



ROAD TEST

LADA 1500

Most expensive of the East European imports. Roomy interior and lavish equipment add up to a lot of car for the money. Performance and economy mediocre; handling safe but uninspiring. Finish still not up to European standards though

WHEN THE Eastern Bloc countries became more consumer orientated they decided to leapfrog the usual growth processes and went shopping in the West for up-to-date technologies. For their motor industry they found a ready and willing supplier in Fiat, who provided them not just with modern designs based on current or barely obsolete models, but with factories, plant, and all the management tools - quality control, production techniques and so on - that a brand-new motor industry would require.

We thus have such cars as the Zastava (a hatchback 128) from Yugoslavia, various Polski Fiat models (they make versions of the 125, 126, 127 and 132) and the Shigulis from Russia. Of these only the Polski Fiat 125P and the

Shigulis, renamed Ladas for the European market, are imported into the UK, and it is the most expensive of the latter, the 1500, that is the subject of this test.

Until the advent of these cars, East European models were generally characterised by three features - poor engineering, poor quality and a very low price. The Polski Fiats and the Ladas have at least partly changed this situation, for they now measure up much better to other European cars - although quality still has some way to go - while retaining the benefits of a low price.

At first sight the Lada 1500, now costing £1798 after a recent price increase, looks, if anything, rather expensive compared to the 1200 (£1360, or £1555 in ES - more luxurious - form) and the Polski Fiat 125P (£1449). But, in

fact, the 1500 is still cheap enough to be considered as astonishingly good value for money: the British equivalents, considering the levels of equipment and overall size, are all more expensive. The Avenger GLS costs £2321, the Marina 1.3 SDL £1971, for example.

This Russian model represents a lot of car, both in engine size and interior space, for the money. In addition it is very well equipped with such items as red warning lights in the trailing edges of the doors, inertia reel belts, a laminated screen, a light under the bonnet and a very comprehensive toolkit. It is also fairly quiet at low speed. However, performance and economy are rather ordinary, while the heavy, stiff steering, the pedal layout and the finish (particularly around the glove compartment) are not up to European standards.

Technically the 1500 is, like the 1200, based in the main on Fiat 124 mechanicals but with modifications to suit the Russian market and climate and to modernise it slightly. The body shell is a three box structure but with a floor pan and exhaust system made from a heavier gauge steel, with other chassis reinforcements including the shock absorber mountings and a comprehensive rust protection.

The suspension, too, is straightforward - though the ground clearance is high - being independent at the front via coil springs and wishbones with an anti-roll bar and at the rear there are coil springs and a live axle

well located by four radius arms and a Panhard rod. The steering is by a worm and roller system, the brakes are 10 in discs at the front and 9.8 in drums at the back with a vacuum servo, dual circuits and a load-sensitive pressure-relief valve at the rear.

The 1500 model is easily distinguishable from its cheaper stablemate by the twin headlamps and different grille at the front, modified tail-lights at the back, and other exterior trim. It is also much plusher inside.

The engine is not the same as any of the units normally fitted to the Fiat 124. In either the 1200 or 1500 versions it has an overhead camshaft driven by a chain rather than a belt and acting on the valves via fingers. Thus it differs from both the push rod and the ohc engines made by Fiat. Both units share a common bore 76 mm - but the 1500 has a long stroke, 80 mm compared to 66 mm thus giving the larger engine ~ capacity of 1452 cc. In this form it develops 7~ bhp DIN at 560C rpm and 77.5 lb ft torque at 350 rpm, 13 bhp and 11 lb ft more respectively, than the 1200. In spite of the claimed extra horsepower the performance 0-1 the 1500 is virtually the same as the 1200 we tested in 1974. Top speed is up by just over 2 mph from 89.7 mph to 91.8 mph (under similar wind conditions the fastest quarter mile of the two around MIRA's banked circuit was covered at identical speeds 94.7 mph). Accelerating through the gears the 1200 was actually quicker to 60mph, taking 14.7s



warm-up was rapid but the engine tended to stutter occasionally until it reached its working temperature. It was never (even when warm) really clear of hesitations which occurred usually without warning, although there was one predictable flat spot when accelerating at about 50 mph in top.

The engine is quite smooth right up to the 6000 rpm red line and feels very willing. But it is not quiet when extended, being raucous over 4000 rpm with a Fiat-like hammering rasp. In general, though, it is less temperamental than the 1200 engine, and subjectively somewhat quieter. Because of the low gearing and a speedometer that becomes wildly optimistic at higher speeds the 1500 gives the impression of being brisker than the figures indicate.

