TOP 10 BUDGET PCs

Budget PCs		Processor type	RAM	Motherboard	Monitor	
		Processor speed	Hard disk capacity	Chipset	Dot pitch	
				USB ports	Maximum resolution@75Hz	
1 Mesh Matrix 3000+ MX TFT 0870 046 4747 www.meshcomputers.com NEW	• £1,175 inc VAT • 3-year onsite warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **133**	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	Asus A7N8X nForce2 6	17in flat-panel Sharp LL T17A4B 0.264mm 1,280x1,024	
2 Multivision Ionix 98 AIW 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk NEW	• £1,175 inc VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon XP 3200+ 2.2GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **134**	512MB DDR RAM 180GB	MSI K7N2 nForce2 4	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
3 NetHighStreet Net PA 999 0870 777 5252 www.nethighstreet.com NEW	• £1,175 inc VAT • 1-year return-to-base, 1-year labour-only warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **132**	512MB DDR RAM 160GB	MSI K7N2 nForce2 4	19in Samsung SyncMaster 957MB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
4 Evesham Axis 3000+ 0870 160 9500 www.evesham.com NEW	• £1,295 inc VAT • 2-year onsite, 1-year return-to-base warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **130**	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	MSI K7N2 nForce2 4	19in ViewSonic GF90FB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
5 Systemax Inspire 3152 0870 729 7364 www.systemaxpc.co.uk LAST MONTH 1	• £1,410 inc VAT • 2-year onsite warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **130**	1GB DDR RAM 160GB	MSI K7N2 nForce2 5	19in CTX EX950F 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
6 Carrera Octan 3200pa 0871 222 3456 www.carrerassc.co.uk NEW	• £1,410 inc VAT • 3-year onsite, 2-year labour-only warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon XP 3200+ 2.2GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **134**	1GB DDR RAM 80GB	Asus A7N8X nForce2 6	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
7 MicroLand Tech AD 099.1 0870 443 0399 www.microland.co.uk NEW	• £1,235 inc VAT • 3-year return-to-base, 3-year labour-only warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **130**	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	Gigabyte GA-7VT600 Via KT600 8	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
8 CCL Computers X-Pro EA91 01274 471 276 www.cclcomputers.co.uk NEW	• £1,295 inc VAT • 1-year return-to-base, 2-year labour-only warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **131**	1GB DDR RAM 120GB	Epox 8RDA3+ nForce2 4	19in Iiyama Vision Master Pro 455 0.25mm 1,600x1,200	
9 Shepley XP3000 R98 0870 758 6445 www.shepleydirect.co.uk NEW	• £1,410 inc VAT • 1-year return-to-base, 2-year labour-only warranty • First review Nov 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **132**	512MB DDR RAM 160GB	Epox 8RDA3+ nForce2 6	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	
10 Multivision Ionix 56 ND 0870 066 0882 www.multivision.co.uk LAST MONTH 2	• £1,175 inc VAT • 3-year onsite, 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Aug 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ 2.17GHz Barton core **WorldBench 4** **128**	512MB DDR RAM 180GB	MSI K792 nForce2 6	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB 0.24mm 1,600x1,200	

new

↑ The Mesh Matrix 3000+ MX TFT doesn't just look stylish – it's a good performer and the ultra-secure casing offers peace of mind

1 Mesh Matrix 3000+ MX TFT

This month's Best Buy goes to Mesh which has produced a fine-looking, fast and well-specified PC. The stylish black casing and flat-panel display combine to produce an aesthetically pleasing system that's secure as well – you actually need a key to get inside the casing.

Whether you require this level of security or not, you'll find that the Mesh looks good on the inside too. Everything is neat and tidy and wiring has been kept to a minimum. Any unused connector cables have been secured so they don't flap about and get in the way during upgrading. There's also plenty of room for additional components with four free PCI slots, a spare 5.25in bay that will house an extra hard drive as well as space for another stick of memory.

