

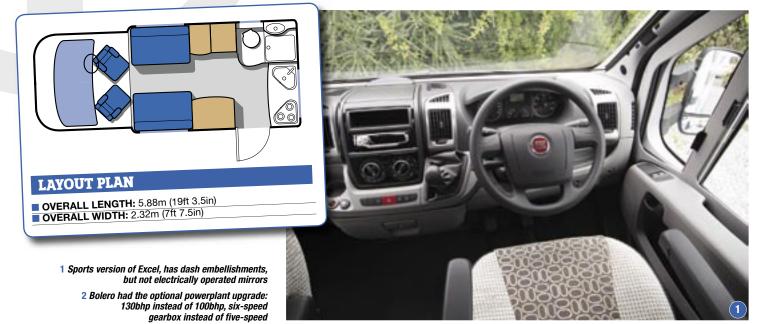
Two for two: a brace of compact British low profiles offer couple-friendly accommodation and pleasurable piloting



wo fine looking fillies this month, both strong contenders in the target market of getaway couples. This market is one of the most difficult to crack, simply because there is such a contrast in the ages

of prospective purchasers. Basically folk are at two different stages in life when such a motorcaravan would be a perfect fit.

Firstly, there are young couples, with no children yet, who want more comfortable camping than a frame tent can provide. Then fast forward to empty nesters, frequently approaching retirement age, who want to downsize from a much larger 'family' coachbuilt. Now add in those couples who motorcaravan together but are not 'partners' - relatives, friends and fellow hobbyists... This encompasses everything from flower





arranging to extreme sports, so you can see why it is so difficult to please everyone. All the more satisfying then, to report that these two are (overwhelmingly) on target.

Each is built in Britain on the short wheelbase version of the Fiat Ducato chassis cab. Each has a similar interior layout, which consists of a forward lounge, amidships wardrobe, offside rear corner washroom and rear kitchen. However, Auto-Trail's

interpretation is quite different to that of the Swift Group. The result of these divergent approaches are two similar layouts, but with very different priorities.

Both exteriors are good lookers and their colour schemes are, to a certain extent anyway, negatives of each other. Swift's



OVERALL LENGTH: 5.90m (19ft 4.5in)
OVERALL WIDTH: 2.31m (7ft 7in)



Bolero has coloured sides with white skirts, Auto-Trail's Excel is the opposite, white sides, with coloured skirts. Further forward, Bolero's cab is all-white-on-the-night with coloured graphics next to the headlights. Excel's cab (here in Sports guise) is a very fetching shade of metallic blue with white stripes. Which is more attractive? You decide, though the different cladding to the exterior walls may well influence your choice. Excel uses GRP, Bolero uses aluminium; both have a moulded GRP roof.

MOTIVE POWER

It was rather fortuitous that one combatant featured an extra-cost engine upgrade that may be specified on both. The bigger motor first: in this size and weight of 'van, and with such a wind-cheating profile, one would have expected it to be a lively performer. No surprise then, that it provided a smooth delivery of power, was remarkably quiet, accelerated confidently on overtaking manoeuvres and cruised comfortably at the motorway limit. Now to the little 'un: I can tell you that 'it provided a smooth delivery of power, was remarkable quiet, accelerated

AUTO-TRAIL EXCEL 590EK





3 Sports Pack adds pizzazz to furnishings

4 Well-equipped kitchen with loads of work-surface and well-placed cutlery drawer below wardrobe 5 Excel's washroom is much smaller than the Bolero's, but usable by all except the large of frame

I LIKED

- Exterior colour way
- 'Young vibe' interior
- Acres of worktop
- Variety and amount of storage

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

- Single beds option
- Duckboard in shower tray
- More 230V sockets

I DISLIKED

- Over-firm ride when unladen
- Can of goo-sealant and 12V inflator instead of a spare wheel

confidently on overtaking manoeuvres and cruised comfortably at the motorway limit.'

Surprised? I wasn't, but only because I drive so many of these that I knew what to expect. Further, despite the fact that it's a cog short in the gearbox department, owners responding to our MMM Motorcaravanners' Report have provided strong evidence that the 100-horse motor is significantly more economical under normal driving conditions than the 130 in an identical model of motorcaravan. Further, enthusiastic tree-huggers, such as my long-suffering partner will, no doubt, point to the 100's lower exhaust emissions.

