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Good Sport

This brand-new model from the Swift Group has more than a sporting chance of being a success, says **Rob McCabe**

ADDING THE the word 'Sport' to a vehicle's name usually means a 'get-bigger' price tag to accompany the 'go-faster' badge on its bodywork. However, the marketing folk at Swift Group have taken the opposite view. So it is that the brand-new Sterling Eccles Sport, and its sibling Swift Challenger Sport, are cheaper and lighter than the plusher, Sport-less Eccles and Challenger models in the company's portfolio.

The Sports are also lighter than the Swift Charisma and Sterling Europa models they have replaced – two more names consigned to the caravanning archives, then.

This stylish-looking 636 twin-axle six-berther is a new, triple-bunk layout in a range that itself does great justice to the word 'new' – everything from the chassis up is brand-spanking, so we'd best get on and see how it all stacks up.

CONSTRUCTION

One word will do to describe how this Sport has been put together – faultlessly. The joinery work has been carried out with precision – not just on the furniture that's on view, but behind the scenes as well. Opening the cupboards and lockers in a caravan often reveals a 'swept under the carpet' approach to hoses/cables and their apertures, but not here: everything is hidden from view behind neat trunking.

Such slick presentation and the high quality of the materials used really make you feel that you're in a classy caravan.

Best of all, though, are the slats that, in the usual way, slide out from under the front chest to make up the double bed. Quite literally, they run on rails to guarantee that they will never, ever come out. Having been provoked to the brink of

extreme violence by wayward slats in the past, this clever solution is a joy to behold.

Outside, the new body comprises a GRP front panel (with the optional £300 sunroof in place), a plastic one at the back and aluminium sidewalls, topped off by a bonded roof. It's all very fresh and modern.

TOWABILITY

It's a big, twin-axle tourer that needs a vehicle with some muscle and bulk to pull it. That given, there won't be any problem here. Al-Ko's ATC traction control system is a welcome standard feature, backed up by a hitch-mounted stabiliser. And, of course, you have four wheels on the road at any given time (if you haven't, you need to rethink your driving style), which brings obvious stability benefits.

If you've never reversed a twin-axle caravan before, you'll be pleasantly

surprised the first time you try it, noting how it moves more predictably and resolutely than a single-axle.

USABILITY

Sit right at the front of the 636 and turn around – it goes a long way back, giving it something of the feel of a small apartment rather than a caravan. This is a holiday home with a significant presence; formidably so with a big awning attached.

If you can somehow manage to resist gliding those wonderful slats in and out, the sofas in the lounge are long enough to make two good single beds, if that's your preference. That's pleasing versatility in an area that's often compromised.

The main compromise on board this caravan comes further back. The washroom is located such that it's effectively an en-suite facility for the rear bedroom when the concertina blind is drawn across to separate it from the rest of the living area.

So, anyone needing to take advantage of what the washroom has to offer in the middle of the night or early in the morning has to slide open the blind (not a quiet operation by any means) to reach it. Not every family will be bothered by this, but it's worth pointing out nonetheless.

When the bunks aren't in use, you can pile the lower pair's mattresses on the top one and hinge the bases up to give a terrific storage area. Cleverly, the middle bunk hinges on the wall side so that the base protects the window, while the bottom one hinges on the other side, the base then providing a bulkhead to keep items contained when under tow. A big hatch allows access to this area from the outside.

The wardrobe at the back of the bedroom has little shelves that correspond with the heights of the bunks, so Swift has, in my opinion, missed a trick by not providing access to said shelves from the bunks.

There's more hanging space available in the big (nay, huge), double-doored cupboard above the fridge, just behind the side dinette. Indeed, it has to be said that storage overall is generous almost to a fault, even with six on board. There's another giant of a floor-level cupboard in the kitchen, plenty of shelving, two lots of pull-out wire racks, deep lockers and unfettered access to the front bedlockers, thanks to hatches that run the entire width.

Other nice-to-see touches include a bin on the inside of the door, blinds and flyscreens that can be used together to foil the winged upstarts whose only aim is to make your life miserable on summer evenings, and a front chest extension that simply slides out from under the existing surface – no need to move everything you've already piled on there.

However, the loose-fit carpets aren't the most snug-fitting in the world, they're not

secured by Velcro and the middle section is a behemoth of a thing that would have benefited from being cut in half to make it easier to lift and store.

LIVING AND SLEEPING

Yes, I know – that panoramic window at the front of the roof looks pretty cool, doesn't it? It helps to make the lounge a brighter and airier place, too. Just one problem, though – your near-£18k outlay doesn't buy you it. If you want one on your Eccles Sport, you'll need to spend another £300.

What you do get is a roomy, commendably comfortable and welcoming place in which to sit and sleep: it's one of those lounges that you look forward to getting back to after a tiring day out.

Three of the four corners are great to flop into, the exception being the edge of the nearside sofa next to the entrance door, which offers nowt to lean against. It would have been easy to extend the wooden edge high enough to plonk a cushion in there, so there's a demerit for not having done so.

