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NEC and Dell take their chances with Intel's new and improved Celeron chip, the Rock notebook packs a punch and weighs a ton and Adobe branches out into Web design with its latest graphics tool

Close-up

NEC Direction SE-333CL & Dell Dimension V333

Intel's improved Celeron chip now has 128Kb of cache memory attached and both NEC and Dell have been quick to adopt it

Intel's Celeron processor was launched with little fanfare earlier this year. Pitched as the budget alternative to the Pentium II, the Celeron's low cost was down to the lack of a fairly major component - the cache. Part of the Pentium II's speed and cost comes from its 512Kb of

on-board cache (built-in fast memory). By removing the cache from the Celeron, Intel not only cut its cost but also crippled its performance and, as a result, few manufacturers adopted it.

The chip manufacturer that dominates the PC market didn't get where it is today by not listening to its customers though, and it's addressed the problem by adding 128Kb of cache to the latest version of the processor. Speed has changed too and the latest Celeron clocks in at a pacy 333MHz.

Two of the first PCs to use the new Celeron 333 are from NEC and Dell. As

Specifications

NEC Direction SE-333CL:

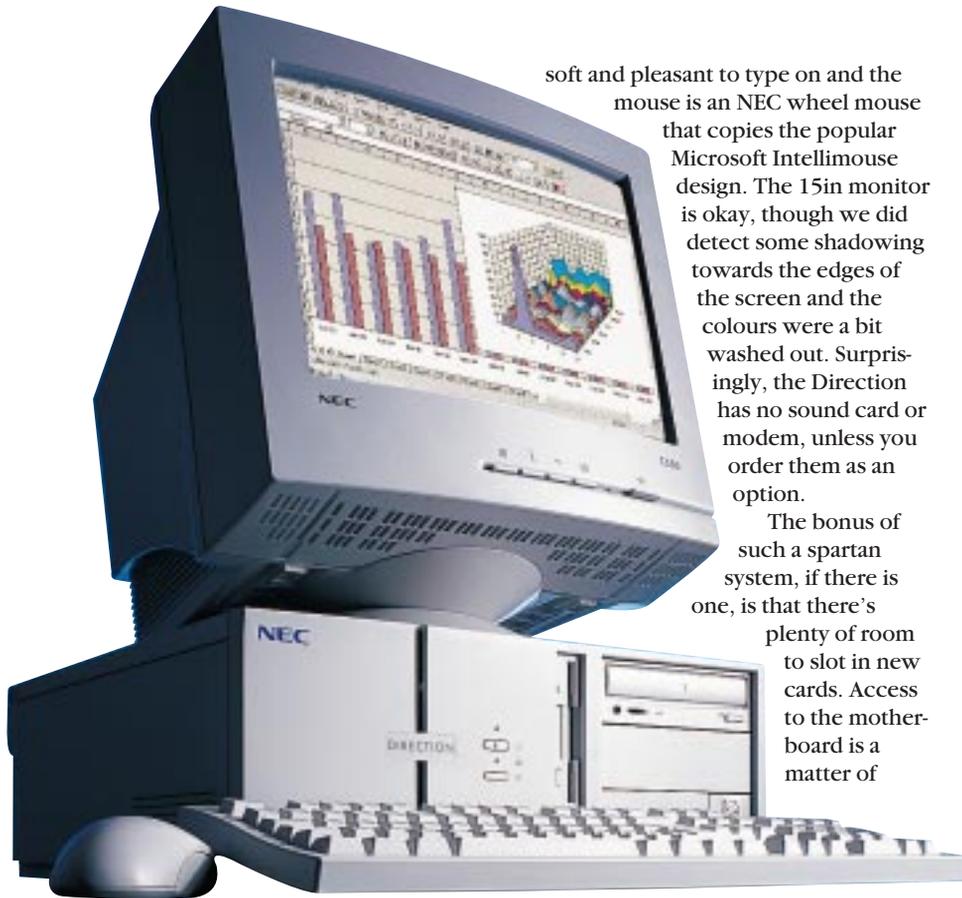
- 333MHz Celeron processor
- 128Kb onboard Level 2 cache
- 32Mb of RAM
- 3.2Gb hard drive
- 4Mb ATI Xpert graphics card
- 32-speed CD-ROM
- 15in monitor

£737.90 (inc VAT)

NEC Direct: 0870 010 6322
www.necedirect-europe.com

NEC Direction SE-333CL					
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★





soft and pleasant to type on and the mouse is an NEC wheel mouse that copies the popular Microsoft Intellimouse design. The 15in monitor is okay, though we did detect some shadowing towards the edges of the screen and the colours were a bit washed out. Surprisingly, the Direction has no sound card or modem, unless you order them as an option.

The bonus of such a spartan system, if there is one, is that there's plenty of room to slot in new cards. Access to the motherboard is a matter of

benefits the Celeron's budget intent, the NEC Direction SE-333CL costs well under £800 and although it certainly shows, NEC has at least put together some nice peripherals. The keyboard is

undoing two clips on the back of the case and sliding off one side. Once you're inside, you'll find three free PCI slots, one shared PCI/ISA slot and one ISA slot, together with two external 3.5in and one external 5.25in drive bays.

