

1

A BETTER BESSY

Bessacarr E480 on 2.3-litre Fiat Ducato

The latest mid-range low profiles from the Swift Group feature enhanced style and specification. A trip to Dartmoor tested the garage-equipped model's talents



British favourite brand Bessacarr survived being absorbed into the Swift group and has successfully kept its distinctly English flavour. With its list of new features for 2010, there's plenty to interest established fans and enough innovation to attract newcomers to the marque.

The E480 is one of a breed that courts controversy by dint of its layout. That's to say it has the capacity to sleep four, but lacks rear seatbelts. This always raises howls of indignant protests from journalists banging on about the safety issues; I include myself in this chorus. We trot out the 'it's not safe to travel in the rear without restraints' message with gusto. But hang on a minute, I happily get on buses, which zip along main roads and lurch around corners, and I've not reached for the nonexistent seatbelt yet.

Ideally, we'll all be belted up 100 per cent of the time, but for the occasional jaunt to a campsite with friends is it really such an issue? For the rest of the time aboard it's so much more relaxing to be without a dinette (the easiest

place to install rear seatbelts) - here, revelling in the feet-up-friendly settees. I admit (wash your mouth out with soap Johnson) to choosing to travel in the rear in our own 'van, unbelted, on occasions; there, I've admitted it. If, however, we wish to carry two passengers I don't ask others to take what's probably a very small risk. (*This is Di's personal opinion. MMM does advise that all rear passengers in motorcaravans should travel only in three-point-belted travel seats. DH*).

FITTING CHOICES

Dinettes pose a motorhome conundrum. While they make the fitting of those rear belts a simple operation, they rarely make effective lounges as the seating is too upright.

Therefore converters are faced with a decision: do they aim for comfort or safety. Bessacarr has gone with, 'let's please the maximum number of folk by providing a plethora of layout choices' in the latest E400 range.

There are high or low-lines, transverse or longitudinal fixed rear beds, dinette or side settees, and, of course, sizes to be pondered over. However, the Bessie here tested has a transverse rear double bed, which allows for a

capacious garage beneath. The facilities are in the mid section, the lounge up front, with twin opposing side settees. The lounge also doubles as dining space and a second double bed.

Opposing settees are one of the most tried and tested of British motorhome layouts, providing an accessible and comfortable lounge area. For those of us, like myself, scrambling up the rock face of our third age, the dinette-free E480 provides a comfortable to lounge in motorhome.

PULLING POWER

There are no engine and gearbox debates for prospective buyers to ruminate about. Bessacarr has gone with the Fiat 130 Multijet engine, which is man enough to pull the E480 along nicely. But how would it cope with the beefy hills we specialise in our local area? We shall see...

First appearances would suggest that this low-line looks a bit, well, high-line. I think it's because the new roof-capping rail, which joins the front GRP overcab to the moulded GRP back panel, gives it an integrated look. However, this does make it look bigger than it is; rather boxy in fact. I like the deep green, almost black,



Words by Di Johnson,
pictures by Pete Johnson



At Cadover Bridge

AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £43,175 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, nearside washroom, offside kitchen and wardrobe. Transverse double bed above garage in rear. Caravan entrance on UK nearside
- **ECONOMY:** 22.8mpg overall

1 Bessie at Sheepstor on Dartmoor

2 The comfortable forward lounge layout is a British classic

3 Midships kitchen and washroom kitchen lead on to a fixed bed above garage



2



3

stripe down the side, and the classy 'B' set in a circular badge displayed on the radiator grille - displacing the usual Fiat logo.

On the nearside there's access to a garage large enough to gobble up unimaginable amounts of clobber. It's fitted out with compartmented shelves (with restraints on the bulkhead) and has a tough chequer-plate floor with hold-down points. Being picky, a further door on the offside would save inelegant clambering across to fetch stuff stored in the inner reaches. Pete said, 'rubbish, you don't need another door'. No sympathy there then.

