



Along with the suspension the Fiat 124 based shell is considerably strengthened

Lada Estate: a sensible alternative

A good deal of nonsense is talked about cars from behind the Iron Curtain. There have been smear campaigns, accusations of dumping, and various political innuendoes. The truth of the matter is that with less inflation and better discipline in the factories, the Russians can't help turning out cars that seem cheap by western standards.

Ignoring the price difference, these Eastern cars may lack some of the superficial attractions of our own productions. On the other hand, they are built to withstand unimaginably rugged conditions and as a consequence they are particularly suitable for the man who habitually overloads his car and drives it off the beaten track. In my opinion, the Russians may excel in the estate car field, producing vehicles that convert from quite acceptable

passenger cars to heavy duty trucks. As many of our readers use estates, both for transporting racing engines and to avoid hotel bills at the circuits, I have recently been testing a Lada 1200 with that type of body.

The Lada - it has another name at home - and the huge factory where it is built, are the result of a package deal with Fiat. The car is based on our old friend, the Fiat 124, but many changes have been made in the specification to stand up to Russian winters and Russian roads, or the lack of them. The steel shell has been greatly strengthened at points of stress and the floor pan is in heavier gauge. The suspension parts have been given the treatment and larger dampers are fitted, while the rear disc brakes have been replaced by drums,

which stand up better to working in a mud bath. There is an extra powerful starter motor for sub-zero temperatures.

Though it is of the same capacity, the engine has been re-designed, with a chain-driven overhead camshaft instead of pushrods. The car is naturally heavier than the Fiat, the estate body also contributing a small increase. Compared with the Lada saloon, there may be a fractional loss of acceleration, but if anything the estate is the faster of the two, due to the aerodynamic advantages of a long roof. The external finish is quite impressive and the interior, though not elaborately appointed, is neat and does not look cheap. The instruments are perhaps old-fashioned and the seats become somewhat uncomfortable on long journeys.

There really is a lot of space in the back when the rear seat is folded, while there is nothing to spoil if a farmer transports his livestock. The flat floor ensures easy loading and the door becomes a rain shield as one piles in the parcels. The doors fit well and are easy to enter, the high seats giving a good all-round view.

The engine is quite different from that of the 124. It does not have the fantastic capacity of a Fiat for extremely high revs, becoming very noisy if it asked to exceed the recommended gear speeds. During normal driving, however, it is quieter than the 124 power unit and the gearbox and back axle are completely silent, which is somewhat rare nowadays. As would be expected, with the gear lever right on top of the box, the gearchanges are quick and easy.

The gear ratios, as on the 124, are widely spaced. This suits a vehicle which may be asked to carry heavy loads and the low bottom gear will give a re-start anywhere. The engine is obviously efficient, the car feels surprisingly lively for a 1200 cc. machine, especially with such a substantial body. The fuel consumption is moderate and, with only a little care, 30 mpg should be obtainable on most journeys.

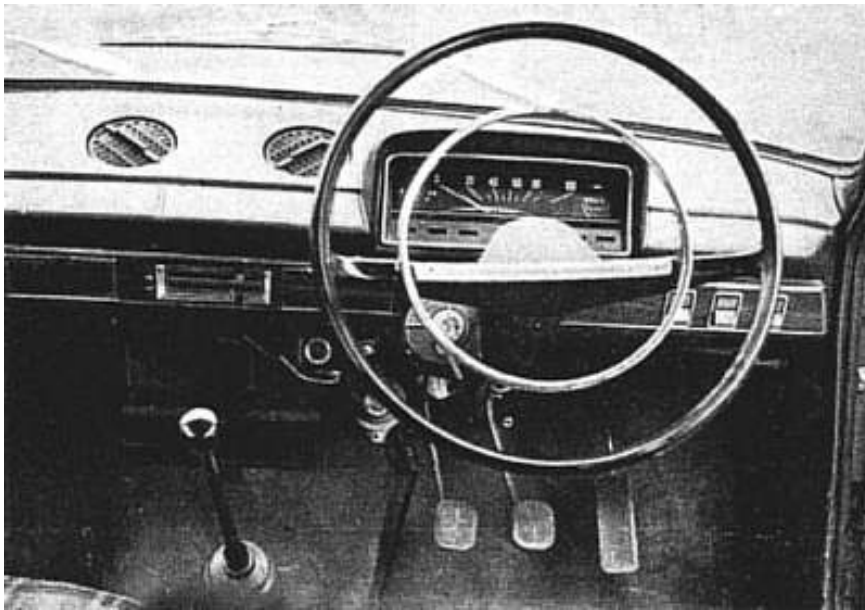
I expected the heavy-duty springing to be harsh, but this is certainly not. Indeed, I prefer the ride and handling to those of the Fiat 124. The steering is light and sensitive, with plenty of self-centering, so that it might well be mistaken for a rack and pinion. There is less understeer than on the 124 and the brakes are certainly better than those of the Fiat; the vehicle can be driven quite fast over unmade tracks without any crashing or bottoming of the suspension.