Both examples had 'raincoats' on vulnerable engine components and benefited from the latest engine suspension system (that's the mountings to you or me). At first, I was puzzled over why the raincoats were of differing designs. Eventually, I remembered that they had different engines. Doh! These motors do look alike though, so perhaps I'm not a completely lost cause.

I'll not be forced into saying the 130 motor is better - it's faster, and more powerful, but it ain't necessarily the most appropriate here.

ROAD MANNERS

Pin sharp handling and very tractable power units made press-on miles a very engaging drive indeed. It was a shame that gentle touring wasn't as relaxing as I might have hoped. My dodgy back got a battering with both Ducatos banging and crashing over pot-holed roads. Interestingly, in each case I'd been over my chosen test circuit two hours earlier in my own Transit-based motorcaravan and that provided a much smoother and more civilised ride. Funny that, as the set up is basically the same, McPherson struts at the pointy end and leaf springs aft. It might have been because my own 'van is loaded to the gunwales, whereas the test vehicles were pretty much unladen, or it might have been because the Ducato's tyres were over-inflated. The above may all be contributory, but probably don't tell the whole story. Instead the smart money would be on the suggestion that Ford and Fiat just set suspension up differently.

The Bolero (130bhp motor, six-speed gearbox) reversed up a one-in-seven tarmac road smoothly even when I retarded progress further by partially applying the hand (parking) brake. The Excel (100bhp motor, five-speed gearbox) excelled on a similar gradient of hill, only this time it was on soft wet grass and compacted sand (don't ask!). In both cases I gave the motor plenty of beans and made robust use of the clutch. Not letting the revs fall away is my secret to a smother manoeuvre. My

Tranny requires the same, much different to the previous generation that would climb the side of a house on tick over.

Wind noise was there, but not at all intrusive on the Excel and barely detectable on the Bolero. I wondered whether the TV aerial on the Excel might have been responsible (this is one of the Sports version's goodies). Anyway, the difference was so slight as to be unimportant.

The Bolero was also the quietest regarding conversion noise. Actually, what I really mean was that the Bolero had the quietest oven, as ovens seemed to be the cause of most of the rattles.

Further, in the Bolero I was reassured by the positive locking to overhead cupboards. The pushbutton locks should help to prevent cupboard contents becoming missiles in a road traffic accident. Of course, it could be that the Excel's bias-sprung hinges will do the job just as well. Certainly, my partner has found lately that increasing arthritis has made pressing small pushbuttons a painful procedure, so she would definitely prefer the handles in the Excel.

Little things mean a lot, and it was really irritating on the Bolero to find the net curtains and feature drapes were unrestrained so they blocked the otherwise brilliant over-the-shoulder views through the side windows. This didn't really matter whilst driving forwards along empty country lanes, but a checking glance through these is a vital contribution to safety when emerging from oblique angled junctions.

The next cannot be over emphasised, which is why I've left it until last in this section. The single most important advantage these motorcaravans have isn't what they've got, but what's missing! Size does matter. Not only are they both under the all-important six-metre mark in length, they are also narrow in the beam. This length of motorcaravan is in the cheapest group on ferries and can be squeezed into a parking space (with just a frazzle of overhang), plus they are very easy to 'place' in heavy urban traffic. The short wheelbase chassis underpinning both motorcaravans facilitated a tight turning circle, and the package is eminently suitable for use as a car.

That said, only the Excel offers the option of an additional rear forward-facing travel seat, which might be a decider if it's going to be your only vehicle.

LOUNGE AND DINE

Plenty of natural light and socially inclusive lounge arrangements pushed all the right buttons. Both motorcaravans utilise very comfortable (ergonomically correct) cab seats. These were adjustable and each had two armrests. What's not to like?

I LIKED

- Single beds option
- Skyview rooflight
- Equipment levels
- Generously sized washroom

I WOULD HAVE LIKED

A fire extinguisher

I DISLIKED

- Over-firm ride when unladen
- Can of goo-sealant and 12V inflator instead of a spare wheel







- 6 Socially inclusive lounge shows the 'very beige' interior colour way. The Skyview rooflight is super
- 7 Kitchen boasts a slot-in domestic-style cooker, featuring a dual-fuel hob. Grey plastic draining surface is removable if you want more work top
- 8 Bolero has the best washroom. All down to better use of available space



COOK'S QUARTERS

Similarities first: both locate the hob, oven and sink on a transverse run of base units at the far rear. And... well, that's it really. Now for the differences: Swift opts for a domestic-style full cooker, whereas Excel features stainless steel designer separates. It was immediately apparent that the Excel offered more worktop, but actually both kitchens deserve a closer look before declaring a winner.

