

# Top 10 Superbudget PCs

PC Advisor RECOMMENDED BEST BUY	Superbudget PCs	Processor type	RAM	Motherboard	Monitor	
		Processor speed	Hard disk capacity	USB ports	Dot pitch	
		WorldBench 4			Maximum resolution@75Hz	
1	<b>Carrera Octan 2800AIW</b> 0871 222 3456 www.carrerassc.co.uk New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £850 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year onsite, 2-year return-to-base labour only warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2800+	512MB DDR RAM	Leadtek WinFast K7NCR18D Pro	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB
			2.08GHz Barton core	120GB	6	0.24mm
		WorldBench 4			134	1,600x1,200
2	<b>Multivision Ionix 2800 FT</b> 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £821 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2800+	512MB DDR RAM	MSI K7N2	19in Iiyama VM Pro 455
			2.08GHz Barton core	120GB	4	0.25mm
		WorldBench 4			134	1,600x1,200
3	<b>Mesh Matrix 2800+ SBPC</b> 0870 046 4747 www.meshcomputers.com New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £850 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year onsite warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2800+	512MB DDR RAM	Asus A7N8X-D	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB
			2.08GHz Barton core	120GB	6	0.25mm
		WorldBench 4			131	1,600x1,200
4	<b>Time Saturn 2800+ PQ</b> 01282 777 555 www.timecomputers.com New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £850 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year return-to-base warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2800+	512MB DDR RAM	MSI K7N2	19in LG Flatron F900P
			2.08GHz Barton core	160GB	8	0.24mm
		WorldBench 4			132	1,600x1,200
5	<b>CCL Computers X-Pro SB91</b> 01274 471 267 www.cclcomputers.co.uk New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £850 inc VAT</li> <li>• 1-year onsite, 2-year return-to-base warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2700+	512MB DDR RAM	EpoX EP-8RDA3G	19in CTX EX951F
			2.17GHz	120GB	6	0.25mm
		WorldBench 4			131	1,600x1,200
6	<b>MicroLand Protech 10.01</b> 0870 443 0399 www.microland.co.uk New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £850 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year return-to-base, 3-year labour-only warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2800+	512MB DDR RAM	Gigabyte GA-7VT600	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB
			2.08GHz Barton core	120GB	8	0.24mm
		WorldBench 4			132	1,600x1,200
7	<b>NetHighStreet Elite PA699</b> 0870 777 5252 www.nethighstreet.com New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £822 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year return-to-base labour, 1-year return-to-base parts warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2800+	512MB DDR RAM	MSI K7N2	17in Samsung SyncMaster 753DFX
			2.08GHz Barton core	120GB	4	0.25mm
		WorldBench 4			131	1,024x768
8	<b>Mesh Matrix 2600+ SFX</b> 0870 046 4747 www.meshcomputers.com Last month 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £821 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year onsite warranty</li> <li>• First review Sep 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2600+	512MB DDR RAM	Asus A7N8X-D	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB
			2.13GHz	120GB	6	0.25mm
		WorldBench 4			128	1,600x1,200
9	<b>Evesham Axis 2600+</b> 0870 160 9500 www.evesham.com New	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £850 inc VAT</li> <li>• 2-year onsite, 1-year return-to-base warranty</li> <li>• First review Dec 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 2600+	512MB DDR RAM	MSI K7N2	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB
			2.13GHz	120GB	4	0.25mm
		WorldBench 4			130	1,600x1,200
10	<b>Carrera SSC Octan 3000PA</b> 0871 222 3456 www.carrerassc.co.uk Last month 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• £821 inc VAT</li> <li>• 3-year onsite warranty</li> <li>• First review Sep 03</li> </ul>	AMD Athlon XP 3000+	512MB DDR RAM	Leadtek WinFast K7NCR18D Pro 2	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB
			2.17GHz Barton core	80GB	6	0.25mm
		WorldBench 4			129	1,600x1,200



## 1 PC Advisor BEST BUY Carrera Octan 2800AIW

The Carrera Octan 2800AIW grabs top honours this month with a PC that brings together some of the best components £850 can buy.

The AMD Athlon XP 2800+ is designed to perform at a similar speed to a 2.8GHz Intel Pentium processor although, even with its Barton core, it runs at a mere 2.08GHz. Team it with 512MB of DDR RAM and a capacious 120GB hard drive and you have a PC that delivers in spades - only the Recommended Multivision Ionix could match its WorldBench score of 134.

