

Live-in test Swift Challenger Sport 554

The most fashionable layout in the caravan market's most glamorous entry-level range sounds like a match made in heaven. But is it style over substance?

Testers Nigel and Helen Donnelly

Where tested Le Bois du Bardolet, Loire, France

When tested September 2011

 Berths	 MIR0	 Payload	 MTPLM	 Awning size
4	1277kg	153kg	1430kg	9.99m



The gas bottle locker is as easy to access as it is enormous

FASHIONS COME AND go in caravan design. This year's hot new idea is next year's clearance bargain. Sometimes, though, a design transcends fashion and becomes a classic. That's where we are with fixed-bed, rear-washroom vans on single axles.

These fixed-beds are currently the darling of UK manufacturers. Originally the preserve of twin-axle tourers, it is debatable whether Lunar's Lexon SE or Bailey's Senator Series 6 California was the first to market in 2008. Either way, the basic layout is now a staple for producers' line-ups. More models have this floor plan than any other.

Fashionable layouts are one thing, but making over an entire range is tougher still. The Swift Challenger Sport brings a dash of style to the mid-range market. Swooping lines, smart interiors and a better level of equipment than in the Charisma range it replaces put it on a lot of shopping lists, but it is the roof window that will catch people's eyes. This £300 optional extra has crept down the range from last year's Challenger.

Style is all very well, but does the Sport have the substance to back it up? To see, Mrs Donnelly and I took the 554 on the Reader Rally to France in September 2011 for a 10-day test.

Pitching and setting up

It took a while for Swift to install the Al-Ko ATC. Now the company is so taken with the system it has fitted it to all new Swift and Sterling models, including the Challenger Sport. Combined with the Al-Ko hitch stabiliser, it promises stability. On our 400-mile trek to France, despite challenging conditions, the 554 towed superbly.

Another new feature for 2012 is a 10-year body warranty – not an original idea, but that doesn't make it any less good. That said, it is only applicable to the first

With its excellent artificial and natural light sources, the Sport feels more spacious than many entry-level vans



PHOTOGRAPHY: TIM ANDREW WORDS: NIGEL DONNELLY

owner, so take note if you're planning to keep your next caravan for the long haul.

Speaking of ideas that aren't particularly original but are great nonetheless, the steps on either side of the A-frame allow owners to clean the front without using a stepladder. With that roof window to clean, they're handy.

All drains and steadies are easily reached, and the gas bottle locker is both enormous and simple to access. The hardest thing is avoiding the temptation to fill the huge space with loads of gear and overloading the nose.

The usual Swift stuff is here, too. Hankook tyres, tough single-piece aluminium sidewalls, full-height GRP front and rear panels and an Al-Ko Secure receiver all come as standard on the Challenger Sport.

Lounging and dining

When the French sunshine put in an appearance, it bathed the front lounge and that's when you really



The roof window is an excellent source of natural light

appreciate the open feel the roof window provides. Other tourers on site felt claustrophobic by comparison. With a large roof light, bigger front windows than the more upmarket Challenger range and the roof window, natural light is definitely not an issue. Neither is artificial illumination, as the over-locker mood lighting adds a distinctly upmarket feel to the interior.

Overall, the front lounge is a practical and usable space with few vices. Plump cushions make for comfortable seating, and ceiling LEDs throw plenty of light for reading. The centre chest's pull-out tabletop was big enough for most of our meals. For extravagant French feasts, the dining table was easily extracted from the storage area outside the washroom and light enough to set up quickly.

The plastic binnacle in front of the centre chest that divided opinion in the 2011 Swift Challenger is smaller in the Challenger Sport, but it is an ideal place to charge a mobile phone, thanks to the handy mains socket. Placing the thermostat for the water heater in the lounge didn't seem very useful but it's better than having it on the front of the seat bases, where it would be hard to see what you were doing.

It would make more sense to have the controller for the Truma blown-air heater on a front bench. That's because you're likely to be sitting in the lounge when you want to adjust the temperature.

As it is, the heater controls are above the small sideboard next to the main access door. If you have a TV here, the controls are hard to see and reach. There is also >>

only one mains socket, but if you have a satellite receiver or Freeview box, a second socket is a must. Luckily, our digibox was 12V so we used the cigar-lighter socket. There are satellite and TV aerial points there, too.

