

TOP 10 SUPERBUDGET PCs

		Superbudget PCs	Processor type Processor speed	RAM Hard disk/capacity	Motherboard USB ports	Monitor	
						Dot pitch Maximum resolution@75Hz	
1		Mesh Matrix 2600+ SFX 0870 046 4747 www.meshcomputers.com NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 2600+ 2.13GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	Asus A7N8X 6	19in Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
				WorldBench 4	128		
2		Carrera SSC Octan 3000PA 0871 222 3456 www.carrerassc.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 3000+ (Barton core) 2.17GHz	512MB DDR RAM 80GB	Leadtek WinFast K7NCR18D Pro 2 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
				WorldBench 4	129		
3		Time Saturn 2600+ 01282 777 555 www.timecomputers.com NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year return-to-base warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 2600+ 2.13GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	MSI K7N2 3	19in LG Flatron F900P 0.24mm 1,600x1,200
				WorldBench 4	125		
4		NetHighStreet Net Elite 699 0870 777 5252 www.nethighstreet.com NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 1-year collect-and-return, 1-year labour only warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 2800+ (Barton core) 2.09GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	MSI K7N2 4	19in Samsung SyncMaster 957MB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
				WorldBench 4	131		
5		Systemax Inspire 3162 0870 729 7364 www.systemaxpc.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year onsite warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 2700+ 2.17GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	MSI K7N2 4	19in CTX EX951F 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
				WorldBench 4	126		
6		MicroLand Addons Superbudget PC 0870 443 0399 www.microland.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year return-to-base, 3-year labour-only warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 2800+ (Barton core) 2.09GHz	512MB DDR RAM 160GB	Gigabyte GA7VAXP-A 6	17in Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
				WorldBench 4	126		
7		Cybyte Primo XP2800 01603 455 554 www.cybyte.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 3-year collect-and-return warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 2800+ (Barton core) 2.09GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	Epox EP-8RDA+ 6	17in NEC MultiSync FE770 0.25mm 1,280x1,024
				WorldBench 4	127		
8		Mesh Matrix 2600+ RD95 0870 046 4747 www.meshcomputers.com LAST MONTH 1	• £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		
9		Carrera SSC Octan 2.8a 0871 222 3456 www.carrerassc.co.uk LAST MONTH 2	• £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		
10		CCL Computers X-Force 97 01274 471 267 www.cclcomputers.co.uk NEW	• £699 ex VAT • 1-year collect-and-return, 2-year labour-only warranty • First review Sep 03	AMD Athlon XP 2700+ 2.17GHz	512MB DDR RAM 120GB	XFX NF2S ALH 4	17in Iiyama Vision Master Pro 413 0.25mm 1,600x1,200
				WorldBench 4	128		



↑ With an excellent 19in monitor and GeForce FX 5600 graphics card, the Matrix 2600+ SFX is ideal for gamers on a budget

1 Mesh Matrix 2600+ SFX

Mesh takes the top spot this month thanks to an unbeatable combination of performance, features and build quality. The Matrix's WorldBench 4 score of 128 is only three points short of the speediest system in the chart, the NetHighStreet Net Elite. This proves that, although the 2.13GHz Athlon XP 2600+ processor might not be the most powerful chip available, the SFX will complete everyday tasks with ease.

There's 512MB of DDR RAM housed in the Mesh while the hard drive stores

a capacious 120GB of data. Not long ago this specification would not have been possible in the Superbudget category but it has now become the standard offering.

The Matrix 2600+ SFX's 19in monitor is the chart-topping Mitsubishi Diamond Plus 93SB (see page 237). This CRT displays a good-quality image and stretches to a resolution of 1,600x1,200 at 75Hz, although it does lack extras such as USB ports and built-in speakers.