The test vehicle had a towbar fitted to the heavy-duty rear chassis extensions (the extensions are standard). Growing numbers choose to tow a trailer loaded with a diddy car for zipping about the countryside once on site, so this feature should please. Boat owners might also consider the advantage of towing a little boat south to warmer waters.

Bessacarr hasn't neglected cyclists either: there are fixing points for a bike rack on the rear, plus a moulded-in position for a reversing camera.

We own a 'van conversion, easy to move

to the water tap, but folk with bigger 'vans - reluctant to move - often resort to using watering cans or other such devices to top up with fresh water. Bessacarr has thoughtfully provided a 12V socket next to the fill-point, enabling a submersible pump to be used to transfer the water. That'll save a few aching arms.

They've got the entry into the E480 just right. The caravan door now has a window (with concertina blind) and bin set into the inner moulding - albeit a bit low. The lock had a satisfyingly car-like closure, much more solid than most, and with the handle in the right place for controlling the door in windy conditions. Three hinges, two latches and solid looking mouldings are the reasons for the satisfying 'clunk.' An inset step, plus an electrically lowered single step, make entry easy, even for those short in the leg. The step is fitted with an audible warning buzzer and automatic retraction (on starting the engine) - a reassuring belt and braces approach. Lastly, there's a pleated flyscreen to deter the bugs on hot summer evenings.

The Bessie comes with passenger airbag and some dubious - to my taste - bits of

pastry-coloured plastic 'wood' trim on the dash. Despite the difference of a foot in our heights, we both found all the controls easy to reach. I also enjoy the Fiat's firm suspension, though this exacerbates any rattles and knocks manifesting themselves - and there were plenty of these - here, mostly from the blinds. The roads and lanes we travelled were, it has to be said, pretty coarse, and it needed smooth roads indeed to quieten the cacophony. Owners will find ways of muffling the blinds I'm sure.

The mammoth hills on the fringes of Dartmoor were tackled efficiently, but the two drivers had differing views. I thought it would be nice to have the option (not offered) of the 3.0-litre engine. Pete felt the 2.3-litre was more than man enough for the job. 'That's what the gearbox is for,' he said.

Reassuringly, the Bessie reversed uphill without any noticeable judder. However, for those who would prefer, or need, the ComfortMatic auto gearbox, the 3.0-litre is the only engine size providing this option. The 'van's 24ft 7in (7.49m) length means it's not easily inserted into the narrowest of winding

On Test Bessacarr E480 on 2.3-litre Fiat Ducato

- 4 *Twin-settee lounge will be one good reason to buy*
- 5 *The freestanding table can be used inside or out*
- 6 *There are two drains in the shower tray, but the wheelarch intrudes into washroom space*
- 7 *The kitchen is very well equipped, and has granite-effect worktop and sink*
- 8 *I'd still prefer a stainless steel drainer, but it all works well*
- 9 *Hen's teeth: a microwave I could reach!*

lanes, but nevertheless, it 'did good,' helped by a quiet evening with no traffic. I found reverse a tad stiff to engage, Pete didn't agree, and said it was just me: 'you done bin spoilt by the ComfortMatic gearbox in our 'van.'

NEUTRAL TONES

I think the Bessie's designers were aiming for tasteful neutrality. They've hit the target, but I found it bland. After a day or two I put on my most colourful fleece to brighten things up, but I didn't 'arf clash! There's lots of custard crème, biscuit, pale wood and leather-effect latte trim, dashed off with silver handles and silver trim on the blonde wood cabinetwork. The carpet is an attractive mink - such a 'practical' colour for motorhomes: doh! The worktops and table have brown/minky granite-effect surfaces. The colours won't offend anyone but they don't inspire either. I'd rush out and buy rust-coloured cushions and tea towels to lift the blandness; but then I'm not a bloke.

SITTING AND CHOWING DOWN

The lounge makes use of the cab seats, which are comfortably supplied with two armrests apiece. A short settee on the nearside and a longer version opposite make up the rest of the lounge. Feet-up relaxing is easy on the offside, but less so opposite, unless the front passenger seat is brought into play. A cushion or two would help and a solid, sculpted bulkhead at the aft end of the settee would solve the feet-up backrest problem. There's only a Midi Heki rooflight above the lounge, but windows either side mitigate any illumination deficiency.



