A look (in amazement, astonishment and wonder) at Lada, then and now… Part One: The story so far

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Riva 1.5E four door saloon.

Records set in a 21st century Russian Revolution – by Dave Moss.

On September 24th 2020, the 30 millionth Lada rolled off a production line at one of the worlds biggest car factories – the Autovaz plant in Togliatti, on the Volga riverside almost 600 miles south east of Moscow. The plant also celebrated 50 years of production in 2020, adding up to a remarkable manufacturing performance – an average 1.6 million vehicles

built every year – for 3 decades.

Though now effectively forgotten here, the marque spent over 20 years in British showrooms, starting with the Lada 1200, which proved to have extremely variable build quality and finish when it went on sale in April 1974, listed at £2,749. It was a boxy 4-door saloon, re-engineered somewhat by Autovaz for far tougher conditions than envisaged when originally designed – for production as the Fiat 124. The Soviets developed a close post-war working relationship with Fiat, which ultimately led to the founding of Autovaz as a car maker through a 1966 collaborative agreement.



Early Lada saloons on the production line.

The larger Fiat 125-based Lada Riva 1500 followed in October 1977, quickly proving to be more in very similar vein… though the entirely home-grown 3-door Niva 4×4 which arrived in 1980 was different, earning respect for it's nimble, competent and determined off road performance, if not style or refinement. (Note: Wheels-Alive will be covering the Niva in-depth in a separate feature which is scheduled to appear 24 hours after this one!).



Riva five door estate.



Riva 1600ES four door saloon being road-tested (for ‘Practical Motorist’ magazine by a young Kim Henson in mid-1979. Photograph copyright Kim Henson).

Variable build and finish, dated looks, economy-grade component and materials quality and poor driving dynamics always hampered Lada’s UK acceptance, though behind-the-scenes work at the concessionaires’ Bridlington import centre was bringing improvements by the time the rather more modern-looking Samara hatchback appeared in 1987, listed from £5,295.



Samara 1.5GL three door hatchback.



Samara 1.5GL four door saloon.



Samara ‘Flyte’ concept car.



Samara ‘Flyte’ 1.5GL three door hatchback.



Three door Samara 1.1 Envi.

Lada's UK peak came in 1988, a record year for new car sales, when SMMT figures reveal it outsold Honda, shifting 30,728 cars to take 1.39% of the market. It didn't last. Sales slipped to 28,061 in 1989, as customers drifted away to new – and better quality – competition from Proton. Daewoo's appearance with an innovative marketing strategy in 1995 further increased pressure at market entry level, and Lada UK sales collapsed to just 4,762 units in 1996.

The marque's fate here was ultimately sealed by increasing competition, rising purchaser aspirations, easier consumer finance options – and tightening European emissions standards, which apparently began outrunning the Soviets' ability – and possibly inclination – to meet them. There was some brief wrangling between then-concessionaire MVI and Autovaz over wholesale prices and payback before Lada left Britain and Europe during 1997/98, officially "unable to meet then-new EEC emission control requirements" – with Autovaz claiming difficulty sourcing parts from the US….

30 million cars built in 50 years surely demonstrates that Autovaz and Lada are alive, well, and still learning, even if today the marque has absented itself from Europe – and various other countries where its products were once sold. Today it's focused on home-grown, value-for-money products for Russian Federation and fifteen selected export markets – ranging from Belarus to Bolivia, and Egypt to Uzbekistan.

Probably its major weakness when it left Britain was poor product quality, and in recent years Lada has gained much through beneficial – and still developing – associations with experienced western motor industry partners. It took a giant step in 2002, establishing a highly successful joint manufacturing venture with General Motors. This has built over 700,000 examples of a neat-looking, Lada-developed but Chevrolet-badged compact 5-door SUV, which took the Niva name, with the original version then rechristened the "Lada 4×4." Autovaz recently bought out GM's share in this enterprise, and added the Niva – carrying its rightful Lada badge – to its current range, alongside Granta, Vesta, X- Ray, Largus, and 4×4 models.



Chevrolet-badged Niva compact five door SUV.

This slideshow requires JavaScript.

