

# LEAVE FOR LESS

## Swift Escape 664 on 2.2-litre Fiat Ducato

*One of the latest British low profiles aims to offer Continental style that's kinder to your wallet*



The Swift Group has reacted to these straitened times with a new range of vans, designed to be appealing from two points of view: modern styling and, most importantly, attractive prices.

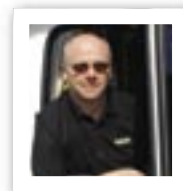
The four-model range includes only one low profile coachbuilt (the others have overcab beds), the Escape 664 tested here.

Escape is very much a container of contrasts - its familiar boxy exterior having been executed by a hand that knows well how to create an entry-level motorhome. Inside,

however, things are quite different, as stylish new furniture cuts a motorhome dash that would look pretty good at any price.

Cynics might suggest that the Swift Group's recently deceased Ace brand has merely been re-named and given a more aggressive paint job, but there's a bit more than that to Escape. As well as the love-it or hate-it deep blue and white exterior, the inside has been revamped with - yes, that sexy new furniture - but also some very interesting new kit and simply sensible ideas.

Escape is also cheaper, pretty much overall, than its Ace ancestor: quite an



Words & pictures by Dave Hurrell



*Pitched at the Caravan Club's lovely Cheddar site*

### AT A GLANCE

- **PRICE FROM:** £31,845 OTR
- **BERTHS:** 4
- **BASE VEHICLE:** Fiat Ducato chassis cab
- **LAYOUT:** Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside half dinette, kitchen and washroom, nearside inward-facing sofa, wardrobe and longitudinal fixed double bed
- **ECONOMY:** 26.5mpg overall



1 At lovely Lacock in Wiltshire

2 Interior layout mirrors one of Europe's most popular

3 Interior style belies this van's budget credentials

4 The cab has a decent stereo, but only manually adjusted mirrors



achievement when you consider that the current dreadful Euro/Sterling exchange rate has pushed up the price of just about every (made in Europe) component that goes into British-built motorhomes.

And so to the subject of this month's live-aboard trip. This Escape may be created in dear old Blighty (East Yorkshire in fact), but it's as near to a Continental classic as it's possible to get. British advantages start with a caravan entrance on our nearside, while the interior sees a half-dinette ahead of kitchen and washroom, with a fixed lengthways double bed in the rear corner. That this layout is probably the most popular in Europe comes as no surprise, as it should provide very comfortable touring accommodation for two people, day and night, and should be equally suitable for those with short, long, or very long, touring tendencies.

### ESCAPE ESCAPES

At a good chunk under seven metres long, and with simple styling (read cheaper to make), Escape 664 is quite light and therefore proved easily propelled by its almost surprise-free Fiat Ducato base vehicle. This version



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of Europe's most common motorhome steed had the smallest available - 2.2-litre, 100 horsepower - motor under its bonnet, but still managed to achieve licence-spoiling speeds with reasonable ease. Think willing rather than thrilling though, as overtaking and hill climbing exposed this engine's lack of grunt.

Even so, I enjoyed my trip from the wilds of Lincolnshire to the cheesy delights of Somerset's Cheddar, taking in lanes, A-roads and motorways along the way. This Ducato cab is unadorned with air-conditioning or cruise control, but sports electric windows, central locking and driver's airbag. I was also pleased to discover a decent - Swift-fitted - stereo, but slightly dismayed to notice that the external mirrors were adjusted only by muscle power. Shame that, as owners who share the driving could have a tiff or two, while shouting, 'in a bit, down a bit' one to another, each time they gain the pilot's seat. But back to that stereo: a nice-looking JVC item with single CD slot and auxiliary input for your choice of MP3 player. Good-looker that it was, I couldn't get the blighter to fire up and dark mutterings about quality control and pre delivery inspection

failings might have made the ears of certain folks at Swift HQ burst into flames! Such is often the lot of the intrepid motorhome tester, but later, and once pitched, I discovered that said wireless actually had a wire: one that got its power from the leisure battery. Good idea this - no flattening of the vehicle's 12V cells when camping, and of course (unlike standard Fiat radios), this boom box doesn't turn itself off when you're in middle of a full-throated sing-along to *Stairway to Heaven*, or yelling at Jeremy Vine to flipping well shut up! Thus, the joys of Radio 2, or your favourite Val Doonican CD should remain blissfully uninterrupted.

