

USA

'Along the Loop Road, I felt the pure joy of biking'

EASY RIDER

Fifty years after the release of the classic film, Chris Coplans jumps on to a Harley and hits Route 66

I didn't do no drug deal, smoke weed or drop acid. Nor did I visit a brothel. But I did ride a Harley Davidson from the Californian desert to the bayous of southern Louisiana. When *Easy Rider* burst onto our screens 50 years ago, the super cool "Captain America" Peter Fonda (Wyatt) and the crazed Denis Hopper (Billy) did all of the above and, according to legend, much more. The low budget counterculture hit follows two hippie bikers who hit the road "looking for the real America". From the moment I set eyes upon Fonda's heavily customised chrome and steel Harley, with its iconic "Captain America"

'Pullquote, Austin deck light 16pt on 16pt. Pullquote, Austin deck light 16pt on 16pt'

ROMANTIC LIAISON
A mural at the Aztec Hotel



stars and stripes teardrop tank, gleaming in the Californian sun, I was on my imaginary "chopper" with him.

Technically, the movie starts in Los Angeles, as our banditos head for Mardi Gras in New Orleans, 2,000 miles (3,200km) away. However, the movie kick-starts 300 miles (480km) further east in Needles, California where the credits roll to the driving beat of Steppenwolf's classic *Born To Be Wild*. I headed to Needles on my modern Harley Davidson Sportster from Las Vegas, a much shorter and easier ride than from LA. Those pulsating opening credits were filmed along Route 66 between Needles and Flagstaff, a rip-roaring 200-mile (320km) ride to the east. I gunned my Harley into action and with a twist of the throttle and a rumble of the 1200cc V-twin engine, followed in their counterculture tyre tracks.

Route 66 climbs, winds and snakes its way through canyons and valleys, past abandoned mines, as it rises over 3,000 feet (914m) to the Sitgreaves Pass, 26 miles (41km) to the north. The air became crisper, the gradients steeper and the drops more precipitous as I zig-zagged my way to the summit. With its endless array of curves and corkscrews, the Sitgreaves Pass is a pulse-racing ride and you are amply rewarded with spectacular panoramic views of the Black Mountains and a blissful silence.

Kingman, 20 miles (32km) on, has crowned itself as the capital of the "Mother Road", as Steinbeck coined Route 66 in *The Grapes of Wrath*. The Arizona Route 66 museum, located in the Powerhouse Visitors Center (www.gokingman.com), is the best of a host of Route 66 museums stung out along its length. It chronicles the history of "America's Main Street". Willy Nelson's knock-off Rolls-Royce golf cart, complete with its own cocktail bar, is one of the museum's more eclectic oddities. Route 66 continues to climb



THE BIKES

The bikes caused nearly as much controversy as the film itself. Fonda purchased four police Harleys at auction in 1967 and had two *Captain America* and two Billy designs by some African-American bike-builders from Watts. One was blown up in the final sequence and the other three were stolen before the movie was completed (that is why you don't see the bikes in

the final camp fire scene where Wyatt tells Billy, "We blew it."). The fourth bike was restored by Grizzly Adams actor, Dan Haggerty, who was in charge of the bikes during the shoot. Allegedly he sold two "originals" to different buyers and to this day not everyone is convinced that the Captain America bike that sold at auction for \$1.35m (£840,000) in 2014 is the original.

north from Kingman towards the Grand Canyon, where the road becomes wilder and more spectacular. The landscape opens up and I rode across high-altitude desert prairies, dwarfed by huge mountain ridges. I reached Seligman, more of a street than a town, where I stayed at the quirky Aztec Motel (001 928 422 3055). The exterior walls are decorated with some racy images, including a flamboyant *Easy Rider* mural.

There are some easily identifiable locations as Fonda and Hopper ride through Flagstaff. The red brick hotel still stands at the corner of N Leroux St and Historic Route 66. And the red-shirted Lumberjack Muffler Man, who they ride past, still stands in the same location on South Milton Rd (Historic R66), albeit a smaller version and now sporting a yellow shirt.

I stayed in the historic 1929 Motel

BORN TO BE WILD
A scene from the cult 1969 movie *Easy Rider*



DuBeau (001 928 774 6731; modubeau.com) on the original Route 66. It's a charming example of early Route 66 motel architecture and design (I was delighted to learn that John Ford and

Fly direct to Bergen

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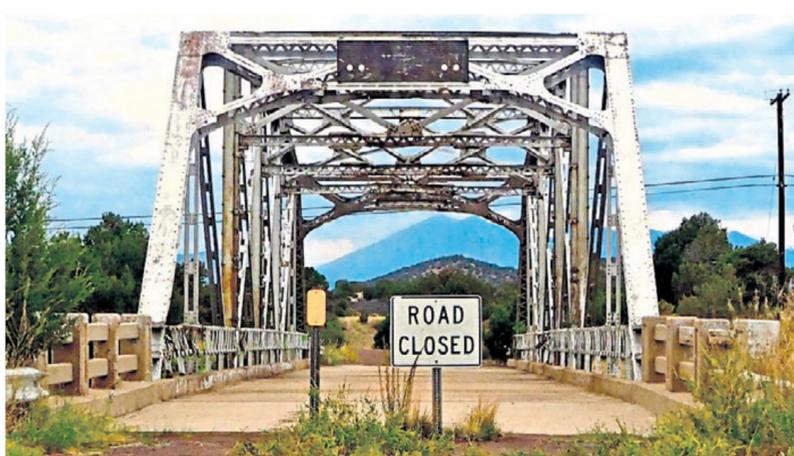
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MORE INFORMATION
VisittheUSA.co.uk; visitarizona.com; louisianatravel.com; visitutah.com/uk. Visit themovie district.com/easy-rider/ for Easy Rider sites on Google Street View.



