

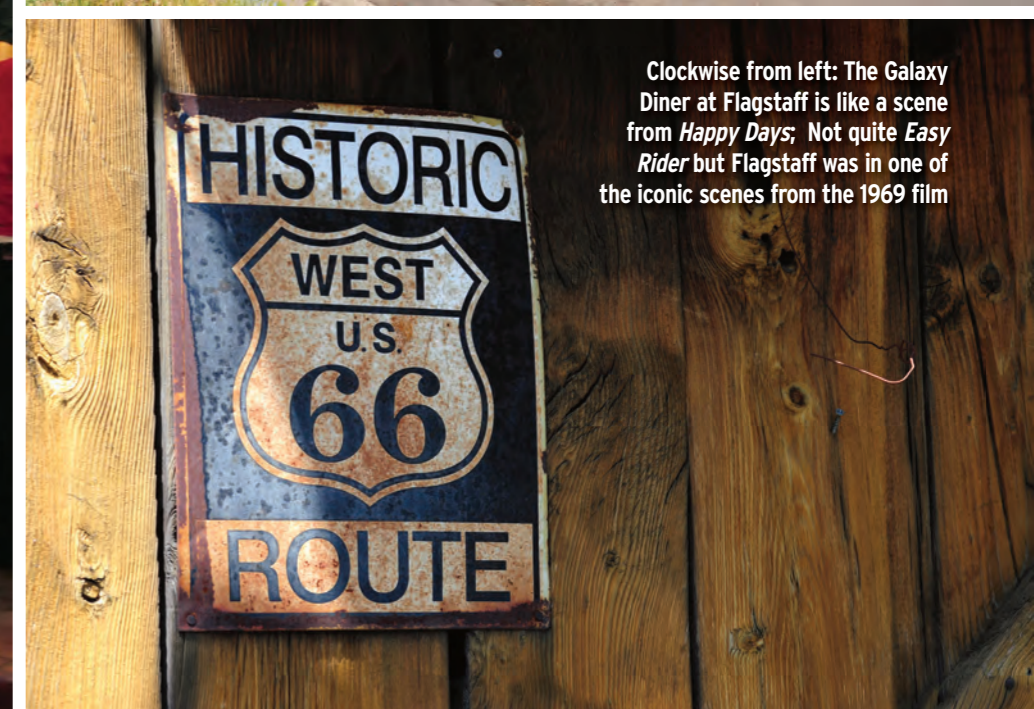
Route 66 through Main Street in Williams a mixture of neon, diners, souvenir shops and classic cars



# GET YOUR KICKS ON ROUTE 66

From a celebrated symbol of US popular culture to one of its most dramatic natural wonders, **Norman Wright** hits Route 66 heading for the Grand Canyon

PHOTOGRAPHY: CLIVE NICHOLLS



Clockwise from left: The Galaxy Diner at Flagstaff is like a scene from *Happy Days*; Not quite *Easy Rider* but Flagstaff was in one of the iconic scenes from the 1969 film

**N**ORTHERN ARIZONA is where nature meets neon. Standing on the rim of the Grand Canyon is like looking over the edge of the world, but that dizzy precipice is not far from another world – the jukeboxes and vintage Cadillacs of Historic Route 66.

Nature wins hands down, of course, but when you've spent the day marvelling at the Canyon, the Painted Desert, Monument Valley or the Red Rocks of Sedona – all thousands of years old – you can travel just a few years back to the 20th century in Route 66 towns like Williams,

Flagstaff and Winslow. Lit by the vivid red, pink, blue and yellow neon signs, the old cars with their bulbous bonnets or sharp rear fins sit outside diners where you expect to see The Fonz make an entrance at any moment.

Route 66 figured in much of the USA's 20th century history. It was once the principal east to west road link running from the Californian coast to Chicago. As such, the little towns on the way flourished as they provided food, fuel and motel beds for travellers. The route was soon described as Main Street America for this reason.

John Steinbeck dubbed it the 'mother road' in his 1939 classic *The Grapes of*

*Wrath*. It was the desperate route used by thousands of families ruined in the dust bowls of the Midwest seeking work in California, usually unsuccessfully.

Steinbeck wrote: "... and they come into 66 from the tributary side roads, from the wagon tracks and the rutted country roads, 66 is the mother road, the road of flight."

In the Sixties, Route 66 entered rock culture. Bobby Troup wrote the song *Get Your Kicks On Route 66* in 1946 but it became a standard when artists like Chuck Berry and the Rolling Stones covered it in the Sixties. Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper were shown riding through Flagstaff in the 1969 film *Easy*

*Rider*, and The Eagles' first hit, *Take It Easy*, written by Jackson Browne, featured the line "standing on a corner in Winslow, Arizona." Winslow has taken full advantage of this by placing a sculpture of a man with a guitar on a corner, which is now a regular photo-stop for tourists.

