

# NORTHEAST *New Mexico* ROUTE 66 TOUR

Get your kicks on historic Route 66,  
America's Main Street.

Length: 193 miles (311 kilometers)

Duration: 2 Days, 2 Nights

Elevation: 4,093 feet (1,248 meters) to 6,590 feet (2,010 meters)

Rememem, remem-memember the freedom of the fabulous Fifties? Those were the delirious rock and roll years that jumped into Chevy Impalas across the Lower 48, fired up those V-8 engines, and blasted down the open roads on hot August nights. Buddy Holly, Little Richard, and the King blasted from car radios turned up as loud as they could go. With the windows rolled down and summer winds whipping the tuck and roll pleats of front seats everywhere, teenaged America cruised for cheeseburgers, fries, and milkshakes.

The late Bobby Troup understood the rhythm of the road. Headed for a music career in 1946, the Pennsylvanian left Harrisburg in his green 1941 Buick convertible. Slipping onto Route 66 in Chicago, he arrived in Los Angeles two weeks later with a song whose catchy lyrics and jazz riffs Nat King Cole crooned into a hit that became the anthem of the asphalt. One hundred fifty recording artists have covered it since.

Those long trips west spawned new catchwords like tourist court, refrigerated air, motor-hotel, tourist trap, last chance gas, Burma Shave, and drive-in. Everything roadside worshiped at the altar of personalized transportation: service stations, motels, and fast foods. They organized, franchised, and went uptempo. Hot rods and muscle cars mollified the need for speed. Gas cost just 25 cents a gallon.

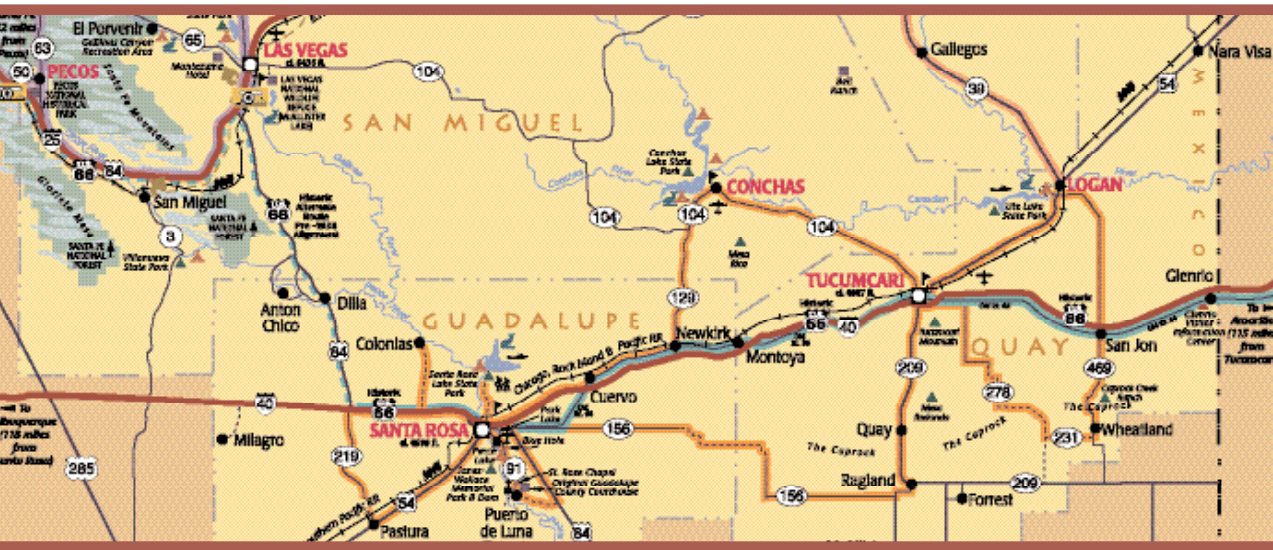
As America accelerated into the 1960s, and as Martin Milner and George Maharis drove Tod and Buz in a beige-colored 1959 Corvette into American living rooms every Friday night on television in 1960-64, a new Federal interstate highway system was spreading across the country. When the final segment of Route 66 was decommissioned in 1984, the Mother Road slipped into history.

But in east New Mexico it endures. It still exists as a gravel stretch of original Route 66 east of Tucumcari that crests endless hills and crosses countless arroyos, evoking grim memories of the Great Depression captured in Dorothea Lange's gut-wrenching photograph and the nameless, faceless impoverished and dispossessed who streamed west, bound for an uncertain future in California in John Steinbeck's most popular novel, "The Grapes of Wrath" (1939) and in John Ford's searing black-and-white film of the same name (1940). Squint into the distances on a hot, dusty summer day, and the Joads' cut-down Hudson Super-Six rises and shimmers in the heat, then disappears.



