

TOP 10 BUDGET PCs

Details	Last month's position	First reviewed	PC World-Bench	Price (ex VAT)	Warranty	Processor type/speed	RAM	Hard disk/capacity	Mother-board	Chipset	Modem	USB ports	Monitor	Screen size	Dot pitch	Max resolution @75Hz	Graphics card	Graphics chip	Graphics card memory	Sound card	Speakers	No of speakers/subwoofer	DVD-ROM speed	CD-RW read/write/rewrite rate	Office suite & other extras
1 Mesh Matrix XP 1800 Ti 020 8208 4702 www.mesh.co.uk	1	Feb 02	121 (WB 4)	£999	3-year onsite	AMD Athlon XP 1800+/ 1.53GHz	512MB DDR RAM	Maxtor/60GB	Asus A7 A266-E	KT266	56K	4	Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 740SB	17in	0.25mm	1,600x1,200	Leadtek WinFast GeForce3	nVidia GeForce3 Ti 200	64MB	Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	16x	40x/24x/10x	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2001
2 Multivision Vision Ultima Ti 200 0121 550 8000 www.multivision.co.uk	2	Feb 02	118 (WB 4)	£999	1-year onsite	AMD Athlon XP 1900+/ 1.6GHz	512MB DDR RAM	Seagate/60GB	MSI 6380LE Pro2/USB 2.0	Via KT266A	56K	6	Hansol 920D	19in	0.25mm	1,600x1,200	Hercules 3D Prophet	nVidia GeForce3 Ti 200	64MB	Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	16x	40x/24x/10x	Windows XP Home, Lotus Suite 2001, Videowave, gamepad, webcam
3 Systemax A1900FA 0870 729 7364 www.systemaxpc.co.uk	3	Feb 02	114 (WB 4)	£1,139*	1-year onsite, 2-year return to base	AMD Athlon XP 1900+/ 1.6GHz	256MB DDR RAM	IBM/60GB	MSI MS-6380LE	KT266A	56K	2	CTX EX950F	19in	0.25mm	1,600x1,200	Gainward GeForce3	nVidia GeForce3 Ti 500	64MB	Creative Labs Audigy	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	16x	32x/16x/10x	Windows XP Home, games, gamepad, ATI TV Wonder VE Lite TV tuner
4 Ideal Computing Ideal Aptus 1800XP 0870 745 5061 www.idealcomputing.co.uk	4	Feb 02	123 (WB 4)	£1,199	1-year onsite, 2-year return to base	AMD Athlon XP 1800+/ 1.53GHz	512MB DDR RAM	IBM/60GB	Chaintech 7CTKJD	AMD 761	56K	2	LG Flatron 775FT	17in	0.24mm	1,024x768	Hercules 3D Prophet III	nVidia GeForce3 Ti 500	64MB	Creative Labs Audigy	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	8x	40x/24x/10x	Windows XP Home, Star Office, remote control
5 NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1900+ 0870 010 6326 www.nec-online.com	5	Feb 02	111 (WB 4)	£1,199	3-year onsite	AMD Athlon XP 1900+/ 1.6GHz	256MB DDR RAM	Seagate/80GB	Gigabyte GA-7DX	AMD 761	56K	4	NEC HR-19	19in	0.25mm	1,600x1,200	WinFast Leadtek	nVidia GeForce3	64MB	Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1	Labtec LCS2632	2/Y	16x	32x/12x/8x	Windows 98 SE, Word, Money, Norton AntiVirus, games bundle, webcam
6 Evesham Axis 1700+ Ti2 0870 728 7070 www.evesham.com	6	Feb 02	110 (WB 4)	£1,199	2-year onsite, 1-year return to base	AMD Athlon XP 1700+/ 1.47GHz	256MB DDR RAM	Maxtor/40GB	Gigabyte GA-7VTXE/GA-7VTXH	Via KT266A	56K	4	Samsung 107FT flat-panel	17in	0.26mm	1,280x1,024	OEM GeForce2 Ti	nVidia GeForce2 Ti	64MB	Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	16x	32x/16x/10x	Windows XP Home, Microsoft Works Suite 2001, StarOffice, Big Fix
7 Hi-Grade Meridian N1400PV12 020 8532 6100 www.higrade.com	7	Dec 01	241 (WB 2000)	£849	1-year onsite, 2-year return to base	AMD Athlon XP 1600+/ 1.4GHz	256MB DDR RAM	UDMA 100/40GB	Asus nForce	Crush 12	56K	2	LG Flatron 775FT	17in	0.24mm	1,024x768	onboard	onboard	32MB	onboard 5.1 Dolby ProLogic	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	16x	40x/16x/10x	Windows 2000, Lotus SmartSuite Millennium
8 Systemax A1800RV Lifestyle 1280 0870 729 7364 www.systemaxpc.co.uk	8	Dec 01	196 (WB 2000)	£1,239*	1-year onsite, 2-year return to base	AMD Athlon XP 1800+/ 1.53GHz	256MB DDR RAM	Western Digital/40GB	MSI K7T266	Via KT266	56K	2	CTX PR960F	19in	0.24mm	1,600x1,200	Systemax GeForce3	nVidia GeForce3	64MB	Creative Labs Audigy 1394	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	16x	32x/16x/10x	Windows Me, Lotus SmartSuite Millennium
9 NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1400 0870 010 6326 www.nec-online.com	9	Nov 01	189 (WB 2000)	£1,199	3-year onsite	AMD Athlon/1.4GHz	256MB DDR RAM	Maxtor/40GB	Gigabyte GA7DX	AMD 760	56K	4 (2 on front)	NEC VR19	19in	0.26mm	1,600x1,200	Leadtek WinFast GeForce3	nVidia GeForce3	64MB	Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 1024	Labtec LCS 2414	2/Y	16x (2x recording)	24x/8x/4x	Windows 98 SE, MS Works Suite, Britannica, games, educational/reference titles
10 Best Price Poweroid 2004 020 8904 3347 www.poweroid.com	10	Nov 01	188 (WB 2000)	£1,199	5-year return to base	AMD Athlon/1.4GHz	256MB SDRAM	Seagate x 2/60GB	EpoX EP-8KTA3	Via KT133	56K	4 (2 on front)	Iiyama VM Pro 411	17in TFT	0.25mm	1,280x1,024	Leadtek WinFast GeForce3	nVidia GeForce3	64MB	Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1	Cambridge DTT2200	5/Y	16x	40x/16x/10x	Windows Me, Lotus SmartSuite