The Octan's graphics hardware is a feast for games enthusiasts and home entertainment buffs alike. Not only is the graphics chip the superb ATI Radeon 9800 (only nVidia's GeForce FX 5900 generates higher frame rates), the card also falls within the All-In-Wonder family. Users can watch and capture television broadcasts on their PC, pause and rewind live pictures and surf multiple channels.

The Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB has a rich colour palette and sharp image definition (aided by the 0.24mm dot pitch) that make a strong case for it as the best 19in CRT monitor on the market.

Graphics card maker	Sound card	DVD drive speed	Operating system, software and extras
Graphics chip	Speakers	CD-RW drive speed	
Graphics card memory	Subwoofer		
ATI	onboard nForce2	16x (DVD-ROM)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Ahead Nero, blank CD-R media
ATI Radeon 9800 (All-in-Wonder)	5 x Creative Inspire 5300	52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
ATI	onboard nForce2	16x (DVD-ROM)	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2003
ATI Radeon 9600	5 x Creative Inspire P580	52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
MSI	onboard nForce2	16x/4x/2.4x/2x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/-R/+R/-RW/+RW)	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works 7.0, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
nVidia GeForce FX 5600	6 x Creative Inspire 6700	40x/24x/10x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
ATI	onboard nForce2	16x/2x/2x/1x (DVD-ROM/-R/-RAM/-RW)	Windows XP Home, business/music suites, games, six-in-one flash memory drive, 10 CD-R discs
ATI Radeon 9500	5 x Videologic ZXR-550	52x/12x/8x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
Sapphire	onboard nForce2	12x/4x/4x/2x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/-R/+R/-RW/+RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Ahead Nero, Panda AntiVirus Titanium
ATI Radeon 9600	5 x Videologic ZXR-550	52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
Sapphire	onboard Realtek	16x (DVD-ROM)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Ahead Nero, Soldier of Fortune II
ATI Radeon 9600 Pro	5 x Creative Inspire P580	52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
MSI	onboard nForce2	12x/4x/4x/2x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/-R/+R/-RW/+RW)	Windows XP Home, OpenOffice, Ahead Nero
nVidia GeForce FX 5600	5 x Creative Inspire 5300	52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
nVidia	onboard nForce2	16x (DVD-ROM)	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2003, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE, 32MB USB pen drive
nVidia GeForce FX 5600	5 x Creative Inspire 5300	52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
ATI	onboard nForce2	16x (DVD-ROM)	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works 7.0, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
ATI Radeon 9600	5 x Creative Inspire P580	52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		
nVidia	onboard nForce2	16x/4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, six-in-one flash memory drive
nVidia GeForce FX 5200	5 x Creative Inspire 5300	40x/16x/10x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	
128MB	yes		

chart stalwart Multivision. Performance is first-class and the Barton core AMD Athlon XP 2800+ processor is combined with 512MB of PC2700 RAM to produce a superb WorldBench 4 score of 134.

Although the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB is probably the best 19in CRT monitor available, the Multivision's Iiyama VM Pro 455 comes very close. It uses the same Diamondtron M2 tube as the Mitsubishi, and its clean image quality and effective High Brightness mode offer a refreshing viewing experience.

ATI's Radeon 9600 is a popular graphics chip among this month's Superbudget PCs and Multivision has managed to get more out of it than most manufacturers - only the Carrera and Mesh PCs were significantly faster in our graphics tests.

The audio is also fairly good, with the Creative Inspire P580 speakers a suitable match for the onboard nForce2 sound controller. No DVD writer is included, although the MSI 16-speed DVD drive and 4KUS CD writer (offering 52/52/24-speed CD-R/RW facilities) are capable. One problem is that the drives are identical and you'll have to remember which one is which. This, though, is a minor quibble in an otherwise well constructed and easily accessible case design.

As ever, no rival PCs are as well protected as the Multivision and a six-year warranty - including three onsite - almost guarantees peace of mind for the lifetime of the Ionix. A low price and a good set of components make this another winning Multivision system.

The Octan's nForce2 sound card demonstrates how onboard audio controllers have improved in the past six months, and strong reproduction is guaranteed by the confident Creative Inspire 5300 speakers.

Internally, the Octan is spacious, and added extras include Ability Office and some blank CD-Rs for use with the MSI CD writer. Some customers may complain about the lack of a DVD burner but the quality of components within the Carrera is such that we can't not recommend this as top purchase.



