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Illinois Gears Up for the Route 66 Centennial in 2026 with Exciting New Attractions, Experiences and Events

CHICAGO — As the world prepares to celebrate the 100th anniversary of America's most iconic highway, Illinois is leading the charge with a slate of new attractions, immersive experiences and major events designed to honor the legacy and the future of Route 66. From vintage murals and larger-than-life Muffler Men to Route 66 classic car events and traveling the "Mother Road" by electric vehicle, Illinois is embracing Route 66's centennial with passion and pride.

"As we approach Route 66's 100th anniversary, Illinois is proud to celebrate the legacy of the Mother Road with new experiences for today's travelers," said **Cory Jobe, Chair of the Illinois Route 66 Centennial Commission**. "With restored icons, interactive exhibits, and unforgettable roadside stops, there's never been a better time to explore Illinois' 301 miles of America's most legendary highway. From Chicago to the Chain of Rocks Bridge, the centennial is a statewide invitation to rediscover the magic of the open road."

"We're proud to preserve the nostalgia along The First Hundred Miles of Route 66 in Illinois, while embracing the exciting new experiences taking shape ahead of the centennial celebration," said **Bob Navarro, President & CEO of Heritage Corridor Destinations**. "The centennial is a chance to spotlight the hidden gems that make our state so fun to visit — from quirky roadside attractions like the Gemini Giant in Wilmington to classic dining experiences like the White Fence Farm in Romeoville."

"Springfield's deep connection to Route 66 makes it the perfect place to celebrate this historic milestone, with unique attractions like the restored Shea's Gas Station Museum and the Illinois State Fair Route 66 Experience and Legends Neon Sign Park drawing fans from around the world," said **Scott Dahl, Director of Visit Springfield**. "We're excited to welcome visitors to get their kicks on Route 66, in the Land of Lincoln."

New Route 66 Experiences in Illinois

Chicago: Wayfinding, Art and Urban Exploration

As the starting point of Route 66, Chicago is reimagining its connection to the road. Chicago recently unveiled a [series of wayfinding signs along Ogden Avenue](#), highlighting the road's historical significance and guiding travelers through some of the city's most vibrant neighborhoods. A new mural and photo backdrop at Lulu's Hot Dogs in the Tri-Taylor neighborhood brings added charm to this urban stretch of the Mother Road.

Along The First Hundred Miles, there are many photo opportunities including prison gates from Blues Brothers movie at Old Joliet Prison; 24-foot Gigantar exterior sign at the Illinois Rock and Roll Museum; neon signs and murals at Joliet's Broadway Greenway park; and Route 66 Shield Community Monuments in Berwyn, Burr Ridge, Oak Brook, Countryside, Willowbrook, Darien, Bolingbrook, Romeoville, Lockport, Crest Hill, Joliet, Channahon, Gardner, Wilmington, Dwight and Pontiac. For your Route 66 souvenirs, shop at The Landing Pad just steps from the Gemini Giant in Wilmington.

Central Illinois: Rediscovered Road and Celebrated Art

Opening in late June 2025, a newly restored quarter-mile stretch of [original Route 66 pavement in Carpenter Park](#) near Springfield will welcome visitors to walk a forgotten chapter of American history. Alongside the scenic Sangamon River and the historic "Old Iron Bridge," this untouched segment offers a rare glimpse of the 1920s-era road.

A major art exhibition honoring the life and work of [Route 66 icon Bob Waldmire](#) will open at the Pharmacy Gallery & Art Space in Springfield in July 2025 and run through December 2026. Famous for his whimsical maps and deep affection for the Mother Road, Waldmire's artwork continues to inspire travelers and artists across generations.

In Bloomington and surrounding McLean County, discover four new [Route 66-themed murals](#) by artist Troy Freeman to commemorate the iconic highway.

Southwest Illinois: Granite City's "Larger Than Life" Attractions (Opening Summer 2025)

This summer, Granite City will unveil a series of supersized roadside attractions along Route 66, including:

- **Muffler Men Statues** – Two new fiberglass giants: a 20-foot-tall Blue Collar Worker named Rusty and a 15-foot-tall Auto Mechanic named Earl
- **Fork in the Road** – A 20-ft metal sculpture
- **Make It Toy** – A giant tribute to the iconic Tinker Toy
- **Granite Wear** – Massive enameled cookware honoring local industry

The newest Route 66 attraction to open in Granite City is the [It's Electric Neon Sign Park](#), illuminating restored neon signage that once defined Route 66 after dark.

