

# Cossack Mars

## Make a day of it

Don't give me that remember the fifties stuff. The trendy whitewalls-and-crepe-soled-wasn't-it-great-to-be-a-teenager-in-love-crying-in-the-chapel-when-we-still-had-hair-to-spare-for barbers fifties. Definitely not. You can't fool me: I recall how truly awful it really was. In fact. . . .

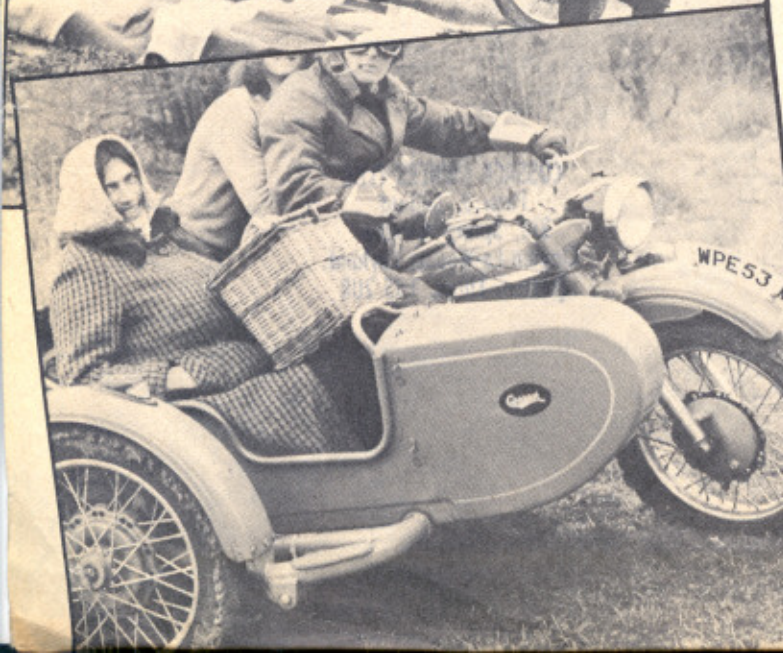
In fact I remember when driving up to your front door in a new car, any car, had the neighbours out in the road taking snaps and asking if you'd won the pools. And all they had was maybe a green Raleigh or a battered old sidecar lugged around by an ancient flathead BSA which wheezed asthmatically towards the nearest

traffic jam on hot Saturday afternoons. What a scene it was: Dad dressed in an indescribably filthy despatch-rider's mac which kept getting sucked into the carb, while mother mouthed complaints through the crazed perspex windows of the chair. They were poor and don't try to kid me that they were happy about the situation.

So where have all those faithful beasts of burden gone? The combos I mean, the 'heavy touring outfits' ideal for the 'family man'. Forget what's left of the British motorcycle industry; don't try looking for a new Royal Enfield, a Velocette, a BSA. And don't try tying a sidecar to the Isolastic frame of a Norton Commando or it could start to look like reheated spaghetti after the first bend. BMW don't recommend it any more and I'm convinced that there isn't a word for 'sidecar' in the Japanese language. But go East, young man.

Go East to MZ in East Germany who build a 250cc two-stroke combo, or so far into the rising sun that your eyes take on a Mongol slant. The heavy-duty touring model is alive and well and living in the Soviet Union. It's called the Cossack Mars combination by importers Satra Motors who'll sell you a great chunk of nostalgia for just £629. That's an awful lot of metal for the money.

Chances are you've heard of the Cossack before under its Ural name, when Fred Wells imported and sold them straight from the crate. A mistake, a palpable error, because the brake linings appeared to be made from recycled cardboard and the valves reacted to high-octane western gas by melting away. Ural? The name stank so much that even the usually fulsome







