

Help us to buy...

... a family van under £15,000



1 Bailey Olympus 546
£14,695

Swift Charisma 540
£14,452 **2**

ON TEST

Bailey Olympus 546

Price £14,695

Berths 6

A contemporary tourer using the latest caravan construction technology with separate spaces for the kids and triple bunks

Swift Charisma 540

Price £14,452

Berths 5

Elegant, nicely equipped and very family-friendly, this twin lounge tourer also has distinct spaces for children and grown-ups



OUR EXPERT

A lifelong camper, Mark Sutcliffe converted to caravanning when he got too old for tents. With two little tearaways of his own, he knows exactly which layouts work for both couples and families and understands the importance of value for money.

THIS MONTH WE HELP

Ian, Lynne, Joshua and Isobel Frost, from Lincolnshire

CARAVANNING HISTORY

Ian and Lynne have been camping for 22 years – both with and without their two children: Joshua (10) and Isobel (7). They currently have a folding camper but need something bigger.

LOOKING FOR AND WHY

Lynne would love the extra creature comforts of a tourer and both she and Ian like the idea of extending their holiday season in a cosy caravan rather than a drafty camper. Ian doesn't like the idea of towing anything too big and with two growing children, affordability is, of course, paramount.



Caravan TOW TEST

This month we towed a Swift Charisma 570 with a Volvo XC60 D5 AWD SE See page 34



1

BAILEY OLYMPUS 546

SCORES

10 BEST I'VE SEEN 9 TOP NOTCH 8 REALLY GREAT 7 PRETTY GOOD 6 CAN LIVE WITH IT
5 AVERAGE 4 BELOW AVERAGE 3 QUITE POOR 2 NOT WORTH CONSIDERING 1 LEAVE IT ALONE

NEW CARAVANS



This rear dinette is only really suited to children – but it is a very nice space for them



The kitchen has wide-open, stylish worktops and a huge stainless steel sink plus a microwave above



Pull-out wire racks are great for kitchen storage

CARAVAN SPEC

PRICE
£14,695 (excludes £495 delivery)

PRICE
Bailey of Bristol, South Liberty Lane, Bristol BS3 2SS
T 01173 052939
W bailey-caravans.co.uk

BERTHS
6

DIMENSIONS
Internal length 5.53m
Overall width 2.19m
Shipping length 7.1m

WEIGHTS
MIRO 1222kg
MTPLM 1457kg
User payload 152kg

BED SIZES
Front double 6ft 6in x 5ft 7in/198cm x 169cm. Two singles 5ft 7in x 2ft 3in/171cm x 69cm. Three rear bunks 6ft x 2ft 1in/188cm x 0.63cm. One rear bunk 5ft 7in x 2ft 6in/169cm x 76cm

WARRANTY
10-year body, three-year comp

HEATING
Truma mains and gas blown air

Mark says

I LIKE
Alu-Tech construction, LED grab handles, integrated water tank, good kitchen, standard ATC, flexible layout, long warranty

I DISLIKE
Spartan washroom, handle-less overhead lockers, rather anaemic LED ambient LED lighting



The fridge is the same size as the Charisma's one

These bunks are great for children and the side panels stop them falling out



A utilitarian but relatively roomy washroom



The kitchen is well-positioned next to the door and lounge



EXTERIOR

The Alu-Tech body is unique among narrower British-built caravans. The almost vertical drop of the nose and the contrasting door of the gas locker are the only clues that the Olympus is different. But when the Alu-Tech system was explained, Ian was impressed with the improved rigidity, strength and thermal performance it offers and liked the reassurance of the 10-year body integrity guarantee. Clever little detail touches like the LED strips integrated into the grab handles, Al-Ko anti-snaking device, twin front side lockers and the removable inboard water tank add to the impression that the Olympus is the more modern of our two caravan candidates here.

8/10

LOUNGING

The wraparound layout of the front lounge seems to suit the marginally narrower Olympus, and for family caravanning Ian and Lynne were comfortable with it. The children loved the idea of being able to partition off the rear section and quickly made themselves at home while Ian and Lynne stretched out in the front lounge and commented on how light and airy it felt. Ian and Lynne liked the upholstery, and both parents and children appreciated having their own spaces. The Olympus doesn't feel as plush as the Charisma, but it certainly doesn't want for anything in spec terms and again feels the more contemporary.