4

Time to get the appetites assuaged. Yes, brilliant! A sensible freestanding table that can be slid about, making it easier for diners to leave the table. Additionally, it can be dragged into use outside, and - when the meal's over - it folds and stores in the wardrobe. Four can dine, but six can sit in here.

The lounge space has - within easy reach - three 230V sockets (for your Playstation or laptop). Battery-saving LED lighting (halogens in the cab) is thoughtfully positioned.

CHEF'S EFFECTS

The mid-positioned kitchen (opposite the nearside caravan door) provides plenty of manoeuvring space for the cook.

There's a reasonable amount of workspace

above the fridge, a cutlery drawer and cupboard, with inset second drawer, plus a wire shelf. There's a bit more worktop above the Truma convector heater opposite, with a third drawer and a couple of cupboards - one overhead.

The worktop here is a bit too low to be anything other than plonking-space, but there are two 230V sockets so you could site the kettle here. Above, is a bracket for a flat-screen TV (with all the appropriate aerial and power sockets).

Back to the kitchen proper: a full domestic-style cooker sits adjacent to the wardrobe, with a gas-saving electric hotplate among its three spark-ignition gas burners. Above, luckily not too far above so I even could reach it, there's a microwave oven, which did a good job of heating chilled meals from M&S. The Thetford 107-litre fridge is adequate for four, and the attractive granite-effect worktop nicely matches the curve of the bow-fronted three-way, (automatic - Smart Energy Selection) fridge.

Cupboards are equipped with wire plate racks and wire slots for capturing mugs, and the cutlery drawer is subdivided. All is very Brit-friendly, but then we come to the round, granite-effect sink... it seems to have no proper drainer. But wait, what's this stowed in the cupboard? Aha, a plastic latch-on suds-catcher, with associated plastic chopping board. It's better than nothing, but a stainless steel drainer and wooden board can have hot saucepans parked on them: plastic ones cannot.

SPRUCING UP

Compromises have to be made somewhere: in the washroom there are a few. Something has to fit over the nearside rear wheelarch, and in the E480 it's the washroom.

To put this delicately, you have to be careful when lowering yourself onto the 'throne,' as one foot will be on the arch. I only got caught once, honest!

The white plastic-lined washroom has a round, grey, plastic basin in one corner, and below two mirrors. It shares a tap with the shower, the riser rail sitting alongside.

A Thetford bench-type cassette toilet



7



8



9



5



6

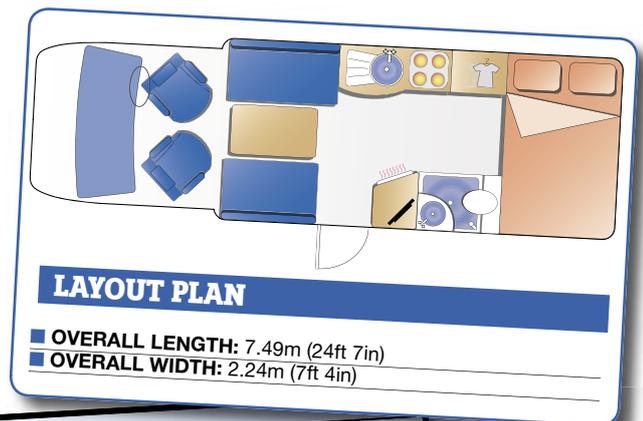
sits opposite, with a bi-fold door, which is supposed to latch across to keep the toilet, shelf unit and your towels dry. This door needs some further development, as we couldn't keep it in the slot it's supposed to marry up with. It just wouldn't stay flat. We also had problems with an overgenerous seal on the washroom door. We had to really lean on it to get it to latch properly.

While there's no window in the washroom, there's natural light from a roof vent and two LEDs take care of illumination at night - the white walls make the best of this light. It was good to see that there are two drains in the shower tray - useful for when you can't be bothered to get the levelling ramps out. Alongside the toilet are three inset shelves with restraints for wash-bags - this being all the storage there is.