Firstly, the Swift has a removable plastic draining surface, whereas the Excel has nowt. Secondly, the Swift's cooker has a dual-fuel hob of greater capacity and the grill is separate from the oven so, in theory at least, one can have simultaneous grilling and roasting. Meanwhile, Excel's combination unit means that they are destined to be individual events.

Swift's Thetford fridge is larger than the Excel's Dometic offering. We have an identical Dometic unit in our own 'van and find it adequate, even when mob handed - though it

Bolero's interior colouring was very beige, but quietly heroic. We think it would prove to be a calm and unobtrusive companion during your travels. On the other hand, the Excel Sport, with its zingy monochrome black 'n' white cushions (with feature black piping), together with slatecoloured worktops, made a far more dramatic statement and seems to have caught the eve of a reassuringly high number of purchasers.

If you like to close the curtains on a winter's night, for a cosier feel, then you'll need an Excel Sports, as both standard Excel and Bolero only have 'feature drapes' in standard form. Actually, these are correctly called 'trimmed or dressed reveals.' Pedant, moi?

Comfort-wise, there was little to choose between the seating. However, the Swift's Skyview overcab rooflight will certainly help those suffering from SAD (seasonal affective disorder), as well as just letting more of the outside inside - if you know what I mean.

Both interiors employed similar-sized freestanding dining tables, with identical folding legs. Plenty big enough for two to dine at, as well as for playing games on - there's even plenty of room for an industrial-sized container of Bombay mix when having friends in for a bevy or three.

Auto-Trail and Swift have both included a dedicated cupboard for table stowage, though the one in the Excel was easier to access. Unlike tables that mount on a wall-rail, these freestanders can be taken outside for alfresco dining or sundowner quaffing (no need to take an additional table, so less weight and less clutter).

Listening to the base vehicle's radio/CD player should be less of a nuisance to your camping neighbours, as well as being easier to hear, in the Swift as it has rear speakers as standard. Bear in mind though, that I couldn't state categorically that this is the case, as the head unit had been removed. Further, Swift has also supplied reading lights for the occupants of swivelled cab seats. Gets my vote - this area can be a tad gloomy, as when sitting here, one tends to be just out of reach of both the standard cab courtesy lights and the living area lighting.

So, the Bolero had the better equipment, but - in our opinion - Excel had the more appealing ambience.

> 9 No single beds option in the Excel, but a good 'chaise longue' is easy to make

HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

■ From: £36,981 OTR ■ As tested: £38,031 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

■ Berths: 2

- Three-point belted seats: 2 (incl driver)
- Warranty: Base vehicle 3 years, conversion year, plus 2 years for specific items
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: Yes
- Construction: Low profile coachbuilt, GRP clad bonded sandwich walls, GRP moulded roof
- **Length:** 5.88m (19ft 3.5in)
- Width: 2.32m (7ft 7.5in)
- Height: 2.79m (9ft 2in)*
- (plus TV aerial on Sports model)
- Wheelbase: 3.00m (9ft 10in)* ■ Rear overhang: 1.90m (6ft 3in)
- Maximum Authorised weight: 3300kg
- Payload: 620kg (after allowance for driver @ 75kg, 90 per cent fuel, water, gas)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Fiat Ducato Light SWB chassis cab
- Engine: 2.2-litre turbo-diesel producing 100bhp
- Transmission: Five-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round. with ABS and EBD
- Suspension: Front: Independent on McPherson struts. Rear: Rigid axle on semi-elliptical springs
- Features: Stereo radio/CD player, electrically operated windows, remote central locking, electronic engine immobiliser. Driver and passenger airbags, cruise control

INSIDE

- Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, nearside fridge housing and caravan entrance. Offside cupboard, wardrobe (with drawers below) and rear corner washroom. Across-the-rear kitchen
- Insulation: Polystyrene. Floor 44mm, walls and roof 40mm
- Interior height: Kitchen: 1.91m (6ft 3in). Lounge: 1.77m (5ft 9.5in)