8/10

DINING

Both caravans are capable of handling separate mealtimes and have impressive kitchens to cope with the demands of feeding a family of four. The Bailey's generous front lounge will accommodate the whole family for dinner together or the youngsters can dine in the rear dinette. Parents of younger children might be happier feeding them in the dinette before bedtime, then settle them in their bunks, close the partition and uncork the wine for a quiet dinner for two in the front lounge. And for families whose little 'uns are early risers, you can serve breakfast in the rear dinette. Whatever option you go for, the kids can be kept well away from hot pots and pans.

9/10

NIGHT TIME

The bunks won't eliminate arguments over who gets the top one, it does mean there's an extra berth if either Josh or Isobel wants to have a friend for a sleep-over. The upper bunks have deep wooden lips to prevent rollouts, although Bailey says the bunks aren't really suitable for children under six without supervision and they have a maximum weight of 75kg, so they're pretty much ideal for Josh (10) and Isobel (7). Each bunk has its own window and reading light, plus with the option for one, two or all three occupants of the bunks also able to eat or play at the dinette table, this is one of the most flexible, hassle-free sleeping solutions we've ever seen.

10/10

STORAGE

The bunks can be loaded up with lightweight items like bedding when in transit. The 546 has 11 overhead lockers – some with splitter shelves – which are more useful than the Charisma's flimsy high level shelves. Storage in the kitchen is good, with two pull-out wire racks and lockers overhead, but the wardrobe isn't as capacious as the Charisma's. There's under-seat storage in the rear dinette and under the front lounge seats. Externally, the Bailey's gas locker is significantly smaller than the Swift's, but it does benefit from a substantial wet locker. In any event, both our contenders have around 152kg of personal effects payload to play with.

7/10

KITCHEN

This is one of the 546's highlights with ample preparation space. There's a four-burner gas hob, separate grill and oven, and a microwave fitted as standard. So catering for the whole family shouldn't be too much of a chore – which saves money for other holiday treats. The 107-litre Thetford fridge has a useful capacity and a big freezer compartment – which is ideal for keeping a selection of convenient microwave-ready meals handy for the kids. Yes, in an ideal world we should all be eating locally sourced, organic rabbit-burgers every night, but sometimes, fish fingers and beans followed by a huge dollop of ice cream is just fine!

8/10

WASHROOM

There is room enough for an adult to supervise the kids' ablutions, but no separate shower cubicle so the rest of the washroom is likely to get a little damp while hosing down a couple of grubby kids. The toilet is crammed into the rear corner and there's only just about enough legroom for an adult to perch on it when rotated at 45 degrees. The corner sink and vanity unit is illuminated by a couple of spotlights, but there are precious few luxuries here. The blown air heating does find its way in here however, so it can be used to air damp clothes. There's also a deep shelf over the toilet and a cabinet under the sink. The space is functional but with few extras.

7/10

FINISH AND BUILD

Some cynics might question the longevity of the Alu-Tech construction, but Bailey has backed the Olympus with a 10-year guarantee. Thousands of Pegasus and Olympus customers have been convinced, though, and Ian was impressed with the improved insulation. He was also happy with the technology and preferred the 546's unfussy interior, which he felt was contemporary and understated. The handle-less overhead lockers with their plastic catches divided opinion however, and Ian was also quick to notice that the Olympus is a couple of inches narrower than the Charisma, which is handy if storage space is restricted, but does pinch the living space.

8/10

2 SWIFT CHARISMA 540



The Charisma's rear lounge is much more spacious than the Olympus' rear dinette



There's more worktop space than the Bailey but the sink is slightly smaller



A nicely finished washroom with separate shower

CARAVAN SPEC

| | |
|-------------------|---|
| PRICE | £14,452 (excludes £495 delivery) |
| PRICE | Swift Group, Cottingham, East Yorkshire HU16 4JX T 01482 847332 W swiftgroup.co.uk |
| BERTHS | 5 |
| DIMENSIONS | Internal length 5.60m Overall width 2.23m Shipping length 7.29m |
| WEIGHTS | MIRO 1263kg MTPLM 1485kg User payload 144kg |
| BED SIZES | Front double 6ft 9in x 5ft 11in/ 208cm x 180cm. Front single (nearside) 6ft 2in x 2ft 5in/ 190cm x 72cm. Front single (offside) 5ft 11in x 2ft 5in/ 180cm x 72cm. Rear double 6ft 9in x 4ft 3in/ 208cm x 129cm. Bunk 6ft 3in x 1ft 10in/ 190cm x 56cm |
| WARRANTY | Six-year body, Three-year comp |
| HEATING | Gas and mains blown air |