Mind you, there's so much stashing space elsewhere, this shouldn't be a problem.

ZZZ-ING GOOD

A good night's sleep - ah! It's what we all hope for when we deplete our savings to purchase our dreamed-of home on wheels. Sadly, this doesn't always happen. Too hard beds are a complaint oft heard, but that's easily remedied with a memory foam overlay. Difficult entry and exit is another hurdle, and this can spoil things when folk get older and less athletic - especially for that 'comfort' trip in the wee small hours.



On Test Bessacarr E480 on 2.3-litre Fiat Ducato

The E480 provides two sleeping options for a couple...

Making up the lounge double was easy (using the twin settees) and quick. We used it for the first night aboard, and it would've been a good night if I hadn't insisted we turn off the space heater. We'd found the gas-powered function very effective in raising the temperature. Next we tried out the mains electric option and I got overheated, so off it went. As we only had thin sleeping bags we had a cold and restless night, and it was my fault. The bed, however, was good.

The ascent to the fixed transverse rear bed involves climbing two built-in steps: all that lovely garage storage below comes at a price. Getting aboard is one thing, climbing down in the dark another. I didn't find it difficult, but with arthritic knees and hips it might be another story. There's an opening window at one end and two LED lights (separately switched) at the other. No conflicts there then. A small opening rooflight provides more ventilation, and there's a shelf - running the width of the rear - for glasses and teeth with a tiny corner shelf for the forward sleeper's artificial bits. *(Di, I always thought your gnashers were your own! DH)*

You could be really spoilt in here, as two speakers allow you to listen to your favourite sounds in the mornings, while a pad on the wall (and nearby 12V socket) suggests a TV location.

So, the second night's sleep - choosing the rear bed - how did it go? Well, since you ask, I loved it. For some reason it reminded me of childhood nights spent in boats and caravans: being allowed the privilege of the top bunk and climbing up to bed was the best. In the Bessie's high bed it was warm and comfortable, and remarkably, we could both sit bolt upright to read. Pete's long back sometimes results in him having to perch on an elbow. A comfortable night and no memory foam in sight. As both Bessie's beds are transverse, a moonlight tinkle will always involve a bit of clambering over bodies.

WHERE TO PUT IT ALL

E480 owners will not be scratching heads for storage solutions that's for sure. Outdoor



seating, barbecue paraphernalia, sporting equipment and re-provisioning of the wine cellar can all be found a home in the garage - not forgetting to keep an eye on your payload (and rear axle weight), of course. If you don't want a bike rack on the rear, the garage is a more secure option for transporting cycles.

Inside is much the same. There's a big moulded overcab locker (new for 2010), provided with two gas struts to hold up the door while you pile in the lounge bedding. I couldn't reach this from the floor, but could when standing on a settee. Under each settee is more space (only slightly compromised by the water heater on the offside) and, once again, packing away gear is made so easy, as there are powerful gas struts to hold up the bases. On the nearside, the leisure battery is located beneath the floor with space pre-made for a second.

WE LIKED

- Comfortable lounge
- Plenty of storage
- Five 230V sockets
- Capacious garage
- Easily made up, and choice of beds
- Microwave set low enough for folk of average height to use
- Battery-saving LED lighting
- Full cooker with dual-fuel hob
- The ability to read sitting upright in the rear bed

WE WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A 'bulkhead' to lean against on the nearside settee
- A second light over the kitchen work area
- A stainless steel sink with drainer
- More secure fixing for the bi-fold door in washroom

WE DISLIKED

- The wheel arch impinging into the washroom floor
- The sealed washroom door difficult to shut
- Plastic 'wood' trim on the dashboard





Four overhead lockers, with shelves, provide more space, with only the Sargent power supply unit taking up one shelf. The kitchen boasts three drawers and plentiful space for provisions - my only beef being trying to find somewhere other than the fridge to store two-litre bottles: the removal of a cupboard shelf somewhere would probably solve this problem. Adjoining the kitchen, the two-door wardrobe is of a size to satisfy most needs. Some might prefer a stack of shelves, but I find hanging coats and jackets make them easy to choose and retrieve.

