TOP 10 BUDGET PCs

Budget PCs	Processor type	RAM	Motherboard	Monitor	
	Processor speed	Hard disk/capacity	USB ports	Dot pitch	
				Maximum resolution@75Hz	
1 Systemax Inspire 3152 0870 729 7364 www.systemaxpc.co.uk NEW	• £1,199 ex VAT • 2-year onsite warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ (Barton core) 2.17GHz	1GB DDR RAM Samsung/160GB	MSI K7N2 5	19in CTX EX950F 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
	WorldBench 4	**130**				
2 Multivision Ionix 56ND 0870 066 0682 www.multivision.co.uk NEW	• £999 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ (Barton core) 2.17GHz	512MB DDR RAM Hitachi/180GB	MSI K7N2 6	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
	WorldBench 4	**128**				
3 Evesham Axis 3000+ 0870 160 9500 www.evesham.com NEW	• £1,099 ex VAT • 2-year onsite, 1-year return-to-base warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ (Barton core) 2.17GHz	512MB DDR RAM Western Digital/120GB	Leadtek Winfast K7NCR18D Pro 5	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
	WorldBench 4	**129**				
4 Multivision Ionix Ti 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk LAST MONTH 1	• £999 ex VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review May 03	AMD Athlon 2800+ 2.25GHz	512MB DDR RAM Western Digital/120GB	MSI K7N2-L 4	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
	WorldBench 4	**134**				
5 NetHighStreet Net PA999B 0870 777 5252 www.nethighstreet.com NEW	• £999 ex VAT • 1-year return-to-base, 1-year labour-only warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 2800+ (Barton core) 2.08GHz	512MB DDR RAM Samsung/160GB	MSI K7N2 6	17in Samsung SyncMaster 172T flat-panel 0.297mm 1,280x1,024	
	WorldBench 4	**129**				
6 CCL Computers X-Force SA28 01274 471 267 www.cclcomputers.co.uk NEW	• £999 ex VAT • 1-year collect-and-return, 2-year parts-and-labour warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 2800+ (Barton core) 2.08GHz	1GB DDR RAM Maxtor/120GB	Asus A7N8X-D 6	15in Iiyama ProLite E380S flat-panel 0.297mm 1,024x768	
	WorldBench 4	**128**				
7 Shepley XP3000 FX 58000 0870 758 6445 www.shepleydirect.co.uk NEW	• £1,099 ex VAT • 1-year onsite, 4-year labour-only warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ (Barton core) 2.17GHz	512MB DDR RAM Seagate/120GB	Gigabyte GA-7VAX 4	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
	WorldBench 4	**126**				
8 Atomic Computer Systems 2800 Pro 01772 257 257 www.atomic-computer-systems.co.uk NEW	• £980 ex VAT • 1-year return-to-base, 4-year labour-only warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 2800+ (Barton core) 2.08GHz	1GB DDR RAM Maxtor/120GB	Chaintech CT-7NJL1 8	19in Iiyama Vision Master Pro 1451 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
	WorldBench 4	**133**				
9 Mesh Matrix XP 2700+ Multidrive 0870 046 4747 www.meshcomputers.com LAST MONTH 2	• £999 ex VAT • 3-year onsite warranty • First review Apr 03	AMD Athlon XP 2700+ 2.17GHz	512MB DDR RAM Maxtor/120GB	Asus A7N9Y 6	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
	WorldBench 4	**132**				
10 Ideal Computing Aptus L90 0870 745 5061 www.idealcomputing.co.uk NEW	• £999 ex VAT • 1-year onsite, 4-year return-to-base warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 2800+ (Barton core) 2.08GHz	512MB DDR RAM Hitachi/120GB	Asus A7N8X 6	17in Iiyama ProLite E430S flat-panel 0.297mm 1,280x1,024	
	WorldBench 4 120					

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↑ You don't need to spend a fortune to get a decent PC. The Inspire 3152 houses top-notch components without costing the earth

1 Systemax Inspire 3152

At £1,199 ex VAT, the Inspire 3152 hits the ceiling of our Budget PC price boundary. However, the Systemax is by far the best value-for-money system here – it has everything you want in a PC without costing the earth. A worthy winner of our coveted Best Buy award.

Inside the Inspire you'll find a Barton core AMD Athlon XP 3000+ processor running at 2.17GHz and this chip is a key factor in the Inspire's WorldBench 4 score of 130. The 1GB of fast DDR RAM is another excellent addition and, with a sizeable 160GB hard drive, the 3152 has the specifications of a very good PC.