The 128MB GeForce FX 5600 graphics card – an excellent inclusion on a

Graphics card maker	Sound card	DVD drive speed	Operating system,
Graphics chip	Speakers	CD-RW read/	software and extras
Graphics card memory	Subwoofer	write/rewrite rate	
nVidia	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2003, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE, 32MB USB pen drive
nVidia GeForce FX 5600	5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300	52x/52x/24x	
128MB	yes		
nVidia	onboard	8x/4x/2.4x (DVD+RW)	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, six-in-one card reader
nVidia GeForce FX 5200	5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300	40x/16x/10x	
128MB	yes		
ATI	onboard	12x/4x/2x (DVD-RW)	Windows XP Home
ATI Radeon 9500	5 x Videologic ZXR-500	40x/16x/10x	
128MB	yes		
MSI StarForce	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home
nVidia GeForce FX 5600	5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300	52x/52x/24x	
128MB	yes		
Connect 3D	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002
ATI Radeon 9600 Pro	5 x Videologic ZXR-550	52x/52x/24x	
128MB	yes		
ATI	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Norton Internet Security Suite
ATI Radeon 9700	5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300	52x/52x/24x	
128MB	yes		
nVidia	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home, OpenOffice
nVidia GeForce FX 5600	5 x Videologic ZXR-550	52x/52x/24x	
256MB	yes		
Connect 3D	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2003, Pinnacle Studio 8.0 SE
ATI Radeon 9500	5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300	48x/48x/16x	
128MB	yes		
Leadtek	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, TV card
nVidia GeForce4 Ti 4800	5 x Creative Labs Inspire 5300	52x/52x/24x	
128MB	yes		
ATI	onboard	16x	Windows XP Home, Ability Office 2002, Panda AntiVirus Titanium
ATI Radeon 9700	5 x Videologic ZXR-500	52x/52x/24x	
128MB	yes		

sub-£700 system – pushes the monitor to its limits and the Matrix whizzed through our graphics tests at all resolutions. The audio chip might be onboard, but the nForce2 chipset features six channels and, thanks to the Creative Inspire 5300 speaker system, the SFX generates great surround sound.

With a three-year onsite warranty that offers peace of mind, the Matrix 2600+ SFX is this month's ultimate Superbudget system and thoroughly deserves its Best Buy accolade.

2 Carrera SSC Octan 3000PA

In second place this month is Carrera SSC. The 2.17GHz Athlon XP 3000+ processor with a Barton core is the centrepiece of the Octan 3000PA and pushed this eye-catching PC to an impressive WorldBench score of 129. The Octan's casing is easy to open and, once inside, everything is neatly arranged with plenty of room for future upgrades.

A 128MB GeForce FX 5200 card handles the Carrera SSC's graphics. In our tests it achieved very high frame



↑ The Recommended Octan 3000PA's DVD+RW drive means that backing up data is a cinch

rates even at a resolution of 1,600x1,200. Another excellent addition, the DVD+RW drive takes care of backing up large amounts of data.

What prevents the Octan 3000PA from snatching the top spot, though, is its 17in monitor. Although the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 750SB is an excellent model, a 19in screen is always preferable – even in this bargain-basement category. Compared to its competitors' offerings, the Carrera's 80GB hard drive also seems stingy. Having said that, though, the average user would have trouble filling 80GB of space but it's always best to grab as many gigabytes as you can. In the Octan's favour, following the lead of the Best Buy Mesh, there is an excellent three-year onsite warranty.

3 Time Saturn 2600+

Considering the Time Saturn's slow performance score, you may wonder why it enters the Superbudget chart in third place. Despite its relative lack of speed the 2600+ still has plenty to offer. For a start, the PC comes with one of the best 19in monitors available on the market, the LG Flatron F900P. Not only does this screen stretch to a resolution of 1,600x1,200 and provide a dot pitch of 0.24mm, it also features a four-port USB hub. This will come in handy as the Saturn's tower unit only houses three USB ports, one of which is used by the six-in-one card reader.

With the GeForce FX cards now making a huge impact in the graphics market, the ATI Radeon 9500 (used in the Saturn) is beginning to show its age – it simply can't get the most out of the excellent LG Flatron. For backup there's a DVD-RW drive, allowing you to burn up to 4.7GB of data on to a single DVD.

