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A look (in amazement, astonishment and wonder) at Lada, then and now... Part Two: The capable four wheel drive Niva

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Niva say never... as little known best seller reaches 40 – by Dave Mass

This story begins on April 5th 1977, when LHD Russian market sales of what was known there as the Niva 1600 began. Right hand drive examples were badged "Lada Niva", with a list price just over £1000 at their 1970 British International Motor Show launch, where they were heavily overshadowed by the introduction of BL's Austin mini motor. Coming from a marque that had not previously enjoyed an entirely appreciative press, the Niva's arrival caused barely a ripple. Its production was reportedly also targeted at Japan; its reception there can only be guessed at.

For some years the Niva was the only vehicle coming to Britain from Russia's Autovaz vehicle manufacturing empire that wasn't a thinly disguised - if rather more rugged - relative of a 1960's Fiat design. It was developed in-house, born of a lengthy project at the Volzhskiy car plant, and largely the result of much lateral thinking by lead engineer Pyotr



Prusov, assisted by designer Valeryi Semushkin.

Created to cope with the terrain and remarkable range of temperatures and operating conditions found in what was then the USSR, no-one could accuse the Niva of being stylish, fast, economical - or refined. Functional is an appropriate adjective, though its design shouldn't be underestimated, with an underlying structure more advanced for its time than its humble origins far from the cutting edge of 1970s vehicle design might suggest.

Though perhaps not immediately obvious, the Niva's basic concept came to be widely copied and endlessly developed over the next 30 years, lending credence to the Autovaz claim that it was a founding father of today's million selling SUVs. From the start it was much more car-like to look at - and drive - than contemporary 1970s four-wheel-drive vehicles - and it incorporated some features which took years to filter into the smaller all-wheel-drive arena elsewhere.

It was a compact, manoeuvrable four-seater liftback, with an integral monocoque bodyshell, independent front suspension, permanent four-wheel-drive, and front disc brakes. Power came from a 1570cc, 78 bhp petrol engine, driving through a 5 speed gearbox and high/low range transfer gearset - with centre differential lock. Its home market terrain demanded short overhangs, excellent ground clearance and long travel suspension, a combination which provided seriously competent, yet nimble - and passably comfortable - off-road potential.

Developed primarily for use where surfaced roads are rare and conditions harsh, the Niva's export potential quickly became clear, and its compact size, car-like nature and effective off-road ability saw it form a consistent nucleus of 1980s USSR auto exports. Success consolidated its position, and where tightening regulations or trade barriers didn't preclude sales, exports dominated - reaching 70% of production in some years. By 2019 well over 500,000 examples had been sold, in almost 100 countries worldwide.

Though still only a junior challenger on longevity to familiar vehicles like the Land Rover



Defender line and its predecessors, the 43 year old design has proven proficient and tough, earning a genuine workhorse reputation. Examples have notched up years of service around the North Pole, and in Antarctica's extreme conditions at Bellingshausen, the continent's Russian outpost. Its been successful at mountaineering too: Despite the power-sapping effects imposed by high altitudes, in 1988 a Niva reached Everest base camp at 5,200 metres (17,080 ft) above sea level, and a later example topped 5726 metres (18,786ft) on the Tibetan Plateau.



'Cossack' version of the Niva.

Though UK Niva sales ceased in 1997, almost 3 million examples have now been built, and at least 30 recognisably different versions developed, ranging from pick-ups to armoured cars, and swamp buggies to MPVs. Evolving customer demands have ensured current versions are much improved compared to those modest, underdeveloped relatives last sold in Britain 23 years ago. A 5-door version with a half-metre wheelbase extension proved popular, and responding to growing customer expectations, steering, handling and general



driveability have received attention. Refinements like air conditioning, metallic paint, body colour bumpers, alloy wheels and interior comfort upgrades have also appeared.

Latest descendants of the early Niva - still instantly recognisable - remain in production albeit badged "Lada 4x4" since 2002, following a 50/50 joint venture partnership with General Motors to build a new, modern-looking compact 5-door SUV, which was named the Chevrolet Niva. Avtovaz has recently taken full control of this venture, and rebadged the car as a Lada. Though today sold only in selected markets, like the original it offers good ground clearance, four-wheel drive, low range gearset, and centre differential lock. However top-specification equipment includes a 7inch touch screen, air conditioning, heated windscreen and front seats, ABS braking, parking sensors and a rear-view camera.

