


A Road Warrior's Last Hurrah



A Traveling Trainer Retires His Rucksack, But Only After a Classic Car Road Trip

 By Frank Whyte

Installment Three: Exploring Route 66 with Those Zany Germans

This is part three of Frank Whyte's cross-country odyssey. A frequent business traveler, Whyte recently found his tether tightened by the arrival of a late-in-life child. His wife granted one last wish: a solo coast-to-coast road trip in a classic car.

The conditions? Whyte had to buy his "California car" on eBay for no more than \$2500, and he has to sell it upon his arrival in Maryland. In installment two, Whyte was found leaving L.A. Now, he's finding the good stuff.

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KNOCK KNOCK KNOCK!

So, I have no idea why I answered the door in my skivvies, but I did, and there's this maid standing there.

She said something in Spanish. I'm barely awake, but I know that I'll need to draw upon my slightly rusty — but still sophisticated — high school language skills to address this situation.

"No! Es solamente puerco espín ahora!" I said. (*"No! It's only porcupine now!"*)

"*Qué?*" she replied. ("Why are you still consuming my oxygen, you east-coast ninny?" [Body language and intonation must be considered in any accurate translation.])

Money being the universal language, I bought twenty minutes ("*Cinco y cinco y cinco y cinco minutos*") of shower and shave time. I gave her two dollars, which, I believe, converts to 37,000 Mexican patos.



The shower time is vital. On the road, a shower isn't simply a cleaning process; it is a refreshing ritual, a place of solace and renewal. The quality of the shower has a lasting effect on the quality of the day.

It's too bad that the online travel sites don't give unbiased reviews of hotel showers: "*While otherwise excellent, we've downgraded this luxury hotel to a tenth of a star because its feeble little showers (better described as 'drippers') feature pathetic little nozzles mounted at belly button height, and are surrounded by Saran-wrap-like shower curtains with a bizarre magnetism for damp torsos...*"

Leaving the motel, I'm reminded of the Lloyd Bridges line in the movie, *Airplane*: "It looks like I picked the wrong day to quit sniffing glue." I'm on a diet that's dissolved ten percent of my body mass. And here I am, out on my own, staring square-on at a Denny's.

Once, a Denny's waiter described the Meat Lover's Skillet to me as "ham, bacon and sausage over seasoned country-fried potatoes, topped with shredded cheddar cheese and two eggs, and served with your choice of bread." I think you can get it with gravy, too.

The customer's question is obvious: "Any cholesterol lost in that shipwreck, there, Skipper?" You need to know that this question is guaranteed to result in defective cuisine.

Fast-forward to the point: On day two of my adventure, amid a weight loss regime, should I hearken to the siren call of biscuits and gravy? Greg, my legal counsel, has advised me not to answer.

Today is Route 66 day. I'm off to see "The Mother Road," and I'm equipped with the maps and guidebooks necessary to locate the very best of this historic highway.

Very early on, I discover that Route 66 looks much better if viewed through a nostalgic filter. Touring Route 66 today is much like meeting your childhood hero in his empty-eyed declining years. You recognize and respect what was; you lament what is.

Barstow, California is a harbinger of experiences yet to come. Here, I search-out the historic 1911 Harley House train depot and Route 66 Museum to find that it's no longer available for tours, but is available for lease.

East of Barstow, as California's high desert gives-way to Arizona's high desert, I find stretches of "America's Main Street" lined with junk and devoid of life. I look to my trusty guidebooks for counsel. Soon, I'm pointed straight-up the side of a mountain, bound for Oatman, Arizona.





Geologically, this has to be some of the most captivatingly complex terrain you'll ever find. Drivers craving a good pretzel path won't find a more devious challenge. ("Look, ma, no guardrails!") You expect to find The Coyote just around the next turn, lacing-up the roller skates, sparking-up the Acme rocket.

But Oatman itself is a letdown. Publicized as an authentic gold-rush-era western settlement, this linear concession stand faithfully adheres to its heritage only if early prospectors sold a lot of sno-cones and cheap t-shirts to tourists driving rented minivans (badly).

The town's quaint reputation rides on a handful of stray donkeys that plod the streets panhandling sightseers for carrots (which are available in the shops, credit cards accepted, no reasonable offer refused, did you see the moccasins?). The donkeys are well fed, thanks to the throng of sunburned day-trippers ducking-out of the Laughlin casinos.

There may have been something awe-inspiring and life-changing in Oatman, something mentioned in the fine print of the billboards, something seldom exposed to direct sunlight, and something never proffered to strangers without official permission. If so, I didn't stay long enough to dig that treasure. I've traveled enough to know that one is wise to move on when the only choices involve spending money, loading-up on calories, or dealing with peddlers who cause you to recall a Rod Serling commentary.



