

TOP 10 SUPERBUDGET PCs

		Superbudget PCs	Processor type Processor speed	RAM Hard disk capacity	Motherboard USB ports	Monitor Dot pitch Maximum resolution@75Hz
1	 Time Neptune 2600+ PQ 01282 777 555 www.timecomputers.com NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Spring 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	
2	 Multivision Vision Pro LT 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base labour-only warranty • First review Spring 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	
3	 Mesh Matrix XP 2400RD Plus 0870 046 4747 www.meshcomputers.com NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Spring 03 	AMD Athlon XP 2400+ 2GHz	256MB DDR RAM 80GB	Asus A7V8X 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
			WorldBench 4		120	
4	 NetHighStreet Net PA669 0870 777 5252 www.nethighstreet.com NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 1-year onsite, 2-year return-to-base labour-only warranty • First review Spring 03 	Intel Pentium 4 2.41GHz	256MB DDR RAM 80GB	Gigabyte GA-8PE667 6	17in Samsung SyncMaster 753DFX 0.25mm 1,024x768
			WorldBench 4		119	
5	 Atlas Meridian 2.4GHz 020 8532 6100 www.higrade.com NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 1-year onsite, 2-year return-to-base warranty • First review Spring 03 	AMD Athlon XP 2400+ 2GHz	256MB DDR RAM 80GB	Gigabyte GA-7VA 6	17in CTX PR705F 0.24mm 1,280x1,024
			WorldBench 4		120	
6	 sdIT sd heaton 2530PCA 08707 442 456 www.sdIT.co.uk NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 2-year return-to-base labour-only warranty • First review Spring 03 	Intel Pentium 4 2.53GHz	512MB DDR RAM 60GB	Asus P4S533-E 6	17in Iiyama Vision Master 1403 0.27mm 1,024x768
			WorldBench 4		120	
7	 Multivision Vision Elite eX 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk LAST MONTH 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base labour-only warranty • First review Jan 03 	AMD Athlon XP 2200+ 1.8GHz	256MB DDR RAM 60GB	MSI KT3 Ultra 2 4	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
			WorldBench 4		113	
8	 Ideal Computing Aptus L40V 0870 745 5061 www.idealcomputing.co.uk NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 1-year onsite, 4-year return-to-base labour-only warranty • First review Spring 03 	AMD Athlon XP 2200+ 1.8GHz	256MB DDR RAM 80GB	Asus A7V8X 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
			WorldBench 4		115	
9	 Shepley PC Advisor Superbudget Test System 0870 758 6445 www.shepleydirect.co.uk LAST MONTH 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 1-year return-to-base, 2-year labour warranty • First review Jan 03 	AMD Athlon XP 2100+ 1.73GHz	512MB DDR RAM 80GB	MSI KT3 Ultra 2 6	19in Sampo AlphaScan 871 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
			WorldBench 4		117	
10	 Systemax Inspire 7377 0870 729 7364 www.systemaxpc.co.uk NEW	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • £699 ex VAT • 1-year onsite, 2-year return-to-base labour-only warranty • First review Mar 03 	AMD Athlon XP 2200+ 1.8GHz	256MB DDR RAM 60GB	MSI KT4V-L 6	17in CTX EX700F 0.25mm 1,280x1,024
			WorldBench 4		117	



↑ A clear Best Buy, the Time Neptune combines a great specification with lightning speed in a very smart package

1 Time Neptune 2600+ PQ
 There may have been little to choose from between the other Superbudget PCs (five of the top 10 were within two WorldBench points of each other) but there's no question over the winner. None of the PCs is better configured, more beautifully presented or as fast as this stunner from Time.

Dwelling on the fantastic turn of pace, the Neptune is aided not just by the AMD Athlon XP 2600+ processor, but also by 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and the resulting WorldBench 4 score of 123 is

a new record at this price point. The PC is also number one for video encoding thanks to the 128MB Radeon 9500 graphics card, although the PC drops back to the middle of the pack for 3D gaming.

