

# Route 66 refresher

Not enough of us get back on the Mother Road as often as we've been meaning to

Story and photos by Tyson Hugie

While seated in downtown Kingman, having dinner along the streetside, we saw a DMC DeLorean drive past. "Oh, check that out," my travel partner Jason said, in between bites of pizza, pointing as it whizzed by.

The symbolism stuck with me, because just hours before, I had mused that it felt like we had taken a time machine that day—*Back to the Future* style—to the late 1800s, while visiting the old mining boomtown of Oatman.

The Route 66 "Mother Road"—or at least what remains of it—has beckoned to road trippers for nearly 60 years. We are fortunate to have strong Route 66 culture in Arizona, right here in our backyard.

We had decided to saddle up our cars and take a weekend adventure to resurrect old memories and make new ones. Our round-trip drive, a clock-

wise loop that started and ended in central Phoenix, came in at just about 485 miles and 8.5 hours of drive time, split over two days. I was excited to visit Oatman since it had been 15 years since my last visit in 2007. I'm happy to report that—perhaps, not surprisingly—it looked about the same!

## Route 66 roots

What was once a 2,448-mile artery between Chicago and Santa Monica has of course largely been overtaken or bypassed by larger, more efficient Interstate highways.

A few surviving stretches of the road offer a glimpse into the past. Many of the buildings and bridges along the way—over 200, in fact—have earned their place on historical registries. The Art Deco style of architecture is evident in many of the smaller towns.

Route 66 got its start in late 1926 but was not completely paved until 1938. The ensuing decades brought occasional changes to the alignments, in the interest of safety and efficiency.

The route was officially removed from the United States Highway System in 1985. Some of its stretches remained in service as business loops for the Interstates, while others were abandoned completely. Today, it's impossible to drive uninterrupted for the entire length, but Arizona offers a few very original stretches.

## Oatman rides again

In Arizona, Route 66 originally covered 401 miles across the northern part of the state, running east and west. One town that remains on the map, despite being bypassed by Interstate 40 in 1953, is Oatman. In the 1960s, Oatman was nearly en-

tirely abandoned, but since the late 1980s it has been revitalized to some extent thanks to Route 66 tourism.

We paused briefly for fuel in Needles, California, then began working our way toward this quaint destination. The road looks and feels old, with little attempt to modernize it with wide shoulders, bike lanes or crisp striping like we are used to seeing in the city. That's part of the allure.

Nestled in the Black Mountains, Oatman was first settled in the 1860s, when gold was discovered there. The site grew into a boomtown between 1915 and 1917. Many of Oatman's buildings succumbed to a fire in 1921, but the original 1902 hotel remains, now converted into a restaurant and museum.

The primary mine closed in 1924, so for about the last 100 years, the town has survived largely on tourism. The atmosphere feels like a step back in time, with wooden sidewalks and Wild West gunfight reenactments. We arrived just in time for one such gunfight, staged around a bank robbery, that drew a crowd along the main street.

Some of Oatman's most famous residents are the wild burros roaming the streets. We said hello to a few, including "Big Mama" who was particu-



larly friendly about taking treats from people on the streetside. Jason and I each ordered a buffalo burger from the hotel restaurant and gave it two (or four) thumbs up.

## Overnight in Kingman

Our travels next took us northwest toward Kingman. The road leading in that direction was once regarded as one of the most dangerous on Route 66 because of its narrow width, steep grades,

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hairpin curves and a lack of guardrails. Sitgreaves Pass, at 3,550 feet, reportedly used to have a service where cars could be towed to the summit if they couldn't make it on their own. Our 2004 Mazda6 and 2004 Honda S2000 didn't seem to have any problems, and we took advantage of the panorama to snag a few photos along the way.

The original main thoroughfare in Kingman, now called Andy Devine Avenue, is home to a variety of motels and other buildings that retain retro Route 66 aesthetics. One of those motels was our resting place for the night: El Trovatore. This motel and its neon sign boast the "World's Longest Route 66 Map"—in fact a mural painted

across the face of the buildings.

Sam, the owner, greeted us at the front desk and proceeded to tell the tale of Kingman and its history. His knowledge was vast and his humor was evident; he wouldn't give me the key to my room until I could tell him how to say the word "key" in a language other than English. Luckily, I remembered a few things from middle school Spanish class! Our room was themed in Marilyn Monroe photography and provided a cozy place for the night.

Afternoon rainstorms had left a fresh scent and a cool breeze in the evening air, so we put the top down on my S2000 and made our way to dinner in the historic business district. The wood-fired pizza hit the spot, and the DeLorean sighting was the perfect capstone to a day-trip that took us back in time. Now if only we could have had lunch



with Marty McFly and Doc Brown, the day would have been perfect. ■

