



### Details

- **Where:** USA
- **Start/finish:** Chicago to Los Angeles
- **Distance:** 2,500 miles approx
- **Photos:** Harry Lyons, Celia Parker



**HARRY LYONS &  
CELIA PARKER**

*Cycling UK  
members*

Their tours have included North & South America, Europe, and Asia

## Great Rides

# BICYCLE ROUTE 66

Cycling UK member **Harry Lyons** and partner **Celia Parker** got their kicks on the iconic tourist trail from Chicago to Los Angeles

**T**he metal sign on the lamppost was battered and rusted, neglected like the historic house it marked, but I was thrilled. I was looking at the Victorian red-brick house that Muddy Waters had bought in 1954 in Chicago's South Side.

We'd flown into the Windy City because I'd discovered the Adventure Cycling Association's maps for Bicycle Route 66. Route 66! A memory had surfaced of Chuck Berry's Juke Box Hits: "It winds from Chicago to LA, More than two thousand miles all the way". I had to do it.

### **SWEET HOME, CHICAGO**

Getting about Chicago by bike was incredibly easy. Historically it's a cycling city. At the end of the 19th century, two-thirds of US bikes were manufactured in the region, and its mayors have been actively pro-bicycle. By law, all new developments along Chicago's riverfront must include riverside access for pedestrians and cyclists.

It now has over 111 miles of dedicated cycle routes, the best being the 18-mile multi-use path running alongside Lake Michigan, the Lakeside Trail. We used that to take us nine miles out to Chicago's South Side to visit Muddy Waters' house.

We returned to base on the road via Blues Heaven, 2120 South Michigan Avenue, the former home of Chess Records, Muddy Waters, Howling Wolf, Little Walter, Willie Dixon, Chuck, Bo, and all the Brit blues boys who wanted to emulate the greats.

### **Do it yourself Getting there**

• Our Bike Fridays pack down into hard cases that convert into cycle trailers. With everything else stuffed into a 90L soft backpack, we can usually manage public transport to the airport and, by transferring items to hand luggage, meet long-haul baggage requirements. We flew direct from Heathrow to Chicago, then back from San Francisco after cycling the Pacific Coast Bike Route up from LA.

Our first day on the road was a wet one, albeit with compensations. We cycled past Anish Kapoor's astonishing Cloud Gate (probably the most popular of Chicago's many public works of art) and the Crown Fountains, with their ever-changing, LED-lit façades of a thousand different faces, and on towards the Buckingham Fountain, the official starting point of the Bicycle Route 66.

### **ABRAHAM LINCOLN'S TOILET**

Within two days of leaving Chicago we were in high summer weather, temperature and humidity both in the mid-90s (Fahrenheit). Our south-south-westerly route through Illinois shadowed Interstate 55, sometimes on its frontage road, sometimes on Historic Route 66, and sometimes on traffic-free trails, but always into a headwind. On either side, vast, flat fields, green with stubs of early corn, sprawled featureless to the horizon.

The trails were edged with flowering shrubs and perfumed by wild honeysuckle and jasmine. Birds sang. Deer and rabbits crossed our path. On the roads, the animals (raccoons, skunks, and opossum) were flattened and dead. There were no hedges, no trees outside of the towns – oases signalled from afar by giant agricultural buildings.

Most places had a 'Historic Route 66' claim to fame. Often it was a gas station, a Brobdingnagian statue, or a little museum. Further west, a staple is the barbed wire display, or branding irons, or cowboys'



▶ spurs. In Pontiac IL there was a Henry Creek Food Mart calendar from 1953 and a shovel used in the construction of Route 66. Treasures indeed!

Springfield supplied us with a surfeit of Abraham Lincoln. Statues, museums, and his actual house with his actual outdoor toilet in the backyard. And in his actual toilet, three seats side by side. The Lincolns were obviously a very close family.

The cycling through Illinois was mixed. We rolled along beautiful, traffic-free trails surrounded by greenery and birdsong and through characterful small towns, but we also experienced long hours on roads alongside the railroad and the Interstate. Ears battered by traffic noise, we struggled through a featureless landscape into a searing headwind.

