

Lada Niva

Featuring 1.7i Hussar



THE HUSSAR IS THE NO-NONSENSE workhorse of the 4x4 Niva range, which eschews the pretentious customised looks of its mechanically identical stablemate, the £2000-dearer Cossack. Not for this macho little mud-plugger such fripperies as a plastic nose-job, sculptured wheelarch trims or a saloon-like interior flaunting flash upholstery and a leather-rimmed steering wheel. No, the Hussar is bog-standard and proud of it.

This is Lada's third-generation Niva and incorporates several important improvements, the most significant of which are to the engine. Bigger bores increase the capacity from 1.6 to 1.7 litres and the twin-choke carburettor is replaced by a GM-designed single-point fuel injection system. Maximum power is up by only one bhp, but torque is increased by 10 lb ft; not a lot, granted, but the instant starting and improved throttle response are welcome features.

Considering that the permanent four-wheel drive absorbs a fair chunk of the engine's power, performance is brisk if you keep the revs up. If you don't, it soon flags on gradients (rather like a diesel), and it's wise not to try to overtake if you see a hill ahead. Fuel consumption is reasonable, with over 30mpg readily attainable if you're not too heavy-footed.

That's the good news. The bad news is that Lada's

latest efforts to reduce noise, vibration and harshness need redoubling. It wouldn't be so bad if there were just the driveline thrumminess to contend with, but throw in constant ear-splitting gear whine and engine boom (especially horrific around 4000rpm) and the result is a wearisome cacophony.

Engine apart, the Niva's mechanicals remain much as before. Yes, there's that firm clutch and the familiar five-speed gearbox with its clingy, notchy shift. We well remember, too, the firmly sprung suspension that gives a jostly ride and a lot of short, sharp choppiness on bumpy roads. We did find, however, that this time the steering was a little lighter, compared with the shoulder-wrenching helm of earlier models – even though the latest test car was on optional extra alloy wheels with wider, 195R15 tyres. It becomes weightier when you wind on a lot of lock, however, and free-play from straight-ahead feels vague and wandery as you go faster – especially in gusty conditions.

Braking calls for a determined push on the pedal, and pressing even harder results in only a mediocre best stop before the front wheels lock.

If we've painted a somewhat gloomy on-road picture so far, let's redress the balance by saying how spectacular the Niva is in its natural habitat – off road. It copes superbly with really tough conditions. In low

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PERFORMANCE

Acceleration time in seconds

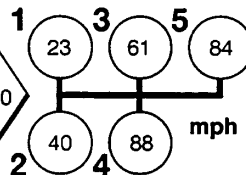
mph	30	40	50	60	70
THROUGH THE GEARS		2.4	6.0	10.8	18.6
IN 5TH GEAR		7.7	15.8	26.3	44.0
IN 4TH GEAR		5.2	10.8	17.7	27.0

20 mph	30	40	50	60	70
5TH/4TH SPEED RANGES		15.9/11.2		18.6/12.5	
			15.8/10.8		28.2/16.2

Maximum speeds

REVS PER MINUTE	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
		5000*		5300	4160

*for best acceleration



FUEL CONSUMPTION

Worst/best mpg	21 ¹ / ₂ /35
Typical mpg overall	28
Realistic tank range*	36 litres/222 miles

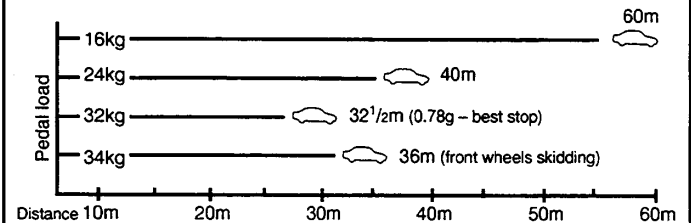
*based on fuel gauge, warning lamp and filling station experience

BRAKES

Pedal feel ●●○○○ Behaviour in an emergency ●●○○○ Handbrake ●●○○○

Dry road stopping distance from 50mph (no ABS)

(A good-to-average best stop is about 28m at 20-30kg pedal load)



Fade test: pedal load required for a moderate (34m/.75g) stop:

32kg at start of test, 58kg at end of test. (Ideal brakes show no change)

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATION

ENGINE

Type longitudinal four cylinder, with iron block and alloy head. Five main bearings

Size 82 x 80mm =1690cc

Power 79bhp at 5400rpm

Torque 98 lb ft at 3200rpm

Valves belt driven single overhead camshaft actuating two valves per cylinder via bucket tappets

Fuel/ignition single-point fuel injection. 42-litre tank, with low-level warning lamp. Three-way exhaust catalyser with lambda sensor. Contactless ignition with coil and distributor

TRANSMISSION

Type five-speed manual with high/low transfer 'box. Permanent four-wheel drive with centre differential lock

Mph per 1000rpm (in high)

20.2 in 5th, 16.6 in 4th

CHASSIS

Suspension front: independent by wishbones, coil springs and an anti-roll bar. Rear: live axle with coil springs, radius rods and a Panhard rod. Dampers: telescopic all round