What with those slats and all, making up the double bed is a delight. So is lying in it, as long as you remember to rearrange the upholstery so that the beefy kneerolls are positioned for minimum intrusion.

The three bunks have supportive, tightly-fitting mattresses that promise quality holiday accommodation for the brood, although there may be a bit of coin-tossing (or just all-out bickering) involved to see who gets landed with the slightly claustrophobic-feeling bottom berth, devoid as it is of a window – the presence of the exterior hatch puts paid to that. The other two are window-equipped, complete with blind and flyscreen. The bunks are just 1ft 10in wide, so do try before you buy if you're intending to accommodate broad-shouldered teenagers back here.

The side dinette's a good 'un, offering two very usable seats and, with the help of the clip-on table, a most agreeable single bed (5ft 9in long) to complete the sextet. A curtain, discreetly tucked out of the way during the day, pulls around to provide some privacy at night.

KITCHEN

It takes only a nanosecond to pick up on the kitchen's most noticeable attribute – there's loads of work surface. Take a few seconds longer to open and close a few doors and another one comes to light – plenty of places in which to put things.

Included among said places are the highly-attractive, two-tone overhead lockers, seemingly devoid of handles. They're actually concealed behind the lower lip – just pull to open. The enormous cupboard under the sink gives a proper home to the sink cover and plastic drainer.

Given how scarily easy it is at meal preparation time for a caravan kitchen to >>



Side dinette turns into a 5ft 9in-long bed



A lounge worth coming home to

“One word will do to describe how this Eccles Sport 636 has been put together – faultlessly”

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RRP	£17,970 OTR
Overall length	26ft (7.93m)
Overall width	7ft 5in (2.25m)
Overall height	8ft 7in (2.62m)
Internal length	20ft 7in (6.27m)
Max internal height	6ft 5in (1.95m)
MRO	1,470kg (29cwt)
MTPM	1,650kg (32.5cwt)
User payload	180kg (3.5cwt)
Berths	6
NCC approved	Yes

Figures supplied by manufacturer

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Smart, functional kitchen has a huge worktop



Storage is good



Privacy guaranteed



Slats on rails – brilliant!



Nice – but needs more cupboard space



Bunks are narrow but comfortable...



... and hinge away during the day

take on the appearance of a student bedsit, both these built-in benefits are extremely worthwhile. So, too, is the fact that you have the full range of cooking options – hob (including one electric hotplate), oven, grill and neatly built-in Sanyo microwave.

The striplight on the underside of the lockers could do with being a tad longer to shed some light on the hob, but the ceiling-mounted dome is ideally sited to illuminate the furthest reaches of that airfield-runway-like swathe of work surface.

It is a great kitchen – smart but, above all, superbly functional.

WASHROOM

Given the marvellous storage options elsewhere in this caravan, the fact that you get nothing more than a cupboard under the basin in the washroom is a bit of a surprise. The amount of product that the narcissist masquerading as my 15-year-old son now insists on dragging around with him everywhere would, by itself, take up all the available space. The shower is better provided for, boasting two good-sized trays for big bottles of shampoo or gel.

Lighting has been well thought-out, with a bright lamp directly above the big mirror – where it's most useful – and another in the shower cubicle. With a frosted window, a skylight and pale-wood finish, it's a pleasingly bright and airy room.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

Four mains sockets? Why, thank you, Mr Swift – most generous. However, quite why the lounge gets two of them – right next to each other, even – when the bedroom is a socket-free zone is puzzling. Not only are the occupants denied the opportunity to operate their battery-drained laptops, consoles and mobiles while lounging in their den, but a socket back here would have been right on the money for hairdryer/straightener users, too.

The offside shelf that separates the front lounge from the side dinette is the designated TV station, although a longer coaxial lead from the aerial socket could be (mostly) tucked out of sight behind the sofa backrest if your preferred viewing location is the front chest.

The JVC stereo radio/CD player with an auxiliary socket for an MP3 player is nice, but the lacklustre Radiomobile speakers are ripe for an upgrade.

All the lighting in the main body of the caravan (not the washroom) is rated as low-energy, which – as well as helping out the environment – will reduce drain on the battery if you're dependent on 12V power on a rally field or CL.

There's plenty of it to go around. Over-locker strips of mood lighting provide a pleasant ambience in the evening, with four downlighters in the lounge and a strip of LEDs on the moulded ceiling panel giving a wide range of options. Two downlighters more than look after the needs of the side dinette; the same can be said of the ceiling dome and individual bunk lights in the bedroom.

The water heater has two mains power settings, including a 1,300W one for when you need hot water in a hurry – perfect for those 'but I thought *you* turned the hot water on' moments.

VERDICT

Being in a caravan that is simply a nice place to be is one of the most enjoyable aspects of ownership for many. If that description applies to you, you won't feel short-changed by this lovely model. It oozes quality, both in terms of how it's presented and how it's built.

The bunks are narrow in the beam and may not suit larger/older children but, if the 636 can pass this important forecourt test, you're guaranteed classy holiday accommodation for years to come. ■