But Systemax hasn't finished there. Taking up a sizeable chunk of motherboard space is nVidia's GeForce FX 5900 Ultra. With 256MB of dedicated memory, this is the most powerful graphics card we've seen so far in any PC category. It managed 94.8fps (frames per second) when running the Annihilator demo in Quake III at a resolution of 1,024x768, dropping by only a fraction of a frame to 94.4fps at a resolution of 1,600x1,200.

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
nVidia nVidia GeForce FX 5900 Ultra 256MB	Creative Audigy2 7 x Videologic ZXR-750 yes	8x/2.4x/2.4x (DVD-/+RW) 52x/52x/24x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, six-in-one memory card reader
ATI ATI Radeon 9600 Pro 128MB	onboard 7 x Videologic ZXR-750 yes	12x/4x/2x (DVD-/+RW) 40x/16x/10x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002
ATI ATI Radeon 9600 Pro 128MB	Creative Audigy2 6 x Creative Inspire 6700 yes	8x/2.4x/2.4x (DVD-/+RW) 52x/52x/24x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
ATI ATI Radeon 9500 128MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	12x/4x/2x (DVD+RW) 40x/16x/10x	Windows XP Home, Lotus SmartSuite
MSI nVidia GeForce FX 5600 128MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR-550 yes	8x/4x/2x (DVD-RW) 52x/52x/24x	Windows XP Home
XFX nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4200 128MB	onboard 5 x Videologic ZXR-550 yes	12x/4x/2.4x (DVD+RW) 40x/16x/10x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Panda AntiVirus
nVidia nVidia GeForce FX 5800 128MB	Creative SoundBlaster Live 5.1 5 x Videologic ZXR-550 yes	12x/4x/2x (DVD-RW) 52x/52x/24x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Norton AntiVirus, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
Sapphire ATI Radeon 9500 128MB	onboard 5 x Nicole SD2500 yes	16x (DVD-ROM) 48x/48x/16x	Windows XP Home, Open Office
ATI ATI Radeon 9700 128MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	8x/4x/2.4x (DVD-/+RW) 32x/24x/10x	Windows XP Home, MS Works Suite 2003, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
nVidia nVidia GeForce FX 5600 256MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	12x/2.4x/2.4x (DVD+RW) 40x/16x/10x	Windows XP Home, Open Office

↑ The classy-looking Ionix 56ND can take pride of place in your living room

running at an equivalent clock speed. The Ionix managed 128 in our WorldBench tests – six points behind its older sibling, the Ionix Ti, but it's still a reasonable score.

Thanks to the 180GB Hitachi hard drive, there's plenty of storage space for your files and applications. The Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB is still the best 19in CRT monitor money can buy and does an excellent job of reproducing everything that the 128MB ATI Radeon 9600 Pro graphics card throws at it.

The nForce audio chip may be an onboard solution but, combined with Videologic's latest speaker setup, the ZXR-750, it creates terrific audio. For backup there's an all-format DVD rewriter, so you don't have to limit yourself to using just one type of DVD media – you can read and write to DVD+R, DVD+RW, DVD-R and DVD-RW discs.

3 Evesham Axis 3000+

PC ADVISOR RECOMMENDED

The first thing you notice about the Evesham Axis 3000+ is its size. If you want to conserve desk space then look elsewhere. However, if you're after a big-and-beefy PC that's got plenty of grunt under its bonnet then the Axis 3000+ fits the bill.

A Barton core 2.17GHz Athlon XP 3000+ chip is the powering force behind the Evesham, helping it reach 129 points in our WorldBench 4 tests. The 120GB hard drive provides more than enough storage space, while the 512MB of DDR RAM allows the Axis to easily handle both everyday and more complex tasks.

The 128MB ATI Radeon 9600 Pro may not be on a par with the latest nVidia GeForce FX graphics cards but, as our Quake III Annihilator demo test results prove, it still handles graphics well at all resolutions. For example, at a resolution of 1,600x1,200, it achieved 83.7fps (frames per second).

The stunning image quality was displayed faithfully by the CTX monitor.

Audio is another area where Systemax has opted for the best setup available. The Creative Audigy2 sound card is combined with Videologic's new ZXR-750 speakers, which combine a massive seven satellite speakers with a subwoofer for the ultimate in surround sound. As if this wasn't enough the Inspire is bundled with a six-in-one memory card reader, while an all-format DVD rewriter takes care of all your backup needs.

