



Family values

Nick Harding and family are impressed after doing more than 2000 miles in the Design & Drive awards overall winner

Above: on the generous pitches at Moat Farm site, County Wicklow

Vehicle supplied for test by: Swift Motorhomes, Dunswell Road, Cottingham, East Yorkshire HU16 4JX. Call 01482 847332

AN UNBIASED motor caravan test report? No such thing. So, I'll declare my interest right here, right now. I was fortunate enough to be invited along as a judge at this year's Club-organised Design & Drive awards for motor caravans and, almost as soon as I'd finished assessing the Swift Escape 686, I was pretty confident it was going to emerge the overall winner. It did.

But there's a world of difference between evaluating for a competition and finding out what it's really like when it comes to actually using the thing. Hence, another declaration: this report is based on what turned out to be over a month's full-on use this summer – including tours of England's Cotswolds, a week in Scotland and a fortnight in Ireland – all with a family of four on board.

The 686 is a six-berth but I've a feeling its appeal lies especially with groups of four,

giving you great flexibility regarding seating and sleeping. Also, if you budget for 100kg per person plus accoutrements, the Escape's payload capacity is likely to be overstretched with six on board.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

The vehicle goes down the same Swift Group production lines that give us Bessacarrs, Kon-Tikis and more, so there should be few qualms about its construction. External features extend to thick-gauge aluminium for walls and roof, sideskirts in GRP and a lower rear panel in ABS. You'll also have noted the blue cab and complementary graphics.

The start point for the 686 is not Fiat's usual X/250 chassis that's designed specifically for motor caravan conversion, but a more standard (ie cheaper) long-wheelbase chassis cab variant. This vehicle comes with a spare wheel and

tyre as standard, as opposed to the emergency inflation kit that's supplied with some more supposedly upmarket units. I've no complaints, either, about the manually-operated step at the caravan door – thoughtfully, it retains a warning buzzer to stop you driving off with it in the out position.

It's not all good news, though. Specifying a caravan door without a window is an obvious cost-cutter, but it was more its operation we found fault with. Initially, its stay kept it well away from the adjacent fridge vents (good), but it was all too easy for a gust of wind to slam it shut (not good, especially with small children around). After too many instances of this happening, the stay mechanism gave up altogether.

Inside it's certainly a family-friendly layout, thanks to a double dinette (complete with four three-point

seatbelts), well thought-out kitchen (nearside, opposite the dinette), reasonably generous washroom (offside, after the dinette) and roomy, rear U-shaped lounge. I'll keep my main critical observations to two: first, it was a surprise to see floor carpets as standard (like us, you'll doubtless feel it not worth taking them away with you); second, we really missed any kind of exterior storage access.

ON THE ROAD

I'll start with the standard Fiat chassis. It sits higher than the X/250 and I felt the ride suffered as a result. Also, both my kids complained of travel sickness – something they've not done in other motor caravans. I've already suggested to Swift a sliding window would be ideal for rear seat passengers, but again appreciate these cost more than the standard top-hinged offerings.

Fiat's latest engines are all pretty impressive. This 100bhp unit may be the least powerful of the bunch, but it put in an amazing performance here. Relatively quiet, and with 'only' a five-speed gearbox, it rarely struggled whatever the load. Best of all, it returned an overall 24.8mpg.

That lower-price base vehicle is also, unsurprisingly, lower spec too. The door mirrors adjust manually (you do miss electrics when you don't have them). However, there's remote central locking for the cab doors, and electric windows and such-like are retained. Also, Swift adds a stereo. But, a big bugbear this, it's wired into the living quarters' circuit allowing less versatility when on the move. Unfortunately, you also get repeated warnings of low levels in the water tanks as any liquids on board slosh around (my driving's smooth, but not that smooth).

Interestingly, Swift tells me every customer so far has ordered the larger engine option. Save your money is my view, but it seems I'm totally out of step on this one. I think I'd happily forego the optional Comfort Pack, too, although – at a more enticing £395 – it gives you a caravan door flyscreen, windscreen blind, a couple of scatter cushions and dual-fuel heating system. Only the latter holds any real appeal for me.

There were the usual rattles from the blinds (the cooker was easily muted, ditto plates if you put them in the dedicated racking). If there's a Campaign for Rattle-free Rides, please can I join?

LIVING ABOARD

When we couldn't eat outside, we found ourselves using the dinette for mealtimes (it coped admirably with four of us), while the rear, despite offering a pedestal table, lived up to its name as the place for lounging.

Hook-and-loop fastenings designed to keep the dinette seat cushions in place are unnecessary and actually a bit of a pain. On the subject of cushions, they're all flat – and therefore much easier to switch to bed mode than the contoured versions.

