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Welcome to the fourth issue of ClassicsWorld European - and to a topic not often covered in the mainstream classic press. Eastern Bloc classics don't enjoy the strongest of reputations in Britain marred both by international politics and by their reputations as bargain basement jokes when new in Britain. But here at ClassicsWorld, we love the choice available and the rarity of the cars, and we think that regardless of your politics the world of Soviet classics is well worthy of celebration.

After all, in Britain we only got the cars of the proletariat - the Skoda 120s, the Lada Rivas, the Wartburg Knights. Beyond these is an entire world of Chaikas, Volgas, older Skodas and Wartburgs, and the Lada Niva, the world's first monocoque 4x4. Strip back the jokes, and while many of these cars were not superior to the Western alternatives they also weren't necessarily inferior. Continual updating meant cars which were well engineered over time, albeit cars which gave little consideration to fashion or personal style.



One man did more than most to highlight the Eastern Bloc car scene in Britain and across Europe, and the launch of this bookazine coincides unfortunately with his passing. It seems fitting to dedicate this publication to Julian Nowill - a gentleman and a fount of Communist car knowledge; someone with whom I had hoped to speak and learn while compiling this guide and someone who will be missed by all who knew him.

These pages will reflect his passion. I hope you enjoy the stories within.

**Sam Skelton,
Editor**



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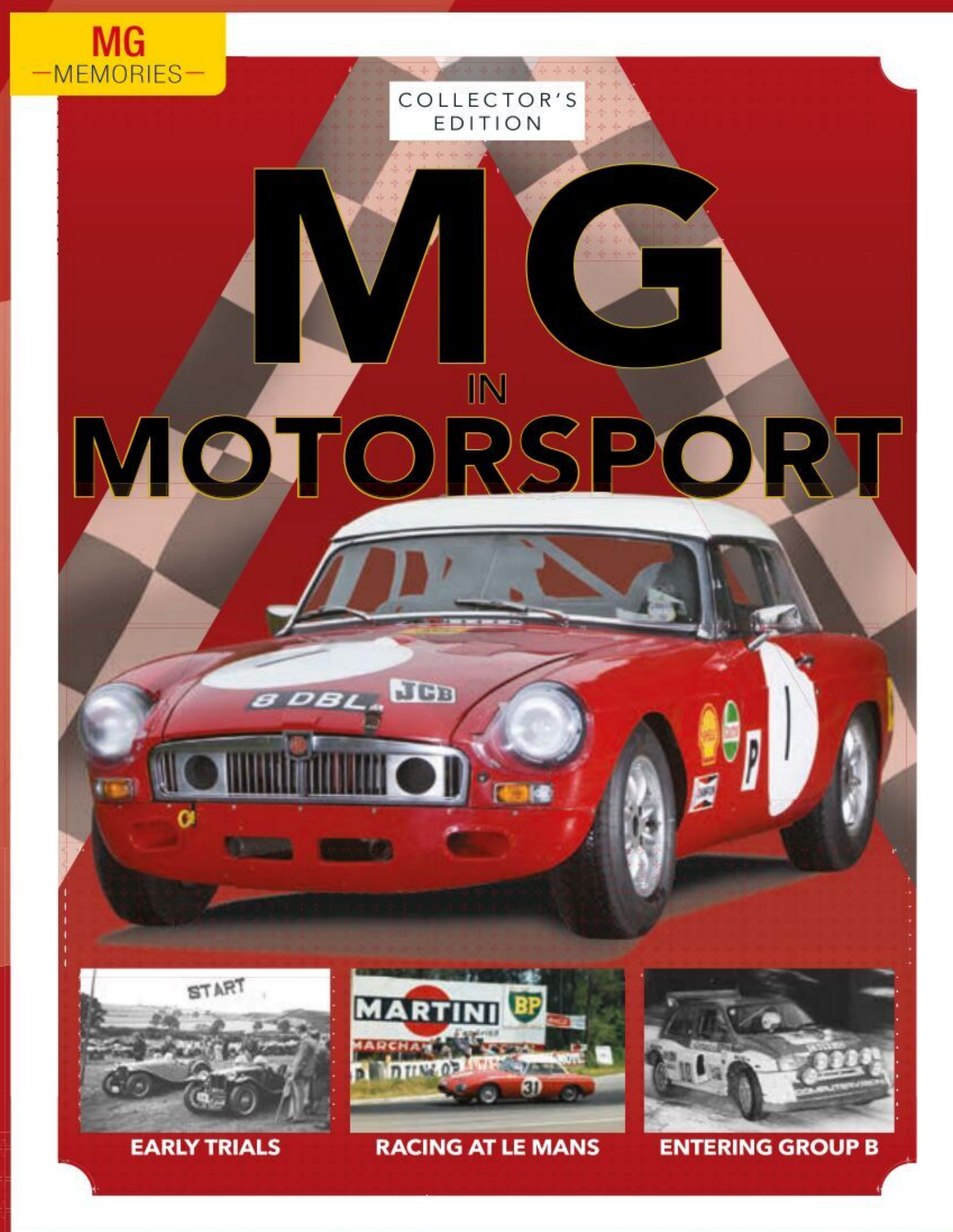
The story behind Lada's famous compact 4x4, from development to the present day.



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THE GENERAL'S MOTOR

First owned by a general in the Bulgarian People's Army, this Volga is now bringing some Cold War intrigue to the streets of Cambridge.

WORDS: ANDREW ROBERTS PICTURES: MATT RICHARDSON

Some cars inspire respect. A few that shall remain nameless inspire apathy, but a 1969 Volga has the power to evoke awe, especially when photographed in Cambridge. This was partially due to its associations with Cold War cinema, with shades of *Funeral in Berlin*, but the main reason is that the Volga M21 really is a very imposing machine. The black paintwork, a fascia apparently borrowed from a B-film spacecraft and the Volga's menacing stance all combine to create a genuinely memorable vehicle.

EHJ 660H is owned by Kiril Vitanov,

who dreamed of owning an M21 ever since he was a child in Bulgaria in the 1980s. His father once told him: 'A black Volga is a car for special people. It is the car of Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space.' At that time, the traffic in Sofia consisted mainly of imports from the USSR – cars like the Moskvich 412, the VAZ-2101 (better known in the UK as the Lada) and the ZAZ Zaporozhets 968. From time to time you might also encounter Warsawas and Fiats from Poland, Wartburgs from East Germany and Škodas from Czechoslovakia, but seldom a Volga M21.

In the Soviet Union, the Volga was the car of choice for the police, middle-ranking party officials, the KGB – and taxi drivers. The M21 was also the largest car available to Soviet citizens because the GAZ13 Chaika and the ZIL limousines were built exclusively for the government. However, as the price was a vast 5400 rubles, a Volga was far beyond the means of the average comrade.

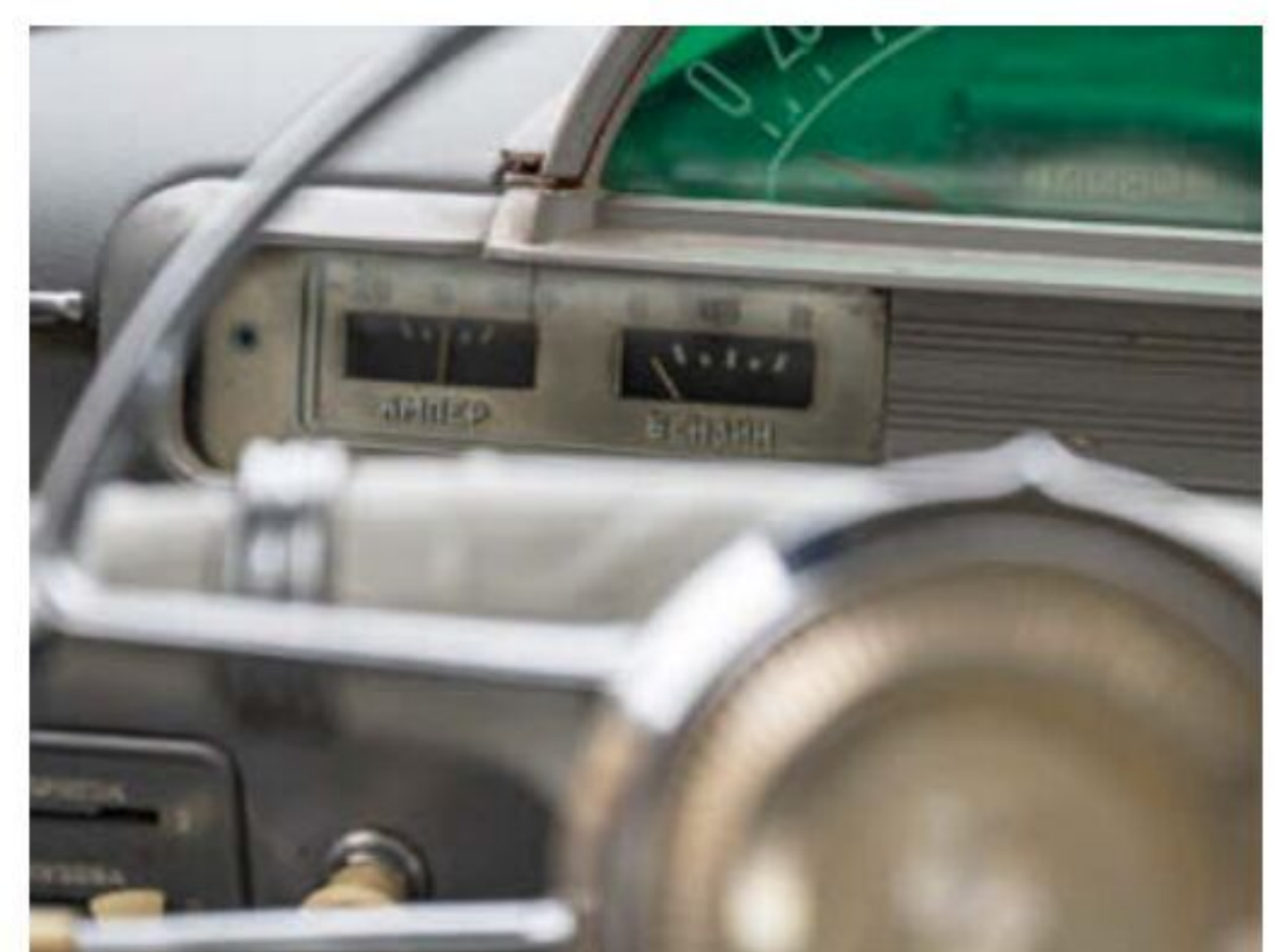
The M21 hailed from the GAZ (Gorkovsky Avtomobilniy Zavod, or Gorky Automobile Factory) plant in modern-day Nizhny. From 1946



onwards, the concern's mainstay was the extremely robust Pobeda M20, but in 1953 the firm's chief designer Alexander Mikhailovich Nevzorov commenced work on a radical successor. The new model sported quasi-American good looks that were faintly reminiscent of the Ford Customline – such bodywork reflected the Volga's role of providing an alternative to the decadent products of Detroit.

Power was initially from the M20's sidevalve engine in 2432cc form, while GAZ carefully planned suspension to cope with highways and dirt tracks alike. The Volga's 9in ground clearance was essential as roads were one of the least-used methods of transportation in the Soviet Union, and Tarmac surfaces were unusual outside larger towns. A motorist could also travel for literally hundreds of miles without encountering a garage, so the M21's 35-piece toolkit was an essential fitting in case of a mechanical issue when travelling through the Ural mountains. The starting handle was equally important in case the engine proved reluctant to start in sub-zero temperatures.

In May of 1955, three Volgas, accompanied by several overseas competitors, took part in a heavily publicised test run from Moscow to the Crimea and back. It was an endurance trial of nearly 5300 miles over some of the most challenging highways in the USSR. The Soviet press gleefully reported the victory of the M21s over



Controls are labelled in Cyrillic-derived Russian script. Green Perspex cover lets light into the speedo.



their bourgeois Western rivals, although it would have been somewhat surprising if this had not been the case. The writers took further pleasure in noting how a Standard Vanguard collapsed en route.

Full production commenced in October 1956, and GAZ updated the Volga as early as 1958. For this Series II there was a modified radiator grille and, more importantly, a new all-aluminium 2445cc four-cylinder

OHV engine. 1962 saw the launch of the Series III, with a further change of frontal appearance, plus telescopic shock absorbers replacing the lever arm dampers. The third-generation model was also available as an appealing M22 Universal estate car, frequently used as an ambulance.

1962 further marked the launch of the M23, a KGB-only model powered by the Chaika's 5.5-litre V8 engine. This

highly exclusive Volga was codenamed Dogonyalka – The Chaser – and featured PAS (which was not available on the standard M21) and automatic transmission. There was also a special headlamp and tail lamp flashing system for sending coded messages, and a sinister internal control for the boot lock. However, many agents found the M23 utterly terrifying to drive as the steering possessed deviationist tendencies.



Everything about this car is over-engineered, including a 2.4-litre alloy OHV four-cylinder engine.



The radiator blind is connected by a cable to a lever on the dashboard.





1968 saw the introduction of the square-rigged M24, and the manufacture of its predecessor ended on 15th July 1970 after 639,478 units had been built.

GAZ intended from the outset that the M21 would earn overseas currency, and exported a third of total production to 43 different countries. The multi-language brochure boasted that here was 'a fully modern car in the best sense of the word with an elegant modern appearance.' In the West, the Volga competed against the Renault Frégate, the Mercedes-Benz 190 Ponton, the Humber Hawk, the Fiat 1900 and the Peugeot 403. Some were employed by Greek cabbies, while Belgian-market models were locally assembled and available with Perkins or Land Rover diesel engines.

British imports commenced in 1959 when the M21 appeared at the London Motor Show alongside its smaller Moskvich compatriot. The ads proudly stated: 'Volga do not subscribe to the idea of obsolescence,' but sales were limited. Any large foreign car was an unusual sight in the UK of the early 1960s, but the concessionaire Thomson and Taylor also faced the challenge of promoting a Soviet product at the time of the Portland Spy Ring.

Yet the M21 had a good deal to offer

the discerning motorist unconcerned at his/her neighbours reporting them to MI5 as a probable sleeper agent. £1113 4s 2d represented incredible value for a very well-built six-seater equipped with a radio, a volcanic heater and a reclining front bench seat as standard. Autocar stated: 'Anyone who is of a mind to discount Russian design or workmanship would do well to think again,' but the Great British public remained unconvinced.

“ Anyone who is of a mind to discount Russian design or workmanship would do well to think again,’ but the Great British public remained unconvinced.

By contrast, the Volga inevitably sold well to Comecon nations, and in Bulgaria it was much favoured by the government, ambulance departments and taxi drivers. Kiril remarks that in the 1960s, to aspire to M21 ownership meant joining the Communist Party, for this was a motor car ranking far above a locally-assembled Fiat 850 or Moskvich 408. The sight of such a vehicle on the streets of Sofia would almost certainly instil awe in the average resident.

Kiril obtained his first classic car in

2011 – a 1969 FSO Warszawa 223, which was the Polish-built version of the Pobeda. He was to own three more of these intriguing machines, but as one who once dreamed of becoming a cosmonaut, a Volga remained his ultimate goal. Four years later, he relocated to London where, despite his busy life, the quest for an M21 continued. 'You can't often find one for sale in good condition, even in my homeland,' he said. 'My mum acted as

the project manager, and she ran almost everything with massive help from my friends in Bulgaria.'

Finally, in 2016, the right M21 was discovered. 'It had been sitting under cover in a garage for the past five years. The paintwork was original, and the condition was stunning,' Kiril recalled. EHJ 660H had covered just 14,000km from new, and was first registered in the town of Burgas. The Volga had actually been ordered in 1961, but there was an eight-year waiting list. This one was first

SPECIFICATION

ENGINE:	2445cc S4 OHV
POWER:	80bhp @ 4000rpm
TORQUE:	129lb.ft. @ 4000rpm
GEARS:	3-speed manual
SUSPENSION:	
Front	Independent coil springs and wishbones with anti-roll bar
Rear	Rigid axle with semi-elliptic springs
BRAKES:	Drums F/R
TOP SPEED:	78mph
0-60mph:	25.9 seconds
FUEL CONSUMPTION:	19mpg
WEIGHT:	1626kg
LENGTH:	4756mm



owned by a military general who was obviously a party official, and Kiril has the original invoice from 1969.

It was a year before Kiril encountered his Volga in the metal, but it was worth the wait. 'I saw the car for the first time in person in front of Sofia Airport,' he told us. 'My mum and a friend were waiting for my girlfriend and me, and around the car were lots of people taking pictures of it. It was a moment I'll never forget.'

After the M21 had been shipped to the UK, Kiril's first task was to re-fit the wiring and source an urgently required new fuel tank. One problem that did not afflict this Volga was corrosion. 'They are made from very thick steel,' said Kiril. 'The brakes are often the M21's main issue. However, they are easy to replace and source.'

In terms of spares availability, you can still find parts in Estonia, Latvia,

“ Above all, the Volga possesses an almost indefinable air of quality. It is easy to understand why many enthusiasts described it as the Soviet Mercedes

Moldova, Lithuania, Belarus, Ukraine, Finland, Poland and Germany. Russia naturally has many Volga clubs, the largest being in Moscow and Saint Petersburg. The latter is also the home of the Official GAZ Shop, which has parts for virtually every former Soviet marque from UAZ to AZLK and others.

Few classic enthusiasts would undertake a 3590-mile round trip to purchase authentic interior fittings, but then the M21 is an extraordinary motor car, and in 2019 Kiril and his girlfriend decided to visit this fine establishment in person rather than have the items

shipped to Cambridge. Kiril remarked: 'The GAZ Shop has a few UK-based customers with Moskvichs, but I was the first with a Volga, and they were very excited about it.' EHJ 660H now features a new carpet and vinyl upholstery, plus whitewall tyres for that additional touch of glamour. One somehow doubts that the original owner would have approved of the last-named modification.

Kiril finds the M21 more than lives up to his expectations when on the road, remarking that it is far lighter than its appearance would suggest, adding: 'The Volga is a big car that weighs around



two tons, but I find it easy. The massive tyres probably help, and although the steering is basic, the M21 was famous as one of the most comfortable Soviet cars of its era.' Another surprising aspect of the Volga is the three-speed transmission with synchromesh on second and third – the steering column gear lever may look formidable, but the set-up is far more precise than the changes on several 1950s and 1960s British vehicles.

Above all, the Volga possesses an almost indefinable air of quality. It is easy to understand why many enthusiasts described it as the Soviet Mercedes, or a Volvo Amazon writ large. This is a highly dignified machine, and in 1962 *The Motor* referred to the M21 as 'a very upper-middle-class car.'

The Volga's paint finish reflected the first owner's status, as black was a colour reserved for Bulgarian

government officials and was not available to the public. A general of the Bulgarian People's Army merited an M21 decorated with extra brightwork, but the overall ethos remains one of durability. Some cars seem to require written notice to start, while the Volga gives the impression of being ready under all circumstances. It also laughs in the face of potholes, for any car designed for USSR motoring of 56 years ago is undoubtedly more than capable of enduring the worst of British urban road surfaces. As for rural motoring, GAZ's publicity accurately promised that lengthy out of town journeys in an M21 would be 'joyous' with 'convenient seating accommodations.'

But perhaps the most charming aspect of the Volga is its detailing. The green Perspex speedometer is illuminated by sunlight. A hand throttle keeps the engine idling at traffic lights. A knob above the

windshield manually controls the radio antennae. The cabin offers a vast amount of headroom, as this is a car built for hat-wearing government officials and security agents. The glove box hinges look like they could hold a barn door in place, while the elaborate wireless dial is incredibly fascinating. One half-expected to hear the chief announcer of Radio Moscow report on Leonid Brezhnev's glorious visit to the Volgograd Tractor Plant instead of *The Now Show*.

The last word must go to Kiril Vitanov, whose advice to anyone considering an M21 is: 'Restoring a classic takes a lot of time, money and research. If you are not ready for it, a classic is not for you. However, people drive some specific type of car because they have an emotional connection with it. The feeling of driving a Volga is incomparable, and I recommend it if you want to drive something different in Britain today.' ■



10 THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT... THE TRABANT

Ask 100 motoring enthusiasts to compile a list of the ten worst cars ever made, and the chances are that 99 of them will include the Trabant on it somewhere. Simon Goldsworthy feels that this is grossly unfair, and wonders how much these critics really know about the East German people's car. Here is a little background, and some trivial facts that may well surprise you.