We drove up from the state capital, Phoenix, to Flagstaff on our way to the Grand Canyon. Up is the right description: it's a steady climb for the 130 miles, from 1058ft to 7000ft.

The compensation for the rarified air was that the temperature was about 20°F lower than the summer time desert further south. Route 66 was first

designated in 1926, its 2451 miles running from Chicago through Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Oklahoma, Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California, ending in Santa Monica. Sections were gravel or graded dirt until it was finally fully paved in 1938. It was rerouted and upgraded many times over the years before being replaced by the Interstate road system and removed as a US Highway in 1985. Since then some of the Arizona sections have been reclassified as Historic Route 66.

Flagstaff is one of those. The highway sweeps down into the centre of town past motels and the famous Galaxy Diner. The diner is all black, white and red with

booths, stools at a counter and an ancient jukebox belting out Elvis and the Everly Brothers. The food is excellent, too.

If you follow 66 into the town, you can park at the railway station. The visitor centre occupies part of the station building and you can pick up a walking tour guide there. This will take you across the tracks and on to the original route of 66. There's a stunning wall mural depicting the history of the route, then Flagstaff's famous first motel, the Du Beau Motel, founded in 1929 to cater for a 'better class of motorist'. It's now an international youth hostel.

As well as a few classic cars you see

Clockwise from main: Route 66 celebrated on this fantastic wall mural in Flagstaff; The railroad depot in Williams waiting for the Grand Canyon special to arrive; sculptor Neil Logan is one of the Route 66 attractions in his Williams studio. This is destined for the county police headquarters to honour their dog section; Route 66 in Flagstaff; Country music entertainers on the Grand Canyon train



plenty of motorcycles; the local motorcycle shop hires out Harleys by the day for visitors who want to cruise Main Street. On the walk you go past the giant 25ft lumberjack that was seen in the titles sequence of *Easy Rider*.

Back on the other side of the tracks are the shopping streets full of restaurants, bars and souvenirs, plus plenty of neon.

Flagstaff was founded by a group of settlers who stripped a pine tree of its branches and bark to raise an American flag on July 4, 1876. The stripped pine became a landmark for other pioneers heading further west until a group of

sheep ranchers made a permanent settlement. Even at 7000ft, the town is dominated by the San Francisco Peaks that reach 12,633ft. Sacred ground to many Native Americans, including five Apache tribes, the early slopes are home to the Lowell Observatory where the planet Pluto was discovered in 1930. Visitors can take a guided tour of the observatory and museum.

The Flagstaff area played an important part in the Apollo moon missions. A giant meteor crater about 35 miles from the town was used as training for the lunar module personnel and as a centre for studying

the geology of the moon. Our next stop en route for the Grand Canyon was the little town of Williams, the last of the Route 66 settlements to be bypassed by the Interstate.

The original 66 runs straight through town with bars, restaurants, diners and lots of souvenir shops. There's a speed restriction on the town section so everyone has to cruise the street at almost walking pace, creating a real Main Street America atmosphere, especially when the neon lights up at dusk.

We strolled along to Wild West Junction, a yard with a saloon, a B&B, shops and

sculptor-at-large Neil Logan's studio. Neil produces amazing works from small-scale up to life-size figures. His project when we visited was to sculpt a German Shepherd dog for a local police headquarters to honour the work of its canine section.

Also in the precinct is The Branding Iron steak restaurant run by the Mayor of Williams, John Moore. John joined us at the end of our excellent steak dinner. He is tall and lean with a dark moustache and dressed in jeans, cowboy boots, waistcoat and a large Stetson hat – every inch the Wild West lawman look.

This is not surprising as John first came

to Williams in 1985 as Chief of Police. Now he is an enthusiastic promoter of the town. Route 66 and the Grand Canyon are the biggest draw but he also points out that the town is in the middle of the world's biggest Ponderosa Pine forest with hundreds of walking trails and outdoor activities. There's also a drive-through wildlife park called Bearizona and water sports on Lake Cataract.