KITCHEN

Sink: Spinflo triangular stainless steel

AUTO-TRAIL EXCEL 590EK

- bowl with chromed monobloc mixer tap and hinged glass cover
- Cooker: Spinflo triangular stainless steel three-burner hob with hinged glass cover. Spinflo oven/grill
- Fridge: Dometic RM 7271 three-way. Capacity 77 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford C250 swivel-bowl
- electric-flush with wheeled cassette Basin: Acrylic vanity type, with chromed
- monobloc mixer tap/shower head
- Shower: Separate compartment with glazed bi-fold door, also houses washbasin

BED

Lounge transverse double **Length:** 2.01m (6ft 7in) ■ Width: 1.20m (3ft 11in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Underslung 85 litres (18.7 gallons)
- Waste water tank: Underslung 55 litres (12.1 gallons)
- Water and space heater: Webasto Dualtop combi boiler with blown-air. Diesel-only operation
- Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x 7kg cylinders
- Lighting: Multi-LED overhead strip lighting throughout. 2 swivelling LED spotlamps
- Sockets: 230V: 2. 12V: 1

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: None
- Conversion: Sports Pack metallic blue paint, Sports striping, Status 530 aerial, 10-inch LCD TV/Freeview/DVD player, graphite slate-effect worktops, Le Mans upholstery (£1050)

Other options

- Base: Upgrade to 130bhp engine and six-speed gearbox (£1497), upgrade to 157bhp engine and six-speed ComfortMatic automatic transmission (£3913), cab air-conditioning (£915)
- Conversion: Half-dinette with two forward-facing belted travel seats (£734)

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has been rather fragile. Both are three-way (for newbies this means that it will run on either gas, 230V, or 12V when travelling), though you'll have to extend some digits to change supply in the Excel. The Swift cooler has SES (Smart Energy Selection), which automatically changes to the most appropriate fuel. Apparently, there's a team of elves inside, constantly monitoring conditions: I'd like to think so anyway!

The 'scores on the doors' show (once again) that the Swift is ahead on equipment, the Excel on design. If I had to pick one, it would be the Excel.

BATHING SPACE

The only things these areas have in common are a swivel-bowl loo and the location of the compartment, in the offside rear corner. Apart from these, they are chalk and cheese. Better just put the record straight: the Excel's grey tambour door looks green in the photographs, as it had a protective covering on it. Whatever its hue, it did allow easy access into what is



HEAD-TO-HEAD DATA

PRICE

■ From: £38,130 OTR As tested: 39,745 OTR

BASICS (*manufacturer's figures)

- Three-point belted seats: 2 (incl driver)
- Warranty: Base vehicle 3 years, conversion 1 year, plus 2 years for specific items
- Badged as NCC EN1646 compliant: Yes
- Construction: Low profile coachbuilt, aluminium clad bonded sandwich sidewalls, one-piece GRP roof
- **Length:** 5.90m (19ft 4.5in)
- Width: 2.31m (7ft 7in)
- Height: 2.77m (9ft 1in)* ■ Wheelbase: 3.00m (9ft 10in)*
- Rear overhang: 1.93m (6ft 4in)
- Maximum Authorised weight: 3300kg
- Payload: 400kg (after allowance for driver
- @ 75kg, 90 per cent fuel, water, gas, 10kg habitation load)

THE VEHICLE

- Chassis: Fiat Ducato Light SWB chassis cab
- Engine: 2.3-litre TD producing 130bhp
- Transmission: Six-speed manual gearbox, front-wheel drive
- Brakes: Servo-assisted discs all round, with ABS and EBD
- Suspension: Front: Independent on McPherson struts. Rear: Rigid axle on semi-elliptical springs
- Features: Stereo radio/CD player, electrically operated windows, electrically adjustable mirrors, remote central locking, electronic engine immobiliser, driver and passenger airbags, cruise control

INSIDE

- Layout: Swivelling cab seats ahead of twin-sofa lounge, nearside cupboard and caravan entrance. Offside wardrobe and rear corner washroom, Across-the-rear kitchen
- Insulation: Polystyrene. Floor 70mm, walls 32mm, roof 40mm
- Interior height: Kitchen 1.94m (6ft 4.5in), lounge 1.84m (6ft 0.5in)