The Trabant made perfect sense in the 1950s and early 1960s. When most people's transport options consisted of walking or riding a moped, the prospect of affording a small car with seating for four was tantalising indeed. And that's exactly what the Sachsenring factory in the East German city of Zwickau produced with the P70 in 1955, a car which was so stylish that Nissan copied it for their Figaro retro-car some 35 years later.

The P70 evolved through the P50 and P60, until arriving at the P601 in 1964. Powered by a twin-cylinder, air-cooled, two-stroke engine of 594cc, the P601 was still in production when the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. As the world watched east Berliners

streaming across the newly opened border in their Trabis, the cars came to symbolise communism: anachronistic, inefficient and depressingly durable. All of which rather obscures the Trabant's many merits. Compared to the other microcars that flowered briefly in the 1960s, it was bigger, better, faster and more enjoyable to drive. Just because political stagnation kept it in production until 1991, it is hardly fair to compare it with a VW Polo of that era. Despite this, even today a good Trabant is surprisingly good fun to drive, something which few critics either know or are willing to acknowledge.

The Trabant design didn't come out of nowhere – Sachsenring had

been building small front-wheel-drive DKWs decades before that genre was popularised by the Mini, and the Trabant followed this space-and-weight effective layout. In fact, Zwickau in Saxony had a long and proud motor industry heritage, dating back to 1904 when Augustus Horch founded his eponymous company there. After being ousted from that business in 1909, he set up Audi (essentially a Latin translation of the German 'horch!', which means 'listen!'). Audi added the small, FWD, two-stroke DKWs to their portfolio from 1931, but from 1932 Horch, Audi, DKW and Wanderer joined forces as Auto Union.

Zwickau was captured by the Americans in 1945, but was then



Most Trabants had a two-cylinder, air-cooled, two-stroke engine (left), but a few got a 1043cc four-stroke unit from the VW Polo (right).

handed over to the Soviets who stripped the factories bare and took the production machinery as reparations. In 1946, ownership of the company was assumed by the state, which became the Deutsche Demokratische Republik (DDR, or in English usually just East Germany) from 1949. Under the new communist rulers, the pre-war DKW F8 re-emerged as the IFA F8, those letters standing for Industrieverwaltung Fahrzeugbau (the centralised Industrial Vehicle Construction Department). This was followed by the IFA F9, before production shifted to Eisenach in 1953, where it was developed into the Wartburg.

Back in Zwickau, they built the upmarket 2407cc, six-cylinder, four-stroke P240 until 1959, but by then they had already introduced the smaller P70, the first car with Duroplast bodywork, in this case screwed to a wood frame. The first Trabant was the P50 of 1957. The name means 'satellite,' and was chosen in honour of Sputnik, the first artificial satellite

that had been launched into space by the Soviet Union. In order to facilitate increased production of the new Trabant, VEB Sachsenring (formerly Horch) and VEB Automobilwerke (formerly Audi) were merged in 1958 to create the VEB Sachsenring Automobilwerke Zwickau.

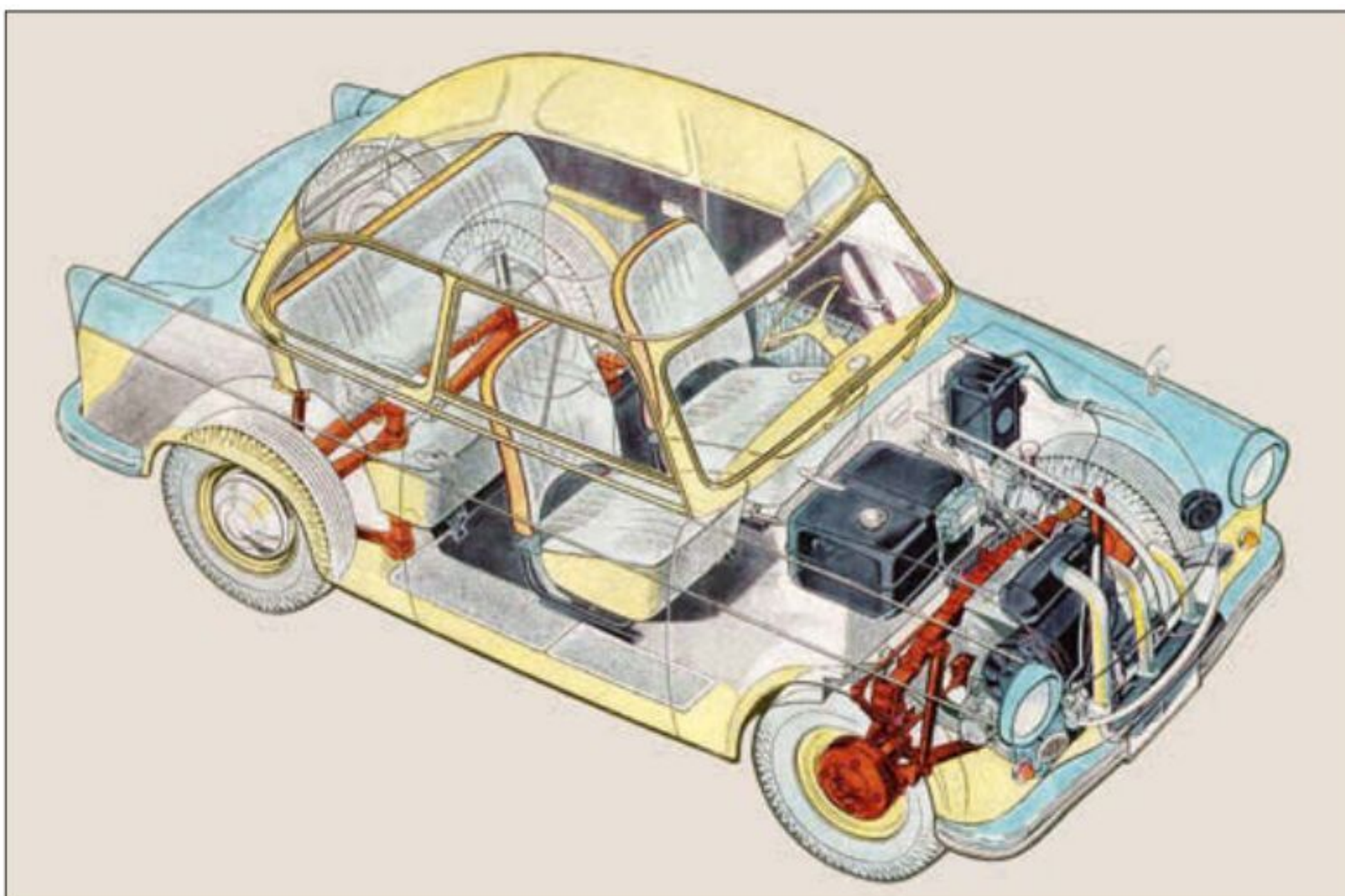
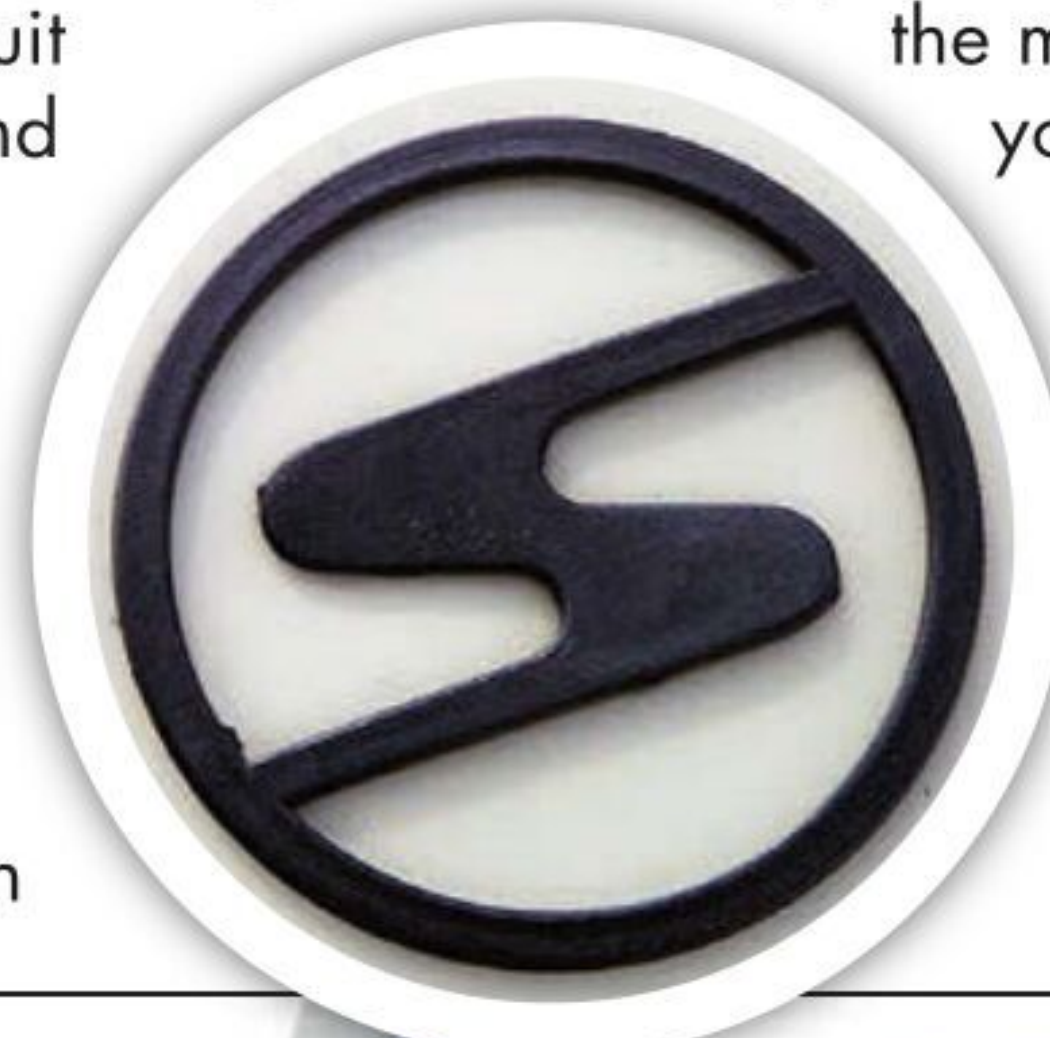
The P50's engine was enlarged from 500cc to 600cc for the P60 of 1962, but that was short-lived because the P601 was about to make its bow. This represented the final stage of evolution, originally not expected to last beyond the 1960s but which soldiered on essentially unchanged for the next 24 years. I say 'essentially,' but there were certainly improvements along the way, such as dual circuit brakes, 12-volt electrics and a switch from leaf springs to coils. There was even a four-stroke version as we shall see later, the Trabant 1.1 which went on sale from May 1990. On 21st May that year a 1.1 became the 3 millionth

Trabant to be produced, but on 30th April 1991 time finally caught up with the Trabi and all production ended.

Today, although it is often ridiculed, the Trabant makes a great daily driver. The steering (via a rack and pinion) is light and positive, as are the brakes (big drums all round). With proper CV joints and a modest 26bhp to play with, torque steer is never an issue.

There is synchromesh on all four gears, plus an automatic freewheel on fourth in two-stroke cars to aid economy and smooth coasting on light throttle. Being a two-stroke you do need to keep the revs up through the gears to keep it all running smoothly and it is certainly

happier on A and B-roads than on the motorway, but wherever you go it will put a smile on your face and on the face of anybody you pass along the way. Here are few facts that will hopefully raise a smile or two as well.



A cutaway drawing showing how the mechanical components were packaged into the curvaceous P50.



A column gear change on the two-stroke cars (four-stroke versions got a floor-mounted stick) and a flat floor from the FWD layout.



The Universal (or Kombi) was a surprisingly versatile little estate car, especially with the rear seat folded flat. We think that the load-lugging lines worked particularly well on the model too, balancing it out nicely.

1 The biggest fallacy about Trabants is that they are made out of papier mache. In fact the outer panels are made of Duroplast, originally a concoction of wood pulp, cotton waste and PVC, but later a mix of phenolic resin reinforced with cotton fibres. Many of those cotton fibres came from recycled clothing, allowing the Trabi to stake a claim to being green long before anybody else thought of the idea. The material arrived at the factory in rolls, and was turned into solid panels using heat and pressure in what looked like a giant panini press. Once formed and hardened, the panels were trimmed to size with a band saw. Duroplast itself is a wonderful compound – immensely strong and far superior to brittle fibreglass. But underneath it all the Trabant has a steel chassis and inner structure, so don't believe sellers who claim they can't rust – cars can look great, but be rotten underneath.



2 The first Trabant engines ran on a 33:1 mix of petrol and two-stroke oil, but the introduction of needle roller bearings for the camshaft in April 1974 stretched this to a more socially-acceptable 50:1. Having said that, no Trabi should smoke unduly once it has warmed up if the engine is in good condition and you use a good quality two-stroke oil. If a previous owner has been using too much oil, a good thrash at the correct ratio should clear out any sludge.

3 Two-stroke engines don't take kindly to long-term storage, especially if they are started occasionally for short bursts. The resulting condensation can cause the roller main bearings to rust and then grumble, although the

big ends last better. For the novice, deciding whether a two-stroke engine sounds OK or is on its way out can be hard. If you are desperate, have a listen to Crazy Frog (remember him?) – that started out as an attempt to imitate the ring-a-ding-ding sound of a two-stroke moped.

4 If you don't fancy a two-stroke engine, some Trabants were built with VW's 1043cc four-stroke Polo engine for the Hungarian market. A VW engine in the commie Trabant? Yes, because work had started in 1984 on a new engine plant in Karl-Marx-Stadt (now Chemnitz) in cooperation with VW, to build these engines for the West German company. Unfortunately, by the time that VW engine appeared in the





Trabant 1.1 in 1989 and went on sale in 1990, it was too little, way too late. One unkind nickname for it was 'the mummy with a pacemaker.'

5 If you want to take a test drive to see whether the Trabi is for you, then once we are allowed to travel again, you can do it by grabbing a cheap flight to Berlin or Dresden and taking a self-drive tour of the city in one. Check it out at www.trabi-safari.de – 75-minute self-drive Trabi Safaris currently start from just €49 per adult, with under 18s going free.

6 The Trabant saloon car is officially known as the Limousine in its native Germany, but don't let this fool you into thinking that the company had ideas above its station because that is merely the German term for 'saloon car.' The estate version was officially the Universal, but more frequently known as the Kombi, and its rear seat folded down to create a surprisingly spacious

load-lugger. There was also the Tramp, a kind of Mini Moke style utility vehicle that was a civilian version of the military-inspired Kubelwagen.

7 The P601 was available in three levels of trim: Standard, Special Edition (Sonderwunsch) and DeLuxe. The DeLuxe came with a contrasting colour roof, chrome bumpers and a better interior as well as spot lights, a radio and opening rear side windows. Waiting lists to get a new Trabant of any sort reached as long as 14 years, and babies were often put on the list from birth. Comrade Karl Wappler got lucky on 22nd November 1973 though – he had worked at the factory for 36 years, and was given the millionth Trabant, which came down the line that day.

8 Hopelessly out-dated and widely ridiculed by the 1990s, the Trabant still enjoyed an initial celebrity status in West Germany after the fall of the Berlin Wall. It was even voted their 'Car of the

Year' in 1989, proving if nothing else that Germans do indeed have a fine sense of irony.

9 The Trabant had a surprisingly strong presence on international rallies up to the 1980s, winning many class honours. In his book *Duroplast in Plastic Colours: The Trabant*, author Jürgen Schiebert says this led to one listener asking a radio station: 'Is it true that the Trabant can reach a top speed of 200km/h?' 'In principle yes,' came the answer, 'it just depends what height you drop it from.'

10 Several attempts were made to create a modern successor to the P601, but none got financial or political support. These included prototypes with four-stroke engines, modern styling and even Wankel motors. Not all of them were destroyed, and some can be found today in the August-Horch-Museum in Zwickau.



It is perhaps unfortunate that so many Trabants were a similar colour to the British Invacar, but there was a semi-automatic Hycomat version of the Trabant from 1965 which was the only automatic system produced within the Soviet Bloc and popular with the physically disabled.



THE MAGIC NUMBER

Good things often come in threes, and Ian Macaulay's collection is proof positive. WORDS AND PHOTOS: SAM SKELTON

The classic car bug is addictive. And Ian Macaulay has it. Never short of classics, his current fleet includes not only Eastern Bloc heroes, but also a pristine Mazda MX-5 and a delightful Austin Metropolitan. But partly by chance and partly by design, Ian has amassed a collection of very tidy examples of Soviet heroes spanning several Eastern Bloc marques and nations. And while global timing may

not see his passion exactly welcomed by all, Ian is proof positive that those of us who adore Soviet classics can look beyond the global climate.

At heart, Ian's love is for cars like the Trabant and Yugo 513 – and these cars have both found their way back to him having been sold in the past. The Volga is more of a spur of the moment buy – and one which will shortly be taking to the road.

"Following visits to Cuba in 2018 and Uzbekistan, Georgia and Azerbaijan a year later, the large number of Volga 24s in daily use prompted thoughts of adding one to my own collection," says Ian. While keen, he recognised that the rarity of the Volga 24 in the UK would make finding the right car difficult, and he resigned himself to a long wait. However, during Summer 2020 while browsing eBay, Ian





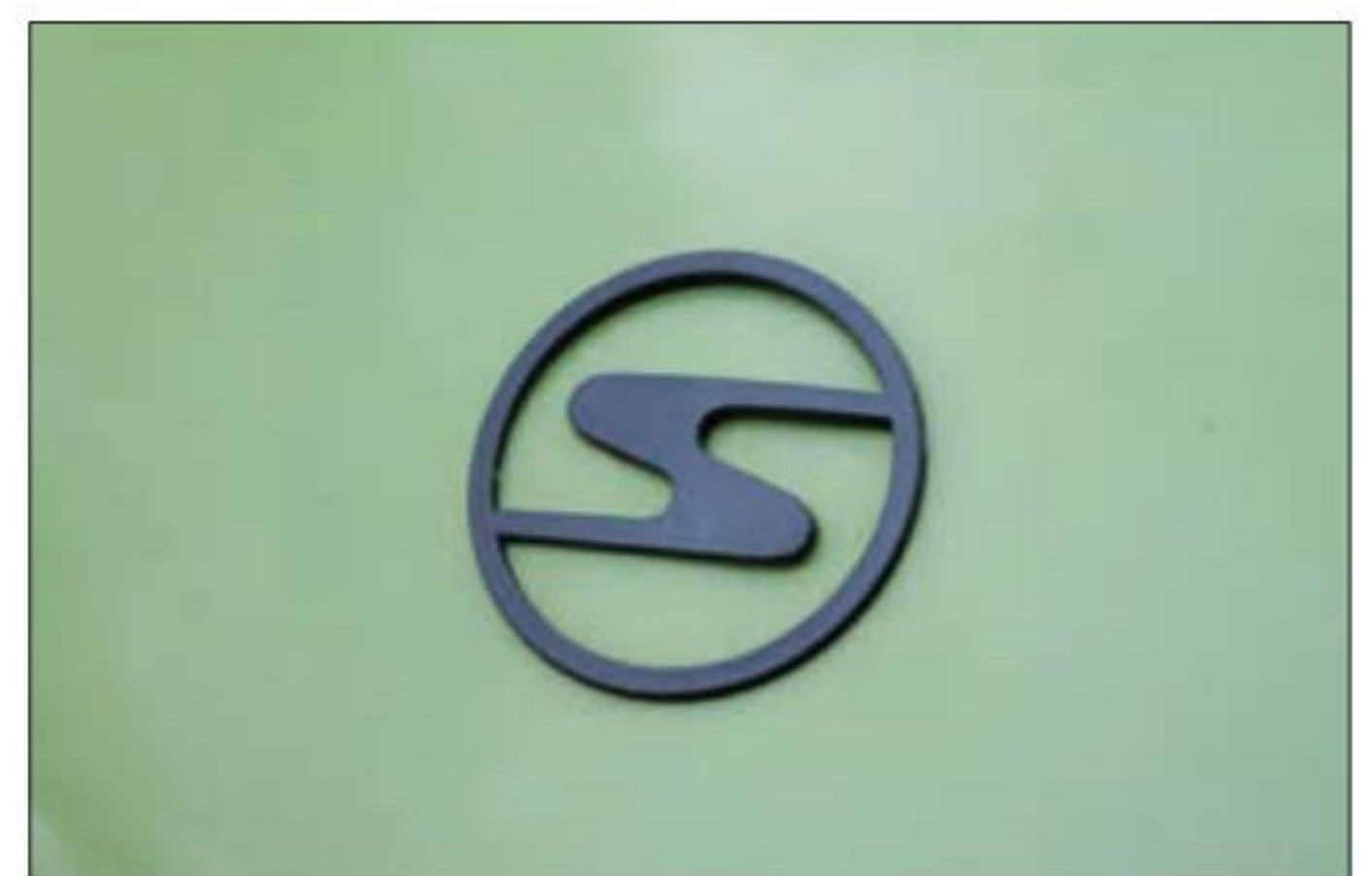
“ At heart, Ian’s love is for cars like the Trabant and Yugo 513 – and these cars have both found their way back to him having been sold in the past.

found a Volga 24 for sale in Wiltshire. The car had been imported from Estonia in 2014, was correctly registered with the DVLA and was road legal. Black from new, the lack of history means nothing can be proven but the likelihood is that this car would have seen service as a tool of the state. Soviet security agencies loved the Volga, and a black example was almost guaranteed to strike fear into the average comrade should it be seen

waiting for him at home after work... Ian picks up the story with a deal to buy the Volga, with his Ford Mustang convertible in part exchange. “The car joined our collection during a convenient break in lockdown restrictions which allowed us to travel to Swindon and drive the car home.” But not all was as it had seemed with the Volga. “A total brake failure occurred on the return journey, confirming my suspicions that there hadn’t been much



Trabi two stroke is almost unmistakable in sound.





by way of routine maintenance since the car left Tallinn three years earlier. Black and silver number plates, the absence of a rear fog lamp together with Russian headlamps which dipped to the right further enforced my view that a few blind eyes had been turned during the MOT test a couple of days before."

