buying advice: PCs

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

Power PCs: from £1,200

• Processor Intel have put an end to AMD's recent dominance in this area with their new 2.4, 2.5 and 2.8GHz chips, though the Athlon XP 2200+ is still a good processor and offers performance very similar to the new Pentium 4s.
• Memory Expect 512MB and make sure that it is the quicker DDR (double data rate) RAM, rather than SDRAM. Also look for faster DDR 333MHz memory, though DDR 266MHz is still up to the job.
• Storage If you are going to use your PC for video editing and holding lots of footage then go for the most storage you can. 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 but doesn't quite match the performance of the Ti 4600s.
• Sound card Some PCs still use the SoundBlaster 5.1 Live, but the best bet is Creative's Audigy. It offers top-quality audio and adds an extra FireWire port.

Budget PCs: £700-£1,200

• Processor The Athlon 2200+ dominates the Budget chart at the moment, but the speedier 2400+ and 2600+ chips have cropped up in one or two systems. If you want to stick with the Intel route, look for a Pentium 4 processor that runs at speeds of at least 2.4GHz.
• Memory The standard in the Budget chart is quickly becoming 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, although 256MB should service the needs of most users.
• Storage Most Budget systems will be supplied with an 80GB hard drive these days, but hard drives of 100GB and 120GB are also becoming popular. In terms of CD-RWs, don't opt for a system with less than a 40-/16-/10-speed (read/write/rewrite) model.
• Monitor If it has good specifications a 17in monitor will satisfy your needs, although you may be able to get a decent 19in model if you search around. Either way, check that the display 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 some systems do come with the new 128MB card – ideal if you play graphics-intensive games on your PC.
• Sound card Creative's Audigy is the best option in terms of audio, but the trusty SoundBlaster Live 5.1 is still available and dependable. Avoid onboard sound if 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 1.3GHz 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 a good choice, but integrated audio is getting better; Cmedia supports full 5.1 surround on some motherboards.