



Hit for six

The latest Swift Escape is a family-friendly six berth that seats six for travel too. **George Hinton** was suitably impressed...

Vehicle supplied for test by: **Swift Group Ltd**, Dunswell Road, Cottingham, East Yorkshire HU16 4JS. Call 01482 847332.

THIS MONTH we have been loaned for your delectation a fresh-from-the-box Escape 696, built by Swift Group. This is a new family layout which tops the award-winning Escape line-up at £37,495 OTR – it also includes a number of improvements that appear across the 2011 range.

CONSTRUCTION AND LAYOUT

The base vehicle is the ubiquitous Fiat Ducato chassis-cab with a 4.04m wheelbase and the 2.2-litre 100bhp engine as standard.

Significant constructional changes this year include a switch to impregnated redwood for the body and floor framing,

plus a new, 44mm-thick 'Xyligen'-treated, Styrofoam-insulated ply floor. Walls and roof are 32mm sandwich construction with a marine-grade aluminium outer skin.

The cab is only available in solid Imperial Blue, but the blue-and-white graphics have been redesigned this season to better link cab to living quarters. A section of dark grey tape highlights the front of the overcab pod.

The family layout crucially includes four three-point seatbelts around the dinette table, which drops to form a large double bed, then there are a pair of bunks across the tail and another double over the cab. Total accommodation is

therefore six berths with a total of six seatbelts (including cab) – but the good news doesn't stop there.

ON THE ROAD

Boasting a smooth, six-speed gearbox, the Ducato is light and viceless to drive, although reverse could ideally do with a lower ratio still. ABS braking with standard EBD/EBA is nicely progressive and visibility is good, aided by a perfectly-positioned rear lower-bunk window for through-vision.

The cab has central locking, but the usual excellent twin-lens door mirrors are manually adjusted. We must really praise

Swift for ditching the Fiat radio/CD player for a JVC unit. There are no rear speakers, but at least it doesn't switch itself off every 20 minutes when on site!

Our test vehicle was upgraded to the 2.3-litre 130bhp engine, which is smooth and quiet. If you are going to travel six-up, or make use of the new heavy-duty rear chassis extension to add a towbar, you will probably find the £1,685 investment for the extra 30bhp a sound one, though the smaller engine is surprisingly lusty.

Rear passengers on the aisle seats weren't entirely happy, as they felt they were tipping off the seat on cornering. However, this applies to most makers' dinette seats as adding higher-density foam at the ends could compromise mattress comfort. The bases are already topped with drilled plywood rather than slats, for stability.

Ride quality isn't bad, but you will want to slow right down for any road humps you can't straddle. We are pleased to report that noise levels are also low from wind and furniture once you have strategically placed your tea towels around the cooker. There is an 11in gap between cab seats for access to the rear and, despite the budget price, the cab roof bed lifts easily on gas struts to give plenty of headroom.

The only signs of economy in the spec are a single airbag for the driver, a Fiat 'Fix and Go' puncture repair and tyre inflation kit in lieu of a spare wheel and the absence of cab air-con, even as a cost option.

LIVING ABOARD

The other option on the test vehicle was the Comfort Pack, which you would be daft to turn down at just £700. This adds an automatically-retracting Omnistep, blown-air distribution to the Truma S3001 heater, pleated night blind to the windscreen, concertina door flyscreen and a pair of scatter cushions.

Again, given the price level, it is pleasing to find a Heki 2 rooflight as standard, albeit small (16in x 25in) and fitted towards the rear of the saloon. The optional step gives comfortable rises of 8in and 11in and is followed by the 9in fixed inset step, whose well has a practical, perforated rubber mat. A low-energy LED exterior light is another new 2011 feature.

Blinds are the top-hung variety, which some prefer, and the black and beige curtains are unlined, but it's good to see any at all. The cab gets matching seat upholstery, switched this season from abstract to an attractive modern floral motif, and carpet too.

Hot water comes from a Truma Ultrastore boiler under the front of the nearside settee, powered by either mains electricity or gas. Controls are on the nearside cab bulkhead, alongside 12V and 230V power outlets plus aerial socket.

Alongside the boiler is the long, thin, 65-litre inboard water tank and the intrusion of the externally-accessed 70Ah battery's locker and electric hook-up inlet, leaving no spare storage space. However, for convenience, the slatted sofa base rises on gas struts. By contrast, the dinette travel seats' bases are totally dedicated to storage, apart from the steel seatbelt frames beneath. There's also another 230V socket down there.

For clothes storage, there are three top lockers over the offside dinette and two opposite, but only one per side is shelved. However, being Swift's modular lockers with injection-moulded inner frames, shelf supports are already there should you wish to add more. The flat locker doors have an aluminium-effect trim and positive-locking catches operated by a concealed central trigger behind the bottom edge. >>

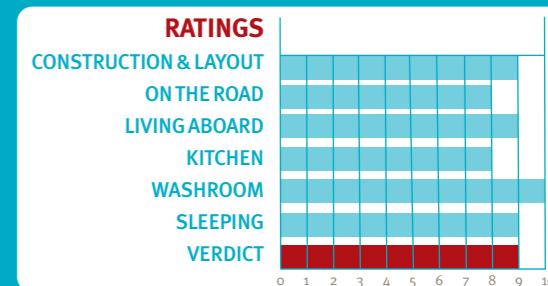


Feeding six? No problem



The Ducato is light and easy to drive

“Swift has made this model family friendly from bumper to bumper”



