

STILL KICKING

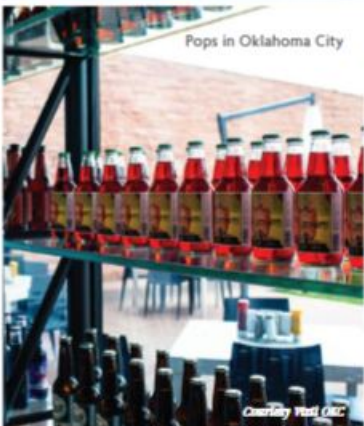
BY ROBIN ROENKER

ROUTE 66 OFFERS GROUPS ICONIC AMERICANA EXPERIENCES

Larger-than-life neon signs, like this one for the Big Texas Steak Ranch, are a quintessential part of the Route 66 experience.

Courtesy Travel Texas

Pops in Oklahoma City



Courtesy Visit OKC

The end of the road in Santa Monica



Courtesy Santa Monica Travel & Tourism

Amarillo's Cadillac Ranch



Courtesy Travel Texas

The “Mother Road” is nearing a major milestone: In 2026, Route 66 will celebrate its 100th anniversary. Since its commissioning in 1926, the legendary road, which originally ran from Chicago to California, has been a beacon for generations of Americans traveling west in pursuit of new destinations and new adventures.

Today, visitors can still indulge in the nostalgic embrace of a road trip from yesteryear in the form of vintage signs, kitschy roadside attractions and historic cafes along well-preserved sections of the iconic route. But there’s also plenty of modern fun to be had along “The Great Diagonal Way,” including lots to see and do in essential Route 66 cities, several of which are spotlighted here.

SPRINGFIELD, ILLINOIS

In Springfield, Illinois, visitors can enjoy multiple attractions synonymous with the highway, including the Cozy Dog Drive In, a family-run Route 66 diner that's been serving up its beloved hot dogs on a stick since 1949. Along with great food, the stop offers a selection of Route 66-related memorabilia and souvenirs.

The city's Ace Sign Co. Sign Museum houses more than 85 original neon signs that once graced Springfield's Route 66 corridor. And no exploration of the city's Route 66 heritage would be complete without a visit to the Route 66 Motorheads Bar, Grill and Museum, which, in addition to being a good spot to grab a burger, is also home to an impressive collection of vintage roadside signage, as well as diner and motorsport memorabilia.

In Auburn, Illinois, roughly 20 minutes from Springfield, a picturesque, 1.4-mile-long, hand-laid brick section of the original Route 66, which was laid in 1931 and is now listed on the National Register of Historic Places, offers an excellent photo stop for any journey along the byway.

"If you're a road tripper or just somebody who wants to stand on the brick Route 66, you can do that there," said Sarah Waggoner, tourism manager for the Springfield Illinois Convention and Visitors Bureau. "It's a really neat experience."

Beyond the allure of Route 66 itself, there's plenty to see and do in Springfield, beginning with tours of the history-packed Lincoln Home National Historic Site, where Lincoln lived from 1844 to 1861. Lincoln fans will also want to visit the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library and Museum in Springfield, where exhibits and artifacts highlight the life of the 16th president.

visitspringfieldillinois.com

JOPLIN, MISSOURI

Route 66 runs through the heart of historic downtown Joplin, Missouri. Groups can stop by the city's visitors bureau, located on the corner of Sixth and Main, to pick up Route 66 postcards, magnets and travel tips.

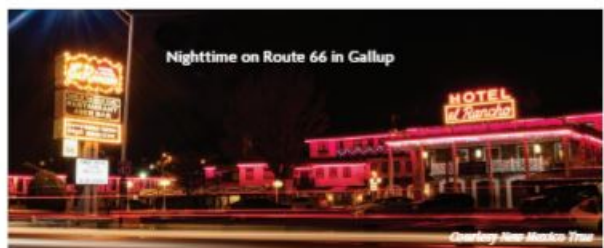
The city's downtown is also home to many fun and eclectic shops, restaurants and art galleries, so visitors can easily spend hours exploring portions of the city's Route 66 corridor by foot.

"When you actually get to the heart of Route 66 downtown, there is a lot of upscale shopping and specialty restaurants," said Kerstin Landwer, assistant director for Visit Joplin.

Every Thursday evening from March through October, groups can enjoy Thursday on Main Street, a free downtown festival with food trucks and live music, as well as open art galleries and extended restaurant hours. Throughout downtown, colorful public art murals, many of them created during rebuilding following the devastating tornado in 2011, speak to the city's vibrancy and resiliency.

While in Joplin, visitors should make time to explore the Joplin History and Mineral Museum, which houses exhibits on the city's early mining history, as well as its Route 66 heritage and ties to infamous robbers Bonnie and Clyde.

visitjoplinmo.com



Nighttime on Route 66 in Gallup

Courtesy New Mexico True



A Route 66 café in Oklahoma City

Courtesy Visit OKC

OKLAHOMA CITY

Vintage architecture fans will find plenty to enjoy in Oklahoma City at stops like the Gold Dome, a geodesic dome built in 1958, and the Milk Bottle Building, a triangular 1930s-era structure that had a milk bottle added to its top as advertising in the 1940s.

