

American Road Trip

America's historic Route 66 fascinates visitors from other countries

By Jim Winnerman
CONTRIBUTOR TO

THE CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR
ST. LOUIS - Soulsby's Shell station in tiny Mt. Olive, Ill., seems like an unlikely attraction for international tourists. The gasoline pumps, which first started dispensing fuel in 1926, have been dry since 1991. But its position alongside historic Route 66 draws scores of visitors from every corner of the globe each spring, summer, and fall.

Between 1927 to 1985, Route 66 stretched 2,448 miles from Chicago to Los Angeles and was a major thoroughfare for Americans traveling west. A John Steinbeck novel, a hit song, a television show, and several movies helped transform the stretch of

pavement into an international symbol of American wanderlust.

Today, tourists who want to experience the thrill of the wide-open road for themselves have taken to motoring what's left of the distance - sometimes even in vintage cars or astride Harley-Davidson motorcycles bought or rented especially for the trip.

"For the four of us it was the desire to see the 'real' America and to experience for ourselves the amazing pioneering spirit Americans had and to try to appreciate the trials endured on their search for a better life out West," says Michael French of southern England, who rented Harleys for a 2008 trip with his wife, Vanessa, and another British couple.

The international interest in Route 66 is extensive. There are Route 66 clubs in Norway and devoted Web sites in Romania and the Czech Republic. A Belgian man created the Historic

Route 66 Web site (www.historic66.com), which has complete turn-by-turn descriptions of the highway to help in trip planning.

With this kind of cult following, it's hardly a surprise that a now-defunct gas station on a remote stretch of highway has become a retro motorist's mecca.

Mike Dragovich, the owner of Soulsby's, says the little building that once pumped gasoline for travelers "is better known overseas than it is in this country."

Soulsby's status as an original Route 66 icon is exactly the type of attraction international Route 66 groupies want to see in person.

Linda Persson from Sweden and a friend rumbled along old 66 in 2007 in a 1975 Pontiac purchased especially for the trip. "Route 66 is just something everyone has heard about," says Persson. "When I told my grand-

mother what I was going to do, she knew right away what it was."

Swa Frantzen, who created the Historic Route 66 Web site, has made the trip twice with his wife. "Route 66 is seen everywhere as a symbol for adventure, freedom, being a rebel, being on the road, even rock 'n' roll," he says.

'Mother Road' legacy

The legendary pavement first aroused international interest in 1939 with the publication of John Steinbeck's novel, "The Grapes of Wrath." Steinbeck referred to the highway as the "Mother Road," and described how it represented a path of opportunity for people seeking a new life in the American West as they fled the Dust Bowl during the Depression.

The 1946 song "Get Your Kicks on Route 66," a musical travelogue of a journey along the

highway, has been recorded by more than 200 singers in several languages.

The early 1960s weekly television show "Route 66" featured two young men traveling across America in a Corvette and was rebroadcast overseas.

The 1969 movie, "Easy Rider," and more recently the 2006 animated feature, "Cars," featured the old road, too.

Friendly locals along the road

Of course, it isn't just the road, it's the communities and access to that overseas visitors feel is part of the draw as they drive across eight states (Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California) and through three time zones.

Add scenery that includes forests, prairies, desert, and mountains, plus the promise of a journey of a lifetime, and many feel it is a package hard to resist.

Persson says that as soon as she stopped to take pictures and talk to the locals, she knew exactly what Route 66 was all about. "It's the people. The more people we talked to the more fulfilling our trip was."

Mom-and-pop diners and 1940s-style motels still thrive along the route.

At Skippy's Route 66 restaurant in tiny Leasburg, Mo., Denise Basham goes out of her way to engage international visitors in conversation and to make them feel welcome. She recalls four men from Spain who spoke no English. She had no idea what they wanted to eat until one said, "Moo!" "I brought out a hamburger and a steak, and they pointed to the steak. I added French fries and a salad and everyone was happy," she says. Original stretches of pavement predominate as cherished vacation memories.

