TOP 10 CHARTS

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The Top 10 chart awards

Regular readers might have noticed that our Top 10 charts have recently moved. We've repositioned them to make them easier to find, but there's more to it than a simple shift to the back of the magazine. We've also updated all our charts to make them easier to navigate, grouping details for each component – such as the graphics card, for instance – under the same column. The new-look tables even include a comments section summarising the main pros and cons to help you see at a glance whether a particular product is for you.

We'll continue to focus on two main charts every month, reviewing a clutch of the latest products against the existing chart entries. Other charts will be updated, too, so look out for new entries in all our tables before you buy. Under each chart you'll also find useful buying advice to help guide you through the process of selection.

All chart rankings are based on a calculation of features and performance compared to price, so the highest-scoring products also represent the best value for money. Charts are introduced, amended or removed as and when necessary to cover any emerging hardware sectors, advances in technology or changes in the industry.

Prices

Our price categories for PCs and notebooks are as follows: Power PCs, over £1,200; Budget PCs, £700-£1,200; Superbudget PCs, sub-£700; Power notebooks, over £1,500; and Budget notebooks, sub-£1,500. Our Digital camera price categories are Professional, over £700; Intermediate, over £300; and Beginners, under £300.

All prices printed in *PC Advisor* are quoted by the manufacturer or distributor and exclude VAT. Prices are only intended as a guide and you may see products on sale for less or more than our quoted price. If you're interested in purchasing any of the products reviewed in *PC Advisor*, please contact the manufacturer or supplier direct, mentioning both the magazine and the issue in which you saw the product. If they won't supply the product as reviewed, contact us at reviews@idg.com. Please note manufacturers are under no obligation to feature reviewed products on their website.

PC Advisor's recommendations are for guidance only and are not a guarantee of suitability. The publisher takes no responsibility for purchasers' decisions.

What is PC WorldBench 4?

WorldBench 4 is the latest version of our benchmarking software, which has been updated to allow us to test PCs running Windows XP, and also contains an upgraded base system against which results are compared.
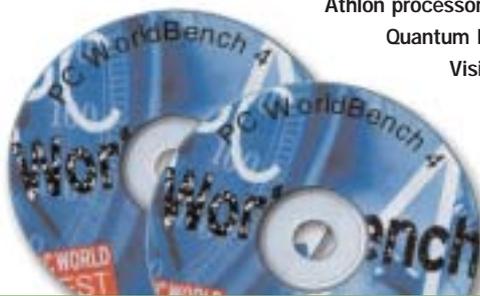
The PC WorldBench 4 benchmarking software tests how well a system runs 11 different applications and provides the best indication of its real-world performance.

The 11 packages are: Photoshop 5.0, PhotoPaint 8.0, Quicken Deluxe 99, Lotus 1-2-3 9.0, Lotus Word Pro 9.0, Access 2000, Excel 2000, PowerPoint 2000, Word 2000, Netscape Communicator 4.73 and Visio 5.0 SE. Test results are then collated and compared against a reference system – namely a Gateway Select 1200 PC, with a 1.2GHz AMD Athlon processor, 128MB of RAM, 20GB Quantum Fireball hard drive and VisionTek GeForce3 graphics card. To make it easy to compare, the control PC's score is set at 100, so a system that scores 150 is 50 percent faster than the control PC, and so on.
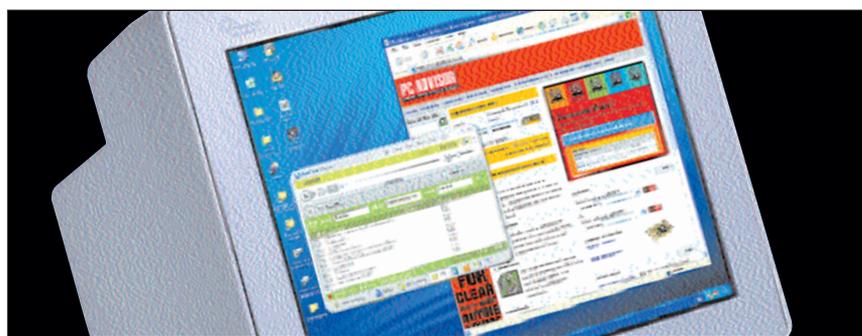
How to buy

• **Ordering** Keep copies of all paperwork and correspondence. A high street dealer should give you a receipt and details of your order. Mail order firms should give you a quote by return with a written guarantee of price and the exact specification of each component. For internet orders, look for privacy-vetted websites displaying trading standards logos such as those of the Which? Web Trader, Trusted Shops and TrustUK schemes. Check there's a UK contact address and telephone number on the website in case you need to get in touch.

• **Service and warranty** Thoroughly check the type of warranty that comes with your system. Is it onsite, where an engineer comes out to you, or is it return-to-base, which means you have to send the computer to a repair centre? If it's the latter, will you be expected to pay the courier fees? Look for insurance-backed warranties that will still be worth the paper they are written on if the vendor goes bust. Some of the larger IT companies make more from selling warranties than they do from selling goods, so it's always worth haggling over warranty prices.

• **Small print** Read any small print. Look out for any disclaimers and E&OE clauses that may mean you won't get your money back if you decide to return the goods. If you are unsure about anything, contact the company and ask for written confirmation it will be able to provide the service that you want.

• **Paying** Always pay by credit card or via a finance house, especially for online or mail order transactions. That way, if you don't receive your goods – for instance, if the company goes bankrupt – you will be able to claim on the credit card company's insurance. However, this protection only applies to goods costing more than £100 and does not apply to charge cards, such as American Express or debit cards, even if they carry the Visa or Access logos. A supplier shouldn't debit your card until the goods are ready to be sent out.

Your new-look charts

We've updated all our charts to make them easier to navigate, grouping details for each component. In the example below we've highlighted the monitor column, which has details on the dot pitch and screen resolution. The red horizontal bar shows the PC's WorldBench 4 score, so you can compare the contenders to see which is the speediest system.

This month: take a look at your monitor

Faster processors and larger hard drives are all very well, but you could argue that they're rapidly reaching their ceiling of benefit. After all, if you've got a 120GB hard drive a further 40GB really isn't going to make that much difference. One area that's often overlooked in the PC setup is the monitor, which is foolish seeing as you're going to be staring at it for a large proportion of the day. If you fancy an upgrade that could really increase your productivity, turn to page 242 and feast your eyes on the latest 17in and 19in monitors.

We're also refreshing our Power PC chart this month. At the top end of their budget, manufacturers can pack in more impressive components. Of course, we still look for value for money but it means that there are fewer compromises. If you're in the market for a top-of-the-range system, turn to page 232 to see what's on offer. ■