John Wayne had once stayed there). Two of the most impressive bike sequences are shot after leaving Flagstaff and Route 66. The first is just 18 miles (29km) north of Flagstaff, off Highway 89. At an elevation of over 8,000ft (2,438m), Sunset Crater Volcano National Monument has pine-clad climbs and bends opening up to reveal huge desert vistas below. It is here that they pick up a hitchhiker to the sweet sounds of The Byrds' *Wasn't Born to Follow*. They shot several short sequences along the 33-mile (53km) scenic Loop Road and it was there I felt the joy of biking. There was a whisper of a breeze as the road opened up, a hint of lavender as I rode through the purple sage, and then the smell of pine as the road twisted through a steep alpine accent. I rode through the impressive Bonito Lava Flow. The Wupatki National

'With a rumble of the 1200cc V-twin engine, I followed in their counter-culture tyre tracks'

Monument, an Ancestral Puebloan ruin, just a short walk off Loop Road, is where the Monument Valley camping scene was shot. After gassing up at the now defunct Sacred Mountain gas station on H89 (junction of Road 150), Fonda and Hopper saddle up for what many consider to be the most stunning ride sequence of the movie. As they hit the road, the first chords of The Band's *The Weight* starts playing and the three-minute sequence takes them all the way to Monument Valley, 150 miles (240km) away. At one point, Hopper does a majestic sweep round Fonda's bike allowing the cinematographer, Laszlo Kovacs to open the shot up into the most magnificent panoramic shot of the high desert. Hopper actually hated bikes. "I was terrified of that bike," he said. His favourite time of day on the

shoot was apparently "seeing the bikes loaded back onto the truck". They ride through an intoxicating landscape, including the Blue Mesa rock formations on the edge of the Painted Desert, before gliding into Monument Valley for the most magnificent of sunset rides. My ride was not as carefree. In minutes, thick, ominous clouds cascaded through the mountain ridges as the temperature dipped, revving my anxiety level up to the red line. After what seemed like an eternity I rode into Kayenta, a Navajo reservation town. Then it all came together. As I entered the valley, the cloud thinned and evaporated and in a heartbeat, the sun broke through. The foreboding grey sandstone mesas, buttes and spires, turned pink, then a deep ochre. With every glance up, the sky changed colour and hue as the

HAVE BIKE WILL RIDE
Chris on his Harley Davidson at a local gas station, above; a disused bridge near Fairfax, top

light faded. My ride was every bit as exhilarating as when the easy riders rode through this ancient landscape. Unlike the movie, where they camped at the Wupatki ruins, I stayed at Goulding's Lodge (001 435 727 3231; gouldings.com), established as a trading post by Harry Goulding in the 1920s. It is one of only two hotels located in Monument Valley and still operates as a trading post today. It was Harry Goulding who introduced director John Ford to Monument Valley (the promptly shot *Stagecoach* and many other westerns there). Hopper, in his state of paranoia, was scared of setting foot in Texas, telling Fonda "they're cutting dudes' hair with rusty razors". The movie skips Texas and cuts to the Louisiana bayous, swamps and plantations. It picks up with a burst of Jimi Hendrix's *If I was 9* as they cross the Long-Allen Bridge over the Atchafalaya River from Berwick to Morgan City in the heart of Cajun Country. By this point I had spent 10 days on my own in the desert. I was now joined by a local Lafayette rider, Johnny Williams, who would guide me through the Louisiana back roads. Our first port of call was nearby Franklin. Franklin typifies small-town Louisiana and is little changed since *Easy Rider*. Fonda and Hopper ride down Main Street, lined with majestic live oaks, past the old Post Office, and Arlington and Alice plantations and a

second cemetery located along the Bayou Lafourche in Raceland, an hour to the east. The Mardi Gras scenes in New Orleans were shot around Canal Street and the French Quarter, and the notorious cemetery scene that caused so much indignation was shot, without permission, at St Louis #1 Cemetery. You can only enter the cemetery now with a licensed tour guide (twochickswalkingtours.com). It's a creepy, but fascinating place. The scene with Fonda clutching the statue was shot at the Italian Benevolent Society Tomb. The movie reaches its climax on nondescript North Levee Rd/Rt 105 (part of the Zydeco Cajun Prairie Scenic Byway) just outside Krotz Springs. A roadside marker now identifies the spot where Hopper gives the redneck truckers that fateful "finger" and they respond with both barrels. As we stood next to the marker taking photographs, two study locals alighted with bulging holsters on their hips. Were we trespassing on their land? Was life about to imitate art? It turned out they were concerned there had been an accident. "No wonder y'all lost the Revolutionary War," said one, with a grin the size of the Mississippi River, when I attempted to explain our presence. Thanks for the ride, boys, and rest in peace, Captain America.

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