



Just champion

Rob McCabe is mightily impressed by a radical new design from the North's biggest manufacturer

COULD YOU just run through the changes from last year's model one more time, please?"

That's a question I've asked of manufacturers more than once over the years, having been presented at a new-model launch with a caravan that makes you feel as though you're in a spot-the-difference competition.

"What... you mean you didn't notice the lighter shade of beige on the scatter cushions? And don't forget the taps, which have five grooves on the knob instead of last year's four."

Suffice it to say that no such line of questioning took place upon seeing the Conqueror for the first time. Even if Swift had made no changes at all to the interior, the 2011 vintage of its range-topping line-up would still merit the description 'radically different'.

Inside and out, this is one of the most attention-grabbing caravans of recent years, so we're excited to be able to bring

you this early test of the four-berth/end-washroom Conqueror 530.

CONSTRUCTION

In common with many contemporary touring designs, the new Conqueror owes quite a bit to motor caravans: view it from certain angles and you can almost imagine it has a wheel at each corner and a steering wheel.

The bold, new roof capping rails that integrate with the even bolder new GRP front panel is a good example of this dalliance with the dark side*. And Swift itself admits that the panoramic front roof window – at the very heart of the Conqueror's visual identity – is an idea with its roots in the automotive world.

The entire bodyshell has been beefed up, with 32mm-thick laminated roof and walls promising increased strength and improved insulation. Even the wheel arches are insulated to help eliminate cold spots in the relevant floor-level

storage areas. The massive lumps of steel that serve as corner steadies look like they'll still be around long after the Forth Bridge has given up the ghost.

All exterior panels are joined immaculately to each other – and the craftsmanship is just as pleasing inside. Locker doors open and close with confidence and precision, slats and drawers glide like birds on the wing and the cabling/plumbing infrastructure has been made as unobtrusive as possible. All very impressive.

TOWABILITY

You wouldn't buy a big, equipment-laden caravan such as this and expect to tow it behind your Ford Mondeo or VW Passat. This particular Conqueror is firmly in SUV territory, given the need for something with a kerbweight of about 1,950kg. There's a built-in hitch stabiliser, of course, and both the fridge and microwave are right over the

axle – good news on the weight distribution front.

USABILITY

I've never tested a caravan with better storage provision than this one. From the two little moulded key trays either side of the 12V control panel above the door, through to the exterior locker on the nearside wall that gives access right across to the offside (ideal for carrying the awning, if noseweight allows), the 530 excels in all areas.

Those with demanding kitchen storage requirements have more lockers, drawers, cupboards and pull-out racks than they'll know what to do with. The cavernous cupboard on the offside wall has been dedicated to the kitchen, as suggested by the extensive pull-out wire racking within.

Elsewhere, it's the same story. The new moulded front panel by the panoramic window has a couple of

useful-sized trays, while the overhead lockers either side of it extended so far forward, I struggled to reach their ends. The spaceframe construction of the furniture allows the now familiar – but very welcome – full-width-opening front bedlocker hatches.

The roomy locker by the caravan door is a good idea, although I sense a lost opportunity here. By making it shelving instead of a twin-door cupboard, it could have served as a shoe rack – helpful if you don't have an awning in which to deposit sand-strewn flip-flops. This same area has a shelf, two coat hooks and a long mirror with downlighter above – terrific on the user-friendliness front.

Owners who tour all year round will benefit from the new internal fresh water tank (15-litre capacity), which complements the usual external pump. The nearside exterior wall houses a mains socket and a connection for a gas barbecue.

You won't see a space heater in the photographs – there isn't one. Instead, there's an Alde radiator central heating system boasting cunningly-concealed outlets throughout the caravan. This fully-programmable set-up – which also looks after heating water – is new on single-axle Conquerors. It wasn't up and running in our very early test vehicle, so I can't comment on its effectiveness.

And a big hurrah for the arrival of a simple, slide-out extension for the surface of the front chest: not only secure, but practical and efficient, too.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

The lounge is simply outstanding. All four corners are extremely comfortable, the front two benefiting enormously from the fact that the backs of the lounging heads are miles clear of blinds and curtain pelmets. The huge corner-bolsters are, if anything, a bit too bolster-ful for their own good: a soupçon more squishiness would have been better.

Even with four up here, there's loads of room, both on the sofas themselves and on the floor: the 7ft 6in (2.3m) width means feet-clashing encounters will be much reduced. Manhandle those big bolsters out of the way and you'll get two sumptuously comfortable single beds, or pull out the slats and shuffle a few bits of upholstery to get an equally luxurious double.