Back to the more mundane, and a short period of grovelling (I'm used to this, just ask my esteemed editors) let me discover that Escape rides on a standard - taller - rear chassis. Taller that is, than Fiat's special Camper chassis frame and, I'll bet, cheaper for Swift to buy. Even so, the 'van handled well (if with a bit of a harsh ride), while conversion noise was kept to acceptable levels, and was better than a few much more expensive 'vans I've tested. Din, such as it was, confined itself to the usual kitchen appliance rattles, although

there was a bit of 'nest of baby swallows getting fed' squeaking from above the cab. Or should that be baby swifts?

#### ESCAPE INTO THE INTERIOR

Entry direct to the living area is gained via a simple-looking caravan door and manual external step, seeing you arrive between the



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## On Test Swift Escape 664 on 2.2-litre Fiat Ducato

lounge's side seat and wardrobe to the right, located at the foot of the fixed bed. Opposite, on the offside, the kitchen stands directly behind a half dinette, with the washroom next in line in the rear corner. Decor is best described - in finest estate agent speak - as neutral. Brown removable carpet, coffee/crème upholstery and brown unlined curtains are easy on the eye: white wine drinkers can relax, those who favour vin rouge will need to be more careful.

Furniture is an unremarkable mid-brown in colour and lacks expensive to make sweeping curves. However, it does not have the look of bad planks sometimes found in entry-level motorhomes. Silver-trimmed overhead locker doors look lovely, hiding clever, concealed positive latching and Swift's lightweight plastic carcasses. Lockers mostly lack shelves, but, as the frames provide support for same, I wondered whether new owners might order some from Swift. Reinforcing the idea of high quality, the washroom door is the kind of goodlooking domestic-style item seen in more expensive Swift Group 'vans.

### THE EURO POSITION

It's easy to swivel the cab seats, an action that completes this 'van's classic Euro lounge-diner. The forward-facing dinette seat (which also provides two three-point belted travel seats), side sofa, and cab pews form this most common - and popular - lounge/dining area, as is normally found in Continental motorhomes. Above, a Midi Heki rooflight is a very welcome standard fitting, adding plenty of natural light and providing good ventilation in hot weather.

As is often the case, it's the cab seats that are the most comfortable for lounging, as the dinette seat is a tad upright, while the side sofa has a low backrest and over-deep



squab. Think in terms of seating a maximum of six people in here, as long as they're good friends: for a couple, there's plenty of room to spread out.

Mealtimes should provide eating space for a full complement in this four-berth 'van, but it falls short of the mark. This is mainly down to the lack of a table extension. There's nothing wrong with the table as such, it's just that it's difficult to reach from the side sofa or cab passenger seat. The extension's absence is possibly a cost-saving exercise: if so, it's an economy too far.

### ESCAPE CATERING

The kitchen is a modest affair, but better than those found in many a Continental-built design that shares this 'van's layout. Central to proceedings, the cooker is a Thetford mid-height unit that should satisfy most cooks' needs. Under its hinged glass lid there are three gas burners - the front one a large-flame device that boiled my kettle in double-quick time: wok lovers should also find it a boon. Below, the modestly sized oven is nonetheless, adequate and includes the grill. In true British tradition - and unlike many foreign jobs - electronic ignition serves every section. To the left, the circular sink is a familiar Swift Group item - its removable plastic draining surface freeing up a decent slab of working surface to its left. A drop-in cutting board lid adds versatility.

