

ROAD TEST

LADA 1200

FOR : excellent value for money; good performance; capacious and comfortable interior; large boot; good visibility

AGAINST : poor engine warm-up characteristics; carburation flat spots; heavy steering; poor instrumentation; disappointing interior finish



Our experiences with East European cars have not all been pleasant. When you consider that only recently have the Iron Curtain countries become consumer orientated and started producing cars in quantity, it's not surprising that until now their cars have been utilitarian, old-fashioned and under-engineered.

But the Lada is a totally different animal. In all but a few areas it measures up well to what Western Europe can offer, while still managing to be very much cheaper. But it's no secret that the USSR have spent somewhere between £300 and £400 million putting the Lada into production, a massive investment by anybody's standards. The Lada is a basic version of the Fiat 124 (with many modifications to make it suitable for Russia) and massive amounts were spent by the Soviet authorities in the West buying machine tools, dies, and so on. And much was spent on buying Fiat's production, quality control and servicing experience. The culmination is a factory complex at Togliatti which, it is claimed, is the biggest automobile factory in the world and is virtually self contained, needing only tyres, glass and some instrumentation from outside. Daily production is currently running at 1800 cars, and SATRA Motors Ltd, the Lada importers hope to sell 4000 in the UK this year.

Just how does the Lada manage to be £300 less than the cheapest Fiat 124? It's undoubtedly in part due to the recent economic upheaval in the West making exchange rates more favourable to the USSR. Whether or not it is additionally sold at a loss in this country (SATRA hotly deny that it is) is fairly academic; in any case, the Soviet authorities are badly in need of foreign currency.

In most respects, then, the Lada is very similar to a 124, but much less costly. The changes that have been made are mainly to withstand extremes of temperature or road surfaces (uprated suspension, heavy duty starter, a floor pan and exhaust system made of heavier gauge steel, modified steering, a bigger clutch, rear drum brakes instead of discs and an increased ground clearance). There's also a new overhead camshaft engine. Of all these modifications the only poor one is the steering; its heaviness can be very

tiring whether driving at speed or manoeuvring in a tight situation.

At £981 the Lada represents unrivalled value for money. The number of four-door saloons at around £1000 are very few. There's the Citroen Ami Super (£1035) and the much cheaper Moskvich 412 (744) both of which offer a higher top speed but worse acceleration and inferior accommodation. The Renault 4 costs £1002 but is much slower. For truly comparable saloons you have to move up-market by £200 - £300 to find the 124 itself (£1273), the Escort 1100L (£1250), Morris Marina (£1248) and Vauxhall Viva De Luxe (£1285). The Lada compares most favourably with all of these on performance, its gear-change, accommodation, the comfortable driving position and excellent visibility. Faults - apart from the steering - are the noisy engine and its poor warm-up characteristics which on our test car were associated with a bad flat spot at low revs, badly designed instruments and an interior that is rather poorly finished. For many buyers though, the clinching factor will undoubtedly be the price.

