

## TOP 10 BUDGET PCs

| Details  | Last month's position | First reviewed | PC World-Bench | Price (ex VAT) | Warranty                             | Processor type/speed        | RAM           | Hard disk/capacity   | Mother-board               | Chipset    | Modem | USB ports      | Monitor                      | Screen size | Dot pitch | Max resolution @75Hz | Graphics card            | Graphics chip          | Graphics card memory | Sound card                           | Speakers          | No of speakers/subwoofer | DVD-ROM speed      | CD-RW read/write/rewrite rate | Office suite & other extras  |
|--|-----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|--------------------------------------|-----------------------------|---------------|----------------------|----------------------------|------------|-------|----------------|------------------------------|-------------|-----------|----------------------|--------------------------|------------------------|----------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|--------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| <b>1</b> Mesh Matrix XP 1800 Ti<br>020 8208 4702<br>www.mesh.co.uk                       | NEW                   | Feb 02         | 121 (WB 4)     | £999           | 3-year onsite                        | AMD Athlon XP 1800+/1.53GHz | 512MB DDR RAM | Maxtor/60GB          | Asus A7 A266-E             | KT266      | 56K   | 4              | Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 740SB | 17in        | 0.25mm    | 1,600x1,200          | Leadtek WinFast GeForce3 | nVidia GeForce3 Ti 200 | 64MB                 | Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1  | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 16x                | 40x/24x/10x                   | Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2001                                    |
| <b>2</b> Multivision Vision Ultima Ti 200<br>0121 550 8000<br>www.multivision.co.uk      | NEW                   | Feb 02         | 118 (WB 4)     | £999           | 1-year onsite                        | AMD Athlon XP 1900+/1.6GHz  | 512MB DDR RAM | Seagate/60GB         | MSI 6380LE Pro2/USB 2.0    | Via KT266A | 56K   | 6              | Hansol 920D                  | 19in        | 0.25mm    | 1,600x1,200          | Hercules 3D Prophet      | nVidia GeForce3 Ti 200 | 64MB                 | Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1  | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 16x                | 40x/24x/10x                   | Windows XP Home, Lotus Suite 2001, Videowave, gamepad, webcam                  |
| <b>3</b> Systemax A1900FA<br>0870 729 7364<br>www.systemaxpc.co.uk                       | NEW                   | Feb 02         | 114 (WB 4)     | £1,099         | 1-year onsite, 2-year return to base | AMD Athlon XP 1900+/1.6GHz  | 256MB DDR RAM | IBM/60GB             | MSI MS-6380LE              | KT266A     | 56K   | 2              | CTX EX950F                   | 19in        | 0.25mm    | 1,600x1,200          | Gainward GeForce3        | nVidia GeForce3 Ti 550 | 64MB                 | Creative Labs Audigy 1394            | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 16x                | 32x/16x/10x                   | Windows XP Home, games, gamepad, ATI TV Wonder VE Lite TV tuner                |
| <b>4</b> Ideal Computing Ideal Aptus 1800XP<br>0870 745 5061<br>www.idealcomputing.co.uk | NEW                   | Feb 02         | 123 (WB 4)     | £1,199         | 1-year onsite, 2-year return to base | AMD Athlon XP 1800+/1.53GHz | 512MB DDR RAM | IBM/60GB             | Chaintech 7CTKJD           | AMD 761    | 56K   | 2              | LG Flatron 775FT             | 17in        | 0.24mm    | 1,024x768            | Hercules 3D Prophet III  | nVidia GeForce3 Ti 500 | 64MB                 | Creative Labs Audigy 1394            | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 8x                 | 40x/24x/10x                   | Windows XP Home, Star Office, remote control                                   |
