

LEADING BY EXAMPLE

Rob McCabe reckons the 2013 Challenger is set to continue the sterling work of its predecessors as a caravan that others look up to

Vehicle supplied for test by:
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Cottingham, East
Yorkshire HU16
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847332.

A lot of caravans would give their front corner steadies to have the reputation of the Swift Challenger. For year after year, the Challenger has sold by the transporter-load, its buyers won over by the combination of equipment and style. You more or less know, even before you open the door for the first time, that it's going to look great inside.

So, it was with not a little anticipation that I turned the key in the door of the brand-new Challenger 574 SE. The 'SE' means more expensive, even more equipment and some weight-shaving compared to previous models; and the '574' means a wow-factor, four-berth layout comprising a rear U-shaped lounge/bedroom with an en-suite washroom.

Plenty of interest – so let's get going.

CONSTRUCTION

The new, sleek front GRP panel imparts a pleasing, streamlined look, which boasts the panoramic front sunroof that has become the most obvious face of the Challenger. Sidewalls, floor and bonded roof are insulated with heavy-duty polystyrene to the tune of 25mm, 44mm and 32mm respectively, and they're all mated to each other impeccably.

'Heavy duty' is a description that also applies to the massive corner steadies and, inside, to the beefy stays to which all the locker doors are attached.

Swift calls the woodwork finish 'Mali Acacia'. I prefer to call it simply beautiful; rich in tone, pleasing to the touch and all accurately put together. The new cream locker doors look terrific.



TOWABILITY

By the time you've finished reading this report, you'll know just how much standard equipment has been lavished on this caravan to justify the SE tag. Given that, and the fact that it's so solidly built, it's quite an achievement to keep the MTPLM to a respectable 1,500kg. That still hardly qualifies it as a lightweight, though; one of the heftier versions of Kia's likeable Sportage SUV would be a great match.

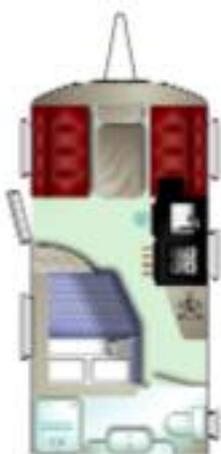
With a hitch stabiliser and the excellent AI-Ko ATC electronic stability control system fitted, a good towing match should ensure a lifetime's fuss-free touring.

USABILITY

The layout of the 574 is an interesting one. The spacious washroom's location right at

the back effectively makes it an en-suite facility for the rear living area/bedroom, which itself closes off from the front quarters by way of a concertina door.

This rear room enjoys the amenities usually associated with fixed-bed models, such as a TV viewing platform, little wall-mounted shelves and a wide-opening sunroof. But in the 574, the U-shaped seating has to be converted into a double bed. Does that kind of defeat the object? You could see it like that. But another way of looking at it is that a fixed-bed caravan will always be that; there's no flexibility. Here, you can make up the bed at the start of your holiday and leave it, so you have the benefits of a fixed-bedder but with the wherewithal to turn it back into a lounge if and when needed. Or you may



prefer to leave the front double made up and use the rear quarters as a lounge.

All this is predicated on the 574 being bought and used by a couple. If you're looking for a family four-berther, there are more user-friendly layouts. Indeed, the 570 SE is virtually identical to our test model, the exception being a permanent double bed instead of the 574's flexible set-up.

All 2013 Challenger SEs come with roof-mounted solar panel as standard – it's good to encounter such a neat factory-fitted version which will, no doubt, attract potential buyers who frequent CLs and temporary sites with no hook-up facility.

Does it work? Well, I left two lights on for 24 hours and the battery-level display on the 12V control panel didn't move. It's not an experiment that will get me on the Nobel Prize shortlist but, given that we were talking about a couple of fairly cloudy autumn days, that's quite impressive.

The exterior locker towards the front of the nearside panel opens up to reveal uninterrupted access right across to the other side of the caravan – perfect for your awning, if it doesn't put too much strain on your noseweight. The weatherproofed mains and gas barbecue sockets also live on this section of wall.

The loose-lay carpeting is attractive and fits with glove-like snugness, although the main section is such an unwieldy big lump, it's a pain to manhandle and the bit in the washroom extends up to and around the loo, which I will never regard as hygienic.

You get blinds and flyscreens on all opening windows and sunroofs. Although the concertina-style blinds look exceptionally smart when deployed of an evening, the flyscreens are integrated

in the same mechanism, so you can't use both at the same time – shame if you wanted a nice through breeze and privacy on a hot Mediterranean night.

Hot Mediterranean nights will seem light years away if you're on a high, windswept CL in the Peak District in the middle of February – you'll want some serious heating. Well, you've got it. The SE has the much-admired Alde central heating system, controlled by touch pad and operated on either gas or mains electric.

