

Culture | The wheel deal

# Route 66: How a century-old highway helps explain America

Driving from Chicago to Santa Monica you glimpse the best aspects of the country

Jul 2nd 2026 | CHICAGO TO SANTA MONICA | 6 min read

Though it began as a motley stitching of state and local roads—not until 12 years after its inauguration did it become the first fully paved American highway—it quickly became the main route west, passing through eight states. Farmhands used it to flee the Dust Bowl; so did workers, many of them African-Americans from Texas and Oklahoma, who flocked to California’s booming industrial base after the second world war; merry holidaymakers travelled along it to Los Angeles. During Route 66’s early years, more people got behind the wheel, thanks to [Henry Ford’s affordable Model T](#). Services for drivers flourished, including petrol stations, diners and motels, as did the small towns through which the route passed.