



Route 66 Tourism Impact on Local Economies

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Summer of 2025

Independent
Research
Project

ABSTRACT & INTRODUCTION

Historic Route 66, known as "The Mother Road," has evolved from a domestic highway into an international tourism corridor symbolizing cultural nostalgia and small town resilience. This research explores how tourism contributes to local economic growth and community revitalization in anticipation of the 2026 Route 66 Centennial. Over a six week journey from Chicago, Illinois to Santa Monica, California, I conducted field interviews with small business owners, museum staff, visitor centers, and national park personnel to evaluate economic recovery, international visitor patterns, and promotional outreach. Quantitative data, such as visitor statistics (2009–2024) and multiple guest book demographics from each city, were analyzed alongside qualitative insights from local stakeholders. Results demonstrate a measurable rise in international visitation, largely influenced by U.S. federal tourism campaigns promoting Route 66 abroad, particularly across Europe and Asia. This research highlights the dynamic interplay between heritage preservation, economic strategy, and community identity in modern American tourism.

HYPOTHESIS

It was hypothesized that international tourism growth and federal promotion efforts are revitalizing local Route 66 economies by stimulating new business development and heritage preservation, transforming nostalgia into measurable economic value.

METHODOLOGY

1. Fieldwork: A 2,448-mile on-site investigation covering 10+ major Route 66 cities: Springfield (IL), St. Louis (MO), Lebanon, Oklahoma City, Amarillo, Santa Fe, Grants, Kingman, Barstow, and Santa Monica. I conducted over 40 semi-structured interviews with local entrepreneurs, visitor-center coordinators, and museum directors.
2. Archival Data Analysis: Historical visitor logs (2009–2024) were photographed and categorized by domestic vs. international origin.
3. Ethnographic Observation: I documented small-town landscapes, signage, and business activity through photography and field notes.
4. Comparative Economic Assessment: Local businesses' reported sales, foot traffic, and staffing changes were qualitatively compared across regions to assess relative post-pandemic recovery.



RESULTS

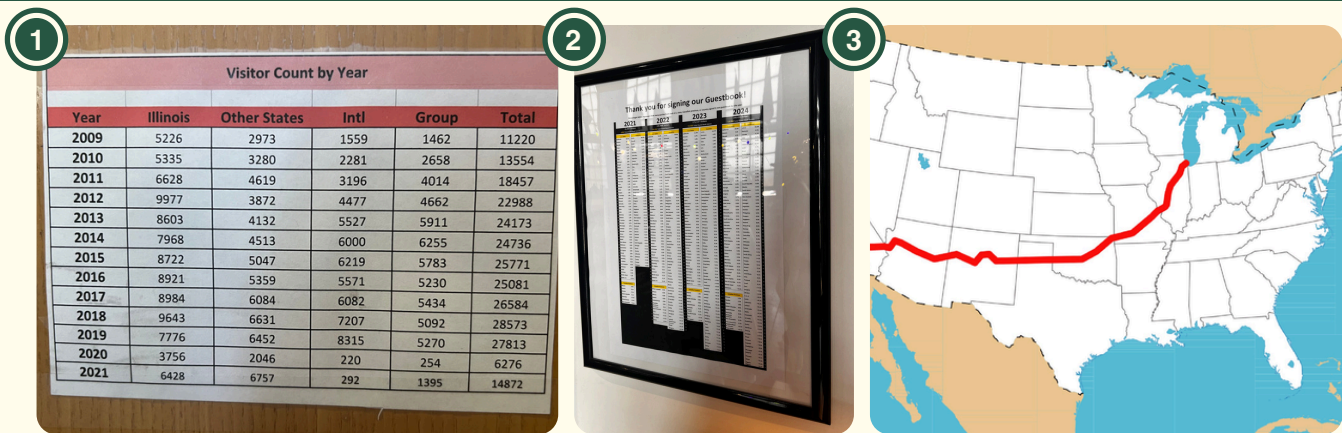


Figure 1: Visitor counts (2009–2021) show a fivefold increase in international visitors pre-pandemic, from ~1,500 to >8,000 annually, with rapid post-2022 recovery.

Figure 2: The guestbook analysis (2021–2024) reveals rising entries from Germany, Italy, the U.K., Japan, and Australia, reflecting successful international marketing.

Figure 3: Highlights the path of Route 66 in red.

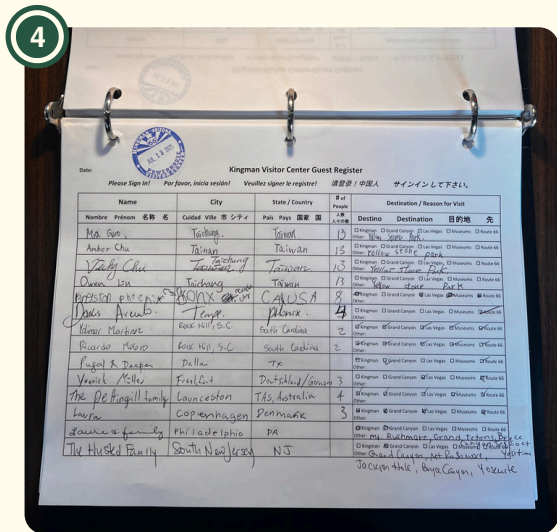


Figure 4: Photographic and interview evidence indicates adaptive business models—from bilingual signage to Route 66-branded merchandise—to accommodate global clientele.

Results: Stakeholders across states consistently reported optimism about centennial-driven visitation and noted growing partnerships with international travel agencies. **My findings suggest that federal promotion of heritage tourism not only drives economic growth but reshapes local identity narratives.**

DISCUSSION

The findings confirm that Route 66 has transitioned from a domestic cultural relic into a global economic ecosystem. U.S. tourism authorities have rebranded the highway as an international symbol of Americana, leveraging nostalgia and cinematic identity. Local economies benefit not only from direct tourism revenue but also from renewed civic investment, such as museum restorations and infrastructure upgrades. Interviews underscored how residents take pride in preserving heritage while embracing globalization, a paradox that strengthens community cohesion. The study also identifies disparities: towns farther from metropolitan hubs rely more heavily on seasonal travel, underscoring the need for sustainable development policies beyond Centennial celebrations to ensure long-term economic sustainability.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Further research could integrate quantitative sales data and GIS mapping to correlate tourism density with economic impact. Cross-national studies comparing Route 66 with other heritage routes (e.g., Italy's Via Francigena or Spain's Camino de Santiago) could reveal universal models for sustainable cultural tourism.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply grateful to the small business owners, museum staff, visitor-center teams, and national park rangers who shared their experiences along the road. Special thanks to the Kingman Visitor Center for access to guest-book archives and to the many travelers whose stories shaped this study. Thank you to the Navajo Native Americans on the Reservation for speaking with me.

REFERENCES

- U.S. Route 66 Corridor Preservation Program, *National Park Service*.
- *United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) Heritage Tourism Reports*, 2022.
- Interviews conducted by author, July-August 2025, across 10+ Route 66 cities.