The Direction gave a SYSmark 98 score of 123, which is some 23 percent faster than our baseline 233MHz Pentium II PC with 64Mb of RAM (the Direction has only 32Mb of RAM). This is around 10 percent slower than a comparable Pentium II 333 but then again, this PC costs a lot less. If you're looking for decent performance on a tight budget, then this is a good choice and it's ideal if most of your work is done in applications like word processing.

Graphics performance isn't bad either. With its 4Mb ATI Xpert AGP

graphics card, the Direction gave a Final Reality score of 2.87. Rendering was quite smooth but we could detect some jerkiness in more complex sequences.

Dell's Dimension V333 costs quite a bit more than the NEC system but comes with a more generous 64Mb of RAM and a larger 9.4Gb hard drive. Alas, this failed to translate into a significantly better performance result and it scored 129 - only just beating the NEC with half the amount of RAM. Apparently, adding extra memory doesn't help to speed up this Celeron chip.

The Dimension's extra video RAM, however, did make a difference and the 8Mb ATI Xpert 98 graphics controller integrated into the motherboard scored 3.46 in Final Reality. Since graphics are built-in, the Dimension has no AGP slot, leaving you stuck with what Dell has chosen for you. While this is acceptable in a business PC where users aren't encouraged to poke around inside, it's less desirable in a system for use at home.

The supplied 17in monitor is a good quality display, capable of handling resolutions up to 1600x1200 but can display a more usable 1024x768 at a flicker-free 85Hz. Sound is provided by a Turtle Beach Malibu sound card, together with a pair of Altec Lansing speakers with sub woofer, and a bundle of productivity and games software means you can do a bit more with this PC straight out of the box.

Though the Dimension doesn't come with a modem either, it does have an Ethernet network card built into the motherboard, which is a plus for business customers. There's still room for expansion though, with one free PCI slot, one shared PCI/ISA slot and one free ISA slot.

If you're looking for out-and-out performance, steer well clear of Celeron-based PCs. If, on the other hand, you want a decent performer at a low price, then the NEC SE-333CL is worth considering. The Dell Dimension is costlier but your money buys you more RAM and a bigger screen.

Ursula Tolaini

Specifications

Dell Dimension V333:

- 333MHz Celeron processor
- 128Kb onboard Level 2 cache
- 64Mb of RAM
- 9.4Gb hard drive
- 8Mb ATI Xpert98 graphics controller
- Turtle Beach 64 Voice PCI sound card
- 32-speed CD-ROM
- 17in monitor

£1,256.08 (inc VAT)

Dell: 01344 720000
www.dell.co.uk

Dell Dimension V333

Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

SYSMark 98 results



BAPCo benchmarks from which this chart was generated were performed in the *What PC?* VNU Labs. In all tests, a longer bar indicates better system performance.

Nikon CoolPix 900

The Nikon name is well known to buyers of conventional cameras and its digital models have a similar pedigree. Its latest digital camera is the CoolPix 900 and as you'd expect from

Nikon, it's well specified and well built.

Pick up the CoolPix 900 and it feels chunky, with a metallic-effect body that is reassuringly robust. Like the Agfa EPhoto 1280, its lens - zoom, of course - is in a part of the body that rotates relative to the other, so you can view yourself in the LCD screen or simply hold the device at a more comfortable angle.

The CoolPix has an optical viewfinder as well as a screen and using this really cuts down on power consumption. You shouldn't need to use many controls other than the shutter release and zoom buttons, which all fall easily to hand. The others are clearly labelled though, and accessing functions - including manual exposure control - is simple using a well-thought-out menu system. Downloading pictures is simple too, as your PC sees the camera simply as an extra disk drive.

Image quality is good for a consumer camera and, with a maximum resolution



of 1280x960 pixels, you'll even get decent printouts, as long as your printer is up to the job. In part, this is down to the lens - a Nikkor model that's the same quality as those used on Nikon's 'proper' cameras.

We found the auto-focus a little slow to react, though admittedly this is only likely to be a problem if you're taking a picture of something moving towards you. The biggest problem though, is space. It's common to all decent digital cameras but you simply can't store more than 4 highest-resolution images on the supplied 4Mb Compact Flash card.

The CoolPix 900 is a high-quality camera but it's pricey even for the serious hobbyist and still doesn't have the image quality that would make it suitable for a professional photographer. John Sabine

Specifications

1280x960 pixel resolution

3x Nikkor zoom lens & 2x digital zoom

Optical viewfinder and LCD screen

Macro mode

Optional fisheye and wide-angle converters.

Uses 4xAA batteries

£759 (inc VAT)

Nikon: 0800 230220

www.nikon.co.uk

Nikon CoolPix 900				
Ease of use	★	★	★	★
Build quality	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★

Corel Print House Magic Deluxe

Specifications

Project editing done via wizards or easy-to-use drawing tools.

Use template designs or create your own.

Over 100,000 graphics images, including 45,000 clip-art images and 55,000 photos

Photo-editing package includes extensive range of picture touch-up, enhancement and special effects features.