The side dinette's a good 'un. Both the seats and the clip-on table are amply proportioned for daytime use and, as such, both play a part in ensuring that bed number three is a good place to be. The cantilever bunk swings out and up into place within minutes, and all the supplied mattress sections fit nice and snugly. The three-quarter-length curtain that provides privacy at night stows neatly out of the way when not in use. >>



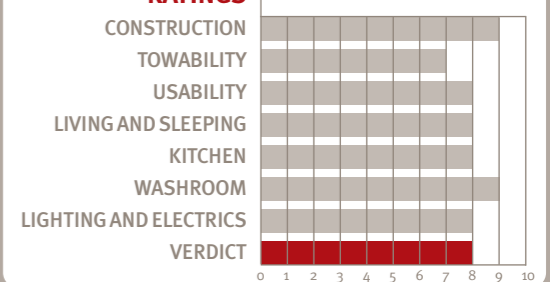
Cream-coloured cupboards contribute to the visual appeal



Sun roof at the front is a major talking point

“ This is one of the most attention-grabbing caravans of recent years ”

RATINGS



RRP	£18,485
Overall length	23ft 8in (7.22m)
Overall width	7ft 6in (2.31m)
Overall height	8ft 7in (2.62m)
Internal length	18ft 1in (5.50m)
Max internal height	6ft 5in (1.95m)
MRO	1,487kg (29.3cwt)
MTPLM	1,650kg (32.5cwt)
User payload	163kg (3.2cwt)
Berths	4
NCC approved	Yes

Figures supplied by manufacturer

Club insurance: 01342 336610 • Info: swiftleisure.co.uk

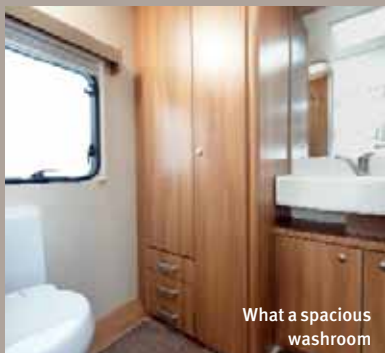




Microwave is at a sensible level; curvy lines abound



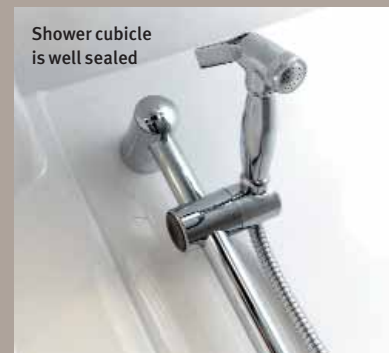
Comfortable additional dining area



What a spacious washroom



New Conqueror boasts a sleek exterior look



Shower cubicle is well sealed

Supplied for test by: Swift Group Ltd, Dunswell Road, Cottingham, East Yorkshire HU16 4JX. Call 01482 847332

So, what of that new panoramic window? I think it's a worthwhile feature that lets in more of the sky, and it certainly makes for an impressive focal point. At night, just slide the blind along.

KITCHEN

With the exception of the cheap-looking surround for the microwave (now lowered to something approaching eye level), this is a handsome kitchen indeed. The trio of side-hinged, cream-coloured cupboards looks great and helps give the kitchen area its own identity.

There's a decent slab of work surface – and what a clever idea to have more space underneath it, atop the locker and drawer that sits to the right of the fridge. You can stash the kettle, toaster and any other superfluous stuff here while you create your culinary masterpieces. Also, there's a

small area on the offside, which is at the same height as the main kitchen worktop.

The new sink features a neat combined strainer/plug and a small 'occasional' drainer – there's the usual big plastic clip-on thing as well. Lighting is still poor, though.

WASHROOM

It's to the credit of Swift's designers that they managed to create such an open, spacious-feeling living/kitchen area and still had enough room left over for such a big washroom.

If you were on a rally field or basic CL and dependent entirely on en-suite facilities, you would struggle to better this. The well-sealed shower cubicle has plenty of stowage areas for soap, gel and shampoo, and there's ample accommodation for other toiletries elsewhere.

The presence of the generously-sized wardrobe/drawer unit, complete with its own courtesy light, helps make this feel as much like a dressing room as a washroom. The new granite-look wash-hand basin lives underneath an enormous, well-illuminated mirror.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

The lack of worthwhile lighting in the kitchen is the only demerit in an otherwise spectacularly well-equipped caravan. Including the one on the outside wall, there are eight mains sockets, including three on the moulded binnacle ahead of the front chest of drawers. One of these also accompanies TV aerial/12V connections, as does the one on the shelf opposite the kitchen.

There are no ceiling dome lights in the main body of the caravan – instead, there's a recessed, five-bulb panel on the new front superstructure and roof-level striplights along both sidewalls. That's more than enough, even before you take into account the six multi-directional reading lights (four in the front dinette, two in the side) that are powerful little blighters in their own right.

The washroom is very well served, with a ceiling dome and two downlights.

VERDICT

This is an impressive and extremely eye-catching new caravan that's well-built, thoughtfully laid out and lavishly equipped. ■

*A phrase delivered with lightness of heart, motor caravanners – please don't write.

Practical sleeping arrangements for four