Classic Icons Return & New Stops Open

- [The Gemini Giant](#), a beloved 30-foot-tall "space-age" Muffler Man, now stands at his new home in South Island Park in Wilmington. Just steps away, visitors can explore The Landing Pad, a newly opened Route 66-themed souvenir shop.
- [Old Joliet Prison](#), true to its historic and notorious legacy, the prison now takes its rightful place as an authentic, unique asset that is inextricably linked to the history of Joliet, the state of Illinois, and people impacted by crime and punishment. Also, film location for Blues Brothers (1980) and Prison Break (Season 1, 2005-2006).
- [The Old Cannonball Jail](#) in Carlinville reopened as a tourism attraction in 2024.
- [The American Giants Museum](#) in Atlanta (opened 2023) is dedicated to Muffler Man statues and history, featuring a collection of roadside 'giants' manufactured by the former International Fiberglass Company.
- [Shea's Gas Station](#) in Springfield was renovated to reopen as a Route 66 Museum in 2024.
- [The Motorheads Museum](#) in Springfield added a new Muffler Man and boasts the World's Largest Route 66 Sign.

- [Legends Neon Sign Park](#) at the Illinois State Fairgrounds in Springfield glows with recreated signage from legendary Route 66 businesses.
- A [Route 66 Mural Trail](#) now spans 11 southern Illinois towns, celebrating the great American road trip in vivid color.

New Lodging Experience

In Edwardsville, the [Urban Collective](#) boutique hotel opened in late 2023 inside the historic McCorkle Building, offering travelers a stylish and historic stopover.

Electric Vehicle Travel on Route 66

The new [“Zero Emissions on Route 66”](#) itinerary guides EV drivers from **Chicago to Collinsville** through a network of charging stations and welcoming communities embracing a greener future.

2026 Route 66 Centennial Events in Illinois

Illinois will mark the centennial of Route 66 with a year-long series of signature events, starting with educational programming and culminating in a grand celebration.

Highlights Include:

- [Red Carpet Corridor](#) (May 2026; multiple locations between Joliet and Bloomington). Celebrating the start of the classic iconic road trip with live events across several communities.
- [The Great Race \(June 15-19, 2026, Springfield\)](#): A nine-day classic car rally that spans more than 2,300 miles and features 120 of the world’s finest antique automobiles. The race will kick off in Illinois’ state capital of Springfield and make an overnight stop in Collinsville during the World’s Largest Catsup Bottle Festival.
- [Illinois State Fair \(Aug 13–23, 2026, Springfield\)](#): The Route 66 Experience and neon exhibits will take center stage during the state’s premier summer event.
- [International Route 66 Mother Road Festival \(Sept 25–27, 2026, Springfield\)](#): The 25th edition of this fan-favorite returns with vintage cars, live music, food, and the nostalgia Route 66 fans love.
- **Last 100 Miles of Route 66 Festival (Oct 2026, Multiple locations in Southwest Illinois)**: Celebrating the final stretch of the road in Illinois with live events across multiple towns.
- **Route 66 Bike Race (Oct. 2026, Madison County)**: Participants can enjoy a timed bike ride along Madison County Route 66 Trails in Collinsville, Granite City, Edwardsville, Hamel and Troy.
- [Miles of Possibility Conference \(Oct 2026, Springfield\)](#): Annual gathering for historians, preservationists, and tourism professionals focusing on the road’s cultural impact.
- [Route 66 Centennial Conference \(Nov 11, 2026, Springfield\)](#): A full day of sessions on preservation, economic development, and future planning for Route 66. A ticketed **Awards Gala** and **Epic Centennial Celebration at Motorheads Bar, Grill & Museum** will cap the day, with live music, special guests, and classic cars.

For a full list of Route 66 Centennial updates, click [here](#).

To download Route 66 images and video, click [here](#).

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