

AMAZING ARIZONA HIKES ON ROUTE 66

By Roger Naylor

The only thing that makes a Route 66 adventure even better is getting out of the car and walking around a little.

A good hiking trail adds spice to any road trip. And Arizona's landscape was absolutely built for hiking. The wild western scenery is raw and untamed with an incredible blend of mountains and deserts, forests and canyons. It pulls us from our vehicles. We stand beneath a sky clear and achingly blue, wrapped in a soothing silence. Then we walk gently into wild country.

The common misnomer is that we take a trail. In reality, the trail takes us. It snatches us from an artificial world and reconnects us to the natural one. Hiking provides numerous benefits, both healthy and spiritual. Everything slows down when we hike. Our senses are heightened. We learn how good it feels to breathe deeply once again.

So next time you're traveling Route 66 across Arizona, add a few of these hiking trails to your itinerary. Walk into these wide-open spaces and create memories that will last a lifetime. And bonus: all those calories you walk off can easily be replaced with juicy burgers and homemade pie from our Route 66 mom and pop eateries

Hikes are arranged from east to west along the Route 66 corridor.

GIANT LOGS TRAIL, PETRIFIED FOREST NATIONAL PARK

Where Route 66 crosses the rolling plains and vivid badlands of northern Arizona, it tells a story of when the world was young. Trees that once shaded dinosaurs now lie tumbled amid the gnawed badlands of Petrified Forest. To admire one of the best collections of a fossilized forest, start with the Giant Logs Trail. Walk out the back door of the Rainbow Forest Museum near the southern end of the park and onto this short loop that leads past some of the largest and most colorful logs. There are a few steps along the way, but the 0.4-mile trail is easy to manage and great for kids. The elevated hillside offers panoramas across the prairie and at the top of the trail you'll find "Old Faithful." Thought to be the largest tree in the park, it's almost 10 feet wide at the base, 35 feet long and is estimated to weigh approximately 44 tons.

928-524-6228, www.nps.gov/pefo.

FATMANS LOOP, FLAGSTAFF

Situated on the eastern end of Flagstaff, this popular hike snakes up the slope of Mt. Elden through pinewoods and a garden of boulders. There are a few short steep segments but nothing strenuous. Views of Elden, the surrounding landscape and the town are really special on this 2-mile loop. Craggy rock formations serve as a reminder of Mt. Elden's volcanic past. At one spot the trail makes a reasonably tight squeeze between boulders earning its name. Fatmans Loop begins at the Elden Lookout Trailhead along U.S. 89 in East Flag across from the mall. 928-526-0866, www.fs.usda.gov/coconino.

KACHINA TRAIL, FLAGSTAFF

Experience a real high country escape on this forested path through dense groves of white-barked aspen trees. In summertime it's a shady cathedral dotted with wildflowers and ferns. Then when the aspen leaves change in autumn, the slopes turn absolutely golden in a dazzling display. For 5 miles, the Kachina follows a gently rolling course across the midsection of the San Francisco Peaks dipping in and out of shallow drainages and skirting small cliffs. The trail stays mostly level as it passes through conifer groves and huddled aspens flanked by slanted meadows filled with waist-high bracken ferns. On the second half of the hike, the pastures widen exposing lovely views of mountaintops above and towns, buttes, and hills far below. 928-526-0866, www.fs.usda.gov/coconino.

BILL WILLIAMS MOUNTAIN TRAIL, WILLIAMS

Bill Williams was an itinerant preacher who set out to convert the Native Americans, but instead became enamored of their beliefs. He chucked his former life, lived among the Osage and became a trapper, guide, translator, and all-around colorful mountain man. A forested trail makes its way up the mountain that bears his name overlooking the town that does likewise. The trail crosses Cataract Creek and winds its way up the slope, first through oak and pine and finishing amid fir and aspen. Long straight stretches are interrupted by carved switchbacks. The climb will definitely get your attention but is not as grueling as some mountain treks. It's 4 miles to the summit crowned with a bristling assortment of communication towers. Trailhead is located just east of the Williams District Ranger Station. 928-635-5600, www.fs.usda.gov/kaibab.

