



Back from THE USSR

Sam and Ed drag a fossilised Zaporozhets from a lockup in Moscow and drive it to Beaulieu

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The idea was simple enough: drive to the Beaulieu Autojumble in a Zaporozhets. It was complicated by two factors. First, the Zaporozhets was in Moscow. Second, it hadn't moved in 20 years.

My friend Vladimir Vozovik had bought the Zaporozhets by accident. Vladimir – who is as 'Moscow' as the The Wurzels are 'Somerset' – stores several classic cars in a sprawling Soviet-era lockup garage complex ten miles south of the city centre. When the elderly owner of a nearby garage passed away and his family advertised it for sale, Vladimir snapped it up. The door was locked, so he gained access with an angle grinder. Inside was the Zaporozhets.

'It looks absolutely unused,' reported Vladimir. 'It's a 1991 model and the parking permit on the windscreen expired in 1998. It's done 3051km. I think the old man was saving it for his retirement. If you want it – you can take it. You can drive it to England! I suspected that the last bit was a joke, but I decided to pretend it wasn't. 'Great!' I said. 'I'll book flights!'

The trip in numbers

- Total distance 2296 miles
- Time at border crossings 17 hours
- Travelling time 8 days
- Zapor's mileage at start 1896 miles
- Zapor's mileage at end 4192 miles
- Cost of Zapor £0
- Cost of parts £550
- Cost of Ukrainian bureaucracy £2400



The Zaporozhets had been entombed for two decades.



One month later – and two weeks before Beaulieu – I arrived at Moscow Domodedovo airport armed with two suitcases of tools, a Zaporozhets manual and Practical Classics tech stalwart Ed Hughes. Ed had been customarily unfazed by my proposal. He agreed that while success was far from guaranteed, failure would still be highly enjoyable.

Tomb raiders

Vladimir threw open the heavy garage doors with a theatrical flourish, revealing a Soviet time capsule that was the stuff of dreams. The space around the entombed Zaporozhets was packed to the rafters with old newspapers, clothes, fishing equipment, jars of mysterious fluid, mouldy books, pickled vegetables, kitchenware, an outboard motor branded ‘Sputnik’, useful bits of wood, skis and empty vodka bottles. Even more excitingly, there was a prince’s ransom of Zaporozhets spares neatly filed in milk cartons or mummified in newspaper. ‘Typical old Soviet mentality,’ explained Vladimir. ‘When you see something for sale, you buy as many as you can in case you never see it for sale again.’

The Zapor was very much at one with the garage. Its fossilised tyres had sunk into the floor and a scummy tidemark on the wheels suggested a flooding incident. Surprisingly, though, all four inner tubes held air. It rose slowly from its crypt one corner at a time as Vladimir perambulated with a tyre pump. We corralled help from neighbouring garages and heaved it into the sunshine – certainly the first it’d seen in two decades. Vladimir’s friend Victor used the three garages opposite to perform

feats of classic car restoration. Victor kindly offered us the use of one of them, giving us the luxury of electricity, an inspection pit and access to his museum of useful bits and pieces. We pushed the Zapor in for a preliminary examination.

Vladimir had extracted the spark plugs and squirted oil into the cylinders before our arrival. Our first step was to drain the sump, scrape the metallic goo from the centrifugal oil filter and add four litres of decent-quality 10w40. We anointed the cylinders and valvetrain with fresh oil, inserted the starting handle and gave it a twirl. It turned beautifully, the pistons making healthy swooshing noises as they squashed air through the plug holes. We changed the transmission oil, then jacked the rear and established that the transaxle span and functioned in all ways expected. Operating the release fork with a screwdriver demonstrated that it even had a working clutch. The plan had taken a giant leap towards feasibility.

We opened celebratory beers and made a shopping list. It read: ignition barrel and door lock (the Zapor came with no keys); front shock absorbers (they’d seized); brake master cylinder, wheel cylinders, shoes and

‘The Zaporozhets rose slowly from its crypt one corner at a time’



The moment of discovery. Vladimir gained access to the lock-up with an angle grinder.



Ed truffles for wonders in the lock-up garage.



The fossilised Soviet tyres had sunk into the floor.



The fuel tank was filled with brown horror.



Two pigs in excrement. Ed strips a carburettor; Sam juggles brake bits.



