



Zaporozhets

Its Color Aside, This Car Is Red

BROOKLYN would be an unlikely setting for a test-drive of the latest sports car from Porsche, but the borough's Russian-speaking enclaves are ideal for a jaunt in a car that has emigrated from the Soviet state. Parking a Zaporozhets outside a Brighton Beach bakery with Cyrillic signs in the window can earn the driver a reception nearly as enthusiastic as the welcome given Yuri Gagarin in Red Square.

Even in the Soviet Union the Zaporozhets was considered a crude device, so my expectations for the 1968 model belonging to Gary Shikhman, who imported the car from Ukraine, were not high. Droopy styling and a front end that looked frozen in a perpetual frown did not make a good first impression. The interior was as homely as the drab-blue exterior, and it had just enough room for a driver and three tightly packed comrades.

In fact, huddling together may have been the safest way to warm the inside of a Zaporozhets through long Russian winters. Early models were equipped with gasoline-fed heaters that occasionally malfunctioned, reducing the cars to smoldering ruins.

In just a few blocks of driving, though, the car began to work its charms, despite its glacial acceleration and the racket from the air-cooled V-4 engine in the rear. The handling was sufficiently competent for Brooklyn streets, even if the suspension continued to bounce up and down long after a bump.

My enthusiasm for the car sagged upon learning that the engine is fastened to the subframe by just two bolts. Should they rust through, the entire drivetrain can drop out of the car, something Mr. Shikhman has seen happen twice on Ukrainian highways. If the engine and transmission do bail out, however, importing replacements is cheap — less than \$100 for both.

For owners without mechanical skills, repairs are as close as the nearest Russian neighborhood. Mr. Shikhman pointed out nearby repair shops where nostalgic mechanics love to work on the cars of their homeland, some even offering their services at no charge.

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