Though still less technically advanced than leading marques, progress in product quality and customer appeal has quickened since Lada became a Groupe Renault brand in 2017. It's an acquisition paying dividends for both parties, with the Russian federation now Groupe Renault's second-largest territory by sales volume. In the first half of 2020, this market was 23% down overall, within which group sales fell 19.5% – but its products still enjoyed a 30.2% share. Of this, clear market leader Lada accounted for over 22%, and Renault products the remainder – including 7,000 units of the new, locally built, Moscow-Motor-Show-launched, Arkana coupé-SUV.

Latest available figures underline Lada's home market resilience as customer demand returns. In September 2020, helped by that rebadged Niva, the marque saw a 6.1% year on

year sales uplift to 35,304 units, which included the territory's three best sellers, the Granta line with 12,488 sales, the Vesta with 11,520 – up 21.9% year on year, almost half of them estate derivatives – and 4,682 passenger and LCV versions of the Largus family – 8% above August sales.

Group Renault: 15 markets - June Ytd

		Volumes 2020* (units)	MS PC+LCV 2020 (%)
1	FRANCE	242 534	27.2
2	RUSSIA	192 158	30.2
3	GERMANY	80 421	6.1
4	CHINA**	70 732	0.8
5	ITALY	63 530	9.9
6	BRAZIL	59 941	7.9
7	SOUTH KOREA	55 242	6.1
8	TURKEY	49 131	19.3
9	SPAIN	48 275	12.0
10	BELGIUM+LUXEMBOURG	31 106	11.3
11	UNITED KINGDOM	27 057	3.5
12	INDIA	26 245	2.8
13	POLAND	21 687	10.6
14	ROMANIA	21 299	37.0
15	ARGENTINA	19 875	13.6

*2020 June Ytd (sales), excl Twizy

** Including Jinbei&Huasong.

Sales by brand

	June Ytd		
	2020	2019	% var.
RENAULT			
PC	623 895	1 008 613	-38.1%
LCV	136 404	216 436	-37.0%
PC+LCV	**760 299**	**1 225 049**	**-37.9%**
RENAULT SAMSUNG MOTORS			
PC	**53 142**	**33 463**	**58.8%**
DACIA			
PC	195 767	366 861	-46.6%
LCV	15 391	25 381	-39.4%
PC+LCV	**211 158**	**392 242**	**-46.2%**
LADA			
PC	147 844	193 325	-23.5%
LCV	4 870	5 757	-15.4%
PC+LCV	**152 714**	**199 082**	**-23.3%**
ALPINE			
PC	**700**	**2 847**	**-75.4%**
AVTOVAZ			
PC	**8 520**	**0**	
JINBEI&HUASONG			
PC	1 213	4 415	-72.5%
LCV	68 912	73 954	-6.8%
PC+LCV	**70 125**	**78 369**	**-10.5%**
RENAULT GROUP			
PC	1 031 081	1 609 524	-35.9%
LCV	225 577	321 528	-29.8%
PC+LCV	**1 256 658**	**1 931 052**	**-34.9%**



2020 New Lada Vesta.

Operating in markets yet to embrace fossil fuel phase-out, there's no EV in sight, but Lada's Renault group membership will surely facilitate rapid implementation of proven electric vehicle technology when needed – just like another group member, Dacia, which recently announced its first EV (the 'Spring') is going on sale in Europe.



Dacia Spring EV.

50 years and 30 million units in from a cold start amidst difficult industrial and economic conditions – and behind a firmly closed iron curtain for much of the time – is a noteworthy achievement, but Lada is not alone in adapting to meet ever-changing motor manufacturing challenges. Though the background situation has been different in each case, Skoda, Dacia, Seat and the Polish motor industry are just some other examples of remarkable turnarounds given time, investment, national determination – and the key benefit of expert external support.

Yet there's inescapable irony here. Togliatti production began in 1970 – often regarded as the point when Britain's historic mass market motor industry started drifting slowly towards oblivion. By 1973 Lada were successfully exporting obsolescent cars built to standards often derided by western commentators, cynics – and comedians alike.

VERDICT

Today, Autovaz and Lada are firmly established in volume car manufacturing, while British Leyland and Rover are long gone – and they certainly had time, investment, external support and determination on their side…

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