?

ABOVE: FROM CITY SKYSCRAPERS TO DESERT HIGHWAY, ROUTE 66 TAKES IN EVERY PART OF AMERICA

RIGHT: THERE'S NO SHORTAGE OF OPPORTUNITIES TO FILL YOUR FACE ANYWHERE IN THE US, AND ROUTE 66 IS NO EXCEPTION. THE DIET STARTS IN CALIFORNIA ...

Rolla, in central Missouri, is a logical destination for your first night on the road. While there is the temptation to start to pile on the miles, that defeats the purpose of travelling the Mother Road. As you approach Rolla, on your right along the frontage road is Route 66 Motors. Like so many establishments that have continued to prosper in the era of the Interstates, it combines a vintage look with classic cars and memorabilia, much of it for sale but getting more and more expensive as eBay turns each curio shop into a retailer with worldwide reach.

Rolla is home to several classic Route 66-style motels as well as modern chains. If you need high-speed Internet, opt for a newer hotel like the Drury Inn (2006 North Bishop Avenue, Tel. 001 573 364 4000). If you're more into the spirit of the road, check in at Zeno's Motel and Steak House (1621 Martin Springs Drive, tel 001 573 364 1301) and you'll get a healthy dose of traditional Route 66 ambience.





Day 2 - Rolla, MO to Tulsa, OK

DEPARTING Rolla south on the business loop, you're now in the heart of Route 66. The Ozarks are beautiful almost any time of the year. The first little town to the south is Doolittle, named after the leader of the aircraft carrier raid on Japan a few months after Pearl Harbor in 1942, giving American morale a much-needed boost. If you have the time, take the exit at County J southbound approaching Arlington. There you can pick up the old alignment of Route 66, better known as Devil's Elbow. While the name sounded frightening, especially with a car with marginal brakes, the scenery is spectacular.

There's a short 12-mile stretch of Route 66 that passes through Kansas. With museums in both Galena and Riverton, this zigzag stretch of the well-preserved old road is a great place to stop if you're getting hungry. With this being my shortest day, mileage-wise, you'll have the opportunity to take your time upon entering Oklahoma. The alternative to Route 66 is the Oklahoma Turnpike, a tollway that stretches from the Kansas border to the outskirts of Tulsa. It should be avoided at all costs as almost all of Route 66 has been preserved and is in daily use in eastern Oklahoma.

One of the highlights of this segment, before reaching Tulsa, is Claremore, home of the Will Rogers Memorial. Rogers, an actor, cowboy and down-home philosopher is Claremore's most famous native son. His statue watches over cars passing through the quaint downtown district. If you didn't take a food break in Kansas, you may want to sample some BBQ ribs at Pits Barbecue (500 N J M Davis Blvd., Tel. 001 918 341 6737). Vegetarians are best to avoid this and similar establishments.

The next stop was Tulsa where I met up with old friends from Kicker, the Stillwater-based mobile electronics company. I knew that I wanted to photograph the classic Metro Diner, but what I didn't realise was that Jeff Meyers and Joe Gross would meet me there with Kicker's latest show car, a restored and modified early Sixties two-seat AMC Metropolitan.

In an era when Americans drove cars that were up to 18-feet long, the British-built Metro was truly an anomaly, a car that was smaller than than anything else on the road. The car was outfitted with Kicker's latest gear and I arrived just as the sun was setting, just in time to get a few shots off, taking advantage of the golden light of sunset.

If you want the traditional Route 66 lodging experience in Tulsa, let me suggest the Desert Hills Motel (5220 E 11th St., Tel. 001 918 834 3311). It's a classic that sports a sign that's changed little over the years, luring in countless Route 66 roadies over the years. This stretch of the road shows many of the classic Route 66 elements, and even with the contemporary McDonalds and Pizza Huts, it's easy to imagine what it looked like 40 years ago. 📍

Richard Truesdell will be continuing towards California along Route 66 next month.

