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HIKING THE APPALACHIANS



2026

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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

MOTHER

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ROAD



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COMMUNITY REBIRTH

LAND OF GIANTS

A new wave of roadside art is rising in Tulsa. Thanks to one woman's vision and her towering troupe of fibreglass statues, this Oklahoma town is reclaiming its place as a must-stop on America's most storied highway

PHOTOGRAPHY **KATRINA WARD**

Mary Beth Babcock didn't set out to become a collector of roadside giants, some taller than a lanky giraffe. But fate, it seems, knew better. As we stand in the shadow of a six-metre fibreglass figure in a 10-gallon hat, looming over a stretch of Route 66 like a rootin'-tootin' guardian of the highway, it's clear she's found her calling. Cowboy Bob is the latest addition to Mary Beth's growing gang of oversized statues, helping transform her corner of the so-called Mother Road into a larger-than-life shrine to mid-century Americana.

"About two years ago, people started asking what I was doing for the Route 66 centennial," says the owner of the Buck Atom's Cosmic Curios gift shop, her eyes twinkling behind winged cat-eye glasses, a jaunty red kerchief knotted at her neck. "I decided, I'm going to collect more giants."

I've come to the tiny Meadow Gold District of Tulsa, in the north east of Oklahoma, ahead of Route 66's 100th anniversary to meet the passionate individuals working to preserve one of America's most iconic stretches of road. Snaking for 2,448 miles from Chicago to Los Angeles, crossing eight states and three time zones, this ribbon of tarmac has carried generations westward in search of escape, opportunity or simply the irresistible thrill of the open road. A century on, it remains a symbol of the great American road trip — and

that's partly thanks to locals like Mary Beth, who continue to upgrade it for a new wave of drivers.

Often called Muffler Men, roadside giants had their heyday in the 1960s, when cross-country road trips ruled supreme and small businesses sought novel ways to lure drivers off the highway. Growing up at the kerb of Oklahoma's Route 66, Mary Beth developed an early fascination with its curiosities. That appreciation led her to install a massive, space-age cowboy — also called Buck Atom — outside her store in 2019, and she's since acquired four more figures. "I guess they're like my giant paper dolls," she says, adding that their creator, Virginia-based fibreglass artist Mark Cline, even encourages her to add her own customisations.

Kerbside renaissance

Much like its Muffler Men, Route 66 peaked in the post-war boom years, when the car was king and the open road pulsed with possibility. But by 1985, it was officially decommissioned, its maintenance funds dried up, bypassed by streamlined highways promising a quicker journey. Like many neighbourhoods along it, the Meadow Gold District fell on hard times, its storefronts shuttered and buildings abandoned. "Drivers used to skip right past Tulsa," recalls Mary Beth. "There just weren't enough attractions here to justify a stop."

Clockwise from top: A fibreglass giant outside Buck Atom's Cosmic Curios; Ike's Chili has been in business since 1908; the Route 66 Historical Village is a free museum. Previous pages from left: A stretch of Route 66 through California; lowriders cruise up and down 4th Street Albuquerque

That all changed in 2018, when she opened Buck Atom's Cosmic Curios inside a mid-century gas station. "I grew up with petrol in my veins, driving along Route 66," she says. "I thought, why not?" The tiny store became a pit stop for graphic prints, logoed T-shirts and miniature bobble-head models of the giant standing nearby.

A revival caught on like wildfire. Warehouses and garages transformed into art galleries and hip restaurants. A vinyl record shop, burger joint and a tiny art deco museum opened, overlooked by a nine-metre Meadow Gold sign salvaged from a former dairy. Mary Beth added a marketplace called Meadow Gold Mack, giving homegrown creatives a space to sell their wares. And a posse of colossal figures sprang up — Cowboy Bob, as well as a cosmic cowgirl, space cowboy and lumberjack, soon to be joined by Rosie the Riveter — inviting drivers to turn the wheel, pull over and stay awhile.

Ahead of the centennial, stretches of Route 66 are being spruced up all along its length, from a new sculpture park of neon signs in the Route 66 Experience in Springfield, Illinois to restored historic storefronts in Amarillo, Texas. But Tulsa is where this renaissance dazzles brightest. Today, the Meadow Gold District is a mural-splashed neighbourhood alive with indie spirit. The paint has barely dried on Mary Beth's latest venture, a second boutique marketplace called 66 Collective where cabinets are crammed with embroidered bolo ties and Cowboy Bob-themed colouring books.