### ESCAPE FROM ST LOUIS

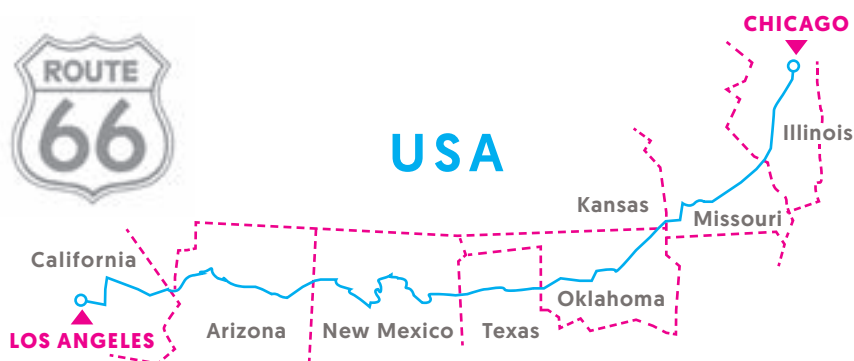
The Chain of Rocks Bridge took us over the Mississippi from Illinois into Missouri. What looked like a green waterfront trail on the map turned out to be largely industrial. Some of it ran along the top of the levee, affording glimpses of the mighty river to our left and, beyond the scrapyards and cement works, the forested hills of Missouri to our right.

As we neared St Louis, we entered a red-brick and rust zone of worn-out buildings and machinery, fantastic in appearance and unfathomable in function. They were like sets from a steampunk sci-fi movie. In fact, the Chain of Rocks Bridge was used in John Carpenter's *Escape From New York*, and the street scenes were shot locally, with East St Louis substituting for a destroyed New York. According to Debra Hill, the film's producer, the location manager was sent "on a sort of all-expense-paid trip across the country looking for the worst city in America". They found it in St Louis.

We never really saw the city proper, cutting west through its suburbs to cross the Missouri River at St Charles. There we picked up the Katy Trail, 250 miles of hard-packed, crushed limestone, a flat route through the corrugations of the Ozarks. From the end of the Katy Trail in Clinton MO, we pioneered a route through to Kansas and then down into Oklahoma using dirt roads.

We rejoined Route 66 at Baxter Springs, Oklahoma. The landscape changed slowly. Much was forested, rolling hills, a little less severe than the Ozarks in Missouri. But we were grateful when Tulsa reared up on the horizon with the promise of a rest day and big town sophistication, i.e. more beer choice than Bud, Busch, and Coors Lite.

If you're in Oklahoma and on 'the Mother Road', history is all about the Dust Bowl and the consequent flight of Okies to California along Route 66. Woody Guthrie was rooted in this history, and his experience of it contributed to his music and therefore to a whole stratum of singer-songwriters ever since: Dylan, Steve Earle, Springsteen, Billy Bragg. The Woody Guthrie museum in Tulsa was bang up to date, with interactive displays and a terrifying VR exhibit of an approaching dust storm.



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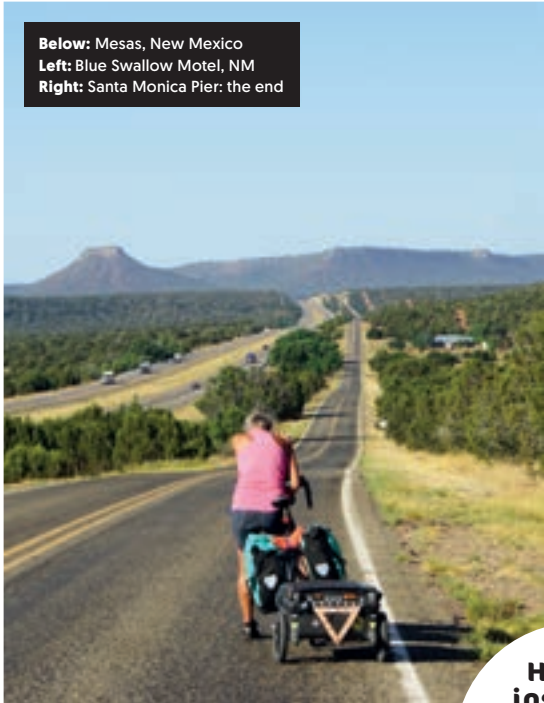
### OKLAHOMA: EVERYTHING GOING OUR WAY?

The following days saw us cycling a roller-coaster road through a landscape of forest and lush pastures, red soil, cattle, and horses. I wondered where the soil moved by the dust storms ended up and how they got it back to Oklahoma. Some places lost up to 75% of their topsoil.