PERFORMANCE



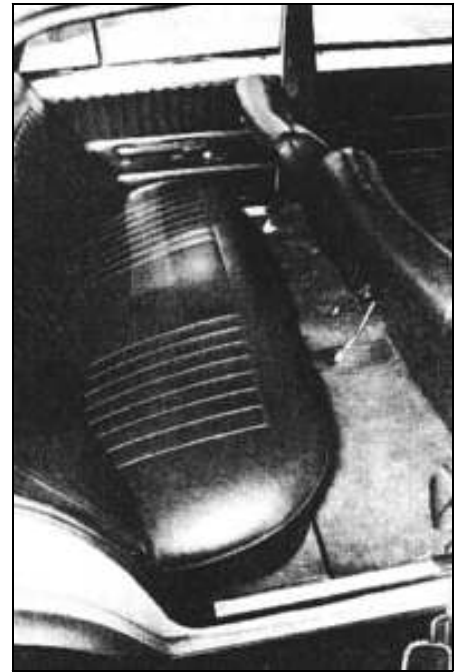
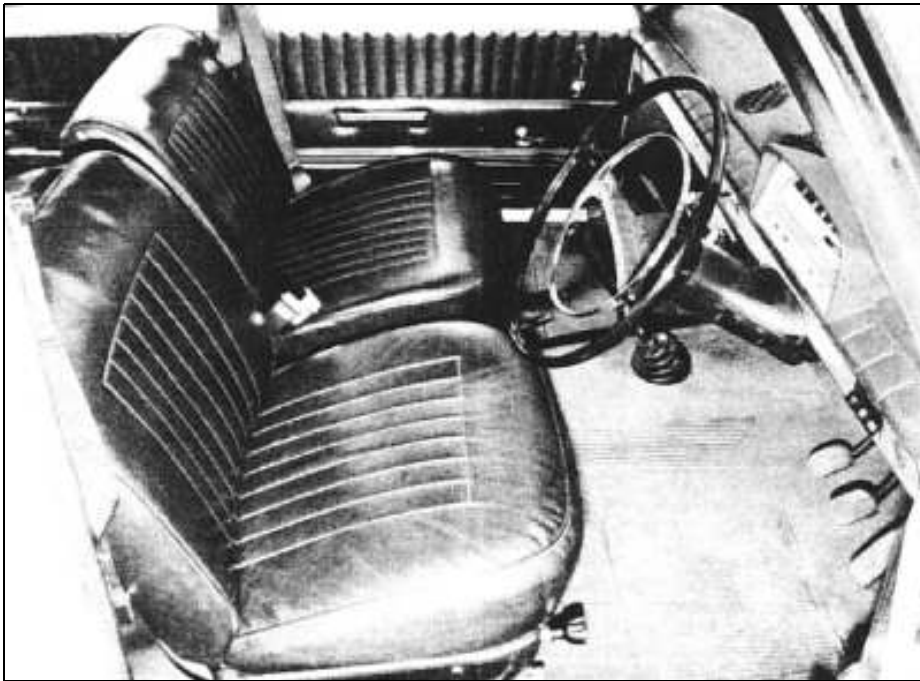
Although the Lada's engine is of similar capacity - 1198 cc - to that fitted to the 124, it is very different, many modifications having been made, mostly to cope with the vagaries of the Russian winter. For instance the cylinder bore spacings are different, to give better cooling water flow. The engine is also more oversquare (76 mm bore and 66 mm stroke in stead of 73/71.5 mm). Most importantly, the cylinder head incorporates an overhead camshaft, though the decision to use this type of valve actuation was probably prompted more by a desire to give the engine a long production life than by any advantage in withstanding extremes of temperature. Unlike the Fiat ohc designs in production which use toothed belts, the camshaft is driven by chain and doesn't act directly on the valves through inverted bucket tappets; instead it does so indirectly via fingers. With a progressive twin-choke carburetter wedge-shaped combustion chambers (but still a non cross-flow

cylinder head) the engine produces 62 bhp (DIN) at 9600 rpm and a maximum torque of 64.4 lb ft (DIN) at 3400 rpm.

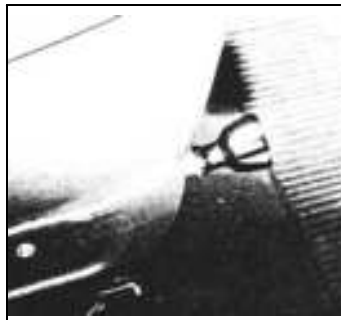
The poorest feature of the engine was undoubtedly its warm-up behaviour. It always started promptly, as long as the choke was used, but took far too long - about four or five miles - to reach a reasonable working temperature even in the warm July weather of our test. During this period, the engine hesitated and stuttered badly, especially at low revs, when the accelerator was depressed, a phenomenon that continued, though to a much lesser extent, when it was warm. There was some hesitation when opening the second choke of the carburetter, too, and even without these faults there isn't much torque at low revs. In other respects the engine acquits itself quite well. Not unnaturally it has a Fiat feel about it and is smooth and unfussed, if rather noisy, when taken to high rpm. The idle is rather lumpy and rough, though. We weren't so keen on the sudden throttle action either, a feature which in conjunction with the rather indeterminate clutch action makes starting from rest a trifle difficult.

