TOP 10 SUPERBUDGET PCs

	Superbudget PCs	Processor type	RAM	Motherboard	Monitor	
		Processor speed	Hard disk capacity	USB ports	Dot pitch	
					Maximum resolution@75Hz	
1	**Mesh Matrix 2600+ RD95** 020 8208 4702 www.meshcomputers.com NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite warranty • First review Jun 03	AMD Athlon XP 2600+ 2.13GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	Asus A7N8X 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
		WorldBench 4			129	
2	**Carrera Octan 2.8a** 0871 222 3456 www.carrerassc.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 2-year return-to-base warranty • First review Jun 03	Intel Pentium 4 2.8GHz	512MB DDR RAM 80GB	Asus P4SX8 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
		WorldBench 4			124	
3	**Multivision Ionix GX** 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base labour only warranty • First review Jun 03	AMD Athlon XP 2500+ (Barton core) 1.84GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	MSI K7N2 6	17in LG F700P 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
		WorldBench 4			126	
4	**CCL X-Force G2** 01274 471 267 www.cclcomputers.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Jun 03	AMD Athlon XP 2400+ 2GHz	512MB DDR RAM 80GB	MSI K7N2 6	15in CTX S500B flat-panel 0.297mm 1,024x768	
		WorldBench 4			124	
5	**Time Neptune 2600+ PQ** 01282 777 555 www.timecomputers.com LAST MONTH 1	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Apr 03	AMD Athlon XP 2600+ 2.13GHz	512MB DDR RAM 80GB	MSI KT4 Ultra 4	17in LG 795FT 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
		WorldBench 4			123	
6	**Shepley SB P4-2.6TFT** 0870 758 6445 www.shepleydirect.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 1-year onsite, 4-year return-to-base labour only warranty • First review Jun 03	Intel Pentium 4 2.66GHz	512MB DDR RAM 80GB	Gigabyte GA-8SG800 6	15in NEC LCD 1501 flat-panel 0.297mm 1,024x768	
		WorldBench 4			124	
7	**JAL Virgo 2700 SB** 01782 848 100 www.jal.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 2-year onsite warranty • First review Jun 03	AMD Athlon XP 2700+ 2.13GHz	512MB DDR RAM 80GB	Gigabyte GA7VAX 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
		WorldBench 4			127	
8	**Systemax Inspire 7407** 0870 7297 364 www.systemaxpc.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 2-year onsite, 1-year return-to-base warranty • First review Jun 03	AMD Athlon XP 2500+ (Barton core) 1.84GHz	256MB DDR RAM 60GB	MSI KT4V 5	19in CTX EX950F 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
		WorldBench 4			124	
9	**Holly KA21V** 01375 397 220 www.hollycomputers.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite warranty • First review Jun 03	AMD Athlon XP 2100+ 1.73GHz	256MB DDR RAM 80GB	Epok EP-8RDA+ 6	17in Philips 107T 0.25mm 1,280x1,024	
		WorldBench 4			121	
10	**Multivision Vision Pro LT** 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk LAST MONTH 2	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base labour only warranty • First review Apr 03	AMD Athlon XP 2400+ 2GHz	256MB DDR RAM 80GB	MSI KT4V 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
		WorldBench 4			121	

new

↑ With top-quality components and an unbeatable WorldBench score, the Mesh is our deserved Best Buy winner

1 Mesh Matrix 2600+ RD95

The Best Buy award this month goes to Mesh, which has not only managed to cram top-quality components into a £699 system but has also made this PC faster than all the other chart contenders.

The Matrix RD95's WorldBench 4 score of 129 is the highest we've seen in the Superbudget category. It even beats seven of the 10 PCs currently in our Budget chart. The 2.13GHz Athlon XP 2600+ chip is largely responsible for this but the Asus motherboard, using the nForce2 chipset, and 512MB of DDR RAM play a part as well.

This Best Buy might not be the prettiest system in the chart, and it's certainly one of the bulkiest, but in its favour it opens up very easily with no screws to undo – ideal for upgrading. The system is lockable, too, so your drives and other components are protected.

The Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB is a quality display and currently sits at the top of the 17in monitor chart (see page 223). Combined with the black Logitech keyboard and mouse, Mesh has certainly

Graphics card maker Graphics chip Graphics card memory	Sound card Speakers Subwoofer	DVD drive speed CD-RW read/ write/rewrite rate	Operating system, software and extras
Connect 3D ATI Radeon 9500 Pro 128MB	onboard 5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2003 Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
Leadtek nVidia GeForce Ti 4800 128MB	onboard 5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300 yes	16x 52x/52x/24x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, TV card
ATI ATI Radeon 9500 Pro 128MB	onboard 5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300 yes	16x 52x/52x24x	Windows XP Home
onboard nForce2 64MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR 550 yes	16x 48x/48x24x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002
ATI ATI Radeon 9500 Pro 128MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR 500 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, educational titles, MSI Bluetooth transceiver
ATI ATI Radeon 9500 Pro 128MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR 550 yes	16x 48x/48x/24x	Windows XP Home, Easy CD Creator
Hitech Exaliber ATI Radeon 9500 Pro 128MB	onboard 5 x Nicole SD 2500 yes	16x 52x/52x/24x	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2003
MSI nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4800 128MB	onboard 4 x Creative Inspire 4400 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, 6-in-1 USB 2.0 memory card reader, Ability Office 2002
Gainward nVidia GeForce MX 440 64MB	onboard 5x Videologic ZXR 500 yes	16x 52x/52x/24x	Windows XP Home, Nero Burning ROM
MSI nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 64MB	onboard 5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300 yes	16x 48x/48x/24x	Windows XP Home Lotus SmartSuite 9.7

new

↑ Previously too expensive to use in a Superbudget system, the Octan 2.8a houses a powerful 2.8GHz P4 chip

to be cheaper. Intel is now concentrating its efforts on the 3GHz Pentium 4s that use HT (hyperthreading) technology and that means its older chips have come down in price. A sub-£700 system can now be built around the powerful 2.8GHz Pentium 4 processor.

Carrera hasn't made too many compromises to achieve this price. Mitsubishi's excellent Diamond Pro 750SB monitor and an nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4800 graphics card handle the visuals. There's no standalone sound card, but the audio chip on the Asus motherboard supports six-channel sound so the Creative Inspire 5300 speaker system isn't wasted.

There's a TV card thrown into the mix and front-mounted FireWire and USB 2.0 ports as well. The warranty provides five years of cover, the first three of which are onsite. The one problem we had with the Octan was the keyboard – it's too small and if you're used to the conventional keyboard layout you'll have trouble finding certain keys. The optical mouse, however, is excellent.

3 Multivision Ionix GX

The first PC we've seen in the Superbudget chart to use the new Athlon XP 2500+ chip with a Barton core, the Ionix GX from Multivision nabs third place and a Recommended award to boot.

Previously reviewed Barton core-based processors (see April 03, page 48) have set new records in our WorldBench 4 tests – an Athlon XP 3000+ achieved a score of 138. The 1.84GHz XP 2500+ powered the Multivision to 126 points – an impressive Superbudget total but not the highest we've seen.

The Ionix's casing is easy on the eye and the front-mounted blue light gives the unit a space-age feel. The LG F700P monitor is also aesthetically pleasing but can't match the

not followed the tried-and-tested beige styling route.

The ATI Radeon 9500 Pro graphics card gives a very good image and pushed the Matrix to achieve 83.9fps (frames per second) when running the Quake III Annihilator demo at a resolution of 1,024x768.

There's masses of storage space on the 120GB hard drive and the system is covered by a three-year onsite warranty. An ideal PC for gamers and users of intensive graphics, the Mesh is also great value for money.

2 Carrera Octan 2.8a

The Octan 2.8a may have missed out on our coveted Best Buy, but its second placing means that it gains a deserved Recommended award. An attractive tower unit conceals quality components and a speedy 2.8GHz Pentium 4 processor that helped the Carrera score 124 in our WorldBench 4 tests.

In the past, Intel's Pentium 4 chips haven't been too popular in the Superbudget chart. This is mainly due to the price – AMD processors tend

new

↑ One of only two PCs to use a Barton core-based chip, the Ionix achieved an impressive WorldBench score of 126

Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB's image quality. The ATI Radeon 9500 Pro graphics card performs well and, although the audio chip is onboard, the nForce2 chipset still offers good sound quality.