Storage is excellent. Overhead lockers have positive catches, some have shelves. There's also loads of space in the seat boxes, although costs are saved by only having access via hinged bases.

KITCHEN

Maybe it's me, but I found myself far happier with the pared-back nature of the Escape's facilities compared with more 'upmarket' motor caravans.

For example, three gas rings are plenty. The oven size is convenient (although grill performance could be better – but that goes for most cookers). We coped easily enough with the fridge's 'mere' 80-litre capacity. The blown air heating is gas-only, but >>

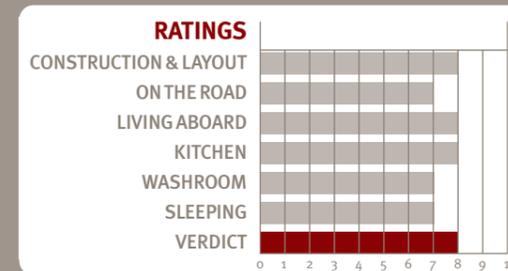


Basking in the sunshine beside the great Escape



Rear U-shaped lounge is roomy, comfortable and practical

“The rear of the Swift lived up to its name as the place for lounging”



RRP	£33,245 OTR
Options	Comfort Pack £395; upgrade to 130bhp engine £1615
Options fitted	None
Engine	Fiat Ducato 2.2-litre long-wheelbase, 100bhp
Transmission	5-speed manual, FWD
Overall length	6.92m (22ft 8in)
Internal length	4.55m (14ft 11in) (B pillar to rear)
Overall width	2.24m (7ft 4in)
Overall height	2.94m (9ft 8in)
Max internal height	1.98m (6ft 6in)
Fuel/econ/tank	Diesel/24.8mpg/19.8gal (90 litre)
MRO	2963kg (58.3cwt)
MTPLM	3500kg (68.9cwt)
User payload	537kg (10.6cwt)
Berths	6
NCC approved	Yes

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Kitchen gets away with average-size fridge and low-spec cooker, but work surface is good. Do you really need four gas rings, anyway?

corner steadies. Surprisingly, Swift doesn't currently list them as a factory-supplied option, but this is where your dealer may be able to help.

VERDICT

Cometh the hour, cometh the 'van. In case you'd forgotten, Swift announced the launch of its Escape range around the same time as the UK plunged into recession. All four current Escapes have been instant best-sellers, providing the right layouts and, just as importantly, class-beating equipment levels and styling at oh-so-keen prices. Frankly, exactly what you'd expect from the UK's largest motor caravan producer.

Actually, I think we may have found a flaw in the Design & Drive judging procedure: we're all asked to give marks for value for money based on starting prices. What would be ideal, however, is if we were able to assess the price any vehicle could command, say, some five years into the future. In such a case, this Escape would have gained even more points – because there's no doubt that family vehicles like this from recognised manufacturers will always command a premium on the second-hand market. That's just one of the reasons I think this motor caravan is an absolute winner.

Of course there are niggles, of course corners have been cut (rightly on specification rather than build quality), and I've a few issues with items of equipment that aren't family – or indeed, user – friendly.

Swift Group will always have its critics (you're the UK market leader, guys, it comes with the territory), but with this Escape 686 it has just got it so right. Swift describes sales as 'excellent'. I'm not surprised – at the price, it's also an adequate description of this unit. ■



Double dinette seating includes side-fixed table that's steady as a rock



Small basin, separate showerhead and good storage



Theftord's latest swivel-bowl toilet

again proved no particular problem. The biggest kitchen niggle was the pathetic catch for the cutlery drawer – it kept working loose.

WASHROOM

The best thing about Escape's washroom? The triggerhead arrangement for the shower – it's a great water saver and should feature in all motor caravan washrooms. Worst? The single towel holder.

Otherwise, it's all pretty much standard here, although storage again is very good, thanks to a large locker over the toilet and cupboards above and below the corner sink. The proper washroom door is a bonus.

SLEEPING

The kids slept in the overcab, parents in the easily-converted lounge double. Indeed,

the extra cushions for the dinette double were further items left at home.

No problems to report with the rear double (unless you like reading lights at all four corners), the only bed here to benefit from a slatted base.

We found the ladder to the upstairs bed creaky (you only really notice it in the middle of the night!) and curtain operation was far from slick. I still can't quite understand Swift's reasoning that the window up here should be at the opposite side to the reading light; my kids' feet were constantly coming into contact with the window blind – and there was only ever going to be one winner there.

I suspect I'm in a minority in preferring the cab window insulation pads to the blind that comes with the Comfort Pack.

One product I would consider is