SYCAMORE RIM TRAIL, WILLIAMS

This trail delivers a lot of bang for the buck, making a long loop through rippling grass prairie, pine forests, copses of twisted oaks, past tumbledown cabins, multiple ponds, and skirting the edge of sheer-walled Sycamore Canyon. The most accessible trailhead is Dow Spring. You'll quickly spot the ruins of a century-old sawmill and the spring with several small pools that in summer are filled with water lily blossoms. And when was the last time you saw water lilies on an Arizona trail? Near the halfway point you'll glimpse Sycamore Falls. Very occasionally there's a waterfall tumbling, but it's normally dry. You'll see rock climbers making their ascent on perpendicular walls and hopefully, no tumbling is involved. 928-635-5600, www.fs.usda.gov/kaibab.

STONE TO STEEL DAM TRAIL, ASH FORK

Here's an interesting tidbit: The first large steel dam in the world was built in Ash Fork. In 1898, the Ashfork Bainbridge Steel Dam was constructed in remote Johnson Canyon to supply water for the railroad. Less than a mile upstream stands another dam, this one constructed from precision cut stone blocks in 1911, also to supply water for the steam locomotives. Even though steel dams were not considered reliable, the one in Johnson Canyon still works just fine. Both Ash Fork dams back up small lakes, now managed as recreational reservoirs. An easy path (0.85 miles) connects them. Exit 1-40 at Welch Road east of Ash Fork. Travel northeast for 0.3 miles to an old Route 66 segment. Turn left and drive approximately 2 miles. Turn right and follow the good dirt road to the parking area. 928-635-5600, www.fs.usda.gov/kaibab.

MONOLITH GARDEN, KINGMAN

Not only is Kingman the anchor of the western end of Route 66 in Arizona, it also is a surprising hiking hotspot. The town has constructed a beautiful network of trails slashing across the Cerbat Foothills Recreation Area. Monolith Garden Trail is the best of the bunch, a tangled route through dramatic boulder fields and crumbling ramparts of volcanic ash. Three different trailheads and multiple forks make Monolith Garden a bit of a maze, so grab a map at Kingman Visitor Center before you start. Even though you're right on the doorstep of town, this trail turns you loose for a fast spin through a rolling landscape of low slanted hills, past stacked rock towers and hunched ridgelines toothy with columns. 866-427-7866, www.explorekingman.com.

BADGER TRAIL, KINGMAN

The Badger Trail winds its way up the southern slopes of the Cerbat Mountains. A bristly array of yucca, cholla, ocotillo, and beavertail cactus lines the path along with clustered boulders adding visual interest. Even though the trail gains almost 1,100 feet in 3.2 miles it's never strenuous, rising in a series of mild switchbacks. Trail markers appear every half-mile to chart your progress. Badger Trail ends atop a high saddle at the junction with the Castle Rock Trail, a 0.6-mile level path that swoops across a ridgeline to reach a dark basalt formation. Enjoy vistas of Kingman and desert basins along the way. Trailhead is north of Kingman off U.S. 93, just past the Arizona 68 junction. 866-427-7866, www.explorekingman.com.

MESA TRAIL, COOL SPRINGS

This path starts from the shoulder of Route 66 directly across from Cool Springs, 20 miles west of Kingman. It slices through gaunt desert to the top of a stone-face promontory. Long lanky switchbacks make for a moderate climb amid these hills populated with bighorn sheep and wild burros. Although it sits on private property it is open to anyone. It was hand carved by the man who rebuilt Cool Springs, a Route 66 icon. The trail hugs the flank of the hill, curling around toward the back and then zigzagging through a seam in the rocky crown. Hikers are welcome to explore the mesa top where you'll enjoy views of the Mother Road, Thimble Butte, and surrounding mountains. Just don't lose track of your way back down. It's a little over a mile round-trip. 928-768-8366, www.route66coolspringsaz.com.

Roger Naylor is an avid hiker, travel writer, and author of numerous books, including *Arizona Kicks on Route 66*.