SUPPORTING CAST

There are five 230V sockets, usefully placed, and two 12V sockets. One 95 amp hour leisure battery is provided, and all but the cab spotlights are powered by battery-sparing LEDs.

Lighting is - generally - good, with only the light under the kitchen cabinets being a trifle lacking. The sink was well illuminated, but the cooker needs its own lamp. Gas-powered heaters are now giving diesel-fired examples a run for their money: here, you can travel with the heating running, as mods to the flue and regulator mean it's now safe to do so.

There's a 90-litre (underslung, insulated) fresh water tank and a 68-litre waste water tank.

It's worth mentioning that - for the skiers amongst us - Bessacarr offers the option of a Winter Pack, comprising fresh and waste water tank heaters, drain insulation and fridge vent covers. I was very glad to see an underslung spare wheel. We've met poor unfortunates unable to carry on in foreign parts, when they couldn't get hold of an appropriate replacement tyre.

OPINIONS

This Bessacarr really had a baptism of fire, or maybe that should be water. On a rainy campsite, within kissing distance of Dartmoor, there are few stiffer tests for a motorhome. We were jolly glad it was the warm comfortable Bessie we were staying in overnight. There's a Brit-friendly lounge and plenty of space to let two people get on with what they're doing without getting in each other's way.

The workable kitchen had the added bonus - for vertically challenged me - of being able to reach the microwave; a rare occurrence indeed!

Beds were easy to make and comfy too.

The washroom had a few shortcomings, including limited storage and a dodgy shower screen. Its uneven floor, caused by a wheelarch, could I guess, be adapted to. So, anytime MMM needs another Bessacarr E400 testing, Pete and I'll be first in the queue. ■



VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Marquis Devon, Lee Mill, Ivybridge, Nr. Plymouth, Devon PL21 9EG (tel: 01752 892 977; web site: www.marquismotorhomes.co.uk)

WE STAYED AT

Tavistock Camping and Caravanning Club Site, Higher Longford, Moorshop, Tavistock, Devon PL19 9LQ (tel: 01822 618672; web site: www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

10 The lounge bed is easily assembled

11 Individual lights, a window at the foot and comfortable mattress make the rear bed a winner

12 Impressively solid door is equipped with window and rubbish bin

13 Bessie managed Dartmoor's rugged terrain without a murmur

14 The big garage should please those who like to take lots of clobber

15 No more lifting heavy water cans when topping up, just plug in a submersible pump

LIVE-IN TEST DATA

BESSACARR E480

TYPE

Low profile coachbuilt

PRICE

- From: £43,175 OTR
- As tested: £43,650 OTR

BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Fiat Ducato Maxi long wheelbase chassis cab
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 2 (including driver)
- **Warranty:** 2 years base vehicle, 3 years conversion

CONSTRUCTION

Aluminium clad sandwich construction, GRP overcab, rear panel, skirts

DIMENSIONS (*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 7.49m (24ft 7in)*
- **Width:** 2.24m (7ft 4in)*
- **Height:** 2.90m (9ft 6in)*
- **Wheelbase:** 4.03m (13ft 2.5in)*
- **Rear overhang:** 2.50m (8ft 2.5in)
- **Max authorized weight:** 4005kg
- **Payload:** 701kg (after allowance for weight of driver @75kg, 90 per cent fuel, fresh water, gas)

INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, nearside washroom, offside kitchen and wardrobe. Transverse double bed above garage in rear. Caravan entrance on UK nearside

- **Insulation:** Floor 44mm, walls & roof 32mm
- **Interior height:** 1.98m (6ft 6in)

THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.3-litre turbo-diesel, producing 95.5kW (130bhp) @ 3600rpm
- **Transmission:** Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 22.8mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all-round
- **Suspension:** Front: Independent on McPherson coil-sprung struts. Rear: Leaf-springs on rigid axle with anti-roll bar
- **Features:** ABS, EBD, driver and passenger airbags, remote central locking includes caravan door, immobiliser, electric windows, electrically-operated mirrors with indicator repeaters, height and rake-adjustable swivelling cab seats with twin armrests, headlamp height adjustment, adjustable-height steering column,

12V socket, pop-up map holder, lockable laptop storage bin, recessed shelves, twin door bins, variable-rate intermittent wiper control, Radio/CD player, spare wheel

LOUNGING AND DINING

Swivelling cab seats and two side-facing settees, free-standing table, stores in the wardrobe. Lounging for six, dining for four

KITCHEN

At right, cooker and saucepan locker containing gas isolation valves, high-level microwave oven above. Sink set in granite-effect worktop above cutlery drawer and cupboard, fridge at left, two cupboards above

- **Sink:** Round granite-effect moulded bowl, long-spout swivelling mixer tap, removable plastic drainer and chopping board
- **Cooker:** Thetford S-CK13000 slot-in stove with hinged glass lid, three gas burners, one electric hotplate, gas grill, thermostatically-controlled gas oven, all with spark ignition. Sanyo EM S2297V microwave oven
- **Fridge:** Thetford N112 three-way, with Smart Energy Selection. Capacity 107 litres

WASHROOM

Thetford C-402C bench-style electric-flush toilet with flush water tank and wheeled cassette, plastic-lined shower area with double-drained tray floor, grey plastic corner washbasin with mirrors, oddments trays above, mixer tap extends on braided hose to double as shower head, bi-fold shower door protects toilet roll, towels and three storage recesses

BEDS

Lounge double

- **Length:** 2.05m (6ft 8.5in)
 - **Width:** 1.32m (4ft 4in) max, 1.14m (3ft 9in) min
- Fixed rear double
- **Length:** 2.05m (6ft 8.5in)
 - **Width:** 1.38m (4ft 6.5in)
 - **Headroom:** 830mm (2ft 8.5in)

STORAGE

Above cab: central locker with top-hinged door supported by gas struts. Lounge: two high-level lockers each side, space under settees. Beside caravan door: cupboard and drawer under work-surface, high-level locker. Wardrobe has two doors, table stowage and hanging rail. Exterior: garage with nearside door, compartmented shelves on bulkhead, anchor points in floor



LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Underslung, insulated, capacity 90 litres (19.8 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung, capacity 68 litres (15 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Truma Ultrastore boiler, gas-mains operation
- **Space heater:** Truma convecter with blown-air, gas-mains operation
- **Leisure battery:** 95 amp hr
- **Gas:** 2 x 7kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Cab: two halogen spots. Awning: LED strip-light. Caravan doorway (above control panel): one LED downlighter. Lounge: four LED reading spots under lockers. Ceiling: two diffused triple-lamp LED units. Kitchen: one double-lamp LED downlighter. Washroom: two LED downlighters. Bedroom: two LED downlights
- **Sockets:** 230V: 5 (1 in offside settee base, 2 in kitchen, 1 below heater controls, 1 beside lounge TV station). 12V/TV aerial sockets: 2 (1 in lounge, 1 at foot of rear bed)
- **Control panel:** Mounted over caravan door. LED pin-light displays and click-touch switches monitor/operate all caravan functions
- **Blinds/curtains:** Pleated cassette blinds at cab windows, pleated blinds and flyscreens at three Seitz/Heki roof vents, roller blinds and flyscreens at lounge kitchen and bedroom windows, curtains in lounge
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** Yes

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base:** None
 - **Conversion:** Tow bar with detachable hitch (£475)
- Other options
- **Base:** Cab air-con & cruise control (£1190)
 - **Conversion:** Roof rack & ladder (£587), wind-out awning (£505), reversing camera (£459), Winter Pack - fresh and waste water tank heaters, drain insulation & fridge vent covers (£190), GPS monitoring system including Eurowatch & GSM subscriptions (£638)

E&OE

