

ARIZONA

Explore the 100-year history of Route 66

Head to Arizona, home to the longest remaining stretch of the original Route 66, to experience the best of the North American open road. Words: Fiona Tapp



Route 66 highway
Right: Delgadillo's Snow
Cap Drive-In in Seligman



IMAGES: GETTY; JULIAN SMITH

Symbolising freedom, adventure and the pursuit of the American Dream, Route 66 has been immortalised in literary classics and blockbuster movies since its inception in 1926. Spanning over 2,400 miles when it was created by the Bureau of Public Roads, it stretched from Lake Michigan in the northeast all the way to Hollywood in the west and the edge of the Pacific Ocean. Roadside diners, gas stations and motels sprung up to serve drivers, but it wasn't until the 1950s and the birth of the family road trip, that the highway truly found fame. In 1985, however, Route 66 literally fell off the map when it was decommissioned and replaced with modern interstates. Its Americana-appeal has never ceased, though, with visitors still drawn to the 85% of the roadway still drivable today.

In the southwestern state of Arizona, the road unfurls for 385 miles from the Painted Cliffs of Lupton on the New Mexico border to just beyond the retro charm of Kingman in the west. Within this is the longest uninterrupted original stretch of the famed road — 158 miles from the central town of Ash Fork to near the California state line. And as the route that American author John Steinbeck dubbed 'the Mother Road' gears up to celebrate its centenary, this five-part, east-to-west

road trip showcases the Arizona stretch of Route 66 at its best. Expect historic trading posts, preserved towns and must-see national parks, as deserts, rolling hills and wide-open plains lead the way.

PART ONE LUPTON TO PETRIFIED FOREST NATIONAL PARK

Serving as a welcome sign to the state of Arizona, the red sandstone cliffs of Lupton, in Navajo Nation, mark the start of Route 66 in the Grand Canyon state. Beneath monumental-scale bluffs you'll find a handful of residents and colourful gift shops like the Teepee Trading Post, which stocks Native American arts and crafts.

From here, journey west to Petrified Forest National Park, a desolately beautiful world containing 200-million-year-old Triassic fossils, ancient petroglyphs and the majestic Painted Desert — miles of rocky badlands wrapped in red and pink stripes. The park's north and south are connected by a 28-mile-long road weaving past trails such as the panoramic one-mile-long Painted Desert Rim Trail and the half-mile walk to Puerco Pueblo, home to the remains of a large compound that was occupied by the Ancestral Pueblo people over 600 years ago.

THREE INDIGENOUS CULTURAL DETOURS

MONTEZUMA CASTLE

South of Flagstaff is Montezuma Castle National Monument, an impressive cliff dwelling built by the Sinagua people around 1100 CE. Follow a short trail loop to observe the well-preserved ruins, set into a 100ft limestone cliff. The castle provides a fascinating glimpse into the lives — as well as the resilience — of the people who lived here, leaving behind a legacy that still resonates today.

HAVASU FALLS

Hidden deep within Havasupai Tribal Lands, Havasu Falls in the Grand Canyon has been sacred to the Havasupai people for centuries. You can access the turquoise waters and cascading waterfalls with a permit — a limited number of which go on sale annually on 1 February, though some guided tours include these. You'll also need to stay the night and have a reservation at the campground or Havasupai Lodge.

WALNUT CANYON

A short drive from Flagstaff, Walnut Canyon National Monument contains the preserved cliff dwellings of the Ancestral Pueblo people who lived in the area over 800 years ago. Follow the steep, mile-long Island Trail to view 25 rooms built into the canyon's walls. The easier Rim Trail offers stunning vistas across the canyon and the dwellings below.

Stop by the Pueblo Revival-style Painted Desert Inn. This 1930s National Historic Landmark showcases Route 66 memorabilia and demonstrations by skilled Indigenous silversmiths, beaders and artists. After the sun dyes the sky shades of orange and lilac and night falls, drive 20 miles west towards Holbrook — an Old West frontier town rising amid the badlands.

PART TWO
WINSLOW TO FLAGSTAFF

Continue your journey west to downtown Winslow, immortalised in the Eagles hit, Take it Easy. Local landmark Standin’ on the Corner Park, with its cherry-red Ford truck, is an obligatory photo opportunity.

Meteor Crater Natural Landmark — 25 miles west of Winslow — was created 50,000 years ago when a meteorite, approximately 150ft wide, crashed with a force 150 times greater than an atomic bomb. The site was used in the 1960s as a training ground by the Apollo 11 team ahead of the moon landing. Explore it by wandering its observation decks or joining a guided tour along the rim.