The 17in LG monitor offers a steady display and high 1,600x1,200 resolution support, while the drive options (80GB hard drive, 48-/16-speed CD-R/RW and 16-speed DVD playback) are beaten only by the number two Multivision PC. The meaty Videologic speakers produce audio performance as good as any in the chart besides the NetHighStreet PC's.

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
ATI ATI Radeon 9500 128MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR 500 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, Educational titles, MSI Bluetooth tranceiving key
MSI nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 64MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	16x 48x/48x/24x	Windows XP Home, Lotus SmartSuite 9.7
Sapphire ATI Radeon 9500 64MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, Lotus SmartSuite 9.7
MSI nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 64MB	Creative Audigy 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, games pack
MSI nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 8x 64MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works 6.0, TV tuner, webcam
Gainward nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 64MB	onboard 2 x Nicole SD211 yes	16x 40x/40x/10x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002 Suite
Gainward nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 64MB	Videologic Sonic eXplosion 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	16x 48x/40x/12x	Windows XP Home, Lotus SmartSuite 9.7
Gainward nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 64MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5100 yes	16x 48x/48x/12x	Windows XP Home, Sun Open Office
ATI ATI Radeon 9000 Pro 128MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR 500 yes	16x 48x/48x/12x	Windows XP Home
Sapphire ATI Radeon 9500 64MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR 500 yes	16x 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home



↑ An impressive specification and outstanding warranty earn the Multivision Vision Pro LT a deserved second place

Mitsubishi Diamond Pro monitor combines a balanced yet eye-catching colour scheme with sharp definition. It is as adept at juggling detailed graphics images as it is at running an office suite without giving you a headache.

With the release of nVidia's new-look 8x GeForce4 Ti 4200 chip (offering support for the 8x AGP graphics port), you'd expect machines featuring the older 4x Ti 4200 cards to be struggling for pace. But the Multivision's 64MB Ti 4200 easily beats the Atlas' 8x card, performing impeccably.

The Realtek onboard sound is one small criticism, although this is still one of the better integrated audio solutions. And with the help of the excellent Creative Inspire 5300 speakers the results are fairly impressive.

Internally, the Multivision is well arranged. Although the six USB 2.0 ports are promising, we would have preferred to have seen a couple of these mounted on the front of the case. Once again, though, Multivision has provided an astounding six-year warranty. It might have missed out on first place, but the Vision Pro remains an excellent system that lets its top-notch features list do the talking.

All of this would have been enough to earn the Neptune first place, but with the extras Time puts the matter beyond doubt. From the spacious casing with two front-mounted and four rear-mounted USB 2.0 ports to the software bundle, comprehensive documentation (the only Superbudget PC to score highly here) and the Bluetooth transceiver, there really is little extra Time could have provided for the money. A fantastic all-round PC, this is the only Superbudget model that can be all things to all customers.

2 Multivision Vision Pro LT

While it can't match the power of the Best Buy Time the Multivision represents the best specification, bringing together many top-notch components. The Vision Pro delivers both speed, with a great WorldBench 4 score of 121, and first-class components.

There's a huge 80GB hard drive, for example, while the 48-/48-/24-speed (read/write/rewrite) CD-RW drive is better than anything else seen in this division. The high-calibre



3 Mesh Matrix XP 2400RD Plus

Building Superbudget PCs is a fairly thankless task, but the job of choosing what to cut and what not to cut is one at which Mesh tends to excel. For example, it takes full advantage of Mitsubishi's well-priced but beautifully conceived Diamond Pro monitor. Video is given an extra burst of energy courtesy of the 64MB Radeon 9500 graphics card and, though the Mesh is only middle of the road on 3D gaming, its video encoding capabilities are not far behind those of the two Pentium 4 machines. Performance is good, with the 2400+ chip and 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM resulting in a WorldBench 4 score of 120.





↑ Mesh has chosen solid hardware components in the well-configured Matrix XP 2400RD Plus

The 80GB hard drive is an extravagance that many of this month's PCs have found irresistible and the 48-/16-speed CD-R/RW facilities and 16-speed DVD playback are well chosen. The onboard audio isn't going to produce the best sound around, but it's a cut above the usual integrated hardware and the Creative speakers make up much of the shortfall.