| <b>5</b> NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1900+<br>0870 010 6326<br>www.nec-online.com        | NEW                   | Feb 02         | 111 (WB 4)     | £1,199         | 3-year onsite                        | AMD Athlon XP 1900+/1.6GHz  | 256MB DDR RAM | Seagate/80GB         | Gigabyte GA-7DX            | AMD 761    | 56K   | 4              | NEC HR-19                    | 19in        | 0.25mm    | 1,600x1,200          | WinFast Leadtek          | nVidia GeForce3        | 64MB                 | Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1  | Labtec LCS2632    | 2/Y                      | 16x                | 32x/12x/8x                    | Windows 98 SE, Word, Money, Norton AntiVirus, games bundle, webcam             |
| <b>6</b> Evesham Axis 1700+ Ti2<br>0870 728 7070<br>www.evesham.com                      | NEW                   | Feb 02         | 110 (WB 4)     | £1,199         | 2-year onsite, 1-year return to base | AMD Athlon XP 1700+/1.47GHz | 256MB DDR RAM | Maxtor/40GB          | Gigabyte GA-7VTXE/GA-7VTXH | Via KT266A | 56K   | 4              | Samsung 107FT flat-panel     | 17in        | 0.26mm    | 1,280x1,024          | OEM GeForce2 Ti          | nVidia GeForce2 Ti     | 64MB                 | Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1  | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 16x                | 32x/16x/10x                   | Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2001, StarOffice, Big Fix               |
| <b>7</b> Hi-Grade Meridian N1400PV12<br>020 8532 6100<br>www.higrade.com                 | 1                     | Dec 01         | 241 (WB 2000)  | £849           | 1-year onsite, 2-year return to base | AMD Athlon XP 1600+/1.4GHz  | 256MB DDR RAM | UDMA 100/40GB        | Asus nForce                | Crush 12   | 56K   | 2              | LG Flatron 775FT             | 17in        | 0.24mm    | 1,024x768            | onboard                  | onboard                | 32MB                 | onboard 5.1 Dolby ProLogic           | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 16x                | 40x/16x/10x                   | Windows 2000, Lotus SmartSuite Millennium                                      |
| <b>8</b> Systemax A1800RV Lifestyle 1280<br>0870 729 7364<br>www.systemaxpc.co.uk        | 2                     | Dec 01         | 196 (WB 2000)  | £1,199         | 1-year onsite 2-year return to base  | AMD Athlon XP 1800+/1.53GHz | 256MB DDR RAM | Western Digital/40GB | MSI K7T266                 | Via KT266  | 56K   | 2              | CTX PR960F                   | 19in        | 0.24mm    | 1,600x1,200          | Systemax GeForce3        | nVidia GeForce3        | 64MB                 | Creative Labs Audigy 1394            | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 16x                | 32x/16x/10x                   | Windows Me, Lotus SmartSuite Millennium  |
| <b>9</b> NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1400<br>0870 010 6326<br>www.nec-online.com         | 3                     | Nov 01         | 189 (WB 2000)  | £1,199         | 3-year onsite                        | AMD Athlon/1.4GHz           | 256MB DDR RAM | Maxtor/40GB          | Gigabyte GA7DX             | AMD 760    | 56K   | 4 (2 on front) | NEC VR19                     | 19in        | 0.26mm    | 1,600x1,200          | Leadtek WinFast GeForce3 | nVidia GeForce3        | 64MB                 | Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 1024 | Labtec LCS 2414   | 2/Y                      | 16x (2x recording) | 24x/8x/4x                     | Windows 98 SE, MS Works Suite, Britannica, games, educational/reference titles |
| <b>10</b> Best Price Poweroid 2004<br>020 8904 3347<br>www.poweroid.com                  | 4                     | Nov 01         | 188 (WB 2000)  | £1,199         | 5-year return to base                | AMD Athlon/1.4GHz           | 256MB SDRAM   | Seagate x 2/60GB     | Epop EP-8KTA3              | Via KT133  | 56K   | 4 (2 on front) | Iiyama VM Pro 411            | 17in TFT    | 0.25mm    | 1,280x1,024          | Leadtek WinFast GeForce3 | nVidia GeForce3        | 64MB                 | Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1  | Cambridge DTT2200 | 5/Y                      | 16x                | 40x/16x/10x                   | Windows Me, Lotus SmartSuite   |