* Due to a rise in the cost of RAM, the price of these PCs increased as we went to press. Because of the timing of this change, we were unable to amend the Top 10. See next month for an updated chart

1 Mesh Matrix XP 1800 Ti

Mesh systems often sit near the top of our Top 10 PC charts because they are well rounded, good-value systems with thorough documentation for the novice user – and there's now the added benefit of a three-year onsite warranty. The Matrix XP 1800 Ti fits well into this proud tradition, keeping its sought-after Best Buy award for another month.

The Mesh Matrix doesn't boast the fastest processor around, but its Athlon XP

Mesh continues to sit at the top of the chart with its all-round performer, the Matrix XP 1800 Ti



1800+ is the second speediest CPU in the chart. It's also one of only three Budget machines to have 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM. The subsequent WorldBench 4 score of 121 makes the Matrix XP 1800 Ti a very impressive performer – the second fastest PC in the Budget PC chart. Storage is provided by a 60GB hard drive and the speedy Teac CD-RW drive will have your files backed up in no time.

While the Mitsubishi Diamond Pro 740SB monitor can't offer the same screen real estate as a 19in model, it's certainly the best 17in display in the chart. Indeed, we'd rather see a good-quality smaller screen than a mediocre large one. Twinned with a Leadtek WinFast GeForce3 Ti 200 graphics card, the image quality is excellent. As with most entries, the Mesh Matrix uses the solid Creative Labs SoundBlaster Live 5.1 card with Cambridge's DTT2200 speakers – probably the best value-for-money sound combination around.

There's enough room inside the Matrix's robust case for upgrading and, if you ever do need to get to the innards,

there's a key attached to the back – just make sure you don't lose it.

The software bundle is pretty sparse, but you do get Microsoft Works Suite 2001, which is enough to get you started. For another month the Matrix XP's combination of power, good-quality components and a generous warranty keep it sitting pretty at number one.

2 Multivision Vision Ultima Ti 200

Multivision often builds machines with a great combination of high-end specifications and supreme value for money. The Vision Ultima Ti 200 is no exception and, as such, it continues to be a deserving winner of our Recommended award.

With the fastest AMD Athlon XP chip at this time – the 1900+ – and 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, the Ultima Ti 200 was always going to be a powerful system. Add a 60GB hard drive spinning at 7,200rpm (revolutions per minute) and it's no wonder it achieved a WorldBench 4 score of 118. This may not be the fastest WorldBench 4 score in the chart, but it's still a creditable result.



The Recommended Multivision Ultima has a decent hardware specification and a low price tag

The motherboard has USB 2.0 support, which in theory is 40 times faster than the current USB 1.1 standard, and there are also six USB ports available. As more and more peripherals makers adopt the new USB 2.0 standard, these ports should prove invaluable.

