

## CAR CULTURE | CHECKER CAB

It's a couple of years ago now, but I still clearly remember my wife and I driving the car on a Friday afternoon through Southern Manhattan with its unexpected, Third World-style workshops until we found Juan's 12th Street Auto Repair in a dark back yard, smelling of old oil, exhaust fumes, rank sweat and grease.

Atilano, the workshop manager, had the aristocratic facial features of a Mayan priest accustomed to making human sacrifices on a regular basis, though his mechanical skills were spot-on. He diagnosed shot front bushings, completely worn brake pads and, more obviously, a leaking radiator. He ordered the spare parts by phone and assured us, 'she'll be ready tomorrow afternoon'.

He was right. She was running beautifully. I also remember contemplating the interior for the first time. The back seat was vast – acres of Americana. The big pedals were made for yeti-sized feet; the dash dominated by an enormous fuel gauge and speedometer, with everything else displayed via tiny red warning lights: fasten seat belts, brake on, door ajar and oil pressure. The parking brake was applied with the left foot in the traditional American way, with a hand release under the dash. Wipers and fan were operated by two large knurled silver knobs, strategically positioned, so that you could only get at them through the steering wheel in its straight-ahead position.

**O**VER THE NEXT COUPLE OF WEEKS WE TRAVELLED FROM MANHATTAN TO Hollywood covering more than 15 000 kilometres. It felt more like a rolling restoration than a holiday, which only deepened my affection for the yellow yank tank.

When it finally arrived in Cape Town, the real restoration work began. The original small-block Chevy engine received some special care. I've added an Edelbrock manifold, a 600 Holley carburettor, a K&N air filter and a custom-made 57mm stainless steel exhaust system, resulting in a couple more horses, better sound and – for a car of this size – rather impressive performance off the mark at robots. ▶



It's been a while since owner Dieter Losskarm (left) wrestled his now immaculate Checker cab from the sleazy previous owner using a sheaf of crisp dollar bills. It helped that Al Pacino once sat in the back seat. Never mind the shot suspension bushes and lime-green fluid pouring from the radiator...