Note to self: The best experiences aren't planned or expected; they are result of the surprises that one stumbles upon along the way.

A quick turn of the key, and the Nova is ready to stumble along with me again.

Pushing the mature machine from Oatman to Kingman, Arizona involved a real workout on the old loosey-goosey steering wheel and ill-mannered brakes. It was an act of energetic and creative manipulation much like The Wizard performed there behind the curtain, only I didn't have a curtain, and other drivers could see the calisthenics underway inside that car. I generally got a lot of space to myself.



Because I did work-up a little perspiration, and because the interior of my 33-year-old motorcar was just a bit gritty, I completely ruined my yard work clothes on this leg of the journey. I emerged from the car with the little Pig Pen stink clouds gathered around my ankles. It was shocking that Murphy's Law never engaged. I fully expected, at my grubbiest worst, to run across an old college buddy. ("So, um, Frank, could you, ah, use a couple of bucks or something?")

Later in the day, as I'm making some time on Interstate 40, I spot a ghost town, the central feature of which is a decaying stone building with a painted sign reading, "MOUNTAIN LIONS." And people are driving right by this. Tourists will spend a day in Oatman, but they



won't investigate a stone building labeled "MOUNTAIN LIONS?" Folks are funny.



I discovered the remains of Two Guns, Arizona, which sits on the edge of Diablo Canyon. The ruins here date as far back as the railroad days, but the most visible artifacts -- a bridge over the modest canyon, a set of bullet-riddled gas pumps, and the mountain lion pavilion -- recall this area's tourist trap heyday on Route 66.

Exploring Two Guns is a fascinating exploration of modern motoring history. Where else but in America will you find a genuine canyon fronted by genuine mountain lion enclosures? And where else can you find a snake as interesting as that one curled up right there? This is interesting stuff; too bad I can't stay.



I pass another Route 66 landmark: The Twin Arrows trading post. It's abandoned, but still shows-up in the guidebooks. The famous Jack Rabbit trading post is still in business, but aside from its landmark yellow "Here It Is" billboard, there's nothing spectacular about it. It's just a clapboard souvenir store with a fiberglass rabbit beside it. I suppose it's a fine rabbit and all, but you'd really have to be re-living fond childhood memories to appreciate a lot of the guidebook's recommendations.

And then, there's The Wigwam.

This Holbrook, Arizona landmark doesn't deviate a bit from its brochure billing. It's a genuine Route 66 motel comprising a dozen standalone concrete wigwams. "Spend the Night in a Wigwam!" the billboard urges. And I'm going to do exactly that, for \$46.62, taxes and color TV included. Sorry, no telephones.

Working the desk is Wigwam co-owner John Lewis, who's likely never met a stranger. It takes little urging to uncork his colorful observations on Route 66 tourism. He sees nostalgia continuing to grow, as a generation previously unexposed to the song and the TV show discover the back way through the Southwest.

And Lewis confirms this odd little suspicion I've been developing. Germans are invading the American Southwest. Certainly, there are other international tourists here, too, but not like the Germans. It's common to hear German conversations in restaurants, and in some places, the waiters join right in.

Lewis, who is cultivating business interests in Germany, explains that wide-open spaces are fascinating to northern Europeans. They travel to this country, and as Lewis puts it, "rent these big giant cars and just go crazy."



If the concept of Germans going crazy in big cars in the American Southwest isn't zany enough, get this: They love Native American art. According to Lewis, many of the world's foremost Tribal art experts are German. It's a fascination, Lewis explains, with something very foreign and very exotic to Europeans.

"There just aren't a lot of Indians in Germany," Lewis explains. I suppose, deep down, I may have suspected that.

Bidding Lewis "gute drehknopf" ("good knob"), I persuaded the Nova to rumble a few more feet, to the doorstep of Wigwam Number Eight. Inside, the room is a bit rustic, but I'm not really surprised. It's much like other small-town motels I've experienced, except that the walls slope inward. I suppose that shouldn't be much of a shocker either.



Since Internet access is out of the question, I was foolish enough to believe that I could watch some of that free color TV. [On] one channel, two wealthy but mind-bogglingly trashy girls were swindling money from farmers and truck drivers. [Click] People were eating grotesque African spiders for money. [Click] People were selling jewelry that appeared to be left over from carnivals. [Off]



Is the economy this bad?

I realized that I didn't yearn for TV, except maybe for the all-news channels, since they're now doing exposés on one another's political biases, which is a lot like sidewalk hot dog vendors snitching on each other to the health department.

The air outside was warm but dry as I took my before-bedtime walk. Wow, it felt good. I miss the girls at home.

Next Installment: [The Road Leads Home](#)

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