

hot off the press

Bringing you the latest and greatest hardware products that missed the Reviews deadline by a whisker, our team takes a look at Sharp's new highly adaptable Linux-based PDA and tests out two PCs built around AMD's latest 1.83GHz processor, the 2200+

Sharp Zaurus SL-5500

Linux-based personal digital assistant

The PDA (personal digital assistant) market has been pretty static of late. Since the launch of Palm's m500 range and Windows Pocket PC 2002, there have been few products of note hitting the shelves. Sharp's latest offering, however, could shake things up, as it is the first handheld to opt for a Linux-based operating system and Qutopia user interface.

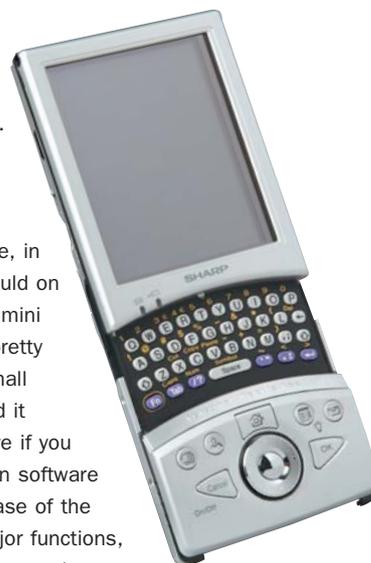
OS of the future?

Linux has, until now, only found favour among more techie users, but don't let this put you off as it is very simple to use. There's all the usual PDA programs – calendar, email, web browser, to-do list, contacts database, calculator and games – plus an image viewer, Mpeg-1 and MP3 media player. You can also work on spreadsheets and word documents, but you can only view PowerPoint files.

Although the Linux operating system might not make much difference in day-to-day use, it does mean that developing tools and device drivers for the Zaurus is open to all. Linux is open source, which means anyone can get hold of the code to build applications for it. Sharp hasn't stopped there, as it also supports Personal Java, which enables users to run cross-platform Java-based applications. By choosing to base the Zaurus on Linux and Java, Sharp hopes to attract corporate customers who can tailor specific applications to their business. It offers strong network support, and Wi-Fi, Bluetooth and GPRS (general packet radio service) modules are all planned for release. Expansion is via CompactFlash Type II and SD (secure digital) card slots.

PDA with a difference

The operating system isn't the Zaurus' only innovative feature. It also incorporates a pull-out keyboard in the centre of the unit, so you can either use a handwriting recognition package, in much the same way as you would on a Pocket PC device, or use its mini keyboard. While the keys are pretty tiny, we found that typing in small amounts of data was easy, and it provides a refreshing alternative if you find that handwriting recognition software provides patchy results. The base of the unit has hotkeys for all the major functions, plus a navigation dial for extra control.



Sharp's screen is a 3.5in 320x240 TFT (thin-film transistor), which is protected by a flimsy plastic cover. The PDA is powered by a 206MHz StrongArm processor and there's 16MB of Flash ROM for the operating system and 64MB of SDRAM built in. It uses a lithium-ion battery for which Sharp claims a 10-hour life. The Zaurus connects to your PC using a USB cradle, and can sync with Linux Desktop, Palm Desktop and Outlook. One neat touch is that the power cable and cradle are separate, which means you can take the AC adapter away with you to charge the device while on the move, without having to lug the cradle with you.

Sharp: 0800 138 8879

Website: www.sharp.co.uk

Price ex VAT: £382.97

Mesh Matrix XP 2200+Ti Pro & NEC PowerMate XL4

EXCLUSIVE

Athlon 2200+ PCs

Although the brand-new Athlon XP processor achieves an actual speed of 1.83GHz, it's branded the 2200+ because AMD claims that its performance will match that of a 2.2GHz Intel Pentium 4 chip. Even more confusingly, the processor is intended to compete with Intel's fastest chip, the 2.53GHz Pentium 4.

With time to test just two 2200+ Athlon PCs, one from Mesh and another from NEC, our results are far from conclusive. However, the latest Athlon doesn't look as though it's going to offer a dramatic improvement in general Windows usage. PCs using the older Athlon XP 2100+ managed an average of 122 in our WorldBench tests, so the scores of 120 and 121 for the Mesh Matrix XP and the NEC PowerMate XL4 are disappointing.

The 2200+ chip does, however, show improvements in video encoding and games performance – two areas where the Intel Pentium 4

has traditionally held the lead. The NEC, aided perhaps by its nForce motherboard, matches the Pentium 4 2.53GHz Evesham PC across the board. Surprisingly, the Mesh brings up the rear, finishing behind the NEC in every section. However, one area where the 2200+ manages to turn the tables is in terms of price: the NEC offers equivalent performance to the 2.53GHz P4 despite costing £500 less.

Contacts: Mesh 020 8208 4702, NEC 0870 010 6326

Websites: www.meshcomputers.com, www.nec-online.co.uk

Prices ex VAT: Mesh Matrix XP 2200+Ti Pro, £1,499, NEC PowerMate XL4, £1,199

