

buying advice: PCs

Whether you're after a top-of-the-range machine or a more modestly specified, budget-priced model, our Buying advice will guide you through the options available when looking for a new PC



Power PCs: from £1,200

- **Processor** Intel has put an end to AMD's recent dominance in this area with its new 2.4, 2.5 and 2.8GHz chips, although the Athlon XP 2600+ is looks set to bring AMD to the fore once again.
- **Memory** Expect 512MB and make sure that it's the quicker DDR (double data rate) RAM, rather than SDRAM. Also look out for faster DDR 333MHz memory, although DDR 266MHz is still up to the job.
- **Storage** If you want to use your PC for video editing and holding lots of footage go for the most storage on offer. Have backup covered with a 40-/32-/10-speed (read/write/rewrite) CD-RW drive.
- **Monitor** Look for a 19in screen that offers a resolution of 1,600x1,200 and a dot pitch of 0.25mm or less.
- **Graphics card** Flavour of the month is the GeForce4 Ti 4600 with 128MB of RAM. ATI's newest card, the Radeon 9700, offers solid performance although doesn't match the performance of the Ti 4600.
- **Sound card** Some Power PCs are still fitted with a SoundBlaster 5.1 Live, but the best bet is Creative's Audigy. It offers top-quality audio and an extra FireWire port.

Budget PCs: £700-£1,200

- **Processor** The 2000+ and 2100+ Athlon chips from AMD dominate in this area at the moment with the 2200+ gradually easing its way into the chart. If you want an Intel processor, though, accept no less than 2GHz.
- **Memory** The standard in the budget chart is quickly becoming 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, although 256MB of DDR RAM should service the needs of most PC users.
- **Storage** Most of our budget PCs have a 60GB hard drive spinning at 7,200rpm (revolutions per minute); if you're really lucky you'll be able to get 80GB. Backup storage is provided by the now obligatory CD-RW drive, although check you have read/write/rewrite rates of at least 40-/24-/10-speed.
- **Monitor** Be satisfied with a 17in monitor if it has very good specifications, although you may also be able to get a decent 19in model for your money. Either way, check that it can achieve an optimal resolution of 1,280x1,024 at 75Hz. Better still, for really sharp images, look for a resolution of 1,600x1,200 at 75Hz. In terms of dot pitch, 0.25mm or lower is fine.
- **Graphics card** A 64MB budget card will suffice but you'll also find the new 128MB cards in the same price range.
- **Sound card** Creative's Audigy is the best option in terms of audio, but the trusty SoundBlaster Live 5.1 is still available. Avoid onboard sound if at all possible, as this is never as impressive as a dedicated card.



Superbudget PCs: under £700

- **Processor** AMD's 2000+ is the standard in the Superbudget chart at the moment. However, if performance isn't vital to you, see what sort of savings you might get by knocking it down to a 1.3 or 1.4GHz Athlon chip. Intel chips are a possibility but will cost more, resulting in a lower overall specification at this price point.
- **Memory** RAM prices are starting to rise, so you may pay more now, but still aim for 256MB. Pay a little extra now for the faster DDR (double data rate) RAM, rather than SDRAM, and your memory will hold its value better in the coming years.
- **Storage** Gigabytes abound these days, so demand no less than 40GB, with 60GB preferable. For fast file access, look for a motherboard that features an Ultra ATA-100 interface. A CD-RW drive is a must for the future – look for CD-R/RW performance of at least 10-speed.
- **Monitor** Don't let the manufacturer cut corners – bear in mind that this is the one part of your PC that you'll be using continuously. Look for a 17in screen and a dot pitch of 0.25 or 0.24mm, although be aware that even screens with a higher dot pitch can produce good images.
- **Graphics card** nVidia's budget GeForce4 MX cards offer superb frame rates for a reasonable outlay, but you may be able to find a system with a GeForce4 Ti 4200.
- **Sound card** A standalone card like Creative's SoundBlaster Live 5.1 is the best choice, although integrated audio is getting better; Cmedia supports full 5.1 surround sound on some motherboards.