Family & Friends feature incorporates a calendar, address book and list manager

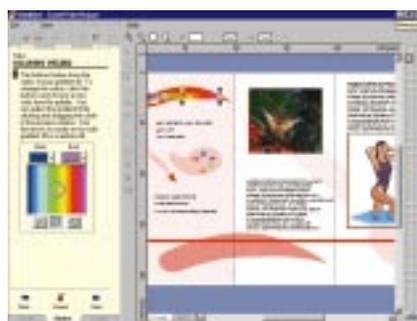
£45.83 (inc VAT)

Corel: 0800 581028

www.corel.com

Corel Print House Magic Deluxe				
Ease of use	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, 8Mb of RAM, 31Mb of hard drive space.



The software industry isn't renowned for modesty in its product titles but even in these circles, some may feel Corel's 'Print House Magic Deluxe' graphics package title stretches the boundaries of exaggeration. All that's missing is the word 'super' but maybe they're saving that for the next release. That apart, this excellent small business and home user package includes a huge range of designs, content and tools to help create almost any print job imaginable.

When we first reviewed Print House Magic (March 1998), we thought this easy-to-use package offered a great range of features and represented excellent value. In this version, the basic features remain the same. Print House 3 is a design, editing

and printing application that contains thousands of customisable template files. Using wizards and other tools, editing a template to your requirements is simply a matter of making choices and following prompts. To touch-up, enhance and add special effects to photos, the excellent Photo House 2 is also included. There's also a fairly lightweight personal information manager, including a calendar, address book, list manager and date reminder feature.

Costing barely £5 more than Print House Magic, this version occupies four CDs compared with the two taken by the earlier one. The additional capacity is mostly occupied by 75,000 extra graphic images (including 52,900 more photos and 15,000 more pieces of clip art) and 1,300 more high-end template files. There's also a sample packet of 25 inkjet papers from Hewlett-Packard. Users with Internet connection can also access an exclusive library of over one hundred free animated electronic postcards for e-mailing to their friends.

Although the basic software remains unchanged, the additional content included in this package makes it even better value for money.

Steve Cotterell



Sony Vaio PCG-737

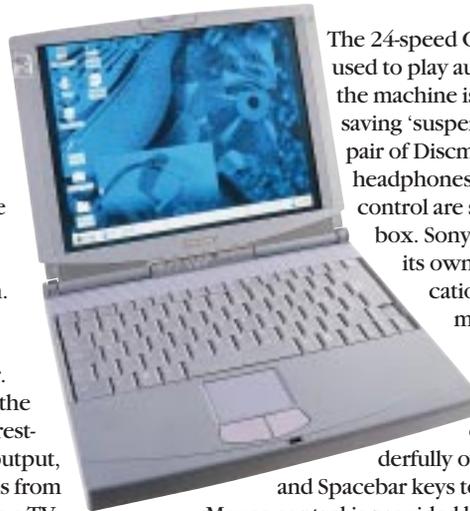
You'd expect a notebook from Sony to be slightly different from the norm and the new Vaio series is

certainly that. 'Vaio' stands for Video Audio Integrated Operation and Sony has designed it with the mobile multimedia enthusiast in mind.

The PCG-737 sits at the top of the range and its purpley grey colour scheme is certainly stylish. At 2.5kg with one battery and CD-ROM in place, it's also a relatively light affair. Closer inspection reveals the usual ports but more interesting is a composite video output, which allows video signals from the notebook to be sent to a TV for presentations or big screen gaming.

There's also a connection for two optional docking stations, one of which provides two Sony 'i.Link' connectors that let you connect your Vaio to Sony digital video camcorders and MiniDisc recorders for video and audio editing. Digital cameras can be connected to the Vaio via the standard serial port.

Other multimedia functions include MPEG1 video acceleration, 16-bit Sound Blaster audio and built-in stereo speakers.



The 24-speed CD-ROM can be used to play audio discs while the machine is in its power-saving 'suspend' mode and a pair of Discman headphones with remote control are supplied in the box. Sony also supplies its own DV Gate application for picture manipulation. The keyboard is sensibly laid out with wonderfully oversized Enter and Spacebar keys to aid typing.

Mouse control is provided by a Glide Pad, again a matter of personal preference but we were impressed with the crisp 12.1in colour TFT screen offering 1024x768 pixels or 800x600 with full 24-bit colour. Battery life is approximately 3hrs with one lithium-ion battery installed, double if you replace the CD-ROM drive with another.

The Vaio combines high build quality with excellent audio and communications features but the extra multimedia potential will be of little appeal to most users.

Chris Cain

Specifications

233MHz Intel Pentium MMX processor with 512Kb cache

32Mb RAM

2.1Gb hard disk

Swappable 24-speed internal CD-ROM and floppy drive

12.1in colour TFT screen

£1,802.45 (inc VAT)

Personal docking station £292.57 (inc VAT)

Network docking station (with i.Link) £504.07 (inc VAT)

Sony UK: 01932 816000

www.vaio.sony-europe.com

Sony Vaio PCG-737	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

MiniZip

Using a Zip drive with a notebook PC is just as easy as with a desktop PC but when it comes to packing up and moving on, the added weight of the bulky drive, extra cable and hefty power supply may make you revert to floppies.

