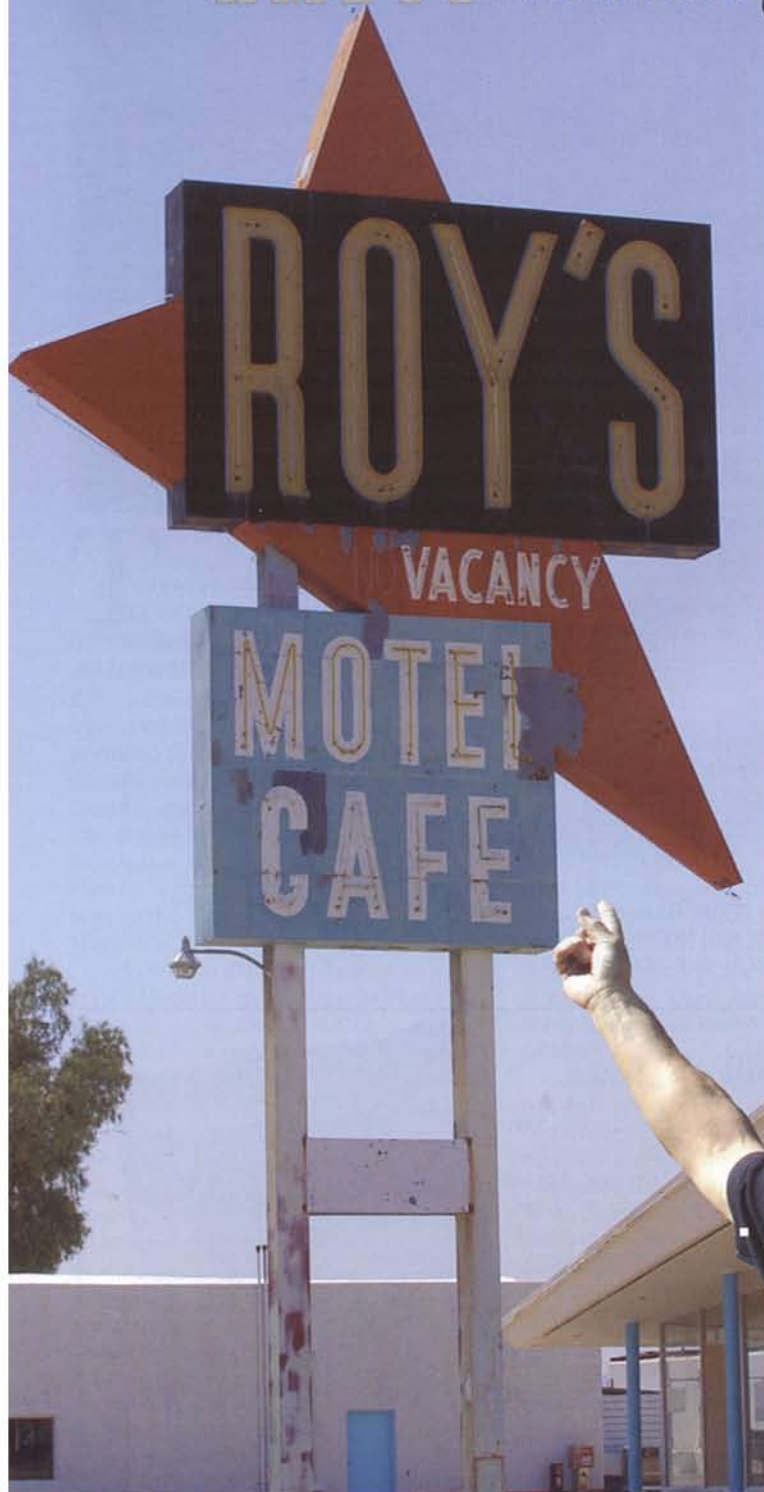




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AMBOY: the busiest ghost town on route 66



Even on the hottest of summer days, Amboy is busy for a ghost town. Cars zip through the California desert on their way to Las Vegas or Laughlin, bikers pull over to rest in the only shade for miles in any direction, and random roadies stop to snap photos of the famous "Roy's" sign and peer in the windows of the defunct motel and café.

