

FROM MURRUSSIA WANTS TO

This is not a Bond car. No, it's something even more outlandish. Say "Привет" to the Avtoros Shaman

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Coming soon to an
evil lair near you...
or Knightsbridge

“There are no roads in Russia, only directions.” So, apparently, said Napoleon Bonaparte, the man who led the French invasion of the world’s largest country. It’s a quite highbrow historical reference to help explain the

Avtoros Shaman, the 8WD beast you see before you. Why is a two-century-old quote relevant to a bonkers extension of the SUV market? Because Russia, despite its vast scale, really is quite short of roads. As such, its people have churned out a variety of solutions on how to cross its terrain, some of them more ingenious than others. A Lada Niva on tank tracks, for instance.

The Shaman, though – or the шаман in the Cyrillic script the Russians use – is an altogether different proposition: a ground-up all-terrain vehicle (ATV) that’s been 10 years in the making. It’s a product of the youthful, post-Soviet generation keen to make local produce to be proud of, with a fastidious approach to keeping components and materials homegrown.

If you gorge on stats, then you’ll likely be disappointed. Its power figure wilts beside most repmobiles, a 3.0-litre turbodiesel from an Iveco van – regrettably sourced from outside Russia because local engines weren’t up to the job – providing 176bhp. The most jaw-dropping number, irrelevant as it may ultimately be to most of us, is the cost. Nine million rubles may be a price best portrayed via a Doctor Evil impression, but it currently converts to a much saner-sounding £88k. Get lavish with the options, as the customer about to take delivery of this one has, and you’ll only just nudge £100k. For the 4.8 tonnes of material alone it seems a bargain, and that’s before you consider that all eight wheels drive and steer. A G63 AMG, a bit of a Russian favourite (with half the wheel count), is another £22k still.

But while Merc’s V8-propelled relic has been taken under the wing of Moscow’s posing posse, the Shaman is for an entirely different audience. It would be fun to roll incongruously into Red Square, knocking the cockiness out of G63 and BMW X6 drivers, but there’s even more hilarity in ignoring urban sprawls altogether and exploring what lies beyond them.

Avtoros MD Vladimir Volkhonsky tells me the Shaman will suit everyone from hunters to first aid crews to mineral resource explorers, even describing it as an alternative to a helicopter, so unhindered is the access it allows. As such, all sorts of specs are possible. More curious options include beds, minibus seating and a propeller. While most of the 15 Shamans so far have been purchased on company expenses, there’s more than a nod and a wink to suggest those buying are actually indulging a less mature, personal desire. Because no matter what your life experience, it’s hard not to behave impishly in its presence. Photographer Justin Leighton – a man not short of air miles from visiting all corners of our planet to shoot a diversity of vehicles – has eyes and a grin as wide as mine, and we can do little more than point, grunt and squeak in the direction of the more absurd features. Scratchproof paint and outboard fuel tanks (see those black strips running above the rear wheelarches?) may be examples of form meticulously following function, but they indulge our inner geeks like nothing else.

Inside, there’s a central driving position. Notions of McLaren F1 glamour, however, are quickly

cancelled out by a seat resembling that of an Eighties Fiesta. Such basicness betrays the bargain pricetag.

But then it operates with the turn of a key, while the steering wheel, dials and six-speed manual gearbox are all decidedly conventional too. With my driver training from Vladimir on a 40-second delay – it’s being relayed from Russian through an interpreter due to his pidgin English – such simplicity is something of a relief.

If, like me, you’re surprised the Shaman doesn’t drive its wheels through an automatic gearbox, then Vladimir cites both technical difficulties and the fact a manual transmission is “the sign of professionalism”, here as much as in a sports car. It is, perhaps unsurprisingly, a notchy shift, while the gears are ludicrously short. The top speed is 50mph, but it’ll get there at a respectable lick for its size.

What takes a little more learning is the control panel immediately left of the wheel; a bunch of buttons lock or unlock each of the four axles, for when inclines and declines are particularly steep, while others activate the eight-wheel steering, the self-developed component Vladimir is most proud of.

“NO MATTER WHAT YOUR LIFE EXPERIENCE, IT’S HARD NOT TO BEHAVE IMPISHLY IN ITS PRESENCE”

£88k buys you ultimate bragging rights... and an Iveco van engine



Two wheels in the air. Luckily there are six more



Low-pressure tyres minimise damage to the ground



We're not sure what we've just ordered...



AVTOROS SHAMAN

Price: RUB 9,000,000
(£88,000 approx)
Engine: 3.0-litre Iveco
F1C 4cyl inline diesel
Performance: 176bhp,
n/a lb ft, 50mph (land),
4mph (water)
Transmission: 6spd
ZF manual, 8WD
Economy: 11.7mpg
(combined); n/a g/km CO₂
Weight: 4800kg

THE FINAL FRONTIER



Russia is a huge country. Vast. An eighth of Earth's land mass. In all that endless space it has just 1.4 million km of road – about the same as Japan, and it's pretty much all contained in the western fifth of the country. A thousand miles east of Moscow and for the next eight time zones there's nothing. Nada.

So these vehicles are a response to the terrain, not proof that Russia can one-up a G-Class or a Hummer. And we do mean 'these' – the Shaman is not unique. OK, so the Dartz Prombron, which

we've driven on a couple of occasions before, is more oligarch protection vehicle than tundra transportation, but consider the Ghe-O Rescue and the Aton Impulse Viking. Tools for exploration as much as rich-man recreation.