If we do have a particular criticism, it's that the casing isn't the best we've seen from Mesh. Cramped and without front-mounted USB ports (although there are six at the rear of the PC), this could be improved upon. Nonetheless, this is a well configured PC. It might lack that vital edge needed to break into the top two, but the consistently high standard of hardware makes this a terrific reserve.

4 NetHighStreet Net PA669

The NetHighStreet is the perfect purchase for sound enthusiasts on a tight budget. Although onboard sound cards have improved over the years, audiophiles will welcome the crystal-clear playback and advanced digital connections of the Creative Audigy card. And it's not just musicians



who'll find the NetHighStreet PC a suitable partner, since games players can revel in the high frame rates pumped out by the graphics subsystem.

Less down to the GeForce4 Ti 4200 graphics card than the 2.41GHz P4 chip, this PC bears testament to the unrivalled video capabilities of Pentium processors (even if the WorldBench score is a slightly average 119). Unfortunately, attractive though the 17in Samsung monitor may be, the lacklustre resolution support (1,024x 768 at best) prevents this PC from being an outstanding games engine. This is a shame, since otherwise the Net PA669 is a polished system backed up by a large and spacious case, FireWire and six USB 2.0 ports (two front-mounted). Its sound facilities will still make it an enticing buy for some, but with a better monitor this could have been in the top three.

5 Atlas Meridian 2.4GHz

It's never been harder to distinguish one Superbudget PC from another and, with the majority of systems having almost identical features lists, the smallest difference can be the defining factor.

In the case of the Atlas the distinction is in the extras. The PC itself is fairly standard issue: AMD XP 2400+ chip, 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM (scoring 120 in WorldBench 4), 80GB hard drive and 48-/48-/16-speed (read/write/rewrite) CD-RW. But additional items such as TV tuners and webcams add an extra dimension.

Having said that, few users will truly be fired up by the prospect of viewing television pictures on the 17in CTX screen (clear and colourful though its image may be), while the webcam is a low-budget model that could be snapped up for a pittance on eBay.

These, then, are unlikely to be compelling reasons for buying the Meridian. And although the graphics card touts the new 8x AGP version of nVidia's GeForce4 Ti 4200 chip, the results in 3D testing were really no better than average.



6 sdIT sd heaton 2530PCA

This month's debutant is a new entry from sdIT, a company from the same people that brought you Student Desktops.

This PC will appeal to users from all walks of life, particularly those with a graphics bent. It offers further confirmation that Intel Pentium 4 chips are the source of a hot graphics system, coming in fastest for 3D games and fourth fastest on video encoding. General performance was good as well, although the WorldBench score of 120 could have been better.

The Iiyama display is another anticlimax: inferior specifications produce an image that is neither sharp nor vibrant. Sound is a let-down too, with the bargain-basement three-piece speaker set unable to make anything of the onboard audio controller.

In other respects the PC blows hot and cold. The CD-RW drive isn't quite cutting-edge, while the flimsy casing and poorly organised internal layout is only partly compensated for by the convenient front-mounted USB and FireWire ports. Nonetheless, the heaton 2530PCA is a solid start for sdIT with plenty to please graphics enthusiasts.



7 Multivision Vision Elite eX

Such is the progress of technology that the raft of new Superbudget PCs has pushed last month's chart-topping Multivision down to seventh position. With over half of the new PCs scoring 120 or more in WorldBench 4, the Elite's 113 looks distinctly groggy and many of its components look slightly behind the times.

That's not to say that the Vision Elite doesn't have its good points: the perfectly pitched 17in Mitsubishi monitor is an excellent addition, while the sound system is as impressive as any in the top 10. The PC's star feature, a sweeping six-year warranty, remains



the best deal on offer here. At a lesser price the Vision Elite would have plenty going for it, but without such a cut this month's new batch of PCs simply deliver more goods for the money.

