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TRAVELLER

USA GREAT AMERICAN JOURNEYS

FROM DRIVING ROUTE 66 TO HIKING THE APPALACHIANS

2026

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THE MOTHER ROAD

Route 66 is turning 100 in 2026, and communities along the highway have been busy preparing for the bash. From revitalised districts and revamped motels to lowrider cars going mainstream, we celebrate with stories of roadside revival

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IMAGES: GETTY; GABRIELA CAMPOS


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LOWRIDING

MOTOR MANIA

The Mexican American tradition of cruising low and slow in flashy cars had been outlawed across the US. Now, it's making a comeback — and nowhere more fashionably than in Albuquerque, thanks to a passionate group of locals

PHOTOGRAPHY GABRIELA CAMPOS

The 1961 Chevrolet Impala leaps skyward with a bounce, chrome flashing in the New Mexico sun. At the wheel, Angelica Griego presses a switch on the dash and again sends the car bunny-hopping, leaping a couple of feet clear off the ground. Her window is down, two-inch hot pink nails resting casually on the doorframe, strands of cherry-red tinsel glinting in her hair. In the back seat, I grip the plush leather and do my best to look unfazed.

"Nice car!" hollers a man from across the street, followed by a long, appreciative whistle. Behind oversized sunglasses, Angelica remains cool as a cucumber, the honeyed tones of 1960s crooner Brenton Wood drifting through her speakers. We've been cruising through the heart of Albuquerque along Central Avenue, home to the longest urban stretch of Route 66, for barely 10 minutes and already he's the third such vocal admirer. Others snap photos, eager to capture a fleeting glimpse of pure Americana rolling past.

I've come to the state's largest city to delve into the world of lowriding, a tradition of driving low-slung cars, often intricately customised and lavished in symbolism, that's part of Mexican American culture. It first emerged in the 1940s in the South West, among communities who faced social marginalisation and drew on the bright colours and intricate designs of traditional Mexican aesthetics. In New Mexico, where nearly half the population identifies as of Mexican descent — the highest percentage of Hispanic residents in the US — it became as much a state symbol as green chilli.

But from around the post-war period, lowriding spent decades under heavy regulation, dismissed as a public nuisance and associated with gang activity. This was particularly true in the South West and along the Pacific Coast, where ordinances banning cruises — where souped-up cars roll leisurely in caravan formation — were common; in Albuquerque, they were banned until 2018. In more recent years, with restrictions lifting, perceptions have changed — and with the centenary of Route 66 coming up, the revival of this motor tradition seems perfectly timed.

Today, the city's Sunday evening cruise through downtown draws a lively mix of locals and tourists. The Albuquerque Lowrider Super Show, a showcase of spectacular cars held each June at the city's convention centre, is a major event attracting 15,000 attendees. There's even talk of the lowrider becoming New Mexico's official state vehicle. This year, events planned for Route 66's centennial include the Route 66 Summerfest, a gathering of local bands, food trucks and modified classic cars planned for July along Central Avenue.

This sun-bleached corridor saw a boom in Atomic Age motels and restaurants after the Mother Road was realigned in 1937 to pass directly through the high-desert city. Much of that mid-century architecture remains, Angelica points out as we glide through her hometown. One moment we're passing the zigzagging facade of the KiMo Theatre, its art deco details mixed with Indigenous Pueblo motifs; the next, we're soaking in the flicker of the

From top: Central Avenue is Albuquerque's stretch of Route 66, which passes local landmarks such as the KiMo Theatre; a driver looks out the window of his 1960 Chevy Impala during a Sunday cruise through the Barelas neighbourhood

vintage sign outside the 1959 Imperial Motel. Think of classic Route 66, and chances are it looks like this car-crazed city, providing the perfect backdrop for riding in Angelica's mint-condition convertible.

"You get a lot of attention as a woman in a car like this," she calls over her shoulder as the craggy outline of the Sandia Mountains begins to fill the windscreen, rising steadily to the east of the city. She tells me she got her first set of wheels at age 15, having grown up in a family of car enthusiasts with her head under the bonnet. "When I first came into the scene, it was all very masculine, and I was one of about three girls. Now, loads of women are getting interested in lowriding."

Even as lowriding becomes more inclusive, Angelica remains one of the few women on the competitive circuit. Since buying her Chevy four years ago, she's transformed it into a gliding showpiece, with a chrome undercarriage, custom interiors, and hand-painted murals that map key moments in her life. Her creativity has earned her a spot across the country's car shows, where owners put their tricked-out rides on display.

Lowriding has always been a spectacle, but here in Albuquerque, women like Angelica are steering it to stylish new heights. "I've also added hydraulics to make the car jump up and down and side to side," she says. Moments later, the Impala shimmies back into dance mode, and we bounce past Central Avenue's chorus line of diners, drive-ins and dives — a stretch of road built for showing off.

Creative drive

Behind every lowrider's gleaming ride lie hours of painstaking artistry, and in Albuquerque none have shaped this visual language more than Rob Vanderslice. The following morning, I head to the red-brick suburban home of the man who's carved a niche as the Pablo Picasso of the lowriding world. His garage at the back of the house does feel more like a painter's studio than a workshop, only here the canvas comes on four wheels.