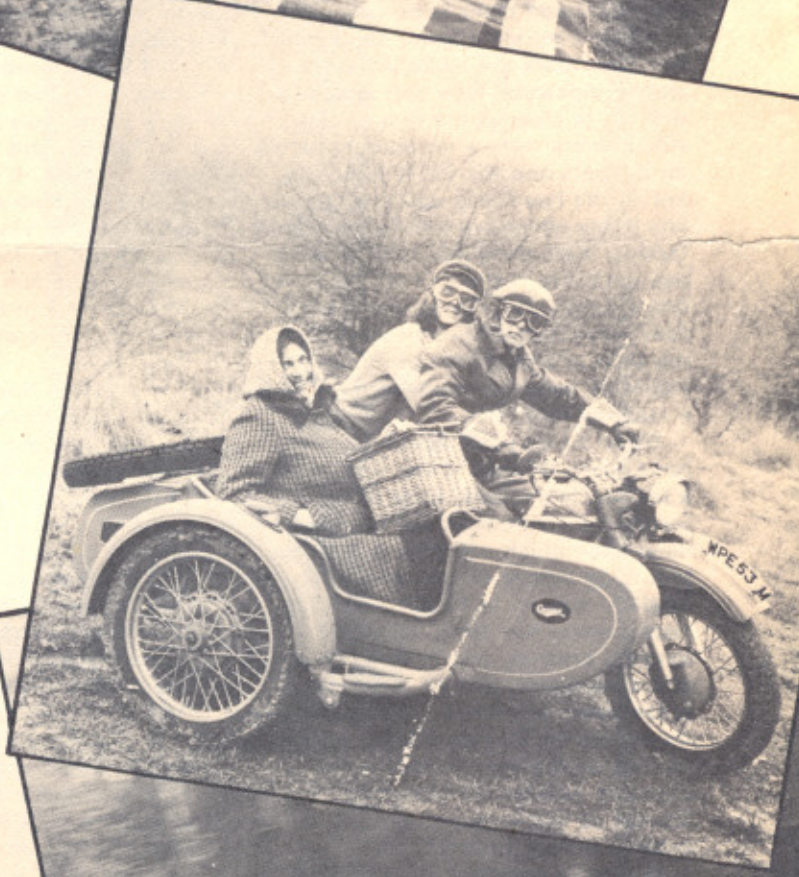
motorcycle weaklies were decidedly muted.

When Satra took over they had a tough job to convince the British market that Ivan's bike wasn't so terrible. They now fit British linings and a British brake cable, while some models have their drums re-lined as standard. It all makes work for the (British) working man to do. . . . Plus they've straightened out the valve problem and they'll even sell you a dualseat to make it look a little more modern. And they've changed the name and they're going to export Russian bikes to the States this year. Ye gods, it hardly seems possible.

The bike, as you can see if your bifocals are switched on, isn't exactly an original Russian design. The engine/transmission is pure BMW, although there's considerable argument about which model Bee-em it's derived from. We plump for a mixture of the WW2 R75 military hack and the later R51, but you pays your money and you takes your choice. The chair—which is delivered without matching machine gun—is a straight steal from Steib's TR500 and comes complete with a natty tonneau but no screen or weather equipment.

These Russians certainly know a good thing when they see it: the twin-cable twistgrip is a very fair copy of the Italian Super Practic chain-pull device we know and love so well. That item didn't suffer too much in translation, but the rest come with a heavy Russian accent. The bike weighs 437lb and the chair tips the scales at 183lb, while the crankcase is obviously hacked from living metal by aged peasant craftsmen.

The motor is a 78 x 68mm 649cc horizontally-opposed twin. Compression ratio is an incredible 7:1 and power output is a claimed 35bhp at 5400-5800rpm. There are twin 24mm, square-slide carbs breathing through an oil-bath filter on top of the crankcase next to a six-volt dynamo which feeds twin coils through a medium-sized battery. Gearbox is four-speed with rocking pedal shift and the engine-speed, twin-plate clutch transfers drive to a lowish—about 3:1—diff via exposed shaft. Cylinder heads are alloy while the barrels are cast





# Cossack Mars

iron; pushrod tubes sport chrome.

The frame is a massive affair coated in either light-blue or black enamel which chips readily. Welding is fair, and the sidecar frame looks tough enough to wipe the front end of any car straight into the nearest ditch. The sidecar is attached in Steib fashion by two balljoints and two adjustable lean-out bars. Once adjusted properly this can be dropped off and screwed back on without disturbing the setting.

Suspension consists of telescopic forks, swinging arm with adjustable dampers and single unit on the sidecar wheel. The chair is adequately sprung on rubber, there's a friction steering damper and all the spring rates and damper settings are spot on. It handles a treat: without doubt the best combo I've ever driven and the right-hand chair is no problem.

Minor controls are not so wonderful. The indicators are switched via a sloppy dipswitch-type unit which is difficult to clear at the first attempt. Alloy levers mate with chromed-steel on the bars and the BMW plunger key in the headlamp operates ignition and lights which are a trifle dim by today's high standards. But at least you get brake lights on both the bike and sidecar. Big plus points are the fully interchangeable wheels—spare on the sidecar's bootlid—and deeply valanced, effective mudguards. There's a steering lock, too.

Okay, so an outfit like this should have plenty of load space, yes? There's a toolbox in the tank, bags of room inside the single-seat 'car and cavernous boot which contains the following: huge stirrup pump, manual in English, manual in Russian, service books, spare fuel lines, oil filters, dynamo brushes, piston rings (full set) and a mammoth tool kit. Now don't break down anywhere, because you've no excuse for staying that way. There's no lock on the boot to stop some comrade walking off with that little lot, but as you know, crime doesn't exist in Russia (official).

