

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** Look for a 1.4GHz Athlon, 1.7GHz P4 or better. Note that P4s perform significantly better with Windows 2000.
- **Memory** If you are a Power user then make sure you have at least 256MB of RAM onboard. Take advantage of current low memory prices and get as much as you can to save yourself the bother of upgrading in a year.
- **Storage** Hard drive space is cheap at the moment so get as many gigabytes as you can. Look for at least 45GB, although 60 or 75GB is becoming standard.
- **Monitor** If you're buying a Power PC, you should insist on the very best monitor. Choose a quality 19in model with 0.24mm dot pitch and 1,600x1,200 resolution at a refresh rate of 75Hz or above.
- **Graphics card** Insist on at least a GeForce2 GTS, although you should be able to get a GeForce3 card at this price. In terms of video memory, 64MB would be a good bet and DDR memory is faster.
- **Sound card** Ask for a Creative SoundBlaster Live 1024, 5.1 or Audigy. For full surround sound you'll need a six-speaker setup – five speakers and a subwoofer.



Budget PCs: £700-£1,200

- **Processor** While it's nice to have the fastest processor on the market, current speeds mean you can save money and opt for slightly less. You'll find 1.4GHz is more than adequate in this category.
- **Memory** Memory prices are dirt cheap so don't settle for less than 256MB. Pay a little extra now for the faster DDR RAM (rather than SDRAM) and your memory is likely to hold its value in the future.
- **Storage** It is possible to combine two hard drives in the same system with a Raid controller for high performance, but the average customer will be quite happy with a standard drive. Gigabytes cost next to nothing, so demand at least 30 of them.
- **Monitor** Don't let the manufacturer cut corners on the monitor – bear in mind that this is one part of your PC that you'll be using continuously. A good 17in monitor (ideally with a 0.24mm dot pitch) is better than a mediocre 19in. 15in flat-panels are increasingly popular, and are a great choice if you want to save space.
- **Graphics card** Even in the Budget category, it's possible to find an nVidia GeForce3 card. If games aren't your main concern, any other nVidia or ATI card should come up to scratch. The Kyro II cards are excellent value for money, and Matrox cards offer strong 2D performance.
- **Sound card** Look for a good sound system, with the Creative SoundBlaster Live cards the perfect choice – the 5.1 offers the best audio quality, although the 1024 is very close behind. The Creative/Cambridge speaker systems are strong, and other top makes include Altec, Labtec and Videologic.



Superbudget PCs: under £700

- **Processor** Celerons and Durons are few and far between these days. Most manufacturers will be pushing Pentium IIIs or Athlons, and it's the latter that seem to be doing a scorching trade in this price range. You should expect at least 1.1GHz in speed.
- **Memory** Four of the entries in the Superbudget chart have 256MB of RAM; if you can get that you've got a great deal. Expect to settle for 128MB, but certainly don't go lower unless your system costs under £400.
- **Storage** A 20GB drive will suffice, but it is a little below average. Look for at least 30GB of storage space on your hard drive but remember, as our Superbudget chart shows, you can get 40GB.
- **Monitor** Be satisfied with a 17in monitor that can achieve an optimal resolution of 1,024x768 or better still 1,280x1,024 at 75Hz. Look out for a dot pitch lower than 0.26mm. You should get a 15in model only if you're paying less than £400 for the overall PC.
- **Graphics card** A 32MB budget card will suffice for most people and is a widely available option in this price range. Avoid integrated graphics where possible as games performance will be poor.
- **Sound card** Onboard sound is another one to avoid but it's very popular in the Superbudget chart. Creative's SoundBlaster 1024 is the best option for most users but it's more likely you'll find Creative's cheaper PCI 128. ■