There was no extractor fan or cooker hood to remove steam or the smoke from the food I was burning (the fitted smoke alarm was vocal in its chiding of my culinary endeavours), but a rooflight above and opening window below did duty in a, thankfully, efficient way.

Enough of heating; this kitchen's cooler also came courtesy of Thetford - a unit that, in its simplicity features a neat latch that negates the need to remember to lock the door before you hit the road. Anyone who's emptied the contents of their fridge at the first roundabout will thank Thetford for this great feature. Easy to keep shut it's true but this fridge proved a touch shallow for my selection of epicurean delights, not to mention the chilled brown ale and herby bangers.

Drawer space here is less than conventional, with a pullout cutlery tray and in-cupboard slideout that, between them, should accommodate eating irons and utensils okay. The cupboard is a slim affair, joined by a wider, but shallow unit below the cooker that held my kettle and pans. Above, the two lockers have no shelves, but one is fitted out with plate and mug racks.

Two mains sockets (shame they're mounted sideways) are adjacent to the worktop to provide for kettle and toaster, and



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motorhome such as this.

Again, it's the generous amount of floor space in here that makes the loo easy and comfortable to use. At the other end, the washbasin is set into a small countertop big enough to stand some of your potions, while above, a pair of big mirrors impress. A big overhead locker and an under-basin cupboard provide plenty of storage space, while a towel ring, toilet roll holder and tooth glass show good attention to detail. Much better than many, this Escape washroom proved easy to use: I liked it a lot.

### ESCAPING TO DREAM

This motorhome's reason to buy feature is, undoubtedly, its fixed double bed. Swift seems to know the importance of a good night's sleep, as this bed rides on a good quality alloy frame with sprung wooden staves. The mattress, too, is a domestic-style item - deep and supportive, it gave me excellent nights' sleep during my stay at the Caravan Club's neat little Cheddar (members only) site. Comfy it's true, but not too long: those over six feet tall will need to look for a 'van with a longer bed. No rear window, a headboard and twin reading lights, made it easy to get propped up to read and drink the



again, this is better mains power provision than most Continentals.