In terms of what's already there, you'll find pretty standard components – the Athlon XP 3000+ processor and 512MB of fast DDR RAM are good but by no means outstanding. The memory is the newer and faster DDR400 standard though, and this

new

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 Radeon 9800 128MB	onboard 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	8x/2.4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 32x/24x/10x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2003
ATI Radeon 9800 SE All-in-Wonder 128MB	Creative Audigy2 5 x Creative Inspire P580 yes	12x/4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 40x/16x/10x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002
ATI Radeon 9800 Pro 128MB	Creative Audigy2 5 x Creative Inspire 5300 yes	12x/4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 52x/52x24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, OpenOffice, PC-cillin 2002
ATI Radeon 9800 SE All-in-Wonder 128MB	Creative Audigy2 7 x Creative Inspire 7700 yes	12x/4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 52x/52x24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
nVidia GeForce FX 5900 Ultra 256MB	Creative Audigy2 7 x Videologic ZXR 750 yes	8x/2.4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Power Director 2.1, TV card, six-in-one card reader
ATI Radeon 9800 Pro 128MB	Terratek Aureon 7.1 7 x Videologic ZXR 750 yes	12x/4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 40x/16x/10x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002
Sapphire Radeon 9800 Pro 128MB	Creative Audigy2 7 x Creative Inspire 7700 yes	16x DVD-ROM 52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Tomb Raider
ATI Radeon 9600 Pro 128MB	Creative Audigy2 7 x Videologic ZXR-750 yes	12x/4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 52x/52x/32x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Panda AntiVirus Titanium, six-in-one card reader
ATI Radeon 9800 Pro 128MB	Hercules Digifire 7.1 7 x Videologic ZXR-750 yes	12x/4x/2.4x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 52x/52x/24x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Pinnacle Studio 7.0 SE
ATI Radeon 9600 Pro 128MB	onboard 7 x Videologic ZXR-750 yes	12x/4x/2x (DVD-ROM/+R/+RW) 40x/16x/10x (CD-ROM/R/RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002

↑ The second-placed Multivision Ionix 98 AIW features the new Radeon 9800 SE graphics card, resulting in very high frame rates

performance of this graphics card in our tests, as it produced some very high frame rates. In Quake III's Annihilator demo, for example, it managed frame rates in the high 90s at a resolution of 1,024x768. This dropped by about 10 frames per second at 1,600x1,200.

But the Radeon 9800 SE isn't just a good graphics card for gamers. If you want to watch television on your PC, the built-in TV tuner allows you to record programmes to your hard drive and even pause live broadcasts. There is plenty of space on your hard disk for recording, too, as the Hitachi drive offers 180GB.

The Ionix's processor is the very capable 2.2GHz Athlon XP 3200+. Combined with 512MB of fast DDR RAM this system should be able to handle just about anything you throw at it. The speaker system is a little disappointing, though – five satellites and a subwoofer don't use the Audigy2 sound card to its full potential.

3 NetHighStreet Net PA 999

The second Recommended award goes to NetHighStreet, which has managed to put together a fully featured and well-priced system in the shape of the Net PA 999. A WorldBench 4 score of 132 is pretty nifty for a PC in this price range right now but it's still a couple of points shy of the Multivision and Carrera machines.

The Athlon XP 3000+ processor and 512MB of fast DDR RAM are average specifications in the Budget PC chart this month, but NetHighStreet has gone for that little bit extra in terms of storage with a 160GB hard drive. For backup there's an all-format DVD writer and a 52/52/24-speed (read/write/rewrite) CD-RW.

The Radeon 9800 Pro graphics card provides excellent visuals that are ably displayed by the Samsung SyncMaster 957MB monitor. The Audigy2 sound card has been slightly

is part of the reason the Mesh Matrix achieved such a high WorldBench 4 score.

