

On Test Swift Escape 696

SIX-PACK

Swift Escape 696

The very latest entry-level coachbuilt from the Swift Group offers genuine family-swallowing talents



When it comes to family-friendly, bunk-equipped motorcaravans, the UK industry has, of late, taken its eye off the ball. Quite a few British converters have had a go at producing the design - Auto-

Trail, Elddis and even Timberland (with a van conversion) have entered and then left the bunk-bed fray. Why?

In the UK, the mainstream market is still for mature couples, mainly looking for two-berth comfort - maybe with an occasional bed or two for family and friends, but mostly, their grandchildren. Across the Channel, things are different: motorhomers are often younger, and with families to accommodate on holiday.

So, the majority of bunk-equipped 'vans hail from mainland Europe, with the likes of CI, Pilote and Chausson importing interesting examples into the UK. These are all fine and dandy, but check carefully, as some offer more basic kitchens and not enough three-point belted seats (some offer lap strap-only belts) to allow all residents to travel safely.

Enter the Swift Group with the latest model from the successful Escape range. Although Escape is easy to identify as an entry-level motorhome outside, the insides raise the game, with great-looking furniture and good quality upholstery.

Though these 'vans are not luxury items, Swift has put thought into providing the kit that us British motorhomers want. Thus, mains sockets where they're needed, good lighting, heating with mains power and decent cookers

can all be found within. In common with the rest of the range for 2011, the 696 has the new graphics and a rear chassis extension that's ready to accept a towbar. Under the skin, framing and floor are now in stronger, rot-proofed wood.

WHAT'S IT FOR?

If bunk-equipped motorhomes have limited appeal in the UK market, what's their forte?

It's a simple concept: these 'vans may be designed for families, but they still provide comfortable accommodation for couples and any number of folks up to the maximum. In fact, cost effectiveness is a very good reason to buy: sharing the 'van (and its costs) with family and friends should allow lots of holidays - even days out and weekends doing just about any activity desired.

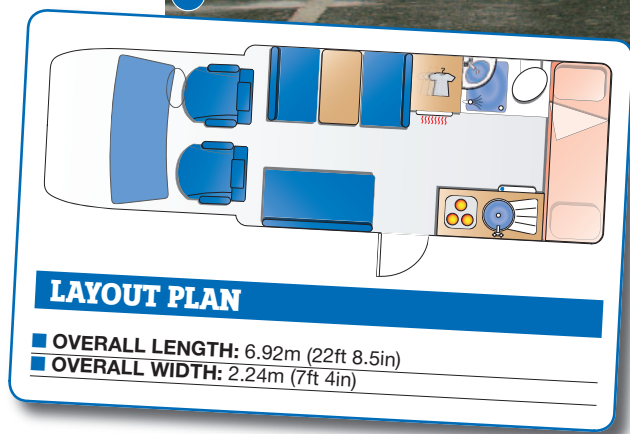
THE LOOK

The 696 is entirely conventional for a family motorhome. Standing at just under 6.92 metres long, it displays the boxy external characteristics that mark it out as an entry-level design. First advantage with this Brit is the UK nearside caravan door: when the kids decide to jump out at the kerbside they'll land on the pavement, not into the road.

Entry is through an equally entry-level caravan door here, fitted with two items from the



Words & pictures by Dave Hurrell





- 1 2011 Escapes get new graphics, stronger timber and towbar-friendly rear
- 2 Looking towards the lounge of this family-friendly motorhome shows off the great looking furniture
- 3 No surprises layout-wise as transverse bunks stand aft of kitchen and washroom, with lounge up front
- 4 Classic lounge uses a Pullman dinette to provide four fully-belted travel seats
- 5 An extra seat and swing-out table extension bring better dining

great-value comfort pack - the electric step is far easier to use than its manual cousin, while the flyscreen door will be a boon on summer holidays.

The layout gives no surprises. An overcab double bed leads a Pullman dinette with side sofa. Aft, the kitchen stands across from the washroom, while transverse bunks occupy the far rear. Decor consists of classy-looking cabinets sporting concealed latches and silver

trim. The upholstery, while neutral in colours, adds spice with a black fleck and flora-based design on the backrests. All makes a great impression and felt cosy even on a cold, wet day.

ESCAPING

Fiat's Ducato provides the lower profile camper chassis, while the test 'van sported the optional 130 horsepower engine with six-speed gearbox. A decent stereo is standard fare, the windows electric, the doors remote-locked.