Although not as quick to warm a caravan from scratch as a conventional space heater, it does start to make a difference soon after being turned on – and it's programmable, so you can set it to make sure you arrive back to a toasty vehicle after your day out. If it's seriously chilly, you can take advantage of a beefy new 3kW setting (1kW and 2kW are your other options).

LIVING AND SLEEPING

All seating is extremely comfortable and supportive. However, the edge of the sofa nearest the entrance door has nothing to lean into, which could be easily solved.

Both double beds are really nice and decently sized – the front double 6ft 8in x 5ft 1in and the rear bed 6ft 4in x 4ft 3in. The latter requires the right-hand-side occupant to lie with their legs at a slight angle, though. Oh, and make sure you ask the dealer to demonstrate the necessary upholstery rearranging to make something that resembles a mattress. I got there in the end, but it was a struggle.

There are two wall-mounted little shelves for night-time paraphernalia although, curiously, only one is on the headboard – the other is on the sidewall. >>



Above: comfy lounge by day...



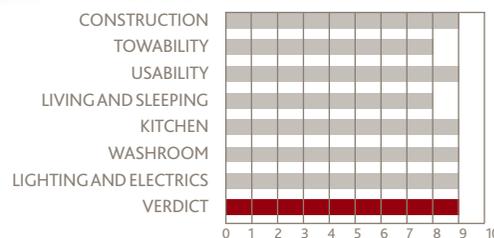
Right: ...decent-sized bed by night



Challenger is a light and airy place in which to be thanks to its large sunroof

TECHNICAL

RATINGS



“The new, sleek front GRP panel imparts a pleasing look”



RRP	£20,135 OTR
Overall length	23ft 9in (7.25m)
Overall width	7ft 5in (2.26m)
Overall height	8ft 8in (2.65m) inc TV aerial
Internal length	18ft 4in (5.6m)
Max internal height	6ft 5in (1.95m)
MRO	1,347kg (26.5cwt)
MTPLM	1,500kg (29.5cwt)
User payload	153kg (3cwt)
Berths	4
NCC approved	Yes

Figures supplied by manufacturer

Club insurance: 01342 336610 • Info: swiftgroup.co.uk



“Challenger benefits from some clever and subtle lighting touches”

Above and right: spacious rear U-shaped lounge converts to a double and can be separated from the rest of the living quarters

Below: heated towel rail is standard Challenger issue



Both bedrooms benefit from a wide-opening sunroof – a highly-civilised way of introducing daylight to the caravan before you’re ready to get up and face the world. The standard-fit stereo radio/CD is at the front, although there’s a mains socket in the rear if you want a bedside radio in there.

KITCHEN

You almost want for nothing here. I say ‘almost’, because the one thing that is in short supply is work surface, even taking

into account the little fold-up extension that juts out into the front lounge.

The 574 galley’s recipe for success combines a healthy measure of eye-catching looks, a good glug of practicality and a generous helping of equipment. The latter extends to a smart new Dometic fridge with cool interior lighting and a freezer compartment that simply lifts out if you’d rather have the extra fridge space, an overhead extractor fan, an eye-level microwave, an electric hotplate alongside three gas burners on the hob, a clip-on

drainer and an acrylic, shaped cover/chopping board for the granite-look sink.

Usefully-deep lockers and a sturdy pull-out wire rack from the ground-level cupboard provide plenty of storage, while you get not one, but two cutlery drawers.

WASHROOM

One of the benefits of having central heating in the Challenger SE is the heated towel rail in here. Similarly, the posh-looking fabric blind adds to the warm ambience of this highly-attractive facility.

At first glance, it looks as though Swift has missed a trick by not fitting a light directly above the mirror. But wait... what’s this switch for? The mirror has two built-in striplights, one on each side.

There’s plenty of storage – including in the shower cubicle, which offers generous provision for toiletries and an ever-useful removable hanging rail. With nice illumination, a big window and a skylight, it’s well-lit in here both day and night.

LIGHTING AND ELECTRICS

Once you’ve figured out which switches control which lights, all is well here. The Challenger is very effectively and stylishly lit by an armoury of 100% LED lamps. The caravan benefits from several clever, subtle illuminatory touches that include backlighting behind the overhead lockers, the aforementioned mirror strips in the washroom, two floor-level night lights and even an LED on the underside of the kitchen worktop. Blimey!

But I’m not done yet. The powerful awning light can be turned off and on from the remote-control button on the key fob; and opening the wardrobe door triggers a lamp in there, too. Swift’s lighting boffins must have missed something out, but I’m blown if I could find it. Why, they even made sure that the kitchen is decently lit.

Mains connectivity includes two TV viewing stations; one in the front lounge and another at the nearside dresser. In this category, the Challenger SE’s credentials as a sophisticated 21st-century tourer are beyond question. ■

VERDICT

A great-looking caravan whose beauty is far more than skin-deep – it’s even better inside, where the marriage of exemplary finish and top-quality materials provides a great ambience. At more than 20 grand on the road, it’s an expensive caravan – but it looks and feels it.