**1** Mesh Matrix XP 1800 Ti

Mesh systems often sit near the top of our charts because they are well rounded, good-value PCs with thorough documentation for the novice user – and there's now the added benefit of a three-year onsite warranty. The Matrix XP 1800 Ti fits well into this proud tradition, winning Mesh yet another Best Buy award this month.

The Mesh Matrix doesn't have the fastest processor around, but its Athlon XP 1800+ is the second speediest CPU in the

chart. It's also one of only three machines to have 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM. The subsequent WorldBench 4 score of 121 makes the Matrix a very impressive performer – the second fastest PC in the Budget chart. Storage is provided by a 60GB hard drive and the speedy Teac CD-RW drive will have your files backed up in no time.

While the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 740SB monitor can't offer the same screen real estate as a 19in model, it's certainly the best 17in display in the chart. Indeed, we'd rather see a good-quality smaller screen than a mediocre large one. Twinned with a Leadtek WinFast GeForce3 Ti 200 graphics card, the image quality was excellent. As with most entries, the Mesh Matrix uses the solid SoundBlaster Live 5.1 card with Cambridge's DTT2200 speakers – probably the best of value for money and sound combination around.

There's enough room inside the Matrix's robust case for upgrading and, if you ever do need to get to the innards, there's a key attached to the back – just make sure you don't lose it. The software bundle is pretty sparse, but you do get Microsoft Works Suite 2001, which is enough to get you started.

The motherboard has USB 2.0 support, which in theory is 40-times faster than the current USB 1.1 standard, and there are

images and smooth graphics performance. However, the screen's shadow mask tube can't match the clarity of an aperture grille model.

Lack of documentation is redeemed by a generous software bundle and some nice extras, such as a webcam. However, it's a great shame that Multivision only protects your investment with a one-year onsite warranty.

**2** Multivision Vision Ultima Ti 200

Multivision often builds machines with a great combination of high-end specifications and supreme value for money. The Vision Ultima Ti 200 is no exception and, as such, it's a deserving winner of our Recommended award. With the fastest AMD Athlon XP processor on the market – the 1900+ – and 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, the Ultima Ti 200 was always going to be a powerful system. Add a 60GB hard drive spinning at 7,200rpm (revolutions per minute) and it's no wonder it achieved a WorldBench 4 score of 118. This may not be the fastest WorldBench 4 score in the chart, but it's still a creditable result.

Though the Ultima is primed for power, Multivision hasn't forgotten the rest of the package. Extra backup is provided by a fast CD-RW drive, and sound is taken care of by the dependable Creative SoundBlaster Live 5.1 card, which is supported by DTT2200 speakers. The 64MB DDR (double data rate) RAM GeForce3 Ti 200 graphics card from Hercules and 19in monitor produce crisp



↑ Like many Multivision systems, the Ti 200 combines great performance with outstanding value for money

also six USB ports available. As the new USB 2.0 standard is adopted by more and more peripherals makers, these ports should prove invaluable.

With a good array of features and specifications, the A1900FA from Systemax effortlessly wins a Recommended award. Systemax selected the Athlon XP 1900+ (running at 1.6GHz) as the processor of choice, twinning it with 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and a 60GB hard drive, which should provide plenty of storage. Unfortunately, 256MB of memory accounts for its just-respectable WorldBench 4 score of 114.

The Systemax's graphics are taken care of by a card that uses one of the best chipsets currently available, namely the GeForce3 Ti 550. Aiding image quality

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There's a FireWire port round the back of the PC, although to only supply two USB ports seem miserly. Internally, there's plenty of room for upgrading and the large case means the components aren't cramped.

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↑ A thoroughly deserved Recommended award goes to Systemax for this well-rounded package

is a 19in monitor from CTX, which handles pictures with aplomb. To help you get the most out of the graphical prowess of this machine, there's a games bundle and gamepad included in the package. The Audigy sound card and DTT2200 speakers provide high-quality audio to complement the top-notch graphics.

There's a FireWire port round the back of the PC, although to only supply two USB ports seem miserly. Internally, there's plenty of room for upgrading and the large case means the components aren't cramped.