Tucumcari Neon / Johnnie V.





Begin in the faded hamlet of **Glenrio** astraddle the Texas/New Mexico state line. There the deserted **Last /First Motel in Texas**, a vestige of the 1940s, '50s, and '60s, still looms, and the pavement turns to sand and gravel. As the hills rise and fall westward, note the torn-up tracks of the **Tucumcari & Memphis Railroad** (operational 1908-86) to the south, and cross four creosote-filled wooden bridges, built in the 1920s.

On a slight rise, in about all that's left of the hamlet of **Endee**, are the intriguing ruins of a tourist court from the 1930s.

In the Village of **San Jon** await the boarded-up **Circle M Motel** (from the 1940s), the empty **Smith's Café** (1930s), and onetime **Western Motel** (1930s). San Jon, which arose circa 1902-06 as the railroad pushed west, had gradually extended its Mother Roadside services eastward as postwar inbound traffic increased, a growth pattern evident in many of the state's Route 66 communities.

On a lonely, windswept hill west of San Jon (where New Mexico's last stretch of Route 66 was deactivated in 1982), note the abandoned **Cedar Hill Service Station & Motel** (operational in 1940-50). Those aren't thousands of actual shingles atop the collapsed canopy and main roof of the

gas station/store; they're flattened oil cans.

Nighttime neon, the signature signage of 66, still beams from several Route 66-era businesses flanking the Main Street of America in cities like Tucumcari and Santa Rosa. Whether they adorn motels, cafes, or shops doesn't matter. That they beam nightly, does.

The architectural styles that once greeted ex-GIs, spent by World War II, who had taken to the open road to see what the Southwest was all about, are still there, too. Among them are the Pueblo Revival and Southwest Vernacular styles, the familiar Art Deco and Streamlined Moderne, Spanish Colonial Revival, Ranch, Territorial Revival, and Neocolonial.

In **Tucumcari**, where billboards once blared "Tucumcari Tonight! 2,000 Motel Rooms," there's serendipity in motel names like the **Palomino** (built in 1953); the legendary and recently restored **Blue Swallow** (1942); and the **Buckaroo** (1952).

It's hard to believe that the city seemed to sprout overnight when the **Chicago, Rock Island & Pacific Railroad** (CRI&PRR) extended its tracks west in 1902.

**TeePee Curios** began wooing roadies through its distinctive teepee-shaped entrance since shortly after it first opened as a grocery store in 1944.

Road food is a blue plate special at places like **Del's Family Restaurant** (1956).

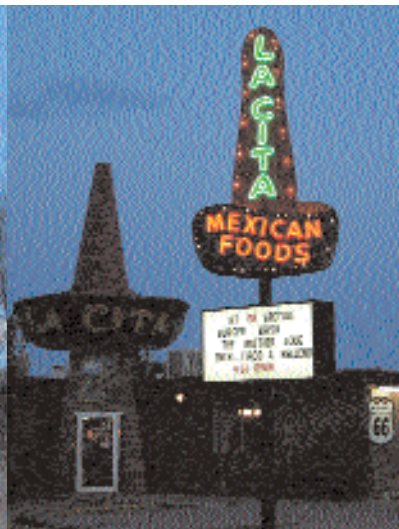
Blue Hole / Paul Evans



Paradise Motel / Johnnie V.



La Cita Restaurant / Johnnie V.



Dinosaur Museum / Mesalands Community College



And the **La Cita Restaurant** (1961). Yes, a Mexican Sombrero adorns the La Cita. Furthermore the restaurant not only survived, it's thriving. Like TeePee Curios and the **Paradise Motel** farther west, La Cita's eye-catching neon has been restored. Up nearby South Second Street at night, the classic neon of the **Odeon Theater** (1936) beams back.

Be sure to visit the nearby **Tucumcari Historical Museum** in the city's red-brick, former school house (1904). An adjacent annex houses a permanent Route 66 history exhibit. A block away awaits **Mesalands Community College's** impressive **Dinosaur Museum**, which opened in 2000. It's got the world's largest collection of fossils and life size prehistoric bronze skeletons, like the fearsome Torvosaurus (a cousin of the T-Rex) and carnivorous, bird-like Struthiomimus.

Other roadside landmarks include the **Kiva RV Park** (which began as the **Rocking Horse Tourist Camp**, pre-1948); the **Cactus Motel-Camp** (circa 1940); **Ann's Corner** (the Venetian Courts, 1946); the **Economy Inn** (Rainbow End Court, 1955); the **Americana Motel** (Star Motel, circa 1935); the **Westerner Drive-In** (1947); **Redwood Lodge** (1955); and **Paradise Motel** (pre-1955).