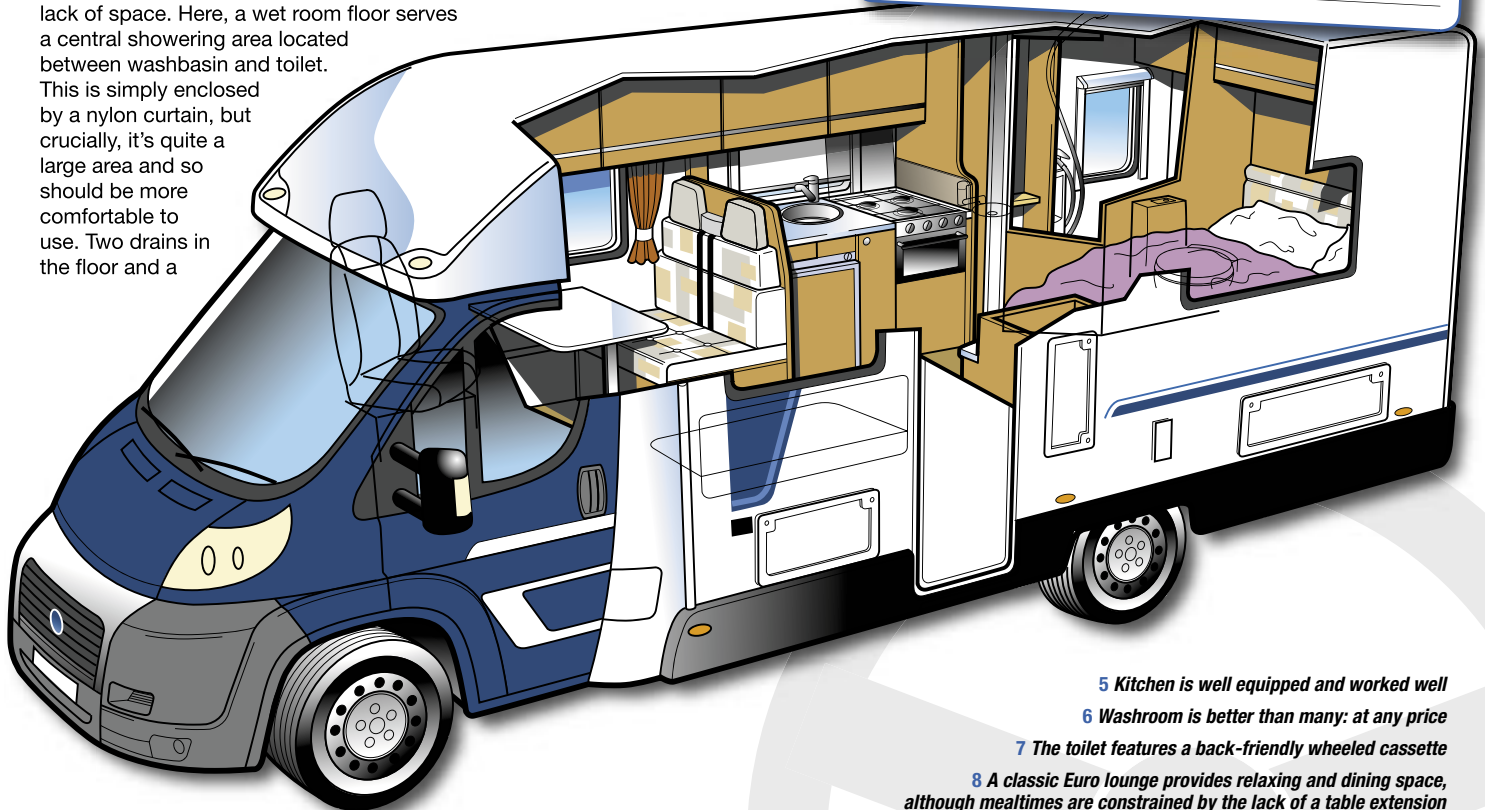
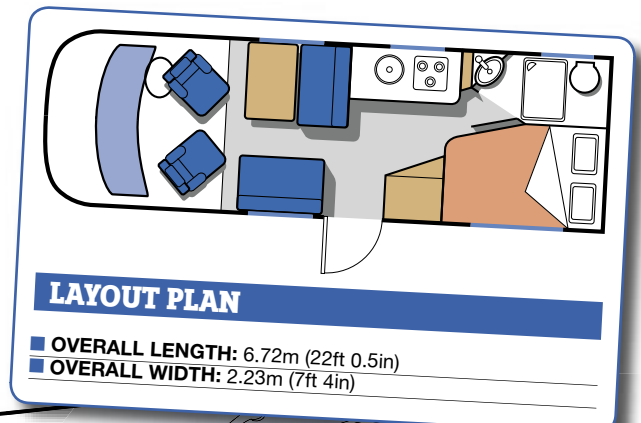
I only made coffee and prepared modest meals while using this galley, but at no time did I grind my teeth and use 'fowl' language (except when I cooked some chicken). The Escape kitchen gets a thumbs-up.

### A SWIFT WASH

Funnily enough, its probably Swift's cost saving approach that is fundamental to the washroom's success. Many ablutions that stand alongside fixed beds are equipped with separate showers that are too small and help cripple the rest of the facilities, thanks to a lack of space. Here, a wet room floor serves a central showering area located between washbasin and toilet. This is simply enclosed by a nylon curtain, but crucially, it's quite a large area and so should be more comfortable to use. Two drains in the floor and a

separate mixer tap/shower head complete a set-up that betters the facilities found in many a more expensive 'van.