The MX TFT might not have the strongest components in every area, but it's a great all-rounder. The Radeon 9800 graphics card isn't as fast as the 9800 Pro, but it suits the 17in flat-panel well.

An all-format DVD writer takes care of backup and there's also a bundled copy of Microsoft Works Suite 2003 – an excellent office suite. All this is covered by a three-year onsite warranty.

2 Multivision Ionix 98 AIW

The Ionix 98 AIW achieved the highest WorldBench 4 score in the Budget PC chart this month, matching the Carrera Octan's total of 134 points. But speed isn't everything and you certainly wouldn't notice the difference between this system and any of the other chart entries in everyday use.

The letters at the end of the name stand for All-in-Wonder, signifying that the Ionix has the new Radeon 9800 SE. We were very impressed by the

↑ With a 160GB hard drive, the value-for-money NetHighStreet Net PA 999 has plenty of storage space

mismatched with the Creative Inspire 5300 speakers as they only provide a subwoofer and five satellites. PC-cillin 2002 has been provided in the software bundle – a bonus, giving the amount of viruses on the loose these days.

The warranty, though, is a disappointment as it only lasts for two years and does not include onsite cover.

4 Evesham Axis 3000+
Design is becoming much more of an issue in the PC manufacturing business. No longer are we content with grubby beige boxes that have to be hidden away upstairs. The styling of the Evesham Axis 3000+ is definitely different, although it certainly won't be to everyone's taste.

The ViewSonic GF90FB is also fairly unusual and bears more of a resemblance to a TV than a CRT monitor. There's a wireless keyboard and optical mouse and, though these are certainly stylish peripherals, they won't just plug and play – you must set them up before you can use them. Bear in mind that they are battery powered too, so you'll need spare cells handy in case they run out.

The Radeon 9800 SE All-in-Wonder card is a great addition to this system – not only does it provide

great frame rates for gamers, it also has a 125-channel TV tuner that records broadcasts to your hard drive. And with the bundled Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE video-editing package, there's a plethora of multimedia options available to you.

5 Systemax Inspire 3152
Last month's Best Buy system drops to fifth place but, given the pace at which technology moves, managing four consecutive months in the Budget PC chart is no mean feat.

The Systemax Inspire's outstanding feature is without a doubt its graphics card. Whereas every other manufacturer in the chart has chosen an ATI card, Systemax has opted for an nVidia solution. The GeForce FX 5900 Ultra has a whopping 256MB of dedicated memory which ensures smooth visuals. But whether it is a better card than the ATI Radeon 9800 Pro is still fiercely debated.

The sound card and speaker setup is one of the best available, and there's a job lot of storage space on the 160GB Samsung hard drive. With a dot pitch of only 0.25mm, the CTX monitor isn't that impressive but image quality is good.

A six-in-one card reader and an all-format DVD writer complete the specification and everything is covered by a two-year warranty. At £1,410 inc VAT, though, the Inspire is right at the upper limit of the price category.

6 Carrera Octan 3200pa
Carrera only manages sixth place this month with the Octan 3200pa. One of only two systems using the ultra-fast AMD Athlon XP 3200+ processor, the Octan was certainly speedy. This was also partly due to the 1GB of fast DDR RAM, although we're not sure the WorldBench 4 score would have

dropped too much if Carrera had gone for the cheaper 512MB option.

The hard drive is a disappointing 80GB – video enthusiasts, music editors and archivers will crave more storage space than this. In terms of audio, a Terratek 7.1 sound card and Videologic ZXR 750 speaker system create brilliant surround sound. The graphics setup is equally good: the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB and Radeon 9800 Pro graphics card combine to provide a great picture. If you're after a home cinema system you could do a lot worse than the Octan.

7 MicroLand Tech AD 099.1
MicroLand's unusual looking Tech AD 099.1 system is similar to the fourth-placed Evesham – a glowing blue light gives a space-age feel to the tower unit. Whether you consider this to be cool or tacky is a question of personal taste.