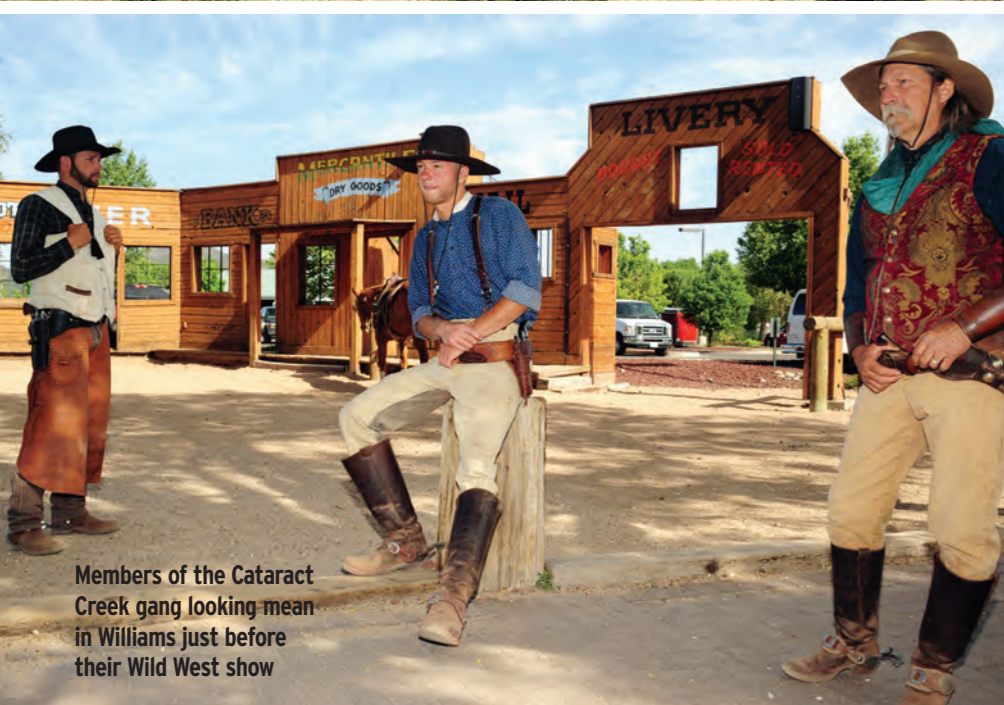
### The Grand Canyon

Williams is the gateway to the south rim of the Grand Canyon whether by road or, best of all, on the train that runs there every day.

We stayed overnight at the Grand Canyon Railway Hotel, walked across the street for a great breakfast at the Grand Depot Café and took our seats in the stands for the Wild West show before climbing aboard our luxury parlour for the trip to the canyon. The show was put on by the Cataract Creek Gang – named after the stream that trickles its way across the high plains to Havasu Gorge, a side branch of the Grand Canyon, before, boosted by spring waters in the ancient Indian Reservation, it plunges via several falls into the main Colorado River.

The gang are consummate performers,

Big sky on the rail trip to the Grand Canyon



Members of the Cataract Creek gang looking mean in Williams just before their Wild West show



The southern rim of the Grand Canyon gives a great view of this wonder. It's a mile down to the white water of the Colorado River

dressed tough but great with the audience. The show comes to a conclusion with a gunfight that in true screen Western style ends with the marshal triumphing.

Then it's all aboard the train for a gentle couple of hours through Old West country.

On board we shared our parlour car with several vacationing American families, including a New Orleans ship pilot who had driven up in a motorhome through Texas and New Mexico and was bound for northern California on a four-week trip.

The car attendant served a buffet and

gave us lots of information and tips on what to do and how to enjoy the canyon. Strolling us on their way through the train.

It made steady progress through the Ponderosa pines then past little groups of cattle and the odd home with barn, stockyard and water pumping windmill. The range and sky seem vast.

Then there's a tantalising glimpse of the Grand Canyon as the train manoeuvres into the depot. From here it is a couple of hundred yards to the canyon rim. You have three and a half hours before the train departs for Williams. First

viewing of the canyon is awe-inspiring. It's a mile down to the white water of the Colorado River, and the rocky gorges, crags and chasms seem to stretch for ever until they end at the north rim in the hazy distance. The colours are muted pinks, rusty reds and every shade of desert buff.

A free hop-on-hop-off bus service runs from the train depot. This is a blue route service that takes you one stop west to link up with the red route that runs further west along the rim. In the east direction the blue route takes you into the Grand Canyon Village and to the visitor centre and access to the rim. We walked along

the rim to pick up the red route bus and travel to Mohave Point, one of the viewpoints where you can see the river rushing below.

Photographer Clive Nicholls walked the couple of miles back to get more pictures. I must admit I used the bus and then sat on the rim at the village enjoying this incredible natural wonder. If you are more intrepid, there are walking trails down into the canyon or you can take a mule up or down. The mule trails look incredibly narrow and precipitous: they are perfectly sure-footed but it must be an adrenaline ride. If you haven't been to the

canyon before, it is enough to just have a gentle stroll and take in the enormity of it. Nothing additional is needed.