A translucent opening window provides ventilation, but I would have like to see a roof vent fitted to speed up the evacuation of moist air and steam. At the far rear, the toilet is Thetford's C250 item - with electric flushing and wheeled cassette, exceeding the standard that you might expect to find in a budget



5 Kitchen is well equipped and worked well

6 Washroom is better than many: at any price

7 The toilet features a back-friendly wheeled cassette

8 A classic Euro lounge provides relaxing and dining space, although mealtimes are constrained by the lack of a table extension

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morning cuppa: Such was the comfort that I read Terry Pratchett's *Monstrous Regiment* too far into the night and stayed abed for a second mug of Waitrose Colombian blend in the morning.

The lounge converts into a transverse - supposedly - double bed to complete this 'van's specified four berths. In the tradition of such beds the table lowers and the side sofa base pulls out. A trio of infill cushions join the rest to complete the job. It's easy to make, flat and quite comfy, but this bed is little more than three feet wide for half of its length. A double? Hardly, but it'll be fine for the occasional visitor and the grandkids that may use it more often.

## EQUIPMENT FOR ESCAPING

Storage and life support equipment become intertwined in this motorhome, nowhere more so than in the under-bed locker. Folks buy fixed bed-equipped 'vans to get the bed, the bonus is that they all feature a large storage area underneath. Often, converters choose to populate this locker with space-robbing equipment. Swift has chosen to locate two essential items under the bed.

The fresh water tank is here, snug and away from frost, but why is it not housed under the dinette seating? This is the case in many similar 'vans - leaving more room under the bed for bulky stuff that can be loaded through the external locker door. The water heater lives here too: another space robber, although this is a more conventional location for such devices. Of course, because of this, there is a big space under the dinette seating, however, it's less versatile. Although the wardrobe (two doors, side-to-side hanging rail) is a little small, there are plenty of big overhead lockers throughout.

The aforementioned water heater runs on both gas and mains electricity - the control for gas operation being located on the bed's base. However, once pitched and hooked up I couldn't find the switch to turn on the



mains electric power for the boiler. The 'van's instruction manual was no use either, suggesting that I might find the switch in the wardrobe. Finally, I located it on the electrical distribution panel inside the dinette seat box. So inconvenient is this location, that I feel (like the lack of a table extension) it's an economy too far. The solution? Well, I hope Swift will rectify the omission, if not, I'd have a switch fitted in a more accessible position.

Space heating is by trusty Truma convector - a seemingly old-fashioned, but excellent device that works without consuming electrical power and almost silently too. Where others would put it on the options list, Swift has equipped the heater with blown-air, ensuring that heat can be distributed evenly and that the washroom is warmed via its own outlet. Meanwhile, the convector will - without blown-air - quietly keep interior chill at bay on cold nights. The only thing missing here is mains electric operation for the space heater. No matter, a mere 395 pounds will get you the Comfort Pack of accessories that includes the desirable Ultraheat mains power feature.

The Comfort pack also includes a

windscreen blind and this is a good thing, as the internal padded blackout for the screen proved to be a faff to install.

The side screens were easy to position, so the Comfort Pack will neatly solve the problem. It also provides a flyscreen for the caravan door, and a pair of scatter cushions, making it a bargain and a must-have in my book.

The rest of the windows feature pull-down blinds and flyscreens: not as effective as the full cassette type, and very much a budget item, they worked okay, but let light in at the bottom. I also suspect that the flyscreens will be less effective at keeping the bugs at bay.

Open an external hatch on the nearside and you're greeted by the inside of a locker box containing the leisure battery and mains input point. More usually found on touring caravans this box allows easy access to the battery and can be locked once you're hooked up. A great idea, but the proximity of a slightly bulging side skirt made it difficult to get the hook-up lead into the slot in the locker that allowed it to be closed. This is a detail problem, but one that strained the door and threatened to damage the cable.