The walls are lined with a rainbow of spray paints and pots of metal flake, twinkling under fluorescent lights. Showing me around, Rob is quick to explain that his fate was sealed early on, having been raised by a hot rod-obsessed father. "My first word wasn't 'mom' or 'dad', it was 'car'," he says with a laugh. Dressed in the unofficial lowrider uniform of a baggy T-shirt, paint-splattered Dickies cargo trousers and a long beard neatly bound with elastic bands, he looks every inch the elder statesman of his community.

Over his 40-year career, Rob has watched lowriding shift gears, emerging from the underground into the mainstream. A turning point, he says, came in 2015 with a landmark exhibition of juiced-up vehicles and photos of hoppers, hod rods and lowrider cars at Santa Fe's New Mexico History Museum, which began to peel away the long-held stigma surrounding the movement. Rob's own creations have since found their way into major institutions, including the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles. These days, he's working on large-scale installations for the centenary of Route 66, including a trippy, gravity-defying display of lowrider cars suspended from the ceiling of Albuquerque's airport.

In demand for his maximalist spray-paint style, known as a 'Rob job', the artist is giving me a taste of the weekend workshops he now occasionally leads, passing on his airbrushing techniques to a new generation. He's been running them since 2019 and says he has noticed an uptick in interest post-pandemic. He demonstrates the process on a skateboard deck, swirling his spray gun with the control of a surgeon wielding a scalpel. I hold my breath as I try to mirror the motion. There's an instant satisfaction to the whole thing: psychedelic shapes blooming from the nozzle in brilliant gradients of colour.

Practise enough, and you might hope to one day achieve something like Rob's more-is-more masterpiece, a modified 1996 Cadillac Fleetwood parked on his driveway. He's been working on it for the past 18 years: the seats are cloaked in touch-me crushed velvet, the bodywork licked with blazing flames of red and magenta, and LED lights hidden in the exterior paintwork mean the car can light up like a Christmas tree after dark.

You might assume this outrageous head-turner is reserved for special occasions, but it's Rob's daily drive, used for the grocery run. "This car is like the inside of my mind: colourful, shocking and loud,"

Clockwise from top: A 1982 Chevy El Camino cruises down Central Avenue during the annual State Fair Parade; Rob Vanderslice paints a skateboard that will be used as an award at an upcoming car show in Albuquerque; Angelica Griego touches up her lipstick in the rearview mirror of her 1961 Chevy Impala convertible


ROUTE
66
5715


Seat Paint

Left: A 1954 Chevy passes the historic Tewa Lodge on Central Avenue, one of Albuquerque's best-preserved motels from the Route 66 era

he says. "My work is all about self-expression. If people think it's too much, I must be doing something right."

Along for the ride

The air is thick with petrol fumes and the sweet smell of churros frying at the roadside in Barelas. Outside the car window, families line the pavement: grandparents unfolding deckchairs, toddlers perched on shoulders, wide-eyed children craning for a better view as a stream of glinting cars parades by at a snail's pace. "Lowriding is trending right now," says Jessica Roybal at the wheel, wearing a strappy sundress and statement silver hoop earrings, nodding as we pass a spectator in billowing zoot trousers, braces and a fedora.

This bumper-to-bumper procession is held every few months in Albuquerque's oldest neighbourhood, a mostly Hispanic inner-city enclave, attracting between 300 and 500 people. An elevated muscle truck rolls past on cartoonishly large wheels, followed by a mint-condition Pontiac Bonneville, its fins and fenders bedazzled in crystals. Jessica's sleek 1980 Pontiac Grand Prix, with a V8 engine purring under the bonnet, fits right in.

A trained architect, she first joined the lowriding scene by photographing drivers but soon caught the bug herself. But despite the growing international attention — lowriding is huge in Japan, where enthusiasts dress in imitation of the Cholo subculture — the practice in this city remains firmly rooted in its origins, Jessica tells me. "It's working-class pride," she says, tapping the steering wheel. Ahead, a vehicle lifts and tilts on its suspension, like a ballerina teetering on pointe. "You work all week, then on your day off, you tinker with your car and show what you've built."

As the cruise winds down, we roll back through the city. "We're fortunate to have Route 66, and there's definitely a connection between the streetscape and the cars," says Jessica. "When you're cruising in a convertible at night and pass a vintage sign all lit up, it makes you stop in your tracks and just appreciate the beauty of that moment."

HOW TO DO IT: Recently revamped, El Vado Motel on Central Avenue is one of New Mexico's original Route 66 motor-court hotels. From $110 (£88). elvadoabq.com

WHAT TO DRIVE ON ROUTE 66

Classic cars

Because of the sometimes-patchy terrain and long hours behind the wheel, most travellers choose roomy, modern cars with plenty of horsepower. Common sense aside, it's hard to resist the allure of coasting in a soft-top Mustang or a fin-tailed Cadillac. A solution could be to incorporate them into a specific experience or leg of the journey.

RVs

Plenty of RV parks line the route, making family travel more convenient, although this option skips staying in charming motor lodges.

Motorcycles

Gleaming Harley-Davidsons make regular appearances on Route 66. Go it solo or join a guided group trip, offering flights, accommodation, a support vehicle and guides who know the best pit stops. Operators like Harden Holidays and Luxury Inspire Me Travel have packages, with daily distances averaging 150 to 250 miles.
hardenholidays.co.uk
luxuryinspiremetravel.co.uk

Coaches

For those who'd rather leave the driving to someone else, escorted coach tours from Titan Travel and Discover North America let you sit back and soak up the scenery.
titantravel.co.uk
discovernorthamerica.co.uk