Though the Ultima is primed for power, Multivision hasn't forgotten the rest of the package. A fast CD-RW drive provides extra backup, and the dependable Creative SoundBlaster Live 5.1 card, which is supported by DTT2200 speakers, takes care of the audio. The 64MB DDR (double

data rate) RAM GeForce3 Ti 200 graphics card from Hercules and 19in monitor produce crisp images and smooth graphics performance. However, the screen's shadow mask tube can't match the clarity of an aperture grille model.

A generous software bundle and some nice extras, such as a webcam, redeem the lack of documentation. However, it's a bit of a shame that Multivision only protects your investment with a one-year onsite warranty.

3 Systemax A1900FA

With a good array of features and specifications, the A1900FA from Systemax keeps its Recommended award this month. Systemax selected the Athlon XP 1900+ (running at 1.6GHz), twinning it with 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and a 60GB hard drive, which should provide plenty of storage. Unfortunately, 256MB of memory accounts for its just-respectable WorldBench 4 score of 114.

A card that uses one of the best chipsets currently available, namely the GeForce3 Ti 500, takes care of the



Sticking at number three is Systemax's PC which offers an impressive graphics and audio setup

Systemax's graphics. Aiding image quality is a CTX 19in monitor, which handles pictures with aplomb. To help you get the most out of the graphical prowess of this PC, there's a games bundle and gamepad included. The Audigy sound card and DTT2200 speakers provide high-quality audio to complement the graphics.

There's a FireWire port at the back of the PC, although only two USB ports seem miserly. The large case means the components aren't cramped, and has the added benefit of leaving lots of space for upgrading.

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↑ Gaining our final coveted Recommended award is the good looking Ideal Aptus 1800XP

4 Ideal Computing Ideal Aptus 1800XP

The Ideal Aptus 1800XP is one of the best-looking systems in our chart. This may be due to an LG monitor with more style than substance, but the inclusion of an Audigy sound card proves its beauty is more than skin deep. Ideal Computing was one of three manufacturers that opted for 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and backed it up with a 1.53GHz Athlon XP 1800+ processor, rendering the fastest WorldBench 4 score of 123. There's ample storage from a 60GB hard drive and one of the fastest CD-RW drives.

Graphically, the GeForce3 Ti 500 is brilliant, but the LG 775FT monitor, which only reaches 1,280x1,024 resolution and is hampered by a low refresh rate, doesn't match it. The Audigy has two FireWire ports but, like the Systemax, there are only two USB ports. The bundled StarOffice suite is adequate, but not the best.

5 NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1900+

The Powermate from NEC only narrowly missed out on a higher chart position. NEC decided to stick with Windows 98 SE rather than XP Home, but hasn't scrimped on most of the main specifications. The 1.6GHz processor is joined by 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and the largest hard drive in the chart – 80GB a welcome addition.

The WorldBench 4 score of 111 is good, but would have been pushed a little further by a bit more memory. NEC's own excellent 19in aperture grille monitor combines with a 64MB GeForce3 graphics card, so image quality is spot on, though a GeForce3 Ti card would give smoother graphics rendering.

The Powermate has a superb three-year onsite warranty and in general is a well considered package. The only gripes are the low-speed CD-RW drive and poor speakers – they are from Labtec, but paltry for a £1,199 PC.



↑ NEC's decision to stick with Windows 98 SE means the Powermate fails to climb higher up the chart



↑ The Evesham Axis 1700+ may be a slow system, but it comes with a great peripheral bundle

6 Evesham Axis 1700+ Ti2

Unusually for an Evesham, the Ti2 doesn't have enough high-end components to keep up with the competition. While the 1.47GHz processor offers faster speeds than previous models, Evesham only supplies 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM. It's also offering a smaller hard drive than in the past – just 40GB. This all produced a WorldBench 4 score of 110, the slowest of the new entries.

The 17in Samsung monitor 107FT is clear and bright and is perfectly matched by the 64MB GeForce2 Ti graphics card. The DVI (digital video interface) port can be connected to the flat-panel display, but hardened gamers should look elsewhere for high-end graphics.

There's a plethora of FireWire and USB ports for connecting peripherals and an extra fan on the chipset to keep things cool. The warranty is good, as is the manual and software bundle.

Motherboard upgrades: getting a better performance

When people discuss upgrading internal components on a PC the motherboard rarely gets a look in – a better graphics card, more memory or improved sound are the usual upgrades. It's easy to forget, though, that all these components are attached to and affected by the motherboard. Install a decent board and you can improve your PC's potential no end.

A high-quality motherboard will make your system more stable, perform faster and add to its upgrade options. When choosing a motherboard, the things to look out for are plenty of spare slots and ports, which will make upgrading and adding peripherals a breeze. Opting for a reputable manufacturer should ensure stability, and support from a fast chipset will help to speed up performance.