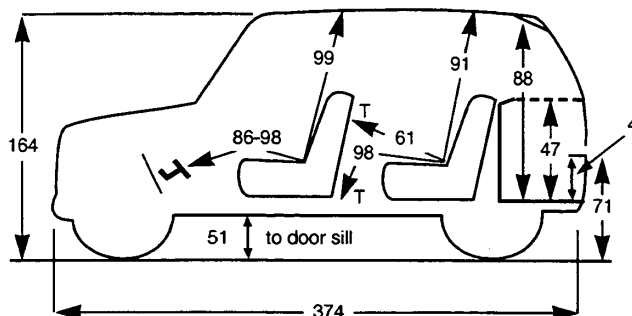
Steering unassisted worm and roller with 3.5 turns between full locks. Turning circles average 10.5m between kerbs, with 17.2m circle for one turn of the wheel

Wheels Hussar: 5Jx16 steel with 175R16Q M+S tyres. Cossack (and optional on Hussar/test car): 5Jx15 alloy with 195R15Q M+S tyres (Bridgestone RD702)

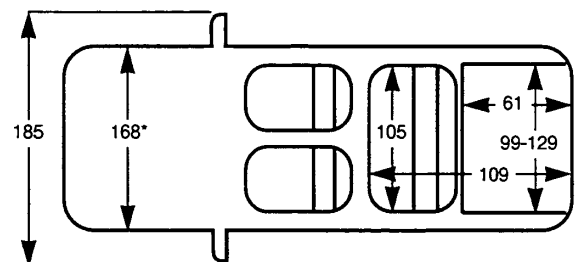
Brakes solid discs front, alloy drums rear with vacuum servo

MEASUREMENTS

Centimetres



T: typical back seat space behind medium-sized front occupants



*with mirrors folded

ratio with the diff lock operating, it will haul itself out of slime and up impossibly steep-looking hills as if being pulled by an unseen winch. Ordinary bumpy mud tracks are simply shrugged off, and the way the front wheels pick their way around rocks, boulders and roots made us grateful for the play in the steering.

A fiddly one-sided key lets you into the cabin that's nicely carpeted and upholstered, but let down by cheap looking and crudely finished plastic fittings and fixtures – and a curious smell. All-round vision is excellent, except that the nearside mirror is partially obscured by the screen pillar. There's a clear view of the four instruments, too, whose brilliant illumination at night can be dimmed by a rheostat. The trio of column stalks and the rocker switches in the centre panel aren't that easy to work, though. Neither is the low-mounted, hand-tuned radio/cassette player, when fitted (it's not standard in the Hussar, only in the Cossack).

The heater fairly belts out hot air from the centre facia vents and a big, foot-operated flap, but it's all or nothing; you have to set the insensitive temperature and air control slides very carefully to avoid the heat flooding out. To cool things off quickly, you can scoop in great quantities of air via the old-fashioned opening front quarter lights – a blast from the past, you might say.

Safety features are limited to front head restraints that are adjustable for height and a driving mirror that detaches on impact. The seatbelts' upper mountings are static and there's no airbag option. No alarm or immobiliser is provided, either, and central locking is fitted only to the Cossack.

Fortunately the front seats now slide forward when they're tilted, so getting to and from the back seat isn't as awkward as it was previously. It's still tricky to ease your way out, though, and it's a longish step down. Kneeroom is tight behind a driver of average height, but foot space and headroom are quite generous. Wide

plastic wheelarch covers that act as armrests reduce the back seat width, but there's plenty of room for two. The cushion could use some more padding, though, and the backrest is rather too upright. Big windows give a good view out, however, and there are two interior lights, a pair of grab handles and an oddments cubby hole.

A stiff interior trigger releases the new, full-length tailgate, which is held high (and slammed shut!) by powerful gas struts. Loading, at bumper height, is now a lot easier and there's no longer a spare wheel to swing out of the way – it's relocated under the bonnet. The load area, topped by a neatly moulded removable cover, is a sensible shape and well carpeted, but the floor is spoiled by two spiteful seatbelt mountings, just where you might want to lay something flat. Double-folding the one-piece back seat increases the load space considerably, but doing the deed is a fiddly, awkward business and also means that the front seats have to be moved forward several notches to accommodate its bulk.

The Niva's undoubted solidity may be able to withstand the worst that wild Russian terrain can throw at it, but its corrosion resistance is less convincing. Although the paintwork is impressively smooth and glossy, our low-mileage test car was already showing early signs of rust in several seams and joints.

VERDICT

Don't buy a Hussar thinking that it's going to give you the quietness, refinement and build quality of a lot of the other off-roaders that are currently on offer. It won't, because it costs about half as much as most of them and a good deal less than its closer rivals. You get what you pay for. In this case what you get is a single-minded vehicle that is, frankly, too crude for comfort on the road, but in its natural environment proves to be a sturdy, gutsy little 4x4 with a go-anywhere talent that's little short of amazing.