So you're standing there looking at it in the cold light of morning complete with its £14 plus VAT dualseat in place of the rubber saddles. The chrome looks a little jaded and you haven't even run it in properly yet, but it starts first prod even when there's a frost on the ground and ticks over quietly and regularly. Climb on dressed in wellies, ex-British Railways mac (thanks a million, BR), Barbour trousers, knitted mitts, Barbour mitts, lots of scarves and a helmet. Engage first gear and wince at the loud thunk as it engages; just like an old BMW.

Power delivery is smooth and

pokey way down and the gearing is low even by sidecar standards. In solo form this would make the Cossack totally unacceptable unless you care to have a BMW crown wheel and pinion set machined to fit. First gear crawling sets up a vibratory groan which can be felt through the footpegs, but other cogs are quieter. Because the left-hand carb's intake hose fouls your ankle, the rocking pedal is only good for heeling when your toes are almost at right-angles to the bike. Scrunch.

There are easier ways of shifting gear to be found. On the right is an alloy hand lever which is useful for finding neutral and swapping cogs at a pinch, but by far the best method is to ignore the gearshift's heel pad. Employing the old Bee-em dodge, you knock the throttle right off, whip out the clutch and pause. Next step is a gentle upward nudge with the toe which should be rewarded with the location of neutral. Take another breather, you're doing ever so well. Now nudge upwards again and the lever goes home with barely a click on 1-2, 2-3, but a low noise from third to top. Peace and quiet are yours, engine-speed clutches notwithstanding.

If that procedure sounds like a big hassle, it's just one of the BMW drawbacks that have been in evidence since Dr Porsche laid 3H in paper in the late twenties. It's something the rest of the machine makes bearable. The steady, unvarying beat of the engine which will trickle through traffic or cruise at 55mph without any signs of strain. All in the same smooth fashion, and probably for a very, very long time.

Obviously this machine isn't terribly quick—it'll top out at about 65mph—but most of that is top-gear plonking because the smooth motor is plenty flexible and the gearing is about six feet underground. All you have to stop you are the SLS drums on the bike, but they produce very acceptable retardation and the 3.75 x 19in tyres—deep, block-tread pattern—are surprisingly good. The spokes are also all heavy-gauge items laced into sturdy steel rims.

If you've never driven a combo before, then the first time is a real facer because it is a rather eccentric arrangement of three wheels. Safe, certainly, but decidedly odd. There you are, driving along, and you find that the handlebars, normally reserved for just hanging controls on and acting

as somewhere to put your hands, have suddenly achieved the importance of a steering wheel. Slow down, put it on full lock and the whole caboodle will turn in its own length; knock the power off and it heads for the kerb aided by torque reaction from the drive. Strange, curious even.

It's a skill easily mastered on the Cossack because of its viceless handling. Left-handers you power through using the sidecar as an outrigger while the fork legs try to walk round each other. Right-hand curves call for a downward shift, deceleration, and then a touch of power to bring you round. No need to lean over and get your passenger to hang out unless you overcook it and the sidecar wheel starts to aviate. Easy to see why fitting a chair used to halve your insurance bill before the advent of compulsory passenger liability cover.

For baseline motoring and the fun of being different, the Cossack has got to be good value. It's absolutely unpretentious, sturdy, dependable, old-fashioned and cheap. How many 650s can you buy for under £800 these days? £629 for the bike and chair looks like a gift if you're prepared to accept it for what it is. If you're looking for a superbike you won't find it here; what you will find is basic, 50mpg two-star motoring.

The major drawback is the lack of any weather equipment. A small screen is available from Satra, and from my own experience of refurbishing a fifties Watsonian (no relation) chair, any good hood company should be able to run you up a ragtop to keep the rain out pretty easily. A hinged 'greenhouse' enclosure isn't out of the question, either. In fact the Cossack 350J parallel-twin stroker's stylish little sidecar (£130) comes complete with a large perspex screen; I'd like to try one of those hauled by a 650cc Mars.

Want to learn on a combination? You can, and even carry unlicensed passengers in the chair. Plus they don't have to wear bone-domes like you do. Don't ask me why, just thought I'd pass it on as further evidence of lunacy among the lawmakers.

There's a big sidecar revival at the moment: you can't get hold of a decent Steib for love or money and the Cossack range is all set to clean up. So next time you fancy a day in the country, out with that grubby mac Uncle Bert left you, pop the missus in the chair, let the nipper ride on the back and off you go. **PW**