It is also worth looking for a motherboard that supports the latest standards, such as FireWire and USB 2.0. As more peripherals adopt these faster methods of connection, you will be glad that you opted for a forward-looking motherboard.

The latest chipset from nVidia – the Crush – which is used in nForce boards, takes a novel approach by doing more of the work onboard usually assigned to add-in cards. The graphics can use up to 32MB of RAM and can cope with a resolution of 1,024x768 at 75Hz. The onboard sound also supports 5.1 Dolby Surround Sound. While the nForce's integrated graphics and sound may never be able to match standalone cards, they are cheaper but superior to previous onboard options.

• For more information on motherboards, see *Technofile* on page 81.

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↑ The Meridian features onboard sound and graphics, but its nForce motherboard ensures decent performance

7 Hi-Grade Meridian N1400PV12

This ex-Best Buy from Hi-Grade remains one of the fastest Budget PCs despite the influx of new contenders with better specifications since it was reviewed. The Athlon XP 1600+, running at 1.4GHz, is twinned with 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and helped produce a WorldBench 2000 score of 241. While a 40GB hard drive can store a lot of information, it's now the minimum you should expect when buying a Budget PC.

The Meridian uses an Asus nForce motherboard, with onboard sound and graphics. Onboard options are usually a long way behind dedicated cards, but the performance from the nVidia chipset is better than many others. The graphics supports 1,024x768 at 75Hz, so the results are impressive. However, combined with the low-resolution monitor it won't be enough to satisfy gamers.

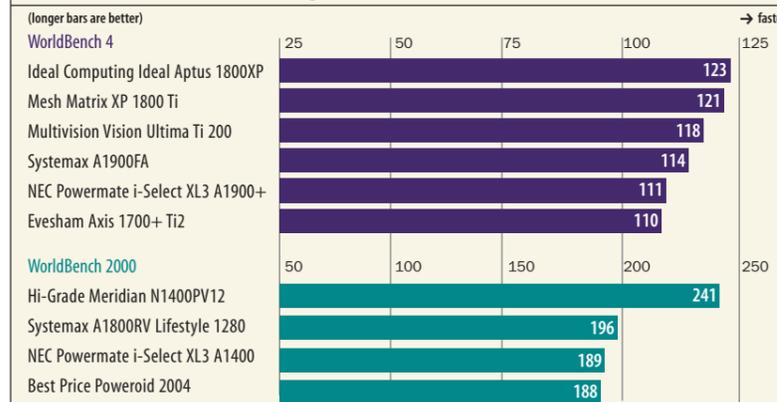
8 Systemax A1800RV Lifestyle 1280

Down but not out, the Lifestyle 1280 from Systemax hangs on to eighth place this month. While its Windows Me operating system may soon be a thing of the past,

↓ If playing games is your main requirement from a PC, the A1800RV Lifestyle 1280 could be the answer



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the A1800RV contains an Athlon XP 1800+ backed up by 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM, which are still impressive specifications. However, the WorldBench 2000 score of 196 has now been surpassed by faster systems.

With a 64MB GeForce3 graphics card, the second-best monitor in the chart and brilliant sound provided by Creative's new Audigy sound card, this is very much a consumer PC. If that weren't evidence enough, the Lifestyle 1280 also comes with a games bundle and gamepad like its sibling at number three.

9 NEC Powermate i-Select XL3 A1400

This Powermate from NEC is starting to look a little dated as it hangs on at ninth place. It's one of only two PCs to stick with the Windows 98 SE operating system and a basic Athlon processor, although it does boast the unique addition of a Pioneer DVD-R/RW, which makes it worth buying for anyone needing the best in storage and backup. A 1.4GHz clock speed is quite slow compared to the competition, while the 256MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM is standard fare for Budget systems. A 40GB hard drive is the bare minimum – though with the DVD-R/RW capable of holding 4.7GB of information, we're not complaining.

10 Best Price Poweroid 2004

The Poweroid 2004 is showing its age rather, and is only able to take tenth place. Its futuristic metallic casing does well on aesthetic value, but it isn't enough to redeem it from the 256MB of slower



↑ The Powermate holds on at number nine, with its DVD-R/RW drive continuing to give it some dash

SDRAM, a 1.4GHz Athlon and the soon-to-be-extinct Windows Me. Despite these disadvantages, the WorldBench 2000 score of 188 was quite high, although this was probably due to the advanced hard drive setup. The Raid controller spreads the workload across two drives, so the 60GB storage can be accessed in less time than a single drive. The other features on the Poweroid are excellent and we're sure it won't be long before we see an updated entry in our charts.

↓ The Poweroid 2004 is easy on the eye, but its hardware specification is looking dated