Kitchen

There is no getting away from the fact that space in the kitchen area is limited, but Swift has done a very good job of ensuring that every inch is put to good use. The level of equipment is bang on, too, with the Thetford oven and separate grill, three gas burner hob and single mains-powered electric hotplate. However, if the concertina dividing curtain is pulled across, it fouls the oven door when it's opened. If the screen isn't in place, though, care must still be taken to avoid snagging the end of the duvet when the oven is opened.

Space constraints are evident elsewhere, too. The 112-litre Thetford digital-control fridge's door cannot quite open the full 90 degrees due to the proximity of the offside seat base. It doesn't affect use of the fridge most of the time, but it does make removing the full-width salad tray something of a logic puzzle come cleaning time.

Kitchen storage is very good. There is pan storage under the cooker, and a tall locker between

the cooker and the fridge with slide-out baskets and utensil drawer. The baskets are tricky to access due to the mounting frame on the left-hand side, but we managed to work around the obstruction.

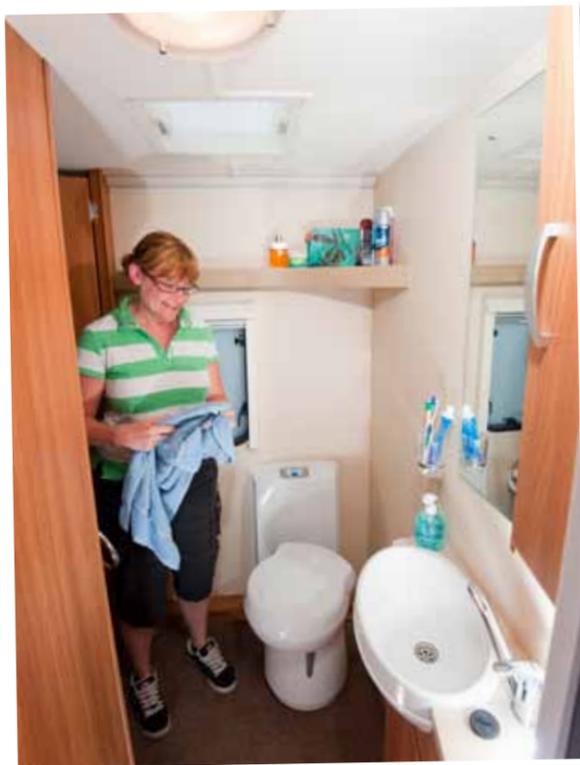
The main cutlery drawer is on the other side of the van, above the heater unit. The two roof-level lockers sit either side of the microwave. Both are side-opening and have plenty of room, although with no shelving, the amount of usable space is deceptively small. We had to stack bowls and cups to get them all in. Positive catches mean they can't move in transit.

As a space for preparing food, the 554's kitchen is helped no end by the small worktop extension that lifts up at the left end of the units. Factor in the discrete LED strip light over the kitchen and there is real sense that Swift has made the most of what is available.

Sleeping

There are two aspects where the 554 excels. One is the bed area and the other is the washroom. It may be a standard-size fixed double with a clipped corner but everything works. There are small shelves and reading lights on both sides of the bed, a midi-Heki rooflight overhead, and the mattress is very comfortable.

As with many caravans of this layout, the constant chatter of the Venetian blind at the foot of the bed whenever you move in the night is irritating, but this is easily fixed by lifting it up. The large mirror on the offside wall next to the wardrobe has a plug socket next to it, which was good for charging mobile phones at



The mattress on the fixed bed is very comfortable ABOVE The washroom makes great use of space

night and for plugging in Mrs Donnelly's low-voltage hair straighteners by day.

Although it is likely to see little use, the front bed is very simple to make. The bed slats run on tracks so they can't drop out during assembly and the resultant bed is wide enough for two to sleep in comfort. The pronounced knee rolls are best turned to the outside edge of the bed for the flattest mattress.