For a four-door saloon costing a mere £999 the Lada's performance is excellent. Of its rivals of similar price, only the Moskvich is quicker (and then only marginally on top speed) while the Renault is far slower. The Lada's top speed of 89.7 mph and a 0-60 mph time of 14.7 secs is above average even when judged by standards of four-seater saloons costing £200-£300 more. Only the Fiat 124 (the figures for which were taken on the original and rather quick test car) itself betters the Lada on performance. the 30-50 mph time of 11.3 secs is similarly good, again only bettered by the Moskvich and Fiat.

At high road speeds, the engine noise tends to be left behind, so that cruising close to the maximum speed - say at 85 mph - is reasonably peaceful, particularly as wind noise is well subdued. Although the red marks on the speedometer for gearchange points indicate that the maximum safe engine speed is 5750 rpm; the top speed of 90 mph is achieved at 6000 rpm. In fact, the engine feels capable of spinning at these speeds for prolonged periods without any adverse



Above: austere, functional trim. The seats are fairly comfortable though, and the driving position is good. Above right: there's a fair amount of leg room in the rear and access is also good. Below: a simple rotary knob projecting from the front seat controls the backrest angle, a feature not found on many £1000 cars. Right: a good boot and a superb tool kit



effect which suggests that the Lada in-gear maximum rpm figures are very conservative. An increase in overall gearing wouldn't go amiss though.

ECONOMY

★ ★ This isn't one of Lada's strongest points. An overall figure of 26.1 mpg might suggest that we had been unusually heavy on the accelerator during our test. But the touring figure of 31.8 mpg computed from our steady speed measurements, indicate that even frugal drivers would be lucky to get 30 mpg. Most rivals - leaving aside the much slower Renault 4 - achieved 28 mpg or so overall, but have the added advantage of a higher touring mpg figure to suggest that gentle driving would be more fruitful in them. The 8.5 gallon fuel tank gives a maximum range of about 270 miles.

TRANSMISSION

★ ★ ★ When cold the gearchange is rather notchy, first gear in particular being rather difficult to find from standstill. Once

warm, though, the change is very good. The lever moves through a precisely defined gate and has synchromesh that's totally unbeatable but doesn't balk on fast changes. If there's one criticism to be made here, it's that the lever is sited a little too far forward and has movements too large in the fore-and-aft direction, features that make first and third a stretch when belted in.

The ratios are what we used to call the "Alpine" sort, giving low maximum speeds in the intermediate gears - 23 mph, 38 mph and 58 mph at the 5750 rpm recommended and a high top. But the engine revs so freely that it's very easy to exceed these maxima unintentionally because, as we've already mentioned, they're very conservative. For emergencies, then, there's obviously some more speed available in each gear.

Although the pedals are sited at much more sensible angles than in many a Fiat, the clutch suffered from a rather sharp and indeterminate take-up point. It had no trouble coping with a restart on the 1 in 3 test hill, however.

HANDLING




Apart from the engine, most differences from the 124 lie in the suspension. Soviet roads aren't always metalled, so sundry modifications have been made to increase the suspension's strength. For instance there are heavier springs and shock absorbers fore and aft and the rear anti-roll bar has been deleted. The Lada retains the basic 124 design, however, with double wishbones and coil springs at the front and a live axle located by parallel arms and Panhard rod with coil springs at the rear. The steering (by worm and roller) has been modified, too, though exactly how, we have been unable to ascertain.

But whatever these modifications were, they haven't been for the better because the steering on our test car and one other we tried was extremely heavy. It may be, though, that this is more a fault of these cars rather than an inherent shortcoming of the design, for the early 124s that we tested in 1967 suffered similarly and were improved in production. The heaviness seems to be the result of a frictional


stiffness rather than a strong castor action for the weighting is substantially independent of cornering speed. Curiously, it did free up for a short period only to return to its heavy state within a few miles. Naturally any assessment of the handling is bound to be coloured by this steering characteristic, though the system has some feel once you get used to it and in fact the car can be driven very briskly along winding roads with little drama. The roadholding, both wet and dry, was excellent on the new steel-belted Dunlop SP4 tyres and the car understeers much more consistently than a 124 (which can flick into sudden oversteer). This is just as well, as the nature of the steering makes opposite lock very difficult to apply accurately and quickly. Despite the uprated springs and dampers, bumps hit in mid-corner don't throw the car off line.



