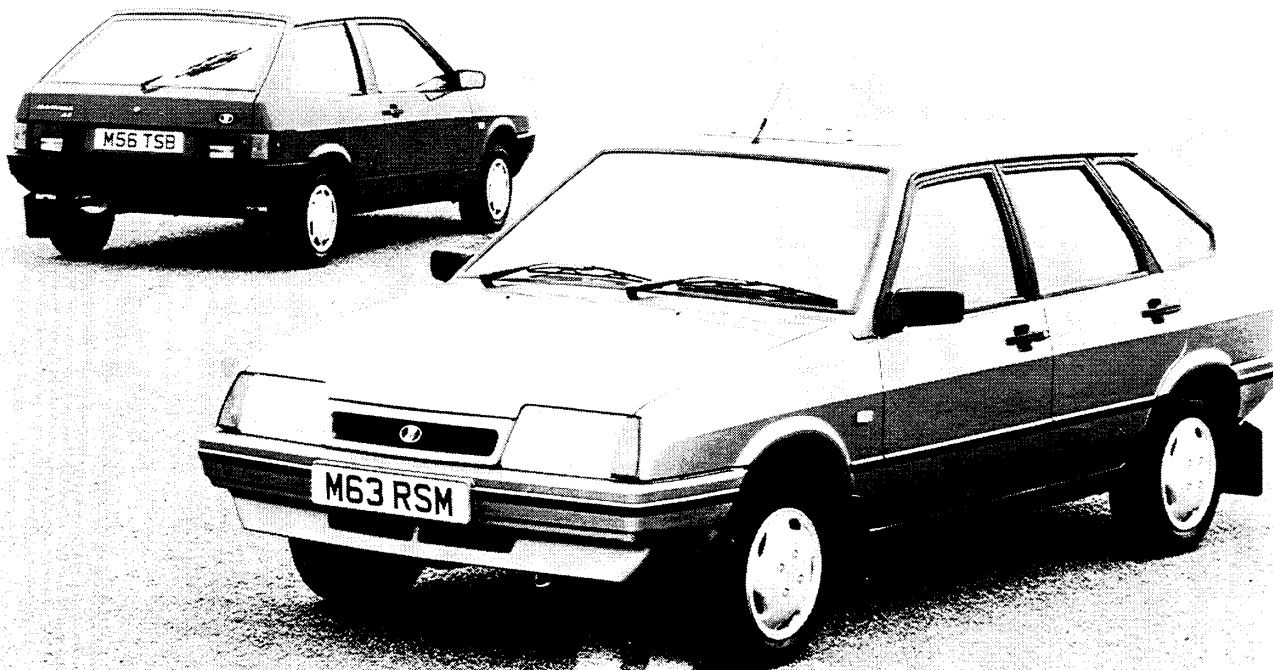




Lada Samara



If you're thinking of buying a used Samara, we can help. We've delved into our breakdown, warranty and vehicle inspection service statistics covering the last few years and have come up with what you need to know if you're planning to become the second owner.

LADA AND SKODA MAY HAVE BEEN THE butt of jokes, but the need for low-cost basic transport is real enough for many people to be attracted to anything that costs under £3000 at two years old.

The most recent Samaras qualify handsomely and there's little point in considering anything built before the facelifted versions introduced in late 1994 – unless it's in outstanding condition with an ultra-low mileage. The 1.3 version with L or SL trim and five doors makes an ideal compromise, although the slower 1.1 offers superior mechanical refinement and the 1.5 has more acceleration – though not much.

A word about the differences between Samara and Riva seems appropriate, because the even cheaper

Riva saloon has just as much room, as well as a useful estate car option that the Samara range lacks.

In fact, the Riva is an obsolete Fiat design dating back 30 years and uses rear-wheel drive. It feels old-fashioned to control and is totally devoid of any semblance of modern comfort and convenience features, but it does the job.

The Samara's specification, on the other hand, reads as up to the minute as that of a Skoda Favorit or any other modern South-east Asian or West European front-wheel drive hatchback. As our new car test reported, however, the Samara lacked the development the Skoda received (thanks to VW funding), so it has remained the poor orphan with the devil in the detail, rather than in its basic concept. It's that absence of cash that finally meant that it could no longer compete, or meet ever more stringent emission rules, here in the UK.