Washroom

The use of space in the rear washroom is very good indeed. The washbasin has a mirror over it and a large storage cupboard underneath, while on site storage is available by using the long, eye-level shelf above the C250 cassette toilet. The toilet has plenty of legroom around it, too.

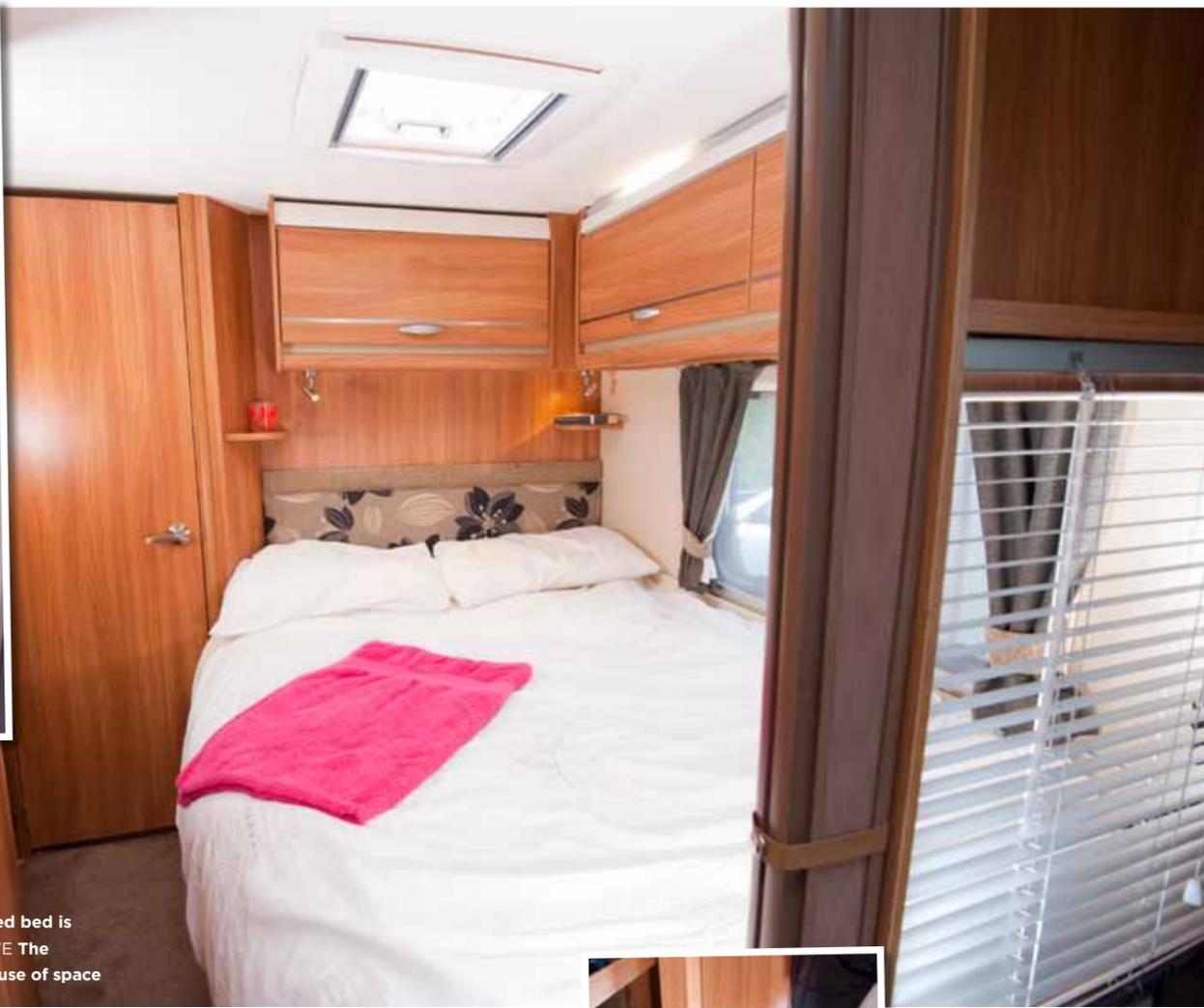
The shower enclosure has a bi-fold door, which is far easier to get past than a single-piece hinged one. Once inside, there is space for a full-size adult to shower - which is not the case in all vans. Storage shelves are provided for shampoo bottles, and Swift's water-saving shower head only dispenses water when you push the lever. Not everyone likes this system, but once we got used to it, we found that it works well.