Into the breach steps MarkTech with the SlimZip. Simply put, the SlimZip is a Zip drive in a



and the drive simply appears as another one in My Computer. Power is supplied through the PC Card slot, so there's no separate power supply but bear in mind that using the MiniZip while away from the mains will drain your notebook's battery more quickly.

We tried the drive on several machines and it worked perfectly each time and you should only need the supplied ZipTools disc if you want to install, say, the backup utility. Performance is nearly as good as a SCSI desktop drive and our only quibble is with the price. At £175 for the drive, it's a bit mean that not even one Zip disk is included.

Portability has its price but this is the most pocketable Zip drive we've seen. Ideal for wandering notebook users but bear in mind that you can't plug it into your desktop PC when you're back at the office.

John Sabine

plastic case, with a short cable connecting it to a Type II PC Card slot. The case is exceptionally thin and it envelops a genuine Iomega notebook Zip drive that's just 12.7mm thick.

Using the MiniZip is a breeze. Just plug the card into one of the PC Card slots on your notebook, wait for Windows to install the driver (one is supplied on disk in case your installation of Windows doesn't have the necessary file)

Specifications

Slimline portable Zip drive

PC Card interface for notebooks

No need for an external power supply

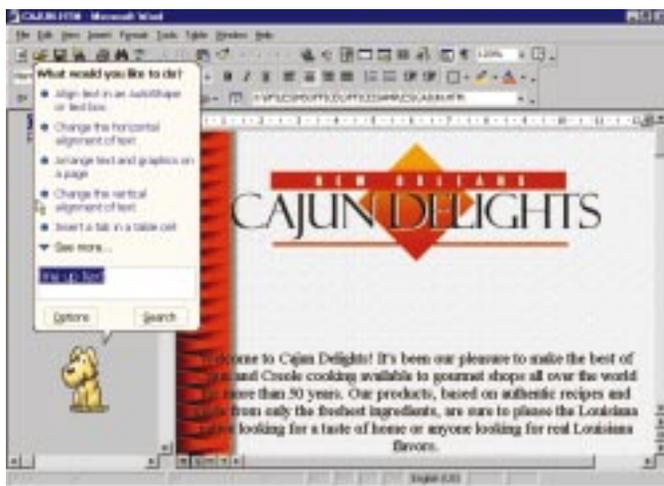
£175.08 (inc VAT)

MarkTech: 0181 968 2111

MiniZip	
Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

MS Office 2000 beta 1

A preview of the next version of Microsoft's leading business application suite, comprising word processor, spreadsheet, presentations, e-mail and scheduling



Office 2000 isn't due to hit the streets until 1999 but 20,000 beta versions were distributed last August. As usual, Word, Excel and PowerPoint take on the word processing, spreadsheet and presentation duties, with Outlook providing e-mail, contact management and calendar. A high-end version will include the Access database and FrontPage Web-authoring.

In terms of new features, there is little change in the individual components - Access has a new file format that supports Unicode fonts, which are essential for displaying Chinese and Japanese. Excel has an easier way of creating pivot tables to view data under different categories, and Word has new 'smart' features that include detecting what language you're typing.

Language and globalisation are key issues in this release. Instead of 36 language variants of the main programs, there is now just one set, with libraries to provide the different interface languages. You'll also be able to buy one language pack of proofing tools for all supported languages, rather than having to buy each separately. All this is mainly aimed at large companies, with the intention of lowering the total cost of ownership but making life easier for administrators - with fewer technical support calls - also makes life easier for users.

Installation is more streamlined, with a new on demand option. No longer do

you have to agonise over which components to install - things such as the Equation Editor or WordPerfect filter can appear on the relevant menus and shortcuts but won't actually be installed on your PC until you go to use them, when you'll be prompted to insert the CD. So

if you never use these features, they won't be wasting disk space. New, too, is self-repair - if a vital program file gets damaged, instead of getting an unhelpful error message, you'll be prompted to insert the CD so that Office can repair itself.

One change in all components is in the menus. These now initially offer just the most common commands. Wait a few seconds and they expand to show the full set - pick one of the supplementary ones and it will be 'promoted' to the short list next time you open that menu. Conversely, little-used commands get demoted.

Another neat new feature is a multiple clipboard, so you can copy several non-consecutive items from one document to another in one trip, rather than hopping back and forth.

The other big change has been in the way Office treats HTML - the language of Web pages. Previously 'Saving As' HTML was a fraught business and it was difficult to preserve layout when converting, say, a Word document to Web format. Now, it's easier and much more accurate. Previously, if you had a Word drawing, this would be permanently converted to a GIF or JPEG picture for display on a Web page and would lose its editability. Now, the conversion process also stores the original drawing as an invisible object. This means that nothing is lost - you can round-trip a file from Word format to

HTML and back and get exactly what you started off with. The other tricky business of saving documents as Web pages was uploading them to the site. This, too, is now taken care of and saving to a Web Folder is as easy as saving to your own hard disk. Although this all works on the Internet (if you have your own Web pages) it's once again primarily aimed at large organisations with private Intranets. Sadly, one disappointment is that unlike the Corel and Lotus suites, there is no speech recognition in this release.

