ATHLON 64 X2 4800+ PC

Mesh Matrix Titan Dual X2 Pro

PRICE £1,360 (£1,599 inc VAT) DELIVERY £39 (£46 inc VAT)
SUPPLIER Mesh Computers 0870 046 4747 INTERNET www.meshcomputers.com
VERDICT **Combining high-performance technology and sensible components, this system will give you dual processing for a reasonable amount of cash.**

There's always something new on the horizon, and it's easy to delay purchasing a PC because you're waiting for the next big thing. Well, with Intel and AMD's new dual-core processors, that big thing has happened and now is an excellent time to buy.

Mesh's X2 Pro hits the sweet spot between Evesham's great-value Dominator X2 (*see opposite*) and SavRow's wildly extravagant Deuterium (*see p58*). It can't match the mouth-watering 23in TFT display or dual GeForce 6800 Ultras of the SavRow, or the sub-£1,150 price of the Evesham, but you can clearly see what the Mesh delivers for the extra £250.

Part of that's spent taking advantage of the SLI-capable Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard (the same as that used in the Evesham). Mesh populates the twin PCI Express 16x slots with two 128MB nVidia 6600 GT PCI Express graphics cards. While they're not the most powerful cards currently available, and carry only 128MB of RAM each, they still put in a decent performance and will cope with all current titles at respectable resolutions. With 4x anti-aliasing and 8x anisotropic filtering, they managed a smooth 40fps at 1,280 x 1,024 in Half-Life 2 and 46fps in Far Cry. Taking the resolution up to 1,600 x 1,200, they blasted through Half-Life 2 at 71fps and Far Cry at 59fps. That indicates there's 3D processing headroom left for some of next year's titles, although we expect them to begin struggling much beyond that.

SLI performance at an affordable price.

The key improvement over the Evesham is the inclusion of AMD's top-end Athlon 64 X2 4800+. Each core is run at 2.4GHz with 1MB of Level 2 cache, and it's matched with a generous 2GB of PC3200 DDR SDRAM. This lifts the overall benchmark score to 2.68, a healthy surplus over the Evesham's 2.25 and only narrowly behind the overclocked SavRow's 2.72. Our 3ds max rendering test demonstrates the power of dual-core architecture, rendering our test image in two minutes, 35 seconds with threading turned off, but racing through in one minute, 21 seconds using both cores to the full.

Taking a tour round the rest of the system, we find a 300GB Maxtor hard disk (a healthy 50GB more than the Evesham) in a triple-space cage that's mounted sideways so disks can be easily added and removed without getting tangled up in graphics cards or the CPU fan. Above this, there are the two optical drives – a dual-layer DVD burner and a DVD-ROM for fast copying – and space for another optical drive. There's a floppy drive at the top, and two USB ports on the front fascia.

The fascia's silver air intake doesn't hide a fan; it just lets air in for the big 120mm fan at the back of the case. There's also a fan in the left side panel with a funnel channelling airflow to the CPU heatsink fan. This makes the Mesh moderately noisy from the left side and certainly not as quiet as the Evesham overall, but if you position the case so the side fan isn't facing you there shouldn't be undue noise problems. Overheating shouldn't be a problem either: the motherboard fits two PCI Express 1x ports between the two 16x slots. So even with both graphics cards in place, there's plenty of room to breathe and there won't be much trouble accommodating bigger cards in future upgrades.

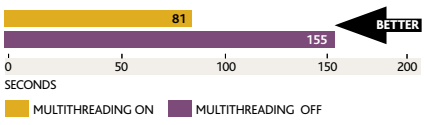
The motherboard also provides excellent connectivity, including two FireWire, eight USB 2 and two Gigabit Ethernet ports, optical and coaxial S/PDIF output, as well as eight-channel sound on 3.5mm outputs. Mesh supplies a comfortable Logitech wireless keyboard and rechargeable mouse combo. The only feature we really miss is a media card reader, but this could be added for less than £20. You also get OneClickPower's Intelligent Mains Panel bundled, which powers down peripherals along with the PC, as featured in our Switch IT Off campaign (*see p36*).

The system is partnered by a 19in ViewSonic VX912 TFT (*see issue 124, p72*). Its 8ms response time follows through to produce good motion handling and, through the DVI-I input, it provides very good image quality. Given the choice, though, we'd opt for the VX924 as supplied by Evesham.

If you want to go AMD dual core, the Matrix Titan Dual X2 Pro sits between the SavRow and the Evesham offerings. It's easy to eliminate the SavRow from the final comparison – its price puts it in another category altogether – but the Evesham/Mesh decision is more difficult. If you simply want to spend less cash, or you want to wait and see how the graphics card market develops over the following year before committing, the Evesham offers a good level of power now with a clear upgrade path. However, you can spend your whole life waiting, and if you want a high-end dual-core SLI system now the Mesh delivers loads of power and great value.

ROGER KIRKWOOD

3DS MAX 7 RENDER



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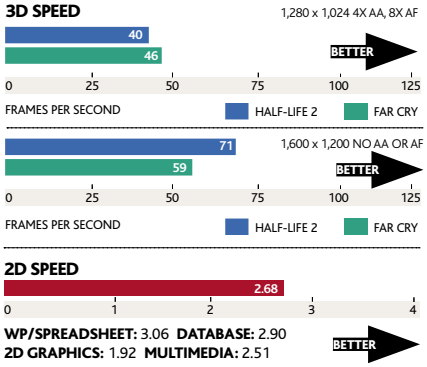

PC PRO RATINGS

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

SPECIFICATIONS 2.4GHz AMD Athlon 64 X2 4800+ processor; 2GB PC3200 DDR SDRAM; Asus A8N-SLI Deluxe motherboard; 300GB Maxtor 6L300S0 hard disk; Sony DW-D23A DVD burner; Sony DDU1613 DVD-ROM; 2 x 128MB nVidia GeForce 6600 GT graphics; 19in ViewSonic VX912 1,280 x 1,024 TFT; V.92 modem; 2 x Gigabit Ethernet; Windows XP Home; 3yr on-site warranty.