Like all the other Superbudget manufacturers in this chart, Time has opted for an onboard



↑ Combining excellent visuals and audio, the Time Saturn 2600+ is a worthy winner of our Recommended award

audio chip in the Saturn. It does, however, support six channels and, thanks to the Videologic ZXR-500 speaker system, you'll be treated to great surround sound. The Saturn's warranty lasts three years but unfortunately it doesn't stretch to onsite cover.

4 NetHighStreet Net Elite 699

RECOMMENDED
PC ADVISOR
Sporting the highest WorldBench 4 score in the Superbudget PC category, the speedy Net Elite 699 can hold its own with any of the systems in our Budget chart – and some of the Power PCs as well. It'll certainly be able to deal with any tasks you choose to throw its way. The NetHighStreet's stunning turn of speed is thanks, in part, to the 2.09GHz Athlon XP 2800+ chip with the Barton core and 512MB of DDR RAM. A generous 120GB hard drive gives you plenty of space to store your data too.

Gamers on a budget should definitely take a look at the NetHighStreet – it combines the latest 128MB GeForce FX 5600 graphics cards with a decent 19in monitor, the Samsung SyncMaster 957MB. During our tests the Elite's frame rates made impressive reading – running the Annihilator demo in Quake III at a resolution of 1,024x768 resulted in an impressive rate of 96.9fps (frames per second). The warranty, on the other hand,

is disappointing as it only protects you for two years, neither of which are onsite.

5 Systemax Inspire 3162

The Inspire 3162 is an all-rounder PC: it's not weak in any particular area but then it isn't outstanding either. Every system in this month's Superbudget chart has 512MB of DDR RAM and Systemax's is no exception. Similarly, all but two entries offer at least 120GB hard drives and the Inspire doesn't buck the trend here either.

A 2.17GHz Athlon XP 2700+ processor powers the system, pushing it to achieve a WorldBench 4 score of 126. This may not be as fast as the fourth-placed NetHighStreet but in practice you'll hardly notice the difference.

Graphics is the Inspire 3162's strongest area. During our tests the Radeon 9600 Pro managed to produce some decent frame rates, while the 19in CTX EX951F monitor gives a clear and crisp image. Another bonus is the three-year onsite warranty.



6 MicroLand Addons

Superbudget PC
MicroLand's first foray into the Superbudget PC chart, the sixth-placed Addons is one of four systems in the chart to boast a Barton core-based processor which is meant to speed up performance. The Athlon XP 2800+ runs at 2.09GHz and played a vital part in the MicroLand's score of 126 in our WorldBench 4 tests. The hard drive is the biggest on offer in this category at 160GB. Although the average user would struggle to fill half this amount, it's still better to have too much storage space for your data and files than too little.

Onboard audio chips have come a long way recently. Although the nForce2 chipset generates the best onboard sound around,

that offered by the Via KT400 chipset on the Gigabyte motherboard isn't far behind.

The Creative Inspire 5300 speaker system should do a good job of reproducing audio, too. A six-year warranty covers this system but unfortunately it is return-to-base.

7 Cybyte Primo XP2800

In seventh place this month is the Primo XP2800 from Cybyte. The only system in the Superbudget chart to offer a graphics card with 256MB of dedicated memory, the Cybyte will attract gamers who don't have a great deal of cash to spend on a new PC. However, the major problem is that the monitor can't do the graphics card justice. The 17in NEC MultiSync FE770 only stretches to a resolution of 1,280x1,024, which doesn't compare favourably with other monitors in the chart.

The 2.09GHz Athlon XP 2800+ processor, which uses a Barton core, pushed the Cybyte to achieve an impressive 127 points in our WorldBench 4 tests. This is combined with the obligatory 512MB of DDR RAM and there's also a bundled 120GB Western Digital hard drive.

8 Mesh Matrix 2600+ RD95

Moving down from the top spot that it held for three months running, the Matrix 2600+ RD95 is starting to show its age. Though its specification is similar to that of other contenders in the chart, there are a couple of areas in which the Mesh falls behind the opposition.

