

Dave Sawyer is a man who knows what he likes and what he doesn't like. He doesn't like gardening, or time-wasters, or people telling him how to live. He likes old cars. He particularly likes early '60s Fords with "a bloody great V8 engine." His Coober Pedy home is littered with automotive relics that he's retrieved from the South Australian scrub – cars that have lain out there for 40, 50 years. He restores them or keeps them for parts.

Sawyer's underground home, a rabbit warren of 30-odd rooms connected by tunnels, is the ultimate man cave. The living room is heated by a V8 engine that he gutted and converted into a wood burner. Pictures of Brocky and Bathurst, a dart board and racks of spanners line the walls. A set of traffic lights hangs from the ceiling ("mood lighting", he calls it) and beside the telly are the bones of a 1927 Chevy which he's restoring. Sawyer says his missus Tammi is "very understanding" and never complains. "She's got her own place on the other side of town," he adds.

The 50-year-old, who got his nickname Swampy from the two decades he spent as an electrician in the tropics – first on Dunk Island, then at a manganese mine in the Gulf Country – came to Coober Pedy nine years ago because it was a place where a bloke could buy a block for 16 grand and live how he wanted.

He's a Ford man to his bones, but when members of a Holden car club rocked up recently to seek his help (en route to Melbourne, their '60s EK was stranded with a broken engine part) he decided they were a "half-decent mob, despite their crap choice in cars" and found them the part. The Holden tribe made it back home – then posted Sawyer an honorary membership badge for their club. "What a bunch of stirrers," he chuckles. ROSS BILTON



Heart of the Nation
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