Mark says

I LIKE
Upmarket interior, well-finished washroom, quality appliances, excellent lighting, really good kitchen layout

I DISLIKE
ATC anti-snaking device is an optional extra, with less flexible layout

SCORES

10 BEST I'VE SEEN 9 TOP NOTCH 8 REALLY GREAT 7 PRETTY GOOD 6 CAN LIVE WITH IT 5 AVERAGE 4 BELOW AVERAGE 3 QUITE POOR 2 NOT WORTH CONSIDERING 1 LEAVE IT ALONE

NEW CARAVANS



The 107-litre fridge can detect automatically the power source



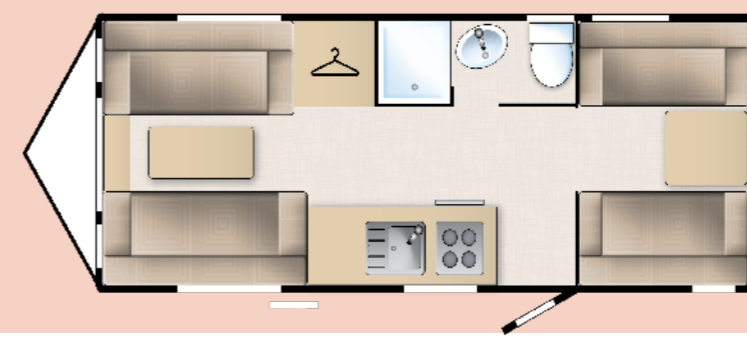
This Swift is wider and looks better finished than Bailey's Olympus 546



Kitchen appliances look more upmarket than the Bailey's



This 'van is open-plan with the kitchen between front and rear dinettes



EXTERIOR

The Charisma is a pretty conventional design, with the traditional raked nose and a shallower incline at the front end of the roof. Like the Olympus, it has alloy wheels and a stable door as standard, but the Charisma doesn't have Al-Ko's ATC anti-snaking device included as standard. At 7ft 4in wide, the Charisma is two inches wider than the Olympus and 10cm longer at bedbox height. But the 540 lacks some of those additional little refinements like LED lights integrated into the grab handles and clever innovations such as the removable inboard water tank. Of the two, however, the Charisma is perhaps the more classically graceful caravan.

7/10

LOUNGING

The front lounge feels more open and spacious, but with the central chest of drawers installed, it's not as cosy. The upholstery is plump and supportive and the fabrics feel high quality and durable. Overhead, the cabinetry is a warm shade. The 540's rear lounge isn't as roomy as its counterpart up front, but it's still more comfortable than the dinette in the 546, which is strictly for children. Like the Olympus, the rear lounge can be partitioned off, albeit with a less robust fabric concertina divider. The overall effect creates the impression of a more expensive caravan on the inside, when in fact, the Charisma is cheaper by a couple of hundred pounds.

9/10

DINING

With just four on board, both front and rear lounges could be used when it comes to mealtimes. There are many combinations with this flexible layout. For example, the rear double could be left up as a semi-fixed affair with all meals taken in the front lounge and the children sleeping at the back. Alternatively, younger children would fit on the rear singles and then have breakfast at the small rear table without mum and dad needing to collapse the front double where they sleep. And when the kids grow up the 540 will make a couples' van with a permanent rear bed. Whichever way you use it, the kitchen will be up to the task of feeding the masses.

8/10

NIGHT TIME

The pleated partition that separates the Charisma's rear sleeping compartment from the rest of the van isn't as substantial as the Olympus' hefty wooden affair, so there isn't quite as much privacy, but it still gives the children that sense of their own space, which makes settling them at night easier. Josh was too tall to fit on the rear settees, which would mean making up the rear transverse double for him and Isobel to share – or erecting the Pullman bunk so both children have their own bed. This can be quite tricky, with a lot of cushion-shuffling and rummaging around – something you may not fancy at the end of a long day caravanning.

7/10

STORAGE

Both our contenders have similar levels of storage with almost identical payloads. The Charisma has 10 overhead lockers plus underseat storage in both lounges – with drop-down locker doors up front. There's also a ¾ length, quite deep wardrobe, which, like the Bailey's doesn't have any shelving incorporated. Kitchen storage is on a par with what's available in the Bailey, with a single huge locker over the kitchen. The gas locker is more capacious than the Olympus' provision, but lacks the flexibility of the Bailey's separate compartments, but in any case, the personal effects payload of 144kg will restrict the amount of clutter.

