

NEWS & PRODUCTS

LONG SHOT

Pete Moore checks out a brace of long barreled Saiga straight-pull rifles in 223 Rem and 7.62x39mm and wonders if they have finally got it right?

The mann-opp AK 47/74 rifles as offered by Saiga are a bit of a mixed blessing. Tough and reliable yes, but with poor ergonomics, plus accuracy is very much down to calibre! The original 7.62x39mm being the worst from the short 16" barrel, the 223 Rem option is better, but still not on par with an AR15. However, for someone looking for a hi-cap, fun, short range rifle they are a cost effective option. But I have always thought something with a longer barrel might prove more competitive.

SPORTING VERSION

Enter the Saiga Sporter, which is a semi-auto hunting rifle, chambered in a number of modern calibres. Essentially an AK mechanism as before, but with a longer/heavier 21" barrel and sporting butt (no separate pistol grip). Everything else remains near the same – big, clunky safety lever, night vision mount on the left of the receiver, iron sights and box mag feed. The major difference is the repositioning of the trigger

rearwards to suit the butt layout. The UK-legal version is manually-operated and offers a hybrid, straight-pull action in 7.62x39mm or 223 Remington. Priced at sub-£500 each they just could be the AK some of us have been looking for!

Cosmetics are as expected - plastic furniture and blacked steel throughout. The forend is long, deep and comfortable, likewise the sporting butt makes the rifle feel and handle better than the standard, military-types.

The iron sights are standard AK with an A-frame (post), complete with slotted cone flash hider up front. At the rear an elevation-only, U-notch, tangent-type marked up to





Same old, the action is pure AK, with the only difference being the sporter butt, which necessitates the trigger lever and guard being moved rearwards



Left side showing the QD scope mount and rear sight, if using larger objective scopes you will need medium/high rings to clear it

300m in 100m increments. Controls are basic with a cocking handle forward on the right, below/rear is the large safety that pushes up for SAFE and down to FIRE, typically it's stiff! The trigger guard is massive with a wide, lightly curved blade offering a 2-stage pull.

First pressure takes up the slack that builds to a wall then there's a reasonably crisp/firm, 5-6lbs break. Forward of the trigger guard on the right is a grey, press-up catch, which is the manual bolt hold open, there's no automatic last round facility. The magazine release is a push-forward lever set on a block at the rear of the well. It looks odd

as on the military-style guns it also acts as the front of the trigger guard. Inspection shows the actual hammer mechanism is in the same place, with the blade and linkage moved rearwards to suit the butt-style.

SCOPE UP

FSU supplied a BP-02, Weaver-type scope base that slides onto the NV rail and locks in place by a lever, which is the best design I have used to date. To this I fitted a Leupold 4.5-14x50- LRT, as it would allow me to reach out and see what both calibres were capable of. Ammunition consisted of PPU 123-grain 7.62x39mm and a cross section of 223 Rem in various weights from 53 to 75-grains. Magazines are polymer and though the same size, capacity differs with 10 in 223 and 5 in 7.62. There are other capacities (5, 20 and 30) and even the 75-round RPK drum for the 7.62 version. Weighing 8 lbs bare-backed the Sporter really starts to put the pounds on with the scope and mount on top.

On Saiga's AK47-type rifles everything is small, with a short butt LOP (length of pull) and a minimal cross sectional area to the shoulder plate, no butt comb worth speaking of and a tiny forend. On the Sporter things are reversed with for once a decent LOP and an acceptable head position. The only negative now is that the cocking handle is too far forward! I have long arms, but I can only just get the first joint of my index finger on the hook! If ever a straight-pull action needed a drop back cocking handle the Sporter does!

HIGH MOUNT

On the point of scope mounting the rear sight base wings do mean you will need medium height rings if you want to fit something like a 50mm objective. This then lifts the scope just out of the comfort zone, so the next addition was an Eagle Butt bag that gives enough extra comb height for a reasonable (ish) stock weld.