Like the performance the fuel consumption is similar to that of the 1200 - the 1500 achieved 25.5 mpg overall, 29.8 touring, the 1200 26.1 mpg and 31.8 mpg respectively. These figures are about average for a car of this size and capacity, but note that the admittedly smaller Honda 1500 (the only car in the rivals, section with a similar capacity) gave 29.5 and 37.2 mpg respectively.

One of the better features of the car is the gearchange, which is pleasant, light and precise, even if the synchromesh can be beaten on rushed changes and reverse graunches occasionally. The ratios, however, have two faults: they are all too low — the gearing is such that first is only good for 26 mph, second for 43 mph and

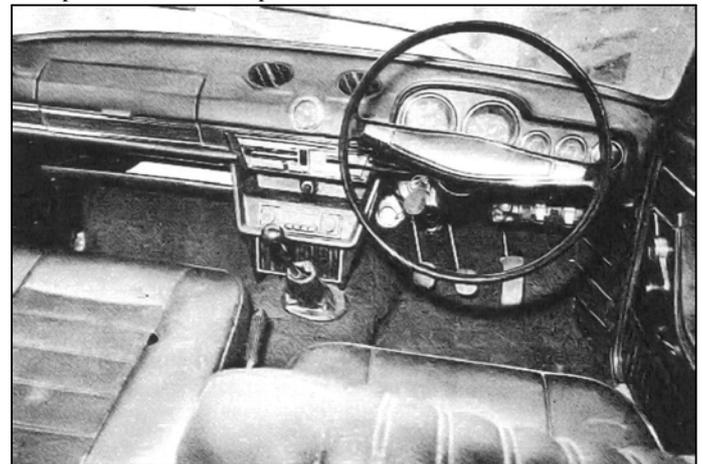
though the car will generally be fitted with Russian-made radials upon which we cannot comment.

Discs at the front, drums at the rear, dual circuits, a pressure limit valve and a vacuum servo add up to a good braking specification but the system is nevertheless a little disappointing. Not because (unlike some other Russian cars we have tried) the brakes behaved badly, just that they felt wrong, their action being both unprogressive and over-served, making smooth stops difficult.

For £1800 you get a lot of car in that it is a full five-seater for people of average height (if perhaps with rather limited width across the back seats) given a little judicious sharing of legroom between the driver and rear seat passengers. Only tall drivers of 6 ft or more will find leg and headroom restricted. The low waistline and sensible body shape give a light and airy feeling to the interior which enhances the impression of spaciousness.

The boot, a deep one lined with a rather cheap looking plastic, took 10.7 cu ft of our Revelation suitcases. The only intrusions are the covered spare wheel and the toolkit, strapped to the high rear panel. Inside there is considerable oddment space, with a non-locking glove compartment on the passenger's side, a tray beneath it, a small tray on the centre console (into which the lighter intrudes) and soft pockets in each of the door.

Comfort levels are generally



third for 66 mph — while there is a gap between third and top which becomes obtrusive when driving briskly. In addition, the gearbox of our car was quite noisy, and a distinct transmission rumble on the overrun was sometimes noticeable.

The worst feature of the handling is the steering which is not very light about the straight-ahead position and stiffens up quite considerably on lock. So it is tiresome to drive briskly on twisty roads and in town. In general, the car understeers strongly but progressively on smooth roads. Mid-corner bumps, however, tend to deflect either the front or the rear rather unpredictably if not really too dramatically unless you are approaching the limit of adhesion. With the Kleber V12 radials fitted this limit was quite high in the dry

quite good, the only disappointment being the ride on good or average surfaces. The car "checks" and jerks on undulations and there is a lot of slow-speed, low amplitude harshness. But it will also smooth out bumps that severely jolt passengers in more softly sprung cars, and without the suspension crashing through.

The seats elicited neither praise nor criticism, the cloth-insert PVC upholstery covering a reasonably soft cushion that lacks a little in side support. For those in the front there is plenty of fore-and-aft adjustment and the backrest is reclining, while for the driver in particular the position is much better than on some Fiats.

One of the car's biggest faults is its pedal layout. All the pedals are too high, creating a conflict

compared to the 1500's 15.4s, and it is really only in top that the 1500 shows any advantage: even so its 30-50 mph acceleration time is only 0.7s faster, though a respectable 10.6s. But the advantage does open out at higher speeds, the 1500's 60-80 mph time being 3.5s quicker than the 1200's.

Perhaps our 1200 was a particularly good example or our 1500 was too new and tight (it had barely covered 3500 miles at the time of testing) to develop its full power — it certainly couldn't match the manufacturer's claim of "a top speed of nearly 100 mph."? The weight difference (less than 1 cwt) does not explain the disparity either.