Although the improvements are largely aimed at big business, end users will welcome the easier installation and maintenance. Web and intranet users will also find life easier.

Tim Nott

Specifications

- Easier installation with a space-saving 'on demand' option
- Automatic repair of damaged or missing components
- All language variants available in a single add-on pack
- Roving user profiles provide 'portable' customisation
- Menus that automatically adapt to the user's habits
- Easier Web page conversion, and easier upload/download of documents
- 'Round-tripping' between native file format and HTML
- Multiple clipboard for storing up to twelve items of text, graphics and other data

Microsoft: 0345 002000

www.microsoft.com/office/

Microsoft Office 2000 beta 1

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	N/A
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Windows 95, Pentium 90 PC, 32Mb of RAM, 250Mb of disk space



Compaq C-Series 8010c

A clear colour screen and useful software modem set Compaq's top-of-the-range H/PC apart from the pack but it's let down elsewhere

Compaq didn't bother launching its first attempt at an H/PC (handheld PC) in the UK, which was a wise move considering the amount of flak first-generation devices from other manufacturers drew. To be fair, much of the fault lay with the Windows CE operating system but the murky monochrome screens and manky keyboards certainly didn't help.

Windows CE version 2 has been around for a while and its colour screen support and improved applications make it a much more serious proposition. Compaq thinks so too and it's decided to launch its new C-Series worldwide.

Just in case you don't know, Windows CE is Microsoft's pocket equivalent of Windows 95. Windows CE won't run Windows 95 applications but if you're used to using a normal PC, you'll feel right at home with an H/PC. As you'd

expect from a pocket operating system, you get pocket applications too, and Pocket Word, Pocket Excel, Pocket Outlook and Pocket Internet Explorer are all recognisable as descendants of their PC counterparts.

The C-Series consists of three models - the 8Mb monochrome 810 (£499) at the bottom, the 8Mb colour 810c (£587) in the middle and the 20Mb colour 8010c (£681) at the top. We looked at the 8010c and style-wise, it's probably best described as 'hefty'. That's not to say it isn't appealing though, and the smoothly sculpted, vaguely bulbous case goes a long way to disguise the fact that this is the biggest H/PC we've seen. The lid is held closed with just a sprung catch but the stiff hinge prevents the 8010c from opening accidentally in your bag or briefcase (you'll never carry it in your pocket, it's too big and heavy).

A 640x240 256-colour backlit screen sits inside the lid and it's clear and bright, with good contrast and little ill-effect from its touch-sensitive layer. The keyboard sits in the other half of the case. Sadly, Compaq has opted for keys of the calculator-you-get-free-with-a-litre-of-petrol variety. According to Compaq, people don't want to do much typing on an H/PC and this is why the keyboard is so dreadful. Compaq obviously isn't aware that Pocket Word is a word processor. It's disappointing that the world's fifth largest computer company can't get such a basic component right (it's not alone, of course) and it's hard to see why someone would want to spend almost £700 on an H/PC they can't type on.

So is it all bad news? No, not really. All



C-Series

H/PCs also

come with a built-in

software modem, complete

with separate telephone socket at the left of the case. Software modems are frugal things, which a plus when you're running on batteries. The downside is that emulating a 33.6Kbits/s modem in software needs a fair bit of processor power and there's not much left for anything else. As a result, it takes an age to display a Web page and all other applications slow to a crawl when you're online. For itinerant e-mail though, it's fine and you can always put a modem in the PC Card slot if you really need speed.

The 8010c also comes with a docking station as standard, which removes the need to fiddle around with mains and link leads every time you want the 8010c on your desk. The NiMH battery gives around three to four hours of use, depending on exactly what you're doing and recharges whenever the unit is attached to the mains. At least that's the theory - our model couldn't figure out whether it was connected, disconnected, charging up or fully charged and the Power Properties tool was unable to say how much charge the battery had.

The 8010c is good by H/PC standards but is still let down badly by that same old PDA complaint - the keyboard.

Julian Prokaza >>>

Specifications

- Windows CE 2 operating system
-
- MIPS-based RISC processor
-
- 20Mb EDO RAM
-
- 640x240 256 colour STN screen
-
- One Type II PC Card slot
-
- Built-in speaker and microphone with digital recording facility
-
- Software modem with separate socket
-
- NiMH battery with mains adapter
-
- Docking station with own power and PC link connections
-
- Pocket Word, Excel, Outlook and Internet Explorer plus...
-
- £681.50 (inc VAT)**
-
- Compaq: 0845 270 4000**
- www.compaq.com/handhelds

Compaq C-Series 8010c

Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

FoneBook Plus & SmartLynx

Filling your new mobile with names and numbers is a tedious business, particularly since most handset keypads are fiddly things with at least four functions assigned to each key. Linking your phone to your PC is one

way around this but, since even models from the same manufacturer require different cables, upgrading your phone puts you back at square one.