Russian parts markets are exciting places.

flexi-hoses; clutch master and slave cylinders; carburettor and fuel pump rebuild kits; fuel hose; engine and transmission mounts; wheel bearings; universal joints; driveshaft, torsion bar, balljoint and trackrod end gaiters; fan belt; alternator rebuild kit; engine gasket and seal set; points, condenser, rotor arm, distributor cap, spark plugs and HT leads; coil; windscreen wipers; suspension bushes; steering idler bushes; battery; tyres and inner tubes.

A joyous evening spent rummaging through the Zapor’s tomb yielded many of these parts and more besides, though perishable items such as brake cylinder rubbers had, naturally, perished. We filled the gaps with a visit to Yuzhny Port Avtozapchasti – a huge outdoor car parts market that dates back to Soviet times. Huddled in an unpopular corner is Moscow’s last remaining Zaporozhets parts stall. The elderly proprietor shook his head in disbelief as we bought a substantial proportion of his stock. Customers were troubling enough, but prosperous customers from England suggested that the world was going terribly wrong.

Five-day plan

Back at Victor’s garage, Stakhanovite Zapor-touching ensued. I started at the front with the brakes and suspension; Ed approached from the rear and caressed the fuel and ignition systems. I crawled underneath to replace the clutch hydraulics while he climbed inside to wake up the electrics. I titillated the trackrod ends while he extricated and purged the petrol tank. We orbited in this productive manner for several days.

The Zaporozhets is a wonderfully engineered car. Or, at least, it’s a series of wonderful pieces of engineering loosely assembled into something vaguely car-like. This late 968M boasted the worst fit and finish of any car I’d ever come across – a morass of wrinkled pressings, jagged edges and



Nice action. Sam enjoys a new shock absorber.

ill-fitting mouldings – but it remained a mechanical *tour de force*. It was stimulating to work on, from the twin torsion bars and coilover struts of its front suspension, to its self-adjusting wheel cylinders and fabulously complicated rear-mounted air-cooled V4. Rectifying the previous owner’s ‘improvements’ was a major feature of the recommissioning. Soviets joked that the Zapor was a car that you had to finish building yourself, and the old man had clearly taken this to heart. Almost everything accessible and adjustable had been duly accessed and adjusted, usually dramatically incorrectly. The taper-roller front wheel bearings had been tightened to destruction, while the Pitman arm of the steering box flapped around listlessly. Critical parts of the transaxle mounting had been deemed unnecessary and thrown away. The ignition timing was 20° over-advanced and the valve clearances ranged from 2mm to less than zero.

TECH SPEC

Engine	1196cc/V4/OHV
Power	40bhp@4400rpm
Torque	52lb ft@2700rpm
Gearbox	4-speed manual
0-60mph	33sec
Top speed	73mph
Fuel economy	34mpg



The Zaporozhets sees sunlight for the first time in 20 years.



The old man had removed the pre-tensioning springs from the rocker shafts then torqued them down with a breaker bar, bending the mounting clamps and introducing axial clatter to the rockers' already wayward oscillation. The fanbelt should be adjusted by adding shims between the two halves of its upper pulley. He'd done away with these, leaving the pulley sections to wobble around until they'd eaten themselves and their hub.

The gearshift gaiter and its retaining screws were lying in the passenger's footwell, suggesting that this was the last thing he'd worked his magic on. Sure enough, it'd been adjusted to the point that engaging reverse was impossible. The Zapor had been parked in its garage nose-in, leading us to wonder if it was this what'd finally sealed its fate.

The carburettor presented interesting issues. Zapor float valves are sealed by a tiny rubber disc at their tip, and Ed and I have learned from experience that these dissolve in modern petrol. Ed's cunning solution was to install a complete valve assembly from a Lada. The thread was smaller, but wrapping it in insulation tape allowed it to be jammed into the hole securely and – seemingly – permanently.

The piston-type accelerator pump was cause for further head-scratching. The rubber piston seal in our rebuild kit swelled to twice its size at its first sniff of petrol, jamming the piston in its bore.

We returned to the parts market to buy an earlier carburettor, which has a taller piston with no rubber seal. Zapor Man didn't have one – but he palmed us off with an earlier-still carburettor with the assurance that its piston would fit ours. It didn't, but I achieved success by painstakingly turning it down to size using an electric drill and a screwdriver wrapped in wet-and-dry paper. The pump's newfound vigour exposed a leak at the base of its jet, which Ed delicately repaired with a dribble of solder.

We couldn't find tyres in the Zapor's stiletto 615x13 profile, or indeed anywhere near it. At the back of its tomb, however, were four unused Soviet crossplies wrapped in bin bags. They looked as good as new and the rubber felt soft and luscious, so

we fitted them in the name of science. We learned later that they gripped and handled perfectly well, but were let down by a lack of roundness.