2 Multivision Ionix 56ND

PC ADVISOR RECOMMENDED

Grabbing the first Recommended award is Multivision's offering, the Ionix 56ND. A low price tag, six-year warranty and a plethora of great features make the Multivision excellent value for money. With good looks to boot, this is one system you won't want to hide away.

The 56ND is built around the Barton core Athlon XP 3000+ that runs at a speed of 2.17GHz. This processor offers superior performance to a Pentium chip

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↑ This monster of a machine puts its waif-like counterparts to shame, but there's plenty of power under the Axis' hood

The Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB may not be quite as good a monitor as the Diamond Pro 930SB, but it still generates a clear image. The Audigy2 sound card, bundled with Creative's 6700 6.1 speaker system, will please anyone who is serious about their music. Add to this an all-format DVD-/+RW drive, decent software bundle and three-year warranty and you've got a great deal.

4 Multivision Ionix Ti

PC ADVISOR The Multivision is housed in a black case and the matching peripherals give a great finish. This PC operates on a level beyond aesthetics, though. The Ionix's most outstanding feature is performance – its 134 WorldBench 4 score is still the speediest we've seen in the Budget PC category and would even give some of the Power PCs a run for their money. In terms of features, though, you can get more for your money now than you could a few months back which is why the Ionix Ti drops to fourth place.

The ATI Radeon 9500 is starting to look second rate in comparison to the newer Radeon and nVidia cards, but if you're not too bothered about top-notch gaming performance then it's more than adequate for the average user.

The sound setup isn't the greatest either – the audio chip is onboard and there are only five speakers and a subwoofer. In its favour, the Ionix Ti is large enough internally to accommodate upgrades. The righthand side panel – where the motherboard sits – opens in order to access hard-to-reach places.

5 NetHighStreet Net PA999B

A system that looks good and performs well, the PA999B has some great features but falls down in a few key areas. The Athlon XP 2800+ Barton core processor and 512MB of DDR RAM push the system to score 129 points in WorldBench 4. The 160GB Samsung hard drive should be big enough for all your data storage needs even if you're a keen video editor.

NetHighStreet has opted for a graphics card that uses nVidia's latest chip, the GeForce FX 5600. We found both the image quality and frame rates pretty impressive when running the Annihilator demo from Quake III on this system.

Then there's the NetHighStreet's flat-panel display – the 17in Samsung SyncMaster 172T. In terms of aesthetics the design cannot be faulted. Image quality, on the other hand, is adequate – the screen can't stretch beyond a resolution of 1,280x1,024.

Rather than opt for an all-format version, NetHighStreet has bundled a Pioneer DVD-RW drive with the PA999B, although the 52/52/24-speed (read/write/rewrite) CD-RW drive is a speedy model.

6 CCL Computers X-Force SA28

With the X-Force SA28, CCL Computers has managed to strike a balance between performance, features and price that results in a reasonable sixth place.

The WorldBench 4 score of 128 is a decent rating.

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With 1GB of DDR RAM at its disposal, the SA28 will handle just about anything you throw at it without breaking a sweat. For backup purposes CCL has bundled a DVD+RW drive that writes to DVD+R discs at quad-speed, while achieving a recording rate of 2.4-speed to DVD+RW discs.

The 15in flat-panel is great if you're struggling to fit everything on your desk – just don't expect brilliant picture quality as the Iiyama ProLite E380S only stretches to a resolution of 1,024x768. The graphics card offers 8x AGP support but it's pointless to have this with such a small monitor. In terms of connectivity, there's plenty of USB and FireWire ports – several of which are front mounted for easy access.

7 Shepley XP3000 FX 58000

With a Barton core Athlon XP 3000+ chip and GeForce FX 5800 graphics card, the XP3000 could easily have been a winner. Sadly for Shepley, though, this is not the case. It may be hard to find fault with the XP3000 FX 58000, but there are many areas in which the opposition offers that little bit more. For example, Shepley has bundled a DVD-RW drive with this seventh-placed system whereas many of the other manufacturers offer superior all-format drives.

The nVidia FX graphics card is an impressive performer, though. Using the Annihilator demo from Quake III, we got almost exactly the same frame rates when running at a resolution of 1,024x768 as we did at 1,600x1,200. Image quality is faithfully reproduced by the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB monitor and Shepley has also opted for a standalone audio solution in the shape of the SoundBlaster Live 5.1.