RRP as tested	£39,679 OTR
Base vehicle	Fiat Ducato 3500 MWB
Engine	2,287cc Multijet 4-cyl DOHC 16v common rail
Power	130bhp (95.5kW) @ 3,600rpm
Torque	236lb/ft (320Nm) @ 2,000-3,000rpm
Transmission	6-speed manual, front-wheel drive
Fuel/tank/econ	Diesel/17.6gal (80 litres)/23.8mpg
Overall length	22ft 8 1/2in (6.92m)
Overall width	7ft 3in (2.21m) exc mirrors; 8ft 10in (2.69m) inc mirrors
Overall height	9ft 8in (2.94m)
Min internal height	6ft 6in (1.98m)
MRO	2,956kg (58.2cwt)
MTPLM	3,500kg (68.9cwt)
User payload	544kg (10.7cwt)
Berths	6
NCC approved	Yes

Figures supplied by manufacturer

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Above: smart graphics now better link cab with living quarters



Kitchen is well equipped and adequately lit



Washroom is a generous 3ft 8in x 2ft 7in

A long mirror features on the double-doored wardrobe, while the stepped interior (concealing the gas locker) offers a 39in drop from the hanging rail.

Feeding six people in a six-berth can be tricky, but not in the Escape: the solid, wall-hung table is clamped to the floor through its folding leg and has a large, pivoting extension that swings out from beneath after releasing a locking bolt. No dedicated table storage is provided, but it could go on a bunk or the overcab bed.

The fresh water filler is on the nearside, with the drain tap for the rear underslung 68-litre waste tank behind the nearside rear wheel. Two gas valves are located under a false floor in the wardrobe and three more can be found under the cooker.

We particularly liked the new, large, easy-to-read 12V control panel above the entrance doorway which features multi-coloured LED status indicators. This is linked to a new mains consumer unit with mains isolators and 12V fuse board.

The heater fires up first time on its piezo igniter and its warmed air outlets are set in good positions in lounge and washroom.

KITCHEN

The 4ft 9½in-long kitchen unit includes more than 18in of work surface as well as the glass lid of the three-burner Spinflo Triplex cooker, that incorporates its grill in the top of the oven.

For this season, the linen-finish stainless steel sink has given way to a stone-effect GRP one, which looks good while new, but how durable will it be? It comes with a drop-in resin cover/chopping board so, all-told, there's plenty of space to cater for six.

Storage is plentiful courtesy of two top lockers, one fitted with wire crockery racks, and a shallow locker beneath the oven, restricted by the wheelarch behind to 6½in deep and only 4½in on the shelf. There's also a full-depth shelved cupboard between cooker and fridge with a shallow drawer at its top for your kitchen tools. A portable drainer stows under here when not required.

Above the 80-litre, Thetford N80 fridge is a convenient slide-out plastic cutlery tray. Lighting is adequate from a single 8W striplight and, if you want to use an electrical appliance, there's a convenient single socket at the left end of the splashback. If cooking is expected to be messy, the kitchen has a detachable carpet section. Overall, it's very practical.

WASHROOM

This gives an immediate good impression, starting with the domestic-type door with internal locking handle.

The toilet is Thetford's flat-top C250 rotating cassette model, fed from the main water tank, and the whole room is a generous 3ft 8in x 2ft 7in. The integral shower tray measures 15in x 27in and the shower boasts its own water control with rigger-head spray and riser-rail, tailored mat, nylon curtain and drains both ends – again far more than you'd expect for the money.

Storage is generous, comprising a shelved cupboard under the sink and a generous roof locker above the toilet. Fittings include a toothbrush mug and towel/tissue holders. There's no window but a rooflight provides light and air. The single 4½in halogen light is



Main bed is fiddly to make up but effective

switched by a domestic pull-cord switch, acknowledging that four of the users might be children – top marks!

SLEEPING

Two large double beds plus two generous permanent bunks at the rear will accommodate most families, though there may be a race for who gets the overcab or the bunks, both of which can be curtained off.

The main bed is a minimum of 4ft 6in wide x 6ft 10in, made by pulling slatted extensions out from the sofa, dropping the table and re-arranging the cushions, using some strategic infill pieces. Slightly fiddly, but it works. Four spotlights give flexible bedtime reading options.

The lower of the rear bunks is better as it has a window, measures 6ft 6in x 2ft 4in and boasts an excellent 34in of headroom. For travelling, it can be folded up to the rear wall to form a garage for cycles etc, accessed from an offside door and closed off from the interior by clever sliding doors.

The upper bunk, accessed by a vertical ladder on the washroom wall (approved by our four-year-old tester), loses 1in of headroom at 23in and has a five-way rooflight in lieu of a window. Oddly for a bunk there is no night blind, only an insect mesh. However, you can easily pop in a square of cardboard at night in summer. Each bunk has a lamp and comfy three-inch mattress on a slatted base.

The overcab bed is 6ft 7in x 4ft 6in and has 23in maximum headroom over its three-inch mattress. There is an opening window on the nearside and a hook-on alloy ladder is provided.

VERDICT

It is refreshing to see that Swift has put a huge effort into making this model truly family friendly, and at the same time used its buying power to give customers a truly excellent spec for the money. There is no exact equivalent in other Swift ranges, so if you want to take up to four children on holiday, give it a look. ■