No other country on Earth needs or creates machines like this. In the UK, our specialist car industry is a response to our enthusiasm for driving on tight, twisty B-roads – the lightweight, two-seat roadster. In Russia, conditions demand a different approach.

**“IT CAN DO THE
LOOPIEST PARALLEL
PARK MANOEUVRE
ON EARTH”**

There are two modes for this: one to angle the rear four wheels in the opposite direction to the front four, for greater agility, and one for pointing them all at the same angle for the wonderfully disorienting crab mode. Its function, as far as I manage to fathom, is both to titillate my photographer and complete the loopyest parallel park manoeuvre on Earth, given a long enough run-up.

Once our conversationally stunted training session is complete, it's time to seek out some appropriately testing terrain to see just what the Shaman will do. Its factory is just a couple of hours from Moscow, so we're in a region of Russia blessed with the odd stretch of tarmac, so a short stint on road is required to take us to something altogether more challenging.

The Shaman will indeed do roads – Vladimir tells me it was one of the first items on the development to-do list – but I'm sure he'd be the first to admit they are far from its strongest talent. The sheer racket caused by its squishy off-road tyres and meagre

soundproofing at such stratospheric speeds as 25mph drowns out any attempt to press him on the issue.

Fun as observing the shock and awe of locals is, cars diving towards us as drivers' jaws drop and cameraphones are ill-advisedly reached for, I'm already certain the Shaman will be much, much more at home once we're back on unmolested ground.

Vladimir points out it should stay unmolested, too, the Shaman's low-pressure tyres ensuring its impact on the glorious nature it traverses is minimal.

The sentiment doesn't last long. I approach a swamp, which Vladimir's excited gesticulations indicate I should plunge right through. With Justin and his camera on the other side, I aim to create the largest water splash I can. Well, wouldn't you?

I hare into the manky brown water, distributing it far, wide and high, before slowly bobbling my way to the other side and ascending effortlessly back onto terra firma. Stumbling out of its side door, two things are immediately apparent: the truly rancid pong that's permeating the air from the disturbed waters, and a whole family of fish flailing in vain, dragged out of the water in my wake. Guilt-ridden, I throw as many as I



Driving position like F1. Similarity ends there



It has removable floorboards so you can do repairs



Russians don't do understated... It's a brutal design

can back in, concluding I do not have the killer instinct to hunt animals that this Shaman's future owner does.

I quickly get over it, though. There are very few ills cocking around on rough terrain in a mock armoured personnel carrier *won't* amend, I reckon. You're probably expecting me to reference Defenders and G-Wagens as I attempt to put into words the sheer fun of the Shaman's driving experience. But I'm not. What it reminds me of most is, erm, a Caterham.

With the eight-wheel steer activated, its agility is ludicrous. It's made to help you cut and weave through tricky forest tracks. And it does. But with a little more margin for error (i.e. no unforgivingly hard trees) at your disposal, the temptation to bung it into corners and throw power at it to emerge, wheel twirling away as you get back on the straight and narrow, is not unlike the one a Seven serves up on a twisty circuit. It's just rather slower and from a greater height...

Stephen ponders doing a rather slow runner...

And how about this? Flick the eight-wheel steering to its most agile, floor it in third on full lock and you'll revel in the most unconventional donuts known to man. There are few more glorious feelings on wheels, though I'd advise exercising more calm if you have stricken adventurers or precious minerals on board.

We've not even got to the Shaman's ultimate party trick, and keen to show it off, Vladimir directs me to a river. The River Volga, to be precise. Europe's longest.

The stretch Vladimir has in mind isn't ferocious, but it does have a current, and I've no doubt it's very deep. As I pull up to the edge, the golden hour before sunset is just beginning, painting a lovely glow across the river and its once-peaceful fishermen. They now look perturbed that a large and aggressive vehicle has turned up. "We're going to cross the river," says interpreter Dmitri, in the deadpan way of someone literally relaying the words of another. I'm assured our

near five-tonne bulk will float, but I can only imagine how cheerfully those fishermen will chuckle if we fail.

Dmitri relays more straight-faced statements, namely "We've never crossed this bit before" and "Can you swim?" As a pairing they're quite something. Vladimir is keen to take the reins, and I'm not about to stop him. And so with the Avtoros MD at the helm, we shuffle slowly towards the water's edge, the boss pointing the nose of his company's creation down towards the waterbed.

Once the rear is proud enough of the ground, the slightly ramshackle propeller is slung on the back and connected up, linking it to the Shaman's controls. It looks for all the world like an under-endowed afterthought. Our descent continues, until the stomach-churning moment the wheels are separated from the ground and something the weight of two Discoverys must keep itself afloat.

That we didn't make the headlines tells you it's successful, though progress across the river can be gauged only by picking a reference point through the side window - I opt for a particularly disgruntled fisherman - and watching it gradually move from right to left.

Ten really rather serene minutes later, we emerge onto land like a hippo clambering ashore. The Shaman doesn't dispatch rivers with quite the lunatic abandon it does hills, swamps and forests, but then it's quite the boast it even does so at all.

The ultimate adventure vehicle? Vladimir's ambitious growth plans mean I'm inclined to say not for long. They include a pickup version of the Shaman, and an Avtoros take on the quad bike. The former will be able to hold a bison, so it will certainly accommodate the latter. Russia, it turns out, really doesn't need roads. **TG**