Lighting was another situation where

simplicity won through to success. Spotlights in lounge and bedroom proved adequate, as did the single fluorescent in the kitchen. In addition, Swift has fitted modest ceiling lights in general and in the washroom. Modest, yes, but also very effective: they gave good light from above - again, something that has been lacking in some much more swanky 'vans that I've tried.

Finally, the control panel that's the master of nearly all it surveys is simple to use, with easy push buttons and LEDs doing the job of control and indication. My only criticism here is the fact that the 'hook-up connected' indicator did not stay on, making me wonder if it was working - especially in respect of the fridge, which has no indicator lights either.

## GREAT ESCAPE?

I don't know for certain, but I suspect that Swift has looked closely at other companies' successful entry-level motorhome ranges and decided to try and go one better: straitened times giving the shove that was needed. While other products are very good, they seem to feature far more traditional interiors: Swift Escape attempts and, I think, succeeds in modernising the British entry-level motorhome. The Escape 664 looks every inch the budget product outside, however, interiors are quite classy and equipment levels high for such a 'van.

Someone at Swift really does seem to

### I LIKED

- The concept
- Stereo that won't turn itself off after 20 minutes
- Interior design
- Comfy bed
- Well-equipped kitchen
- Sensible washroom
- Good lighting
- Excellent value options pack
- The price

### I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- A table extension
- Water heater switch easier to get at
- Wider lounge bed
- A constant mains indicator light

### I DISLIKED

- Exterior colour scheme
- Water tank located under bed

have made the right decision about what's important - a comfortable bed, good kitchen, and surprisingly competent washroom impress. In addition, an inboard water tank and decent heating should make this motorhome suitable for extended-season use.

My quibbles are all about details that can easily be improved, possibly with the

- 9 Fixed bed is very comfy but not over long
- 10 Lounge bed claims to be a double
- 11 Front to back: Leisure battery/hook-up point locker, caravan door with pullout step, underbed locker access
- 12 Simple control panel is easy to use
- 13 Underbed locker's space is compromised by the fresh water tank



exception of the rear-located water tank.

Finally there's cost, and here Swift seems to have excelled - pricing so sharp is the final thing that makes this capable motorcaravan very good indeed. As I write, I've just returned from the Caravan Club's 2009 Design and Drive competition: the overall winner? A Swift Escape 686. ■



### VEHICLE SUPPLIED BY

Swift Group, Dunswell Road,  
Cottingham, East Yorkshire HU16 4JX  
(tel: 01482 847332;  
web site: www.swiftgroup.co.uk)

### WE STAYED AT

Cheddar Caravan Club Site (members only), Gas House Lane, Draycott Road, Cheddar BS27 3RL (tel: 01934 740207; web site: www.caravanclub.co.uk)

Cold Aston in the Cotswolds

## LIVE-IN TEST DATA

## SWIFT ESCAPE 664

### TYPE

Low profile coachbuilt

### PRICE

- **From:** £31,845 OTR
- **As tested:** £31,845 OTR

### BASICS

- **Vehicle:** Fiat Ducato chassis cab
- **Berths:** 4
- **Three-point belted seats:** 4 (incl driver)
- **Warranty:** 3 years base vehicle and conversion

### CONSTRUCTION

Aluminium clad sandwich construction with ABS plastic/GRP mouldings. Caravan entrance on UK nearside

### DIMENSIONS (\*manufacturer's figures)

- **Length:** 6.72m (22ft 0.5in)\*
- **Width:** 2.23m (7ft 4in)
- **Height:** 2.85m (9ft 4in)\*
- **Wheelbase:** 3.80m (12ft 5.5in)\*
- **Rear overhang:** 1.96m (6ft 5in)
- **Max authorised weight:** 3500kg
- **Payload:** 640kg (after allowance for driver @75kg, 90 per cent fuel, fresh water, gas)

### INSIDE STORY

Swivelling cab seats ahead of offside half-dinette, kitchen and washroom, nearside inward-facing sofa, wardrobe and longitudinal fixed double bed