With a genuine 90 mph maximum, the Lada has plenty of speed for its size, which means that at 70 mph on the motorways, there is a lot more power

Just one of the many thoroughly practical jobs the Lada 1200 Estate will perform



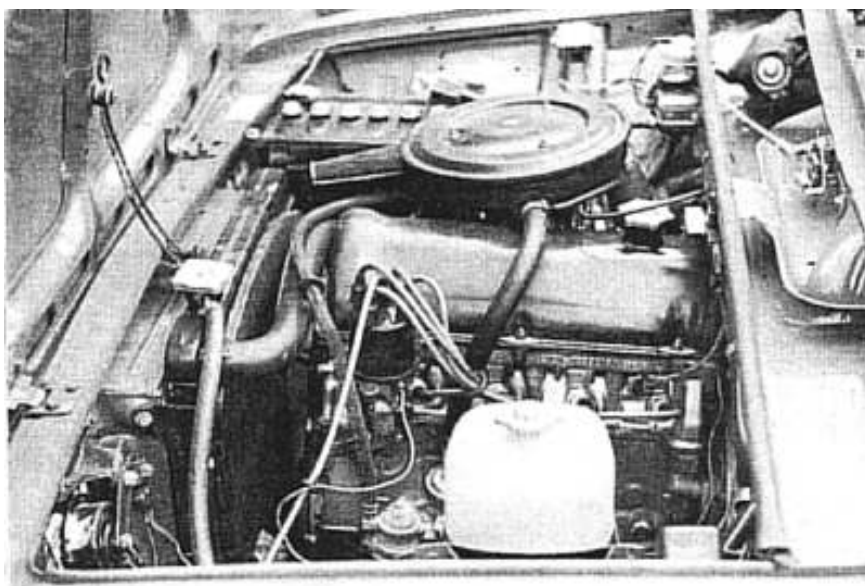
Road test



Above: Inside, the Lada is hard to tell apart from a Fiat 124.



The engine has been substantially altered. Accessibility remains excellent



in reserve for maintaining speed uphill. It is not a GT car, of course, but it avoids the noise and uncomfortable ride of so many estate cars. There are nevertheless some items of equipment that one misses, such as reversing lights and a heated rear window. There is a typical Russian heater, which you don't turn on fully unless you want to melt your socks, but there are no eye-ball ventilators, only old fashioned quarter lights that swivel. The powerful heater works well on warm air but will also recirculate, when the potent blower has tow settings, noisy and bloody noisy, but it warms the whole interior very quickly.

On the plus side, there's a fabulous outfit of excellent tools and as many of us are being forced to do our own servicing nowadays, such equipment is a great advantage. Above all, there's a proper starting handle, which makes such a difference when you are setting the points or the valve clearances. Engine accessibility is good, though it's best to remove the air cleaner for some of the jobs; there's an automatic under-bonnet light for oil level checking.

The test car was fitted with Michelin tyres, which gave an excellent grip on wet or dry roads. Once it is really warm, the engine is quite flexible and top gear can be used in towns when the traffic is not too dense, the usual 4-cylinder rumble only starting at fairly low speeds, though a touch of third is useful for regaining speed rapidly. The handbrake, operating in the rear drums, is powerful and has a good ratchet.

Though the Lada will be bought by many people as an everyday car at a realistic price, it will be regarded by others as a sensible second car, for slipping down to the local when it's raining and James has just washed the Camargue. I tested it largely for those readers who want a tough work-horse, but I enjoyed driving it more than I expected. It has safe roadholding, pleasant steering, and quite a comfortable ride, with lights that permit a fair average to be kept up at night.

As I have already remarked, cars from behind the Iron Curtain make a lot of sense in estate form, but for those who require a normal saloon, the Lada is even cheaper at £1199. The estate car which I drove had covered a considerable mileage, but none of its five doors had the suspicion of a rattle when it was driven fast over rough tracks. It earned my respect as a useful multi-purpose vehicle of a thoroughly sound construction, and I hope that Satra Motors will invite me to try the 1500 cc version when it becomes available in the country.

Car Tested: Lada 1200 5-door estate, price £1,349 including car tax and VAT

Engine: Four cylinders, 76 x 66 mm (1198 cc). Compression ratio 8.8 to 1, 82 bhp DIN at 5,600 rpm. Chain driven overhead camshaft. Russian Weber twin-choke downdraught carburettor.

Transmission: Single dry plate clutch. 4-speed synchromesh gearbox with central change, ratios: 1.0, 1.49, 2.30 and 3.75 to 1. Hypoid rear axle, ratio 4.3 to 1.

Chassis: Combined steel body and chassis. Independent front suspension by wishbones, coil springs and anti-roll bar. Worm and roller steering. Live rear axle on coil springs, 4 trailing arms and Panhard rod. Telescopic dampers all round. Dual circuit disc/drum brakes with rear control valve. Bolt on disc wheels fitted 155.13 tyres.

Equipment: 12-volt lighting and starting. Speedometer. Windscreen wipers and washers with intermittent setting. Heater. Cigar lighter. Flashing direction indicators. Starting handle. Inspection lamp. Full tool kit.

Dimensions: Wheelbase 7ft 11.5in. Track 4ft 4.8in/4ft 3in. Overall length 13ft 3in. Width 5ft 4.5in. Weight 19cwt.

Performance: Maximum speed 90 mph. Speeds in gears, Third 62 mph, second 40 mph, first 26 mph. Standing quarter-mile 20.1s. acceleration 0-30 mph 4.5s, 0-50 mph 10.7s, 0-60 mph 14.8s, 0-70mph 22.5s.

Fuel consumption: 28 to 333 mpg