Starting the engine with the aid of a manual choke was very easy,

The seats are comfortable and have cloth inserts. The standard of finish is better than that of most East European cars and we found the driving position more comfortable than that of the Fiat on which the Lada is based

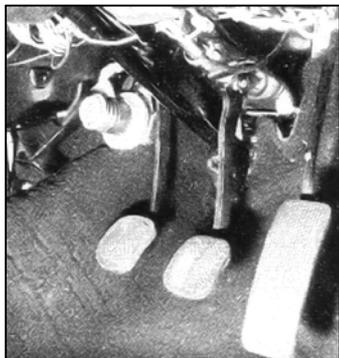


between their arcs of movement and those of the feet, especially for the accelerator which additionally had a sticky and unprogressive linkage. The unprogressive brakes and sharp clutch further impede smooth driving. And the foot-operated wind-screen washer is very awkwardly placed, on top of the transmission tunnel beneath the fascia.

We condemned the instrumentation of the 1200 for being cheap and old-fashioned. No such complaints can be made about the 1500, for the instrumentation, apart from being more comprehensive, is also more attractively styled. The main instruments, consisting of a large speedometer and tachometer in front of the driver and smaller oil pressure, water temperature and fuel gauges off to the right of the panel, are round and easy to read. But the speedometer is poorly calibrated, being marked at 20 mph intervals only, and like the tachometer, is inaccurate. There are some reflections from the glasses and the smaller instruments, are labelled in Russian I Only the fuel gauge is hidden by the right hand and/or the steering wheel rim.

The Lada has no fresh air vents, just a heating system with a crude distribution control — a pair of hinged flaps with which the foot-well vents can be opened or closed. The recent heatwave prevented us from assessing the heater. It was possible to obtain some cool air by rotating the screen vents, though these cannot cope with a really hot day. Even with the noisy fan on full they are very directional, giving a narrow jet rather than a diffused flow. However, if you can put up with the noise, the opening quarter lights can be swivelled right round to give an enormously powerful blast which was much appreciated in the exceptionally hot weather during our test.

The 1200 was reasonably quiet, with road and transmission noise well subdued: surprisingly the 1500 is not as good in this respect. The engine is thrashy at high revs, there is the transmission rumble already mentioned, plus quite a lot of bump-thump and tyre roar.

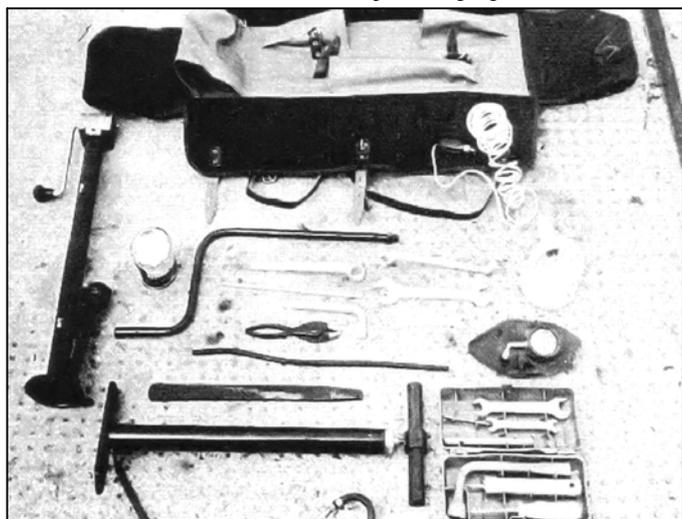


The high pedals are awkward to use and the accelerator had a sticky action

At high speeds the engine noise becomes noticeable but the major culprit is wind noise, which begins at 65 mph and becomes progressively worse as speed rises.

Aesthetically the interior of the 1500 is much more attractive and plush than the 1200's, as befits its higher price and more up-market image. There are carpets throughout, cloth insert upholstery, door trims that don't leave any bare metal, and a centre console. The finish, though better than most of the other Comecon cars, is not yet up to European standards — the fit around the glove compartment is poor, the instrument panel could be waggled around as could the supplementary switch panel (which is hung rather untidily underneath). There were other poorly fitting items, too, as well as signs of rust on the seam at the base of the windscreen pillar.

What will make the Lada 1500 most attractive to many people, though, is its lavish equipment. There are such things as a cigar lighter, a clock, an outside mirror, inertia reel belts (the excellent Toric buckleless type that we like so much), a laminated windscreen, a tachometer, intermittent windscreen wipers, halogen headlamps, a light under the bonnet, red warning lights in the trailing edges of the front door, grab handles, armrests and ashtrays on each door, a central armrest in the back, door pockets, opening quarter lights, and a 21-piece toolkit that includes a portable lamp, a pump and a tyre pressure gauge.



