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TODAY**

NATIVE AMERICANS

2025

CELEBRATING NATIVE AMERICAN HERITAGE MONTH



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Artistic Appreciation

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Into handiwork

TRAVEL



The Natural Arrowhead landmark in California's San Bernardino Mountains is one of the last stops on the original Route 66. YUHA AVIATAM OF SAN MANUEL NATION

Mother Road's Centennial

Revving up for the ultimate Native American Road Trip

By Kit Bernardi

Route 66 travels 2,448 miles across eight states linking Chicago to Los Angeles. Roughly 1,372 of those miles cut through Native American Tribal land. According to the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, the homelands of 28 federally recognized tribes are within 50 miles of Route 66, as are ancestral territories of unrecognized tribes.

ROUTE 66 CENTENNIAL

Route 66 turns 100 years old in 2026, presenting the country an opportunity to authentically rewrite the narrative and reroute road trippers toward Indigenous tourism experiences on the Mother Road, so-named by John Steinbeck in his 1939 novel, "The Grapes of Wrath."

Sherry L. Rupert (Paiute/Washoe), CEO of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association, says, "Tribes' tourism initiatives preserve their

TRAVEL

cultures, support their economies and ultimately help visitors understand the diverse histories and lifeways of Native American people who have always lived on and protected the land surrounding Route 66."

Chicago is where Route 66 begins, and as it makes its way southwest, it crosses the Mississippi River passing the Cahokia Mounds State Historic Site, the largest pre-Columbian area north of Mexico. Its 72 earthen mounds sit across the river from St. Louis which was also once covered by similar mounds before urban growth razed all but one, Sugarloaf, which is owned by Osage Nation. In Gateway Arch National Park's free Museum Under the Gateway Arch, learn about the region's tribes and how westward expansion affected them.

Route 66 jogs slightly through southeast Kansas, and then Oklahoma, where it touches the jurisdictions of 14 tribes. The First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City showcases the lifestyle, culture and history of the 39 distinct tribes living in the state.

In northeast Oklahoma, Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. leads Cherokee Nation, the United States' largest tribe of more than 450,000 citizens. He says, "From a historical context, Route 66's development and infrastructure laid on top of natural resources in sovereign nations' territories was an extension of a country's past actions breaking promises to the Cherokee Nation. ... With those events in the rear view, Route 66's centennial celebration provides the country a tourism opportunity to reexamine and reinterpret history, which leads to greater understanding and respect."

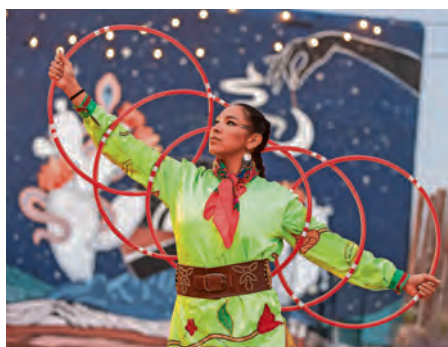
He recommends visiting Cherokee Nation Anna Mitchell Cultural and Welcome Center in Vinita, Oklahoma, along original Route 66, also known as Will Rogers Highway. In nearby Claremore, the Will Rogers Memorial Museum spotlights the Cherokee opinion leader and entertainer's global influence.

Route 66 stretches across the Texas panhandle's flat, sweeping plains where Comanche and Kiowa tribes once followed bison herds when they migrated across the land. Crossing into New Mexico, the road rises into a ghost town dotted high desert. On the way to Santa Fe, motor through Tucumcari's



Pueblo women sell pottery in Grants, New Mexico, which is along Route 66.

PROVIDED BY THE HAAK'U MUSEUM



Hoop dancer Shandien Sonwai LaRance performs at Mystic Echus in Santa Fe, New Mexico. SHANDIEN SONWAI LARANCE & MYSTIC ECHOS

TRAVELING THE MOTHER ROAD

To build an authentic Route 66 itinerary, refer to the American Indians & Route 66 guide published on americanindigenoustourism.org.

trapped-in-time Route 66 roadside buildings, such as the Tee Pee Curios gift shop. The town's name is derived from the Comanche language's word "Tukamukaru," meaning "to lie in wait for someone."

The original Route 66 passed through the heart of Santa Fe. Stop in the state capital to tour the immersive Museum of Indian Arts and Culture on Museum Hill. Santa Fe School of Cooking hosts chef-taught, Native American cooking classes and the IAIA Museum



"A Bundle of Seven Arrows" sculpture stands at the Anna Mitchell Cultural and Welcome Center in Vinita, Oklahoma. CHEROKEE NATION

of Contemporary Native Arts exhibits up-and-coming Native artists' works. Hoop dancers sometimes perform in nearby Historic Plaza, a former Tewa settlement.

In Albuquerque, the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center explores the diverse cultures of New Mexico's 19 sovereign Pueblo nations. The museum's Indian Pueblo Kitchen restaurant serves seasonal Indigenous foods.

Continue west to Acoma Pueblo's Sky City crowning a 367-foot-tall mesa. Spread across 60 mesa-top acres, 500 village structures dating back to 1150 A.D. compose the oldest continuously inhabited community in North America.

"Structurally, we know this by carbon dating timbers used to construct

20 three-story buildings made of sandstone, mud mortar and mica mineral glass windows," says Acoma Pueblo historian, tour guide and potter Brandon "Turtle" Valdo.

Valdo's tours depart from Sky City Cultural Center and Haak'u Museum, where guests learn about the Acoma Pueblo people's prized coil pottery decorated with intricate geometric line designs. Valdo says that in the 1930s his great-grandmother, like many Acoma Pueblo women, sold their pottery to tourists driving through the valley on Route 66.

HEADING TOWARD THE COAST

Route 66 enters Arizona near Window Rock, the Navajo Nation's capital. Navajo Nation Museum traces Diné heritage and culture. Families love the Navajo Nation Zoo, the only tribally owned zoo in the country.

Visit 1878 Historic Hubbell Trading Post. Along the Hopi Arts Trail, observe basket-weaving artisans and silversmiths at work, then stop by the Explore Navajo Interactive Museum in Tuba City. Before leaving Arizona, the road winds toward stunning views at the Little Colorado River Gorge not far from the Grand Canyon's east rim.

The iconic road begins its California journey in San Bernardino County's 7.4 million-acre ancestral territory of the Maara'yam people, also known as Serrano. This name given to them by Spanish Catholic mission colonizers means "highlander." The Yuhaaviatam of San Manuel Nation, a Serrano people, are based in Highland. Yuhaavitam translates to "People of the Pines."

James Ramos is past chairman of the tribe, the first Native American elected to the California State Assembly, and cofounder of the San Manuel Nation Cultural Awareness Program. He is also a member of the San Manuel Bird Singers who perform throughout Southern California and at the annual San Manuel Pow Wow. The songs they sing share deep ancestral knowledge of the land and how to live with it while respecting all the people who exist upon it.

Ramos says, "My wish for everyone traveling Route 66 is to move forward into a world of acceptance of Native American perspectives and, in all things, listen to the voices of this country's first peoples."