Gamers will be very impressed with the Tech AD. There's a fantastic monitor in the shape of the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB and the Sapphire Radeon 9800 Pro is one of the best graphics cards around. You'll be able to create fantastic surround sound too, as the 7.1 Creative Inspire speaker system combines with the Audigy2 sound card to give high-quality audio. Another bonus is the bundled Tomb Raider game.

On the down side there's no DVD writer and the warranty doesn't include any onsite cover, although it does last for six years.

8 CCL Computers X-Pro EA91

The CCL X-Pro EA91 only enters the chart in eighth place despite having a massive 1GB of fast DDR RAM. In reality, the difference between having 512MB and 1GB of memory wouldn't be noticeable to most users unless you had several applications running at once. With memory prices high at the moment, CCL would have been better off sticking with 512MB of RAM.

We did like the six-in-one card reader mounted in the front of the tower, though, and digital camera users will really appreciate it. Being able to insert several types of media straight into your PC will save plenty of time and hassle.

CCL has also bundled Panda AntiVirus Titanium so you can ensure your PC is protected and virus free.

Buying advice

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

If you're aiming for the budget end of the scale expect at least an Athlon 2800+ AMD processor, although you may be able to get one of the Barton core chips. There are no Pentium 4 CPUs in the chart at the moment, but if do opt for a P4-based system don't accept any less than a 2.8GHz processor.

• Memory **This month sees 512MB of DDR RAM as standard in the Budget chart, although some models offer 1GB. However, 256MB of DDR RAM should service the needs of most users.**

• Storage **An 80GB hard drive will suffice for most but is now seen as below average. The majority of our Budget PCs have a 120GB hard drive spinning at 7,200rpm (rotations per minute). Five models offer 160GB-plus drives and this will prove plenty. Backup storage is provided by the now obligatory CD-RW drive and nearly all the vendors are offering DVD writers too. If you want a DVD writer try to buy an all-format drive so it can write all of the DVD standards – that is, DVD-R, +R, -RW and +RW.**

• Monitor **Be satisfied with a 19in CRT monitor if it has good specifications – aperture grille tube, optimal resolution of 1,600x1,200 at 75Hz and a dot pitch lower than 0.25mm. Alternatively, look for a 17in flat-panel display if space is tight.**

• Graphics card **nVidia is challenging ATI's dominance of this chart with the new FX cards that perform beautifully but are very noisy. The company's GeForce4 cards are becoming less common but are still up to the job, although an ATI Radeon 9600 card or later is a better option. Remember to look for at least 128MB of dedicated memory.**

• Sound card **The Audigy2 is the best audio option available on the market but Creative's card is rare at this price point. It's better to get a standalone sound card but the onboard solutions are pretty impressive these days – just check for 5.1-channel support.**

9 Shepley XP3000 R98

When you consider that all of the top nine Budget PCs tested this month achieved WorldBench 4 scores within four points of each other you'll realise just what a competitive category this is.

Although it only managed ninth place, the XP3000 R98 isn't a bad PC by any stretch of the imagination – it just doesn't quite have everything that the competition offers. In its favour, the Shepley's graphics setup will impress gamers thanks to its Radeon 9800 Pro card and Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 930SB monitor.

The unstylish case sticks out like a sore thumb in comparison with the opposition. It's also rather messy on the inside and this won't impress people who want to upgrade components – you'll have to work around the jumble of wires to remove and replace parts.

10 Multivision Ionix 56 ND

Last month's second-placed system slides to tenth place, pushed down by a spate of new entries. Styled in a similar way to the second-placed Ionix 98 AIW, the 56 ND has the lowest WorldBench 4 score in the chart.

If you're interested in video editing then you'll find the massive 180GB hard drive a bonus, while the all-format DVD writer will ensure that you never run out of storage space for your videos and files.

Graphics are where the Ionix falls short. The Radeon 9600 Pro card is fine for most users but won't be suitable for serious gamers.