

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** The Athlon XP 2000+ is proving a real winner in the Power PC chart, comfortably outstripping the 2.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 for general Windows operation.
- **Memory** After a dip in prices, memory is now surging in value again. Even so, power users shouldn't settle for less than 512MB of DDR (double data rate) RAM.
- **Storage** The average user should be happy with 50GB or 60GB, although 80GB or 120GB will futureproof your PC. Look for a CD-R with at least 24-speed writing; for CD-RW recording, 10- or 16-speed is fine.
- **Monitor** Expect a top-quality 19in CRT (cathode ray tube) monitor with a dot pitch of at least 0.25mm and resolution support of up to 1,600x1,200. If you want to save desk space, a flat-panel is a viable option.
- **Graphics card** For top 3D performance, opt for the GeForce4 Ti 4400 or 4600 with 128MB of onboard memory. The GeForce3 Ti 500 is also a worthy contender.
- **Sound card** The Creative Audigy is the perfect choice, although the older Live 5.1 is still a high-quality card. The Cambridge SoundWorks/Creative family of speakers are both of the highest quality, and the Videologic generates thunderous audio.

Budget PCs: £700-£1,200

- **Processor** Celeron and Duron chips are rare these days, as most manufacturers are pushing Athlons or Pentiums. Pentium 4-based systems do make an appearance in our Budget chart, but the Athlon XP remains king here too. Expect a clock speed of at least 1.5GHz from an AMD processor or 1.7GHz from an Intel chip.
- **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) and 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've got read/write/rewrite rates of at least 40-/24-/10-speed.
- **Monitor** Be satisfied with a 17in monitor if it has good specifications, but you might 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 can get the new 128MB cards in this 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 possible, as this is never as impressive as a dedicated card.



Superbudget PCs: under £700

- **Processor** AMD's 1700+ and 1800+ processors are fairly common and 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 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 30GB, with 40GB 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 eight-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.
- **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. ■