- **Insulation:** Floor 46mm, walls and roof 32mm
- **Interior height:** 1.97m (6ft 5.5in)

### THE VEHICLE

- **Engine:** 2.2-litre turbodiesel producing 74kW (100bhp) @ 2900rpm
- **Transmission:** Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- **Fuel consumption:** 26.5mpg overall
- **Brakes:** Servo-assisted discs all round with ABS
- **Suspension:** Front: independent on coil springs. Rear: rigid axle on leaf springs

- **Features:** Driver's airbag, radio/CD player, reach-adjustable steering wheel, height-adjustable seats, remote central locking, electric windows, manually-adjustable mirrors, twin door bins, central storage locker, height-adjustable headlamps, variable wiper delay, spare wheel

### LOUNGING & DINING

Swivelling cab seats, half-dinette and side sofa provide seating for six, dining for three people at wall-hung table

### KITCHEN

Two overhead lockers - one fitted for plates and mugs. Two cupboards below - one with pull-out tray-style drawer and two shelves. Cutlery tray/drawer unit. Reasonable slab of worktop to left of sink

- **Sink:** Circular 'linen' finish stainless steel bowl with chromed mixer tap, freestanding plastic drainer and drop-in cutting board/lid
- **Cooker:** Thetford slot-in stove with hinged glass lid, three-burner hob, grill/oven, all with electronic ignition
- **Fridge:** Thetford N80 three-way width full-width freezer compartment. Capacity 81 litres

### WASHROOM

Oval vanity basin with chromed mixer tap, two mirrors above, cupboard below. Thetford C250 swivel-bowl, electric-flush toilet with wheeled cassette. Twin outlet wet-room floor, curtain encloses showering area served by mixer tap and shower head mounted on wall bracket. Towel ring, toilet roll holder, tooth 'glass'

### BEDS

- **Lounge double**
- **Length:** 2.09m (6ft 10in)
- **Width:** 1.22m (4ft 0in) max
- **Rear fixed double**
- **Length:** 1.85m (6ft 1in)
- **Width:** 1.25m (4ft 1in)

### STORAGE

Lounge: Top-accessed space in dinette and side sofa bases, three overhead lockers, one shelf and two cubbies above cab.

At foot of bed, two-door unit with side-to-side hanging rail. Two overhead lockers, one shelf unit, top and external access to under-bed space

### LIFE SUPPORT

- **Fresh water:** Inboard. Capacity 70 litres (15.4 gallons)
- **Waste water:** Underslung. Capacity 68 litres (15 gallons)
- **Water heater:** Trumastore boiler, gas-mains operation
- **Space heater:** Truma convector with blown-air, gas-only operation
- **Leisure battery:** 85 amp hr
- **Gas:** Capacity 2 x 7kg cylinders
- **Lighting:** Lounge: Two eyeball halogen reading lamps, one halogen ceiling lamp. Kitchen: One single-tube fluorescent. Bedroom: Two eyeball halogen reading lamps, one halogen ceiling lamp. Washroom: One halogen ceiling lamp. Awning lamp
- **Sockets:** 230V: 3 (1 in lounge, 2 in kitchen), 12V: 1 (in lounge)
- **Control panel:** Mounted above caravan door, LEDs display leisure battery level, mains connected, fresh and waste water levels, push-buttons control battery level display, lights, water pump, tank level display, 12V on/off
- **Blinds/curtains:** Pull-down blinds/flyscreens to all caravan windows, unlined curtains to lounge and bedroom, internal insulating/blackout screens to cab windows
- **Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant:** Yes

### OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- **Base:** None
- **Conversion:** None
- **Other options**
- **Base:** None
- **Conversion:** Comfort Pack consisting of flyscreen door, mains/gas space heating, windscreen blind, two scatter cushions (£395)

E&OE



Deep in the Cotswolds