

KINGMAN NIGHTS



By Mitchell Brown

Opening photograph by David J. Schwartz - Pics On Route 66

It's 3PM in Kingman, Arizona, and Sam Frisher has just clocked in to work — not as a typical desk clerk, but as the co-owner of the historic El Trovatore Motel. From his office window, he takes in the view: the motel's towering neon marquee, a gleaming 1937 Mercedes parked just beneath it, and the sunbaked ribbon of Route 66 stretching beyond. His shift isn't about paperwork — it's about storytelling. As the day unfolds, Sam prepares to welcome travelers with tales of the Mother Road and the colorful legacy of the motel he calls home.

Northern Arizona's Finest

The story of the El Trovatore Motel begins in 1937, in the shadow of the Great Depression and just before the world was thrust into war. It was the vision of John F. Miller, a seasoned entrepreneur with a talent for spotting opportunity in unlikely places. Decades earlier, Miller had made his mark in a dusty railroad stop called Las Vegas, founding one of the city's first two banks and opening its very first hotel — the Hotel Nevada — in 1906. When Nevada legalized gambling in 1931, Miller adapted quickly, adding a casino and renaming his property Hotel Sal Sagev (pronounced Sal-Sagy) — Las Vegas spelled backwards, a clever semordnilap. Today, that same building stands in glittering downtown Las Vegas under a name more familiar to modern visitors: the Golden Gate Hotel & Casino.

Following the completion of the Boulder Dam, Miller saw an opportunity in Kingman, a dusty desert town poised to become a vital junction along the increasingly traveled highway. With earnings from his ranches and properties scattered across southern Nevada and Arizona, Miller saw more than just open land — he saw potential. In 1937, he chose a spot in what was then a small, incorporated area known as El Trovatore and built a service station, laying the first stone in what would become one of Route 66's most iconic motels. He later added a tourist court in 1939, charging patrons three dollars a night (the equivalent of \$67 today). The El Trovatore Autel Court, as it was then called, was touted as “one of the finest courts along ‘66,” being the first motel in the state to have air conditioning, a luxury in the late 1930s, plus an inviting cafe, curio shop, and cocktail lounge. A giant 100-foot-tall tower, sporting the motel's name in bright neon red-and-green lettering was built the same year as the venue. Set on a bluff, the neon tower, an illuminating beacon of hospitality, could be seen for miles. Another retro sign, standing on Route 66, displaying the era's iconography, was added in 1945.

John F. Miller passed away in 1957 at the age of 92, after a long decline in health. By then, one of his five sons — Abe P. Miller — had taken the reins, overseeing the family's hotel ventures. Miller had seven children in total, but it was Abe who continued his father's legacy. What became

of the El Trovatore in the years following World War II is largely lost to time. But by the late 1980s, the neon lights had flickered out, and the once-proud motel had faded into a weekly or monthly apartment complex, a shadow of its former self. With time, vagrants and drug users would strip the motel clean. What was once “Northern Arizona's finest Autel” had fallen into intense disrepair and eventual bankruptcy. The motel's best days appeared to be in its rearview mirror. That is, until the Frishers came into the picture.

Enter Sam and Monica

While born in Tel Aviv, Israel, Sam and his Los Angeles-born-and-bred wife Monica were California residents long before the El Trovatore became their career path. Sam did maintenance work on apartment complexes in LA until he got his contractor's license and worked as a contractor for the next 22 years. Monica was no stranger to the work either, having 30 years of experience herself as a contractor, in maintenance and management. After Sam and Monica got married in 2002, they set their eyes on bigger dreams.

“We decided to look for an apartment building to buy and manage. So, we put our money together slowly. We went to Vegas because we couldn't buy anything in Los Angeles. It was too expensive,” said Sam Frisher. “We bought two properties in Vegas, though we still lived in Los Angeles at that time.” One of the properties was an apartment building that the Frishers renovated and was eventually bought out by an investor in 2010 who made them an enticing offer that they couldn't refuse. Along with the money earned, the couple also received a 1031 exchange, wherein they had to invest the money within six months to be deferred onto the next property. Otherwise, it would've put them at a higher tax rate. This turned into something of a ticking clock to find a new property and find it quickly. Fortunately for them, luck and serendipity seemed to be on their side. “When we sold the property, which was a year and one month later, we started buying stuff, and this [El Trovatore] was one of the places we bought. We were driving through Kingman to Mesa, where we owned an 88-unit apartment building, and on the way — usually we would go via the freeway, but this time we drove through the town itself, down Route 66 — my wife looked to the right, and saw this place,” Frisher continued. “It was fenced completely; it was in bankruptcy for a few years. It was closed; it was kind of destroyed. We didn't know what was inside. We looked at it through the fence, and I saw a small sign on the fence that said a bank owned the place, and it was the same bank that we had all the way in Vegas.”

Through a fortuitous bit of luck and a well-placed phone call, Sam contacted the bank's manager, whom the Frishers had known for several years by that point. Because of that familiarity, the manager trusted them with the keys to the motel so they could get a proper look at the inside of the building. Dilapidated would be an accurate word to describe the condition of El Trovatore. The interior was all but destroyed, and the walls were covered with vandalism. Where others may have seen a lost cause, the Frishers saw an opportunity. So, after three months of negotiating with the bank, they secured a loan and put money down, becoming the proprietors of the historic El Trovatore. That's when the real work began.