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↑ The great-looking Aptus 1800XP is also pretty powerful, though its monitor is not the best

#### 4 Ideal Computing Ideal Aptus 1800XP

The Ideal Aptus 1800XP is one of the best-looking systems in our chart. This may be due to an LG monitor with more style than substance, but the inclusion of an Audigy sound card proves its beauty is more than skin deep.

Ideal Computing was one of three manufacturers that opted for 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and backed it up with a 1.53GHz Athlon XP 1800+ processor, rendering the fastest WorldBench 4 score of 123. There's ample storage from a 60GB hard drive and one of the fastest CD-RW drives.

Graphically, the GeForce3 Ti 500 is brilliant, but it isn't matched by the LG 775FT monitor, which only reaches 1,280x1,024 resolution and is hampered by a low refresh rate.

The Audigy has two FireWire ports but, like the Systemax, there are only two USB ports. The bundled StarOffice suite is adequate, but not the best.

#### 5 NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1900+

The Powermate from NEC only narrowly missed out on a higher chart position. NEC decided to stick with Windows 98 SE rather than XP Home, but hasn't scrimped on most of the main specifications. The 1.6GHz processor is joined by 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and the largest hard drive in the chart – a welcome addition. The WorldBench 4 score of 111 is good, but would have been pushed a little further by a bit more memory.

NEC's own excellent 19in aperture grille monitor combines with a 64MB GeForce3 graphics card, so image quality is spot on, though a GeForce3 Ti card would give smoother graphics rendering.

The Powermate has a superb three-year onsite warranty and in general is a well considered package. The only gripes are the low-speed CD-RW drive and poor speakers – they are from Labtec, but are paltry for a £1,199 for a PC.



↑ The NEC Powermate has superb main specifications, but scrimps a bit on some of the peripherals



↑ Though it's the slowest of the new entries, the Evesham Ti2 has great peripherals

#### 6 Evesham Axis 1700+ Ti2

Unusually for an Evesham, the Ti2 doesn't have enough high-end components to keep up with the competition. While the 1.47GHz processor offers faster speeds than previous models, Evesham only supplies 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM. It's also offering a smaller hard drive than in the past, with just 40GB available. This all produced a WorldBench 4 score of 110, the slowest of the new entries.

The 17in Samsung monitor 107FT is clear and bright and is perfectly matched by the 64MB GeForce2 Ti graphics card. The DVI (digital video interface) port can be connected up to the flat-panel, but hardened gamers should look elsewhere for high-end graphics.

There's a plethora of FireWire and USB ports for connecting peripheral devices and an extra fan on the chipset to keep things cool. The warranty is good, as is the manual and software bundle.

## TOP 10 BUDGET PCs



↑ The speedy system of the Hi-Grade Meridian is well complemented by its Asus nForce motherboard

#### 7 Hi-Grade Meridian N1400PV12

This ex-Best Buy from Hi-Grade slips down to seventh place, but remains one of the fastest Budget PCs despite the influx of new contenders with better specifications. The Athlon XP 1600+, running at 1.4GHz, is twinned with 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and helped produce a WorldBench 2000 score of 241. While a 40GB hard drive can store a lot of information, it's now the minimum you should expect when buying a Budget PC.

The Meridian uses an Asus nForce motherboard, with onboard sound and graphics. Onboard options are usually a long way behind dedicated cards, but the performance from the nVidia is leaps and bounds above others. The graphics supports 1,024x768 at 75Hz, so the results are impressive. However, combined with the low-resolution monitor it won't be enough to satisfy gamers.