The garage complex was a hive of enterprise, much of it automotive but some of it more sinister in nature, involving the exchange of goods between black-windowed G-Wagons. We became a popular fixture in the daily procrastination cycle of residents, who'd wander in to poke at the Zapor and offer guidance. They didn't let the language barrier stand in the way of lengthy pontification. The local approach to car repair seemed to involve long periods of cranking followed by long periods of revving – so our systematic method was viewed as pitiable and misguided. Imagine everyone's surprise, therefore, when on the morning of the fifth day we started the Zapor and drove away.

'The gearshift had been adjusted so engaging reverse was impossible'



The Zapor enjoys a facial at a nearby car wash.



The drive across Russia was broken by pauses for roadside adjustments.



A five-hour border queue is an ideal place for an electrical service.



The 32° heat caused engine to overheat above 60mph.



Vladimir and son Nick are subjected to interrogation. Sam keeps his mouth shut.



Ed administers on-the-spot improvements.



Victory! Export plates are issued after a suspenseful two-hour wait.

Marching forward

Our maiden voyage was to a car wash, where a team of five fell on the Zapor with delirious enthusiasm. The transformation was remarkable, revealing the car's miraculous state of preservation and dashing shade of hospital toilet green. We took a scenic route back to the garage to give it a decent test-thrash, which went well until a grotesque Nissan Titan pickup swiped into the side of us in heavy traffic. Its monstrous front tyre glanced off our rear wing, which limited damage to a black smudge and a smashed bumper corner. The driver didn't seem to notice.

The next day was one of tense bureaucracy. While we'd been enjoying ourselves in the garage, Vladimir and his son Nick had been performing miracles in offices across Moscow. They had succeeded in acquiring a registration document, buying insurance and applying for export plates.

One last step remained, though: the Zapor had to be inspected by an official in a large hat. It had an appointment on the other side of Moscow at 11.30am – and it was imperative that it made it. It rose to the challenge, darting lithely through the city's aggressive traffic with grace and agility.

The large-hatted official disliked the Zapor – and he liked me even less. He demanded that I open the rear, then whipped the engine angrily with his baton and gave me a scowl that said 'I know what you've done with the body'. Fortunately, he spoke no English, so Vladimir was able to field his questions by posing as my interpreter. Whatever Vladimir said, it worked. Export plates appeared after a suspenseful two-hour wait. The Zapor scuttled gaily back to the garage and we spent the rest of the day fussing over minor adjustments and shovelling spares into its generous front luggage compartment.

THE 'ZAPOR'

The cheapest proper car you could buy in the USSR – and the only one that didn't have a lengthy waiting list. The 966 entered production at the Zaporizhia Automobile Factory, Ukraine, in 1966. It received a few upgrades in 1971 to become the 968. The lightly modernised 968M followed in 1979. Production finally ended in 1993.



We hit the road – specifically the E101 heading southwest from Moscow. The Zapor punctuated periods of speedy progress with random bouts of power-loss. It happened only when the engine was hot and it appeared to be load-related, though this was by no means clear-cut. Having already fondled every part of the fuel and ignition systems, Ed and I were flush with knowledge. We'd come up with a theory, pull over to replace or lobotomise the accused component, declare it mended and speed away. Then the engine would suffer another attack of hiccups and we'd repeat the process.

The sight of a broken Zapor at the roadside attracted much nostalgic interest. Men would sidle over, stare knowingly into the engine bay and deliver one of two pearls of wisdom: wedge the engine cover open with a plastic bottle or wrap the fuel pump in a piece of wet cloth.

We stayed in Kaluga – a handsome city with charming Soviet ambience – then continued our staccato progress. By the time we reached rustic Sevsk – a 'duelling banjos' sort of a place – the next night, we'd eliminated everything but the fuel pickup. We removed the rear seat and burrowed our way to the tank. The issue was clear: the rubber hose from the top of the tank had to bend 90° before passing through a grommet in the firewall. Ham-fisted installation of the spare wheel had pulled the hose through the grommet, tightening the bend to a sharp kink. When heat from the engine softened the

hose, it flattened and restricted the fuel supply. We fitted a longer hose with a graceful loop before the firewall and the matter was concluded.

International fallout

Our Russian transit plates precipitated a national emergency at the Ukrainian border. The domestic customs officers refused to have anything to do with us, dismissing us in the direction of the main customs office. I presented our documents to a lady in a booth. She was furious. She stormed outside and stared disbelievably at the Zapor, then shooed us into the office of the chief customs officer and gave him a vicious earful.