**2**  
**Multivision Ionix 2800 FT**



Not quite matching the class of the Octan's component list, the Ionix nonetheless is another strong performer from

**3**  
**Mesh Matrix 2800+ SBPC**



On performance alone, the Mesh Matrix isn't a top three machine. Its rather leisurely WorldBench score of 131 is a mystery, considering that it shares the Athlon XP 2800+ processor (complete with Barton core) and 120GB hard drive of the Carrera and Multivision. Indeed, the 512MB of PC3200 memory is even superior to those machines.

The Mesh is much closer on graphics speed and the nVidia GeForce FX 5600 card offers some wonderfully high frame rates. The 19in monitor is



fairly good as well, although the Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB is unable to duplicate the silky reproduction of the more expensive Pro 930SB. Audio is arguably the best in the chart and the mighty Creative Inspire 6700 speakers quickly atone for any minor shortcomings in the onboard nForce2 sound controller.

The Matrix is compact but well organised and decorated with plenty of USB ports. The software is adequate and the three-year onsite warranty gives comprehensive protection.

Where the Matrix really earns its top placing, however, is the DVD writer. Although you shouldn't really expect it in the Superbudget category, the Sony DW-U10A is so good that we find it hard to resist. Promising sensational quad-speed write rates across both DVD-R and DVD+R formats, this is undoubtedly the drive to specify for top-level DVD writing. For anyone looking for something other than a straight high-performance PC, the Mesh is the real star.

#### 4 Time Saturn 2800+ PQ



Other PCs may offer more power but none can match the sheer weight of features of the Saturn 2800+ PQ, making this a great choice for the customer who wants to sample everything the industry has to offer but doesn't want to pay for the best.

On raw speed, the Time fails to live up to the high standards set by the Carrera and



Multivision, although its WorldBench score of 132 shows an adequate return from the almost obligatory pairing of an Athlon XP 2800+ and 512MB of PC2700 RAM. Games and video performance is fairly good considering the graphics chip is only an ATI Radeon 9500, while the 19in LG CRT monitor offers a clear picture.

With its gargantuan 160GB hard drive, the Time provides 33 percent more storage space than any of its rivals. The most impressive feature, though, is its array of drives. From the six-in-one memory card reader to the CD-R, DVD-R and DVD-RAM facilities (albeit at slower speeds than the Mesh), this PC has a drive for every occasion. Equally astounding is the huge range of office, home and leisure software.



#### 5 CCL Computers X-Pro SB91

The X-Pro is another modestly priced but feature-packed PC from chart regular CCL. Like almost all of this month's PCs, it uses 512MB of PC2700 DDR RAM and a 120GB hard drive. The chip is only an Athlon XP 2700+, although the WorldBench 4 score of 131 reveals that the X-Pro performs reasonably well in Windows. It also notches up an extremely fast time for video editing, although in our games tests the Radeon 9600 pushes it back into the middle of the pack.

CTX monitors are frequently high quality and always good value for money. The 19in EX951F is no exception, with crisp image definition and a bright colour palette. The nForce2 onboard sound controller is given good voice by the Videologic ZXR-550 speakers. And although the Oporite CD-RW and DVD+RW/-RW drives may not be blessed with the most famous of brand names, their specifications are on a par with any in the Superbudget chart.

Internally the case is well organised but not spacious and the adequate software



bundle includes Ahead Software's Nero, Ability Office and Panda AntiVirus Titanium.

Another strong, value-for-money system from CCL that ticks all the right boxes but won't threaten the top PCs.

#### 6 MicroLand Protech 10.01

The casing is the most outstanding feature of this balanced but unexceptional machine. The lever system allows the lid to be removed in seconds and there's acres of space for drives and cards. Eight USB and two FireWire ports offer excellent connectivity.

The Protech posts an ample 132 points in our WorldBench 4 tests thanks to its Athlon XP 2800+ and 512MB of memory. Graphics performance is middle of the road despite the ATI Radeon 9600 Pro chip. The 19in Mitsubishi monitor is a good choice and the Creative Inspire P580 speakers make the most of the onboard Realtek audio facilities. CD-RW facilities are good, although there's no DVD writer. We would prefer to see more software, but the return-to-base warranty covers six years and the robust Microsoft keyboard is worth a mention.