The nearest we could get to a criticism is that, for all the wall space on offer, the only clothes hooks are behind the bathroom door. Nothing that a trip to Poundland couldn't fix of course, but a gripe nonetheless.

Storage

As soon as we started loading the van, we realised storage was in very good supply. Five roof lockers at the front and four at the back meant we barely missed the front two, which have been lost due to the high-level front window.

That said, there are no clever corner lockers like you get in the posher Challenger. To reach the storage in the front corners, you must reach through from the adjacent roof locker - and that could be tricky for shorter caravanners. Another small roof locker sits above the small sideboard in the middle of the van on the nearside, although a lot of space in it is lost due to the heater flue.



ABOVE Great storage, but wardrobe doors (LEFT) need more clearance

Low down in the lounge, the two seat-base lockers have drop-down fronts but there is little storage available on the offside - plumbing, mains controls and the water heater see to that. The nearside, however, is broadly free of obstructions and provides a home for practical kit items such as a toolbag or a crate of various potions for cleaning and maintaining the caravan.

The only storage area that drew our criticism is the wardrobe. Opposite the foot of the bed on the offside, it is big, but an awkward size. Happily though, there are useful shelves to the rear and at the bottom, although the latter can be a bit tricky to access due to the proximity of the bed.

Two things annoyed us about it, however, and both concerned the double doors. It would be helpful if the right-hand door was the one that opened first. As it is, you have to open the left-hand door, walk to the left,

then open the right-hand door which is all a bit of a pain.

The other niggle was the clearance of the wardrobe doors from the floor. They sit barely an inch off the carpet, which means that you cannot swing them over your feet. Instead you need to dance around the doors as you open them to ensure you don't skin the top of your foot. Or chip your nail varnish, in Mrs D's case. And while we're at it, it's crying out for a light inside, too. By standing in front of it, the contents are constantly in shadow, making it hard to find your stuff.

The *real* experts view

Real caravanners and real opinions on Britain's top new tourers

Peter and Cynthia Warren, Jersey



Van 2009 Lunar Clubman SI

'The kitchen cupboards are good. I like the way they open sideways and have locking catches. In fact the storage is very good throughout. There is good space in the lounge, too. It's comfortable.'

Chris and Collette Willmet, Jersey



Van 2009 Lunar Clubman SI

'The washroom is really good. Chris is tall and he could easily get into the shower without hitting his head. And the bi-fold door makes it much easier to get in and out than a solid door.'

John and Gillian Waudby, West Yorkshire



Van 2005 Sterling Eccles Onyx

'I really like the upholstery in the Challenger Sport. The space in the washroom is very good, too, but I'm not sure about the window at the front - you lose the storage lockers. The weight is impressive, though.'

Verdict

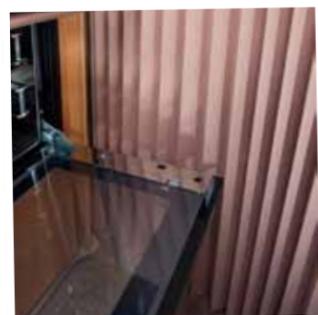
The speed with which fixed-bed, end-washroom layouts on a single axle have come to dominate the caravan market is astonishing, but in the short time they've been around, the details have been refined. These days, the best versions are hard to fault.

That's the situation in which we found ourselves with the 554. Even after 10 days on site, there were very few niggles. The biggest was definitely the wardrobe doors,

which were more of a fiddle than a major irritation. Other than that, the rest of the issues were more in the realm of observations than serious problems.

The combination of a well-resolved layout with stunning looks and a good specification go a long way to justifying the Swift's modest price premium over its rivals. With so little to fault it, if you're shopping for this fashionable layout, we'd suggest that this is a caravan you must have on your shortlist.

Specifications and comparisons for this model on page 72 »



The worktop extension provides some much-needed extra work space TOP The concertina door fouls the oven door when the latter is opened