

VACATION

SEPTEMBER 1991

Detour...

*moving down
America's
loneliest road*

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THE LONELIEST



ROAD

I N A M E R I C A

Get your motor running/Head out on the highway/Looking for adventure/And whatever comes our way...
—Mars Bonfire, "Born To Be Wild"

U.S. HIGHWAY 50, sometimes called the Heartland Highway, snakes its way 3,100 miles across middle America. It begins in Ocean City, Md., and slithers through Virginia, West Virginia, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Missouri, Kansas, Colorado, Utah and Nevada before it sheds its skin in Sacramento, just 100 miles from a soothing dip in the Pacific.

U.S. 50 is not a well-known route, has never had a television show or song named after it and doesn't even qualify as a national interstate highway. It avoids teeming population centers, preferring to wind its way past rural outposts and quaint villages that preserve an American heritage endangered by the modernization of our big cities.

The highway's closest brush with prominence came in 1986, when *Life* magazine and the American Automobile Association named a section of it "the loneliest road" in America.

The 287-mile stretch of barren asphalt that earned this notoriety bisects Nevada from

By Jack E. Sheehan • Photography by Karen Kuehn



Before the asphalt, Pony Express riders pounded down this path. Only a few station ruins remain of the venture, kaput four days after the transcontinental telegraph line wired the country.

Ely to Fernley and is patrolled by rabbits, deer, cattle and burros, which roam the open roads with the same disdain for intruders as their ancestors did more than a century ago, when the occasional, solitary human who galloped by was carrying mail for the Pony Express.

Feeling restricted by the ever-growing crunch of bodies moving into Las Vegas, I decided a day of loneliness might be good for the soul. I would make the drive up U.S. Highway 93 (which could run a close second to Highway 50 in a Desolation Derby), pick up 50 at Ely and drive at least as far as Austin, 148 miles due west. Although I wouldn't cover the full 287 miles, I would be traversing the loneliest stretch of the loneliest road.

The night before embarking, I compiled a medley tape of old songs that would provide appropriate background music for the journey. Among the artists were Paul Anka, Bobby Vinton, Roy Orbison and B.J. Thomas. I chose them not merely because they were among my favorites while growing up, but because their

