

The Longest Stretch

My first clue was the Joshua Tree — an outlier, I thought, in the Sonoran Desert. Then a flurry of them, and a humble sign by the roadside that said simply, “Joshua Trees.” Leaving the Wild-West-themed small-town clamor of Wickenburg, headed for Kingman and Route 66, I had no idea what was ahead of me. I didn’t expect the Mojave Desert so soon, but there, in fact, it was—on the edge of the more familiar Sonoran with its lush life. A few saguaros, wearing their spring-hat white blossoms, mingled with the Joshuas.

The two-lane highway climbed steeply, and the view opened up. Desert mountains rose, tan and grey, shadowed in the afternoon sun, with names I’d later learn: Arrastra, Wabayuma, Aquarius. I saw a turnoff for Burro Creek Campground and earmarked it for a future trip. And then, the Burro Creek canyon itself — a stunning cleft with tall slate-grey walls. I left my heart in Burro Creek Canyon; call it the Silver Gate.

But onward I must go, to my night’s lodging. I am headed for Route 66. Here in Arizona is the longest stretch of original Route 66 still remaining, not covered up by interstate highways. I am heading back in time, with the excuse of having turned sixty-six on my last birthday, and in honor of my brother Steve, who passed away before he could make the last big road trip he desired. Nostalgia and a lower speed limit can also lead forward, and that’s why I’m here: to engage in that great American fantasy/pastime/dream of making new.

The Kingman Visitor Center and Arizona Route 66 Museum is in the old power plant by the railroad tracks in downtown Kingman. I buy a postcard and a few kitschy items (mustn’t one?) and then head upstairs to the museum, where a friendly docent welcomes me, and displays teach me the early history of the road through Arizona, the hardships of the Dust Bowl era, and a few good Burma Shave rhymes.

Now I’m headed south on Route 66, along the railroad tracks through a canyon, and already I’m going too slow for the trucks that are headed somewhere. I pull over to let them go by and take my time with the rounded reds and tans of rock. In my imagination, a train passes, and it might be the 40s before I was born. I’m driftin’ along....

All too soon I make the turn westward towards Oatman. Here Route 66 crosses the broad Sacramento Wash. Driving at the 45 mph speed limit, I’m surprised at how much more I see. As the road starts to climb the Black

Mountains, I honor the speed limit of 15 mph because I have to—the curves are sharp, the grade steep, and the dropoff real. The views up here are vast. They're studded in the near view with pillowed, jumbled, pillared rocks, and farther off there's nest of mountain ranges beyond distant Kingman.

Of Oatman, I've been told to expect wild burros in the streets—descendants of burros turned loose by early miners—and a wildly-decorated-with-dollars saloon and café. I find a bit of a Disneyland: store after store selling Wild West kitsch, numerous places to buy burro feed pellets, a boardwalk-era Love Meter (from “Clammy” to “Uncontrollable”). Two adult burros and a young one, with a sticker on its forehead that reads “Don't Feed Me,” belly up to an accustomed spot, an unhitched hitching post, for photos and snacks. There they mingle with motorcycles and children. And hippos.

One of the things about my brother: he loved hippos. He had quite a collection, but his favorites were two small pink beanbag hippos that had been with him for 45 years. Harold and Harriet had taken turns joining me and my siblings on our big trips: to Sweden, Tanzania, Peru. Later Harvey joined the family. He's the same model as Harold and Harriet, but noticeably less faded. Since my brother's death, I take the hippos with me on my travels and send photos — and messages in hippo-speak — to Steve's 18-month-old grandson Evan, care of his mom.

They enjoyed their time in Oatman.



Down the mountain and across the wide Colorado. For the crossing and a few miles after it, you must take I-40, but then it's back on Route 66 to Needles, where Harvey the hippo posed by the historic Harvey House Hotel. From here, Route 66 hops on and off the interstate. I get off to take an early 66 alignment to the hamlet of Goffs, where there's a schoolhouse museum. "Hamlet" may be an overstatement, as Wikipedia lists the population at 23. I found the museum closed, but two minutes later a young man on a golf cart drove up and asked if I'd like him to open it. He is the caretaker, and proudly told me of the 75 acres of grounds, the nature trail, the displays of mining equipment, an old phone booth with quite a history you can go and ask him about.

"Do you live here?" I asked him.

"Yes. When I applied for the job, I asked 'What's the downside?' They told me, 'You'll be living in the middle of nowhere.' I asked, 'And what's the downside?'"

I said it seemed very quiet and peaceful. "Except when the train goes by, it is," he agreed.

I drive on, through middle-of-nowhere desert, to Roy's in Amboy. There's not much else in Amboy other than the stunning view of Amboy Crater, an almost-perfectly-symmetrical cinder cone. Roy's is the main attraction. It was a motel, service station, and café in the heyday. It's now being very gradually restored. The parking lot was full of visitors posing with the vintage cars and buying hot dogs and root beer outside the office of the old filling station. Standing in the heat by the road, seeing miles of nowhere in either direction, it's easy to imagine the feeling of oasis for early travelers.

I'm going to leave Route 66 now. I'll be back in July, headed east from Flagstaff on a concert-and-sightseeing tour with my old friend and partner in travel and music, Paul Oorts. Keep your radio on...