The further Ian looked, the more presented itself. The car needed rather more than he had initially thought – with work to the brakes, the steering, the electrics, the clutch hydraulics, the exhaust and the fuelling system vital before the car would truly be roadworthy. Fortunately, the body and trim were in good order, and replacement parts can be sourced via specialists in Germany. "I can get most parts within five days and at reasonable

“Despite the decadence of the Volga, Ian’s always liked the cars which show that all comrades are equal. And few cars are more equal than the Trabant.

cost. They can be cheaper in Eastern Europe, but they take months to arrive in some cases and it’s easier to deal with Germany." As a precaution, Ian also discarded the original crossply tyres – he didn’t know how long they had been fitted, and the white-walled radials suit the shape. Eighteen months on from purchase, the car is almost ready to be submitted for a legitimate MoT – and Ian is looking forward to showing it off. "I’m hoping to use it for local shows, as well as for a SALT Soviet Auto Luxury

Tour if it behaves. Watch this space!"

Despite the decadence of the Volga, Ian’s always liked the cars which show that all comrades are equal. And few cars are more equal than the Trabant. With a steel monocoque akin to a Rover P6, and panels made of a mixture of waste cotton and resin in a manner akin to Bakelite, the two stroke Trabant had become one of the most potent symbols of Soviet life in the lead up to the fall of the Berlin wall. And Ian was captivated by these cars as he saw them on the news.



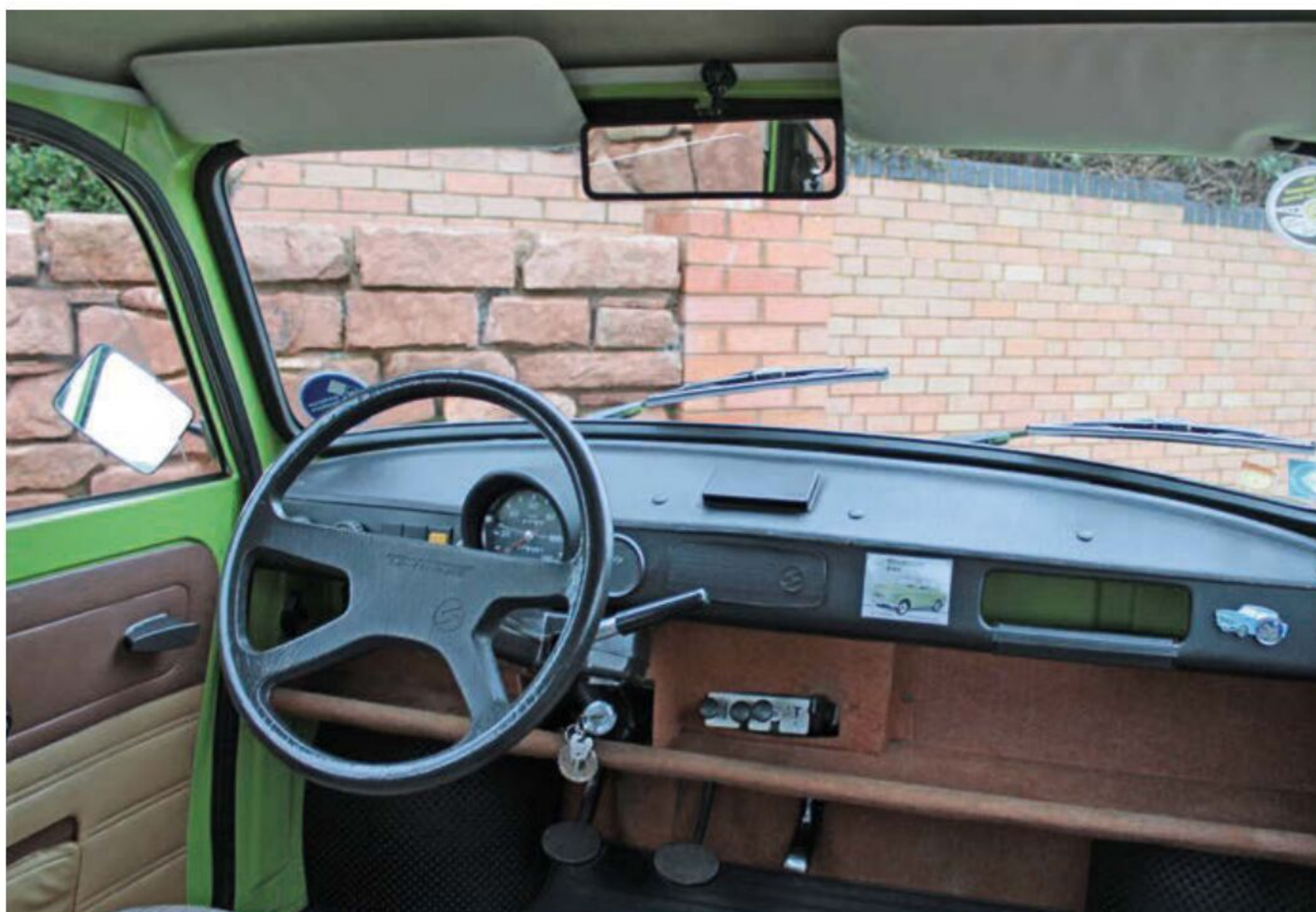


“During 1989, in the months leading to November’s memorable fall of the Berlin Wall I would eagerly tune into the evening news, hoping for a glimpse of the strange little car which I later learned was the Trabant, an example of which I vowed would one day join my collection. In the years that followed, several Trabants came into my ownership, some good, some bad but each and every one had that all important ability to make me smile.”

A runaway truck destroyed a particularly nice example back in 2005, in a freak accident. “It propelled the Trabant through the front of my house, reducing the car to a few buckets of glass, plastic and fractured Duraplast, and my garage to a pile of rubble resulting in a somewhat hefty insurance claim. At this point, demoralised and upset, I vowed that my Trabant association was at an end and determined never to buy another.”

He did, of course. Seven years later, in November 2012, he bought the Capri Green 1987 Trabant you see in these images. It was being sold by a fellow member of the Wartburg-

“Several Trabants came into my ownership, some good, some bad but each and every one had that all important ability to make me smile.”





Trabant club, and one known for keeping his cars in perfect fettle. "The Trabant was a recent import from Hungary and had covered a genuine distance of 31,000Km, had never needed welding and was the best example I had owned to date." Having

detailed the engine bay thoroughly and replaced the steering column bushes, Ian was overjoyed to win the "Car of SALT" award during the 2013 Soviet Auto Luxury Tour event. But personal circumstances meant that C931SRB was advertised for sale in 2014 – and

went to an enthusiast in Northampton. Having tried over the years to buy it back repeatedly and owned a number of inferior examples in a bid to recapture the magic, Ian once again decided that his days as a Trabant owner were over, and sold every single





Trabant spare he had.

Fast forward seven years, and in September 2021 Ian received a phone call. It was the chap he'd sold the green Trabi to, asking if he was still interested in re-purchasing the car. "It had only covered a further 1000km in the seven years since he bought it from me and was now surplus to his collection. I immediately arranged a visit to view the car which happily was every bit as good as I remembered, having been

“ The story of his Yugo 513 is similar to that of the Trabant – owned, sold, regretted and subsequently repurchased...

meticulously maintained and kept in dry storage. A deal was struck which included a huge assortment of new and used spare parts plus a large collection of Trabant memorabilia, books and model cars.”

And it won't be going anywhere again any time soon. Since buying the car back, Ian's had it fully rustproofed underneath, replaced the seat covered with a brand new set sourced from Dresden, and effected a repair to a





clutch are which snapped on a recent excursion and left him to return home in second gear.

"Whilst all of the cars in my collection make me smile, the Trabant somehow ticks boxes which the others can't quite manage."

And it's not the only car in Ian's collection that's going to be sticking around. The story of his Yugo 513 is similar to that of the Trabant – owned, sold, regretted and subsequently

repurchased, and again Ian won't be making the same mistake twice.

"I purchased the Yugo 513 in August 2011 whilst working as magazine editor for the now sadly defunct Zastava Yugo Club UK," says Ian. The club had been contacted by a dealership with links to a Yugo agent, and which had supplied Yugos locally in period. When a local elderly owner gave up driving, the garage repurchased his Yugo 513, and contacted the club to see if anyone

might be interested in an example with a verified 9200 miles from new. Ian wasted no time, he viewed the car immediately and had it trailered home to be recommissioned. Unfortunately – as happens – life got in the way. The Yugo sat in the garage awaiting its recommissioning for eighteen months, and eventually Ian agreed to sell it to a collector of low mileage modern classics called Julian Pearson.

Julian undertook the process that time





had denied Ian – he replaced most of the car’s rubber components, including the timing belt, tyres, gaiters and more, he had the underside fully rust protected with Dinitrol, and Dinitrol was also applied inside the box sections. The car otherwise remained as it was when it was first discovered by the club – in almost-new condition.

“Julian and I became friends and regularly chatted on Messenger until one evening a few years later when he informed me that his collection had peaked at 22 vehicles and ‘something had to go’. I offered to repurchase the Yugo but this was apparently a car he wanted to keep so I was offered a Morris Ital instead – an offer I politely declined. Fortunately, a few weeks later Julian did agree to sell the car back to me so in September 2019 it re-joined my collection. By this time the odometer reading had risen to just 9900 miles whilst figures obtained from the How Many Left website suggested it was one of only two 513s still registered with the DVLA.”

Since 2019 Ian has used the car sparingly, with its total now sitting just

“ He replaced most of the car’s rubber components, including the timing belt, tyres, gaiters and more, he had the underside fully rust protected with Dinitrol...”

shy of 11000 miles. It’s needed scant work in that time – a new battery, alternator and front calliper seals have been all Ian’s needed to do, though he added a timing belt to the list just to be on the safe side. It might have done few miles since Julian had recommissioned the car, but six years is still a long time for a belt. The Yugo’s longest outing – and its most recent – was to Lincolnshire from Ian’s Staffordshire home, to attend the Festival of the Unexceptional. “Sarah Crabtree of Bangers and Cash fame was present, and my Yugo attracted her attention. She was keen to hear its tale, and I have photographs of her with the car.”

While the Zastava Yugo Club UK no longer exists, there is a Facebook group

for enthusiasts of UK Yugos, and Ian is an active member of the Yugo/Zastava UK group on that channel. Through this, he has located and helped to rehome the UK’s only other 513, which was recently discovered alongside a 511 in a barn in Kent. Both cars are now undergoing restoration.

What’s next for Ian’s fleet? “I’d like a more powerful convertible than the MX5 for touring, and I had considered a Jaguar XK8. The Metropolitan belongs to my wife, and that’s going nowhere – like the Trabant and the Yugo, it’s a keeper. I’d quite like to find another Zaporozhets at some point as I miss Zapo ownership, but for now I’m happy with the three Eastern Bloc classics I own.” ■

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FIAT 124 V LADA 1200

The Fiat 124 is arguably the most important car of all time. But how does it compare to its best-known offspring? WORDS: SAM SKELTON



In the pantheon of greats sit such cars as the Ford Model T. The Benz Patent Motorwagen. The Citroen DS. Even the Volkswagen Beetle. And yet the car which has mobilised more than any other, the Fiat 124, is often forgotten. Is it because so many of the originals crumbled away? Is it because its styling was nothing especially special? Or is it simply because it made so many of its achievements under noms-de-plume? The Tofas, the FSO, the Seat, the Premier, and the Lada all owe a debt to the small Fiat at some level. Produced in the USSR until 2012, the small Fiat of 1966 continued to be built for several years in Egypt. And yet most books

on the topic of historically important vehicles give it a footnote at best.

We don't think this is fair. But equally, we recognise the role that its licence built derivatives had in the process. So we think the fairest way to acknowledge the 124's role in history is to pit it head to head against the Lada that carried the 124's torch high for decades. Which makes the better classic today?

ITALIAN STYLE

Launched in 1966, the Fiat 124 was never intended to set the world on fire. Meant as a replacement for the Fiat 1300, it was a small saloon

and estate car range with rear wheel drive, disc brakes all round and coil spring rear suspension. It used a 1.2 litre version of a new overhead valve engine family that would subsequently sire the Fiat Twin Cam, and begat the Sport Spider and the Sport Coupe; both highly regarded as affordable Italian performance cars of their era. These two models featured the double overhead camshafts that would be a signature part of this engine's illustrious life.

For 1967, the 124 Special was launched. It used the same 1.4 litre engine as the Sport Spider and Sport Coupe, but with the OHV head of



the 1200. New grille, wheels, door handles and tail lamps denoted the 124S, while inside were better seats, a new dashboard and new door cards. A new Special T for 1970 would gain the twin cam engine of the sports variants, along with another new grille, chrome trimmings to the rear, wood trim for the dash and carpets in place of the typically Italian rubber flooring.

Facelifts to the standard model for 1971 included a new grille and dual circuit brakes, while 1973 saw all models fitted with a wood dash trim and new flush door handles. Soon after the launch of the Special T the Special was retrimmed to reflect the more premium model, albeit without a tachometer. For 1973 there was a facelift to the Special

“ We think the fairest way to acknowledge the 124’s role in history is to pit it head to head against the Lada that carried the 124’s torch high for decades.

with new interior chrome, while the Special T would gain a 1592cc engine by 1973 in the UK. All models were discontinued for 1974.

The 124 would also give rise to the larger 125 model – developed as a replacement for the Fiat 1500 series, and fitted with the larger 608cc engine from launch. Launched in 1967, it used much of the same shell as the smaller 124 and the same doors, but it sat on

the longer wheelbase and floorpan of the older Fiat 1500. The rear seat was set further back, giving greater legroom. The 125S would follow for 1968, with more power and a five speed gearbox.

Fiat replaced the 124 with the 131 Mirafiori in 1974 – a model which would arrive in Britain for 1975. Its wider range would incorporate a two door saloon as well as four door and estate variants. The 124 Sport Coupe





would continue in production to 1975, while the Spider – in later life offered by Pininfarina as the Spidereuropa – would last to 1985.

A SOVIET UNION?

The Fiat 124's legacy would live beyond the mid 1970s though, and the car which did the best job of carrying its torch was the Lada. AvtoVAZ was established in 1966, in conjunction with Fiat, the Soviet Union and the Italian Communist Party, in order to build compact and basic up to date

“ The Fiat 124's legacy would live beyond the mid 1970s though, and the car which did the best job of carrying its torch was the Lada.

transport for the people. The car selected as the base for this project was the new Fiat 124, and the factory was built on the banks of the River Volga. The site and the surrounding village were renamed Tolyatti in honour of the

leader of the Italian Communist Party, Palmiro Togliatti, in recognition of his efforts.

The Zhiguli, as the first cars were known, was launched in 1970. It bore a cosmetic resemblance inside and



out to the Fiat 124. But it had been thoroughly re-engineered in order to cope with everything that the Soviet climate could throw its way. Rear brakes were replaced by aluminium drums, the engine was replaced with a newly engineered unit developed in Russia, the suspension was raised, the shell strengthened and the panels made from far heavier, higher grade steel. In the first year, just 22000 were built. But by 1973, 660000 per year could be made and the first million cars had been produced. Under the

TECH SPECS:	FIAT 124	LADA 1200
ENGINE:	1197cc 4-cyl	1198cc 4-cyl
TRANSMISSION:	Four-speed man	Four-speed man
MAX POWER:	60bhp	62bhp
MAX SPEED:	85mph	90mph
0-60:	15.9 seconds	18.4 seconds
LENGTH:	4013mm	4013mm
WEIGHT:	834kg	922kg

original licencing agreement with Fiat, the Zhiguli wouldn't be sold in Italy, nor would it be sold in direct competition with the original Fiat 124 on any market. British imports, as the Lada

1200, began in 1974 – after the 124 had been discontinued to make way for the 131. Larger engined 1300 and 2101 models were also produced, alongside the more prestigious Lada



1500 and 1600 models which used grilles similar to that of the Fiat 124 Special. All models came with a starting handle, while the posher models came with an auxiliary fuel pump and improved soundproofing.

A comprehensive facelift for 1980 gave us the car that we know in the West as the Lada Riva. Larger lights to the rear, a squared off nose, new doorhandles and revised trimmings led to a car which had lost some of the Italianite style of the earlier models, while simultaneously consolidating a solid and sturdy appearance. It also had the effect of modernising what was by then a fourteen year old design, and one which had fallen out of step with Western mores even if it still looked at home in Russia.

The Lada struggled on in Britain to 1996, further imports stymied by

“ The Fiat 124’s legacy would live beyond the mid 1970s though, and the car which did the best job of carrying its torch was the Lada.

a double pronged problem, Firstly, emissions legislation meant that it would take too much to make the Lada fit for the British market. Secondly, a complex three way deal between the importers, Lada and Coca Cola fell through, weakening the business case for their import. Lada Rivas were still produced in Russia, however, for a further 15 years. The last examples were built in Russia in 2012, though Riva production would continue in Egypt.