Avtovaz was feeling its way on the automotive manufacturing learning curve, alone, and against economic and political odds, when the last Lada was sold in Britain. People say "nostalgia ain't what it used to be..." but the overall quality of Lada vehicles has improved dramatically - and much has changed in Russia, the world and the motor industry since then, begging questions about whether the marque - and the Niva - might yet return to Britain.

It seems unlikely. Lada's budget-value products have been honed to appeal strongly in their established markets, and have benefited since January 2017 from Avtovaz's membership of Groupe Renault. But... the value-for-money Romanian brand Dacia has been associated with Renault since the 1960s, and became a full Group member back in 1999. Since then, the Dacia range has been reinvigorated and relaunched, and includes modern SUVs much like the Niva - distributed through a widespread international network, which has sold around 6½ million Dacia vehicles in the last 15 years.

Knowing this, and against a multi-problematic industry background, right now only seriously optimistic analysts might find justification for the investment needed to establish and support a second, overlapping and competing, budget-level model line across similar international markets. It seems illogical today, but the future is unpredictable, and the



industry ever-changing, and ever-adapting...bringing to mind another old proverb: Never say never...

[Note: References as per our 'Part One' of the Lada Story.](#)

Kim adds: "When the Nivas were current models sold in Britain, I test-drove several examples both on and off road. Yes, they were basic in concept but proved to be extremely capable, rugged and reliable in extremely challenging conditions, in fact remarkably so. When I was part of the road test team for 'Practical Motorist' magazine, in one group test all the 4x4 test cars were driven on a military off-road test circuit intended for much larger army vehicles, and following long spells of heavy rain. To its great credit the Niva, with its most effective four wheel drive set-up, kept going up and down slippery slopes, and through very deep mud and water that defeated other vehicles..."

[The man behind the Lada Niva: Petr Mikhailovich Prusov - by Dave Moss](#)

Despite leaving an innovative mark on automotive history, Petr Mikhailovich Prusov's profile is invisible outside Russia, where he's credited with designing the world's first monocoque-bodied SUV - known there as the VAZ 2121, and once sold in Britain as the Lada Niva. He was born in 1942 in the village of Zubki in Belarus, and graduated in 1970 from the Zaporozhye machine-building Institute. A design engineering position beckoned soon afterwards at the Volzhsky automobile factory, part of the vast Togliatti vehicle manufacturing complex where his career unfolded over the next 46 years.

In 1972 Prusov was appointed lead designer on the VAZ-2121/Niva project, which was destined to set company records for export sales, production volumes - and production run longevity. It was his only major whole-car design, though he was a leading light in several concept vehicles and contributed much to the development of various later Avtovaz production cars. Of these, only the Samara 2 made it (briefly) into western Europe, but he was involved in the VAZ 1111 Oka family, the VAZ 2110 and, as he climbed the career ladder to become Avtovaz chief engineer in 1998, the latter-day VAZ 2123 Kalina line.



Retirement in 2007 appears to have brought little time for rest or relaxation: until 2011 he headed up a project group working towards Lada car production in the Chechen Republic - while simultaneously holding the position of lead engineer in the company's homologation and structural design department until 2014. He continued working at the Togliatti plant until just three weeks before his death, at the age of 75, on March 19th 2017. In his final years Petr Prusov - perhaps rather ironically - was an adviser to the Avtovaz Vice-President for personnel and social policy.

His death came only days before the 40th anniversary of the Niva's launch, on April 5th 1977. In those 40 years over 2½ million examples had been built, and over half a million exported - and production continues today...

Petr Mikhailovich Prusov was buried at the Togliatti city cemetery. Unlike some of his western contemporaries, his achievement in masterminding the advanced design of Russia's longest production run car - and most exported vehicle to date - appears to have gone unmarked - beyond a short valedictory speech at his funeral by the then President of JSC Avtovaz, Nicolas Maure... and payment of his burial ceremony costs by the plant where he spent his entire career.