#### 7 NetHighStreet Elite PA699

In a price category where it's difficult to make a good job of everything, no chart entry proves more erratic than the NetHighStreet Elite PA699. If the average WorldBench score of 131 shows that this PC lacks pace, the triumphant graphics

and video tests (second only to the 9800-powered Carrera) come as a shock.

The good work of the GeForce FX 5600 card is quickly undone by the cramped 17in Samsung monitor, with a disappointing 1,024x768 resolution. The Microsoft keyboard and Pioneer DVD writer (offering DVD+RW and DVD-RW formats) both stand out. More software would have been welcome, though.

Even with the Elite's low price tag, other chart entrants offer better value for money.

**8 Mesh Matrix 2600+ SFX**

Today's PCs age faster than a colony of fruit flies, and the Mesh Matrix 2600+ SFX is the perfect example. Laying waste to all contenders in our September 03 issue, it now struggles to hold a place in the top eight. In truth, this is little more than new technology overtaking the old. The 2600+ AMD Athlon processor now looks distinctly underpowered even though it



runs at a faster gigahertz setting than the 2800+ Athlon processors in many other PCs because it uses a Thoroughbred core instead of a Barton.

There are still some very good accessories and components, such as the 19in Mitsubishi monitor, the 52/24-speed CD-R/-RW facilities and the GeForce FX 5600, but there are no outstanding features to compensate for the lack of speed.



**9 Evesham Axis 2600+**

While Axis 2600+ owners can rest safe in the knowledge that their PC is protected by one of the biggest manufacturers in the chart, the specs suggest that it's far from the best deal.

The most obvious flaw is the AMD's Athlon XP 2600+, which clocked a WorldBench 4 score of just 130. Graphics performance is average and other machines squeeze more out of

the ATI Radeon 9600 graphics card. The Evesham has some good hardware but there are no surprise additions, such as a DVD writer, that could have pushed it further up the chart. The Axis may be a safe choice but it's far from the best.

**10 Carrera SSC Octan 3000PA**

Carrera SSC was pretty forward thinking in our September 03 issue, kitting out its Superbudget entry with an AMD Athlon XP 3000+ processor. Unfortunately, this masterstroke hasn't translated into raw Windows performance and the WorldBench 4 score is five points off the top machines.

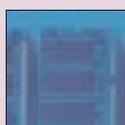
The graphics tests are an improvement, with the GeForce FX 5200 producing surprisingly robust frame rates, and the DVD writer and six-in-one memory card reader are good additions. But the smaller monitor and hard drive results struggle to match the value of this month's new entries.



**Buying advice**



• **Processors** AMD Athlon XPs dominate the Superbudget PC chart at the moment, although in this price range you can also afford a Pentium 4 running at anything up to 2.8GHz. Intel chips are better for graphics and video work while AMD processors are superior all-rounders. Look for nothing less than an Athlon XP 2600+, although you should be holding out for an XP 2800+ or even 3000+. Most Athlon chips use the latest Barton core, so expect a lower price if you're offered a processor with an older Thoroughbred core.



• **Memory** Insist on 512MB of DDR RAM in this price category. The cost has gone up recently but don't be fobbed off by manufacturers who suggest you settle for 256MB.

• **Storage** The minimum you should look for in a Superbudget system is 80GB. A CD-RW drive is standard, but look for at least 48-speed CD-R (52-speed is better still) and 24-



speed CD-RW capabilities. Some manufacturers will also give you a DVD writer, but if you're trying to save pennies this is a luxury you can do without.

• **Monitor** So many Superbudget manufacturers now offer 19in monitors that it hardly seems worth settling for a cramped 17in unit.



Make sure, however, that the make is a good one. Superbudget flat-panels may seem a good way of saving space, but be aware that the quality you'll get at this price point is unlikely to be high. A CRT is definitely a safer bet.

• **Graphics card** The mid-range



nVidia GeForce FX and ATI Radeon cards are often featured at this price point. Look for the FX 5600 or 5600 Ultra, or the Radeon 9600 or 9600 Pro. Some manufacturers may go a step further, however, and even in this category you might get a Radeon 9700 or 9800.

• **Sound card** Onboard audio is the order of the day in the Superbudget chart. Don't worry, though, since the quality of these controllers is much higher than used to be the case - the nVidia nForce solutions are particularly good. Any doubts should be dispelled by a strong set of speakers. Any of the 5.1 (five



speakers and a subwoofer) sets in the Creative Inspire or Videologic ranges will be ideal.