VERDICT

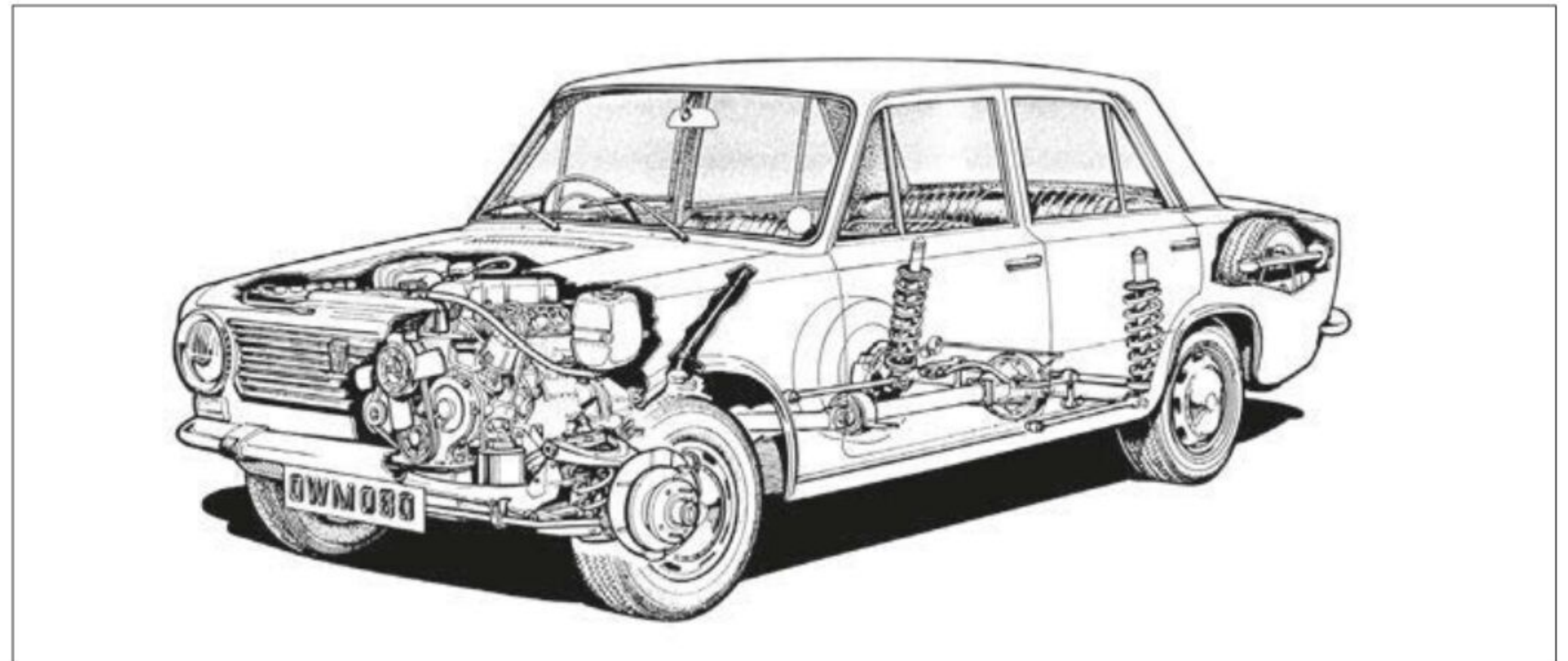
The Fiat 124 is without doubt the more interesting car here. Not only did it beget so many licenced variants, it also gave the world the legendary Fiat Twin Cam engine. Its simple styling by mid 60s standards was elegant, the rev happy powertrain made it entertaining, and it was seen as a little bit separate when new. The Lada – in Britain at least – was outdated when it landed, and always came off as a shade impoverished.





But the Lada is the more worthy of classic status, we think. Because not only did it offer people behind the Iron Curtain a genuine attempt at a car for the people, but the upgrades made to ensure longevity mean that many Ladas are still giving sterling service in Eastern Europe as beasts of burden as well as classics to cherish. There's also the very real fact that it will be far easier to get hold of a Lada today than to find an original 124 saloon in UK specification.

And the number of enthusiasts in its native Russia mean that it's still possible – with the aid of a translator – to get hold of many of the parts you might need. The scarcity of the 124 means that you're going to struggle to restore one in comparison.



The Fiat is the car that better deserves a place in the history books. But without the Lada, it would be seen as a footnote in Italian history. Meanwhile, the hardy

and reliable nature of the Lada, its thicker steel and its ease of ownership make it by far the more convincing classic buy today. ■



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SHADOWS OF FREEDOM

In Part 1 of our look at cars from behind the Iron Curtain, we contemplate the era of Soviet style. And the Trabant. WORDS: SAM SKELTON



The GAZ-13 Chaika was one of the Soviet Union's biggest and most impressive cars. The GAZ-14 (above right) replaced it.

It seems almost ridiculous to think that for half a lifetime, our planet was divided into two broad blocs with different socio-political attitudes, and that neither could quite see eye to eye with the way the other felt. While there are undoubted political tensions rife in the world, there is nothing quite to the same scale as the Cold War between the NATO alliance and the Warsaw Pact countries – a non-combative war which stretched from 1946 to 1991. Historic conflicts such as the Great Game over

Afghanistan and the Crimean War set the stage for the worldwide split into factions, as did the Russian Revolution and Russia's adoption of socialism – eventually communism. After WWII, the Long Telegram, the Iron Curtain speech and other acts of rhetoric induced hostilities which, while unlikely to result in combat, effectively severed socio-political ties. A wall was built around West Berlin as an enclave of western power in the Eastern Bloc, and it became perceived as subversive for

either side to show sympathies for the other. This naturally meant that the Soviet Bloc had restricted access to Western cars. So they increased production of their own instead.

While hardly the first wave of Soviet bloc car production – companies such as Tatra and GAZ had been around for decades, the 1950s were undoubtedly the glory decade for Soviet automotive styling and technological advances. Transatlantic influences were the order of the day, scaled down in a similar



manner to the Three Graces from Ford of Britain, or the Vauxhall E-series. The earliest Volga M21s are rarely seen now, many having been modernised over the years with the later and more prevalent grille. But they really are shrunken Americana, with a Studebaker-aping nose in place of the later chromium grin. Lesser known was the M22 – an estate produced from 1962

“ The 1950s were undoubtedly the glory decade for Soviet automotive styling and technological advances.

to the model’s replacement in 1970.

Cars like the GAZ Volga M21 have come to typify the Soviet automotive scene – not least as the cars of the

oppressors – the KGB, or the Stasi if you lived in East Germany. Not only would government officials turn the black Volga into a sight that could strike



The GAZ M21 Volga was popular with state officials - especially when fitted with the Chaika’s 5.5 litre V8.

IRON CURTAIN CARS SOVIET STYLE



Early M21s had a handsome, almost American facade, though most were updated to the latest nose while in service.

fear into the most hardened of men, but when fitted with the 5.5-litre V8 from the M13 Chaika the cars of the state were unbeatable on the road. With 110mph achievable from these specially adapted Volgas, you might hide – but you certainly couldn't run.

The Chaika itself was a far more rarefied prospect – a luxury limousine targeted only at the most equal members of the society, or at least as parodied by Orwell in *Animal Farm*. Classified as a limousine, it was only available to party officials – but could be rented

by citizens for special occasions such as weddings. Inspired by mid '50s Packards, the Chaika (which translates as seagull) can best be likened to a Soviet Daimler DS420. Much like the Daimler, it had an extended production run – launched in 1958, it took until



Czech Tatra T603 could be rebuilt to the latest specification by the factory.



Wartburg 311 offered three cylinder style. Its square edged 353 replacement wasn't so visually appealing.

1977 for the GAZ M14 Chaika to replace it.

Officials in satellite states could also have the option of a Czech-built Tatra T603. Launched in 1956 and a contemporary of the Citroen DS, here was a car that looked like it was from

the future in much the same manner as its Gallic counterpart. With three headlamps in the space you'd expect to find the grille, the remnants of Tatra's traditional dorsal fin, and a body shaped like a bar of soap, the Tatra was distinctive even in the gloomy black

that so many seemed to be. But you never see these early cars because of a quirk in the way Tatra did business. If your T603 was getting stale, the factory would rebuild it to the then-current specification. Sustainability in motion, this accounts for why so many



Wartburg 313-1 Sportwagen was one of the Eastern Bloc's few sports cars, offering style on par with the Borgward Isabella.

IRON CURTAIN CARS SOVIET STYLE



By the end of production, Trabants were fitted with 1.1 litre four cylinder engine derived from the Volkswagen Polo.

T603s were rebuilt into T603-2s, and subsequently into the unofficially named T603-3. The Vignale styled T613 replaced the T603 in 1975 – and lasted until the launch of the heavy-facelift T700 in 1996.

The proletariat could enjoy style too, in East Germany, courtesy of the factory that had given the world the first BMW cars. BMW had started producing cars with the Dixi in Eisenach, and had kept the factory as its car production plant. Following the end of WWII, Eisenach was in the Soviet zone -and the company had been registered as Soviet stock. BMW management looked on helplessly as car production resumed under its name, using its models, behind the Iron Curtain – while it was Soviet owned, BMW was unable to mount a challenge to retrieve its own name. Once ownership transferred back to East Germany in 1952, BMW AG mounted a lawsuit and won the rights to its name back. Undeterred, the East Germans simply painted the blue parts of the propeller badge red and renamed the company EMW – Eisenach Motoren Werke. It was this company which



THE TRABANT

Not only was the Trabant a symbol of East Germany, but it enjoyed a period as an object of ridicule equivalent to our Reliant three wheelers in Britain. Contrary to myth their bodies were not formed from cardboard, but from a plastic similar to GRP. Instead of glass, however, the plastic was reinforced with cotton waste – a new material called Duroplast. Duroplast

was durable – and impossible to destroy. It was carcinogenic when burned, didn't rot, and was non-recyclable at the time. Time was in the mid-1990s when a Trabant was an object of ridicule – available for small change, indestructible and, in a way, they represented the old ways from which the East was trying to escape. The passage of time has been kind to the Trabi though – as former

Soviet nations have begun to embrace their past, surviving Trabis have now been transformed into icons of Ost-algia. In some former Eastern Bloc cities including Budapest, it's possible to hire a Trabant by the day to experience the full Eastern European lifestyle. As if that wasn't enough, the enthusiast scene for this little plastic runabout is thriving worldwide – with several in the UK.

subsequently produced the Wartburg 311 from 1956 – 311, because it had been a tradition in the BMW days to begin each new model's 3-digit code with the number 3. Powered by a three-cylinder two stroke engine with just seven moving parts and based on the underpinnings of the DKW-based IFA F9, the Wartburg was named both after BMW's first sportscar and the company which had first produced cars in Eisenach. Unusually for a Soviet vehicle, several variants were available – from humble saloons and estates to a sports roadster redolent of the Borgward Isabella. Its replacement in 1965 by the 353 might have brought chassis

“ Sadly, the spate of futurism from the 1950s was followed, largely, by stagnation.

refinements, but it heralded the trend toward angular design behind the Iron Curtain that would continue until the wall had fallen.

Sadly, the spate of futurism from the 1950s was followed, largely, by stagnation. Designs from the 1960s and 1970s such as the Trabant P601, the Wartburg 353, the Tatra T613 and even the Fiat based models from Lada and FSO, might have appeared up to date

when they were launched, but each enjoyed a lengthy production run that left it hopelessly outclassed by Western alternatives after the Berlin Wall came down in 1989. Many of these models were exported outside the Soviet Bloc, starting sixty years ago with the Moskvich 407 and the Volga M21 – but more prevalently from the mid-1960s. We shall assess their reception in the UK in a future piece. ■



ALTERNATIVE AUTOMOTIVE STRATEGY

When Eastern Bloc cars came to the UK, reactions were mixed. WORDS: SAM SKELTON

While Eastern Europe never quite conquered the West in the way it had hoped, there were nevertheless strong areas of support within the UK for certain Iron Curtain brands – but the marketing strategy that led to their success didn't endear them to the motoring press.

The first wave of Soviet-built cars to make it to the UK market on an official basis was in 1959 – where the Earl's Court Motor Show showed the Volga M21 model to an intrigued UK public. Alongside it was the Moskvich 407, but while the Volga was sold here in small numbers by importer Thompson and Taylor, it took the later Moskvich 408 for that model to gain any traction.

Not that their initial sales figures were strong. The Volga, the 1964 Wartburg 311 and 1966 Moskvich 408 sold in small numbers because the British market of the 1960s viewed imported cars with suspicion. Not only that, but imported cars made by the communists were distinctly undesirable, given that elements of popular culture including the James Bond film franchise and the works of Len Deighton had marked Eastern Europe as subversive. Ownership of a Moskvich was almost akin to admitting you were part of the circle beyond the Cambridge Five, in the eyes of the Cortina buyers toward whom the car was targeted.

In 1970, however, Thompson and Taylor was purchased by Satra Corporation - Soviet American Trading, a New York based company aimed at promoting the trade between the two blocs. Now renamed Satra Motors, and importing the new Moskvich 412, the company adopted a new strategy which saw the humble Mosky attracting more British attention. By reducing the price from that of a Cortina to that of a Mini (at which the importer could still profit), the pile 'em high and sell 'em cheap approach meant that suddenly the Moskvich enjoyed a surge of popularity in Britain.

Satra was selling all the Moskviches it could get – so many, in fact, that some

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of the pre-delivery inspection work was rushed. And with cars built carelessly, that wasn't really viable. When the Consumer Association got hold of a sample Moskvich to assess the quality standards it was panned, and the report in Which in 1973 also cast serious doubts over the safety of the Moskvich. Its days in the UK were numbered. But Satra was already assessing the viability of importing the Lada 1200 – which first

reached our shores in 1974. Two years later, the Moskvich was over for Britain.

The Lada, meanwhile, continued the Mosky's keen pricing policy, with vastly better quality-control. Better still, it looked like a Western car – this funny new import was effectively a modified Fiat 124, a car Britain had enjoyed in small numbers for much of the last decade. Solid, reliable and sturdy, those at the sharp end embraced the concept



of an Escort sized saloon with an extensive toolkit, designed for a Soviet winter, for the cost of a second-hand Hillman. But the motoring press were not so favourable.

As motoring magazines are often supported by advertisers, naturally Satra was approached by many magazines in the hope of securing revenue. But Satra could barely meet demand for

imports – and at a margin which didn't allow for advertising. Unsurprisingly, the media cooled to the concept of this small Soviet saloon, and road tests were muted in their appreciation. But the Lada still sold, helped by such specials as the UK only 1600ES. This featured a vinyl roof, plush sports seats and alloy wheels in a facsimile of the Dolomite Sprint's appeal – but for basic Cortina

money. The 1983 facelift into the Riva broadened the gap between the Lada and the contemporary Ford however – far from trying to attract Sierra buyers, special Rivas aimed to bring luxuries to the lower end of the Lada line. By this point, the basic design was getting on for being two decades out of date, and it shifted toward being a car bought purely on good value and wholesome



Ladas were sold in Britain from the early 1970s to 1997. This is a UK-spec Lada 1200 saloon.



Tatra T613-5 was thoroughly revised by former Jaguar engineer Tim Bishop to appeal to Jaguar buyers. Few were sold.

sense. The expansion of the range with the Samara and Niva 4x4 models only boosted Lada's success – making it one of the strongest Communist brands to have entered the British marketplace. But that love affair came to an end in 1996 – Satra's dealings with Coca Cola in order to secure entry to the Russian market for the well-known soft drink, and the Lada's woeful emissions, made import fiscally unviable. The Riva stumbled on to 2010 in Russia, though production continued even then in Egypt.

If you liked your Lada lookalike to be a little bigger and even cheaper, you could choose an FSO 125p. By 1986, the 1300 version was almost 25% cheaper than the more common Lada, but as its underpinnings were distinctly more agricultural this wasn't as good a saving as it may have seemed. The pickup, however, was Britain's cheapest commercial vehicle – and with an arctic heater and high ground clearance, it became popular in the East of England as farm transport.

The FSO Polonez was much the same underneath, but with a more modern body courtesy of Giugiaro. A hatchback, the Polonez was marketed in the UK until 1992, and returned in 1994 as the Polonez Caro. Power was from a series of FSO four pots of 1500cc and 1600cc, though the diesel offered in later UK cars was the Peugeot XUD.

Yugos attracted surprising popularity

in the UK – not least because the 45, 55 and 65 drove much like the Fiat 127 upon which they were based, and the quality by Eastern Bloc standards was high. These cars sold far better than the older Fiat 128-based 311 and 511 series in Britain, as their size was more appealing to those solely seeking a runabout and their style was less outdated. Unfortunately, civil war in Yugoslavia put paid to attempts to sell the larger and more modern Sana in Britain after a matter of months, despite a period Top Gear report which noted space, a good warranty and driving dynamics as among the Sana's positive points.

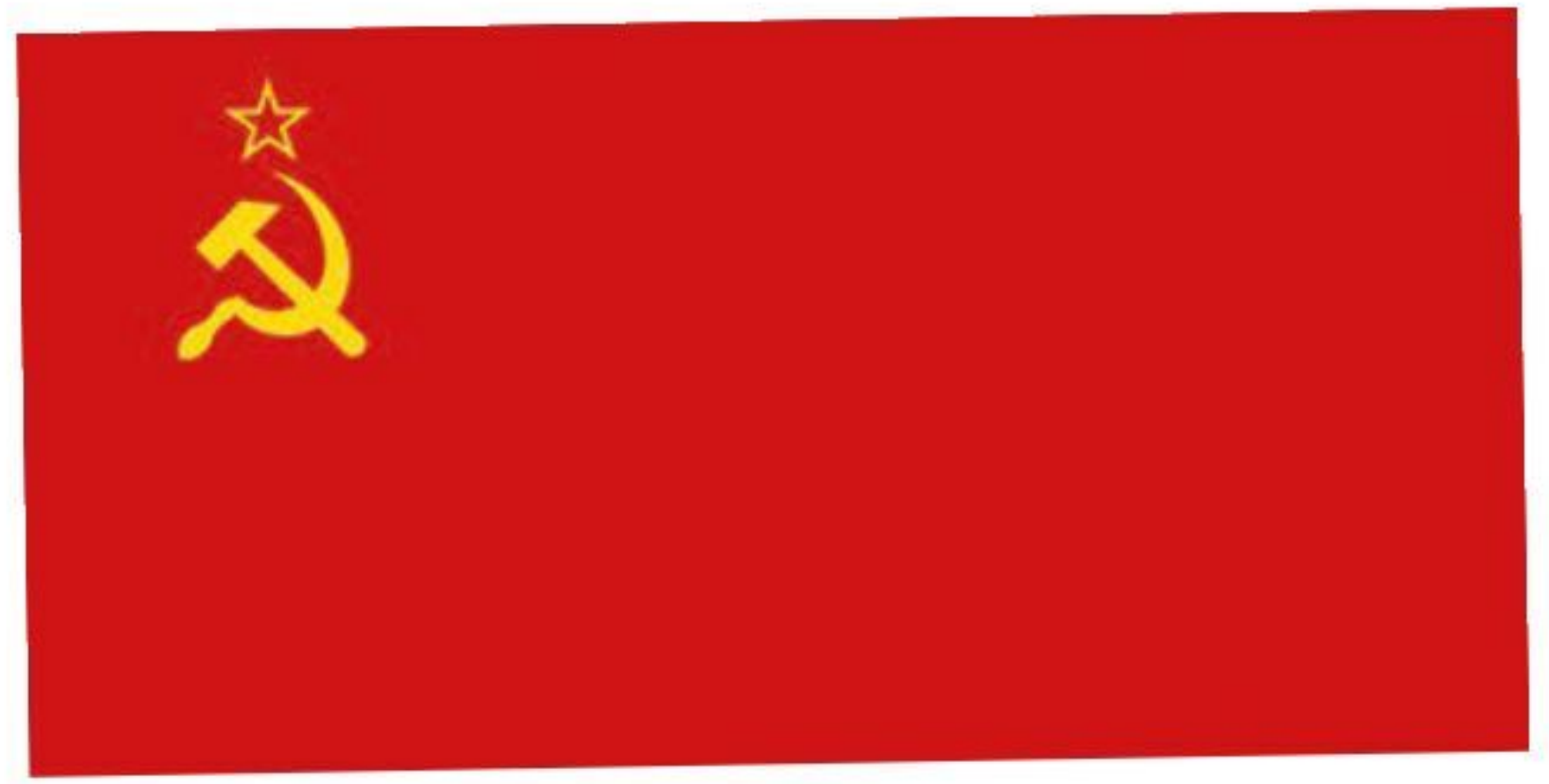
Arguably, Britain's biggest Soviet love affair was with Škoda. From the launch of the Estelle, here was a small car that didn't look too offensive, nor did it look like a Western castoff. By Soviet standards, the quality was good, and Škodas were among the cheapest of the Eastern European models available at the time. The Rapid coupe looked and felt a bit like a Porsche for potato money, courtesy of its two door rear engine layout and repeated RAC Rally class wins, while the Felicia was a genuinely competent small car that needed neither excuse nor apology. An injection of Volkswagen capital and some clever advertising slogans made Škoda into a market force which has continued to this day. Nowadays, Škoda is effectively the budget arm of Volkswagen, but its

reputation for value and good sense was built on the reputations of cars like the Estelle and the Favorit.