There's 512MB of DDR RAM and a whopping 120GB hard drive for storage. The CD-RW drive offers impressive 52/52/24-speed (read/write/rewrite) backup rates. There's four FireWire ports, one of which has been mounted on the front with two of the six USB 2.0 ports – handy if you don't have much room.

4 CCL X-Force G2

The last Recommended award goes to CCL with a stylish and fast system in the shape of the X-Force G2. Powered by a 2GHz Athlon XP 2400+ processor, the CCL managed a speedy score in our WorldBench 4 tests.

Flat-panel displays are dropping in price dramatically and this means they will soon become a common feature in the Superbudget category – for the first time in *PC Advisor* history we have two top 10 Superbudget systems featuring a slimline flat-panel display.

But buyer beware: flat-panels can vary wildly in quality. Fortunately,

new

CCL has picked out a high-quality model – the CTX S500B.

The X-Force G2 is the perfect home office system. The flat-panel saves on desk space, while the graphics and sound are handled by the onboard nForce2 chips on the MSI motherboard. This allows for plenty of free PCI slots and the CD-RW/DVD-ROM combo drive offers room for three extra drives. Six USB 2.0 ports and two FireWire ports mean you can connect a plethora of peripherals too.

5 Time Neptune 2600+ PQ

Last month's Best Buy is pushed down to fifth place by the sheer quality of the top four new entries. An outstanding PC in its own right, the Time Neptune is powered by a 2.13GHz Athlon XP 2600+ processor that helped it achieve a reasonable performance score.

The LG 795FT monitor is an excellent choice and, thanks to its dot pitch of 0.24mm, image quality is very sharp. To round off the specifications there's

512MB of fast DDR RAM, an 80GB hard drive and a 48/48/16-speed (read/write/rewrite) CD-RW drive for backup. A Bluetooth transceiver is also bundled with the Neptune 2600+ PQ and, thanks to the system's six USB 2.0 and two FireWire ports, you have plenty of connectivity options.

Looking inside the PC, everything is neatly organised so it should prove easy to upgrade. The provided documentation is also of a high standard. The Time's only letdown is its warranty – though it's three years long, there is no onsite cover.

6 Shepley SB P4-2.6TFT

Shepley's well put together PC takes sixth place this month. Dark grey or black tower units have become far more common recently and we think they generally look much better than a beige box.

The tower unit is complimented by a black keyboard and mouse, while NEC's stylish 15in flat-panel

display rounds off the SB P4-2.6TFT's good looks. But there's some substance behind the beauty, as Shepley's 2.66GHz Pentium 4 processor powers this system to an impressive WorldBench 4 score of 124.

new

There's 512MB of DDR RAM and an 80GB hard drive to back up the P4 processor. The ATI Radeon 9500 Pro may not be a top-of-the-range model but it's still a decent graphics card.

As with many of the Superbudget entries, Shepley's audio chip is onboard so sound isn't as rich as it could be. The speakers, however, are Videologic's excellent ZXR 550 models which offer great audio reproduction. The warranty provides five years worth of cover, with the first year onsite.

7 JAL Virgo 2700 SB

The first of two new manufacturers to enter a system for the Superbudget chart, JAL manages a creditable seventh place. Achieving the second highest WorldBench 4 score in the Top 10, the Virgo 2700 SB is a fast system and this is largely thanks to its Athlon XP 2700+ processor.

The overall spec of the Virgo is good – there's 512MB of DDR RAM, an 80GB hard drive and a 128MB Radeon 9500 Pro. This graphics card combines well with the excellent Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB monitor to give a brilliant image that gamers will really appreciate.

The wireless keyboard and mouse will stop you getting in a tangle and there's a generous software package including Microsoft Works Suite 2003.

The major quibble we had, though, was with the JAL's speaker system. Although there are five satellites and a subwoofer,

new

the Nicole SD speakers are not up to the standard of Creative's Inspire 5300 or Videologic's ZXR 500.