Paragon Software's SmartLynx takes a different approach. Cleverly, it bypasses the complicated business of PC-to-phone cables by concentrating on the SIM card instead. SmartLynx consists of a SmartLynx box, which attaches to the PC's serial port and the FoneBook Plus contact manager application. The SmartLynx box supposedly draws power from the serial port but we had to fit a 9V battery (not supplied) to get it working.

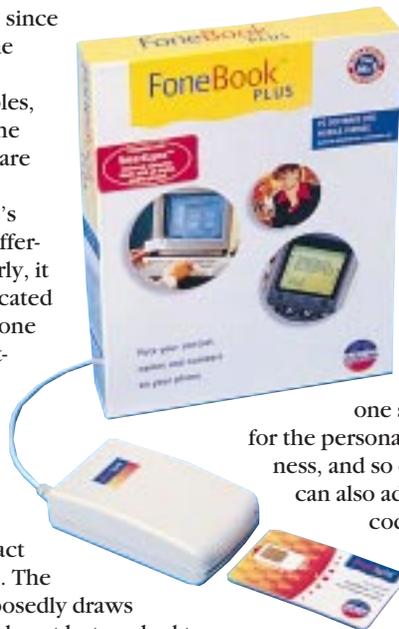
With your SIM card slotted into the SmartLynx box (both sizes of SIM card can be used), FoneBook will read its information. FoneBook is a fully-fledged contact manager and can import data

from other PIMs, such as Organizer and ACT! Getting numbers from your SIM is as simple as clicking the New Handset button and a Wizard takes care of the rest.

The idea behind FoneBook is that you manage your contacts on your PC and transfer the numbers you need to your SIM. So, for example, you can have one set of FoneBook contacts for the personal contacts, one for business, and so on. Usefully, Fonebook can also add international dialling codes to numbers automatically, so whenever you go abroad, your mobile phone will always have a correct set of

telephone numbers. **SmartLynx is a nifty way of managing the contacts stored on your mobile phone but since it only works with FoneBook, you'll have to abandon your existing contact manager to use it.**

Ursula Tolaini



Specifications

- Works with all GSM phones
- Manages contact information
- Imports data from other PIMs
- Uploads and downloads data to mobile phone

£49.99 (inc VAT)

Paragon Software: 01202 734736
www.paragonsoftware.com

FoneBook Plus & SmartLynx

Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: 486 PC, Windows 95, digital mobile phone, 9V battery.

Rock Agenda 960

If you're after a light, portable notebook then the Rock Agenda 960, as you might guess from the name, is not the best model to choose. On the other hand, it matches its bulk with a heavy-weight specification that makes it the

most powerful portable we've seen so far.

The Rock Agenda 960 uses a 300MHz mobile Pentium II processor - the latest in Intel's mobile line that offers the same speed as its desktop counterpart for much lower power consumption. Given that this is twinned with 128Mb of RAM, far more than most users have in their desktop machines, you'd expect it to fairly fly along. True enough, with a SYSMark 98 score of 108, it's significantly faster than any of the budget notebooks reviewed in last month's *What PC?* But then it also costs around twice as much.

The Agenda has a large 14.1in TFT screen, whose visible diagonal is bigger than most 15in CRT monitors and this makes the Agenda an ideal presentation tool. Its keyboard is decent enough and retractable feet at the back mean you can angle the machine to a more comfortable typing angle. Some of the bulk has gone

into making the PC Card slots more convenient as well and you can use both a Type 2 and a Type 3 PC card simultaneously.

Unfortunately, the Agenda 960 is simply too big to carry around on a daily basis and it's really a compact desktop replacement rather than a machine for the frequent traveller.

Although Rock is a long-established company, it's also worth checking out some of the bigger brands. Dell, for instance, can do a similar machine for much the same price but throws in a copy of MS Office Small Business Edition as well.

If you really, really want all this power in a package to fit in a small suitcase, then you'll be more than pleased with the Rock Agenda 960 but its weight means that with it sat on your lap, you may well be stuck between a Rock and a hard place (ahem).

John Sabine



Specifications

- 300MHz mobile Pentium II processor
- 128Mb RAM
- 5.1Gb hard disk
- 14.1in TFT screen
- Three Type II PC Card slots
- Windows 98

£2,583.83 (inc VAT)

Rock Computers: 01926 816606
www.rock-computers.co.uk

Rock Agenda 960

Build quality	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★



Sanyo VPCG250

In these days of ultra-high resolution, megapixel digital cameras, you'd be forgiven for thinking that Sanyo must be bonkers for producing a model with a 'high' resolution of just 640x480, at a price a penny short of £450.

Fortunately, that's not the end of the story and the VPCG250 offers quite a bit more than the average digital camera. Superficially, it's nothing special. It's small enough to fit in the palm of your hand but its blocky styling doesn't really shout out 'I'm expensive'. Sliding open the wide lens cover turns the camera on and a sliding switch next to the shutter release lets you frame pictures using the clear colour LCD or the equally clear viewfinder.