"The Tulsa 66 Commission [an organisation that promotes the city's strip of Route 66] offered grants to businesses towards new neon signs," says Mary Beth, pointing to the signage beyond the window. But the revival couldn't have happened without the tenacious locals. "I did a lot of fundraising myself, selling miniature sculptures of my giants and commemorative bricks laid at their feet." Even musician Taylor Hanson, a Tulsa local from the band Hanson, chipped in to help pay for the Stella Atom space cowgirl statue.

For Mary Beth, the Herculean effort was one worth making. "Route 66 offers a way to experience almost the entire United States by following a single road," she says. "You've got the bustle of Chicago, the lush rolling grasslands of Oklahoma, the red rocks of New Mexico and then the vast ocean of California. It's a true overview of America."

A new taste for the old

The Meadow Gold District may have undergone a revamp, but not everything here's changed. Just down the street from 66 Collective, Ike's Chili has been ladling out steaming bowls of meaty goodness since 1908, making it one year younger than the state of Oklahoma itself.



Visitor hats and coats at Ike's Below: Mary Beth Babcock, owner of Buck Atom's, next to a model of the new Rosie the Riveter giant, which is being installed in the Meadow Gold District in 2026





The Meadow Gold sign on 11th Street, Tulsa's stretch of Route 66, dates from 1934

Inside, diners perch on cherry-red stools as bowls of no-frills stew slide across a tiled counter. Through a gleaming chrome serving hatch, co-owner Len Wade stands beside a vast silver vat — so large it could plausibly bathe a child — turning out around 480 portions of the stuff, often devoured within a single brisk day of service. “Spices, tomatoes and freshly ground meat — it’s a straightforward recipe that hasn’t changed much since we first opened,” he says. He won’t divulge the nitty-gritty, but a cluster of championship belts won at cook-off competitions glinting nearby are testament to the winning flavour.

What he will tell you is that Ike’s food was designed with Route 66 cruisers in mind. “Our chilli is like fuel,” Len says as we sit in the dining room, linoleum flooring underfoot and framed monochrome photographs of Tulsa’s yesteryear lining the walls. “Its beauty lies in its simplicity.” I tuck into the signature ‘three way’, a plate piled high with spaghetti smothered in beefy chilli and topped with beans. It’s pure comfort food, the kind of warming, no-nonsense meal that sets you up for the long road ahead.

Sustained, I head a couple of miles east to the Golden Driller, a 23-metre gilded statue outside the Tulsa Expo Center. Installed in 1966 to honour Oklahoma’s oil heritage, this concrete and fibreglass figure was a looming precursor to the playful eccentricity of today’s Meadow Gold District giants.

Waiting beneath the statue’s straddled legs is Rhys Martin, president of the Oklahoma Route 66 Association, which preserves and promotes the state’s historic stretch of road through restoration projects, education and

tourism. Wearing an Indiana Jones-style fedora and a shirt stitched with a Route 66 highway shield, he’s quick to explain why the road’s resurgence comes as no surprise in his home state. “We’ve always been in the driving seat here in Oklahoma,” he says. “Cyrus Avery, the highway commissioner who helped establish Route 66, lived right here in Tulsa.” Today, the city honours him as ‘the father of Route 66’ with a bronze statue and a dedicated plaza.

We make a final stop at the Route 66 Historical Village, a free open-air museum where a clickety-clack steam train rests beside a visitor centre designed to look like a vintage Phillips 66 gas station. Sitting inside, Rhys reflects on the deeper pull of the Main Street of America as it turns 100, especially among younger travellers. “Anemoia. It means nostalgia for a time you didn’t experience,” he says. “Route 66 gives you permission to stop checking emails, put the phone down and have a conversation with the stranger in the next booth. It tells you it’s okay to take your time.”

Heading west at my own easy pace, I spot Cowboy Bob shrinking in the rearview mirror, his silhouette briefly framed by the Tulsa skyline. I think back to Mary Beth, who once set out with no clear sense of where this road, or indeed her life, might go. That faith in the journey feels appropriate on Route 66, a highway that has always rewarded those willing to slow down and see what unfolds.

