

Murals & neon light up Route 66 in Tucumcari

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TUCUMCARI, NM – America’s most famous road, Route 66 put Tucumcari on the map in countless songs, paintings, books, movies and even a 1960s TV show called “Route 66.” Established in 1926, U.S. Route 66 ran 2448 miles from Chicago to the beach at California’s Santa Monica Pier, running right down Tucumcari’s Main Street along the way.

Known also as the Will Rogers Highway, the Main Street of America, or simply the Mother Road, Route 66 was the primary way west for America’s Dust Bowl refugees in the 1930s. Supplanted by I-40 in the Interstate Highway System that began in the 1950s, Route 66 was finally removed from the U.S. Highway System in 1985.

Tucumcari has done an impressive job getting those high-speed I-40 travelers to exit the interstate and come spend money in town a mile out of the way. Some of the original businesses have kept their neon signs working while other businesses have added new neon, lighting up the evenings in bright colors.

More recently, transplanted Louisiana artists Sharon and Doug Quarles spearheaded the creation of huge eye-catching murals throughout the town. Tucumcari Chamber of Commerce has published a big glossy tri-fold “City of Murals” Mural Map showing 31 murals with locations, titles, descriptions and artist credits.

Ranging from whimsical to rhapsodic, many of the murals depict the area’s surrounding landscapes where the neighboring Bell Ranch has entered American cowboy lore

and the TV show “Rawhide” spent six weeks filming among red-rock mountains and buttes. Other murals are site-specific, depicting the friendly attendant, for example, at the local Phillips 66 station. Some are historical, depicting the heyday of Route 66 as it passed through Tucumcari.

The epicenter of Tucumcari’s explosion of colorful neon and murals is the iconic Blue Swallow Motel, created in 1939 as Blue Swallow Court when “motor courts” were common along America’s highways. A traveling family would pull in for the night and park their car next to the door of their room.

The Blue Swallow went even further: Each room had—and still has—an accompanying garage right next to each room. Today those garages are painted with murals, complete with overhead light at night. Because of a rough rise into the garage, I parked my Prius under a nearby tree. When a storm cell brought a brief rain deluge to an otherwise glorious weekend of sunshine and big white clouds, the motel’s young managers, Cameron and Jessica Mueller, asked to use my garage for the motel’s 1957 Hudson Hornet. It looked a lot better than the Prius would have looked in there.

The Muellers also keep a 1951 Pontiac Chieftain, a 1966 Pontiac Bonneville and a 1929 Ford Model A pickup truck—all in good running order, all moved to varying places around the property each day. Add the cars to the retro neon and extensive murals and it’s no wonder that photos of the Blue Swallow have graced countless travel guides and magazines.

Something those photos miss is inside the rooms. Until 2000, guests stayed in rooms without telephones. When the motel finally relented and installed telephones in the rooms, each room got a working 1939 rotary-dial telephone, complete with instructions for guests too young to have ever dialed a rotary phone.

My room had a flat-screen TV with cable, but the TV stood atop a cabinet that, when opened, revealed a 1940s RCA black-and-white TV set. I was on the end in Room 15, but there are only 12 guest rooms these days; others have been converted to other uses such as a laundry room for guests.

Del's Restaurant is an easy walk from the Blue Swallow, a walk that passes Tepee Curios with its neon that rivals the Blue Swallow for almost giddily bright colors. Since 1956, Del's has offered a great soup & salad bar along with steaks, chicken, seafood and Mexican food. It also has a full bar and list of beers on tap, plus wines by the glass or bottle. Open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, there was a waiting line by 5:30 p.m. when I was there on a Friday evening.

Sisters Yvonne Braziel and Yvette Peacock own and manage Del's along with its sister restaurant, the adjacent Kix on 66 that's open only for breakfast and lunch; it, too, has waiting lines during peak hours. Both restaurants had all of their employees wearing cowboy hats and sheriff's badges for Tucumcari's recent Rawhide Days weekend. A mile farther down Route 66, Pow Wow Restaurant also served great food and drinks to happy diners. On the wall at each booth at Pow Wow, murals depict some of the restaurant's regular customers. I wondered who the guy was that was eating beside me, painted on the wall. He looked happy there. So did I.