Renovating an Old Relic

Considering the state of the building when they bought it, it's no surprise that it took a lot of work to bring it to the condition of being hospitable. The interior had to be completely remodeled, new carpets had to be installed in some rooms, while others required new tiles and hardwood flooring, and finding the proper pipes for fixing nearly century-old plumbing required some innovation and research. All told, the renovations took five months to complete, and even then, the motel had limited rooms for guests, but the endeavor became something of a passion project for the Frishers. “We put more than \$200,000 into this place to fix it,” said Frisher. “As a contractor, it was easy for me, but it's still a work in progress. You can't just walk into a Home Depot to buy faucets for plumbing that goes back to 1937. Everything is a challenge in this place, but you either love what you're doing in life, or you don't.”

Despite the effort put into bringing the property back, the Frishers ran into some trouble when, in 2011, they were forced to close the motel for nearly a year due to a series of unpaid electricity bills that almost brought the establishment into foreclosure. During that time, they worked to negotiate a lower interest rate, as well as secure an additional loan to remodel the motel and create 20 Hollywood-themed rooms. This Tinseltown theme wasn't just some gimmick — it came from the motel's historic patronage.

“In the Second World War, in Kingman, there was a base here with 7000 B-17s that were delivered out to Europe. There was also a gunnery school in town. Charles Bronson and Don Knotts were gunners in this town,” said Frisher. “At that time, the USO would come here to perform for them, so a lot of famous people would stay at the motel, people like Bob Hope, The Three Stooges, Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, James Dean, even Elvis Presley stayed here three times.” The motel was a desirable place for the entertainers to stay, thanks to the rooms having both air-conditioning and bathrooms. It would give them a



Monica and Sam Frisher of the El Trovatore Motel.

comfortable resting place after performing for the 40,000 soldiers stationed there during World War II. Hollywood plays an integral part in what gives the motel its charm. Its sign promotes its “Hollywood Icon Theme Rooms,” and its stretch of Route 66 is even called Andy Devine Avenue, Devine being a renowned character actor from the area who starred alongside famous Hollywood juggernauts like John Wayne and Roy Rogers. And while that would've been a suitable enough facelift to give the motel a new look and incentive for guests to stop in, the Frishers went further and added their own touch to the historic motel through murals.

Finding the Right Artist for the Job

Even those who lack an observant eye would have a hard time not noticing the murals that cover the walls of the El Trovatore, such as the ones of a B-17 Bomber and Kingman Airfield — the World War II training facility located east of the city — and the motel-spanning red locomotive that splashes across the front of the building. The building's most famous mural, however, is the 206-foot-long Route 66 mural, which is promoted as the world's largest map of the Mother Road (the Guinness Book of World Records hasn't verified it, but the Frishers are getting around to it). While the paintings have become a noteworthy part of the appeal of staying at the motel, they're also a recent addition. Around 2013, Sam was looking for a muralist to do work on the motel, even going to the local college and

attending classes to see if he could get some of the students involved. He approached the school and sponsored a small competition at the college to see if people could give him ideas of what murals would look best for the motel, going so far as to ask one of the art professors if they would be interested in getting involved, but to no avail. That's when luck appeared to, once again, be on his side.

"I was driving one day from here to Vegas, and on the way, I noticed some murals on a gas station, and I found the name of the muralist: Dan J. Loudon," says Frisher. "It took me over a year to find this guy. I brought him here and he lived with us for close to a year. I started doing murals, and the first one he worked on was of Elvis Presley, on the side. Then we started doing some on the front; he did the mural of the B-17 and painted Route 66 on the building itself."

Louden completed the first mural in a day, but the map took nearly three weeks. The murals have stayed on the walls since they were painted, but the Route 66 mural received a touch-up sometime in late 2022 or early 2023, when the Frishers got a visit from the TV series *Motel Rescue* on Discovery+. In the episode "Reno on Route 66," which aired in May 2023, the mural gets a more contemporary look.

Nearly a hundred people came over five days, and the visit got them a remodeled lobby, updated rooms, and a communal locker room. The helping hand was needed because, like many small businesses, the pandemic hit the motel hard.

It eventually reached such a critical point that they had to use their social security to keep the lights on. But luckily, they managed to keep their heads above water and get out of the pandemic with the motel intact. Mostly intact, anyway. At one point, the tower that stands over the motel was struck by lightning, so they're in the process of trying to get it fixed.

From Around the Globe

When it comes to the motel's day-to-day, the clientele consists of a lot of travelers — Kingman has a monthly car show of over 350 classic cars, which draws in business — but it's no surprise that the motel's bread and butter is Route 66 travelers. The season runs from March through October, and they're always bound to see a few regulars from out of town.

With a history that spans decades, Art Deco architecture that reflects the style and optimism of the pre-World War II era, and a vibrant neon sign, one of the largest and most colorful on Route 66, the El Trovatore stands as a landmark and an integral part of the history of Kingman and Arizona's stretch of Route 66. From its history of housing celebrities to entertaining the troops during World War II, to its ramshackle days of housing vagabonds and drifters, to its current state of being lovingly maintained by the Frishers, the El Trovatore stands as a vibrant beacon of Route 66 history and American road travel culture.



The 100-foot-tall El Trovatore Tower and recently restored rooms.

Photograph by Glen Boulter.