Through West Oklahoma, the land continued to roll. Our road cut straight up and over every contour, bikes taking a battering on badly maintained 'pavement'. Tree cover thinned out and the fields became huge. As we moved into the Texas Panhandle, the land started to flatten out at about 3,500 feet. The skyline became dominated by grain elevators, those great churches of the plains, dwarfed themselves by huge wind turbines.

The small towns were sad and neglected: empty houses, doors ajar, with old cars and trucks rusting into the long grass. Although attempts were made

**Below:** Mesas, New Mexico  
**Left:** Blue Swallow Motel, NM  
**Right:** Santa Monica Pier: the end



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to attract Route 66 tourist traffic, they weren't always worth the detour. Groom had two 'attractions': the largest cross on Route 66 (not quite as big as a wind turbine); and the Leaning Tower of Texas (a water tower that leaned a bit). I was tempted by the Barbed Wire Museum in McLean...

**HEATSTROKE IN NEW MEXICO**

We left Amarillo TX and made a brief visit to Cadillac Ranch, moving on quickly from its tourist-and litter-strewn field to Adrian, the official Route 66 halfway mark. Shortly afterwards we were off the frontage road and onto the Interstate for 20 miles of smooth, rolling road through vistas of bleached white grasses, dotted with sage and the occasional stunted juniper.

Crossing the state border into New Mexico, distant mesas made a faint blue line on the horizon. Back on the frontage road, a solitary pronghorn antelope stood amongst the sage, watching as we cycled past. We'd seen little wildlife for a long time. Throughout Oklahoma our route had been spattered with roadkill. Approaching Tulsa we'd seen dozens of armadillos, all dead, some flattened like giant trilobites. Tulsa even has a craft brewery named after them: Dead Armadillo.

Leaving the iconic Route 66 town of Tucumcari at dawn, hoping to avoid the brutal afternoon heat, the wind turbines promised a headwind. I stopped for chocolate milk to boost flagging energy levels. It didn't help. I was done for, dead-eyed and exhausted. The temperature soared to over 100°F.

A gas station offered welcome shade and cold drinks. I needed both. I sat on the kerb with a huge Mountain Dew from the soda fountain while Celia

chatted to people about our travels ("Wow, cycling Route 66? That must be fun!"). I threw up on the kerb: sunstroke.

In the days that followed, we cycled through high desert, arid and sun-burned, gradually climbing. The vegetation changed from sage, dried grasses and small yuccas to piñon-juniper woodlands. Our journey from Santa Fe to Albuquerque skirted the southern end of the Sangre de Cristo mountains. There had been no winter, no snow, and therefore no snowmelt, making everything even drier than usual. Over the passes, the landscape had a stony stillness.

**TAKING THAT CALIFORNIA TRIP**

We knew that as we dropped in altitude, the temperature would rise and humidity fall. The weather forecast for places like Barstow and Needles (the hottest place in the US, sometimes the world) predicted temperatures of 44°C and over.

So we looked at the train schedule. It turned out that we couldn't just leapfrog the difficult bits by Amtrak. There was a stark choice: cycle the whole thing or take the train all the way from Albuquerque to LA. With some relief, we booked tickets for a 16-hour train journey to the end of Route 66. ●

**Fact file**  
**Bicycle Route 66**

**Distance:** We cycled 1,700 miles. Add another 950 from Albuquerque to LA.  
**Route:** Chicago to St Louis via Route 66. The Katy Trail across Missouri, then south through Kansas on backroads. Route 66 through Oklahoma, Texas, and New Mexico to Albuquerque. Train (\$20/bike) to LA.

**Conditions:** Some great trails, but frontage roads beside the Interstate were often hard going. Heat and humidity can be dangerous. We crossed tornado territory in tornado season...

**Maps:** Adventure Cycling Association [[adventurecycling.org](http://adventurecycling.org)] paper maps combined with their Bicycle Route Navigator app, which kept us up to date with where we were, the weather, and local facilities en route.

**I'm glad I had...** Schwalbe Marathon Plus tyres: no punctures, even from goat-head thorns.  
**Next time I would...** Try an early season start. Going east from LA to Chicago probably makes more sense too.

**i Read more**  
 Harry's account of Essex:  
[cyclinguk.org/cycle-magazine/great-rides-adventure-essex](http://cyclinguk.org/cycle-magazine/great-rides-adventure-essex)