Not all Eastern imports were value family cars, though. An attempt in 1993 to import the Tatra T613 from Czechoslovakia to the UK showed that behind the wall, even executive models were being built. Its 3.5-litre V8 meant 0-60 in under 8 seconds, and 138mph flat out – figures which compared well to the BMW 535i. UK cars bear the designation T613-5 and feature walnut dashboards, new instruments, five spoke alloys, new fuel injection and a heater you could program a week in advance. You could even order it with varying axle ratios, depending on whether you wanted a sprinter or cruiser. Just four were converted to UK RHD specification by importer and former Jaguar engineer Tim Bishop before the project folded – in part because its £30,000 price would have bought you a Jaguar XJ6. The Tatra was pitched as a hand-built and exclusive car in the mould of the Bristol, but British buyers sadly didn't see it that way.

As classics, all Eastern Bloc cars enjoy a small but fanatical UK following – not only the cars we were able to buy new, but other models which have subsequently been imported. The Unloved Soviet and Socialist Register, numerous Facebook groups and marque specific clubs all cater for the needs of Eastern Bloc enthusiasts in the UK. ■

WINDS OF CHANGE



The Soviet Union's best known automotive exports highlighted differences across the continent. And by the end of the Cold War, both sides could claim automotive victories. WORDS: SAM SKELTON



The svelte Fiat begat many Eastern European derivatives.

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF THE FIAT 124

There is a case to be made for the Fiat 124 as the most historically significant car of all time. And if you're wondering why we're citing an Italian thoroughbred here among the chariots of iron, you'll need a history lesson.

You see, the Italians were responsible for a big chunk of Eastern Bloc automation both in Poland and in Mother Russia itself. And the Fiat 124, technically, proved to be the start point in both endeavours. The 124 was

key to the deal agreed between the Soviet Department of Foreign Trade and Fiat in 1966, following discussions in 1965. A new company was to be formed on the bank of the river Volga – AvtoVAZ, broadly translated, became "Volga Automobile Plant" – and the factory was to produce a series of models based upon the Fiat 124 design.

These cars were initially sold as the Zhiguli, but became known as Lada when attempts to export them in 1973 met with marque bewilderment.



Broadly the Lada – or VAZ2101 in its initial form – was a strengthened 124, known internally at Fiat as the 124R project. Panels were made of



heavier gauge steel, the engine was replaced with an all-aluminium OHC unit, drum brakes replaced at the rear, recessed door handles were fitted and the independent rear suspension of the Fiat gave way to a simpler live axle. In Britain, we got the Lada 1200 – followed by larger engine derivatives up to the Lada 1600ES. Here was a car that looked like a genuine rival to the Dolomite 1850 on paper and in the showroom, but owing to the Lada's low pricing and low rent image few Cortina buyers could be swayed. The facelift of 1982 and rebranding as Riva generated a minor flurry of interest, but ultimately the Lada was not seen as a desirable car alongside the sleek new Sierra.

As a music hall joke in Britain, it was second only to its Polski-Fiat 125 sibling. This car was the result of a deal Fiat had done with Poland,

“ This car was the result of a deal Fiat had done with Poland, reviving a pre-war agreement and brand name to manufacture the Fiat 125 in Warsaw.

reviving a pre-war agreement and brand name to manufacture the Fiat 125 in Warsaw. The 125 was, in essence, a stretched 124 shell on the floorpan of the old Fiat 1500, featuring a 1600cc derivative of the new Fiat Twin Cam. Polski-Fiat derivatives were also available with the old OHV engines from the Fiat 1300 and 1500. Production of the 125 lasted until 1991 – at which point it had been Britain's cheapest car for over a decade.

Meanwhile, the Lada underwent continual development – new models,

an estate, bigger engines and more extras became available. In 1982, a series of cosmetic revisions were implemented which served the car until its demise in 2012. By this point, the basic design of the Fiat upon which it was based was already nearly fifty years old – and even as a Lada its bones had existed for well over forty years. For a car with a projected manufacturing period of perhaps ten to fifteen years, the Lada surpassed all expectations and cast the Fiat 124 into history as one of the world's longest-



produced automotive dynasties.

But the story of the Fiat 124 doesn't even end here. Because Fiat licenced the design to scores of other nations too. The SEAT 124 in Spain (1968-1980), Kia 124 in Korea (1970-1975), Tofaş Serçe in Turkey (1971-1994), Premier 118NE in India (1985-2001) and Pirin-Fiat in Bulgaria (1967-1971) all owe a debt to the Fiat 124 as their basis, and as recently as 2015 the car was still being built by Lada in Egypt.

This simple saloon was not only the second world-Volkswagen, but the basis of so many models that it comes second only to the Type 1 in terms of its production. Lada alone built over 18 million – just 3.5 million behind the Beetle. By the time we consider all the variants, could the humble Fiat 124 have been responsible for more cars than any other single type?

CZECH IT OUT

While Fiat was busy indulging in a bout of automotive Catholicism, homespun Eastern Bloc manufacturers were investing in their futures. Škoda in particular, post war, had adopted a new tactic to produce a car suitable for Czechoslovakia on a budget. Similarly to pre-war Volkswagen, it had done so by sneaking a look over the shoulder of Hans Ledwinka at Tatra – for nobody could argue that the 1000MB was a distinct break from Škoda traditions and a shift toward Tatra mores.

For a start, it was rear engine, to minimise cabin noise, with luggage space under what most cars would consider to be the bonnet. That engine was air cooled rather than water cooled too, simpler yes, but also a nod to Škoda's bigger Czech brother. It was also fairly aerodynamically styled, with chrome touches and vents in similar

locations to the 603 series. The roof and bonnet pressings even included an interpretation of the traditional Tatra dorsal fin.

Overall however, the styling was less radical than the T603 models – in no small part owing to Škoda's interest in exporting the 1000MB for hard currency. Launched in 1964, by 1965 the 1000MB was available on the British market – where it compared favourably against cars such as the Ford Cortina 1200 and the Hillman Minx in terms of price and specification. A facelift and its rebranding as the Škoda 100/110 series in 1969 didn't harm sales appeal, and nor did the sporting S110R coupe – seen by many as a mini-Porsche. The range sold in steady numbers until its replacement in 1977.

That replacement had been planned as a new front wheel drive, front



1000MB brought rear engine design to Škoda, modernising its range at a stroke.

engine saloon – but as this would have made the satellite Škoda producers of the Soviet Bloc's most advanced car, Mother Russia refused to grant it a licence. The car would have to be a revision of the existing 100/110 series – and so when the 105/120 series was unveiled, under its sharp new body remained a rear mounted engine and rear wheel drive. Once again there was a coupe, initially called the Garde and revised to Rapid in a facelift of 1984.

“ The truth was that at their low price point in Britain they attracted rather more retirees than wannabe Ari Vatanen

1984 also brought the larger engine 1.3 litre 130 model, while a new aluminium head in 1987 turned this into the 135/136. And while Škodas were criticised for somewhat pendulous handling at the extreme, the truth was that at their low price point in Britain

they attracted rather more retirees than wannabe Ari Vatanen, and so their handling was rarely pushed beyond the limits by those who drove them.

Škoda finally got its front wheel drive car in 1987. The Favorit was developed to replace the Estelle, with



Later Škodas such as the 120 and 130 were sold in the UK under the Estelle name.



The Favorit was Škoda's first front wheel drive car, and finally put an end to the Škoda jokes.

work commencing in 1982. It was styled by Bertone in three styles; a five door hatchback, an estate, and a four door saloon which was not permitted for production for political reasons. The Favorit was the last car to be designed by a wholly independent Škoda and was, at the time of its introduction, the most advanced family car available in the Soviet Bloc. It formed part of a triumvirate of front-drive hatches launched at a similar time; the Lada Samara, the Yugo Sana and the Favorit

each brought their manufacturers up to date.

The fall of Communism in Czechoslovakia with the Velvet Revolution led to a number of changes for Škoda. Most industries were privatised, and the automotive one was no different. The Czech government invited offers from multiple foreign marques as partner companies, and Volkswagen's bid proved to be successful. Renault had been considered, but its reluctance

to continue with anything other than Twingo production counted against it.

VW, having taken an interest in 1990, steadily consolidated its position. The 1994 Felicia was a heavily revised Favorit, while all subsequent models owed a debt to various VW Group platforms. The Octavia was a Golf based, Passat sized offering that sold for Polo money. Unsurprisingly, Volkswagen had a hit on its hands. Škoda's image as a Communist joke played well for



Škoda Octavia was developed from the Volkswagen Golf floorpan as a mid 90s Škoda range-topper.



Developed in former BMW factories, the Wartburg 353 makes for an interesting comparison with contemporary BMWs.

marketing purposes, enabling VW to develop a strong range of value for money cars from existing floorplans, which in turn have contributed to the inexorable rise of the Czech marque. Since 2005, Škoda has enjoyed well over 1% of the UK market – and a waiting list. This success has been reflected elsewhere too.

ALL GERMANS WERE EQUAL... In 1966, family saloons were launched on both sides of the Berlin Wall which

“ The BMW -02 series and the Wartburg 353 might ostensibly have been similar, but the differences were great...

offered an insight into the mechanics of their relevant political systems. The BMW -02 series and the Wartburg 353 might both ostensibly have been German saloons of similar size, and both might have been styled with a simplicity befitting of the burghers of

the Bauhaus era, but the differences were greater than the similarities.

There was more in their shared heritage that immediately apparent, of course. The Wartburg factory in Eisenach had been a BMW factory before the war and had marketed pre-





With more doors than the BMW 1502 and offered at a lower price, the on-paper benefits of the 353 were clear.

war BMW models as EMWs during the immediate post war period. The 3 at the beginning of the 353's name harked back to pre-war BMW tradition of beginning all automotive model numbers with a 3, too.

Let's get the elephant in the room out of the way first. The Wartburg 353 was never called the Farty Hans in East Germany, and while it did appear in a BBC documentary on the car, it was not present in any of the research. Believed to be an embellishment on the part of the presenter, it has passed into folklore and since been cited in several books. Yes, it ran a small yet efficient two-stroke three-cylinder and yes, it had a distinctive smell as a result. But the other popular East German family car, the Trabant, had the same design of engine. It seems absurd that one would earn a nickname while the other be accepted as normal.

The -02 series also had an engine of a type common on its side of the wall – a 1573cc four-cylinder four-stroke, much as would be found in contemporaries from across the west. Soon this was enlarged to 1600cc, then to 2.0 for the 2002. Where Wartburg had the Tourist, BMW offered the Touring, a three-door hatchback targeted at the state market, offering more practicality as a trade-off for a little more weight. Unlike the BMW though (excepting



BMW may have appeared more modern, but did it offer better value?

the performance models), there was a waiting list for the Wartburg – East Germany's planned economy meant that domestic private customers could be waiting for up to ten years before their car was allocated to them.

Where the cars differed wildly was in their marketing. A car in the East was a tool to do a job – and when exported, it was marketed as such. BMW meanwhile was able to pitch in a capitalist market as an aspirational item, ensuring that by the time both met on the same marketplace the two could scarcely be mentioned in the same breath.

One primary difference emphasises the stark contrast between a planned economy and a capitalist economy. By the time the Wartburg 353 series left production as the Wartburg 1300 in April 1991, BMW had been producing its E36 3-series for over a year. In the intervening years, the first two generations of 3-series had moved the family car game forward considerably.

“ In the intervening years, the first two generations of 3-series had moved the family car game forward considerably.

Following German reunification, the cost of producing the now outdated Wartburg ultimately spelled the end for Automobilwerk Eisenach. Many of the employees subsequently found work in the new Opel factory, opened in Eisenach in 1992 to produce the Vectra A.

BREAKING THE ICE

1989 saw Secretary Gorbachev and President Bush Snr. meet in Malta to discuss the relationship between the US and Soviet Union moving forwards. The announcement which followed sparked the reunification of Germany, the resolution of Third World conflicts, the withdrawal of the Soviet military from Eastern Europe and – effectively

– the end of the Cold War. A number of arms control agreements were put in place, and the Soviet Union was While Russia has in theory transformed into a capitalist economy, it doesn't sit entirely in step with the Western world and retains its own markets, its own industries, and brands such as Lada are still commonplace within former Soviet nations. Exports to the West petered out in the 1990s from all but Škoda, whose increased links with VW led to ever greater Western market share. The revival of the Dacia brand has underlined the reputation of Eastern Europe as a mecca once again for solid value, though the majority of Eastern European vehicles in Britain today now bear western badges. ■





SOVIET RE-UNION

How a pair of Ford enthusiasts brought a forlorn and forgotten Lada 1500 back to life and thanks to their attention to detail, this top of the range model is a gem.



John Beckett is very much a Ford Consul Classic and Capri man. Indeed, some of his superbly restored Consul Classics and Consul Capris have previously graced the pages of Classics Monthly. This is a passion he also shares with his son, Paul, as his Consul Capri was featured in the August issue of CM. Despite the pair's allegiance to the Blue Oval, John also owns this Russian runabout. It's one of a mere handful that are known to still reside in Britain and what's more,

with his son's help John Beckett was driven to restore it. But owning, let alone restoring a Lada was not on the Beckett's radar. Not even a faint blip. Yet on occasions fate steps in and plays its hand and it was a chance remark, during a conversation at one of the local shows they attend that piqued John's interest. John had got chatting to a chap who mentioned that he owned an Escort Mexico. During the course of the conversation, the guy happened to mention that he had this old Lada and

although it was in reasonable condition it hadn't been on the road in years. John went on to explain the reason why the car had been laid up. "The owner had booked a holiday, but on the day he and his family were to leave for the airport the Lada wouldn't start. So he hired a car and the Lada was pushed into an outbuilding and for various reasons it stayed there for the best part of twenty-two years. Then the chap mentioned that he'd like to sell it. However, because he lived right out in the middle of nowhere,



no one could be bothered to come and view it. Well, Paul and I were interested and we made arrangements to go and see it."

When John and Paul arrived, they discovered that the Lada wasn't problem-free but it was definitely worth salvaging, especially as the seller only wanted scrap value for it.

"The condition wasn't too bad," admits John. "The rear arches were rusty, but the sills, doors and floorpans were sound. When it was laid up, he'd

poured oil into the doors and the sills. Even the vinyl roof was unmarked and there were no signs of any rust bubbling through underneath. Plus, beneath the accumulated dust and dirt the interior was in mint condition. Mechanically it was reasonably good. He'd even poured oil down the bores, as the engine turned over easily".

John thought the car had a certain charm and as Paul and himself have been involved with Classics and Capris for so long, the pair felt that restoring the

Lada would make a nice change. "That said, because we reckoned it wouldn't be worth a great deal, even when restored, we decided to be cautious when it came to expenditure. Luckily, Paul's very handy when it comes to bodywork, so he did the welding and some of the preparation which saved us quite a lot" added John.

SHINING EXAMPLE

Paul began by repairing the rear arches and quarter panels. There was also some



rust evident behind the badge on the tailgate. This was cut out and replaced with new metal. Having also discovered a small amount of rust in the driver's footwell, Paul had to undertake a small repair to the area behind the pedals. The jacking points had to be renewed too. But in terms of the metalwork repairs, that was it. Not bad for a 1977 Lada, especially one that had been laid up for so long. With the bodywork sorted, the long-languishing Lada was taken to Stoke Bodyshop where it was painted. But not in the original colour according to John.

"It was green originally but not a very

“ It’s a 1974 colour and appeared on lots of Fiat 124s, which is rather fitting seeing the Lada is based on the 124

nice shade,” said John smiling. “Having looked through lots of colour swatches, we decided to have it painted Fiat Moss Green. It’s a 1974 colour and appeared on lots of Fiat 124s, which is rather fitting seeing the Lada is based on the 124”. Moss Green seems to soften the Lada’s boxy, utilitarian shape and gives it a real presence. The pair couldn’t

have chosen a better colour. It’s perfectly applied and the contrasting vinyl stripe adds a dash of style.

To ensure that the bodywork remains pristine, Dinitrol has been sprayed into every nook, cranny and orifice in the bodywork. This, and the fact that the car is garaged and is fitted with genuine, ‘heavy-duty’ Lada arch liners, should



keep the dreaded tinworm at bay. Thankfully the Lada's interior was in really good condition, with hardly any wear evident. All it needed to bring it back to life was a wash and brush-up.

UP AND RUNNING

With the bodywork in pristine condition and the interior looking almost like new, John and Paul turned their attention to the running gear. The front brakes had seized and the lower front wishbones were in a poor condition, as were the springs, dampers and struts. These were all renewed along with the copper and hydraulic brake pipes and various

suspension and steering joints. The wheels were shotblasted, painted and fitted with 155/13 tyres on the front, and a slightly beefier 165/13 at the rear.

The engine, which had only covered 59,000 miles, was found to be in very good order. Even so, to aid starting the points were swapped for an electronic set-up. Mind you, should it ever refuse to start, John can always resort to swinging the starting handle, as Lada supplied one with the car as standard. John also swapped the original and somewhat tired carburettor for a much better one. "I bought a Weber kit from Webcon,"

he enthuses. "It fits perfectly and works exceptionally well, giving better economy, power and it's much smoother-running too."

Not only was the original carburettor in poor shape, so too was the rear section of the exhaust system. Amazingly, the local motor factor had a back box in stock. But it wasn't cheap. "They wanted £65 for it," explains Paul. "I thought it was a bit steep, so I did a search on the Internet and got one delivered for just £26. Incredible value seeing that it came all the way from Luxembourg!"

Transmission-wise, the Lada was in

OWNER'S Q&A

What is special about this car?

Because it's so rare and a survivor.

What reaction does it get?

Everyone wants to chat about it and we are amazed by the huge amount of interest it generates at shows.

What was the best moment of the restoration?

When the paintwork was completed and we knew we'd made the right colour choice.

What are you most proud of?

That's it back on the road after twenty-two years.

What's it like to drive?

It actually drives very well. The handling's pretty good, as is the performance. To be honest, it's a good all-rounder.



fine fettle. The gearbox swapped ratios perfectly, the clutch was in good order too and the rear axle was quiet and free from play. All John and Paul had to do was drain the transmission oils and replenish with fresh fluids.

KEEPING TRIM

In terms of the exterior, new, period-looking headlights were fitted complete with new chrome surrounds. All of the

other lights and clusters are also new, as are the bumpers but according to John, thereby hangs a tale. "There's a Lada Facebook group," explains John. "A guy in the group who lives in Lithuania had bought a load of new old stock parts from a local dealership. On the off chance, I emailed him to ask if he happened to have a pair of estate bumpers. Not only did he have some, he said that he'd get a friend to deliver

them ...all the way from Lithuania.

"I was a bit sceptical. But true to his word a few weeks later, this bloke turned up with the bumpers. It cost us €160 for the bumpers and we gave him £30 for fuel plus a bottle of Lucozade and a Mars bar for the journey."

When John and Paul embarked on this project, they fully expected it to be delayed by parts availability and



BUYING A LADA 1500/ES

Although it's thought that some 350,000 plus Ladas were imported, only a very small number of Lada 1500 saloons/estates are to be found in the UK. They are tough and simple-to-maintain cars. However, despite claims that the metal used was very thick and the company had undertaken extensive anti-corrosion measures, rust is likely to have been the major contributor to their downfall. Sensibly, buy the very best you can find. Mechanically the Lada is robust, just check for undue valve train noise, oil smoke from the exhaust, emulsified oil and gearbox/diff issue. General parts availability is excellent.

costs. However, thanks to sourcing parts on the Internet the restoration was completed within a very short timeframe and well within budget. "Without the Internet we couldn't have restored the Lada," confesses John. "It was so easy to get hold of the parts. And they were so cheap. We did source quite a few parts from the LADA Shop in the Netherlands, but the majority came from Lada Moscow. Thankfully, on the few occasions we had to phone Lada Moscow, they spoke pretty good English. The customer service was great and they even put a handful of Russian chocolates in with every order.

"We've had some luck in the UK too. The car was missing one hubcap, but I found one at an autojumble!" We even managed to find a new roof lining, but haven't got around to fitting it yet. It's not one of our favourite jobs!" Interestingly, John and Paul haven't had to buy all of the parts needed. Some have been donated. "When we've been to shows, people have been so interested in the Lada, particularly those who've owned them, a few have donated us parts," explained John. "Someone even gave us a genuine Lada toolkit."