KITCHEN

- Sink: Round stainless steel bowl with chromed monobloc mixer tap and free-standing plastic drainer
- Cooker: Stoves dual fuel appliance, 3 gas hob burners, 1 electric hotplate, grill and oven

SWIFT BOLERO 600EK COMPACT

Fridge: Thetford N104 three-way, with Smart Energy Selection. Capacity 105 litres

WASHROOM

- Toilet: Thetford C250 swivel-bowl electric-flush with wheeled cassette
- Basin: Acrylic vanity unit with chromed monobloc mixer tap
- Shower: Walk-through showering area with rigid hinged doors at each end, mixer tap, riser rail and wooden duckboard

BEDS

Lounge transverse double

- **Length:** 2.06m (6ft 9in)
- Width: 1.37m (4ft 6in) reducing to 1.20m (3ft 11.5in)

Alternative longitudinal singles

- Length: Nearside 1.93m (6ft 4in), offside 1.78m (5ft 10in)
- Width: Both 710mm (2ft 4in)

EQUIPMENT

- Fresh water tank: Underslung insulated, 90 litres (19.8 gallons)
- Waste water: Underslung, 68ltr (15 gallons)
- Water and space heater: Truma Combi boiler with blown-air and en-route heating feature. Gas-mains operation
- Leisure battery: 110 amp hr
- Gas: 2 x 7kg cylinders
- Lighting: Overhead luminaire in lounge, LED strip lights in kitchen and washroom, 3 LED swivel reading lights, 2 halogen reading lights serving swivelled cab seats, low-drain downlighter over washbasin and above entrance, LED step light and awning light
- Sockets: 230V: 5. 12V: 1

OPTIONAL EXTRAS

Fitted to test vehicle

- Base: Upgrade to 130bhp engine and 6-speed gearbox (£1615)
- Conversion: None
- Other options ■ Base: Towbar and electrics (£464)
- Conversion: Vogue Pack cab air-con, colour rev. camera, satellite navigation system (£975), Winter Pack - fresh and waste water tank heaters, fridge vent covers (£113), microwave oven (£112), roof rack and ladder (£440)

E&OE

a very bijou lavatory enclosure, which itself is adjacent to (and a step up from) the walk-in shower compartment. The shower is also home to the washbasin. It's all perfectly usable but rather claustrophobic. A duckboard in the shower tray would give some support to the feet when sat on the throne. For most of us, our feet will just dangle in fresh air. I don't like dangling feet and neither did I like the clear glazing to the loo compartment window.

The Swift's washroom is around 50 per cent larger and that says it all really. Very spacious, well laid out, and containing good equipment. Swift opted to put the loo right at the end of the compartment, so Bolero babes won't have to do the 'Thetford shimmy' in order to use the shower or basin.

Swift couldn't make the mistake of putting clear glazing in the loo window, as there is none. Despite this oversight, it's a clear win for the Bolero in the ablutions sweepstake.

BEDTIME

Although it is probably difficult to see from the accompanying photographs, the Swift's offside settee is actually shorter than the nearside one, so the resulting transverse double bed tapers slightly to the offside. Excel has settees of identical length, though nothing's gained as they are both only the same length as the Swift's shortest one.

Where the Bolero pulled ahead, was by offering the option of sleeping as two singles by employing its specially shaped cab seat squab overlay cushions that level the bases out a treat. Research by me suggests that many prospective purchasers (especially at the senior end of the age range) will wish for single beds, or at least a choice in sleeping arrangements. By not facilitating this, Excel misses a trick. I suggest Auto-Trail gets on the case right away.

STORE ROOM

Just when Swift looked to be in the lead. Excel fought back! It was the clear winner here, offering far more internal storage and a greater variety of different sizes and shapes of cupboard/locker/drawer. Partly, this is because

10 Bolero Is alone in offering the single beds option. The grey overlay cushions level the cab seat bases







- 11 Transverse double is made in the conventional way by bridging the central aisle
- 12 Smoothrunning chest of drawers sits below the double-door wardrohe
- 13 Excel has a glazed one-piece door and a stout grab rail - management panel and controls for the Webasto dieselfired heater above





Excel has chosen to prioritise extra cupboard space over washroom space, and partly because the available storage is maximised.