However, the mirrors are manually-adjusted, there's no passenger airbag and no air-conditioning. None of these items are offered on the options list either - something that's probably done to keep overall costs down: only two chassis options are available making purchasing and production planning more efficient.

The excellent on-road qualities of the Ducato are well known by old hands. Very easy to drive and comfy, performance was very good even with the bulky overcab body above and behind the cab. Without the extra 30 horsepower and six-speed gearbox that the engine upgrade provides, this 'van should perform well. However, when fully loaded (and with its near-brick-like aerodynamics) the larger motor will be a boon.

The 696's handling was light and quite precise, while the whole structure felt solid, even over rough roads. Conversion noise was lacking too, with only the cooker tinkling away; a tea towel will easily damp this problem.

SITTING

The lounge layout is based around a four-seater Pullman dinette, and for very good reason. It's the dinette that features the - essential - four, fully-belted travel seats



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that help provide safe travel for the full complement of residents.

Because of this configuration, the cab seats (unlike in many designs) don't swivel. This can have its advantages: with a family onboard there's a separate space that can be used to banish the kids and their PlayStations, while domestic duties - getting the tea ready - are underway. Adults may even be able to hide here with a glass from time to time.

Back in the lounge, seating is available for six people and when it's time for that tea, there's a clever little feature on the menu. As might be expected, the table extends to accommodate all diners - an extension swinging out from beneath. This isn't really stable enough for 'tough steak cutting' operations, but plenty good enough to support portions of 'spag bol' and the like.

The clever feature is the fact that the forward portion of the sofa's slide-out base (all of it is part of the lounge bed) bridges the gap between sofa and dinette seat to provide an extra seat and make getting six around the



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table more comfortable. It's always gonna be a bit of a squeeze with all at this table, but this simple little idea is a good'un.

There's no fancy TV locker, but above the side sofa, a set of sockets provides 12/230V power and pre-wired aerial socket. There's also an outside aerial inlet (in the external leisure battery box that also houses the mains hook-up point) to allow easy connection of your freestanding satellite dish or campsite signal supply.

COOK'S ESCAPE

Centre of operations in the galley is Thetford's neat Triplex stove. Here, this half-height device offers three hob burners - one of which is a high-speed device for woks and boiling the first-of-the-day kettle in double-quick time.

To the stove's left is Swift's own GRP sink, with a slab of good-looking worktop next door. Aside from adding style, this also incorporates a hook-on drainer and drop-in chopping board - both with dedicated stowage in the big cupboard below.

Said cupboard also contains a pull-out utensil tray. This is a good thing as the only other drawer is a tiny item for knives, forks and other cutlery.

Another small locker downstairs and two big ones above complete kitchen storage, while the fridge is quite modest (for a family) at 80 litres. There's a mains socket above the worktop, and task lighting is confined to single fluorescent over the cooker. I'd like to see a second, over the sink, but retro-fitting one should be easy.

FAMILY BATHROOM

Ablutions are entirely conventional, with a solid wet-room floor (two drains) served by a trigger-head shower and nylon curtain. The washbasin unit has been around for a while but does the business with counter-top and a big cupboard below. Another large locker at high level, means there should be plenty of space for all the family's bits and bobs, while below, the superior Thetford C250 loo offers electric flushing and a wheeled cassette.

SLEEPING

The overcab bed is typical of the breed - approached by an alloy ladder, it has

I LIKED

- The price
- 130bhp engine option
- Excellent value Comfort Pack
- Good quality furniture and upholstery
- Simple, but clever lounge seating
- Well equipped kitchen
- Inboard fresh water tank

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A more modern washroom design

I DISLIKED

- Lack of electrically adjustable mirrors
- No cab air-conditioning option

reasonable headroom, a wall-mounted light and window. The bed base hinges up so there's less head bashing during daytime activities.

The lounge makes up into a big transverse double (precluding the use of the overcab's ladder) by pulling out the two sofa bases and lowering the table. Infills help complete the bed and are best stored in the overcab during the day. The finished bed is strong, flat and comfy.

An alternative is to use the dinette as a lengthways single (now the ladder can be used), bearing in mind that it's a whisker short of six feet long.

The sofa, meanwhile could accommodate a little one, as it's four-foot seven long.

Aft, and the reason-to-buy bunks are of decent size and comfy. Both get ventilation (window and roof) and lights, while the fixed access ladder is a nice touch, but one that needs a deal of agility to use.

