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: £1,200+

• Processor The Athlon XP has proved a real winner, providing top-notch performance without adding to the cost. Go for a top-of-the-range 1900+ or 2000+ version.

• Memory Expect a minimum of 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM. You can get even more if you shop around but, unless you run several applications simultaneously, you won't feel the benefit.

• Storage The bare minimum is 60GB, but 80GB to 100GB is not out of the question. You'll also need a speedy CD-RW – most Power PCs offer 16- or 24-speed writing and 10-speed rewriting.

• Monitor Unless it has something special, opt for a 19in model instead of 17in. You might also want to consider a flat-panel display, which is popular thanks to the lower price of TFT (thin-film transistor) screens.

• Graphics card The GeForce 3 Titanium 500 is winning hands down in the Power chart, but the ATI Radeon 8500 is also a decent option. Look for at least 64MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM.

• Sound card Creative's Audigy, with its enhanced audio and FireWire ports, is popular, but don't rule out machines sporting the SoundBlaster Live 5.1 card.

Budget PCs: £700-£1,200

• Processor Again, the Athlon XP has taken over our Budget chart. At this price point, a 1700+ processor running at 1.4GHz is acceptable. Obviously, though, if you can scoop up a faster processor without losing out on the other components, do so.

• Memory Even in this category, 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM isn't out of the question. However, be careful that this isn't at the expense of other components. Although 256MB is acceptable, make sure it is the faster DDR memory.

• Storage A 40GB hard drive will suffice, but this is now the average capacity. You should be able to get 60GB or, if you're really lucky, 80GB. A backup CD-RW drive is almost mandatory and should have minimum read/write/rewrite speeds of 32-/16-/10-speed.

• Monitor You are better off with a good 17in screen, which can reach a minimum resolution and refresh rate of 1,280x 1,024 at 85Hz, than a poor 19in model. However, if you can find a decent 19in screen then snap it up.

• Graphics card Most Budget graphics cards can cope with pretty much anything these days, and only gaming connoisseurs will seek out the really high-end options. Aim for a card with at least 64MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM and a minimum chipset of the GeForce2 Titanium 200.

• Sound card Even in the Budget category the Audigy is starting to crop up. It's likely, though, that you'll end up with the trusty Creative SoundBlaster Live 5.1. Avoid onboard audio, unless it's the superb nForce Crush chipset from nVidia.

Superbudget PCs: under £700

• Processor Plenty of Superbudget PCs feature AMD's 1600+ processor, which is extremely fast. 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 take up more of the system price resulting in a lower overall specification.

• 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 30GB, with 40GB preferable. For smooth Windows operation, 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 eight-speed.

• Monitor Don't let the manufacturer cut corners on the monitor – 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 a good image.

• Graphics card The nVidia GeForce2 Titanium cards are excellent value for money, with ATI Radeons and GeForce2 MXs also ideal alternatives under Windows XP.

• Sound card The Creative SoundBlaster Live 5.1 card is the perfect choice in this category.