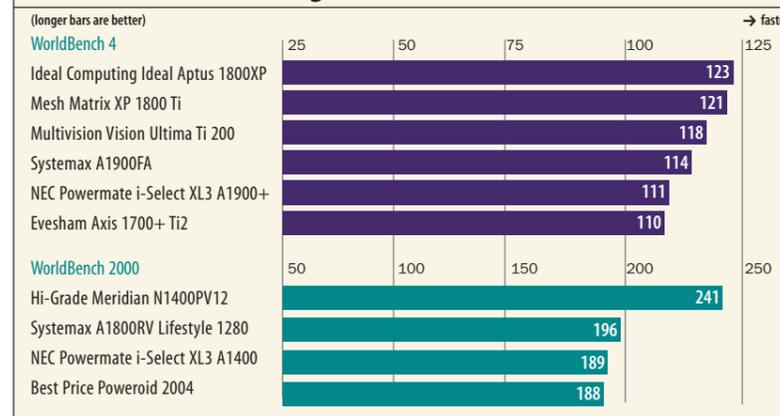
#### 8 Systemax A1800RV Lifestyle 1280

Down but not out, the Lifestyle 1280 from Systemax clings to the chart for another month, dropping from second place to eighth. While its Windows Me operating

↓ With great visuals and sound, a good processor and games bundle, the Systemax is a gamer's dream



## PC WorldBench: Budget PCs



system may soon be a thing of the past, the A1800RV still contains an Athlon XP 1800+ backed up by 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, which are still impressive specifications. However, the WorldBench 2000 score of 196 has now been surpassed by faster systems.

With the second-best monitor in the chart and brilliant sound provided by Creative's new Audigy sound card and a 64MB GeForce3 graphics card, this is very much a consumer PC. If that weren't evidence enough, the Lifestyle 1280 also comes with a games bundle and gamepad like its sibling at number three.

#### 9 NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1400

This Powermate from NEC now looks a little dated as it slides down to ninth place. It's one of only two PCs to stick with Windows 98 SE and a basic Athlon processor, but the unique addition of a Pioneer DVD-R/RW makes it worth buying for anyone needing the best in storage and backup. A 1.4GHz clock speed is slow compared to the competition and 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM is standard fare for Budget systems. A 40GB hard drive is the bare minimum – though with the DVD-R/RW capable of holding 4.7GB of information, who's complaining?

#### 10 Best Price Poweroid 2004

The Poweroid 2004 is showing its age and falls to tenth place. Its futuristic metallic casing does well on aesthetic value, but it isn't enough to redeem it from the 256MB of slower SDRAM, a 1.4GHz Athlon and the soon-to-be extinct Windows Me.



↑ The Powermate may be getting a little bit past it for the chart, but its DVD-R/RW drive gives it some dash

Despite this, the WorldBench 2000 score of 188 was quite high, although this was probably due to the advanced hard drive setup. The Raid controller spreads the workload across two drives, so the 60GB storage can be accessed in less time than a single drive. Other features on the Poweroid are excellent and we're sure it won't be long before we see an updated entry in our charts.

↓ Despite its lacklustre specifications, the Poweroid produced a solid performance to hold tenth place



→ Turn to page 110 to see what's happening in the Top 10 Superbudget PC chart

## Motherboard upgrades: getting a better performance

**W**hen people discuss upgrading internal components on a PC the humble motherboard rarely gets a look in – a better graphics card, more memory or improved sound are the usual upgrades. It's easy to forget, though, that all these components are attached to and affected by the motherboard – get a decent board and you can improve your PC's potential no end.

A decent motherboard will make your system more stable, perform faster and add to its upgrade options. When choosing a motherboard, the things to look out for are plenty of spare slots and ports, which will make upgrading and adding peripherals a breeze. Opting for a reputable manufacturer should ensure stability, and support from a fast chipset will help to speed up performance.

It is also worth looking for a motherboard that supports the latest standards, such as FireWire and USB 2.0. As more peripherals adopt these faster methods of connection, you will be glad that you opted for a future-proofed motherboard.

However, the latest chipset from nVidia – the Crush – which is used in nForce boards, takes a slightly different approach by doing more of the work onboard. The nForce graphics can use up to 32MB of RAM and can cope with a resolution of 1,024x768 at 75Hz. The onboard sound also supports 5.1 Dolby Surround Sound.

While the nForce's integrated graphics and sound may never be able to match standalone cards, they are superior to previous onboard options and yet they still offer the same cost savings.