BRAKES

 Lada considered drum brakes at the rear more suitable for Russia than discs, so the 1200 saloon has the more usual disc/drum set-up instead of the four disc brake arrangement on the 124. The car does, like the 124, have a pressure relief valve for the rear brakes and a dual system split front and rear. The front callipers aren't of the Fiat single piston design, however, being of the more normal two-piston type. The result is a pedal feel definitely superior to that of the 124 (which has spongy, long travel brakes) though the fade resistance is equally definitely inferior. Over our 20-stop fade test, the pedal load required for a 0.5g deceleration from 65 mph rose from 45 lb to 75 lb by the 10th stop, enough to be easily noticed subjectively. They did recover somewhat (the pedal load reducing to 60 lb) but the results suggest that the brakes could fade badly on a long downhill descent with a full load aboard, though we didn't experience much fade when driving hard on the road. The water-splash had no effect, though, and the handbrake had no trouble holding the car on a 1 in 3 slope. It also gave a deceleration of 0.33g, an average figure for a front engine / rear wheel drive car.

ACCOMMODATION

 By normal 1200 cc four-seater standards, the Lada is surprisingly roomy inside. There's plenty of legroom in the front and sufficient in the rear for people up to 5ft 10in tall, even with the front seats fully back. Any lack of headroom is only apparent to people over, say, six feet. Getting into the rear is easy, too, with doors that open reasonably wide and offer a large gap between the front of the rear seat cushion and the door pillar. Subjectively, the interior feels even roomier, for the sensible body shape and large window area give an airy and light impression. The boot is capacious, too, taking 10.7 cu ft of our test suitcases. Space for oddments inside the car is

PERFORMANCE

CONDITIONS

Weather Overcast, wind 5-12mph
 Temperature 65°F
 Barometer 29.6in Hg
 Surface Dry/damp tarmac-adam

MAXIMUM SPEEDS

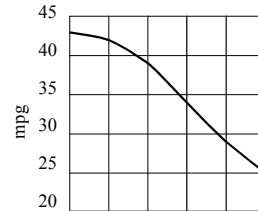
	mph	kph
Banked circuit	89.7	144.3
Best 1/4 mile	94.7	152.4
Terminal speeds:		
at 1/4 mile	68	100
at kilometre	82	132
Speed in gears (at 5750rpm)		
1st	23	37
2nd	38	61
3rd	58	93

ACCELERATION FROM REST

mph	sec	kph	sec
0-30	4.4	0-40	3.4
0-40	7.0	0-60	6.3
0-50	10.5	0-80	10.5
0-60	14.7	0-100	18.1
0-70	22.7	0-120	28.7
0-80	35.8	Stand'g km	37.7

ACCELERATION IN TOP

mph	sec	kph	sec
20-40	10.9	40-60	6.7
30-50	11.3	60-80	7.2
40-60	13.0	80-100	9.2
50-70	16.3	100-120	12.5
60-80	23.4		



FUEL CONSUMPTION

	mpg	litres/100 km
Touring	31.8	8.9
Overall	26.1	10.8
Fuel grade	98 octane (RM)	4 star rating
Tank capacity	8.5 galls	39 litres
Max range	270 miles	435 km
Test distance	850 miles	1370 km

*Consumption midway between 30 mph and maximum less 5 per cent for acceleration.