The train journey back was interrupted by the Cataract Creek boys. Fully recovered from their gunshot wounds earlier, they rode alongside, stopped the train and boarded to 'rob' the passengers – great fun.

There are plenty of other magnificent natural wonders in this part of Arizona. If you drive east through Winslow, not forgetting to get a picture with the standing-on-a-corner sculpture, you drive through the Petrified Forest National Park,

named for its deposits of petrified wood. The spectacular rock formations are marked in many colours by mineral deposits and geological history.

The park runs into the south-west corner of the Painted Desert, an even more spectacularly marked and coloured expanse running across the state line with New Mexico.

Further north, on the state line with Utah, is Monument Valley, made famous in many classic Western films.

The Valley is two-thirds in Utah but from the Arizona end the view will bring back memories of stagecoaches, cavalry

Courthouse Rock near Sedona one of a spectacular group of ancient rock formations in the Verde Valley



columns and John Wayne. This is Navaho and Apache native American country – a desert wilderness.

South from Williams and Flagstaff is Sedona Verde Valley with a series of little towns and villages like Sedona, Cottonwood, Camp Verde, surrounded by huge rock formations.

Red Rock State Park and Slide Rock State Park are the best places to view and photograph the spectacular red rocks, but even Main Street, Sedona, gives you a great sight of these ancient formations.

This is not a wilderness, but the valley's towns, wineries and the stunning scenery were not to be missed as we headed south.

The desert city of Phoenix is another tourist gem of Arizona, which we will be covering in a later issue of *Choice*.

The third part of our Arizona adventure will cover the far south of the state towards the Mexican border and the Wild West town of Tombstone, where the gunfight at the OK Coral is refought every day and you can visit the original Boot Hill cemetery – watching out for rattlesnakes.

## Passport to Arizona

### Getting there

■ Direct non-stop flights from London to Phoenix take about 10 hours 15 minutes and are available from British Airways and American among others

■ Taking a flight to an American hub airport on the East Coast then flying on an internal flight to Phoenix can be cheaper and gives you a wider choice of airlines, but it does mean you have to spend time waiting for your connection. We flew in to Detroit and out via New York JFK, making long travelling days

■ Driving to Flagstaff is about two and a half hours from Phoenix. Car rental and petrol are cheap, with easy driving on excellent motorways.

### Where to stay

■ Little America Hotel is set outside the Flagstaff in 500 acres of Ponderosa pine forest with lots of walking trails. Prairie dog communities outside the windows kept us amused. The food was excellent and great value: 2515 E Butler Avenue, Flagstaff, AZ 86004-6019. Website: ([flagstaff.littleamerica.com](http://flagstaff.littleamerica.com))

■ Grand Canyon Railway Hotel is the perfect spot opposite the railway station and a couple of hundred yards from Route 66: 233 N Grand Canyon Boulevard, Williams, AZ 86046. Website: ([www.thetrain.com](http://www.thetrain.com)).

### Where to eat

■ At the Galaxy Diner in Flagstaff you can eat surrounded by 100-plus pictures of film stars on the

walls and Elvis in your ears. There's a classic car meet every Friday night and swing dancing on Saturday nights with free lessons: 931 West Highway 66, Flagstaff, AZ 86001. Website: ([www.jbsfamily.com/galaxy-diner/](http://www.jbsfamily.com/galaxy-diner/))

■ Grand Depot Café in Williams provides a great buffet breakfast; the omelette chef's skill is an entertainment in itself and although it caters for a lot of people it's so organised you wouldn't notice - great value, too. Website ([www.thetrain.com](http://www.thetrain.com))

■ The Branding Iron Restaurant in Williams serves breakfasts, barbecue and steaks in the dining room or outside in the Wild West Junction precinct. There's entertainment, too, with a Wild West atmosphere. Website: ([www.wildwestjunction.com](http://www.wildwestjunction.com)).

### Find out more

■ Flagstaff Convention and Visitors Bureau, 211 W Aspen, Flagstaff, AZ 86001. Website: ([www.flagstaffarizona.org](http://www.flagstaffarizona.org))

■ Lowell Observatory on Mars Hill Road, Flagstaff. Website: ([www.lowell.edu](http://www.lowell.edu))

■ Grand Canyon Railway, Williams. Information and booking website: ([www.thetrain.com](http://www.thetrain.com))

■ Williams visitor information website: ([www.experiencewilliams.com](http://www.experiencewilliams.com))

■ Williams Chamber of Commerce website: ([www.williamschamber.org](http://www.williamschamber.org))

■ Arizona Visitor Information: ([www.visitarizona.com](http://www.visitarizona.com)).