6 Kitchen is compact, but well-equipped and capable

7 The entirely conventional washroom still offers an upmarket toilet and lots of stowage space

8 The overcab bed can, if desired, be partnered with short single beds

9 Deal-making rear bunks work well

10 Transverse double bed is strong, flat and comfy

11 The bottom bunk folds up to help make a slim garage

12 Sliding doors hide the garage's contents



Test report extra



STORE AND SUPPORT

Like many of the type the bunk space converts to create a slim garage. Simply hinge up the bottom bunk (having first shifted its folding mattress upstairs). The space can be accessed from inside and through an offside external door. Note that this door will be wider on production models.

Inside, a neat pair of sliding doors encloses the garage space. There's more stowage space around the interior, including a deep, two-door wardrobe and space under the

dinette seating.

A full complement of people will have to travel quite light (both from a payload and space point of view) but there is quite a lot of room in this motorhome. The overcab will probably do service as a storage area - as squashy bags of holiday clothes can live here.

Life support gear - fresh water tank, pump leisure battery box and water heater are all neatly grouped under the side sofa. All are easy to get at, as the side sofa bases lift, supported by gas struts.

Space heating is by Truma convector - a versatile unit that works in near silent fashion. Add the optional Comfort pack and you get mains operation and blown-air distribution - making most of your hook-up and gaining a heat outlet in the washroom are two things that are worth the £499 cost.

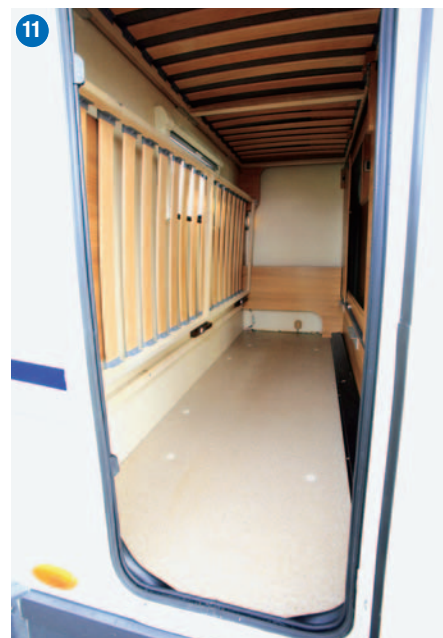
Lighting is best described as basic, but it does include some decent ceiling lights - something that can even be absent in more upmarket 'vans.

GREAT ESCAPE?

The Escape range compares well with Italian entry-level 'vans, strutting its stuff in finer style for the same kind of money.

Better quality, both in looks and feel, are great, but there's more to the 696 than that. This 'van provides nicely designed, sensible features that should appeal to British motorhomers.

Although we're talking entry-level, work out how many holidays can be had and you may find that the unit cost is actually very attractive - to say nothing of having your own holiday home on wheels. ■



TEST EXTRA SPECIFICATION

■ **Price OTR from:** £37,495

■ **Price as tested OTR:** £39,679

■ **The vehicle:** Fiat Ducato camper chassis cab; 2.3-litre turbo-diesel 130bhp engine; six-speed manual gearbox; front-wheel drive

■ **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle and conversion

■ **Dimensions and weights:** Length 6.92m (22ft 8.5in); width 2.24m (7ft 4in); height 2.90m (9ft 8in); gross vehicle weight 3,500kg; payload 529kg

■ **Belted seats:** 6 (including driver)

■ **Berths:** 6

■ **Beds:** Overcab double - length 2.08m (6ft 10in), width 1.37m (4ft 6in). Lounge double - length 2.08m (6ft 10in), width 1.36m (4ft 5.5in). Top rear bunk - length 1.96m (6ft 5in), width 750mm (2ft 5.5in); bottom rear bunk - length 1.93m (6ft 4in), width 730mm (2ft 5in)

■ **Water and space heating:** Truma Combi boiler, mains-gas-operation, Truma convector with blown-air, mains-gas operation

■ **Tanks:** Fresh water, inboard, 68 litres (15 gallons); waste water, underslung, 68 litres (15 gallons)

■ **Gas:** 2 x 7kg cylinders

■ **Options on test vehicle:** Upgrade to 130bhp engine/six-speed gearbox (£1,685), Comfort Pack - electric external step, flyscreen door, dual-fuel space heating/blown-air upgrade, windscreen blind, 2 scatter cushions (£499)

■ **Other options available:** None