Customers of the local **Lowe's Supermarket** love the Route 66 imagery on its walls and above its aisles. On West Tucumcari Boulevard is Arizona sculptor Tom Coffin's 1997 Cultural Corridors-funded Route 66 art work, a chrome tail lights-and-fins homage called **Roadside Attraction**.

West of Tucumcari's city limits, access vintage 66 at Interstate 40 Exit 321 (marked Palomas) and continue west. In the nearly deserted hamlet of **Montoya**, note **Richardson's Store**; the stone-block, tin-roofed mercantile was operational from 1925 through 1980.

Farther west is the Village of **Newkirk**, which sprang up, like Montoya, in 1901 as the CRI&PRR laid tracks west. Note the abandoned **Save 5 Cents Gas Station** (from the 1930s), **Wilkerson's Store, Gas Station & Motel** (operational in 1940-77), and the abandoned hipped roof, stone-block **Gulf Station & Store** (1930s).

West of Newkirk is the hamlet of **Cuervo**, settled in 1901. Its proximity to Santa Rosa kept its Route 66 services to a handful of gas stations and cafes. Although ripped in two by Interstate 40 in the 1960s, it hints at how close-knit it once was: along its south side, amid several abandoned homes, are a closed Catholic church and an abandoned WPA-funded elementary school.

Farther west is the city of **Santa Rosa**. Access Interstate 40 and pass the faded **Frontier Museum** complex, a Western-themed tourist trap (1952-53). Or pass under I-40 and head southwest, for a blissful jaunt along paved, rural 66 to U.S. Highway 84 on the outskirts of Santa Rosa.

The nearby **Santa Rosa Municipal Airport's** paved landing strip sits atop a segment of earliest 66. The east-west runway overlooks the **Santa Rosa Sink**, a broad bowl formed by the subsurface collapse of cavernous Permian rocks.

Santa Rosa owes its many freshwater lakes—hence its nickname, the City of Lakes—to the sink. Its most famous lake, famed **Blue Hole**, is a scuba-diving mecca.

Settled circa 1865 astraddle the **Pecos River**, Santa Rosa welcomed the first cattle drive north on the famed **Good-night-Loving Trail** (1867). But its Spanish heart lies four blocks south of post-1937 Route 66 amid the quiet ruins and graveyard of Don Celso de Baca's tiny chapel, **La Capilla de Santa Rosa de Lima** (1890), honoring St. Rose of Lima, the first canonized saint in the New World.

Its four miles of America's Main Street, once part Wills Rogers Drive, part Parker Avenue, and part Coronado Road, was recently unified and modernized into Historic Route 66. A westward drive encounters the **Silver Moon Budget Motel** (which began as the Silver Moon Motel, built circa 1943-45), tidy **La Mesa Motel** (1940) across from the closed **Rio Pecos Ranch Truck Terminal** (circa 1955), the **Sun & Sand Motel** (1965), the **Motel La Loma** (1950), and the **Tower Motel** (1950).

Tucked away near the Pecos River is a treasure, the once-regal **Coronado Courts**. Its curvilinear parapet and California Mission Revival architecture smile at its eight cozy bungalows and open-bay carports. It was operational from 1929 through 1972. From its courtyard, gaze north at the steel-trestle railroad bridge spanning the Pecos; it was immortalized in Ford's "Grapes of Wrath" film. Nearby is **Chief Auto Supply** (once a Texaco Service Station, 1937).

Santa Rosa is also prominently mentioned in the Joad family's cross-country California trek in Steinbeck's novel.

Road food awaits in the **Silver Moon Café** (1959), **Joseph's Bar & Grill** (once the La Fiesta Drive-In, 1956), **Sun & Sand Restaurant** (1966), and the gloriously neon-lit **Comet II Restaurant** (circa 1952). But the landmark **Club Café**, famed for its grinning **Fat Man** billboards, is closed. It was operational from 1935 to 1992.

Sun & Sand Restaurant / Johnnie V.

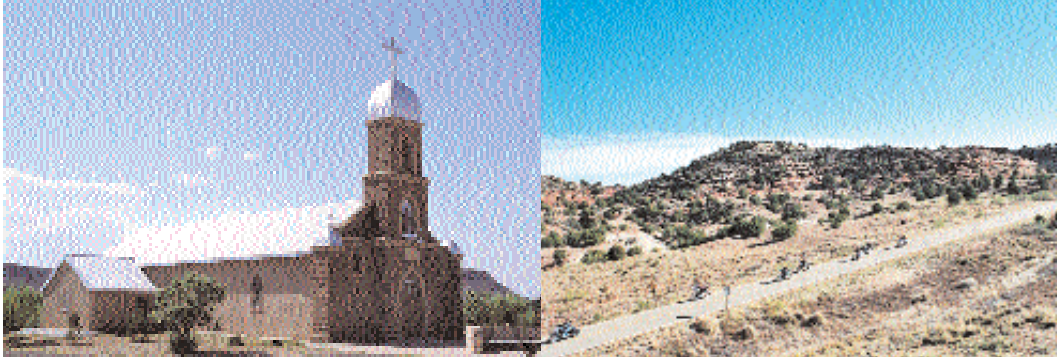


Route 66 Cafe / Johnnie V.



