

Let's be real here. The first thoughts that come to mind when you think about bridges are probably along the lines of overpriced tolls and 20-minute traffic delays during rush hour. But let's look a little deeper and reflect on the real purpose of these often beautiful, mostly underrated, man-made marvels that decorate our landscapes. Bridges, in more ways than one, make our world go round. From the times when they were composed of sticks and stones to today's modern-day architectural masterpieces, bridges have been created with the best intentions and destroyed in the face of some of the worst threats to humanity. Yet the majority have proven to stand the test of time and continue to be enrichments to millions of people everyday. They shape our economies, join our lands, and define our skylines like no other engineering structures out there. And for the most part, they're everywhere.

St. Petersburg/Tampa, FL

The Sunshine Skyway Bridge in Florida (pictured) has the kind of past that can clearly be divided into two sections: a before and an after. At the time of its original completion in 1954, the Sunshine Skyway was the first structure of its kind to connect St. Petersburg to Manatee County in Florida. But one foggy day in 1980 everything changed. During a violent rain

squall, a 20-ton freighter, the *SS Summit Venture*, lost control and collided into a main section of the steel bridge. What resulted was one of the worst bridge disasters in American history, with over 1200 feet of roadway plunging into the stormy bay because of the collision.

In the aftermath, engineers and city officials decided to construct something safer, bigger, and, while they were at it, prettier. So in 1987, the modern-day "Skyway to Heaven" reclaimed its former notoriety. Since it has claimed both the title of the first suspension bridge in Florida and the largest concrete suspension bridge of its kind in the world at 5.5 miles (it's as long as Mount Everest is high), perhaps most impressive are the spectacular views of sunrises and sunsets.

Pittsburgh, PA

If you ever find yourself in the steel city of Pittsburgh, chances are you'll find yourself on one of its many bridges. In fact, it's almost impossible *not* to. With an official number at 446 (although it is in the 1000's, depending on what you define an actual "bridge"), this City of Bridges has more arches, beams, and suspensions rising over rivers and valleys than any other place in the world, including Venice.



Crossing Over

What do Madison County, Troubled Water, and Remagen, Germany* have in common? They are all crossed by world famous bridges. Large, covered or just plain lyrical, these maligned but often beautiful structures play an essential role in everybody's life in the USA. We better take good care of them.

* A Bridge Too Far was a strategic crossing point in WWII.

And the varieties, it seems, are endless. You have what is probably the most welcoming (and recognizable) of the Pittsburgh bridges – the Fort Pitt Bridge – giving one of the best panoramic views of a city around. Then you have the “Three Sisters” or the Sixth, Seventh, and Ninth Street bridges, which are the only identical trio of bridges in the entire nation (this title was almost ruined when the original Sixth Street bridge burned down in the late 1800s as a result of steamboat smoke sparking sparrow nests in the beams). Or, there’s the infamous Smithfield Street bridge (originally called the Monongahela Bridge), which was destroyed in 1845 during the Great Fire of Pittsburgh... along with two-thirds of the entire city. It was later rebuilt in 1883 by the architects of New York’s Brooklyn Bridge and now stands as one of the oldest steel truss bridges in the world. Of course, the list goes on (and on, and on), but part of the appeal of this great city is that you never know exactly which bridge you’ll end up on, and what stories lie hidden within its steel frame.

Detroit, MI

The 1920s in Detroit were a time of growing decadence and development. The Detroit River served as a passageway for timber barges and bootleggers alike, and as the Motor City

began establishing itself as a hub for trade and commerce (both legal and illegal), the need for a link between Canada and the U.S. became more evident than ever. So after much debate, planning and a seemingly fast construction under a private company, the Ambassador Bridge opened up for traffic in 1929, linking downtown Detroit and Windsor, Ontario. With a 1,850-foot central span and a total length of nearly 7,500 feet at the time of its construction, this massive steel structure was the longest international suspension bridge in the world. It became such a big deal, in fact, that in the years after its opening, planes would fly under it, people would parachute off of it, and a couple would even be married at its Canada-U.S. boundary line. And although the glitz and glory was often overshadowed by financial problems in the subsequent decades, the Ambassador Bridge has stood the test of time over 79 years and has grown into the busiest suspended border crossing in the world, with over 10,000 commercial vehicles passing through on a typical day, and as many as 10 million in a year. Yet most significantly, the carvings on the bridge remind commuters what the real meaning of this withstanding and unifying structure is: “The visible expression of friendship in the hearts of two peoples with like ideas and ideals.”

