



## Route 66 Rolls on in Santa Monica

*Enduring Myth, Rich History of 'The Mother Road' Made L.A.'s Beach City an American Icon of Surf, Sand & Success*

**SANTA MONICA, Calif.** – For nearly a century, Route 66 has symbolized the hope and promise of the “open road,” a uniquely American icon whose enduring legend has lured millions west to the sunny shores of Santa Monica.

Although it was a U.S. highway for less than 60 years, Route 66 continues to fascinate and entertain fans around the world. California includes 315 miles of the original route, with more than 90 percent still drivable today, including several unique Santa Monica sites from its 20th-century heyday.

Take a ride down Route 66 — then and now:

### **A Short History of 'The Mother Road'**

First declared a federal highway in 1926, the original Chicago-to-Los Angeles route eventually grew to 2,448 miles across eight states. The popular connector was built on the remnants of the National Old Trails Road, a transcontinental path formed by indigenous peoples and early European settlers.

For less than a decade, Route 66 ended ambiguously in downtown Los Angeles. In 1935, it was formally extended from its official end at the then-intersection of Broadway and Sunset Boulevard to Santa Monica, 13 miles west.

Historically, the official terminus was Lincoln and Olympic Boulevards, where U.S. 66 joined U.S. 101A. In symbolic recognition of Route 66's end, the much-photographed “End of the Trail” sign at the Santa Monica Pier was installed in 2009 next to Pacific Park and one of Santa Monica Travel & Tourism's visitor center locations.

During its years of formal use, Route 66 grew into a potent symbol of America, a nostalgia-tinged memory lane of weather-beaten signs, buzzing neon, eccentric roadside attractions and hundreds of mom-and-pop gas stations catering to weary drivers.

In 1946, Nat King Cole's recording of Bobby Troup's now-classic “(Get Your Kicks On) Route 66” became a hit, with shout-outs to sleepy towns like Gallup, Kingman and Barstow urging

listeners to “motor west” to California. Artists as varied as Bing Crosby, the Rolling Stones, Chuck Berry, John Mayer and Depeche Mode later found success with cover versions of the swinging song.

The 1960-64 CBS TV series *Route 66* starred Martin Milner and George Maharis as two aimless young men touring America in a convertible Corvette. But like many show business myths, the gritty drama bore little resemblance to reality, with episodes set and shot on locations far from the real route. Nevertheless, the weekly adventures of Tod and Buz set to the tinkling piano, gentle strings and jazzy brass of Nelson Riddle’s jaunty theme song helped further hook the public’s imagination.

Construction of the Interstate Highway System began in 1956, slowly siphoning traffic away from isolated roads. Route 66’s slow fade began in 1964, when Caltrans began removing U.S. 66 signage from Santa Monica to Pasadena. By 1979, all official signs were gone from California and in 1985 what remained of Route 66 was decommissioned entirely.

Disney-Pixar’s *Cars* made an instant icon of Lightning McQueen in 2006 with a poignant look at the devastation caused by a Route 66 bypass. Since then, the animated film’s massive success and consumer-product boom have helped fuel new interest in the “Mother Road,” boosting longtime efforts of groups like the California Historic Route 66 Association to revitalize businesses and spur visitation along the historic highway.

### **Get Your Kicks on These Route 66 Sites**

Decommissioned nearly 40 years ago, Route 66 lives on through the efforts of fans, historians, preservationists and merchants. While U.S. 66 can no longer be found on official road maps, Route 66 rolls on at these Santa Monica sites:

#### Lincoln & Olympic Boulevards

For nearly 30 years, Route 66 officially began and ended at this unassuming site, where U.S. 66 joined U.S. 101A (a.k.a. ALT 101). Look for BEGIN and END historical markers on the intersection’s northern and southern traffic-light poles. No photo opportunity is available at this location.

To follow U.S. 66’s original route, cruise northwest on Lincoln Boulevard, then northeast along Santa Monica Boulevard toward downtown L.A. — and on to Chicago!

#### Mel’s Drive-In

The nostalgic diner chain immortalized in “American Graffiti” now operates from the restored, end-of-the-route site of The Penguin, a 1959 coffee shop and classic example of Googie architecture. The parking lot’s colorful California 66 mural makes a great photo op. 1670 Lincoln Blvd. [www.melsdrive-in.com/locations/southern-california/santa-monica-now-open](http://www.melsdrive-in.com/locations/southern-california/santa-monica-now-open)

#### Will Rogers Highway Marker

To promote Warner Bros.' 1952 biographic film "The Story of Will Rogers," plaques commemorating Route 66 as "Will Rogers Highway" were unveiled in eight states. The well-traveled humorist, performer and social commentator is honored with a bronze marker in Palisades Park near Santa Monica Boulevard and Ocean Avenue. Insider's tip: At the Santa Monica Visitor Information Kiosk in this location visitors also features an "End of the Trail" sign. [www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=119616](http://www.hmdb.org/m.asp?m=119616)

### Santa Monica Pier

For decades, visitors embraced the Santa Monica Pier as the symbolic end of Route 66, the epitome of California's surf and sand culture. Santa Monica Travel & Tourism, the Santa Monica Pier Corporation and entrepreneur Dan Rice led efforts to erect the nostalgic "End of the Trail" sign. This opened in 2009. Don't miss the giant collage paying tribute to late Route 66 artist Robert "Bob" Waldmire at the Last Stop Shop and 66-to-Cali, a shop dedicated to Route 66 memorabilia. Pacific Park also honors this history with Route 66 Racer, a custom-designed midway race game hosted in an airstream camper. West Coaster, the only oceanfront, steel roller coaster on a pier in the Western United States is also a great way to honor the speeds of the open road. 200 Santa Monica Pier. [www.santamonicipier.org](http://www.santamonicipier.org), [www.66tocali.com](http://www.66tocali.com), [www.route66laststopshop.com](http://www.route66laststopshop.com), [www.bobwaldmire.com](http://www.bobwaldmire.com)

### **Commemorate Your Route 66 Journey**

For a one-of-a-kind memory, stop by any of the Santa Monica Visitor Information Centers for a complimentary Route 66 certificate of completion. Centers are open most days at the Santa Monica Pier, Palisades Park and 2427 Main St. [www.santamonica.com/about/visitor-centers/](http://www.santamonica.com/about/visitor-centers/)

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### **ABOUT SANTA MONICA TRAVEL & TOURISM**

Santa Monica Travel & Tourism is a nonprofit organization chartered to strengthen the local economy by promoting our community as a vibrant, accessible and inclusive travel destination. For more information, visit [santamonica.com](http://santamonica.com), email [info@santamonica.com](mailto:info@santamonica.com), or follow us on Instagram ([@SeeSantaMonica](https://www.instagram.com/SeeSantaMonica)), Facebook ([@VisitSantaMonica](https://www.facebook.com/VisitSantaMonica)) and X/Twitter ([@GoSantaMonica](https://twitter.com/GoSantaMonica)).