8 Systemax Inspire 7407

Despite boasting one of AMD's newest processors, the XP 2500+ with a Barton core, the Systemax only managed eighth place in this month's Superbudget chart. It may seem harsh that the Inspire 7407 is positioned so far down the chart, but it's up against some quality opposition.

Systemax's processor helps the system achieve a healthy 124 points in WorldBench 4. The graphics test results were also impressive thanks to its 128MB MSI GeForce4 Ti 4800 card. The only system in the chart to offer a 19in monitor, the Inspire 7407 is a great gaming PC if you're on a tight budget.

Although there's a bundled six-in-one memory card reader Systemax has failed to provide any FireWire ports and the 60GB hard drive is the smallest in the Superbudget chart. The top seven entries also offer an extra 256MB of DDR memory – even in the Superbudget category, 256MB is a miserly amount.

9 Holly KA21V

The second debutant in the Superbudget chart this month is Holly Computers. While its KA21V system only managed ninth place in the chart it wasn't far off the pace of the rest of the pack – its WorldBench 4 performance was only three points down on the average score of 124.

The Holly KA21V uses one of the older Athlon processors – the XP 2100+. This is still a pretty nifty chip, as demonstrated by the WorldBench score, but it will date fast.

The hardware components are pretty good on the whole but can't match the standard of the opposition – the 64MB GeForce4 MX 440 graphics card isn't on a par with the 128MB GeForce4 or Radeon cards and the Philips monitor isn't a sought-after display. The warranty, on the other hand, offers three years onsite support.

Buying advice

• Processor **Although AMD's Athlon chips have dominated this chart in the past, Intel has cut the price of its older Pentium 4s so they are becoming more common in the Superbudget category. An Intel chip is better for graphics and video work, but the Athlon is a much better all-rounder processor.**

If you're aiming for the budget end of the scale expect a speed of at least 2GHz from an AMD processor and 2.8GHz from an Intel chip. AMD's Athlon XP 2700+ is the maximum in this price bracket, but also look out for processors that feature the new Barton core such as the Athlon XP 2500+.
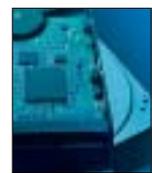
• Memory **Most manufacturers will give you 512MB of fast DDR RAM, but as the price of memory has gone up recently some makers might opt for 256MB so they can spend extra on other components.**

• Storage **The minimum you should look for is 60GB, but go for as much as you can. Even though the average user will never fill 120GB it's better to have too much than too little. A CD-RW drive is standard on any PC you buy these days, but look for at least a 40/16- speed (write/rewrite) model.**

• Monitor **Flat-panels have appeared in the Superbudget category for the first time, but be wary of their quality. They're great for saving space but the image they display isn't as good as that of a CRT (cathode ray tube) monitor. If you need a pin-sharp image look for a dot pitch of 0.24 or 0.25mm.**

• Graphics card **Both ATI and nVidia have recently released new cards, so the older Radeon and GeForce4 offerings will be more readily available in the sub-£700 category. The GeForce4 Ti 4800 offers spectacular frame rates, as do the Radeon 9500 cards, so look for one of these if you're a keen gamer. In terms of dedicated memory, the more you can get the better.**

• Sound card **Onboard sound is the order of the day in the Superbudget chart right now. Standalone cards are preferable if you're fussy about sound quality, but if you're not a keen audiophile then the onboard audio chips will suffice as they handle six channels. This means that 5.1 speaker systems such as Creative's Inspire 5300 and Videologic's ZXR 500 models can be used to their full potential.**

10 Multivision Vision Pro LT

Last month's second-placed system has been pushed down to tenth place by the new competition. The Multivision Vision Pro LT doesn't represent as good value as the rest of the chart entries, but it's still a decent Superbudget PC.

The all-round specification – an 80GB hard drive and 256MB of DDR RAM – isn't bad, if a bit on the miserly side. As you can see, many of this month's new entries give you much more than this. However, unless you need to run many applications at once or store lots of large files then this will be more than enough for you. The Vision Pro LT, which uses the Athlon XP 2400+, may have the lowest performance score in the chart, but it's only eight points shy of the Mesh in first place. ■

Unsure of a technical term? Find out exactly what it means in our searchable Glossary which is on the cover disc