

time to escape

Swift's budget Escape range gets a facelift – and this new family bunk bed layout

WE'VE been fans of Escape since Swift introduced these affordable models two years ago. But it will have escaped no-one's attention that we're even bigger fans of the even newer Tribute coachbuilds. And with Elddis having refreshed their Autoquest (see our Touring Test last month), it was time for Escape to visit the cosmetic surgeon too.

The results are not dramatic, but they are worthwhile. On the outside you'll immediately spot the bolder graphics and the Fiat wheeltrims, which make the new models look less budget, while the bold blue cab (now better integrated) is retained to differentiate the marque. Inside, too, the 2011 Escape is more about a subtle change of clothes than a total Gok Wan transformation. Mali Acacia woodwork looks smarter than before, while the soft furnishings follow domestic fashions for plain (oatmeal) squabs and boldly patterned backrests. Closer examination shows surprisingly upmarket build, with details like the thick washroom door with domestic-style handle.

There are practical improvements, too, such as a new floor and body framing for greater durability, a heavier duty vinyl under the removable carpets, and a chassis extension to allow the fitment of an optional homologated towbar. All worthy stuff, but the real news is an additional layout, the six-berth 696. It's similarly sized to the existing 686, but caters for kids with a pair of bunk

beds. With seatbelts for six (all three-point inertia reel type), it's been properly designed for mob-handed touring and, crucially, it has no direct competitor from Tribute or Elddis.

Based on a 100 Multijet Fiat as standard, buyers are sure to upgrade to the 130bhp engine and six-speed gearbox. And just as much of a certainty is them ticking the box marked 'Comfort Pack', thus adding a flyscreen door, gas/mains blown-air heating, a pleated windscreen blind, two scatter cushions and (new this year) an electric step. That brings you up to the spec of our test vehicle (and a price of £39,679) – a figure nicely in tune with this decade of more cautious spending.

But despite its price, the Escape 696 is a comfortable vehicle in which to relax. Details can make all the difference in motorhome design and here the ace up the sleeve is the ability to convert a typical pullman dinette and side settee into a much cosier L-shaped arrangement. Along with the rotating extension leaf to the table, this also makes it practical to sit six around the sturdy wall-mounted table. There's plenty of lighting too, with swivel spotlamps in each of the four corners of this smart and impressively comfy lounge.

To go with the 696's six seatbelts, there are six adult-sized berths. Obviously, the swoopy luton includes a double bed, but mum and dad will probably opt for the thicker mattress and greater dimensions

of the transverse double below. This does require a fair bit of cushion shuffling (and two extra cushions best kept in the luton), but the resultant bed is long and wide, as well as flat and inviting. It precludes use of the ladder, though, so younger ones may need parental assistance in getting up and down from the overcab.

Of course, the 696 also has two ever-ready berths across the back, and they are full-sized, each with a reading light and their own ventilation. There's a fixed ladder for access to the upper berth but it's resolutely vertical, so adults will find the climb quite awkward. A full-length curtain provides privacy for both bunks – perhaps not ideal if your kids have different bed times. Mattresses are three inches thick on sprung slats.

Bunk bed motorhomes aren't just about multiple berths, though. It's versatility that counts. In the Escape you can fold away the lower bunk, storing its mattress on the upper bed and shutting sliding doors across to create a fully enclosed garage. It's quite a height to lift bikes on board, but lighter items such as outdoor furniture will be easily stowed. Only one garage door (on the offside) is provided, but it will be increased in width on production models.

If you have concerns about catering for six then those fears should be allayed by the generous worktop space (made possible by Swift's usual removal draining board) and the three-burner and oven/grill cooker. There's plenty of storage too, and all cupboards – high and low – have positive locking catches for safety. Pity then that having scored this safety advantage, Swift haven't added a passenger airbag to the cab spec.

Finally, there's a generic Swift washroom opposite the galley, with decent space to wash or use the swivel cassette loo. Wheelarch intrusion into the floor space and a meagre 65-litre water tank will make site facilities preferable though. Swift say that a larger water tank would have precluded offering six berths within a 3500kg gross weight.

FACT FILE

PRICE FROM £37,495

PRICE AS TESTED
£39,679

BERTHS 6

TRAVEL SEATS
(INC DRIVER) 6

DIMENSIONS 6.92m L,
2.24m W, 2.94m H

INTERIOR HEIGHT
1.97m

MAXIMUM WEIGHT
3500kg

PAYLOAD 544kg
(513kg as tested)

BEDS Overcab double
2.02m x 1.37m,
transverse lounge bed
2.08m x 1.81/1.35m
(or smaller offside,
lengthways bed 1.68m
x 0.92m), rear bunks
– upper 1.97m x 0.77m,
lower 1.96m x 0.73m

FRESH WATER
65 litres (inboard)

WASTE WATER
68 litres (underfloor)

LEISURE BATTERY
70Ah

MAINS SOCKETS 3

BASE VEHICLE

FIAT DUCATO 35 LWB

ENGINE 2.3 Multijet
130bhp as tested
(2.2 Multijet 100bhp as
standard)

COOKING/HEATING

COOKING Thetford
three-burner hob and
combined oven/grill

FRIDGE Thetford 81-
litre three-way

GAS 2 x 7kg

HEATING Truma 3kW
convector fire (Comfort
Pack – Ultraheat gas/
mains blown-air)

BOILER Truma
Ultrastore gas/mains

RIVALS

CHAUSSON FLASH 03
CI CARIOCA 707
EUROSTYLE A69

Bolder graphics combined with the familiar dark blue cab



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**EXCLUSIVE
FIRST
TEST**



Words & Pictures | Peter Vaughan