In the city's Uptown district, the historic Tower Theatre, with its intact, 1930s-era neon marquee, now hosts movies, live music and entertainment events. Not far away, Cheever's Café, housed in a building that was for many decades a florist shop, now serves steaks, seafood and salads surrounded by unique, Art Deco ambiance.

In nearby Arcadia, Oklahoma, Pops, with its 66-foot-tall soda pop bottle outside and 500 flavors of soda inside, is a service station, a convenience store and a restaurant that has become a go-to Route 66 stop, offering a convenient spot to refuel and recharge.

For overnight accommodations, groups can book rooms at the Classen Inn, which has recently been refurbished to its classic 1960s glory.

"It's very cool," said Sandy Price, vice president of tourism sales for the Oklahoma City Convention and Visitors Bureau. "It was renovated in 2020, and they've really furnished it back to the era."

This summer, June 18-19, Oklahoma City will host the first-ever Route 66 Road Fest at the OKC Fairgrounds complete with vintage cars, musical acts, exhibits and vendors. The event is expected to become an annual attraction leading up to the 100th anniversary of Route 66.

visitokc.com

AMARILLO, TEXAS

The Cadillac Ranch, one of the most iconic roadside attractions in the U.S. since its creation in 1974, features 10 Cadillacs with their noses buried in the ground alongside Route 66 just west of Amarillo, Texas. Admission is free, and visitors are welcome to add their own artistic flourish to the cars with a simple can of spray paint or two.

Route 66 runs through downtown Amarillo, where more than 60 antique shops and boutiques offer plenty to explore. When groups get hungry, they can try their luck at the 72-ounce steak challenge at the Big Texan Steak Ranch, a historic Route 66 diner that now sits near Interstate 40, a location easily found thanks to the 60-foot neon cowboy sign.

For a break from the road, groups can get some fresh air at Palo Duro Canyon State Park, a roughly 20-minute drive from Amarillo, where "The Grand Canyon of Texas" offers 30 miles of hiking trails.

visitamarillo.com



Springfield's Cozy Dog Drive In

Courtesy Springfield IL CVB

GALLUP, NEW MEXICO

In New Mexico, Route 66 travels through Gallup, home to the annual Gallup Inter-Tribal Indian Ceremonial, a marquee event hosted each August that draws Indigenous peoples from throughout New Mexico, across the U.S. and around the world. In 2002, the event will be hosting its centennial celebration August 4-14.

At any time of year, groups can enjoy the city's many public murals via a downtown walking tour or enjoy a movie or live theater event at the city's historic El Morro Theatre, which opened in 1928 just one block off Route 66.

Fans of vintage signage will want to visit "Motel Row" on Gallup's Route 66, where original neon signs like the Lariat Lodge marquee and the tree-shaped Blue Spruce Lodge logo hearken to bygone eras.

"Gallup has a long history as a trading post," said Nicole Barker, media relations manager for the New Mexico Tourism Department. "Today, it showcases Western wares and works by Diné and Zuni Pueblo artists and artisans."

Shops like the Silver Dust Trading Company on Route 66 offer jewelry made by artisans at the nearby Zuni Pueblo, for example. Nearby, Zimmerman's Western Wear features Stetson hats and Pendleton wool goods, and Richardson's Trading Company sells both Native American and Western decor.

After exploring the downtown shops, groups can book an overnight stay at the city's historic El Rancho Hotel, which has greeted guests to Route 66 since 1936.

visitgallup.com

SANTA MONICA, CALIFORNIA

Route 66 ends at the Santa Monica Pier in Santa Monica, California, where groups can take a photo at the "End of the Trail" sign and bask in the beauty of the nearby Pacific Ocean.

Book some shopping time at Third Street Promenade, just east of the pier, where open-air shopping plazas are filled with both high-end designer boutiques and eclectic mom-and-pop shops.

Just be sure to plan some fun-in-the-sun time on any Santa Monica trip, since wide-open beach space is plentiful at the city's municipal beach.

"The Santa Monica State Beach is public, and it's vast. It's one of the largest sandbars in the entire state of California," said Ozzie Otero, sales and services manager for Santa Monica Travel and Tourism. "You could go there and be hundreds of feet from the next nearest person. Catching a sunset there is magical."

santamonica.com



A Route 66 mural in Joplin

Courtesy Visit Joplin



Ace Sign Co. Sign Museum in Springfield

Courtesy Springfield IL CVB



A neon sign in Gallup

Courtesy New Mexico True



Oklahoma City's Milk Bottle Grocery

Courtesy Visit OKC



Zuni nation members at Gallup's Red Rock Park

Courtesy New Mexico True