

# The Breezy charm of a gay Hussar

## FIRST DRIVE

Blame it on the Bridlington air. It's cheap it's oafish - but **Giles Chapman** fell for Lada's latest four-wheel drive Niva

BRIDLINGTON, Thursday afternoon: a remote town on the east coast of England where fishing and holiday trade are neck and neck in decline. It's famous for things falling off. Houses that is.

As Bridlington's coastline erodes, they drop off the cliffs into

The latest Niva Hussar retains the long-travel coil spring suspension of previous models, and ride on the rough stuff is impressive. High ground clearance, a tight (36ft) turning circle and decent steering - Lada bizarrely refers to it as 'anti-traumatic steering

the Niva was launched.

With its choice of high and low ratios on its five-speed gearbox and a standard differential lock for those really tight situations, the all-wheel permanently driven Niva is a happy mud plugger. A stance that feels a mite top heavy on tight bends is rapidly forgotten as it willingly ploughs its way through the sort of mud that would come up to your mid calf if you trod in it. It makes mincemeat of mild undergrowth, and it tackles slippery stony hills with gusto.

This is thanks in part to a new 1.7 litre engine

"Taylor Made" fudge shop on the prom. Here the Niva differs. Its coarse engine, the latest of a stoic line born in the hideous old Moskvich of the Sixties, negligible sound-proofing and a constant whine from the transmission which makes the wail of a bolshy toddler sound idyllic by comparison, mean falling asleep at the wheel will never happen..

At over 40mph on the road, the wind roars round the open quarter lights and poor door seals like an Eiger sound effect.

Inside, the Niva gets a



THE 1.7 LITRE ENGINE ENSURES THE NIVA 'AIN'T NO PANSY'



INSIDE, IT GETS A BADGER'S BOTTOM AWARD FOR ROUGHNESS

the North Sea below. It's not what you'd exactly call sophisticated but, then, it's probably OK for a dirty weekend.

Which is much how I'd describe the four-wheel drive Lada Niva which I'm here to have a go in - except that nothing fell off it, even after a bounce through woodland and along rutted tracks in the East Yorkshire countryside nearby.

gear' - means the Niva certainly doesn't feel too proletarian on the road, even if it does feel slightly lumpen.

Only when you belt down an unmade track straight from the road do you feel there's little difference in ride quality either. An all-right compromise between Tarmac and terrain behaviour, I'd say, and certainly less than a Land Rover of 1978 vintage - the year

which, with its General Motors fuel injection, pumps out 79bhp at a rowdy 5400rpm, resulting in a horsebox hauling 98lb ft of torque. Its only 1bhp more than the 1978, 1.6 litre original gave, but then the latest car has a catalytic convertor and runs on unleaded.

Bridlington is a quiet place but for the North Sea wind howling around the Funland bingo hall and the

Badger's Bottom award for roughness. Plastic trim panels have the thickness and texture of your average fruit punnet, while there are jagged edges on the ludicrously unergonomic column stalks. The seats are lumpy, their adjustable headrests not very adjustable. The grim black plastic dash is, says Lada, a new design, but is still looks like an Aeroflot check-

in desk circa 1960. The gear lever is like a broom handle with a small turnip on the end. Open screwheads laugh at you from every surface.

Outside, the bumpers look like bolt on girders and the side window has more ripple in it than the Black Sea. On the plus side, the Hussar now boasts a hatch-back that opens down to bumper level. Overall,

imported need major rehab, they even call the place a "factory". "We're here to build in the quality our manufacturer isn't able to achieve," shrugs one senior Lada executive.

But this is also where the importer does a lot of "up-specing" - a ghastly industry euphemism for adding extras like radios, sunroofs, fancy wheels and jazzy seats. This is

strong engine and even its notchy gear change, which is hardly different in its feel from the gearbox on my 1971 Triumph Herald..

And, Hussar decals apart, there's something pleasingly simple about this boxy little car, originally designed for use on Russia's desolate co-operative farms: this ain't no pansy Fulham Road machine - it's a hard-as-nails

the Niva's discomfort and patchy finish melts away. The Niva Hussar, like Bridlington, has its redeeming factors: what better way to transport those vital sacks of spuds across the windswept fields to the town's superb seafront fish and chip shops.



MUD PLUGGER: THE NIVA HUSSAR MAKES MINCEMEAT OF MILD UNDERGROWTH AND TACKLES SLIPPERY HILLS WITH GUSTO

Paint finish looks good - and so it should, fresh off the build line. Ladas Russia are usually from blemished thatally st of the British distributor's 230 staff in the Lada import centre near a Bridlington spend their days 'reg'ing and respraying the gabe before they can be sold to the public.

As almost 40% of cars

how the Niva Cossack, the Hussar's bedecked, upmarket sister, is created.

All the Hussar gets on top of its standard issue Russian garb, though, is its new wheels, a radio and a set of silly stickers. You probably imagine I wouldn't own a Niva. Wrong. I ended up quite liking its honest if oafish nature,

workhorse. Its designer must have been conscientious, unlike the people who bolted it together, 600 miles east of Moscow.

The Hussar is ideal for farmers or small, rural businesses. The Isle of Man electricity board, apparently, runs a fleet of them. And at the basic price of £7,595, every single gripe about

**GILES  
CHAPMAN**

**THE DAILY  
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