Route 66 Auto Museum / Johnnie V.





Nuestra Senora Refugio Church / Paul Evans

Mesalands / Courtesy of the city of Santa Rosa

Visit the glistening, memorabilia-filled **Route 66 Auto Museum & Malt Shop**, too. Amble among 60 carefully restored cars that underscored the route's golden era, humming to the continuous play of late 1950s rock and roll hits.

New Mexico's earliest alignment (1926-37) was a circuitous, washboard journey. Past Santa Rosa, westbound motorists turned north and passed the Pecos River Village of **Dilia**. In the hamlet of **Romeroville** (near Las Vegas), they turned west to the Village of **Pecos** and the capital of **Santa Fe**. By 1938, the state Highway Department had trimmed that route. Instead of turning northwest past Santa Rosa (approximating U.S. Highway 84), the new alignment let motorists continue west to Albuquerque and beyond.

As these motorists reached the Southwest, they encountered live rattlesnakes, teepees and turquoise jewelry, sagebrush and tumbleweeds, hogans and Harvey Houses, real Indians, blue skies and unending sunshine. Once in New Mexico, some of them traveled no further. In New Mexico, many of them realized, they had come home. That's still true today, as New Mexico's long segments of Route 66 lure classic car enthusiasts, hopeless romantics, eager history buffs, motorcyclists, and motorcoach passengers, all bound for yesterday.

## MESALANDS STATE SCENIC & HISTORIC BYWAY

Lengths: 14 to 102 miles (23 to 164 kilometers)

Duration: One Hour to a Half-Day

Elevation: 4,093 feet (1,248 meters) to 4,620 feet (1,409 meters)

Seventeen caliche-capped sandstone and siltstone mesas punctuate the seven unique segments of this byway surrounding the Route 66 cities of **Tucumcari**

and **Santa Rosa**. Some of this scenery was filmed by Second-Unit Director Otto Brower for the Joads' jalopy trek to California segment in John Ford's 1940 film, "The Grapes of Wrath."

The first two segments begin in Tucumcari. The third links Tucumcari and Santa Rosa and the last four begin in Santa Rosa. Find complete descriptions at [www.NEnewmexico.com](http://www.NEnewmexico.com). Here are highlights of two of the seven Mesalands tours.

From Tucumcari, drive a clockwise route to Santa Rosa. En route, pass through the hamlet of **Quay**, named for U.S. Senator Matthew S. Quay (R-Penn.), a Civil War Medal of Honor winner who died in office in 1904. To the west is **Saddleback Mesa**, a roost of 1890s train robber Thomas "Black Jack" Ketchum. Atop the Caprock is the hamlet of **Ragland**, settled in 1906. En route to Santa Rosa, traverse the broad, treeless **Alamogordo Valley**, which welcomed the Goodnight-Loving Trail. Passing **Luciano Mesa**, ascend wide **Sunshine Mesa**, a backdrop in Ford's film. Nearby to the north are **Cuervo Mesa** and **Mesa Contadero**. The final leg to Santa Rosa is paved, rural 66. (91 miles one way)

From Santa Rosa drive ten miles southeast on State Road 91 to the quiet Spanish Village of **Puerta de Luna**, settled in the 1860s. In PDL, visit the 1874 adobe-and-stone home and store of Alexander Grzelachowski. Not only did the Polish merchant know Billy the Kid, he hosted Pat Garrett, his posse, and the shackled young outlaw for an impromptu afternoon dinner on Christmas Day, 1880, as they were taking him to jail in Las Vegas. PDL's most imposing structure is **Nuestra Senora de Refugio Church**, built in 1882. Return the way you came or venture further east and take US Highway 84 back to historic Route 66. (30 miles round trip)

*Text and tour information by Michael E. Pitel.*

## NORTHEAST NEW MEXICO CONTACTS

For groups rates, lodging, restaurants and museums, plus annual events and other activities, contact:

### Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce

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505-472-3404; fax 505-472-3848  
info@srmn.org

### Tucumcari / Quay County Chamber of Commerce

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505-461-1694; fax 505-461-3884  
chamber@tucumcarinm.com