Persson says her favorite part was a section in Oklahoma that dated from the 1930s. "It is the longest preserved stretch of all of 66. I just loved driving it," she says.

Motorcycles are a popular way to make the journey. One-way rentals of a Harley-Davidson are big business at the EagleRider Motorcycle Rental in Chicago, where about 60 percent of the customers for the Route 66 trip are foreigners.

French, the English motorcyclist, says that a trip on Route 66 had long been a dream of his. And because his wife had read "The Grapes of Wrath," she was eager to go, too.

In Springfield, Mo., Dominick Cricchio, who manages the sale of clothing at Denney's Harley-Davidson store, says that he's had visits by several groups of at least 50 motorcyclists from Norway.

"Last year we had a group of 10 from Mexico," he adds. "Instead of stopping for repairs, most want to buy dealership patches and pins or T-shirts to show where they were. One group of Japanese riders stopped to trade pins and patches."

A famous Englishman also made the trip in 2008. Paul McCartney drove the entire route, leaving a legacy of memories at the Route 66 stops he made.

Yet one of the more unusual contingents to make the trip were 10 men and women from England who shipped five Austin 7's to the U.S. and drove the highway at 50 m.p.h. in the vintage cars. One of the couples enjoyed the adventure so much that they returned to do it again in 2008 - but in a full-size rental car.

Philly Casino Licensee Has 20-Year-Old Drug Record

PHILADELPHIA (AP) - Some state lawmakers are unhappy that a Connecticut tribal leader got a license to operate a planned Philadelphia casino despite a two-decade-old drug conviction, but a gaming board official says another state law barred that from being a factor.

Michael J. Thomas, 40, chairman of the Mashantucket Pequot tribe, was sentenced in 1988 to 18 months in a Rhode Island prison and placed on probation until 1994. The tribe is a partner in the Foxwoods Casino project, first proposed along the Delaware River and now sought at a downtown shopping mall.

Under Pennsylvania law, a felon cannot get a gaming license within 15 years of serving out a sentence.

But R. Douglas Sherman, acting chief counsel for the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board, said the 2006 award of the license was allowed by another Pennsylvania law that bars the use of expunged criminal information from consideration for a license or permit.

"If an applicant had a conviction which had been expunged, it would be impermissible for any licensing body to make a decision based upon that conviction," he said.

Rhode Island expunged the criminal record of Thomas, who was eligible for such relief in 2004. The Philadelphia Inquirer reported Saturday. The paper said Thomas did not respond to a request for an interview.

An article Friday in The Day of New London, Conn., drew renewed attention to Thomas' background.

Lori Potter, a spokeswoman for the Mashantucket Pequot Tribal Nation, said all disclosure required by the Pennsylvania Gaming Control Board "was adhered to during the process of his application."

Former board chairman Thomas "Tad" Decker said he and other members did not know about the conviction, but the board should not get evidence it could not use when considering applicants.

"Our board was never informed of this, and appropriately so," Decker said.

But Senate Majority Whip Jane Orie, R-Allegheny, said the 2004 law requiring disclosure of criminal records should have overridden the 1979 law regarding the use of expunged information.

"You try to err in favor of not violating the statute - and they (the board) seem to go in the opposite direction," she said.

Democratic state Sen. Lawrence M. Farnese Jr., whose district includes the proposed casino, said the license award "should be a red flag."

GOP state Sen. John Rafferty said "no one convicted of a felony should be part of gaming in Pennsylvania" and called for the law to be changed.

Pa. Fire Kills Mother, Daughter

WILBURTON, Pa. (AP) - State police say a fire that killed a mother and daughter in northeastern Pennsylvania appears to be accidental.

The fire killed 84-year-old Minnie Alice Brassington and her 52-year-old daughter, Gloria. Police say it started near a stove in the kitchen of the home in Wilburton, which is in Columbia County and is about 85 miles northwest of Philadelphia.

The fire broke out early Friday afternoon.

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