

# Lada gaga

No, you aren't going mad - the Lada Niva really is back on UK roads. Time to dig out your well-thumbed copy of *Das Kapital*

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EREMY CLARKSON, WHO can do everything, once said that a real man never reads an instruction book.

Not sure I agree with this.

I bet the Apollo astronauts read a few books of instructions for the Lunar Module, and is he going to call them all a bunch of pansies?

When it comes to cars, though, he may have a point. Even really complicated modern cars with built-in satnav and reconfigurable suspension are pretty logical, and in any case, the handbooks are so massive you'd need to take them on holiday with you.

However, and at the risk of being branded a right poof, here is an extract from the owner's manual for the car I've just been driving.

"Pull up the door handle to open the door from the outside. The courtesy light comes on automatically when the door is opened." How about that? I'd have struggled to work that one out for myself. It goes on:

"The doors have locks, which can be engaged from outside using button 1, or from inside using button 4. From inside, the door can be opened by pulling the handle, irrespective of the lock button position."

This is amazing. And there's more:

"The doors have convenient arm rests. Rotate window winder to slide window down."

To anyone who still thinks communism was a good idea, I present to you the English translation of the slim but incredibly thorough volume that is the handbook for a Lada. Thing is, this is not something I picked up at an autojumble. I found it in the glovebox of a brand new car (although one that has been in production since 1977) and one that is – sort of – on sale in Britain.



"It's difficult to shake off the urge to wear a massive coat and speak like a Bond villain"

It's the Niva, the Russian word for crop field.

Mark Key, posing as Niva Imports in a funny Russian hat, has charged himself with importing this fine icon of Soviet automotive excellence for the first time since the early Nineties. It's yours for a bit under £10,000 in red, white or blue, and comes with a two-year warranty that will be honoured providing you have the car serviced at a VAT-registered garage. Try getting that past your Merc dealer.

Currently, the Niva is only available in left-hand drive and as a four-seater or a van. The tooling for the RHD version still exists at the factory, apparently, but they will only get it

out if you place an order for 500 or more. Mark has so far sold six.

A bit of a recap. The Niva, launched in 1977, was the first Lada not to be a mere knocked-off Italian saloon. While much of the underbonnet stuff remained Fiatski, the drive system and bodyshell were Lada's own glorious work. It gained a reputation for durability, achieved some success in off-road racing, and found favour with land-owning toffs and other people with no sense of irony.

Today's Niva has been updated in line with the times and now features fuel injection for the 1.7-litre petrol-only engine, modern instruments and "more aerodynamic front indicators". And that, I think, is it, although there is a nebulous claim that the seat upholstery has been improved.

In every other respect, the Niva is terrifyingly old-fashioned. There are two keys: one small one, and one really small one. The fluted exterior doorhandles are a bit like the ones from a Marina. Inside, there is a random scattering of rocker switches and rotary knobs, feeble little doorhandles, and fairly disgusting plastic trim. The gearstick is an inordinately long way away, which leads to some flappy wrist action during the familiarisation process.

Most evocative, though, is the unmistakable interior smell of the Eastern Bloc. No other political persuasion endowed its cars with quite such a distinctive whiff. To anyone who grew up in the Seventies and Eighties, it evokes those earnest types who advertised their allegiance to the Communist Workers' Party by driving around in a Lada, a Moskvich or an air-cooled Skoda. These people always looked like idiots, unless they had a Niva, because the Niva was somehow acceptable. ☺



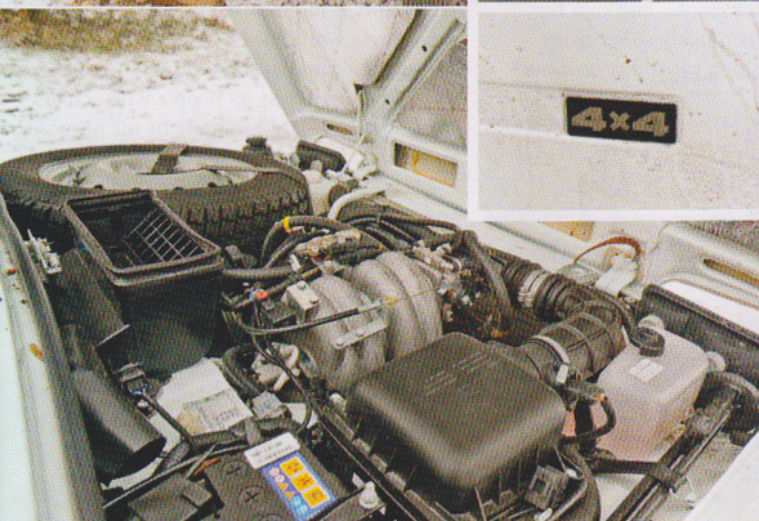
Niva means 'field', so it feels really at home here



**Lada Niva**

**Room for you and  
three of your  
radical friends**

**Plenty of room  
for blini and  
caviar in here**



**"First, fashion  
a key out of an  
old Coke can"**