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8 Atomic Computer Systems 2800 Pro

Atomic Computer Systems' first foray into the Budget PC category shows a great deal of promise. Though the 2800 Pro only manages eighth place, its WorldBench 4 score is the second highest in the chart thanks, in part, to the Barton core Athlon XP 2800+ processor and 1GB of DDR RAM.

In nearly every other area, though, the Atomic falls short of its rivals. The graphics card is only a Radeon 9500 while the bulky 19in Iiyama Vision Master Pro 1451 monitor reminds us of a fish bowl, although image quality is decent.

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The clear panels and lighting on the side of the tower unit are a nice touch, if a little reminiscent of an Essex boy's souped-up Fiesta, but they can't propel the 2800 Pro any further up the chart.

9 Mesh Matrix XP 2700+ Multidrive

Using a 2.17GHz Athlon XP 2700+ chip, 512MB of DDR RAM and 120GB hard drive, the Mesh managed a speedy score of 132 in our WorldBench 4 tests – the third best in the Budget category.

As its name suggests, the Matrix XP 2700+ Multidrive has an all-format DVD rewriter that offers excellent backup options. The Radeon 9700 handles graphics and the Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB is an excellent display. Sound quality won't impress serious audiophiles, although for most users the onboard chip and 5.1 surround speakers will be perfectly adequate.

A three-year onsite warranty covers the Mesh and you'll find the documentation included with the PC very clear and easy to understand.

Buying advice

• Processor **If you're spending upwards of £700 on a new PC it's unlikely that you'll be lumbered with a budget chip from Intel or AMD. Most manufacturers push Athlons or, occasionally, Pentium 4s. It's the Athlon chip that seems to be doing a scorching trade in the Budget price range – it's cheaper for manufacturers to buy and performs brilliantly despite having a lower clock speed.**

Expect at least an Athlon 2600+ AMD processor, although you may be able to get one of the Barton core chips. There are no P4 processors in this chart at the moment, but if you do buy a Budget PC that houses this Intel CPU don't accept any less than a 2.8GHz model.

• Memory **This month sees 512MB of DDR RAM as standard, although some manufacturers are offering 1GB. However, 256MB of DDR RAM should serve the needs of most users.**

• Storage **An 80GB hard drive will suffice but is now seen as below average. Most of our Budget PCs have a 120GB hard drive spinning at 7,200rpm (rotations per minute), although three models offer 160GB-plus drives. Backup storage is provided by the now-obligatory CD-RW drive and nearly all the vendors are offering DVD writers. Try to get an all-format drive that's compatible with all DVD standards – DVD-R, DVD+R, DVD-RW and DVD+RW.**

• Monitor **Be satisfied with a 19in CRT monitor if it has good specifications – that is, an aperture grille tube, optimal resolution of 1,600x1,200 at 75Hz and a dot pitch lower than 0.25mm. If you're looking for a space-saving 17in flat-panel display remember to check that the specifications are up to scratch.**

• Graphics card **Chip manufacturer nVidia is challenging ATI's dominance of this chart with the new FX cards that perform beautifully but can be noisy in operation. The company's GeForce4 cards are becoming less common but are still able to do the job, although the Radeon 9500, 9600 and 9700 are all better options. In terms of dedicated memory, look for at least 128MB.**

• Sound card **The Audigy2 is the best standalone audio option on the market but Creative's card is rare at this price point. Onboard sound solutions are pretty impressive these days – just check that there's 5.1 channel support.**
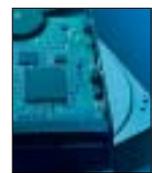
10 Ideal Computing Aptus L90

On paper the Aptus L90 looks as if it should have performed a lot better than it did. Considering it has a Barton core Athlon XP 2800+ processor, 512MB of DDR RAM and a 120GB hard drive, its WorldBench 4 score is slow compared to the opposition. We also had doubts about the stability of this system as it had some difficulty running our benchmark program – we use this not just to rate the speed of a PC but also to judge its reliability.

A 256MB GeForce FX 5600 graphics card is the most outstanding feature of the Aptus but it seems ill matched with the 17in Iiyama ProLite. This flat-panel is fine for everyday tasks and ideal if you want to save space, but to get the most out of the FX 5600 you'll need to invest in a decent 19in CRT monitor.

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