HOW TO DO IT: The Tulsa Club Hotel, Curio Collection by Hilton is set in a restored 1927 building with period details, perfect for design-lovers. From \$153 (£115). tulsaclub.com



MEET MARK CLINE

Mark is one of only two fibreglass artists still creating Muffler Men from scratch, and the only one offering a bespoke customisation service.

How did you start making Muffler Men?

I’d been creating large-scale statues for theme parks when I began getting requests to restore vintage giants, most of which were built in the 1960s. In 2015, I started producing my own.

Has social media contributed to their popularity?

Absolutely! People travel hundreds of miles to be photographed with them. I can’t think of any other way their popularity could have spread so quickly.

Which Route 66 attraction would you recommend?

The giant Blue Whale of Catoosa sculpture, outside Tulsa in Oklahoma. The guy who created it built it on his lake for his family. He didn’t have any formal training, just a love for the craft.

How can people learn more about the craft?

At my Enchanted Castle Studios in Virginia, over the course of a weekend, I introduce people to fibreglass statue-making, which is a bit of a lost art. I teach basic skills, so they can create something for their own backyard. enchantedcastlestudios.com

Route 66.



Left: Buck Atom's Cosmic Curios in Tulsa, Oklahoma is full of quirky, themed souvenirs

HOW TO DRIVE ROUTE 66

It's no wonder the Mother Road is a firm favourite – but where to begin with such an epic journey? Read on and buckle up

Can I tackle the whole route in one go?

It's technically possible to drive from Chicago's skyscrapers to the seaside pier in Santa Monica in about 30 hours, traffic permitting. But the joy of the Mother Road lies in slowing down, lingering over stacks of pancakes in old-school diners and pulling over for snapshots with roadside giant statues. Two to three weeks is the sweet spot for the full stretch.

Many travellers explore shorter segments, focusing on a few states depending on interests. For example, Illinois appeals to petrolheads with its car museums, while California preserves kerbside Americana.

How can I get there?

Chicago and Los Angeles both offer direct flights from and to the UK. Other useful entry points include St Louis in Missouri, which has a new direct link to London. Tulsa in Oklahoma, Albuquerque in New Mexico and Flagstaff in Arizona require connections.

What do I need to drive in the US?

UK drivers need a valid UK licence and should carry an International Driving Permit for most US states. Ensure your car rental includes appropriate insurance coverage.

How do I map out my route?

When the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 introduced superhighways across the US, much of Route 66 was bypassed in favour of faster routes, which often run in parallel. Around 85% of the early route remains drivable, but signage is patchy and Google Maps doesn't recognise Route 66 as a continuous road. A good workaround is to select 'avoid motorways' in your navigation settings and add in key stops you want to hit.

When's the best time to go?

May to October, when the weather is mild and attractions are in full swing. In 2026, St Louis kicks off Route 66's centenary with a week of concerts, car displays and more celebrations in April. From late autumn to spring, snowstorms and business closures can disrupt travel.

Who can help me plan?

To travel the entire route, America As You Like It, Audley Travel and Hays Travel offer self-drive packages, including flights, accommodation and car hire. For a shorter road trip, Bon Voyage can help. americaasyoulikeit.com audleytravel.com haystravel.co.uk bon-voyage.co.uk □

THE ROUTE 66 SURVIVAL KIT

Sing: (Get Your Kicks on) *Route 66*, first recorded by the Nat King Cole Trio in 1946 and covered by The Rolling Stones and Depeche Mode.

Listen to: Episode 648 of the *Travel with Amateur Traveler* podcast, where Route 66 tour guide Austin Coop maps must-see stops.

Read: John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), which immortalised Route 66 as the 'Mother Road' and chronicled Dust Bowl migrations.

Watch: *Easy Rider* (1969), the ultimate Route 66 movie, with hippies and Harley-Davidsons.

Or... Martin Scorsese's *Killers of the Flower Moon* (2023), which traces the Osage Nation's struggle after oil was discovered on tribal lands in Oklahoma.

Show the kids: Pixar's *Cars* (2006), a love letter to Route 66 sure to inspire a family adventure.

Buy: Exquisite contemporary Indigenous jewellery from the giftshop at Albuquerque's Indian Pueblo Cultural Center. indianpueblo.org

Order: Golden fried chicken at Chicken Annie's Original in Kansas. chickenanniesoriginal.com

Tackle: The 72oz steak challenge at Big Texan in Amarillo, Texas. bigtexan.com