BRAKES

Pedal pressure deceleration and stopping distance from 30 mph (48 kph)

lb	kg	g	ft	m
25	11	0.27	111	34
50	23	0.65	46	14
75	34	0.87	35	11
90	41	1.00	30	9

Handbrake 0.83 91 28

FADE

20 1/2g stops at 1 min intervals from speed midway between 40 mph (64 kph) and maximum (65 mph, 104kph)

	lb	kg
Pedal force at start	45	20
Pedal force at 10th stop	75	34
Pedal force at 20th stop	60	27

STEERING

Turning circle between kerbs

	ft	m
left	33.8	10.3
right	36.9	11.3
Lock to lock	2.7 turns	
50 ft diam circle	1.0 turns	

CLUTCH

	in	cm
Free pedal movement	0.3	0.8
Additional to disengage	3.3	8.4
	lb	kg
Maximum pedal load	33	15

SPEEDOMETER (mph)

Speedo	30	40	50	60	70	80
True mph	29	39	49	58.5	68	77
Distance recorder	1.0 per cent fast					

WEIGHT

	cwt	kg
Unladen weight*	18.8	956
Weight as tested	22.5	1145

* with fuel of approx 50 miles
 Performance tests carried out by Motor's staff at the Motor Industry Research Association proving ground, Lindley

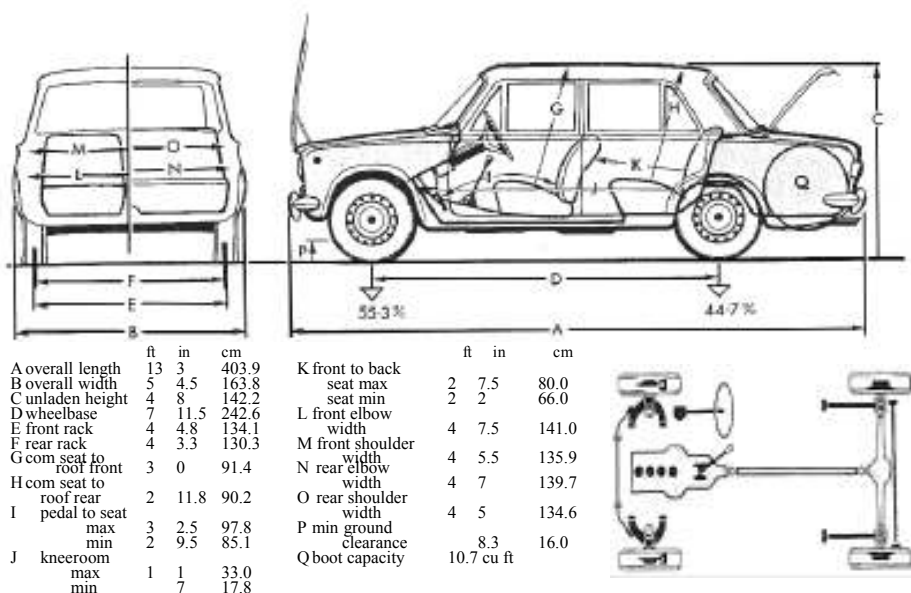


- 1 air vents
- 2 horn ring
- 3 fuel gauge
- 4 speedometer
- 5 water temp
- 6 glove box
- 7 ashtray
- 8 heater fan switch
- 9 heater controls
- 10 dipswitch/headlamp flasher stalk
- 11 indicator stalk
- 12 light switch
- 13 panel light switch
- 14 wiper switch
- 15 washer button
- 16 cigar lighter
- 17 choke pull
- 18 ignition/steering lock
- 19 bonnet release

COMPARISONS

	Capacity cc	Price £	Max mph	0-60 sec	30-50* sec	Overall mpg	Touring mpg	Length ft in	Width ft in	Weight cwt	Boot cu ft
Lada 1200	1198	981	89.7	14.7	11.3	26.1	31.8	13 3	5 4.5	18.8	10.7
Citroen Ami Super	1015	1035	88.0	16.4	13.5	28.0	32.0	13 0	5 1	18.8	7.6
Datsun 100a 4-door†	988	1121	85.2	16.6	12.3	32.6	39.0	11 10.5	4 9.8	12.8	5.8
Fiat 124	1198	1273	90.7	13.3	11.2	28.3	33.0	13 2.8	5 4.5	17.0	10.01#
Ford Escort 1100L 4-door	1098	1250	80.4	19.6	13.5	28.7	35.6	13 0.6	5 1.8	15.1	8.01#
Moskvich 412	1478	744	92.0	15.3	9.9	26.1	28.2	13 8.5	5 1.25	20.1	10.1
Renault 4 De-luxe	845	1002	67.6	30.6	14.8	26.5	46.4	12 0.5	4 10.6	12.1	6.4#
Morris Marina 1.3DL 4-door	1275	1248	85.6	16.8	11.0	27.1	37.2	13 10	5 4.4	17.4	12.4
Vauxhall Viva DL 4-door‡	1256	1295	82.9	16.2	13.0	28.0	32.5	13 8	5 4.7	16.6	10.4

