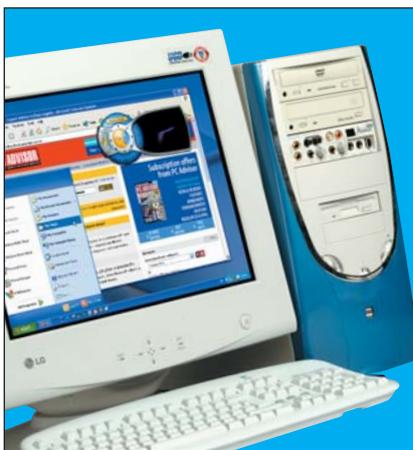# Buying advice: PCs

Whether you're after a top-of-the-range machine or a more modestly specified, budget-price model, our Buying advice will guide you through the options available when looking for a new PC

Power PCs: from £1,200

• Processor AMD's Athlon XP dominates the Power chart. If you opt for this route look for at least an XP 2000+, although go for the fastest CPU you can afford. Intel's top chip is the 2.53MHz Pentium 4, which is worth a look for video enthusiasts.

• Memory Expect 512MB and make sure that it is the quicker DDR (double data rate) RAM, rather than SDRAM. You can also look for faster DDR 333MHz memory, but DDR 266MHz is still up to the job.

• Storage If you are going to use your PC for video editing and holding lots of footage then go for the most storage you can. Have backup covered with a 40-/32-/10-speed (read/write/rewrite) CD-RW drive.

• Monitor Look for a 19in screen that offers a resolution of 1,600x1,200 and a dot pitch of 0.25mm or less.

• Graphics card Flavour of the month is the GeForce4 Ti 4600 with 128MB of RAM. ATI's 128MB Radeon is its nearest rival, but we don't rate it as highly.

• Sound card Some PCs are still fitted with the SoundBlaster 5.1 Live, but the best bet is Creative's Audigy. Not only does it offer top-quality audio, it also adds an extra FireWire port.

Budget PCs: £700-£1,200

• Processor The 2000+ and 2100+ Athlon chips are dominating in this category at the moment, with the latest AMD offering, the 2200+, gradually making its presence felt in the Budget PCs chart. If you'd prefer to plump for an Intel processor, though, accept no less than 2GHz.

• Memory The standard in the Budget chart is rapidly becoming 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, although 256MB of DDR RAM should service the needs of most PC users.

• Storage Most of our Budget PCs have a 60GB hard drive spinning at 7,200rpm (revolutions per minute) and, if you're really lucky, you'll be able to get 80GB. Backup storage is provided by the now obligatory CD-RW drive, although check you've got read/write/rewrite rates of at least 40-/24-/10-speed.

• Monitor Be satisfied with a 17in monitor if it has good specifications, but you might be able to get a decent 19in model for your money. Either way, check that it can achieve an optimal resolution of 1,280x1,024 at 75Hz. Better still, for really sharp images, look for a resolution of 1,600x1,200 at 75Hz. In terms of dot pitch, 0.25mm or lower is fine.

• Graphics card A 64MB budget card will suffice but you can get the new 128MB cards in this price range.

• Sound card Creative's Audigy is the best option in terms of quality audio, but the trusty SoundBlaster Live 5.1 is still available. Avoid onboard sound if possible, as this is never as impressive as a dedicated card.

Superbudget PCs: under £700

• Processor AMD's 2000+ chip is the standard in the Superbudget chart at the moment. However, if performance isn't vital to you, see what sort of a saving you can make by opting for a 1.3GHz or 1.4GHz Athlon chip. An Intel CPU is a possibility but will cost more, resulting in a lower overall specification.

• Memory Although memory prices are starting to rise, still aim for 256MB of RAM. It's best to pay extra for faster DDR (double data rate) memory rather than SDRAM – this way it will hold its value better in the coming years.

• Storage Gigabytes abound these days so demand no less than 40GB, with 60GB preferable. For fast file access, look for a motherboard that features an Ultra ATA-100 interface. A CD-RW drive is a must for the future – look for CD-R/RW performance of at least 10-speed.

• Monitor Don't let the manufacturer cut corners as this is the one part of your system that you'll be using continuously. Look for a 17in screen and a dot pitch of 0.25 or 0.24mm, although be aware that even screens with a higher dot pitch can produce good images.

• Graphics card nVidia's budget GeForce4 MX cards offer superb frame rates for a reasonable outlay, but you may be able to find a system with a GeForce4 Ti4200.

• Sound card A standalone card, like Creative's SoundBlaster Live 5.1, is a good choice, but integrated audio is getting better; Cmedia supports full 5.1 surround on some motherboards.