OWNER RESTORATION
LADA 1500



CONCLUSION

Lada is a marque that has been the butt of many a cruel joke over the years, but that's a tad unfair for a good number of reasons. And, our feature 1500ES is deserving of nothing but praise. It looks fantastic and is such a practical and easy-to-run proposition.

Modern car design has dictated that many of the current crop of estates are styled as 'lifestyle' vehicles and this often compromises practicality. The Lada, with its design rooted in the 'Seventies is a capable carry all with plenty of space for five and their luggage. It's a car that lives up to its promise. Moreover, in a simple, workmanlike way, it has real charm and character. ■

TECH SPEC – LADA 1500ES ESTATE

Production date:	1977 to 1981
Body Style:	5-door Estate
Engine:	1452cc, 4-cyl, ohc
Power:	75bhp@5600rpm
Torque:	97ft/lbs@3600rpm
Gearbox:	4-spd manual
Steering:	Recirculating ball
Suspension:	
Front:	Independent, double-wishbone, telescopic dampers, anti-roll bar.
Rear:	Live axle, coil springs, telescopic dampers.
Brakes	Front: Discs. Rear: Drums. Servo-assisted. Dual-circuit.
Top Speed:	93 mph
0-60mph:	14 secs
Fuel Consumption:	27mpg





DID YOU KNOW?

- The Lada 1500 Estate was introduced in October 1977
- Lada stopped importing cars into the UK in 1997
- Ladas are still being produced in Russia. They are available in Western Europe but not in the UK.
- Although Lada, typically made basic models, British buyers usually demanded higher specifications and most cars were 'up-specified' in the UK by a special team.
- The 'up-specing' components were usually all UK-sourced.

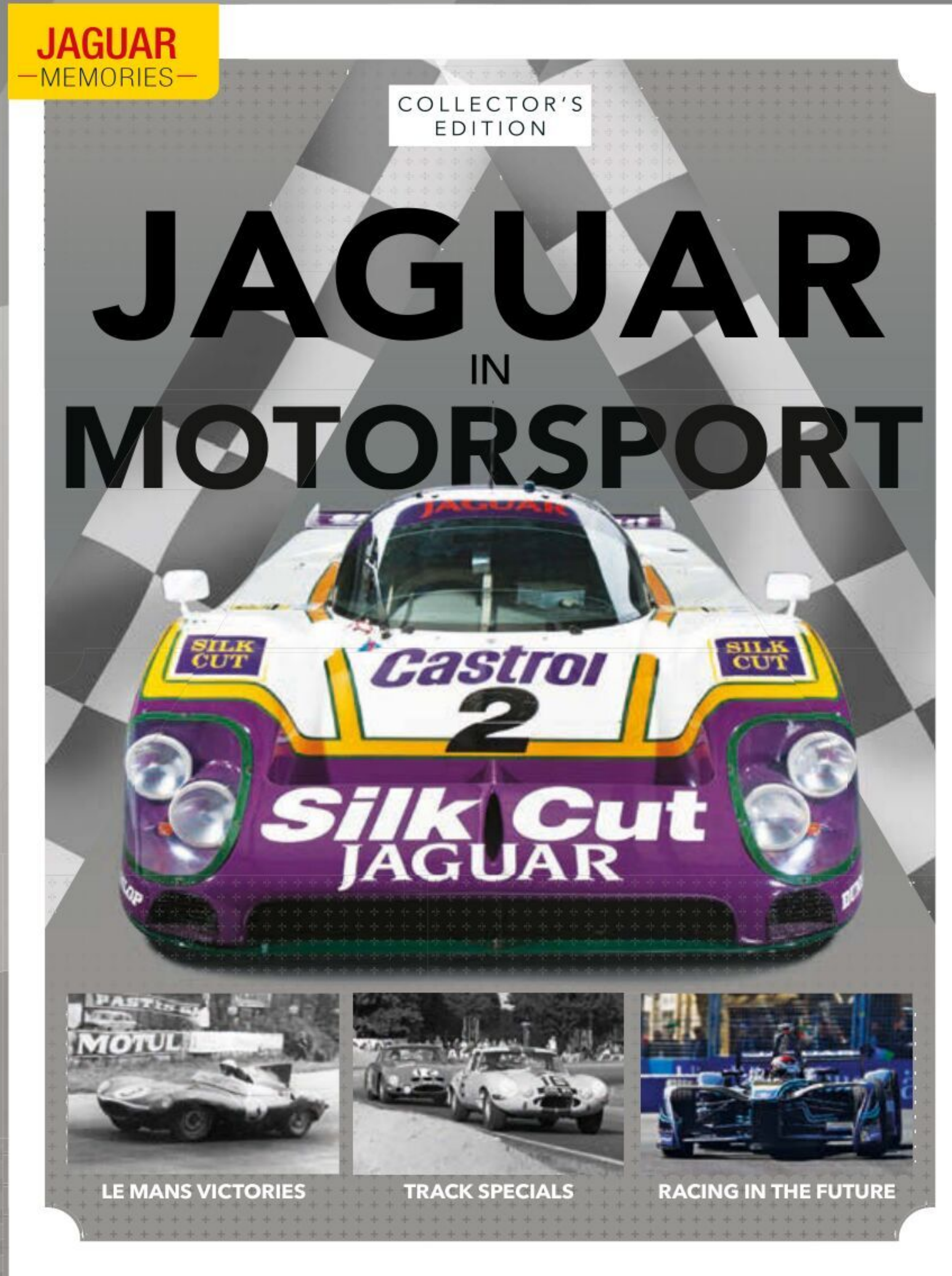


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CZECH MATE

Rapid by name if not by nature, the last of the rear-engined Škodas was surprisingly well regarded back in the day. WORDS PAUL WAGER



A recent office clearout unearthed a goldmine in the shape of a box full of mid '80s car magazines, with predictable effects on the Kelsey Publishing deadlines as the editorial team downed tools to revisit the era of the Golf GTI and Cizeta V16.

Looking beyond the group tests of yuppie GTIs and all the 'scoop' stories on that new F-Type that was destined never to be, it's the way the road tests of humdrum mainstream cars illustrate the way the car market has changed in what is a relatively short time.

One feature which caught my eye was a group test of Eastern Bloc cars which concluded – inevitably, really – that their poor quality, lousy driving dynamics and crippling depreciation made them a poor second to used mainstream brands.

Except, that is, for the Škoda. Despite being isolated for so long behind the Iron Curtain, the Czech maker still managed to cling to some of the engineering excellence from its history as one of Europe's oldest and

most innovative car makers. Forced by necessity and lack of hard currency to rely on what was essentially a single design from the '60s right into the late '80s, Škoda still somehow managed to produce products which were slightly more interesting than the other Communist cheapies.

One thing which certainly set the Škoda apart from the Ladas and FSOs was its rear-engined layout, something which wasn't such a novelty when the basic design was launched in 1964 as the 1000MB, but which had become an anachronism by the '80s.

The 1000 MB became the Škoda 100 in 1970, with a coupe version added to the range badged as 110R.

The 100 would be replaced by the Škoda 105 in 1976, later marketed as 136 and Estelle by which time the financial implications of the Communist system were becoming ever more obvious. Despite updated squared-off styling, the 105 was still effectively based on the 1000 MB but still sold well both at home and abroad, with coupe

versions taking the Rapid name in export markets.

It was the Rapid which was famously pictured on the cover of *Autocar* in September 1988, with the headline "What handles like a Porsche, costs only £4200 and is more fun than a GTI?"

By the late '80s, the affordable coupe had pretty much been replaced by the hot hatchback and as *Autocar* pointed out, you needed to spend twice the Škoda's £4200 selling price to get yourself into a genuine coupe.

Under the skin, its mechanical make-up was like something from a different era. The engine itself was an evolution of the water-cooled four-cylinder which had been used in the rear-engined cars since the 1000MB and was technically rather urious. In a complete reversal of the usual practice and a real oddity when all-alloy engines were becoming commonplace, the Škoda unit used an aluminium block but sat a cast iron head on top.

An overhead valve design, for the change from 130 to 136, the 1289cc

“ The 1000 MB became the Škoda 100 in 1970, with a coupe version added to the range badged as 110R.



engine gained an eight-port head and water-heated manifold to aid cold running, the end result being an increase in power from 58 bhp to 62 bhp at 5000 rpm. This was backed up with 74 lbf.ft torque at 2850rpm which meant the Rapid's performance was best described as adequate.

Straight-line speed wasn't the point with the car though and even at lower speeds it was an entertaining steer, thanks to that rear-engined layout which sat it somewhere between VW Beetle and Porsche 911. I remember working on a VW magazine in the late '80s and speaking to several readers who had made the switch from the air-cooled VW to the Škoda and found themselves entirely at home. Back in 1985 Škoda had revised the rear suspension to use semi-trailing arms which together with rack and pinion steering made the car's handling closer in feel to the contemporary Porsche than the VW.

The OHV motor was no high-revving screamer and in truth was rather boomy

at high revs with reasonable progress still being made without exceeding 4000 rpm but with a five-speed box, the Rapid was acceptably civilised, with a 91 mph top speed making it usefully more capable than the old Beetle on the motorway.

It was the car's handling which gave the road testers the excuse to come up with that famous cover line, with the Škoda pitched sideways in an opposite-locked stance usually reserved for the latest 911.

As any readers who regularly watched the RAC Rally of the era will know, the Škodas were also regular class winners on the gruelling event, their robust build winning them many friends in rural areas.

As an antidote to the ubiquitous front-drive hatch, the testers reckoned the Škoda provided more thrills per pound spent than anything else on the market, signing off with the comment that the car made an ideal stepping stone to Porsche 911. Praise indeed.





RAPID REVIVAL

The Rapid coupe was destined to be the end of the line for the rear-engined layout which had served Škoda so well through the restrictive days of the Soviet era. In 1988, Škoda's first all-new car for 50 years entered production in the shape of the Favorit, using a modern style penned by Bertone but under the skin another derivative of the same 1289cc engine.

Almost as soon as the wraps came off the new car though, things started moving rapidly and with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1990, the new government was openly seeking a Western partner for Škoda.

“ The immediate practical result of the Volkswagen involvement was an improvement in the Favorit...

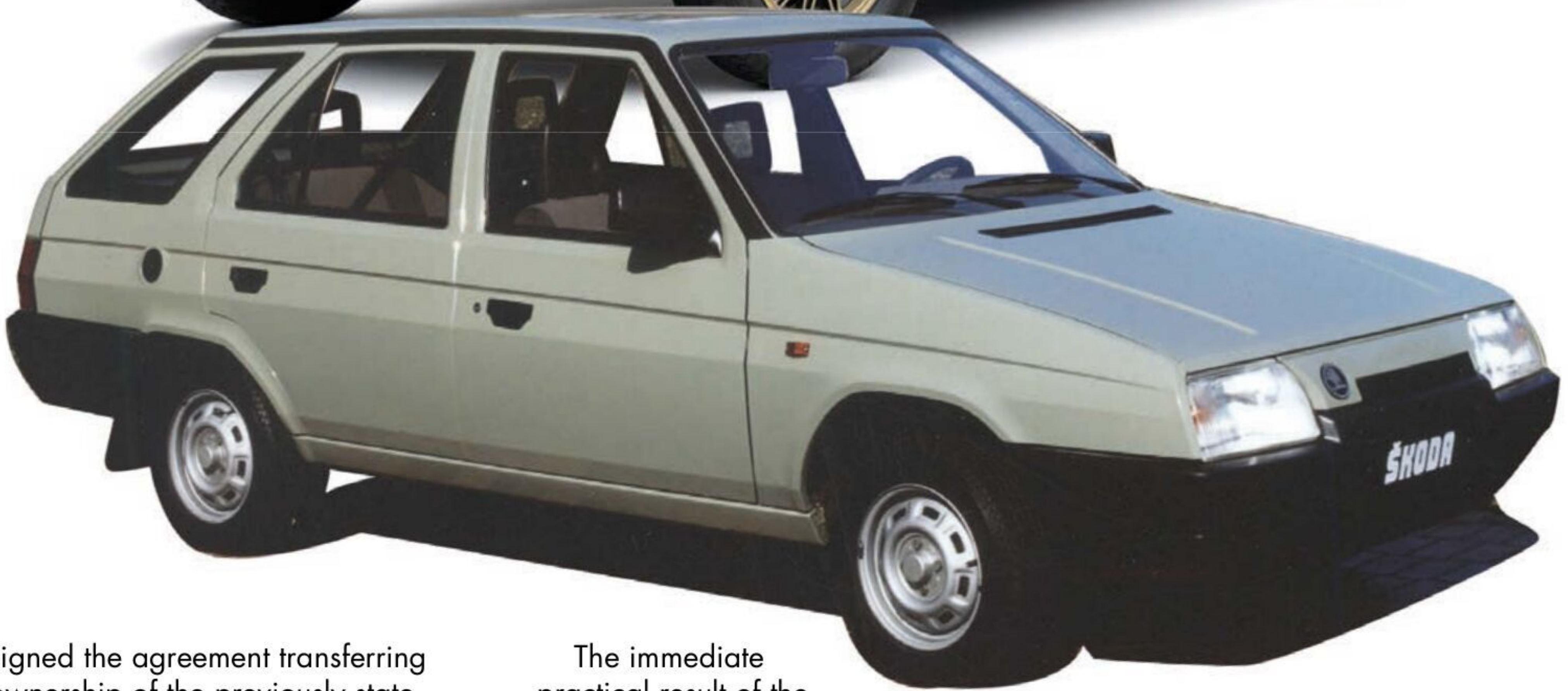
Most of the western European makers expressed an interest, but it was Volkswagen which eventually won the approval of the Czech government. No doubt it was hard economics which ultimately decided the deal but one can't help wondering if the fact that original Volkswagen Beetle designer Ferdinand Porsche's birthplace in what is now the Czech Republic had an influence.

One factor which was reported as

a major influence was Volkswagen's intention to retain Škoda as a distinct brand rather than simply use its plants as a source of cheap labour to build its own cars. For Volkswagen of course a budget brand was something it was desperately keen to create, having long ago moved itself upmarket from the era of the Beetle.

Accordingly, on March 28, 1991, Czech Industry Minister Jan Vrba and Dr Carl Hahn as CEO of Volkswagen





signed the agreement transferring ownership of the previously state-owned Škoda concern to a joint-stock company in which Volkswagen held a 30 per cent stake.

The next few years would see the Germans steadily increasing their stake, first to 60.3 per cent in December 1994 and to 70 per cent in December 1995 before taking full ownership in May 2000.

The immediate practical result of the Volkswagen involvement was an improvement in the Favorit, which shortly after the takeover gained Volkswagen interior fittings together with Polo-style exterior handles, improved hinges and fuel injection to permit the use of catalytic converters. In 1993 the car received a proper facelift, with the Škoda engine

revised to meet modern emissions standards.

This was very much a stopgap though and the first of a new generation of VW-developed models appeared in 1994 in the shape of the Felicia. The firm hasn't looked back since and one of its latest additions is a revival of the Rapid name. ■



HATCHING A PLAN



FSO's first standalone model offered hatchback practicality and forward thinking – but failed to make its mark in Britain. We chart its story. WORDS: SAM SKELTON

On paper, the FSO Polonez wasn't such a bad idea. Take the successful Polski-Fiat 125p, add a more up to date body, and sell. The project began in 1974, with Poland agreeing to provide specifications and guidelines, and Fiat working on the primary design. It had to meet current and future crash and emissions standard in order to enable its sale in the West as well as behind the Iron Curtain. The first three prototypes were created in 1975, and shipped to Poland. The first production models were built in September 1977, and the car launched in 1978.

The fact that it shared its underpinnings with the 125p meant that most of that car's flaws were inherited – an unfashionably short wheelbase, a large turning circle, and outdated engines. What the Polonez did offer over the older car though was better equipment; a hatchback, better seats, a more informative dashboard, and a stiffer shell to maximise passenger safety. There was to be a two stage development plan, and the car as launched was envisaged as stage 1.

Stage 2, to follow at an unspecified point in time, would focus on the fitment of Fiat's Twin Cam engine family and revisions to the rear suspension – unfortunately, none of this ever happened, and the Polonez would continue for several years with what at launch was an outdated chassis.

The monocoque, as well as being stiff, incorporated a number of passive safety features not seen before either behind the Iron Curtain or on contemporary Fiats. Crumple zones engineered into the design, side impact bars, and inertia reel seat belts helped hugely. Unfortunately, the side effect was added





weight, not helped by the trimmings – velour seats, a clock, revcounter, heated rear window, cigar lighter and an adjustable steering column made the Polonez positively decadent.

While civilian Polonezes never got the Fiat Twin cam as promised, it was fitted to some models targeted at the military and government institutions. The 112bhp units were to Fiat 132 specification, and when accompanied by a five speed gearbox meant a top speed of almost 110mph and 0-60 in 12 seconds. Detuned variants were also available, adapted to run on petrol from just 78RON upwards.

British imports began in 1979. Autocar's testers reported that it was slower than the 125p upon which it

“ The fact that it shared its underpinnings with the 125p meant that most of that car's flaws were inherited – an unfashionably short wheelbase, a large turning circle, and outdated engines.

was based, with a lack of punch at the bottom end of the rev range and a flat spot in the carburetion. It was deemed noisy, with an obstructive gearchange, and poor fuel consumption – though the testers did note the presence of a comprehensive toolkit among its standard features. Strong castor when reversing was noted as a downside, as was the heavy worm and roller

steering with 3.2 turns lock to lock and a turning circle of almost 39 feet. Average suspension and brakes verging on the overly-sharp rounded off the package. However, Autocar praised the car's hefty bumpers and rubbing strips, rear wash wipe and rake adjustable seats, as well as its bargain basement £2999 price. While expensive when compared to the base 125p at £2129, it was prices to



compete with the Lada 1600ES, and undercut the Morris Marina 1700 at £3201. That and the Ford Escort 1300L at £2888 were deemed to be better buys for those seeking inexpensive and modern transport, while fans of Eastern Bloc motoring were advised to choose the Lada.

FSO remained undeterred though, with developments making it to the British market alongside the Polish. A new nose was fitted, as was a rear quarter window – though British models retained the fixed rear seat when Polish models

“ The Ford Escort 1300L at £2888 were deemed to be better buys for those seeking inexpensive and modern transport, while fans of Eastern Bloc motoring were advised to choose the Lada.

were offered with the option of a folding item. Away from the British market, a three door model and a Coupe were made available between 1979 and 1981, though the only additional

body we received in Britain was the inexpensive and popular pickup truck. From 1991 the Polonez was facelifted as the Caro, and both the Peugeot XUD diesel and Rover 1.4 litre K series engine





became optional, alongside the original engines and the Ford Pinto in 2.0 form. These models weren't made available in Britain – imports had stopped for 1991, though in 1994 the Caro 1.5 and 1.9D were temporarily made available again alongside the pickup. By then the Polish market was also offered the Polonez Atu saloon, a model which never came to Britain. Closely resembling the Caro hatchback, it was built as the FSO Atu until 1997.