* in above †-figures for 2 door version # measured with boxes ‡-figures for estate version



GENERAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE	
Cylinders	4 in line
Capacity	1198cc (73.12cu in)
Bore/Stroke	76/66 mm (2.95/2.60in)
Cooling	Water
Block	Cast iron
Head	Aluminium alloy
Valves	Sohc
Valve timing	
inlet opens	12° btdc
inlet closes	40° btdc
ex. opens	42° btdc
ex. closes	10° btdc
Compression	8.8:1
Carburetter	Progressive twin choke
Bearings	5 main
Fuel pump	Mechanical
Max power	62 bhp (DIN) at 5600 rpm
Max torque	64.4 lb ft (DIN) at 34.. rpm

TRANSMISSION	
Type	4-speed manual
Clutch	Sdp diaphragm Spring
Internal ratios and mph/1000 rpm	
Top	1.00:1 / 15.1
3rd	1.49:1 / 10.1
2nd	2.30:1 / 6.8
1st	3.75:1 / 4.0
Rev	3.87:1
Final drive	4.3:1

BODY / CHASSIS	
Construction	Unitary steel
Protection	Phosphate primer

SUSPENSION	
Front	Independent by double wishbones, coils, telescopic dampers, Anti-roll bar
Rear	Live axle located by parallel arms, Panhard rod, Coil springs, telescopic dampers

STEERING	
Type	Worm & roller
Assistance	No
Toe-in	4 +/- 1mm
Camber	0° 5' +/- 0° 20'
Castor	3° 30' +/- 0° 30'

BRAKES	
Type	Disc / drum
Servo	Yes
Circuit	Dual, split front/rear
Rear valve	Yes

WHEELS	
Type	Pressed steel 4 1/2 x 13
Tyres	Dunlop SP4 155 SR13
Pressures	27psi front 28 psi rear

ELECTRICAL	
Battery	12V, 55AL
Polarity	Negative
Generator	Alternator
Fuses	10
Headlights	2 x 45 / 40W

STANDARD EQUIPMENT

Adjustable steering	No	Head restraints	No	Petrol filler lock	No
Anti-lock brakes	No	Heater rear window	No	Radio	No
Armrests	4	Laminated screen	No	Rev counter	No
Ashtrays	3	Lights		Seat Belts	
Breakaway mirror	No	Boot	Yes	Front	Yes
Cigar lighter	Yes	Courtesy	Yes	Rear	No
Childproof locks	No	Engine bay	Yes	Seat recline	Yes
Clock	No	Hazard warning	No	Seat height adjuster	No
Coat hooks	2	Map reading	No	Sliding roof	No
Dual circuit brakes	Yes	Reversing	No	Tinted glass	No
Electric windows	No	Spot / Fog	No	Combination wash / wipe	No
Energy absorbing steering col	No	Locker	Yes	Wipe / delay	Yes
Fresh air ventilation	Yes	Outside mirror	Yes	Vanity mirror	No
Grab handles	4	Parcel shelf	No		

IN SERVICE

GUARANTEE		Rear axle	2.6 pints, AE 90 EP	REPLACEMENT COSTS	
Duration	12,000 miles or 12 months	Steering gear	0.4 pints, SAE 90 EP	Brake pads/linings (front))
MAINTENANCE		Coolant	16.9 pints	Clutch unit)
Schedule	Every 6 months	Chassis lubrication	None	Complete exhaust system)
Free service	At 1,000 miles	Contact breaker gap	0.37 - 0.43mm	Engine (new)) No Prices
Labour for year		Spark plug type	Champion N9Y	Damper (front)) Available
DO IT YOURSELF		Spark plug gap	0.5-0.5mm	Front wing)
Sump	6.0 pints, SAE 20W / 50	Tappets (cold)	0.15 mm inlet 0.15 mm exhaust	Gearbox (new))
Gearbox	2.4 pints, SAE 90 EP			Oil filter)
				Starter motor)
				Windscreen)