For more space-themed discoveries, journey to Flagstaff — the largest town on Arizona’s Route 66. Be sure to visit the Lowell

Observatory — where Pluto was discovered in 1930. Here you’ll be able to appreciate the perfect stargazing conditions created by the town’s commitment to reducing light pollution. This saw Flagstaff designated as the world’s first Dark Sky City by DarkSky International in 2001 — awarded to the planet’s best stargazing destinations.

Downtown, Heritage Square is filled with live music and restaurants. Around the corner, award-winning Atria detours from Route 66’s quintessential diner fare with a 10-course tasting menu focused on farm-fresh regional ingredients. Meanwhile, country and western fans should polish off their cowboy boots for line dancing at The Museum Club, a music bar dating from 1931.

PART THREE
GRAND CANYON NATIONAL PARK TO WILLIAMS

Leave Flagstaff to discover four seasons of outdoor adventure in the surrounding Coconino National Forest, where you can ski, bike and hike on a tapestry of terrain spanning 1.8 million acres.

Take a detour 70 miles north and as the forest’s peaks disappear, Grand Canyon National Park will emerge. Peer across the

mile-deep split in the earth and hike part of the Rim Trail. Hermit Road has nine exceptional lookouts including Mohave Point with views of the Colorado River, Hopi Point and The Abyss, which offers an almost vertical view down the canyon. Those with a looser itinerary could consider a detour 51 miles east to explore Moenkopi Dinosaur Tracks in the Navajo Nation, where you can find trace fossils and follow real dinosaur tracks left below Hamblin Ridge.

Williams, 55 miles south of the Grand Canyon, is full of diners and stores brimming with classic road signs and nostalgia-evoking souvenirs. Don’t miss Canyon Coaster Adventure Park, where a roller coaster has been built into the side of a mountain on a mile-long track.

PART FOUR
SELIGMAN TO KINGMAN

Set your GPS west, stopping at the Ash Fork Route 66 Museum on your way to the small town of Seligman — the start of Route 66’s oldest section. The State of Arizona recognised the original stretch of road between Seligman to Kingman as Historic Route 66 in 1987. This is in no small part thanks to Seligman barber Angel

Delgadillo, who founded the Historic Route 66 Association. Both Seligman and Kingman are primed for Americana enthusiasts, awash with classic neon signs and early 20th- to mid-century architecture evoking a bygone era. In Seligman, visit Angel & Vilma Delgadillo’s Original Route 66 Gift Shop for merchandise. Then stop at Delgadillo’s Snow Cap Drive-In, opened in 1953, for burgers and malt shakes.

Continue west for 37 miles, passing through the small town of Peach Springs. The rugged landscapes here provided inspiration for Radiator Springs, the fictional town in the animated movie, *Cars*. Stop at Hackberry General Store, full of vintage finds, before arriving in Kingman, known as the Heart of Historic Route 66.

Swing by the Route 66 Museum to learn about the road’s 100-year history before stretching your legs on a self-guided walking tour of the storied downtown. Dotted with over 40 sites on the National Registry of Historic Places, it’s also home to a growing collection of vibrant murals by local artists, celebrating Kingman and its place on Route 66. Craft beer awaits at numerous breweries such as Rickety Cricket Brewing, while Mr D’s Route 66 Diner will transport you back to the 1950s with a root beer float beside the jukebox.

PART FIVE
OATMAN TO TOPOCK

The last leg of Arizona’s Route 66 runs south west for 28 miles to the gold rush town of Oatman. This is the steepest and narrowest part of the road — the eight-mile section running through the Black Mountains is nicknamed the Arizona Sidewinder thanks to its 191 curves and turns. However, the view across the desert landscape is worth it.

In Oatman, you’ll find all the quintessential features of a Wild West town, including wooden sidewalks and wild burros roaming the main street — these small donkeys descend from those used by the miners when gold was struck here in the early 20th century. You’ll also have the chance to watch free daily gunslinger shows performed by the Oatman Ghost Rider Gun Fighters. While you’re here, visit the historic Oatman Hotel — formerly the Durlin — to place a dollar bill on the wall or ceiling of the saloon by way of local tradition.

The nearby border town of Topock, once a railroad stop and steamboat landing, marks the end of Arizona’s Route 66. Finish your trip at Old Trails Bridge. Linking Arizona to California, it carried Route 66 traffic across the Colorado River until 1948 and featured in the movie classics *Easy Rider* and *The Grapes of Wrath*.

From left: Mr D’s Route 66 Diner; a hiker looks out across Meteor Crater National Landmark

PLAN YOUR TRIP

There are regular direct flights from London to Phoenix Sky Harbor International (PHX). From there you can rent a car and start your road trip by driving north to Route 66. For more information, go to visitarizona.com/uk



IMAGES: ARIZONA OFFICE OF TOURISM; ANPHAM

