



In my friend Roland's garage in Hout Bay, the car was taken apart completely and all the body parts de-rusted, primed and repainted. The torn vinyl was changed to leather and all the door and window rubbers replaced. Just over a year later the car was looking and driving better than when it had left the factory in 1976.

Since then I have done trips all over South Africa, attending car shows in Pretoria, George, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town. And there's still only one way to drive the cab: one hand on the wheel, one arm out the window and the music turned up. My favourite drive is a cruise around the Cape Peninsula, but it doesn't matter where I go, the eccentric car with its brawny looks seems to make people happy. Even if I park it next to a Ferrari or Lamborghini, guess which car is photographed more often? A genuine New York Checker taxicab definitely beats the hell out of almost anything else on wheels. Not that I would be biased. **TC**



There's only one way to drive a genuine Checker cab - like generations of previous taxi-driver owners, with one hand on the wheel, elbow monitoring the breeze. This one was initially ordered by the Feds, hence the 5.7 litre V8 under the hood, but saw years of service ferrying punters about Manhattan. Body style remained essentially unchanged from 1958 to 1982



THE LONGEST RUN

IT'S AN IDEAL WHO WANTS TO BE A millionaire? final question. Which car has the longest production run in American automotive history? It's not widely known that the car in question was produced by an independent manufacturer, the Checker Motors Corporation of Kalamazoo, Michigan.

It was founded in 1922 by Russian immigrant Morris Markin, who, after arriving penniless in the States, started to make trousers and hit it big with a large military order for uniform pants during WW1.

Being an entrepreneur he'd given a substantial loan to a friend whose business it was to build taxi bodies for the Commonwealth Motor Company of Joliet, Illinois, who produced the chassis and running gear. When the friend ran into financial troubles, Markin ruthlessly took over the company and renamed it the Markin Auto Body Corporation.

Markin assumed command over Commonwealth, enabling him to build complete rolling taxis, except for the engines, which were supplied by Buda.

He then bought out the well-known Checker Cab Company of Chicago, whose claim to fame was a checkered border around the roof and sides of its taxis and also on the peaked caps and cuffs of its drivers. The black and white checker borders became the trademark of Markin's company, subsequently named Checker Motors Corporation. Checker cars were born.

About 80% of production was taxicabs, the rest civilian versions. Production of the famous A-11 and its more comfortable civilian brother, the A-12 Marathon, started in 1958. Until production ceased in 1982 Checker never changed the exterior of this model. At first glance the 1980s vehicle looks like the 1950s version - except for things like the power steering, power brakes and GM's turbo Hydra-matic 400 automatic transmission. The later cars also have massive battleship-type bumpers, introduced in 1973 due to new legislation requiring bumpers that could withstand 8km/h crash impacts. They made the cars instantly recognisable.

Checker hand-built its cars at the glacial rate of 4500 a year, so could react quickly to customer demands. Derivatives of the famous taxi appeared over the years, including the stretched Aerobus versions with six or eight doors, the strange Mediacar with a raised bubble roof for wheelchair access, station wagons, a couple of ambulances and even some police cars.

The cabs were built to take the toughest punishment. A double channel X-brace separate ladder chassis provided a flat floor. The independent front suspension with its heavy-duty inside coil springs was strong enough to carry a Springbok rugby team. The rear relied on a live axle of monstrous girth supported by heavy-duty shocks and massive leaf springs.

Mercilessly driven over potholed streets, shift after shift, day after day, they clocked an average of 300000 kilometres per year. Yet tough as they were, the chunky cabs were running out of time, and production stopped in 1982.

Luckily Checker cabs had gained cool cult status, by then having been immortalised in flicks like *Taxi Driver*, *Escape from New York*, *Stuart Little* and *Carlito's Way*.

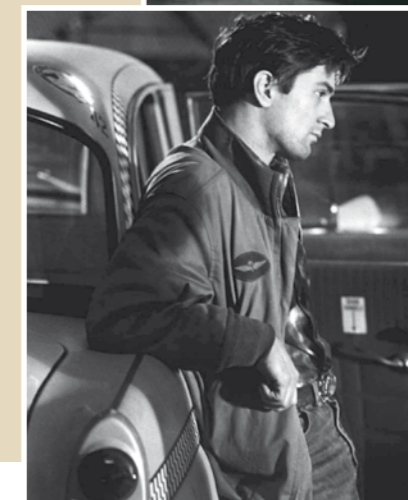
The very last genuine yellow New York Checker taxicab retired in 1999. The driver, a Jamaican by the name of Earl Johnson, had clocked 1.6 million kilometres. Sotheby's in New York auctioned it on his behalf and the final bid - US\$134500 - turned Checkers into sought-after collector's items.

It is estimated that 100000 Checkers left the Kalamazoo plant between 1956 and 1982, of which some 20000 were non-taxicabs. Today, only 1500 cars in various states of repair are left.



SOME STRAIGHT TALK ABOUT TAXICABS:

- Only Checker looks like a taxicab.
- Only Checker seats 5 passengers in the rear.
- Only Checker has the Life-Guard partition for driver safety.
- Only Checker has over 50 years experience in proven low-cost maintenance.



NO OTHER CAR IS BUILT LIKE CHECKER

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