Given the limited scope mounting options the BP-02 Weaver mount is worth the investment



Gut feeling is that the 223 version will shoot best with bullets from 62 to 69-grains

Bare-backed the Sporter tips the scale at 8 lbs, which should get you out to 100-yards



WE RECKON

- It's cheap and reliable, but needs work
- 223 versions is the only way to go for PR use
- Needs a cocking handle conversion and spare hi-cap magazines

Though technically a hunting rifle I see the Sporter more aimed at the Practical market, given it can shoot, it could be of interest! At just £459 (223 Rem gun) the BP-02 mount adds £65 to that. Magazine prices show a 30-round polymer at £42 (currently out of stock) or a steel 30 at £59. So the whole package with a couple of spares costs a maximum of £642. I think a side handle conversion from Bradley Arms is around £100, so you are around £250 cheaper than an entry level AR15. So now the question can it shoot? FSU says on its website: "the .223 model is capable of hitting regularly Fig.11 target at 600 yards!"

AMMO FUSSY

The twist rate of the 223 was 1-9", meaning it should handle a good cross section of bullet weights. I was not as concerned about the 7.62x39mm as its .310" bore requires the standard, military load of a 123-grain FMJ bullet @ 2300 fps. Reloading here is not really worth the effort! My interest was would the extra 5" of barrel improve upon the inconsistent, 3-4" groups you normally get from a 16", 7.62mm AK at 100-yards?

The 223 gun proved very ammo fussy and shot badly with the 55 (PPU and Remington) and 60 grain Hornady TAP loads, shooting raggedy and inconsistent 3-4" groups which did surprise me. Switching to some 62-grain SS 109 I got my first inkling of what it was capable of, with 1.5-2" on average. Likewise some old MEN 63-grain

SPs did equally as well. Both PPU and Hornady 75-grain Match BTHPs were awful at around 5", not really surprised as they work better with a 1-8" twist. As I had brought along some 52-grain Hornady match HPs I tried them and weirdly they shot best of all at 1.5". Not sure how they would fare at 600-yards though?

My gut feeling is that the Sporter will like bullets from 62 to 69/70-grains, though I did not have any 69-grain Sierra BTHP Match loads, but I feel that would be the one. Though the 52-grain Hornady was a real oddity given how the 55s and 60 did not perform. So taking the average you could say the 223 could shoot 2" at worst at 100-yards. Given a Fig 11 is 18" wide then in perfect conditions (no wind and a good shot) you might expect a sub 18" group at 600, might... However, it will not shoot as tight as a custom AR such as an SGC Speedmaster, but then again it's under half that price!

AS EXPECTED

The 7.62x39mm gun was very much as expected, to be honest I do not think I have ever seen this calibre shoot well and I have also used the RPK, which is the long barrelled (20") Russian Light Machine Gun version. But then again it was never meant too, as it is an assault rifle cartridge purely designed for close range work and firepower. The longer 21" barrel did bring the groups down a little too around 3" but I feel it would be struggling much past 200-yards. At 300 from a 100-yard zero you already have -25" of drop to compensate for and 17 1/2" of windage (10mph @ 3 o'clock). At 600

velocity is just 1016 fps, drop is -200" and wind 82" – see what I mean? However, given the low cost of ammo and the rifle it would be attractive for the club shooter who has no aspirations past 200-yards and is of a vaguely practical bent.

Generally the AK action is reliable and in either calibre showed no issue with primary extraction (unsticking the fired case from the chamber). The 7.62 empties showed a double diameter neck when they came out. This is intentional as it shows that it come from either a sporter or military gun. The cocking handle is just too far forward and you have to break your position slightly to operate it. Equally annoying the fired cases come out and bounce off your knuckles, which gets painful on a 20-round string! So a drop-back handle is in my opinion mandatory, or get a heavy glove... The lack of automatic hold open is a bit annoying but not a disaster and the safety is clunky and hard to operate!

Of the two the 223 is the only real choice if you are thinking Practical Rifle use. However with the right weight ammo it should keep you in the game to a greater degree. Plus you could definitely do with a couple of 30-round magazines for the high round count stages, so include them in the package when you buy or you will never get up and running...

TECHNICAL SPECIFICATIONS

■ Name	Saiga Sporter
■ Action	hybrid straight-pull
■ Calibres	223 Rem & 7.62x39mm
■ Capacity	10 (DM)
■ Barrel	21"
■ Weight	8lbs (un-scoped)
■ Sights	Y
■ Scope mount	Y (AK-dedicated)
■ Manual hold open	Y
■ Prices	£449 (7.62x39mm) £459 (223 Rem) BP-02 Weaver mount £65
■ Contact	FSU Connections, 01344 750735 www.rusmilitary.com

The 7.62x39mm version despite the longer barrel is still a reasonably short range option