As an example, half of the Bolero's offside seat-box is taken up with the Truma boiler, whereas there's nothin' but fresh air in the Excel's - its Webasto heater is mounted externally, underneath the 'van.

Each manufacturer claims that its gas cylinder locker will hold a brace of 7kg cylinders - both lockers looked well constructed and surpassed the current safety requirements. The positioning of stored cylinders is different though. The Swift places one cylinder behind the other, whereas in the Excel they will sit side-by-side. At first I thought that this would be better, as it should allow easy withdrawal of either cylinder when spent. Now, I'm not so sure, as wouldn't you always have the one you are using nearest the access door in the Swift's locker?

Both motorcaravans have an outside access door to the nearside seat box, but Excel also has an additional sealed-from-the-interior, exterior-accessed locker to the rear of the entrance door. It looked most useful - I'd have that filled up with 'essentials' before you could say, 'accessorise me!'

LIFE SUPPORT

Wot no spare wheel? Nope, nuffink in either. I'm probably in a minority of one (oh no you're not, *DH*), but I wouldn't ever rely on the supplied can of sealant goo/12V inflator. Instead I'd buy a spare wheel. Actually, I'd first ascertain that the converter had left enough room for an underslung spare wheel cradle, *then* I'd buy that wheel and tyre.

Everything else appeared to be present and correct though, including ample water capacities (both 'vans have a reasonably well matched fresh/waste water ratio, so both could be serviced at the same time). As both types of heaters are blown-air-only (consuming more 12V power), we'd specify an additional leisure battery, as we rally a lot on fields where the only available hook-up is the farm tractor's tow hitch.

Whilst we are looking at heating, I'd better just reiterate that the Truma in the Bolero runs on gas or mains electricity, whether it is heating the room or the water, or both. The Webasto in the Excel uses neither; instead it runs on diesel from the vehicle's fuel tank. Both units are excellent toe-toasters, it all depends which fuel you prefer to use, or more accurately, which is better suited to your pattern of usage. This brings me back neatly to the Swift's dual-fuel hob I mentioned earlier. That and the mains option on the Combi boiler will mean that you will get better value out of pitch fees on campsites where the hook-up is not metered and included whether you want it or not.



Others, of course, will prefer the Excel's diesel-powered unit as it reduces the reliance on mains power and also lowers concern over running out of gas when abroad. Both of these are more important if you favour camping offseason and/or away from commercial sites.

CONCLUSION

These are both fine examples of the genre. The Excel has better storage, more kitchen worktop, and a bigger payload. On the other hand, the Bolero's payload is perfectly adequate, plus its washroom is far superior to the Excel's and the Skyview overcab window is just inspired. It's all a question of which features are the most important to you.

The Bolero is instantly recognisable as a typically stylish Swift offering, whereas the enhanced Excel Sport doesn't look like a traditional Auto-Trail product. It is all the better for that, as it has a much younger vibe than the firm's usual fare.

I don't care how many times I'm challenged over this, I still maintain that although it is the least powerful, the 100-horse motor is by far the most civilised of the latest Sevel-built chassis' offerings. Unless you tow heavy trailers, require an automatic, or travel regularly at the speed of sound, I wouldn't bother with an engine upgrade on these compact 'vans. I wouldn't buy an Excel without the Sports option though: it transforms it.

With my normal cussedness I'd go for the Excel exterior and interior finishes, and fabrics, but for the Swift's interior layout. This is solely because the latter offers the option of two longitudinal single beds. For many though, this wouldn't be an issue.

VEHICLES LOANED FOR EVALUATION BY:

Swift Bolero 600EK Compact Wandahome, Brough Road, South Cave, East Yorkshire HU15 2DB (tel: 01430 424342;

web site: www.caravanbuys.com)

Auto-Trail Excel 590EK Davan Caravans Ltd, St Georges, Weston-super-Mare, North Somerset BS22 7XA (tel: 01934 510606; web site: www.davan.co.uk)

THANKS TO:

Both Wandahome and Davan, provided these motorcaravans for evaluation with great enthusiasm. Both the vehicles had been prepared to a very high standard which spoke volumes about these companies' commitment to excellence.







14 Transverse double is made by employing two metal seat box extensions 15 Offside seat box storage is compromised by inclusion of Truma Combi boiler

16 Entrance foyer is just great: the Hartal door has a waste bin and flyscreen