When San Bernardino restaurateur Albert Okura's vision comes to fruition, the small Mojave Desert railroad town will once again bustle with life as it did in its heyday, when hot and weary travelers pulled in to cool off, have a tasty meal and fill up their cars with notoriously overpriced gasoline.

This page, immediate left: In past decades, when Roy's sign came into view, the motorist was in for more than a rest stop, he could also expect notoriously, overpriced gas. **Below:** New owner Albert Okura promises to offer gas at a reasonable price. **Facing page, top:** Okura's town sits in the vastness of the Mojave Desert on a lonely stretch of Route 66. **Courtesy Bob Moore.** **Insert:** Existing cabins at the site. **Bottom, left:** Amboy Crater is a few miles west of the town. **Bottom, right:** Amboy has been the background for movies and ad campaigns. **Courtesy the author**

Okura, 55, is owner of the Juan Pollo chicken franchise, headquartered in another roadside icon – the original McDonald's building on E Street in San Bernardino. He purchased Amboy in 2005 from the family of the late Buster Burris, who built the town into a booming oasis in the desert only to watch it wither as Interstate 40 cut off traffic from this stretch of Route 66.

The town first came to Okura's attention when it went up for sale on eBay in 2003, several years after Burris's death. Following a visit to Amboy, Okura knew it was something he had to have.

Unfortunately, the reserve was not met on the auction, and the sale did not happen. Another buyer swooped in and purchased the town from Burris's widow, Bessie, but subsequently lost it in foreclosure proceedings. Okura put his dreams of rescuing

Amboy from oblivion on the back burner until 2005, when he learned the town was again "for sale, best



cash offer." He visited Burris's granddaughter, Bonnie Barnes, and spoke with her about what he hoped to do with the town, should it become his. He shared with her his dream of preserving what remains of Buster's handiwork and reopening the gas station, café and motel.

"Bonnie had better cash offers (than mine), but she liked my plan to restore Amboy," said Okura. "I then went to see Bessie and (we) did a handshake deal. Two months later it was mine. It was destiny," he said.

For a cool \$425,000, Albert Okura purchased Roy's motel and café, the Amboy post office, four gas pumps, a pair of small airstrips with an airplane hangar, miscellaneous outbuildings and 540 acres of desert. "His" town is home to two companies – Hill Bros. Chemical

and the National Chloride of America plant – which were not part of the deal. The town currently has six or seven residents, not counting K9s and coyotes, depending on whom one asks.

Although the restaurant and motel remain closed, Amboy is delightfully interactive for travelers. On the eastern approach to Amboy, one can read messages left by fellow roadies, spelled out in white rocks along the roadside, or leave their own message for posterity. On the south side of the road, at the eastern edge of Amboy, travelers hang their worn-out footwear in the "shoe tree" to memorialize their trip and leave a piece of themselves along the road.

Just to the west of town lies the Amboy crater, a volcanic cinder cone surrounded by a large lava field. The crater is a designated

national natural landmark, recently upgraded with interpretive and trail information plaques, a picnic area and restrooms. A male tourist who recently visited the site joked, "It's the Eva Longoria of craters — it's small, but it's quite symmetrical. A very nice specimen."

Meanwhile, back in town, Okura's main man on the ground is Larry Stevens, a former construction superintendent from Las Vegas. Stevens maintains the property and keeps Roy's Café "open" during the triple-digit-temperature warmer months, selling bottled water, Roy's T-shirts and emergency gas [at cost], and directing folks to the clean restrooms with flush toilets around back. He and his dogs, Jackson and Meka, greet travelers and keep watchful eyes on Okura's town.

Stevens notes that ninety to ninety-five percent of the people who stop in are regulars — those who live in the region and are on their way to Vegas, Laughlin or Lake Havasu. The rest are tourists, mainly from Europe. He marvels at how many of them travel the road on rented Harleys to get the "full American desert experience."

He can't get over the people who "ride the road in full motorcycle gear in the middle of summer," adding, "I'll see a case of heat stress every day...but so far I haven't had to call 911."

Stevens is an "all-around I-can-handle-it" sort of fellow, and is well suited to living more or less alone in a nearly empty desert town.