The Fiat-style standard tool kit (bottom right of picture) is supplemented by all these tools

MOTOR ROAD TEST No. 32/76

Lada 1500

PERFORMANCE

CONDITIONS

Weather	Hot, sunny
Temperature	wind 0-10 mph
Barometer	76-90°F
Surface	29.8°F
	Dry tarmac/adam

MAXIMUM SPEEDS

	mph	kph
Banked circuit	91.8	147.7
Best 1/4 mile	94.7	152.4
Terminal speeds		
at 1/4 mile	67	108
at kilometer	82	132
at mile	88	142
Speed in gears (at 6000rpm)		
1st	26	42
2nd	43	69
3rd	66	106

ACCELERATION FROM REST

mph	sec	kph	sec
0-30	4.7	0-40	3.5
0-40	7.1	0-60	6.1
0-50	10.0	0-80	9.9
0-60	15.4	0-100	16.5
0-70	22.9	0-120	27.2
0-80	84.0		

Stand'g 1/4	20.2	Stand'g km	38.1
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ACCELERATION IN TOP

mph	sec	kph	sec
20-40	10.8	40-60	6.4
30-50	10.6	60-80	6.8
40-60	11.8	80-100	7.4
50-70	13.7	100-120	10.9
60-80	19.9		

FUEL CONSUMPTION

Touring*	29.8 mpg
	9.5 litres/100km
Overall	25.5 mpg
	11.1 litres/100km
Fuel grade	93 octane
	3 star rating

GENERAL SPECIFICATIONS

ENGINE

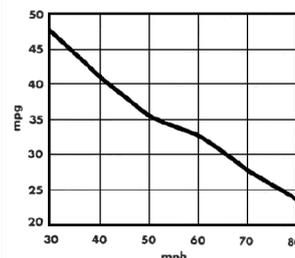
Cylinders	4 in line
Capacity	1452 cc / 88.5 cu in)
Bore/Stroke	76/80mm
	(2.99/3.15in)
Cooling	Water
Block	Cast iron
Head	Light Alloy
Valves	Sohc
Valvetiming	
inlet opens	12° btdc
inlet closes	40° atdc
ex opens	42° btdc
ex closes	10° atdc
Compression	8.8 : 1
Carburettor	Twin-choked down-draught
Bearings	5 main
Fuel pump	Mechanical
Max power	75 bhp (DIN) at 5600 rpm
Max torque	77.5 lb ft (DIN) at 3500 rpm

TRANSMISSION

Type	Four-speed manual
Clutch	Sdp, Diaphragm spring
Internal ratios and mph/1000 rpm	
Top	1.00 : 1/16.4
3rd	1.49 : 1/11.0
2nd	2.30 : 1/7.1
1st	3.75 : 1/4.4
Rev	3.87
Final drive	4.10 : 1

BODY/CHASSIS

Construction	Unitary, all-steel
Protection	Electrophoretic primer dip, bitumastic underbody coating, Tectyl wax-based spray, plastic coated springs



Tank capacity	8.6 gallons
	39 litres
Max range	256 miles
	412 km
Test distance	1017 miles
	1639 km

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

SPEEDOMETER (mph)

Speedo	30	40	50	60	70	80
True	28	37.5	47.5	57	65	73

Distance recorder : 2.5 per cent fast.

WEIGHT

	cwt	kg
Unladen weight*	19.5	990.6
Weight as tested	23.2	1178.6

* with fuel for approximately 50 miles.

Performance tests carried out by Motor's staff at the Motor Industry Research Association proving ground, Lindley

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SUSPENSION

Front	Independent by wish-bones, coil springs, anti roll bar
Rear	Live axle, coil springs location by four trailing arms and Panhard rod

STEERING

Type	Worm and roller
Assistance	No
Toe in	5.5mm +/- 1mm
Camber	0° 5' +/- 35'
Castor	3° 30' +/- 1° 30'
Kingpin	6° 4'

BRAKES

Type	Disc front, drum rear
Servo	Yes
Circuit	Split front / rear
Rear valve	Yes
Adjustment	Self-adjusting

WHEELS

Type	Pressed steel
	5 1/2 J x 13
Tyres	Kleber V12
	165 SR 13
Pressure	24/28 psi F/R

ELECTRICAL

Battery	12 V. 55 ah
Polarity	Negative
Generator	Alternator
Fuses	10
Headlights	4 x 4 quartz halogen
	50 / 55 W

Make : Lada

Model : 1500

Makers : V/O Avtoexport, Moscow, USSR

Concessionaires : Satra Motors Ltd, Satra House, 359-361 Euston Road, London NW1 3AW

Price : £12536 plus £138 car tax plus £134 VAT equals £1798