MAKE : Lada

MODEL : 1200 Saloon

MAKER : V/O Avtoexport, Moscow, Russia

CONCESSIONAIRES : Satra Motors, Carnaby Industrial Estate, Bridlington, Yorkshire, YO15 3QX

PRICE : £838.85 plus £69.83 car tax plus eighth per cent VAT gives total as tested: £980.84

reasonable. Although there isn't a parcel shelf or tray on the transmission tunnel there is a fairly large glove box (not lockable) and large flexible map pockets at the bottom of each front door. In the rear there's a large shelf under the rear window which as a high front lip to prevent objects sliding off under braking.

RIDE COMFORT

Despite the uprated suspension the ride is surprisingly good. Not that it's particularly distinguished at any time (around town, for instance, it's rather knobby and tends to round off bumps rather than absorb them), more than that it never becomes uncomfortable. Potholes and severe bumps are taken very well though with some crashing. AT high speed and when cornering hard the ride seems better than a 124 with no trace of diagonal pitching or wallowing.

AT THE WHEEL

Unlike some Italian cars, the Lada doesn't suffer from a driving position in which pedals are too close to the steering wheel. Most of our drivers found the relationship between the major controls to be good apart from the gear-lever being a little too far forward; the fact the Lada has an adjustable headrest as standard must have more than a little bearing on these favourable comments. By modern standards, the steering wheel is pretty large and mounted high up, but we didn't object to this at all. The seat was rather hard but on whole well shaped; a little more lateral support wouldn't go amiss, however. The seat covering (plastic) is unpleasantly hot and sticky even in moderately warm weather; modern cloth trim is so much superior in this respect.

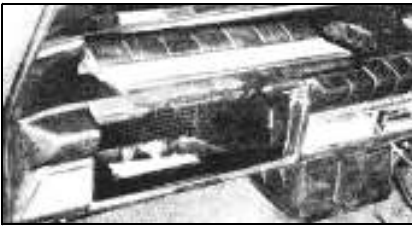
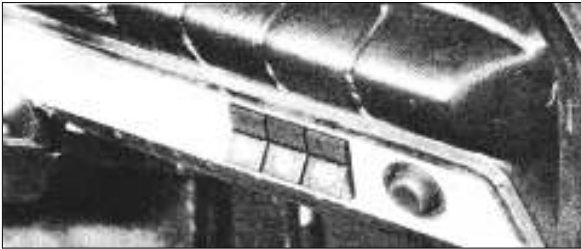
For the minor controls, the Lada inherits the Fiat collection of finger stalks grouped around the steering wheel. Unfortunately, as in the 124 only the dipswitch, indicators and headlamp flashers are controlled in this was, leaving the light switch and washer / wiper controls on the facia. The wiper switch (for wipers that include an intermittent wipe facility) are mounted close together, however.

The static seat belts fitted to our test car tended to lose their adjustment, so that they needed continually retightening. When one is strapped in, it is virtually impossible to reach the heater controls.

VISIBILITY

One advantage of the Lada's chunky three-box style is that it gives excellent visibility. Even short drivers should be able to see all four corners with ease and so be able to judge the length and width of the car accurately. There are virtually no blind spots, even though the windscreen pillar is fairly thick and there are quarterlights.

