

● £399 PC

PC PRO
A LIST

PC Nextday Zoostorm 2-3302 Value PC

PRICE £399 (£469 inc VAT)

DELIVERY £35 (£41 inc VAT)

SUPPLIER PC Nextday via website

INTERNET www.pcnextday.co.uk

VERDICT Making a decent, responsive PC on a shoe-string budget isn't easy, but the system designers at PC Nextday have made a superb job of it.

It's been a while since we saw such a cheap and cheerful compact PC. For ultra minimalism and space-saving, there's the Labs-winning Elonex ProWire/D notebook (see p103), but this system from PC Nextday is £200 cheaper, sports a space-saving TFT and decent peripherals.

From the internal shot below, it may look like there isn't much going on inside this microATX case. But looks can be deceiving, as can modern motherboards with their host of controller chips. On this ECS board, you'll find integrated six-channel audio and 10/100 Ethernet, both of which are more than adequate for their respective uses.

The same can be said for the CPU itself, a Sempron 3000+. It's the latest revision of the Socket 754 chip with SSE3 instructions, 64-bit support and 90nm transistors. These smaller, more efficient transistors help to lower its heat output and should lead to a slower-spinning, quieter CPU fan. Unfortunately, despite supporting AMD's excellent Cool'n'Quiet technology, the



The TFT is a welcome bonus in such a low-cost system, as are the large hard disk and DVD burner.

motherboard's current BIOS doesn't have dynamic fan speed control. The CPU fan spins at maximum all the time, making a whiny, distracting noise. We'd be tempted to fit a Zalman FanMate (£7 from www.quietpc.co.uk) to throttle back the fan speeds.

Naturally, we were worried about how sluggish a Sempron-based desktop would be in use, but the benchmark score of 0.69 indicates this machine will still outperform any PC more than about two years old: our tough Photoshop test, for instance, was completed with respectable swiftness. Our multi-application torture test is the reason it lags behind modern dual-core machines though. In use, there was no noticeable difference between this and any other PC, save for the occasional stuttering when we tried to do several tasks at once.

It's the same story for gaming, with an nVidia 6200 sitting in the AGP slot of the motherboard. Our standard benchmark settings are extremely tough, leading to the scores of 10fps or less. Merely dropping the anti-aliasing and anisotropy brought frame rates into the mid-20s, but to get consistently playable frame rates we had to sacrifice the high-detail settings and drop the resolution. So while the 6200 might not be up to the visual treats of games such as Far Cry and Half-Life 2, it does offer a great excuse to dig out those old classics.

The 6200 also provides a DVI output to feed the 17in AOC TFT with the digital signal it deserves. We're impressed that a system at this price has a TFT rather than a bulky CRT, although, predictably, it has its faults: a narrow colour gamut and uneven backlight are our main criticisms. These are only a concern for high-end graphics work, though, and this isn't a system suited to that anyway. In general use, it's still bright and crisp enough to give a clear, eminently usable Desktop. Films don't suffer much either, with viewing angles pleasingly wide; approaching 180 degrees in both planes.

With margins on PCs so tight these days, it's no surprise that the warranty is only a year long. What did surprise us is that it's an on-site policy. Typically with a cheap PC, you'd expect to arrange and pay for a courier to get the unit back to the manufacturer, but PC Nextday will send an engineer to you at no extra expense (as always, conditions apply). You can upgrade to a three-year warranty for an extra £99 inc VAT, which is a good deal if you're convinced the system has a three-year lifespan.

Yes, it's odd to talk about something that costs £400 possibly having a lifespan of less than three years, but the Sempron will look long in the tooth quickly given the rate technology is developing. Being Socket 754, it isn't the best option for upgrades, as you're limited to budget Athlon 64s at best, and the AGP slot is losing support by the minute. Still, the 160GB hard disk is big enough, the DVD writer provides decent backup potential and the 512MB PC3200 RAM stick (leaving one free slot for an immediate upgrade path) will be usable in a new Socket 939 microATX motherboard. If you opted for a new motherboard with integrated graphics (and preferably PCI Express), the upgrade would likely cost around £150 in a year's time – not bad going for the performance boost you'd get.

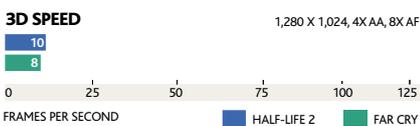
Considering the low price of the system, it was surprisingly difficult for us to find meaningful or significant shortcomings. The screen is fine for the intended use of the system, the components will last you for years, and there's even a clear upgrade path. It's also well built and belies its price by looking pretty good too. All this earns it a place on our A List as our Value PC of choice.

CLIVE WEBSTER



The microATX case will tuck away neatly in your study, yet includes everything most people need.

RESULTS



OFFICE: 0.73 2D GRAPHICS: 0.83
ENCODING: 0.67 MULTITASKING: 0.52

An explanation of our new benchmarks can be found on the cover disc.

PC PRO RATINGS

PERFORMANCE	★★★★★
FEATURES & DESIGN	★★★★★
VALUE FOR MONEY	★★★★★
OVERALL	★★★★★

SPECIFICATIONS 1.8GHz Sempron 3000+; 512MB PC3200 RAM; ECS K8M800-M2 motherboard; 160GB Western Digital Caviar SE hard disk; Samsung SH-W162C DVD writer; 128MB Inno3D GeForce 6200 graphics; 17in AOC LM-728 TFT; Realtek 6-channel integrated audio; 10/100 Ethernet; V.92 modem; Windows XP Home SP 2; 1yr on-site warranty.