For a start, the Radeon 9500 is one of the older ATI graphics cards and struggles to maintain decent frame rates at higher resolutions in our tests. The CD rewriter is an older model that offers a slower





read/write/rewrite rate of 48/48/16-speed – many of the other charted systems offer 52/52/24-speed. The monitor is only a 17in model, too, although it does offer good image quality.

On the plus side the RD95 is a fast performer, scoring 129 in our WorldBench 4 tests, and comes with a decent software package that includes Microsoft Works Suite 2003. The three-year onsite warranty adds peace of mind.

9 Carrera SSC Octan 2.8a

Dropping from second to ninth place, the Octan 2.8a is the only Superbudget PC in our Top 10 that uses an Intel processor. Running at 2.8GHz, the Pentium 4 chip resulted in the Octan achieving 124 points in WorldBench 4 – the lowest score in the chart. However, this is only seven points behind the NetHighStreet's unbeatable score and in everyday use you're unlikely to notice any difference in speed.



Compared to what's on offer from the competition, the Octan's 80GB hard drive is pretty miserly, although most users will still find it difficult to fill. The warranty may be five years long but there are better deals available for the price.

10 CCL Computers X-Force 97

One of the best looking systems in the Superbudget PC chart, the X-Force 97 only manages 10th place. Its all-round specification isn't bad but the CCL doesn't offer as much for the money as the other PCs in the chart and therefore doesn't gain a higher placing. With a 2.17GHz Athlon XP 2700+ processor and the

Buying advice

- **Processor** AMD Athlon XP processors dominate the Superbudget PC chart at the moment, although within this price range you'll also be able to afford a Pentium 4 running at anything up to 2.8GHz. Intel chips are better for graphics and video work, while AMD CPUs are much better all-rounders. Look for nothing less than an Athlon XP 2400+ processor – some of the Barton core-based chips such as the XP 2800+ and even the XP 3000+ are also available.
- **Memory** Most manufacturers will give you 512MB of DDR RAM in this price category. But as the price of RAM has gone up recently some might opt for just 256MB, allowing them to spend a little extra on other components.
- **Storage** The minimum you should look for in a Superbudget system is 80GB, but obviously purchase as much as you can. Even though the average user will never fill 120GB it's better to have too much storage space than too little. A CD-RW drive is pretty much standard on any PC you buy these days, but look for rates of at least 40/16-speed (write/rewrite). Some manufacturers are starting to offer DVD writers at this price point but this will only be useful if you need to back up large amounts of data.
- **Monitor** Although 17in CRT screens are most common in the Superbudget chart, some manufacturers offer a 19in display. Be wary of the quality of these larger monitors, though. Flat-panel displays offered at this price point might be good for saving space but don't expect a particularly high-quality model.
- **Graphics card** Both ATI and nVidia have new models entering the market, so the older Radeon and GeForce4 cards will be more readily available in the sub-£700 category. The GeForce4 Ti 4800 cards offer decent frame rates, as do the Radeon 9500 cards, but if you're a keen gamer then look for at least a GeForce FX or Radeon 9600. In terms of dedicated memory, the more you can get the better.
- **Sound card** Onboard audio is the order of the day in the Superbudget chart. Dedicated standalone cards are preferable if you're fussy about quality, but if you're not a keen audiophile then the onboard chips that handle six channels will suffice. This means that 5.1 speaker systems such as Creative's Inspire 5300 and Videologic's ZXR-500 can be used to their full potential.



now-standard 512MB of fast DDR RAM, the X-Force reached a healthy 128 points in WorldBench 4. There's 120GB of storage space on the Hitachi hard drive, while a 128MB Radeon 9700 card handles the graphics.

The Iiyama Vision Master Pro 413 might only measure 17in but it's still a decent display that generates clear images. What really lets this system down, though, is the warranty – just one-year collect-and-return cover with two-year labour-only cover after that.



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