7/10

KITCHEN

The Charisma's kitchen makes quite ambitious self-catering for a large family a realistic proposition. There's a nicely finished Thetford oven with separate grill, four-burner hob (with electric hotplate) and 700W microwave at eye-level and an SES fridge with digital readout of identical 107-litre capacity. The storage and worktop space available is virtually identical to the Bailey's, and there's plenty of room and equipment to produce first-class food for a big family. The circular granite-effect sink isn't as practical as the 546's one, but it does come with chopping board and drainer, and the appliances feel just a little bit more upmarket than the Olympus.

8/10

WASHROOM

The robust domestic-style door with chunky handle suggests a substantial washroom, which is exactly what you get. It has more space, a separate lined shower with proper partition and pleasant wood and brushed aluminium detailing. With good lighting, it feels much more plush than the Bailey Olympus' functional affair. There's a high-level shelf over the vanity unit and a small cabinet below the sink and more legroom around the loo – which is where the Charisma's extra width makes itself felt. It's perhaps not quite as easy for adults to supervise showering dirty kids, but it's certainly a nicer environment for a bit of peace and pampering prior to a night out.

8/10

FINISH AND BUILD

The Charisma might lack the Bailey's modern body construction techniques, but this doesn't mean it's any less robust and it's backed by Swift's six-year body integrity warranty. In some ways, it feels more expensive than the Olympus and the appliances are a little more upmarket than the Bailey's. The cabinetry also feels slightly more substantial and the lockers with proper metal handles and pelmets underneath will appeal to more traditional tastes. Finally, the Charisma's lighting options are more comprehensive than its rival's. The Frosts thought the Charisma seemed a little bit more luxurious but they actually preferred the plain and utilitarian styling of the Bailey Olympus 546.

8/10

NEW CARAVANS

OTHERS TO CONSIDER

LUNAR QUASAR 546

Price £14,965

Berths 6

A bit pricier than these two, but Lunar was the first to introduce this layout and is the past master at building big 'vans packed with ample accommodation which are significantly lighter than their competitors.

ELDDIS AVANTÉ 556

Price £14,599

Berths 6

This 'van has identical layout to the Olympus and is as solidly built with a nicely finished interior, but not featuring quite as many innovations as the Olympus.

ADRIA ALTEA 542 DK

Price £11,239

Berths 6

This is the budget option. This little Adria is very basic inside and only has the one lounge, but it will comfortably sleep four, costs significantly less and can also be towed by a family hatchback.

GEIST AKTIV 565

Price £13,995

Berths 5/6

Solid German build quality and a more conventional layout, but this 'van is still capable of accommodating a large family at an extremely attractive price.

Final scores



BAILEY OLYMPUS 546

Practicality 8/10

It has one of the best family layouts on the market but the Charisma's is more flexible

Value for money 8/10

The Bailey is the more innovative of the two and we think it will also hold its value better

Caravan
Our rating

80/100



SWIFT CHARISMA 540

Practicality 8/10

The Charisma will fulfill a wider range of roles and it will be a top couples' van, too

Value for money 7/10

Inside it feels more expensive, but the Bailey has better standard spec

Caravan
Our rating

78/100

OUR TESTERS' CONCLUSIONS

Both these vans take quite different routes to achieving the same objective and both make excellent family vans.

Bailey's Alu-Tech construction is a significant step forward in caravan design, but on the inside, the Olympus' cabinetry doesn't feel quite as durable as the Charisma's and equipment like the oven, fridge and microwave aren't quite as high spec. So while the Bailey employs more modern construction technology, Swift gets the interior design award.

The Swift also has the better of the two

washrooms – in terms of space, practicality and appearance, but it's almost impossible to separate them in the kitchen – although the Charisma's appliances are slightly higher spec.

The children loved the idea of having their own space at the back of both vans, and were quick to pull the partition across to do their own thing, giving Ian and Lynne some dedicated space in which to relax. But at bedtime, they found the prospect of rearranging the Charisma's rear lounge to create beds for the children unappealing.

WE CHOSE

Bailey Olympus 546

Both offer accommodation in a lightweight body which can be towed behind a modest car. The Charisma has the more flexible layout, which is better able to cope with the changing demands of a growing family, but as a dedicated family 'van the Bailey is the better bet and the Frosts felt more at home in the Olympus. It's lighter than the Charisma, but has more payload – and when you're trading up from a folding camper, the smaller and lighter the caravan is, the easier the transition will be.



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With special thanks to Steve Wicks and the team at Pioneer Caravans in Eye, Cambridgeshire, for helping out with this test.