The main points to look for...

Engine and cooling system

Although slightly agricultural in sound, this isn't a bad unit, but look out for timing cover oil leaks at the front end and listen to the starter, to ensure both motor and flywheel ring gear sound healthy. Head gasket

problems aren't a major worry, but coolant loss is more likely via the water pump – listen for problems and check the pulley for play. The fuel pump can be lose its oomph (perhaps that's why a hand primer is provided), but most petrol problems involve later cars with a catalyser. The associated electronics can play up or fail entirely, especially on cars made before autumn 1995. Shy away from accepting any car with erratic idling, a tendency to stall or poor starting – diagnosis could reveal blocked needle valve jets or faulty electronics that control them, so specialist attention may be called for.

While making an underbonnet check, look for frayed or broken coolant tank locating straps, and see that the dipstick tube is sound and secure.

Transmission

Driveshaft gaiters are prone to collapse prematurely under the strain (and those on the ends of the steering rack and suspension track rods are also worth a close look while you're there). Clutch failure and associated cable problems are prevalent, while gearbox internal faults are more common than on most modern cars, so the way the lever and pedal work in pulling away and gearchanging should be checked assiduously. Some engine shunt and wobble may be acceptable, but take odd noises and crunchy synchromesh seriously.

Suspension, steering and brakes

All Samaras – even new ones – have a heavyish, rather spongy-acting brake pedal, but be careful because too many Samaras develop servo faults which may emit odd noises, but also cause changed pedal feel. Rust can afflict the rear hydraulic pipes and wheel cylinders can play up, with less easy detection.

At the other end, front wheel bearings are prone to wear, but steering wobbles and vibration (a common malady) are more likely to be due to tyres of East European origin and showing signs of uneven wear. A new set of a leading brand tyres could work wonders for the Samara's contact with the road.

Electrics and instruments

Instrumentation (except for the fuel gauge) seems fairly reliable and the switchgear has a good record, too. Central locking and electric windows – often the source of failure and expense on modern cars – give no problems on the Samara because they're not fitted! However, other electrics produce significantly higher-than-average problems or failure. The usual starter and alternator troubles are accompanied by wiper and washer motors (mostly the front one), heater fans and, underbonnet, coils and ignition amplifier units. Check all of these components on a longish test run; clearly the motors just won't work, but the coil and distributor faults may cause misfiring first.

Bodywork

Although its construction is robust (to withstand a bit of punishment on potholed roads back home), paint finish and protection are fairly rudimentary, although the all-plastic bumpers are sensibly robust. As a secondhand Lada buyer, you'll have time on your side, however, and will be able to afford a much younger Samara for the same outlay as an equivalent domestic alternative.

Costs and servicing

You can't buy a new Lada here in the UK any more, but the importer has promised to maintain a stock of well-priced spares well past the millennium. Even so, is it worth it? Well, the main attraction will be the low purchase price, for depreciation has been hefty and, allied to low list prices from new, your Lada at three years old should cost you less to buy than most West European alternatives lose in value over the first 12 months from new. So you could argue that even two years' motoring in a tidy secondhand Lada, followed by a visit to the scrap yard, would still show a sensible return on capital. In fact, properly treated, Lada Samara's go on with few serious problems and, apart from the fuel system complexities of recent versions, they present nothing too daunting for a general local garage to handle, in the absence of a Lada dealership. Insurance rates are good news, as well, and there have been no maker's recalls on the model in recent years.

So to sum up...

The Samara isn't such a good car as the Skoda Favorit or the ubiquitous Escort and Astra. However, if you're on a really tight budget and want personal transport, you could do a lot worse than buying a Samara that's much newer than your cheque book would permit with any counterpart. Buy it young, lower or mid-range (with few accessories to go wrong) and move it on while it's still intact with a good MOT. The result will be cheap and cheerful motoring.

We can't tell you which model to choose, but once you've found a car you like, we can provide reassurance by arranging a comprehensive check anywhere in the country by one of our Vehicle Inspection Engineers. Call 0345 500 610 for details of fees or to arrange an inspection. For longer term peace of mind we can also offer mechanical breakdown insurance. For further information, call AA Warranty Services on 0800 269 798.