The wipers clear a good area of the



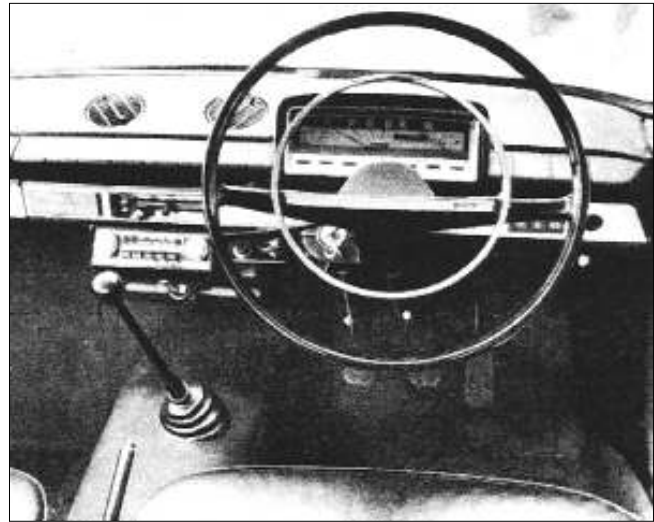
Above: the wash and wiper switches are mounted on the fascia but they are fairly close to one another. Right: we found the fascia treatment unattractive and the instruments difficult to read

Left: a fair sized but not lockable glove box

Left: the upper vents for the heating system can be swivelled to direct the air towards the occupants's faces

Below: a better pedal sitting than on most Fiats but some drivers found the gearlever a little forward.

Right: a very accessible



windscreen but lifted off the screen at speeds above about 75 mph. As we mentioned above there is in intermittent wiper facility, a feature that is probably unique in this class of car. Other touches show awareness from the manufacturers of the importance of good visibility - the door mounted exterior mirror and dipping interior mirror.

INSTRUMENTS

★ ★ This is the only area where the car looks cheap and old fashioned. Three instruments are provided (speedometer, fuel gauge and water temperature gauge) but they are poorly designed. The speedo is vaguely calibrated (figures are given only every 20 mph) so it's unnecessarily difficult to read your speed. Although they're mounted high up and directly in front of the driver, the instruments are prone to giving stray, distracting reflections from their glasses. Some compensation for the poor instrumentation is provided by the number of warning lights: for low oil pressure, low fuel, low battery voltage, indicators, handbrake, side lights and main beam.

HEATING

★ ★ The controls for the heater are mounted in the centre of the fascia and consist of two slides (one for air volume and one for temperature) and a switch for the two-speed booster fan. Air can be diverted upwards for

demisting simply by closing off the outlets to the footwells, something that can't be done when strapped in. When the car is fully warmed up the heat output from the heater is good and reasonably controllable. At high road speeds the throughput is sufficient but when travelling slowly flow has to be boosted by the fan. Opening the quarter-lights helps a lot, though this increases noise.

VENTILATION

★ ★ ★ Although there isn't an independent ventilation system it is possible to get warm air to your feet and cool air to your face. The heater outlets towards the screen can be swivelled to direct air towards your face and at low temperature settings of the heater the air supplied upwards is much colder than that supplied downwards.

NOISE

★ ★ Except when driven hard, the Lada is remarkably quiet, with road and transmission noise well subdued. But as we've already remarked, the engine is noisy when taken to high rpm. Wind noise is low even at the car's maximum speed.

FINISH

★ ★ Externally, the finish is good, with well fitting panels and doors. Externally, the finish is

good, with well fitting panels and doors. Inside, though, it's rather disappointing and there's quite a lot of evidence of shoddy workmanship. On our test car there was a blob of sealer on a door and some glue marks around the fascia. The glove box and ashtray were poor fits. Overall it looks very utilitarian and plasticky inside.

EQUIPMENT

★ ★ For a £1000 car the list of standard equipment is good but not lavish. The specification includes intermittent wipers, reclining seats, radial-ply tyres, an alternator, a cigar lighter, a dipping interior mirror, an exterior mirror, grab handles for each of three passengers, coat hooks in the rear, and a very comprehensive tool kit. One curious omission, though, is a heated rear window; in our climate it's almost essential

IN SERVICE

Lada recommend servicing every 10,000 km (6000 miles). There's an extremely comprehensive handbook supplied with the car, which should be sufficient to help any DIY enthusiast service the car himself. There is also a very full tool kit. The engine is extremely accessible.

For the owner who doesn't wish to carry out his own servicing there are about 180 Lada dealers in the UK