8 Ideal Computing Aptus L40V

Ideal Computing has paid the penalty for building its system around the 1.8GHz Athlon XP 2200+ chip.



The resulting WorldBench score of 115 and the distinctly middle-of-the-road figures in our video and 3D games tests are the only failings in a PC that otherwise matches the competition almost component for component.

The Aptus' capacious 80GB hard drive and crystal-clear Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB monitor are features that have already drawn praise. Even the onboard sound controller is given a new lease of life by the throaty Creative Inspire 5100 speaker system, while the wealth of FireWire and USB 2.0 ports complement the spacious internal arrangement. Unfortunately, the lack of pace makes the Ideal Computing Aptus L40V something of a misnomer.

9 Shepley PC Advisor Superbudget Test System

It's much to Shepley's credit that, in a month where most of the Superbudget



PCs look like clones, its Test System forges its own path through the chart. Unfortunately, the direction of that path appears to be straight down as the flood of new entries have forced last month's number two to trawl the bottom of the table.

The inferior 2100+ Athlon processor and the slothful performance of the ATI graphics card (finishing last in both the video encoding and the 3D games tests) are the main offenders, although the 19in Sampo monitor is another deficiency. This is a shame, since in most other

Buying advice



• **Processor** Although AMD's Athlon XP chips have ruled the roost in the sub-£699 category for well over a year now, there are signs that Intel is beginning to wrest back the initiative. Even 2.41 and 2.53GHz Pentium 4 chips are now low enough in price to be affordable and for graphics and video work they produce the best performance. For general Windows use, however, you're still far more likely to see an AMD Athlon XP producing the goods – the 2400+ and 2600+ chips will make good acquisitions.



• **Memory** RAM prices are starting to rise so you may pay more now, but a minimum of 256MB with 512MB is still the best Windows XP option. To keep up with the technology, and to make your PC less costly to upgrade, look for DDR (double data rate) RAM rather than SDRAM.



• **Storage** Gigabytes abound these days, so demand no less than 60GB with 80GB preferable. A CD-RW drive is a must for the future – look for a CD performance of at least 40-/10-speed (write/rewrite) with 48-/24-speed better still.



• **Monitor** Bear in mind that this is the one part of your PC that you'll be using continuously. Look for a 17in screen and a dot pitch of 0.25mm or 0.24mm. If you're paying for a 19in then you'll probably lose out in terms of image quality.



• **Graphics card** The fantastic graphics technology of last year is now widely available on sub-£699 PCs. Look for a GeForce4 Ti 4200 or an ATi Radeon 9500 for decent frame rates without exorbitant cost. You should now expect cards of at least this quality, so don't be fobbed off with the GeForce4 MX series or the Radeon 9000. In terms of graphics memory, 128MB is best but you're more likely to have to settle for 64MB. If you're offered a Ti 4600 or a Radeon 9700 accept it but make sure that your monitor can cope. Many Superbudget monitors only go up to a resolution of 1,024x768 and this won't help you get the highest image quality from your graphics card.



• **Sound card** A standalone card like Creative's Audigy is a good choice, but integrated audio is improving. Team it up with a strong set of speakers – for example, Creative's Inspire 5300 or Videologic's ZXR-500 – and few users will notice the difference.

respects the PC can hold its own against the new entries – even now, the 512MB of DDR RAM is far from typical.

10 Systemax Inspire 7377

Reviewed last month as a standalone, we expected the Inspire 7377 to gain a high chart positioning. The competition was too much for the Systemax, though, and it has to make do with tenth place. It's not that it didn't push the right buttons – it's just that nine other PCs push them harder.

The WorldBench 4 score of 117 is commendable from the 2200+ chip and 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, while the 64MB Radeon 9500 video card

generates attractive, if not particularly fast, graphics. Although we've seen much worse in the Superbudget category, the 17in CTX isn't equal to the likes of the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB used by four of the other PCs and the sound and drive facilities generally come up to scratch. But in spite of its name the Inspire is dependable rather than galvanising. More innovation is required to make this PC stand out from the crowd.