Amboy may be a ghost town, but it's one that lacks evidence of the paranormal. Everybody loves a Route 66 ghost story, but Stevens doesn't truck in such matters, commenting, "I have been able to explain any anomaly so far." He once saw six orange lights over the crater that seemed to float in mid-air, but attributes it to activity at the nearby 29 Palms Marine base.

Although Amboy remains in a sort of limbo, Albert Okura is busy making plans for its resurrection.

He emphasizes that he does not want to fundamentally change the face of Amboy, but plans to bring its infrastructure up to strict and ever-changing state and local codes and reopen the town's attractions. First, he hopes to bring back gasoline service, then reopen the café, and then eventually reopen the motel. Ultimately, he would like to create an Amboy museum behind the café and fill it with memorabilia from the town's former residents and from those who were merely passing through.

After learning about serious — and expensive — problems with the town's plumbing and electrical systems — which the ever-resourceful Buster Burris had cobbled together when building the place — he was pleasantly surprised to find out that the gas tanks were only four years old and would not need to be replaced. However, like so many complex decisions Okura has to make, he is weighing the costs of restoration versus replacement of the original old-school gas pumps from the 1970s. These pumps, while charming and authentic, do not meet required gas vapor recovery standards, nor do they have credit card readers for ease of use. Modifications could be made, but they would be very expensive — possibly more so than simply replacing the pumps. This is just one example of how every detail in Amboy begets a dozen or so questions about how to proceed with the restoration process.

This process is becoming more expensive than Okura expected. He has already invested well over \$100,000 in Amboy's upkeep and improvement. On top of the unexpected costs to fix up the town, Okura's restaurant business is getting slammed by an unstable economy and rising gas prices, making cash flow a greater challenge than originally anticipated.

A less committed person might wring his hands and wonder

what he's gotten himself into, but Okura is optimistic that funds to restore the town will come. He has funding proposals in front of a number of foundations and governmental agencies, and is awaiting their decisions. His first order of business is to raise \$30,000 to fund the creation of a master plan and timetable for restoring Amboy. He stresses that renovating the town is a labor of love.

"I'm not in it for the money," he says. "It's for goodwill only, for me and my business. It's my chance to leave a legacy and make people happy."

He believes whole-heartedly that the next twenty years will be a new golden age for Route 66. He envisions carloads of retired baby-boomers taking to the open road to revisit a bygone age, and he sees a continuation of the trend for Europeans to come to the U.S. to search out authentic Americana.

While Okura is looking to the baby-boom generation's nostalgia to fuel the rebirth of Amboy, Sylvia Schmitt, a locations specialist with Locations Unlimited, says that younger generations have a love affair with Route 66 as well, especially the well-preserved desert locations like Amboy.

In past decades, the town was used as a setting for gritty films like "Kalifornia," with Brad Pitt and Juliette Lewis, and "The Hitcher" with Rutger Hauer. In recent years, it has served as the setting for Enrique Iglesias's steamy 2001 "Hero" video, and for countless commercials and photo shoots. Amboy has been the scenic backdrop for shoots as diverse as a Hustler magazine spread and a Bloomingdale's ad campaign.

"The whole Route 66 concept has been popular (in this business) for about ten years," said Schmitt. "The photographers bring in vintage cars from that era and do the shoots. It's especially popular with younger, hip clothing companies doing editorial work and fashion catalogs." She adds, "Amboy has been trendy and hip in its virtually untouched state. A restoration will only make it better."

Despite the multiplying trials and tribulations of reviving an entire town, Okura has no interest in razing the existing buildings and starting anew. He is completely dedicated to Amboy's preservation and restoration, and sees a brilliant future for the town.

"The more I get involved, the more I realize it needs to stay the way it is," concludes Okura. "I believe that, for sure, Amboy can become the number one Route attraction in California."



Story by Roberta LeGrand

About the Author:

Roberta LeGrand is a former newspaper editor turned freelance food and travel writer. Her favorite piece of travel advice is for women traveling alone: Always take a dog with you...the bigger the better. Nobody bothers the lady with the German shepherd in the car.