Daewoo's 1997 takeover of FSO saw some revisions made to the range and UK sales ceased once more – with the Caro Plus and Atu Plus models launched under the Daewoo-FSO name in the car's native market. These, alongside a new Kombi estate, would be produced until 2002. ■



CZECH MATE



Fancy owning classic Škoda built in the days when the Iron Curtain hung heavily over Eastern Europe? Then look no further as this rare 1200 is looking for a new home. WORDS IAIN WAKEFIELD PHOTOGRAPHY MATTHEW RICHARDSON

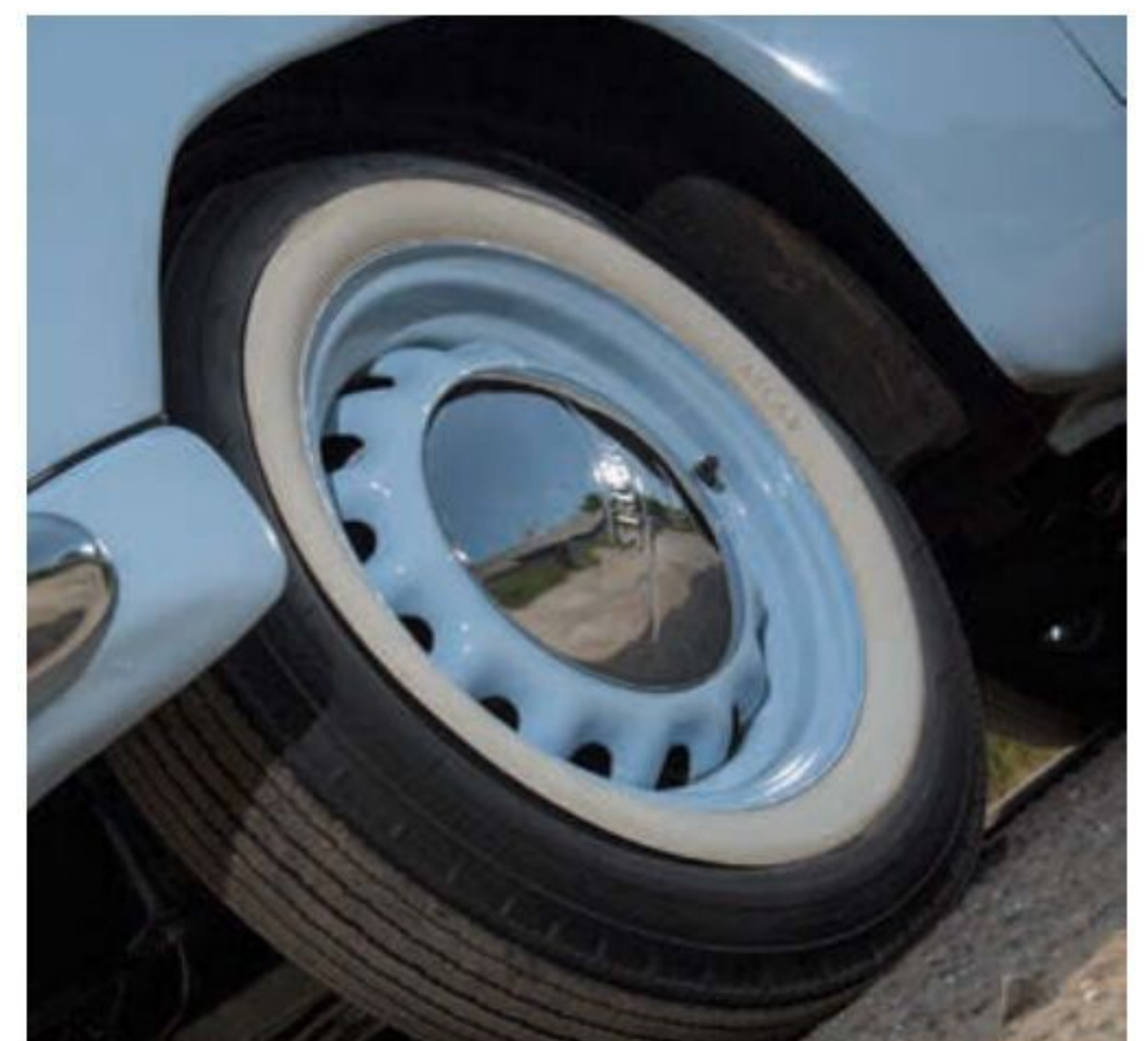
Once the butt of a string of bar room jokes throughout the Seventies and early Eighties, Škoda Auto has come a long way since those dark days. Models like the cheap-as-chips S100/S110 and the later, heavily revised Estelle and sporting Rapid were prime examples of the huge gulf that existed in technology between car manufactures based in Western Europe and those operating behind the

Iron Curtain in Eastern Bloc territories such as Czechoslovakia where Škoda Auto is still based.

It wasn't always like that though, as back in the early Fifties, communist-controlled Škoda Auto was producing a range of good-looking cars that included the 1098cc 1101 series. These tough little family cars were built in the timehonoured body-on-frame manner and were capable of coping with the

worst of Czechoslovakia's notoriously rough country roads. The covers came off the equally tough Škoda 1200 in 1952 and right from the start this curvaceous new model was offered as a four-door saloon, three-door van or five-door estate.

The 1200's modern-looking Ponton-styled all-steel body sat on a sturdy welded box section frame very similar to its predecessors. Power now came from



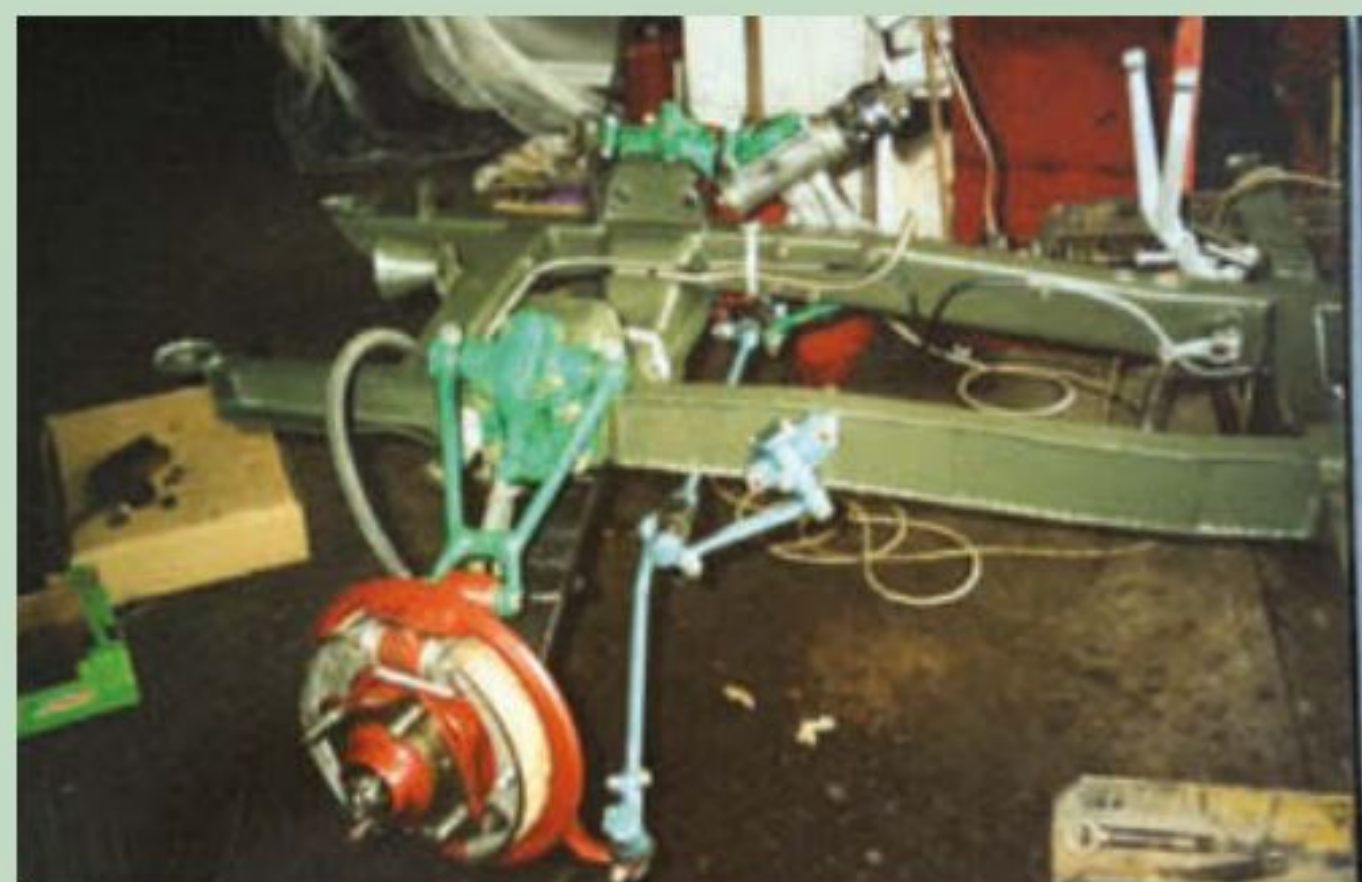
“ The 1200’s modern-looking Ponton-styled all-steel body sat on a sturdy welded box section frame very similar to its predecessors.

a bored-out 1213cc overhead valve inline-four rated at 36bhp at 4200rpm and drove the 1200’s rear wheels though a four-speed gearbox.

A central chassis lubrication system had been carried over from the 1101/1102 series, as had the 1200’s independent suspension setup, which consisted of transverse front and rear

leaf springs and a swinging rear axle. Hydraulic drum brakes were fitted all-round and post-1955 models featured unusual amber tail lights that started to glow when the car decelerated. The more powerful 1201 replaced the 1200 in 1956 and the 1202 estate remained in production until 1970, although sales of this model in Western Europe

THE RESTORATION





were limited and most 1200 series cars remain in former Eastern Bloc countries.

This makes this 1955 Škoda 1200 a very rare beast indeed and before being imported into the UK in 2000, the car underwent a full body off restoration in the Czech Republic about 20 years ago.

Since then the car has hardly been used and we caught up with this rare Škoda in early July at the Peter James Bromley Pageant of Motoring where the car was displayed in a line up of equally smart classics with a 'For Sale' sign stuck inside the windscreen.

After the show, we managed to track down Trevor Cowell, the car's current owner and he explained how his ultra rare right-hand drive Škoda had originally been displayed in a Kent-based franchised dealer's showroom for ten years. In 2010 the car was sold to an enthusiast and registered for use

“When we came to recommission the car in the workshop, the carburettor and fuel tank were all gummed up

in the UK for the first time, but was only driven very occasionally. Trevor, who runs Oxted-based T.J. Motors in Surrey, told us how the Škoda was a non-runner when he purchased the car earlier in the year: “When we came to recommission the car in the workshop, the carburettor and fuel tank were all gummed up.

Obviously we also changed the oil and fitted a new set of spark plugs and after a bit fiddling around the engine fired up and ran really well,” he explained, who also added how there's only 27,000km showing on the Škoda's odometer.

Although it seemed odd that a car built and used in Czechoslovakia for most of its life should be right-hand drive, Trevor explained how the first owner had been a disabled gentleman and ordered the 1200 with right-hand drive so he could access the driver's seat from the pavement.

“Unfortunately there's very little history about the car's early time in the Czech Republic and I expect it had been laid up somewhere for a long time until being discovered and restored.

The restoration was a massive body off undertaking and a detailed

RESTORATION ŠKODA 1200



photographic record showing all the work comes with the car," explained the vendor before adding that a copy of the original factory build sheet shows this Škoda 1200 came off the line at Mladá Boleslav on 23 August 1955.

When we asked how the Škoda drove, Trevor smiled before replying: "Just like an old Škoda! The steering is very heavy at low speeds and it understeers when pushed but with only 36bhp on tap, it feels rather underpowered. I think you could comfortably compare the driving

characteristics of this Fifties' Škoda to an early Morris Minor, but it gets much more attention than a Moggie would when its out and about."

As can be seen from the restoration images, the bodywork resembled a lace curtain after all the paint and filler had been removed. This meant that a lot of the repair panels had to be expertly formed and welded into the bodyshell to sort out the damage, especially around the front and rear light clusters. The Czech-based technicians that completed the work have done a superb job and

a close inspection shows no sign of any new corrosion trying to break through the light blue paint around the repaired sections.

Although the neat-looking engine bay has been detailed with the addition of a chrome air filter and rocker cover, it's not been overdone. One nice touch is the rolled up blind sitting at the base of the radiator, which can be raised and lowered by pulling and pushing a knob located inside on the bulkhead inside the car.

The car's interior is sparse but a



column gear change means there is plenty of space for two large adults on the smartly upholstered front bench seat. The highly decorated material used on the seat facings has been repeated on all the door panels and it would be interesting to know if this material was replaced during the rebuild or if it is still the factory-fitted original.

During the time Trevor has had this car, he's grown to appreciate its rarity. Several online searches have only discovered a couple of left hand drive examples up for sale, but Trevor reckons

“ I think you could comfortably compare the driving characteristics of this Fifties' Škoda to an early Morris Minor

you would have to travel to Prague to see them. The estates are more numerous and Škoda even built about 2000 ambulance versions based on a 1200 estate.

ŠKODA – A BRIEF HISTORY

Those cheap jokes doing the rounds

back in the Seventies and Eighties tended to ignore Škoda's impressive history that stretched back to 1859 when the Škoda Works was formed by the aristocratic Waldstein family at Pízen to produce heavy castings for use in constructing railway industry and ship building. A decade later the



business was taken over by the dynamic industrialist Emil Škoda who went on to establish the works as a major producer of heavy guns and armaments for the Austro-Hungarian military campaign.

Prior to the First World War, the Škoda Works produced the massive castings used in the construction of the locks on the Suez Canal and by 1917 the factory was employing 35,000 workers making munitions for the war effort. After the conflict, Czechoslovakia became a republic and the mighty Škoda operation was transformed into a multi-sector heavy engineering conglomerate that concentrated on manufacturing ships, railway locomotives, brewery equipment and steam turbines.

Škoda's winged arrow in a circle trademark was registered in 1923 and a year later the company took over the Mladá Boleslav-based vehicle manufacturer Laurin & Klement. This

“ Just over a quarter of a century later, Škoda has established itself. It is now a hugely successful brand in the UK and has recently introduced an impressive line up of all-wheel drive SUVs.

new division was later renamed Škoda Automotive and the plant continued to build cars and light commercials until the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia in 1939. During the Second World War the factory was renamed Reichswerke Hermann Göring and produced a variety of vehicles and tanks for the German military.

The factory at Mladá Boleslav was heavily targeted throughout the conflict by the Allied air forces and by 1945 all that remained of the Škoda Works was a bombed out heap of rubble. An area

of the rebuilt plant was subsequently separated from the Škoda Works and became part of the country's communist planned economy. By 1946 Škoda Auto had started to build cars again and introduced an updated version of the pre-war designed Popular badged as the 1089cc body-on-frame 1001/1102 series. Although Škoda Auto was now cut off from the white hot heat of Western automotive technology, the company went on to produce a range of rugged cars that included the 1200, the high compression 1201 and larger



capacity 1202 followed by the restyled 440, 445 and Octavia.

From 1964 Škoda brought itself up to date with a rear-engined model called the 1000MB. Available with four doors, or as an optional MBX Coupe, Škoda replaced the MB with the Škoda 100 in 1969.

Rear-engined Škodas were produced in the Seventies and Eighties (when the company was known as AZNP) and these models attracted attention in the UK for all the wrong reasons. But it was all change when the Bertone-designed Favorit broke cover in 1987. This Western-influenced mid-sized front-wheel drive hatchback marked a huge turning point in Škoda's fortunes and although the technology gap was still there, the very capable Favorit sold well in the UK due to its low price.

As communism fell out of favour in Czechoslovakia, most of the country's large industries ended up being privatised and in March 1991 a joint venture agreement was signed between Škoda Automotive and the Volkswagen Group. Just over a quarter of a century later, Škoda has established itself. It is now a hugely successful brand in the UK and has recently introduced an impressive line up of all-wheel drive SUVs. These technically advanced crossover vehicles are light years away from those rear-engined models all those ill-informed bar room comedians enjoyed mocking so much, which means the last laugh is now firmly with the directors of Škoda Automotive. ■



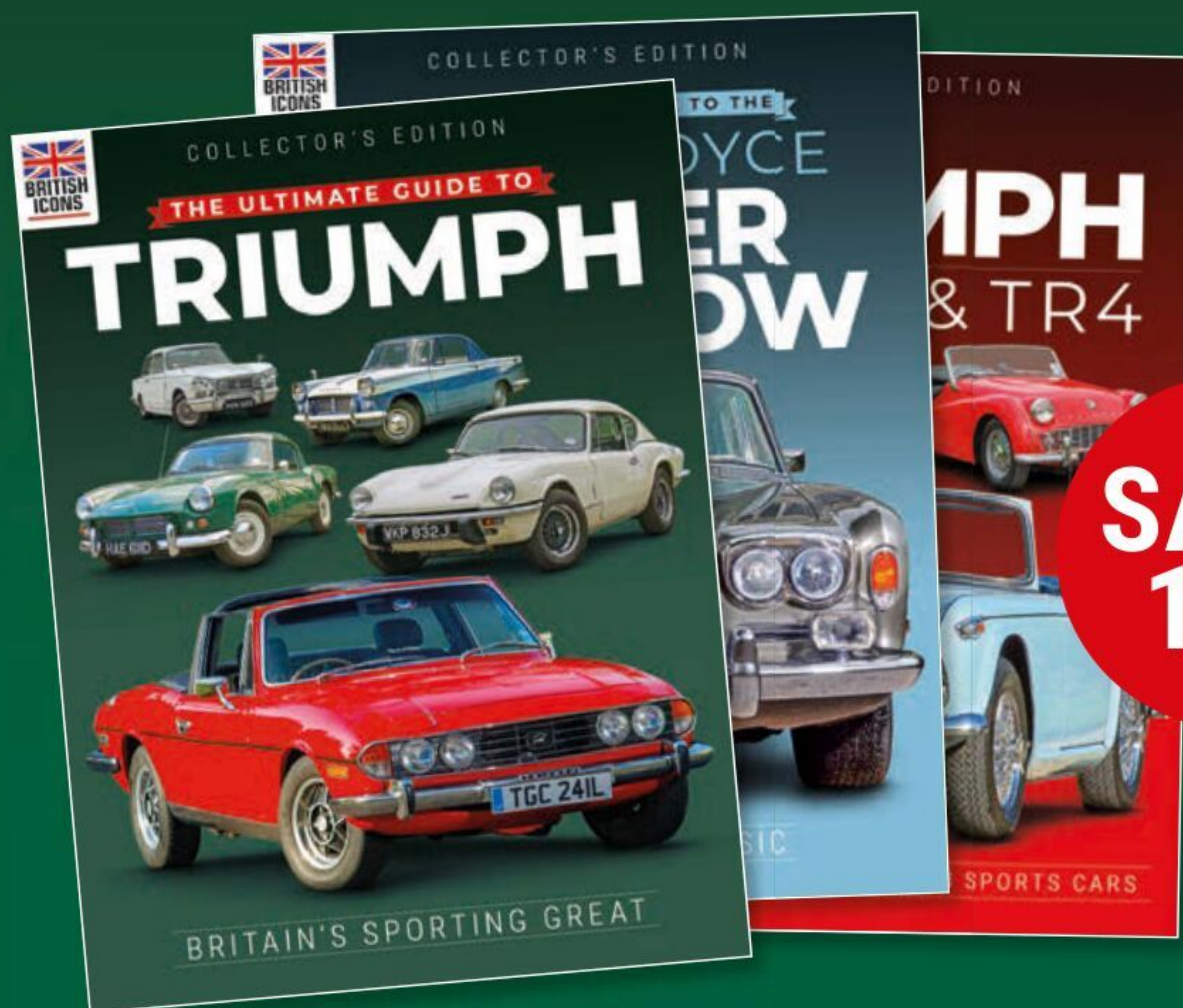
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COMMIE HITHER

Conceived in the dying days of communist Czechoslovakia and spanning Škoda's takeover by VW, the Favorit was a wholly competent modern small car. Now extremely rare, it's a slice of history worth seeking out. WORDS: PHIL WHITE



As the Soviet Union and its communist neighbours staggered uneasily towards the Western world during the 1980s, their car design suffered. Automotive highlights of the time tended to be superannuated remnants of yesteryear, inadequately and cheaply rehashed rather too many times.

However, Škoda fared better than most Eastern bloc manufacturers. It is one of the world's oldest car makers, having grown from Laurin & Klement who built their first car in 1905. By the 1980s Škoda's output was old, but interesting – when Eastern Europe hit its doldrum period, outpaced by the West in the 1970s, Škoda had the rear-engined Estelle and Rapid on its books rather than factories full of cast-off Fiat tooling. The Škodas might have been the butt of jokes in the UK, but they rallied well and achieved an enthusiastic following. Very few people of my generation harbour affectionate memories of Ladas, but Škoda stories abound.

As the winds of economic and

political change whistled around them in the early 1980s, these manufacturers were dipping their toes in other markets. And so, while the Berlin Wall was being torn down late in 1989, several fresh Eastern European small cars were available.

Some of them were unspeakably mediocre, desultorily constructed in the gaps between fag breaks, and horrible to drive. But Škoda's Favorit was very

different. For one thing, it was created by the pen of Bertone. Although not the direct creation of the Italian design house's resident genius Marcello Gandini, its styling was a very European take on Eastern bloc brutalism – slabby and geometric, but nicely proportioned.