Further officials were summoned and an intense debate ensued, with much exasperated arm-waving. The Zapor was widely discussed and, at one point, they appeared to be calculating its scrap value based on the relative weights of steel, aluminium and magnesium alloy used in its construction. A friendly English-speaking official who looked like Dustin Hoffman came forward as spokesperson. 'We are very sorry,' he began. 'Because your car is not registered, you will have to pay a bond to drive it across Ukraine. We have calculated the absolute minimum – but it is still 90,000 Hryvnia (£2400). You will get it back when you leave.' Our single-entry Russian visas had been terminated, so there was no point arguing.

A bank kiosk conveniently placed inside the customs building took our Visa cards and handed back five house-bricks of Hryvnia. Dustin gave these straight to a junior official, who'd drawn the short straw of handling our paperwork. He typed, stamped and sweated fervently for seven hours. The wedge of documents he thumped triumphantly on his chief's desk was half-an-inch thick and required my signature 11 times. There was a tangible sense of wellbeing in the customs office as they waved us goodbye. We were tired, starving and £2400 poorer, but we concurred that we'd been extremely well looked after.

Ukraine whizzed past. The now fully-functional Zapor was a thing of absolute wonder. It was nippy, agile and not at all uncomfortable, its clever

'The official typed, stamped and sweated fervently for seven hours'

RIGHT The Zapor cuts a dash in the handsome streets of Lviv.

BELOW Ed soaks up exciting vibrations at a 60mph cruise.



long-travel suspension floating over surfaces that sent modern cars into convulsions.

Soundproofing could've been better – or, indeed, present – though the happy cacophony of howls, crashes and rumbles behind us provided a pleasing reminder of the exciting engineering at work.

The Zapor was thrumming nicely at 65mph on the motorway west of Kiev when the temperature gauge – dormant since Moscow – woke up and sprang straight to its 120°C maximum. We pulled over and confirmed that the engine was indeed quite hot, which had presumably shocked the temperature sender back to life. Charging along motorways in 32°C heat was clearly not something that designers in Sixties Ukraine had envisaged. We found that it would cool down below 60mph and heat up above it. Higher speeds could be resumed in the cool of the evening.

Beaulieu or bust

Entering Poland took another full day. We queued for five hours to reach the border. When we got there, a young and cocky official spotted our Russian number plates – not a good look in Ukraine at present – and pulled us to one side. He snatched our passports, ordered us to empty the Zapor's luggage compartment – no mean feat considering the quantity of spares it contained – and subjected us to aggressive interrogation. He simply wasn't ➔





buying our 'eccentric Englishmen' act. Then, he found Ed's camera and demanded to trawl through the photographs. His heart melted when he discovered that they matched our story. He jumped into the Zapor and directed us to the customs office with his truncheon, beaming from ear-to-ear.

Another crisis occurred. 'Why couldn't they have driven through the Balkans?' demanded the fierce Captain Birdseye character in charge. We were assigned a charming minder named Natalia, who made frantic phone calls for an hour. The upshot was that they could give us our bond money back and let us out of the country – but not in that order. 'You must visit our main office in Lviv,' said Natalia, with a sigh. 'I'm afraid it will take one hour to get there by taxi – and it will be closed.' I asked if I could fly back to collect the money at a later date.

This prompted another explosion from Captain Birdseye and more frantic phone calls. 'Within one year is fine!' was Natalia's eventual answer. She raced through our paperwork in less than two hours, while Captain Birdseye vented his frustration by barking at lorries outside. As we disappeared into Poland, our relief was nothing compared with theirs.



Don't believe the rumours: the Zapor is a fine car.

Over breakfast in Zamosc, we realised that we now had two days to get to Beaulieu. We corrected the Zapor's ragged-sounding valve clearances and knuckled down to some serious Autobahn-storming. We covered 600 miles to Leipzig that day and 450 to the Hook of Holland the next, plumping for a cushy overnight ferry to Harwich. The Zapor continued to do a convincing impression of a real car, bobbing along without complaint, fatigue or explosion. It chattered victoriously through the Beaulieu crowds at lunchtime on Saturday.

Ed and I opened our last cans of Zhigulevskoye beer and agreed that it was a good day for Ukraine. Ukrainian engineering had been proven adequate and Ukrainian authoritarianism had demonstrated a friendly side that we'd never previously have believed existed. Ukraine was also £2400 richer. That was only temporary, though... right? ■

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