The VPCG250 offers plenty of control over how pictures are taken as well as a self-timer and there are macro and focus-free settings for the lens. You can also adjust the amount of exposure for a picture but although this allows you to take long exposure photographs at night, for example, the lack of a tripod bracket means there's no easy way to keep the camera steady.

At its highest 640x480 setting, the



VPCG250 can store 30 images on the supplied 4Mb SmartMedia card. Drop the resolution to 320x240 and this goes up to 120 images. Usefully, the camera can also record up to six seconds of audio with each image (via a built-in microphone), though this eats into its storage capacity. More usefully still, the VPCG250 can also store up to four five-second bursts of video - just press the shutter release and the camera works as a normal (if puny) camcorder, storing clips as normal (if slightly jerky) AVI files.

Though under-specified in terms of resolution, the VPCG250's audio and video features make it an interesting alternative to a still digital camera. Julian Prokaza

350,000 pixel CCD
 Maximum still resolution 640 x 480 in
 24-bit colour
 Stores audio and video clips
 Built-in flash and LCD screen
 Uses 4Mb SmartMedia card (supplied)
 Uses 2xAA NiMH batteries (four supplied with charger)
 Supplied with MGI PhotoSuite SE and TWAIN driver

£449.99 (inc VAT)

Sanyo: 01923 246363

www.sanyo.co.uk

Sanyo VPCG250					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Build quality	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: (for software)
 Windows 3.1, 486PC, 8Mb of RAM, 40Mb of hard disk space, CD-ROM drive.

Specifications

Xircom RealPort



Ethernet network adaptor and GSM phone adaptor. In other words, even though the RealPort takes up the space of two PC Cards, it does the job of at least three.

Multi-functionality isn't the end of it though. The RealPort's size has also allowed Xircom to put more electronics inside its case and as a result, has banished the irritating

soap-on-a-rope-style connectors. Instead, the RealPort uses standard cables for the modem and Ethernet connections (the GSM socket still needs a custom cable though), which means any cables you have to hand can be plugged into its standard sockets. An added bonus is that if you lose or damage a cable, you don't have to go back to the manufacturer for a costly replacement.

Like most PC Cards under Windows 98, installing the RealPort is a breeze - simply pop it into a slot and insert the driver disk when it's requested. Since the card has no protruding components, it can also be left in its slot when not in use

without fear of damaging it. **Though a little pricey for less-demanding users, the RealPort is a neat solution for notebook owners with more PC Cards than slots, or those who simply keep losing cables.**

Julian Prokaza

Almost every notebook PC has two Type II PC Card slots but very few notebook users fill both of them. PC Card stalwart Xircom has taken advantage of this under-utilisation with its latest model - the RealPort.

The RealPort is rather bigger than the average PC Card and in fact, is wedge-shaped. The added size means it's a Type III PC Card and so takes up both Type II slots when fitted to a notebook. With this extra space to play with, Xircom has managed to cram in a good deal more than you might expect. Function-wise, it offers a K56flex 56Kbits/s modem with telephone pass-through, 10/100 BaseT

Type III PC Card with K56flex 56Kbits/s modem, 10/100 BaseT Ethernet adapter and GSM phone connector

Uses standard cables with RJ-11 and RJ-45 connectors

Flash upgradable to V.90

£280.83 (inc VAT)

Xircom: 01256 332552

www.xircom.com

Xircom RealPort					
Ease of use	★	★	★	★	★
Performance	★	★	★	★	★
Features	★	★	★	★	★
Value for money	★	★	★	★	★
Overall	★	★	★	★	★

Minimum requirements: One Type III PC Card slot.

Specifications



Macromedia Fireworks

Internet image production at speed – generate the pictures you need in a way that will see them arrive quickly over slow modems

Macromedia's Flash has long been the de facto standard for producing compact Web animation and its effects can be witnessed on such sites as the MSN homepage. This 'small is beautiful' theme is carried through in Fireworks, enabling you to create rapidly downloadable images of a quality that doesn't instantly scream 'compromise'.

Like its sister products, Flash and Freehand, Fireworks is simple to learn and is based almost entirely around the idea of layers. A simple image, whether line art, a scan or a photo from a digital camera, will be drawn on just one layer. Fireworks will then allow the user to save it in a variety of the most common file formats and adjust the compression level to achieve the smallest possible file size.

The higher the compression, the lower the quality of an image, so a live preview in the pre-save dialogue screen will show the effects of your tweaking although, unlike Adobe's ImageReady, it has no option to display both images

within the same window for comparison purposes.

More complex images – those that have a function other than mere static illustration – will span layers. One of the most common applications of this is to generate animated GIF images. These formerly required users to create a series of images and then load them into a compiler to be linked together as the final animation sequence. Fireworks instead allows the user to create a number of layers – one for each frame in the sequence – and draw an image into each.

These layers are like the pages of a book so the process is similar to placing all of your images in a single, bound location where they will not be lost or split up. A simple menu also allows layers to be copied multiple times. Incremental changes can then be made to each layer to save users creating each new cell from scratch.

A default delay time of 20 hundredths of a second is applied to each (this determines the speed at which your animation plays in a browser), though each frame can be adjusted individually before saving.