Commissioned in 1982, its launch was delayed until 1987, a lag attributed to rows with Bertone. UK drivers didn't get the Favorit until 1989. The long





gestation seems to have allowed some proper engineering to go into the car's development, which is partly why we are paying it tribute here.

The core of the Favorit's appeal was its simplicity. It was a decent-looking car with plenty of interior space for five people and their chattels. It packed a proven engine, alongside an uncomplex chassis. Unburdened by air conditioning, ABS brakes or power steering, there wasn't much to go wrong. Quite rightly, the Favorit was regarded as a sturdy and reliable machine, just as competent as its Western competition but rather

“ The core of the Favorit's appeal was its simplicity. It was a decent-looking car with plenty of interior space for five people and their chattels.

cheaper. The only downside was that it depreciated more rapidly, but plenty of British buyers spotted a bargain and sales were strong.

There was only one engine option, but it was a decent unit. The 1289cc, inline four-cylinder, OHV petrol motor

had previously seen service in the rear end of the Estelle. For the Favorit, Škoda employed legendary Sussex engineering firm Ricardo to redesign the head. Carburettor-fed at the outset, it produced 58bhp and 69lb.ft of torque. During the Favorit's production, various





combinations of catalytic converter and fuel injection were added, bringing power output to 67bhp and torque to 74lb.ft. The 840kg car was no rocket ship, but no slouch either. Testers were impressed by the surprising smoothness and torquey nature of the motor, along with its willingness to rev. It also lacked the roughness normally exhibited by cheap four-pot mills of the era.

Drivers also applauded the five-speed manual gearbox, and the neat handling provided by McPherson struts at the front and a torsion beam axle at the rear. In extremis, the Favorit would do exactly as would the VW Golf – tuck into a corner nicely, understeer out under acceleration and cock the inside rear wheel entertainingly as it did so. Porsche had been employed to play with the suspension, and it showed. The Favorit's split-circuit, disc and drum brake configuration worked well, too. While there was nothing revolutionary about this car, it was a thoroughly competent

“ Then history happened. As former communist nations opened up, Western companies moved into their economies. In 1991, VW took over Škoda.

and surprisingly engaging vehicle.

Other aspects of the car that garnered praise were a spacious, airy interior with well laid out controls, plus a large boot aided by fold-down rear seats. The estate version, which arrived 1991, was positively cavernous. The flimsy materials used to fit out the Favorit were called into question, but it was so much cheaper than its competition that drivers accepted wafer-thin trim in preference to shoddy mechanical engineering.

Then history happened. As former communist nations opened up, Western companies moved into their economies. In 1991, VW took over Škoda. Rather than scrapping the Favorit and starting

again, the Wolfsburg company made a string of improvements to the engine and the interior, plus cosmetic tweaks to the nose and safety upgrades such as side impact door bars.

After further VW upgrades in 1993, the Favorit bowed out in 1994, although the estate was available into 1995. But as a testament to its fundamental qualities, its successor was basically just the next generation because rather than switch to a VW platform, Škoda simply evolved the Favorit into the Felicia – a softer, more VW-looking version of the same car. The engine went along for the ride too, and in fact survived until 2003 in various guises and several VAG



Favorits left in existence, which will make shopping around for one very hard indeed. But the silver lining to this cloud is that survivors are generally well-loved and consequently in good shape. After all, Škoda has always enjoyed a loyal and enthusiastic following in the UK.

While you wait for a Favorit to become available, you can entertain yourself with the hilarious promotional video that can be found on a popular internet portal. In it, a new Favorit is driven into a UK port en route to a very obviously paid-for road test. Customs officers – whose performance is clearly inspired by Fulton Mackay and Richard Beckinsale’s campy in the 1970s TV series *Porridge* – stop and proceed to dismantle parts of it. While they fail to discover cached drugs, arms or

currency, they do note several of the car’s ergonomic virtues as they work. The driver helpfully provides further noteworthy details as the narrative develops. Eventually (and presumably after a quick off-camera reassembly), the car is driven away, but not before the customs officers make an actual attempt to steal it.

If you’re a fan of laughably poor acting to a ludicrous script, this is several minutes well spent. If you like a film with nuance and layers of significance, don’t bother – spend the time looking for a Favorit instead. This is a most unlikely-seeming candidate for future appreciation, but few cars combine utility, old-world charm and the weight of European history in the way this little Škoda does. ■



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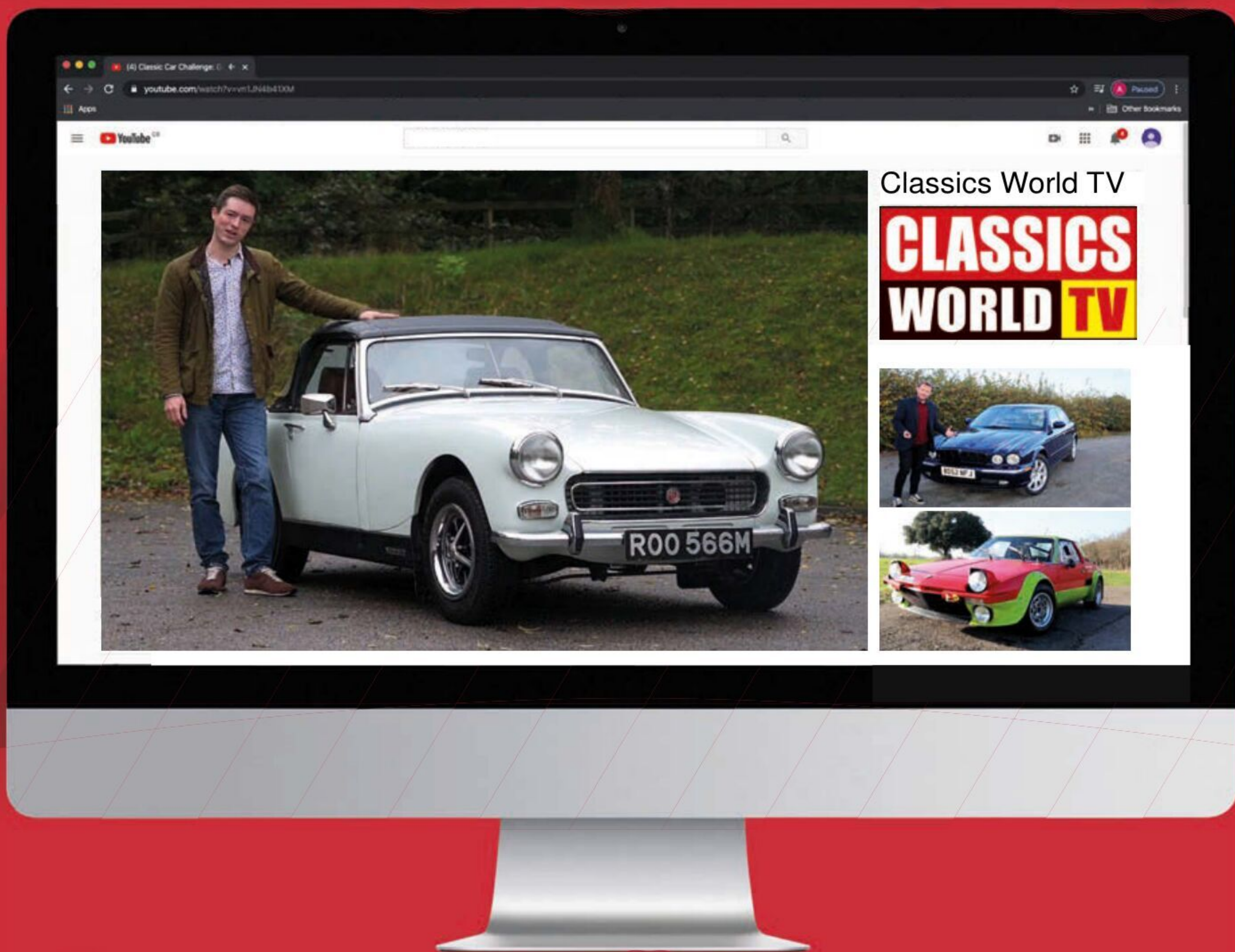
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CLASSIC IN ITS OWN LIFETIME

The legendary Lada Niva is not only still in production, it's been back on sale in the UK in recent months... albeit not officially

Words: Paul Jackson Pics: Richard Gunn



The list of vehicles still in production 45 years after they launched is understandably short. There are plenty of model names that have been around for longer, of course, but the cars themselves bear little resemblance to their forebears. And then there's the Lada Niva, the ultra-rugged 4x4 that's still in production in 2022, remaining faithful to the design that first arrived way back in 1977.

The Niva has been a major part of the East European motoring scene in particular throughout the last four and a half decades, and was once a fairly common sight in the UK. It arrived here at the end of the '70s and remained available through to 1997, when Lada imports finally ceased. An effort was made to begin unofficial imports again in 2010, with Niva aficionado

Mark Key bringing in small numbers of left-hand drive examples for a short time. But it was in 2021 that he had a second attempt, this time generating huge amounts of publicity and attracting punters willing to buy one of the hardest-working 4x4s of all time.

Naturally, we couldn't resist borrowing Mark's demonstrator for a few days when the opportunity arose – and it was a fascinating experience, largely because of the reaction from other road users. A brand new Niva attracts serious attention in the UK, with people puzzled as to how what looks like an old Lada happens to have a current-style registration number. Forget your six-figure price tag supercars; when it comes to maximum head-turning ability, the latest Lada Niva has few peers.





LOOKS FAMILIAR

Anyone who experienced the Niva decades ago will already be familiar with the latest model, now badged as the Niva Legend. It's changed little over the years, with only minor trim updates (bumpers, grille and other details) to differentiate it. There's the same boxy three-door styling, the same distinctive 'eyebrow' indicators up front, the same high ground clearance, the same short overhangs for off-roading. And under the bonnet there's the same 1.7-litre OHC fuel-injected petrol engine that's powered the Niva since the early 1990s, now with 83bhp for a top speed of 88mph. There may be a touch more black trim around the place, plus a redesigned (but still reassuringly basic) dashboard and marginally posher upholstery, but the

latest Niva is essentially the same car it was all those years ago.

There are obviously downsides. The Niva is now produced solely in left-hand drive guise, which will no doubt deter some Brits. And, of course, it's crude. Compared with a modern-day SUV that's designed for everyday comfort and convenience, this Russian tool is hard work. The four-cylinder engine is smooth enough at tickover but sounds raucous as the revs rise (ear defenders for motorway cruising would be a wise investment), while the whining from the drivetrain and power-steering (a typical Niva trait) can be wearing.

The five-speed manual transmission is notchy but the Lada picks up speed reasonably well and keeps up with modern traffic. The disc/drum brake set-

up is effective and the all-coil suspension does a good job (by 4x4 standards) of smoothing potholes and rough surfaces. Throw the Niva into a corner and you'll be either amused or alarmed by the body roll, but also impressed by the all-weather grip. There's permanent drive to all four wheels; and when the going gets tough you have two extra 'gearsticks', one to select low-range and the other to lock the diff for extreme off-roading.

The one area where the Niva has changed is in its standard equipment, with 'our' Luxe version coming with alloys, electric windows and mirrors, air-con and even heated front seats. Bizarrely though, you don't get a stereo; and the only airbag you'll find is the side-impact one fitted to the driver's seat. The hard-plastic dashboard isn't the last word





in ergonomics, and the exposed screw heads on the cheap-looking door cards are a reminder of the Niva's age.

RUNNING ONE

This might be a brand new car but its spec is firmly in the 20th century, which brings advantages when it comes to ease of maintenance. Admittedly, there are no longer any Lada dealers in the UK, so you'll need to make your own arrangements when it comes to servicing. But the Niva's simplicity means any competent garage will be able to help, and it's easy to buy parts

and all consumables at reasonable cost via either the importer or from Lada specialists online.

After more than four decades in production, the Niva is a well-proven design. It tends to be inherently reliable (it's built to work hard), although new ones come with a two-year warranty for extra peace of mind.

It was in 2021 that Mark Key recommenced imports of the Niva, bringing up to seven into the UK on a single transporter at any one time. And it didn't take him long to build up a list of satisfied customers – the kind of

MODERN CLASSIC LADA NIVA

people who value the Niva's no-nonsense engineering and off-road agility more than modern-day refinement. Having said that, with the Niva being ULEZ-compliant, you're as likely to spot one on the mean streets of London as you are traversing the Yorkshire Dales.

Each new Niva has to pass an Individual Vehicle Approval (IVA) test, for which Mark has to change the headlights (for driving on the left), reinstate the rear foglights, swap the speedometer for a bespoke illuminated one showing miles-per-hour, carry out various wiring loom modifications, as well as add extra conduit for the wiring that runs beneath the vehicle. Once the IVA is passed, the Niva is registered as a brand new car and will be issued with an independent two-year mechanical warranty.

Prices for a road-ready Niva start at less than £19,000 for the basic Classic model, though the much better-equipped Luxe tested here is £20,000-plus. Anybody wishing to buy a pre-prepared Niva and arrange for their own IVA can save a few thousand pounds, though – and if you're VAT registered and opt for the two-seater van version, the price tumbles further once you've reclaimed the VAT.

OUR VERDICT

What we love about the Niva is that it provides a unique opportunity: a chance to buy a 'brand new classic', a machine that oozes 1970-style character. Yes, it has drawbacks; it's tiring on a journey and it's slow and unrefined by modern standards. But it's also one of the finest off-roaders of all time, a machine capable of giving farmers and rural dwellers the reassurance of all-year-round mobility at a sensible price. That a new one also turns more heads than a Ferrari is the icing on the 4x4 cake.

But there is a downside. Since we sampled the Niva shown here, the world has changed. The war in Ukraine has tuned Russia into a pariah state as far as the west is concerned, with sanctions in place and motor manufacturers responding accordingly. So, has the Niva bitten the dust once again in the UK? Time will tell. Meanwhile, it remains on sale in Russia, with production set to finally cease at the end of 2023.

CONTACT

To find out more about the current-spec Lada Niva and the latest on the situation with UK sales, go to lada4x4.co.uk.





TECH SPEC

ENGINE:	1690cc 4-cyl OHC
POWER:	83bhp @ 5000rpm
TORQUE:	95lb.ft @ 4000rpm
MAX SPEED:	88mph
0-60MPH:	16.2sec
FUEL CONSUMPTION:	25-34mpg
GEARBOX:	Dual-range 4x4, 5-sp manual

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NIVA BETTERED

The Eastern European 4x4 that refused to die. WORDS: Sam Skelton



The automotive market is primarily led by the consumer's needs and wants – the ubiquity of satellite navigation, air conditioning, in car entertainment and scores of other types of technology show that for many, the car isn't so much about its technical ability as its showroom appeal. But for one car, the two have always been inextricably linked. The Lada Niva remains popular not because of any trinketry, but because it still does the job for which it was designed astonishingly well.

The Niva story begins in 1971, when leading politician and Premier of the Soviet Union Alexei Kosygin gave VAZ and AZLK the challenge of designing a suitable car for Russians in remote areas – places that the Lada, Moskvich and Zaporozhets were incapable of reaching. Early prototypes were inspired by the Izh-14 prototype of 1974, and while the mechanicals were carried over from existing Lada models the car was not based on Fiat parts. By the time the Niva was set in stone, it utilised a hatchback body inspired by a stalled Lada front wheel drive programme, the

Lada 1500's engine, and elements of its trim. Plans to fit the Moskvich 1500 engine were abandoned, as it was deemed incompatible. The Niva could have entered production by 1975, but the launch of the new Lada 1600 model had opened new possibilities, and the Niva was re-engineered with the new engine.

When launched in 1977, it was the world's first monocoque off roader. Tested before launch in Siberia, the Urals, the Pamir Mountains and the

made it a formidable off road machine, and official marketing claimed it offered Lada comfort with UAZ ability. Elsewhere, it was likened to a Renault 5 shell sitting atop a Land Rover chassis.

A lengthened variant was produced from 1993, and given five doors from 1995. This was never originally imported into Britain, though subsequent importers have brought examples across with left hand drive to meet the needs of people who required more space than the three door could offer. Of more interest was

“ The Niva story begins in 1971, when a leading politician gave VAZ and AZLK the challenge of designing a suitable car for Russians in remote areas

Kazakh SSR, its abilities were assessed against the military UAZ, the Land Rover Series 3 and the Range Rover. Permanent all wheel drive with a central differential lock, short wheelbase, independent suspension and high ground clearance

the Niva diesel, introduced in 1999 and known as the VAZ 21215. In production for eight years, it used the Peugeot XUD engine in 1.9 litre naturally aspirated or mildly turbocharged form – similar to the units supplied to FSO for the Polonez.



While Peugeot ceased production of the engine in 2001, the slow uptake of diesel engined Nivas was such that Lada was still able to produce them until 2007. No other diesel suppliers were sourced for the Niva once this model had ceased production, and it was not widely exported.

It became the first car to spend more than a decade in Antarctica, used by the Soviet Antarctic Expedition and operating at temperatures as low as -54°C . A long wheelbase Niva also made it to the North Pole in 1998, while another made it to the base camp on Mount Everest at 17600ft. It was also

used by farmers, fire crews, ambulances and rescue teams, such was its versatility and purpose. But it made most friends as a road car, and many of those in Britain.

The Niva was launched in Britain, in left hand drive, in May 1979 – a right hand drive model becoming available for 1983. Autocar tested a Niva in



4X4

LADA NIVA

January 1979, and found that while it was understandably slow given its weight and power output, economy wasn't poor and the car was happy to run on low grade petrol – as low as two star in some instances. It was deemed acceptable to drive on road, albeit far better off road – though testers acknowledged that this was true of most all wheel drive vehicles. Luggage space with the seats up was criticised, but again with the acknowledgement that this is a compact car. With Autocar's considered

competition including the Range Rover and Jeep Cherokee Chief at over twice the price, it's clear that the market was ill-equipped to offer 4x4 ability at an inexpensive price. Even the Series 3 Land Rover was more expensive, albeit by £3, and offered a far less advanced chassis, reduced performance and higher fuel bills. The overall conclusion was that a Land Rover might be more capable off road, but that a Niva wouldn't be far behind and offered better on road manners into the bargain.

British cars came with a variety of trim levels dreamed up by the importer, including the upmarket Cossack with steel bullbars, a sunroof, alloy wheels and decals, and the more basic and lower-priced Hussar toward the end of RHD production. The Hussar retained the original grill when launched in 1995, though the Cossack model gained a new unit styled by Rover. Given the target market of the Niva, it's perhaps unsurprising to learn that more Hussars were sold than Cossacks toward the





“ The core of the Favorit’s appeal was its simplicity. It was a decent-looking car with plenty of interior space for five people and their chattels.

end, though both models would benefit from a new, deeper tailgate. 1997 would prove to be the final year of UK Niva importation, as it was becoming harder to adapt the cars to meet emissions regulations. A steady if small stream of importers have continued to bring left hand drive Nivas into the UK since, and show no signs of stopping. From 2010, one importer offered a full range – the three door hatchback, a two door, two seat van, and a two door pickup. Five door models have also

been imported in small numbers.

In 2006, the Niva name was sold to General Motors for use as part of a joint venture, and the car became known as the Lada 4x4. A revised version was also launched in 2014 with new bumpers, a new grille, new mirrors, new wheels and a revised interior with heated front seats. There was also a commemorative 40th Anniversary edition, with new colour schemes, 40th Anniversary badging, leather seats and steering wheel rim, and stainless steel sill



coverings. For 2020, all standard Niva models were rebranded from Lada 4x4 to Lada Niva Legend, while Lada would rebadge the Chevrolet Niva as the Lada Niva Travel when GM sold back its stake in the joint holding company GM-AvtoVAZ.

The Lada Niva is still in production – at 45 years, it is the longest

serving four wheel drive vehicle still to be produced in its original form, outlasting the Series Land Rover and the Defender which followed it. It will be discontinued in 2023, with pollution and safety levels among the primary reasons for its cessation. In a world of modern SUVs with limited ground clearance, big engines, ltos








of technology and the near certainty that none will be taken off road, a beast of burden like the Niva is an anachronism, yet one whose singular vision of purpose makes it one of the most compelling cars not only to have left the Eastern Bloc, but to have been produced anywhere in the world. We will be poorer for its loss. ■



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