Rollover buttons – icons that change as the mouse is rolled over them – are a great way of enhancing interactivity on your site. Using any of the 32 Fireworks tools, it's easy to generate the four images needed to create the different button statuses (up, down, over and clicked).

Implementing them formerly meant fiddling with some rather tricky JavaScript but by checking the 'generate HTML' tick box on the 'export' dialogue,

Fireworks will now take care of this for you.

Once the generated code has been saved, it's ready to be copied and pasted onto your Web site, although an option to save the HTML alone, like that found in ImageReady, would have been useful.

Rollover buttons and GIF animations aside, Fireworks' third cool feature is image mapping. Certain areas of an image can be defined as hyperlinks exactly like words in your text.

Using the same selection tools as for drawing, users can define which areas of a picture should link to pages on a particular site by entering the address on the standard toolbar. Once again, Fireworks will take care of all the hard work by writing any necessary HTML ready for pasting.

Fireworks is not a fully fledged Web page creation package but then that's not what it sets out to be. Its primary function is generating compact images of high quality and any code necessary to implement them in your final page, which means you'll still need to invest in something along the lines of FrontPage 98. **If you're looking for a quick and easy way to tart up a Web site, this is it. Shunning the conventions of print production, Fireworks is the epitome of effective Web design through and through. If only it was a little cheaper.**

Nik Rawlinson



Specifications

- 32 drawing tools
- Export previews
- HTML coding
- Simple interface
- Small file sizes through compression
- Animation generation
- Instantly applicable special effects
- **£239 (inc VAT)**
- **Computers Unlimited: 0181 358 5857**
- www.getfireworks.com

Macromedia Fireworks	
Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Pentium 120 PC, Windows 95, 32Mb of RAM for Windows 95, 60Mb of free hard drive space.

Adobe ImageReady 1.0

Does just what the name suggests – gets your images ready for the Net and lets you create brand-new Web-ready art



Like Fireworks, ImageReady joins a well-established stable of graphic production tools. As the promotional blurb explains, it's designed to allow Adobe PhotoShop and Illustrator users to optimise their images for the Net. This makes it great for magazine producers and professional designers who will already have images they want to transfer to a more Web-friendly format. For first-time users, the package also includes a subset of the tools found in these two more powerful design suites.

Each image you create or open in ImageReady is displayed in a window hosting two tabs – 'original' and 'optimised'. This allows the user to instantly see how altering the amount of compression, colour palette or file format affects image quality just by clicking each tab for a 'before and after' effect. Pull-down menus at the bottom of the window also give an at-a-glance measure of the most important factor – how long it will take for your image to download over a variety of modem speeds.

The primary strength of ImageReady is its ability to handle animation. Like Fireworks, it allows the user to construct an animation on a number of layers but the key difference is the way in which these are employed. In this instance, each frame can contain many different layers,

whereas in Fireworks a layer is used to define the new frame itself. Adobe's more versatile approach leaves the user free to adapt elements on one layer across all cells without altering anything on the remaining layers.

The second innovation in its handling of animations is its ability to compare two images and 'tween' – automatically estimate the changes necessary to transform one into the other. After creating the first cell of an animation, copying it into a new frame and making alterations to it, ImageReady will then create a number of intermediate cells to fill in the missing steps necessary to give a smoothly animated transition. Not only does this speed things up considerably, it also cuts out any possibility of user error.

Compared to Fireworks, ImageReady's handling of image maps is disappointing. Each hyperlink element has to be drawn on a separate layer rather than the image itself and while this means you don't have to worry about carefully outlining the 'hot' areas of an image, it prevents you from simply importing an image and using it as the basis of a map. This would become a problem, for example, if you wanted to import a scanned street plan onto which users could click for a guided tour.

ImageReady makes it easy to display

your images in your Web browser of choice. Selecting 'Preview in...' from the File menu will give you the option of dropping it into your browser and will also display any necessary HTML code on the page that can then be copied and pasted into your final document. Alternatively, an option to save the HTML directly from ImageReady's editing screen bypasses this stage of the process and allows you to write it straight to a text file.

Like Macromedia's Fireworks, Adobe's ImageReady is clearly aimed at Web design professionals. This is evident in its consistency with other Adobe products – PageMaker and, most notably, PhotoShop – all of which are based around the same award-winning interface. This is not to say that it's unsuitable for the beginner but at the end of the day, Macromedia's Fireworks will get novices on their feet faster.

If you're looking for a way to generate original Web art then there are better products on the market, Fireworks being one. ImageReady's real strength lies in taking pre-drawn artwork and getting it ready for the Net.

Nik Rawlinson

Award-winning PhotoShop interface

Seamless browser integration

Instant compression results preview

Automatic HTML generation

Animation tweening

PhotoShop compatibility

Easily customised colour palettes

£182.13 (inc VAT)

Adobe: 0181 606 4001

www.adobe.com

Adobe ImageReady 1.0

Ease of use	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Performance	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Features	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Value for money	★ ★ ★ ★ ★
Overall	★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Minimum requirements: Pentium PC, Windows 9, 16Mb of RAM, 20Mb of free hard drive space, CD-ROM drive, sound card for interactive tutorial files.